

Leadership Analysis of President George H.W. Bush

“41: A Portrait of My Father” by George W. Bush

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November 15, 2014

Forty-three men have served as President of the United States. Only two of which—John Quincy Adams and George W. Bush—were sons to other presidents. When David McCullough wrote his prolific, highly celebrated, and Pulitzer Prize winning biography on John Adams, he was disappointed to find that his son, John Quincy Adams, had never written about his father. This startling news gave George W. Bush the necessary inspiration to write this truly one-of-kind biography; never before in history has a son of a president, who also served as president, written about his father. In fact, no major writings written by any president about any president are in existence other than the writings they wrote of themselves.

In the second book of his post-presidency, W. explicitly states that he in no ways offers an objective look at his dad but “is a love story—a personal portrait of the extraordinary man who I am blessed to call my dad.”¹ W. walks through the early years of his dad’s life, spending a majority of the book focusing on the pre-presidency years. It had never crossed my mind at how well prepared HW was to be President of the United States, having served in the capacities necessary for presidential success, and having dealt with the fast-paced scandals that plagued the nation’s capitol.

In the space of one decade, George [HW] Bush had served as Ambassador to the United Nations, Republican Party Chairman, Liaison Officer in China, and Director of the CIA. He had seen a President fall and a new world power begin to rise. He had dealt successfully with diplomats, communists, and spies. He had led organizations through crises and emerged with his reputation enhanced.²

In HW’s many years of public service, he demonstrated the six keys to effective decision making; however, in order to get to that point, HW employed a method which

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he coined *personal diplomacy*. By this method, he prioritized obtaining the respect of another person before ever asking him or her to do something. While personal diplomacy was later accredited to his foreign policy skills as president, he used the principles behind this method his whole life.

HW was in many ways a risk-taker his whole life. Upon graduating from an Ivy League school in New England, HW decided to take a chance in the oil business in rural Texas. He left his comfort zone in Maine and roughed it in the dusty plains in search for black gold. It was after working as an oilrig worker that HW decided to start up his own firm. He, in essence got lucky by picking a piece of land that happened to contain massive amounts of oil; however, in essence, the land selection was strategic because of other industry factors.

As his oil firm progressed, HW had a vision for a mechanism to make off shore oil drilling possible and profitable. It took massive amounts of recruiting, and massive amounts of fundraising; however, HW was able to use his vision to convey hope in many people, and he quickly raised a few million dollars in order to build the device. The device ended up thrusting HW into the massive wealth that sustained him and his family financially to today.

From these early career risks, HW demonstrated the three core definitions of leadership. For one, he had convinced his new wife to move halfway across the country to follow his dream, he had influenced many people to believe in his off shore drilling vision, and he mobilized their resources into results. While these three core definitions seem minimal at this point in HW's life, they will consistently arise as his life progressed. While his circumstances adjusted constantly, his attitude and style did not.

During his rise in the oil industry, HW got involved in a county Republican Party central committee. As he progressed further, he eventually ran for Senate. He lost. Two years later, although dismayed, he ran for Congress and won. Two years later, he ran again unopposed. Two years later, he left his seat in Congress to run for US Senate again, and lost. Seemingly, his political future was over. Shortly after the election, President Nixon called on him to serve as Ambassador to the United Nations. Despite his opposition as a Congressman to the United Nations, he gladly accepted.

President Nixon had great respect for HW. He had only been a Member of Congress for four years, but the influence he had on Capitol Hill surpassed that of a typical Representative. Two years later, President Nixon asked HW to take a step back from the international stage and run the National Republican Party. HW retained his great influence in that role and had much success because of it. His influence did not stop at donors though, for amidst the Watergate Scandal, it was a personal letter from HW—a practice HW did throughout his entire life—to Nixon that greatly influenced Nixon's decision to resign.

After President Ford was sworn in, HW was named the highest-ranking official to China. During his time, he developed relationships that would benefit his own presidency down the road, but more significantly the US-China relations during the Cold War. His style of personal diplomacy is what brought forth those early relations. They were done with moves as simple as inviting key leaders *and their families* to his residence and cooking a meal with them. Other times, it would be a simple sporting outing such as golf or tennis. His mindset was that if he developed these relationships early on, later when things needed to happen, he could make a call to those leaders to

ask of them what he needed with a higher chance of a positive response. His influence and vision for positive working relationships between the two super powers was effective. His effectiveness was so much so that decades later at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, a special dinner was hosted by Chinese President Hu Jintao to honor HW as the single most important person in developing positive US-China relations and a prosperous Chinese economy from trade with the west.

HW's influence worldwide increased in influence within the United States. Many wanted him as the Vice Presidential replacement but ultimately it went to someone else instead. HW was moved though from China to the CIA. The CIA was amidst many crises and scandals and HW was to clean it up. He employed his style of personal diplomacy with the operatives who felt excluded from their own jobs, and in less than a year he had dramatically improved employee morale. Additionally, sensing that he could be replaced if Carter won the election, he trained several deputies to manage the agency in his administrative style. Sure enough, Carter won, and replaced HW with one of the deputies HW had specifically trained. The agency's momentum continued forward in the years following the HW year. HW's influence over the agency was so obvious to employees and vital government officials that in 1999, the CIA Headquarters was renamed the George Bush Center for Intelligence, a name it still holds today. HW prevented the agency from collapsing and reestablished into the powerful agency that it continues to be today.

