**Mehdi Hasan on George H.W. Bush’s Ignored Legacy: War Crimes, Racism and Obstruction of Justice**

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Democracy Now

"The Ignored Legacy of George H.W. Bush: War Crimes, Racism, and Obstruction of Justice"

George H.W. Bush died in Houston on Friday night at the age of 94. Bush was elected the 41st president of the United States in 1988, becoming the first and only former CIA director to lead the country. He served as Ronald Reagan’s vice president from 1981 to 1989. Since Bush’s death, the media has honored the former president by focusing on his years of service and his call as president for a kinder, gentler America. But the headlines have largely glossed over and ignored other parts of Bush’s legacy. We look at the **1991 Gulf War, Bush’s pardoning of six Reagan officials involved in the Iran-Contra scandal and how a racist election ad helped him become president**. We speak with Intercept columnist Mehdi Hasan. His latest piece is titled “The Ignored Legacy of George H.W. Bush: War Crimes, Racism, and Obstruction of Justice.”

AMY GOODMAN: We turn now to look at the life and legacy of George H.W. Bush, the nation’s 41st president, the father of the 43rd president. President Bush died in Houston on Friday night at the age of 94. His body will lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda from tonight until Wednesday. He’ll be buried later this week in Houston. There will be two memorial services: one at the National Cathedral on Wednesday and then one in Houston. Bush was elected president in 1988, becoming the first and only former CIA director to lead the country. From 1981 to 1989, he served as Ronald Reagan’s vice president.

Over the weekend, the media honored Bush and his legacy, focusing on Bush’s years of service, from his time in the Navy during World War II to his call as president for a kinder, gentler America. But the focus of the media’s coverage has largely glossed over, or even ignored, other parts of Bush’s legacy, from **his expansion of the racist so-called war on drugs to his reluctance to tackle climate change**, famously saying, quote, “The American way of life is not up for negotiation,” unquote. It was also George H.W. Bush who nominated and continued supporting future Supreme Court Justice **Clarence Thomas** even after Thomas was accused of sexual harassment by Anita Hill. Internationally, the ramifications of Bush’s foreign policy in the Middle East are still being felt. In 1991, **Bush launched the Gulf War in Iraq.**

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH: Our objectives are clear: Saddam Hussein’s forces will leave Kuwait, will be restored to its rightful place, and Kuwait will once again the free. Iraq will eventually comply with all relevant United Nations resolutions. And then, when peace is restored, it is our hope that Iraq will live as a peaceful and cooperative member of the family of nations, thus enhancing the security and stability of the Gulf. Some may ask, “Why act now? Why not wait?” The answer is clear: The world could wait no longer.

AMY GOODMAN: **Over the next 42 days, U.S. forces devastated the Iraqi civilian infrastructure and killed an unknown number of Iraqi civilians.** On February 13, 1991, the U.S. bombed an air-raid shelter in the Amiriyah neighborhood of Baghdad. F**our hundred eight civilians were killed**. Some Iraqi relatives of the dead later sued Bush and his defense secretary, Dick Cheney, for war crimes. While the Gulf War technically ended in February of 1991, the U.S. war on Iraq would continue for decades, first in the form of devastating sanctions, then in the 2003 invasion launched by George H.W. Bush’s son, President George W. Bush, the 43rd president. Thousands of U.S. troops and contractors remain in Iraq today.

**President Bush’s invasion of Iraq came just over a year after he sent tens of thousands of troops and hundreds of aircraft into Panama to execute an arrest warrant against its leader, Manuel Noriega,** on charges of drug trafficking. General Noriega was once a close ally to Washington and **on the CIA payroll.** During the attack, the U.S. unleashed a force of 24,000 troops equipped with highly sophisticated weaponry and aircraft against a country with an army smaller than the New York City Police Department. An estimated **3,000 Panamanians died in the attack.** Last month, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights called on Washington to pay reparations to Panama over what was widely seen as an illegal invasion.

In one of his last acts in office, **President George H.W. Bush granted pardons to six former Reagan officials who were involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, when the Reagan administration secretly sold arms to Iran to help raise money for the Nicaraguan Contras despite a congressional ban on providing aid to the Contras in Nicaragua.** Bush was never held liable for his role in the scandal. The ex-CIA director claimed he was, quote, “out of the loop,” even though other participants and a paper trail suggested otherwise.

