



# Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush

By Jon Meacham

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**#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • NAMED ONE OF THE TEN BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *THE WASHINGTON POST* AND ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY *The New York Times Book Review* / *Time* / *NPR* | *St. Louis Post-Dispatch***

In this brilliant biography, Jon Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author, chronicles the life of George Herbert Walker Bush. Drawing on President Bush’s personal diaries, on the diaries of his wife, Barbara, and on extraordinary access to the forty-first president and his family, Meacham paints an intimate and surprising portrait of an intensely private man who led the nation through tumultuous times. From the Oval Office to Camp David, from his study in the private quarters of the White House to Air Force One, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the first Gulf War to the end of Communism, *Destiny and Power* charts the thoughts, decisions, and emotions of a modern president who may have been the last of his kind. This is the human story of a man who was, like the nation he led, at once noble and flawed.

His was one of the great American lives. Born into a loving, privileged, and competitive family, Bush joined the navy on his eighteenth birthday and at age twenty was shot down on a combat mission over the Pacific. He married young, started a family, and resisted pressure to go to Wall Street, striking out for the adventurous world of Texas oil. Over the course of three decades, Bush would rise from the chairmanship of his county Republican Party to serve as congressman, ambassador to the United Nations, head of the Republican National Committee, envoy to China, director of Central Intelligence, vice president under Ronald Reagan, and, finally, president of the United States. In retirement he became the first president since John Adams to see his son win the ultimate prize in American politics.

With access not only to the Bush diaries but, through extensive interviews, to the former president himself, Meacham presents Bush’s candid assessments of many of the critical figures of the age, ranging from Richard Nixon to Nancy Reagan; Mao to Mikhail Gorbachev; Dick Cheney to Donald Rumsfeld; Henry Kissinger

to Bill Clinton. Here is high politics as it really is but as we rarely see it.

From the Pacific to the presidency, *Destiny and Power* charts the vicissitudes of the life of this quietly compelling American original. Meacham sheds new light on the rise of the right wing in the Republican Party, a shift that signaled the beginning of the end of the center in American politics. *Destiny and Power* is an affecting portrait of a man who, driven by destiny and by duty, forever sought, ultimately, to put the country first.

#### **Praise for *Destiny and Power***

“Should be required reading—if not for every presidential candidate, then for every president-elect.”—*The Washington Post*

“Reflects the qualities of both subject and biographer: judicious, balanced, deliberative, with a deep appreciation of history and the personalities who shape it.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A fascinating biography of the forty-first president.”—*The Dallas Morning News*

“When we rank, reconsider, laud, or denounce past Presidents, living or dead, we are taking stock of our own times. In that sense, the vindication of George H. W. Bush is a reflection of what we know we’ve lost. Jon Meacham’s new biography of Bush, *Destiny and Power*, makes that plain from its very first pages.”—*The New Yorker*

“The story of the forty-first man to hold the office sheds light not only on the country we were, but the one we’ve become.”—*Los Angeles Times*

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

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“*Destiny and Power* reflects the qualities of both subject and biographer: judicious, balanced, deliberative, with a deep appreciation of history and the personalities who shape it. If Meacham is sometimes polite to a fault, *Destiny and Power* does not suffer for it. His kinder, gentler approach succeeds in making George H. W. Bush a more sympathetic—and more complex—figure than if the former president had written his own doorstopper after all.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Jon Meacham, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Andrew Jackson, put an enormous amount of work into this volume: nine years of interviews, full access to the diaries of George H. W. and Barbara Bush, and an open door to family members and friends. Add to this Meacham’s balanced journalism and smooth writing, and you have a fascinating biography of the forty-first president.”—*The Dallas Morning News*

“When we rank, reconsider, laud, or denounce past Presidents, living or dead, we are taking stock of our own times. In that sense, the vindication of George H. W. Bush is a reflection of what we know we’ve lost. Jon Meacham’s new biography of Bush, *Destiny and Power*, makes that plain from its very first pages.”—*The New Yorker*

