

2. GEORGE W. BUSH: THE ALMOST UNANIMOUS CHOICE

The date was March 1, 1999. The year 2000 presidential election was more than a year-and-a-half away. Ten North Carolina state legislators, all Republicans, paid their own way to Austin, Texas, to have lunch with Texas Governor George Walker Bush. The North Carolinians toured the Texas Governor's Mansion while waiting for Bush, who was running a little late, to get back from a visit to a West Texas school.

When George W. Bush finally arrived, he was all friendliness and charm. The Texas Governor was dressed in a formal western style complete with cowboy boots. He stood and talked for more than 90 minutes while the North Carolina Republicans ate their meal. As one of the luncheon guests later put it: "There was not a person in that room who did not leave with energy and commitment to [go] back to North Carolina and work for him."¹

Did George W. Bush recruit the Republican Party to back his candidacy for President in 2000? Or did the Republicans rush to Bush's door en masse, demanding that he grab the reins of the GOP and drive the Clinton-Gore team out of the White House? The most likely answer is that both forces were at work simultaneously. Many Republicans throughout the United States decided on-their-own that they wanted George W. Bush to be the Republican standard-bearer in 2000. Governor Bush and his staff in Austin did everything in their power to encourage this voluntary outpouring of support.

Also helping were the nation's 32 Republican governors. As a group, these GOP governors were more moderate and middle-of-the-road than the conservative Republicans who represented the party in Congress. The Republican governors informally banded together, seeking one of their number to run for President as a mainstream candidate with a record of getting things done at the

state level. Early in the game, the Republican governors settled on George W. Bush of Texas as the best man for the job.

The result was that, by the early fall of 1999, George W. Bush was the runaway leader in the national polls for the Republican nomination for President. In a *USA Today/Cable News Network* poll conducted by the Gallup organization, Bush had 62 percent support compared to just 10 percent for his nearest competitor, former Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole. All the other would-be Republican candidates for President were in single digits.²

Who was this man who, almost effortlessly it seemed, appeared to have been anointed the GOP candidate for President before even one vote was cast in a Republican presidential primary? Was it going to be George W. Bush as the Republican nominee by acclamation? Suddenly it was the newspaper reporters and political columnists who were descending on the Governor's Mansion in Texas, trying to find out who this man was and how he gained such an early lock on the year 2000 Republican nomination for President.³

* * *

George W. Bush was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1946. A few years later his family moved to Midland, Texas, a booming oil town surrounded by lonesome dry prairie and plenty of oil drilling rigs. George W. Bush thus grew up as a small-town boy in West Texas, playing Little League baseball and being paddled for cutting up in class by the principal of Sam Houston Elementary School.

The Bush-for-President campaign worked hard to portray Bush's early life in Midland as something akin to Abraham Lincoln's boyhood in a log cabin. The rough-and-tumble life of a West Texas oil town was said to have given George W. Bush his belief in personal responsibility and the

idea that anyone who worked hard would eventually succeed. Midland was said to be the source of Bush's egalitarianism and his political philosophy of "compassionate conservatism."⁴

Although George W. Bush grew up in Texas, his family roots were planted firmly in New England. His father, George Herbert Walker Bush, was the son of Prescott S. Bush, a U.S. Senator from Connecticut. George W. Bush's mother, Barbara Bush, was a descendant of Franklin Pierce, of New Hampshire, who was President of the United States in the early 1850s.

This New England heritage greatly influenced George W. Bush's education. Instead of attending public high school in Midland, the younger Bush went to his father's New England prep school, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Then it was on to his father's college, Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. A few years later, Bush completed his education at Harvard Business School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

When George W. Bush was a young adult, his father began to pursue a career in Republican Party politics. The elder Bush, George H. W. Bush, served in a variety of appointed positions, such as National Chairman of the Republican Party, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and Ambassador to the United Nations. Then, after serving eight years as Vice President under Ronald Reagan, the elder Bush was elected to the White House in 1988.

George H. W. Bush's service as President of the United States was limited to only one four-year term. Bill Clinton defeated him for reelection in 1992.

