THE LEADERSHIP STYLE OF GEORGE W. BUSH

Fred I. Greenstein
Princeton University

May 27, 2003

Copyright © 2003 by Fred I. Greenstein

THE LEADERSHIP STYLE OF GEORGE W. BUSH

George W. Bush is the twelfth in the sequence of White House incumbents of the period that began with the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the course of FDR’s three terms and one month in office, the United States became a nascent welfare state and global superpower, thus vastly increasing the responsibilities of its chief executive. Meanwhile, the presidency itself underwent a metamorphosis: the president began to take on much of the traditional Congressional function of setting the nation’s policy agenda, the presidency acquired major staff resources in the form of the Executive Office of the Presidency, and the persona of the occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue became a ubiquitous presence in the nation and the world, a development that was made possible by advances in the technology of modern mass communication.

Such is the institution George W. Bush has inherited from his eleven modern predecessors. What has he added to its legacy? What is his leadership style, and how has it evolved during his unexpectedly eventful presidency? How successful has it been? In what follows I provide a basis for exploring these questions by reviewing Bush’s formative years, political ascent, and early presidency. I then characterize his political style in terms of the categories I have employed elsewhere for studying presidential leadership – emotional intelligence, cognitive style, effectiveness as a public communicator, organizational capacity, political skill, and policy vision. I conclude with a paradoxical observation about how the presidency of George W. Bush could come to resemble the otherwise strikingly different presidency of his father.¹

-2-
FORMATIVE YEARS

George W. Bush was born on July 6, 1946, in New Haven, Connecticut, where his war hero father was a Yale undergraduate. 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 was mild-mannered and avoided confrontation, he has the brashness and directness of a typical Texan.

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 at a career stage in which he was frequently away from home on business, and the son sought to be his mother’s consoler. He did so by playing the clown, developing the bantering manner that is one of his adult hallmarks.

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 a lackluster student in prep school and college, but was conspicuous for his social skills and popularity. At Andover, he became the football team’s head cheerleader and “high commissioner” of a tongue-in-cheek stick-ball 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 served 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 anti-war 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 camaraderie and ballyhoo 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 reentered 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 under-achieving son of a super-achieving
father. He drank to excess and had a devil-may-care life style 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 oil exploration company went deeply 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 co-director, 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 as 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.5

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 fund raiser. 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 side-lines. 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 reelection 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 highly 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 convention that the senior George Bush was 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 a degree of 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, staying on message, and ignoring Richards’ provocations, winning with 53 percent of the two-party vote.

Bush conducted his governorship in a whirl of face-to-face communication and give and take. 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 over one hundred 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. He was reelected 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 he was delivered a lengthy report on a tragedy in which a number of Texas A&M students were killed in a bonfire, he read neither the report 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 30 to 15 minutes in the course of his governorship. There was a laid-back quality to his management of this time as governor,
including an extended mid-day break during which he worked out and had lunch. It was by no means obvious that he would seek higher office.

TO THE WHITE HOUSE

As the 2000 presidential primary season approached, the Republican party’s king-makers were acutely aware that their party needed a strong presidential candidate if it was not to go down to defeat as it had in 1992 and 1996. Bush’s name recognition and electoral record in Texas made him an instant front-runner, a status that enabled him to raise a record $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 rebounded, 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 candidates girded themselves for the longest presidential campaign in American history.

As he had in his quest for the Texas governorship, Bush campaigned on a small number of tirelessly reiterated issues, including proposals for lower taxes and education, health, and social security reforms. His policies, he asserted, reflected his commitment “compassionate conservatism.” He was an economic conservative, he explained, holding that cutting taxes fosters economic growth, but he recognized that the benefits of conservative economic policies could not be assured to reach all groups in society. He therefore favored continuing such government welfare programs as Medicaid and instituting new programs designed to help the disadvantaged, for example, by enabling students in “failing schools” to attend good schools and making it possible for federal funds to be distributed by church-based charities.

Bush said nothing in the campaign that anticipated his administration’s major military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq, much less its commitment to rebuild those nations.
economically and politically. Indeed, he declared his opposition to a globally expansive foreign policy, criticizing the use of the American military in “nation building.” The danger of an assertive foreign policy, he asserted, was that the United States would be disliked for its arrogance, whereas “if we are a humble nation, they’ll welcome us.” 9

Whatever the electoral appeal of Bush’s policies, it was widely held that he was unlikely to defeat 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 uninspiring campaign. As election day approached, the public opinion polls showed Bush and Gore to be 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 one percent, and the all-important electoral vote was also a near tie.

