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# In Memoriam

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## The Life and Legacy of George H.W. Bush

By Fernando Sanchez

How do we remember our recently deceased presidents? With the passing of George H. W. Bush and the multitude of obituaries coming out of major American news media, the answer becomes remarkably clear. We remember them through rose-tinted glasses. Virtually all retrospectives on George H. W. Bush, no matter their author's political predilection, sanctify him. This is certainly nothing new: the American media tends to concentrate on the positive aspects of recently deceased politicians rather than on their negative ones. However, this should not be the norm, especially in the case of a man who held many high-ranking government positions like George H. W. Bush.

Obituaries are particularly powerful last comments on a person's life. Sean Sweitzer, in his retrospective analysis on the life of former Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, argues that an obituary, unlike a biography or memoir, is directly accessible to a broad audience. It encapsulates the entirety of someone's life in one short and direct statement. The events included or omitted, the way they are presented, and the words used to describe them, can either sanctify or vilify an individual.<sup>1</sup> When obituaries are written from opposing viewpoints, readers are able to examine the same

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Switzer, "Obituaries, Subjectivities, and Perceptions of Ariel Sharon," *History in the Making* 7 (2014): 171-172.

historical figure from different perspectives and hopefully see the value, truth, and bias in both representations.<sup>2</sup> However, if most obituaries are written from one perspective, then a person's life can be misrepresented. The complexities inherent in humans and history are lost, and their life and legacy become simplistic to the point of falsehood. George H. W. Bush was a complex man, but most obituaries do not portray him as such.

Most obituaries of Bush nostalgically paint him as the last great bipartisan president, a man of morals and principles who put country above party. There is also a large effort to sentimentalize him. An example of this is the considerable amount of coverage given to his service dog Sully, and how he mourns the loss of his owner.<sup>3</sup> Even some of his critics, such as current President Donald Trump, took the time to publicly praise him. Trump said, "Through his essential authenticity, disarming wit, and unwavering commitment to faith, family, and country, President Bush inspired generations of his fellow Americans to public service — to be, in his words, "a thousand points of light" illuminating the greatness, hope, and opportunity of America to the world."<sup>4</sup> These narratives present a simple and acceptable man, driven by faith, a sense of service, and a commitment to peace. While this is not the entire story, these are the only aspects of Bush that are given any attention. In an effort to respect the dead, these retrospectives ignore some important, yet unfavorable, components of Bush and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Upon Bush's death, a multitude of stories regarding his friendship with his service dog, Sully, were released. These stories served to soften his image by portraying Bush as a kind-hearted animal lover. Some examples of these are "George HW Bush's service dog Sully pays touching last tribute" from *BBC News* and "'Mission Complete' For Sully, George H.W. Bush's Service Dog" from *Huffington Post*.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Trump and Melania Trump, "Statement from President Donald J. Trump and First Lady Melania Trump on the Passing of Former President George H.W. Bush," *The White House*, December 01, 2018, accessed March 04, 2019. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-first-lady-melania-trump-passing-former-president-george-h-w-bush/>.

his legacy. As David Greenberg proclaims, “Respect for the dead must coexist with respect for historical record.”<sup>5</sup>

It is understandable to want to remember our former leaders in the best possible light, although it is a mistake to do so. For many Americans, all they will learn or remember about a president is written in their obituary. These short summaries will inform millions of people. Focusing on the positive aspects of a president while ignoring their failings serves only to present a false, idealized version of them and, by extension, the United States.<sup>6</sup> Their legacy ultimately becomes America’s legacy. While everyone might not be satisfied with the outcome, the American people, together, elect one person to represent and lead the United States. Their actions reflect our society and values, and it is impossible to learn from past mistakes if we simply pretend they do not exist. Thus, it is undeniably important to critically analyze a president’s life without glossing over their follies or ignoring their poor decisions. Therefore, this “In Memoriam” seeks to remove the rose-colored glasses in the hopes that readers will obtain a better understanding of a profoundly historical individual. It does not intend to sanctify nor vilify, but to analyze the complexities of the life of George Herbert Walker Bush, the forty-first president of the United States of America.

### **George Herbert Walker Bush: 1924-2018**

George Herbert Walker Bush passed away November 30th, 2018 at the age of ninety-four. After several trips to the hospital, the former commander-in-chief finally succumbed to old age. Following his death, several former presidents including Bill

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<sup>5</sup> David Greenberg, “Is History Being Too Kind to George H. W. Bush?” *Politico*, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/12/01/george-hw-bush-legacy-222730>.

