

Eulogy for Brent Scowcroft
By Robert M. Gates
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Brent asked me to join the NSC staff on loan from CIA in the spring of 1974, four months before President Nixon resigned. It was a decision I never regretted. He was the best boss I ever had and, over time, he became my best friend. I loved him. And I was far from alone in doing so.

One way or another, I worked with Brent for some 45 years, most closely under President Ford and then especially President George H. W. Bush. In all the jobs I had thereafter, he was my most trusted counselor and sounding board. He was a world-class strategist and a far-sighted, bold thinker.

Brent is often described as the model National Security Adviser, not least because other senior officials – especially Jim Baker and Dick Cheney – trusted him to faithfully represent their views to the President. But Brent was far from a passive rapporteur or great policy traffic cop. He had strong views and was never shy about putting them forward.

As a matter of fact, Brent loved to argue. He and I argued all the time when I was his deputy. He argued with Larry Eagleburger, Condi Rice, Bob Blackwill, Richard Haass, Ginny Lampley, Arnie Kanter and so many more – he relished the give-and-take with people he respected and liked. And, on those rare occasions when he yielded a point, it was always grudging. Those he argued with the most, loved him the most. And that is telling.

What set Brent apart as National Security Adviser was that he played fair – he never blind-sided his colleagues, he never disparaged others to the President, he facilitated getting unhappy senior officials in to see the President, he did not take advantage of his close relationship with the president to disadvantage others.

Beyond his deep commitment to protect America and to do so respecting the law, orderly process and the institutions of government, Brent was singularly focused on protecting the presidency itself. His calm demeanor, personal humility and sense of humor masked the fact that he could get mad. I mean truly angry. And his temper nearly always was ignited by the same match: whenever officials in the White House or elsewhere in government placed their personal interests above those of the President.

When other officials' actions added to the President's burdens, flouted the authority of the President, or claimed credit for achievements that were rightfully the President's.

Brent demanded excellence and hard work but, at the same time, he was truly fun to work for. He had a high tolerance for being teased. You may remember that Brent got into some hot water when the President sent him and Larry Eagleburger to China after the tragedy at Tiananmen Square and Brent gave a dinner toast that proved controversial. After that, before an official dinner with some particularly obnoxious foreign leader, I'd ask Brent if he was going to give the toast. After he and 41 came up with the notion of the New World Order one summer up in Maine, I'd tell Brent and others that the New World Order is what you get when the bluefish aren't biting.

Then, of course, there was the now-famous Scowcroft Award, created by 41 to recognize the senior official who most obviously fell asleep in a meeting with the President. An award Brent won many times. My favorite was one time in the oval office with a particularly boring foreign leader. Jim Baker, Brent and I were seated on the couch. Brent got drowsy, scooted forward to the edge of the couch and put his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands. He fell asleep, his elbows slipped off his knees and he pitched forward, headed directly for the flower arrangement on the President's coffee table. I stuck my arm out in time to catch him and eased him back on to the sofa.

But there is a back story to the daytime naps. After a long and stressful day at the White House, Brent would go home to take care of his ailing wife Jackie, doing the laundry, the cooking, the housecleaning. More than once I heard from someone who had spotted Brent at the neighborhood grocery store at midnight.

The only times I ever went behind Brent's back with the President were when Jackie was in the hospital. Brent wouldn't leave the office in the evening until the President had gone to the residence and so I would sneak down to the President's study off the Oval Office and tell him Jackie was in the hospital and he needed to head to the residence early so Brent could go to the hospital. After Brent left, I'd give the all clear, and 41 would return to the Oval.

Brent's deep love of family obviously centered on Karen and, later in life, Meghan. Mentioning Karen or Meghan to Brent was guaranteed to bring a smile to his face and a twinkle to his eye.

I suppose this is the proper point to correct the historical record and recent newspaper stories in one important respect. Who would ever imagine that the ascetic-looking high priest of national security really and truly liked a good vodka martini – Chopin, very dry, straight up, with a lemon twist.

There are very few men and women in the American public arena who, in a lifetime of service to our country, have earned and kept the respect, admiration and even the affection of all who knew them, in and out of government. Brent was one of those all too rare figures. Tough as nails on matters he cared about, Brent was at the same time the most decent, kindest and humble person I have ever known. A man of impeccable integrity and unbounded courage, he was a true patriot – an American icon. And the best friend anyone could ever have.