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Fred I. Greenstein: The Presidential Difference

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George W. Bush and the Politics of Agenda Control

INTERVIEWER: Can you name the president of Chechnya?

BUSH: No, can you?

INTERVIEWER: And the prime minister of India?

BUSH: The new prime minister of India is (pause) . . . No.

—GEORGE W. BUSH,
“POP QUIZ,” NOVEMBER 4, 1999

Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.

—GEORGE W. BUSH,
ADDRESS TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

We’re never going to get people all in agreement about force and the use of force. But action—confident action that will yield positive results—provides . . . a slipstream into which reluctant nations and leaders can get behind and show themselves that . . . something positive has happened toward peace.

—GEORGE W. BUSH,
INTERVIEW WITH BOB WOODWARD,
IN WOODWARD, *Bush at War*, 2002

The presidency is said to be an office in which the incumbent may grow or merely swell. If ever there was a chief executive to whom the former applies, it is George W. Bush. Arriving at the White House with only modest experience in public affairs, Bush took a minimalist approach to his responsibilities before the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. Rising to the challenge, he went on to preside with far greater authority and assertiveness over an administration that has gone to great lengths to put its stamp on the national and international policy agendas, but been highly controversial in the policies it advances.

FORMATIVE YEARS

George W. Bush was born on July 6, 1946, in New Haven, Connecticut, where his war-hero father was a Yale undergraduate.¹ In contrast to George H. W. Bush, whose claim to be a Texan is belied by his Eastern accent and diffident manner, George W. Bush is very much a product of the Lone Star State. Whereas the elder Bush attended a private day school in the wealthy New York suburb of Greenwich, Connecticut, the younger Bush went to public school in the West Texas town of Midland, where oil was the dominant economic force and the ambience was that of tract houses, little league baseball, and easy informality. Acknowledging the difference between his Connecticut-bred father and himself, Bush has commented that while his father is mild mannered and avoids confrontation, he has the brashness and directness of a typical Texan.²

In 1953, the Bush family was devastated by the death of George's three-year-old sister Robin from leukemia. The seven-year-old George, who had no idea that his sister was gravely ill, was stunned when he was taken out of school and told that his sister was dead. His mother sank into a depression. His father was frequently away from home on business, and the son sought to be his mother's consoler, playing the clown and developing the bantering manner that is his adult hallmark.³

After completing elementary school in Texas, George followed in his father's footsteps, attending two intellectually rarified schools in the Northeast—Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and Yale University. He had unhappy experiences at both. At Andover, he wrote a composition about the wrenching experience of learning of his sister's death, but used an inappropriate word to refer to the tears he shed. He was deeply hurt when the instructor ignored the content of the paper and criticized him for the way it was written. At Yale, he was offended when the college chaplain commented that his father had been beaten by "a better man" in his 1964 run for the Senate. The ironic effect of Bush's exposure to Andover and Yale was to alienate him from what he came to think of as the "intellectual snobs" who set the tone of these institutions.

Bush was an indifferent student in prep school and college, but he stood out for his social skills and popularity. At Andover, he became the football team's head cheerleader and "high commissioner" of a tongue-in-cheek stickball league. At Yale, he won ready admission to a fraternity that was legendary for its parties and beer consumption after revealing that he could name all of the fifty-odd fellow applicants. (None of the others could name more than a half dozen.) Bush went on to become the fraternity's president and to win admission to Yale's most exclusive secret society, returning to Texas with friendships that were to serve him well when he ran for public office.

Bush's freshman year at Yale saw the beginning of the American military intervention in Vietnam. By his senior year, the campus was wracked with antiwar protest. The political ferment of the 1960s largely passed Bush by, but he was far from indifferent to politics. In 1964, the eighteen-year-old Bush took part in his father's race for the Senate, delighting in the hoopla and camaraderie of campaign politics. By his mid-thirties, he had worked on the campaigns of two other senatorial aspirants and participated in his father's unsuccessful campaigns for the Senate in 1970 and the Republican presidential nomination in 1980.

