

Presidential Posts and Dashed Hopes

Appointive Jobs Were Turning Point

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A month after he lost his 1970 Senate race, then-Rep. George Bush accepted a job in the Nixon White House "as assistant to the president with a wide range of unspecified general responsibilities," according to a memo by then-chief of staff H.R. (Bob) Haldeman on file in the Nixon archives.

"Bush told the president," Haldeman wrote, "that he would be delighted to take on this assignment, although he did still prefer the opportunity of going to the United Nations as U.S. ambassador. He . . . pointed out that there was a dearth of Nixon advocacy in New York City and the general New York area—that he could fill that need in the New York social circles he would be moving in as ambassador."

That meeting on Dec. 9, 1970 ended with an agreement that Bush would take the White House job "for now," the memo said. Three hours later, President Richard M. Nixon called Haldeman to his office in the Executive Office Building and told him "he had been very strongly persuaded by Bush's arguments" and to notify Bush that he was giving him the U.N. job. Two days later it was announced at a White House news conference.

Bush's U.N. appointment—and his private suggestion that he take on the unpublicized role as a spokesman for Nixon—marked a sharp turning point in his political career. His loss to Lloyd Bentsen in the 1970 Senate race had taken him out of Texas elective politics for the immediate future. A

two-term congressman, he was 46, married with five children, and wanted to remain in public life. But if he was not to win elections, then his next steps up the political ladder would depend on his ability to ingratiate himself with more successful politicians—Nixon, Gerald R. Ford and Ronald Reagan.

Many new details of Bush's career over the next six years—as U.N. ambassador, chairman of the Republican National Committee (RNC), envoy to China and CIA director—can be found in the Nixon archives and at the Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Mich. Documents in those collections and interviews with people who played roles in Bush's life during the Nixon-Ford years provided the information in this article. Bush declined to be interviewed.

These were not easy years for Bush. He was bumped from job to job, and the opportunity he sought most avidly—to be picked by Ford to be vice president in 1974, or vice presidential candidate in 1976—eluded him. The setbacks were painful, according to Bush intimates, but he always sought to play down his personal ambition and play the good Republican trouper. Throughout these years Bush made new friends and alliances, and his experiences convinced him he could begin his own run for the presidency in the late '70s.

But in the days after his defeat by Bentsen in November 1970, Bush was worrying about what he would do next for a job. Nixon, according to former aide John Ehrlichman, had always planned to give Bush an administration post if he lost the Senate election. On the night of Nov. 3, as the election results came in and Bentsen's victory became clear, Haldeman wrote down "Bush" as the fifth name on a list of defeated Senate candidates under the heading: "Need posts for:"

The Washington Post A-1
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times _____
The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____

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Two days later, at a 9 a.m. meeting with Nixon, Ehrlichman discussed the election results and subsequently sent a note to Haldeman saying "as of 9 a.m. today, the President is thinking about Bush for NASA. . . ." the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

In subsequent conversations involving Nixon and his top aides, Bush's name came up as a possibility for various jobs including head of the Small Business Administration, chairman of the Republican National Committee, White House congressional liaison and undersecretary of commerce.

Back in Houston, however, Bush heard none of this, according to his close friend and political aide Jack Steel. He received no personal word of condolence from Nixon after his defeat. On a Saturday in late November after the election, Steel said he helped Bush clear out his Houston congressional office. "He said he didn't know what he was going to do" next, Steel recalled.

At the time Nixon had another Texan on his mind—former Gov. John B. Connally. Connally loomed large in Nixon's imagination as a key figure in his secret plan to transform American politics by luring centrist and conservative Democrats into the Republican Party. By early December, Nixon had decided that Connally should join his administration as secretary of the Treasury.

Nixon's enthusiasm for Connally rankled with Bush, who saw him as a principal sponsor of Bentsen, the conservative Texas Democrat who had spoiled Bush's dream of following his father to the Senate. When Nixon appointed Connally to the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) in November, Bush complained to White House legislative liaison man William Timmons that the White House was helping a man who helped defeat Bush.

