

BEHIND THE BASINGER-BALDWIN BREAKUP

JANUARY 29, 2001

People

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All about the **NEW FIRST LADY**

She loves Tex-Mex,
singer Van Morrison
and drugstore makeup.
The surprising world of
LAURA BUSH



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The First Lady Next Door

A small-town girl with no consuming passion for politics, Laura Bush brings to the White House unaffected charm, quiet humor and a confident personal style



On Christmas Day at a family luncheon 19-year-old Jenna Bush came down with a stomachache. By late afternoon, as the pain intensified, Laura Bush and her daughter, escorted by a half-dozen Secret Service agents, were rushed by private car to nearby St. David's Hospital. There, after a white blood cell count confirmed their suspicions, doctors ordered that Jenna be wheeled to a second-floor operating room where they administered anesthesia, made an inch-long incision and removed her appendix.

And so it came to pass that on the Christmas night at the close of one of the most harrowing American elections ever, the next First Lady of the United States was not kicking up her heels at some lavish soiree or even putting her feet up back at the ranch. Instead she spent the night under a quilt and rose-colored sheets on a fold-out sleeper sofa in St. David's suite 503, by the side of one of the college-age twin girls who still call her Mama. That display of devotion surprises no one well-acquainted with Laura Welch Bush, 54. "Basically what we have always been are mothers, and our children always come first," says Lynn Munn, 57, a Midland, Texas, energy consultant's wife who has known her for more than two decades. "I would have been amazed had it been any other way."

The new First Lady likes Irish singer Van Morrison and salt-rimmed margaritas on the rocks but is also a self-described introvert who, she says, is "interested in politics because my husband is involved in politics." She holds a

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAM FRANCIS





"Whatever Laura does will be done quietly and with great taste," says Nancy Reagan's former press secretary, Sheila Tate, of the incoming First Lady (with Spot on the porch of the Texas governor's mansion).

graduate degree in library science but has not yet mastered the computer. And when her husband met recently with National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney at the Bush's 1,600-acre ranch in Crawford, Texas, she retreated to the kitchen to whip up a batch of chili. In short, as her husband, George W., 54, once said, "I have the best wife for the line of work that I'm in. She doesn't try to steal the limelight."

Distanced skeptics wonder if her traditional 1950s persona might be a bit calculated. "Laura Bush crafted this image," suggests Pat Schroeder, former Democratic representative from Colorado. "Who could be angry at a librarian and educator, someone who never stepped outside the bounds?" But in fact, Laura is no Stepford wife. Says *Houston Chronicle* columnist Julie Mason: "People who dismiss Laura Bush as a mousy librarian are missing her key role. She's the iron rod at her husband's back. She keeps him from going too far off the deep end when he gets all caught up in his cock-of-the-walk behavior."

True, the woman who calls the President-elect "Bushie" in private was overheard telling him to "rein it in, Bubba," when he took to pontificating on the campaign trail. But she tends to deliver her barbs with a wry smile. "She has a dry sense of humor, sly, not a knee-slapper," says a friend. "We were laughing about the downside of running for President, and she decided that she probably survive it if 'John Goodman doesn't play me'" on *Saturday Night Live* (as he did Linda Tripp).

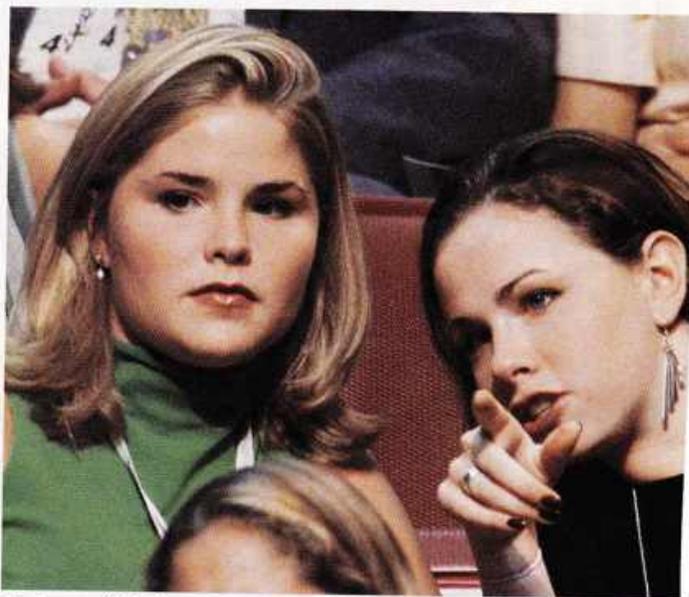
Others insist that Laura—for whom housecleaning is a relaxation technique and who once organized books in the couple's bedroom using the Dewey decimal system—is also a down-to-earth woman who has never strayed far from her middle-class Texas roots. "I can tell you this," says her friend Bill Bostelmann, a Fort Worth event planner, "Laura much prefers riding around in my old white Ford pickup truck than a Suburban. My friends tell me, 'I can't believe you get Laura Bush in that truck!' But this is a girl from Midland."