After Yale, Bush spent two years in the Texas Air National

Guard and went on to Harvard Business School, graduating in 1974 with an MBA. He then returned to Midland, first holding an entry-level position in the oil industry and then forming an oil exploration company with funds raised through family connections. In 1978, the congressman in the district that included Midland announced that he was retiring, and Bush entered the race to succeed him. He won the Republican nomination, but lost the general election to a conservative Democrat, who portrayed him as a carpetbagger from the Northeast and a representative of his party's moderate wing. Nevertheless, he received 47 percent of the vote in a traditionally Democratic congressional district and learned a lesson he took to heart when he re-entered electoral politics—that of refusing to be outflanked from the right.

There is another theme in Bush's early adulthood. For most of the two decades after he graduated from college, he was conspicuous as the underachieving son of a superachieving father. He drank to excess and had a devil-may-care lifestyle that was marked by periodic alcohol-related scrapes. Gradually, his life came together. In 1977, he married the level-headed librarian Laura Welch. In 1981, he became a father. During the next several years, he experienced a spiritual awakening and became a regular reader of the Bible. Then, after waking up with a fierce hangover on the morning of his fortieth birthday, he swore off alcohol, anchoring his resolve in his Christian faith.

PRE-PRESIDENTIAL POLITICAL CAREER

Oil prices plunged in the 1980s, and Bush's company went in the red. Because of favorable provisions in the tax code, he was able to sell it for \$2.2 million to a firm specializing in takeovers. The sale coincided with the initial stage of his father's efforts to become the 1988 Republican presidential nominee. Bush moved his family to Washington and became codirector, along with the veteran political consultant Lee Atwater, of his father's campaign. Bush's account of

the part he played in the campaign provides insight into his managerial philosophy:

I was a loyalty enforcer and a listening ear. When someone wanted to talk to the candidate but couldn't, I was a good substitute; people felt that if they said something to me, it would probably get to my dad. It did only if I believed it was important for him to know. A candidate needs to focus on the big picture, his message and agenda, and let others worry about most of the details.⁴

After his father's election, Bush returned to Texas, where a promising business opportunity came his way. He was asked to organize an investment group to buy the Texas Rangers, a second-tier major league baseball team that had come on the market. Bush was an ideal fundraiser. He had never struck it rich in the oil business, but he had been successful in raising capital, and it did not hurt that his father was president of the United States. He assembled a consortium of investors that purchased the team, naming him its managing general partner. With new leadership and greater resources, the team prospered, hiring star players and finally making its way to the playoffs. Bush proved to be an excellent front man. He became a popular speaker at meetings of Texas business, civic, and athletic groups, and was regularly seen on television, rooting for the team from the sidelines. Before long he was a state celebrity.

Baseball was Bush's political springboard. It publicized him, demonstrated that he could manage a complex organization, and gave him financial independence. After his father was defeated for re-election in 1992, Bush felt free to resume his own political career. The next year, he entered the running to become the 1994 Republican opponent of Ann Richards, the state's feisty, popular Democratic governor. Assembling a strikingly professional campaign staff, he raised an impressive war chest and handily won his party's nomination.

Bush's next hurdle was the outspoken Richards, who had

famously declared at the 1988 Democratic National Convention that the senior George Bush had been born “with a silver foot in his mouth.” Richards derided the younger Bush, calling him “Shrub.” Rather than replying in kind, Bush ran an issue-driven campaign. Taking as a warning his father’s failure to enunciate a clear policy vision during his time as president, Bush ran on a small number of explicitly stated issues that already had support in the Democratically controlled legislature—greater local control of education, welfare reform, stiffer penalties for juvenile offenders, and limitations on the right to litigate against businesses. He campaigned vigorously, stayed on message, and ignored Richards’s provocations, winning with 53 percent of the two-party vote.