Connally agreed to join the Nixon administration, but he set one condition that might have surprised Bush. Texas Republicans would be furious, Connally warned Nixon, if Nixon gave a big job to him—a man who helped defeat Bush—when Bush himself still had no job. According to a source close to Connally, the former governor told Nixon that a job had to be found for Bush. The next week, Bush's appointment to the U.N. job was announced.

In his autobiography Bush skipped over the details of how he got that appointment. "My name had come up in connection with the United Nations job," he wrote. Some of Bush's closest friends and political associates said they never heard the full story. Robert A. Mosbacher, for example, who has

been the chief fund-raiser for all Bush campaigns since 1970, expressed surprise when advised of Haldeman's memo describing Bush's efforts to persuade Nixon to give him the U.N. post. "I didn't realize until now what a self-made opportunity it was," Mosbacher said in a recent interview.

"That's typical of George Bush," he added of the fact that Bush had successfully pleaded his own case for the job, but never mentioned his efforts. "I'm not surprised."

Bush was elated to get the job, which carried with it a seat in the president's Cabinet. He was determined to become a significant player on a range of issues, not just in the foreign policy field, and he began at once cultivating Nixon with notes and messages.

"Dear Mr. President," he wrote on March 2, 1971, "that handwritten note at the bottom of your letter to [U.N. Secretary General] U Thant will be VERY helpful to me in my work. We Bushes, including parents, brothers, sister etc., are still overcome by the 'swearing in' [apparently a reference to the ceremony where Bush was sworn in as ambassador]. Please thank Mrs. Nixon. This work is interesting!"

Bush quickly learned, however, that Henry A. Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, blocked any direct access to Nixon on foreign policy issues. In May he sent Nixon, through Haldeman, suggestions for the makeup of the 1971 U.S. delegation to the General Assembly session. Haldeman wrote back, saying "matters such as this one should go directly through [Kissinger's] office. . . ."

The biggest U.S. concern at the United Nations that year was how to handle the seating of China. This issue was part of the secret China diplomacy then being conducted by Nixon, Kissinger and Secretary of State William P. Rogers, and they kept Bush in the dark.

Rogers told Nixon months before the final U.N. vote that the original U.S. hope of preserving a seat for Taiwan even after China was seated was "a lost cause," according to White House records. Bush, not knowing of that assessment, pressed ahead enthusiastically for the lost cause.

In September he sent Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, a photograph that had been taken of Tricia Nixon Cox and her husband Edward with the U.N. secretary general, suggesting Patricia Nixon might like it for her scrapbook. With reference to his job, Bush added in a postscript: "Things are boiling here. WOW! - GB"

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The final vote took place about 11 p.m. Oct. 26, 1971. Bush thought Taiwan's seat would be saved, according to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a member of the U.S. delegation that fell, and then was dejected when it lost. Bush told Moynihan "it was his first assignment and he believed he muffed it." Only much later did Bush find out that his superiors never expected him to win.

Bush spoke before numerous audiences on Nixon's behalf during 1971, and was thanked with a note from Nixon in June. By the end of the year, Nixon's reelection campaign was under way, and members of the Cabinet had been instructed to "start moving on a totally all-out political basis," according to a memo prepared for a Cabinet meeting Bush attended.

In March 1972, Nixon and Bush talked during a helicopter ride about the 1972 campaign. In a March 23 letter to Nixon, Bush referred to that conversation and said he had enclosed a list of 20 major speeches he had made since the first of the year, half of which were outside New York, and eight others that were scheduled. "Also," he added, "I will keep those states in mind that you mentioned and direct more attention that way. I enjoyed our chat!"

One of Bush's appearances was on behalf of Rep. Delbert L. Latta (R-Ohio), who then wrote Nixon: "I hope [Bush] is used extensively during the campaign. His 'non-partisan' pro-administration foreign policy speeches will win friends in any audience."

A memo from a Haldeman assistant to Nixon aide Dwight L. Chapin in September said "we should be sure to use George Bush as a major surrogate in nonpartisan forums. We need to get him moving heavily around the country as soon as possible."

