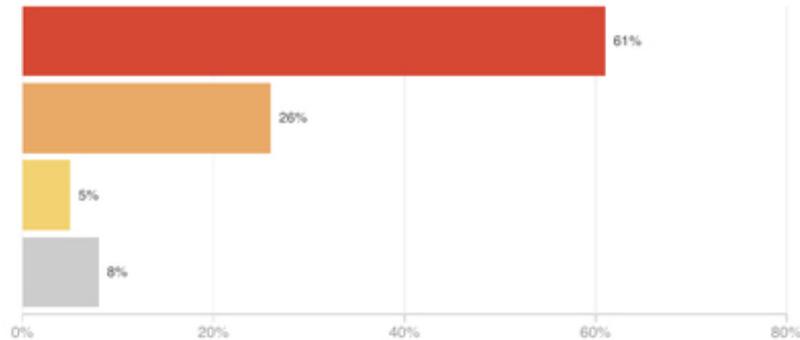


Former President George W. Bush Denounces President Trump

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NPR's Ari Shapiro talks with NPR's Mara Liasson about a speech former President George W. Bush delivered Thursday that did not name Donald Trump but was clearly a criticism of his presidency.

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

And, Mara, stay with us now as we turn to another compelling political moment today, this one from former President George W. Bush. In New York, the former president delivered an unmistakable denunciation of President Trump without ever mentioning Trump by name. Bush was speaking at the Bush Institute's Spirit of Liberty event. It was clear that he was speaking out against some of the forces that brought Trump to the White House.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

GEORGE W BUSH: Discontent deepened and sharpened partisan conflicts. Bigotry seems emboldened. Our politics seems more vulnerable to conspiracy theories and outright fabrication.

SHAPIRO: And former President George W. Bush warned that American democracy is under threat.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BUSH: We've seen our discourse degraded by casual cruelty. At times it can seem like the forces pulling us apart are stronger than the forces binding us together. Argument turns too easily into animosity. Disagreement escalates into dehumanization.

SHAPIRO: Mara, we haven't heard much from George W. Bush in the last nine years. He certainly hasn't attacked a sitting president in quite this way. What stands out to you about this speech?

MARA LIASSON, BYLINE: Well, it is extraordinary, another extraordinary moment. He stayed silent during the Obama years, did not get involved in political campaigns. But I think this was a first principle speech. It was about what it means to be an American and what's the definition of nationalism in the age of Trump. He - whether it's about shared ideals and values, that's what George W. Bush thinks that should be, that it should be creedal.

Or he seemed to say that Donald Trump has a blood-and-soil definition of nationalism. He said our identity as a nation, unlike many other nations, is defined not by geography or ethnicity, by soil or blood, but being an American

involves the embrace of high ideals and civic responsibility. Remember, blood and soil was one of those chants that the white supremacists used in Charlottesville. Here's what George W. Bush said.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BUSH: We've seen nationalism distorted into nativism, forgotten the dynamism that immigration has always brought to America. We see a fading confidence in the value of free markets and international trade, forgetting that conflict, instability and poverty follow in the wake of protectionism.

SHAPIRO: Mara, is this the establishment Republican line?

LIASSON: Well, certainly about free trade it is. But I think it was more than that. He sounded a lot of the same things that Senator John McCain talked about on Monday - America as an idea, about shared values and democratic principles, a country that's willing to lead on behalf of those values around the world. And here's George W. Bush's version of that.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BUSH: This means that people of every race, religion, ethnicity can be fully and equally American. It means that bigotry or white supremacy in any form is blasphemy against the American creed.

(APPLAUSE)

SHAPIRO: Mara, how much weight does former President Bush have with Republicans in America today?

LIASSON: It's true that the George W. Bush Republican Party is pretty much extinct. Today the GOP is the Donald Trump party. The base is nationalist and populist, and there's a strong strain of white identity politics in it. But there's still a lot of Republicans that Bush does speak for in Congress, in the foreign policy establishment, in the business world, a lot of Republicans who disagree with Trump's concept of America in the world, who disagree with his use of divisiveness as a strategy.

They worry that the idea of America first means that America isn't the leader of the free world anymore, standing up for democratic freedom and free markets. Instead it's a nation just competing against other nations for our slice of the pie. So not very many of them are speaking out. But I do think it's significant that the last Republican president, George W. Bush, has now joined people like John McCain or Jeff Flake or Ben Sasse, the small group of Republicans who really have pushed back against both the ideology and the behavior sometimes of their own Republican president.

SHAPIRO: So this was a challenge to Trump that never named Trump. Where did you see it getting most pointedly at the president?

LIASSON: Well, there were several times. At one point he said - he was talking about we need renewed emphasis on civic learning in schools. He says our young people need positive role models. Here's what he went on to say.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BUSH: Bullying and prejudice in our public life sets a national tone, provides permission for cruelty and bigotry and compromises the moral education of children. The only way to pass along civic values is to first live up to them.

LIASSON: And speaking of what impact this might have, Bush himself was asked about whether his message would be heard in the White House. And he reportedly on his way out of the auditorium nodded slightly and said, yes, I think it will.

SHAPIRO: That's NPR national political correspondent Mara Liasson. Thank you, Mara.

LIASSON: Thank you.

(SOUNDBITE OF EASTGHOST'S "FLINT HILLS")

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