

The Virgin Islands Consortium

George H.W. Bush Is Dead At 94

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Associated Press -- He was the man who sought a “kinder, and gentler nation,” and the one who sternly invited Americans to read his lips — he would not raise taxes. He was the popular leader of a mighty coalition that dislodged Iraq from Kuwait, and was turned out of the presidency after a single term. Blue-blooded and genteel, he was elected in one of the nastiest campaigns in recent history.

George Herbert Walker Bush was many things, including only the second American to see his son follow him into the nation’s highest office. But more than anything else, he was a believer in government service. Few men or women have served America in more capacities than the man known as “Poppy.”

“There is no higher honor than to serve free men and women, no greater privilege than to labor in government beneath the Great Seal of the United States and the American flag,” he told senior staffers in 1989, days after he took office.

Bush, who died at age 94 — nearly eight months after his wife of 73 years died at their Houston home — was a congressman, an ambassador to the United Nations and envoy to China, chairman of the Republican National Committee, director of the CIA, two-term vice president and, finally, president.

He was no ideologue — he spoke disparagingly of “the vision thing,” and derided the supply-side creed of his future boss, Ronald Reagan, as “voodoo economics.” He is generally given better marks by historians for his foreign policy achievements than for his domestic record, but assessments of his presidency tend to be tepid.

“Was George Bush only a nice man with good connections, who seldom had to wrest from life the honors it frequently bestowed on him?” journalist Tom Wicker asked in his Bush biography.

Wicker’s answer: Perhaps. But he said Bush’s actions in Kuwait “reflect moments of courage and vision worthy of his office.”

The Persian Gulf War — dubbed “Operation Desert Storm” — was his greatest mark on history. In a January 2011 interview marking the war’s 20th anniversary, he said the mission sent a message that “the United States was willing to use force way across the world, even in that part of the world where those countries over there thought we never would intervene.”

“I think it was a signature historical event,” he added. “And I think it will always be.”

After Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Bush quickly began building an international military coalition that included other Arab states. After freeing Kuwait, he rejected suggestions that the U.S. carry the offensive to Baghdad, choosing to end the hostilities a mere 100 hours after the start of the ground offensive.

“That wasn’t our objective,” he said. “The good thing about it is there was so much less loss of human life than had been predicted, and indeed than we might have feared.”

But the decisive military defeat did not lead to the regime’s downfall, as many in the administration had hoped.

“I miscalculated,” Bush acknowledged. The Iraqi leader was eventually ousted in 2003, in the war led by Bush’s son that was followed by a long, bloody insurgency.

Unlike his son, who never served in the military, the elder Bush was a bona fide war hero. He joined the Navy on his 18th birthday in 1942 over the objections of his father, Prescott, who wanted him to stay in school. At one point the youngest pilot in the Navy, he flew 58 missions off the carrier USS San Jacinto.

His wartime exploits won him the Distinguished Flying Cross for bravery. He was shot down on Sept. 2, 1944, while completing a bombing run against a Japanese radio tower. Eight others who were shot down in that mission were captured and executed, and

several were eaten by their captors. But an American submarine rescued Bush. Even then, he was an inveterate collector of friends: Aboard the sub Finback, "I made friendships that have lasted a lifetime," he would write.

This was a man who hand wrote thousands of thank you notes — each one personalized, each one quickly dispatched. Even his political adversaries would acknowledge his exquisite manners. Admonished by his mother to put others first, he rarely used the personal pronoun "I," a quirk exploited by comedian Dana Carvey in his "Saturday Night Live" impressions of the president.

Bush was born June 12, 1924, in Milton, Massachusetts. His father, the son of an Ohio steel magnate, had moved east to make his fortune as an investment banker with Brown Brothers, Harriman, and later served 10 years as a senator from Connecticut. His mother, Dorothy Walker Bush, was the daughter of a sportsman who gave golf its Walker's Cup.

Competitive athletics were a passion for the Bushes, whether at home in Greenwich, Connecticut, or during long summers spent at Walker's Point, the family's oceanfront retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine. Bush, along with his three brothers and one sister, had lives of privilege seemingly untouched by the Great Depression.

