

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

Presidential Legacy

PETER DREIER JANUARY 27, 2003

President George W. Bush was an affirmative-action beneficiary, at Yale University and then at Harvard Business School. Now he wants the University of Michigan to end its policy of considering applicants' race, among other factors, in admitting students. According to Bush, this approach "amounts to a quota system that unfairly rewards or penalizes prospective students based on their race."

Bush was admitted to Yale in 1964 under an affirmative-action policy for children of alumni -- what colleges call a "legacy" system. Legacy preferences **still exist**, of course, at most selective schools, including Michigan and Yale. But they no longer carry quite the same weight they did at schools such as Yale, Princeton University and Harvard University when Bush was applying to colleges in 1964.

The president never released his high-school grades from Andover -- an elite New England prep school that his father had also attended -- or his SAT scores. But several years ago, *The New Yorker* got hold of Bush's Yale records and discovered that he scored a 566 on the verbal SAT and a 640 on the math SAT -- 180 points below the median score for his Yale classmates.

From what is known about Bush's academic performance at Andover, it is doubtful that he would have been admitted to Yale unless his father (at the time a Texas businessman running for the U.S. Senate in a race he eventually lost) and grandfather (Prescott Bush, a former Republican U.S. senator who represented Connecticut from 1952

to 1962) had been Yalies (from, respectively, the classes of 1948 and 1917). In fact, as a student, Bush studied in the Yale library's Prescott Walker Bush Memorial Wing.

Back then, Yale's student body was disproportionately made up of white, upper-class students from the nation's most elite prep schools. But without a Yale legacy, even a student from the most select private high school needed excellent grades and SAT scores to get in. Like other Ivy League colleges, Yale at the time had its own criteria for "diversity." It looked for students with strong athletic abilities or special skills such as musical or theatrical talent, as well as students from different parts of the country. These non-legacy students had to meet Yale's basic academic standards, of course, though the college no doubt rejected plenty of one-dimensional students who may have had higher grades and SAT scores but lacked other qualities Yale was looking for. (At the time, however, Yale made little effort to recruit minorities. In the fall of 1964, there were only 28 African-American students out of 4,093 undergraduates.)

Other than being a legacy, Bush had no qualities that would have gotten him into Yale. Had he been a National Merit Scholar finalist, an outstanding athlete or actor or editor of the Andover newspaper, or had he perhaps organized his fellow students to tutor underprivileged kids, we probably would know by now. In fact, he was a mediocre student -- he never made the honor roll -- and demonstrated no particularly outstanding talents to warrant being admitted to Yale. He was head cheerleader during his senior year, organized the school's stickball league and played baseball, basketball and football. But, unlike his father, who was an outstanding baseball player, W. was not a star athlete, and certainly not good enough to be recruited by Yale's coaches. Perhaps Yale was looking for students from west Texas to add some cultural and regional diversity, but, if so, why accept a kid from Midland, Texas, who had attended *prep school in Massachusetts*?

It probably didn't hurt that three of the seven members of Yale's admissions committee who reviewed Bush's application had been in Skull and Bones,

the exclusive college club that also included W.'s grandfather and father among its members (and would later "tap" W. for membership during his junior year). The fact is that, just a few years later, when Yale began admitting women and tightened its legacy policy, it is unlikely that Bush -- even with all his connections -- would have gotten in.

And has anyone asked the president how he got into Harvard Business School, the nation's premier training ground for corporate executives? We like to think that the school selects students based on meritocratic criteria: college grades, scores on the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) or some experience in the real world of business that would demonstrate the skills necessary to run a major corporation.

But Bush's Yale transcript shows that he was a C student. He got particularly poor grades in political science and economics. In his freshman year -- the only year for which *The New Yorker* obtained rankings -- Bush was in the 21st percentile of his class. In other words, 79 percent of the students had better grades than he did. Indeed, when he gave a speech at Yale's 2001 commencement ceremony, he joked, "To the C students I say, you, too, can be president of the United States."