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 or 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 BLAND BEGINNING

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 his 14-minute inaugural address, the work of 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 many 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 went on enumerate the issues on which Bush campaigned: Social Security and Medicare reform, tax reduction and strengthening the nation’s military defenses. Its final passage began with 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 the whirlwind and directs this storm.”

Despite the moving imagery of Bush’s address, its effect left much to be desired. Bush’s delivery lacked dramatic force and was weakened by his propensity to stumble over words and pause in mid-phrase instead of 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 his own voice. Bush was more fluent on unscripted occasions, but then there was the risk that his lack of national experience would lead him to misspeak, as he did in an April 26 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 it would 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 only meant to highlight the seriousness with which the
United States took its relationship with Taiwan.¹¹

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 press conference until a month after that date. He periodically responded to questions from reporters, but did so in snap exchanges with the White House press pool, avoiding pre-announced press conferences in which he would have faced the heavyweights of the media. Bush also took a minimalist approach to communicating with the public on occasions when presidents often speak out 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 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 it had left the American people without a “clear definition” of their new leader.¹²

Yet in other respects Bush exhibited impressive strengths – for example, in organizing his presidency and advancing his program. Bush made his most important organizational choice even before he became his party’s official nominee in the person of the Washington-wise, strategically shrewd Dick Cheney, opting for a running mate who would compensate for his own lack of national experience rather than one who would serve 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 first Bush, Reagan, and Ford presidencies, and two of Bush’s longtime Texas aides, political strategist Karl Rove and communications advisor Karen Hughes. His national security team was particularly well seasoned: the secretary of state (Colin Powell) had been chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and national security advisor, the secretary of defense (Donald Rumsfeld) had previously held the same position, and the national security adviser (Condoleezza Rice) had been a White House foreign policy advisor.

The political skill the Bush team displayed in promoting its legislative agenda is explored by the chapters in this volume of Charles Jones and John Fortier and Norman Ornstein. Suffice it to say that Bush and his associates had notable successes not only by practicing the bipartisanship that Bush lauded in his victory speech but also by dint of rigorous partisanship. On the bipartisan 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, inviting the Kennedy family to the White House for a screening of a film on John F. Kennedy’s handling on the Cuban Missile Crisis and 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.”

But earlier in the year, Bush had focused single-mindedly on mobilizing the Congressional Republicans and a handful of Democrats to enact his proposed tax reduction. Here too, he was open to compromise, first pushing for the $1.6 trillion cut he had requested and then settling for $1.35 trillion. Four months into the Bush presidency, however, the 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 Jeffords for voting for a smaller tax reduction that Bush 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.

On the eve of the fateful events of September 11, there was a widespread view in the political community that Bush was out of his depth in the presidency. Still, there were signs that he was growing into the job. In the episode in which an American reconnaissance aircraft was forced down by China, for example, Bush’s first response had been to issue a peremptory demand that the plane be returned and the crew released. He then backed off, remaining patient while negotiations went on to release the crew. And in August, he gave a thoughtful address to the nation on the complexly controversial issue of funding of embryonic stem-cell research, making it evident that he had begun to recognize the importance of the teaching and preaching side of presidential leadership. Nevertheless the second Bush presidency was not off to an auspicious start.

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, when he was informed that an airliner had collided into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. When a second airliner collided into the South Tower fifteen minutes later, it became evident that the first collision was 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.”

-13-
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 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, declaring that the attacks were “acts of war,” that there “would be a monumental struggle between good and evil” in which “good will prevail,” and that the United States would “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”

In the chaotic first day of the episode, Bush came across as less than fully 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. But then he underwent a transformation. On September 14, he delivered a moving 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 audience 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!”

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 the al Qaeda leadership over to the United States and close down its terrorist camps. Three weeks later, he gave a similarly strong 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 come to call the War on Terror.

Just as Bush’s conduct of his responsibilities improved dramatically, so too did the American public’s response to him. There can be few more compelling graphic representations of quantitative data than Figure One of Richard Brody’s chapter in this book, which shows a near perpendicular spike in the public’s approval of Bush in the aftermath of September 11. In a Gallup survey 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 were not 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 in the influential Frankfurter Allgemeine commented that Bush had grown into his job “before our eyes,” comparing him to another president who rose to meet the demands of his times after an unpromising start – Harry S. Truman.14

One reason why 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 National Security Council 24 times.15 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
advocating attacking not just the al Qaeda, but also states that sponsor terrorism, notably Iraq. Secretary of State Powell stated his disagreement, 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.