Two years later, when Bush appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee as President Ford's nominee to be director of central intelligence, he was asked whether his partisan background disqualified him from such a sensitive post. He promised the members that if approved, he would "take no part, directly or indirectly, in any partisan political activity of any kind." In support of that pledge, Bush said, "My ability to shut off politics when serving in nonpartisan jobs has been demonstrated in two highly sensitive foreign affairs posts, as I hope this committee can verify." The first of those posts was the U.N. ambassadorship.

How Watergate Touched Bush

In Nixon's second term, Bush hoped for a senior job in the State Department, but when he met the president at Camp David on Nov. 20, 1972, Nixon proposed that Bush take the RNC chairmanship. "We have a chance to build a new coalition in the next four years, and you're the one who can do it," Nixon told Bush, according to Bush's autobiography. Bush soon accepted the job after winning an assurance that he could retain his seat in the Cabinet. He also got an office in the Executive Office Building near Nixon's personal hideaway there.

Within a few months, Watergate was Topic A for Bush and the RNC. Unaware that Nixon and his inner circle were plotting a cover-up, Bush was brought into the question of allowing live televising of White House witnesses before the Senate Watergate committee, which the Democrats wanted to do. The White House wanted executive sessions with transcripts released later.

On April 12, Bush had breakfast with Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.), then vice chairman of the committee, and Sen. William E. Brock (R-Tenn.) to get their views and called Ehrlichman to report the results. The phone call was recorded by Ehrlichman and a transcript is filed in the Nixon archives.

Bush told Ehrlichman that Baker wanted the session televised. Bush added: "My position is somewhere in between not doing it but believing deep down that the fuller disclosure, the more open the thing, the better we'll acquit ourselves."

Ehrlichman sharply disagreed. Haldeman, he said, "just doesn't have any experience with this kind of thing . . . Dwight Chapin who I would guess without knowing would choke or could conceivably choke . . . [Nixon aide Charles] Colson, who doesn't appeal to me as the most attractive figure in the world. . . I'd rather have you out telling our story, you know."

Bush then changed tack, saying, "I told Howard [Baker], look, I'll talk to John [Ehrlichman] but I'm not going to be your best salesman because I don't think it [television] is a *sine qua non*."

As the conversation continued, however, Bush seemed again to change his view. "I still feel in spite of what you've told me that I'd rather see it [television] than not. . . But

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you make a point." After going over Baker's position again, Bush closed by saying he was "sitting happily on the middle of the fence with a picket sticking up my you know what. I'll see you."

Bush himself was touched by a Watergate-related issue when news leaked about "Operation Townhouse," the secret White House campaign fund that gave money to Bush and other Republican senatorial candidates in 1970. On July 11, a news story in The Washington Star disclosed that Sen. Lowell P. Weicker (R-Conn.), an outspoken member of the Senate Watergate Committee, had received Townhouse funds. The next evening, according to notes Weicker dictated at the time, Bush called him to say that he had the Townhouse records showing contributions to Weicker and asked: "What should I do, burn them?" Weicker said he rejected that suggestion. Weicker first publicly discussed this episode in 1980, when Bush was running for president. Asked about it then, Bush denied to a reporter that he ever mentioned burning the records.

The 1973 call upset Weicker because it followed an earlier private warning to him from former White House counsel John Dean that Weicker's acceptance of Townhouse money would be used against him by Nixon aides. Against that backdrop, Weicker has told friends, he thought Bush's phone call might be some kind of set-up.

At that time it was not publicly known that Bush, too, had received Townhouse money in 1970—a fact that would come out, to Bush's disadvantage, 13 months later.

In 1974, as Nixon's impeachment problems deepened, Bush found himself part of a White House "damage control" group, according to Dean Burch, a longtime GOP insider who had been brought to the White House to help deal with the crisis.

Bush recommended to Republican candidates that they talk about "our record of accomplishment, our positive programs, be against congressional inaction." When voters say "What about Watergate?" Bush suggested the answer should be "What else are [Democrats] for?"