Bush conducted his governorship in a whirl of face-to-face negotiation and persuasion. Even before the election results were in, he forged a bond with the legislature’s most influential Democrat. Upon taking office, he formally proposed the program on which he had campaigned. By the end of the first legislative session, he had advanced that program in dozens of meetings with lawmakers of both parties. All four of his signature measures were enacted. Although he had gone along with compromises in their provisions, Bush declared victory and went on to run for a second term in 1998.⁵ He was re-elected with a record 69 percent of the vote, drawing strongly from such traditionally Democratic groups as women and minorities.

As governor, Bush was sweeping in his acts of delegation. A study of his Texas schedule found that when a report was delivered to him on a tragedy in which a number of Texas college students had died in a bonfire, he read neither the report itself nor its executive summary, leaving it to his aides to highlight a few paragraphs of its conclusions. Even in the sensitive realm of capital punishment, Bush relied heavily on the recommendations of his aides, reducing the time he spent on reviews of death sentences from thirty to fifteen minutes over the course of his governorship. There was a laid-back quality to his management of time as governor, including an extended midday break during which he worked out and had lunch.⁶ It was

by no means obvious from his gubernatorial style that he was burning to seek the presidency.

TO THE WHITE HOUSE

As the 2000 presidential primary season approached, it was evident that the Republican party needed a strong presidential candidate if it was not to go down in defeat as it had in 1992 and 1996. Bush's name recognition and Texas record made him an instant front-runner, a status that enabled him to raise an unprecedented \$90 million in campaign funds. Bush suffered a stinging blow in the New Hampshire primary, when he was defeated by Arizona senator John McCain, but he bounced back, clinching the nomination in March with victories in California, New York, and seven other states. Vice President Al Gore locked in the Democratic nomination the same week, and the two men girded themselves for the longest presidential campaign in American history.

Just as he had in Texas, Bush took pains to enunciate a clear-cut program. As he put it in his campaign autobiography, "The first challenge of leadership . . . is to outline a clear vision and agenda."⁷ Included in his program were proposals for sharply reduced taxes, military modernization, Social Security and health care reform, and measures targeted to disadvantaged groups that fell under what he referred to as "compassionate conservatism." Principal among them were a testing-based educational program designed to identify schools in which students were failing to learn basic skills and to enable their pupils to transfer to good schools, and a "faith-based initiative" that would channel federal funds through the church-based charities that provide many of the social services in high-poverty areas.⁸

Bush said nothing in the campaign that anticipated his administration's major military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq, its commitment to rebuild those nations, and its later initiatives in the Middle East and Africa. Instead, he declared his opposition to a globally expansive foreign policy, criticizing the use of the American

military in “nation building.” The danger of an activist foreign policy, he declared, was that the United States would be disliked for its arrogance, whereas “if we’re a humble nation, . . . they’ll welcome us.”⁹

Whatever the merits of Bush’s campaign proposals, it was widely held that he was likely to be defeated by Gore. The vice president represented the incumbent administration in a period of prosperity, he had far more governmental experience than Bush, and he was a formidable debater. But the economy began to sag, Bush held his own in the presidential debates, and Gore ran an unimpressive campaign. As Election Day approached, the polls showed Bush and Gore running neck and neck. What resulted was one of the closest and most controversial election outcomes in the nation’s history. Gore ran ahead in the popular vote by a fraction of 1 percent, and there was a close division in the all-important electoral vote.

The outcome of the election hinged on Florida, where Bush and Gore were in a dead heat and there was a bewildering array of controversies about the mechanics of the voting. There ensued a thirty-six-day impasse over the Florida vote count, which was broken by a five-to-four ruling of the United States Supreme Court that made Bush the winner. On the evening of December 13, Gore conceded. Within the hour, Bush made his victory speech, doing so in the chamber of the Texas House of Representatives. He had chosen that venue, he explained, “because it has been home to bipartisan cooperation,” adding that “the spirit of cooperation we have seen in this hall is what is needed in Washington, D.C.”¹⁰

A B L A N D B E G I N N I N G

Given the intensely controversial conclusion of the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush might have been expected to assume the presidency in a firestorm of contention. In fact, the political system’s healing processes had set in. The media coverage of Bush’s inauguration focused on the dignified pomp of the occasion, not the legitimacy of the process that led up to it. Bush seemed at ease as he took the oath

of office, and the fourteen-minute inaugural address written by his talented speech writer Michael Gerson was free of apologetics.

