

He's not the prez, but he plays him on TV

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By William Keck, USA TODAY

MARINA DEL REY, Calif. — For 10 minutes, Steve Bridges sat unrecognized in a deli near his home before this reporter, who was worried he had missed his interview subject, turned to him in desperation and asked, "You're not Steve Bridges, are you?"

That's because Bridges is identifiable only as President George W. Bush. He performed his dead-on impersonation right alongside the commander in chief behind matching podiums at last weekend's White House Correspondents' Association dinner in Washington, D.C.

With a thin face and thinning straight brown hair, Bridges, who is 42 and single, looks nothing like Bush. He becomes The President with the aid of a gray wig and prosthetic facial attachments (forehead, cheeks, nose, upper lip, chin, neck and ears). "The only me you see is my eyes," he says.

He has brought his Bush impersonation to *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno dozens of times since 2002, but has also done his spot-on impression on shows such as *NCIS* and *JAG* and at countless corporate events. This Sunday, he appears as Bush on NBC's *Meet the Press* (check local listings).

A Texas-born Republican who also impersonates California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ronald Reagan and all the living U.S. presidents, Bridges says he borrows from his preacher father's Southern drawl in voicing the president. "I like the man," he says of Bush. "What you see with him is what you get."

Bridges met the real W in 2003 at the White House after Barbara Bush became a fan. At the conclusion of that introduction, at which Bush's staff instructed him not to dress as the president ("They were very clear"), W told Bridges: "We're going to have to do something down the road."

When the invitation to the White House Correspondents' annual dinner arrived a month ago, "I couldn't believe it," Bridges says, still in awe.



Last Friday in the White House, Bridges and Bush rehearsed their skit, in which Bridges voiced what the president was really thinking. And at one point during their run-throughs, Bush admonished Bridges, telling him, "Hey c'mon, dude, you're reading my lines."

But Bush didn't get his first look at Bridges in his prosthetics until they took the spotlight together Saturday night at the Washington Hilton in front of an uproarious audience of 2,600. "It was amazing," Bridges says. "With all the strong opinion about the president, it's good to give people a chance to be less serious and have some laughs. It's a great way to make a living."

And with Bush's term winding down, Bridges is already plotting his next gig. He has John Kerry, John Edwards and John McCain down. But "if Hillary (Clinton) runs and wins, I'm going to do Bill Clinton. I thought about impersonating Hillary, but I just don't think it would work."