

Bush Opened Up To Secret Yale Society

Turning Points in a Life Built on Alliances

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Late one night 40 years ago, locked in the windowless building on High Street in New Haven that is the home of Skull and Bones, Yale's most secretive student club, George Herbert Walker Bush presented his life history, or "LH," as it is called by Bones men.

Each year 15 Yale juniors are "tapped" to join Skull and Bones by the 15 graduating seniors in the society. In Bush's day selection to Bones was perhaps the ultimate honor for a Yale undergraduate. On that night, Bush was supposed to tell all, hold nothing back about his life. The "LH" was a central feature of the formalized ritual of self-examination within the closely knit organization.

Bush, then 23, held the group in thrall with the story of the most dramatic episode—almost the last episode—of his life. He told them how, more than three years earlier, on Sept. 2, 1944, the Navy plane he was piloting was shot down during a bombing run over the island of Chichi Jima in the Pacific. As the World War II plane, a TBM Avenger, plummeted toward the ocean, Bush bailed out. He later was rescued by a U.S. submarine patrolling nearby. But Bush's two crewmen died.

One of them was Lt. (j.g.) William G. (Ted) White, an officer not trained as a naval aviator, who had been begging to go for a ride on a combat mission in the turret gunner's seat; Bush and the squadron commander let him go. White had been a Bush family friend. He also was a Bones man, Class of 1942.

"I wish I hadn't let him go," Thomas W.L. (Lud) Ashley, a fellow Bones man, quoted Bush as saying that night. Bush "was heartbroken. He had gone over it in his mind 100,000 times and concluded he couldn't have done anything . . . He didn't feel guilty about anything that happened on the plane . . . But the incident was a source of real grief to him."

"It tore him up, real anguish," Ashley said. "It was so fresh in his mind. He had a real friendship with this man . . ."

Ashley said he can still recall vividly Bush's "description of how small that atoll was, how vulnerable he was flying in at low altitude. Everything had been routine up until then, everything had probably been routine since he'd joined the Navy. In fact, it had been routine since he'd been born. Now, all of a sudden, it wasn't routine. He described the quiet kind of hysteria being in the front of the plane [as the pilot], not seeing the two in the back, the smoke, losing control of the plane, the anguish as you lose altitude and don't see motion, nothing, no effort to eject [by the two crewmen], then the horrible moment when you go yourself or you don't go."

Bush has told that story in public since, in his autobiography and elsewhere, but never with the self-scrutiny and obvious pain that he shared in Skull and Bones that night. Apparently, Bush was able to open up to that group in a way he has rarely been able to duplicate in 25 years in public life, and his relationships with his classmates in Skull and Bones

have continued to be an important part of his life for 40 years. As recently as three years ago, at a time when Bush seemed uncertain about his own political identity and future, four members of the group had dinner with him in Washington to buck him up, as several put it.

Like his experience in Skull and Bones, many of the important turning points in Bush's life have not been fully explored. The only recent full-length treatment of Bush's life is his autobiography, "Looking Forward," which was published last year. It did not even mention some important moments in Bush's 64 years, including his membership in the Yale society. Skull and Bones is part of the story of George Bush as a privileged Yankee aristocrat—an aspect of his life that Bush the politician has always played down.

More than 200 people were interviewed for this series of

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articles, and extensive records of Bush's career in politics were culled from the presidential archives of Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford. These interviews and documents reveal many new details about important moments in Bush's long career until the time he became Ronald Reagan's vice president.

Records at the Johnson library show that in preparing to run for a Senate seat in Texas in 1970, Bush, the Republican, avidly cultivated the support of Johnson, the Democrat. The Nixon archives reveal that after Bush lost that race he accepted a job on the Nixon White House staff, but then talked his way into the more prestigious post of United Nations ambassador.

In 1974 Bush hoped—more fervently than he ever let on—to be chosen as Gerald Ford's vice president. He knew he was the first choice of leading Republicans in a private White House survey—255 backed Bush, while 181 preferred Nelson A. Rockefeller, who got the job. To flee the Watergate "stench" in Washington, as a close friend put it, Bush then asked for the job of U.S. envoy to China, though he knew he would play no significant role in China policy (then dominated by Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, who repeatedly put Bush in his place during the Nixon-Ford years).

