

## Nomination of George H. W. Bush as DCI

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***As President Gerald Ford's nominee to lead the Intelligence Community and CIA, Bush marked an important inflection point in the nomination and confirmation process.***



President George H.W. Bush holds a special place in the canon of CIA directors. Despite serving as director of central intelligence (DCI) for less than a year during a period of relative calm, his support for the CIA workforce lifted morale and rehabilitated the agency's public image at a low point in its history. His backing for the CIA and the broader Intelligence Community (IC) continued under his presidency and after leaving the White House. CIA's main campus in McLean, Virginia, is named the George Bush Center for Intelligence in his honor.<sup>1,2</sup>

As President Gerald Ford's nominee to lead the Intelligence Community and CIA, Bush marked an important inflection point in the nomination and confirmation process. Before Bush, the process was relatively free of politics, and new presidential administrations customarily kept an incumbent in office

temporarily on the principle that the position was above politics.

John McCone's contested nomination—a first—in aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, William Raborn's unhappy tenure (1965–66), and Richard Helms' dismissal in 1973 amid the unfolding Watergate scandal showed this consensus was fraying. With Bush's nomination, it unraveled permanently. After his tenure, confirmation of US intelligence leaders has been a more partisan affair, and with the exception of George Tenet, CIA directors have been shown the door when the White House changes political parties.<sup>3</sup>

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### ***Halloween Massacre***

President Ford overhauled his administration on Sunday, November 2, 1975, replacing his secretary of defense and DCI and shuffling his national security adviser and White

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House chief of staff. He also accepted Vice President Nelson Rockefeller's decision to bow out of the 1976 presidential campaign.

Ford's actions surprised the nation. The White House press corps branded the turnovers the "Halloween Massacre," or the "Sunday Massacre," in a tendentious attempt to draw parallels with Richard Nixon's sacking of Justice Department officials in October 1973. The fumbling to find the right label matched the clumsiness of Ford's sudden move. Some of Ford's staff even thought the seeds of his defeat in 1976 were sown that Halloween weekend.<sup>4</sup>

The abrupt shakeup was understandable, though. A lingering sense of transition had clung to Ford's administration in the wake of Nixon's resignation. Ford knew he had to distinguish his presidency from his predecessor's, but once sworn in, he could ill-afford a wholesale turnover in personnel because he had made his way to the executive branch from Congress, where as the House minority leader he had only a small staff. Ford retained Henry Kissinger, for instance, who served simultaneously as secretary of state and national security advisor.

Ford's decision to keep Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger (a former DCI) quickly became problematic. The two clashed over *détente* with Moscow and, more ominously,

Schlesinger refused to authorize airstrikes that Ford had ordered during the SS *Mayaguez* incident in May 1975.<sup>a</sup> The resulting strain weakened Ford publicly, and with headwinds building on the GOP's right flank against his re-election bid, Ford acutely felt the need to clean house more thoroughly by fall 1975.<sup>6, 7</sup>

DCI William Colby had become a similar political liability for Ford but for different reasons.<sup>b</sup> Watergate, for all the tumult, had little impact on the CIA, even though the infamous "smoking gun" was a recording of Nixon's approval of a plan to have the CIA warn off the FBI's investigation into the scandal. Watergate raised a few questions about oversight of CIA, but because no abuse of power had occurred, these concerns were dismissed as "so minor that reform might do more harm than good."<sup>8</sup> Likewise, allegations in September 1974 that the CIA had been involved in Salvador Allende's ouster in Chile failed to capture the attention of Congress and the public. Everything changed in late December, when it was revealed that CIA had spied domestically on the anti-war movement. The bombshell sparked an outpouring of condemnation.<sup>9</sup> The "year of intelligence" had begun.

