

## Skull & Bones Society

A rare look inside Skull and Bones, the Yale secret society and sometime haunt of the presumptive Republican nominee for President

by Alexandra Robbins

ON High Street, in the middle of the Yale University campus, stands a cold-looking, nearly windowless Greco-Egyptian building with padlocked iron doors. This is the home of Yale's most famous secret society, Skull and Bones, and it is also, in a sense, one of the many homes of the family of George W. Bush, Yale '68.

Bush men have been Yale men and Bonesmen for generations. Prescott Bush, George W.'s grandfather, Yale '17, was a legendary Bonesman; he was a member of the band that stole for the society what became one of its most treasured artifacts: a skull that was said to be that of the Apache chief Geronimo. Prescott Bush, one of a great many Bonesmen who went on to lives of power and renown, became a U.S. senator. George Herbert Walker Bush, George W.'s father, Yale '48, was also a Bonesman, and he, too, made a conspicuous success of himself. Inside the temple on High Street hang paintings of some of Skull and Bones's more illustrious members; the painting of George Bush, the most recently installed, is five feet high.

There were other Bush Bonesmen, a proud line of them stretching from great uncle George Herbert Walker Jr. to uncle Jonathan Bush to cousins George Herbert Walker III and Ray Walker. So when George W. was "tapped" for Skull and Bones, at the end of his junior year, he, too, naturally became a Bonesman -- but, it seems, a somewhat ambivalent one.

New members of Skull and Bones are assigned secret names, by which fellow Bonesmen will forever know them. Some Bonesmen receive traditional names, denoting function or existential status; others are the chosen beneficiaries of names that their Bones predecessors wish to pass on. The leftover initiates choose their own names. The name Long Devil is assigned to the tallest member; Boaz (short for Beelzebub) goes to any member who is a varsity football captain. Many of the chosen names are drawn from literature (Hamlet, Uncle Remus), from religion, and from myth. The banker Lewis Lapham passed on his name, Sancho Panza, to the political adviser Tex McCrary. Averell Harriman was Thor, Henry Luce was Baal, McGeorge Bundy was Odin. The name Magog is traditionally assigned to the incoming Bonesman deemed to have had the most sexual experience, and Gog goes to the new member with the least sexual experience. William Howard Taft and Robert Taft were Magogs. So, interestingly, was George Bush.

George W. was not assigned a name but invited to choose one. According to one report, nothing came to mind, so he was given the name Temporary, which, it is said, he never bothered to replace; Temporary is how Bush's fellow Bonesmen know him today. (In recent interviews I asked a number of Bush's Bonesmen classmates about the name and elicited no denials.)

The junior George's diffidence in the matter of his secret name seems to reflect a larger ambivalence toward Yale and its select, the most elite of whom are the members of Skull and Bones. The elder George holds his fellow Yalies -- particularly his Bones brethren -- in great esteem, and over the years

has often gone to them for advice. George W., in contrast, has publicly made a point of his disdain for the elite northeastern connections that shaped his father's world and, to some extent, his own. Fay Vincent, the former commissioner of baseball, who is a Bush family friend and himself the son of a Bonesman, says, "Young George is as unlikely a Bonesperson as I've ever met." Young George has not attended a Yale reunion since he graduated.

Bush's dismissal of Yale and all it stands for may be a response to the repeated charges of political opponents that he is not much more than a papa's boy. Kent Hance, who trounced Bush in his 1978 congressional race, insinuated that Bush was not a true Texan and accused him of "riding his daddy's coattails."

If George W. truly wanted to detach himself from his father and from the traditions of a long line of ancestors, he chose a curious path -- in effect, retracing his father's footsteps.

SKULL and Bones is the oldest of Yale's secret societies and by far the most determinedly secretive. As such, it has long been an inspiration for speculation and imagination. It still is. The society is, of course, the inspiration for the new Universal Pictures thriller *The Skulls*, about a nefarious secret society at an Ivy League school in New Haven. In 1968, when George W. Bush was in Skull and Bones, there were eight "abovegrounds," or societies that met in their own "tombs," and as many as ten "undergrounds," which held meetings in rented rooms. In an article in the 1968 Yale yearbook Lanny Davis, a 1967 Yale graduate and a secret-society member who would go on to become a White House special counsel in the Clinton Administration, described how Bones, famous for its distinguished list of members, held more sway than the others.

