



PRINT EDITION TOP NEWS WORLD NATION **POLITICS** METRO BUSINESS & TECH HEALTH OPINION WEATHER

## Young Bush, a Political Natural, Revs Up

By Lois Romano and George Lardner Jr.  
Washington Post Staff Writers  
Thursday, July 29, 1999; Page A1



George W. Bush talks with workers while campaigning for Congress in the Midland oil fields, 1978. (George Bush Presidential Library)

### ▼ Related Items

#### On Our Site

- [Post Series: The Making of George W. Bush](#)
- [Photo Gallery](#)
- [Interview: "You've Got to Have a Base"](#)
- [Campaign 2000](#)

#### *Fifth in a series*

On July 6, 1977, George W. Bush celebrated his 31st birthday with little to show in the way of a resume or significant career prospects. Since arriving in Midland, Tex., in the summer of 1975 after finishing Harvard Business School, he had worked as an entry-level land man in the oil business, spending his days in the courthouse researching titles to mineral rights and negotiating deals to lease them. He lived in a cluttered bachelor apartment above a cinder-block garage, his bed held together by one of his ratty ties.

But his birthday brought an unexpected opportunity. Rep. George Mahon, Midland's congressman, was a conservative Democrat who had served in the House for 43 years, longer than anyone else in Congress at the time. And on July 6, he unexpectedly announced his retirement. National Republicans, seeing a chance to pick up a Democratic House seat, began lining up behind Jim Reese, a former television sportscaster and mayor of Odessa who had run against Mahon the year before and won 45 percent of the vote.

"And then out of nowhere – and I mean nowhere, even after Reese has shown so much strength – comes George Bush," remembers V. Lance Tarrance, a pollster who worked for Reese.

Less than two weeks after Mahon revealed his plans, Bush startled both the Republican and Democratic establishments by holding news conferences in Lubbock and Midland to announce that he was jumping into the race.

Bush would later say that the opportunity to run for Congress far outweighed his preparedness back then. But his quick decision to run and his willingness to challenge an established candidate suggest the pull that politics had for him as well as his ambition, which would go unfulfilled until 17 years later. He was drawn to the game, and he was not someone who wanted to get in it by starting at the bottom.

By 1977 Bush had already worked in three of his father's campaigns. He had been on the campaign staffs of two Republican Senate candidates – Edward J. Gurney in Florida in 1968 and Winton Blount in Alabama four years later – and liked it so much that his uncle Jonathan Bush was convinced he would become a political consultant. He had also briefly considered running for the Texas legislature after he finished active duty with the National Guard. As the grandson of a senator, Prescott Bush from Connecticut, and the son of a politically ambitious father, Bush was immersed in politics as a boy. But his conservative opinions didn't seem rooted in any particular philosophy. John Kidde, an Andover classmate, recalls his friend reading Barry Goldwater's "The Conscience of a Conservative" in school. When Kidde asked Bush why he was reading the book, Bush told him his father had given it to him.

When Bush announced for Congress that July, he sounded conservative themes, complaining that President Jimmy Carter was trying to control natural gas prices and saying he wanted to go to Washington to halt what he called the "bureaucratic spread of federal government that is encroaching more and more on our lives."

But it was clearly more than issues that attracted him to running for office. It was the people and the competition he liked – that and the chance to be the center of attention.

"He knew how to work a crowd perfectly long before he decided to go into politics," said Doug Hannah, an old friend from Houston, who traveled Texas with him during Bush's father's losing 1970 Senate campaign against Lloyd Bentsen. "He loved it and he was having a great time. My shock was that he was such a good speaker. I started to notice he sounded just like his father – if you closed your eyes, you heard his father."

The experience of his ultimately losing campaign for Congress would inform Bush's role in his father's presidential campaigns and offer indelible lessons for his own political future. He would confront the power of the religious right long before it was seen as a formidable political force, and he would suffer the consequences of allowing his opponents to define him as an Easterner – something he would never let happen again.

He would also experience the downside of being George Bush's son. His father's career, he would learn, would loom large over everything the son did for years to come.

But something else became apparent as Bush traipsed through the cotton farms around Lubbock and knocked on oil-field workers' doors in Odessa. He was a natural, and it wasn't long before his opponents knew it.

## **Built-In Advantages For a Bush in Midland**

Bush started his campaign with some built-in advantages. He was the son and virtual namesake of one of Texas's rising politicians, who was just beginning his own campaign for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination. George Herbert Walker Bush's old friends from Midland – where he had lived for nearly a decade – were all too happy to help his son make his way in politics.