Trying to head off Congress, Ford created a "blue-ribbon" panel in early January 1975 to investigate alleged Intelligence Community abuses and suggest reforms. It was not enough. A few weeks later the Senate stood

up the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, known as the Church Committee after its chair, Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho). The House piled on, establishing its Select Committee in February.<sup>10</sup> It soon became clear that the domestic spying had been ordered in contravention of the CIA's charter, but more lurid revelations tumbled out, leading Church to declare in July that the CIA "may have been acting like a rogue elephant on the rampage."<sup>11</sup>

Colby tried to quiet the uproar with "selective disclosures" (such as confirming domestic surveillance had occurred), but he abandoned the effort altogether as hearings continued, increasingly irritating the White House by his willingness to answer requests from the Hill. Colby's public display in September of a "nondiscernable microbioinoculator," an assassination gadget, especially angered the administration. "Every time Bill Colby gets near Capitol Hill, the damn fool feels an irresistible urge to confess to some horrible crime," Kissinger fumed.<sup>12</sup> Colby's appearances undercut the blue-ribbon panel and left the CIA's public image in tatters. Concerned for the IC and feeling political heat on his right flank, Ford resolved that Colby had to go.<sup>c</sup>

Ford felt confident in his changes even as the Halloween Massacre played out in the press. "I strongly feel a president should have his own well coordinated, cooperative team," he told advisers. But the suddenness

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a. On May 12, 1975, Khmer Rouge forces seized the US merchant ship SS *Mayaguez* off the coast of Cambodia (then Kampuchea). Forty-one US servicemembers were killed in an attempted rescue operation. The crew and ship were released after four days.

b. See Harold P. Ford, "An Honorable Man: William Colby: Retrospect," *Studies in Intelligence* 40, No. 1 (1996).

c. For a perspective of a Church Committee member on the proceedings see in this issue CIA Historian David Robarge's interview of former Senator Gary Hart (page 29).

of the turnovers also highlighted that Ford's eye was on his political future. Either way, he was pleased with the nominations of Bush as DCI and Donald Rumsfeld, a longtime friend and aide, as secretary of defense. "These are my guys," he said.<sup>13</sup>

### Career Dead End

News of Ford's shakeup literally caught up with Bush while he was bicycling home from church in Beijing, a favorite weekly activity. The US Liaison Office's car pulled up with an "Eyes Only" dispatch.<sup>14</sup> Bush had become the top US envoy to China by way of service in the House of Representatives, as UN ambassador, and the Republican National Committee (RNC), where he became the chair not long before Watergate broke.<sup>15</sup> Bush had twice been considered for vice president, most seriously in August 1974 as Ford's replacement, but Rockefeller got the nod instead, in part because



Chief of the US Liaison Office in China Bush about to mount his bike in Beijing, China. On one such weekend ride in November 1975, he was handed an "Eyes Only" cable. Photo: George H. W. Bush Library and Museum, undated, #HS 1075.

### ***Bush had no substantive policy role in Beijing—Kissinger maintained tight control—and had grown restless throughout 1975, particularly when contemplating his political future.***

Bush had publicly defended Nixon until Watergate's bitter end.<sup>16</sup>

Passed over, Bush was nonetheless determined to leave the RNC, but Ford loathed the idea that Bush would leave his administration. "I don't want to lose your talents," he told Bush, as the two kicked around ideas.<sup>17</sup> Talk turned to ambassadorships, and the US Liaison Office to China—diplomatic relations and an embassy had yet to be formalized despite the opening of ties in 1972—quickly became the preferred choice of both. Kissinger concurred and Bush was easily confirmed in September.<sup>18</sup>

Bush viewed service in China as "a tremendous challenge and a tremendous opportunity of substance leading to somewhere." It would also

allow Watergate's fallout to pass him by.<sup>19</sup> He won praise from his hosts and, later, Kissinger, who noted he was "very, very impressed" with how Bush had "grown into the job."<sup>20</sup> To Bush's disappointment, however, he had no substantive policy role in Beijing—Kissinger maintained tight control—and had grown restless throughout 1975, particularly when contemplating his political future.<sup>21</sup>

Bush "whipped open" the sensitive dispatch only after reaching his official residence in Beijing, the safest place to do so.<sup>22</sup> It was from Kissinger:

*The President is planning to announce some major personnel shifts on Monday, November 3, at 7:30 P.M. Washington time. Among those shifts will be the transfer of Bill Colby from CIA.*

