

United States - George H.W. Bush, Icon of the WASP Establishment—and of Brutal US Repression in the Third World

Thursday 6 December 2018, by [GRANDIN Greg](#), [THRASHER Steven W](#) (Date first published: 4 December 2018).

Obituaries have transformed the terror that Bush inflicted, depicting it as heroism.

George Herbert Walker Bush represented a ruling class in decay. His WASP awkwardness, his famous syntactical struggles—[described](#) in obituaries as an ah-shucks genuineness, a goofy, “irreducible niceness”—was symptomatic of an Establishment in crisis. Franklin Foer, writing in *The Atlantic*, notes the nostalgia of the encomiums. The public apparently yearns for a time when politics were less coarse, when the country’s clubby elites were well-bred, well-voweled (compare the pleasantly rolling *i*’s and *o*’s found in the Harrimans and Roosevelts with the guttural *u* of today’s ruling clan), and well-mannered, their grasping and groping kept out of the press, for the most part.

What Foer doesn’t mention, and what is perhaps the single most important through-line in Bush’s life, is the way the extension of the national-security state, and easy recourse to political violence in the world’s poorer, darker precincts, allowed Anglo-Saxon men like Bush to stem the decomposition and to sharpen their class and status consciousness.

Raised in the shadow of legends, of a father (Prescott Bush) and two grandfathers (Samuel Bush and George H. Walker) who helped steer the expansive, epic era of Episcopalian capitalism—when American industry and politics had become interlocked with militarism—George H.W. Bush came into his own during the glory days of covert action in the Third World. This period ran from, say, the 1953 overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran through the Guatemala coup in 1954 and the Cuban Revolution in 1959 to the assassination of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba and the Bay of Pigs in 1961, until the eve of escalation in Vietnam.

Bush would serve for a year as the director of the Central Intelligence Agency in the mid-1970s, but, as Joseph McBride [reported](#) in *The Nation* in 1988, his involvement with the agency had started much earlier. In November 1963, shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover wrote a memo to the State Department describing the briefing of “Mr. George Bush of the Central Intelligence Agency” on the reaction to the assassination by anti-Castro Cuban exiles in Miami (it was feared by some that the exiles might take advantage of the chaotic situation by initiating an unauthorized raid against Cuba). McBride also cited a source with close connection to the intelligence community who confirmed that, as McBride put it, “Bush started working for the agency in 1960 or 1961, using his oil business as a cover for clandestine activities.”

Kevin Phillips’s *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush* provides a helpful summary of the investigative journalism into the Bush family’s long-standing ties to this shadow world, a family linked by but a few degrees of separation to all the most-storied intrigues and collusions in postwar history, everything from the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala to the Iran/Contra scandal. Phillips provides thick descriptions not to prove any

particular conspiracy theory but to establish sociological overlap and ideological affinity—the tight class and status connections between elites, like the Bush and Walker family, and foreign policy. According to Phillips, “from Yale’s class of 1943 alone, at least forty-two young men entered the intelligence services” (Bush attended from 1945 to 1948), and nearly every major player involved in the Bay of Pigs invasion had been in Yale’s secret Skull and Bones society. By the time Bush became director of the CIA in 1976, Phillips writes, “three generations of the Bush and Walker families already had some six decades of intelligence-related activity and experience under their belts,” which apparently also involved a Mexico-CIA “money line” that made its way into “the hands of the Watergate burglars.”

Through birth and breeding—at the Greenwich Country Day School, Phillips Academy, and Yale—Bush identified with an Eastern Establishment already, in the decades after World War II, threatened by democratization: by immigration, the rise of a meritocracy, the consolidation of an administrative state that socialized and bureaucratized private economic relations, and the spread of popular culture, which made the markings of WASP habitus available to the population at large. Anybody could wear a polo shirt, soon to be wildly popularized by [Ralph Lauren](#), born Ralph Lifshitz in the Bronx to parents who had immigrated from Belarus.

Bush’s family, despite its [Nazi entanglements](#), had done well under the New Deal. But H.W., out of Yale, made the jump to the libertarian rebel lands of West Texas, where “independent” Houston oilmen bridled at the privileged position of large petroleum companies—among others, Standard and Gulf—and their cozy relationship with foreign nations. As the war in Vietnam accelerated the crisis within the Establishment, and as Third World nationalism began to threaten their economic interests, this new class of carbon extractors gained in political influence and injected an intensified ideological fervor into covert ops. Phillips places Bush’s Zapata drilling company (named, apparently, after the 1952 Marlon Brando film *Viva Zapata!*) at the center of this transformation, involved in both the 1954 Guatemala coup and the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. (According to Phillips, the Walker-Bush sugar holdings in Cuba took a hit, as Fidel Castro’s revolutionary government “seized the company’s lands, mills, and machinery.”)

