I believe the President’s job is to confront problems, not to pass them on to future Presidents and future generations. That’s the job of a leader. That’s how I have led, and that’s how I will continue to lead.


What does George W. Bush’s style of presidential leadership—his orientation to office and his framing, ordering, and taking of decisions—disclose about his presidency? I approach the question through a simplified version of Richard Neustadt’s framework for the analysis of presidential leadership by consideration of his authority, professional reputation, sense of purpose, and temperament. Documentary records that are relevant and available are thin. Accordingly, we work with what we have: the president’s public statements, which are available electronically from the American Presidency Project Web site (hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara); newspapers and magazines; the memoirs of participants; the records of journalists; and secondary academic literature.

Neustadt argues that a president’s “effective influence,” or his “power,” derives from three related sources. The first comprises the president’s bargaining advantages that offer the possibility of his persuading others in the so-called Washington community that what he wants them to do is what they ought in any case to do for their own reasons. The second concerns the expectations that those people have about his capacities and his will to use the various advantages that they believe him to have. And the third entails those people’s judgments of how voters regard him and of how they may regard their legislators if they do what he wants. Among the advantages that Neustadt argues that a president has are his “human qualities,” a “sense of purpose,” and a “feel for power,” conditioned by sources of “confidence, itself fashioned from experience and temperament.”"
Neustadt distinguished between formal “powers” (authority), “professional reputation” within the Washington Community of presidency watchers, and “prestige” or public support. He defined power as “personal influence of an effective sort on governmental action,” differentiating it from the “formal ‘powers’ vested in the Presidency” by constitution, law, or custom. He insisted upon the need to be “meticulous about distinguishing personal influence from constituted authority,” and considered the presidency’s limitations in authority so pronounced that “weak” was its fundamental and primary descriptor.

Would Neustadt have drawn an inference comparably broad or strong had he or a successor analyst within his intellectual tradition relied for evidence on the presidential style of President George W. Bush? Can the claim that the presidency is “weak in authority” be sustained in the early twenty-first century? President Bush pressed relentlessly to surmount not just constitutional constraints upon executive authority’s scope and exercise, but also statutory ones. His pressure upon both changed policy and politics, not least in strengthening congressional and public doubts about the utility and acceptability of the use of military force in Iraq, the torture of suspects, and extensive surveillance of American citizens. Acceptable or not, effective or not, the president’s actions for three reasons were revolutionary neither in scope nor effect. First, a president’s executive order is open to being modified or even formally revoked, as President Barack Obama showed by his actions on his first day in office. Second, irrespective of whether a president’s use of authority is contentious, its results may damage his professional reputation at home and abroad—as President Bush discovered. Third, partly in consequence of the second, Bush’s successors are constrained to act in light of knowledge of the costs to him of his use of authority. That use embraces not only abuse of authority during his presidency but his failure to draw upon ample reserves of lawful authority to bring the full force of presidential assistance to bear immediately upon the human disaster that Hurricane Katrina caused. In security policy, President Bush laid claim to Article II powers that the framers did not grant; in the major emergency that devastated thousands of lives in Louisiana, he failed to use such powers that constitution and statute did grant him. Most of what follows in this section is concerned with expansive claims in the first category of cases rather than with his inertia in the second. But the contrast matters for revealing that Bush’s stance toward authority was both instrumental and a matter of expedient calculation.