



Leonard Pitts

Columnist

George H.W. Bush is gone, as is his vision of 'a kinder, gentler nation'

On the last night of the Republican National Convention in 1988, the candidate sought to impart to the country a vision of the America it could be.

"Some," he said, "would say it's soft and insufficiently tough to care" about troubled children. "But where is it written, that we must act as if we do not care, as if we are not moved? Well, I am moved. I want a kinder, gentler nation."

And at the end of that speech, he made a promise: "I will keep America moving forward, always forward, for a better America, for an endless, enduring dream and a thousand points of light."

Those words would enter the political lexicon, but in one sense, there was nothing remarkable about what George H.W. Bush said. Presidents — and those who want to be president — have always sought to weave poetry from the prose of our daily lives, to ennoble our strivings and speak to what another Republican once called "the better angels of our nature."

That's what statesmen did once upon a time. But America has seldom seemed further from statesmanship — or from the vision Bush articulated — than it does now as the 41st president passes from the scene.

He died just days after the United States used teargas against asylum seekers, including children in diapers, after a handful of boys and men threw rocks at a border checkpoint in San Diego.

He was eulogized in Washington as lame duck GOP legislature in Wisconsin brazenly strong-armed democracy and lifted a middle finger to the will of the people, voting to strip power from the incoming Democratic governor and attorney general.

He was memorialized in Texas as investigators in North Carolina probed an alleged scheme in which an operative working for a GOP candidate collected absentee ballots from voters in Democratic areas and diverted them from the ballot box.

These are the kinds of things that seem to happen every day in the thugocracy America has become. And that speaks to how thoroughly America rejected the vision of itself Bush offered 30 years ago.

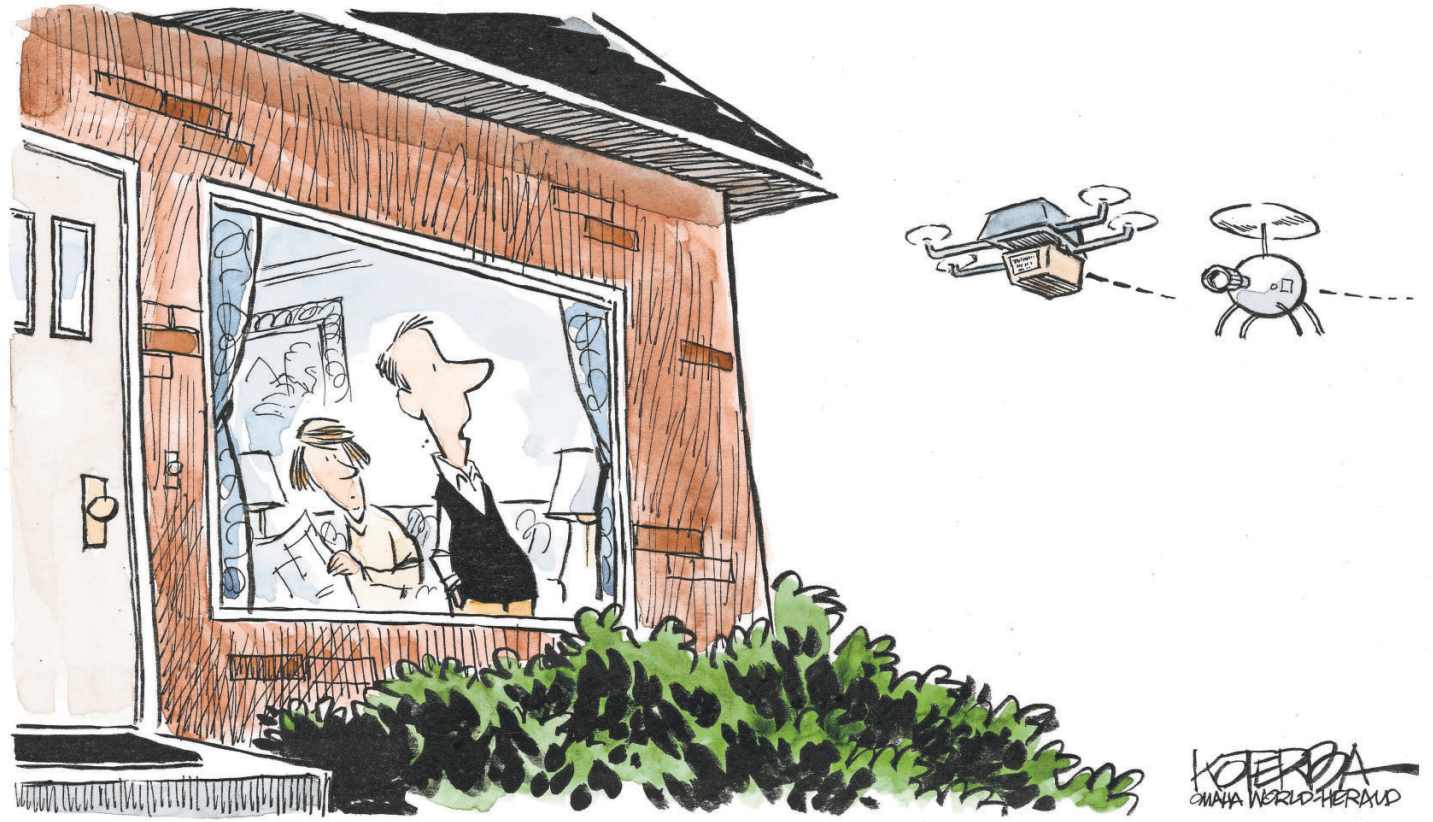
Think what you will of Bush. Criticize his Willie Horton ad as a despicable dog whistle to the nation's abiding racism, condemn him for his inaction against AIDS and for escalating the ruinous War on Drugs. Laud him for his firm but measured response to Iraq's seizure of Kuwait, his signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act or his support for climate science.