Come "Tap Day" ... if you're a junior, despite the fact that you've banged your fist at the lunch table and said, "This is 1968," and have loudly denounced societies as anachronisms, when the captain of the football team is standing by your door and when the tower clock strikes eight he rushes in and claps your shoulder and shouts, "Skull and Bones, accept or reject?" you almost always scream out, "Accept!" and you never, never, pound your fist at the lunch table, not for that reason ever again.

Fewer than a tenth of Yale's 1,400 seniors are members of the university's secret societies, which many undergraduates view as self-serving vehicles for real and aspiring aristocrats. Certainly this view seems to have some validity when it comes to Bonesmen. Until 1992, when it became one of the last two secret societies to admit women, Skull and Bones had a history of picking the same kinds of people over and over. Davis's yearbook article explained,

If the society had a good year, this is what the "ideal" group will consist of: a football captain; a Chairman of the Yale Daily News; a conspicuous radical; a Whiffenpoof; a swimming captain; a notorious drunk with a 94 average; a film-maker; a political columnist; a religious group leader; a Chairman of the Lit; a foreigner; a ladies' man with two motorcycles; an ex-service man; a negro, if there are enough to go around; a guy nobody else in the group had heard of, ever.

Indeed, George W.'s 1968 brethren slip easily into the desired slots: among them were the Olympic swimmer and gold medalist Don Schollander; a future Harvard Medical School surgeon, Gregory Gallico; a future Rhodes scholar, Robert McCallum; the Whiffenpoofs' pitch, Robert Birge; Donald Etra, an Orthodox Jew; Muhammed Saleh, a Jordanian; a future deputy director of the National Institute of Mental Health, Rex Cowdry; and the black soccer captain Roy Austin. Only George W.

himself fell into none of the aforementioned categories. He was generally regarded as a legacy tap.

Given the society's history as an incubator and meeting point for rising generational elites, it is not surprising that an especially susceptible kind of "barbarian" -- the Bones term for a nonmember -- has long seen the society as a locus of mystery, wealth, and conspiracy. One doesn't need to scratch deeply to uncover accusations of sinister ties with the CIA, the Trilateral Commission, the Illuminati, the Council on Foreign Relations, even the Nazis. It turns out that the Yale admissions committee that voted to admit George W., despite his poor record at Andover, included three members (out of seven) who were Bonesmen; those seeking evidence of malign influence will surely raise an eyebrow. (For the conspiracy-minded, the most useful omnium gatherum is the British writer Antony C. Sutton's feverish 1983 tract *An Introduction to the Order*.) World domination aside, the most pervasive rumors about Bones are that initiates must masturbate in a coffin while recounting their sexual exploits, and that their candor is ultimately rewarded with a no-strings-attached gift of \$15,000. Bonesmen, who are sworn to secrecy at initiation, have not publicly denied or confirmed these rumors; they have usually made a point of refusing to speak to the press about the society at all. As *The Skulls* was about to be released, and as George W.'s quest for the Republican presidential nomination looked increasingly certain to succeed, the society sent all members a memo reminding them of their vow of silence. Still, as I recently discovered in the course of looking into *Skull and Bones*, not all Bonesmen see the necessity of remaining tight-lipped about a society whose biggest secret may be that its secrets are essentially trivial.

THE story of *Skull and Bones* begins in December of 1832. Upset (according to one account) by changes in the Phi Beta Kappa election process, a Yale senior named William Russell and a group of classmates decided to form the Eulogian Club as an American chapter of a German student organization. The club paid obeisance to Eulogia, the goddess of eloquence, who took her place in the pantheon upon the death of the orator Demosthenes, in 322 B.C., and who is said to have returned in a kind of Second Coming on the occasion of the society's inception. The Yale society fastened a picture of its symbol -- a skull and crossbones -- to the door of the chapel where it met. Today the number 322, recalling the date of Demosthenes' death, appears on society stationery. The number has such mystical overtones that in 1967 a graduate student with no ties to *Skull and Bones* donated \$322,000 to the society.

