George Bush

An Intimate Portrait

FITZHUGH GREEN

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Writing is thought to be a solitary occupation. Yet this biography has been a joint venture involving the ideas and memories of many people.

Preface

WALK THE STREETS OF GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN, and with a little fine tuning of the imagination one can hear the exuberant shouts of Eagle Scout Gerald Ford. Stand in the seared streets of Yorba Linda, California, and gaze at the tiny boyhood home of Richard Nixon, and suddenly there is a tug to move on. Journey to the grass and stand along the ocean's edge at Hyannisport, Massachusetts, and you can hear, as John Kennedy did, the distant calls of warriors and ship captains. Squint from the front porch of Lyndon Johnson's early Texas home and there is the huge sky and the hard weather waiting beyond to temper and shape a man. Loiter on the hill above the Rock River in Dixon, Illinois, as the summer light fades and Ronald Reagan and a gang of kids will come out of the shadows and tussle on the green lawns, trusting and believing in their code and their country.

Where to find George Bush? Along the rocky shore of Kennebunkport, Maine, or on the manicured lawns of Greenwich, Connecticut? Maybe in the windowless Skull and Bones clubhouse of Yale University, or at the Petroleum Club of Midland,

Texas? Though he may be the mildest, the most unassuming, the least self-centered of the modern presidents, Bush may prove to be the most illusive when examined by today's legion of presidential analysts.

He is, if we may borrow from Bush's own political lexicon, a million points of light, and some shadow too. How they play on each other and what they will mean for us will ultimately constitute the Bush adventure, the 41st chapter in the American presidency. Given the natural vigor and growth of the modern media, it probably is not a great stretch to suggest that already more has been written and broadcast about George Bush early on the job than any other recent president. He has been in public life so long—23 years through seven assignments. And yet there is the vague feeling that we know him less, only dimly understanding what makes him function. He has been so many places, done so much—but so politely and quietly.

Presidents, like other striving humans, resemble complex geologic formations. They are created over the years as the various strata are deposited by heritage, by experience. They do not suddenly leap into full power. There is no manual on how to be president. They do not appear overnight at center stage, nudging nations this way and that. They are gentled by mothers, challenged by fathers, inspired by teachers, humbled by failure and assembled finally in the forge of continuous exposure to the world's realities.

George Bush is the most blessed of the presidents of this century. He was born with wealth (but not too much), given health, intelligence, talent, good looks, family love, discipline and the confidence that follows all of the above. He observed the great depression but was never scarred by it. He was called to war and his courage was summoned in combat, but he was not maimed by battle, either in mind or body. His political defeats were never of such magnitude to discourage him. His victories were not so great that they bred arrogance.

What now to expect? The presidency is a challenge far beyond anything else that Bush has undertaken. It is impossible to chart the way ahead. The world is so capricious, the prob-

lems too intractable, even this privileged man—so carefully shaped and burnished by Providence—will need a kind of magic to claim success. What moves in Bush's heart and mind? From whence did it come? We can at least get some hints.

Fitzhugh Green writes here of the intimacies of George Bush's formation, the little things that are the glue of the human soul. In his way, Green offers us some of the best glimpses yet caught of Bush, especially the early Bush where the building blocks of character were laid down. In the flashes of insight one can see courage and concern, in the crevices of family experience there are calls to honor and duty, in the narrative of his adult life there are the marks of hard work and ambition. Collect all of them and they make up the mosaic which is George Bush, they are the reasons why he is president of the United States.

—Hugh Sidey
June 1989
Washington, D.C.

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CHAPTER 1

Heir to Excellence

THE BOY IS FATHER TO THE MAN, AND GEORGE BUSH is no exception. But the father of the boy was such a paramount figure in George's life, that Prescott Bush's story comes first.

For George and his siblings, Prescott stood tall, an imposing father in the small enclave of Greenwich, Connecticut. In their eyes he must have seemed invincible. He not only was a strict and loving father, but he also was a hardworking and successful businessman who disappeared into Manhattan for nearly twelve hours daily, a community leader who spent long evenings on the Greenwich town council and hospital board, a champion golfer who brought home silver cups as often as some garnered groceries, and a stern church-goer and a singer with a booming bass voice.

He was built to match these accomplishments. Prescott was six-foot-four; weighed two hundred pounds; had a physique of well-conditioned muscle; and was blessed with a handsome, craggy face topped with thick charcoal-black hair and prominent brows.

He bore no nonsense from the boys: Prescott Jr. (born in

1922), George (1924), Jonathan (1931), and William T. ("Bucky," 1938). He was a bit more gentle with his third child and only daughter, Nancy. But the children revered him. He was warm and affectionate with them, although they knew he could mete out firm discipline if necessary. Friends of the family over the years found him dignified, courtly and never really hard on anyone. With all his talents and accomplishments, he clearly liked people, had a twinkle in his eye, and made them feel at ease.