Bush’s time in office coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. He termed the post-Soviet era the New World Order and was a key architect of neoliberal globalization, setting the stage for, among other things, NAFTA and the WTO.

To talk more about the legacy of George H.W. Bush, we’re joined by Mehdi Hasan. He’s a columnist for The Intercept, host of their Deconstructed podcast. He’s also host of UpFront at Al Jazeera English. His most recent piece for The Intercept, “The Ignored Legacy of George H.W. Bush: War Crimes, Racism, and Obstruction of Justice.”

Mehdi, we want to thank you for being with us. Of course, when someone dies, people—and certainly in the media, when it comes to a U.S. leader—they focus on what they feel was the important praiseworthy accomplishments of a person. And it’s the instinct of all not to speak ill of the dead. But, Mehdi Hasan, if you can talk about the significance of the presidency of George H.W. Bush?

MEHDI HASAN: I mean, huge significance, Amy. And you’re right. You know, not speaking ill of the dead is true, and it’s a basic—you know, basic courtesy and decency. But this is not about speaking ill of the dead. This is about evaluating the record of a president of the United States, the 41st president of the United States, and one of the most important human beings of the 20th century, technically.

And, yes, a lot happened on his, you know, 4-year watch. You mentioned a great deal of it in your introduction there. And I think the problem is—I find it astonishing, as a Briton living in Washington, D.C., watching cable news on Saturday and seeing this **hagiography masquerading as journalism,** just talking about what a great guy he was, what a great president he was, what a civil and decent human being he was, ending the Cold War, and many achievements. You know, he stood up to the NRA. He stood up to AIPAC. He did do some good things. But the idea that you only focus on the positive and you ignore the negatives, especially when the negatives involve the loss of huge amounts of human life—in Iraq, for example, in Panama—I think, is absurd. It’s a dereliction of journalistic duty for a president to die and journalists to act as if they’re cheerleaders and put, you know, their own, whatever, patriotism or nationalism ahead of their duty to really give a full set of facts to the viewers, you know, a first draft of history, Amy.

A president is dead. We should look back on George Bush Sr. and say, “Hold on.” You know, this is a president who is being described now as the anti-Trump, right? And yet he did some things which were similar to Trump. You mentioned in your intro the pardoning of the Iran-Contra perpetrators. **He pardoned Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger on the eve of his tria**l. And the independent special counsel at that time—the independent special counsel at that time said this was misconduct. He said this was helping cover up the crimes. And today we get all worked up when Trump says, “Oh, I might pardon Paul Manafort.” I think we should hold him to the same account we hold other people. The fact that, you know, he was nicer than Trump or less aggressive than his son doesn’t change the fact that he has a lot to answer for.

AMY GOODMAN: Mehdi Hasan, and then we’re going to come back and look at his record, from the **Iraq War to the so-called war on drugs, the Willie Horton ad** that became so famous, that one of his top aides, Lee Atwater, who really devised the scheme, apologized for on his deathbed. Mehdi Hasan is a columnist for The Intercept. We’ll be back with him in a moment.

AMY GOODMAN: I’m Amy Goodman. Mehdi Hasan is our guest, a columnist for The Intercept, host of the Deconstructed podcast, also is host of UpFront for Al Jazeera English. You mentioned the Iran-Contra scandal. If you can explain what the Iran-Contra scandal was?

MEHDI HASAN: Yeah. So, in the 1980s, there was congressional ban on the United States government supporting the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, which were trying to bring down a communist government in South America. And you had this issue where the Reagan administration **decided to sell weapons to Iran, which was supposedly an enemy country at that time, fighting Iraq, and use the proceeds from that money to fund the Contras, in violation of a congressional ban.**

There was a massive investigation. It was a huge scandal—think Russiagate times 10—at the time, in the 1980s. Reagan obviously left office without being punished for it. There was a special counsel, Bob Mueller-style, which was tasked to look into this: Lawrence Walsh, a former deputy attorney general under Eisenhower, I think it was. And when he tried to look into this, he found resistance from Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush. We’re now being told what an honest and transparent man he was; he followed the rule of law, unlike Donald Trump today. And yet, at the time, he refused to hand over his diary. He refused to cooperate with the special counsel. He refused to give an interview. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it, Amy? And **then he pardoned the six top perpetrators—Elliott Abrams, the neocon; Caspar Weinberger, Reagan’s defense secretary.**