“Graceful prose, backed by diligent mining of the archives and access to an oral diary that Bush dictated throughout his presidency . . . The story of the forty-first man to hold the office sheds light not only on the country we were, but the one we’ve become.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“Meacham is a superb historian and he weaves a compelling historical narrative, drawing heavily on Bush’s own contemporaneous diaries. The result is a fascinating behind-the-scenes glimpse into high-stakes decision making in a rapidly evolving world.”—*The Seattle Times*

“Through one man’s long journey through politics, we see America’s changing attitudes toward power and duty.”—*Time*

“Illuminating . . . written from Bush’s perspective but with a journalist’s rigor . . . George and Barbara Bush have provided extraordinary cooperation [for] an account of his life and presidency that has depth and value.”—*USA Today* (4 out of 4 stars)

“A gripping new biography of the forty-first president.”—*The Economist*

“Meticulously researched . . . a revealing biography that should serve as the starting point for future evaluations of the forty-first president.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A vivid, well-written account.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“The more time passes, the more the dust settles, the clearer it becomes that George H. W. Bush and the strengths of character he brought to his long service to this country deserve more attention and appreciation.

And now comes *Destiny and Power*, Jon Meacham's altogether fair, insightful biography of the forty-first president—a portrait made especially compelling by the author's remarkable access to Bush's private White House diaries. This is a timely, first-rate book!"—**David McCullough**

"What a spectacular and moving portrait this is—not only of a remarkably classy man but of the era that shaped him! It is hard to imagine a biographer more fitted than Jon Meacham to write what will surely be the definitive work on George Herbert Walker Bush."—**Doris Kearns Goodwin**

"This astonishing book is both timely and timeless. Based on candid interviews and intimate letters and diaries, it provides a deep insight into the character of George H. W. Bush, flavored with colorful anecdotes depicting his relationships with people ranging from Gorbachev and Reagan to his sons George and Jeb. The result is a fascinating and insightful portrayal of the life of an exemplary American citizen."—**Walter Isaacson**

"Jon Meacham's timely and intimate biography of George Bush 41 is a welcome reminder of this modest president's call to service, from the cockpits of World War II to the Oval Office and the end of the Cold War. Here you'll meet a man of patrician manners, wartime heroics, Texas assimilation, party and personal loyalty, with a refined sense of power that carried him into history. Meet the George Bush you didn't know."—**Tom Brokaw**

"This riveting biography by the incomparable Jon Meacham gives George H. W. Bush his well-deserved place in history. *Destiny and Power* is full of surprises, revealing 41's important role in scene after crucial historical scene of the past seven decades. President Bush used to say that he could never quite convey his "heartbeat" to Americans. Now, using a treasure of heretofore unseen diaries and other documents, as well as his own detailed interviews, Meacham takes us behind closed doors to show us what this sometimes misunderstood leader was really like."—**Michael Beschloss**

*From the Hardcover edition.*

About the Author

**Jon Meacham** received the Pulitzer Prize for his 2008 biography of Andrew Jackson, *American Lion*. He is also the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*, *American Gospel*, and *Franklin and Winston*. Meacham, who teaches at Vanderbilt University and at The University of the South, is a fellow of the Society of American Historians. He lives in Nashville and in Sewanee with his wife and children.

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One

The Land of the Self-Made Man

★

Is it not by the courage always to do the right thing that the fires of hell shall be put out?

—The Reverend James Smith Bush, Episcopal clergyman and great-grandfather of George H. W. Bush

Failure seems to be regarded as the one unpardonable crime, success as the one all-redeeming virtue, the acquisition of wealth as the single worthy aim of life.

—Charles Francis Adams, Jr.

To Samuel Prescott Bush—“Bushy” to his beloved first wife, Flora—the ocean seemed to go on forever. The view from the top of the Hotel Traymore overlooking the boardwalk in Atlantic City at Illinois Avenue was grand, and unique: A publicist for the hotel assured the press that the Traymore roof was “the most elevated point on the Atlantic coast south of the Statue of Liberty.” (“In absence of evidence to the contrary,” a reporter added, “we take his word for it.”) A prominent Midwestern industrialist, Bush was at the Jersey Shore in the early summer of 1915 to take part in what was described as “the highest golf driving contest ever held in the history of the great Scotch game.”

