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Highlights of George H. W. Bush's Presidency at VA

by Darlene Richardson, Historian, Veterans Health Administration, December 4, 2018

As the nation mourns the November 30, 2018, passing of its 41st president, George Herbert Walker Bush, let us at VA remember some of the highlights of his presidency.

Vice President George H. W. Bush was elected as the 41st president of the United States on November 8, 1988, just two weeks after his predecessor, President Ronald Reagan, signed the Department of Veterans Affairs Act into law. The law set many changes into motion immediately, but delayed the appointment of key leadership positions, reorganizations, and other significant changes until March 1989, so that the new incoming president could set up the new department as he saw fit. Elevation of the former Veterans Administration to a newly created Cabinet-level department, with its veterans' benefits programs whose origins traced back to the Revolutionary War, was inextricably linked to George H.W. Bush's presidency.



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NEW VA CHIEF: President George Bush and Veterans Affairs Secretary Edward Derwinski walk to a White House ceremony on Wednesday after the swearing in.

Bush selected long-time U.S. senator Edward J. Derwinski as the first VA Secretary placing a no-nonsense war veteran from Chicago at the helm to steer the new department through uncharted waters. Derwinski set the tone for the new VA and determined that the

department would not be known as DVA. Bush appointed Jo Ann K. Webb as the first Director of the National Cemetery System (formerly Memorial Affairs) and D'Wayne Gray as first Chief Benefits Director for the Veterans Benefits Administration (formerly Department of Veterans Benefits). He appointed Dr. James W. Holsinger as the first Under Secretary for Health for the Veterans Health Services and Research Administration (renamed as Veterans Health Administration in 1991). During his first year in office, President Bush signed the American Disabilities Act into law which promised improved accessibility and quality of life for veterans and civilians, alike, living with a wide range of disabilities. Along with a new name, VA also acquired a new official insignia and flag because of the elevation.

New VA medical centers were approved or opened in Detroit, Oklahoma City, Palm Beach (FL), Orlando, and Baltimore. San Joaquin National Cemetery opened, Fort Logan National Cemetery was expanded, and the first grave locators were placed at national cemeteries. Non-Hodgkins lymphoma was determined as a service-related condition for benefits purposes. VA made its 13-millionth home loan and saw its first satellite television equipment installed. A huge renovation project began at VA Central Office to update its interior and aging infrastructure including pipes, removing asbestos, and installing new elevators. Pershing Hall, the American Legion's Paris Post No. 1, was transferred to VA in 1991. Dr. Millie Hughes-Fulford of the San Francisco VAMC went into space for medical research experiments aboard the *Columbia* space shuttle. The Robert W. Carey Award for quality improvement was established and VA's Veterans Canteen Service got an update when the first "pizza stop" opened at Brooklyn VAMC in 1992. Hospice programs and the first mobile clinics, starting with a bus at Prescott, began at VA. The sale of tobacco products ended in all VA hospitals in 1991. Six VA medical centers-- Leavenworth, Saginaw, Albany, Charleston, Honolulu, and Northampton--were bestowed with honorary names after veterans.

Bush took us to war in Iraq and activated VA's fourth mission--requiring VA to serve as a "pipeline to the desert" for backup medical and emergency services to DOD. Hundreds of VA employees served in the Gulf War as members of the military and hundreds more took care of war-injured soldiers, sailors, and marines when they returned. VA established the Persian Gulf Veterans Registry to track exposure to chemical and other forms of warfare and benefits were extended to those who served in the war.



Mrs. Bush at the Washington, D.C., VAMC.

President Bush was a decorated World War II veteran who delayed his college studies to serve as a Navy pilot during the war. He enjoyed a long career in local, state, and federal public service and had an instant rapport with many veterans. First Lady Barbara Bush became an honorary VA volunteer and graciously visited many hospitalized veterans during her husband's presidency. Under President Bush, not only did VA change--the world changed. During his first year in office East Germany opened its borders for the first time since the Cold War began, the Berlin Wall came down, and our relationship with Russia started to shift. Every year of his presidency, VA's budget increased and he supported our efforts to modernize and adapt to new and changing technologies. His wisdom in the selection of appointees got the new Department of Veterans Affairs off to a sound and solid start that has continuously been built upon since then. May this honorable veteran, devoted family man, dedicated public servant, and former president rest in everlasting peace.

Photo credits:

top - March 15, 1989 photo of President Bush and VA Secretary Derwinski after his swearing in ceremony, courtesy San Bernadino County Sun, March 16, 1989, p. 3.

bottom - March 1992, First Lady Barbara Bush volunteers at DC VAMC, *Vanguard*, p. 4.