And the special counsel report, which is online—you can go and look at it now—very, very clearly says that **Bush helped perpetrate the cover-up.** Bush did not cooperate. And he says, I think, it’s the first time a president pardoned someone on the eve of a trial that the president would have had to testify in. That’s what Bush Sr. did. So when we’re told today, “Oh, look at the difference between George Bush Sr. and Donald Trump,” well, when it comes to obstruction of justice, when it comes to cover-ups, actually they were more similar than some of the media and some of the journalists would have you believe.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, let’s turn to the Gulf War. In January of 1991, George H.W. Bush addressed the nation on the invasion of Iraq.

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH: As I report to you, air attacks are underway against military targets in Iraq. We are determined to knock out Saddam Hussein’s nuclear bomb potential. … Some may ask, “Why act now? Why not wait?” The answer is clear: The world could wait no longer.

AMY GOODMAN: That’s President George H.W. Bush in January of 1991. Of course, flags were at half-mast in Washington this weekend, as they were in Kuwait. Mehdi Hasan, you remind us of a very important part of the story, the lead-up to what took place and how it was the U.S. responded the way they did to Iraq and Kuwait.

MEHDI HASAN: Yes.

AMY GOODMAN: Tell that story.

MEHDI HASAN: So, you heard the statement from George Bush Sr. Look, let’s be very clear. **Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait illegally, in violation of international law.** It was a brutal occupation of Kuwait. No one is denying any of that. But what Bush Sr. told the country was that this came without any warning, without any provocation, when in actual fact his own ambassador at that time in Iraq, the U.S. ambassador, April Glaspie, had told Saddam, just weeks before the invasion, that **we in America have no opinion on your border dispute with Kuwait**. It was interpreted as a green light. Historians—many historians have suggested that was a green light to Saddam from the Bush administration to invade. After Saddam invaded, we were also told by Bush Sr. that America had to go in to protect Saudi Arabia, because that was coming next. Saddam was about to invade Saudi, as well. There were Iraqi troops massing on the border. In fact, one reporter—I think her name is Jean Heller, if I remember correctly—went and bought some private commercial satellite data and found **there were no Iraqi troops massing on the border to invade Saudi Arabia.** It was another lie, like his son told in the run-up to the 2003 invasion. So, it was a war built on half-truths, evasions, lies. No one is denying Saddam invaded. But what George Bush told the nation was not the full truth.

And even after he went to war, as you mentioned in your introduction, how many civilians were killed? The United States government bombed an air-raid shelter in Baghdad, the Amiriyah shelter, **killed more than 400 civilians**. Human Rights Watch called it a serious violation of the laws of war, because the U.S. knew—the U.S. had been told beforehand—the U.S. intel knew that that was a place where civilians were congregating. They didn’t just bomb an air-raid shelter, Amy. **They bombed power stations, electricity-generating facilities, food-processing plants, flour mills—the civilian infrastructure of Iraq.** And this was not collateral damage. Planners from the United States government told The Washington Post, told Barton Gellman, in 1991, that they were doing this on purpose so that they would have leverage with a postwar Iraq which would be forced to supplicate in the international arena for foreign assistance. And we know what happened next, with the sanctions, with the devastation that came in the '90s and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi kids who died. That all started on George Bush Sr.'s watch.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, I want to go back to the election of George H.W. Bush.

MEHDI HASAN: Oh, yes.

AMY GOODMAN: During his 1988 presidential bid, his campaign released a now-notorious television ad called “Weekend Passes.”

NATIONAL SECURITY PAC AD: Bush and Dukakis on crime. Bush supports the death penalty for first-degree murderers. Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty, he allowed first-degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison. One was **Willie Horton**, who murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times. Despite a life sentence, Horton received 10 weekend passes from prison. Horton fled, kidnapped a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend. Weekend prison passes: Dukakis on crime.

AMY GOODMAN: That was the ad that Lee Atwater—Roger Ailes and Lee Atwater, top aides to George Bush at the time—

MEHDI HASAN: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: —would apologize for on his deathbed. Explain how significant this was.

