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## At Height of Vietnam, Bush Picks Guard

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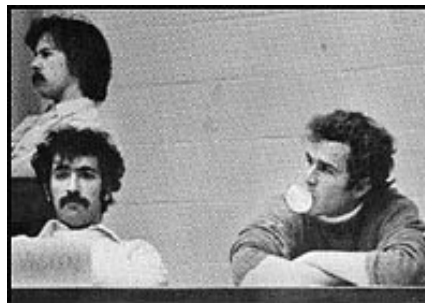
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Two weeks before he was to graduate from Yale, George Walker Bush stepped into the offices of the Texas Air National Guard at Ellington Field outside Houston and announced that he wanted to sign up for pilot training.



George W. Bush, right, during his Harvard Business School years. (Harvard Yearbook)

It was May 27, 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War. Bush was 12 days away from losing his student deferment from the draft at a time when Americans were dying in combat at the rate of 350 a week. The unit Bush wanted to join offered him the chance to fulfill his military commitment at a base in Texas. It was seen as an escape route from Vietnam by many men his age, and usually had a long waiting list.

Bush had scored only 25 percent on a "pilot aptitude" test, the lowest acceptable grade. But his father was then a congressman from Houston, and the commanders of the Texas Guard clearly had an appreciation of politics.

Bush was sworn in as an airman the same day he applied. His commander, Col. Walter B. "Buck" Staudt, was apparently so pleased to have a VIP's son in his unit that he later staged a special ceremony so he could have his picture taken administering the oath, instead of the captain who actually had sworn Bush in. Later, when Bush was commissioned a second lieutenant by another subordinate, Staudt again staged a special ceremony for the cameras, this time with Bush's father the congressman — a supporter of the Vietnam War — standing proudly in the background.

Bush's father went on to run for senator in 1970 against Lloyd Bentsen Jr. — a prominent Texas Democrat whose own son had been placed in the same Texas Guard unit by the same Col. Staudt around the same time as Bush. On Election Day, before the polls closed, Guard commanders nominated both George W. Bush and Lloyd Bentsen III for promotion to first lieutenant — even as the elder Bentsen was defeating the elder Bush.

Three decades later, as Bush begins a campaign for the presidency

that has invited new scrutiny of his life, Staudt and other Guard commanders insist no favoritism was shown to him. But others active in Texas politics in the 1960s say the Texas National Guard was open to string-pulling by the well-connected, and there are charges that the then-speaker of the Texas legislature helped George W. gain admittance.

Vietnam was clearly a crucible for Bush, as it was for Bill Clinton, Al Gore and most other men who left college in the late 1960s. Bush maintains that he joined the National Guard not to avoid service in Vietnam but because he wanted to be a fighter pilot. Rather than be drafted and serve in the infantry – an assignment Bush has acknowledged he did not want – he agreed to spend almost two years in flight training and another four years in part-time service.

That commitment, in turn, was to frame a period of aimlessness and drift that Bush now calls his "nomadic" years: As the war and the youth culture of the 1960s rocked America, Bush partied and dated with gusto, dabbled half-heartedly in business and politics, and flew jets part time. Apart from his Guard commitment, he was unemployed for stretches that lasted for months. His last job before he returned to the East to attend Harvard Business School, as a social worker helping poor children, was arranged by his father after George W. drunkenly confronted him one night and challenged him to a fight.

Even after returning to the elite classrooms of the Ivy League, Bush seemed adrift compared with his classmates. But Harvard offered the beginnings of a self-discipline – his mother called it "structure" – that was to propel him back to Texas with an ambition to build his own future.

As he drifted, Bush struggled with his own feelings about Vietnam and the turmoil he saw around him in America. Over time, he now says, he became disillusioned with the war, even as he believed that he should support the government that waged it. "In a sense he was trying to remain a centrist in a time when there wasn't anything left at the center," said Craig Stapleton, who is married to Bush's cousin and has been a confidant of Bush's for 25 years. "All of the sudden everybody moves and you're still standing in the center. He didn't dodge the military. But he didn't volunteer to go to Vietnam and get killed, either."

## **Grabbing a Slot In the National Guard**

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Bush learned that there were pilot openings in the Texas Air National Guard during Christmas vacation of his senior year at Yale, when he called Staudt, the commander of the 147th Fighter Group, and, he said, "found out what it took to apply."

