



When Bill Richardson was asked, as he often was, how to talk to dictators, he would talk about the importance of making a personal connection, of showing respect, of “getting into their culture.” He would lean forward, steeple his hands,

and describe how he had gotten Saddam Hussein to crack a smile, or how he bonded with Fidel Castro over their shared love of baseball. But there was another piece of advice he didn’t give as much in public, though those who knew him heard it all the time: “Just don’t be weak.”

Bill embodied a particular kind of strength: gregarious, warm, self-deprecating and frank. When Bill Clinton was president of the United States, someone asked him why, when rogue regimes took Americans hostage, the then-New-Mexico congressman was sent off to negotiate their release. “Bad people like him,” Clinton said. Dozens of Americans owe their freedom, and most likely their lives, to Bill’s likeability, and to his courage, persistence and skill. He understood how power worked, so he understood people who only thought in its terms.

Good people liked Bill, too, of course. He loved baseball, boxing and cigars, smiled easily, and told corny jokes. But the corny jokes were often very funny, and the plainspoken wisdom was actually wise. Unafraid to provoke, he was impatient with ideology and dismissive of anything that smacked of hand-wringing, or of admiring the problem. “Take a stand, no matter how unpopular that stand may be,” he said in a commencement address at Colorado College in 1999, “The world does not honor fence-sitters.”

He believed, above all, in results. Bill led nuclear talks in North Korea, helped negotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, and, as New Mexico governor, raised salaries for teachers and abolished the death penalty. He helped secure the release of hostages from North Korea, Venezuela, Libya, Iraq, Cuba, Iran, Russia and Myanmar—dissidents, journalists, aid workers, soldiers, tourists, and, most recently, the basketball star Brittney Griner. He set a Guinness World Record by shaking 13,392 hands in eight hours at the New Mexico State Fair and

could undoubtedly have gone for several thousand more. This experience, like his time spent campaigning across his home state in Native American reservations and small mountain towns, filled him with exuberant energy.

Among the many public and private tributes that have come in since Bill died have been notes of gratitude from environmentalists, anecdotes from the individuals he freed, and remembrances from leaders all over the world whose trust and affection he earned. One was from Sergei Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs for Vladimir Putin’s Russia, who recalled working with Bill when the two men represented their respective nations at the United Nations. “Often, diametrically opposed views on world problems and ways to solve them did not prevent us from conducting a constructive professional dialogue,” Lavrov wrote.

The way you got results, Bill insisted, was through talking. He was right, but that belief, like the cigars, feels like a throwback today. He would talk to anyone, anywhere. He would go to Pyongyang, or he would just cross the aisle. And while he didn’t try to paper over disagreements, he didn’t treat his opponents as villains, either. The American journalist Danny Fenster was one of the hostages Bill freed from Myanmar’s military junta. Fenster later wrote, of Bill and his colleagues at the Richardson Center for Global Engagement, “They know that peace can only be achieved by engaging with the world as it is, and never by ignoring those standing in the way of the world we wish to see.”

But Bill wasn’t cynical. Throughout all his decades in public service, official and unofficial, his realism coexisted with optimism. “We still have our moral authority,” he said in 2016, “but I wish we would exercise it more.”

One of the most powerful themes in the letters submitted in support of Bill’s most recent nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize is the gratitude of the families of the hostages—not just for how he freed their loved ones, but for how he helped them survive the ordeal itself. He and his Richardson Center colleagues put themselves at the service of the families throughout, at a time when their own government could seem aloof and opaque. “Over the course of our two-year journey,” one family member wrote, “we have literally contacted the Richardson Center at all hours of the day and each day of the week for advice or to pass along important

information about Matthew. Our outreach was never turned down. Instead, we were always met with caring ears, concern for our issue(s), logical suggestions and action, where warranted.”

Bill was a mentor to many, and for those lucky enough to be his proteges, the advice he gave was copious and brutally honest, and always from the heart. He was ferociously loyal to his inner circle, counseling friends and loved ones with the same tenacity that he brought to the negotiating table. “Don’t do that—that’s weak!” he’d chide amiably, before offering up a totally different strategy. Show strength in being authentic, live life generously, take risks to help others, go after what is right, “remember where you came from: your community, your neighborhood, your school, your friends.” These were words he lived by in all phases of his career—as a Congressman, US Ambassador to the United Nations, US Secretary of Energy, and Governor of New Mexico.

Many politicians, and other people who love being onstage, tailor their persona to the occasion. Bill was utterly himself, whether speaking to a longtime friend, a bank of TV cameras, or a notorious war criminal. Being around him and Barbara, his wife of 51 years whom he met in high school, was illuminating and inspiring. But mostly it was fun. Barbara was his constant sounding board—a knower of all things, unflappably effective behind the scenes, and someone whose observations reflect decades of providing counsel. He recently surprised her by dedicating a bench at the Santa Fe Botanical Garden, next to that of a recently deceased close friend. It was a way to keep the friendship alive. She will now add Bill’s memory, looking around at a landscape shaped by his legacy. “You have to connect with people,” he always said. Even after they’re gone.

Donations in his honor may be made to: the Richardson Center for Global Engagement, 216 Washington Ave #1, Santa Fe, NM 87501

Service Schedule

WEDNESDAY, September 13, 2023

11 AM - 4 PM

Lying in State at the New Mexico State Capitol Rotunda
Open to the public to pay respects
411 S Capitol St, Santa Fe, NM 87501

THURSDAY, September 14, 2023

11 AM - 12:30 PM

Mass of Christian Burial at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi
Celebrated by Archbishop John C. Wester
Open to the public
131 Cathedral Pl, Santa Fe, NM 87501

1 PM - 2 PM

Reception at the New Mexico State Capitol Rotunda
Hosted by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham
Open to the public
411 S Capitol St, Santa Fe, NM 87501