

Alabama Getaway What Dubya was doing when he was supposed to be serving in the National Guard By PAUL ALEXANDER



An unguarded moment
Illustration by Steve Brodner

One day in the late fall of 1972, James Pryor Smith walked into the roomy two-bedroom house that belonged to his aunt, Elizabeth Dickerson, an elderly woman who was confined to a nursing home, and he could hardly believe his eyes. Located in the heart of Cloverdale - an exclusive, old-money neighborhood in Montgomery, Alabama - the house, his son Neil remembers now, "was a total wreck." A chandelier was badly damaged, there were holes in the wall and the place was full of empty liquor bottles. "The cleaning bill alone was \$900," Neil Smith says, "which was no small thing in 1972." One detail about the mess stood out. "The bedding had to be hauled out into the street," says Jackson Stell, a friend of Pryor Smith. "Pryor said there must have been no sheets on the bed, the mattress was so horribly soiled."

"The trash and damage clearly came from drunken partying," says Mary Smith, who was married to Pryor at the time. "Pryor was very specific that this was related to booze."

Pryor Smith was livid. He had rented out his aunt's house in May as a favor to a family friend who knew Winton "Red" Blount, a construction magnate who became one of the richest men in Alabama before being appointed postmaster general by President Nixon. The twenty-six-year-old tenant - his name was George W. Bush - had sounded like a reliable young man. He was a Yale graduate who came from a good family. His grandfather, Prescott Bush, had been a United States senator from Connecticut. His father, George H.W. Bush, was a former congressman from Houston who had gotten rich in the Texas oil business. Young Bush was coming to Montgomery to serve as the state organizational director of Blount's United States Senate campaign. After Pryor Smith had the house cleaned and repaired, he sent a bill to Bush - twice. Bush never responded.

The period from May 1972 until May 1973 would come to be called Bush's "missing year." But the only thing Bush appeared to be missing during that year was his National Guard duty. He was, at that point, a twenty-six-year-old college graduate still searching for something to do with his life. An idle young man such as himself might have seemed like an ideal candidate for conscription - after all, when Bush had graduated from Yale four years before, more than 500,000 young American men were serving in Vietnam.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the way a young man dealt with the question of Vietnam was the crucible in which the character of an entire generation was revealed. Like John Kerry and Al Gore, you could volunteer for military service. Like Bill Clinton, who had deep-seated doubts about the way the war was being handled, you could express your misgivings openly. Like Dick Cheney, you could use deferments to keep yourself out of the draft. And for the privileged few whose family had the power to pull strings, like George W. Bush, there was the National Guard. In later years, the Guard occupied a large part of the country's fighting force, but during the Vietnam era, fewer than one percent of the fighting force came from the Guard. Entrance into the Guard, then, meant you were virtually guaranteed not to see combat duty in Vietnam.

So while Bush knew what he wasn't going to have to do - fight in Vietnam - the young man had not dealt with the problem of what he was going to do with himself. That spring, Bush had quit his job at Stratford of Texas, an agricultural conglomerate based in Houston. Jimmy Allison, an old friend of his father's from Midland, Texas, had been named campaign manager of Winton Blount's senatorial campaign in Alabama. Bush's father wanted Allison, who owned

the newspaper in Midland, to take George W. along with him. But Bush Jr. had an obligation to serve in the National Guard, which required him to show up on a regular basis for drills.

At first, Bush tried to transfer to an Air Force reserve unit, the 9921st, based in Montgomery, that was all but out of business. "We were as low on the totem pole as you got," says Reese Bricken, commander of the 9921st, who approved Bush's request on May 26th, 1972. "We were not even paid. The unit only existed so that some of us could earn enough points to qualify for retirement."

It seemed like the perfect solution for Bush: He'd take care of his obligations with the absolute minimum responsibility. But two months later, in July, the Air Force regional personnel office in Denver threw a wrench in his plans: He needed to be in an active unit, not the inactive 9921st. After all, the United States military had spend almost \$1 million training him to fly fighter jets. He couldn't just go to Alabama and serve with a bunch of aging reservists waiting to draw their pensions.

So Bush's attempt to game the system had faltered. In September he asked to be transferred to the 187th Fighter Group of the Alabama Air National Guard. That request was approved, but on September 29th he was suspended from flying because, earlier in the year, he had missed his annual physical exam.

He was paid for just two days of Guard duty: October 28th and 29th. He never reported to any of the commanding officers he was ordered to report to. Only one Guard veteran from the 187th had vague memories of meeting him, and that guardsman had the timeline all wrong: He placed the future president in the 187th months before he was supposed to have shown up. To those with whom he worked in the Blount campaign, Bush seemed to regard his Guard service as a nonissue. "I have no memory of him talking about the Guard," says Devere McLennan, who worked on the campaign, first as a youth director and then as a staffer trying to woo disaffected Democrats to support Blount. "I think I had to run him to the cleaners to get some military uniforms once, but I never saw him wearing a uniform."

Indeed, when questioned, Bush would not even talk about the Guard. "I had been told that George was a lieutenant in the National Guard," says C. Murphy Archibald, a nephew by marriage of Winton Blount, who was working on his uncle's campaign. "I had been a lieutenant in the Army, served fifteen months in Vietnam, and I tried to talk to Bush about the Guard, but he wouldn't talk about it. At that point, Vietnam was constantly being discussed, but George just changed the subject."

Still, even with his free pass keeping him out of harm's way, George W. Bush did not fulfill his obligation to attend Guard drills on a regular basis while in Alabama. Exactly what was he doing? For one thing, he was drinking heavily. "You had a bunch of guys and girls in their twenties just out of college - what do you think happened?" says McLennan. " We probably kept the state liquor store in business."

