

# An analysis of some quotes of George W. Bush: Bumbling idiot or master wordsmith?

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*“Strategy.”*

- Will Ferrell, impersonating George W. Bush

## INTRODUCTION

Presidential address is of interest to scholars of history and rhetoric alike. The Lincoln-Douglas debates, for example, are still used as a template for forensic approaches to policy deliberation. In an age when words proliferate as quickly as a celebrity's—or a president's—twitter account can gain followers, the text and delivery of presidential oratory is still seen as a means of taking the country's discursive pulse. The well-considered words that come from presidents' mouths are read as a distillation of the hopes and fears of the American public sphere.

In the [2008 Saturday Night Live sketch](#) quoted above, Will Ferrell encapsulated what many American people thought of their then-President, George W. Bush—he was a bumbling idiot that misspoke, uttered grammatically embarrassing sentences, and invented completely new words. This belief was so prevalent that the majority of Americans incorrectly attribute the word “Strategy” to Bush (Luntz 2015<sup>1</sup>) and not to Will Ferrell. This perception was further magnified by several blogs dedicated to “Stupid Bush

Quotes” (e.g., [Kurtzman](#); [Weisberg](#); [Smith](#)) as well as several entire books on the subject (e.g., [Weisberg 2001](#)). There's even [a Wikipedia page](#) dedicated to the subject.

Comparatively fewer people know and appreciate the vast intelligence of our 43rd President. He attended The Kinkaid School, one of the most academically rigorous schools in the country. He graduated from Yale University, while also serving as the president of a prestigious fraternity, playing rugby for the university, and joining the cheerleading squad. He went on to receive an MBA from Harvard University, becoming the only president in US history to do so.

These facts warrant an extensive re-examination of the dominant narrative that Bush was a dimwitted blunderhead. Ask yourself what is more likely: 1) that a person with two degrees from Ivy League schools would not be able to grasp even the simplest public speaking skills? or 2) that a person with two Ivy League degrees who started his own oil businesses and became the governor of the 2nd most populous state would know exactly what he was saying and craft his every single word for maximal effect?

What follows is a qualitative discourse analysis of a convenience sample of Bush quotes in support of the more probable option (Option #2). And when you operate under this perspective and re-analyze some of Bush's more popular malapropisms, you begin to realize what a freakin' genius we had as our President.

<sup>1</sup> Luntz F (2015) Majority of Americans believe Bush first said Strategy (after the removal of 'outliers', haha). *To editor: make sure the item in parentheses is removed before publication.* Journal of Push Polling and Questionable Copy Editing, Volume 34, Issue 8

**QUOTE 1: “THEY MISUNDERESTIMATED ME.”**

We begin with a quote that we feel perfectly summarizes Bush’s tenure as Commander in Chief. During his administration, Bush was often viewed as an ineffective leader who was plagued by misguided policies and fits of idiocy. However, as we’ll see in this essay, Bush allowed this view to persist in order to hide his true status as a linguistic genius. Bush felt that exposing his intellectual side would alienate the majority of the American people. He also wanted his political and foreign enemies to think of him as weak, which was a strategic tactic he learned at Yale (see [here](#)). Thus, he would often purposely say such unintelligible drivel such as “misunderestimated” in order to undermine and therefore obfuscate his own powerful persona.

The Bush-coined term “misunderestimate” is also a testament to Bush’s sociolinguistic prowess in that it couples not one but two prefixes, resulting in an intensification of meaning: [the enemy’s] estimation of him is both factually off (‘mis’) and quantitatively wrong (‘under’), making it double-wrong (not to mention the irony of the third “misunderestimation” that results in the grammarian’s harsh judgement of the coinage).

**QUOTE 2: “TOO MANY GOOD DOCS ARE GETTING OUT OF THE BUSINESS. TOO MANY OB/GYN’S AREN’T ABLE TO PRACTICE THEIR LOVE WITH WOMEN ALL ACROSS THE COUNTRY.”**

At first glance, Bush seems to humorously suggest that the current healthcare system is preventing OB/GYN’s from making love to their patients, and that Bush meant to say “medicine” instead of “love”.

