CHAPTER SEVEN

Writing for President
George H. W. Bush

Having lived in Virginia as a child and then as a professor, I suffered under the impression that the South was homogeneous. Anyone who spends some time traveling in the South quickly realizes that it has very diverse pockets of culture within other pockets of culture. Inside the colorful Miami environs lie Cuban, African American, Haitian, and Jewish enclaves, to name but four. Atlanta sports a large Jewish community, a thriving city center, and a remarkable number of suburbs, each unique unto itself. When I arrived in Birmingham in the fall of 1976, it was a thriving city with special places like Five Points, where shops and restaurants sit on the conjunction of several streets. Tuscaloosa lies 30 miles to the west, while Atlanta, looking a lot like Oz as you come upon it, lies 150 miles to the east. Four hours south is the Gulf Coast with its beautiful white sandy beaches lapped by turquoise water. In six hours you can drive to New Orleans and enjoy the mysterious streets of the French Quarter. In less than four hours, you can be in Memphis for blues and barbeque. Nashville’s country music is a quick two hours up Interstate 65.

Because the steel magnates of the North had formed the city during the Reconstruction period when carpetbaggers found iron in its red hills, Birmingham never knew the Civil War; but it did know the Great Depression. It was one of the worst-hit cities because its steel mills closed when production collapsed across the nation. Nonetheless, the population leaned toward the Republican Party, a fact that separated it from the rest of the state. George Wallace, the Democratic populist governor, ran so poorly in Birmingham that he refused to complete the interstate freeways through the city. When I lived there, Interstate 20 stopped outside the west side of the city at Bessemer, so that drivers had to endure myriad traffic lights to cross
through to the other side of the city, where they could pick up Interstate 20 at Irondale on their way east. Interstate 65 stopped on the north side of the city at Fultondale, and you could not pick it up again until you reached Hoover, south of the city. Even when you were on the interstate, you might find yourself going 25 miles an hour behind a tractor in the left lane because Wallace had told the farmers he had built the interstates for them.

The charm of Birmingham came from its people and the fact that it was built at the tail end of the Appalachian Mountains, hence the lovely ridges distinguishing it from the flatlands of the rest of the state. Birmingham did have its problems, not the least of which was overcoming the stains of racial prejudice. Sheriff Bull Connor had used German shepherds and water guns to control demonstrations in the 1960s. It was from the Birmingham jail that Martin Luther King Jr. had penned his famous letter. However, by the time I arrived in Birmingham, it was working hard to overcome the negative image. The University of Alabama at Birmingham played a large role in that mission.

The university housed the medical school, famous for its world-renowned heart surgeons. It was a commuter school that embraced its community and facilitated the enrollment of at-risk youth. Unlike the staid, traditional university branch at Tuscaloosa, Birmingham’s branch had no football team, nor any fraternities or sororities. It did have new buildings and many vibrant programs, particularly in the arts.

I followed the presidential election closely and sent memos to Hassertmann about how Ford should handle Carter in the impending presidential debates. In the first debate, Ford benefited greatly from low expectations. The press was sure the “brilliant” Jimmy Carter with the degree in nuclear engineering would tear the bumbling Ford apart. Ford held his own, scored more points than Carter, and forced him to reveal specific positions that surprised Southern conservatives. After the first debate, the polls closed to a dead heat. I began to wonder if I should have stayed at the White House.

That speculation ended with the second debate in San Francisco at the Palace of the Arts on October 6, where Ford made a mistake. In answering a question from Max Frankel, a reporter from the New York Times, in defense of his policy of détente, he said, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford Administration.” Ford pointed out that Yugoslavia was free of the Soviets, and Romania and Poland had similar tendencies in mind. When Frankel asked a follow-up about whether Ford had said Poland was free of Soviet dominance, Ford said, “The United States does not concede that those countries are under the domination of the Soviet Union.”
Immediately following the debate, Stu Spencer advised the President to clarify the answer he had given. Ford did not believe he had misspoken, perhaps remembering the first part of his answer to Frankel instead of his answer to the follow-up question. Spencer pressed him again: Didn’t the President mean that in their hearts and minds the Poles were not dominated by the Soviet Union? At some point Kissinger joined the conversation and supported Ford’s decision not to retract. Remember that Kissinger was humiliated in Kansas City when his advice on the Helms amendment undercutting détente was rejected. Now he pushed his point again, defending his policy of détente. Did the President want to insult the Soviets and hence endanger Kissinger’s negotiations to get Anatole Sharansky out of the Soviet Union? This time Ford went with Kissinger, and the decision proved fatal.

Carter’s team and the national media had a field day with Ford’s gaffe. The mistake allowed the nation to recall Ford’s other mistakes and bumbling. (After Ford had slipped coming down the rain-soaked stairs of a plane in Salzburg and fallen to the tarmac, Chevy Chase had made a career out of characterizing Ford as a slapstick president on the popular Saturday Night Live television program.) Several days after the debate, Ford bowed to pressure, and in California, on the campaign trail, said that he meant the Poles in their hearts and minds were not dominated by the Soviet Union. It was too late.