In from Columbus, Ohio, where he presided over Buckeye Steel Castings, a manufacturer of railroad parts, the tall, angular Bush looked out from a makeshift tee atop the brick hotel two hundred feet above the beach. A favorite of well-heeled visitors to Atlantic City, the domed Traymore had just undergone renovations that *Bankers’ Magazine* solemnly reported had turned the hotel into a showplace with “700 rooms and 700 baths”—the kind of construction project that was making grandeur ever more accessible to men who were building a prosperous business class.

S. P. Bush was one such man. The son of an Episcopal clergyman, Bush, who was to become George H. W. Bush’s paternal grandfather, had spent much of his childhood in New York and New Jersey. After college, Bush went west, finding his future at Buckeye, a company backed by the railroad baron E. H. Harriman and run, in the first decade of the new century, by a brother of John D. Rockefeller, Frank. President of Buckeye since 1908 and a director of numerous railway companies, S. P. Bush had grown rich. Now standing on the roof of the Hotel Traymore, he was part of an emerging American elite—one based not on birth but on success and achievement. Facing the Atlantic, in a long-sleeved dress shirt and formal trousers, Bush, driver in hand, took his stance and swung smoothly. He connected just the way he wanted to—cleanly and perfectly. The ball rose rapidly, a tiny spinning meteor. Bush’s shot streaked out over the blue-green water, soaring over the white-capped waves before disappearing deep in the distance, the sound of its splash lost in the wind and surf.

Bush won, of course. Though his opponents did what they could, they failed to surpass Bush’s dramatic drive. It was not the most serious of competitions, but that did not matter. The *New York Times* reported Bush’s triumph. A contest was a contest.

To win was to be alive; to compete was as natural as breathing—a common code among the ancestors of George Herbert Walker Bush. Theirs is a story of big men and strong women, ambitious husbands and fathers taking unconventional risks—in business, in politics, even in religion—while wives and mothers who might have expected fairly staid lives adapt and emerge as impressive figures in their own rights. Across more than two centuries, maternal and paternal lines reinforced and supported one another, producing generation after generation driven by both the pursuit of wealth and by a sense of public service.

Bush’s ancestors were in America from the beginning. Some arrived on the *Mayflower*, settling in New England and New York. On the night of Tuesday, April 18, 1775, the Massachusetts patriot Dr. Samuel Prescott, a Bush forebear, rode with Paul Revere and William Dawes to warn Concord of the pending British invasion. Only Prescott made it all the way through the night.

Obadiah Bush, George H. W. Bush’s great-great-grandfather, was born in 1797, served in the War of 1812 at age fifteen, and became a schoolmaster in Cayuga County, New York. He married a pupil (a young woman whom family tradition recalled as the “comely” Harriet Smith), and went into business in Rochester. He fell on hard times and, in distress, unsuccessfully turned to Senator William Seward (who would join Lincoln’s

cabinet much later) in search of government preferment in San Francisco or in Rio de Janeiro.

Gold, or at least the prospect of it, saved him, then killed him. Obadiah grew obsessed with news of the gold rush in California, journeying west to look into mining opportunities in the San Francisco area. He liked what he found but died before he could collect his family and permanently relocate.

Obadiah's eldest son, James Smith Bush, who would become George H. W. Bush's great-grandfather, barely made it out of infancy. Born in 1825, he was described as "a puny and sickly child, of fragile build, with weak lungs." A doctor was harsh with Harriet Bush, James Smith Bush's mother: "You had better knock him in the head, for [even] if he lives he will never amount to anything." He survived, and, in 1841, at sixteen, enrolled at Yale College. James Smith Bush was popular and charming, a good student, and an excellent athlete, especially at crew. "His classmates speak of him as tall and slender in person, rather grave of mien, except when engaged in earnest conversation or good-humored repartee; ever kind and considerate, and always a gentleman—still very strong in his likes and dislikes," a friend of Bush's wrote. "He made many friends."

