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Portrait of George W. Bush As a "Late Bloomer"

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Speaking with reporters yesterday as she visited the Austin campaign headquarters of her son, George W. Bush, Barbara Bush said: "George is no dummy ... maybe he was a tad of a late bloomer."

— *The Washington Post*, Dec. 3, 1999

It's a hot simmering day in August 1989. The new part-owner of the Texas Rangers is sitting behind the batting cage watching baseball practice. The \$2,500 black eel-skin boots of the Lone Star state's future governor are clearly visible, as is the emblazoned Texas flag, which seems as vibrant as "Dubya" himself.

To those who know him best, presidential candidate George W. Bush is a likeable, gregarious personality, charming and congenial. If ever proof was needed that character endures, Dubya would be it: College classmates characterize Bush as "personable," "outgoing," and "funny," while childhood friends describe "the Bombastic Bushkin" in similar terms.

The words commonly used to characterize Bush capture the essence of what contemporary personality theorist Theodore Millon calls the "outgoing personality pattern." Bush clearly recognizes his central personal quality, as affirmed in his own words in a 1994 interview with Tom Fiedler of the *Miami Herald*: "When your name is George Bush, with the kind of personality I have, which is a very engaging personality, at least outgoing, in which my job is to sell tickets to baseball games, you're a public person."

Millon notes, however, that few people exhibit personality patterns in "pure" or prototypical form. Most personalities represent a blend of two or more prevailing orientations, and Bush is no exception. Beyond his trademark gregariousness, Bush's college cronies remember him as "mischievous" and a "prankster." Those words evoke images of Millon's "dissenting pattern" — a dauntless, adventurous, unruly personality type.

Bush's colorful life story bears witness to an indelible outgoing streak, tinged with an unruly, dauntless element. At age 20, frat boy George was questioned, arrested, and charged with disorderly conduct following the disappearance of a wreath from a New Haven storefront. (The charges were later dropped.) The errant scion of the Bush clan had another run-in with the law at Princeton when, with fellow frolicking Yale fans, he flattened the goalposts following a football game. This time, Bush was detained, questioned, and told to leave town. For a future governor who would later invoke education as an election incantation, the budding young Bush's college years at Yale were remarkably rooted in the less cerebral components of a college education.

Following graduation from Yale and a Vietnam-era stint in the Texas Air National Guard, and armed with his natural exuberance, his daddy's connections, and an MBA from Harvard Business School, the 29-year-old Bush returned to Texas in the summer of 1975, "drawn by the entrepreneurial spirit of the energy business," to forge a career for himself in the risky oil exploration and development business. Risky, perhaps, but undaunting for someone propelled by an adventurous personality with its love of high-risk challenges, gift of the gab, and talent for thriving on sheer wits and ingenuity.

Throughout his time in the oil business, Bush, by his own admission, was "drinking and carousing and fumbling around." But the "so-called wild, exotic days" of his youth ended abruptly just after his 40th birthday in 1986 when Bush unceremoniously jumped on the wagon, reigned in his unruliness, and

turned his life in a direction that would ultimately take him to the pinnacle of power in politics.

This turning point in the life of George W. Bush marks a juncture where psychological inference diverges from direct biographical interpretation. The conventional wisdom concerning Bush's midlife course correction is that Laura Bush's exhortations played a pivotal role, as did personal faith and the healing power of heart-to-heart talks with family friend Billy Graham and other pastoral advisers.

But consideration of Bush's character in broader context raises another possibility. The adventurous, dauntless personality style is a normal, adaptive variant of a personality pattern that in extreme cases may emerge as an antisocial personality disorder. Perhaps by dint of more favorable childhood socialization experiences the more adaptive styles express themselves, as Millon puts it, "in behaviors that are minimally obtrusive, especially when manifested in sublimated forms, such as independence strivings, ambition, competition, risk-taking, and adventuresomeness."

In *The New Personality Self-Portrait* (1995), John M. Oldham and Lois B. Morris characterize individuals with this kind of adventurous personality style as bold, tough, persuasive, "silver-tongued" charmers talented in the art of winning friends and influencing people, who like to keep moving and are adept at getting by on wits and ingenuity, with a history of childhood and adolescent mischief and hell-raising. Bush biographer Bill Minutaglio writes in *First Son* (1999) that Bush "loved it" when Richard Ben

Cramer, in his chronicle of the 1988 presidential campaign, *What It Takes* (1993), called him “an ass-kicking foot soldier, a quick-witted spy, the ‘Roman candle’ in the family.”

