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## HABIB BOURGUIBA'S ORIGINAL THINKING LED TO TUNISIA'S SUCCESS

WASHINGTON -- When Tunisian leader Habib Bourguiba was a small boy, his mother died giving birth to her eighth child -- and the boy never forgot either his loss or the reason for it.

Many years later, he told a friend of mine that that terrible early loss was instrumental in making him one of the most progressive and far-seeing leaders in the Middle East regarding women's rights and population control.

But that sorrowful event can explain only a small part of the man who earned Tunisia's independence from colonial France in 1956, who ruled the small North African Arab country from 1957 to 1987, and who laid out the entire blueprint for his country, enabling it to become one of the most rapidly developing countries in the world.

When he died this week at age 96, ex-president Bourguiba still remained somewhat of a mystery to much of the world, if only because he had at every turn done everything his way. He had always taken the distinctly unfashionable road, and he had paid precious little attention to his many derisive critics in the Arab world.

In the '50s and '60s, when nationalism was sweeping the Arab world indiscriminately, Bourguiba secured Tunisia's independence from France virtually without bloodshed. Then he even allowed the French to keep a military based there (Result: The French paid for Tunisian security). While other Arab states exhausted themselves with wars against Israel, he constantly called for "a just and lasting peace" (Result: He was able to put one-third of the budget into education, thus assuring his country's present prosperity).

While other Arab leaders of the time kept women locked away in their homes and harems and extolled the nationalist virtues of tribal and desert life, Bourguiba lectured his people of the countryside to "accede to city life" so that they would not "remain attached to a primitive type of life, which condemns you to vegetate on the margins of society" (Result: Tunisia today is a harmoniously urbanized and agricultural society).

Those decades, remember, were decades of impassioned and intransigent extremism in the entire region. Men gladly risked their lives for illusion and refused every rational alternative as if it were a poison. A leader such as Bourguiba, son of an unprepossessing, low-ranking civil servant, was pitied when he was not ridiculed or vilified. Yet, in an age of irrationality and unrestrained passions, he was destined to emerge as the passionate rationalist.

When he died on April 6, his country led the Arab world in economic development and in an educated populace. Largely because Bourguiba encouraged women's rights, Tunisian women do every kind of work. Two-thirds of the people own their own



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homes and are middle-class. Bourguiba also lived to see radical Islamic fundamentalism defeated in his own country, to see the first multiparty elections there last fall, and even to witness the entire Middle East now embrace his ideas of a phased solution to the Israeli conflict.

Even the fact that, as he aged and refused to leave office, he was replaced in a bloodless coup and allowed to live out his life in his beautiful hometown of Monastir cannot dim his extraordinary accomplishments.

Since this type of original leader remains so rare, at Bourguiba's death it is only appropriate to ask what conjunction of historical, national and personal characteristics and imperatives formed this clay into this unique man.

Educators would point first to his French education. Years of study in Paris had given him the pattern of logical thinking that led him early on to advocate the unpopular peace with Israel and the even more unpopular population control for Tunisia. Tunisia in those years had a penchant for violence as large as any other Arab society, so this was not exactly a natural road.

What was natural for him was the kind of tactics he employed. Always, he preferred to outwit and outmaneuver his adversaries and enemies, rather than confront or attack them frontally, an approach that became known as "bourguibism." This, in turn, led to and then underlined his lifelong attention to evolutionary rather than revolutionary methods in the development of his nation.

That, blended with meticulous planning and visions of "what can be ... if," has led to the highly successful country Tunisia is today.

There are other leaders who combine Bourguiba's traits. Sultan Qaboos of Oman is one. Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore is another. But try to plumb the wellsprings of any of these pragmatic leaders, and one finds no easy explanations for why they took different, and so often so unpopular, roads.

In the end, what drives these leaders to succeed so masterfully in following an original path for their peoples remains a mystery, a glorious mystery.