Bush has never released his GMAT scores. During the five years between his graduation from Yale in 1968 and his application to Harvard Business School in 1973, he had no obvious career trajectory or major accomplishments. In 1970 he worked on his father's second unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. Senate. He had never worked in the business world except for nine months in 1971, when he was a management trainee with Stratford of Texas, an agricultural and ranching company. In 1973 he worked for nine months as a counselor at the Professional United Leadership League, a program that provided mentors from professional sports leagues to Houston's inner-city children.

During this five-year period, Bush served part time in the Texas National Guard. And even his acceptance to the National Guard's pilot-training program required special

treatment. Bush scored only 25 percent on a pilot-aptitude test, the lowest acceptable grade. Nevertheless, commanders of the Texas Guard, aware that Bush's father was then a U.S. congressman from Texas, swore W. in as an airman the same day he applied.

In 1973 he was discharged from the National Guard in order to enter Harvard Business School. By that time, Bush had already been rejected in his home state by the University of Texas' law school because of his lackluster performance at Yale. So when the admissions directors at Harvard Business School looked at Bush's transcript and application, they must have seen something that allowed them to take a chance on an applicant who could charitably be labeled an "at-risk" student. (And it probably wasn't that he'd been president of his fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon, known as the hardest-drinking jock house at Yale.)

At the time Bush's application landed at Harvard Business School, Bush Senior -- who had recovered from his defeated bids for U.S. Senate in 1964 and 1970 and was by then a former congressman from Texas, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and former U.S. diplomatic liaison to China -- was chairman of the Republican National Committee. Might Senior's fame have played a role?

It isn't clear if the business school's forms asked if applicants had ever been arrested. But if so, Bush's application might have stood out -- for the wrong reasons. He was not arrested for protesting for civil rights or against the Vietnam War. Rather, as a 20-year-old Yale junior, Bush was arrested for stealing a wreath from a New Haven hotel. He was charged with disorderly conduct, though the charge was later dropped. Perhaps Harvard's admissions committee saw this experience as good training for someone who might later run a Texas oil company or, as president, have to decide how to deal with such corporate law breakers as Enron and WorldCom executives.

Regardless of his own privileged background -- and the obvious ways that Yale and Harvard ignored his grades and test scores when admitting him -- Bush is entitled to his opinions about affirmative action. What he seems to misunderstand is that Michigan's affirmative-action policy does not allow the admittance of students who are unqualified or unable to handle the academic work. No selective school simply uses grades and test scores in deciding which students to accept. Colleges accept students whose high-school grades and SAT scores meet a basic threshold, and then give extra points to students with various characteristics, based on such factors as athletic or artistic ability; urban, suburban or rural background; demonstrated commitment to public service; attendance at public, private or religious high schools; and ethnic and racial backgrounds. All of this is done merely in the name of creating a diverse student body, a goal that Bush says he supports.

Bush, a mediocre student, got into Andover, Yale, Harvard Business School and the Texas National Guard's pilot-training program because he was rich and well-connected. His subsequent business career -- including his early efforts to start an oil company, the financial favoritism that allowed him to buy part of the Texas Rangers baseball team with hardly any of his own money, the political favoritism that allowed him to persuade the city of Arlington, Texas, to subsidize a new stadium -- was due in large part to his family and social connections. These connections laid the groundwork for Bush to enter politics and helped catapult him to the presidency.

The University of Michigan's affirmative-action program seeks to help qualified students without these sorts of connections -- indeed, to help some students who have had to cope with considerable economic and social disadvantages, including racism -- in order to level the playing field.

Bush says he wants college admissions to be "race neutral" because racial background isn't something you earn, it's something into which you're born. So the

question for Bush is whether he would also have wanted college admissions to be "legacy neutral" for the exact same reasons -- and where in life he would be right now if they were.

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