"He recalls hearing from friends while he was home over the

Christmas break that the Guard was looking for pilots and that Colonel Staudt was the person to contact," said his communications director, Karen Hughes. She said Bush did not recall who those friends were.

Retired Col. Rufus G. Martin, then personnel officer in charge of the 147th Fighter Group, said the unit was short of its authorized strength, but still had a long waiting list, because of the difficulty getting slots in basic training for recruits at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. Martin said four openings for pilots were available in the 147th in 1968, and that Bush got the last one.

Staudt, the colonel who twice had himself photographed with Bush, said his status as a congressman's son "didn't cut any ice." But others say that it was not uncommon for well-connected Texans to obtain special consideration for Air Guard slots. In addition to Bush and Bentsen, many socially or politically prominent young men were admitted to the Air Guard, according to former officials; they included the son of then-Sen. John Tower and at least seven members of the Dallas Cowboys.

"The well-to-do kids had enough sense to get on the waiting list," Martin said. "Some [applicants] thought they could just walk in the door and sign up."

One address for those seeking help getting in was Ben Barnes, a Democrat who was then the speaker of the Texas House and a protege of Gov. John B. Connally. A top aide to Barnes, Nick Kralj, simultaneously served as aide to the head of the Texas Air National Guard, the late Brig. Gen. James M. Rose.

An anonymous letter addressed to a U.S. attorney in Texas, produced in a discovery proceeding for an ongoing lawsuit, charged that Barnes assisted Bush in getting into the Guard. The suit was brought by the former director of the Texas Lottery Commission, who believes Barnes, now a lobbyist, may have played a role in his dismissal.

In a deposition for the suit, Kralj confirmed that he would get calls from Barnes or his chief of staff, Robert Spelling, "saying so-and-so is interested in getting in the Guard." Kralj said he would then forward the names to Gen. Rose.

In an interview, Barnes also acknowledged that he sometimes received requests for help in obtaining Guard slots. He said he never received such a call from then-Rep. Bush or anyone in the Bush family.

However, when asked if an intermediary or friend of the Bush family had ever asked him to intercede on George W.'s behalf, Barnes declined to comment. Kralj, in his deposition, said he could not recall

any of the names he gave to Gen. Rose.

Hughes, Bush's spokeswoman, said: "The governor has no knowledge of anyone making inquiries on his behalf."

Martin and others said Bush was quickly accepted because he was willing to sign up for the intensive training and six years of service required of fighter pilots. "It was very difficult to find someone who would commit himself to the rigorous training that was required," says Martin.

Bush, said Staudt, "said he wanted to fly just like his daddy."

Bush's father had volunteered for service in World War II at the age of 18 and was shot down while flying combat missions in the Pacific theater. By enlisting in the Guard, his son not only avoided Vietnam but was able to spend much of his time on active duty in his home town of Houston, flying F-102 fighter interceptors out of Ellington Air Force Base.

In discussing his own decision, he has always said his main consideration was that he wanted to be a pilot, and the National Guard gave him a chance to do that. In 1989 he tried to describe his own thought process to a Texas interviewer. "I'm saying to myself, 'What do I want to do?' I think I don't want to be an infantry guy as a private in Vietnam. What I do decide to want to do is learn to fly."

Asked in a recent interview whether he was avoiding the draft, Bush said, "No, I was becoming a pilot."

Four months before enlisting, Bush reported at Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts to take the Air Force Officers Qualification Test. While scoring 25 percent for pilot aptitude – "about as low as you could get and be accepted," according to Martin – and 50 percent for navigator aptitude in his initial testing, he scored 95 percent on questions designed to reflect "officer quality," compared with a current-day average of 88 percent.

Among the questions Bush had to answer on his application forms was whether he wanted to go overseas. Bush checked the box that said: "do not volunteer."

Bush said in an interview that he did not recall checking the box. Two weeks later, his office provided a statement from a former, state-level Air Guard personnel officer, asserting that since Bush "was applying for a specific position with the 147th Fighter Group, it would have been inappropriate for him to have volunteered for an overseas assignment and he probably was so advised by the military personnel clerk assisting him in completing the form."

During a second interview, Bush himself raised the issue.

