

Nation Reflects on Legacy of President George H. W. Bush

In the News

President George Herbert Walker Bush died Friday, November 30, at his home in Houston, Texas, at the age of 94.

A decorated war hero, Bush joined the Navy upon turning 18, becoming the country's youngest Navy pilot at the time. He flew 58 combat missions during World War II, on one occasion bailing out after his plane was hit by enemy fire. When he was picked up by a submarine, he thanked God and pondered why he had been spared and what God might have for him.

Bush completed a bachelor of arts degree in economics in two and a half years at Yale University, where he captained the baseball team to two College World Series. Then he founded a profitable oil company in Texas, where he began his political career as chair of the state Republican Party and a two-term congressman.

When he ran unsuccessfully for the Senate in 1964, he opposed the Civil Rights Act, not because he was opposed to civil rights, but because he believed that the federal government was using it to extend its powers beyond what it legitimately had been granted. His struggle to do the right thing is reflected in a letter he penned to a Jewish friend and supporter: "What shall I do? How will I do it? I want to win, but not at the expense of justice, not at the expense of the dignity of any man -- not at the expense of teaching my children a prejudice I do not feel."

Four years later, in spite of opposition from constituents of both parties, Bush voted for the legislation, which included the Fair Housing Amendment.

President Nixon appointed him ambassador to the United Nations, and later chairman of the Republican National Committee, placing him in the awkward position of having to ask for Nixon's resignation when the Watergate scandal broke out.

Bush served in President Gerald Ford's administration as envoy to China and later as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan won the presidency, and selected Bush, his rival in the Republican primaries, to serve as his vice president for two terms.

Bush mounted a successful bid for the presidency in 1988, defeating the Democratic nominee, Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis. A group supporting Bush produced the infamous Willie Horton ad that portrayed Dukakis as weak on crime. Some criticized Bush for the ad, which they said stoked fear and race-based prejudice. He later expressed regret for the commercial, a forerunner of similar ads that are commonplace today.

In his 1989 inaugural address, Bush described America as "a nation of communities ... a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky."

As commander in chief, Bush mustered a global coalition that swiftly forced the withdrawal of invading Iraqi troops from Kuwait, but he declined to engage in more extensive regime change efforts in Iraq that he believed would result in "incalculable human and political costs." He also ordered a successful military operation in Panama to topple its drug-trafficking leader, Manuel Noriega.

Bush's diplomatic skills helped negotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, end the Cold War between the United States and the former Soviet Union peacefully, bring down the Berlin Wall, and craft the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

On the domestic front, Bush appointed Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court when Thurgood Marshall retired. He signed two landmark bills: the Americans With Disabilities Act and a tough amendment to the Clean Air Act.

But he also broke his campaign promise not to raise taxes in order to reduce deficits and end political gridlock, costing him the support of many conservatives in his run for a second term.

At the peak of his presidency, Bush's approval ratings soared to nearly 90 percent, but by the time he ran for re-election, his popularity had fallen due to recession. He lost in a three-way race to the more charismatic Bill Clinton.

But there was no hint of bitterness when he passed the baton of national leadership to his successor in 1993. Instead, Bush left a note on the desk in the Oval Office, offering his support and wishing him happiness and success. "He made us feel at home, as much as he could. Total class," Clinton said of the letter.

"He was the paradigm of the Christian gentleman," said one of Bush's speechwriters, Christopher Buckley. "He ... had no mean bone in his body. ... I never heard an *ad hominem* attack or caustic comment come out of him. He had a beautiful soul. And it was always radiant and on display. ... He could be maddeningly self-effacing. But that was part of the reason you loved him."

After his political career ended, Bush devoted himself to the Points of Light Foundation, his presidential library, and to tsunami and hurricane disaster relief efforts, raising tens of millions of dollars with former rival Bill Clinton.

"It's been an eye-opening and enjoyable experience for me to work with [Clinton] on something truly apolitical," Bush remarked. "Just because you run against someone does not mean you have to be enemies. Politics does not have to be mean and ugly."

Clinton echoed the sentiment recently, saying of Bush: "I just loved him."

The son of a U.S. senator, Bush, and his wife of 73 years, Barbara, raised two sons who became governors (George W. in Texas, who went on to serve as president, and Jeb in Florida). They lived to see a grandson elected to statewide office in Texas.