*The President asks that you consent to his nominating you as the new Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.*

*The President feels your appointment to be greatly in the national interest and very much hopes that you will accept. Your dedication to national service has been unremitting, and I join with the President in hoping that you will accept this new challenge in the service of your country.*

*Regretfully, we have only the most limited time before the announcement and the President would therefore appreciate a most urgent response.*<sup>23</sup>

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Bush had to have been surprised, if not disappointed. While eager to return home, accepting the nomination for DCI came with serious drawbacks. Most immediately, how would China react? A natural assumption would be that he had been a spy all along, and Bush worried this would undermine the good will cultivated between the United States and China since 1972. More selfishly, it meant sacrificing his political future—something hard to contemplate after his brush with the vice presidency. “[Even in] the best of times the CIA job wouldn’t be considered a springboard to higher office,” Bush later recalled.

The DCI was not a policy adviser to the president, except where covert action was required, and Bush could not build a political following as DCI. Because it was also customary to maintain a DCI from administration to administration, Bush assumed that even if Ford lost in 1976, he might spend the next five years as DCI, maybe more, which would completely erase him from public life. And there was a final drawback: no DCI had ever become president. “Anyone who took the job,” Bush remembered, “would have to give up any and all political activity. As far as future prospects for elective office were concerned, the CIA was marked DEAD END.”<sup>24</sup>

Bush touched on his concerns in his reply to Kissinger. Foremost, it was not “the best of times” at the CIA. Being so far away, Bush admitted that he could not “[assess] the entire situation,” but he knew enough about the Church Committee hearings to declare, “In all candor I would not

have selected this controversial position if the decision had been mine.” Bush also understood that serving as DCI meant “the total end of any political future.” But duty outweighed his reservations. He went on:

*Henry, you did not know my father. The President did. My Dad inculcated into his sons a set of values that have served me well in my own short public life. One of these values quite simply is that one should serve his country and his president.*

*And so if this is what the President wants me to do the answer is a firm “yes.”*

Almost as an afterthought, he added that he did not “believe in complicating [the president’s] already enormously difficult job.”<sup>25</sup> Bush’s reply cheered both Ford and Kissinger, who responded back, “The President was deeply moved—as I was—by your message. He is deeply appreciative of the nobility of your decision. . . . You are indeed a fine man.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite the good news, Ford briefly backtracked on the nomination. The administration had overlooked that Bush needed to stay in Beijing through Ford’s scheduled visit in early December. Colby graciously agreed to remain at the CIA for another month.<sup>27</sup> It was not the last time the impulsiveness of the Halloween Massacre would embarrass Ford.

Bush learned, at least, that his fears regarding the Chinese were unfounded. At the meeting between Ford and Mao Zedong, the aged

dictator warmly greeted Bush with the remark, “You’ve been promoted.” He then turned to Ford and said, “We hate to see him go.” Another Chinese official subsequently confided to Bush that “they felt they’d spent a year ‘teaching’ me their views on the Soviet threat and now, as America’s chief intelligence officer, I’d be able to ‘teach’ them to the President.” The good feelings would not last.

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***An Undesirable Political Cast***

Just as Bush had not actively sought to be DCI, he was not the White House’s first choice to head the CIA. When Ford’s advisers began discussing replacements for Colby in summer 1975, Bush made—just barely—the list.<sup>29</sup> Feelings about Bush were mixed. He had domestic and foreign policy experience, familiarity with intelligence, and “high integrity,” an “ability to rein in a wildcat organization” because of his competent handling of the RNC during Watergate. But this also hurt him. “[The] RNC post lends an undesirable political cast,” one adviser noted.<sup>30</sup> Any nominee for DCI from outside the CIA would have to reassure the Senate that he could withstand unethical or illegal requests from the White House, never mind serving in an apolitical fashion.