As the younger Bush's campaign for President accelerated in the fall of 1999, many observers accused him of being a "princeling." George W. Bush was portrayed as the privileged scion of a notable New England family born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Bush was, after all, the son of a former President and a product of prestigious and exclusive educational institutions such as

Andover, Yale, and Harvard.⁵

But the Bush team skillfully answered back that, at the time George W. was growing up in Midland, his father was just another West Texas oil man. Important government jobs and the White House were all far in the future for the elder Bush. George W. Bush's childhood, with its emphasis on public school and sandlot baseball, was said to be no different than that of most other middle class Americans.⁶

In May of 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, the younger Bush joined the Texas Air National Guard. This permitted him to meet his military obligation with a low risk of ever having to do active duty service in Vietnam. The Air National Guard was a popular way for the offspring of influential Texans to avoid fighting and possibly dying in a messy southeast Asian war.

George W. Bush went to flight school and learned how to fly F-102 jets. At that time, the F-102 was an aging design, almost obsolete, so there was little chance that Bush and his F-102 would be sent on a mission to Vietnam.⁷ Bush spent most of his active-duty military career flying from an air base in Houston, Texas. Following his discharge from full-time military service, Bush continued to fly jets on weekends as a National Guardsman.

Then it was back to Midland, George W. Bush's boyhood home. He married Laura Welch, a local librarian, and set about trying to make money in the Midland oil industry. Bush mainly played the role of "a deal maker, using other people's money to drill for oil.... He'd work with bankers, drilling contractors, and suppliers to put all the pieces together."⁸

No account of the life of George W. Bush is complete without the life-changing year of 1986. Bush celebrated his 40th birthday with a group of friends at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, Colorado.⁹ The celebration included a great deal of drinking alcohol. The younger Bush

woke up the next morning with a heavy-duty alcoholic hangover. On that day, July 28, 1986, George W. Bush gave up alcohol and set to work living his life in a more motivated and directed manner. "If you change your heart," Bush said later, "you can change your behavior."¹⁰

George W. Bush was only moderately successful as a Texas oil man. In the fall of 1986, Bush sold his oil exploration company to a much larger firm based in Dallas, Texas. The deal rescued Bush financially, it was said, and provided him the money he would use later to become managing partner of the Texas Rangers professional baseball team.

In addition to business experience, the younger Bush also was gaining political experience. In 1978 he ran for the U.S. House of Representatives from Midland. He won the Republican primary but lost in the general election to a Democrat. Then, in 1988, George W. Bush jumped into the elder Bush's presidential election campaign as an all-purpose campaign assistant. The younger Bush got an inside view of exactly how a winning campaign for elective office can be put together.

Following the 1988 presidential election, which put the elder Bush in the White House, George W. Bush set to work on the most important business deal of his life. He organized a group of investors to buy the Texas Rangers major league baseball team. Bush was designated to take charge of the day-to-day management of the organization. The team did well under Bush's direction, both financially and on the baseball diamond. The younger Bush "parlayed a \$606,000 investment into \$14.9 million when he sold his share in the team in 1998."¹¹

In 1994 George W. Bush decided to make political capital out of his record as the head man of one of the nation's most successful sports teams. He ran for Governor of Texas against Ann Richards, a popular Democratic incumbent who was initially regarded as a sure bet for reelection. Bush ran a tightly controlled campaign in which he focused on a limited number of campaign issues.

Bush climbed slowly but steadily in the polls and, on election day, defeated Richards by a wide margin. In 1998 Bush was easily reelected Governor over a relatively unknown Democratic opponent.

As the race for the year 2000 Republican nomination for President got underway, George W. Bush began by demonstrating an unusual talent for raising money. He gathered around him a group of the top fund raisers in the Republican Party, whom he nicknamed "the Pioneers." Each "Pioneer" pledged to raise a minimum of \$100,000 in campaign money for George W. Bush for President. The money had to be raised in \$1,000 increments, because U.S. law limits presidential campaign contributions to \$1,000 per person.

As early as the spring and summer of 1999, the Bush fund raising apparatus was making headlines. By July 1, 1999, the Bush money machine had raised more than \$36 million, a record for having so much money in the campaign bank at such an early date. Even more astounding was the fact that Bush had raised more funds than all of his Republican competitors combined.

The Bush campaign exploited this news, scheduling a press conference for George W. Bush himself to trumpet the favorable monetary results. "I am humbled by the response," Bush told the stunned reporters. "I am, as you can imagine, amazed at the outpouring of support."¹²

Exactly as the Bush campaign intended, Bush's outstanding prowess at raising money led to widespread press speculation that other Republican candidates soon would become cash starved and start dropping out of the race. It was duly noted that campaign contributors are similar to financial investors. They put their money where they think it will pay off with a big victory, in this case the Republican nomination for President.

