Bush League of Their Own

An Inside Story of Spineless Self-Promotion

By Matthew Scully

EXACTLY HOW the whole thing fell apart so quickly and so completely is a complicated question. But for me, one man stands out as a useful symbol. He sat in an office near mine at the White House Office of Political Affairs, where I had staked out a temporary desk. As a strategy man, this fellow would accompany the president on regional trips, and his thrills were derived from haggling on the phone over which local big shots would or would not be allowed to ride along on Air Force One: "That idiot—no way he's getting on the plane! . . . That ass—we let him on last time! . . . Forget it, man, that mother-[expletive] isn't stepping foot on the aircraft!"

In between these delicate negotiations you could hear him complaining to others about all those yokels begging for his favors, "making so goddam much of a ride on Air Force One." Meanwhile, his own office was adorned with three or four framed pictures of himself sitting on Air Force One, plastic cups and napkins from Air Force One, a model of Air Force One suspended from the ceiling, and—separately matted and framed—a seat assignment card with his very own name and the words, "Welcome Aboard Air Force One."

The quintessential Bush underling, he was a man in whom vanity ran far deeper than conviction. He brought to public service the greedy zeal of a hobbyist, a loyalty dependent on the next presidential favor or keepsake and principles about as fragile as his little model airplane.

During the campaign it was a common reproach that such Bush staffers had lost the will to win; they "didn't want it enough." This misses the mark. They "wanted it," all right. But they seemed to want it more for

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TITANIC, From C1

its little privileges than its duties; it was those privileges they were paralyzed with a fear of losing. In politics as in romance, merely wanting—craving possession without quite knowing why—brings sure ruin.

How did an honorable, loyal man like George Bush wind up dependent on men so devoid of both virtues? Probably because of that very civility and fealty. Kind forbearance toward one's staff is admirable, provided you have first assembled a capable and trustworthy staff. It turns out the election really was "about trust" after all. President Bush trusted the wrong people.

One of them was Office of Management and Budget Director Richard Darman, about whom a senior White House staffer tells this story: One day Bush, then vice president, was in his West Wing offices chatting with him when Darman came strolling down the hallway. "Hi, Dick!" said the vice president, only to have the then-assistant treasury secretary indifferently turn away and walk on—the same treatment he affords most anyone who dares distract such an important man. Bush, who himself makes a point of waving at the lowliest intern, is said to have told his visitor: "God forbid something should happen to the president, but if I ever became president the first thing I'd do is run that ass out of here."

Flash forward to last October, as President Bush heads off to debate practice with the erstwhile ass, now his budget director of four years and author of the tax compromise of 1990, good old Dick. For Dar-

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man, playing the part of Bill Clinton in mock debates, the rehearsals required a distracting interruption in the interviews he was then giving The Washington Post for a series that would absolve the "brilliant" budget director and lay the blame for the tax compromise squarely with the president, just days before the election. It was as if Caesar, in preparation for the big "Ides of March" speech, had called upon his old friend Cassius.

A similar breed of public servant could be observed in the lower strata of the Bush staff—lesser Darmans with none of his storied brilliance but all of his fidelity and steadfastness to duty. I think of the previous inhabitant of my own office, a fellow of about 26 who left behind a monument to this mindset: 16 nailholes, a remarkable number for a presidential speechwriter hired by Chief of Staff Sam Skinner last May on the strength of a connection and jettisoned two months later when his West Wing patron was disconnected. At a stage in life when he should have been sitting in a cubicle somewhere, a little too much of his White House sojourn was spent beautifying the office with new furniture and an intimidating array of plaques, certificates of merit and signed pictures of himself standing beside all the Lords of the Earth—presidents, governors, senators, a Hudson County supervisor—he'd brushed up against in his rise to eminence.

Likewise, you knew something was amiss when you picked up the papers this summer to find that spokeswomen Torie Clarke and Mary Matalin had granted various interviews for profiles on their personal lives: for Torie, an upcoming marriage; for Mary, a romance with Clinton's strategist. Did they really suppose the president was served by having his campaign press secretaries jabbering on about their wonderful lives of newfound celebrity?

Of course these two chatterboxes should have been called in for a little refresher on campaign priorities. But Bush is a gentleman—a trait perfectly captured by his treatment of the absurd John Frohnmayer. Frohnmayer was our director of the National Endowment for the Arts—brave benefactor of Mapplethorpe, Serrano and other neglected geniuses of our time. At some point in their political association Frohnmayer earned the media designation "an old friend of the president." But, as with so many of Bush's colleagues, the two had different ideas about the duties of friendship.

Bush's idea involved loyalty, so he supported Frohnmayer as long as possible, whereas Frohnmayer's notion was to sponge political capital off his old friend and then play the media against him. One was left, then, with these two ridiculous scenes: Frohnmayer, the media martyr who would later endorse Clinton, somberly gathering his staff to mourn the coming darkness of artistic repression with reporters there to record the poignant moment; and the president, sitting in the Oval Office still agonizing over the decision, wondering if his persecuted NEA director could not be spared. I'm told that when they gave Bush the farewell letter to Frohnmayer, the president asked, "Now, do we really need to do this?"