<sup>6</sup> The American voting system is not a direct democracy but a representative democracy that employs an electoral college to represent the populace by voting in presidential elections.

Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, as well as the current President Donald Trump, offered their condolences to his family. Bush held various governmental positions: two terms in the House of Representatives, UN Ambassador, CIA Director, and Vice President, however, his single term as president is considered the most significant in terms of American Diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> During Bush's single term as president, the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the United States entered the first in a string of conflicts in the Middle East.

George Herbert Walker Bush was born on June 12th, 1924, in Milton, Massachusetts. His parents, Prescott Bush, a successful investment banker and United States Senator, and Dorothy Walker Bush, were part of the elite upper class whose wealth came from old money. Their ancestors worked alongside notable business families such as the Rockefellers and Harrimans.<sup>8</sup> During his teenage years, George H. W. Bush attended Phillips Academy, one of the top preparatory schools in the nation, where he prepared for life as a businessman and politician. However, Bush did not immediately go on to college after graduation.

The United States entered World War II while Bush attended Phillips Academy. Graduating in 1942, he opted to join the Navy rather than attend college, and became the youngest Naval Airman up to that point.<sup>9</sup> During the war, Bush flew fifty-eight combat missions in the Pacific theater, including one where he was shot down. He received three medals for his service, including the Distinguished Flying Cross.<sup>10</sup> Upon the conclusion of the war, Bush left the Navy and attended Yale University in 1946, graduating in 1948.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffery A. Engel, "A Better World... but Don't Get Carried Away: The Foreign Policy of George H. W. Bush Twenty Years On," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (2010): 25-46.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Greenberg, "Is History Being Too Kind."

<sup>10</sup> The Distinguished Flying Cross was established on January 28, 1927. The medal recognizes United States Military personnel for heroism or extraordinary achievement during an aerial flight.

Bush's political career started after he moved from his home in Connecticut to Texas. In 1964, after successfully establishing an oil company, he ran for Senate. During this time, the political parties began to transform. The Democratic party, through the actions of Presidents Kennedy and later Johnson, began to establish itself as the party of civil rights. The Republican Party, in turn, began the process of reconstituting itself as a staunch supporter of the American South.<sup>11</sup> In his Senate campaign, Bush demonstrated his willingness to put aside political principles for political gain.

Prior to his Senate run, Bush appeared to be in favor of the burgeoning civil rights movement. As a student at Yale, he held a fundraiser for the United Negro College Fund. After his move to Texas, Bush invited several members of the local NAACP to his house for dinner. Bush's father, Prescott Bush, sponsored legislation to desegregate schools and protect voters' rights.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, after adopting the Republican Party's new Southern Strategy, as well as satisfying the more nativist voters, Bush criticized the landmark Civil Rights Act.<sup>13</sup> He stated that, "The new Civil-Rights Act was passed to protect 14 percent of the people. I'm also worried about the other 86 percent."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this was not the last time Bush abandoned principle to advance his political career.

Despite his failed bid for the Senate, Bush began to move through the ranks of the Republican Party. He was elected to the Texas House of Representatives, where he remained from 1967 to 1971. As a Representative, he occupied a string of high-profile positions. Bush was appointed as the US United Nations

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<sup>11</sup>Franklin Foer, "The Last WASP President," *Atlantic*, December 2nd, 2018, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/george-hw-bush-last-wasp-president/577156/>.

<sup>12</sup> Foer, "The Last WASP President."

<sup>13</sup> Greenberg, "Is History Being Too Kind."

<sup>14</sup> Foer, "The Last WASP President."

Ambassador in 1971.<sup>15</sup> From there, he went on to become the Chair of the Republican National Committee, and was then appointed as the CIA Director in 1976, where he remained until he was removed by President Jimmy Carter in 1977.<sup>16</sup>

After he left the CIA, George H. W. Bush launched his first bid for the presidency in 1980, but lost the Republican primaries to Ronald Reagan, who ultimately chose Bush as his running mate. Prior to becoming Reagan's running mate, Bush was critical of supply-side economics and famously decried it as “voodoo economics.”<sup>17</sup> He also did not take an outright stance against abortion. Prescott Bush, Bush's father, was an early supporter of Planned Parenthood and Bush himself supported family planning as a congressman.<sup>18</sup> However, these beliefs did not align with Reagan's platform. Reagan embraced supply-side economics as a key component of his economic policy and was staunchly pro-life. Christian voters were immensely important to the success of the Republican Party. After the landmark court case, *Roe V. Wade* (1973), abortion became a central issue for the Republican Party.<sup>19</sup> After his appointment as Reagan's running mate, Bush recanted these long-held beliefs in order to more closely fit the mold of the Republican Party and to align with Reagan's stance on the issues of abortion and supply-side economics.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Bush embraced supply-side economics, and became an outspoken critic of abortion.<sup>21</sup> He served as vice president for both of Ronald

