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GOVERNOR BUSH'S JOURNEY *A Man Adrift*

After Yale, Bush Ambled Amiably Into His Future

By JO THOMAS

HOUSTON -- George W. Bush left Yale University in the spring of 1968 with a diploma in hand but no plans for what to do with it.

So for five years, not unlike many young men his age, he drifted.

He lived in three states, had at least seven apartments and at least that many girlfriends, held three full-time jobs -- one in business, one in politics and one in public service -- and learned to fly fighter jets with the Air National Guard.

"There are some people who, the minute they get out of college, know exactly what they want to do," he said in a recent interview about what he calls his nomadic years.

"I did not.

And it didn't bother me. That's just the way it was."

These youthful years also contain the gray areas of his biography: periods of unemployment and a hiatus of at least six months in his National Guard obligations while he worked on a political campaign.

And this was a period in which Mr. Bush has seemed to acknowledge



Phillippe Diedrich for The New York Times

George W. Bush lived in an exclusive and lively apartment complex, the Chateau Dijon, top, when he first moved to Houston after graduating from Yale. He also joined the Texas Air National Guard, above, where he learned to fly fighter jets.

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trying drugs, if only by not denying that he did. Although he has steadfastly refused to answer directly whether he used marijuana, cocaine or other illegal drugs, he said last August that he could have passed a 15-year F.B.I. background check when his father became president, apparently ruling out drug use since 1974, but not before.

Of those preceding years, he stood on an earlier answer: "When I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible."

But in dozens of interviews conducted over several months, friends, former girlfriends, neighbors and roommates said they did not recall seeing any signs of drug use.

Indeed, the interviews and an examination of National Guard records create a complicated and sometimes contradictory portrait of Mr. Bush at that time in his life.

Mr. Bush sometimes seemed to inhabit two distinctly different social worlds, on some nights joining poolside parties at the Chateau Dijon, an upscale apartment for young professionals, and on others attending formal dances sponsored by an elite club of 100 bachelors.

He spent more than a year learning to fly supersonic military jets, becoming, by most accounts, among the best in his squadron.

Yet he gave up flying -- and for months on end failed to show up for alternative military duty as he had promised, instead working on the hopeless campaign of a political neophyte running against one of the most powerful men on Capitol Hill.

He counted among his friends people who today say they smoked marijuana back then, and acquaintances say they saw him at a popular nightclub where pot was sometimes smoked. (Mr. Bush says he does not recall going there.) Yet dozens of people who knew him well described him as a conservative who preferred to party with beer. These friends professed to be baffled by the questions of drug use that have cropped up in his presidential campaign.

He went for months without a steady job, and the jobs he held all came from associates of his father. And he seemed to inhabit a series of successively cheaper, less exclusive apartments in Houston, a city that was about to boom on oil money.

Yet friends and acquaintances recalled Mr. Bush as a stable,

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outgoing, hardworking, unpretentious, idealistic young man who cherished his family and was simply trying to figure out how to make his own way in the world, something he would do a few years later as he started his own business and ran for Congress.

At Ease in a Brooks Brothers Suit

Just before leaving Yale, Mr. Bush was accepted into the Texas Air National Guard, thanks largely to the prominence of his family. It was a path that reduced the chance of his being sent to Vietnam. After a summer of basic training, he spent two years on active duty learning to fly, first in Georgia and later at Ellington Air Force Base, near Houston.

Susan Munson, who met him at a poolside rice-and-beans party she held in 1970 and dated him off and on for several years, recalled that he was very good at arguing.

"He was conservative, and he hung around with people who were more liberal," Ms. Munson said. "Most of George's friends were the type who would sit on the floor with torn jeans and T-shirts. They were people who were well-educated and interested in making the world better."

Another woman who dated Mr. Bush at the time remembered him as "very nice, very straight. There was a little tension between the two of us. I was 'little miss liberal.' He was more conventional than people I knew." The woman, a former beauty queen who is now a lawyer living outside Texas, asked that her name not be used.

"There was a lot of counterculture stuff going on," she said, but "I've been mystified by the rumors about drugs. He wasn't using drugs. I thought he was about the straightest person I knew. He was straight in a refreshing way. He had a very good sense of humor. He had an edge, an energy, charisma. He could be wild and go to a party and drink a lot, but he was a very conventional college guy. He could have been a college guy from the early 60's."

