

His party-boy days behind him, his weighty legacy now more blessing than burden,  
George W. Bush gets ready to rumble

# Here Comes the Son

Wine flowed freely at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs that late July evening in 1986. And why not? George W. Bush and a handful of close friends had gathered to celebrate an auspicious occasion—their 40th birthdays. The next morning, when Bush awoke for his daily run, he was in the throes of a hangover. It was a condition not totally unfamiliar to him. All his adult life, Bush had been known as a genial, sometimes rollicking party guy with a fondness for alcohol.

But as he ushered in his fifth decade, the oldest son of George Herbert Walker Bush, the nation's sitting Vice President, was reeling from more than a night of overindulgence. Plunging energy prices had brought his oil-exploration business to the verge of collapse. But he had to admit his social habits were overtaking him. "I realized that alcohol was beginning to crowd out my energies," he told *The Washington Post*, "and could crowd, even-



"I welcome strong women in my life; it starts with my mother," says Bush of Barbara (with his father). "She was a huge influence."



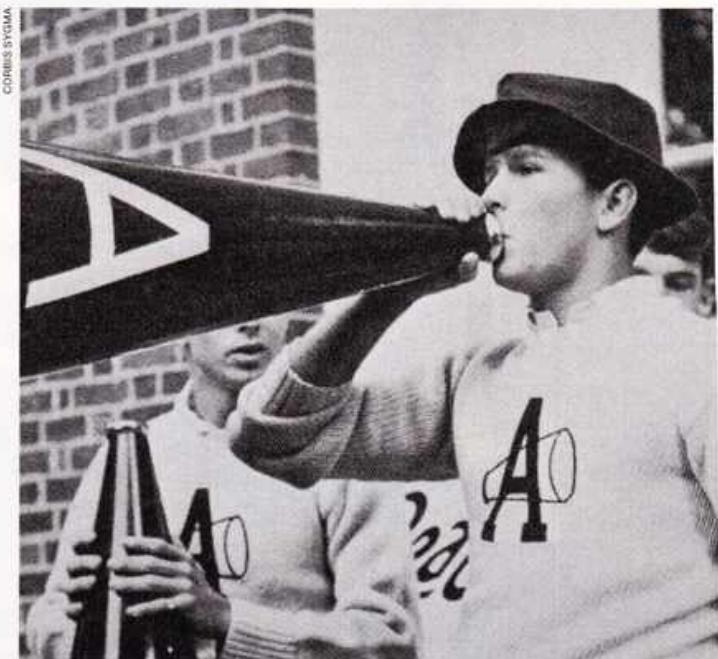
tually, my affections for other people." So on July 28, the day after his revel at the Broadmoor, Bush gave up drinking. He hasn't touched a drop since. "He realized he had a drink a day for a lot of days, and he didn't want to be like that," says Laura, his wife of 22 years. "There were other reasons. His dad was thinking about running for President. George had also been in this Bible group with men, and I think that helped."

Whether Bush intended it to become so or not, that day is seen by some as a turning point in his life. Indeed, though he seemed to follow dutifully in his father's early footsteps—from prep school to Yale to the oil business—the young George Bush had become known as a feckless frat boy with mediocre grades and a puckish need to tweak the Eastern elite at Harvard Business School by chewing tobacco and wearing his National Guard flight jacket to class. As for the first two decades of his working life, they were desultory at best. "I never had a game plan," he admits. But in his early 40s, he seemed slowly to emerge as more serious and disciplined. His business luck also improved; helped in part by his name and connections, he would eventually rid himself of the oil company and turn a relatively small investment in the Texas Rangers baseball team into a handsome fortune. That, in turn, would serve as a stepping-stone to two terms as governor of Texas.

