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GEORGE W. BUSH'S JOURNEY *The Cheerleader*

Earning A's in People Skills at Andover

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

ANDOVER, Mass. -- Perhaps there have been other presidential candidates who have dressed in drag, flaunting their legs from beneath a (fairly short) white skirt. But George W. Bush is probably the only one who has done it in front of a camera.



A photograph showing George and friends wearing wigs and employing falsies to fill out their sweaters appears in a yellowed copy of the school newspaper of Phillips Academy here in Andover, near Boston. It was 1963, and George, then a high school senior and head cheerleader, was leading a skit intended to mock rival schools.



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Ever the showman, George W. Bush could feign a nap, below, or lead a group of friends dressed in wigs in a skit intended to mock rival schools, top.

Governor Bush's student days were in most respects supremely undistinguished, and anyone hoping to find reassurance about his candidacy through signs of great intellect or gravitas in those years will be disappointed. There were many other students then who seemed far more likely to emerge as political leaders.

Yet there was one important area where young George did excel: people skills. It was in high school that he first seemed to cultivate them and exhibit them, using the tactics that show through in that photo -- wisecracking showmanship -- to carve out an identity for

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Political Journeys

This is the third in a series of articles about the lives of the presidential candidates. The next installment will explore George W. Bush's years at Yale and Al Gore's years at Harvard.

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himself, an identity that is more subdued today but otherwise intact.

It was also then that George W., while forging countless loyal friendships, also began to turn some people off with what they saw as arrogance, emptiness and a tendency to smirk and be dismissive.

In his stump speeches today, Mr. Bush comes across not as a policy maven or intellectual but as a politician motivated in large part by optimism and a yearning to "lift the spirit of America," as he puts it. In all this, there is perhaps an echo of a boy at Andover long ago who finally found his niche by building coalitions across cliques and lifting the spirits of his school.

In an institution that respected brains and brawn, George seemed to overflow with neither. He was a mediocre student and no more than a decent athlete, and he paled in comparison with his father and namesake, who had been brilliant at everything he did.

Yet, in the end, George found alternative ways to claim the stage and become popular. Against the odds, he emerged by force of personality as a significant figure on campus.

No one thought of George W. Bush as a future politician, and he seemed oblivious to the civil rights struggle and other issues of the day. But he worked hard to remember everyone's name and managed to worm his way into the limelight. Early on, he showed one of the most fundamental political skills: the ability to make people feel good.

"You can definitely see the germination of leadership there, even though the activity was not anything you would call political," said Randall Roden, a childhood friend of George who also attended Andover. "He was learning those skills, or perfecting them, at Andover."

Portraits of the youthful George W. tend toward the extremes, presenting him either as a paragon of decency, street smarts, charisma and quips, like some Republican John F. Kennedy, or else as a spoiled dolt who (as was said of his father) was born on third base believing that he had hit a triple. Yet the George whom classmates recall is no such caricature, one way or the other, but rather the more complex image of the nervous, excited and

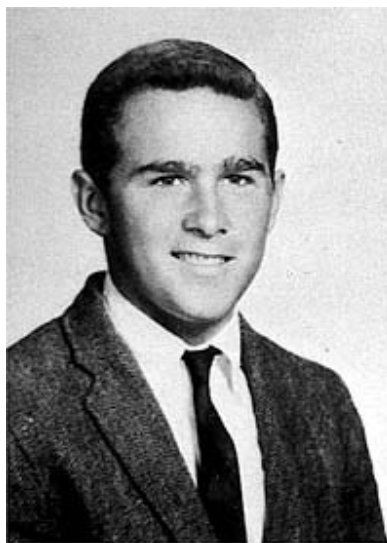
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A senior at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., in 1963-64.

exuberant boy with a thick Texas accent who showed up for classes at Andover in September 1961.

A Question of Privilege

What if George W. Bush's father had been an ordinary Texas oilman named Smith? Or, to ask it another way, how much of his achievement has been his own? This is a question that dogs him today as a presidential candidate, and it does seem that from the very beginning, Mr. Bush got a crucial helping hand in life because of his name and family connections. Otherwise, he would probably not have been admitted to Andover and then Yale.

This question of privilege is one that rankles Mr. Bush, and when he was asked about it in a long interview about his past, he became prickly.



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George W. Bush takes the call, surrounded by classmates at Phillips Academy.

"I think I'm asked that all the time," Mr. Bush scolded. "It's interesting, they always use the word 'Smith,' too." He deepened and modulated his voice to mimic a television interviewer: " 'Would you be standing here as presidential candidate if your name were George Smith?' Well, you know, it's not George Smith. It is George Bush. And how did it influence? I don't have any idea."