The address was widely praised for its eloquence. Taking its theme from Bush's frequent campaign references to "compassion," it declared that "the ambitions of some Americans are limited by failing schools and hidden prejudice and the circumstances of their birth," promising to "reclaim America's schools, before ignorance and apathy claim more young lives." The speech enumerated the issues on which Bush campaigned, and went on to quote a rhetorical question asked of Thomas Jefferson by one of his contemporaries during the dark days of the American Revolution: "Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?" It concluded with the questioner's assertion that "an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm."¹¹

The effect of this moving imagery was blunted by Bush's delivery, which lacked force and was further weakened by his propensity to stumble over words and pause in mid-phrase rather than at logical breaking points. By the time Bush arrived at the address's peroration, his halting presentation made it obvious that he was reading a script, rather than speaking in a voice that was natural to him. Bush was more fluent on unscripted occasions, but then there was the risk that his lack of experience would lead him to misspeak, as he did in an April 26, 2001, interview in which he stated that the United States was committed to do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan from attack by the People's Republic of China. In fact, it had long been American policy to remain vague about how to respond to such a contingency, and Bush had not intended to signal a policy departure. The State Department was compelled to engage in damage control, saying that Bush had meant only to highlight the seriousness with which the United States took its relationship with Taiwan.¹²

There was another problem with Bush's early public communications—their infrequency. Bush never addressed the nation from the Oval Office until the night of September 11, 2001. He never convened a full-fledged, prime-time news conference until a month after

that date. He periodically fielded questions from reporters, but did so in hastily convened exchanges with the White House press pool, avoiding pre-announced conferences in which he would have faced the heavyweights of the media. Bush also put little emphasis on his capacity as the nation's symbolic leader. Thus, he made no statement to the nation when the city of Cincinnati was wracked with racial unrest, and he did not join in the welcoming ceremony for the crew of a reconnaissance plane that had been held captive in China for eleven days. Three months into the Bush presidency, the *Washington Post's* David Broder devoted a column to Bush's neglect of the bully pulpit, saying that the American people had been left without a "clear definition" of their new leader.¹³

Yet in other respects Bush exhibited impressive strengths—for instance, in organizing his presidency and advancing his program. He made his most significant organizational choice—even before the Republican National Convention made him his party's official nominee—by selecting as his running mate the Washington-wise, strategically shrewd Dick Cheney, someone who would compensate for his own lack of national experience rather than serving mainly to balance the ticket or share the burdens of campaigning.

With Cheney as a source of advice, Bush appointed an experienced White House staff and cabinet, not waiting until the resolution of the Florida electoral dispute to engage in transition planning. Bush's appointees included veterans of the Ford, Reagan, and first Bush presidencies, as well as two of his longtime Texas aides, political strategist Karl Rove and communications adviser Karen Hughes. His national security team was particularly well seasoned: Secretary of State Colin Powell had been chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and national security adviser, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had served before in the same capacity, and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice had been a White House foreign policy adviser.