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 extensive bombing campaign. Later in the month, U.S. Special Forces entered Afghanistan and began to provide support to the military forces of 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.

**ON TO IRAQ**

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 dangerous weapons” were acquired by “the world’s most dangerous regimes.” One such regime, he specified, was Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which he grouped with Iran and North Korea in what he referred to as an “axis of evil.”

Bush’s address sent out shock waves. Whereas his rhetoric and actions in 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 whether and to what extent they posed threats; some was
directed at the usage “evil,” which led critics to worry about whether the president’s private
commitment to evangelical Christianity was leading him advance an inappropriately moralistic
public 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 abroad.” The actions he
proposed included authority for the president to take initiatives to promote free trade, policies
designed to reduce the nation’s reliance on foreign oil imports, and reform of Social Security,
Medicare, and welfare. Above all, Bush promoted his signature policy for stimulating the
economy – further tax reduction. Acknowledging that the economy was in recession, Bush
declared that the “way out” was to provide “tax relief so people have more money to spend.” In
short, he invoked the controversial “supply-side” economic theory that had informed the huge
tax cut of Ronald Reagan’s first year in the White House, a doctrine that his father had once
derided as “voodoo economics” for its premise that tax cuts pay for themselves by stimulating
economic growth.

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 to stimulate the sluggish economy. These
matters are dealt with in detail in the chapters in this volume on national security and budgetary
policy by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsey and Allen Schick, both of which are critical of the
administration’s performance. Bush himself was sufficiently dissatisfied on the economic front
to accept the resignations of his secretary of the treasury and top economic advisor in December
2002. Any assessment of his administration’s international performance with respect to Iraq would have to examine such questions as whether the administration gave diplomacy and inspections a fair shake before embarking on military action, whether it could have taken such action without antagonizing so much of the world, and whether the victory in Iraq will be negated by the turbulent conditions that followed the war. But whatever the future has in store for George W. Bush, he has proved to have a highly distinctive, and often impressively effective, political style.

THE ELEMENTS OF A POLITICAL STYLE

Emotional intelligence. “Emotional intelligence” has come into currency as a summary term for the many ways in which emotional flaws can undermine the actions of even the most cognitively gifted individual. No quality could be more important in the custodian of the most potentially lethal military force in human history. To be emotionally intelligent a president need not be a paragon of mental health. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, left much to be desired as husband and father, but there was a superb fit between his emotions and the demands he faced as president. What is critical for a president’s emotional intelligence is that his (and someday her) public actions not be distorted by uncontrolled passions.

By this litmus, 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 abused alcohol until early middle age and abruptly went on the wagon proved to be an emotional tinder box, but Bush’s performance as a private sector executive and governor of Texas was not marred by emotional excesses, he weathered the 2000 presidential campaign, including his setback in New Hampshire, with seeming equanimity, and held up well in the
extended deadlock over the election outcome.

Bush also appears to have been unruffled by the April 2001 min-crisis over the forcing down of an American reconnaissance by China, but the sterner test is his performance in the genuine national security crises of the period after 9/11. Here again he appears to have had his emotions well in hand. There are no instances in which Bush is described as acting on uncontrolled impulse in Bob Woodward’s in depth account of his administration’s decision making on Afghanistan. Indeed, Bush explained to Woodward that it was in his nature to be “fiery” in the sense of wanting to take an action before the conditions were ripe, but that he relied on national security advisor Rice’s to “take the edge off” such impulses, adding that “she’s good at that.”17 Insight into how Bush’s emotions figured in the war in Iraq is provided by a lengthy interview he granted to NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw, just after the conclusion of the fighting. Whereas Bush might have been expected to have been defensive about the widespread criticism of his administration’s action or boastful about the rapidity of the military victor, he was neither. Instead, he was good-humored and reflective, expressing regret that the use of force had been necessary, but insisting that inaction would have been more costly. Whatever the merits of his actions, they appeared to be those of a man who was at peace with himself.18

Consider by way of contrast the needlessly confrontational actions of Richard Nixon in the course of his efforts to terminate the American military involvement in Vietnam in the early 1970s. At one point, Nixon decided to buy time for South Vietnam by ordering an American military strike against a concentration of communist forces on the Cambodian side of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Spurning advice that the action be reported by the Pentagon as a matter of military
routine, Nixon announced it himself in a truculent speech from the Oval Office. In so doing, he triggered an intense nationwide wave of anti-war protest, creating a political climate that much complicated his effort to extricate the United States from Vietnam.

