

She Called It the Way She Saw It: My Encounter with Barbara Bush By Shibley Telhami

The nation has lost an extraordinary first lady in Barbara Bush, one known for her modesty, grace, and frankness. Certainly, the one conversation I had with her lived up to her reputation.

It was January 2011 in College Station, Texas. Former President George H. W. Bush had convened a conference at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 1991 Gulf war, *Operation Desert Storm*. Except for a few experts, the conference included some of the most prominent people around the Bush presidency: former Vice President Dan Quayle, former Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, former Secretary of State James Baker, former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, and many others. The conference included a few substantive sessions that led to the publication of a [book](#), edited by Professor Jeffrey Engel: *Into the Desert: Reflections on the Gulf War* to which I contributed an article about the Arab dimension of the war.

The Bushes had a small apartment at the Bush School, to which they invited conference participants for an evening reception. I had a chance to talk to President Bush briefly as he was seated (everyone else was standing as the apartment was relatively small). I also spoke with a few people I already knew, particularly Secretary Baker and Brent Scowcroft, two men I have always respected. I had never met Barbara Bush before, so I took the opportunity to approach her, as she stood close to where her husband was seated, holding a puppy in her arms.

On the way to Texas, I had read George W. Bush's book, *Decision Points*, as I was planning to write an article about it for [The Cairo Review](#). One thing in particular stood out in my mind. George W. Bush recalled a speech he had delivered about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Bush had decided to give a speech that simultaneously favored the establishment of a Palestinian state (which was opposed by Cheney and Rumsfeld), and also called for a change of Palestinian leadership (which was opposed by Powell). Only National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, supported the idea of the speech. But the headlines after the speech predictably highlighted Bush's call for replacing Arafat—so much so, Bush writes, that the president's mother called to rib him: “‘How's the first Jewish president doing?’ she asked. I had a funny feeling she disagreed with my policy.”

After introducing myself to Barbara Bush, I told her what George W. Bush had said in his book. She replied: “did he really?,” then followed up saying that George W. had told her he would do so, but that she hadn't yet read the book. I asked her what she had meant by “how's the first Jewish president doing?” She replied: “Whatever happened to fair and balanced?”

Then, seemingly out of context, she volunteered: “Oh George, when he came to tell me he was running for governor of Texas, I thought to myself, ‘poor George,’ he really thinks he is going to win.”

May she rest in peace.

Shibley Telhami is the *Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development*, *Director of the University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll*, and *nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution*.