

Bush Travels the Nation Preaching GOP Message

By Lou Cannon

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George Herbert Walker Bush is driving a purple Gremlin these days instead of the chauffeured black limousine once favored by chairmen of the Republican Party.

Republicans are losing special elections, and the polls show GOP party identification at ebb tide. Bush is receiving letters telling him that he is overly loyal to President Nixon and other letters telling him that he is not loyal enough. The big givers have stopped giving to the Republican National Committee. Bush's ulcer is acting up.

"People come up to my mother and say, 'Isn't it too bad about George,' like I had died," says Bush. "Senators come up to me at parties and say, 'George, we've been thinking about you, keep a stiff upper lip.'"

Ignoring auguries of Republican disaster, Bush flies from state to state preaching a political revivalist's message of post-Watergate



GEORGE BUSH

... man with a mission

redemption. The Republican Party, he tells anyone who will listen, does not deserve to suffer for "the alleged sins" of a few. "Any Democrat who runs against any Republican opponent on Watergate will get a real backlash from his voters."

See BUSH, A14, Col. 1

BUSH, From A1

Bush has carried his gospel of faith, hope and Republican survival a distance of 124,000 miles. He has visited 40 states where he has given 118 speeches, held 84 press conferences, granted 76 interviews. Sometimes, in his quiet moments, Bush wonders whether his message is getting across.

"We've struggled mightily to make clear that the party is separate from Watergate but I don't know that I've been overly successful," says Bush. "I think I've been successful with the party people but not with the general public or the press. When the Committee for the Re-Election tried to settle its lawsuit with the Democrats, lots of headlines said it was the Republicans who were offering to settle."

This confusion is particularly galling to RNC staff members who in 1972 were treated with suspicion and contempt by the well-heeled CRP operation. But the RNC is suffering from more than unfair publicity. Only 500 persons contributed \$1,000 or more to the national committee in 1973 compared to 8,000 who made such contributions in 1972 and 1,500 such givers in 1971. The RNC has cut its staff accordingly. Only 115 persons remain on the payroll compared to the 187 who were there when Bush arrived on Jan. 23, 1973.

And yet surprisingly, after what President Nixon has called "a year of Watergate," claims of optimism still come out of Republican National Committee headquarters on Capitol Hill. Staff morale among the survivors is said to be high. The small contributions which pay the expenses of the ongoing party program are still rolling in. Both Bush and Finance Chairman Robert Odell are proud, they say, of the party's small givers.

In 1973, for instance, the national committee raised \$3,964,000 (out of a total \$5,366,000 budget) from contributions of \$100 or less. The average contribution was \$22.30.

"These are the contribu-

tions of people who support us through thick-and-thin," says Odell, "and there are lots of them. The 600,000 persons who are sustaining contributors are responsible for the largest ongoing political fundraising program in the history of American politics."

Odell has just fired off a new fundraising letter to this mailing list, proclaiming that "not a hint of scandal" has touched the Republican Party. The letter even attempts to make political capital of the vanishing big giver.

"Despite the Democrats' attempts to make our party to be one of 'fat cats,' the opposite is true," the letter declares. "We depend on the loyalty of the rank and file to maintain the party's strength."

Nonetheless, the holding back of the "fat cats" has forced the national committee to reduce its programs as well as its personnel. The decline is reflected by the overall fundraising figures, which was \$8.5 million in 1971 and again in 1972. The target figure for 1974 is \$5.2 million.

Because of the reduced contributions, Bush trimmed his staff, abolished what he considered "separate fiefdoms" at the RNC and used his business experience to keep the committee in the black.

"We had to curtail some employment, hold the line on automatic raises and institute administrative discipline," he says. "That doesn't make you voted most likely to succeed."

But Bush seems to have made peace with one of the toughest constituencies in American politics—the Republican state chairman. A year ago many of these state officials were fans of Sen. Bob Dole, the outgoing national chairman who was eased out in a shakeup reportedly instigated by the then White House chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman.

Bush was regarded by some state chairmen as both politically inexperienced and uninterested in their problems. Additionally, it was well known that he was

reluctant to give up his post as United Nations ambassador for the turmoil of the party chairmanship.

One party official recalls that in his early days at the national committee Bush would sometimes break off conversations and start talking about life at the United Nations.

Those days are gone. He has been a fulltime chairman and party salesman who simultaneously softpedals Watergate while exalting the mission of the Republican Party.

On a typical day last week, Bush arrived at the office at 8:15, met with Eddie Mahe (the committee's political director), conducted a staff meeting, saw two other visitors, granted a newspaper interview, lunched with Ken Aspromonte of the last place Cleveland Indians baseball team ("We're going to surprise a few people this year," said Aspromonte, "maybe Bush will, too."), went to a White House meeting with the President, attended a reception given by the Savings and Loan League and finished off the day at a black tie dinner held in honor of Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Casper Weinberger.

Sometimes the long days and the frequent travel get to Bush, and he becomes discouraged. At these times, he says, it is his conviction that his job is important which makes him stay on as party chairman.

"I get kind of cranked up inside about keeping the party system going," says Bush. "People outside don't understand that. They just think you've got a thankless job. It isn't all that thankless. Sometimes I admit it gets complicated as hell. When you're dealing with people at a time that morale is a problem, you've got to be sure that your own morale is properly positioned. I couldn't do that if I didn't have an inner feeling that we're engaged in important work."

Bush has made some changes at the RNC. Monday, a peppery little propaganda sheet is gone and a relatively staid monthly pub-

lication, First Monday, has taken its place.

The field force under Mahe's direction has been integrated with the field force of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee. The committee still provides computerized election and demographic data for GOP candidates, but the effort is more highly targeted to key districts than in the past. The RNC also is playing a more significant patronage role in the choice of political ("Schedule C") administration appointments.

Bush is regarded by some of his old friends in the House as essentially a non-partisan person in a highly partisan job, and there is some evidence of this. He is a close friend of Robert Strauss, his counterpart at the Democratic National Committee and a fellow Texan.

"We have some pretty fundamental areas of agreement along with our areas of disagreement," says Bush.

Their most fundamental shared belief is a conviction that the disintegrating political party system must be restored and strengthened. The two chairmen have launched a bi-partisan committee that hopes to find a new way to finance national political conventions, and they have cheerfully appeared at each other's fundraisers.

In some ways Bush's friendship with Strauss is reminiscent of the personal friendship he forged at the United Nations with Soviet Ambassador Jacob Malik. When Malik was in Washington recently, he dropped by RNC headquarters for a chat with Bush, who delightfully showed him his purple Gremlin and compared it with Malik's Cadillac limousine.

Bush also has made friends in an arena traditionally even more difficult for Republican chairmen—the White House. He plays what he immodestly describes as "first class tennis" with White House Chief of Staff Alexander M. Haig and he has a friendly relationship with several other White House staff members.