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Nelson and Barbara A. Perry, *41: Inside the Presidency of George H. W. Bush* (Cornell University Press, 2014), xvii-xviii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> "Voodoo Economics," *NBC Nightly News*, New York, NY: NBC Universal, 02/10/1982, Accessed February 27, 2019 from NBC Learn: <https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=33292>.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Mccammon, "Looking Back On President George H.W. Bush's Legacy On Abortion," Interview by Mary Louise Kelly, *All Things Considered*, *NPR*, December 4th, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/04/673398023/looking-back-on-president-george-h-w-bushs-legacy-on-abortion>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Greenberg, "Is History Being Too Kind."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Reagan's terms, after which Bush launched a second bid for the presidency.

In the 1988 presidential election, George H. W. Bush ran against Michael Dukakis, Democratic Governor of Massachusetts. During the campaign, Bush was criticized for the controversial Willie Horton ad. The ad painted Dukakis as soft on crime and stoked racial fears by overhyping the story of Horton's crime. While on his state authorized furlough, Willie Horton, a convicted felon serving life without the possibility of parole, broke into Angela and Clifford Barnes' home, assaulted them both, and raped Angela.<sup>22</sup> While some dismissed the ad as the work of Lee Atwater, future Chair of the Republican National Committee and architect of Bush's campaign, it still remains a controversial aspect of Bush's campaign, and another instance of his hypocritical attitude towards civil rights.<sup>23</sup> Bush's selection of Dan Quayle as his running mate caused further controversy, especially among his staff, who were not notified, nor did they approve of his choice.<sup>24</sup> Quayle, a hawkish Indiana senator, frequently opposed new civil rights measures.<sup>25</sup> Despite these controversies, Bush won the election and became the forty-first President of the United States. During his presidency, George H. W. Bush's administration faced many international challenges, including the fall of the USSR, the reunification of Germany, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which prompted the first Gulf War. The Bush administration may not be entirely responsible for these global events, especially the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is debate as to whether Ronald Reagan is the true catalyst for the United States victory in the Cold War.<sup>26</sup> However, Bush is highly regarded for his foreign policy achievements.

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<sup>22</sup> Robin Tone, "Prison Furloughs in Massachusetts Threaten Dukakis Record on Crime," *Los Angeles Times*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Foer, "The Last WASP President."

<sup>24</sup> Nelson and Perry, *41*, xvii.

<sup>25</sup> Foer, "The Last WASP President."

<sup>26</sup> Engel, "A Better World," 27.

Bush is lauded both for intervening in world affairs and for knowing when to back off.<sup>27</sup> In May of 1989, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he pushed for peaceful East-West negotiations and anticipated that these talks were capable of producing a slow and steady strategic transformation and integration of the Soviet Bloc into the global system. He hoped that a nonviolent approach would “dramatically increase stability on the continent” and “set out a new vision for Europe at the end of this century.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Bush did not prolong the Gulf War: after successfully destroying Iraq’s air defenses and crippling their infrastructure, the US did not occupy Iraq.<sup>29</sup>

From a military perspective, Bush executed the war excellently. He brought together a team of advisors, one being General Colin Powell, that helped in planning the Gulf War. Bush insisted that Powell, Chair of the Joint Chief of Staff, be a part of his team of advisors. Powell provided a military perspective in the cabinet, which helped end the war quickly and efficiently.<sup>30</sup> Operation Desert Storm began on January 16th, 1991 and consisted of a coalition constructed of several different nations including the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Turkey.<sup>31</sup> This coalition fielded around 500,000 troops, aided by a significant bombing campaign, ready to attack Iraqi forces.<sup>32</sup> In order to avoid mission creep,<sup>33</sup> which would lead to incalculable human and political cost, Operation Desert Storm had a clear end goal and viable exit strategy: the liberation of Kuwait.<sup>34</sup> Bush’s objective

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<sup>27</sup> Nelson and Perry, *41*, 81.

<sup>28</sup> Engel, “A Better World,” 32.

<sup>29</sup> Nelson and Perry, *41*, 82.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick J. Dobel, “Prudence and Presidential Ethics: The Decisions on Iraq of the Two Presidents Bush,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2010): 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 69. It is important to note that these were not the only countries to participate. The allied coalition consisted of thirty-nine countries.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Mission Creep is a term used to describe a gradual shift in objectives during a military campaign. This shift often results in unplanned, costly, long term military commitments.