But understand that ultimately, the successes and failures of his public life have little to do with the very particular sense of loss some of us feel as the last president of the Greatest Generation takes his leave. There is always a sense of moment when a president dies. But the death of this president, this decent man, seems to close one of the few remaining doors between us and that time when presidents made poetry of our prose and you didn't wake up every day to some new thugocratic outrage.

"Some have said this is an end of an era," Bush's pastor, the Rev. Dr. Russell Jones Levenson Jr., said during his eulogy in Washington. "But it doesn't have to be. Perhaps this is an invitation to fill the void that has been left behind."

We can only hope. Because this moment is haunted by a curious and sobering duality. Some people mourn for George H.W. Bush, yes. But some of us mourn for America, too.

Leonard Pitts is a columnist for *The Miami Herald*. Readers may contact him via email at lpitts@miamiherald.com.



"IT'S NOT THE AMAZON DRONE BRINGING MY PACKAGE THAT CONCERNS ME... IT'S THE NSA DRONE FOLLOWING IT."

FROM OUR READERS

Refugee resettlement is not under City Council authority

I am writing in response to Paul Brandmire's Dec. 1 column about refugee resettlement in St. Cloud. As a St. Cloud resident, and more specifically a constituent of Brandmire's, I was dismayed to read that he continues to think this is an issue for the St. Cloud City Council to address.

This has been addressed multiple times by various leaders in the community, including Mayor Dave Kleis and the council itself.

Kleis went so far as to call this unconstitutional when former council member Jeff Johnson pushed a similar line. City councils have no business or right

to police the free movement of people within the United States, nor do cities set federal immigration policy.

When it comes to "listening to both sides," it is quite clear that Brandmire is the one not listening. I suggest he go back and read Kleis's comments for reference, and review the statements made by council members about previous attempts to limit refugees moving to St. Cloud. There have also been local events that specifically addressed the costs, though it's clear from his column that cost is not the real issue — culture is.

If refugee resettlement is Brandmire's main interest, he should have run for a higher office where he could actually work on the issue. My hope is that he does some additional reading, partic-

ularly on the job description of council members, so that he can understand his role on the council.

In the meantime, he is wasting his time, our time and our resources by focusing on an issue that the council can do nothing about. Further, I would say that by using his elected office to continue to demagogue this issue, he's adding to the divisiveness he decries.

These aren't the values of St. Cloud, nor is this leadership. We have great examples of city leadership in St. Cloud, particularly in Mayor Kleis, who has demonstrated admirable leadership in several challenging situations. Kleis has made it clear that we need to work together as a community, all of us. Brandmire would do well to follow Kleis's example.

