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Douglas Bennet, Who Led NPR and Wesleyan, Dies at 79

By [Neil Genzlinger](#)

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Douglas J. Bennet, who took over National Public Radio when it faced an uncertain future and spearheaded a decade of growth, died on Sunday at his home in Essex, Conn. He was 79.

The cause was complications of a fall sustained five years ago, his family said.

In a wide-ranging career, Mr. Bennet also led Wesleyan University in Connecticut for 12 years and served in various political and government positions. He was known for bringing financial and organizational stability to whatever institution he took on, a skill honed as an assistant to political figures like Chester Bowles, a diplomat and a former governor and congressman; and Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey.

When Mr. Bennet took the helm at NPR in 1983, during the fiscally conservative administration of President Ronald Reagan, the organization was in financial distress. Mr. Bennet made structural changes that reversed the decline.

“He restored NPR’s financial stability and directed its further growth,” Ralph Engelman wrote in “Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History” (1996).

The same was true of his years as president of Wesleyan, where he rejuvenated physical facilities and initiated what was, at the time, the largest fund-raising effort in its history. During his presidency, the university’s endowment rose to \$631 million from \$345 million.

Michael S. Roth, the current president, in a posting on the university’s website, called Mr. Bennet’s tenure “years of remarkable progress for Wesleyan” and “the culmination of a truly distinguished career.”

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Douglas Joseph Bennet Jr. was born on June 23, 1938, in Orange, N.J., and grew up in Lyme, Conn. His father was a small-business man and an aide to Mr. Bowles when he was governor of Connecticut in the late 1940s and early '50s. His mother, Phoebe (Benedict) Bennet, helped

establish a state office to assist people with mental disabilities.

Mr. Bennet received a bachelor's degree at Wesleyan in 1959 and a master's in history from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1960. After a stint as an assistant to Mr. Bowles when Mr. Bowles was the ambassador to India, he earned a Ph.D. in Russian medieval studies at Harvard in 1967.

In 1967 and 1968 Mr. Bennet was an assistant to Mr. Humphrey, Lyndon B. Johnson's vice president. From 1969 to 1973 he was an aide to Senator Thomas F. Eagleton, the Missouri senator who was briefly George McGovern's running mate on the 1972 Democratic presidential ticket before dropping out after disclosures that he had been treated for depression. Mr. Bennet was a key figure in arranging Mr. Eagleton's withdrawal from the ticket, a testament to his growing skill as a Washington insider.

That skill would serve him well later in the 1970s as staff director of the Senate Budget Committee — he was the first person to hold that position — and then as assistant secretary of state for congressional relations. In that job he played a pivotal role in 1978 when he helped shepherd through the Senate the contentious Panama Canal treaties, which led to the eventual transfer of control of the canal to Panama.



Mr. Bennet, right, at Wesleyan's 175th commencement in 2007. At left is the chairman of the university's board of trustees, Jim Dresser. Bill Burkhardt, via Wesleyan University

In 1979 Mr. Bennet, by then something of an expert in foreign policy, was named administrator of the Agency for International Development. He had no radio experience when he took over the presidency of NPR a few years later, but he saw similarities between the two jobs.

“Both organizations are highly complex, and their missions are very sensitive,” he said at the time. “A requirement of strenuous nonpartisanship is essential.”

Mr. Bennet expanded NPR’s audience and news operation. But by 1989 some on the staff were complaining that NPR’s coverage had lost its risk-taking spunk.

“We have evolved into the standard of radio news,” he told The Washington Post by way of defending the change. “The real debate here is whether that has resulted in a homogenization of product, and my answer is the depth of our reporting, which is still greater than any other broadcast organization in the country.”

After leaving NPR in 1993, Mr. Bennet became assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs under President Bill Clinton. He served until taking the Wesleyan post in 1995.

His tenure at the university was not without controversies. One involved his decision, in 2002, to place a moratorium on “chalking,” a university tradition in which opinions and other messages, some of them profane, would be scrawled on sidewalks. The practice, he said the next year when he turned the moratorium into a permanent ban, did not “meet the civility test.”

Some students and faculty members complained about the stifling of free speech. A group of students marched on his house chanting, “We want chalk!”

The issue was still being debated years later. In 2012 a student blog ran a five-part series called “A Decade Without Chalk.”

Mr. Bennet’s first marriage, to Susanne Klejman, ended in divorce in 1995. His survivors include his wife, Midge Bowen Bennet, whom he married in 1996; a brother, John; and three sisters, Phoebe Bennet Boyer, Lois Bennet Hager and Mary Bennet Rhodes. They also include two sons, Michael, a United States senator from Colorado, and James, the editorial page editor of The New York Times; a daughter, Holly Bennet, global managing director of Deloitte & Touche; two stepchildren, Richard Ramsey and Elizabeth Ho Chee; seven grandchildren; and two step-grandchildren.

When he left NPR, Mr. Bennet was given a farewell party that featured staff members doing impressions of him and some off-key singing.

“No wonder he’s leaving,” the NPR correspondent Susan Stamberg deadpanned in a report on the party.

She also made reference to the financial stability he had brought to the organization.

“Thanks to Doug Bennet,” she said, “we have no debts anymore, except to him.”

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