

Vice Presidents of the United States George H.W. Bush (1981-1989)

Citation: Mark O. Hatfield, with the Senate Historical Office. *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 529-538.

Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



U.S. Senate Collection

Only the President lands on the south lawn.

—Vice President George Bush, March 30, 1981

Rarely had a vice president come to the office so eminently qualified as George Bush. He had been a businessman, United States representative, United Nations ambassador, chairman of the Republican National Committee, chief U.S. liaison officer to the People's Republic of China, Central Intelligence Agency director, and presidential contender. Yet while his vice-presidential predecessors had struggled to show they were part of the president's inner circle of policymakers, Bush found himself having to insist that he was "out of the loop." While he occupied the vice-presidency, he kept his profile low, avoided doing anything that might upstage his president, and remained ever loyal and never threatening. That strategy made him the first vice president in more than 150 years to move directly to the presidency by election.

A Tradition of Public Service

Bush dedicated his vice-presidential memoirs, *Looking Forward*, to his mother and father, "whose values lit the way." "Dad taught us about duty and service," he said of Senator Prescott S. Bush. The son of an Ohio steel company president, Prescott Bush had attended Yale, where he sang with the Whiffenpoofs and excelled in athletics. After military service in the First World War, he married Dorothy Walker in 1921 and produced a family of five children. In 1923 Prescott Bush moved east to take a managerial position in Massachusetts, and two years later shifted to New York City, establishing his family in suburban Greenwich, Connecticut. In 1926 he became vice

president of W.A. Harriman and Company, an investment firm, later Brown Brothers, Harriman. In addition to his Wall Street activities, Prescott Bush served as president of the United States Golf Association during the 1930s. During World War II, he helped to establish the United Service Organization (USO). Prescott Bush also sought elected office. From 1947 to 1950 he was finance chairman of the Connecticut Republican party. He lost a race for the Senate in 1950 by just a thousand votes, and in 1952 defeated Representative Abraham Ribicoff for a vacant seat in the Senate. Tapping his golf skills, Prescott Bush became a frequent golfing partner with President Dwight Eisenhower. After two terms in the Senate, he retired in 1962, an exemplar of the eastern, internationalist wing of the Republican party.¹

As much as George Bush physically resembled his tall, lean, athletic father and followed his footsteps in business and politics, he was raised primarily by his mother, Dorothy. An athletic woman herself (she was runner-up in the national girls' tennis tournament of 1918), Dorothy Bush brought up her large family while her husband absented himself to devote long hours to business and public service. She taught her children kindness, charity, and modesty—and rebuked them for any signs of self-importance. George Bush's closest associates attributed his difficulty in talking about himself to his mother's admonitions. Once when he was vice president, Dorothy complained that her son had been reading while President Ronald Reagan delivered his State of the Union address. Bush explained that he was simply following the text of the speech, but she still thought it showed poor manners.²

George Herbert Walker Bush was born on June 12, 1924, at Milton, Massachusetts, where his father was then working. His mother named him for her father, George Herbert Walker, and since Walker's children had called him "Pop," his namesake won the unfortunate diminutive "Poppy." George grew up in Greenwich and spent his summers at his grandfather's vacation home in Kennebunkport, Maine. At twelve he went off to the prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, in preparation for entering his father's alma mater, Yale. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, George Bush determined to enlist. Secretary of War Henry Stimson delivered the commencement address at Andover, urging the graduating class to get a college education before putting on a uniform. "George, did the Secretary say anything to change your mind?" his father asked. "No, sir. I'm going in," Bush replied. He was sworn into the navy on his eighteenth birthday.³

The youngest aviator in the navy, Bush was sent to the Pacific and flew missions over Wake Island, Guam, and Saipan. On September 2, 1944, his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire. Bush managed to drop his cargo of bombs (winning the navy's Distinguished Flying Cross for completing his mission under fire) before he flew out to sea to give his crew a chance to parachute. However, one crew member was trapped on the plane and the other's chute failed to open. Bush ejected, drifted alone at sea on a raft, and was rescued by the American submarine, *U.S.S. Finback*. Rejoining his squadron, he saw further action over

the Philippines, flying a total of fifty-eight combat missions before he was finally ordered home in December 1944.⁴

Two weeks later he married Barbara Pierce in her home town of Rye, New York. They had met as teenagers at a Christmas dance and become engaged in 1943 (in the Pacific he had nicknamed his plane "Barbara"). The newlyweds headed to New Haven, where George Bush enrolled at Yale. Their first child—a future governor of Texas—was born there in July 1946. Having a wife and child to support deterred Bush neither from his education nor from his extracurricular activities. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa, captained the Yale baseball team, and was admitted to the prestigious Skull and Bones Club. Unlike fellow student William F. Buckley, Bush was not offended by the liberal humanism of Yale in the 1940s. Neither a political activist nor an aggrieved conservative, Bush concerned himself primarily with winning a national baseball championship at the College World Series.⁵