Prescott Bush was a theatrical fellow, a man who held center stage naturally, regardless of what was happening. Perhaps he had been influenced by the famous actor Douglas Fairbanks, who took an interest in young Prescott when the boy caddied for him in the family resort at Watch Hill, Rhode Island. At the time Prescott was the schoolboy golf champion of Ohio. Fairbanks electrified young Bush when he was at Yale by sending him free tickets to see one of his plays on Broadway. There also was Prescott Bush's gift for singing, which gave him the timing and technique of a public figure even before he became one.

The children were raised not to be like him, but to accept the values that he and their mother, Dorothy, laid down for them: honesty, modesty, neatness and an unwillingness to talk about money. Yes, their father made enough money for them to be comfortable, but he had to work hard to do so. Therefore, it was wrong to leave one's bicycle out in the rain.

To Prescott's satisfaction, all of his boys (except for George) had good voices too, and he spent many hours teaching them how to sing together, in quartets, the way he had learned at Yale. They were well aware that he had sung on the nationally known Whiffenpoofs and Yale Glee Club; that he had been so good that he almost was a musical legend there. One spinoff of all this was the "Silver Dollar Quartet," a popular amateur group of which he was a part that was asked to sing in various cities on the East Coast.

The children enjoyed hearing how he had met their pretty and athletic mother in St. Louis and how the two had fallen in love and married and were in the process of living happily ever

after with their adored progeny. It was a secure upbringing with these parents who did everything right and expected the same from people around them. The children learned about the night when their father and mother were at a soiree celebrating an event with toasts and songs. One of the speakers used the four-letter S word in a joke he was telling. Immediately, but without fanfare, the Bushes excused themselves and went home. Their son Jonathan has been quoted as saying he never heard his father break wind; as a fact that may not make Prescott Bush unique, but, as a report from his child, it bespeaks an attitude, more along the lines of not that he didn't, but that he wouldn't! Curiously, George Bush's youngest son, Marvin, has specified that he wouldn't commit that faux pas in front of his grandfather.

Prescott Bush's children steadily picked up more information about him. His war experience was of great interest to them. He had fought in the Meuse-Argonne offensive in France and actually had found the adventure of it all exciting. He had become a captain in the army and was decorated. He also was well thought of not only by his fellow officers but also by soldiers in general with whom he was said to have enjoyed swapping yarns.

From the unbending requirement that they attend church every Sunday, the children were not surprised to find out that when Prescott was a student at St. George's boarding school, he had briefly considered becoming an Episcopalian minister, like his grandfather. They also were proud to discover that he had been an outstanding athlete and senior prefect of his school.

It was more complicated to understand how he had reached the happy and lucrative business heights with Brown Brothers, Harriman where he was a partner in New York. They knew that it had to do with investing money. They did grasp that it involved their grandfather, George Herbert Walker, a hero in their lexicon, since he had held the amateur heavyweight boxing crown in Missouri. Now he was head of his son-in-law's company. Another key person there was Roland Har-

riman, who had been at Yale with their father. They had both been members of the exclusive and mysterious Skull and Bones Club.

It wasn't like Prescott Bush to boast about himself to his children. Gradually, though, by listening to their parents and their friends converse and questing elsewhere for information, the elder boys pieced together their father's climb to success. Details were skimpy, but they became aware that he had found his first job after the war by talking to a fellow Yale alumnus at a reunion in New Haven. Then he worked in numerous places in the Midwest, South and Northeast, under several nationally known industrial names like Simmons, Winchester Arms and U.S. Rubber Company.

After these switches he settled on an affiliation that would endure for the rest of his life. How he was hired was certainly a useful lesson for his boys. The investment banking house of W. A. Harriman brought him in as the first young (he was then 31) college graduate in their organization. They thought his time with U.S. Rubber was useful, and that his varied industrial experience most likely would enhance his judgment on security values. They also looked favorably on his wide acquaintance through his education and military service. In short, they felt he had a lot of contacts for a young man; that he could attract business.

The Harriman firm had begun just a few years earlier. It was owned mainly by W. Averell Harriman, who would later hold many top diplomatic and other positions in Washington. He was chairman of the board; Prescott's father-in-law, G. H. Walker, had become president. Walker and Averell's brother, Roland, also owned a substantial share of the business.

The next step was only vaguely clear to Bush's children as they heard about it in succeeding years. This was the 1931 merger of the Harriman company with Brown Brothers, who were respected veterans in investment and commercial banking both in the United States and overseas. The deal gave an infusion of prestige to the Harrimans and much-needed capital to the Browns, who still suffered financial strain from the 1929 crash.

The resulting firm was a model of cooperation. All the men at the top were convivial, most of them close friends of many years. The young Bush boys surely were affected by the easy nature of their father's success. What a pleasant way to make money! Brown Brothers, Harriman did increase business and profits despite the lingering economic slump in America, which ended only with the onset of World War II.

