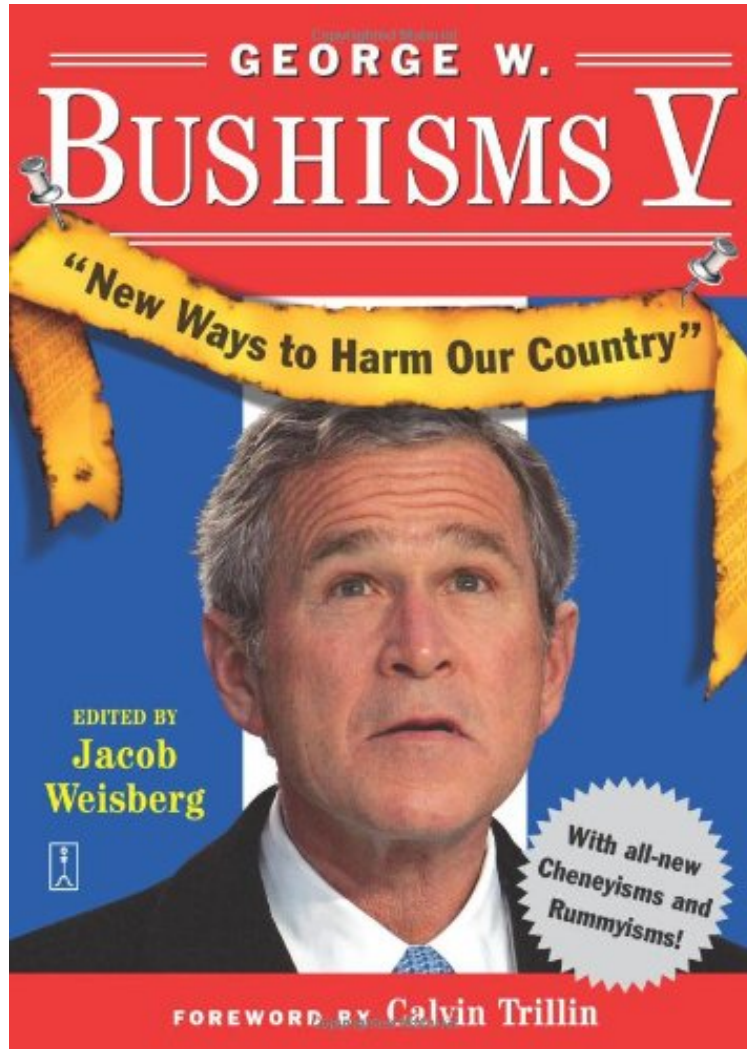


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George W. Bushisms V: New Ways to Harm Our Country

Jacob Weisberg

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"I can only speak to myself." True -- and yet we must listen. Sometimes his accidental wit speaks louder than any prepared statement. "Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we." "I always jest to people, the Oval Office is the kind of place where people stand outside, they're getting ready to come in and tell me what for, and they walk in and get overwhelmed by the atmosphere. And they say, 'Man, you're looking pretty.'" "I'm honored to shake the hand of a brave Iraqi citizen who had his hand cut off by Saddam Hussein." Thanks to the faithful work of Jacob Weisberg, the wisdom of George W. Bush -- America's Malapropist in Chief -- has been carefully preserved for the ages in annual editions. Now that the president is armed with a new (and unprecedented!) popular electoral victory, America can breathe a sigh of relief -- or, as the president once put it, we can "thank our blessings." The language experiments will continue. Stand-up comedians will enjoy full employment. With George W. Bushisms V, the second term truly begins.