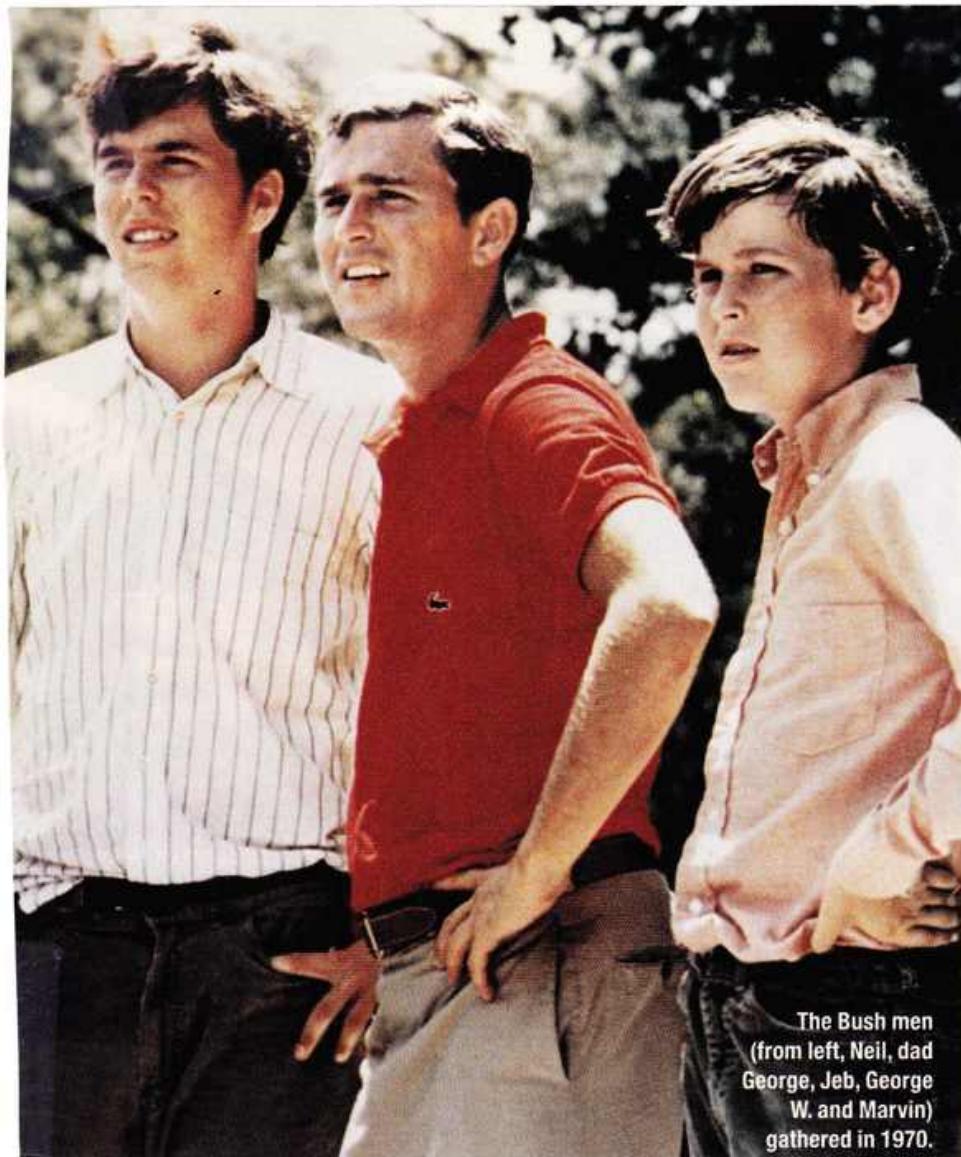
As he is formally anointed at this week's Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, Bush, now 54, faces the most serious test yet of his transformation—a bid for the Presidency. He doubtless takes some delight in the fact that he has enjoyed a consistent—if sometimes narrow—lead in the polls against Vice President Al Gore, the junior partner of the very man from Arkansas who evicted his father from the White House eight years ago. But Bush—often called W to distinguish him from his father—quickly deflects any suggestion that he's out to reclaim the family honor. In fact he says his father was pleased by his decision to run but has not pressed him during the campaign. "He said, 'Listen, son, I love you whether you run; I love you whether you don't run,'" says Bush.

Of greater concern was his own home front. "I was worried about what effect this decision would have on my family," he says, referring to Laura, 53, and their twin daughters, Jenna and Barbara, 18. "What clinched it was realizing that my family would endure. Second, I believe an Administration can change a tone in Washington. It needs somebody who can lift this country's spirit." Bush seems to be making his case despite some early blunders: his murky response to rumors that he used drugs as a young man; a chummy campaign visit to Bob Jones University, known as a bastion of racial and religious intolerance; and a well-publicized failure to identify several world leaders for a reporter.

Of course the real race is just beginning, and Americans will soon focus on where Bush stands on pivotal issues. In selecting as his running mate former Wyoming Rep. Dick Cheney, 59, Bush has chosen a well-liked Washington insider who not incidentally was his father's Secretary of Defense. A conservative, Cheney is against abortion rights but believes the party should be accommodating to those who are pro-choice. With vacant Supreme Court seats looming in



"The year we roomed together was certainly the most entertaining one I spent there," an Andover pal says of W (in '64).



