

The state funeral for George H. W. Bush and the ritual of oligarchy

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On Wednesday, former President George H. W. Bush, who died last Friday, performed his final service to the American financial elite. The New York Stock Exchange was closed for the national day of mourning proclaimed by President Donald Trump, giving Wall Street an additional 24 hours to recover from Tuesday's 800-point plunge in the Dow Jones Industrial Average, sparked by concerns over the US-China trade war, signs of an impending global recession and fears over the outbreak of mass working class protests in France.

The memorial service for Bush, held in Washington DC's National Cathedral, was attended by Trump and every living former president, as well as hundreds of members of Congress, federal officials, judges, generals and corporate bosses. It was a lugubrious affair, culminating in the maudlin remarks of former President George W. Bush, with its inevitable conclusion about his father now being reunited in heaven with his wife Barbara and baby daughter Robin, who died of leukemia more than 60 years ago.

The memorial service for a former president who had previously been a congressman, UN ambassador, Republican National Committee chair, CIA director and vice president was remarkably devoid of politics. The *Washington Post* reported Monday that the Bush family had insisted there would be nothing like the anti-Trump remarks of Meghan McCain at the memorial service for Senator John McCain in August, informing the White House that they "wouldn't want anyone there to feel uncomfortable, including the incumbent president." Thus reassured, Trump sat in the front row of the cathedral, along with the Obamas, the Clintons, the Carters and the Bushes.

The Bush funeral continues a pattern of outlandishly elaborate ceremonies and hypocritical eulogizing of reactionary political figures, in which the celebration of

their lives and characters bears no relation either to their actions in office or their standing with the public. This began with the funeral of Richard Nixon in 1994, continued with Ronald Reagan (2004) and Gerald Ford (2006), and resumed again with John McCain earlier this year, and now George H. W. Bush. Not only political figures have been accorded such treatment. Ten years ago, it was Tim Russert, the now long forgotten moderator of NBC's "Meet the Press."

These ceremonies reflect an increasingly aristocratic environment, in which the deceased are the focus of funeral rituals that with their combination of religion and government pomp more resemble those accorded a monarch than a former head of state in a democratic republic.

On the most fundamental level, this signifies that political conventions are being brought into conformity with its underlying social structure.

In today's America, a tiny aristocracy of the super-rich presides over the great mass of the population—or, as they prefer to say, "serves the people"—in a fashion that is more reminiscent of Tsarist Russia or the France of the Bourbons than of America in 1776, to say nothing of the Civil War, which was waged, as Lincoln declared, to insure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

It is this contradiction, between the actual economic relations of oligarchic rule and the remaining democratic political trappings, that is the objective basis for the past five days of unrestrained hypocrisy and cynicism.

The United States is a land of lies. Its ruling elites lie to the American people, to the world, and most pathetically of all, to themselves. In the flood of commentary unleashed by the death of George H. W. Bush, it is all but impossible to find a single honest

word spoken about his life, his presidency, or the presidency of his son, let alone about the current political environment, in which the historical decay of American capitalism has placed the political buffoon and fascistic provocateur Donald Trump in the office once occupied by George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

There is an undercurrent in the media coverage, as well as the pronouncements of political figures like Clinton and Obama, aimed at contrasting the crudeness and viciousness of Trump with the supposed decency and noblesse oblige of George H. W. Bush. This is largely wishful thinking, since there is little in the administration of the elder Bush, and even less in the administration of his son, that would be out of place in the government of Donald Trump.

The elder Bush, after all, used his term in the White House to invade Panama and carry out a mass slaughter of conscript troops in Iraq, ushering in more than a quarter-century of unending war aimed at using Washington's military supremacy to offset its economic decline. His son came to office in a stolen election and proceeded to launch an unprovoked war in Afghanistan and an invasion and occupation of Iraq, based on lies, which killed over a million people. As part of the same fraudulent "war on terror," he introduced indefinite detention, mass surveillance, and torture, policies that were either whitewashed or continued and expanded by Obama.

The supposedly vast contrast between George H. W. Bush and Trump is an exercise in self-deception. What the bourgeoisie mourns in the transition from George H. W. Bush to Trump is the dramatic decline in the world position of American capitalism, from the illusions of the "unipolar moment," the "new world order" and even "the end of history" that followed the dissolution of the USSR, to the grim reality of the United States as a declining world hegemon facing challenges from new rivals like China and allies turned potential threats like Germany.

The true measure of the decay of the American ruling elite is not the transition from Bush to Trump, but the contrast between the brilliant family dynasty of the first decades after the American Revolution—President John Adams; son John Quincy Adams, also a president; grandson and diplomat under Lincoln Charles Francis Adams; great-grandson Henry Adams, novelist,

historian and essayist—and the dreadful Bush dynasty. The Adamses were a product of the rise of American democracy, while the Bushes epitomize its utter corruption and decay.

But there is another America, that of the working class, the vast majority of the population. For working people, the national day of mourning for President George H. W. Bush had an impact only in the lack of mail delivery and the closure of post offices and banks. If they even remember who he was—half the population was either born or moved to America after Bush was president—they couldn't care less about his death.

The passing of President Bush has not evoked the slightest genuine mourning among the American people. There would be more tears shed if Bush's television mimic Dana Carvey were to die, and they would be more genuine. As for the crowd in the National Cathedral Wednesday, if they were touched by sadness, it was not for George H. W. Bush, a thoroughly mediocre personage. Their tears are for the system he defended, the source of their own wealth and privilege, which is increasingly threatened by the development of a movement from below.

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