We disagree and believe Bush meant to say these exact words. For starters, Bush was well aware of the humor and innuendo contained in this sentence and, for that, we applaud his efforts to make something as dry as healthcare potentially entertaining.

The main thrust of Bush’s carefully crafted argument is an urge for higher quality care. He is calling for an end to the hospitals-as-a-business concept (note how he subtly refers to the medical profession as a “business”), and a transformation towards one-on-one intimate interactions between doctor and patient, subsequently making all patients momentarily ecstatic about the level of care they are receiving. That was the “love” to which Bush was referring:

high-quality healthcare.

We can only assume that this is the exact type of healthcare Bush championed during his administration, and we’re so confident in this statement that we feel we don’t have to support it with a source.

**QUOTE 3: “RARELY IS THE QUESTION ASKED: IS OUR CHILDREN LEARNING?”**

This quote is probably Bush’s most famous grammatical flub. However, what many people see as Bush’s manhandling of the English language, we see as a clever wordplay that highlights the inadequacies of the American educational system and demonstrates a well-developed awareness of his audience.

Bush knows fully well that the correct phrasing is “are our children learning?” Remember, the man went to Yale AND Harvard. Yet he purposely phrased the question using the grammar of a 6 year old to dramatize the fact that we rarely seek our own children’s input when designing America’s educational curricula. The question “Is our children learning?” (which is how a child would phrase it) is rarely asked, because we don’t actively seek input from children about their own education. With this impressive double-entendre, Bush is stressing that we should be gathering this input from our children, we need them to start asking, “Is we learning?”, and we need to listen to what they say, no matter how grammatically incorrect it may be (note that Bush was ‘priming’ the audience for the bad grammar one would expect when talking to a child). Only then can we make substantial gains in our paltry educational system.

Personally, we applaud Bush’s willingness to make a fool of himself for the sake of our children. Unfortunately, the multiple meanings behind this quote were lost on many.

**QUOTE 4: “TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY MEANS THAT; IT’S SOVEREIGN. I MEAN, YOU’RE A - YOU’VE BEEN GIVEN SOVEREIGNTY, AND YOU’RE VIEWED AS A SOVEREIGN ENTITY. AND THEREFORE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND TRIBES IS ONE BETWEEN SOVEREIGN ENTITIES.”**

After this quote, Bush was heavily criticized for not knowing the definition of tribal sovereignty. To the common observer not schooled in domestic affairs, we could see how one would arrive at such a conclusion.

However, Bush knows exactly what sovereignty means (Yale AND Harvard, folks!), and his seemingly mangled definition is actually a subtle retort on the current interpretation of the phrase “tribal sovereignty”. What Bush said in regards to tribal sovereignty is a completely meaningless mess, a string of rambling nothings stripped of any informative content. Yet this characterization of Bush’s definition actually perfectly parallels what the idea of tribal sovereignty has become in modern domestic policy. “Tribal sovereignty,” as a seemingly instrumental phrase, is in fact a linguistic exercise in enacted egalitarianism with little to no instrumental force. Nobody knows what tribal sovereignty means; the phrase lacks any real meaning. Being the clever wordsmith that he is, Bush decided to dramatize the definition of “tribal sovereignty” instead of merely stating “I don’t know.”

**QUOTE 5: “THERE’S AN OLD SAYING IN TENNESSEE—I KNOW IT’S IN TEXAS, PROBABLY IN TENNESSEE—THAT SAYS, FOOL ME ONCE, SHAME ON, SHAME ON YOU. FOOL ME—YOU CAN’T GET FOOLED AGAIN.”**

In this famous gaffe, Bush seemingly conflates a popular proverb (“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me”) with a popular song by The Who (“Won’t Get Fooled Again”). In this case, context is important. Immediately before this quote, Bush discussed how Saddam Hussein fooled the world into believing that Iraq has not harbored terrorists or stockpiled dangerous weapons, and how Saddam fooled his own people into shunning American ideals such as liberty and justice.

