



NEWS

STYLE

SPORTS

CLASSIFIEDS

MARKETPLACE

PRINT EDITION

TOP NEWS

WORLD

NATION

POLITICS

METRO

BUSINESS & TECH

HEALTH

OPINION

WEATHER

Bush Once Pleaded Guilty to DUI

By Laurie Kellman

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MILWAUKEE — George W. Bush regrets driving under the influence of alcohol 24 years ago, but insisted the revelation just days before Tuesday's presidential election will do little to change voters' minds about him.

His campaign spokeswoman, Karen Hughes, told reporters Friday at a news conference on an airport tarmac that Bush has not hid his record. She said the only time Bush was asked whether he has been arrested for drinking and driving, he responded, "I do not have a perfect record as a youth."

She added, "He has made mistakes and has been very forthcoming about those mistakes."

Bush late Thursday said much the same.

"I have been straightforward with the people, saying that I used to drink too much in the past," the Republican presidential candidate told reporters Thursday night.

"I have been very candid about my past. I've said I've made mistakes in the past. People know that. They've thought about that. They're making their minds up now," he added.

The Sept. 4, 1976, arrest was first reported Thursday night by Fox News, based on a report prepared by a local affiliate in Maine. Bush, who was 30 years old at the time, said he chose to keep the incident private to protect his daughters, but his hand was forced by the news media.

He questioned the timing of the revelation.

"I do find it interesting that it's come out four or five days before the election," Bush said during a hastily arranged news conference, his first in months of campaigning. He refused to name his top suspect, saying only, "I have my suspicions."

Tom Connolly, a Portland lawyer and Democratic activist who attended the Democratic National Convention, confirmed Friday to

The Associated Press that he was the source of the report.

Connolly said someone who was in Biddeford District Court when Bush's 1976 case came up was alarmed that it had never been reported and alerted "a public figure" about the case. That person passed the word to Connolly, he said, though he would not name the public figure.

Connolly, who ran unsuccessfully for governor two years ago, said he had been talking about the case at the courthouse Thursday. He said he had confirmed Bush's arrest by obtaining a copy of the court docket – which he gave to a local television reporter.

"It's not a dirty trick to tell the truth," Connolly said, maintaining that Bush should have made the case known a long time ago.

Chris Lehane, a spokesman for Democratic rival Al Gore, denied involvement. "We had absolutely nothing to do with this," he said.

WPXT-TV reporter Erin Fehlau, who broke the story, said the information came from a Portland attorney, who she wouldn't identify.

Fehlau said she looked into the arrest after hearing a rumor at the Cumberland County (Maine) Courthouse.

Hughes said Bush had no other arrests besides the drunken-driving case, and an incident in which he was cited for stealing a Christmas wreath as a Yale student. She said Bush was also involved in a fight for which he was asked to leave a college football game for disruptive behavior.

The Dallas Morning News on Friday reported that Bush was called for jury service in a 1996 drunken driving case in Austin, but was dismissed from the panel before potential jurors were questioned about their histories of drinking and driving.

P. David Wahlberg, the defense attorney who struck Bush from the jury panel, said Thursday that his action followed requests by the governor and the governor's lawyer to excuse him.

Although Bush at first said he would perform jury service, Wahlberg said, the governor's lawyer, Al Gonzales – later appointed by the governor to the Texas Supreme Court – argued it would be improper for Bush to sit on a criminal case in which he might be asked to grant clemency.

Bush said he was not proud of the DUI arrest.

"I oftentimes said that years ago I made some mistakes. I occasionally drank too much and I did on that night," Bush said. "I regret that it happened. But it did. I've learned my lesson."

Aides said Bush was pulled over near his family's Kennebunkport, Maine, summer home after visiting a bar with friends and a family member during the Labor Day weekend in 1976.

Spokeswoman Mindy Tucker said Bush, who had been drinking beer, paid a \$150 fine and lost his driving privileges in the state of Maine for a short period. His driver's license in Texas, where he lived at the time, was not revoked or suspended, she said.

The arresting officer, Calvin Bridges, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview that he recalled driving home from work after midnight and spotting a car slipping briefly onto the shoulder before getting back on the road.

Bush, the driver, failed a road sobriety test and a second test in the police station, registering a 0.10 blood-alcohol level – the legal limit at the time, Bridges said.

Asked about Bush's demeanor, the retired officer said, "The man was, and I say this without being facetious, a picture of integrity. He gave no resistance. He was very cooperative."

Bush, 54, has refused to answer questions about "youthful indiscretions," including whether he used illegal drugs in the 1960s and early 1970s. He continued to avoid specifics Thursday night.

Bush has said he quit drinking the day after his 40th birthday on July 6, 1986.

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[Back to the top](#)

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