

The Final Gift of President Bush
Posted On:December 31, 1969

We have all become so numbed by the constant flood of nastiness in our current politics that President George Herbert Walker Bush, our 41st president, even in dying, has given the country his final gift. His graceful death at 94 has been accompanied by memorials to his life of service and his astonishing competence as a one-term president. His passing even shamed President Trump to do what he rarely does: praise the life of this remarkable man, whom he trashed throughout his run for the 2016 presidency.

Almost every accomplishment in his long life of service reminds us about what we do not have today. He was a quiet man, not ever boastful or bumptious; kind to everyone around him, including even the humblest members of the Whitehouse staff; he regarded his political opponents as opponents, not enemies (and never suggested that his predecessors be "locked up."

He befriended former opponents, most noteworthy becoming almost a father to his successor, Bill Clinton. And he honored his rival for office, Bob Dole, when he signed the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act, a tribute to Dole's World War II disabling wounds. He had a big compassion gene.

How surprising to see this very competitive man in his running for office surrender some of his own values in deference to his serving Ronald Reagan as Vice President. Like most moderate Republicans before him, he believed in contraception, women's right to choose, the validity of science, and bipartisan cooperation on issues that benefitted the country.

Reagan was already in thrall to the newly emerging right-wing branch of the Republican party when he directed Bush to find ways to cut back regulations that protected clean air and water, slash the Americans with Disabilities Act, and accept the new mantra of the right wing, anti-abortion, including cutting funding for global women's health clinics. Bush did what he was told out of loyalty to the President.

However, when he became president himself, he worked with Democrats to restore those regulations, re-funding the Disabilities Act, which has since enabled countless handicapped Americans to enjoy public life, and handicapped children to mainstream in school. He did it because "it was the right thing to do."

He never liked talking about himself, even though he was a national hero and could have boasted about it. He did things because they were right, and his amazing foreign policy actions made the US countless friends around the world. He never said "America First and to the Devil with the Rest of the World."

Two great accomplishments were how deftly and kindly he brought the Cold War to an end without humiliating Russia. The trust in which our allies held him enabled him to talk them into doing the right thing with the reunified Germany, to accept it warmly into the European community. A lesser president might have gloated over and punished our former adversaries. He not only never boasted, but would never think about boastful exaggeration and lying.

President Bush's model reminds us that decency is a good thing. Throughout the country, in newspapers, journals, and TV, the word "decency" is front and center. The San Francisco Chronicle devoted a full page to an article: "What We've Lost: The 41st president set the standard for public service and decency." Noted in this article is how his decency and more concern for the country's good than for his party's good deprived him of a second term as President.

As a now dying breed of Moderate Republican, he collaborated with Democrats for policy progress, as on the milestone regulation expanding Clean Air Act amendments (original credit for this goes to Richard Nixon!) and banning the imported semiautomatic weapons (that now reinstated, have killed so many of us).

He blocked drilling off the coasts of much of California and Florida (now being reinstated by Trump). These actions fractured the Republican party and the most fanatical wing took over, where they preside today. These radicals, plus the National Rifle Association, saw to it that he would not get a second term in power.

Honor, Service, Duty should govern all our Washington leaders.

686 words

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