Oldham and Morris’s portrayal of this pattern provides the theoretical underpinnings for what Bush himself has referred to as his “nomadic” period and the “so-called wild, exotic days” of his youth. The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*’ (DSM-IV) description of people with antisocial personalities as “excessively opinionated, self-assured, or cocky” individuals having “a glib, superficial charm,” does not seem too far removed from accounts of the — to borrow his own phrase — “young and irresponsible” Bush in his 20s and 30s.

But the clincher is this: According to *DSM-IV*, antisocial personality disorder “may become less evident or remit as the individual grows older, particularly in the fourth decade of life.” Ultimately, we have no way of corroborating the root cause of Bush’s dramatic midlife change at age 40; human behavior, after all, is determined by multiple causes, none of which can be experimentally controlled in the psychobiographical study of lives. Thus, attributing diagnostic meaning to Bush’s midlife metamorphosis must of necessity remain highly speculative.

Psychobiographically, the operative question is whether Bush’s developmental history reveals compelling evidence of socialization experiences consistent with the hypothesized underlying dynamics of dauntless, antisocial character traits. In *Disorders of Personality* (1996), Millon

asserts that the experiential history of “socially sublimated antisocials” is often imbued with secondary status in the family: “It is not only in socially underprivileged families or underclass communities that we see the emergence of antisocial individuals. The key problem for all has been their failure to experience the feeling of being treated fairly and having been viewed as a person/child of value in the family context. Such situations occur in many middle- and upper-middle class families. Here, parents may have given special attention to another sibling who was admired and highly esteemed, at least in the eyes of the ‘deprived’ youngster.”

The circumstances surrounding the death of his three-year-old sister Robin when George was seven, younger brother Jeb’s early achievements, and the unspoken burden of being the standard bearer of the Bush legacy may all have played a part in the emergence of these speculative dynamics. Pamela Colloff, in the 1999 “Who is George W. Bush” special issue of *Texas Monthly*, chronicles how, during the seven months that his sister battled leukemia in a New York hospital with mother Barbara Bush at her bedside and father George Bush shuttling back and forth between Midland and New York, George W. and his baby brother Jeb were often left in the care of family friends. And in a 1998 *New York Times Magazine* profile, Sam Howe Verhovek paints the young George Bush as “a mischievous boy with a passion for sports, especially baseball, and a penchant for wisecracks that may well have its origins in a family tragedy. ... [B]oth of his parents told friends that George seemed to develop a joking, bantering style in a determined bid to lift them from their grief.”

Concerning Jeb's favored status in the Bush family and George W.'s burden of first-born status, Paul Burka, also in the *Texas Monthly* special issue, writes: "[George W. Bush] will inevitably be compared to his father. ... They spent quality time together ... but well into George W.'s adulthood, their relationship was marked by the competitive issues that often arise between fathers and firstborn sons. ... Perhaps the source of the tension lies in the status within the family of brother Jeb, seven years his junior, ... who was regarded as the smart one, while George was the smart-alecky one."

There can be little doubt, however, that the life course that George W.'s parents charted for him — following in his father's footsteps to Andover, Yale, and the oil fields of Texas, and his prominent role in his father's political campaigns — also bestowed special privileges on the "First Son," scion of the Bush political dynasty. It would be a mistake to venture too far out on a limb with the speculative "socially sublimated antisocial" hypothesis in describing the character of George W. Bush.

Nonetheless, what *can* be stated unequivocally is that Bush is not a highly conscientious character type, and this can have important political implications. Perhaps most pertinently, Bush is unlikely to exhibit what psychologist Dean Keith Simonton calls a "deliberative" leadership style. Thus, a President Bush may neglect to keep himself as thoroughly informed as he should (for example, by diligently reading briefings and background reports), place political success over

effective policy, fail to exhibit depth of comprehension or understand the broader implications of his decisions, and force decisions to be made prematurely.

As the 2000 presidential campaign unfolds, Bush's task will be to convince voters that he's a serious candidate, not just a charmer who wants to be taken seriously — a task for which, ironically, he has the requisite personality skills. And voters, for their part, will have to weigh the evidence and decide what premium to place on the past and whether the mellowed George W. Bush has the mettle to lead the United States into the new millennium.

*Aubrey Immelman, PhD, is an associate professor of psychology at St. John's University in Minnesota, where he also directs the [Unit for the Study of Personality in Politics](#), a faculty-student collaborative research project with the mission of studying the impact of personality on political leadership and disseminating the findings to the public. Immelman specializes in the personality assessment of presidents, presidential candidates, and other public figures. The personality data in this paper are drawn from Immelman's contribution, "[The Political Personality of U.S. President George W. Bush](#)," which will appear in the forthcoming Praeger volume, *Political Leadership for the New Century: Personality and Behavior among American Leaders* by Ofer Feldman and Linda O. Valentz (Eds.). Dale Fredrickson, an undergraduate political science major at St. John's University, contributed to this paper.*