A Shift to the Sunbelt

Having graduated in two and a half years with honors and won two letters in sports, Bush considered applying for a Rhodes scholarship but concluded that he could not afford to bring his wife and son with him to England. He turned instead to a career in business and accepted an offer from a close family friend, Neil Mallon, to work in the Texas oil fields. Bush started as an equipment clerk at Odessa, Texas. The company then transferred him to California as a salesman and then called him back to Midland, Texas. George and Barbara Bush moved frequently and calculated that they had lived in twenty-eight different houses before eventually reaching the White House. During these years their family increased to four sons and two daughters, although, tragically, their first daughter, Robin, died of leukemia as a child. Bush coached Little League and was less an absentee father than his own father had been, but it was Barbara Bush who served as the disciplinarian and kept the growing family in line.⁶

Once back in Texas, George Bush decided to go independent. He and a neighbor, John Overby, formed the Bush-Overby Oil Development Company, which benefitted from Bush family connections on Wall Street that financed its operations. His uncle Herbert Walker invested nearly a half million dollars, for instance. Others, including *Washington Post* owner Eugene Meyer, were willing to invest in a "sure-fire" business headed by Senator Prescott Bush's son. By 1953 Bush-Overby had merged with another independent oil company to form Zapata Petroleum—picking the name from the Mexican revolutionary and Marlon Brando film, *Viva Zapata!* In 1959 the company split its operations between inland and offshore oil and gas, and Bush moved to Houston as president of Zapata Offshore.⁷

The moving force for Bush's energetic business career was a desire to amass sufficient capital to enter politics. His father had been elected to the Senate in 1952 from Connecticut, but the son, born and raised a Yankee, staked his claim instead in the "Solid

South." In 1952 Democrats held almost every House and Senate seat in the southeastern and southwestern states, a vast expanse sweeping from Virginia to Southern California. Yet dramatic change was already underway. In 1948 southern delegates had walked out of the Democratic convention in protest over including a civil rights plank in the platform and had run South Carolina Governor J. Strom Thurmond as the "Dixiecrat" candidate for president. In 1952 Republican presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower made inroads into the states of the old Confederacy, carrying Virginia, Tennessee, Florida, and his birth state of Texas. Texas' conservative governor Allan Shivers led a "Democrats for Eisenhower" movement, and in 1961 a political science professor named John Tower won Vice President Lyndon Johnson's vacated Senate seat, becoming the first Texas Republican senator since Reconstruction.⁸

George Bush reflected a significant political power shift in post-World War II America. Young veterans like himself sought a fresh start by moving from inner cities into new suburbs and from the Rust Belt to the Sunbelt. Throughout the South, military bases established or expanded during the Second World War continued to grow during the cold war. In Texas, the postwar demand for energy sources brought boom times to the oil fields. The state attracted eager young entrepreneurs not bound by old party loyalties. In 1962, a group of Republicans fearful that the reactionary John Birch Society might take over the local party operations invited Bush to head Houston's Harris County Republican party organization. "This was the challenge I'd been waiting for," he said, "—an opening into politics at the ground level, where it all starts."⁹ Bush did not plan to stay at the ground level for long. In 1963 he announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination for the Senate to oust the incumbent liberal Democrat Ralph Yarborough. Bush won the primary with 67 percent of the vote. Although the Texas electorate was lopsidedly Democratic, Bush believed he could appeal to its conservative majority. But in 1964 he ran on a ticket headed by Barry Goldwater, while Yarborough had the coattails of Texas' own Lyndon B. Johnson. LBJ took 63 percent of the state's votes, while Bush managed to pare Yarborough's winning margin to 56 percent. It was a creditable first race for a novice politician.¹⁰

The national population shift also added new members to the Texas delegation in the House of Representatives. In 1963, as Harris County chairman, Bush had filed suit under the Supreme Court's one-man-one-vote ruling for a congressional redistricting in Houston. Victory in court led to the creation of a new Seventh Congressional District, for which Bush ran in 1966. To finance his campaign, he resigned from Zapata, selling his share for more than a million dollars. His opponent, the Democratic district attorney of Houston, portrayed Bush as a carpetbagger, but Bush knew that three-fourths of the district's residents were also newcomers. It was a "silk-stocking" district—white, wealthy, and with only a small Hispanic and African American population. Cashing in on the name recognition he had gained from his Senate bid, Bush took the House seat with 57 percent of the vote.¹¹