Young Bush attended Greenwich Country Day School and later Phillips Academy at Andover, Massachusetts, where he was senior class president and captain of the baseball and soccer teams. It was there, at a dance, that he met Barbara Pierce, daughter of the publisher of McCall's magazine. George and Bar would marry when he left the Navy in January 1945. They were together for more than seven decades, becoming the longest-married presidential couple in U.S. history. She died on April 17, 2018.

Out of the service, Bush resumed his education at Yale. Lean and 6-foot-2, he distinguished himself as first baseman and captain of the baseball team, which went to the College World Series twice. He took just 2½ years to graduate Phi Beta Kappa.

But rather than joining his father on Wall Street, in 1948 he loaded his wife and young son George W. into the family Studebaker and drove to the hot, dusty Texas oil patch to take a job as an equipment clerk for the International Derrick and Equipment Co.

He did everything from painting oil pumps and selling oilfield equipment to discovering a taste for Lone Star beer and chicken fried steaks. At first, the family lived in Odessa in a two-apartment shotgun house with a shared bathroom; by 1955, they would own a house in Midland, and Bush would be co-owner of the Zapata Petroleum Corp.

By the turn of the decade, the family — and Bush's business — had moved to Houston. There, he got his start in politics, the traditional Bush family business. A handsome and well-spoken war hero, he was sought as a candidate by both parties. He chose the Republicans.

Bush lost his first race, a 1964 challenge to Sen. Ralph Yarborough, but won a seat in the House in 1966. He won re-election in 1968 without opposition. In Congress, he generally supported President Richard Nixon and the war in Vietnam.

In 1970, he tried for the Senate again. Yarborough was upset in the Democratic primary by Lloyd Bentsen, and Bentsen defeated Bush in the general election. Eighteen years later, Bentsen would be the Democratic vice-presidential nominee on the ticket that lost to Bush and his running mate, Dan Quayle.

Nixon appointed Bush ambassador to the United Nations and, after the 1972 election, named him chairman of the Republican National Committee. Bush struggled to hold the party together as Watergate destroyed the Nixon presidency. He urged Nixon to quit one day before the president resigned in August 1974.

Denied the vice presidency by Gerald Ford in favor of Nelson Rockefeller, Bush was given his choice of jobs and surprised Ford by asking to head the small mission in Beijing. Then, in 1975, Ford put Bush in charge of the Central Intelligence Agency, beset by congressional probing and allegations of assassination plots and domestic spying.

Bush returned to private life when the Republicans lost the presidency in 1976, but he quickly began planning his own run for the White House.

He won the first contest of 1980, the Iowa caucuses, and boasted that he had the “big mo,” his slang for momentum. But Reagan, who had led the conservative movement for more than a decade, won the New Hampshire primary and the nomination. His choice of Bush as his running mate was a near thing. Reagan — still smarting from Bush’s ridicule of “voodoo economics,” first wanted to pick Gerald Ford, and asked Bush only after negotiations broke down. They went on to defeat Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale.

In 1988, many Democrats assumed Bush would be easy pickings. He was the man “born with a silver foot in his mouth,” as fellow Texan Ann Richards jibed at the Democrats’ convention in Atlanta. He trailed Michael Dukakis by as many as 17 points that summer. Bush did little to help himself by picking Quayle, a lightly regarded junior senator from Indiana, as a running mate.

The campaign was bitter and muddy. Advised by campaign manager Lee Atwater, Bush became an aggressor, wrapping himself in patriotic themes and settings — even visiting a flag factory — while flaying Dukakis as an out-of-touch liberal. Commercials hammered Dukakis for a prison furlough policy that allowed murderer Willie Horton to rape a woman while out on a weekend pass.

Bush won by a landslide, with 40 states and a nearly 7 million vote plurality, becoming the first sitting vice president to win the White House since Martin Van Buren in 1836. He entered office with a reputation as a man of indecision and indeterminate views. A wimp, one newsmagazine suggested.