Ford fell back in the polls. The third debate was a virtual tie, with both candidates speaking so carefully that the television ratings plummeted with each passing minute. Over the last weeks of the campaign, it didn’t help when the President said he would be rooting for his alma mater, the University of Michigan, in a key football game with Ohio State. It was crucial for Ford to carry Ohio if he were retain the presidency.

On election night, though Ford lost by about two million votes, the electoral college vote was much closer than predicted and could have been won had Ford carried Mississippi and Ohio. The race was close in both states. However, when the votes came from the southern Ohio counties, the Ford team knew that the Nixon-Ford era was over. The country looked forward to a new beginning, and I turned my attention to my new job.

As usual, I befriended students and had them over for dinner. However, my main time was occupied with building the new program, which I named the Communication Arts Division. There were some part-time faculty in place who could teach broadcasting or public speaking. Some faculty were moved over from the English Department, where they had been teaching courses in journalism. But basically, the division was mine to build, so I set
about recruiting young PhDs to populate the program. After a year, we had a strong foundation for the diverse program. I had hired Martha Martin, John Wright, and Larry Hosman for the fall. They proved very able teachers who loved their students and who could publish at the same time. Though they eventually moved on, they were the foundation of what became and remains to this day a strong department.

POT LIQUOR

I also began to reach out to the community in different ways. One of my African American students had invited me to his home for dinner, if I didn’t mind “poor folks’ food.” He lived with his parents in a rundown part of town in a row house. I was reminded of the poor black community that was just over the tall hedge behind my house in Norfolk when I was growing up. Sitting on a stoop in Birmingham, I had a beer with the student and his father before dinner. Inside the house, as it cooled in the evening breeze, we shared a meal that consisted of ham, collard greens, and corn bread, which one was expected to dip in “pot liquor,” the drippings from the vegetables. These dinners were regularly replicated throughout my stay in Birmingham.

After the first dinner, it occurred to me that African American students came out of an oral culture and therefore might be better served by the university if they took the basic public-speaking course before they took the basic English course, which was more alien to them. So I put in for a federal grant to try my theory out. Fifty at-risk entrants to the university were placed into two public-speaking classes, 25 students each, in their first quarter, and two basic English courses, 25 each, in their second quarter. Fifty more at-risk students did exactly the reverse. I taught one of the fall sections of the public-speaking classes and another one of them in the winter quarter. Ninety-nine of these students were African American.

The results were stunning. The at-risk students who took the public-speaking course first had a much higher retention rate in the university and also had higher grades than those who started with basic English. The reason was not difficult to discern. Because public speaking was oral, and these students came from oral cultures, it was easier for them to assimilate tools for critical thinking, such as the evaluation of evidence, organizational skills, and grammar, in the public-speaking environment than in the basic English composition class.
Since the Tuscaloosa branch of the university was not far away, and since I knew their former debate coach and now chair, Annabel Hagood, and their current coach, Cully Clark, I often came to Tuscaloosa to visit with them and guest-lecture. Annabel was quite good at putting on a dinner; the liquor flowed as freely as the conversation. I soon became one of her favorite guests, and because of the drinking would stay in her guest room rather than drive back to Birmingham in the middle of the night. One night after the other guests had left, Annabel asked me if I missed coaching debate. “No,” I responded, “I loved it while I did it, but once you are out of it and look back, you ask yourself, how did I do that for all those years?”

“I know what you mean,” she said as she sipped some brandy. “Weekend after weekend, holidays, the whole nine yards. You just never think about it while you are doing it.”

“But you do love the debaters. They are the most talented kids I ever knew.”

HYDE AND HEIDEGGER

In my second year, Annabel added Michael Hyde to her faculty, a bright young man who had just finished his PhD at Purdue. We immediately hit it off. In fact, he had applied for an opening I had at UAB, but I had discarded his resumé, believing he would never come to my department since I assumed he wanted to be at a flagship institution. “Oh, no,” he informed me at our first dinner at Annabel’s, “I wanted to come to UAB to work with you.” I was flattered and we began to collaborate on research. My work with Michael encouraged me to delve deeper into Heidegger’s thinking, where I found a link to the spiritual world. Heidegger argued that by rejecting the common herd and its prattle, one could meditate on and stand in hearkening attunement to the spiritual. Such meditation, I argued, increased intuitive powers. However, I explained that intuition was a tricky term that had been defined in different ways. For Plato, it meant turning into the soul and questioning back to pure truths found in the noumenal world, the non-material world of perfect forms. For John Locke, it meant truth that was readily apparent to the senses; we intuit the heat of the burner through our sense of touch. For Zen masters, intuition often meant enlightened clarity resulting from intense meditation and realizing that desire was the root of pain. For Heidegger and for me, it meant spiritual insight into hidden and transcendent meaning—the intuition of something others don’t
know or see, but that you know is absolutely true. Once you reach that kind of intuition, you are a more creative person, and often your art calls others to spirit. And you are a more sensitive person in that you begin to read others better; you sense their neuroses or their spirituality more quickly and more accurately. It would take a while to get that theory published. In fact, no journal in my field would touch it.

