

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

By Michael Ventura

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"There is no greater American value than owning something."

Watching George W. Bush say that in real-time on television last December 20, I was stunned. He spoke the sentence as he drifted off-script while nominating Mel Martinez for Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. I paced up and down and waved my arms in a spurt of futile gestures; wrote the words down; checked their accuracy in *The New York Times* transcript the next day. Yup. He said it. I was equally stunned when I didn't find the sentence boxed in that newspaper's "Quote of the Day" -- for surely this was one of the most telling and outrageous statements an American president-elect had ever uttered.

"There is no greater American value than owning something." In that statement the man measured himself. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address; the astonishingly consistent technological and cultural creativity of the United States throughout its history; the world-shaping issues of the Revolution, the Civil War, the Depression, the Second World War, the Cold War; the cultural transformations since 1945 -- for George W. Bush, all this was distilled into one overwhelmingly banal conclusion: "There is no greater American value than owning something."

The sentence damns itself so completely, I thought of doing a column that simply repeated it over and over for as long as my allotted space allows. There seemed nothing else ever to comment about the man. "There is no greater American value than owning something."

I decided not to write about George W. Bush until there was a record to write about. I didn't want speculation, I wanted facts. Beginning on January 1, for eight months and 10 days I clipped newspaper articles. I've got a large packing-box full. Fact after fact supported Bush's devotion to his signature sentence: "There is no greater American value than owning something." The economy, the environment, the rights of individuals -- profound issues of century-transforming significance ... for him they seemed all boiled down to that sentence. It was the motivational core of most Bush administration policies. Having amassed the clippings, I intended a series of articles which were to begin right about now. My working title was "The Bush Chronicles." Each article would open with "There is no greater American value than owning something," followed by chapter and verse, White House choice after choice, rooted solely in that anemic vision, that sickly conception of the American dream, a dream turned masturbatory, a wet dream of possession, a dream stripped of nobility, generosity, liberty, community. I heard those words in my head nearly every time I saw him: "There is no greater American value than owning something." For eight months and 10 days I amassed the facts, they fitted the sentence, it was the foundational idea of George W. Bush's conception of America, of government, of ... everything, it seemed.

Eight months and 11 days: on September 11 I watched those towers fall. We all did. We are just beginning to comprehend ... no, not comprehend ... who can comprehend such horror? ... we are just beginning to absorb the experience.

To put it kindly, Bush was ineffectual that day. His handlers lied about a threat to Air Force One. Think of it. I know it's unpleasant, but think of it: In response to the horror all the White House found to do was lie, telling us there was "a credible threat" to Air Force One. They're not saying that anymore, not talking about it at all -- except to try to intimidate any journalist who brings it up. It wasn't true. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, not Bush, ordered aircraft carriers to protect New York harbor. Vice President Dick Cheney, not Bush, ordered fighter jets to shoot down the fourth jet if necessary. That's a matter of record. That's what happens when a president who believes "there is no greater American value than owning something" is caught flatfooted with a failed security system, the most incompetent intelligence services in the nation's history, no foreign policy to speak of, and no clear targets to shoot at. It was fair to ask: If they'd lie that day, what else will they be willing to lie about?

It took September 11 for George W. Bush to realize that there's a greater American value than owning something.

Because actually we don't own anything.

Everything we have, we have on loan.

Anything we have can be taken from us, in any variety of ways, at any moment.

Every year we mark an unknown anniversary. We live through the date -- the month and day -- that will be written on our tombstones as the day we lose every last thing, the day we die. "There is no greater American value than owning something" ... will not be written on anyone's marker. For there is no greater human certainty than that we will lose not only something but everything. As Lenny Bruce used to say, "Everybody's ass is up for grabs."

And then ...

Sometime in the wee hours of September 12, George W. Bush realized that he is the President of the United States.

Not the scion of conservative interests. Not the child of privilege. Not the servant of the religious right. Not the corporate darling. Not Dick Cheney's punk. Not the front for the 1% of the population who control 90% of the nation's resources. But the President of the United States.

He'd chickened that day, but sometime that night he stopped clucking.

On September 12 he would never think to say "there is no greater American value than owning something." I don't think he'll ever say anything like it again. With the death of all those innocents, with the crumbling of those towers, this American president finally remembered America. Suddenly George W. Bush was really and truly the President of the United States.

And since then, on the international front at least, Bush has been ... is "exemplary" too strong a word? He's ordered no drastic over-reactive military action. He's assembled a tentative coalition in the most hostile international climate imaginable. He's made a repeated point of honoring and protecting American Muslims. He's done as well as anyone could to assure the Islamic world that America is not warring against their religion -- the Islamic "street" doesn't believe him, but that's beyond his control. He's initiated a reasonable military strategy; it doesn't seem to be working, but neither did Washington's early strategy in the Revolution, Lincoln's in the Civil War, the early Allied strategies of both World Wars, Truman's in Korea, or Kennedy's and Johnson's and Nixon's for the entire agonizing length of the Vietnam War. It takes time to learn to adopt to the peculiarities of each particular war. The mess that various government agencies

have made of the anthrax attack can't be laid at Bush's door; such confusion is inevitable at this stage, given the unknowns that must be faced and learned. And President Bush has memorably articulated the bedrock stance that must be held if America is to remain an America we want to live in: "We're in a fight for our principles. And our first responsibility is to live by them."

Not that there aren't the usual political shenanigans and danger signs -- above all, the administration's attempt to control information must be watched and resisted. But even this requires a little perspective: Woodrow Wilson encouraged an utterly senseless pogrom against American socialists and pacifists during the First World War, Franklin Roosevelt signed on to incarcerating Japanese-Americans in the Second World War, and Lincoln suspended habeas corpus when it suited him in the Civil War. No Bush proposal has been anywhere near as extreme.

Like the all-too-average men who in war after war have found themselves doing extraordinary things on battlefields, with America under fire even the White House has become a foxhole and so far George W. Bush is measuring up. It's important for his most virulent critics, like myself, to say so. It's important to realize that human beings are so paradoxical that the best can sometimes come from the least of men.

But the hardest part comes next. We've hit every target worth hitting in Afghanistan, with meager results. America remains under attack. Israel, the Middle East, and Islamic countries all over the world, are on the verge of a contagious chaos the danger of which is hard to conceive. Uncertainty is the signature of this time; uncertainty is what most people can least endure; uncertainty is bound to increase, and it usually multiplies exponentially. Intense collective uncertainty may require something Bush still lacks: imagination. Imagination is the hardest thing to learn.

Having repeated Bush's old words, it's important to repeat his new words now: "We're in a fight for our principles. And our first responsibility is to live by them."

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