These and other family traits became evident in Bush's life during his Yale years. There was a restlessness, an eagerness to break away from the established order of life, but not so much that one could not return. There was a kind of moderation, a discomfort with extremes or dogma. There was a capacity to charm and a fondness for attractive women. And there was also a sense of familial duty. At college he realized that his father, Obadiah, was short of money, and so James Smith Bush sought professional security in the law. On a visit to Saratoga Springs as a young attorney, he was dazzled by the passing figure of Sarah Freeman, the daughter of a local doctor. She was, it was said, "the most beautiful woman of this place," and Bush fell in love. They married in October 1851, and he took her to live in Rochester.

It was a love match. Bush adored his bride, and the world seemed a brighter, happier place to him with her in it. Then, eighteen months after the wedding, Sarah Freeman Bush died, devastating her young husband into near insensibility. Shattered by the loss of his wife, Bush sought consolation in religion. Initially a Presbyterian, he had become an Episcopalian under Sarah's influence. Now, in the wake of the calamity of her death, Bush was ordained a priest and took charge of Grace Church in Orange, New Jersey, in June 1855. He eventually found another great love: Harriet Eleanor Fay. Like Bush's first wife, Harriet was said to be "brilliant and beautiful." The poet James Russell Lowell admired her extravagantly. "She possessed the finest mind," Lowell remarked, "and was the most brilliant woman, intellectually, of the young women of my day." Bush's head turned anew, he married Harriet Fay at Trinity Church in New York in 1859. The marriage was a happy one, producing four children, including, on Sunday, October 4, 1863, a son they named Samuel Prescott Bush—S.P.

While Obadiah appears to have had a gambler's temperament, James Smith Bush was moderate in tone and philosophy. Amid a controversy over the teaching of the Bible in public schools, the Reverend Bush preached a sermon in support of the separation of church and state. A strong Union man during the Civil War, Bush spoke to public gatherings celebrating the North's triumphs at Vicksburg and at Gettysburg and reportedly flew the American flag at his church against the wishes of the neighborhood's Southern sympathizers. After the grim news from Ford's Theatre on the evening of Good Friday, 1865, Bush wrote a sermon to commemorate the martyred Abraham Lincoln. "Be assured, my brethren, as that great and good man did not live in vain, so he has not died in vain," Bush told his Easter congregation that Sunday. "The President was an instrument in the hands of God."

The popular Bush served as chaplain on an expedition around Cape Horn to California under Commodore John "Fighting Jack" Rodgers and spent several years at Grace Church on Nob Hill in San Francisco before



returning east in 1872, where he became rector of the Church of the Ascension at West Brighton, Staten Island. There the strains of the second great spiritual crisis of Bush's life became apparent. Forged in the fire of his grief over the death of his first wife, Sarah, his faith was fading. The more miraculous elements of the creeds—the Virgin Birth was one example—now seemed implausible to him. “I discovered early in my acquaintance with Mr. Bush that his theological garments were outgrown,” said Dr. Horatio Stebbins of San Francisco, a leading Unitarian.

On a visit to the Ashfield, Massachusetts, home of George William Curtis, the editor of Harper's Weekly, Bush discussed his shifting views on religion. Curtis introduced his guest to a poem of Ralph Waldo Emerson's entitled “The Problem,” which tells the story of a believer who has fallen out of love with the trappings of earthly ecclesiastical institutions, beginning with the “cowl,” or a long robe with deep sleeves and a hood.

I like a church; I like a cowl;

I love a prophet of the soul;

and on my heart monastic aisles

Fall like sweet strains, or pensive smiles;

Yet not for all his faith can see

Would I that cowed churchman be.

Why should the vest on him allure,

Which I could not on me endure?

Bush was stunned at how Emerson's verses resonated. “Why, why,” Bush told Curtis, “that is my faith.” Around Christmas 1883 he resigned from his parish and moved his family to Concord, Massachusetts, a center of inquiry and of Unitarianism infused with the spirits of Emerson and Thoreau.