But his work-hard, play-hard approach to the presidency won broad public approval. He held more news conferences in most months than Reagan did in most years.

He pledged to make the United States a “kinder, gentler” nation and called on Americans to volunteer their time for good causes — an effort he said would create “a thousand points of light.”

It was Bush’s violation of a different pledge, the no-new-taxes promise, that helped sink his bid for a second term. He abandoned the idea in his second year, cutting a deficit-

reduction deal that angered many congressional Republicans and contributed to GOP losses in the 1990 midterm elections.

He also set out to be “the education president,” but did little more than call on states and local communities to stiffen their school standards.

Bush, an avid outdoorsman who took Theodore Roosevelt as a model, sought to safeguard the environment, signing the first improvements to the Clean Air Act in more than a decade. It was activism with a Republican cast, allowing polluters to buy others’ clean air credits and giving industry flexibility on how to meet tougher goals on smog.

He also signed the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act to ban workplace discrimination against people with disabilities and require improved access to public places and transportation.

Months after the Gulf War, Washington became engrossed in a different sort of confrontation over one of Bush’s nominees to the Supreme Court — Clarence Thomas, a little-known federal appeals court judge. After a former colleague named Anita Hill accused Thomas of sexual harassment, Thomas’ confirmation hearings exploded into a national spectacle, sparking an intense debate over race, gender and the modern workplace. He was eventually confirmed.

Seven years of economic growth ended in mid-1990, just as the Gulf crisis unfolded. Bush insisted the recession would be “short and shallow,” and lawmakers did not even try to pass a jobs bill or other relief measures.

Bill Clinton took advantage of the nation’s economic fears, and a third-party bid from independent Ross Perot added to Bush’s challenge in seeking a second term.

In the closing days of the 1992 campaign, Bush fought the impression that he was distant and disconnected and seemed to struggle against his younger, more empathetic opponent.

During a campaign visit to a grocers’ convention, Bush reportedly expressed amazement when shown an electronic checkout scanner — a damaging moment that suggested to many Americans that he was disconnected from voters. Later at a town-hall-style debate, he paused to look at his wristwatch — a seemingly innocent glance that became freighted with deeper meaning because it seemed to reinforce the idea of a bored, impatient incumbent.

In the same debate, Bush became confused by a woman’s question about whether the deficit had affected him personally. Clinton, with apparent ease, left his seat, walked to the edge of the stage to address the woman and offered a sympathetic answer.

“I lost in ’92 because people still thought the economy was in the tank, that I was out of touch and I didn’t understand that,” he said. “The economy wasn’t in the tank and I wasn’t out of touch, but I lost. I couldn’t get through this hue and cry for ‘change, change, change’ and ‘The economy is horrible, still in recession.’

“Did I hurt when I lost the election? Sure. There’s a feeling of letting others down.”

This was not the first heartbreak in Bush's life, or the worst. In 1953, his 3-year-old daughter, Robin, died of leukemia. Sixty years later, he teared up when he talked about her with biographer John Meacham. "Normally I push it away, push it back," he said.

Barbara and George Bush had four sons and another daughter: John, known as Jeb, the former Florida governor who sought the Republican presidential nomination in 2016; Neil, Marvin, and Dorothy; and George, president 43 to his father's 41. The day George W. Bush took office, the elder Bush signed a letter "the proudest father in the whole wide world."

Mostly, he stayed out of the public eye. Summoned by his son, Bush joined with Bill Clinton to raise money for relief after the Southeast Asian tsunami in 2004. He piloted his speedboat, played tennis and golf. On his 72nd, 80th, 85th and 90th birthdays, he reprised his World War II parachute jumps.

Quietly, occasionally, he counseled his son, the president. Mostly, he served as a cheerleader.

On the day George W. sent forces to attack Iraq, he also sent his father a letter. "I know what you went through," he wrote.

The senior Bush responded that his son was "doing the right thing," a decision made "with strength and compassion." But he ended his note with the words of a little girl, dead a half-century.

"Remember Robin's words 'I love you more than tongue can tell,'" he wrote. "Well, I do."