Congressman Bush

The 1966 election provided a midterm rebound for Republicans after the disaster two years earlier. Former Vice President Richard Nixon canvassed the nation for Republican congressional candidates, building a base for his own political comeback. Nixon toured Houston for Bush, as did House Republican leader Gerald Ford in his bid to become Speaker. Both Nixon and Ford had known Prescott Bush in Washington. Due to his father's prominence and his own well-publicized race for the Senate, George Bush arrived in the House better known than most of the forty-six other freshmen Republicans. As a freshman he won a coveted seat on the Ways and Means Committee (which put the Bushes on everyone's "list" of social invitations). He paid diligent attention to constituent affairs and in 1968 was reelected without opposition. That year, after a single term in Congress, his name surfaced on the short list of candidates whom Nixon considered as running mates. Holding a safe seat and fitting comfortably into the camaraderie of the House, Bush might have made his career there, except for his greater ambitions and for the urging of two presidents of the United States that he run for the Senate.¹²

Neither Lyndon Johnson nor Richard Nixon cared for the liberal Democratic senator Ralph Yarborough, and both appealed to Bush to challenge him again. Nixon added a particular inducement by promising Bush a high-level post in his administration should he lose the race. Calculating the conservative mood of his state, Bush concluded that he could unseat Yarborough in a rematch. In 1970 he easily won the Republican nomination but was distressed when Yarborough lost the Democratic primary to the more conservative Lloyd Bentsen. Rather than campaigning from the right of his opponent, Bush found himself situated on the left. Democrats portrayed him as a liberal, Ivy League carpetbagger. (At a Gridiron dinner years later, Texas Representative Jim Wright was still teasing Bush as "the only Texan I know who eats lobster with his chili. . . . He and Barbara had a little down-home quiche cook off.") Bush lost the race with 46 percent of the vote. It would take him eighteen years to even the score with Bentsen.¹³

Politics and Foreign Policy

Bush reminded President Nixon of his offer of a job but did not want anything in the White House, where he might be under the thumb of Nixon's "praetorian guard," H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. He volunteered instead for the post of United Nations ambassador, arguing that it would position him within New York's social circles, where Nixon lacked a strong political base. That argument appealed to Nixon, who was very concerned about his own reelection in 1972. Bush's appointment raised complaints that he was a Texas oilman-politician with no previous experience in foreign affairs. He retorted that his experience as a salesman would make him "the American salesman in the world marketplace for ideas."¹⁴

Nixon won a landslide reelection in 1972 and went to Camp David to reorganize his administration, determined to put absolute loyalists in every top position. In his memoirs,

Bush later recalled that he hoped for a cabinet appointment, but when he received his summons to the president's mountain retreat it was to take over the Republican National Committee from Senator Bob Dole. Bush reluctantly agreed to take the job but only if he could attend cabinet meetings. At the time, he had no notion that the Watergate break-in of June 1972 would erupt into a post-election scandal and destroy Nixon's presidency. But from the moment he took office, Bush recalled, "little else took up my time as national committee chairman." Throughout the storm, Bush defended the president against all charges. Finally, the release of the "smoking gun" tape revealed that Nixon had participated in the Watergate cover-up, eroded what was left of the president's support on Capitol Hill, and changed Bush's mind.¹⁵

On Tuesday, August 6, 1974, Nixon called a cabinet meeting to dispel rumors of his impending resignation. He announced that had decided not to resign because it would weaken the presidency and because he did not believe he had committed an impeachable offense. As Nixon then tried to steer the discussion onto economic issues, White House chief of staff Alexander Haig heard a stir from the group sitting away from the cabinet table:

It was George Bush, who as a guest of the President occupied one of the straight chairs along the wall. He seemed to be asking for the floor. When Nixon failed to recognize him, he spoke anyway. Watergate was the vital question, he said. It was sapping public confidence. Until it was settled, the economy and the country as whole would suffer. Nixon should resign.

Surely it was unprecedented, Haig observed, for the chairman of the Republican National Committee to advise a Republican president to resign from office at a cabinet meeting. The cabinet sat in shocked silence as all realized that Nixon's resignation was inevitable. Bush, who thought that Nixon had looked "beleaguered, worn down by stress, detached from reality," felt that the issue needed to be addressed squarely. In a letter the next day he reiterated that Nixon should resign, adding that his view was "held by most Republican leaders across the country."¹⁶

Nixon's resignation on August 9 made Gerald Ford president and opened a vacancy in the vice-presidency. Bush let Ford know that he was available for the post. A poll of Republican officeholders put Bush at the top of the list, but he was passed over for New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who carried more independent stature. To soften the blow, Ford offered Bush a choice of ambassadorships to London or Paris. Instead, Bush asked to be sent to China. There he thought he could both broaden his foreign policy expertise and remain politically visible. Nixon's initiatives in 1971 had drawn great public attention and put China back on the American political map. During his year in Beijing, China attracted a steady stream of American visitors, from President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to members of Congress and countless delegations of prominent American citizens.¹⁷