Within months of his arrival in Beijing, Bush began looking for a way back to Washington so he would be positioned to be chosen as Ford's running mate in the 1976 election. Ford again frustrated that dream when he appointed Bush director of the Central Intelligence Agency, then quickly acquiesced to the demands of Democratic senators that he promise not to put Bush on the '76 GOP ticket.

Before he was first elected to Congress Bush worked in the oil business, and made nearly \$1 million from the sale of his Zapata Off-Shore Co. in 1966. Since then, records show, most of his private earnings and successful investments have come from opportunities provided by friends.

For a quarter-century, in public life Bush has persevered, pleasing the presidents he served as best he could, rarely complaining, always deferring, accumulating friends and frequently subordinating his own views.

Bush's enduring ties to his Skull and Bones classmates illustrate another little-appreciated aspect of his personality: Throughout his life Bush has forged a series of strong personal allegiances that have been critically important to him personally, and to his rise. Indeed, friends and associates from every phase of his life agreed that relationships with other people have always been much more important to Bush than political ideas, policy preferences or any abstract intellectual concern.

"Family, Yale, country, our group, these were the driving forces He works at it . . . they are one extended family" for Bush, said Valteau Wilkie Jr., another member of the Bones Class of 1948.

"A drilling rig can disappear off the face of the Earth, you can go down in the polls," his son, George W. Bush, said in a recent interview, but friendship "doesn't waver with the polls. It is there and consistent." For Bush, his son said, these relationships provide a "permanency" in life that is absent from politics.

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For example, in 1970, two Houston friends lost their wives to cancer at almost the same time. Both were despondent. One night Bush gathered up these two friends and took them to dinner, expressed his concern for both and gently suggested that they had to let go of the past, focus on their children. Bush regularly stayed in touch with these friends and helped them get over their grief. Both say he has earned their enduring gratitude and friendship.

One of the men is James A. Baker III, who Friday announced he will give up his job as secretary of the treasury to become Bush's campaign chairman. The other is Robert A. Mosbacher, Bush's chief fund-raiser since 1970.

Family has always been extremely important to Bush. Echoes from the life of his famous father, Sen. Prescott Bush (R-Conn.), recur throughout Bush's life. Prescott Bush went to Yale, played first base on the varsity baseball team, belonged to Skull and Bones, served in the military at an early age, set out on his own in business after Yale, then moved into public service—and Bush followed precisely the same path.

According to friends and family, the presence of Prescott Bush has always loomed over George Bush's life; the son frequently mentions his father to this day. His mother, 87, also has been a powerful influence, according to friends. A strong, outspoken woman, she instilled good manners and competitiveness in her offspring.

"He is a product of Victorian parents in a modern world," said Ashley, Bush's Yale classmate. "That's going to give you a different person. You didn't challenge your parents. They were unassailable He was not brought up to be independent."

Bush's accounts of various periods in his life "are often off 10 to 30 percent," said a longtime Bush associate who asked not to be identified. "Part of this is shyness, and the [Bush] family ethic of 'Don't brag,' but there is a certain reserve, even secretiveness . . . the inner turmoil is not conveyed."

Some of Bush's personal traits have been obscured by his public image. For years politicians have considered his experience in a series of senior government posts his biggest asset; the resume candidate, he has been called. But interviews and newly discovered records indicate that Bush often got those jobs for reasons that had little to do with their subject matter. President Nixon sent Bush to the U.N. to be a spokesman for him in New York; President Ford sent him to China as a consolation prize after picking Rockefeller to be vice president, then asked Bush to take over the CIA because of his ability to soothe Congress and follow orders. Once on the job, according to past associates, Bush rarely tried to master the subject matter and often remained detached, delegating major issues to his aides and letting others conduct the real policy debates.

Bush's aides and friends repeatedly said that Bush does not have an ego problem, and can step back and let others handle details.

According to numerous associates, past and present, Bush has in common with his current boss, Ronald Reagan, a limited attention span. "You have to stand between him and the window or he will spend his whole time looking out the window, day-dreaming," said one frustrated official after an economics briefing for Bush.

Bush has always spent considerable energy on personal gestures. He writes notes by the hundreds, both to political associates and old friends, and will make a telephone call the moment one is recommended to him by an aide. But Bush rarely keeps personal lists of reminders of things to do, according to his intimates; he reacts to immediate stimuli, not to a strategy or plan thought out in advance.