Bush's body has lain in state in the U.S. Capitol this week. Memorial services were scheduled at the National Cathedral in Washington and St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, before burial beside his wife Barbara, who died in April, and daughter Robin, who died in 1953.

President Trump declared Wednesday a national day of mourning and ordered flags on public buildings flown at half-staff for 30 days as a gesture of respect for Bush.

In his 50th-reunion Yale yearbook, Bush summed up his life. "Yes, I am the George Bush that was once President of the United States. Now, at times, this seems hard for me to believe. All that is history and the historians in the future will sort out the bad things I might have done from the good things."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Friends, Former Aides Remember What Made George H.W. Bush 'The Kind of Person I Want as President.' *PBS.org*

Looking Back at George H.W. Bush's Lifelong Career of Public Service. *Smithsonian.com*

The Faith of George HW Bush. *The Christian Post*

The Quiet, Steely Faith of George H.W. Bush. *Religion News Service*

A Kinder, Gentler Republican President Is Dead. *The Atlantic*

Applying the News Story

George Bush Sr. was not one to brag about his accomplishments or to wear his faith on his sleeve. Yet he was shaped by the daily family worship his parents conducted every morning in his childhood, using the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and A Diary of Private Prayer by Scottish Presbyterian theologian John Baillie. That early training carried him through the stresses of war, the disappointments of failure and visions deferred, and the pain of grief when his daughter died of leukemia at the age of 3.

Bush had no hesitation in stating that he accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, but couldn't point to "one single moment, above any others, in which [his] life ha[d] been instantly changed, ... since there have been many moments," he once told a journalist.

We are intrigued by the question of how God shapes a person into a godly leader. We look at Bush's life, not primarily to recall his accomplishments as a civic leader, but to see how his faith grew and how it influenced the man he became and the decisions he made throughout life.

Author Stephen Mansfield calls this kind of spiritual foundation in Bush's life "a faith that could fashion destinies."

We consider how we can nurture "a faith that can fashion destinies" in our own lives and in the lives of those we love.

The Big Questions

1. What character traits are most important in a leader? How are those traits nurtured and developed?
2. Would you say your faith was born "in an instant," in a dramatic moment or event such as the metaphor "born again" might suggest? Or has your faith developed over "many moments," in the manner described by President Bush? Or was it some combination of these?
3. Who has nurtured your faith? What role has your faith played in "fashioning your destiny"?
4. At times, Bush realized it was better to do what he thought was right (try to reduce the deficit) than to keep his campaign promise to not raise taxes. Recall a time when you had to choose between doing what you thought was right in the eyes of God, and pleasing people. How did you decide what to do? What price did you pay for your choice?
5. George H.W. Bush was a man of deep Christian faith. Would you be willing to elect a president who identified as an atheist or agnostic or even a member of a non-Christian tradition? Why or why not?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 27:2

*Let another praise you, and not your own mouth --
a stranger, and not your own lips.* (For context, read 27:1-2.)

Author Stephen Mansfield wrote that this was "nearly the Bush family creed. *Never vaunt yourself. Never set yourself above. No good will come of it, and God is watching.*"

Sometimes, Bush's supporters wished he would let them speak more about his accomplishments and honors as a war hero. When it came to politics, some thought he was too self-effacing for his own good.

Christopher Buckley, a speechwriter for George Bush when he was vice president, said in an interview with Scott Simon, "Famously, in 1988, when [Bush] was running for president of the United States and he was home and in Greenwich for Thanksgiving, sitting around the table, telling, you know, pretty interesting stories about running for president, his mother rapped on the table and said, 'George, you're talking about yourself too much. Stop it.' I've been in the presence of a lot of great men. And almost all of them preferred to talk about themselves. He wanted to talk about you. And that's what made you fall in love with him."

The proverb preceding this text warns against boasting about tomorrow, because we have no control over what will happen in the future. This verse speaks to the problem of bragging about oneself.

Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." One way to guard against the pride that leads to destruction is to set a guard over our mouths, so as not to boast about ourselves. Rather than draw attention to ourselves, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and *he* will exalt you" (James 4:10).

Questions: Are you more likely to exalt yourself, to put yourself down, to speak about yourself excessively, or to clam up about your positive character traits and accomplishments? Is it unwise to praise yourself? Why or why not?

