

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytimes.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY

**January 16, 2009****OP-ED COLUMNIST**

Forgive and Forget?

By [PAUL KRUGMAN](#)

Last Sunday President-elect Barack Obama was asked whether he would seek an investigation of possible crimes by the Bush administration. "I don't believe that anybody is above the law," he responded, but "we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards."

I'm sorry, but if we don't have an inquest into what happened during the Bush years — and nearly everyone has taken Mr. Obama's remarks to mean that we won't — this means that those who hold power are indeed above the law because they don't face any consequences if they abuse their power.

Let's be clear what we're talking about here. It's not just torture and illegal wiretapping, whose perpetrators claim, however implausibly, that they were patriots acting to defend the nation's security. The fact is that the Bush administration's abuses extended from environmental policy to voting rights. And most of the abuses involved using the power of government to reward political friends and punish political enemies.

At the Justice Department, for example, political appointees illegally reserved nonpolitical positions for "right-thinking Americans" — their term, not mine — and there's strong evidence that officials used their positions both to undermine the protection of minority voting rights and to persecute Democratic politicians.

The hiring process at Justice echoed the hiring process during the occupation of Iraq — an occupation whose success was supposedly essential to national security — in which applicants were judged by their politics, their personal loyalty to President Bush and, according to some reports, by their views on *Roe v. Wade*, rather than by their ability to do the job.

Speaking of Iraq, let's also not forget that country's failed reconstruction: the Bush administration handed billions of dollars in no-bid contracts to politically connected companies, companies that then failed to deliver. And why should they have bothered to do their jobs? Any government official who tried to enforce accountability on, say, Halliburton quickly found his or her career derailed.

There's much, much more. By my count, at least six important government agencies experienced major scandals over the past eight years — in most cases, scandals that were never properly investigated. And then there was the biggest scandal of all: Does anyone seriously doubt that the Bush administration deliberately misled the nation into invading Iraq?

Why, then, shouldn't we have an official inquiry into abuses during the Bush years?

One answer you hear is that pursuing the truth would be divisive, that it would exacerbate partisanship. But if partisanship is so terrible, shouldn't there be some penalty for the Bush administration's politicization of

every aspect of government?

Alternatively, we're told that we don't have to dwell on past abuses, because we won't repeat them. But no important figure in the Bush administration, or among that administration's political allies, has expressed remorse for breaking the law. What makes anyone think that they or their political heirs won't do it all over again, given the chance?

In fact, we've already seen this movie. During the Reagan years, the Iran-contra conspirators violated the Constitution in the name of national security. But the first President Bush pardoned the major malefactors, and when the White House finally changed hands the political and media establishment gave Bill Clinton the same advice it's giving Mr. Obama: let sleeping scandals lie. Sure enough, the second Bush administration picked up right where the Iran-contra conspirators left off — which isn't too surprising when you bear in mind that Mr. Bush actually hired some of those conspirators.

Now, it's true that a serious investigation of Bush-era abuses would make Washington an uncomfortable place, both for those who abused power and those who acted as their enablers or apologists. And these people have a lot of friends. But the price of protecting their comfort would be high: If we whitewash the abuses of the past eight years, we'll guarantee that they will happen again.

Meanwhile, about Mr. Obama: while it's probably in his short-term political interests to forgive and forget, next week he's going to swear to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." That's not a conditional oath to be honored only when it's convenient.

And to protect and defend the Constitution, a president must do more than obey the Constitution himself; he must hold those who violate the Constitution accountable. So Mr. Obama should reconsider his apparent decision to let the previous administration get away with crime. Consequences aside, that's not a decision he has the right to make.

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)