A former administration official who worked closely with Bush and Reagan observed that Bush approaches an issue in its own frame, not in a larger context. "He can settle a problem, but not look ahead five years from now."

Bush has won a reputation as a successful operator, smoothing troubled waters and resolving conflicts successfully in his past jobs, but he has left few if any monuments to his tenure in the House of Representatives, at the CIA, the U.N., the U.S. mission to China or the vice presidency; no laws or major policy changes are remembered as George Bush's personal contribution.

Bush declined to be interviewed for these articles. "I've been so thoroughly explored that I doubt they [Post reporters] can add a new dimension to it," Bush said last week when asked why he wouldn't sit down for an interview. "I don't know that I can contribute anything to it."

But members of Bush's Bones delegation—people who have been close to him since college—were willing to discuss their friend, contrary to the traditional secrecy that surrounds Skull and Bones activities. Bush has maintained his undergraduate pledge of secrecy; he won't discuss Skull and Bones, just as he has generally declined to discuss himself in any intimate way. These Yale classmates provide a glimpse of the private man who has been hidden from public view.

The relationships that were formed in the "Tomb," the large mausoleum-like building where the society's meetings took place each Thursday and Sunday night during the academic year, have had a strong place in Bush's life, according to all 11 of his fellow Bonesmen who are still alive.

Several described in some detail the ritual in the organization that builds the bonds. Before giving his life history, each member had to spend a Sunday night reviewing his sex life in a talk known in the Tomb as CB, or "conrubial bliss," a term from the 19th century annals of the society.

"The first time you review your sex life We went all the way around among the 15," said Lucius H. Biglow Jr., a retired Seattle attorney. "That way you get everybody committed to a certain extent. So when we came around to round two [the "LH"], you knew where you stood It was a gradual way of building confidence."

The sexual histories helped break down the normal defenses of the members, according to several of the members from his class. William J. Connelly Jr., another member from Bush's class, said, "In Skull and Bones we all stand together, 15 brothers under the skin. [It is] the greatest allegiance in the world."

Memento Mori—Latin for "Remember that you must die." It is one of the phrases that is part of the lore in the 156-year-old Skull and Bones ritual. Said one of Bush's group, "Skull and bones is the theme, the basis, because when all is said and done, we're all going, no one is immortal It's like the scholastics of the Middle Ages who kept a skull around to remind themselves they are mortal."

Several members also recall *tempus fugit*—time flies—another Latin phrase that appears in a hymn written for the society in the 19th century. The Bonesmen say they read it as another reminder of their mortality, and the importance of the brotherhood in this short life.

The society has been almost a family tradition. Besides Bush's father, a member of Bones, Class of 1917, another member was Neil Mallon, head of Dresser Industries, who gave Bush his first job out of Yale. Bush's oldest son, George W. Bush, also was in Bones, Class of 1968, as were about a half-dozen other Bush family members.

One or more of the members of Bush's own Bones group have been involved in many of the major turning points in Bush's personal and political life. Several provided comfort when Bush's daughter, Robin, died from leukemia in the early 1950s, all have offered advice on his political career, and a few have raised money for his campaigns. One invested \$40,000 in Bush's Zapata oil company in the early 1950s, later selling his investment for nearly a 300 percent profit. Another who invested in Zapata came out with enough profit to make a down payment on a house.

On Feb. 21, 1981, a month after Bush was sworn in as vice president, 12 of the surviving Bonesmen, their wives and the widows of two members, gathered in Washington for a weekend reunion, including a Saturday night dinner at the vice president's mansion.

John E. Caulkins, a Michigan banker, read a poem he had written, with a stanza about each member. Bush's—using the vice president's childhood nickname—referred to "Old Poppy, our own V.P."

The next day the group went on a tour of the Oval Office, Bush's office and the Capitol.

In 1985, four members of the delegation gathered again with Bush in Washington under less celebratory circumstances. A half-dozen Republicans were gearing up to challenge Bush for the 1988 Republican presidential nomination, and the vice president's inglorious 1984 campaign against Democratic vice presidential nominee Geraldine A. Ferraro had tarnished his image. "It was a period when Bush was getting the crap kicked out of him," said Ashley, who served as a Democratic member of Congress from Ohio for 26 years until 1980.