Then Michael got me into an international phenomenology conference at Purdue, where things got interesting. I was put on a panel where I was supposed to react to the paper of another professor who was talking about Heidegger’s view of science. I would be given enough time to insert my own views on Heidegger in my response. As I listened to the other professor’s paper, I realized that I sharply disagreed with his interpretation of Heidegger. I began my report by pointing out the difficulties in his reading of Heidegger. Note the use of academic politeness in my rhetoric:

Professor Stewart’s paper seems to me to be a careful analysis of Heidegger’s view of natural science. . . . I would point out, however, that Heidegger separates himself from the tradition of Kant and Husserl more radically than Professor Stewart would have us believe. The ways in which Heidegger rejects the explicative powers of natural science are far more radical than the ways in which Kant performs this function. Furthermore, I have some difficulty understanding how Professor Stewart can argue that Heidegger evolves from Kant and is at the same time compatible with Wittgenstein. Perhaps this is a result of Professor Stewart’s tendency to define and use major terms, such as Dasein, to suit his own purposes.

I then moved on to my own agenda:

Sophists, like Protagoras, found no easy access to the “truth.” Instead, they decided to build the “better illusion” through rhetoric. . . . The twists and turns of philosophy since that time provide a road map of rhetorical theory. Existential thinkers, for example, have forced a reevaluation of rhetoric. . . . Different existentialists have different descriptions of rhetoric. But whether this rhetoric be “edifying,” “willful,” or “authentic,” it is derived from how it functions to create an existential situation. In Martin Heidegger, we find a philosopher who completes a careful study of rhetoric taking it back to Heraclitus and forward to individual existence and transcendence.

The paper focused on a Heideggerian theory of rhetoric, eventually comparing authentic rhetoric (discovery of self, understanding, taking responsibility)
with inauthentic rhetoric (ambiguous, curious, chatter). Uncovering truth, I argued, was the key to understanding, which could create a state of hearkening attunement, a readiness to hear the voice of God. Once heard, that voice could be reconstituted into a rhetoric that would bring others to a state of hearkening attunement, eventually expanding the realm of spirituality in the world.

As I finished the paper, there was some whispering and buzzing in the room. Then the moderator recognized a wizened old woman who rose to her full five feet in stature. She spoke in loud and harsh German; she seemed to be very angry. She pointed at me and then at Professor Stewart. All I could translate was the phrase “hounded drek.” It means “dog shit.” Good Lord, I thought, is she saying my theory is dog shit? I leaned over to Michael Hyde, who was on the panel beside me, and whispered, “Am I in trouble or what?” He wrote a quick note to me that read, “No. She says you reduced his paper to dog shit.”

The woman was Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka from the World Institute for Advanced Phenomenological Research. More importantly, she was the coeditor of *Analectica Husserliana*, the leading journal of phenomenology. At the end of the session she came to me, and with Michael’s help as a translator, she invited me to rewrite my remarks into an article for her journal. So my article on Heidegger appeared in an international philosophy journal, and only then was my thinking on this subject accepted in America in my field. I would continue down this path for many years, inviting other scholars in my field to follow. After all, rhetoric was a field studied by Plato and advanced by Aristotle. No field has better academic roots than that.

**GIVING UP TENURE**

During this time, John Macksoud decided that tenure was immoral and told his department at SUNY Binghamton that he would not accept tenure if they offered it to him. They told him that if he refused tenure, he would have to leave, because if they didn’t give him tenure, it would get them in trouble with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). John resigned and took a terminal year. He moved into an apartment in Binghamton and began saving what he could.

John convinced me that he was right about tenure, and he encouraged me to resign mine. The main argument came in the form of a poem he entitled “Outlaw Wine (To CRS)” and it reads:
It is vain my friends to pretend that a saint
Having tasted outlaw wine could fail
To discern that lawful drink is as pale
As spit. What else could it be? It must sit
And stay in the bellies of Christians whose intimate
Traffic with courage extends to its
Spelling.
But Jesus the outlaw stands large in the mind.
He who said he was lawful while Pharisees tried
Him. Whatever he said it is certain he died
As an outlaw, was judged so and suffered the fate
Of an outlaw whose passion was feared in the states.
Who knowingly drinks his blood partakes
of outlaw wine.