"Had my unit been called up, I'd have gone . . . to Vietnam," Bush said. "I was prepared to go."

But there was no chance Bush's unit would be ordered overseas. Bush says that toward the end of his training in 1970, he tried to volunteer for overseas duty, asking a commander to put his name on the list for a "Palace Alert" program, which dispatched qualified F-102 pilots in the Guard to the Europe and the Far East, occasionally to Vietnam, on three- to six-month assignments.

He was turned down on the spot. "I did [ask] – and I was told, 'You're not going,' " Bush said.

Only pilots with extensive flying time – at the outset, 1,000 hours were required – were sent overseas under the voluntary program. The Air Force, moreover, was retiring the aging F-102s and had ordered all overseas F-102 units closed down as of June 30, 1970.

After basic training at Lackland and his commissioning as a second lieutenant in 1968, Bush got what amounted to a two-month-plus vacation that enabled him to head to Florida to work for a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, Edward J. Gurney. Put on inactive duty status, Bush arrived in early September and stayed through Election Day, riding the press plane, handing out releases, and making sure traveling reporters woke up in time. He occasionally returned to Houston for weekend Guard duty.

In late November, Bush was sent to Moody Air Force Base outside Valdosta, Ga., for year-long undergraduate flight school. Bush impressed fellow trainees with the way he learned to handle a plane, but he became a celebrity for something else. In the middle of his training, President Richard M. Nixon sent a plane down to fetch him for an introductory date with his older daughter Tricia, according to fellow trainee Joseph A. Chaney. It did not lead to another date, but the story lives on. So does memory of the graduation ceremony: Rep. Bush gave the commencement speech.

In December 1969, George W. returned to Houston to hone his skills and eventually fly solo on the all-weather F-102, firing its weapons and conducting intercept missions against supersonic targets. He learned with a verve that impressed his superiors, becoming the first hometown graduate of the 147th's newly established Combat Crew Training School. The group's public relations office celebrated his solo flight in March 1970 with a press release that began:

"George Walker Bush is one member of the younger generation who doesn't get his kicks from pot or hashish or speed. . . . As far as kicks are concerned, Lt. Bush gets his from the roaring afterburner of the F-102."

Brig. Gen. John Scribner, director of the Texas Military Forces

Museum in Austin, said it was only natural that the Guard would have publicized Bush's service with special ceremonies and press releases. "That's how they do things, play it up big, especially since he was a congressman's son. That was important to the Guard," he said.

## No Career in Mind, No Rush to Settle Down

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Bush graduated from Combat Crew Training School on June 23, 1970, having fulfilled his two years of active duty. But he still flew the F-102 Delta Daggers a few times a month; his unit kept two of the fighters, fully armed, on round-the-clock alert and needed the pilots to man them. With no career in mind, Bush was still "looking," as his mother said – looking for work and looking for his road. He seemed to be in no rush to settle down, which his mother said was fine by his parents.

Barbara Bush said she recalled that her father-in-law, Prescott Bush, came to Yale in the late 1940s and told her husband that " 'you don't have to make up your mind now what you're going to be when you grow up.' " She added: "I think we told our children that. . . . I'm sure George did."

George W. promptly took a one-bedroom apartment at one of the most attractive complexes in Houston at the time, the Chateaux Dijon. A popular spot for singles, it offered fancy street lamps and striped awnings and six pools filled with ambitious secretaries, students and young businessmen. Bush relished his bachelor life there. He played hard, plunging into all-day water volleyball games, but left frequently for 24-hour flight duty in the alert shack at Ellington Field.

"He did some night-flying as I recall," said Don Ensenat, a Yale classmate who lived with him in Houston. "No alcohol 24 hours before. They had to keep planes on alert all the time." Bush had to be ready to scramble in his F-102 after any flying objects that Air Force radars couldn't figure out.

Coincidentally, Bush's future wife, Laura Welch, a public school librarian, lived at the Chateaux Dijon too, but they didn't meet. Bush dated other women frequently, but none steadily.

"He had a couple of girls that were more than one date, but nothing that looked like a serious romance," Ensenat said. "Dates and the opposite sex were always high on the agenda. He was always enjoyable to be around. But we didn't do anything anybody else in their twenties didn't do."