When he made the appointment, Ford told Bush to expect to stay in China for two years, but after a year Bush wrote the president that he wanted to return to the United States. His

letter arrived while Ford was preoccupied with congressional scrutiny of the Central Intelligence Agency. Considering Bush an able administrator and a savvy politician, Ford telegraphed him to come home to be CIA director. The "for eyes only" cable came as a shock to Bush, who had expected a cabinet appointment. He never anticipated taking charge of an agency that was under investigation for everything "from lawbreaking to simple incompetence." Since the post had traditionally been nonpolitical, Bush suspected his rivals within the administration wanted to bury him there. Yet he felt he had no choice but to accept. His confirmation was stalled when congressional Democrats demanded that Bush promise not to run for vice president in 1976. "If I wanted to be Vice President," Bush demurred, "I wouldn't be here asking you to confirm me for the CIA." He refused to renounce his "political birthright" for the price of confirmation. The senators persisted until Bush finally asked Ford to exclude him from consideration for the second spot. "I know it's unfair," he told the president, "but you don't have much of a choice if we are to get on with the job of rebuilding and strengthening the agency." After Ford notified the Senate Armed Services Committee that Bush would not be considered for vice president, the CIA confirmation followed speedily.¹⁸

Although he briefed the president each week on intelligence matters, Bush found that the CIA directorship was not a policy-making position. It also kept him on the fringe of politics. From his offices in Langley, Virginia, Bush watched the 1976 presidential race take place in the distance. Challenged from the right by former California Governor Ronald Reagan, Ford dropped Rockefeller and selected Kansas Senator Bob Dole for vice president. An even more unexpected political saga was unfolding on the Democratic side, where a pack of senior Democratic senators vying for the nomination were eliminated by an obscure political "outsider," former Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter. In Iowa, Carter scored an upset by persistent personal campaigning and by promising to create a less "imperial" presidency. As CIA director, Bush briefed candidate Carter, then later returned to Plains, Georgia, to brief him as president-elect. Bush informed Carter that if the president wanted to name his own director he would resign from the CIA.¹⁹

Running for President—and Vice President

Back in private life in Houston for the first time in a decade, Bush laid the groundwork for a presidential campaign in 1980. As with the Democrats, Republican party reforms had shifted control of the delegate-selection process from state party organizations to primary elections. In 1979, Bush logged more than 250,000 miles to attend 850 political events. Like Carter, he intended to make his mark in the Iowa caucuses. The field of Republican contenders included Senators Howard Baker and Bob Dole, Representatives John Anderson and Philip Crane, and former Texas Governor John Connally, but the man to beat was Ronald Reagan. After narrowly losing the nomination in 1976, Reagan made it clear that despite his age he planned to run again. As the frontrunner, Reagan initially pursued a more traditional campaign, spending most of his time in New Hampshire and the northeast, while Bush devoted nearly every day to Iowa. A week before the Republican caucuses, Bush's organization sent a million pieces of mail to party members

across the state. When the caucuses met on January 21, 1980, Bush won 31.5 percent to Reagan's 29.4 percent. The margin was slim but enough to enable Bush to claim momentum—or as he called it "the Big Mo."²⁰

The news from Iowa jolted Ronald Reagan, who learned the result while watching an old movie. Rather than become unnerved, however, Reagan found the loss reinvigorating. He reorganized his staff, replaced his campaign manager, and concentrated his fire on Bush in New Hampshire. Reagan and Bush agreed to meet at a head-to-head debate sponsored by the *Nashua Telegraph*. When four other Republican candidates objected to the two-person format, Bush opposed opening the debate, while Reagan dramatically appeared at the debate trailed by the four excluded candidates. As Bush sat stiffly, Reagan started to explain why he had brought the others. The debate moderator, *Nashua Telegraph* editor Jon Breen, ordered Reagan's microphone turned off. Reagan replied, "I am paying for this microphone." No matter that he had swiped the line from an old Spencer Tracy movie, *State of the Union*, Reagan had given a memorable performance. Leaving the debate, Reagan's staff told him that "the parking lot was littered with Bush-for-President badges." Having regained command of the race, Reagan remained in the state until election night, convincingly beating Bush by 50 to 23 percent.²¹