I wanted to become an outlaw, but I didn’t believe John had been properly informed about the AAUP. So I went to my university and told them I wanted to be stripped of tenure and evaluated the way assistant professors were evaluated. I hated the two-class caste system under which we were suffering: the tenured aristocrats versus the untenured slaves. The power relationship is contradictory to academic freedom of the ideals of university life. Untenured professors are often afraid to advance controversial ideas, let alone confront or even vote against tenured professors. By the time they get tenure, they have been compromised into the hegemonic thinking of their tenured associates. And at the time I made this an issue, post-tenure reviews had no teeth, and in too many cases tenure was protecting laziness. At least today some schools are trying to correct that problem.

None of this would be necessary if we just went to a contract system. Professors might start with a three-year contract; if they did well, it could be increased to a five-year contract. If they continued to do well, extend them a seven-year contract. If professors did poorly in terms of teaching or publishing, then give them a shorter contract and a final terminal year when you wanted to let them go. But in no case is a lifetime contract justified. After a legal wrangle, I got the university lawyers to draw up a contract under which I gave up all my rights to appeal any decision to terminate me. The AAUP begged me not to do it, but they said they would not censure the university if the contract went into effect. The day I signed it, I felt terribly liberated, a desperado. And according to the AAUP the only department chair ever to give up tenure. It would not be the last time I caught the attention of the AAUP.
REVIVING REPUBLICANISM IN ALABAMA

When I read in the paper that the Republican Party had elected a new, young state chairman, Bill Harris, I decided to give him a call and offer my services. Our first meeting was over lunch on January 27, 1977. At the time, no more than 10 percent of the voters in Alabama called themselves Republicans, and most of them were in Birmingham. Alabama was deep Confederate territory that had voted for George Wallace for president in 1968. Those who ran the Republican Party treated it like a country club. They had no interest in making it into a viable entity. Bill Harris was different; he saw that though Alabamans called themselves Democrats, they had long since embraced the conservative principles housed in the Republican Party. Barry Goldwater had carried the state in 1964; Nixon carried it in 1972, and was making significant inroads when Watergate stopped Republican momentum. In 1976, the election of Jimmy Carter, a former Southern governor, was another setback. But soon the Carter administration was unraveling. As he began his administration, he gave a two-part speech on energy in which he sounded like a minister chastising his flock. Rather incongruously, he did this while sitting in a rocking chair wearing a sweater. Massive inflation would follow, and then our embassy in Iran would be seized by radical Islamists who came to power because Carter had insisted that the shah of Iran make certain reforms or lose U.S. aid. The shah’s secret police were a terror. However, when the shah made some reforms—for example, liberating women—he was overthrown and replaced by a right-wing ayatollah.

That came a few years after Bill Harris and I set out to make Alabama a Republican state. We hit it off immediately. He put me on the Republican steering committee, and we began to give speeches across the state to recruit young entrepreneurs, farmers, and executives into the party. We told them our party was the land of opportunity in terms of political advancement as opposed to the crowded Democratic Party, which was impossible to break into. I also agreed to work with potential candidates as a kind of media consultant. In May of 1977, that led to a tough lesson. I wrote a speech for Guy Hunt, our presumptive candidate for governor, then traveled to hear Hunt give the speech. It went well, but in the Q&A that followed, Hunt made a racist remark. I wrote him that I would never work with him again, and that he’d better clean up his act if he ever wanted to become governor.2

Before the situation could be turned around from the doldrums of 1976 and 1977, Bill and I also needed to raise money. The quickest way to do that
was to host a dinner for a big-name speaker. Most of them demanded a huge fee unless they planned to run for president in 1980. So we put together a request letter in May 1977 that went to likely presidential candidates. We quickly learned that of the big guns, like Reagan and Connally, none would come to Alabama because the state was seen as a waste of time. We found one exception: George H. W. Bush, the former head of the CIA when I was at the White House, and before that ambassador to China and the UN, head of the Republican Party, congressman, entrepreneur, and war hero. We immediately began to plan a dinner at which he would speak.

I had always liked George Bush, a bright, sensitive man whom you would like to have as a brother or a best friend. So I looked forward to his speech. The event, in the new Birmingham Civic Center on October 28, 1977, was well attended. I was seated with a lively group, including a blond young man who was something of a political nerd. Since I was a speech professor and former presidential speechwriter, he goaded me into agreeing to give a critique of Bush’s speech when it was over; so as he spoke, I wrote notes on a napkin. When Bush finished, I delivered my assessment to our table. Basically, it amounted to nice guy, terrible speech. It had no sense of style; it was disjointed and often cryptic; his delivery was neither fluent nor energetic. The nerd told me he was traveling with Bush. They were looking for a speechwriter and had heard from former President Ford that I was in Birmingham. The nerd was Karl Rove, who had set me up and I loved it. Would I like to meet Ambassador Bush after the dinner? You bet.