Ensenat said he never saw Bush use illegal drugs.

That fall, as his father raced Bentsen for the Senate seat, both Bush

and Ensenat, who had already entered law school at the University of Houston, applied for admission to the University of Texas law school. Both were rejected, though Ensenat later became a lawyer. Then, after losing to Bentsen, Bush's father was named ambassador to the United Nations by President Nixon. The Bushes moved to New York, leaving their eldest son to rely on his family's old school and corporate ties to find a job.

Bush called Robert H. Gow, a Yale man who had roomed with the senior Bush's cousin Ray in college and who had been an executive at the senior Bush's Zapata Off-Shore Co. In 1969, Gow left Zapata and started Stratford of Texas, a Houston-based agricultural company with diverse interests: from cattle to chickens to indoor, non-blooming tropical plants.

"We weren't looking for someone, but I thought this would be a talented guy we should hire, and he was available," Gow said. In early 1971, Gow gave Bush a job as a management trainee. He was required to wear a coat and tie and dispatched around the country and even to Central America, looking for plant nurseries that Stratford might acquire. The newly buttoned-down businessman also moved into a garage apartment that he shared with Ensenat off Houston's North Boulevard, an old 1920s neighborhood close to downtown.

"We traveled to all kinds of peculiar places, like Apopka, Florida, which was named the foliage capital of the world," said Peter C. Knudtson, another Zapata alumnus who was Stratford's executive vice president and Bush's immediate boss.

Once or twice a month, Bush would announce that he had flight duty and off he would go, sometimes taking his F-102 from Houston to Orlando and back. "It was really quite amazing," Knudtson said. "Here was this young guy making acquisitions of tropical plants and then up and leaving to fly fighter planes."

Bush learned the ropes quickly, putting in long hours, and fitting in smoothly – but this wasn't the place for the impatient young man. He would later refer to his time at Stratford as a dull coat-and-tie job. Within weeks he was talking to Gow and Knudtson about his future, questioning, searching – but never coming to any firm conclusion. His bosses recall today that he was weighing whether he should pursue public service or stick it out in the business arena to build some security.

Bush stayed at Stratford only about nine months, and by fall 1971 he was flirting – albeit very briefly – with running for the state legislature. The Houston Post reported the possibility in a story that misnamed him "George Bush Jr."

In the late spring of 1972, Bush was again looking, when he joined another political campaign. This time he helped longtime family

friend Jimmy Allison work in Alabama on the U.S. Senate campaign of Republican Winton M. "Red" Blount against longtime Democratic incumbent John J. Sparkman. Bush moved to Alabama and worked until November as political director for Blount, who lost by a wide margin.

By the end of 1972, Bush's father was mulling over a new job offer from Nixon – to be chairman of the Republican National Committee. With his parents back in Washington, Bush went to stay with them for the holidays and was involved in one of the most notorious incidents of his "nomadic" years. He took his 16-year-old brother Marvin out drinking, ran over a neighbor's garbage cans on the way home, and when his father confronted him, challenged him to go "mano a mano" outside.

There was no fight, and Bush was apparently able to mollify his father with the news that he had been accepted for the following fall at Harvard Business School. But with nothing to do until then, his father decided it was time to give this restless young man some broader exposure to real life.

Shortly after Christmas, Bush began working as a counselor with black youngsters in Houston's Third Ward in a program called PULL (Professionals United for Leadership) for Youth. The brainchild of the late John L. White, a former professional football player and civic leader, it was set up for kids up to 17 in a warehouse on McGowen Street and it offered sports, crafts, field trips and big-name mentors from the athletic, entertainment and business worlds.

Bush and his brother Marvin, who tagged along for the summer weeks, were the only whites in the place. "They stood out like a sore thumb," said Muriel Simmons Henderson, who was one of PULL's senior counselors. "John White was a good friend of their father. He told us that the father wanted George W. to see the other side of life. He asked John if he would put him in there."

Dressed in khaki, with his pants torn at the knees, Bush managed to fit right in. He "came early and stayed late," in the words of one former employee, playing basketball and wrestling with the youngsters, taking them on field trips to juvenile prisons so they could see that side of life and resolve not to end up there themselves. He also taught them not to run when a police cruiser came by.