In fairness, aside from help with admissions committees, the name was not the eye-opener then that it is now. Young George's father was an obscure Texas oilman until he ran for the United States Senate in 1964, the year George graduated from Andover. His grandfather, Senator Prescott Bush of Connecticut, occasionally visited George at Andover in a car with the senatorial "Connecticut 2" license plates, but several friends from that era insisted in interviews that they did not even know back then about his grandfather and did not see George as anyone special.

George W. had generally enjoyed a privileged upbringing, particularly after he moved with his family at the age of 13 to Houston from the West Texas oil town of Midland. There the family settled into a large house with a pool on a 1.2-acre lot, and George attended the eighth and ninth grades at Kinkaid, an excellent private school.

The specific benefits of his family heritage became clear in 1961, when George was accepted by Andover, one of the country's premier high schools. Then an all-male institution, Andover had a college-level faculty and an amazing \$80,000 budget just for mowing the lawns and planting the grounds.

It was also exceptionally difficult to get into, and George had already encountered problems with admissions officers. He had been rejected by St. John's, the best private school in Houston.

(A family friend vaguely recalled the rejection, but when Governor Bush was interviewed he said he knew nothing of this. Later, after checking with his parents, he went out of his way to confirm, without any apparent embarrassment, that he had indeed been rejected.)



Phillips Academy Yearbook

Andover was far more competitive than St. John's. A contemporary magazine article says 80 percent of Andover applicants were then being turned down, and it seems unlikely that George would have been admitted to Andover entirely on his own merits.

George W. Bush as the head cheerleader at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., in fall 1963, in a role that some classmates now see as a precursor of his political rise as presidential candidate.

But he did not need to be. The Andover admissions process calculated a numeric score for each applicant, ranging from 4 to 20, and then gave a 3-point bonus to any son of an Andover graduate. George's father had been a star graduate, still beloved by teachers there.

This may diminish George's achievement in getting into Andover but it does not erase it. Even among sons of Andover graduates, fewer than half were admitted at that time. Mr. Bush says he has no recollection of his grades at Kinkaid, but a friend from that time says he was an A student, and it was those grades and his activities as a class officer and athlete that, along with his pedigree, put him over the top at Andover.

Adjusting to Andover

The adjustment to Andover was a rough one for young George, who had been wrenched from sunny Texas and a school where he had effortlessly been a good student. At Andover, in contrast, George's first grade on an essay (about his sister's death from leukemia when he was 7) was a zero, boldly written in red ink along with the teacher's scrawled comment: "disgraceful."

"It was a shocking experience," Clay Johnson, a fellow Texan in the class of '64, said of Andover. "It was far away from home and rigorous, and scary and demanding. The buildings looked different, and the days were shorter. We went from being at the top of our classes academically to struggling to catch up. We were so much less prepared than kids coming from Massachusetts or New York."

And young George had another concern. "He had this fear that generation after generation had gone to Andover," Mr. Johnson said, "and he would fail after three weeks."

As a presidential candidate, Mr. Bush has emphasized education

policy and the need to raise expectations. That theme, he suggested, is rooted in those hours spent slaving over assignments at Andover.

"If you want to translate real-life experience, I understand what it means for people to raise expectations," he said. "When I talk about high expectations of schools, Andover has high expectations, at least when I went there. And it was rigorous. I mean it was very rigorous academically, and I'm a better person for it."

Yet despite the pressure, young George seems to have remained remarkably sunny. Classmates remember him as cheerful and exuberant. When snow began falling in October of his first year, he bounded outside in excitement to catch the flakes and try to gather enough for a snowball.

"My memory of living with George was that it was probably the funniest year of my life," recalled Donald E. Vermeil, a roommate at Andover. "George is just an incredibly funny guy. He had a way of keeping everything light and entertaining without offending people or getting out of line."

Andover was rife with cliques, and George fell into the jock crowd, which was disproportionately made up of boys from beyond the Northeast. Although George had always had a foot in the privileged blue-blood world of the Northeast -- he frequently visited his wealthy maternal grandparents in Rye, N.Y., as well as the family retreat in Kennebunkport, Me. -- he hung out less with the ubiquitous New Yorkers and more with the jocks who also felt a bit out of place and overwhelmed by the schoolwork.

"He was less of a jock; he was more of a jock hanger-on-er," said Peter Schandorff, a classmate. "He was a member of teams, but he never really distinguished himself in sports."

Those who played basketball, baseball or football remember George as moderately talented but exceptionally scrappy, sometimes too much so. Once the coach had to pull him out of a basketball game when he became angered at a referee's call and hurled the ball at an opposing player.

A Rebel From Texas

George W. Bush was a slob.

School rules required boys to wear jacket and tie during meals and classes. He tested these rules by frequently wearing sneakers (without socks), ancient pants, a wrinkled shirt, a disastrously knotted tie and sometimes an army jacket. Friends say his aim was not just to rebel but also to remind everyone that he was a Texan, not a preppy.