That the president's loyalty was, at the end, even more firmly unrequited was evident in the "inside accounts" by departing Bushmen that began to fill the pages of The Post, the New Republic and other publications. These underlings were passing away in much the same spirit as they arrived, back when they were bad-mouthing Ronald Reagan, smugly hinting to the media of their man's better work habits and among themselves dismissing the preceding eight years as the "Pre-Bush Era." Nowadays the game is self-exculpation. So we have Darman blaming Bush for the fatal tax deal, campaign counsel James Pinkerton blaming Darman and (by implication) Bush for ignoring his advice, Darman in turn blaming Pinkerton and both Darman and Pinkerton blaming James Baker as Baker (via leaks) blames Bush. Among other rules of honor the whole lot of them seems to have forgotten is the old idea of falling on one's sword for the president—who alone has been man enough to accept a measure of the blame for himself.

Pinkerton's account of things in the New Republic—"Life in Bush Hell"—is a gem worth examining in detail. Here's a man, obscure outside of Washington, who could become a force in the world only here, whose idea of a rallying cry is "The New Paradigm," the high-flown name he gives his much-discussed "model" of big yet efficient government.

Life was hell for poor, unappreciated Jim because no one would hear out his plea for a New Paradigm, the one thing that could save the administration. His piece has him presciently racing to an airport phone after the L.A. riots to urge the president to "get out here." Frustrated at every turn, he then calls Bush's son with an inspiration: We've got to "bring back the Civilian Conservation Corps."

As it turned out, George Jr. called him back to report that "the president was unenthusiastic: 'Isn't this the sort of thing we're fighting against?' " Lacking the clairvoyance of his maltreated aide, "Bush broke New Paradigm hearts." The times demanded that we "think anew, and act anew"—and damm it, the president just wasn't up to it. It never occurs to Pinkerton that the president might have had a point, or to explain what exactly is so new about a "New Paradigm" entailing a return to the make-work programs of the New Deal.

Meanwhile, you pick up a recent Post and there he is again, resurrected from "Bush Hell" and professing to be "inspired by Bill Clinton's generosity of spirit," urging a "paradigm shift" as we all "move on to our common future." "If we can agree on the goal—a tolerant, prosperous society whose gains are enjoyed by all citizens—then the only thing left to argue about is technique."

Apparently, malleability is a trait highly valued under the New Paradigm, for it's hard to square this "paradigm shift" with Pinkerton's unused draft of a convention acceptance speech, a copy of which drifted onto my desk during the campaign. In this masterpiece (alas, rejected again) he had Bush saying again and again that Clinton is an Old Paradigm liberal who proposes "a return to ***massive*** taxes, ***massive*** spending and ***massive*** regulation of business" [italics his]. Even allowing for campaign hyperbole, this seems an awfully ungenerous slur on

such an "inspiring" man with whom we differ only in "technique." All that "common ground" seems to have suddenly disclosed itself on election night, the same night a paradise of presidential patronage suddenly became "Bush Hell."

With a staff of self-promoters not much better than such New Parasites, no wonder Bush seemed so lost, so message-less at the end, his speeches stuffed with fulsome platitudes ("Values!"), co-opted liberal cliches ("Change!"), lame witticisms ("bozos!") and embarrassing pop-culture references (Clinton's "Freddy Krueger campaign," whatever that might mean).

Against this sycophancy and self-aggrandizement, we had an unlikely profile in courage, one man who repaid his president's loyalty. In a way, all the taunts and cruel snobbery Dan Quayle endured were the best thing that ever happened to him. Of an earnest but callow senator they made a wise realist, freeing him to get on with his job without illusions about earning the ephemeral praise of the media. Maybe the best tribute to Quayle is that he was nowhere lauded in the media for having "grown" in office—everlasting testimony to his perseverance.

Even at the end it was Quayle who had to make the case for pardoning Caspar Weinberger, against the counsel of others warning the president about "going out in a storm of criticism." In an administration marked by personal arrogance and political timidity, Quayle alone had the humility to take good advice. Still more to his credit, having fought the most valiantly to stay here, he seemed the most content to go.

All in all, though, Pinkerton's "Life in Bush Hell" is not a bad description if one recalls C.S. Lewis's picture of the thoroughly modernized Hades in "The Screwtape Letters." "We must picture Hell," Lewis wrote, "as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passion of envy, self-importance and resentment."

But "Bush Hell" was only a subdivision of "Washington Hell," a city full of craving and starved of conviction, enthralled by New Paradigms, New Covenants, New Anything. It's that place where a sincere if awkward man of principle is thought an embarrassment, but the "brilliant" conniver is feared, the craven pragmatist obeyed, the ungrateful poseur indulged, the paradigmatic parasite nourished. It's that place where wisdom is measured by newspaper column inches, worth by office space, importance by motorcade assignment or restaurant placement, personal achievement by souvenirs and party invitations. It's a place, our nation's capital, so bereft of goodness that even a Bill Clinton could be welcomed as delivering angel, promising Reform and Change, and so hollow that under his moral guidance the personnel and spirit of the place will hardly change at all.