George W. also had his own wide circle of friends who were willing to help, some who had known him when he was growing up in Midland in the '50s and others who had met him through the oil business. Most of them were stunned at how fast he made up his mind to run.

"I remember him sitting around our kitchen table talking about this and we were saying: Why do you want to do this?" recalled his close friend Joe O'Neill. "He looked around the table and said, 'Are you gonna do it? Are you gonna do it?' And of course none of us wanted to. He said, 'Well then, I am.' "

This was the "Bombastic Bushkin" his friends had come to love for his unpredictability and impulsiveness, the unfettered enthusiasm that brought excitement into their suburban lives. Many of his friends eagerly signed up to help.

"I don't know that we ever got into the 'whys,' " said Bob McCleskey, his friend from seventh grade. "It was just, 'Were we gonna help?' It was something new. Most of us had never done anything like it before, never even made a contribution, much less be actively involved."

Within a few weeks, Bush had the core of his little team in place – most of whom worked for free, and many of them still working for him today.

Don Evans, an oil executive who is now Bush's national finance chairman, agreed to oversee the campaign. O'Neill would be the treasurer and fund-raiser. Charlie Younger, an orthopedic surgeon, would help stuff envelopes and whatever else was necessary. McCleskey, today Bush's accountant, found himself studying Federal Election Commission filing requirements. Bush's brother Neil, still a college student, would head to Texas after he finished out the year at Tulane. It was also during this campaign that Bush began his long-term relationship with Karl Rove, then an aide to his father in Houston and today George W.'s chief strategist.

Everyone agreed that Bush's father should remain on the sidelines. The name was enough of a statement. The senior Bush had already been a Texas congressman, chairman of the Republican National Committee and director of the Central Intelligence Agency – and now he was running for president.

It was lost on no one in the Bush camp that Jim Reese was tight with one of Bush's father's main rivals – Ronald Reagan – and that the Reagan camp would just as soon not see George W. show strength in Texas, a pivotal presidential state.

Charles Black, the Republican National Committee's young political director, got a call in Washington one day from Bush's father, the former party chairman. "You know George is getting in this race down here in Texas," he told him. "I hope you all will stay neutral through the primary."

"Absolutely," Black assured the senior Bush. "By all means."

Some Republican leaders in Texas worried about a fractious primary and urged Bush to wait his turn. It was Reese, after all, who had forced Mahon from Congress. But Bush was already making an impression on people as he moved around the sprawling district, people like Ruth Schiermeyer, the Lubbock Republican chairwoman.

She had met the young man briefly a year earlier when he had come through Lubbock on behalf of President Gerald R. Ford's campaign. But they really hadn't talked until he came to her home a few weeks after his announcement.

Like others in the district, Schiermeyer had been uneasy about Reese. In 1976 he had painted Mahon as a liberal – which he was not – and even Republicans believed Mahon had represented the district well for four decades.

Bush settled into her small living room on her blue tweed couch and made himself comfortable. He pulled out the loose pillows and propped his arms on them, then put his feet up on her coffee table. He told her that he cared about people, that he could go the long haul. He knew his name would help, but he wanted to establish himself as his own person.

Schiermeyer had to stay neutral in the primary. But by the time Bush left her little house on 25th Street, she and he knew she was with him. She even agreed to give his brother Neil her garage apartment when he came to help.

## **A Backyard Cookout Leads to the Altar**

---

Ten days after declaring his candidacy, Bush accepted an invitation from Joe and Jan O'Neill for a backyard cookout at their Midland home on the last weekend in July.

For years the O'Neills had tried to set Bush up with their childhood friend, Laura Welch, a 30-year-old librarian who was as quiet and introspective as Bush was loud and blustery. In truth the O'Neills never really thought it would work.

Welch was a self-contained only child, who was at her happiest immersed in a good book. Bush loved crowds – especially when he was at the center of attention, making people laugh. It was Welch who had put the O'Neills off. She had grown up in Midland, knew Bush from grade school, knew the family name and knew she had little interest in politics.

Bush hadn't been ready to settle down – but neither was he considered any kind of ladies' man. In fact, his friends saw him as a bit of a reclamation case, a tad eccentric and a slob. The wives of his friends took pity on him and did his laundry.

"I didn't think he was really shopping around," said Joe O'Neill. "He was at the age where it was getting awkward to be a bachelor, but I don't think he thought about it." Bush, he recalled with a laugh, "wasn't exactly presidential timber yet. It took some coaching for us to get the girls to go out with him."