So what kind of First Lady will this unpretentious Midland girl make? Certainly not one as polarizing as Hillary Clinton, who pushed her own political agenda during her husband's tenure. "What America wants in a First Lady is someone who has maternal warmth. We don't want Madonna in the White House," says Charlotte Hays, editor of the conservative *Women's Quarterly*. But the country also undoubtedly wants a First Lady with a mind of her own, and while Laura Bush "won't go into it gangbusters, she is somebody who's going to have some kind of activist role—even if it's behind the scenes in education reform," says author Carl Sferrazza Anthony, referring to her pet causes of literacy and learning.

By the time the Inaugural parade is over on the afternoon of



CHARLES DIMANN/REUTERS



KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

Their mom "lets them just be who they are," a friend says of twins Jenna (left) and Barbara (at the GOP convention in August).



"I have the advantage [of] a mother-in-law who was a wonderful First Lady," says Laura (with George W.'s parents at the governor's mansion on Nov. 7).

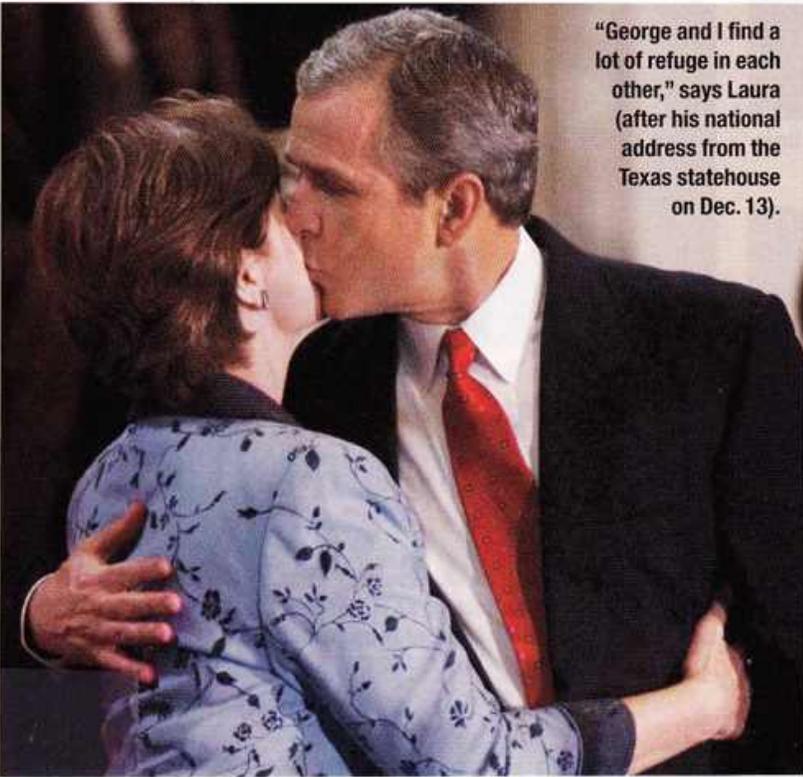
Jan. 20, Laura Bush and her family will go to their new home where "their clothes are in the closet, furniture is where they designated, and we have their favorite foods and snacks in the pantry," says White House Chief Usher Gary Walters. From that moment on she will be at the helm of a 25-person staff and a domain of some 150 rooms, with which she is not entirely unfamiliar. Thanks to her father-in-law's four years as President, Laura has already slept in the Lincoln and the Queen's bedrooms and still trades Christmas cards with many of the staff who waited on the elder Bushes.

But there will be changes. Across from the antique-filled bedroom she will share with her husband of 23 years, Laura will likely set up quarters where fraternal twins Jenna and Barbara can crash when they're home from the University of Texas and Yale, respectively. She'll also find a niche for George W.'s 250 baseballs (signed by such superstars as Ted Williams and Willie Mays) and baseball cards, which he began collecting in boyhood by sending them to famous players and rookies and asking for their autographs. And she will also surely stock the small second-floor kitchen installed by Hillary Clinton with Diet Coke and her husband's favorites, egg salad and peanut butter and jelly.

