



One for the history books

GASPER TRINGALE

Jon Meacham examines George Herbert Walker Bush's presidency

By Chris Penttila

BRINGING THE PAST to life is all in a day's work for Pulitzer Prize-winning presidential historian Jon Meacham, whose best-selling biographies have taken readers into the mindset of well-known leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Meacham returns this month with his latest biography, *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush*, a page-turning journey through the life and times of our 41st president. Through interviews with President Bush and his inner circle, as well as information gleaned from access to Bush's White House diary, Meacham paints an intimate, human portrait of a contemporary U.S. president.

Meacham was drawn to President George H.W. Bush because of his pivotal place in modern events. By the end of Bush's presidency, the Soviet Union no longer existed and the Cold War, the defining international political struggle of the 20th century, had thawed. "He's the last of a certain kind of American president," says Meacham, a Costco member. "He's the last president of the

Greatest Generation, and the first president of the post-Cold War world. So, historically, he is a pivot point."

Pulled in by presidents

As a biographer, Meacham gravitates toward leaders who managed somehow to exceed the limitations of their time and place at a critical, if not chaotic, moment. "Even if there are only one, two or three moments in a long public life where they do something courageous—they do something against self-interest in order to advance a larger good—that moment of transcendence is something to study and to understand, so that in our own time we have some sense of what it takes to transcend the ultimate human frailties that are a part of all of us," Meacham tells *The Connection* from his home in Nashville. "To me, that's the weighty essence of biography."

Writing a best-selling biography can be a ponderous process in itself, requiring years of in-depth archival research and interviews. Meacham writes every day, and spends a prodigious amount of time on his source notes to provide additional information for his read-

ers. Uncovering new details about famous historical figures is "like being a detective, a little bit," he says.

Chronicling a recent president, whose own son would later be elected to the nation's highest office, seems a big departure from Meacham's previous works about early American leaders. "My view, when I undertook the project, was that he is a figure of history," Meacham says. "Inevitably, we see him through the prism of his sons, but my goal was to put him onstage as he was, as he dealt with things, because he didn't know how the story was going to turn out."

Politics and prose

Meacham's own life story begins in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where his early interest in history, literature and politics was piqued by his late grandfather Judge Ellis K. Meacham, who was also an author. "I knew I always wanted to do something involving politics, and I was always interested in writing," he says. "Those two tributaries intersected."

After Meacham graduated summa cum laude from the University of the South, his career path took him from the *Chattanooga Times* to *The Washington Monthly* and *Newsweek*, where he served as editor. His best-seller *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (Random House, 2009) won the Pulitzer Prize for biography the year it was published. You might also recognize Meacham from guest appearances on news shows such as *Meet the Press* and MSNBC's *Morning Joe*.

Ultimately, Meacham (jonmeacham.com) hopes to add to the historical conversation around our 41st president. "It's been [almost] 25 years [since Bush was in office]. We can see pretty clearly what he got right and what he got wrong," he says. "His career now belongs to history." ☐

Chris Penttila is a freelance journalist based in Alexandria, Virginia.

The Costco Connection

Destiny and Power, by Jon Meacham (Item #1018691, 11/10), will be available in most Costco warehouses.