Who observes your behavior and holds you accountable when you are too quick to boast? How do you react when someone checks you for bragging? If no one does this for you, would you be open to that kind of discipline? Why or why not?

Genesis 37:5-8

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. (For context, read 37:1-11.)

Jacob (also called Israel) doted on his son Joseph, the son born to him when he was old. Jacob showed his favoritism openly by making him a special robe unlike any his 11 brothers had. They hated him because they saw that their father loved Joseph most.

It's not surprising that 17-year-old Joseph may have developed a swelled head. He made the most of his favored position, giving his father a bad report about his brothers. Naturally, they resented him for driving a wedge between them and their father. And when he bragged about a dream that seemed to suggest that they would all bow down to him, it was the last straw. Soon after that, they sold him as a slave to human traffickers en route to Egypt.

There, Joseph endured years of bondage and suffering that humbled him, slowly washed away any vestiges of boasting and pride, and strengthened his good qualities. When he was finally reunited with his brothers, he treated them wisely, compassionately and patiently.

Although Bush was reticent to talk about any of his trials in war or his grief over the death of his 3-year-old daughter from leukemia, he was no doubt shaped in part by those hardships into the kind of man he became, just as Joseph was shaped by his suffering.

Questions: How have you responded to adversity in your own life, and how has suffering changed you? How can you make sure that hardships don't make you brittle or bitter, but instead open you up to the work of the Spirit in your life?

John 3:27-30

John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." (For context, read 3:22-36.)

John the Baptist's disciples became concerned because Jesus was baptizing people, drawing the crowd that had previously flocked to hear John. But John was not upset about this at all. If he had a following, he accepted it as a gift from heaven.

John had already acknowledged publicly that he was not the Messiah, but only the voice of one who called people to prepare for the Messiah's coming. Why should he be depressed when the Messiah he himself had announced came to claim his people? It would make no sense for the friend of the bridegroom to be jealous of the groom.

Questions: When, if ever, have you found yourself trying to play the role of a kind of savior or messiah? How is that different from the role John the Baptist accepted with joy? When, if ever, have you sought to act as "a friend of the bridegroom," rejoicing greatly to hear Jesus' voice as he comes to claim his bride? In what way must Jesus "increase" while we "decrease," and how does that happen?

Mark 10:37, 42-45

[James and John] said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."... So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (For context, read 10:35-45.)

In this incident, two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, asked him to give them the seats of honor when he came into his glory. But while they focused on gaining glory, Jesus spoke of

drinking the cup of suffering and being baptized with the baptism with which he would be baptized, the baptism of death he would endure for the salvation of the world.

Bush did aspire to greatness, but served many years and in many capacities, often in the shadows, "always a bridesmaid, never a bride." In whatever role he was assigned, his faith prodded him to serve others rather than seek self-aggrandizement.

Eventually, he did rise to the highest position of power in the nation and the world. But it was said of him that he took more satisfaction in helping to found a local YMCA in Texas than in almost any other accomplishment. That kind of attitude is only possible when one finds more joy in serving others than one finds in self-promotion.

Kay Coles James, an official in the Department of Health and Human Services in the Bush 41 administration, remembered visiting the D.C. General Hospital with Bush when a baby began crying.

"The president intuitively, with no prompting, went over and picked the child up," James said. "The baby had no way of knowing he was being held by the most powerful person in the country, the president of the United States. [He] didn't stop to think about race, creed, identity, gender identity, anything; it was a baby that needed to be held. ... Just to see the president's desire to reach out and comfort that child was so special."

Bush began his 1989 inaugural address by thanking God for his love, asking God for the willingness "to heed and hear" his will and the strength to do his work. He also asked God to "write on our hearts these words: 'Use power to help people.'"

Questions: Why are we moved when a powerful person shows tenderness to the weak? When Christians act this way, serving others selflessly, what, if anything, does their behavior suggest to observers about the God they serve?

Galatians 5:22-26

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. (For context, read 5:19-26.)

Paul here lifts up the fruit of the Spirit in contrast to the works of the flesh mentioned in vv. 19-21, which include enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions and factions, among other things. With proper care, spiritual fruit, like physical fruit, develops over time, throughout the seasons and variables of life.

