

Remembering President George H. W. Bush (1924–2018): The Model Consumer

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Over enough time, intelligence officers—at least this intelligence officer—might be inclined to mark epochs in their careers by the presidents they and the Intelligence Community have served. The death this past weekend of George Herbert Walker Bush brings to my mind, in both sadness and joy, a 12-year period in which intelligence was held in the highest regard by the most senior consumer in the land. Much of the flavor of this tumultuous period is nicely reflected in recollections of President Bush that were rolled out in www.cia.gov the weekend after his death on the night of 30 November.

For those of us fortunate enough to have served on the *President's Daily Brief Staff* during the 12-years Mr. Bush—as vice president and then president (1981–93)—received the *PDB*, no labor was too intense to produce the needed story and no hours were too many or too late to make certain we—the authors, the day and night editorial teams, the designers, and the briefers—made it good and got it right. This may have been true with later presidents, but what stood out with President Bush was that we, thanks to his dedicated briefers, Charles A. Peters (usually addressed as “Chuck” or “Pete”) and Henry (Hank) Appelbaum (a predecessor of mine in my present job), knew well that the effort was truly appreciated. We heard it in daily debriefings, and we frequently saw it in handwritten personal notes. As a staff editor, even I received one.

We also saw through those interactions, as though at first hand, the humor and personality of a man who deeply cared about the people who served him. The former is reflected in the opening passages of Chuck Peters's *Studies in Intelligence* article in which he describes Vice President Bush's thinking in 1988 about the *PDB* were he to win the coming election and succeed President Reagan.^a

a. Charles A. Peters, “Intelligence for the Highest Levels: Serving Our Senior Consumers,” *Studies in Intelligence* 39, no. 3 (September 1995). Available in cia.gov FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

When he had finished the briefing, the Vice President said, “Pete, assuming all goes well at the convention and if I win in November, I want to change President Reagan's practice of receiving The President's Daily Brief (PDB) from his National Security Adviser. I want to continue these daily briefings by you and the staff.”

I was frankly flattered, but I reminded him that the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), who was by statute his intelligence adviser, might have something to say about the arrangement.

“The DCI is welcome to attend whenever he wishes,” the Vice President said, “but the PDB session should be handled on a regular basis by the usual working-level group.”

Of course, the convention came off without a hitch, and the Vice President won the election convincingly. On 21 January, the day after the inauguration, therefore, we gathered for the first time in the Oval Office. Present, as was the custom in the Bush presidency, were Chief of Staff John Sununu, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, and Deputy National Security Adviser Bob Gates. DCI Webster also was there. (Image on the left.) And that led to the first of a long series of informal bits of byplay that were to mark our daily sessions.

When the President had finished reading, he turned to me and said with deadly seriousness, “I'm quite satisfied with the intelligence support, but there is one area in which you'll just have to do better.” The DCI visibly stiffened. “The Office of Comic Relief,” the new President went on, “will have to step up its output.” With an equally straight face I promised the President we would give it our best shot. As we were leaving the Oval Office, I wasted no time in reassuring the Director that this was a lighthearted exchange typical of President Bush, and that the DCI did not

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have to search out an Office of Comic Relief and authorize a major shakeup.

What would follow during his presidency were the addition to the PDB of a section called “Signs of the Times,” which brought into the book the amusing, the idiosyncratic, or the uncommon that might lighten, for a moment, the mood of an otherwise challenging and potentially depressing period. A couple of examples from Pete’s article.

Libyan intelligence chief recently passed message via Belgians laying out case for better relations with US and expressing desire to cooperate against terrorism... even suggested he would like to contribute to your re-election campaign. (27 January 1992)

French company says it has won contract to export vodka to Russia... deal apparently stems from shortage of bottles and bottling equipment... no word on whether Paris taking Russian wine in return. (25 July 1992)

Though not a reflection of humor, but of President Bush’s interest in people, especially in his counterparts abroad, the PDB introduced another element, briefs on the public activities of the president’s counterparts. We would learn that from time-to-time the president was inspired to call one of those leaders and chat with someone doing something interesting.

President Bush’s personality also came through in his notes of thanks and in his expressions of concern to staff members when illness or tragedy struck. In reminiscing with Chuck Peters, he told me how he had written directly to Chuck’s son shortly after a family tragedy involving Chuck’s grandchild. Certainly President G. H. W. Bush knew of such tragedy and felt it for others. In years that followed his leaving office, I would, by virtue of still being on current intelligence, become involved in relaying sentiments from and to him from various officers he had concerns about and come to learn was in need of encouragement or congratulation. In this way, for example, Hank Appelbaum received the former president’s best wishes in 2010, when Hank was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease.^a

While it became somewhat fashionable in recent years to downplay the president’s grasp of the issues of the day and his role in their evolution, the trend is hardly justified in the minds of those who worked with him and for him. In John Helgerson’s book about briefing presidential candidates, *Getting to Know the President*, the former CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence made clear the seriousness with which President Bush took his relationship with intelligence and how important a contribution that relationship made to his presidency.

Thinking back on the transition from his eight years as Vice President to the four years as President, Bush volunteered that there had been no real changes in his intelligence requirements after he moved up to be chief executive. “The big difference is that you have to make the decisions—that makes you read a lot more carefully.”

On becoming President, Bush had sought no significant alterations in the format or composition of the PDB. He had become comfortable with it over the previous eight years. Looking retrospectively, he judged that the mix of items addressed had been well suited to his needs. He attributed that suitability to the presence of the briefer while he read the material, making the Agency aware that he needed more or less on a given subject. Bush was sensitive to the fact that his National Security Adviser and Chief of Staff would occasionally discuss with senior Agency officers the purported need to include more items on a specific subject in the PDB. Referring to the efforts of his aides to determine what was provided in the PDB, Bush offered the decisive judgment that “I felt well supported on the full range of issues. Don’t let anybody else tell you what the President wants or needs in the PDB—ask him.”

CIA’s relationship with Bush was undoubtedly the most productive it had enjoyed with any of the nine presidents it served since the Agency’s founding in 1947. Alone among postwar Presidents, he had served as CIA Director. Also uniquely, he succeeded to the presidency by election after receiving full intelligence support as Vice President. These circumstances were obviously not of the CIA’s making and may never be repeated, but they made the Agency’s job immeasurably easier at the time.

a. Hank died of complications from the disease on 16 December 2018, and in Hank’s obituary, his family remembered the president’s kindness.

The good relationship was also a result of Bush's deep personal interest in developments abroad and his experience as a diplomat representing the United States in Beijing and at the United Nations. More than any other President, he was an experienced consumer of national-level intelligence. Also of critical importance was the fact that he had a highly capable and experienced National Security Adviser in Brent Scowcroft, who was determined to see that he received good intelligence support.

Bush was candid in telling CIA officers when he thought their analysis might be flawed and equally quick to commend them when they were helpful or identified an approaching key development before he did. There were many such developments because his presidency witnessed the most far-reaching international changes of the postwar period: the collapse of European Communism, the reunification of Germany, the disintegration of the USSR and the rollback of Russian imperialism, and the full-scale involvement of the United States in a ground war in the Middle East. On these, and on the lesser issues of Tiananmen Square, Haiti, Bosnia, or Somalia, President Bush was uniquely and extraordinarily well informed.^a

And those of us who helped in the process were truly enriched.



a. John Helgerson, *Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952–2004, Second Edition* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2012). Available on <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/getting-to-know-the-president/index.html>