By the summer of 1999 political reporters were already warning that a number of GOP candidates were soon going to fall by the electoral wayside because of lack of funds. *U.S. News & World Report* speculated:

"Perennial presidential wannabe Lamar Alexander is barely staying afloat, his campaign so broke that he laid off four campaign workers.... Elizabeth Dole could run out of cash before the leaves turn. And the financially malnourished campaigns of [U.S.] Representative John Kasich of Ohio and family-values candidate Gary Bauer will probably crash even sooner."¹³

The fall of 1999 arrived and George W. Bush was being distinguished by the stature of the Republican candidates he had driven out of the race. The early dropouts included former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander, former Vice President Dan Quayle, former Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole, and conservative newspaper and television commentator Patrick Buchanan. In all four cases, it was the inability to keep up with George W. Bush in terms of fund-raising that led to a major candidacy coming to an early demise.

George W. Bush clearly had won the "News Media Candidate Evaluation and Promotion Period." Other names for this period prior to the presidential primaries and caucuses include "The Exhibition Season" and the "Prehistory of the Nominating Process."

Whatever it is called, it is that unstructured period when would-be presidential candidates raise money, tour the country, and hold press conferences on subjects of current interest. The purpose of all this candidate activity is to attract the attention of the news media and get plenty of press coverage. A candidate wins the "News Media Candidates Evaluation and Promotion Period" when the political reporters give the candidate the most newspaper stories and television news interviews that present him or her in a favorable light.

Suddenly it was January of 2000, with the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary looming on the political horizon. The Republican race was down to only three credible contenders, with George W. Bush viewed by the news media as being way out in front. Bush was particularly ahead in terms of money raised. Next-in-line, but actually very far back, was U.S. Senator John McCain of Arizona.

McCain was a U.S. Navy jet pilot who was shot down in the Vietnam War and was held as a prisoner of war in Hanoi. Following his liberation and return to the United States, McCain entered Republican Party politics in Arizona and eventually was elected to the U.S. Senate. Colorful and charismatic on the campaign trail, John McCain was a genuine war hero with a significant national following.

The third contender in the year 2000 race for the GOP nomination was Steve Forbes, who had run unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination in 1996. Forbes was a millionaire magazine publisher who worked in New York, where he put out *Forbes* magazine, but lived in New Jersey, where he owned a large country estate. Forbes had never held political office, but he was willing to plunge large amounts of his personal fortune into the contest with George W. Bush and John McCain.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 2:

1. Dan Balz, "The Bandwagon Builds," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, March 15, 1999, pp. 6-7. Peter Grier, "Inside Story Of The Ascent Of Bush," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 21, 2000.

2. "Bush Maintains Lead Over Rivals From Both Parties," *USA Today*, September 16, 1999, p. 6A.

3. Dan Balz, "Back To Smoke-Filled Rooms?: This Year's GOP Presidential Campaign Is

Reinventing The Primary Process," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, August 16, 1999, p. 11.

4. Kenneth T. Walsh, "The Man From Midland," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 7, 1999, pp. 18-21.

5. Lois Romano and George Lardner, Jr., "A Son Follows In His Famous Father's Footsteps," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, August 9, 1999, p. 9.

6. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Values Grown In The Conservative Soil Of West Texas," *New York Times*, May 21, 2000.

7. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Bush's Choice In War: Devoid Of Passion Or Anxiety," *New York Times*, July 11, 2000.

8. Kenneth T. Walsh, "The Man From Midland," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 7, 1999, p. 20.

9. Lois Romano and George Lardner, Jr., "The Unlikely Candidate: George W. Bush's Struggle With Drinking Problems Began His Road To Success," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, August 9, 1999, p. 6.

10. "George W. Bush," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, July 31-August 7, 2000, p. S8.

11. Kenneth Walsh, "A Lone Star Legacy," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 15, 2000, p. 16.

12. Jill Lawrence, "Bush Breaks Fund-Raising Record," *USA Today*, July 1, 1999, p. 10A. Also see Susan B. Glasser, "George W. Bush's Dash For Cash," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, April 19, 1999, p. 10.

13. Sheila Kaplan, "When The Money River Runs Dry," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 28, 1999, p. 24.