

Eulogy for Brent Scowcroft
By Richard N. Haass
August 22, 2020

I was doing research in the Bush presidential library in College Station Texas – that’s Bush 41 – and came across an previously undisclosed memorandum. It turns out President-elect Bush called Brent soon after the November 1988 election and asked him to be his national security advisor even though Brent had held that same job in the Ford administration. “After all, Brent,” the president explained, “you know the job so well you could do it with your eyes closed.”

Brent took 41’s words to heart, and slept through significant portions of the Bush presidency. That part is true, even if the conversation with the president never happened and no such memorandum exists. That didn’t stop Brent from laughing heartily at the story and at himself every time I told it.

It was in the late 1970’s or early 1980s when we first met. Truth is we didn’t know each other all that well when he asked me to come work on the Middle East on the National Security Council. After a day of thinking it over, I called back and said yes. It was the best professional decision I ever made.

It was also one of the best personal decisions. It was impossible not to learn from Brent. He mentored by example. He was open to argument, fair-minded, curious, willing to change his mind and admit error, demanding but at the same time decent and generous. I can still see him sitting in his chair, unmoving for what seemed like minutes, as he pondered the implications of some new information he’d received.

It is hard to explain how a job that required 14 hours a day, six or seven days a week filled with interagency meetings, a job that caused me to miss my honeymoon so I could travel to Europe and the Middle East with the president and Brent, could be fun, but it often was.

Saturdays were my favorite time, as Brent, Bob Gates and I would often meet in Brent’s West Wing office. Brent would be lying on the couch, awake but with his eyes closed, the two of us in chairs. We would talk about everything and everyone, alternating what was serious with howls of laughter. The conversation ranged from grand strategy to grand gossip. One morning Bob said, “You guys realize, it’s never going to be better than this.” He was right.

Most observers would agree that we –and by “we”, I mean the Bush administration – did ok too. The administration succeeded in ending the Cold War peacefully with a unified Germany in NATO, in building an international coalition that liberated Kuwait and ensured the post-Cold War era would not begin with an unanswered act of aggression, in bringing together Israelis and Arabs for the first time to openly discuss peace. No administration since Truman’s has had a better foreign policy record.

This success was due in no small part to the gentleman we remember today. For good reason Brent is viewed as the gold standard of NSA’s. Brent got the balance right, between being a counselor to the president and the guarantor of due process for everyone else.

A realist to his core, he thought the principal purpose of American foreign policy should be to shape the foreign policies of others, not transform them. He worked to protect the Sino-American relationship after Tiananmen at a time many others advocated for something very different. He pushed Israel to make peace; he was wary of being drawn deeply into the Balkans. Years later, he opposed the 2003 Iraq war and supported the JCPOA with Iran. Brent had the courage of his convictions, even when they went against foreign policy orthodoxy or were unpopular.

Native-born Israelis are called sabras, a fruit that is tough on the outside and soft on the inside. Brent was more the opposite. He was mild-mannered, but there was nothing mild about his intellect. He challenged the military when he didn’t think much of its proposed plans for liberating Kuwait. He had strong views about just about everything and everyone.

I remember a moment early in the Gulf crisis. As a first step, the President wanted to send American troops to Saudi Arabia, to make sure Saddam did not add to his conquests. The secretary of defense was to lead a US delegation to the Kingdom. The Saudis were reluctant to commit in advance to hosting US troops. Brent called in Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador, and told him no commitment, no delegation, no troops. If Saudi Arabia wanted American help, Brent suggested that he get the king on the phone there and then to get his agreement. The rest as they say is history.

Brent left government in January 1993 more than a little frustrated as there was much he wanted to do in a second term that he expected 41 would have. We had grown close by then and grew closer over the next three decades. I said before that Brent was a mentor; he was also a friend and, at times, a father to me. He would pull for me, go

easy when I came up short, laugh with me and, when deserved, laugh at me. I loved him, as did Susan. The love was fully requited.

These remarks began with a reference to the running joke of Brent's tendency to doze off. The Scowcroft Award, given to whomever nodded off most ostentatiously in meetings, was aptly named. Today, though, Brent alone receives the award as he goes to his final rest.

May his memory always be for a blessing.