Bush arrived in Montgomery in early May 1972. In political campaigns, the state organizational director is a vital position, since he is the conduit to the county chairmen, who are responsible for getting out the vote on a grass-roots level. Bush started his work at a slow time for the campaign. By late spring, Blount had already won his party's nomination. It wouldn't be until the end of the summer that the campaign - his opponent would be the legendary Alabama senator John Sparkman - kicked into high gear.

When he got to Montgomery, Bush lived with other staffers in an apartment paid for by the campaign. After he'd moved out of that apartment into the house in Cloverdale, he still made use of an amenity supplied by Blount: the tennis courts on the Blount estate. "I was learning how to play tennis at the time," McLennan says, "and George hit me a million tennis balls. He was a much better player than I was, but he was patient. We played a lot of tennis at Red Blount's house."

Bush had a regular group of drinking buddies he hung out with, and during his stay in Alabama he was said to have dated an array of local young women, among them Emily Marks - "One of the most beautiful women you have ever seen," McLennan says - and Baba Groom, the estranged wife of writer Winston Groom, who years later would write *Forrest Gump*.

Throughout the summer, Bush maintained his heavy social life. By September his behavior had become a problem. "Here's the thing that stood out," says Murphy Archibald, who arrived to work on his wife's uncle's campaign in September. "People were glad to have me there. They said, to a person, 'You are going to like Jimmy Allison, but why did he bring this young guy with him?' The general feeling was that it was strange that someone of Allison's competence would have someone who didn't seem very interested in the campaign."

According to Archibald, Bush regularly didn't show until noon or later, and then would leave four or five hours after that. He'd spend most of those few hours in his office with the door closed. When he did talk to the staff - and he made the rounds each day as soon as he came in before he locked himself away - his conversation was often disconcerting. "I found it so strange that in that position - in a United States Senate campaign - this guy who was twenty-six years old would come in and good-naturedly talk about how plastered he had gotten the night before. It was usually in the context of saying, 'I'm sorry to be coming in so late, but last night I really knocked them back.' He was very comfortable about talking about how drunk he got."

By late September it became obvious that Bush was performing his job so badly that changes had to be made. The county chairmen were talking to Bush on the phone, they were telling him what they needed in terms of support and campaign materials, and then nothing was happening. Finally, a substantial amount of Bush's responsibilities were turned over to Archibald, who marveled at how Bush seemed to assume no liability for his behavior - and knew he didn't have to.

"George had one story he told a lot," Archibald says, "and the story was about how he was always getting picked up by the police in New Haven during his time at Yale, and how they would always let him go when they found out his grandfather was Prescott Bush. When he told this story, George would always laugh as if it was the funniest joke. The first time I heard it, I said, 'Who's Prescott Bush?' And he said, 'My grandfather - the United States senator from Connecticut.' I thought it was stunning. He knew he was bulletproof because of his family. I had never seen someone with such a well-defined sense of being 'above it.' And it was not so much because of his money as his family."

In the end, Blount lost badly to Sparkman, who pulled almost two-thirds of the vote. Sparkman was such a towering political figure in Alabama that probably no Republican could have defeated him - not even one of the state's richest businessmen. Still, Bush's work on the campaign, such as it was, had been noted. "I heard what people were talking about," says Tom Blount, Blount's son, who was living in Washington, D.C., at the time. "I knew the guy was screwing around."

On Election Night, following Blount's concession speech, Bush drove Tom Blount to his father's house. "It was just the two of us," Tom Blount says. "Personally, I didn't like him. I thought he was real full of himself, and I had heard that he was making his way with all the ladies in town, which was fine, but I thought he was a little immature about it. I remember very clearly asking him - we were driving into the gates of my father's house - where he went to school. Then he did this fake 'Oh, shucks, man, I went to Yale,' like he was embarrassed by it. I thought this was so pretentious. I looked down at his cowboy boots and jeans and thought, 'Not my type.' "

Later that night, according to an article published in *Salon*, Bush would return to downtown Montgomery from the Blount estate, get drunk, urinate on a parked car and yell obscenities at police officers.

Eight years after the Blount campaign, when George H.W. Bush ran for president, Winton Blount supported John Connally instead of Bush. "The Bushes were not happy about it," Tom Blount says. "Barbara was not real pleasant when she heard my daddy was supporting Connally. She really is the force behind that family."

Toward the end of the Blount campaign, Bush began dating a young woman named Mavanee Bear. He seems to have continued dating her after the campaign was over. It is not clear, then, exactly when he returned to Ellington Air Force Base, in Houston, to continue his Guard training. He was paid for four days of duty in November, none in December. In January 1973, he was paid for six days. But by January 6th, 1973, he had returned to Montgomery, for on that date he reported to the Maxwell Air Force Base to have a dental checkup. It would be the only documented visit that he made to a military facility in Alabama, even though he had been living in the state since May.

In February and March 1973, he would not be paid for any days in the Guard. Then he put in a flurry of days of paid duty: two in April, fourteen in May, five in June and nineteen in July. Around this time, to further complicate matters, William Harris and Jerry Killian, his commanding officers in Texas, wrote about the period of May 1st, 1972, until April 30th, 1973: "Lt. Bush has not been observed at this unit during the period of the report" because "a civilian occupation made it necessary for him to move to Montgomery, Alabama. He cleared this base on 15 May 1972. . . ." Later, the authenticity of certain Killian memos would come into question, but this memo was not one of them.

On September 5th, 1973, Bush requested in writing an early release from the National Guard so he could attend Harvard Business School. On September 18th, the Guard approved his request. Then, on October 1st, even though he had signed up for a six-year stint in the Guard to avoid the draft, Bush received an honorable discharge after finishing only "five years, four months and five days towards obligation." Bush did not even bother to sign his discharge papers.

"Not available for signature" was written in the blank space where his signature should have been.

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