MEHDI HASAN: Hugely significant, Amy. And even today, in media journalism classes across the country, that ad is taught, that ad is studied. **Until Donald Trump came along, until the migrant caravan ad came along, it was considered to be the most racist ad in modern American political history.** It was the 1988 election, and George Bush Sr. and his team decided that they were going to tie Michael Dukakis, the Massachusetts liberal, to this black rapist who had been released on a weekend furlough program. I think Atwater—there’s a quote from Atwater where he said, “We’re going to talk about Willie Horton so much that people are going to think he’s Michael Dukakis’s running mate.” And this was—Bush Sr. approved of this campaign ad. Bush Sr. talked about Willie Horton in press conferences.

And he never apologized. He never—you know, Atwater, on his deathbed, apologized. Bush Sr. never apologized. Roger Stone, Amy, one of the most vile political operatives of our time, close adviser to Donald Trump, former adviser to Richard Nixon, he went up to Atwater and the Bush campaign and said, “You will regret this, because this is a clearly racist ad.” **When Roger Stone is telling you that you’re too racist, you know you’ve gone too far.** And yet, on Saturday, on Sunday, I heard former Bush aides and advisers going on cable news saying, “He was a thoroughly decent man. He believed in civility. He didn’t believe in rancor. He wanted, you know, to unify Americans.” And I have two words in response to that: “Willie Horton.”

AMY GOODMAN: In fact, as you quote, Lee Atwater bragged at the time, “By the time we’re finished, they’re going to wonder whether Willie Horton is Dukakis’s running mate.”

MEHDI HASAN: Exactly.

AMY GOODMAN: And he was talking about a policy that was actually a law in a number of states—

MEHDI HASAN: Yeah.

GOODMAN: —including California.

MEHDI HASAN: Yes, indeed. I think Reagan had signed off on a similar thing, if I’m not correct. But, you know, it was a deliberate attempt to stoke racial division, to scare white voters into thinking that Michael Dukakis was going to release a bunch of black murderers and rapists who were going to come and kill and rape them. It was vicious. And even recently, Amy, what’s so ironic is the same cable news hosts who have been kind of, you know, praising George Bush Sr. to the hilt since Saturday morning, a few weeks ago they were all referring to Willie Horton when they were condemning Donald Trump’s migrant caravan ad, you know, the ad that came out during the midterms about the Democrats let in this murderer, cop killer. We were all reminded of Willie Horton back then, but it seems like we won’t make the logical collection which says that Willie Horton, that ad, came from the Bush Sr. campaign, this guy who was supposed to be a throwback to an era of civility and decency, yet he had no problem running this racist election campaign. **Nor did he have a problem escalating a racist drug war.**

AMY GOODMAN: Let’s talk about that drug war and what George H.W. Bush did, especially around the issue of crack.

MEHDI HASAN: Yeah. So, he sat in the White House, in the Oval Office, in 1989, and he held up a bag of crack cocaine, which he said, famously, “Well, this was found just outside the White House, in a park across from the White House. That’s how bad the drug problem is.” It was a great dramatic visual prop. And yet, we discovered, thanks to reporting from The Washington Post, that that drug dealer, the drug seller, had been arrested by federal agents, yes, in Lafayette Square, but he had been “lured” there, to quote The Washington Post, by those federal agents. He was told to come and sell his—by an undercover operative. And he’s even heard on tape, I believe, saying, “Well, where is the White House? What’s the address? I have no idea how to get there.”

This was—I mean, this is pure cynicism, Amy, **to use this prop in this fake stunt basically to mislead the nation,** from this supposedly honest Republican president, which then led to a $1.5 billion increase in spending, which is what Bush Sr. called for. He called for more prosecutors, more jails, more prison, more courts. And we know how that story ends, Amy: mass incarceration, the imprisonment, disproportionately, of young black men, lives lost, thousands of innocent lives lost in the so-called drug war both at home and abroad. And today you have people like Rand Paul, a Republican senator, who will admit, Republican senators who will admit—Chris Christie—will say this was a failed and racist drug war.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Mehdi Hasan, I want to thank you for being with us, columnist for The Intercept, host of the Deconstructed podcast. Most recent piece for The Intercept, we’ll link to, “The Ignored Legacy of George H.W. Bush: War Crimes, Racism, and Obstruction of Justice.”