

US bids goodbye to George HW Bush with high praise, cannons, humour

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The coffin bearing the remains of former President George HW Bush is carried out at the conclusion of his funeral at the National Cathedral in Washington on Wednesday. (Source: Doug Mills/The New York Times)

Washington:

Written by Peter Baker

The nation bade farewell on Wednesday to George Herbert Walker Bush, the patriarch of one of the most consequential political dynasties of modern times and the president who presided over the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era of American dominance in the world.

As bells tolled and choirs sang and flags flew at half-staff, the nation's 41st president was remembered as a kinder and gentler leader whose fortitude steered the country through a tumultuous moment in history even as his essential decency stood in contrast to the politics of insults now in vogue.

When the history books are written, former President George W. Bush, his son, said in a eulogy at Washington National Cathedral, they will say that George H.W. Bush was a great president of the United States, a diplomat of unmatched skill, a commander in chief of formidable accomplishment and a gentleman who executed the duties of his office with dignity and honor.

George W. Bush, like his father an emotional man given to tearing up over family, struggled to make it through his eulogy, his eyes watery, his face etched with emotion. He held on until the very end, when he choked up and began weeping as he called the former president the best father a son or daughter could have.

President Donald Trump joined all four living former presidents as well as more than 3,000 foreign leaders, lawmakers, Supreme Court justices and other mourners at the service, but given his history of rancor with the Bush family, he had no speaking role. As he took his seat in the front row, Trump awkwardly shook hands with Barack and Michelle Obama but otherwise did not interact with his presidential peers, recite the Apostle's Creed or sing the hymns.

Former President George W Bush delivers the eulogy during the funeral of his father, former President George H.W. Bush, at the National Cathedral in Washington on Wednesday. (Tom Brenner/The New York Times)

There was less of an overt sense of rebuke to Trump than in September at the funeral for Sen. John McCain, to which he was not invited, but the implicit contrasts between the former and current presidents were hard to miss. While speakers talked about Bush's civility, his commitment to the institutions of government and his faith in alliances, Trump was sitting feet away, his arms tightly crossed, as if in defiance.

Without directly saying so, the speakers pushed back against Trump's mockery of the former president's volunteerism slogan "a thousand points of light" during campaign rallies this year.

"To us," the younger Bush said, "his was the brightest of a thousand points of light."

The elder Bush died on Friday at age 94 after years of struggling with a form of Parkinson's disease and seven months after his wife, Barbara Bush, died. His state funeral, the first in 12 years, served as a milestone in the life of a country that has moved beyond the type of politics he preached and, with notable exceptions, practiced. The moments of bipartisan compromise that marked his presidency feel alien as the politics of anger and division dominate Washington and the country.

As with any funeral, Bush was venerated in death as he was not always in life. During his time in politics, he was excoriated for his violation of his "read my lips" vow not to raise taxes, his racially charged campaign tactics and his inattention to growing economic troubles. He garnered only 37 percent of the vote in a three-way election contest in 1992, the lowest of any incumbent president in 80 years.

But with time, Bush has become one of the most admired recent presidents, ranked third out of the past 10 in polls behind only Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy. During his eventful single term from 1989 to 1993, he helped bring the Cold War to a peaceful end, paved the way for the reunification of Germany, won the Persian Gulf War expelling Iraqi invaders from Kuwait and signed landmark environmental, civil rights and disabilities legislation.

"I believe it will be said that no occupant of the Oval Office was more courageous, more principled and more honorable than George Herbert Walker Bush," said former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada, a friend who was asked to deliver a tribute.

Jon Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and Bush's biographer, called him "America's last great soldier-statesman, a 20th-century founding father."

Former President George W Bush touches the coffin as he arrives to deliver the eulogy during the funeral of his father, former President George H.W. Bush, at the National Cathedral in Washington on Wednesday. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

He also essentially explained Bush's thousand-lights phrase to Trump. "Abraham Lincoln's 'better angels of our nature' and George H.W. Bush's 'a thousand points of light' are companion verses in America's national hymn," Meacham said. "For Lincoln and Bush both called on us to choose the right over the convenient, to hope rather than to fear and to heed not our worst impulses but our best instincts."

For Trump, it was a chilly encounter with his fellow presidents, the first since his inauguration. As he shook hands with the Obamas, they forced polite but palpably strained smiles. Trump did not reach past them to shake hands with Bill Clinton, who appeared open to it, much less with Hillary Clinton, who avoided looking at him. Sitting on the other side of the Clintons were Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter.