Bush was frustrated at the way the public perceived him and his opponent. Bush had been a combat pilot in the Second World War, but Reagan was widely known for his war movies. Bush had actually "met a payroll" as an independent oil company executive, while Reagan had simply preached the free-enterprise system to appreciative audiences. Bush was a devoted family man, while Reagan won attention for defending family values, despite being divorced and estranged from his children. Bush looked and sounded awkward and inarticulate on television, while Reagan mastered the medium. Bush's media advisers warned him about his "preppy" and "elitist" appearance, but when he asked why the public had never held Ivy League attendance against the Roosevelts, Tafts, and Kennedys, they had no explanation. He concluded that his image was "just something I'd have to live with."²²

The New Hampshire primary effectively ended Bush's presidential campaign well before he formally dropped out of the race in May. It was during this interregnum, when his political future seemed doubtful, that Bush sold his home in Houston and purchased his grandfather's old estate, Walker's Point, at Kennebunkport, Maine. This move further blurred his identity: was he a Texan or a Yankee? In July, he went to the Republican convention in Detroit with a slim hope for the vice-presidential nomination but encountered a boom for Gerald Ford. With a good chance of defeating the incumbent President Jimmy Carter and the divided Democrats, Reagan wanted to unify the Republican party. At Henry Kissinger's suggestion, Reagan approached Ford with the novel idea that the former president run for vice president. Ford indicated he might accept if assured a meaningful role in the administration.

Word of this "dream ticket" sparked considerable enthusiasm at the Republican convention. Then Ford visited the CBS booth to be interviewed by Walter Cronkite. The veteran broadcaster pressed Ford about the details of how a former president might accept the second spot, prompting Ford to elaborate on his ideas for a co-presidency. From his hotel room, Bush watched the interview with the sinking feeling that Ford would never talk so freely unless all of the arrangements for his candidacy had been completed. But Ronald and Nancy Reagan also watched Ford's interview, with mounting dismay. *"Wait a minute"* Reagan later recalled thinking, *"this is really two presidents he's talking about."* Later that night, Reagan called Ford to his hotel suite, where the two men met behind closed doors. When they emerged after ten minutes alone together, the "dream ticket" had evaporated. "The answer was no," Reagan told his staff. "He didn't think it was right for him or for me. And now I am inclined to agree." Reagan knew he needed to make a prompt decision about a replacement, since any delay would cause a letdown among the delegates and raise questions about his decision-making abilities. As Michael Deaver described the scene, Reagan "picked up the phone and said, to the amazement of everyone in the room, 'I'm calling George Bush. I want to get this settled. Anyone have any objections?'" Recognizing the need to broaden the ticket ideologically, no one could offer an alternative. Reagan placed the call, telling Bush that he wanted to announce his selection right away, if he had no objection. Surprised and delighted, Bush had none.²³

Joining the Reagan Team

Reagan had not been impressed by Bush during the primaries. During their contest, Bush had leveled the charge of "voodoo economics" against Reagan's programs, a taunt that still stung. Reagan thought Bush lacked "spunk" and became too easily rattled by political criticism. "He just melts under pressure," Reagan complained. Thus when Reagan won the presidency in 1980, there were indications that Bush would remain an outsider from the Reagan team. Washington observers commented that the Reagans and the Bushes rarely socialized. Yet Bush had several advantages as vice president. His personality and his long experience in appointed offices made him naturally deferential to the president. He avoided criticizing or differing with Reagan in any way. He also had the good fortune of seeing his campaign manager, James A. Baker III, appointed chief of staff in the Reagan White House. While other vice presidents had to combat protective chiefs of staff, the long-time friendship of Bush and Baker continued throughout Reagan's administration. Although Baker served Reagan foremost, he made sure nothing would jeopardize Bush's eventual succession to the presidency.²⁴

George and Barbara Bush moved into the vice-presidential mansion at the Naval Observatory and thrived on the many social duties of the office. Bush's attendance at a string of state funerals became a common joke for comedians. Barbara Bush felt such criticism was shortsighted, since "George met with many current or future heads of state at the funerals he attended, enabling him to forge personal relationships that were important to President Reagan—and later, President Bush." From the start, Bush recognized the constitutional limits of the office. He would not be the decision maker,

since that was the president's job. His position would be meaningful therefore only if the president trusted him enough to delegate significant responsibilities to him. He determined to be a loyal team player and not to separate himself when things got tough. As president of the Senate, he also tried to stay in close touch with the senators and to keep the president informed of what was happening on the Hill. Respecting the limitations on his legislative role, however, he avoided trying to intervene in Senate deliberations.²⁵

That attitude served Bush well during the first crisis of his vice-presidency. Touring Texas, where he had unveiled a historical marker at the hotel where John Kennedy spent his last night before Dallas, Bush received word that President Reagan had been shot and seriously wounded. He immediately flew to Washington. When his plane landed at Andrews Air Force Base, aides wanted him to proceed directly to the White House by helicopter. They thought it would make dramatic television footage and demonstrate that the government was still functioning. Bush vetoed the idea, declaring that "only the President lands on the south lawn." His helicopter instead flew to the vice-presidential residence, from which he drove to the White House. The gesture was not lost on Ronald Reagan, who slowly warmed to his vice president.²⁶