The Bush men  
(from left, Neil, dad  
George, Jeb, George  
W. and Marvin)  
gathered in 1970.

the next decade, abortion will prove a tricky battleground for Bush, who hopes to woo women and swing Democratic voters while opposing abortion except in cases of rape, incest or to save a mother's life. Bush supports the ban on automatic weapons but opposes mandatory gun registration. As for the death penalty, 139 people have been executed during his six years as governor, more than twice as many as in any other state over that period. Still, Bush campaigns on the theme of compassionate conservatism. "I do have a deep, abiding compassion for America," he says. "I don't want people left behind."

Message aside, Bush so far is winning the day with a combination of warmth, humor and accessibility that contrasts with Gore's famous woodenness. Even opponents acknowledge W's magnetism. "Bush's greatest strength is a remarkably charming and disarming personality," says Paul Begala, a former Clinton aide who is now a professor at Georgetown University. "Showcasing that with the press is a wise thing. It also exposes his greatest weakness—his lack of depth, his lack of intellectual curiosity. I'd love him for a neighbor but never as President." Democratic strategist



"The most important job I'll ever have is to be a dad," says Bush  
(at home in Dallas in '88 with Laura, Jenna, left, and Barbara).

Jennifer Laszlo agrees that people are swayed by Bush's down-home appeal but argues that "the downside is his record." She notes, for instance, that he "signed a bill allowing people to bring concealed guns into churches" and cites a U.S. Bureau of the Census survey indicating Texas has the highest percent of children without health insurance.

In contrast, intimates tout such studies as a Rand report showing impressive recent gains in student achievement scores in Texas, and they portray Bush as an amalgam of style and substance. His brother Neil says W combines the best traits of their father and their immensely popular mother, Barbara, 75. "He's got Mom's wit and caring," says Neil, an entrepreneur. "And he's got Dad's political and management instincts. Dad's a very able leader, and George has that quality. But he's got Mom's personality traits—and this isn't a put-down of Dad—that make him a little easier for people to relate to."

Their father, now 76, was still at Yale when George Walker Bush was born in New Haven, Conn., on July 6, 1946. Two years later the family moved to Texas, where the elder Bush took a trainee job with an oil-service company. In 1953 he started his own oil business, and the Bushes prospered, eventually settling into a sprawling house in Midland. But that same fall, eight months after the birth of W's brother Jeb, now 47 and governor of Florida, a sor-

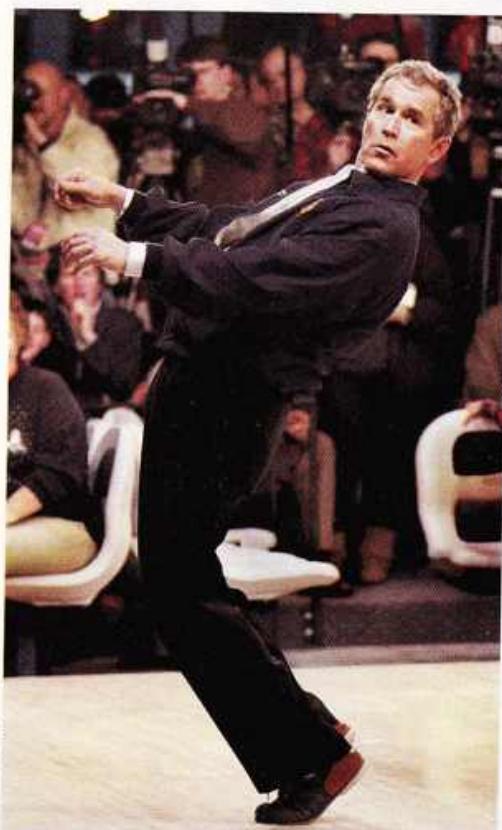
BARBARA C. LANG

row darkened the clan's oil-boom idyll: Bush's 3-year-old sister, Robin, died of leukemia. It was a loss the family bore largely in stoic silence and still finds anguishing to discuss.

By 1959 there were three more Bush offspring—Neil, now 45, Marvin, 43, and Dorothy, 40. George W., who played quarterback for his junior high school and was also elected seventh-grade class president, takes pains to point out that anything he did achieve was accomplished without parental arm-twisting. "My dad never took us out to the backyard and told us to tackle a dummy for a month because he wanted us to be tackles," he says. "They never tried to impose their vision on me." Though irrepressible, Bush asserts he was no hellion. "My mother was the front line of discipline," he recalls. He does acknowledge a passage in his father's book of letters, *All the Best, George Bush*, in which the former President, writing in 1955, said, "Georgie aggravates the hell out of me at times." But Bush can't recall an instance when his father was especially angry. "When he wanted to discipline me," he says, "all he had to say was, 'Son, you've disappointed me.'"

