Ronald Reagan, patronized and dismissed by many during his tenure in the White House, dominated the national political landscape in a manner equalled by relatively few American presidents. The first president since Eisenhower to complete two terms in office, he was a reformer out to make basic changes in the system, whereas the other leader had been essentially a consolidator. The popularity both he and Eisenhower maintained throughout their terms contrasts with the experiences in office of the very unpopular (though now redeemed) Harry Truman, discredited Lyndon Johnson, disgraced Richard Nixon, and frustrated Jimmy Carter. Initially a hard-liner toward the Soviet Union, Reagan ended his tenure comparable to Eisenhower and Nixon as a notable foreign policy leader who was seeking stability, and to some extent achieving accord, with the Soviets. For both George Bush and Bill Clinton, this important predecessor has been in unusually literal terms a ‘hard act to follow’.1

President Bush employed the term ‘new world order’ to describe the transformation in the international system, yet neither the Bush administration nor to date the Clinton administration has fully come to grips with the new state of affairs. This is true in foreign policy overall, as well as in relatively specific relations with Asia and Europe. Alleged shortcomings have different permutations and emphases depending upon the particular critic, but generally can be described as twofold: an absence of effective conceptualization and public explanation of the primary features of the ‘new’ international system, and a failure to implement policies to foster stability and deter or reduce the threat of war.

Reagan, by contrast, maintained his standing and popularity despite initial lack of emphasis on and some reversals as well as successes in foreign policy. This does not mean his policies were superior; certainly the intelligentsia did not love him more than Bush or Clinton. Reagan rather was aided by the Cold War environment, which was dangerous but also clear-cut, with a principal, indeed preoccupying, opponent – the Soviet Union and associated Soviet bloc. The fundamental military, ideological and diplomatic contest between the two superpowers coloured all other international involvement of the United States. The comparatively simplistic approach of President Reagan was more appropriate, and perhaps more effective, in this environment than in one not ordered by such an overshadowing,
preoccupying contest. Given Reagan’s popularity at home, difficulties abroad in Lebanon and Central America were more easily addressed or evaded in the always-intense domestic political debate.

**BUSH: FAILURE TO INSPIRE**

Reagan’s successors have confronted a more complex environment. The Cold War indeed had become so familiar, the related atmosphere and assumptions concerning policy so pervasive, that there was even a reassuring quality to the dangerous but stable system which melodramatists early on had termed the ‘balance of terror’. Any president would have difficulty in coping with the end of that competition. Uncertainty about the best course of policy should not therefore be surprising. Reagan was able effectively to employ standard hard-line rhetoric early in his administration, and later to adopt the détente themes previously associated with less conservative predecessors, with considerable success, but arguably he faced a less frustrating, less slippery policy environment.

In the case of President George Bush and his administration, the world was quickly becoming much more complicated and unpredictable, with Germany coming together as well as the Soviet Union coming apart during the course of his one term in office. Even a very gifted political leader would have been hard-challenged to address this revolutionary change effectively with comprehensive new policies and effective presentations to the public. George Bush was never known for rhetorical skill, and his leadership talents proved to be highly operational and organizational, not thematic or structural. There was a continuing failure to conceptualize coherently and persuasively the profound manner in which the world was changing, and a related inability to engage in persuasive public explanation and exhortation. He was able to cope with crisis very effectively; he proved unable to orchestrate a long-term, diverse set of international relationships in the post-Cold War world. Arguably he handled the great foreign policy challenges effectively in terms of day-to-day business, but more is required for political survival in our age of democratic review and mandate.

Bush may ultimately go down in history as a President who was almost the reverse of Reagan in office in foreign policy terms. In a variety of circumstances, including major crises, he demonstrated considerable executive ability, especially but by no means exclusively in mobilizing people and institutions for the Gulf War. Yet he remained deficient at the most fundamental level of major political leadership; there was within him an