Moreover, Bush had not escaped Watergate’s shadow, despite being virtually out of sight in Beijing.<sup>31</sup> Given the tensions between the White House and the Hill over intelligence hearings, a tough fight over Bush was expected. Nonetheless, Ford eventually found that his closeness to Bush and faith his abilities overrode any reservations. “I need a team that I am most comfortable with,” he told his

advisers in November. “I need people close to me.”<sup>32</sup>

The scrutiny began as soon as Ford announced the nomination—and the tone indicated a tough road ahead. As White House advisers feared, critics viewed Bush as too partisan and too politically ambitious to lead the CIA in a professional manner. Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Washington), a Cold War hawk and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, bluntly disparaged Bush. “[He cannot] hold a candle to . . . Bill Colby in terms of judgment, knowledge, or intellectual ability,” Jackson said, adding that Ford needed “strong men,” not “yes-men.”<sup>33</sup>

Senator Church was equally harsh. “I think there could not be a poorer choice than to take a past chairman of the Republican Party and put him in as director of the CIA, because the agency was created to

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be professional, to be independent, and to be non-partisan, and that’s the kind of director the agency should have,” he said. Church signaled he might lead a floor-fight if Bush’s nomination cleared the Senate Armed Services Committee.<sup>34</sup> There was also opposition at the CIA. One CIA officer sputtered, “Why didn’t [Ford] name [Spiro] Agnew? He’s already been vice president.”<sup>35</sup>

Colby was one of few voices of support. He thought CIA could look to its future under Bush’s leadership, rather than the abuses of the past, because he was an outsider.<sup>36</sup> Richard Helms was another. Writing to a mutual friend, he enthusiastically endorsed Bush:

*Frankly I think George Bush is a good choice . . . I have known George mildly well over the*

*years and have found him to be intelligent, energetic, and decent. . . . [H]is political abilities will stand him in good stead when he has to face that Congress . . . How anyone expects [a] professional intelligence officer or an ordinary [citizen] from business or the law to stand up to Frank Church . . . I do not understand. Intelligence has been thrown into politics, so why should it not be headed by a politician? And an honest one at that!<sup>37</sup>*

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***Knows Nothing of Intelligence***

Bush, still in Beijing waiting on Ford’s visit, was hampered in his efforts to answer critics and gather support. His first step in this regard—and set his own mind at ease—was to seek Ford’s assurance that he would have “free and direct access to the president in conjunction with my new duties.” Bush saw restoration of the CIA’s importance and role in national security as his primary duty as DCI, and the unfettered freedom to speak with the president would jumpstart the process.

Bush also felt that only an open relationship would help prevent future intelligence-related abuses. Such a demand did not worry him, because he was confident Ford shared the view “that the USA must retain a strong . . . intelligence capability.”<sup>38</sup>

Bush also tried to work the Hill. On November 7, 1975, he cabled the White House with talking points to help both deal with queries and raise support (he also noted his distaste for



Bush’s arrival to CIA was delayed because he was needed to participate in President Ford’s state visit to Beijing in December 2, 1975. Above Ford and Bush are escorted from a meeting by Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping. Photo: Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum.

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Church's attack). Aside from emphasizing his use of intelligence at the UN and in China, Bush stressed his "total commitment to laying politics totally aside." He recognized that "it is essential to do that in the new job," and highlighted he had done just that at the UN and in Beijing.<sup>39</sup> It made little impression. On November 20, Bush cabled again, ratcheting efforts up a notch:

*There are several incidents of my having to resist White House pressure during Watergate times that Tom Lias at [the then US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] can give you if you need them. Without giving details to senators, which I will do if necessary, the theme should be emphasized that Bush did withstand . . . pressure, but did not do it glamorously on the front pages. I will approach my CIA job in the same way.*

He also pivoted to the offensive, arguing his political background could be a positive asset at the CIA. "Further point should be made," he wrote, "that someone with some feel for public opinion might better keep Agency out of illegal activities." In other words, as a politician, he had a better sense of what Congress and the public would not tolerate in an intelligence organization.<sup>40</sup>

Bush began jotting down his thoughts to assure himself he could do the job and to answer his critics. He echoed some of these sentiments later in his confirmation hearing. To those who thought he was ill-prepared to be DCI, he scribbled:

*charge: Knows nothing of 'intelligence'*

*answer: a) dealt with product—access to CIA reports for 3 years*

*b) [illegible] "dealt with CIA people["]—NSA product etc*

*c) dealt with the policy—UN wide range*

*China—specific*

*d) dealt with "reporting" which becomes part of intel. Product*

*e) extremely [illegible] & practical "security" procedures*

*f) strong feelings, based on experience—of need for intelligence*

*g) personal backing of President<sup>41</sup>*

He noted that he viewed working at the CIA like working at the UN. He might not know everything at first, but he could learn, while relying on professionals to help cover his weak spots. He also indicated he was "glad" that excesses committed by the CIA had been exposed, specifically allegations about assassinations. The CIA, as he typed in another series of notes, "must be postured so as never to involve itself in this kind of murder plotting again," although he hedged in "war-time—is a question." He was determined to get the CIA "off the front pages" and to implement "guidelines" and "review" of future operations to avoid past abuses. Even more important was the protection of "sources and methods."<sup>42</sup>

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***A Tame Elephant***

By the time Bush arrived in December 1975, events in Washington appeared to be breaking in his favor. The year of intelligence was winding down, in part, due to dwindling public interest and the recognition that the House and Senate hearings had taken on a partisan cast. In particular, Senator Church, who harbored presidential aspirations, had come under fire. "[W]e really don't know if he truly is running the CIA investigation in a nonpartisan manner, do we?" one columnist asked.<sup>43</sup> Others pushed back on objections to Bush's nomination. "[I]t comes down to the question of whether one trusts Gerald Ford and George Bush. Is it their aim to reform the CIA and bring it back under control, or is it their aim to implement still further excesses of its awesome power for partisan advantage?" asked another.<sup>44</sup>

Friends nonetheless warned Bush that he faced a hostile climate. When one asked what he could do help, Bush quipped, "Give Frank Church a call. Tell him I'm a tame elephant."<sup>45</sup> He might have caught a break had opposition to his nomination not coalesced around the real possibility that Ford might pick Bush to be his vice presidential running-mate. Ford had not yet made a decision, but Bush was an attractive prospect, having made the president's short list once before.

Sen. Walter Mondale (D-Minnesota), a Church Committee member, summarized the concern in a speech on the Senate floor. Mondale explained that he did not oppose Bush's nomination because of Bush's political background. On the contrary, he noted that partisan figures had served in government impartially and

quite well. Rather, Mondale opposed the nomination because, if chosen to be Ford's running-mate, Bush would serve about six months as DCI before hitting the campaign trail. The CIA needed more stability.

Further, Mondale was concerned Bush might compromise—even if unconsciously—his impartiality as DCI as long as he remained a potential candidate. Even if Bush did stand up to the president, there would always be suspicion that he was angling for higher office. Mondale concluded it was better for Bush to renounce any interest in the vice presidency. In fact, if Bush declared a two-year moratorium on seeking higher office, Mondale indicated he would consider Bush for DCI.<sup>46</sup>

Bush strongly objected. He was committed to professional and

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apolitical service as DCI, but the sacrifice of what he saw as another call to service was not a prerequisite for the job. He would not campaign for the vice presidency, but "if drafted, legitimately, I would serve; unless the Senate votes specifically on this question," as he had written to himself in Beijing. And he firmly opposed such a vote. "[N]o one should be asked not to accept a legitimate call to service in high office," he wrote. "No one at all."<sup>47</sup>

The White House agreed, with Ford publicly defending Bush. "I don't think people with talents, individuals with capabilities and a record ought to be excluded from

any further public service," he said. Ford's advisors also advocated that Bush "avoid such a pledge," although they acknowledged such a call was up to him.<sup>48</sup>

Hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee began on December 15th and deadlocked almost immediately along party lines. Giving his statement, Bush reaffirmed that a strong CIA was vital to US defense, and he pledged that he would not repeat past abuses as long as he was DCI. He affirmed his commitment to proper oversight, restoration of Agency morale, and the protection of sources and methods.