In advancing his legislative agenda, Bush had notable successes not only by practicing the bipartisanship that he lauded in his victory speech, but also by dint of rigorous partisanship. On the bipar-

tisan front, Bush began his presidency by launching what the media referred to as a “charm offensive,” meeting with a wide range of Democrats. He put particular effort into wooing Massachusetts senator Edward Kennedy, whose cooperation was necessary to pass Bush’s education bill, by inviting the Kennedy family to the White House for a screening of a film on John F. Kennedy’s handling of the Cuban missile crisis and by naming the Justice Department building for Robert Kennedy. By the end of the year, Congress enacted an education bill with provisions favored by legislators on both sides of the aisle. In praising the outcome, Kennedy declared, “President Bush was there every step of the way.”¹⁴

But earlier in the year, Bush had concentrated single-mindedly on mobilizing the congressional Republicans and a handful of Democrats to enact a record tax cut. Four months into his presidency, however, his administration’s hard-edged partisanship boomeranged. On May 24, Vermont senator James Jeffords, a moderate Republican, announced that he was resigning from his party. Bush and the Republican congressional leaders had sought to punish the Vermont senator for voting for a smaller tax reduction than Bush had called for by eliminating a dairy program that was vital to his state. Jeffords’s defection placed the Democrats in control of the closely divided Senate.

By the time of the fateful events of September 11, 2001, there had been periodic signs that Bush was growing into the job. In the episode in which an American reconnaissance aircraft was forced down by China, for example, his first response had been to issue a peremptory demand that the plane be returned and the crew released, but he backed off and remained patient while negotiations went on to release the crew. And in August, he gave a thoughtful address to the nation on the complex and controversial issue of government funding of embryonic stem-cell research, making it evident that he had begun to recognize the importance of rhetoric in presidential leadership. Still, there was a widespread view in the political community that he was not up to the demands of the nation’s highest office.

TERROR AND TRANSFORMATION

Bush was visiting a Sarasota, Florida, elementary school to promote his administration's "No Child Left Behind" education bill on the morning of September 11, 2001, when he was informed that an airliner had crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. When a second airliner flew into the South Tower fifteen minutes later, it became evident that the first collision had been no accident. By mid-morning, a third plane crashed into the Pentagon, and the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed. Before leaving the school, Bush read a statement declaring that "terrorism against our nation will not stand."¹⁵

Because there was concern that he would be targeted by terrorists, Bush was flown to an air force base in Louisiana, where he made another public statement, and then to the control center of the Strategic Air Command in Nebraska, where he presided by electronic means over a meeting of the National Security Council. At the meeting the director of the Central Intelligence Agency reported that the attacks were almost certainly the work of al-Qaeda, an Afghanistan-based terrorist organization that had been behind other acts of terrorism directed at the United States. Bush then returned to the White House, where he addressed the nation from the Oval Office, asserting that "these acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat[,] but they have failed," and that the United States would "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."¹⁶

In the chaotic first day of the episode, Bush came across as less than completely self-assured. He read his statements from Florida and Louisiana mechanically and did not seem fully at ease as he delivered his September 11 address to the nation. He then underwent a transformation. On September 14, he delivered a deeply emotional tribute to the victims of the terrorist attacks at a memorial service at Washington's National Cathedral. He then flew to New York City, where he inspected the wreckage of the World Trade Center, using a bullhorn to address the rescue workers. When members of the audi-

ence shouted that they could not hear him, Bush replied, “I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you[,] and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!”¹⁷

In the weeks that followed, Bush became a compelling public presence. On September 20, he made a forceful presentation to Congress, giving the Taliban regime in Afghanistan an ultimatum to turn over the al-Qaeda leadership to the United States and close down its terrorist camps. Three weeks later, he gave a similarly effective address to the United Nations. Most impressive was his October 11 prime-time news conference in the East Room of the White House. Responding in depth to questions, he radiated a sense of composure and made evident his detailed mastery of what his administration had begun to refer to as the War on Terror.

Just as Bush’s conduct of his responsibilities improved dramatically, so too did the American public’s ratings of his job performance, which underwent a near perpendicular spike in the aftermath of September 11. In a Gallup Poll fielded the week before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Bush’s approval level was at low ebb for his presidency—51 percent. Two weeks later, it had soared to 90 percent, the record high in Gallup presidential approval ratings.

