

In memory of George H.W. Bush

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George H.W. Bush, the U.S. president from 1989 to early 1993, recently passed away. To most Koreans, he may seem like a character from the distant past, but he had a great impact on the Korea of today. He worked hand in hand with Roh Tae-woo to open South Korea to China and Russia and to begin the process of engaging North Korea about nuclear weapons. And that is not all.

It is always easy for a leader to enjoy power and just keep things as they are for a few more years. It is quite another to be an agent of change. Leaders who are broad-minded and willing to look at things with fresh eyes, and take risks, are the ones that move the world forward. Bush was such a leader, and Korea is a different place today because of it.

Bush came from a rich family and attended the best schools. He could have just sat back and enjoyed himself. Instead, he used his head start in life to make his own way in the world. At just 20 years old, he volunteered to be an aircraft carrier pilot. He became a war hero when his airplane was shot down by the Japanese in World War II and he barely escaped death. Floating in his life raft, he cried because he knew his two crew members had been killed. He said combat had given him a sober understanding of war and peace.

Bush started his own oil company and became rich on his own. He served in Congress. He was the first U.S. envoy to communist China. He was director of the CIA. As Ronald Reagan's vice president for eight years, he traveled and traveled, meeting the world's peoples and leaders. Among the people he met then was Mikhail Gorbachev, who Bush had identified as the likely next Soviet leader — nearly two years before he was so named.

Bush was a man of wide experience when the world went through convulsive changes during his presidency, and he was well-prepared to understand what was necessary to cope with that change. Consider what he did and how Korea is better for it:

- He established a one-on-one working relationship with Gorbachev, and together, they announced the bloodless end of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War on Dec. 3, 1989, in Malta. In Korea, that meant that North-South issues were

no longer entangled in the possibility of a wider hot war.

- He repulsed Saddam Hussein's threat to the Gulf oil producers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etcetera. Had Saddam conquered the region, high oil prices would have strangled Korea's economic leap forward.

- He worked for a peaceful end of the USSR and good relations with the new Russia. His relationships with Boris Yeltsin and Chinese leaders, and personal introductions to them, paved the way for President Roh Tae-woo to open diplomatic and economic relations with Russia and China — "nordpolitik.

- Realizing that the collapse of the Soviet economic system would be devastating to North Korea, he worked with President Roh and U.S. Ambassador to Korea Donald Gregg to announce that there were no U.S. nuclear weapons on Korean soil, creating the atmosphere for the 1991 North-South Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchanges and Cooperation, and the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. He used U.S. influence at the United Nations to secure approval for both Koreas joining the UN (and making it possible eventually for Ban Ki-moon to be secretary general.) Bush also authorized the first direct U.S. diplomatic contact with North Korea, eventually leading to the Agreed Framework nuclear agreement under President Clinton. The outreach to North Korea and the nuclear issue has been a tortuous path, but we see some possibility of a positive resolution coming. If Bush had been a snarling hard-liner, consider where we might be now.

George H.W. Bush was a kind, considerate man who took the time to send hand-written thank you notes every night to those people, from world leaders to waiters, whom he had met and talked to that day. He exuded class and integrity.

He occupied the world stage at just the time when the world needed such a man — and Korea needed such an ally.