Obituaries have transformed the terror that Bush inflicted—as head of the CIA, as Ronald Reagan’s vice president, and as president, on poor countries—depicting it as heroism. The invasion of Panama is given scant notice, and the first Gulf War is judged “[just](#).” But Bush helmed the CIA when it was working closely with Latin American death squads grouped under Operation Condor, naming Ted Shackley, implicated in terror operations in Southeast Asia and Latin America—including Vietnam’s Phoenix program and the 1973 coup against Chile’s Salvador Allende—the agency’s powerful associate deputy director for operations. Bush gave the go-head to the neoconservative Team B project, founded on the idea that, after the US debacle in Vietnam, the agency had become too soft on Third World nationalism. Politicizing intelligence, Team B provided the justification for Reagan’s escalation of the Cold War, including the various operations that made up Iran/Contra. As president, Bush set a precedent that Donald Trump might turn to, pardoning, on his last Christmas in office, six Iran/Contra conspirators, an act that “decapitated,” [wrote](#) *The New York Times*, the work of independent prosecutor Lawrence Walsh. “The Iran-contra cover-up, which has continued for more than six years, has now been completed,” Walsh said of the pardons.

Bush’s wars in Panama and the Persian Gulf should be remembered for gratuitous killing. On the heels of the fall of the Berlin Wall, his 1989 invasion of Panama established the legal and political foundation (as I’ve written [here](#)) for his son’s catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003. The killing in Panama was on a smaller scale than in the Persian Gulf, but it was still horrific: Human Rights Watch [wrote](#) that even conservative estimates of civilian fatalities suggest “that the rule of proportionality and the duty to minimize harm to civilians...were not faithfully observed by the invading U.S. forces.” That’s an understatement. Civilians were given no notice. The University of

Panama's seismograph [marked](#) 442 major explosions in the first 12 hours of the invasion, about one major bomb blast every two minutes. Fires engulfed the mostly wooden homes, destroying about 4,000 residences. Some residents began to [call](#) the ravaged Panama City neighborhood of El Chorrillo "Guernica" or "little Hiroshima." After hostilities ended, bodies were shoveled into mass graves. "Buried like dogs," [said](#) the mother of one of the civilian dead.

This was followed by the Highway of Death in Bush's Persian Gulf. On February 26, 1991, US airstrikes massacred thousands of Iraqis fleeing Kuwait City in clear retreat on the road to Iraq. Here's *The Boston Globe* (not available online, but published on March 2, 1991) describing the scene: "Flies hummed over the body of one decapitated Iraqi soldier. A charred tank, its hatch flung wide, still smoldered. A battered car lay flipped on its side, a trail of loot spilling from its half-open trunk: jewelry, sacks of potatoes, a pair of women's red high heels. This was the doomed highway of escape for Iraqis attempting to flee Kuwait City too late. Four days after allied air and ground attacks turned this road into a blazing hell, the route remains a gruesome testament to the destruction rained down as Iraqi soldiers fled north Monday night. Mile after wreckage-jammed mile of highway appeared as if frozen in mid-battle. The remnants of a charred body still clung to a car door...." *The Intercept's* Jeremy Scahill [tweeted](#) a reminder that Bush targeted civilian infrastructure in that war, including, on February 13, bombing the Amiriyah shelter in Iraq, which killed more than 400 civilians.

Bush famously had to counter the image of being a "wimp." So for him, war in the Third World, whatever else it accomplished in terms of US interests, was more than (as Bush put it) "just foreign policy." It was self-help. "You know," he told soldiers returning from the Gulf in March 1991, "you all not only helped liberate Kuwait, you helped this country liberate itself from old ghosts and doubts.... No one in the whole world doubts us anymore," he said. "What you did, you helped us revive the America of our old hopes and dreams." Driving Iraq out of Kuwait "reignited Americans' faith in themselves." That faith was short-lived, destroyed by his son's wars, but the social decay that both made and unmade the short-lived Bush dynasty—which has now delivered the nation to Trump—continues.

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• THE NATION. DECEMBER 4, 2018:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/george-h-w-bush-icon-of-the-wasp-establishment-and-of-brutal-us-repression-in-the-third-world/>

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It's a Disgrace to Celebrate George H.W. Bush on World AIDS Day

The 41st president's "civility" hid the vast nature of American state violence.