In 1961 his parents, by then living in Houston, dispatched 15-year-old "Georgie" to Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., the highly competitive prep school north of Boston that the elder Bush had attended. A varsity baseball and basketball player, George W. was elected Andover's head cheerleader and created the school stickball league, installing himself as "high commissioner." He later applied to only two colleges, the University of Texas and Yale, and was reportedly stunned to be accepted by the latter. Like his father, Bush was admitted to Yale's elite Skull and Bones society, so secretive that members are forbidden for life to discuss it. He was also elected president of the hard-partying Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. "He was a good-time guy," ex-DKE brother Calvin Hill, later an NFL running back, told *The Washington Post*. "But he was not the guy hugging the commode at the end of the day."

After graduating from Yale in 1968, Bush enlisted in the Texas Air National Guard and spent the Vietnam War in Houston, serving six part-time years as a pilot. Some suggest the move was a dodge to avoid the war, though he has said the Guard gave him the best opportunity to fly. The early '70s would prove to be what he has called his "nomadic" period, during which he was unemployed for long stretches broken by stints as a management trainee for an agricultural firm and a worker for U.S. Senate campaigns in Florida and Alabama. His restlessness came to a head one night in 1972 after he took his 16-year-old brother Marvin to a



"I've never feared failure or success," says Bush (bowling on the campaign trail).

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"George W. is being taken seriously now," political scholar Stephen Hess says of Bush (in '99 with, from left, Laura, Jenna and Barbara). "But this election will be won or lost between Labor Day and Election Day."

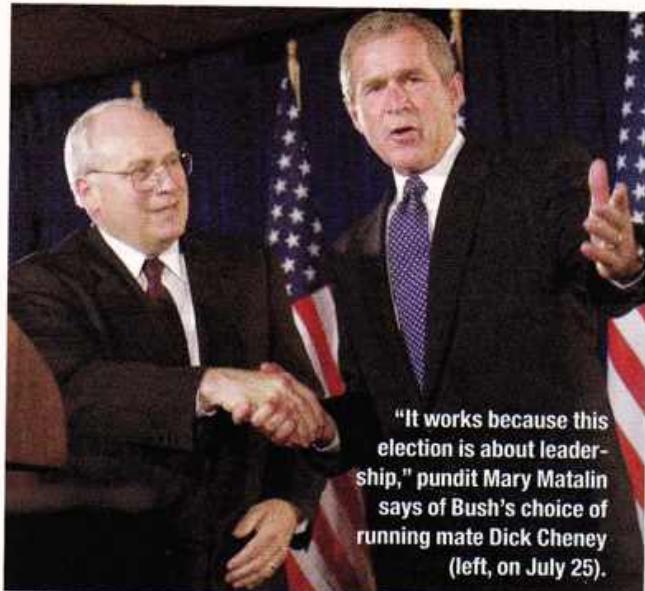
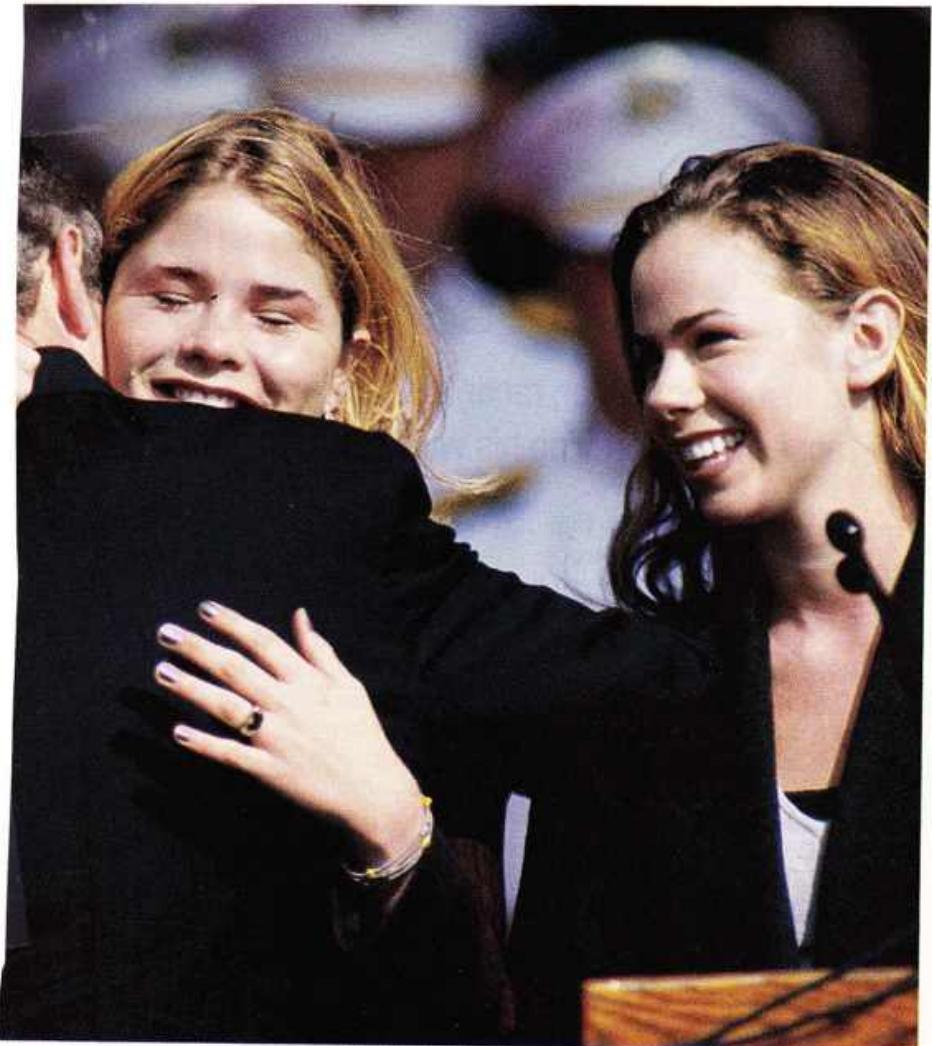
PAUL S. HOWELL/LIAISON