Robert H. Gow, a colleague of Mr. Bush's father, who hired young George W. in early 1971 to work at his agricultural and horticultural conglomerate, Stratford of Houston, remembered him as "a presentable, attractive young college student."

"I've heard all this about a wild youth, but I never saw it," he said.

"He was wearing a Brooks Brothers suit. He showed up on time and worked well past five, as we all did."

Mr. Bush was assigned to research small nurseries that Mr. Gow hoped to acquire, a job that occasionally took him to Central America.

His new boss had been an executive at the elder Bush's Zapata Oil Company and a guest at the Bush home.

He gave his young employee a friendly ear.

"George liked to talk," Mr. Gow said. "He was searching for what to do.

He was constantly wanting to talk about what to do with his life."

Houston itself was poised for a boom.

The 1970's would bring 200 corporations and a flood of newcomers that reached 6,000 a month.

As Houston expanded to cover 450 square miles, anything but zoning and mass transit seemed possible.

"It was a big change from what I knew in New England," Mr. Gow recalled.

"One time, possibly at the Bushes', I went to a dinner party where one man was talking about walking on the moon. Another transplanted hearts.

Another was digging for gold in Guyana. George and I were talking about drilling for oil at the bottom of the ocean. My father thought everybody in Texas must be mad."

The Dorm Away From College

On the raw southwestern edge of Houston in the early 1970's, just after the glittering Galleria shopping complex opened, the Chateau Dijon apartments were the place to live if you were young, ambitious and well-to-do.

The complex on Beverly Hill street included a mock French chateau and a web of 300 semitropical garden apartments connected by walkways and set among oak trees and swimming pools. One tenant rented an extra apartment for his wine collection.

Another, an inventor, used his apartment as a lab.

George W. Bush called it home.

The developer built the Chateau Dijon to be beautiful and comfortable and hired Mildred Alexander, a formidable widow with high-society credentials, as the manager who could keep it that way.

"She knew everybody's family," recalled Robert Sakowitz, the department store heir. "If you made too much noise, she'd let you know. It was a bit like a dormitory; it had that kind of feeling."

John W. Link, who lived in the apartments after law school, said, "You could literally have a whole social life without going outside the Chateau Dijon.

You would date different people, and there were groups inside of groups. The guys would have contests: this week, we'll date from only this side of the street."

"Houston was on the edge of the sexual revolution," Mr. Link

recalled.

"It got here, but it didn't quite get here. We were not L.A., not New York. We were all young, trying to make a living."

Former neighbors at the Chateau remembered the youthful Mr. Bush as a "regular guy" who did not try to capitalize on his family name. But the Bush name was hard to miss.

In the fall of 1970, his father ran for the Senate against the father of another Chateau resident, Lloyd M. Bentsen III, a member of a powerful and wealthy Texas family. Mr. Bush worked in the campaign.

"We had Bush banners stretched across the street," remembered Louis Atlas, a neighbor.

"We had banners on our cars. The girls wore Bush scarves."

In an interview, Mr. Bush smiled as he recalled his days at the Chateau Dijon.

"I'm a person who makes friends easily," he said. "It didn't matter whether I'd grown up there and gone to the University of Texas. There were University of Texas people there and a lot of other people. My wife-to-be was living in the apartments, although I didn't know her.

She was at the other end -- I was at the sedate end, of course.

But we had fun. We had a lot of fun."

"All of us had jobs," he added. "It wasn't a bunch of people hanging around." He said he did not remember attending the banana daiquiri parties for which two of his friends were famous. "That was a little sophisticated for me," he said.

"I might have been more willing to drink beer."

Some of the residents of the Chateau, including Mr. Bush, belonged to a social club that was a far cry from beer parties in someone's apartment.

It was the Master's Club, an elite group of about 100 bachelors that held formal dances at local country clubs, allowing its members to keep a toehold in the comfortable, exclusive world in which most of them were raised.

Jim Woodson, the club's organizer and now a Houston real estate executive, got the idea for the name from the golf tournament. The club's parties, he said, offered "a controlled atmosphere.

You knew who was dancing next to you."

Ms. Munson remembers the less formal side of the future presidential candidate, the side that cared little about his appearance, for example.

"George would wear his father's suit coats when he'd throw them away," Ms. Munson said.

"They were obviously his father's suit coats. George wasn't as tall."

"George was interested in people," Ms. Munson said. "He seemed to like to sit around and talk about serious things in a fun way. You didn't get that with most of the guys there.

