

A “kinder, gentler” imperialist butcher, dead at 94

Media, political establishment laud George H. W. Bush

By Patrick Martin
3 December 2018

Former President George H. W. Bush died late Friday at the age of 94. Born into a ruling class family of wealth and privilege, he lived a life a world away from the struggles and sufferings of the working class.

In his decades as a political representative of American imperialism, the most murderous and reactionary force on the planet, Bush helped insure that millions of people around the world did not have a chance to live the full and comfortable life he led. Instead, they were shot to death, bombed or otherwise annihilated by the armed forces of the United States, or starved, jailed or tortured by governments backed by the CIA and doing the bidding of Washington.

Few people in recent American history have had so long a record of “service” to the US ruling elite and its state machine. Few have participated in the crimes of American imperialism in so many ways: legislator, diplomat, CIA director, commander-in-chief. As a member of Congress for four years, 1967-71, Bush voted repeatedly to fund the war in Vietnam. As US ambassador to the United Nations, 1971-72, he was the public voice of the United States government, defending its crimes in Southeast Asia before a world audience. As US envoy to China in 1974-75, he carried out the Kissinger policy of wooing Chinese Stalinism as a counterweight to the USSR. As CIA director in 1975-76, he oversaw Operation Condor, the joint venture in the assassination of leftists conducted by the CIA and the US-backed military regimes in Chile, Argentina, Brazil and other Latin American countries.

While vice president in the Reagan administration (1981-1989), he was complicit in the terrorist “contra” war against Nicaragua and the death squad operations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, in which hundreds of thousands died, as well as the dispatch of US troops to Lebanon, the invasion of Grenada and the bombing of Libya. In the first year of his presidency he ordered the invasion of Panama and in the final year the occupation of Somalia. In between came the greatest crime of all, the waging of the first Persian Gulf War, deliberately instigated by the Bush administration, in which hundreds of thousands of Iraqi conscripts were incinerated by US bombs and missiles.

Bush’s political record at home was less openly murderous but equally reactionary. He was a consummate political cynic. While his father Prescott Bush, a Wall Street banker and Republican

senator from Connecticut, had been a social moderate, George H. W. Bush tailored his political positions to the reactionary climate of Texas in the period before the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation. In his first campaign for office, as the Republican candidate for US Senate in Texas in 1964, Bush ran as a Goldwaterite, opposing the 1964 Civil Rights Act as an infringement on freedom (to discriminate) and condemning the impending establishment of Medicare as “socialistic.” He later denounced “the militant Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

As chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1973-74, Bush defended Richard Nixon throughout the Watergate crisis. After memorably branding the supply-side policies advanced by Ronald Reagan as “voodoo economics,” during the contest for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination, Bush worked assiduously to become Reagan’s running mate. As vice president, he supported all the right-wing domestic measures of the Reagan administration, from the firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981 to the deregulation of business, cuts in social programs and tax reductions for the wealthy and big business.

In the 1988 presidential campaign, Bush pledged a “kindler, gentler” America, implicitly acknowledging the brutality of the Reagan administration’s onslaught on the poor and the working class. But his campaign unleashed the Willie Horton ad against his Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis, which used the image of a black convict who had committed rape and armed burglary during a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts prison to paint Dukakis as soft on crime. This brazen appeal to racism was part a deliberate effort to cement the gains of the Nixon-Reagan “southern strategy,” which recruited racist elements in that region, formerly dominated by the Democrats, and made it the stronghold of the Republican Party.

The Bush presidency carried forward right-wing policies in both foreign and domestic areas. Bush bailed out the savings & loan industry at taxpayer expense—his son Neil was a prominent executive of a failed S&L—while seeking to slash spending for domestic social programs. He suffered a political embarrassment when he inadvertently revealed his distance from the daily experiences of ordinary Americans by expressing surprise at the use of barcode readers in a supermarket.

In 1991, he nominated the ultra-rightist Clarence Thomas to the US Supreme Court to replace the retiring Thurgood Marshall. As

he left office in January 1993, Bush issued pardons for Caspar Weinberger, Reagan's secretary of defense, and five other officials who had been indicted or convicted for their roles in the Iran-Contra scandal.

