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A statue of former U.S. President George H.W. Bush is illuminated in Houston Dec. 1 following the announcement of his death. (CNS/James Ramos, Texas Catholic Herald)



by Michael Sean Winters

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President George H.W. Bush undoubtedly possessed a concern for getting policy right, an interest in building strong alliances, and a respect for other nations and their interests and values that our incumbent president lacks. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tells the story of Bush's advisors streaming into the Oval Office as the Berlin Wall fell, urging him to pack his bags and head to the former, and future, capital of Germany for the photo op of a lifetime. The president demurred: "This is a German moment," he wisely counseled.

"Bush 41," as he became known once his son ascended to the presidency, had a genuine love for his country, evidenced as a young man when he enlisted in the Navy right out of preparatory school, flew many missions, and, even after his plane had been hit, continued until he could drop his bombs on his target on the island of Chichijima before ditching his plane in the ocean where he was retrieved by a submarine. It is impossible to assess where devotion to public service stops and ego begins in the life of any politician, but the patrician Bush could have decamped to Kennebunkport at any point in his long career and spent his life sailing and playing golf.

As president, Bush signed the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Both laws demonstrated an openness to activist government that dialed back some of the extreme anti-government rhetoric of the Reagan years. The ADA was an act of public decency, the kind of decency of which President Donald Trump seems incapable, and the Clean Air Act updates embodied an understanding of stewardship that likewise escapes the greedy and irresponsible man who lives in the White House now.

Nonetheless, when former Secretary of State and longtime Bush friend James Baker goes on "Fareed Zakaria GPS," and says, "Here's a guy who got to be president by being nice to people; What a lovely thought that is," then it is time to stop the encomiums, tip our heart and then turn our back on the sentiment "*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*," ignore the eulogists, and scream at the top of our lungs, "What about Willie Horton?"

You see, the first problem with comparing President George H.W. Bush, or almost any previous president, with President Donald Trump is that you have set the bar so dreadfully low.

The second problem is that Bush did not confront, he abetted, the immoral habit the Republican Party developed in the last quarter of the 20th century of winking at racism. Bush's opponent in 1988 was Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis who, like most governors, including the former California Gov. Ronald Reagan, permitted some prison inmates to take furloughs. One of those prisoners, William "Willie" Horton, a black man, escaped during furlough and later committed rape and assault. Bush's campaign ran an ad that highlighted a mug shot of Horton and implied Dukakis was "soft on crime." It was one of the most blatant uses of a racist dog whistle in presidential politics in my lifetime, aimed at keeping the George Wallace voters in the GOP's column.

So, when you hear someone say that Bush was such a decent man, remember what he was willing to do to gain the presidency. His son, George W. Bush, is among those testifying to his father's decency and greatness, but the son, like the father, was not above stooping to racism in order to win election. In the South Carolina primary, the son's campaign conducted a push poll that asked, "Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?" The McCain's adopted daughter, Bridget, is from Bangladesh.

Now, all of a sudden, the white nationalism of Trump is something outrageous?

There is a deeper problem behind the Willie Horton episode — and the South Carolina push poll. Not only did the Bushes decline to confront the racism of some of their voters, they furthered the belief that the manner in which an election was won bore little, and certainly no necessary, relation to governance. "Bush often said that while he might take the low road in campaigning, he hewed to his ideals while governing," noted historian David Greenberg. Such a posture is not only cynical in the extreme, which it is. It is to weaken democracy at its roots, a kind of delegitimizing of democracy itself.

Perhaps for a patrician like Bush, born to the idea that he and his kind were meant to lead — I had almost written rule — the delegitimizing effects were not so obvious. They are obvious now. First came the revival of states' rights by segregationists and later libertarians. Then, Reagan's first inaugural with its famous line: "In our present

crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Then came the cynical Bush clan. They should have been smart enough — they were certainly well educated enough — to see how divorcing election politics from governance would weaken democracy, making it susceptible to other attacks of the kind we see coming from our incumbent president.

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Historians know that causality cannot be assigned in a facile way. Perhaps Trump or someone very much like him was inevitable. The dumbing down of the culture, evidenced by the unreality of strangely popular reality TV, and the residual racism of the culture, the implications of which have been obvious since George Wallace's 1968 and 1972 campaigns, may have been destined to collide and create the opening Trump has exploited even if George Herbert Walker Bush had not denounced the Civil Rights Act, not flip-flopped on what he once, correctly, deemed "voodoo economics," and never met Lee Atwater nor heard of Willie Horton. The ugly latent Trumpism could have strengthened in any one of a number of ways, but one of the ways it did, in fact, strengthen was by means of decisions Bush made.

The 41st president was not, like his 1992 primary opponent Pat Buchanan, a proto-Trump, but Bush was not innocent either, not even a bystander. He was complicit in the continued willingness of Republican Party leaders to coddle racists. He, more than any president before, divorced governance from the campaign that bestowed upon him to right to govern, a divorce that has caused great harm to our democracy, harm we are still measuring and with which we still reckon.

Clio is permitted to speak ill of the dead and she will not be denied when the time comes to render a definitive verdict on the political career of President George H. W. Bush. The praise and honorifics of the day notwithstanding, I think history's verdict will be decidedly mixed and likely more negative than not.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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