

Statement on the death of President George H. W. Bush

From presidential historian Louis L. Picone

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Today, along with the rest of the nation, I mourn the passing of George H. W. Bush, the 41st President of the United States of America. Over the last several hours I have been thinking about his legacy. Certainly he was president during some of the most significant events of my lifetime: the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the fall of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, signing START 1 treaty with Russia to reduce nuclear weapons, and the Gulf War to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. He handled each with diplomacy, fortitude, and resolve. The world was, and is, a better place for his steady leadership. But while history is static, a legacy is less so – it is malleable over time, constantly shaped and reshaped by contemporary events and circumstances. If you asked what President Bush’s legacy was in 1993 when he left office, the answer would be much different than it is today. This morning I was interviewed on BBC radio within an hour of his death. I was asked about his legacy, and after listing the seismic world events during his term, I added that perhaps the most powerful thing he leaves for us is the character of the man himself. He was an honorable and decent man who began a life of public service as the youngest Naval fighter pilot in World War II. He was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather, a dignified president, and he had a warm and self-deprecating sense of humor. George H. W. Bush treated his political opponents with respect and never, never, engaged in the politics of personal destruction that has unfortunately become commonplace today. As he said in his 1988 Republican candidate acceptance speech, George H. W. Bush envisioned a “kinder and gentler nation.” In his post presidency, he rightly was respected as an elder statesman and

continued to lead by example. His friendship with President Bill Clinton who defeated him in 1992 was heart-warming and sincere as they worked together on causes such as Hattian relief. In 2011, President Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Hopefully in his death George H. W. Bush can continue to teach us to be better, to serve as a shining example of what it means to be a man of character, and encourage a renewed spirit of service and civility.

Personally I greatly admired President Bush. I have met several presidents briefly in my research, but regrettably did not have the honor to meet President Bush. I did, however, receive a letter from him. Several years ago I sent him, along with several other former presidents, a copy of my first book, *Where the Presidents Were Born*. In an accompanying note, I wished him well and added that I hoped I had portrayed his birthplace “accurately and warmly.” Shortly after sending the book, he was hospitalized for several weeks. I never expected a reply and as months passed had forgotten about it. But one day, a letter arrived. By this time I was also honored to have received responses from other former presidents. But the one from President Bush was different. The other letters were impersonal form responses. President Bush, however, sent a warm personal note that, astonishingly, was prefaced with an apology for the late response. Just to put that into perspective, the former leader of the Free World, was apologizing to *me*, for the time it took him to reply, while much of that time he had been hospitalized in failing health! Over the coming days and weeks, many will speak of what a down-to-earth man he was, and how he treated everyone – whether King, Queen, gardener, or citizen – with the same decency and respect. His letter is one of my most prized possessions and says, much better than I can, in his own words, what a wonderful human being he was.

Dear Louis, it just came to my attention that I never wrote to thank you for your nice letter and for sending me a copy of your book. My apologies! Barbara and I have read

most of your work and are finding it very interesting and informative. And yes, you did portray my birthplace “accurately and warmly.” Thank you. All the best to you. (signed)

George H. W. Bush

Rest in peace, President George H. W. Bush