To help her, Laura will bring along Fort Worth interior designer Ken Blasingame, who spruced up the Texas governor's mansion for Christmas with a life-size cowboy Santa on the front porch. Her style, which includes sisal rugs and blue-green upholstered contemporary furniture at the Crawford ranch house, will not be fancy or ostentatious, says artist Pamela Nelson, 54, a close friend since junior high. The Bushes, she maintains, "aren't into materialism. Laura said that the White House already has everything as far as furniture. She said that at first all they were going to pack is their clothes and pets." (The pets include cat India as well as Spot, a springer spaniel, and the family's new puppy, Barney, a gift from New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman, Bush's choice to head the Environmental Protection Agency.)

When the First Couple do entertain, it's likely to be an informal affair. "I think we'll see lots of Tex-Mex, lots of grilling and barbecuing," says sister-in-law Sharon Bush, 47, wife of George W.'s younger brother Neil. Indeed, Laura didn't throw a single black-tie event during her five years in the governor's mansion. Instead friends recall tailgate parties and a Christmas bash last month at which the state's first lady was seen leaning against a sideboard in the yellow back parlor, munching on chicken tenders with cream gravy dip, sipping white wine and chatting with reporters about their kids. Three years ago Laura held her high school reunion at the mansion. "Well, it absolutely poured, and the reception was [in a tent] on the lawn," says Peggy Weiss, 54, a restaurant owner and one of a handful of nearly lifelong women friends who make up Laura's inner circle. "We took off our shoes and danced to all our favorite '60s and '70s songs until well past midnight."

For public appearances her personal style will



"George and I find a lot of refuge in each other," says Laura (after his national address from the Texas statehouse on Dec. 13).

ERIC GAYNE



"I was an only child, probably slightly lonely," says Laura (at Christmastime, 1950, at the Welch family home in Midland).



In 1965 Laura (right) packed with her friend Candy Poage for their trip to college at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.



"She's a very sympathetic person," says Jenna Welch (with her daughter and husband Harold at Laura's college graduation in '68).



"It's really what I look back on as one of the sweetest times," says Laura (as a new mother with her twins in Midland in 1982).



In-laws (from left) Marvin, Dorothy, Neil, Columba and husband Jeb, Barbara, George the elder, and George W.'s grandmother Dorothy Walker Bush flanked the couple at their 1977 wedding.

be just as low-key. "I've never really been that interested in clothes," she told PEOPLE in November 1999. "Before I had the job as the first lady of Texas, I wore jeans, pants and T-shirts. I had very few clothes. So I got a new wardrobe—suits, jackets, skirts and pant sets." At the ranch she wears fitted shirts over jeans and relies on Dallas designer Michael Faircloth for working wear: simple suits in bright colors with high armholes and lots of buttons, to prevent "jacket gap." Beyond that "she's very opinionated and very strong-willed," says Faircloth, whose design portfolio includes new uniforms for the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders. "I'll suggest things like maybe a cardigan with a scarf tied around the neck, and she'll say, 'No, Michael.' She sees it as unnecessary and frivolous." On visits to Austin's Anne Kelso Salon, Laura bypasses the \$50 Sea Salt Body Polish and \$75 Moor Mud Wrap for traditional pedicures "in the red or pink categories," says pedicurist George Eitt IV, who was recommended by her daughters. For makeup she continues to rely on drug-store Cover Girl. Still, she has made a few concessions to her new higher profile: She organizes her shoes by color (in their original boxes) and has begun scanning photographs of her clothes into a computer to keep track of her outfits.

said. Perhaps, as a result, "I felt very obligated to my parents. I didn't want to upset them in any way," Laura, who took her mother on a bird-watching trip to Belize in 1999, confided to a *New York Times* reporter last July.

In high school Laura and her pals would cram into a car and head for Agnes's, a local drive-in. "There were at least five girls in the car every time we went out [cruising]," says Weiss. "We liked Kent cigarettes and would be down on the floor in the back of the car smoking. Oh, we all stopped smoking eventually. But in college we used to sit out by my swimming pool and play bridge and smoke and drink Coke. Laura was excellent at bridge." She also had a huge record collection, and when another close friend, Regan Gammon, 54, wife of the owner of an insurance agency, got a treasured copy of *Meet the Beatles*, "we played that album over and over again," says Weiss. "Regan liked Paul, I liked John, and I think Laura liked all of them."

Looking back, Laura said in an earlier interview, "I was lucky to have a very normal childhood in a small town where people felt very free to do whatever we wanted to do. We were sheltered in this freedom in a way that maybe we didn't understand." But sometimes life—and death—intruded. In

During off-hours in the private living quarters the Bushes can be expected to keep to their normal morning routine, which includes the President rising at 6 a.m. to feed the pets and make coffee for his wife. In the evenings the family watches "action films, but the girls and I [also] like movies girls like," she said. "We really liked *Elizabeth*." Sports are another staple. "We watch a lot of football and baseball," she added. "Sadly I don't have a lot of other hobbies except for reading." And unlike the night owl Clintons, "the Bushes go to bed by 10 p.m., always, with Laura reading a good novel [favorite authors include John Graves and Dostoyevsky] and George W. will be asleep or watching a tape-delay baseball game he missed," says *Washington Post* society reporter Roxanne Roberts. "They're going to be just like your next-door neighbor. The President and his wife."