By purposely mixing up the popular proverb with a popular song by The Who (note the connection between British Invasion and possible Iraqi Invasion), Bush is using colorful language to demonstrate what would happen if the Iraqi dictator were allowed to rule without American regulations: American people would start to have their ideals (symbolized by the “Fool me once” proverb) invaded by foreign influences (symbolized by the lyrics from a British rock band).

The evocation of The Who also causes the song’s message to resonate between the lines of Bush’s explicit address. “Meet the new boss... same as the old boss,” helps to remind listeners that Saddam was the Iraqi leader at the time of the first (“old”) Gulf War as well as the present conflict. Moreover, Bush’s own

father, George Herbert Walker Bush, was our own “old boss,” with the same name as the new boss.

By decomposing an overwhelmingly complex foreign policy problem into a format that better reverberates with Americans (i.e., song lyrics and proverbs), Bush was demonstrating his remarkable ability to connect with the average American. It’s no wonder, then, that he was, at one time, the most popular president in U.S. History.

**QUOTE 6: [WHEN ASKED BY A GERMAN NEWSPAPER WHAT HIS BEST MOMENT IN OFFICE WAS] “I WOULD SAY THE BEST MOMENT OF ALL WAS WHEN I CAUGHT A 7.5 POUND LARGEMOUTH BASS IN MY LAKE.”**

Many people see this quote as a complete lack of respect for the Office of the Presidency and for the United States as a country. A president’s best moment was when he caught a fish? And it wasn’t even close to record size?

A closer inspection reveals that this quote was simply a translation error. Yes, Bush does speak German (again, he went to Harvard and Yale!) and was answering the reporter’s question in German. He meant to say that his best moment in office was when the United States caught Saddam Hussein hiding in a small hole near an Iraqi farmhouse. Bush replied, in perfect German: “...ich fing einen 7.5 pound Fuhrer-leiben arsch in diesem loch,” which roughly translates to “...I caught a 7.5 pound Fuhrer-loving asshole in that hole.” The phrase “Fuhrer-loving asshole” refers to Saddam Hussein (the 7.5 pound might be confusing, but that was an inside joke Bush used to mock Saddam’s appearance. Soldiers joked that when Saddam was captured, he weighed 7.5 pounds and that 7 pounds of that was beard).

However, the translator misheard and thought Bush had said “...ich fing einen 7.5 pound forellenbarsch in diesem loch”, probably assuming Bush didn’t know the German word for lake and used ‘loch’ instead.

At least Bush didn’t say he was a jelly donut.

**QUOTE 7: “I WILL NOT WITHDRAW, EVEN IF LAURA AND BARNEY ARE THE ONLY ONES SUPPORTING ME.” [REFERRING TO THE WAR IN IRAQ]**

Many see this quote as evidence of Bush’s stubbornness on the War in Iraq, suggesting that Bush would not withdraw troops even if his wife (Laura

Bush) and his dog (Barney) were the only ones still supporting him. Taken at face value, the implications hidden in this quote would be unsettling, as we certainly wouldn't want a president to make wartime decisions without the support of 99.9% of Americans and 99.9% of its dogs.

However, few people realize that by saying "Laura", Bush actually meant Queen Elizabeth of the British Empire, whom he mistakenly thought was named Laura. And by "Barney", Bush was referring to Barney the Purple Dinosaur (the popular children's television show character) whom he thought commanded an army of 20,000 dinosaurs.

Seen through this perspective, then, this quote is rarely the Bushism it is purported to be, as going to war with only the support of the British Empire

and Barney's Dinosaur army is hardly a terrible military strategy. Admittedly, thinking that the Queen of England was named Laura and that Barney the Dinosaur commanded an army of other dinosaurs was not Bush's most sterling moment.

**QUOTE 8: "GOODBYE FROM THE WORLD'S BIGGEST POLLUTER!" [DEPARTING WORDS AT HIS FINAL G8 SUMMIT]**

Alright, this one was kind of a dick move...

**QUOTE 9: "I'LL BE LONG GONE BEFORE SOME SMART PERSON EVER FIGURES OUT WHAT HAPPENED INSIDE THIS OVAL OFFICE."**

Well said, Mr. President. And thanks for calling us smart.