Discussing his role as RNC chairman during Watergate in a meeting with Washington Post editors and reporters last month, Bush said he had to walk a fine line. "I had two stacks of mail," he said, one of letters asking "How come you're not doing more to support the president?" and the other "saying how come you're keeping the party so close to the president?"

"Therein," Bush said, "lay a very serious dilemma."

Bush's loyalty finally broke Aug. 5, when the tape of the June 23, 1972, White House meeting was made public, disclosing that Nixon ordered the cover-up. The day before Nixon resigned, Bush sent him a private letter saying, "I now feel that resignation is best for the country, best for this President."

On the night of the resignation, a handful of the Nixon faithful had dinner. The conversation turned to who Ford would pick for vice president. Leonard Garment, one of Nixon's White House lawyers, guessed it would be Bush.

Less than a fortnight later, on Tuesday, Aug. 20, 1974, Bush was sitting on the porch of his home in Kennebunkport, Maine, with his wife Barbara and several aides watching television and waiting to hear from President Ford about the vice presidency. Bush and his supporters had worked cautiously, but hard, to promote him for the post. Bush and former New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller were considered the front-runners, but Bush's high hopes had dimmed over the previous 24 hours because he had heard nothing from Ford.

The station they were watching suddenly switched to Washington. The Oval Office came on the screen. The door through which Ford was to enter opened, and then shut again before anyone appeared; a moment later the phone on Bush's porch rang.

Passed Over for Vice President

The conversation was short. When Bush hung up he said: "You'll never guess who that was. Watch. It's not going to be me," according to Peter Roussel, his press aide at the time. Ford then appeared with Rockefeller.

Later, when a Portland, Maine, television reporter observed that Bush didn't look too upset, Bush responded, "You can't see what I'm feeling inside," according to Roussel.

Bush's chances had seemed so bright when Ford announced Aug. 10, two days after he became president, that he would poll Republicans in Congress and across the country, as well as his Cabinet and the White House staff for suggestions on the vice presidency. The results of that survey were striking: 255 respondents favored Bush, 181 picked Rockefeller and no one else was close.

According to Baine P. Kerr, a close Bush friend for nearly 40 years and former president of Pennzoil Co., a number of his old Texas friends with ties to Ford were promoting Bush for the vice presidency. They "all thought he would get it and were quite surprised" when Rockefeller was chosen instead, Kerr recalled in an interview.

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On Aug. 15, Tom Evans, former cochairman with Bush of the RNC and a Rockefeller supporter, complained to the White House that at least 19 GOP national committee members had expressed a preference for Bush as vice president because they had to make their recommendations through the RNC chairman—Bush himself. In his letter to the White House, Evans said that “George is great at PR but he is not as good in substantive matters. This opinion can be confirmed by individuals who held key positions at the National Committee.” Evans also complained that “an active campaign” was being conducted on Bush’s behalf, “which I do not believe properly reflects Republican opinion.”

On Aug. 18, Newsweek published a story quoting “White House sources” who said Bush’s chances had been damaged by their discovery that Bush’s 1970 Senate campaign had received \$100,000 from the Townhouse fund and that “\$40,000 of the money may not have been properly reported as required by election law.”

One former Ford aide, who asked not to be identified, said the White House realized that picking Bush could reopen Watergate debates and also lead to the disclosure of up to 18 more secret Townhouse donations to Republican Senate candidates.

Ford picked Rockefeller. Two days after the announcement, on Aug. 22, Bush met with Ford for 40 minutes. Not since Bush’s 1970 loss was his future so much in doubt. Ford offered Bush almost any post he wanted, according to Bush’s friends and aides. Bush expressed interest in becoming head of the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing. “He wanted to get as far away from the stench [of Watergate] as possible,” according to his old friend Mosbacher.

Burch recalled in a recent interview that Bush came to his White House office to discuss the China job. Bush looked on the post “in a romantic rather than practical” sense, Burch said. He had a “Marco Polo complex, thinking he could penetrate the mystery of the place.”