Welch was living in Austin at the time and was in Midland visiting her parents when she finally agreed to meet Bush. It wasn't until a few weeks after the cookout that the O'Neills found out their friends were still in touch. "I was not just surprised. I was shocked," said Jan O'Neill. "They really seemed to be the two most unlikely people to get together."

Welch found they had more in common than they expected – particularly their friends. Three months later, on Nov. 5, 1977, they were married. "In a lot of ways I guess I felt like I'd known him all my life without really having known him that well," Laura Bush recalls.

It was a good thing too, because she had much to contend with during their first year of marriage. They delayed the honeymoon and hit the campaign trail in Bush's white Bonnevill. He promised her she would never make a speech, a promise their friends still laugh about. "Yeah, he lied," jokes Don Evans.

## **A Relentless Drive In a Sprawling District**

---

Bush never missed a chili supper and knocked on more than 60 doors a day in the windswept district, flat and treeless as far as the eye could see. He would often start his week in Midland, drive the 20 miles to Odessa, and then hit the 115-mile stretch north to the farms of Lubbock, rolling into every strip mall along the way.

"The way he focused on what he had to do was extraordinary," Reese recalled. "He didn't relax. He worked all the time."

J. Michael Weiss remembers meeting Bush in a men's clothing store in Lubbock when Bush walked up to a group of men hanging out in the back and started talking. Before Weiss knew it, Bush was inviting

himself to Weiss's law office the next day. He knew the family name and he was flattered – but he never thought he'd see him again. The next morning, there was Bush standing in front of his desk.

"I was just a fella here in Lubbock," Weiss said. "I was honored that he would allocate all that time to the conversation. I agreed to work as his [county] chairman."

On the issues, there was little difference among Bush, Reese and a third candidate in the primary, Joe Hickox, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel. They were conservatives opposed to big government, inflation and anything that would harm the oil patch. Asked once whether he was too closely aligned with the oil industry, Bush replied: "There's no such thing as being too closely aligned with the oil industry in West Texas."

By early 1978, Reese had made Bush's background the main issue. He repeatedly referred to Bush "Junior" (he isn't because he doesn't have Herbert in his middle name) and called him a "liberal Northeast Republican." And he spent considerable time discussing the senior Bush's affiliation with the controversial Trilateral Commission, a group of international political and corporate leaders viewed by many conservatives then as sinister elitists plotting to establish a world government.

In April, one month before the primary, Reagan took the unusual step of writing a letter of endorsement for Reese. His political action committee gave the Reese campaign \$1,000. Before long, the race was being portrayed as an early Bush-Reagan presidential showdown in the state.

Clay Johnson, Bush's old friend from Andover and Yale who came out to Midland to be with his buddy the night of the May 6 primary, couldn't believe the endless accusations against Bush and his father.

"How can you stand it?" Johnson asked his friend, but got no response.

When the votes were counted, Bush had forced Reese into a runoff. At his Midland campaign headquarters, Bush jumped up on a folding chair to thank his cheering supporters. As he stepped down, he spotted Johnson.

"That's how I stand it," he said. "There are some benefits – to have ... people excited about what you're trying to do."

Four days before the runoff, Reese produced a copy of Bush's birth certificate and accused Bush of omitting the fact that he was born in New Haven. A Bush aide insisted it was an error of "punctuation" – not deliberate deception. The brochure had said: "Born July 6, 1946 and raised in Midland, Texas."

In a last-minute letter, Reese again accused "George Jr." of being a liberal Rockefeller-type Republican. And Reagan's PAC plowed another \$2,000 into Reese's campaign, prompting his father to tell The Washington Post the day before the runoff: "I'm not interested in getting into an argument with Reagan. But I am surprised about what he is doing here, in my state. ... They are making a real effort to defeat George."

Lyn Nofziger, a longtime aide to Reagan, said Bush's father complained directly to the California governor about the endorsement. Nofziger said he told Reagan, " 'Governor, we're supporting a guy who supported you.' ... We didn't owe George W. anything. We didn't owe [George H.W.] Bush anything." On June 3, Bush carried only one of the district's 17 counties, Midland, but that was enough to defeat Reese by 1,400 votes. That night, Bush said he and Laura were looking for an apartment in Lubbock, where he had been soundly beaten.

### **Carpetbagging Charges Dog the Yale-Harvard Grad**

---

State Sen. Kent Hance, winner of the Democratic primary, had grown up in Lubbock and gone to college there at Texas Tech University. He picked up right where Reese left off, accusing Bush of being an "outsider" and a dilettante "riding his daddy's coattails."

"George Bush hasn't earned the living he enjoys," Hance said. "I'm on my own two feet and I make my own living."