As Brown Brothers, Harriman prospered, Prescott Bush again found himself, as he had at St. George's, among the "favored few." He wasted little time living up to his earlier resolve to plough his good fortune back into the system that provided it. Soon he devoted himself to this aim via numerous volunteer routes.

As time went on, the Bush children saw their father grow in importance. He was president of the U.S. Golf Association and managed to change a silly rule about stymies. Until Prescott Bush changed it, the stymie allowed one player to use his ball to block his opponent's ball from a free shot at the hole.

During World War II Prescott was made head of the United Service Organization (USO), which provided recreation for soldiers and sailors both at home and abroad.

As an investor in companies that became successful, like Pan American Airways, Columbia Broadcasting System and Dresser Industries, Prescott Bush built his fortune. He also joined their boards, thus helping produce employment for Pres Jr. in Pan Am and later for George in Dresser Industries.

While his kids were emerging into the competitive postwar world, their father's career kept on its rising trajectory. In the late 1940s he began to advance from his community service activities, which had included raising money for the Republican Party of Connecticut, toward elective office. Soon he had an opening to run for the U.S. House of Representatives.

His partners at Brown Brothers, Harriman balked at the idea of this political move. They thought he was too important to them to leave just to become a congressman. But when he had the chance to go for a Senate seat, they acquiesced. His race for the Senate and his service there is covered later since it coincides with George Bush's career.

This review of Prescott Bush's excellence would not be complete without sufficient emphasis on his supreme talent: music. His children were aware that it was in Bush Senior's musical side that his soul thrived. They well knew that his singing companions were legion, like John Holmes, fifteen years his junior, former president of the Yale Glee Club and a Whiffenpoof. One sunny spring afternoon in 1950, Holmes encountered Bush walking up Fifth Avenue in New York. Holmes introduced the attractive lady at his side to Bush, who immediately recognized her name. "I believe you are a fine singer. Is that right?" asked Bush. Holmes affirmed that indeed she was. Whereupon Bush threw an arm around her shoulders and said, "Well, why don't we have a little song?" At that, he led the other two into the nearest bar on a side street and, as Holmes recalls, "We sang one number after another for the next two hours. We two were in awe of him, he was such a distinguished fellow, and his music was pure gold. Yet he was so pleasant to us more youthful types. It wasn't that his voice was so outstanding, but it was his ear, his enthusiasm and his concept of a second bass part in a quartet which revolutionized barbershop sin. g," Holmes said. "Also he had an incredible repertoire of old songs that we had never heard before. He taught us some that day."

One story about their dad was kept quiet until the children were adults. Evidently he had an inner office in Brown Brothers, Harriman, and when he was in there his secretary would tell callers that he was in conference. That room had a little piano in it, and if his secretary said "Mr. Bush is busy," he probably was puzzling out a new arrangement with Chuck Spofford, one of his partners in the Silver Dollar Quartet.

Also in awe of Prescott Bush were three young Washingtonians who sang with him from about 1962 to 1968, after he quit the Senate. These were Joyce Barrett (daughter of Clark Clifford, lawyer and advisor to presidents since Harry Truman), her husband Richard D. Barrett (a banker), and Wesley M. Oler, (a physician). When I told Barrett about the meeting on Fifth Avenue, he said he was surprised that Bush

didn't burst into singing right on the spot since he loved to do it so much.

This threesome were all thirty years or so junior to the senator, actually of his children's generation, but they enjoyed each others' singing company so much that they met for dinner and song a half-dozen times per year. Usually they sang at Bush's house in the Georgetown section of Washington. He called them the Kensington Four, named for the city suburb in which the Barretts lived. Dick Barrett described Bush in those days as still handsome and fit-looking, with his black hair turned to salt and pepper.

Dr. Oler feels that he probably already had been stricken with the cancer that he suffered until his death in 1972. He had left the Senate because he said his arthritis limited his strength somewhat. Often thereafter Bush sorrowed that he had not run again. He missed being a senator; it appeared to him and others that he could have carried the state easily.

The Kensington Four helped ease this disappointment. They also met sometimes in Bush's Greenwich house, or the one in Hobe Sound, Florida. Barrett remembers that at Greenwich they would sit around the swimming pool on summer evenings while Dorothy Bush would listen. "We would join him wherever he asked us to go," says Barrett. George and Barbara were only present at one of these occasions, in Washington, and then only for dinner. Son Jonathan Bush would sometimes come from New York to join in along with Jonathan ("Jack") Sloat.

The Alibi Club in Washington was another rendezvous for these evenings of dinner and song. The Alibi has only about 50 members, with very few of them politicians. It is so named, according to unverifiable sources, because if a member's wife calls him at the club, the head waiter says he isn't there even if he is.

"We would take over the entire club, just the four of us," says Barrett. "First we would have food and drink in that dark wood-paneled dining room," which has the skull of a sabre-toothed tiger, heads of African wildlife, quaint eighteenth-