Bush soon learned that his new job gave him no more influence in the Ford administration than he had had under Nixon. Kissinger, as both secretary of state and national security adviser, held nearly total re-

sponsibility for China policy in his hands. It took a note from Burch to Ford even to arrange for Bush to have a farewell session with the president before he left for China. Burch had suggested a 15-minute meeting, but Brent Scowcroft, Kissinger’s deputy in the White House job, cut it to 10 minutes.

From China to the CIA

Bush has often spoken of how much he enjoyed his time in China, but the documentary record suggests that Bush looked at it as a temporary job.

On March 20, 1975, just five months after Bush arrived in Beijing, a White House memo showed he was thinking about coming home. “It is my impression and partial understanding that George Bush has probably had enough of egg rolls and Peking by now (and has probably gotten over his lost VP opportunity),” Russell Rourke wrote to his boss, Ford counselor Jack Marsh. “He’s one hell of a presidential surrogate, and would be an outstanding spokesman for the White House between now and November 1976. Don’t you think he would make an outstanding secretary of commerce or a similar post sometime during the next six months?”

The same idea had been put to Bush by Rogers Morton, the secretary of commerce and a former RNC chairman himself, as well as an old Bush friend. Morton and Bush discussed the idea before Bush left for China; according to Bush’s memoirs, Morton described the Commerce post as “a perfect springboard for a place on the ticket” in 1976.

Bush learned that Ford had new plans for him in a telegram from Kissinger in early November 1975, which informed him that CIA Director William Colby would be transferred as part of several personnel shifts and “the president asks that you consent to his nominating you as the new director” of CIA.

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In his autobiography, Bush indicates that this was the first he heard that he was being considered for that job. (Ford had first offered the CIA job to Washington attorney Edward Bennett Williams, who turned it down.) Bush had hoped to return to Washington to be in position to run as Ford's vice presidential candidate from a Cabinet post such as Commerce. His friends saw the CIA offer as a move to get Bush out of contention, a view Bush included in his book. "Having lost out to Rockefeller as Ford's vice presidential choice in 1974," Bush wrote, "I might be considered by some as a leading contender for the number two spot in Kansas City [at the 1976 GOP convention]—but not if I spent the next six months serving as point man for a controversial agency being investigated by two major congressional committees."

The White House understood that because of Bush's partisan political roles in the past, naming him to the CIA could cause some controversy. In a Nov. 18 memo to Marsh from Michael Raol-Duval, his assistant for intelligence matters, Duval wrote that it was Bush's intention to declare "his non-involvement in politics" if his nomination were approved. Ford took the same tack in a phone conversation with then-Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.) on Nov. 22. To win Mansfield's support, Ford's notes of that conversation indicate, Mansfield said Bush "must say no politics."

When he appeared before the Senate panel Dec. 15, Bush pledged that "If confirmed I will take no part, directly or indirectly, in any partisan political activity of any kind." It was in that testimony that Bush asserted that he had already demonstrated "my ability to shut politics off when serving in nonpartisan jobs" at the United Nations and in China.

Key Democratic senators wanted a more explicit assurance from Ford that Bush would not be on the Republican ticket in 1976. Bush was reluctant to give "a Sherman-like statement" disavowing the vice presidency, he wrote in his autobiography. Bush associates have long said that Bush himself finally asked Ford to issue this assurance.

But a key source close to Ford said that the president himself—apparently nervous that his nominee might not be confirmed—decided that a letter should be written promising that Bush would not be his running mate.

Ford showed Bush the letter he proposed to send to the Senate in an Oval Office meeting. This must have been a blow to Bush, but in the end, according to a source involved in these events, he proposed modifying the letter to make it appear that he and Ford had jointly decided to rule him out as a potential vice presidential candidate. These bitersweet sentences were added: "He [Bush] and I have discussed this in detail. In fact, he urged that I make this decision. This says something about the man and about his desire to do this job for the nation."

George Bush's ability to win his way with his president had failed him for the second time in just 16 months. For the second time, Gerald Ford had denied him the chance he sought to become vice president.

Staff researcher William F. Powers Jr. contributed to this report.

NEXT: Bush at the CIA.