Meanwhile, members of the political community formed markedly more positive views of Bush’s leadership qualities. Before September 11, even a good number of his supporters had not been persuaded that he was up to his responsibilities. Thereafter, even many of his critics concluded that he had been underestimated, a view that extended to other nations. On October 20, for example, a columnist for the influential *Frankfurter Allgemeine* commented that Bush had grown into his job “before our eyes,” comparing him to another president who rose to the demands of his times following an unpromising start—Harry S. Truman.¹⁸

One reason Bush improved his mastery of policy in the weeks following September 11 was the depth of his immersion in policy deliberations. In the month between the bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and his bravura October 11 press

conference, Bush met with his NSC twenty-four times. These meetings, moreover, were far from pro forma. In the September 12 meeting, for example, there was a sharp debate that foreshadowed the 2003 war in Iraq. Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld advocated attacking not just al-Qaeda, but also nations they viewed as sponsors of terrorism, notably Iraq. Secretary of State Powell disagreed, however, arguing that the American people would readily back action against the terrorists linked to the September 11 attacks, but would be puzzled by a proposal to attack Iraq. Bush put a halt to the debate, indicating that this was not the time to resolve that issue.¹⁹

In early October, the Afghan regime let it be known that it would not surrender the al-Qaeda leadership, and the United States and its ally Great Britain began an intensive bombing campaign. Later in the month, U.S. Special Forces entered Afghanistan and began to provide military support to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. By November 13, the Northern Alliance had occupied the Afghan capital of Kabul, and in early December, the last major Taliban stronghold surrendered. When the Gallup organization polled the public at the end of December, Bush's approval level was a towering 86 percent.

IRAQ AND THE ECONOMY

Bush had postponed a decision on whether to target Iraq in the War on Terror in the September 12, 2001, NSC meeting, but Iraq came into his cross-hairs in his January 2002 State of the Union address. Anticipating the doctrine of preemption that his administration would formally promulgate later in the year, Bush declared that he would not “wait on events” while “the world’s most destructive weapons” were acquired by “the world’s most dangerous regimes.” One such regime, he specified, was Iraq, which he grouped with Iran and North Korea in what he described as an “axis of evil.”²⁰

Bush's speech sent out shock waves. Whereas his response to

September 11 had been favorably received, there was widespread criticism at home and abroad of his axis-of-evil locution. Some of it was prompted by a belief that Bush had lumped together nations that were very different in terms of whether and to what extent they posed threats; some was directed at the term “evil,” which led critics to worry about whether the president’s intense personal commitment to evangelical Christianity was leading him to advance an inappropriately moralistic foreign policy.

Despite the attention Bush’s assertions about the global situation received, a good half of his address was devoted to his domestic program. “We have clear priorities,” he declared, “and we must act at home with the same purpose and resolve we have shown overseas.”²¹ The actions he proposed included reform of Social Security, Medicare, and welfare, and passage of legislation designed to advance free trade and reduce the nation’s reliance on oil imports. Above all, Bush promoted his preferred policy for stimulating the economy—further tax reduction. Acknowledging that the economy was in a recession, he declared that the “way out” was to provide “tax relief so people have more money to spend,” invoking the controversial “supply-side” economic theory that his father had once derided as “voodoo economics.”

Bush’s address presaged two major preoccupations of the second and third years of his presidency: his efforts to come to terms with Iraq and stimulate the sluggish economy. Bush himself was sufficiently dissatisfied with his administration’s performance on the economic front to accept the resignations of his secretary of the treasury and top economic adviser in December 2002. But neither his displeasure with his advisers nor the continuing weaknesses in the economy shook his confidence in the merits of reducing taxes, and by the spring of 2003 he had signed the third of the major tax cuts sponsored by his administration. In so doing, he was undeterred by the contention of budgetary specialists that he was depriving the government of the revenues that would be needed later in the decade to pay for the retirement needs of the first wave of the post–World War II baby boom generation.

