

DEAD CERTAIN

ALSO BY ROBERT DRAPER

Hadrian's Walls
Rolling Stone Magazine: The Uncensored History

—◆—
THE PRESIDENCY
OF GEORGE W. BUSH

ROBERT DRAPER

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*Always there: my parents, Bob and Claire;
my brother, John.*

His hot dog arrived. Bush ate rapidly, with a sort of voracious disinterest. He was a man who required comfort and routine. Food, for him, was fuel and familiarity. It was not a thing to reflect on.

"The job of the president," he continued, through an ample wad of bread and sausage, "is to think strategically so that you can accomplish big objectives. As opposed to playing mini-ball. You can't play mini-ball with the influence we have and expect there to be peace. You've gotta think, think BIG. The Iranian issue," he said as bread crumbs tumbled out of his mouth and onto his chin, "is *the* strategic threat right now facing a generation of Americans, because Iran is promoting an extreme form of religion that is competing with *another* extreme form of religion. Iran's a destabilizing force. And instability in that part of the world has deeply adverse consequences, like energy falling in the hands of extremist people that would use it to blackmail the West. And to couple all of that with a nuclear"—as always, he pronounced it *nu-ku-ler*—"weapon, then you've got a dangerous situation. . . . That's what I mean by strategic thought. I don't know how you learn that. I don't think there's a moment where that happened to me. I really don't. I know you're searching for it. I know it's difficult. I do know—y'know, how do you decide, how do you learn to decide things? When you make up your mind, and you stick by it—I don't know that there's a moment, Robert. I really— You either know how to do it or you don't. I think part of this is it: I ran for reasons. Principled reasons. There were principles by which I will stand on. And when I leave this office I'll stand on them. And therefore you can't get driven by polls. Polls aren't driven by principles. They're driven by the moment. By the nanosecond."

A moment later, press secretary Tony Snow stepped into the doorway and immediately assumed a deferential tone. "When I go in front of the press," he said, referring to the daily briefing he was about to conduct, "can I just say, 'We will not be giving the speech until the New Year'? I mean—"

"The New Year," Bush cut in, "and the reason why is, the president still has other people to listen to, and there's a lot of work to be done on a very important task. And I think you oughta just say, 'He's gonna be very deliberate—and listen, he's not gonna be rushed.'"

"Yeah," said Snow.

"And if their argument is, 'Well, what happens if there's an attack in Baghdad?' You can say, 'He talked to his commanders today, and there's a *current* strategy in place.'"

"Right."

"Of dealing, protecting—whatever."

"Can we say you're moving in a direction and assigning tasks to people to try and work out—there are hard political issues—"

"Yeah." Bush's voice rose, as if facing the truculent press at that very moment: "I want to make sure before we put the policy in place that Gates—I *don't have a secretary of defense!*"

"Right, I'm working that out—"

"The president wants to make sure that all the key players on the national security team are well briefed, well versed, and ready to make a measured judgment," Bush finished.

"Good. Perfect. Sorry to interrupt," Snow said as he vacated the room.

"It's okay," remarked Bush. "This is worthless, anyway." Then, in a sudden bellow: "*I'd like an ice cream! Please!* You want some ice cream, Robert?"

Bush dived into his vanilla ice cream. "The presidency is—you get tired," he confessed. Then, leaning back from the bowl: "This is a *tiring* period we're in now. I've got Iraq on my mind. A *lot*. You know, every day I see the casualties, I get the reports—I am *immersed* in this war."

He was taking pains to sound factual instead of anything that could be construed as overwrought. "Look—it's war," he went on. "Listening to a lot of people right now. Plus the trips I've been on," referring to the late-November meetings in Eastern Europe and then Asia. "Plus the sixteen holiday events we're doing. Eight thousand, nine thousand hands I'll be shaking. . . . I'm actually feeling pretty good," he insisted. "Exercise helps. And I think prayer helps. I really do."

Bush added, "I'm also sustained by the *discipline* of the faithful experience. I don't think I'd be sitting here if not for the discipline. I was undisciplined at times. Never over the edge, but undisciplined. I wouldn't be president if I kept drinking. You get sloppy, can't make decisions, it clouds your reason, absolutely."

Laughing, he said, "I remember eating chocolate in the evenings after I quit drinking, because my body was saying, 'Where's that sugar, man?' And so—I can still, interestingly enough, I still remember the feeling of a hangover, even though I haven't had a drink in twenty years."

Now that the speech had been postponed, the next days would be light for Bush before he spent Christmas at Camp David. One of the