But it was in foreign policy that his administration made its mark and established its "legacy" in the eyes of the American ruling elite. The Bush presidency coincided with the collapse of Stalinism, beginning in Eastern Europe in 1989 and culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Weekend obituaries hailed Bush for adroit management of the crisis, although in truth he had little to do beyond accepting the surrender of Soviet Stalinist leader Mikhail Gorbachev. His one distinctive contribution was the decision to back the reunification of Germany in 1990 over the objections of British Prime Minister Thatcher and French President Mitterrand, both of whom feared the consequences of the reemergence of Germany as a world power in the center of the continent.

The implications of the dissolution of the Soviet Union for world politics were laid bare in the crisis that erupted after Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. The Reagan administration had backed Saddam Hussein during the bloody Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, and Bush continued this policy, even hinting in July 1990, through a US envoy, that the US was neutral on Saddam's border clash with Kuwait, which was siphoning oil from Iraq's Rumailah oilfield. Saddam seized Kuwait, but soon found himself caught in a trap, as hundreds of thousands of US and allied soldiers were mobilized to the Arabian Peninsula along with hundreds of warplanes and warships armed with cruise missiles.

When the war began in January 1991, it was a one-sided slaughter of the soldiers of a Third World country by the most powerful military force on the planet. But Bush decided not to expand the war by marching on Baghdad, in part because Saddam Hussein was still viewed as a counterweight against Iran, but even more because he was allied to the Soviet Union, whose existence provided a check on US military options that no longer existed by the time Bush's son entered the White House ten years later.

The atmosphere in the George H. W. Bush White House during this time was one of imperialist triumphalism, summed up in Bush's pledge to create a "New World Order." Bush's former defense secretary Richard Cheney, who was vice president under George W. Bush, gave a glimpse of this mood during an appearance on ABC's "This Week" program on Sunday. Cheney recalled fondly the budget process of the George H. W. Bush administration when the president and his top aides set spending levels. "When it was time to put the budget together," he said, "defense came first. We'd decide what the top line was going to be for defense, and I was free to go spend that. Then everybody else got what was left. That's a great way to operate, if you're secretary of defense."

There was little truth about this record of reaction and militarism in the obituary published by the *New York Times*, which ran to 10,000 words, or the similar 6,000-word tribute in the *Washington Post*. The two leading US newspapers set the tone for the reverential media coverage, which will continue at full blast on cable television through Wednesday's national day of mourning,

which will be a day off for bankers, stock traders and capitalist politicians, but not for most workers, a class difference that is peculiarly appropriate for this particular dead president.

All sections of the US political establishment joined hands to sing the praises of George H. W. Bush. The Trump White House, whose occupant has made no secret of his hatred of the Bush family, released a statement hailing Bush's leadership during the "peaceful and victorious conclusion of the Cold War," adding, "As president, he set the stage for the decades of prosperity that have followed." Enrichment for Wall Street, of course, not the working class.

The Democrats were even more fervent in their declarations, in part seeking to contrast Bush with the current president, even as they seek "common ground" with Trump's fascist rants.

Former President Obama said that America "has lost a patriot and humble servant," calling Bush's life "a testament to the notion that public service is a noble, joyous calling."

Former President Bill Clinton said in a statement that he considered Bush's friendship "one of my life's greatest gifts." In an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, Clinton gushed: "He was an honorable, gracious and decent man who believed in the United States, our Constitution, our institutions and our shared future. And he believed in his duty to defend and strengthen them, in victory and defeat."

Other Democrats chimed in: "He set the standard for decency," said Thomas A. Daschle, the former Senate majority leader. Former Vice President Joe Biden described Bush as "decent, kind and welcoming."

Incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who entered Congress shortly before Bush became president, called him "a gentleman of the highest integrity and deepest patriotism," and said it was a privilege to work with him. She added that Bush demonstrated "great humility, unwavering compassion, deep faith, and extraordinary kindness in and out of the political arena."

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