Over time, Reagan grew comfortable with his vice president. The genial Reagan especially appreciated Bush's effort to start staff meetings with a "joke of the day." The two men had lunch together every Thursday and their discussions, according to Bush, were "wide-ranging, from affairs of state to small talk." The vice president made a point of never divulging publicly the advice he gave the president in private, and Reagan clearly appreciated his loyalty and discretion.²⁷

As vice president, Bush devoted much attention to two special projects the president assigned to him. One was to chair a special task force on federal deregulation. The task force reviewed hundreds of rules and regulations, making specific recommendations on which ones to revise or eliminate in order to cut red tape. Bush chaired another task force on international drug smuggling, to coordinate federal efforts to stem the flow of drugs into the United States. Not coincidentally, both efforts—against big government and illegal drugs—were popular issues with Republican conservatives. Having joined the Reagan ticket as a representative of the moderate wing of his party, Vice President Bush courted conservatives to erase their suspicions. His conspicuous efforts to befriend the likes of New Hampshire publisher William Loeb and Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell drove the newspaper columnist George Will to comment: "The unpleasant sound Bush is emitting as he traipses from one conservative gathering to another is a thin, tinny arf—the sound of a lap dog."²⁸

A Troubled Second Term

Bush so solidified his position by 1984 that there was no question of replacing him when Reagan ran for a second term. By then, Barbara Bush had also become a national figure in

her own right. The public enjoyed her direct, warm, and casual style. In 1984 she published a popular children's book *C. Fred's Story*, about the family's basset hound—a forerunner of the best-selling *Millie's Book* by C. Fred's replacement. Yet George and Barbara Bush found the reelection campaign far more trying than the race four years earlier. The Democratic candidate, Walter Mondale, had made history by choosing the first woman candidate for vice president on a major national ticket. New York Representative Geraldine Ferraro was an attractive and aggressive candidate. Although a millionaire herself, she represented a blue-collar district in Queens that placed her in sharp contrast to Bush's Ivy League image. While Ferraro encountered significant problems of her own, she brought color to an otherwise dull and packaged campaign. Many reporters, especially women members of the press, cheered her campaign, leaving Bush at a decided disadvantage. As his anger flared after his televised debate with Ferraro, Bush was quoted as saying that he had "tried to kick a little ass last night." Despite Reagan's landslide reelection, the campaign left Bush feeling depressed and wondering if he still had a future in politics.²⁹

Bush's friends Jim Baker and Nicholas Brady quickly helped revive his optimism and enthusiasm, and by that Christmas they were already planning strategy for his run for the presidency in 1988. From the Reagan camp, Bush hired Craig Fuller as his vice-presidential chief of staff, and from Reagan's campaign team he selected Lee Atwater as his chief campaign strategist. Before the end of 1985, Atwater had set up a political action committee, the Fund for America, that had raised more than two million dollars. Well in advance of the election, Bush became the conceded frontrunner to replace Reagan. The strategy, however, depended upon Reagan retaining his phenomenal popularity. Then news of the Iran-Contra scandal shook the Reagan administration.³⁰

The press and public were astonished in the fall of 1986 to learn that the Reagan administration had secretly reversed its declared intention not to sell arms to Iran. Designed to free American hostages, the arms sales had produced revenue that administration officials had diverted to support anticommunist rebels in Nicaragua, in direct violation of the law. These revelations implicated President Reagan's national security advisers, Robert McFarland and John Poindexter, and a National Security Council aide, Oliver North. When Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger made it clear that they had opposed the Iran-Contra plan, they left open the question of the vice president's position. Either way, whether he had supported the illegal plan or been kept in the dark about it, Bush stood to lose. Alexander Haig, one of his opponents for the Republican nomination, asked: "Where was George Bush during the story? Was he the copilot in the cockpit, or was he back in economy class?"³¹

The vice president maintained that those who ran the operation had "compartmentalized" it, so that he knew of only some parts of the plan and had been "deliberately excluded" from others. Despite his claims of being "out of the loop," public opinion polls indicated that people had trouble believing Bush was an innocent bystander. The issue burst open in

a live television encounter between Bush and CBS anchorman Dan Rather on January 25, 1988. Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes, Bush's campaign director and media adviser, worried much over the vice president's image as a "wimp." Before the interview, they convinced Bush that the broadcaster was setting a trap for him and planned to "sandbag" him over the Iran-Contra affair. Rather prefaced the interview by suggesting that Bush had been present at numerous White House meetings on Iran-Contra and then devoted his first question to the scandal. Bush angrily charged that CBS had misrepresented the purpose of the interview. Rather replied that he did not want to be argumentative, but Bush retorted, "You do, Dan. . . . I don't think it's fair to judge a whole career . . . by a rehash on Iran." Atwater and Ailes were delighted. Bush's obvious fury had put "the wimp issue" to rest.³²