<sup>34</sup> Dobel, “Prudence and Presidential Ethics,” 69.

was not the dispossession of Saddam Hussein.<sup>35</sup> In a little over a month, the coalition defeated Iraq, however, despite the success of Operation Desert Storm and the defeat of the Iraqi military, the Gulf War should not be considered a great victory.

Iraq's military might can be attributed to the United States' prior involvement. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-8), several years prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the US supplied Iraq with military equipment. This occurred when George H. W. Bush was vice president to Ronald Reagan. There is no evidence to indicate that Bush had knowledge about arms sales, however, Senior White House officials claim Bush advocated for favorable policies towards Iraq.<sup>36</sup> Once he became president, he attempted to strengthen business, diplomatic, and intelligence ties between the US and Iraq.<sup>37</sup> John Hubert Kelly, Bush's Assistant Secretary to Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, stated, "Iraq is an important state with great potential. We want to deepen and broaden our relationship."<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, this did not affect public opinion about the Gulf War.

The Gulf War was not unpopular among the American public or media. In fact, the completion of the war boosted George Bush's approval ratings. Notwithstanding his popularity, at the time, some questioned the purpose of the war, and feared the potential blowback that could result from a US led attack in the Middle East. In spite of their rhetoric, the Bush administration had a clear preference for global interventions based upon geo-political

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<sup>35</sup> Steven Hurst, "The Rhetorical Strategy of George H. W. Bush during the Persian Gulf Crisis 1990-91: How to Help Lose a War You Won," *Political Studies*, 52, no. 2 (2004): 377, accessed December 16, 2018, [https://csusb-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primoexplore/fulldisplay?docid=TN\\_sage\\_s10\\_1111\\_j\\_1467\\_9248\\_2004\\_00485\\_x&context=U&vid=01CALUS\\_USB&lang=en\\_US](https://csusb-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primoexplore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_sage_s10_1111_j_1467_9248_2004_00485_x&context=U&vid=01CALUS_USB&lang=en_US).

<sup>36</sup> Murray Waas, "What Washington Gave Saddam Hussein for Christmas," in *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, (New York: Times Books, 1991), 85.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

stability rather than upon human rights.<sup>39</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, a New York Times journalist, stated that the Gulf War had less to do with democracy and human rights, and more to do with protecting government loyalty to the US<sup>40</sup> Patrick Buchanan wrote, “Given U.S. Air and Naval Power, and the might of U.S. ground forces, eventually the U.S. could smash Iraq... declaw Hussein, if not bring him down. But, [who] would rise from the ruin? Who would fill the power vacuum?”<sup>41</sup> These fears turned out to be well-founded. Although Bush did not occupy Iraq after expelling its forces from Kuwait, the crippling sanctions imposed on Iraq after the war caused the country to descend into chaos. This disorder helped set the stage for the rise of radical Islamic terrorist groups in Iraq. Feisal Istrabadi, Iraq's former UN Ambassador, stated in an interview on NPR, “[The United States] allowed, also, 13 years of sanctions, which destroyed the Iraqi middle class and allowed the rise of the power of the religious parties in Iraq.”<sup>42</sup> Not only did the Gulf War result in the devastation of Iraq's economy, but, towards the end of the war Bush made a statement that led to the deaths of thousands of Iraqi people.

One of the major missteps in the Gulf War was Bush's insinuation that the Shiites and Kurds of Iraq should attempt to overthrow Saddam Hussein. In a speech on February 15th, 1991, at the Raytheon Company, Bush stated, “There's another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands to force Saddam

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<sup>39</sup> Engel, “A Better World,” 45.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Washington's Vital Interest,” in *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. by Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, (New York: Times Books, 1991), 203.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Buchanan, “Have The Neocons Thought This Through?” in *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, (New York: Times Books, 1991), 214.

<sup>42</sup> Feisal Istrabadi, “Examining Former President George H.W. Bush's Legacy in Iraq,” Interview by Rachel Martin, Morning Edition, *NPR*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/07/674467932/iraqs-former-ambassador-to-the-u-n-shares-george-h-w-bushs-role-in-iraq>.