**Cognitive style.** Late-night television comedy notwithstanding, Bush has ample native intelligence. But he appears never to have been marked by intellectual curiosity or drawn to the play of ideas. Moreover, as the nation’s first MBA chief executive, he favors a corporate leadership model in which he relies on his subordinates to structure his options. As we have seen, Bush was often remote from specifics as governor of Texas and seemed ill-informed in the early months of his presidency. After September 11, however, there was a dramatic increase in his mastery of the content of his administration’s policies, a development that has been documented in interviews with members of Congress who are in regular contact with Bush. As one of them put it, “He’s as smart as he wants to be.”

It is possible, however, to be well informed without being well equipped to reason clearly about the complex tradeoffs presidents typically have to make. Judging from his extemporaneous statements, Bush is better at enunciating the broad outlines of his administration’s positions than at elucidating their subtleties. In this he contrasts with a statesman with whom he periodically shares a podium, British Prime Minister Tony Blair. At a March 25, 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
Effectiveness as a public communicator. As we have seen, early in his presidency was a flawed public speaker and seemed not to recognize the rhetorical potentialities of the presidency. Within days after 9/11, however, he was presiding over a teaching and preaching presidency, addressing the public regularly and with force, effectiveness, and even eloquence. Thereafter he has sometimes slipped into the plodding mode of delivery that marked his inaugural address, especially when he reads routine prepared remarks. But he now is quite effective in prepared addresses for which he had rehearsed, and on unscripted occasions he has come to employ a punchy vernacular manner that has serves him with most Americans, but is more effective at home than abroad.

Organizational capacity. Organizational leadership is one the strengths of the nation’s first MBA president. Bush has chosen strong associates; he is a natural when it comes to rallying his subordinates; and he encourages diversity of advice. Because avoiding public disagreement is a watchword of the Bush administration, the precise dynamics of its deliberative processes are not well documented, despite the only partially veiled conflict between Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Powell and each of their supporters.

Woodward’s account of the administration’s post-9/11 decision making points to two respects in which Bush’s deliberative processes leave something to be desired. Woodward reports that Powell and Rumsfeld expressed their differences more sharply in the meetings from which Bush was absent than those in which he was present, which suggests that Bush may sometimes be shielded from potentially valuable debate. Woodward also describes an instance in which Powell arranged to meet privately with Bush and national security advisor Rice in order to
register his disagreement with the hawkish proposals of Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney.\textsuperscript{21} When subordinates advance policies by making end runs on their colleagues, the advice a president gets tends to be a function of his advisors’ bureaucratic skills, rather than the intrinsic merit of their 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 allied supreme 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 earlier ones.” \textsuperscript{22}

**Political skill.** The congenitally gregarious George W. Bush resembles his fellow Texan Lyndon Johnson in his aptitude for personal politics. As he did in Texas, Bush sometimes has worked effectively on both sides of the aisle. However, there has been a hard edge to his administration’s partisanship in Washington that was not evident in Texas, as is shown in the chapter in this volume by John Fortier and Norman Ornstein. Moreover, Bush and his highly professional aides have sometimes been less sure-footed in the international than the domestic arena. This was particularly evident in the lead-up to the Iraq war, when the Bush administration failed to make a case for the urgency of immediate military action and wound up going to war in the face of the opposition of a number of the nation’s traditional allies.

**Policy vision.** The topic of policy vision permits a concluding observation about an unlikely parallel between George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush. The senior Bush was famously indifferent to “the vision thing.” The younger Bush has faulted his father for failing to
enunciate clear goals for his presidency and not building on the momentum of victory in the 1991 Gulf War to rack up domestic accomplishments on which he could campaign for reelection. George W. Bush does have the “vision thing,” not because he is an afficionado of policy, but because he holds that if a leader does not set his own goals, others will set them for him..

Therein lies a potential irony. The senior Bush suffered politically from the lack of vision. If the supply-side remedy of tax cuts fails to alleviate the nation’s economic woes or there is a dire aftermath to victory on the Iraq war, the junior Bush may prove to suffer because of his policy vision.


4. A manner that is engagingly captured in the 2002 HBO documentary *Journeys With George*.


15. A list of the post-September 11 NSC meetings can be found in the index of Woodward’s *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 367. In the early period of the Iraq war, Bush was receiving three hours a day of briefings. Elisabeth Bumiller, “President, No Matter Where, Keeps Battlefield Close,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2003. See also, Judy Keene