"He was a super, super guy," said "Big Cat" Ernie Ladd, a 6-foot-9, 320-pound pro football great and PULL luminary who stopped by frequently. "If he was a stinker, I'd say he was a stinker. But everybody loved him so much. He had a way with people. . . . They didn't want him to leave." One little boy in particular, a 6-or-maybe-7-year-old named Jimmy Dean, made a special connection with Bush. "He was an adorable kid," said Edgar Arnold, PULL's operating director. "Everybody liked him, but he bypassed all these



famous athletes, all these giants, and picked out George Bush, and vice versa." The two became inseparable. If George was a little late, Jimmy would wait for him on the stoop. "At business meetings," Arnold said, "that kid would be on top of George, head on his shoulders." When Jimmy showed up shoeless, George bought him shoes.

Bush says he heard many years later that little Jimmy Dean was killed by gunfire as a teenager. "He was like my adopted little brother."

In keeping with family tradition, Bush did not boast of his pedigree, or even mention it, to others at PULL. "I didn't know he was of a silver spoon nature," Henderson said.

His car, like his clothes, carried no hint of it. "He had a bomb of a car," she remembered. "It was the pits . . . always full of stuff, clothes, papers. No one could ride in it with him. . . . He never put himself in the position of looking down his nose at someone, like, 'I've got all this money, my father is George Bush.' He never talked about his father. He was so down to earth. . . . You could not help liking him. He was always fun."

## **Back to New England And Another School**

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To start at Harvard, Bush needed early release from Guard duty in Texas, and he got it easily, about eight months short of a full six years. A Bush spokesman, Dan Bartlett, said early departures were quite common and, in Bush's case, appropriate because his unit had phased out the F-102s. Bush was transferred to a reserve unit in Boston for the rest of his time, Bartlett noted.

Arriving in Cambridge in September 1973 in his spray-painted Cutlass and scruffy clothes, Bush was not at all what his classmates expected when the word spread that he was indeed the son of the Republican National Committee chairman.

"One of my first recollections of him," says classmate Marty Kahn, "was sitting in class and hearing the unmistakable sound of someone spitting tobacco. I turned around and there was George sitting in the back of the room in his [National Guard] bomber jacket spitting in a cup. You have to remember this was Harvard Business School. You just didn't see that kind of thing."

Classmates vividly remember Bush as an iconoclast and a character, someone who didn't fit the tailored mold of business students in the nation's premier graduate program. Many of the students who arrived that fall, like Bush, had been out of college and working a few years. But unlike Bush, a good number were returning to school with a road map of where they were heading: Wall Street.

Bush's entry into the program came five years after his graduation from Yale, and after a series of dead-end or unfulfilling jobs. He was 27 and clearly had not found his niche yet. "A lot of people went to Harvard Business School . . . for a job and all that. I went there to actually learn. And did," says Bush.

Indeed, many of those closest to him, including his mother, believe Harvard's rigorous academic demands brought his life and potential career into focus. "Harvard was a great turning point for him. I don't think he'd say that as much as I would," said Barbara Bush. "I think he learned what is that word? Structure."

Bush shrugged off the trappings of Harvard and avoided the official clubs that would showcase him in the yearbook and look good on his resume. Instead, he showed up for class looking like he had just rolled out of bed in the morning, often sat in the back of the room chewing gum or dipping snuff and made it clear to everyone he had no interest in Wall Street.

He was one of the few people who posed for his yearbook mug shot in a sports shirt, a wrinkled one at that. The other prominent picture of him in the book showed him sitting in the back row of class with longish hair blowing a huge bubble.

"This was HBS and people were fooling around with the accouterments of money and power," recalled April Foley, who dated Bush for a brief period and has remained friends with him. "While they were drinking Chivas Regal, he was drinking Wild Turkey. They were smoking Benson and Hedges and he's dipping Copenhagen, and while they were going to the opera he was listen to Johnny Rodriguez over and over and over and over."

What Bush wanted to get out of Harvard were some practical business fundamentals. He wanted to do something entrepreneurial, he told his pals, but he wasn't sure what. He mused about running for office but told friends he had to make some money first. Of this everyone was certain: George W. Bush would never end up on the East Coast. He was going back to Texas.

*Staff researchers Nathan Abse, Madonna Lebling and Mary Lou White contributed to this report.*

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