When I met Bush at the intimate post-dinner gathering, I told him that I remembered the great job he did in reviving spirits at the CIA after he took over after the Watergate crisis. Bush asked me what I thought of his speech. I told him I would send him a full critique. A few days later I sent the critique to his staff leader. It included these passages:

Ambassador Bush conveys credibility by exuding character, expertise, goodwill, and, at times, spontaneity. These factors should be enhanced in the future. His prior reputation works to his advantage and those who introduce him should be scripted to highlight that he was the youngest Navy pilot in World War II, that he was shot down over the Pacific, rescued by a submarine and won the Distinguished Flying Cross, and three other medals, that he is a self-made businessman, that he won his congressional seat in a heavily Democratic district in 1966 and then was unopposed for reelection, that he served with distinction as our party chairman during its worst crisis, that he served as ambassador to China and the U.N., and that he revived the flagging CIA after Watergate. . . .

A sense of style must be developed. There were many missed opportunities for
parallel structure, alliteration, balances, and the like. . . . Ambassador Bush needs to let his audience know where he is going. Ideas need to be grouped and structured. (Castro was mentioned twice in the speech, but the mentions were ten minutes apart.) Why wasn’t all the energy material grouped together into a deep structured unit? . . . Only in a few places in the foreign policy sections did the speech develop enough emotion to excite the audience. This gives the audience the impression that the ambassador has a passion for foreign policy but not for domestic policy.

I then offered to fly over to Houston to work on a campaign speech for Bush.

On November 11, 1977, Bush wrote me a personal letter inviting me to Houston in January for an interview. I told him I would be in Houston as soon as I got back from London, where I would spend Christmas with friends. I then received a two-page letter from Karl Rove detailing what would happen when I came to Houston. Then came a transcript of a speech that Bush gave in Albuquerque. I sent a critique back that was very detailed and outlined a longer speech that Bush could use for most occasions by picking and choosing the issues to be covered for the immediate audience. This was the same technique Reagan had used when he ran for governor of California and about which I had written my master’s thesis.

A letter was waiting for me when I arrived at my friend’s place in London. Bush told me to visit with Jennifer Fitzgerald, who was working as Ambassador Kingman Brewster’s chief of protocol at the American Embassy. Jennifer had been a loyal Nixon Republican who met Bush while he was chairman of the party. She had been with the Bush team ever since. Because Bush was a Yale graduate, when the Republicans fell from power in 1976, he was able to get Jennifer on with Brewster, who had been president of Yale. Bush’s letter to me concluded, “I am deeply touched that you want to help me. I am deadly serious. I know it is a Long March but I’m up for it. Happy Christmas over there.” Jennifer Fitzgerald and I met at the Embassy and were simpatico; she okayed me to Bush.3

When I went to Houston in early January to meet with Bush, I was put up at the ritzy Galleria Hotel. All dressed up in my best three-piece suit, I was driven to Bush’s home in the River Oaks neighborhood on a Sunday morning. Bush, in a red Izod polo shirt and slacks, greeted me at a side door. “If you’ll take off that silly vest,” he laughed, “I’ll cook you breakfast.” First, he gave me a tour of the hacienda, and then asked me to sit at the kitchen bar while he cooked up some eggs, bacon, and toast for me. He asked if I wanted coffee and I said I did. He filled a cup with coffee, handed it to me,
and slapped some bacon into a hot pan. Just then Mrs. Bush entered the kitchen in a housecoat and stared me up and down.

“George, this young man is drinking coffee without a saucer. The Chinese delegation is coming tonight and I don’t want a spot anywhere.”

Summoning up courage from God knows where, I responded, “Mrs. Bush, I came to your door in a three-piece suit. If you think I’m going to spill one drop of this coffee, you don’t know who you are dealing with.”

Both Barbara and George laughed. “George,” she said, “I like this young man.”

For the next few hours, Bush and I went over a speech I had written for him. He liked it and added examples and some figures he had in his head on national defense. Then we retreated into the den, where Barbara joined us and we listened to his speech before Washington’s Gridiron Club, an off-the-record night among the press and major players in Washington. Bush was genuinely funny in front of educated people. His humor was dry and offbeat. The more I knew him, the more I liked him.

The important thing was to get Bush on the road to the 1980 nomination. Our first tour began in February of 1978 with a speech to Texas Bear County Republicans in Houston. It went well. The chairman gave Barbara a bouquet of yellow roses and Bush the Texas state flag. As our Saberliner took off through a snowstorm for Tulsa, Karl Rove read a book and I tried to break the tension by saying how beautiful the roses were. Barbara replied, “I would rather have had the damn flag.” This woman could be tough. Later Karl told me that he was afraid of her and that I should always be positive in my criticism of George Bush. “She’s very protective, Craig. I’ve learned that the hard way.” Bush then handed me a few changes for the speech in Tulsa the following night. After we landed and I got into my room at the Hilton, I worked until 3 a.m. on the final version of the speech.

