



May 1, 2006

WHITE HOUSE LETTER

A New Set of Bush Twins Appear at Annual Correspondents' Dinner

By [ELISABETH BUMILLER](#)

WASHINGTON

It was love at first sight. When President Bush met Steve Bridges, a Bush impersonator, three years ago in the Oval Office, he immediately thought that he and his doppelganger could gang up at the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner.

As Mr. Bush told Mr. Bridges, according to Mr. Bridges's manager, who attended the meeting: "Every year they have the White House correspondents' dinner, where everybody goes and leaves having had a good time except for the president."

So on Saturday night, in a duet of a stand-up routine at the annual press Bacchanalia, Mr. Bush seemed to have a less painful time than usual with Mr. Bridges as his sidekick and inner voice.

Mr. Bush, from the stage in the cavelike Washington Hilton ballroom: "As you know, I always look forward to these dinners."

Mr. Bridges, standing aside the president at an identical lectern: "It's just a bunch of media types, Hollywood liberals, Democrats like [Joe Biden](#) there. How come I can't have dinner with the 36 percent of the people who like me?"

Mr. Bush: "I'm sorry that Vice President Cheney couldn't be here tonight. I agree with the press that Dick was a little late reporting that hunting episode down in Texas. In fact, I didn't know a thing about it till I saw him on 'America's Most Wanted.' "

Mr. Bridges: "You reporters would go nuts if you knew the full story. He was drunk as a skunk! On one beer! Light beer! Oh, people were duckin' and divin' for cover. I wish I'd been there. I saw him coming down the hall the other day, I looked at him and said, 'Don't shoot!' "

White House officials and Mr. Bridges said the double stand-up was the idea of the president, who last year ceded his spot on the program to his wife and in previous years relied on slide shows as visual props for his routines. As the 2,500-plus guests at the annual event know, by tradition the president is supposed to make fun of himself in an effort to establish his regular-guy credentials and ingratiate himself with the press.

With his approval ratings in the mid-30's and a White House beset by troubles, there is some evidence that Mr. Bush worked harder on his performance this year than in the past. At the very least, he started focusing on his stand-up as long ago as January, when he asked Dan Bartlett, the White House counselor, to contact Mr. Bridges and Landon Parvin, a longtime speechwriter.

For Mr. Bush, the timing seemed right. He had known about Mr. Bridges, who appears regularly as a Bush impersonator on "The Tonight Show," since 2002.

At Christmas that year at the president's ranch, [Barbara Bush](#), the president's mother, showed her son and the assembled clan a video of Mr. Bridges imitating Mr. Bush that had been used to introduce her at an appearance in Texas. Mr. Bush, amused, asked to meet Mr. Bridges, and eventually got together with him in Washington on Feb. 24, 2003, three weeks before the American-led invasion of Iraq.

"Maybe he needed a break or something," said Randy Nolen, Mr. Bridges's manager. "We had him laughing."

Mr. Nolen said that Mr. Bush greeted Mr. Bridges by opening his arms and asking, "Is this me?" and that the president and the impersonator spent 20 minutes together. Mr. Bridges did his imitation of Mr. Bush and talked about the two and a half hours it takes to apply the makeup he needs to morph into the president.

"Everything but his eyes and teeth are fake," Mr. Nolen said.

Mr. Bush told Mr. Bridges, Mr. Nolen said, that the time was not right for comedy, but that in the future they had to get together and do "something big." This year's correspondents' dinner was apparently big enough, and by mid-April Mr. Parvin had a script. Mr. Parvin, who has written jokes for Mr. Bush and former President [Ronald Reagan](#), then had a run-through with Mr. Bush in the Oval Office.

Last Friday was the dress rehearsal with Mr. Bridges in the White House family theater. Mr. Bartlett and [Joshua B. Bolten](#), the new White House chief of staff, attended, but many other senior aides were kept out to keep it secret. Mr. Bush and Mr. Bridges did two straight run-throughs.

"I was so nervous," Mr. Bridges said yesterday by telephone from California, after a morning flight from Washington. "I had a twitch in my eye for two weeks." The session soon dissolved into laughter, but Mr. Bush was instructed to keep a straight face during the actual performance.

It was at the dress rehearsal, Mr. Parvin said, that Mr. Bush suggested adding a line for Mr. Bridges that the first lady "is hot," and Mr. Bridges suggested

following up with "muy caliente," or "very hot." Both additions were in the final routine.

Other lines came from Mr. Bridges's regular spoof of Mr. Bush, like "Yes, my fellow Americans, in the words of [Sigmund Freud](#), 'I have a dream.' " One line, delivered by Mr. Bush, was particularly topical: "I'm feeling pretty chipper tonight — I survived the White House shake-up."

Other lines made fun of Mr. Bush's pronunciation difficulties.

Mr. Bridges: "We must enhance noncompliance protocols sanctioned not only at I.A.E.A. formal sessions but through intercessional contact."

Mr. Bush: "We must enhance noncompliance protocols sanctioned not only at E-I-E-I-O formal sessions but through intersexual contact."

So did the laughter in the ballroom help Mr. Bush in his time of political trouble?

"I have no idea," Mr. Parvin said. "The way we looked at it, we were just going to have a good time and get through it."