Bush's reference to Iraq was the prelude to a procession of actions directed at Saddam Hussein's regime. Diplomacy prevailed in the fall of 2002, when the administration persuaded the United Nations Security Council to enact a resolution insisting that Iraq destroy any weapons of mass destruction it might have and admit United Nations inspectors to establish that it had done so. Early the following year, the administration turned to military action, attempting without success to persuade the Security Council to authorize the use of force on the grounds that Iraq had failed to comply with the U.N. demand. Then, in the face of substantial opposition at home and abroad, it launched an invasion of Iraq, proceeding with Great Britain as its principal ally.

The Anglo-American assault on Iraq began on March 20, 2003; on April 6 American troops took control of Baghdad, and on May 1 Bush announced the end of "major combat operations."²² But the situation in Iraq remained highly unsettled, and the number of American troops killed in the guerilla action that followed Bush's declaration exceeded the number who died during the period of "major" fighting by the end of the summer of 2003. Meanwhile, the prospect for full economic recovery remained uncertain, and the American public's assessment of Bush's performance, which had surged during the war in Iraq, receded. Whatever the fate of his presidency, however, it was evident that George W. Bush had molded a distinctive and often strikingly effective leadership style.

SIGNIFICANCE

Public Communication In the first eight months of his presidency, Bush seemed insensitive to the importance of public communication in presidential leadership. He appeared reluctant to address the public; when he did so, his delivery was unpersuasive; and when he was unscripted, was error-prone. In the wake of the acts of terror of September 11, 2001, Bush became a rhetorical activist, addressing the public regularly, forcefully, and sometimes eloquently and handling himself far more effectively in extemporaneous contexts.

As the immediacy of the crisis receded, Bush sometimes slipped into his former plodding manner, especially when he read routine remarks, but he remained effective in major addresses. Meanwhile, his ad-lib communications continued to be more effective than they had been in the pre-9/11 period. Bush also developed a punchy, vernacular style of stump speaking that undoubtedly contributes to his sustained high approval ratings.

There are distinct limitations to Bush's ability to win support, for reasons that fall as much under the heading of "vision" as "public communication." His rhetorical manner, coupled with the content of those of his messages in which he asserts his determination to take such controversial actions as the intervention in Iraq, has produced a visceral aversion toward him for many American liberals, an antipathy that is widely shared elsewhere in the world. In a sense, Bush has proven to be a mirror image of Bill Clinton, who was as passionately disliked by some of Bush's most fervent supporters and viewed very favorably by many of his opponents.

Organizational Capacity Organizational leadership is one of the strengths of the nation's first MBA president. Bush has chosen strong associates; he excels at rallying his subordinates; and he encourages diversity of advice. Because avoiding public disagreement is a watchword of the Bush administration, its deliberative processes are not well documented. What evidence there is points to a presidency in which bureaucratic politics simmer beneath the surface, most notably in foreign affairs, where there has been a scarcely veiled conflict between the supporters of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Powell. An unknown in the George W. Bush adviser system is the extent to which the prudent George H. W. Bush provides his son with off-the-record advice. The senior Bush has commented that "historians will be very interested" in what he and the younger Bush discuss, but "they've got to wait."²³

Preliminary insights into the inner workings of the Bush presidency can be gained from Bob Woodward's account of the administration's post-September 11 decision making. Woodward reports,

for example, that Powell and Rumsfeld expressed their disagreements more sharply at meetings from which Bush was absent than in those at which he was present, which suggests that Bush may sometimes be shielded from instructive debate. Woodward also describes instances on August 5 and September 2, 2002, in which Powell arranged to meet privately with Bush and national security adviser Rice in order to register his disagreement with the hawkish proposals of Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney.²⁴ There was a similar instance on September 2, 2003, in which Powell circumvented the administration's hawks by meeting with Bush to make the case for seeking a United Nations-sanctioned military force in Iraq, having established that he had the agreement of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.²⁵ The shortcoming of policy making by end run is that it places a premium on an adviser's bureaucratic skills and not just the merits of his or her recommendations.