Winning the Presidency in His Own Right

By the time Bush had officially declared his candidacy for president, his campaign had already raised ten million dollars, but he was by no means assured of the nomination. No vice president since Martin Van Buren in 1836 had won election on his own immediately following the term of the president with whom he had served. While Reagan was still personally popular, the Iran-Contra scandal had hobbled his administration. Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole was pressing a hard campaign against Bush, as was televangelist Pat Robertson. Returning to an economically depressed Iowa, Bush campaigned surrounded by Secret Service agents and rode in a motorcade of official limousines that looked like "the caravan of an Eastern potentate." The results of the Iowa caucuses relegated Bush to a dismal third place behind Dole and Robertson.³³

As it did for Ronald Reagan eight years earlier, the embarrassing loss in Iowa forced Bush to revamp his strategy. The Bushes flew to New Hampshire, where Governor John Sununu assured Barbara: "Don't worry. He'll win in New Hampshire. 'Mr. Fix-it' will see to it." Bush followed the advice of his "handlers"—Sununu, Baker, Atwater and Ailes. He abandoned his set speeches in favor of meeting voters at factories and shopping malls and drove an eighteen-wheel truck, trying to shed his "preppy" image and show a more down-to-earth personal side. He also went on the attack, pledging that he would never raise taxes as president, while claiming that Senator Dole had straddled the tax issue. The New Hampshire campaign saw the beginning of the negative attack advertisements that would mark the Bush campaign for the rest of the year. The decent, affable, self-effacing Bush, who had trouble boasting about his own impressive resume, had fewer compunctions about attacking his opponents. Bush defeated Dole and Robertson in New Hampshire and went on to take the Republican nomination.

Although he started well behind in the polls at the outset, he waged a vigorous general election campaign against Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis and his running mate, Lloyd Bentsen (who had defeated Bush for the Senate in 1970). Atwater and Ailes crafted a campaign of direct attacks on the Democratic candidate for refusing to sign a bill making the Pledge of Allegiance mandatory for school children, for allowing a weekend parole system that released convict Willie Horton from prison, and for not

having cleaned up a badly polluted Boston harbor. Never appreciating the impact of the negative ads, Dukakis responded to them inadequately. Bush won an impressive victory in November, portraying himself as proudly patriotic, tough on crime, opposed to taxes, and sympathetic to educational and environmental issues.³⁴

The chief circumstance in which candidate Bush ignored the advice of his "handlers" concerned the choice of his own vice-presidential candidate. Neither James Baker nor Lee Atwater was impressed with the qualifications of Indiana Senator Dan Quayle, although Roger Ailes and Craig Fuller saw Quayle's potential to attract younger and more conservative voters. Quayle had also been conducting his own "sub rosa" campaign to bring his availability to Bush's attention. Bush viewed Quayle as a young, good-looking, successful politician who was likely to play the same appreciative and deferential role that Bush had as vice president. Whatever Quayle's merits, the Bush campaign's strategy of keeping his choice secret until the last moment to add some drama to an otherwise predetermined convention, proved to be a mistake. Quayle was so little known to the nation—even to the media—that his public image became shaped entirely by initial perceptions, which were not favorable. One 1988 Democratic campaign button read simply, "Quayle—A Heartbeat Away."³⁵

George Bush served one term as president of the United States. His years of experience in foreign policy prepared him well to serve as the nation's first post-cold war president. When the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein invaded Iraq's oil-rich neighbor Kuwait, Bush responded promptly and boldly on both the diplomatic and military fronts. The lightning-quick Persian Gulf war lifted his public approval rating to an astonishing 91 percent. On the domestic front, his administration fared less well, diminished by a persistent economic recession, mounting federal deficits, and his broken campaign pledge not to raise taxes. Bush also suffered from his lack of what he called "the vision thing," a clarity of ideas and principles that could shape public opinion and influence Congress. "He does not say why he wants to be there," complained columnist George Will, "so the public does not know why it should care if he gets his way." Standing for reelection, Bush faced a "New Democrat," Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, and a scrappy Texas billionaire independent candidate, Ross Perot. In November 1992, President Bush finished second with 38 percent of the vote to Clinton's 43 percent and Perot's 19 percent.³⁶

