

Bush Bids Fond Farewell To Stomping Grounds On Way To White House

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MIDLAND, Texas — Saying farewell to his home state en route to Washington and his inauguration, President-elect George W. Bush on Wednesday talked about values he learned growing up in this West Texas [community](#) and said those values will guide him in the White House.

Donning a white cowboy hat, Bush, with his wife, Laura, swaggered across the makeshift stage erected downtown on Texas Avenue and basked in the adulation from the hometown crowd. Though he wasn't born [here](#), Bush said he considers Midland his home because it is where he was reared, where he met his wife and where he cut his teeth in the [oil](#) business after earning an MBA from Harvard.

"In that little house on Ohio Street, it was hard to envision the future--two presidents and a governor of Florida. But it really is the story of America," Bush said. "This place shaped my values that will shape the service to our nation."

Despite an unusually cold [day](#) with temperatures in the low 30s, 20,000 people--about one-fifth of the city's population--jammed Centennial Park for a [celebration](#) that featured high school bands and local singers.

For many, it was a time to witness history and a time for the city to relish its place in it.

"It's a great day for Midland," said Mayor Pro Tem Lee Wood.

"This is the biggest day since they discovered oil here," Wood said, adding he hopes the fact that the Bushes grew up here will help Midland become a tourist attraction 📌. "There's a little extra giddy-up in everybody's walk."

Bush moved to Midland as a boy in the 1950s when his father, former President George Bush, was an oil man. Midland sits atop the Permian Basin, an area roughly the size of Ohio with one of the largest oil and natural gas 📌 reserves in the U.S.

The Bushes were known as a close-knit family that regularly attended church and often had barbecues at their home. As a boy, George W. Bush played Little League and attended Sam Houston Elementary School and San Jacinto Junior High School in 7th grade.

Residents say admiration for Bush goes beyond his accomplishments. What's special, they say, is that he hasn't forgotten where he came from.

Scott Skidmore, assistant principal at San Jacinto Junior High, said: "His motorcade passed the school and [Bush] had his hand out the window waving. The kids were really excited. I'm sure at some point we'll do something to honor him in our school's hall of fame."

Teachers and administrators at Midland's Robert E. Lee High School, the alma mater of Laura Bush, then known as Laura Welch, were also expressing pride.

At Lee, Laura Bush, Class of 1964, served on the junior council, yearbook staff and was a homecoming court nominee. On Saturday, the school's marching band will put aside its long-standing rivalry with the band from Midland High School when they play as one unit during Bush's inaugural parade. The 400 members of the combined band raised \$400,000 to pay for their travel 📌 expenses.

"The one-upmanship between the bands gets pretty intense 📌," said Randy Storie, the band director at Lee.

But the level of cooperation between the bands in preparing for the inauguration "has been incredible," Storie said. "The kids are so excited, they are on the top of the roof."

The president-elect, encouraged by his childhood buddy Joe O'Neill, returned to Midland in the 1970s after getting his Harvard MBA. O'Neill introduced Bush to Laura Welch.

Bush started an oil company called Arbusto, Spanish for bush. He launched his political career in Midland, running unsuccessfully for a congressional seat. Residents say they mainly remember him as a family man.

"They were a wonderful family, just like they are now," said Rev. Jan Reed, associate pastor of First United Methodist Church, where the Bushes worshiped. Don Evans, Bush's longtime friend, his campaign manager and his nominee for commerce secretary, as well as his mother-in-law Jenna Welch, are members of the church.

With its oil-based economy and boom and bust cycles, Midland has prepared Bush Washington, residents say.

"Look at the presidential campaign: He took a pretty good beating from [GOP rival Sen. John] McCain, Gore tried to portray him as a guy who is not bright and he went through the post-election roller coaster," said Wood, the mayor pro tem.

"He's a tough man, he exemplifies the Midland spirit," Wood added. "He got knocked down, but he got up and dusted himself off and kept going."

Indeed, Bush said he will draw upon his Midland experiences in Washington.

"There is so much energy here, not just in the ground but in the people of West Texas," Bush said.

"I'm going to take a lot of Midland and lot of Texas with me," he added. "It is here in West Texas that I learned to respect people of all backgrounds, of all walks of life. It is here in West Texas where I learned to trust in God."

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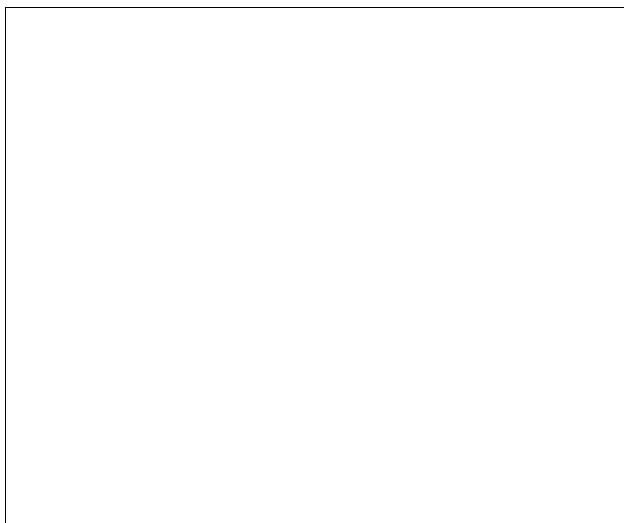
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