Students all ate in the Commons, an elegant dining hall with high ceilings, somber portraits and dark wood paneling -- the formal atmosphere undermined by the pats of butter that the boys sent hurtling at one other or at the walls, where they stuck if catapulted with enough force. George and the other jocks mostly sat together at one end of the Commons, while the academic types and nerds sat on

the other end.

Most of the time, there were only 2 blacks among the 240 students in the class of '64, although in their final year they were joined by the son of the prime minister of Somalia. (He proved to be a useful resource to the teenage boys because he had several wives and, under pressure, revealed something of the mysteries of sex.)

"Much to my astonishment, the fellows from the South, especially the guys from George's little Texas group, were more friendly than their Northern counterparts," recalled Conway A. Downing, a black student from Virginia. "At least with respect to African-American guys in the class, he got along very well with them."

José R. Gonzalez, a Puerto Rican, has the same memory of Mr. Bush, as unusually friendly, open and unpretentious.

"A guy from Puerto Rico was sort of unusual at Andover," Mr. Gonzalez recalls, "but it didn't bother him."

Mr. Gonzalez remembered being invited once to spend Thanksgiving vacation with George at his grandfather's house in Connecticut. It was only after he arrived at the house that he figured out that the grandfather was a United States senator.

"He took pains to get along with everybody," recalls Thomas B. Eastland, a classmate. "He was building coalitions throughout."

Yet there are others who recall things very differently, and who remember limits to that inclusiveness.

One of Mr. Bush's political problems today is a perception among some voters that he is arrogant, an empty suit smirking condescendingly at the world, and that perception seems to have first manifested itself at Andover. That is when he developed his smirk (which his friends insist is simply a self-deprecating smile), and even then it irritated some classmates who saw him as no more than an empty polo shirt.

While Mr. Bush charmed his way into the most desirable social circle, some recall say that he was dismissive of other students and practiced his put-downs on them.

"George was very much in the 'cool' group, and it seemed to me that he wasn't that interested in those who weren't," said Robert P. Marshall, a more scholarly classmate.

" 'Inclusive,' " Mr. Marshall added, "is about the last word I would have used to describe how George was at Andover."

Matthew J. McClure, who was then on a lower social plane than Mr. Bush's crowd, also remembers Mr. Bush's social skills as directed only at others who were "in," while disdaining the less fortunate.

"When I was at Andover, I was not part of the cool crowd, and George was," Mr. McClure said. "If you were not cool, then George ignored you. When you're that age and the people who are cool

ignore you, it's unpleasant, and that was my experience."

Raising School Spirits

George W. found his avenue to prominence on campus by leveraging his enthusiasm and affability. One steppingstone was his role as head cheerleader, which gave him a chance to ham it up in front of crowds.

George initiated a series of humorous pep talks and skits in the weekly school assemblies, but school officials fretted that they simply drew attention to the cheerleaders rather than to the football team. G. Grenville Benedict, the dean of students, urged the cheerleaders to tone it down and perhaps call off the skits.

That drew a swift rebuke from the school newspaper, the *Phillipian*, which ran a lead editorial in defense of "Bush's antics."

In the end, Mr. Benedict grew extremely fond of George. The next head cheerleader, Michael M. Wood, said he was taken aside by Mr. Benedict and told that George had raised Andover's school spirit to its highest level since Mr. Benedict had joined the school, in 1930.

More than cheerleading, though, George's claim to fame at Andover was organizing a huge intramural stickball program. Stickball, played with broomsticks and a tennis ball on a field, a variant of the kind played on the streets in New York City, had been an informal pastime at Andover for several years.

But at the weekly assembly in April of his senior year, George stood up and announced the formation of a stickball league. He was wearing a top hat like a circus showman, and instead of a brief announcement, he offered a 20-minute speech that had much of the audience in stitches.

"I was his roommate and I don't remember him rehearsing or practicing," said John Kidde. "And he got up, and you can see why he's doing what he's doing today. He announced how he was high commissioner of stickball, and he got some chuckles, and he just kept going. He was making it up as he went along. And he started talking about rules, and it was very funny. It was a riot."

The stickball league was popular among the students in part because it was seen as subversive, spoofing Andover's somber athletic traditions. Instead of the earnest sports matches that were rigidly controlled by adult coaches, the stickball league was entirely run by the students and was dedicated to fun rather than excellence, just like the high commissioner himself.

George chose team names for their appeal to adolescent tastes. There were the Nads, so that fans could scream "Go, Nads!" And there were various other risque names, or else respectable-sounding ones that cleverly had unprintable acronyms. Team members printed personal nicknames on their white T-shirts -- McScuz, Vermin, Zitney and the like.