When he accepted the Republican Party's nomination for president of the United States on August 18, 1988, Bush lifted up two of the Spirit's fruits when he called for a "kinder, gentler nation."

Monday, at a ceremony in Bush's honor at the Capitol Rotunda where his body lay in state, House Speaker Paul Ryan referred to the 41st president as "a great man, a gentle soul. ... [whose] legacy is grace perfected."

In his book, *Healing of Purpose*, John E. Biersdorf wrote: "Compassion is expressed in gentleness. When I think of the persons I know who model for me the depths of the spiritual life,

I am struck by their gentleness. Their eyes communicate the residue of solitary battles with angels, the costs of caring for others, the deaths of ambition and ego, and the peace that comes from having very little left to lose in this life.

"They are gentle because they have honestly faced the struggles given to them and have learned the hard way that personal survival is not the point. Their caring is gentle because their self-aggrandizement is no longer at stake. There is nothing in it for them. Their vulnerability has been stretched to clear-eyed sensitivity to others and truly selfless love."

Questions: When have you been touched by kindness and gentleness in your life?

What can you do to nurture the fruit of the Spirit so that kindness and gentleness flourish and flow through you to bless others?

For Further Discussion

1. A favorite quote of Bush came from St. Ignatius, who said, "Work as though all depended upon yourself, and pray as though all depended on God." Give an example of how this might work itself out in life, from scripture, in the church or in contemporary life.

2. On one of the rare occasions when Bush touted his own virtues, something he was normally rather loathe to do, he said "I equate toughness with moral fiber, with character, with principle, with demonstrated leadership in tough jobs where you emerge not bullying somebody, but with the respect of the people you led. That's toughness. That's fiber. That's character. I have got it. And if I happen to be decent in the process, that should not be a liability."

But Bush wasn't perfect. He stumbled over syntax, at times, so much so that once-governor of Texas Ann Richards famously remarked that he was "born with a silver foot in his mouth." People of good will may disagree about various policies of the Bush administration. Bush recognized that historians would have to sort out "the bad things he might have done from the good things."

How can we admire the good qualities, choices and actions of people, while acknowledging their flaws, weaknesses and mistakes? How should we relate to leaders who may delight us at times and disappoint us other times?

3. Early in his career, George H.W. Bush supported the right to legal abortions, but when Ronald Reagan asked him if, as his vice presidential running mate, he'd abide by the party platform that sought to outlaw abortion, Bush said yes.

What compromises are you willing to make in what you believe and for what purpose? Can compromise sometimes lead to a better result for all, or is compromise always to be seen as a moral failure? What factors do you consider when deciding whether compromise is appropriate in a particular situation?

4. Former United Nations Ambassador Thomas Pickering once related a story about then Vice President Bush when he spoke to Salvadoran government officials who were knowingly murdering innocent people through death squads for political gain.

Bush stated, "If you guys, you military, don't stop this death squad killing, there is nothing Ronald Reagan or I can do to preserve your assistance programs from the U.S. Congress." The result was that the death squads ceased.

Pickering explained that this was an example of how Bush balanced his goals with American values in an effective and diplomatic way without harsh and threatening rhetoric. He stated the facts and natural consequences, and then let the Salvadoran government make their decision.

How do we as Christians balance our goals with our Christian values when speaking to others about matters of faith? How can we be diplomatic in our approach? What do the scriptures teach us about how we approach others about matters when we disagree?

5. First Lady Barbara Bush said her husband "pray[ed] and believe[d] enormously." The couple finished each day with evening prayers together. Bush always began his cabinet meetings with prayer, and said he drew "great strength" from the prayers of the people.

How does a commitment to regular prayer figure in your days? Do you pray with a spouse, family member, friend, colleague, etc.? What benefits, if any, result from praying with others? Praying for others?

Responding to the News

Paul writes, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

This might be a good time to consider how faithfully you pray and intercede for people in high positions, whether they subscribe to your views or not, or act in ways you admire or abhor.

Do you really believe prayer for our leaders can make a difference? What does your answer reveal about your ability to trust God?

Prayer

Thank you, O God, for your love. Make us and our leaders willing to heed and hear your will. Give us all the strength to do your work. Write on all our hearts the words, "Use power to help people." In Jesus' name. Amen.