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George W's Love-Hate Affair with Yale

By James Carney

George W. Bush has a curious relationship with his alma mater. On Monday, the President delivered a short, light-hearted speech to the graduating students of Yale, where he was class of 1968. It made sense for Bush to be there. He is, after all, a third generation Yalie, and his daughter Barbara made it four generations when she entered as a freshman last year. And yet Bush has spent the better part of the last 25 years scorning the elitism and the intellectual snobbery that he says he encountered at Yale.

Some college friends say that much of Bush's antagonism towards Yale was contrived, an attitude adopted after his Ivy League pedigree was used against him in his failed 1978 bid to become a Congressman from Midland, Texas. Even his friends in Midland would tease Bush about his preppie East Coast ways, especially his habit of wearing tattered penny loafers without socks. It wasn't long before he chucked the loafers in favor of cowboy boots and was vowing that he would never again allow a political opponent — or a business one, for that matter — to portray him as an effete Easterner.

The poor little boy from Texas

But not all of it was an act. I talked to Bush about his college years several times while he was running for President. Early in his campaign, I asked him what it was that bothered him so much about Yale. We were sitting in the back of a minivan on an hour-long drive between stops in Iowa. "I'm not sure how to describe it," Bush said. "I love my friends. One of the reasons why I'm doing well politically is I'm blessed with a lot of people, a lot of friends, who want to help me. I mean, I've got friends all over the country, many of whom I went to Yale with, who, whatever it takes, they want to help. And they'll be there whether or not the polls are up or the poll is down. So that part of the experience was good." Back then, Bush was still prickly about his reputation for being an amiable frat-boy who never cracked a book in college. "There's a great myth about how I didn't go to school," he said, scowling. "You know, I went to school, I studied hard, I learned a lot....There is a certain East Coast attitude ..."

Bush's voice trailed off. We changed subjects, but he came back to the Ivy League. "There's a certain intellectual arrogance," he said. "And it might have been, you know, a 'You're from Texas, therefore,'

attitude that I didn't find very appealing." In other words, Bush felt dismissed as a dumb Texan, and he resented it. Some readers might find the idea a little absurd that someone who counts the Queen of England as a distant relation and whose family is the epitome of the blue blood upper class could feel discriminated against at Yale. But there you have it. "As a matter of fact," Bush continued in the minivan, "I still believe that just because somebody's got an Ivy League title by their name doesn't make them smarter than anybody else."

But Bush didn't want to linger on the discrimination notion for long. "I mean, I have been a happy person," he said. "I wasn't miserable. As a matter of fact, I enjoyed myself."

You, too, can get gentleman's 'C's'

One Bush biographer, Bill Minutaglio, suggests that there was a heaviness about Bush when he was in college, that he felt the "weight" of his legacy at Yale, that living in his father's shadow — and failing to come close to matching his father's academic and sports success — was a burden. "I don't know about that," the younger Bush said. "I'm not sure I felt any weight." Then a grin crept across the face of the once and future president (of DKE and the United States). "I mean, some might argue that I didn't feel *enough* weight." Bush laughed at the memory.

The week before the South Carolina primary, I joined the candidate on a mid-day run. We talked about Yale then, too. He said the university president, Richard Levin, had called him when *The New Yorker* magazine got hold of his college transcript. Levin promised that no one from Yale's administration had released it. I could tell the exposing of his transcript bothered Bush. But I also could tell that he appreciated the way Levin was handling it. Bush's feelings about Yale already seemed to be changing. In the general election campaign, he started mentioning Yale more frequently on the stump. Some thought he was doing it to reassure voters that he had the intellectual heft to be president. But friends said it had more to do with the fact that one of his twin daughters had been accepted by Yale and planned to attend.

On Monday Bush declared, "I'm a better man because of Yale." The bitterness was gone, replaced by humor. Bush has long since realized that the jokes about his limited intellect aren't going to stop. So he's decided to turn them to his advantage. "To those of you who received honors, awards and distinctions, I say, 'Well done,'" he told Yale graduates before breaking into a grin. "To the 'C' students, I say, 'You, too, can be president of the United States.'"

True enough. But it's a lot easier if your last name is Bush.

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