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THE 2000 CAMPAIGN: THE 1988 CAMPAIGN

THE 2000 CAMPAIGN: THE 1988 CAMPAIGN; For Bush, Thrill Was in Father's Chase

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

For months a young woman had been flirting with George W. Bush, resulting in a cash bet among co-workers about whether they would end up having an affair. And now the flirtation had provoked a crisis.

Mr. Bush had told the woman off, humiliating her, and a top campaign official stormed into his office and rebuked him.

"She's hurt," the official scolded, glaring down at Mr. Bush. "You really hurt her."

"Good, good," Mr. Bush replied icily from his chair. "I'm a married man. I'm glad she got the signal."

It was the end of 1987 in Washington, in the decrepit eighth-floor headquarters of Vice President George Bush's presidential campaign. Doug Wead, then a campaign worker who happened to be in George W.'s office talking to him when the confrontation occurred, recalled the episode, along with a senior campaign official who also witnessed it.

Mr. Bush, who had moved to Washington to help his father's campaign, even asked Mr. Wead to stick by when they were on the road and to stay with him in his hotel room until late at night, Mr. Wead said. The aim was to fend off the woman, whose seductive energies Mr. Bush valued so long as they were directed at voters.

"He wanted everyone to know that nothing was happening," Mr. Wead said.

George W. Bush was getting a first-rate political education, and proving his skill in maneuvering through an often treacherous electoral world. He describes himself in those days as having been "a warrior for George Bush," and he became a single-minded one, constantly and sometimes rudely driving home the sole goal of getting his father into the White House.

He learned the importance of a disciplined, loyal and tightly focused campaign. He made sure that campaign officials would be distracted neither by hormones nor by the opportunity to become

media stars.

And as he got his first real taste of national politics, Mr. Bush found that he loved it and was good at it. He also learned from a master strategist, Lee Atwater, how to woo baby boomers and destroy opponents.

Yet one paradox stands out: Mr. Bush immersed himself back then in the practice of national politics while remaining largely oblivious to its substance. Some people get into politics because they feel passionately about certain issues; Mr. Bush's passion in the 1988 campaign was for his father.

"My motivation was, he's been a great dad," he told reporters recently, speaking of the 1988 and 1992 campaigns. He pushed no particular agenda, and no one seems to recall instances when, of his own volition, he pressed for one policy or another.

Likewise, the correspondence between father and son during the Bush presidency, obtained from the Bush presidential library through the Freedom of Information Act, turns up plenty of times when George W. asked his father to send autographs to Texas friends or even to consider particular people for federal jobs -- but virtually none in which he suggests that his father take a particular position on an issue.

All of this paints Mr. Bush not as a political chameleon, exactly, but at least as an ad hoc decision-maker who lacks bedrock passions. Like President Ronald Reagan, Mr. Bush is an amiable leader with tremendous communication skills and limited interest in policy details, but Mr. Reagan had a clearly defined ideology -- he stood for something. Mr. Bush comes across as far more flexible in his beliefs, and it is much less clear what he stands for.

The upshot is that Mr. Bush, in that first encounter with national politics, proved immensely talented at steering his ship to avoid shoals and rough seas, while keeping the passengers content. But he sometimes seemed less concerned with precisely where the ship of state was headed.

Escape From a Drying Well

George W. Bush was drawn into politics in part by his failings as a businessman.

He has sometimes portrayed his year and a half on his father's presidential campaign, in 1987 and 1988, as simply a bid to help his father, and there is something to that. But he had not been active in his father's unsuccessful presidential campaign in 1980. The difference may be that in the run-up to 1988, oil prices had collapsed.

Mr. Bush's oil company in Midland, Tex., had been acquired by a larger concern, leaving him with a fancy salary as a consultant but no company to run. So he accepted a standing invitation from Mr. Atwater to join his father's presidential campaign.

Republican campaign officials were nervous in April 1987 when Mr. Bush settled in a town house

on Massachusetts Avenue and began working in the ratty Bush headquarters at 733 15th Street NW in Washington. He would sit in his bare office, door always open, his cowboy-booted feet on his desk, a wad of tobacco under his lip and a plastic foam cup in his hand as his spittoon.

"The general rule of the campaign staff is to keep as far away from the candidate's family as possible," said James Pinkerton, who had an office across the hall from Mr. Bush's. "You can never win. You can never be as respectful as you need to be, you can never work as hard as you should."

But Mr. Pinkerton and others said they quickly warmed to Junior, as he was called.

"He wasn't just decisive, he was the most decisive person I'd ever met in my life," Mr. Wead said. "He wasn't just energetic, he was constantly on the go, even missing meals. When you came from being on the road with him, you felt something like jet lag."