(The number 322 has also been a particular favorite of conspiracy-minded hunters for evidence of *Skull and Bones*'s global connections. It was the combination to Averell Harriman's briefcase when he carried classified dispatches between London and Moscow during World War II. Antony C. Sutton claims that 322 doubles as a reminder of the society's mother organization in Germany; the American group, founded in 1832, is the second chapter -- thus 32-2.)

In 1856 Daniel Coit Gilman, who went on to become the founding president of Johns Hopkins University, officially incorporated the society as the Russell Trust Association, and *Skull and Bones* moved into the space it still occupies. The Bones tomb is forbidding only on the outside. Marina Moscovici, a Connecticut conservator who recently spent six years restoring fifteen paintings from the *Skull and Bones* building, describes the atmosphere inside as "funny spooky." She says, "Sort of like the *Addams Family*, it's campy in an old British men's-smoking-club way. It's not glamorous by any means."

"Bones is like a college dorm room," a 1980s Bonesman told me. "Ours was a place that used to be really nice but felt kind of beat up, lived in. There were socks underneath the couch, old half-deflated soccer balls lying around." Dozens of skeletons and skulls, human and animal, dangle from the walls,

on which German and Latin phrases have been chiseled ("Whether poor or rich, all are equal in death"), among moose heads, sconces, medieval armor, antlers, boating flags, manuscripts, statuettes of Demosthenes, and a pair of boots that one member wore throughout his active duty with American forces in France during World War II. The gravestone of Elihu Yale, the eponymous eighteenth-century merchant, was stolen years ago from its proper setting in Wrexham, Wales, and is displayed in a glass case, in a room with purple walls.

As noted, for many years the society has possessed a skull that members call Geronimo. In the 1980s, under pressure from Ned Anderson, a former Apache tribal chairman in Arizona, the society produced the skull in question. The skull didn't match Anderson's records, and it was returned to the society's tomb. Anderson wasn't finished. He reportedly took the issue up with his congressman, John McCain; McCain tried to arrange a meeting between Anderson and George Bush, who was then the Vice President. Bush wasn't interested, and the matter was dropped. "We still call it Geronimo anyway," a Bonesman says. The issue of Geronimo's skull never surfaced in the public record during the bitter contest between McCain and George W. for the Republican nomination.

The most private room in the building, known as the Inner Temple, or (this will be no surprise) Room 322, is approximately fourteen feet square and guarded by a locked iron door. Inside, a case contains a skeleton that Bonesmen refer to as Madame Pompadour. Compartments in the case guard the society's cherished manuscripts, including the secrecy oath and instructions for conducting an initiation.

The initiation ceremony, held in April, involves as many alumni, or "patriarchs," as possible, one of whom in each instance serves as the supervisor, known as Uncle Toby. The Inner Temple is cleared of furniture except for two chairs and a table, and Bonesmen past and present assemble: Uncle Toby in a robe; the shortest senior, or "Little Devil," in a satanic costume; a Bonesman with a deep voice in a Don Quixote costume; one in papal vestments; another dressed as Elihu Yale; four of the brawniest in the role of "shakers"; and a crew of extras wearing skeleton costumes and carrying noisemakers. According to the initiation script, Uncle Toby "sounds like the only sane person in the room."

As an initiate enters the room, patriarchs standing outside the Inner Temple shout, "Who is it?" The shakers bellow the initiate's name, which the patriarchs echo. The shakers push the initiate toward the table, where the secrecy oath has been placed, and he is enjoined to "Read! Read! Read!" The shakers then half-carry the initiate to a picture of Eulogia, and the Bonesmen shriek, "Eulogia! Eulogia! Eulogia!" After another trip to the oath, the shakers fire the initiate toward a picture of a woman that Bonesmen call Connubial Bliss.

Rituals along these lines go on for quite some time, recalling a cross between haunted-house antics and a human pinball game -- "like something from a Harry Potter novel," in the words of one Bonesman, now an engineer. It is perhaps worth noting, in light of George W.'s controversial episode at Bob Jones University and the specter of anti-Catholicism, that at one point in the proceedings every initiate kisses the slippered toe of the "Pope." At last the initiate is formally dubbed a Knight of Eulogia. Amid more raucous ritual he is cast from the room into the waiting arms of the patriarchs.

