Presidential and Party Views of the Presidency and Government:  
FDR to G.W. Bush

I. Supporters of active national government for liberal purposes, with expansive view of presidential power

A. FDR: the New Deal and the development of (U.S. style) welfare state; vast expansion of executive bureaucracy, specifically designed to insulate programs such as Social Security and AFDC from abolition by later presidential administrations

B. Harry Truman: maintained FDR’s New Deal legacy

C. John Kennedy

D. Lyndon Johnson: the Great Society; institutionalization of the personal presidency, with increased policy development placed under White House instruction; Vietnam war (the Imperial Presidency)

II. Supporters of smaller national government for conservative purposes, with expansive view of presidential power

A. Richard Nixon: new federalism, consolidation of power in executive for purposes of returning power to the states, Watergate and the Imperial Presidency

B. Ronald Reagan: with theme of morning in America, Reagan began to restore public confidence in government and the nation; Reagan is also seen as restoring presidential power following the Ford and Carter administrations and restoring confidence in the nation with actions such as strengthening national defense

III. Supporters of stay-the-course, “healing,” or moderate purposes

A. Dwight D. Eisenhower

B. Gerald Ford

C. Jimmy Carter: liberal on social issues but conservative in terms of government spending; oil crisis and Iranian-hostage crisis influential in Carter’s failure to be reelected

D. George Bush: heir to Reagan’s legacy, albeit “kinder-and-gentler” domestic policies; primary focus on foreign policy

E. Bill Clinton: “New Democratic” affiliation with the Democratic Leadership Council, triangulation of conservative pro-business perspective, liberal social welfare, education and training, and new policy ideas
IV. George W. Bush

It is too early to decide where President George W. Bush will fit into the framework above, particularly in light of September 11. The President clearly came into office as a supporter of smaller national government for conservative purposes, with an expansive view of presidential power (as evidenced, for example, in his refusal to turn over transcripts from the meetings of the energy task force that was led by Vice President Cheney. In terms of national security and homeland defense, the federal government will undoubtedly grow during the Bush administration. As far as other areas of domestic policy (e.g. health care and education), however, it is still unclear what direction the Bush administration will ultimately go.

Since September 11, President Bush has focused more on national defense and military strategy, but the President and his advisors are also concerned to try and avoid repeating the mistakes of the first Bush Administration, where a failure to focus on domestic concerns and the health of the national economy led to a failed attempt at reelection.

Note: There have been both Republican and Democratic presidents who have supported an expansive view of presidential power. The differences lie in views of the uses of presidential power and in views of the size and role of the national government: Republicans have tended to be more supportive (and Democrats less supportive) of returning power to the states and reducing the role of government, particularly in terms of economic regulation and provision of social welfare benefits.