In retrospect, George Bush lost in 1992 for the same reason he had won in 1988. Having served as Reagan's vice president, he personified a continuation of the previous policies. By 1992, Barbara Bush concluded that "we lost because people really wanted a change. We had had twelve years of a Republican presidency." Seen in those terms, Bush's defeat represented the vice-presidential conundrum: once having achieved the office, one never escapes it.³⁷

Notes:

1. George Bush with Victor Gold, *Looking Forward* (New York, 1987), p. 26; Leonard Schlup, "Prescott Bush and the Foundations of Modern Republicanism," *Research Journal of Philosophy and Social Sciences*

- (1992), pp. 1-16; Garry Wills, "Father Knows Best," *New York Review of Books* (November 5, 1992), pp. 36-40.
2. George Bush, pp. 26-27; *Washington Post*, November 20, 1992.
 3. George Bush, pp. 30.
 4. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-40; Fitzhugh Green, *George Bush: An Intimate Portrait* (New York, 1989), pp. 27-40.
 5. George Bush, pp. 41-45; Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* (New York, 1994), pp. 16-29; see William F. Buckley, *God and Man at Yale; The Superstitions of Academic Freedom* (Chicago, 1951).
 6. George Bush, pp. 46-58; Green, pp. 55-58, Barbara Bush, pp. 30-49.
 7. Green, pp. 59-74; George Bush, pp. 61-68.
 8. See Dewey W. Grantham, *The Life and Death of the Solid South: A Political History* (Lexington, KY, 1988).
 9. Green, pp. 75-81.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-87; George Bush, pp. 77-89.
 11. Barbara Bush, pp. 57-63; George Bush, pp. 89-93.
 12. George Bush, pp. 93-98; Barbara Bush, p. 67; Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978), p. 312.
 13. George Bush, pp. 99-103; Bob Schieffer and Gary Paul Gates, *The Acting President* (New York, 1989), p. 317; *Washington Times*, March 24, 1986.
 14. Schieffer and Gates, p. 317; Barbara Bush, p. 79; Green, pp. 115-17; George Bush, pp. 107-20; H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York, 1994), p. 217.
 15. George Bush, pp. 120-25; Haldeman, pp. 540, 545, 553.
 16. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World: A Memoir* (New York, 1992), pp. 492-93; George Bush, pp. 122-25.
 17. George Bush, pp. 129-49.
 18. Barbara Bush, pp. 108, 130-131; George Bush, pp. 153-59; Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York, 1979), pp. 325-26, 337-38; Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: The Senate Intelligence Investigation* (Lexington, KY, 1985), pp. 158-59.
 19. George Bush, pp. 164-79.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-85; Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York, 1982), pp. 229, 247-48.
 21. Cannon, pp. 249-54; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, 1990), pp. 212-13.
 22. Schieffer and Gates, p. 341; George Bush, p. 203.
 23. Marie D. Natoli, "The Vice Presidency: Gerald Ford as Healer?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 10 (Fall 1980): 662-64; Schieffer and Gates, pp. 313-14; Cannon, pp. 265-67; Reagan, pp. 214-16; Michael Deaver, *Behind the Scenes* (New York, 1987), pp. 96-97; Barbara Bush, p. 169.
 24. Cannon, pp. 262-63; Schieffer and Gates, p. 125.
 25. Barbara Bush, p. 182; Green, pp. 185-96; George Bush to Senator Mark Hatfield, April 14, 1995, Senate Historical Office files.
 26. George Bush, pp. 217-32.
 27. Schieffer and Gates, p. 318.
 28. George Bush, p. 233; Schieffer and Gates, p. 320.
 29. Barbara Bush, pp. 194-97; Schieffer and Gates, p. 318.
 30. Schieffer and Gates, p. 319.
 31. William S. Cohen and George J. Mitchell, *Men of Zeal: A Candid Inside Story of the Iran-Contra Hearings* (New York, 1989), p. 268; see also Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: the Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York, 1991).
 32. George Bush, pp. 216-18; Cohen and Mitchell, p. 264; Schieffer and Gates, pp. 347-50; Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Whose Bright Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency, 1988* (New York, 1989), pp. 188-30.
 33. Schieffer and Gates, pp. 321-23, Germond and Witcover, pp. 65-80, 101-18.
 34. Barbara Bush, pp. 224-25; Schieffer and Gates, pp. 353-55, 373; Germond and Witcover, pp. 399-467.
 35. Schieffer and Gates, pp. 365-67; Germond and Witcover, pp. 375-95; David S. Broder and Bob Woodward, *The Man Who Would be President: Dan Quayle* (New York, 1992), p. 15.
 36. George F. Will, *The Leveling Wind: Politics, the Culture and Other News, 1990-1994* (New York,

1994), pp. 282-94; on Bush and the Persian Gulf War, see Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York, 1991).

37. Barbara Bush, p. 498.