By contrast, when George W. Bush arrived, he shook hands with all of the presidents and first ladies, making a special point of mischievously slipping candy to Michelle Obama, as he did at McCain's funeral. In his eulogy, he did not mention Trump by name, instead greeting "our presidents and first ladies."

Some of the tributes may have gotten under Trump's skin. Mulroney praised the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement, both of which Trump has sharply criticized.

Trump has been snappish with aides most of the week, according to administration officials, miffed in part by so many ceremonial events not related to him. He was impatient for the memorials to end but expressed pride in himself for remaining publicly civil. People close to the president called it a course correction after his peevish reaction to McCain's death.

President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump are joined by three former presidents in the front row at the National Cathedral in Washington for the funeral of former President George HW Bush on Wednesday. From left: Trump; the first lady; Barack and Michelle Obama; Bill and Hillary Clinton; and Jimmy Carter. (Tom Brenner/The New York Times)

This was the service Bush wanted, an Episcopal send-off with all the majesty of the capital's cavernous cathedral. He was involved enough in the planning that both Meacham and Mulroney, in separate visits, read him their eulogies in recent months. Mulroney told the story of a plaque at Bush's home in Kennebunkport, Maine, that said CAVU "ceiling and visibility unlimited," a phrase from his flying days that applied to his life, too.

By now, that life is well known. A son of privilege and product of an elite education at Greenwich Country Day School, Phillips Academy and Yale. One of the youngest Navy pilots in World War II, shot down over the Pacific. Texas oilman. Congressman. Ambassador to the United Nations. Republican Party chairman. Envoy to China. CIA director. Vice president. President.

But also husband of 73 years, father of six, grandfather of 14 and great-grandfather of eight. Tennis player. Mangler of the English language. Pork rind aficionado. Broccoli hater. Prolific note writer. Practical joker. Avid speed boater. Inventor of speed golf. Geriatric sky diver. Lover of funny socks.

Called Poppy by his family, Gampy by his grandchildren and 41 by his son, Bush was a patrician by birth and a preppy by inclination, yet in many ways the most human of presidents. He was hardly the towering figure Reagan was, but neither was he as remote. His foibles were easily parodied, but his humanity was not. Nearly everyone who gathered in Washington had a story of a gracious personal note or gesture.

Former Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., a longtime friend, said Bush could have just one letter as his epigraph, L for loyalty. "It coursed through his blood," he said. "Loyalty to his country, loyalty to his family, loyalty to his friends, loyalty to the institutions of government and always, always, always a friend to his friends."

For George W. Bush, the eulogy was always going to be a challenge to deliver without crying. It was crafted to help him get through, laugh lines intermixed with the serious in hopes that it would make it easier. But at the end, he could not help himself and his voice thickened with grief as he looked down to regain control.

As he returned to his seat, giving two pats to his father's coffin as he strode past, Bush sat down and wiped his eyes, then laughed, probably at himself for not quite making it all the way through. His brother Jeb smiled and reached over to squeeze his hand.

The rest of the family sat nearby, including Bush's other children, Neil, Marvin and Doro, and a passel of

grandchildren. Three granddaughters — Lauren Bush Lauren, Ashley Walker Bush and Jenna Bush Hager — offered readings. Ronan Tynan, the Irish tenor who sang for Bush on his last day, performed “The Last Full Measure of Devotion.”

Also on hand were leaders like Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and titans of the Bush era like James A. Baker III, Dick Cheney, Colin L. Powell and Dan Quayle. Baker, the president’s best friend long before becoming his secretary of state, sobbed openly when a minister described him rubbing Bush’s feet on the day of his death.

After the funeral, Bush was flown to Houston, where a service will be held on Thursday at St. Martin’s Episcopal Church. He will be taken by train to College Station, Texas, to be interred at his presidential library next to Barbara Bush and Robin, their daughter who died of leukemia at age 3.

“My hunch is heaven, as perfect as it must be, just got a bit kinder and gentler,” the Rev. Dr. Russell J. Levenson Jr., rector of St. Martin’s, said Wednesday in his homily. Turning to the coffin, he said: “Mr. President, mission complete. Well done, good and faithful servant. Welcome to your eternal home, where ceiling and visibility are unlimited and life goes on forever.”

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