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Obituary
Then-New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson greets Pope Benedict XVI during the pope's weekly ge

Then-New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson greets Pope Benedict XVI during the pope's weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 15, 2009. Richardson, a Catholic, died in Chatham, Massachusetts, Sept. 1, at age 75. He was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and energy secretary in the Clinton administration. (OSV News/Reuters/L'Osservatore Romano)

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Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, an influential figure in Democratic politics who also was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and energy secretary in the Clinton administration, died Sept. 1, according to a statement from the Richardson Center for Global Engagement.

Richardson, 75, who was Catholic, died in his sleep at his summer home in Chatham, Massachusetts, according to multiple reports. He is survived by Barbara, his wife of more than 50 years, and their daughter, Heather.

Mickey Bergman, vice president of the Richardson Center, said in a statement that Richardson "lived his entire life in the service of others — including both his time in government and his subsequent career helping to free people held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad."

"There was no person that Governor Richardson would not speak with if it held the promise of returning a person to freedom," Bergman said, adding Richardson was a "champion for those held unjustly abroad" as well as a "mentor and a dear friend."

A lying-in-state at the New Mexico Capitol Rotunda will be held Sept. 13, with a funeral Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the following day, according to local media. Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe is scheduled to celebrate the Mass.

"The Archdiocese of Santa Fe extends its deepest sympathy to Governor Bill Richardson's wife, Barbara, and his family as we mourn the loss of this great statesman," Wester said in a Sept. 7 statement provided to OSV News. The archbishop noted Richardson's life was "clearly focused on public service" and that in addition to being a "tireless advocate for the freedom of those unjustly detained," Richardson "was especially instrumental in ending the death penalty in 2010 here in New Mexico."

"St. Irenaeus famously said the glory of God is a human being fully alive," Wester said, adding that Richardson "certainly ... fit that description as he lived life fully. He enjoyed his many roles of service, and he enjoyed being with the people he served. He will be missed, but his legacy will live on for many, many years."

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Born in Pasadena, California, but raised in Mexico City, the Catholic Church was an important element of Richardson's childhood. "My mother was a very strong Catholic," he once said in an interview with Catholic News Service some years ago. "My father was very religious, too, but he was a Protestant. My grandmother, especially, was very devout. She would teach me the prayers in Spanish, '*Padre nuestro, que estas en el cielo*.' ... I remember all those in Spanish. I still say them."

Richardson had been a fixture in New Mexico politics since 1983, when he became the first representative elected to New Mexico's 3rd Congressional District

established that year. He held that seat until 1997, when he was appointed as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. He was then appointed in 1998 as U.S. secretary of energy by then-President Bill Clinton.

Richardson returned to New Mexico and was elected as its governor in the 2002 gubernatorial election, serving two terms. He later ran an unsuccessful campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008.

In a statement, President Joe Biden said Richardson "wore many weighty titles in his life — Congressman, Governor, Ambassador, Secretary. He seized every chance to serve and met every new challenge with joy, determined to do the most good for his country, his beloved New Mexico, and Americans around the world."

"Few have served our nation in as many capacities or with as much relentlessness, creativity, and good cheer," Biden, a Democrat who is the nation's second Catholic president, said. "He will be deeply missed."

Biden listed Richardson's accomplishments, but said his most lasting legacy will likely be "the work Bill did to free Americans held in some of the most dangerous places on Earth."

"American pilots captured by North Korea, American workers held by Saddam Hussein, Red Cross workers imprisoned by Sudanese rebels — these are just some of the dozens of people that Bill helped bring home," Biden said. "He'd meet with anyone, fly anywhere, do whatever it took."

Biden noted Richardson received multiple nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize. Richardson's most recent nomination took place in August; he most recently had helped negotiate the release of Brittney Griner, an American professional women's basketball player who had been imprisoned by Russia in a remote penal colony over illegal possession of cannabis oil.

"The multiple Nobel Peace Prize nominations he received are a testament to his ceaseless pursuit of freedom for Americans," Biden said. "So is the profound gratitude that countless families feel today for the former governor who helped reunite them with their loved ones."

Biden said he came to know Richards during Biden's time in the Senate when Richardson was a staffer on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"Over the years, I saw firsthand his passion for politics, love for America, and unflagging belief that, with respect and good faith, people can come together across any difference, no matter how vast," Biden said. "He was a patriot and true original, and will not be forgotten."