"I try to build him up, just like he tries to build me up," says Laura Bush (flying to Oregon with her husband in June).

friend's house, where they did some drinking, and ran over a neighbor's garbage can on the way home. Confronted by his father, then ambassador to the United Nations, Bush challenged him to a fistfight. It never came off. The following fall he enrolled at Harvard Business School.

Upon earning his M.B.A., Bush returned to Midland and, through networking and research, learned the oil business. Then in 1977 he decided to run for Congress—



prompted, he says, by frustration over government regulation of natural-gas prices. "I won a tough primary," he recalls, "then lost to Kent Hance, who gave me a good lesson in country-boy politics." The election, in November 1978, came exactly a year after Bush married librarian Laura Welch. They had met the summer of 1977 at a barbecue held by Joe and Jan O'Neill, mutual friends. "I didn't know there was a great attraction," says Jan, "until

he called the next morning to see if Laura wanted to play miniature golf."

Three months later the couple wed in a quiet church ceremony. "Laura is the centerpiece of my life," declares Bush. Recently the couple bought a 1,600-acre ranch in Crawford, Texas, where Bush unwinds by bass fishing and throwing the occasional barbecue. Their twins are off to college—Barbara heading for Yale, Jenna to the University of Texas—and their parents vow to keep them out of the spotlight. "I think the media has let Chelsea Clinton have a private life," says Laura. "I hope they would give that same courtesy to Barbara and Jenna."

By the time of the twins' birth in 1981, Bush had started his oil-exploration firm, backed largely by family and friends as well as cronies and campaign contributors of his father's, including a Princeton classmate of James A. Baker III, who would become the elder Bush's Secretary of State. The company struggled to find profitable wells, and after a dramatic oil-price collapse in 1986 nearly put Bush out of business, it was sold at a bargain price to a local energy company. Bush and Laura moved to

Washington, D.C., to work for his father's presidential election in 1988. The next year Bush assembled an investment group—again including some who were politically connected to his father—to purchase the Rangers baseball franchise. A hands-on managing partner, Bush would see his \$606,000 outlay blossom into \$14.9 million when the team was sold in 1998.

The family's run of good fortune came to a sudden halt with his father's defeat by Bill Clinton in 1992. The morning after, they gathered in the Houstonian Hotel, where his parents kept a suite to maintain their Texas residency. "We were all moping around," Bush recalls, "and Mom came in and essentially said, 'Get over it! Get on with your life!'" Out of his father's shadow at last, George dared to take on powerful incumbent Democrat Ann Richards for the Texas governorship in 1994. Running on a platform that included local control of schools and welfare reform, he won handsomely. That win would be eclipsed in 1998, when he was reelected with a breathtaking 67 percent of the vote. The drubbing of the Democrats caught the eye of GOP insiders who felt they might have a convincing presidential candidate in the making. But maybe more important—at least to Bush himself—the win seemed to earn the unqualified admiration of the man whose praise he most covets. In a letter written on Election Day, his father said, "He is good, this boy of ours."

- Richard Jerome
- Laurel Calkins, Hilary Hylton and Anne Lang in Texas and Linda Kramer and Jane Sims Podesta in Washington, D.C.