The speech in Tulsa was the real test. There were plenty of Republicans there to hear it, but they leaned toward the candidacy of John Connally. By this point in time, Connally’s speeches were legendary. In one section, the former Democratic governor of Texas attacked the Japanese for illegal trade practices and said his policies would leave them sitting in their Toyotas on their docks with no place to go. The line always got a cheer.

Karl and I had decided that Bush couldn’t out-Connally Connally. Bush needed to be his own man. That meant starting each speech with some humor that was created on the spot, then adapting the opening to the local audience, and then getting very serious about the issues, displaying his knowledge of foreign policy. Throughout the Tulsa speech, you could hear a pin drop. No applause interrupted the speech, but the audience was
attentive. When it ended, Bush got a long, standing ovation. People near me said exactly what I wanted to hear: “Now, that was presidential.” We were betting that Bush’s issue orientation would in the long run overcome the passion and flash of Connally. In those days, making a cowboy president was unthinkable.

Bush came over to me after the speech and I held my breath. “Craig, I thought it went very well. I felt very comfortable with that speech. And, you know, Barbara really liked it too.” Barbara winked at me as we left the hotel ballroom. At 6:30 A.M. she flew home and I traveled on with Bush and Rove. I suggested some minor tweaks for the speech and he approved them. We landed in Chicago for a day crazy with activity. There were two breakfasts, a pre-lunch cocktail hour with donors, a lunch featuring my speech on the economy at a commercial club, more meetings, another cocktail hour with donors before dinner, then a dinner and a modified version of my campaign speech. It was a tough life, with very little down time for a candidate, and this was almost two years before the election. God, I thought, what is it going to be like during the primary season?

The next day we arrived at Beloit College, a very small, 1,000-student liberal arts campus in southern Wisconsin. We were the guests of the president of the college, Martha Peterson, who looked something like Margaret Mead. She had scheduled a press conference for noon on the steps of her presidential mansion, where we each had been given a room. The news media was hostile to Bush, but he parried the questions well. He knew that he would be questioned about his role as national party chairman during Watergate, and then head of the CIA. I admired his diplomatic tenacity.

After freshening up, Bush and I went for a walk through the campus, which was gleaming white in the sunshine after a snowfall. It was wonderful to be alone with him and just talk like friends about nothing in particular. He liked me to take his mind off the campaign and into academic subjects. Eventually we found our way to a hall where Bush was to lecture on China. The place was packed by the time President Peterson introduced Bush. As I stood offstage holding his overcoat, I felt very protective of him. I was proud that his lecture was quite good. He needed no notes and the students listened in rapt attention. Then came time for questions. Several were hostile. But again, he parried the questions well and won the crowd over.

President Peterson had arranged a dinner in the evening for some local fat cats and politicos; we were not far from Chicago, Des Moines, Milwaukee, and Madison. When she offered us all a round of drinks, Bush demurred, saying he’d given up alcohol for Lent, “but” (pointing to me) he
said, “you can count on beardo over there to have a gin martini!” From then on, I was “beardo” on the Bush team.

During the dinner, the fat cats asked a lot of pushy questions and made a lot of demands, but Bush handled them with finesse and dignity. I would have thrown my plate at them. It is one of the reasons I could never run for public office. Even educated, well-to-do people suppose that politicians should do their bidding. After Bush and Rove retired, I stayed up until 2 A.M. talking with Martha Peterson about the sad state of education in America.

After a good night’s sleep and hearty breakfast, we were off to Rockford for a press conference and then a fundraising luncheon. Karl had scheduled me to leave the entourage at O’Hare Airport and return to Birmingham. Since this was my first road trip with the team, I suspected that Karl didn’t want to book me on for too long in case my chemistry with Bush was bad. Bush was to go on to Akron to deliver “the speech” again. Karl hadn’t told Bush that I’d be leaving. He was surprised and seemed sad to see me go. I said I was sorry but I had to get back to my duties in Birmingham. “I thought Karl let you know.”

“Well, no he didn’t. We’ll miss you.”

“Good luck, Ambassador. Knock ’em dead in Akron.”

“They’re already dead in Akron,” he quipped. When I got back to Alabama, Karl called to say the speech in Akron went very well.

Soon Adam Clymer of the New York Times wrote that Bush had become a “hot property on the G.O.P. dinner circuit. . . . He draws his experience into his speeches, which are well-spoken, with effectively timed punch lines.”5 Later in the year, Newsweek wrote, “Bush is toning up his once flat style of speaking—and increasingly his speeches seem to catch fire.”6 A few weeks after I got home, Bush sent a private letter in which he promised “to work on the speech you sent me, and I’ll do what you suggest and let you know how it goes.”7 I continued to send versions of “the speech” to Bush, who regularly sent back notes expressing his gratitude.