Yet even then Mr. Bush, the boss's boy, cut himself some slack. He never wanted to spend more than two nights on the road, so the campaign would fly him back from the West Coast so he could spend a night with his wife and daughters, and then fly him out West again. Any other campaign worker asking for such treatment probably would have been laughed at.

Mr. Bush was a consultant and senior adviser, paid \$5,000 a month, according to federal election records, but as he told a Texas reporter at the time, "When your name is George Bush, you don't need a title in the George Bush campaign."

James A. Baker recalled that "he was in a sense his father's eyes and ears." Mr. Baker, President Bush's longtime friend and a cabinet member in the Reagan and Bush administrations, said, "The president knew he could rely on W. to report truthfully on what was going on."

Mr. Bush gradually won friends in the office with his humor and lack of pretension.

"He'd come in to a meeting with a cup" -- his spittoon -- "and stick out his hand with a big smile and say, 'Hi, I'm George Bush, and thanks for what you're doing for my dad,' " said Richard Bond, then the national political director for the campaign.

Mr. Bush won over doubters in part by poking fun at his own role, sometimes calling himself "Maureen" because Maureen Reagan was then notorious in her father's White House for forever telling staff members what to do. He also sometimes mocked those he regarded as the more pretentious associates of his father, like Nicholas Brady, the future treasury secretary.

Of course, spitting tobacco juice and dropping references to his father can be seen as signals of a down-home, rustic style -- or of a dauphin's arrogance. And Mr. Bush, for all his charm, eventually became something of a hit man on behalf of his father.

Mr. Bush once waited at Washington National Airport with Mr. Wead when they spotted an official on the vice president's staff arguing with an airline employee.

They were too far away to overhear the details, but they saw that the official was preening and showing off his leather garment bag and suitcase, which he had decorated with the seal of the vice president. Mr. Wead said he did not recognize the man, but Mr. Bush did, and "was muttering and simmering" in embarrassment.

"When we boarded, this guy was already in his first-class seat reading *The Wall Street Journal*," Mr. Wead recalled. "And Junior kind of flicked his page, and he looked up in fury, as if to say, 'Who would dare interrupt my reverie?' And he saw Junior and recognized him and registered shock, and he was fumbling and saying, 'Where are you sitting?' and 'You should be up here; I'll talk to them for you.'"

"And George W. said: 'No, I don't waste taxpayers' money. I don't waste campaign money. I ride coach.'"

A Testy Trouble-Shooter

In his ghostwritten autobiography, Mr. Bush suggests that one of his main roles was dealing with reporters. But aides say he did little of that, partly because he was too temperamental to be trusted with journalists. He tended to become enraged when he did not like the coverage. Sometimes he yelled or cursed at them because he thought their coverage mean-spirited, and once he strode over to a bewildered television reporter who had just finished his stand-up commentary and lashed out at him for his statements about the vice president.

But Mr. Bush did play a more substantive role in putting out one media fire. It was in the summer of 1987, when rumors began circulating widely, without any particular evidence, that Vice President Bush was having an affair with a longtime assistant.

Mr. Atwater and two other top aides went to the vice president's residence to discuss it with him. They were on the front porch, deeply embarrassed, when Barbara Bush strolled up and asked what everyone was talking about. There was a mortified silence, until the vice president explained.

Peter B. Teeley, then the spokesman for the campaign, remembers arguing against addressing the rumors, for fear of giving journalists an excuse to broadcast them. But Mr. Atwater and George W. insisted that they had to do something, and they concocted a scheme.

George W., a campaign aide recalls, was so adoring of his father that he never doubted for an instant that the rumors were false. And so, with characteristic bluntness, he simply asked his father about them.

"They're just not true," the vice president replied.

Mr. Atwater then leaked the exchange to *Newsweek*, along with George W.'s colorful conclusion: "The answer to the Big A question is N-O." The adultery rumors immediately faded and the issue was defused.

Mr. Bush attended senior staff meetings and poked around in areas ranging from budgeting to convention planning. One role was to give a quick sense of how his father might react to a proposal, and another was to be a "loyalty thermometer," to preach pure dedication to the Bush campaign.

Mr. Bush was also deployed in the field to make speeches and press the flesh, and he impressed campaign officials with his willingness to slog through snow in Iowa and Michigan to meet tiny groups of voters.

"Once I saw a ballroom, and I thought he'd kill me because there were only three people there," recalled Mary Matalin, who was working on the Bush campaign and had overseen the event. "That was in Michigan. But he just shook their hands and talked to them and never said a word to me about it."

As the campaign went on, Mr. Bush increasingly became Mr. Atwater's friend and protector. In the frequent quarrels between the campaign staff and the vice-presidential staff, Mr. Bush was a forceful advocate for Mr. Atwater.