He knew he wanted to own a baseball team, and he wanted to do politics," she said.

"He wasn't sure how he was going to get to those goals.'

A Frugal, Not Prodigal, Son

In late spring 1971, Mr. Bush moved from the Chateau Dijon to an unfurnished one-bedroom garage apartment at 2039 1/2 South Boulevard, an elegant neighborhood near Rice University.

Donald Ensenat, an old friend, shared this apartment for the rest of that year.

Rosemary Thornton, whose widowed mother, Georgia Corbett, rented the main house at 2039 South Boulevard, said her mother, who was 75 then, liked to sit out on her patio and would banter with Mr. Bush, who "had to walk down her driveway to get to his place."

Mrs. Thornton also recalled her mother's saying: "He doesn't seem lonesome, but you never see him with groups or other people. He's always alone."

In the fall of 1971, after a year of work at Stratford, Mr. Bush quit and was unemployed for the next five or six months. In an interview he said he spent the time flying with the Air National Guard. He was 25.

His father had given up his seat in Congress and was living with his mother in the Waldorf Towers in New York, serving the Nixon administration as its United Nations ambassador.

But according to his parents, there was never any concern about what young George was doing with his life.

In a recent interview, former President George Bush and his wife, Barbara, were both asked whether they worried about their son's nomadic period and both dismissed the question.

"He wasn't aimless," Mrs. Bush said. "I don't know why they say that."

She added: "We never worried about it. That's sort of a fiction-ary thing."

Governor Bush echoed the thought.

"I think they must have had pretty good confidence in their ability to

raise children," he said, "plus they had other children to worry about, too.

A teenager is a heck of a lot harder to raise than a guy who has just gotten out of college."

He added that he did not ask them for financial support.

"I was supporting myself," he said. "I wasn't calling them saying, 'Hey, I'm out of money again,' or 'Help!' I was making a living."

"It's not that hard to get along financially if you don't have a lot of desires," he added, "and I wasn't spending a lot of money. I think my friends will tell you I'm a frugal person. I was not living it up big time."

Even though his parents profess to have had little concern at the time, one of his father's friends came forward in May 1972 to offer him a job.

Jimmy Allison, a former newspaper publisher in Midland, Tex., who had served as a political adviser to the elder Bush, recruited Mr. Bush to go to Alabama to join the Senate campaign of Winton M. Blount, a Republican novice running against a powerful Democratic incumbent, John J. Sparkman.

In a recent interview, Mr. Bush described Mr. Allison, now dead, as "an older figure who served as a mentor in a way, a wonderful friend."

Mr. Blount, a millionaire contractor known throughout Alabama as Red, had served three years as President Nixon's postmaster general but had never run for elective office.

After he announced his intention to run, a newspaper columnist remarked that Mr. Blount must have decided "it's as good a time as any to go over Niagara in a barrel."

Nee Bear, who dated Mr. Bush at the time, said she was struck by how hard Mr. Bush worked for Mr. Blount.

"He wanted to be a hands-on guy," remembered Ms. Bear, who first met Mr. Bush while working on the campaign.

"He put bumper stickers on in the parking lot, and believe me, that is the pits.

At that time in Alabama, people would spit on you if you were a Republican."

Kay Blount Miles, who worked in the office for her father's campaign, remembered Mr. Bush as "funny and fun to be around. He was good at keeping the office up. He worked as part of the team. I never felt he was somebody from the outside coming in."

But it was an uphill battle. Former Gov. George C. Wallace heaped scorn on Mr. Blount for living in a Montgomery mansion with, as

Mr. Wallace exaggerated it, 26 bathrooms. Even President Nixon, a fellow Republican, did not help for fear of angering the powerful Senator Sparkman, even though he was a Democrat.

"President Nixon did not support me," Mr. Blount recalled. "Sparkman was a leading senator, and the president needed his support."

Mr. Bush, who monitored the polls, kept the bad news to himself. Not until Election Day did he warn Devere McLennan, who worked for him and shared an apartment with him, what to expect. "George explained to me we weren't going to win," said Mr. McLennan, who was expecting a victory.

In an interview 28 years later, Mr. Bush remembered the numbers. "We all teamed together and helped Red get about 36 percent of the vote," he said with a short laugh, "in spite of the fact that Nixon had gotten 72 percent of the vote. The ticket-splitting was phenomenal."