WITHIN the tomb students run on Skull and Bones time, which is five minutes ahead of the time in the rest of the world. "It was to encourage you to think that being in the building was so different from the outside world that you'd let your guard down," a Bonesman ('72) explains. At 6:30 on Thursdays and

Sundays the Bonesmen gather in the Firefly Room for supper. The room is dim and intimate; light shines through the gaping eyeholes of fixtures shaped like skulls. Bonesmen drink various refreshments from skull-shaped cups, but never alcohol. The dry-society rule, fervently enforced, was designed to keep members level-headed for discussions -- a change of pace for George W., who drank heavily during his college years.

At 7:55 barbarian time Uncle Toby rings a bell to summon the members to the session. When the knights are seated, they sing two sacred anthems before the Hearing of Excuses, during which members are assessed fines for errors, such as arriving late or using a society name outside the tomb. Uncle Toby then draws debate topics and an order of speakers from the Yorick, a skull divided into compartments. The ninety-minute period of debate can be frivolous or grave.

One of the standard pieces of lore about Skull and Bones is that each member must at some point give an account of his sexual history, known as the CB (for "Connubial Bliss"). "After the first one or two times it's like guys listing their conquests, and that gets old," one young Bonesman told me recently. "There's just not that much to talk about" -- and so CBs have evolved into relationship discussions. "It's the kind of stuff a lot of guys do with their teammates," says another Bonesman ('83). "There was nothing perverse or surreal or prurient -- just an open exchange. It's like TV's Ricki Lake -- there's now a national mania for purging thoughts at large. This is a way of doing it in a very private, non-sensationalist way that benefits the people who are listening and the people who are telling."

By mid-autumn, after each member has presented a CB, the time slot shifts to Life Histories, when Bonesmen spend one or more nights giving their autobiographies. George Bush's autobiography focused on his military service but also looked ahead, a 1948 member told me. "He was talking about the future, first about his family and then about being able to have an impact in public service." George W., in contrast, spoke often about his father. George W.'s fellow Bonesmen have been unwilling to elaborate.

WHEN U.S. News & World Report asked President Bush in 1989 why he had chosen to attend Yale, he replied, "My family had a major Yale tradition." Today George W. Bush distances himself from Yale (although supporters cite his alma mater to combat charges that he is a lightweight). He has criticized its "intellectual snobbery" and has maintained that the school epitomizes "a certain East Coast attitude" and an "intellectual arrogance." George W.'s attitude toward Yale extends to its most elite society. Whereas George Bush returned to the tomb in 1998 to be the dinner speaker at the annual Skull and Bones commencement party, George W. has stayed away. In his 1999 campaign autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*, George W. Bush mentions his membership in Skull and Bones only in passing: "My senior year I joined Skull and Bones, a secret society, so secret I can't say anything more."

Yet Skull and Bones was not relegated entirely to George W.'s past after he graduated. In 1971, having been rejected by the University of Texas Law School and needing a job, Bush called a Bonesman, Robert H. Gow. Gow, who later told *The Washington Post* that his Houston-based agricultural company had not been looking for anyone at the time, hired Bush as a management trainee. In 1977, when Bush formed Arbusto Energy, his first company, he once again applied to Skull and Bones for financial aid. With assistance from his uncle Jonathan Bush (Bones '53), he lined up \$565,000 from twenty-eight investors. One of them contributed \$93,000 -- the California venture capitalist William H. Draper III (Bones '50). Twelve Bonesmen (including family members) and the son of a patriarch gave a total of \$35,500 to Bush's 1998 gubernatorial campaign. At least forty-six Bonesmen or sons of patriarchs have given approximately \$1,000 apiece to his presidential campaign -- the maximum allowed by law.

Not surprisingly, loyalty often flows in the other direction. In 1984 Bush flew to Tennessee to accompany the Republican Senate nominee and Bonesman ('67) Victor Ashe on a seven-city tour. Ashe lost to Al Gore.