Bush didn't help himself in his first television ad, which showed him jogging around a track. No one jogs in Muleshoe, Hance and his supporters joked, not unless you're trying to get away from someone.

With the help of friends and his father's contacts, Bush raised \$400,000 – a nice sum for 1978. But his list of contributors – names like that of former president Ford, baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn and film producer Jerry Weintraub – made Bush vulnerable to Hance's charges that outside money was trying to buy the election.

Hance was making headway, and Bush's advisers begged him to go on the attack.

"George ran a nice-guy campaign," recalled Ernest Angelo, who was then a Republican national committeeman as well as the mayor of Midland. "I told him toward the end that you couldn't run a nice-guy campaign. He said, 'That's what Kent is doing too.' Well, sure enough, in the last 10 days Kent Hance unloaded with everything but the kitchen sink."

In a series of radio ads in those final days, Hance contrasted his local roots with Bush's eastern education. While Hance was attending Dimmit High School, Bush was at Andover; while Hance was at

Texas Tech, Bush was at Yale. And on it went.

During a debate 10 days before the election, Hance drawled that his "daddy and granddad were farmers. They didn't have anything do with the mess we're in right now, and Bush's father has been in politics his whole life."

Washington is the way it is, said Hance, precisely because of all those Yale fellas running the place.

In rural corners, talk about the Trilateral Commission and its purported evils wouldn't go away, Evans recalled. "It was everywhere." And it frustrated Bush.

At a Jaycees luncheon in Odessa, Mel Turner, a well-known radio personality, asked Bush whether he or any member of his family was involved in the commission or one-world government. Bush, Turner recalls, turned red and never directly answered.

After the lunch was over, Turner positioned himself by the door to say his goodbyes to the candidates and guests. Bush, he said, refused to shake his hand. "You [expletive]," Bush said as he brushed by.

Turner was a conservative Republican at the time but voted for Hance.

The Bush team tried to counter with its own five-minute paid TV biography. But it was too late. "Once the cat was out of the bag, it was too hard to counter," said Evans.

Bush's undoing came in the final days of the campaign at the hands of one of his own volunteers. A Texas Tech student working for Bush ran an ad in the school paper, inviting students to a "Bush Bash" with free beer.

Hance seized on it. His law partner mailed a "Dear Fellow Christian" letter to 4,000 members of the Church of Christ, accusing Bush of "using tactics to secure votes which do not indicate" good character.

"Mr. Bush has used some of his vast sums of money in an attempt, evidently, to persuade young college students to vote for ... him by offering free alcohol to them," the letter said.

"Maybe it's a cool thing to do at Harvard or Yale," Hance said to a reporter.

Bush had his own information that Hance owned a piece of property near Texas Tech that he leased to a bar patronized by students. His staff begged him to expose Hance as a hypocrite, but Bush refused.

"Kent lives here," Bush told them. "If I win he has to come back to live. I'm not going to ruin the guy in his home town. He's not a bad



person."

In a recent interview, Bush said he now believes he made a mistake in not counterattacking. "I think in retrospect I would have done it differently," Bush said. "I chose not to do it because I thought at the time that people would see the hypocrisy miscalculated, I thought more people knew [about the bar]."

Ten years later, when he became his father's liaison with Christian conservatives, he concluded that he could have just as effectively communicated with those 4,000 church members in Lubbock. By then Bush had undergone his own religious experience.

"He realized he had been ambushed in 1978," said Doug Wead, who worked closely with George W. as an evangelical adviser to the 1988 presidential campaign.

Bush carried only one county, Midland, but in a congressional district that had never elected a Republican, managed to win 47 percent of the vote. He blamed his defeat on "provincialism" – the voters of the district had simply decided they wanted someone from Lubbock. Hance, who became a Republican in the mid-'80s, is now a lawyer in Austin.

After the congressional race, Bush's friends decided that he was ill-suited for the minutiae and tedium of Congress. They began to see him as someone who would thrive in a broader management position. Like CEO of a company. Or governor of a state.

Two years after Bush's defeat, however, his father was elected vice president, and eight years later he became president. Bush decided that he could not run again until his father was out of public office.

*Staff researchers Madonna Lebling and Margot Williams contributed to this report.*

© 1999 The Washington Post Company

[Back to the top](#)

washingtonpost.com	NEWS	STYLE	SPORTS	CLASSIFIEDS	MARKETPLACE				
PRINT EDITION	TOP NEWS	WORLD	NATION	POLITICS	METRO	BUSINESS & TECH	HEALTH	OPINION	WEATHER

**Yellow Pages**