On Monday, November 11, 1889, James Smith Bush died after a heart attack. A eulogy underscored his love of politics and his gentleness of temper. “Interested in all public questions, possessing strong opinions, and having the courage of his convictions, he never was offensive or aggressive in asserting them,” a friend said of Bush. He was buried in Ithaca, where he and his family had moved yet again, his restless journey done.

Mechanics and money, not metaphysics, was top of mind for Bush's son Samuel Prescott Bush. In this, George H. W. Bush's grandfather reflected the larger currents of the time. The post-Civil War era found its name in Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's novel *The Gilded Age*. The excesses of the era, including the exploitation of labor and the attendant growth in the gap between the few and the many, led to the important work of the Progressives. Yet, among elements of the Gilded Age elite there was an expectation that money brought with it certain responsibilities. Andrew Carnegie articulated this new faith in “The Gospel of Wealth,” published in 1889:

This, then, is held to be the duty of the man of wealth: To set an example of modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance; to provide moderately for the legitimate wants of those dependent upon him; and, after doing so, to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds, which he

is called upon to administer, and strictly bound as a matter of duty to administer in the manner which, in his judgment, is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community—the man of wealth thus becoming the mere trustee and agent for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience, and ability to administer, doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves.

The pursuit of wealth was thus imbued with a sense of purpose. America, wrote the banker Henry Clews, was “the land of the self-made man.”

S.P. attended the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, a choice suggesting he had decided to seek his career in a world of certitude and of science rather than in his father’s ethos of twilight and of theology, devoting himself to engineering, manufacture—and money making. After graduating from Stevens in 1884, Bush worked for a number of railroads, moving between Logansport, Indiana; Columbus, Ohio; and Milwaukee. In 1901, he returned to Columbus to join the Buckeye Castings Company, whose railroad parts were widely praised for being of the “highest grade.”

Late on the afternoon of Tuesday, October 14, 1902, in Columbus, Buckeye invited spectators to witness the shift from the older world of iron to the new, more profitable universe of steel. Watching a crane and furnace at work at Buckeye, a reporter for *The Columbus Citizen* wrote “the steel came pouring forth in a stream of liquid fire amid a cloud of fiery spray. It was a beautiful sight, indeed.” So began S. P. Bush’s long career at Buckeye, one that made him rich and—crucial for the Bush family’s self-image—“respected,” as his grandson George H. W. Bush recalled. The Bushes were a big force in a big town in a big time. And S. P. Bush, who married a Columbus native, Flora Sheldon, was a big man. “Grandfather Bush was quite severe,” recalled George’s sister, Nancy Bush Ellis. “He wasn’t mean, but so correct.” He was, a Buckeye colleague recalled, “a snorter .??. Everyone knew when he was around; when he issued orders, boy it went!”

There was championship level golf; the leading of charities; the building of a great house with elaborate gardens; a critical role in creating the Ohio State football program; the establishment of the Ohio Manufacturers’ Association; and, politically, a voice in both the state’s Democratic Party and in the anti-tax Ohio Tax League. There was also the support of symphonies, of art galleries, of literary and cultural gatherings. S.P. expected hard work from others and from himself. Determined and focused, he was often asked to serve as a director on the boards of other companies—perhaps the highest compliment one businessman can pay another. Yet, Bush spoke of himself in a humble, self-improving tone: “I could be a lot better man if I could do a little more of some things and less of others, and I would like to be a better man too.”

Flora, who was engaged by many things—gardening, design, history—saw her main role as that of a supportive wife. “Let me know dear what you are doing—the little details of your days & nights—for they are my greatest interest in life,” Flora wrote S.P. when he was away on business. “You are a very dear Bushy, adored by your children and tenderly loved by your wife & loved more today than ever before.”

The eldest of those children was Prescott Sheldon Bush. Born in Columbus on Wednesday, May 15, 1895, Prescott was high-spirited, savoring athletic success and attention. After church one summer day at Osterville, a Cape Cod village where the Bushes spent time in the summers, lunch with the family was raucous. “The children were hilarious to such a degree I think your poor mother’s head whirled,” Flora wrote her husband. “Prescott is after all a naughty boy on occasion—he kept the ball rolling so that I was helpless” with laughter.

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