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President George H. W. Bush was an elite custodian of capitalism and empire, with countless victims, from Iraq to Panama. The former oil tycoon and CIA director paved the way for Trumpism

BEN NORTON: Former United States President George H. W. Bush died on November 30, 2018. And while leading Democrats joined the GOP in celebrating the Republican leader as a hero, honoring him in a bipartisan ceremony, the real Bush left behind a murderous legacy, full of war crimes across the planet.

The corporate media lionized Bush, a former oil tycoon and director of the CIA, as a statesman who committed his life to his country. But Bush's patriotism was not rooted in a devotion to the average working-class American people; instead, he was an elite custodian of capitalism and empire.

From Iraq to Panama, George H. W. Bush was responsible for countless deaths. And far from being the moderate voice of reason he is now being presented as in the era of Trumpism, Bush paved the way for right-wing extremists to take control of the US empire he so carefully preserved.

If one had to succinctly summarize George H. W. Bush in a single moment, it would be on the eve of his presidency, in 1988. On July 3 of that year, the US government shot down an Iranian civilian plane, killing all 290 passengers on board, including 66 children.

The United States adamantly refused to apologize for this horrific atrocity. Bush was then vice president under Ronald Reagan, and was in the middle of his own campaign for president. At a GOP event just a month later, in August, Bush indirectly responded to the US massacre of Iranian civilians with the following infamous words:

GEORGE H. W. BUSH: I will never apologize for the United States of America. Ever. I don't care what the facts are.

BEN NORTON: This lone quote says so much about the 41st US president. It is a concise representation of the imperial hubris and chauvinism that Bush was the physical embodiment of. He refused to apologize for the crimes of the US empire, and did not give a damn about the facts.

George H. W. Bush's family, life, and world were the textbook representation of the American ruling class, combining together the CIA, the oil industry, elite Ivy League universities, and even Nazi Germany.

Bush was born in 1924 into an elite capitalist family. His grandfather Samuel Bush was a corporate steel and railroad executive who oversaw US government contractors with weapons corporations during World War I.

H. W.'s father Prescott Bush was an even more notorious figure. In 1918, as a member of Yale University's elite secret society Skull and Bones, Prescott and his peers dug up the grave of former Native American leader Geronimo and stole his skull.

Prescott Bush then went on to become a bank executive on Wall Street. And during the Holocaust, the Bush family patriarch even profited from the genocidal Hitler regime. As the newspaper The Guardian reported in 2004, "even after America had entered the war and when there was already significant information about the Nazis' plans and policies, he worked for and profited from companies closely involved with the very German businesses that financed Hitler's rise to power. It has also been suggested that the money he made from these dealings helped to establish the Bush family fortune and set up its political dynasty."

Although the assets of Prescott Bush's company were seized by the US government in 1942 under the Trading with the Enemy Act, this did not stop him from pursuing a political career. A decade later, in 1952, Bush was elected to the US Senate, representing Connecticut.

George H. W. Bush followed in the footsteps of his father. He went to Yale University and was also a member of the elite secret society Skull and Bones. After graduation, Bush moved to Texas and entered the oil industry. In 1953, he co-founded the Zapata Petroleum Corporation and quickly became a millionaire.

In the early 1960s, before Bush officially entered politics, he also secretly started to work with the CIA. Journalist Joseph McBride noted, "Bush started working for the agency in 1960 or 1961, using his oil business as a cover for clandestine activities."

After over a decade of building up his fortune in the oil industry, Bush then moved onto politics. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1966, representing Texas.

But that was just the beginning. Bush then became US ambassador to the United Nations, and subsequently chairman of the Republican National Committee. And then in 1976, Bush was appointed director of central intelligence. After secretly working with the CIA for over a decade, Bush, a staunchly conservative Cold Warrior, was now the chief of it.

Historian Greg Grandin wrote that "Bush helmed the CIA when it was working closely with Latin American death squads grouped under Operation Condor." This was the height of the Cold War, and after the CIA had already violently overthrown numerous democratically elected governments throughout the Global South, from Iran, to Guatemala, to Chile; the US continued supporting far-right military dictatorships and death squads throughout Latin America.

This was also when Bush began developing deeper ties to Saudi Arabia, one of the world's largest oil producers and a key US ally in the Cold War. With US backing, the Saudi monarchy supported right-wing Islamist groups, many of which were extremists, to undermine secular socialist and communist forces in the Middle East. And through both oil and politics, Bush and his family maintained close links to Saudi elites, including the powerful bin Laden family.