"Stickball was a way to send up Andover and let off some of the

inevitable senior year springtime steam," recalled David T. Mason, a classmate. "To George's eternal credit, it did this without getting anyone expelled."

The season culminated in a tournament and eventually a grand-championship game umpired by George himself, in which the Steamers faced the Beavers. Throngs watched as the teams dueled, with the 6-foot-9 Steamer pitcher (Root) facing off against a skinny but wily junkballer (Zitney) for the Beavers. After a dropped fly ball, the Steamers won 3-0.

"The Beavers were heartbroken, but it had been a hell of a season," recalled Zitney, more formally known as Peter T. Pfeifle. "I doubt there has ever been anything like it again since that spring of 1964. Stickball was the thing, and Bush was stickball."

Friends found that George became increasingly self-confident as he realized that he had a talent for social leadership.

"It was part of his self-image and what built his confidence," said Mr. Roden, his childhood friend. "He knew he could get people to do things."

Precursors of Politics

George was particularly admiring of a legendary history teacher, Thomas T. Lyons, and later majored in history at Yale. Yet he exhibited little intellectual curiosity, and he also was largely oblivious to politics.

"We certainly didn't talk about world affairs," recalls Mr. Bush's girlfriend in those years, Debbie Taylor, with whom he danced the twist, played tennis and listened to the Crystals' song "He's a Rebel."

"I thought he was kind of studly," Ms. Taylor recalled, laughing. "He played tennis well. He could drive. Not to belittle anything that he is, but he could drive and that was important. He was more assertive and certainly more outgoing than some other guys. I thought he was good-looking.

"I was 15," she added, laughing at herself.

George was not involved in student government. But some classmates now think that his roles as stickball commissioner and head cheerleader were precursors of politics. When Governor Bush talks about making America feel better about itself -- well, some classmates think back to their old stickball commissioner.

"At the time the whole stickball thing seemed like a grand prank, without political overtones," said Bryce Muir, a classmate. "Looking back, it was an inspired scheme with definite political implications."

Mr. Bush himself does not claim, of course, that his student activities qualify him for the White House. Asked about his leadership at Andover, he said sarcastically, "Well, I think the stickball commissioner makes me perfectly suitable to become the

president."

Ever since Andover, Mr. Bush has consistently demonstrated the same kind of leadership: not a powerful intellect or dazzling policy expertise but rather an exceptional ability to make friends, work a crowd, cheer people up and take them all in his direction. As Texas governor, for example, he worked with Democrats as well as Republicans, built successful coalitions and became a popular figure without typically becoming immersed in policy details.

A Helping Hand at Yale

George fretted among friends about the pressure to get into Yale, which his father and grandfather had attended, and he hit the books largely with that goal in mind.

Mr. Benedict, the dean, looked over George's transcript and College Boards and then suggested in a kindly way that he apply to some easy colleges in addition to Yale. So George applied to University of Texas as his "safe school," but in the end Yale accepted him.

Yale, like Andover, gave a helping hand to alumni sons in the admission process -- far more than now -- and it seems unlikely that Mr. Bush would have been admitted into Yale otherwise.

There were no class rankings, but George never made honor roll even one term, unlike 110 boys in his class. His College Board scores (leaked by some current Yale students and reprinted in The New Yorker) were 566 for the verbal part and 640 for math. Those were far below the median scores for students admitted to his class, as published in his Yale class's 25th reunion book: 668 verbal and 718 math.

So if his father and grandfather had not been stars at Yale, and his grandfather had not been a Yale trustee, George almost certainly would have ended up at the University of Texas.

Several of George's classmates went to Harvard instead, and one of them, Mr. Schandorff, became friendly there with a young Tennessean named Al Gore. It is, of course, difficult to compare a high school pupil with a college student, but Mr. Schandorff recalls George Bush and Al Gore as strikingly different.

Mr. Schandorff says that George was energetic, memorable and a constant cheerleader, but never showed any political interest, deep thoughts or long-term ambition. In contrast, he says he found the youthful Al Gore immersed in politics, very intelligent and fiercely ambitious.

"I always thought Gore might be president," Mr. Schandorff recalled. "We talked about things like that. He talked about buying The Nashville Tennessean and working his way up to be president. We laughed and he said, 'What job would you like in the cabinet?' I said, 'National cruise director.' "

As he graduated from Andover, George was a well-known character on campus, a young man with warm and loyal friends but not one

who seemed destined for greatness. He was not a finalist in voting for "most likely to succeed," "most respected," "politico," or any of the other main categories. But, in a reflection of his people skills, he did come in second for "big man on campus."

What would those Andover students have thought if they had been told back then that George W. Bush would become a candidate for president?

"The reaction," said William T. Semple, a classmate, "would have been gales of laughter."

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