Such practices would have been anathema to the modern president who was most gifted at organizational leadership, Dwight Eisenhower. "I know of only one way in which you can be sure you have done your best to make a wise decision," the former supreme allied commander once remarked: "That is to get all of the responsible policy makers with their different viewpoints in front of you, and listen to them debate. I do not believe in bringing them in one at a time, and therefore being more impressed by the most recent one you hear than the earlier ones."²⁶

Political Skill Much like his Texas predecessors Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson, the congenitally gregarious George W. Bush is a political natural, especially when it comes to face-to-face politics. It is sometimes argued that Bush tends to view politics in rigidly black-and-white terms, but this is belied by the flexibility of his political tactics. Thus he worked easily with the Democratic majority in the Texas legislature during his governorship, but in Washington alternated between rigorous partisanship and cross-party coalition building as circumstances permitted.

Unlike Rayburn and Johnson, Bush is not a creature of Wash-

ington politics, but he has compensated for that limitation by appointing highly experienced subordinates, including the same director of congressional relations that his father had employed. Still, Bush and his aides have sometimes been less than sure-footed in the international arena. This was particularly evident in the lead-up to the Iraq war, when the Bush administration relied on shifting arguments and blatant economic inducements in its unsuccessful efforts to win broad support for immediate military action.

Vision When it comes to the “vision thing,” George W. Bush is the virtual antithesis of his highly pragmatic father, whom he has faulted for not building on the momentum of victory in the 1991 Gulf War to rack up domestic accomplishments on which he could campaign for re-election. George W. Bush *does* have the “vision thing,” not because he is an aficionado of policy, but because he holds that if a leader does not set his own goals, others will set them for him. The question in the case of the younger Bush is the viability of his vision, whether that of relying on tax cuts to stimulate the economy or of mounting a war in Iraq in the face of domestic and international opposition. The ultimate result of these policies remains to be seen.

Cognitive Style Bush’s ostensible cognitive failings are a staple of late-night television humor, but it is evident from his remarks on matters that engage him that he has ample native intelligence. In the words of one member of Congress, who remarked on Bush’s far greater mastery of policy after September 11, “He’s as smart as he wants to be.”²⁷ To the extent that Bush’s presidential performance suffers from his cognitive style, his problem may be that of lacking intellectual curiosity, a shortcoming that blunts a president’s sensitivity to emerging issues.

There also are cognitive implications to Bush’s management style, which leads him to rely heavily on subordinates to structure his options. Having been a front man in his business career, his tendency is to do better at outlining his administration’s positions than

elucidating their subtleties. In this he contrasts with a leader with whom he periodically shares a podium, British prime minister Tony Blair. At a March 27, 2003, joint “press availability,” for example, Bush and Blair responded to questions about how long the fighting in Iraq would continue. Bush was laconic and uninformative, contenting himself with such assertions as “however long it takes,” whereas Blair was expansive and analytic, reviewing the roots of the conflict, its global ramifications, and its likely aftermath. All told, Blair rather than Bush provided a model of the intellectual suppleness one might hope for in the American chief executive.²⁸

Emotional Intelligence By the litmus of emotional intelligence, the heavy-drinking, young George W. Bush was too volatile and unreliable to be a promising prospect for a responsible public position. It would not be surprising if a man who had abused alcohol until early middle age and had abruptly gone on the wagon proved to be an emotional tinder box, but Bush’s pre-presidential job and his early presidency were not marred by emotional excesses. Woodward’s investigation is again instructive. As it turns out, there are no episodes reported in *Bush at War* in which Bush is shown to have acted out of uncontrolled passion. Indeed, Bush explained that he expected national security adviser Rice “to take the edge off” any such impulses on his part, adding that “she’s good at that.”²⁹ In the case of Iraq, an extensive interview granted to NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw not long after the fall of Baghdad is illuminating. Bush came across as thoughtful and good humored, neither boasting at the rapidity of the military victory nor revealing defensiveness in the face of his administration’s many critics. In short, whatever the merits of his actions, his emotions appear to have been well in hand.