Historian Greg Grandin likewise pointed out that it was Bush who helped facilitate Ronald Reagan's escalation of the Cold War, including the infamous Iran-Contra scandal.

Bush served as vice president under Reagan during this scandal, in which the Republican administration sold weapons to Iran in order to fund far-right Contra death squads in Nicaragua.

When Bush succeeded Reagan as the 41st president, he used his authority to pardon the conspirators involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, thereby preventing an investigation into his own criminal activity. Many observers have noted that, by doing this, George H. W. Bush helped set the precedent that Donald Trump would later exploit as president.

But this paled in comparison to Bush's most egregious crimes.

In 1989, the administration of newly inaugurated President Bush invaded the tiny Central American nation of Panama, in order to oust dictator Manuel Noriega, who had himself been a longtime CIA asset who for years worked closely with the United States, helping it fund right-wing death squads while he was trafficking drugs.

The US brutally bombed Panama, burning down thousands of homes, leading to the nickname "Little Hiroshima." Historian Greg Grandin noted that bodies of dead Panamanians were shoveled into mass graves.

But Bush's bloodiest atrocities were yet to come.

In August 1990, Iraq militarily occupied its southern neighbor Kuwait. The Bush administration wanted a war in response. And in order to sell this war, it spread blatant lies.

In October, a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl testified before the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus and claimed:

NAYIRAH AL-SABAH: While I was there I saw Iraqi soldiers coming to the hospital with guns. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the children to die on the cold floor. It was horrifying.

BEN NORTON: Human rights organizations like Amnesty International obediently echoed this myth, and George H. W. Bush used it to justify a war on Iraq.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH: And they had kids in incubators, and they were thrown out of the incubators so that Kuwait could be systematically dismantled.

BEN NORTON: It was only after this war, in 1992, that it was revealed that this 15-year-old girl was actually the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the US, and the lies she spread had been orchestrated by a PR firm on behalf of the Kuwaiti monarchy.

But remember, Bush had declared just a few years ago that he didn't care what the facts are.

In 1991, the 41st US president launched a war on Iraq, and it was extremely brutal. Under Bush's leadership, the US military deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure, devastating the country.

Just weeks after the end of the war, the United Nations published a survey analyzing the civilian damage done by US bombing. The UN found that Iraq was "near apocalyptic," that it had be bombed back "to a pre-industrial age," and that the country was on the verge of an "epidemic and famine."

The US military also used depleted uranium weapons on Iraq, leading to birth defects, high cancer rates, and environmental damage that still continue to this day.

Even the Washington Post, which supported the war, acknowledged fourth months after it that the US and its allies "sought to achieve some of their military objectives in the Persian Gulf War by disabling Iraqi society at large." The US "deliberately did great harm to Iraq's ability to support itself as an industrial society."

Precision-guided weapons were used to specifically target electrical plants, oil refineries, and the transportation grid. The US destroyed more than 100 bridges, along with roads, railroads, factories, phone networks, and TV and radio stations.

The Pentagon admitted that it intentionally demolished Iraq's electricity infrastructure, reducing the power generation level after the war by 96%, knocking it back to the level the country had in 1920. A lieutenant general told the Washington Post that the psychological impacts that average Iraqi citizens would suffer from after losing their electricity was a "side benefit."

One of the most extreme crimes was committed on February 13, 1991, when the US military used laser-guided smart bombs to destroy a shelter full of civilians. 408 Iraqi civilians were massacred in the attack. And the Pentagon itself admitted that the Amiriyah shelter that it bombed was being used by civilians seeking protection.

Even more blood-curdling was an atrocity that was so heinous it earned the name the Highway of Death. On February 26 and 27, the US and allies Britain, France, and Canada bombed Iraqi soldiers as they tried to flee Kuwait and return to Iraq. Thousands of fleeing Iraqis were massacred. There were even reportedly some civilians among the soldiers as they tried to flee, including foreign workers and Palestinians who were expelled by the Kuwaiti monarchy. They were bombed to pieces. Thousands died; the exact number of victims is unknown.

The aftermath of the war was beyond catastrophic. A Harvard public health team investigated after the war, and found that Iraq had acute malnutrition and "epidemic" levels of the preventable diseases cholera and typhoid. The Harvard team also estimated that at least 170,000 Iraqi children under age 5 would die in the coming year due to the effects of the US bombing.

The Washington Post noted, "Planners now say their intent was to destroy or damage valuable facilities that Baghdad could not repair without foreign assistance." The Bush administration deliberately made the lives of millions of Iraqis complete hell to try to force them into such desperation that they would overthrow their leader.