It was a role Laura Welch could scarcely have imagined growing up in the West Texas oil town of Midland as the daughter of Harold, a home-builder who died in 1995, and his wife, Jenna, now 81, who kept the books for his company. As a little girl Laura showed an early predilection for orderliness, lining up her dolls and pretending to teach them. "She liked to cook, as all little girls do," her mother remembers. "She enjoyed making cookies, muffins and things, and she's pretty good at casseroles. But the main interest we've always shared is books." By the time Laura was born, Jenna had suffered several premature births and miscarriages. "I was very aware that my parents wanted other children and were disappointed that they didn't have any," Laura

the courtyard of Midland's Robert E. Lee High School stands a Civil War style cannon, its wheels now rotting, dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. W.T. Douglas in memory of their son Michael Dutton Douglas. On Nov. 6, 1963, two days after her 17th birthday, Laura, driving a Chevy sedan, didn't see a stop sign at an intersection and ran into a Corvair. She didn't realize at first that the driver was her close friend Mike Douglas, 17. A track star whose father had been following him in another car, Douglas suffered a broken neck and died at the scene. Laura was never charged.

"That was hard. But I mean it's sad that it happened and that it was reported," Laura told PEOPLE. "Laura took it really hard," says Midland accountant Robert McCleskey, 54, a friend since childhood. "Nobody here held it against her. She didn't totally withdraw from everything, but it took some time to get over it. She kept going to school. She had a good circle of friends to support her. She didn't change in any way that I could tell."

A year later Laura Welch left the three-bedroom brick house on Humble Street for Southern Methodist University in Dallas, where she wore bell-bottoms and peasant shirts like the rest of the girls and "her room was always the central headquarters for fun," says Susan Nowlin, a former Kappa Alpha Theta sorority mate. "She was never one to tell people, 'I have to study, so everyone has to leave.'" At times, adds Nowlin, her friend was a cutup. "One day Laura says, 'I need to practice my Miss America wave.' We all started laughing and asked her what she was talking about. She laughed and said, 'You just never know when it will come in handy.' She put her hand up in the air, middle fingers together and moving it in a mechanical motion. Now when we see her on television before she gets into a car or as she walks to the stage, we'll scream, 'Look! She's doing her Miss America wave!'"

Before going on to her master's degree in library science in 1973, she taught at Houston's John F. Kennedy Elementary, where Larry Gatson, 38, owner of a cleaning business, had her as his second-grade teacher. "The kids really did love her," he recalls. "She'd go outside and play with us. If you had problems on reading and spelling, she'd take a little more time with you." Her dates were mostly with young men "who were really bright," says her friend Pamela Nelson. "She wouldn't waste her time with anyone who wasn't serious about their future and studies." It wasn't until 1977 that she reconnected with a boy she'd known vaguely in



Laura (with, from left, pals Jane Ann Fontenot, Regan Gammon, Peggy Weiss and, front, Marge Petty) took a '96 rafting trip in Utah.

Midland's First United Methodist Church, "it was like Audrey Hepburn walking into the Animal House," says George's brother Marvin, 44. "Here was this bright, cerebral, lovely human being—a very serene-type person—coming into this chaotic environment known as the Bush household." But she soon settled her new husband down—in 1986 he stopped drinking. Today she refers to their twins' birth as the turning point in their lives. "I was 35 when I finally had Barbara and Jenna," she said, "so we never took our children for granted. Ever."

To this day "one of her favorite memories was when she and George would be lying in bed and reading all of the papers early in the morning, and the girls would wake up and pile into bed with them," says Nelson. "She'd say, 'Those were the happiest times, just having those babies and that luxury of time together.'"

There will be precious little of that in the next four years—no sunset walks with George W. through fields of native grasses on their Texas spread and not much chance to share chiles rellenos with girlfriends at Guero's Mexican restaurant in Austin. Yet if history serves, Laura Bush will make the most of her situation. And though her husband may be forever shadowed by the extraordinary circumstances that brought him to the White House, few seem to quibble with his roommate at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

"I just know what I feel when I see or hear her," says Nellie Connally, 81, widow of the late Texas Gov. John Connally. "I could be offtrack. But I think we're gonna be lucky to have her."

• Susan Schindehette
 • Jane Sims Podesta in Washington, D.C., Bob Stewart in Midland, Laurel Calkins, Anne Lang and Hilary Hylton in Austin, Gabrielle Cosgriff in Houston and Chris Coats in Dallas