Malik Stewart, St. Cloud

Funeral was a great celebration of a noble American patriot

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There were the tears of his son that I won't forget. And there was the respect shown to him by his nation. But it was that nation that had turned him out of office after one term for a most uncivil man, who defiled the Oval Office from the start.

And as Bush was mourned, America was being admonished by a most uncivil media for its general lack of civility.

It was a political funeral, a grand state funeral for a president. One who prudently — yes, prudently — used restraint and prevented nuclear war, as a desperate and frightened nuclear Soviet Union began its final collapse.

George H.W. Bush, 94, had been a young pilot shot down over the Pacific in World War II, and a Texas oilman, congressman, diplomat, director of the CIA, vice president and president. But he was also a father, mourned by his family.

"So through our tears let us see the blessings of knowing and loving you," said his son, former President George W. Bush, the 43rd president, talking of family, and of his late mother, Barbara, and his sister Robin, who died of leukemia as a child.

"A great and noble man, and the best father a son or daughter could have. And in our grief, let us smile knowing that Dad is hugging Robin and holding Mom's hand again."

It was that moment, the son's voice breaking, chest heaving, then pulling himself together and continuing, that will be difficult to forget.

As will the memory of ancient former Sen. Robert Dole, the Kansas Republican and fellow World War II veteran, being helped from his wheelchair to stand and salute Bush's casket the day before.

But there are other moments about the death of George H.W. Bush that will be impossible to forget, too, like the disgraceful sentimentality of mewling

hypocrites.

The late president's critics in politics and media had despised, mocked and dishonored him in life. But they sure loved him in death.

And they used him as a weapon against their enemy, President Donald Trump and the millions of Americans who voted for him.

Bush had been dismissed by the ever left-leaning media as a colossal wimp, a cold bloodless preppy, unable to feel our pain, an establishment patrician so out of touch that he didn't know about grocery scanners at the supermarket.

He was vilified as a racist, a moron, a fool, again and again by liberal pundits with one object in mind: propelling Bill Clinton into the White House.

But shortly after word of Bush 41's death, there they were, on cable TV, in print, talking of honor, bemoaning the loss of Bush's civility, mourning the loss of his kindness, with constant comparisons to Trump, a slugger who is neither kind nor gentle.

They propped Bush up on a horse, in the manner of El Cid at the siege of Valencia from centuries ago, tying him to the saddle so he might ride out, sightless, to shame and rout their enemies.

They've done this before, most recently with the death of Trump critic and Republican establishment Sen. John McCain of Arizona. Though McCain never met a war he didn't like, he was beloved by the media until he posed a threat to the election of President Obama. Then they turned on him too.

George H.W. Bush wasn't a nifty orator. The fusion dreamed of years before by William F. Buckley, melding traditional conservatives and anti-communist neoconservatism began to unravel under Bush. His greatest political blunder was raising taxes after issuing his "Read my lips, no new taxes" pledge. This wore the establishment down and gave rise to populist, anti-big govern-

ment movements, from a third-party challenge by Ross Perot that put Clinton in office, to the tea party and ultimately to Trump.

Bush was an establishment blue blood, yes, but also a warrior, and perhaps because he knew of death in war firsthand, he learned something invaluable: When you have the power to break the world into pieces, be prudent.

Be prudent was the line used against him. Years ago he was mocked by Dana Carvey of "Saturday Night Live." "It wouldn't be prudent," Carvey would say, and the impression was hilarious. It reduced Bush to a tightass. But the tightass graciously invited Carvey to the White House and appeared on "SNL" and got a laugh.

Yet it was prudence and skill that helped Bush manage chaos. He deftly accomplished the unification of a divided Germany, while refusing to expand NATO further and risk nuclear war with a frantic Russia.

And prudence again during the first Gulf War, when he would not send his legions to occupy Baghdad. That would have led to chaos. He left all that to his successors, like his son.

President Clinton pushed to expand NATO even further. And in the second Gulf War, the son, captured by the neocons, would send his legions into Baghdad, thinking he could rebuild nations in our image.

It failed. Our troops are still there. And we inch closer to confrontation with Russia's Putin.

I suppose (though I hope I'm wrong) that America knows more about Bush's loyal service dog, Sully, than his successes and failures in office.

But he loved America. And he served her with honor all his life. Godspeed, Mr. President.

John Kass is a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*. His Twitter handle is [john-kass](https://twitter.com/john-kass).

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