“The speech” was not to run over thirty minutes, not counting opening remarks and local adaptations, but had enough material to run ninety minutes. The object was to take the most appropriate thirty minutes for the local audience. I regularly updated the speech, especially in terms of new evidence and current events. But the main themes were set, the major issues engaged. And that made my job a little easier. It also gave me a chance to put some of my existential beliefs into Bush’s mouth. Here’s a passage from Bush’s call to the Republican Party to return to its roots by creating
our own identity and building our own home in the American political system. This Party was born out of a struggle for principle and if it is to survive and flourish, to principle it must return. . . . Nothing creative, nothing worth while exists that does not come from the individual or from cooperation among individuals. It is not society that provides us with inventions, but individuals. It is not society that creates art, but single individuals. The individual in freedom is the productive force of this greatest of all cultures.

After a discussion of such other core values as “security,” “responsibility,” and “freedom,” Bush moved to the meat and potatoes of his speech, beginning with an attack on the Carter administration:

It seeks compromise at almost any cost. It would not only surrender the Panama Canal but pay the Panamanians to take it. It would not only renegotiate the SALT agreement, but would rewrite it to our disadvantage. . . . First, we must maintain a credible force: This means we must not only develop the B-1 Bomber and the mx and Cruise missiles, but any other weapon that proves us credible. . . . We cannot on the one hand surrender Angola to Cuba, and on the other maintain credibility in Latin America.

The transition to domestic issues was a natural for Bush, given his strong record on civil rights:

We must guarantee human rights at home before we can advocate them abroad. . . . Reducing unemployment among our minorities will give credibility to our call for human rights abroad. . . . Let’s provide incentives not only for energy exploration but for economic growth. Let’s plan on steady development, not with hit or miss programs, but with a full range of research and development options including solar, wind, geothermal, oil shale, and nuclear. And let’s assess our environmental needs not with passion and prejudice, but with objectivity and optimism.

The speech holds up pretty well over thirty years later. Because Bush came to Alabama, and news was spreading about the work of Bill Harris and me to rebuild the party there, more speakers came. In the spring, I was delighted to welcome former President Ford to the university, which further enhanced my credibility there. Afterward, I treated myself to a solo trip down to Fort Walton Beach on the Florida Gulf Coast. The sand was white and clean; the water was warm, aquamarine, and clear. The trip gave me time to meditate on my life and pray for spiritual growth in the
midst of all the political activity. It was important to keep the inner spiritual core strong if I was to remain creative and at peace in the closet.

When I returned to Birmingham, I continued my spiritual quest over dinners with Michael Hyde. I kept in physical shape by playing a lot of tennis. I kept in mental shape by teaching my classes and publishing my research. The University of Alabama, Birmingham was getting a reputation as a good place for young professors to begin a career, which was fine with me. I wanted new PhDs so I didn’t have to break any bad habits that were formed by professors coming from other departments.

In March 1978, Bush asked me to consider moving to Houston for the summer to work on his campaign. I told him I wasn’t interested in doing the job full-time. I could fly over from Birmingham whenever he needed me. At the end of the spring, Bush gave several commencement addresses, which gave me a chance to nudge him a little further down the road to a “kinder, gentler nation” with spiritual values. At Phillips Exeter Academy in Andover, from which he graduated before attending Yale, Bush told the students:

I believe the pursuit of happiness should be a spiritual quest, not a material game. The real rewards in life are personal, not public; they are moral, not monetary; they are of the heart, not of the intellect. . . . This spirit of sacrifice would direct us toward magnanimity, to helping, to sharing. It would direct us away from self seeking, self satisfaction, and self indulgence. . . . The role of the private citizen in a democracy is to assure that the political and economic foundations remain strong, to work for the spiritual values that hold the nation together, and to demonstrate beyond a doubt the power of individual action in a mass society. If our citizens will accept this challenge, we can restore faith where cynicism now prevails. We can bring hope where despair now prevails. We can continue the struggle for individual freedom where collectivism now prevails.

The summer became rather hectic. I had speeches to give in Alabama and I enjoyed getting to know the state better. There were trips to Houston to work on speeches, meet with the political team headed by Jim Baker, and get to know Bush better. One day he asked me to sit in on a meeting in his office. Bush’s son George W. was running for Congress from the district in west Texas that centered on the city of Midland. There was some talk that the rowdy younger Bush would be challenged in the primary by a member of the Christian Right. So his father decided to meet with a leading clergyman from Midland in an effort to gain support for his son and to dissuade the Christian Right from fielding a candidate. I would serve as a witness to
the conversation so that the minister could not make false claims about it later. The Christian Right rejected Bush’s advice, and though his son won the primary, he lost the general election in part because the Republicans had been divided by the primary fight. This lesson was not lost on George W. or his father. Unfortunately, it made them, in my opinion, much too deferential to the Christian Right.