That George W. keeps his Skull and Bones connections in repair is hardly a sign of anything insidious; it's just business as usual in America. Compared with his family connections and his family's Yale connections, the Skull and Bones network is just a sideshow. But in the eyes of the conspiracy-minded, interconnections of any kind, especially when cloaked in mystery and ritual, constitute virtual proof of dark doings. Skull and Bones will probably never rid itself of innuendo -- innuendo that has not helped the Bonesmen Bushes in the pursuit of politics.

Conspiracy theories, which George W. has called "the kind of connect-the-random-dots charges that are virtually impossible to refute," contributed to Bush's defeat in his 1978 congressional campaign. Bill Minutaglio, in his biography of Bush, First Son, recalls an afternoon debate moderated by the radio talk-show host Mel Turner:

Turner ... wanted to know if the young Bush was a tool of some shadow government; it was the same thing people had confronted his father with when they had called him a "tool of the eastern kingmakers."

"Are you involved in, or do you know anybody involved in, one-world government or the Trilateral Commission?"

Bush, who had been telling people he was tired of being hammered for having "connections" through his father to the eastern establishment, was fuming. "I won't be persuaded by anyone, including my father," he said, with a biting tone in his voice.

On the way out of the restaurant, Bush was still livid. He refused to shake hands with Turner. "You asshole," Turner heard him hiss as he walked by.

George W.'s father has certainly felt that membership in Skull and Bones damaged him politically. When Fay Vincent made a consolation call to Bush after his 1980 loss of the Republican presidential nomination to Ronald Reagan, the weary candidate said, "Fay, let me tell you something. If you ever decide to run for office, don't forget that coming from Andover, Yale, Skull and Bones, and the Trilateral Commission is a big handicap. People don't know what they are, so they don't know where you're coming from. It's really a big, big problem."

In *The Skulls*, members of the secret society murder a student journalist who is attempting to probe its mysteries. Real-life journalists have not met the same fate, so far as we know, although Ron Rosenbaum, the author of a 1977 *Esquire* article on Skull and Bones, wrote that a Bonesman warned him not to get too close: "The alumni still care," the source warned.

"Don't laugh. They don't like people tampering and prying. The power of Bones is incredible. They've got their hands on every lever of power in the country. You'll see -- it's like trying to look into the Mafia."

When I read this excerpt to one young Bonesman, he laughed and said, "I really don't think I'd be working nights as a paralegal while trying to be an actor if I had access to some golden key."

SKULL and Bones doesn't own an opulent island hideaway like the one depicted in *The Skulls*. It does own an island on the St. Lawrence River -- Deer Island, in Alexandria Bay. The forty-acre retreat is intended to give Bonesmen an opportunity to "get together and rekindle old friendships." A century ago the island sported tennis courts and its softball fields were surrounded by rhubarb plants and gooseberry bushes. Catboats waited on the lake. Stewards catered elegant meals. But although each new Skull and Bones member still visits Deer Island, the place leaves something to be desired. "Now it is just a bunch of burned-out stone buildings," a patriarch sighs. "It's basically ruins." Another Bonesman says that to call the island "rustic" would be to glorify it. "It's a dump, but it's beautiful."

The fading of Deer Island exemplifies the dwindling finances of Skull and Bones, which can no longer claim the largest society endowment at Yale. Unlike members of other societies, Bonesmen pay no dues, though patriarchs receive an annual letter requesting a "voluntary contribution to the Russell Trust Association." In truth, Skull and Bones has never been wealthy.

The society's accounts are much fatter in the ineffables department. A Skull and Bones document states,

The experience we have come to value in our society depends on privacy, and we are unwilling to jeopardize that life in order to solicit new members. The life which we invite you to share in our society is based on such intangible factors that we cannot meaningfully convey to you either its nature or quality.

Hardly a tool of Hades, but rather a staid wayside for students, its heyday past, its glory faded, Skull and Bones may have little more than this to conceal.

As for the \$15,000 graduation gift, George W.'s contemporary Rex Cowdry says, "I'm still waiting for mine."

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This article originates at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/05/robbins.htm> and is listed here only to augment our material. Ms. Robbins has a book entitled "Secrets of the Tomb" that deals with the society in greater depth.