Bush did not shy away from his political background, but, as he had signaled earlier, pitched it as an advantage: "[s]ome of the difficulties the CIA has encountered might have been avoided if more political judgment had been brought to bear." He added, "I am not talking about narrow political partisanship. I am talking about the respect for the people and their sensitivities that most politicians understand."<sup>49</sup>

He did not comment on his political future until last. Bush declared he was not actively seeking to be Ford's running-mate, and promised not to do so as DCI, but he objected to making his confirmation conditional on the surrender of his possible candidacy. "To my knowledge," Bush told the committee, "no one in the history of this Republic has ever been asked to renounce his political birthright as the price of confirmation for any office." He concluded, "In this new job I serve



DCI-designate Bush on December 15, 1975 engaging in a cordial exchange with Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) just before the Senate Armed Services Committee began to consider Bush's nomination. At the time, Church was also chairman of a Senate select committee, the "Church Committee," to investigate alleged abuses of the US Intelligence Community during the Vietnam War and before. Church had said publicly he would oppose Bush's confirmation. (See interview of Gary Hart, a member of the Church Committee on page 29.) Photo: © Henry Griffin/AP/Shutterstock.

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***Bush entered the Oval Office better prepared to use intelligence than any of his predecessors since Dwight Eisenhower.***

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at the pleasure of the President. I plan to stay as long as he wants me here.”<sup>50</sup>

Bush’s statement had little effect, and he even raised eyebrows when, despite declaring that assassination plots were “morally offensive,” he refused to rule out CIA participation in coups or other similar operations in the future. Committee Democrats remained opposed to Bush’s nomination because of his potential candidacy.

Sen. Church, in his statement before the committee, played up this fear, warning that Bush had been nominated only to groom him for vice president. Even when Bush revealed that he had urged Nixon to resign during Watergate, something he had not previously divulged, it made no impression. “Lord, I know I’ve got a heck of a problem,” he lamented following adjournment, but he would not back down.

The deadlock extended into a second day. Sen. Jackson blamed Ford. The president, he said, should not have offered Bush the job without pledging to exclude him from consideration for higher office. Echoing Mondale, Jackson underscored that without such an assurance, Bush would hold office for only six months before hitting the campaign trail.<sup>51</sup>

After the second day of hearings, a vote was imminent and Ford’s aides reckoned that Bush would be confirmed only by a slim margin. All six Republicans on the committee were counted on for favorable votes, and at least three Democrats, including Chairman John Stennis

(D-Mississippi), were expected to cross the aisle. It would constitute a majority of the committee’s 16 members, but the tally was so thin it would probably “lead to an active floor fight” that might unite “rank and file Democrats together in a vote which will embarrass the President and badly tarnish, if not destroy, one of his brightest stars,” wrote one adviser. Yet nobody recommended that Ford should promise to exclude Bush as a running-mate.<sup>52</sup>

The Halloween Massacre then sounded a last discordant note. Anxious for resolution, Ford reversed himself a day later and pledged to Stennis that “if Ambassador Bush is confirmed by the Senate . . . I will not consider him as my Vice Presidential running mate in 1976.”<sup>53</sup> Ford could not risk a confirmation setback in a

campaign year. With the back-peddling, confirmation came easily. The Armed Services Committee approved Bush 12 to four, and the entire Senate, after a two-hour debate, followed in January with a 64-to-27-vote in Bush’s favor.<sup>54</sup> He was now DCI, for better and for worse.

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***Best Job in Washington***

Bush quickly grew to love the job, despite his initial reservations. The education, competence, and professionalism of CIA personnel frequently amazed Bush, and he became a devoted public advocate. “I realize that dirty-tricks artist James Bond is far more fascinating than a scholarly analyst of foreign political or economic trends, but in seven months as Director of Central Intelligence, I have never met anyone remotely like James Bond,” he said in one such speech. “[D]uring any lunchtime visit to our headquarters cafeteria, I may



Bush sworn in by Justice Potter Stewart on January 10, 1976. Outgoing DCI Colby (left) attended the ceremony and, with few friends remaining to bid him farewell, immediately drove off alone into retirement. Photo: George H. W. Bush Library and Museum.