"Basically they were the same kind of people," recalled Sally Atwater, his widow (he died in 1991 of a brain tumor). "They were both high-energy level, from the South, interested in politics, both after the common man. They would always prefer a barbecue over a candlelight dinner."

Mr. Atwater was tremendously skilled at hardball, negative politics, and made good use of that skill in the 1988 campaign. Famously, he tarred the Democratic candidate, Gov. Michael S. Dukakis of Massachusetts, in connection with a state program that had allowed a black murderer named Willie Horton out on furlough; Mr. Horton then stabbed a white man and raped a white woman. Critics complained that the references to Mr. Horton had a racist subtext, although the Bush campaign vigorously denied it.

Aides say Mr. Bush was not much involved in the Horton episode or other mudslinging. Some say he lacked Mr. Atwater's exuberance at bare-knuckled methods. Once, Mr. Atwater rushed into Mr. Bush's office, exultant at finding an old magazine article saying that Mr. Dukakis had once honored a witch. Mr. Wead recalls that Mr. Atwater was thrilled and urged that it be quietly circulated among evangelical Christians to discredit Mr. Dukakis.

"G.W. wasn't excited; he was maybe a bit disgusted," recalled Mr. Wead, who said that the article was duly disseminated among Christian groups. "He wasn't afraid to attack, but I never saw him show any glee in taking people down."

By all accounts, Mr. Bush showed a talent for managing people in the headquarters, reassuring them when they were upset and reproaching them when they were not working hard enough.

"He was the disciplinarian," remembered Andy Card, another aide. "I'm blessed that I never got taken to the woodshed. But if you were a disappointment to the campaign, he would let you know

that you were a disappointment."

One of Mr. Bush's most remarkable abilities, a particularly useful one in politics, is making people think he likes them and approves of what they are saying. He had a knack for melting into any group he wanted. He could speak in salty language with campaign workers one moment and talk about Christ as his personal savior with evangelicals the next.

Mr. Wead recalled flying at night with Mr. Bush and a senator and congressman on a private jet, returning from a campaign appearance. They were relaxing in their seats, facing each other, and the lawmakers were drinking Scotch and sodas and getting steadily more talkative.

"So these guys were telling all these stories about their girlfriends," said Mr. Wead, who was sitting beside Mr. Bush. "And they were talking about where they stashed their girlfriends and telling stories about close moments with wives and journalists. They were saying what they did with their girlfriends, and it got raunchier the more they drank. And George W. was taking it all in and laughing.

"And when they paused, he said, 'I'm a lucky man to have Laura.' And they sort of gulped and looked down at their whiskeys. And one said, 'Let's toast Laura.' And so they toasted Laura right there and then in the plane."

Hello I Must Be Going

Mr. Bush gave the impression of not liking Washington much.

The 1988 election ended in victory for the Bushes, of course, but George W. immediately became impatient to return to Texas. He worked with mounting frustration on the presidential transition - and, aides say, helped kill the prospect that Craig Fuller, his father's chief of staff, would become White House chief of staff.

Mr. Bush complained that Mr. Fuller, among other sins, had been disrespectful to the Bush family, not even returning calls. So instead Mr. Bush pushed for John H. Sununu to get the job -- and Mr. Sununu did. Likewise, Mr. Bush pushed his father to give the job of chairman of the Republican National Committee to Mr. Atwater.

"Once his father won, and he settled in to this transition, he was very unhappy," said Roland W. Betts, a college friend who in early 1989 joined Mr. Bush and other investors in buying the Texas Rangers baseball team. "He did not want to be there. He was looking for 'what am I going to do next?' And that's just when the Rangers came up."

So Mr. Bush returned to Texas to run the Rangers, but he visited the White House periodically and became a trouble-shooter.

"He had a good sense of what wasn't going right," said Alan K. Simpson, an old family friend and senator from Wyoming, "and when things weren't going right, George W. would suddenly be on

the front porch."

In particular, aides say that Mr. Bush became disenchanted with Mr. Sununu and began plotting with them to oust him. In Mr. Bush's account, he virtually fired Mr. Sununu, but that seems to be an exaggeration. Instead, he took soundings and reported to his father -- and also spoke bluntly to Mr. Sununu of the dissatisfaction. Mr. Sununu, instead of resigning as expected, dug in.

"The conversation that George had with John was when John was already under fire," recalled Charles Black, a White House official who himself played a role in the episode. "George didn't 'fire' Sununu. It wasn't the result of that specific conversation. It was a result of a whole bunch of things."

Sorting the Favor File

A stack of Bush administration documents, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, offers a window into Mr. Bush's interests during his father's administration.

