

# *'I Love You, Too': George Bush's Final Days*

By Peter Baker

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George Bush had been fading in the last few days. He had not gotten out of bed, he had stopped eating and he was mostly sleeping. For a man who had defied death multiple times over the years, it seemed that the moment might finally be arriving.

His longtime friend and former secretary of state, James A. Baker III, arrived at his Houston home on Friday morning to check on him.

Mr. Bush suddenly grew alert, his eyes wide open.

“Where are we going, Bake?” he asked.

“We’re going to heaven,” Mr. Baker answered.

“That’s where I want to go,” Mr. Bush said.

Barely 13 hours later, Mr. Bush was dead. The former president died in his home in a gated community in Houston, surrounded by several friends, members of his family, doctors and a minister. As the end neared on Friday night, his son George W. Bush, the former president, who was at his home in Dallas, was put on the speaker phone to say goodbye. He told him that he had been a “wonderful dad” and that he loved him.

“I love you, too,” Mr. Bush told his son.

Those were his last words.

Mr. Bush’s final days, as recounted on Saturday by Mr. Baker, who saw him repeatedly at the end and was in the room when he died, were remarkably peaceful after an eventful 94-year life that took him from the skies of the Pacific during World War II to the Oval Office at the end of the Cold War.

*[Read about the legacy of former President George Bush.]*

“I can’t even hardly talk about it without welling up,” Mr. Baker said in a telephone interview. “It was as gentle a passing as I think you could ever expect anyone to have. And he was ready.”

In addition to the former secretary and his wife, Susan Baker, others in the room with Mr. Bush were his son Neil Bush and his wife, Maria, and their son, Pierce. Marshall Bush, a granddaughter, was there. So were Jean Becker, the former president's longtime chief of staff, and the Rev. Dr. Russell J. Levenson Jr., rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, as well as two doctors, Clint Doerr and Amy Mynderse, and a couple of caregivers.

In an interview on Saturday, Dr. Levenson, who has been Mr. Bush's pastor for more than 11 years and visited repeatedly in recent weeks, said the former president was comforted that he would soon rejoin Barbara, his wife of 73 years, who died in April, and Robin, their daughter, who died in 1953 of leukemia at the age of 3.

"There was no question he knew where he was going and who he was going to be with," Dr. Levenson said. "He was looking forward to being with Barbara and Robin again."

After Mrs. Bush's death in the spring, Mr. Bush told friends that he was not yet ready to die. He had been suffering for years from a form of Parkinson's disease that made it impossible for him to walk and increasingly made it difficult for him to speak. But after his wife's funeral, he resolved to hang on long enough for one last summer at his family home in Kennebunkport, Me.

When he returned to Houston in the fall, he was somewhat diminished. He and Mr. Baker went out for oysters on the half shell two weeks ago. "Then things sort of went downhill from there," Mr. Baker said.

Mr. Baker visited about 10 days ago and found Mr. Bush sitting in the library of his Houston house. They had a drink.

"Jefe," Mr. Baker said, using his Spanish nickname, "Chief," for Mr. Bush. "You want to live to be 100?"

"Yes, I do," Mr. Bush answered, "but I don't think I'm going to make it."

Theirs was an extraordinary friendship, unique in the annals of the American presidency. They were close long before their political alliance, getting to know each other on the tennis courts of the Houston Country Club some six decades ago and bringing their families together for Sunday barbecues, touch football games and cocktails on Christmas.

Mr. Bush was there when Mr. Baker's first wife died in 1970 and recruited him to help run his Senate campaign to take his mind off his grief. While they lost the race, it began a partnership that would ultimately take them to the top. Mr. Baker, 88, ran all three of Mr. Bush's campaigns for the presidency, in 1980, 1988 and 1992, and served as his secretary of state during the end of the Cold War. Statues of the two men stand across a park from each other in Houston.

Mr. Bush did not get out of bed the last few days. Former President Barack Obama visited on Tuesday while in town for an event with Mr. Baker. By Thursday, Mr. Bush had stopped eating and was losing weight.

He told his medical team that he did not want to go back to the hospital, where several times in recent years he had been treated and seemed close to death, including most recently just after Mrs. Bush's death.



Former President George Bush and James A. Baker III, his former secretary of state, in 2012. Mr. Baker, a longtime friend, saw Mr. Bush repeatedly in the days leading to his death. David J. Phillip/Associated Press

“This is the most competitive man I ever knew in my entire life,” Mr. Baker said. “He demonstrated that right up until the very end. He competed with death — although he did say it’s time to go. But he kept fighting, he kept coming back.”

When Mr. Baker came to the house early on Friday morning, Mr. Bush seemed to rally a bit, and it appeared that he would defy death one more time. He began to eat again. He had three five-minute soft-boiled eggs, a favorite, as well as a bowl of yogurt and two fruit drinks. “Everybody thought this is going to be a great day and he’s back and he’s bounced back again,” Mr. Baker said.

Mr. Baker left around 9:15 a.m. but decided to return in the evening when he and Mrs. Baker were on the way to dinner with some friends. “He was sitting up in bed and was able to converse with people,” Mr. Baker said.

But in the car on the way home from dinner, the Bakers received a phone call urging them to come back to Mr. Bush's house. They arrived about 8:15 p.m. "He had slipped considerably," Mr. Baker said.

Ronan Tynan, the Irish tenor, had called earlier in the day to ask if he could drop by, and when he showed up, Ms. Becker asked him to sing to the president. Mr. Tynan sang two songs, the first "Silent Night" and the second a Gaelic song.

As he sang "Silent Night," Mr. Baker said, "Believe it or not, the president was mouthing the words."

Mr. Baker held Mr. Bush's hand and rubbed his feet for nearly a half-hour. The other children, who live around the country, were called so they could tell their father goodbye.

Dr. Levenson, who arrived at 9:15 p.m., led those in the room in prayer. "We all knelt around him and placed our hands on him and prayed for him and it was a very graceful, gentle death," he said. "It was very evident that that man was so deeply loved."

There was no struggle, no prolonged period of labored breathing. At 10:10 p.m., the former president slipped away.

"If those things could be sweet," Mr. Baker said, "it was sweet."

*Follow Peter Baker on Twitter: @peterbakernyt.*

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