The Presidency Wars
By DAVID BROOKS, September 30, 2003

Have you noticed that we've moved from the age of the culture wars to the age of the presidency wars? Have you noticed that the furious arguments we used to have about cultural and social issues have been displaced by furious arguments about the current occupant of the Oval Office?

During the 1980's, when the culture wars were going full bore, the Moral Majority clashed with the People for the American Way. Allan Bloom published "The Closing of the American Mind" and liberals and conservatives argued over the 1960's.

Those arguments have died down, and now the best-sellers lists are dotted with screeds against the president and his supporters. A cascade of Clinton-bashing books hit the lists in the 1990's, and now in the Bush years we've got "Shrub," "Stupid White Men" and "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them."

The culture warriors were passionate about abortion, feminism or prayer in schools. But with the presidency warrior, political disagreement, cultural resentment and personal antipathy blend to create a vitriol that is at once a descendant of the old conflicts, but also different.

"I hate President George W. Bush," Jonathan Chait writes in a candid piece in The New Republic. "He reminds me of a certain type I knew in high school — the kid who was given a fancy sports car for his sixteenth birthday and believed that he had somehow earned it. I hate the way he walks. . . . I hate the way he talks. . . . I suspect that, if I got to know him personally, I would hate him even more."

The quintessential new warrior scans the Web for confirmation of the president's villainy. He avoids facts that might complicate his hatred. He doesn't weigh the sins of his friends against the sins of his enemies. But about the president he will believe anything. He believes Ted Kennedy when he says the Iraq war was a fraud cooked up in Texas to benefit the Republicans politically. It feels so delicious to believe it, and even if somewhere in his mind he knows it doesn't quite square with the evidence, it's important to believe it because the other side is vicious, so he must be too.

The fundamental argument in the presidency wars is not that the president is wrong, or is driven by a misguided ideology. That's so 1980's. The fundamental argument now is that he is illegitimate. He is so ruthless, dishonest and corrupt, he undermines the very rules of civilized society. Many conservatives believed this about Clinton. Teddy Kennedy obviously believes it about Bush. Howard Dean declares, "What's at stake in this election is democracy itself."

The warrior goes out looking for leaders strong enough to crush the devil. Wesley Clark appeals to the warrior mentality when he declares: "This is war. It's a culture war, and I am their greatest threat. They are doing everything they can to destroy me right now." It doesn't matter that Clark doesn't yet have policies. This isn't about policies. So far the campaign has not been shaped by how much of the Bush tax cut this or that Democratic candidate wants to roll back. It's about who can stand up to the other side.

To the warrior, politics is no longer a clash of value systems, each of which is in some way valid. It's not a competition between basically well-intentioned people who see the world differently. It's not even a conflict of interests. Instead, it's the Florida post-election fight over and over, a brutal struggle for office in which each side believes the other is behaving despicably. The culture wars produced some intellectually serious books because there were principles involved. The presidency wars produce mostly terrible ones because the hatreds have left the animating ideas far behind and now romp about on their own.

The warriors have one other feature: ignorance. They have as much firsthand knowledge of their enemies as members of the K.K.K. had of the N.A.A.C.P. In fact, most people in the last two administrations were well-intentioned patriots doing the best they could. The core threat to democracy is not in the White House, it's the haters themselves.

And for those who are going to make the obvious point: Yes, I did say some of these things during the Clinton years, when it was conservatives bashing a Democrat, but not loudly enough, which I regret, because the weeds that were once on the edge of public life now threaten to choke off the whole thing.