For seven months the president was a near recluse in the White House. His disability was the longest lasting crisis the presidency had ever faced, as his cabinet carried on the business of government. Finally in 1921 he left office, an idealist who had lived ahead of his time.

In the end history would redeem him. His dream of an American-involved League of Nations became reality under Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman with the formation of the United Nations. And, virtually every great foreign policy of the modern era would owe its lineage to Woodrow Wilson. “I do not mean any disrespect to any other great people,” Wilson wrote toward the end, “when I say that America is now the hope of the world.”

GEORGE BUSH
1989–1993

Personal Contact

George Herbert Walker Bush was raised in privilege in suburban Connecticut, in a family that cared deeply about international issues. “People say I was a man of privilege and by that they mean money,” Bush reflected. “But I was privileged in the question of values—a mother and father who were determined to help their kids be good people.”

His mother, Dorothy Walker Bush, had a lifelong influence on him; he said she was still instructing him even when he was in the White House. His father, Prescott Bush, was a successful businessman who went on in later life to become a Senator. Bush credited him with passing on his core values: “Tell the truth, be honest, work hard, try to see the other guy’s point of view while sticking to your own principles. These were truisms, you might say, that my three brothers and my sister and I had inculcated into us growing up.”

His values were affirmed at the private school Andover Academy. But it was his experience as a Navy pilot, shot down in the Pacific, that left the deepest imprint on him. It forced him, he said, to count his blessings.

Returning home after the war, Bush married Barbara Pierce, and upon his graduation from Yale, they left for Texas, where he would make his fortune in the oil business. Then he and Barbara were struck by a personal tragedy—the death from leukemia of their four-year-old daughter, Robin. “We thought, why, dear God, why does this child have to die?” Bush said. “The epitome of innocence to us—beauty, everything else. And there’s no explanation. But all these things contribute to your life, maybe your character, to what you stand for, and that was a maturing happening. But it hurt, badly.”

It was then that Bush began to grow increasingly interested in Republican politics. “I ran in 1964, with a spectacular lack of success, for the U.S. Senate,” he recalled. “And maybe Dad’s experience, though I was way out in west Texas while he was Senator, had something to do with my desire to be in elective politics.”

In 1966 he won a seat in the U.S. Congress. And over the next two decades, international affairs would become the main focus of his life. He served as ambassador to the United Nations, then as U.S. envoy to China, and in 1975 as direc-
tor of the CIA. “The U.N. was fabulously important in terms of contacts, knowing people around the world,” he remembered. “The CIA, equally as important in terms of issues.”

Shortly after leaving the CIA, Bush had his first ambition to go after the presidency. “Jimmy Carter had been elected,” he said. “I went home to Texas and I started thinking, ‘Well why not? I’d like to think I can help make things better, here and abroad.’” He ran against Ronald Reagan in the GOP primaries, but Reagan trounced him. It was after that that he agreed to run as Reagan’s vice president. “Reagan, at the last moment, put me on the ticket,” Bush remembered. “He was so good to me in every single way. And so the pluses of the vice presidency far outweighed any of the confines of the vice presidency.”

When he ran for the presidency in 1988, George Bush promised to turn the country into a “kinder and gentler” nation. But he also made a promise that would come back to haunt him. “Read my lips,” he told a campaign crowd. “No new taxes.”

As President, Bush’s principal focus became foreign affairs, the area in which he was best prepared and in which presidents have the most liberty to exercise their powers. In an important link back to the hemispheric perspective of James Monroe, Bush became involved in the affairs of Latin America. Following the killing of an American soldier in Panama in 1989, he personally ordered troops to invade the country and to capture Panama’s dictator, Manuel Noriega. Encouraged by an elected government that Noriega had suppressed, he saw his presidential invasion as in keeping with the spirit of the Monroe Doctrine. He called it “Operation Just Cause.”

Bush saw his chief task in foreign policy as overseeing an end to the Cold War. “I hoped it would end but I wasn’t sure it would end that fast,” Bush later recalled. “I wasn’t sure the [Berlin] wall would come down. I wasn’t sure Germany would be unified. I wasn’t sure that the Soviet Union would have dramatically imploded as it did.”

Following in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan, Bush developed a relationship with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. His personal access to the top Soviet leader became the key to his ensuing successes in diplomacy. “I believed in Gorbachev,” Bush said. “I believed in his word. Some were very skeptical of that. But I think history will be very kind to Mikhail Gorbachev.”

The collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War left America for the first time in decades without a clear mission in world affairs. But then came Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, and the United States involvement in the Persian Gulf War. Critics claimed the real motive for fighting was oil. George Bush insisted it was a matter of principle.

“The evil against the good was so clear,” he said, “it made it very easy for me. It didn’t make it easy for a lot of the American people at the outset. Didn’t make it easier for those congressmen that fought me almost unanimously on the other side of the aisle when I asked for the authority to do what the U.N. said we should do. But it was an easy call for me on principle.”

Using the telephone for personal diplomacy like no president before him, Bush placed personal calls to dozens of world leaders, and brought together a coalition of nations to oppose Iraq. Then he carefully held that coalition together throughout the war. “We used the U.N. in the best way since its founding,” Bush said. “We could do that because of our relationship with Gorbachev, and our convincing Gorbachev that he should join us and not stand with his traditional ally, Iraq.” It was an example of what Bush called the beginnings of “a new
world order,” in which peaceful nations could stand united against rogue states and against terrorism. “A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace,” he said in a speech in 1990. It was a vision in keeping with that of Woodrow Wilson, and many years before him, of James Monroe. And when the Gulf War was won, in large part because of George Bush’s efforts, he reaped an extraordinary political benefit. “I think Desert Storm lifted the morale of our country and healed some of the wounds of Vietnam. I’m sure of it,” he said.

Bush’s conduct of the Gulf War, his carefulness about objectives, and his success in coalition building left him with the highest approval ratings of any president in the history of the Gallup polls. By most accounts, that should have given him a second term. But it didn’t. And it didn’t because the economy had weakened and the voters took their frustrations to the ballot box. In his 1992 campaign for reelection, Bush was cast by critics as a tired relic of the Cold War who had neglected the home front and broken his pledge not to increase taxes. Competing in a three-way election against Bill Clinton and Ross Perot, in November he received the lowest percentage of votes of any sitting president in eighty years.

“It hurt a lot,” Bush later admitted. “But the minute we got back to Houston, Texas, and were welcomed by our neighbors, and went into that little house with two dogs and Barbara and me and nobody else, we began to say, ‘Hey, life’s pretty good. And I think some of the reason that I’m very happy is I think we upheld the honor of the presidency; because I did feel the majesty of the office. And you wanted to keep it. You wanted the kids to have stars in their eyes when they went through the White House or looked at the West Wing, looked at the Oval Office. Maybe it’s old-fashioned but I have great respect for the dignity of the office, and for the presidency itself.” When asked what he wanted historians finally to say about his presidency, George Bush answered simply, “He did his best. Did it with honor.”

PART FIVE

AN OFFICE
AND
ITS POWERS