Hussein, the dictator, to step aside.”<sup>43</sup> Many Shiites and Kurds took this as encouragement from a United States President to rebel. Feisal Istrabadi, in the same interview with NPR, stated, “when the rebellion began, no one imagined that with a half-million men and women and air superiority that the United States would stand by... and allow Saddam Hussein to use helicopter gunships to slaughter men, women and children civilians—well over 100,000—from the air.”<sup>44</sup> Bush’s senior advisors were unwilling to respond to the violent rebellion, since intervention, commending or condemning the act, meant further war with Iraq. The Shiites and Kurds did not receive US military aid and as the result, thousands from both groups were killed in the ensuing violence.<sup>45</sup> The Gulf War was extremely costly, in terms of human lives. The war was executed quickly and efficiently, and Bush’s decision not to invade and occupy Iraq is commendable, especially considering his son’s 2003 Invasion of Iraq. However, his insinuation that the Shiites and Kurds should rebel against Hussein proved to be a costly mistake. His promise for “a kinder gentler nation” would not transpire.

After the Gulf War, Bush’s popularity grew among the American people. His approval ratings reached as high as roughly 88 percent. Nevertheless, the faltering economy contributed to his ultimate defeat. His campaign promise of “Read my lips: no new taxes” would ultimately come back to haunt him. In 1990, amid climbing deficits, Bush signed a tax bill that added several new taxes the American people were be obligated to pay.<sup>46</sup> In 1992, a year after he was praised for the success of the Gulf War, Bush barely won the Republican presidential primary.<sup>47</sup> His inability to follow through with his main campaign promise led him to lose the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Greenberg, “Is History Being Too Kind.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Adam Nagourney, “George Bush, Who Steered Nation in Tumultuous Times, Is Dead at 94,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2018, accessed December 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/30/us/politics/george-hw-bush-dies.html>.

presidency to Bill Clinton. Towards the end of his presidency, Bush pardoned several officials implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal.<sup>48</sup> This drew controversy because one of the men he pardoned, former Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, could have implicated Bush in the scandal.<sup>49</sup>

After he left the White House, Bush remained publicly active. He, along with his former political rival, Bill Clinton, participated in fundraising for disaster relief. Together, they toured tsunami devastated areas of Southeast Asia, and parts of the US East Coast destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. In response to the wreckage of Katrina, they established the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund.<sup>50</sup> Bush's two sons followed in his footsteps and ventured into politics. George W. Bush was elected to two terms as president and Jeb Bush was elected as Governor of Florida.<sup>51</sup> Undeterred by his failing health, Bush remained active until he contracted an infection following the death of his wife, Barbara Bush (April 17, 2018). Five months later, on November 30th, 2018, George H. W. Bush passed away at the age of 94. He is survived by his four sons, one daughter, and grandchildren.

## **Conclusion**

How do we remember our recently deceased presidents? We should remember them as they were, without glorification. It is understandable, even commendable, that the American media looks fondly on former politicians, especially presidents. Particularly at a time when the nation is deeply divided, it can be cathartic to collectively grieve and nostalgically remember a former leader. Additionally, it is important to allow the family of

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<sup>48</sup> The Iran Contra Scandal took place from 1985 through 1987 and involved the United States selling arms to Iran in order to support rebel fighters in Nicaragua. The selling of weapons to Iran was illegal at the time owing to Iran being on the "Nations that support Terrorism list."

<sup>49</sup> Nagourney, "George Bush."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

the deceased time to grieve without critical disruption. Given the effect presidents have on history, and the lasting-power of obituaries, it is a mistake not to be critical of former presidents. The American media can respect the dead, while simultaneously acknowledging the legacy, both positive and negative, of a president.

George H. W. Bush was a complex man with a complex legacy. He led the nation during turbulent times, and his actions had far reaching consequences that changed not only America, but the world. He lived most of his adult life in service to the United States, however, like all people, he made mistakes, some of which had disastrous consequences. Bush was willing to abandon the cause of Civil Rights, in order to advance his political career. He, like many other presidents, was more inclined to intervene in global affairs for geopolitical advantages, rather than for human rights or the spread of democracy. The Gulf War, considered the greatest accomplishment of his presidency, was fought not for humanitarian reasons, but to secure loyal regimes in the Middle East. These failings need to be acknowledged, considering George Herbert Walker Bush's legacy ultimately becomes the legacy of the United States. It is time we stop idealizing that legacy.

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Fernando Allen Sanchez is currently an undergraduate History major at CSUSB. His primary academic focus is Middle Eastern studies, but he also plans to earn a minor in Arabic studies. Along with his academic endeavors, he is a Supplemental Instruction Leader for several history courses at CSUSB. After graduating, he hopes to teach history at the secondary level while also pursuing a Master's degree and PhD in Middle Eastern studies.



*History in the Making*