MURDER IN MOBILE

Back in Birmingham that summer, news arrived that Alabama Democratic Senator “Big Jim” Allen, a master of Senate parliamentary procedure, had died. Bill Harris and I decided this presented us with an opportunity to test the revitalized Republican Party. We recruited a former Republican congressman from Birmingham, Jim Martin, to run for the newly open seat. The Democrats nominated Don McDonald, a liberal labor lawyer. Martin and I hit it off and he asked me to write his speeches and coach him through the campaign. I told him we could do to McDonald what Ford did to Carter: force him into debates and then reveal to the public what a liberal he was. Martin agreed with the strategy; the problem was that McDonald was smart, way ahead in the polls, and knew that the debates would give exposure to Martin’s underfunded campaign. I told Martin to keep hammering for a debate. “Call the man a coward if you have to.”

Martin was a quick study when it came to speeches, and I quickly adapted his policies to the Alabama electorate. We were short on funds for the campaign, so we took advantage of every possible event to get Jim free airtime. He flipped more pancakes than Aunt Jemima. Slowly, our poll numbers improved. Soon the National Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee (NRSCC) took notice of our race and sent a consultant, let’s call him Sean, down in October. We struck up a fast friendship; he was witty, a devotee of Theodore Roosevelt—he had even developed a Roosevelt accent. On his second visit, he revealed to me that he was a closeted gay man with a wife and child. He sensed that I was gay and I allowed as I was. It was such a relief to have someone to talk to who was in a similar situation to mine. However, the fact that he was deep into the cover-up with a wife and child was troubling. We exchanged views on what it is like to be in the closet in the Republican Party and became loyal but unromantic friends.

At Sean’s suggestion, the NRSCC pumped some money into the campaign. That gave us another boost when we put all of that money into
television and radio commercials, some of which continued the drumbeat for a debate. Soon the news media was hammering McDonald about not debating with Martin. Finally, McDonald caved and agreed to one debate in late October. I negotiated the tedious details with his staff. Because they were all labor lawyers, the final agreement took some time to work out. My mantra became, “If you insist on that rule, I have to go to the news media and explain how unfair you are being.” However, I got the debate into the 6 p.m. dinner slot when most Alabamans could watch it on television when they got home from work.

A few days before it was to take place, we flew to Mobile on a private plane with Martin’s campaign manager and the brother of the late Senator Allen. In Mobile, Martin and I worked on debate strategy. At a fund-raising dinner, Allen’s brother and the senator’s widow endorsed Martin for the Senate seat, opening the door to crossover Democratic voters. Our timing was perfect; the newspapers went crazy with the story. The next morning, Martin appeared with Senator Barry Goldwater on a destroyer in Mobile Bay to push defense issues. That afternoon, we were scheduled to fly back to Birmingham on the private plane and continue to ready Jim for the big debate. However, after the press event with Goldwater, Jim told his campaign manager that he wanted to stay in Mobile an extra day with me, away from distractions. Jim’s campaign manager and Allen’s brother were to take the private plane back to Birmingham; we would follow on a commercial jet the next morning. Allen’s widow planned to stay with friends in Mobile for a few days.

Just as we were finishing rehearsing Jim for the debate, the phone in his hotel room rang. Jim picked it up and suddenly turned ashen. He almost fell over the bed trying to seat himself. He ended the phone conversation with, “I understand. I understand. Of course, make all the necessary arrangements.” The private plane carrying our campaign manager and Allen’s brother had crashed. No one survived.

The debate was canceled, the funerals were held, and suddenly it was election day. Throughout the day, Bill Harris and I got news of different kinds of election fraud across the state, which we promptly reported to election officials and the FBI. In many rural districts, the lever next to Martin’s name had been removed from voting machines. In the cities in the evening, Democrats loaded school buses with poor people, handed them what is called “walking around money,” and had them vote in place of people who had not shown up at the polls. Despite these tactics, Jim Martin carried every major city in the state of Alabama. But it was not enough. McDonald
carried rural precincts by huge margins, sometimes ten to one. In the end, Martin got 45 percent of the vote to McDonald’s 55 percent.

A few weeks later, the report on the plane crash was completed by the FAA and the FBI. They ruled that the plane had been sabotaged; its fuel lines were cut. The perpetrators of the crime were never found. I never forgot how close Jim and I came to being killed along with the others on our staff. Then another event reinforced my feelings of mortality. I had followed Harvey Milk’s career with interest. He was a gay activist who got elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the first openly gay person elected to public office in America. Another member of the board, Dan White, couldn’t deal with Milk’s positions, nor those of Mayor Moscone, and on November 27, 1978, White killed them. He would get off on an insanity plea, claiming he had become deranged by eating too many sweets.

All of this was too much for me. I accepted an invitation to be a guest professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, for the winter quarter. I wanted some away time to consider what to do with my life and whether now was the time to come out. However, I was about to become deeply embedded in the machinery of the national Republican Party.