The letters between George W. Bush and his father's White House are strikingly mundane. They almost never mention the grand issues of the day; nearly all have to do with paying back favors for old family friends in an old-boy network.

A Texas autograph collector named John W. Dorman, for example, had written to Mr. Bush asking for help in getting the president's signature. So Mr. Bush forwarded it to his father's secretary, with the notation: "Patti -- this guy has been loyal to all Bushes. Thanks, GB."

The record shows that in each case, President Bush sent out the autographs, personal notes and other favors, usually with a plug along these lines: "George, the Texas Rangers man, did indeed pass along your letter." The result was that Mr. Bush gained chits that would be useful when he began his own political career.

Sometimes Mr. Bush also backed particular appointments, invariably citing loyalty as his reason. For example, Donald B. Ensenat, an old Yale fraternity brother and former roommate of Mr. Bush's, recommended Edith Brown Clement, known as Joy, for a federal judgeship. Mr. Bush forwarded the recommendation to C. Boyden Gray, his father's counsel, with the notation: "Boyden -- Don Ensenat is a very good man and good friend of all Bushes. Please give Joy any consideration you can. Warmly, G." Ms. Clement became a federal district judge.

The only item in the archive containing a policy suggestion from Mr. Bush is a 1992 letter to Samuel K. Skinner, who replaced Mr. Sununu as chief of staff, about oil prices. "We have trouble in the oil states," Mr. Bush warned, "because the president is viewed as favoring cheap energy."

In the letter, Mr. Bush suggested that Mr. Skinner meet with representatives of independent oil companies to soothe them and that "a mention in the State of the Union message would help." He added: "Perhaps, the big guy could renew his call for a cleaner America and announce that ----%

of the government fleet will be converted to use natural gas or fuel with farm product additives."

Later that year, President Bush signed into law a bill providing that some new cars in government fleets would use natural gas.

Mr. Bush was far less involved in the 1992 campaign than he had been in 1988. He did some public speaking and stayed in regular touch by telephone with campaign officials, but he did not move to Washington.

"Our campaign obviously wasn't going well, our numbers weren't good, so he, like all of us, expressed frustration," said Mr. Skinner, then White House chief of staff. "He was expressing these frustrations to me, but the phone wasn't ringing off the hook."

Mr. Bush seethed from a distance at the portrayal of his father in the news media and at the way campaign officials blamed one another, leaked secrets and generally ran an undisciplined effort. Mr. Bush has seemed cool to Mr. Baker this year, and some attribute that to resentment at Mr. Baker's slowness in leaving the State Department for the White House in 1992 to help President Bush win re-election.

Yet Mr. Bush may have learned even more from the failed 1992 campaign than from the successful 1988 one.

"I saw them jumping out the windows in 1992 looking for the next campaign," Mr. Bush told reporters last month. "And that influenced me. Yeah, that influenced me. I worry that some may be wanting to be involved in my campaign to enhance their consulting businesses."

One lesson Mr. Bush drew, friends say, is the importance of relying on old friends in a campaign, even over people with more experience. This year, he has surrounded himself with friends who are absolutely devoted to his career, and his leakproof staff has the discipline and harmony of a chorus line.

What Mr. Bush has never picked up, despite having a father in the White House, is a fascination for the intricacies of foreign or domestic policy. Marlin Fitzwater, President Bush's spokesman, recalls that when they met during his father's White House years they would chat about baseball, not government. Mr. Skinner puts it this way: "He was certainly not immersing himself deeply in policy."

Some other presidential candidates, of course, have been even more removed from politics and policy. Zachary Taylor had never voted in a presidential election before the one he won in 1848, and Dwight D. Eisenhower was so apolitical that he had to figure out whether he was a Democrat or Republican in the months before he ran for president in 1952. Mr. Bush was different in that he enjoyed the horse-race excitement of politics, but he was similarly bored by policy debates.

So while Mr. Bush gained an excellent political education under his father, it was focused entirely

on gaining power rather than using it. He came across as a work in progress, relishing the theater of politics, but leaving questions about what he would do with the reins of government if he got hold of them.

Governor Bush's Journey

This is the 11th article of a series about the lives of the presidential candidates. The next installment will look at Al Gore's midlife crisis and the book he wrote to deal with it.

Photos: As the podium cleared on his father's Inauguration Day, George W. Bush seized it for a moment himself. (Angel Franco/The New York Times)(pg. A1); Sally and Lee Atwater and Laura and George W. Bush at an inauguration ball with Mr. Bush's father, the new president. The younger Bush was an advocate of Mr. Atwater's.; George W. Bush, in dark overcoat, with President Bush on Inauguration Day. (Photographs by Paul Hosefros/The New York Times)(pg. A18)

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