And even when the 1991 gulf war ended, the Bush 41 administration's war on Iraqi society continued. The US used the United Nations Security Council to expand crippling sanctions on

Iraq, which banned all trade with the country. These sanctions, which were further continued under subsequent President Bill Clinton, led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children and other civilians.

In response to these reports of mass civilian devastation from US bombing, George H.W. Bush's secretary of defense, Dick Cheney, insisted that every target was "perfectly legitimate." He declared, "If I had to do it over again, I would do exactly the same thing."

Bush Senior's secretary of defense, Dick Cheney, would go on to become Bush Junior's vice president, and the brains behind George W. Bush's foreign policy and his own second war on Iraq a decade later.

Moreover, H.W. Bush's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, later served as W. Bush's secretary of state.

Given the overlap between Bush 41's administration and that of Bush 43, it is no surprise that Bush Junior followed in his father's footsteps, launching another devastating war in the Middle East, which destabilized the region and led to more than 1 million deaths.

These crimes fly directly in the fact the corporate media's portrayal of George H. W. Bush as a principled moderate, and expose the cynicism behind the attempts to distance him from the political horrors that followed.

While Google made a doodle dedicated to H.W.'s passing, and while neoliberal centrist leaders of the Democratic Party tried to rehabilitate Bush and as a resistance figure against Donald Trump, the reality is that he and the Bush family only helped set the stage for the rise of the far-right Trumpism.

Even the explicit racism and the dog-whistling to fascists and white supremacists that Donald Trump has weaponized is not new. George H. W. Bush engaged in it as well.

During his 1988 campaign for president, Bush and his supporters resorted to using racist undertones to attack his Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis. Specifically they exploited the case of Willie Horton, a Black man who was imprisoned for murder and rape, but who escaped from prison after being temporarily released on a weekend furlough program in Massachusetts.

Far-right writer Ann Coulter, a staunch Donald Trump supporter who who regularly contributes to a white supremacist website, described the H.W. camp's racist exploitation of the Willie Horton scandal as "Bush's finest 30 seconds."

Anti-fascist journalist Russ Bellant, the author of the book Old Nazis, the New Right, and the Republican Party, also documented how Nazi collaborators from Eastern Europe helped get Bush elected president. Fascist anti-communists who immigrated to the US from socialist Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War and took leadership positions in the Republican National Committee's ethnic outreach groups.

A lifelong Cold Warrior, George H.W. Bush was also president when US-backed counterrevolutions overthrew the Eastern Bloc in 1990 and 1991. He helped oversee brutal neoliberal capitalist reforms that were referred to as "shock therapy" that led to millions of unnecessary deaths in the former Soviet Union.

Under Bush's leadership, the US pressured these former socialists governments to engage in mass privatizations, selling off state-owned industries and assets for pennies on the dollar. This US-backed neoliberal shock therapy established the network of capitalist oligarchs who control Eastern Europe still today.

This was just one of the many policies that George H. W. Bush oversaw that the world is still reeling from today.

It was not just war crimes and CIA spying, oil drilling and racist dog-whistling that defined his life. In 1990, Bush heralded in what he proudly called a "New World Order." Capitalism has won the global war on socialism. And Bush was the leader of the only remaining superpower in the world. The United States of America was the global hegemon, and its military and corporations ruled all. American imperialism had triumphed, and would spend the next three decades imposing the Washington Consensus on the planet.

In this way, George H. W. Bush did much more than just pave the path for his son and eventually Donald Trump to take power. Even more importantly, Bush was the anointed king of the neoliberal era whose seeds had been planted by his predecessor Ronald Reagan.

That neoliberal era died in 2016, with the election of Donald Trump, the resurgence of far-right and fascist movements across the globe; with a renewed socialist left and the implosion of the bipartisan centrist consensus.

After his passing, Bush was commemorated as a skilled and underappreciated leader. And he was indeed skilled, in the art of empire, warmongering, and reaction. Bush was the last competent manager of the American ruling class. He came from an elite, powerful family, and he left it even richer on his deathbed.

Bush was a lifelong custodian of US imperialism and capitalism. He served these systems well. And he bears significant responsibility for helping to give birth to the world order that followed him.

Bush 41's supporters might try to absolve him for the state of the country and the world that he left behind him. But George H. W. Bush cannot be separated from it.

After all, he refused to ever apologize for his country, and cared little for inconvenient facts.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH: I will never apologize for the United States of America. Ever. I don't care what the facts are.