Just after midnight on December 1, World AIDS Day, I learned that President George Herbert Walker Bush had died. And I was dismayed not just that the hagiography afforded dead presidents

would overshadow Bush's own appalling legacy on AIDS, but that his death would eclipse the tens of millions of lives we should be remembering today.

When I teach AIDS history, I always show a clip of ACT UP's October 11, 1992, "[ashes action](#)" at the White House, in which brave activists took the cremated bodies of loved ones who had died of AIDS and hurled them onto Bush's lawn. (If you've never seen it, I dare you to [watch](#) without crying).

The ashes action is brilliant not just for how raw it was but also for how it held a powerful man to account *without* civility. (ACT UP had also gone to Bush's [vacation home](#) in Maine, and they hounded him up until the night he lost reelection, when they marched the dead body of [Mark Fisher](#) to his campaign headquarters.) For in life—and, sadly, in the first obits, in death—Bush dangerously hid the vast nature of American violence beneath the seductive cloak of *civility*, that opiate of mass media that gets journalists and readers to let violence go unremarked.

But at a presidential debate with Bill Clinton and Ross Perot the day after the ashes action, journalist John Mashek [asked](#) Bush:

Mr. President, yesterday tens of thousands of people paraded past the White House to demonstrate about their concern about the disease, AIDS. A celebrated member of your commission, Magic Johnson, quit, saying there was too much inaction. Where is this widespread feeling coming from that your administration is not doing enough about AIDS?

Looking annoyed, Bush [listed](#) what his administration was doing before saying, seemingly irritated, "I can't tell you where it's coming from. I am very much concerned about AIDS. And I believe we have the best researchers in the world at NIH working on the problem." But then he added:

It's one of the few diseases where behavior matters. And I once called on somebody, "Well, change your behavior! If the behavior you're using is prone to cause AIDs, change the behavior!" Next thing I know, one of these ACT UP groups is saying, "Bush ought to change his behavior!" You can't talk about it rationally!

Bush's words are not just cruel; they fundamentally misunderstand what causes AIDS and how to effectively address it. Sex—yes, even *gay* sex—is a part of being human, and the people who died of AIDS did so because of societal neglect, not because of their human acts. And while he was nominally better than his predecessor (a very low bar) at addressing the *consequences* of AIDS, he'd been unforgivably quiet as Reagan's vice president.

But as director of the CIA, vice president, and then president, Bush exacerbated the material conditions that allow AIDS to flourish in the first place. For what causes AIDS? And why has it always so disparately affected black people? Medical research and pharmaceutical interventions are important in dealing with the *consequences* of seroconversion and limiting onward transmission of HIV. But AIDS is *caused* by broader social problems: homelessness, inadequate access to health care, political instability, racism, homophobia, and the violence of capitalism. And on these fronts, Bush is guilty; his "behavior matters." As a former head of the CIA, Bush created political instability in nations around the globe where AIDS would thrive. He hyped up racism with his [Willie Horton ad](#), by replacing civil-rights titan Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court with Clarence Thomas, and by [vetoing](#) the Civil Rights Act of 1990.

And, of course, in starting the 1991 Iraq War, he set our country on a nearly three-decade-long disaster which has left millions sick, disabled, and dead—many of them LGBTQ soldiers and civilians.

Sadly, gay journalists have been among the worst to immediately whitewash this part of Bush's legacy. Frank Bruni published a [gushing](#) *New York Times* column on World AIDS Day ("George H.W.

Bush's Uncommon Grace") without mentioning the words "gay," "homosexual," AIDS, or HIV. Meanwhile, over at the gay magazine the *Advocate*, Neal Broverman [headlined](#) his insipid revisionism "George H.W. Bush, No Ally But No Enemy of LGBTQ People, Dead at 94."

The American desire for civility is so strong that many liberals who were enraged that Trump nominated and stood by Brett Kavanaugh have been silent that Bush nominated and stood by Clarence Thomas. Even in the Me Too era, many seem to be eliding that Bush was recently accused of [groping women](#) (while allegedly declaring "I'm David Cop-A-Feel!").

On World AIDS Day, it would be an unforgivable injury to those who died of AIDS because of Bush's actions and inactions to let him off the hook. Instead, look at what drove grieving lovers and friends to pour ashes onto Bush's lawn—and really sit with the violence of American empire embodied by George Herbert Walker Bush.

Steven W. Thrasher

- THE NATION. DECEMBER 1, 2018:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/george-hw-bush-world-aids-day-obit/>

- Steven W. Thrasher, a doctoral candidate in American Studies at New York University, will join the faculty of Northwestern University in 2019 as the inaugural Daniel H. Renberg chair of media coverage of sexual and gender minorities
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