Thomas W. Moseley of the Bones group said he received a call from Ashley, who said, "We're going to throw a dinner party for [Bush]. He's not having any fun, the job is grating on him." Moseley added, "You

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could see it was gnawing on him. It was to be a buck-him-up dinner. He felt alone."

Had Bush compromised himself by hewing to the Reagan line on every issue? members of the group wondered. Had he submerged his true personal and political self so much that he would never make himself distinguishable from his president and project the necessary sense of command?

Bush, Ashley, Moseley, Caulkins and a fifth member of their Bones class, Samuel S. Walker Jr., with their wives, met for dinner at Ashley's house in Northwest Washington on Saturday, Oct. 5, 1985.

The dinner unexpectedly turned into a traditional Skull and Bones session of personal discussion and cross-examination. Ashley recalled, "Moseley, a true believer in the magic that is woven by these relationships . . . stands up and says, 'Let's repair to the inner sanctum.' Bush was all for it and said, 'Why not?' Everyone else seemed to want to do it, so I acquiesced. It was an hour, everyone was heard from. [There] was a flow of communication. [Bush] was as vulnerable and as much a target as anyone and he handled it with apparent candor. The question was, 'What are you doing?' and how was it sitting with him."

Bush seemed anxious for this chance to unburden himself. Ashley said, "Bush rejoiced. He was almost the first one to go into the den, the library I have there. He welcomed the questions . . . He was aware of the dilemma of being Ronald Reagan's vice president."

Ashley said Bush expressed surprise at "the tone and substance of the attacks on him" in the press. Bush acknowledged that serving as vice president put him in "gridlock," Ashley recalled. Bush said he was determined to run for president, that he knew how hard this would be, and that he would soon establish his own political identity.

Moseley said the purpose of the session in the library was "to go back to the wellspring of understanding . . . I craved it, [Bush] craved it . . . Being vice president for years, well, you feel the foot in your back."

According to Walker, the session was "a chance to talk personally . . . talk about his political identity. He answered in a straightforward way. [The others] felt he had so many pressures on him. It was really difficult to let go and be himself, if only he were able to handle himself with fewer inhibitions."

"If there is a flaw in Bush," Ashley said, "it is the level at which he accepts compromise . . . It is now hard to know how honest he is with himself. It's hard to account for his silence [on issues he cares about]. He's learned to rationalize a lot more than ever before, which just brings him into the company of those of us who got there earlier . . . It's hard to make the case that the last seven years have made him any stronger."

These old friends of Bush feel strongly that the warm, attentive classmate they know does not emerge from the TV screen, or from his performance on the public stage. The real Bush, they said repeatedly, is a considerate, generous person.

San Francisco stockbroker George H. Pfau Jr. said of Bush, "He generally calls on New Year's. I don't hear from anyone in my family, but I hear from George Bush."

Moseley said that in 1981 Bush took him to Camp David for a weekend of "shooting, bowling, napping, going to the movies, dinner, breakfast . . . He swept me into all that hoopla" of flying on a helicopter and motorcades.

Richard G. Mack is one of the three members of the Bones class who has died. Mack had a tumor when Bush was living in Houston and went to the acclaimed medical facilities there for three operations before he died.

Said Pfau, "George and Barbara stayed with him every step of the way. They were mother, father, brother and sister to him until he died."

Bush was the best man at Pfau's first wedding. After a divorce, Pfau remarried in 1975 when Bush was in China with the U.S. mission. "It was a cushy job and there wasn't much to do," Pfau recalled. He and his new wife went to China for their honeymoon and stayed with the Bushes.

"It was the best visit we've ever had. He didn't have much to do and we rode bikes around Peking . . ."

Moseley counts at least 85 communications from Bush—letters, notes, cards—in the last 21 years. The last was June 9, answering Moseley's inquiry about which Bush campaign committee could most effectively use his contribution. Bush replied, referring Moseley to a campaign official.

"Got to run," Bush wrote to Moseley and his wife Jane, "but not before I say thanks for all you do. With you and Jane on our side, Bar and I will never lose."

Staff researcher William F. Powers Jr. contributed to this report.