About the Author Jacob Weisberg is the editor of Slate magazine and three previous editions of Bushisms. He lives in New York City. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction This year disaster struck the Bushisms project, when the President began speaking English. The phenomenon was first observed during the summer of 2004, in the midst of a presidential campaign that should have had George W. gibbering and sputtering the way he had in 2000. At the outset, the signs were subtle. Bush's "hunnert" flattened almost imperceptibly into an articulated "hundred," his "garmint" into a trisyllabic "government." During the debates, Bush sounded almost fluent. Though he flat ran out of things to say halfway into his first showdown with John Kerry, he hardly stumbled at all. After the inauguration, the situation continued to deteriorate. Bush held a nearly flawless press conference. On a fence-mending trip to Europe, he delivered an eloquent speech citing Leibniz, Newton, and Camus, the latter's name pronounced without a final "s." I'd been noticing this trend with alarm when the Wall Street Journal weighed in with a front-pager on the subject. "He is enunciating more clearly and dotting his remarks with more literary references," a reporter named John McKinnon noted of Bush. My little problem was out of the bag. Some of Bush's literary references appear to come from...reading. Bush informed an interviewer that he was immersed in Natan Sharansky's *The Case for Democracy* (though when he met the author, he did acknowledge that he hadn't finished it). He told friends he loved Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (though six months later, he was still hefting it around). Aides noted that he was working his way through biographies of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. To Bryan Lamb of C-SPAN, Bush even sung the praises of reading in bed. "Twenty pages later you're out cold," he said. What the Kennebunkport is going on here? Adult-onset literacy violates what we know of psychology and even physiology. People can learn to read at any age, but Yogi Berra does not wake up on Wednesday sounding like Gore Vidal. In the past, specialists have speculated that Bush suffers from some sort of genetic malady like dyslexia or apraxia. That kind of thing doesn't just clear up spontaneously, like a case of teen acne, at fifty-eight. We must not discount the possibility of a conspiracy at the highest reaches of the government. To date, no one has explained the mysterious rectangular bulge and wire observed beneath Bush's suit coat at the first debate in Miami. Yes, this could have been some sort of medical or security device. But the box could also have transmitted a grammatical conservative voice for Bush to echo. Arguing against this theory is that the bulge hasn't reappeared. But perhaps the device has been...implanted. A more plausible explanation is that Bush's inarticulacy has always been to some degree a pose. There's no question but that he amps up his regular guy-ness and anti-intellectualism on certain occasions. But during the election and since, Bush has had reason to amp them down. Running against a haughty, hyperarticulate Boston Brahmin pulled Bush to the linguistic center. Now that he's ineligible to run again, it's safe for Bush to be himself -- a bit of a yahoo, to be sure, but not the populist bumpkin he sometimes pretends to be. There's also the muzzle factor. During the campaign, Karl Rove wasn't taking any chances. Bush was allowed to appear in public for the most part only in scripted settings. Even after the election, the president's Social Security "conversations" were stacked with carefully vetted supporters, who offered up prescreened questions. By April, though, Bush was again appearing at more spontaneous events and his output of Bushisms increased correspondingly. Finally, it must be admitted that Bush has simply improved with practice. If you have no ear for music, four years of piano lessons won't turn you into Duke Ellington. But it would be amazing if it didn't make you a better, even a passable pianist. Why should being president and trying to speak English be any different? Luckily for me, a comment doesn't have to be flubbed or ungrammatical to qualify as a "Bushism." From the beginning, I've included in these anthologies statements by the president that while indisputably correct in terms of sentence structure and noun-verb agreement are nonetheless amusing or terrifying, depending on your perspective, because of what they reveal about the inner man. (To the top of the heap in this edition: "I trust God speaks through me.") In such cases, the concern is that the president may in fact have said precisely what he did mean. In this habit of occasionally scaring us silly by speaking his true mind, Bush has some company inside his administration. In particular, his two most powerful lieutenants, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, do it too. This edition features the best of what you might call their Bushisms-by-proxy. As with Bush, the offhand comments of Cheney and Rummy reflect sides of their characters usually kept hidden. Rumsfeld's intermittent candor, which often

strikes partway into his Pentagon press conferences, invariably creates a "meta" moment. Rummyisms highlight the fundamental absurdity of the SecDef's position, while conveying a curious, Zenlike serenity at the core of someone who is frequently misunderstood as a simple bully (he's actually a complicated bully). Cheneyisms, by contrast, broadcast the bottled-up bitterness of the most powerful man in the world. For a brief moment, the number 2 drops his placid mask (along with the mask that he's a number 2), in order to emit a ghoulish, mwha-ha-ha cackle. These politically inappropriate feelings -- Rummy's Goodness gracious, what I'm saying is ridiculous and Cheney's I can crush you like a bug -- are aspects of Bush's persona as well. Like any good executive, the man knows how to delegate. Copyright © 2005 by Jacob Weisberg