Several years later, he decided to run for president. His style of personal diplomacy aided him on the campaign trail having nearly no name recognize to winning the Iowa caucuses. His success slowly dwindled, and eventually he lost, but because of

his great status around the country, and because of his colossal foreign policy experience, which was where Ronald Reagan fell short, Ronald Reagan asked him to be his Vice President. President Reagan found HW to contain a wealth of expertise, incredible loyalty demonstrated in his many roles in public service, and superb character that he gave HW one of the greatest workloads of any Vice President to date (to be surpassed by Dick Cheney later).

Eight years later, he found himself running for President himself, and finally he had won his home state of Texas. His now infamous campaign slogan—Read My Lips, No New Taxes—was one that resonated around the country and because of his great reputation as someone to be trusted, the American People trusted him. Two years later, he made a compromise on budget reform to decrease spending and increase taxes to a ratio of 2:1. Before making his decision, several key things occurred. First, HW met with as many economic advisors to determine if there were any viable alternatives; he wanted to have all the information. Second, it was just after the Democrats took control of Congress, so in essence they had some right to demand change. Third, he brought people into his decision making process, including that of W., among others. From the options made available by the plethora of advisors, H.W. prioritized the options, embraced the difficult consequences that those options would produce, and implemented that action.

The biggest consequence of his action on budget and tax reform was breaking his most clear and concise promise. He knew the consequences could be losing reelection, but he felt it was the right thing to solve the crisis at hand. History shows that his action did ultimately save the economy from further recession and actually

catapulted growth, initially accredited to President Clinton but later correctly attributed to H.W. In his book, W. writes that H.W. heavily weighed the option of not running for reelection after seeing the immediate consequences of his action play out; however, he felt it would only create more chaos in an already scandal-wary D.C.

In his presidential debates with Bill Clinton, Clinton often brought up his failed promise of raising taxes. H.W. attempted to rebut his comments by pointing out the dozens of tax increases Clinton had implemented as governor of Arkansas; however, Clinton, being the political genius he is, struck down his argument every time by saying he never promised not to raise taxes. H.W. integrity was lost in his decision to raise taxes, and how very devastating that is considering the high character H.W. was known for before, during, and after his reelection. No Vice President has ever gone on to serve two terms as President, and H.W. fell into that mould. He lost his reelection to Clinton.

Staying consistent to his character, H.W. continued to practice personal diplomacy in his post-presidency years with world leaders he had come to know, and even with the man who defeated him, Bill Clinton. H.W. and Clinton have spent more time together in their post-presidency years than any two presidents have with perhaps the exception of H.W. and W. Clinton and H.W. have teamed up on dozens of common good, charitable causes, particularly with natural disasters during the W. years. Working together, they have raised hundreds of millions of dollars and have grown quite close to each other, their families included. Clinton, who never knew his father, came to see H.W. as a father figure, and the two presidential families have spent much time together since. H.W. is a man of high class and character to look beyond personal differences to see the humanity behind each person. It takes true leadership for the person who

defeats you to look up to you as a role model. Clinton coined H.W. as the best one-term president the United States has ever had, a theme that sticks in the minds of historians judging H.W. presidency.

H.W.'s form of leadership is summed up in his personal diplomacy. He cared about other people and made that clear to the people he was working with. When W. was elected governor of Texas, his brother Jeb also ran for governor of Florida and lost. H.W. was proud of W. was grieved with Jeb. To a reporter on that election night, he said, "Our joy is in Texas, but our hearts are in Florida." W. writes that nobody in his family thought this to be an action of favoritism or an action of misplaced priority. He writes that all knew H.W. as the man looking out for the ones most others forget about.

H.W. got things done because he rightly recognized that to get something done, there is a team of people working on that something. H.W. got things done effectively because he made a sincere effort to know those team-members usually overlooked as pawns in the political chess match. His lessons on leadership can play out in church ministry in a couple of key ways.

First, an effective pastor must recognize that the ministry of their church, even a small church, is reliant upon a team of leaders. These leaders include Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, small group leaders, nursery leaders, the secretary, and the worship leaders. The effective pastor must not just recognize that these individuals are imperative to the church he leads, but that their part in the team will be vastly more effective if he takes the time to know his leaders. H.W. knew the strengths and weaknesses of those he got to know; he played to their strengths and helped them work on their weaknesses rather than exploit them for personal gain.

Second, particularly at the C.I.A., H.W. trained leaders to replace him. A pastor, even more so than individuals in politics, must be training and mentoring new leaders for the Church. Even if a pastor ends up staying with a congregation for decades, if he is constantly training additional leaders, there will be much fruit to show both in his own congregation with ministry growth and outside his own church. When Mars Hill recently announced they were splitting up into a dozen separate entities, evangelicals heavily criticized them. I disagree with that criticism. One thing Mark Driscoll excelled in was preparing leaders to take on the responsibilities for leading. Rather than taking one church with one vision and spreading it out across the Northwest, the leaders of Mars Hill recognize that they can multiple their impact with a dozen churches with a dozen visions working in the Northwest to advance the Gospel. There are arguments on both sides, but my pastor once told me that he would prefer ten churches with one hundred members each than one church with a thousand. His sentiments likely have shaped my feelings about Mars Hill.

While I understand W.'s biography on his father H.W. was not an objective biography and intended to display a side to H.W. that a typical historian would overlook, it has reshaped my understanding of H.W. and W. I was almost two years old when H.W. left office; however, I lived through the presidency of W. and have always admired his leadership. Although controversial, I have a hard time thinking there was any decision he could have made in response to 9/11 that would not have been criticized. Now knowing the man who shaped W. into the leader he was, my admiration for the Bush family has grown immensely. Time will tell if a third Bush, Jeb Bush, will serve as president too, and how the influence of H.W.'s leadership affects his own style as well.

Bibliography

Bush, George W. *41: A Portrait of My Father*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2014.