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be sharing the room with enough scholars and scientists who hold enough advanced degrees in enough disciplines to staff a university,” he marveled.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, he had to know his future at Langley was uncertain if Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter won the 1976 election.

In a key campaign speech, Carter obliquely referred to Bush as a political failure and his appointment to the CIA as an ill-advised political favor (which Bush charitably dismissed as “a one-time shot”). Carter’s constant drumbeat of “Watergate, Vietnam, and the CIA” on the stump was more troubling. The attacks on the agency, Bush felt, were too “frequent and vituperative.”<sup>56</sup>

Carter, of course, narrowly beat Ford. When he later delivered a series of customary intelligence briefings to the president-elect, Bush found Carter focused, but wary. Bush felt Carter “harbored a deep antipathy to the CIA,” despite his “surface cool.” The two, however, remained cordial, and Carter even complimented Bush by suggesting he might one day become president.<sup>57</sup> He also later wrote to thank Bush for the quality, depth, and professionalism of the briefings.<sup>58</sup>

Bush asked to stay on as DCI, if only a few months, so Carter could pick a solid replacement and avoid politicizing the office, but he was ignored. In January 1977, Bush

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became the first DCI to step down solely because of a change in administration. He had held office only six months longer than he would have if he had been Ford’s vice-presidential candidate. Whether he recognized the irony or not, Bush hated to leave.<sup>a</sup> Stansfield Turner, his successor, later remembered that Bush said about being DCI, “It’s the best job in Washington.”<sup>59</sup>

Bush’s advocacy on behalf of the CIA and sure hand at a moment of great institutional turmoil earned lasting praise from its personnel. Yet his confirmation as DCI was not without significant controversy. With his partisan background, Bush was not a politically safe nominee for an intelligence job—perhaps in any era, let alone 1975. In fact, Bush’s confirmation probably ranks among the most contentious in US intelligence history.

Ford deserves at least some credit for the esteem given to Bush, because he was willing to risk a political fight due to his faith in Bush’s abilities. While Bush arguably took a principled stand that a call to higher service should not prejudice his confirmation as DCI—which the White House also backed—it only added to the clamor. Indeed, his refusal to act in a

politically expedient manner almost cost him the job.

Ford’s reversal on the matter, while embarrassing, was an attempt to thread the political realities of the moment. Ford needed to act aggressively if he wanted to hold onto the presidency, and he did, but he also felt he could not afford to lose Bush in the process. The net result, coupled with the broader changes brought about by Watergate and the year of intelligence, politicized the office of DCI. Bush’s later dismissal signaled as much.

Carter was more prophetic than he knew. Bush entered the Oval Office better prepared to use intelligence than any of his predecessors since Dwight Eisenhower. It is therefore hard to argue that events did not turn out well for both him and the IC in the end. Few would have thought so, however, given the emotion and politics of his confirmation hearings, or later after his dismissal. As new debates embroil the nominations of future US intelligence leaders—which are sure to come—it is worth keeping in mind the uproar over Bush. Despite the drama and heat, the confirmation of even controversial nominees like Bush may result in sound leadership for the CIA and IC.



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a. Bush, ever mindful of morale, took advantage of his Republican National Committee connections to invite Lionel Hampton (a staunch Republican at the time, whom Bush would describe as a “friend”) to bring his band to Langley. On December 7, 1976, he brought a 12-piece group, which performed to a full house in the CIA auditorium. (*Washington Post*, Personalities, December 8, 1976: B2.)

### Endnotes

1. Henry R. Appelbaum, "Honoring a Unique DCI: The George Bush Center for Intelligence," *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1999–2000): 97–99.
2. David S. Robarge, "Directors of Central Intelligence, 1946–2005," *Studies in Intelligence* 49, No. 3; Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (Harper Perennial, 1995), 324.
3. Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 427.
4. James A. Reichley, *Conservatives in an Age of Change: The Nixon and Ford Administrations* (Brookings Institution, 1981), 350–51; Ron Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (Playboy Enterprises, 1978), 160; John J. Casserly, *The Ford White House: The Diary of a Speechwriter* (1977), 225.
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