When Mr. Bush went to work on the campaign he was still obligated to serve in the National Guard, and accordingly he sought a transfer to Alabama.

His original request, to serve with the 9921st Air Reserve Squadron in Montgomery, was rejected because the unit would not meet his military obligation. He requested another assignment in July, and the Texas Air National Guard recommended letting him serve with another Montgomery group, the 187th Tactical Recon Group, from September to November 1972.

On Sept. 15, 1972, the head of personnel for that unit wrote: "Lieutenant Bush should report to Lt. Col. William Turnipseed, DCO, to perform equivalent training."

Questions about Mr. Bush's military service arose in May when The Boston Globe quoted Mr. Turnipseed, who retired as a general, as saying Mr. Bush never appeared for duty.

In a recent interview, the general took a tiny step back, saying, "I don't think he did, but I wouldn't stake my life on it. I think I would have remembered him. The chances are 99 percent he didn't."

In an interview, Mr. Bush disagreed. "I was there. I know this guy was quoted as saying I wasn't, but I was there."

Emily Marks, who worked in the Blount campaign and dated Mr. Bush, said she recalls that he returned to Montgomery after the election to serve with the Air National Guard.

National Guard records provided by the Guard and by the Bush campaign indicate he did serve on Nov. 29, 1972, after the election.

These records also show a gap in service from that time to the previous May. Mr. Bush says he made up for the lost time in subsequent months, and guard records show he received credit for having performed all the required service.

Young Man Without a Game Plan

Back in Houston, Mr. Bush went to live in a four-unit apartment building at 2910 Westheimer, a busy east-west artery.

His downstairs neighbor, a florist, had a dog and refused to let the landlord spray pesticides, Ms. Munson recalled, and "the roaches were just terrible."

Ms. Bear agreed: "It was little and dumpy, and there were a lot of bugs.

It wasn't a nice place.

He drove a white Cutlass, dirty laundry, tennis shoes, and everything else in the back of his car -- just like a guy.

No Gucci loafers or things like that."

Asked about other women in Mr. Bush's life at the time, Ms. Bear said: "Not that summer. Well, I don't know.

I spent a good deal of time with him. Mr. Lothario I never got the idea that he was. Do you get the impression he's a big romantic? I don't. He never was wolfish. He was a decent guy. He would never be a kiss-and-tell guy. Never."

In January 1973, Mr. Bush went to work for a Houston youth program, Professional United Leadership League, or PULL, set up by John L. White, a former professional football player who knew Mr. Bush's father.

"John had a vision of matching off-season athletes with city kids in the Third Ward, and he wanted me to come work with him," Mr. Bush said.

"It was 27 years ago, so I don't remember the exact incident where John and I met each other, but I went down, and it was a great experience.

"I was coming from the west side of town, and this was in the inner city.

I saw a lot of tragedy, and I saw a lot of goodness. I saw people who really cared about kids. There are some success stories out of that program, and there are some horrible failures, including this one little boy whom he and I had a very close attachment to, named Jimmy Dean, who's dead, shot on the streets of Houston."

Ms. Bear recalled that Mr. Bush "was trying to get a lot of the baseball players from the Astros and professional athletes to come there and show kids there was a way out. He spent time and energy on those children.

He wasn't a dilettante who comes in and says, 'This will look good on my résumé.'

Ms. Bear remembered that he liked simple pleasures. She said she never went to a night club with him.

"We went to the VFW dance hall in Navasota, Tex., where you saw little old ladies dancing with each other in their housedresses and listened to Bob Wills and the Texas Troubadours. He loved it."

It was during this time that Mr. Bush applied to Harvard Business School, a move for which he thanks Mr. White.

"A friend of mine sent me the application, and I really didn't seem to be that interested," Mr. Bush said. "And his attitude was, 'Well, it's a great challenge, and you ought to try it.' "

"So I filled out the application. I don't remember all of it, but I got in, and I wasn't really that excited about going.

I think if you look at my full life, I have never been a person---- I haven't had a game plan. I could put it in the perspective of this race: I've never said, 'Gosh, I'll do this in high school, and then this will lead to that, and I'll end up being president.' Or, 'I will go to Harvard Business School so I can be president.'

"The truth of the matter is, I don't know what I'm going to do next, and it doesn't bother me. I do know I'm going to be the president, at least I think I am. We're about to find out in about four months. But I don't know what's after that. I truly don't."

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