

# Bones of Contention

Infamous for reportedly bizarre initiation rituals, Yale's secret society Skull and Bones serves as a recruiting ground for entrants into the covert international Power Elite.

by William Norman Grigg

**H**ow did George W. Bush become president? This question is not meant to address his election, but rather his means of ascent as a viable candidate for the office. Whatever one thinks of Mr. Bush's character, abilities, and policies, there are many others who could be better presidents. And even his most ardent supporters would have to admit that his rise to the presidency was not propelled exclusively by his personal merits.

In his autobiography, George W. Bush coyly alluded to an influential underground network that has covertly aided his political career. Referring to his undergraduate days at Yale, Bush recalled: "My senior year I joined Skull and Bones, a secret society, so secret I can't say anything

more." That society is the focus of the new book, *Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power*, by Yale graduate Alexandra Robbins. The author describes the Order of Skull and Bones as a key part of a network "which is powerful but intangible and available only to those who seek it out."

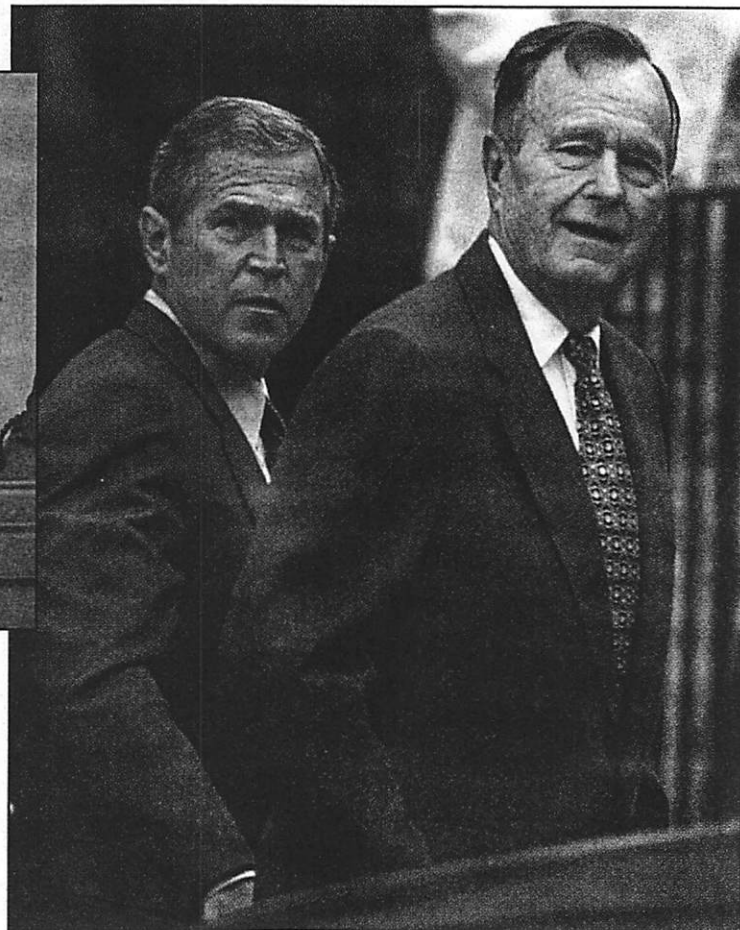
In fact, it is the Order that does the seeking, selecting (or "tapping") 15 promising Yale students to spend their senior years communing as "knights" of the society in the "Tomb," the society's Gothic sandstone headquarters. "There is reason to everything Skull and Bones does; its headquarters, program, and rituals have all been carefully calibrated to cultivate its power by essentially training its members," writes Robbins. "Eventually a member's self-

perception is so intertwined with his secret-society identity ... that if he were to betray or leave Skull and Bones, he would lose what has become a major part of the way that he identifies himself."

Skull and Bones has also become a major spawning ground for our nation's political, diplomatic, financial, and media elite. "The list of prominent members of Skull and Bones is staggering, particularly given that, with only fifteen new members initiated each year, there are approximately eight hundred living members at any one time," Robbins points out. "It would seem to be no small coincidence that a tiny college club has somehow managed to spawn three presidents of the United States" — William Howard Taft and the



AP/Wide World



AP/Wide World

**Three generations of secrets:** As a heavy-drinking Yale senior of limited accomplishments, George W. Bush (**right, with George Bush the elder**) was tapped for Skull and Bones, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, Senator Prescott Bush (**above**). Bonesmen helped finance George W.'s unsuccessful forays into business, as well as his gubernatorial and presidential campaigns.

**Sober analysts of the partially submerged international Power Elite do not believe that Skull and Bones is running that hidden network. Yet there is very good evidence that Skull and Bones serves as a primary recruiting ground for that covert elite.**

two George Bushes. The 2004 presidential race might involve two "Bonesmen" — President Bush and Massachusetts Democratic Senator John Kerry.

"The biggest benefit to Skull and Bones is the networking," one Bonesman told Robbins. "In the rest of the world you get to know people through accident or through choice. In Bones you meet people whom you otherwise wouldn't get to meet. It's a forced setup among a group of high achievers...." That network can also help less gifted individuals gain access to it as "legacies," initiates who are sons of distinguished members of the Order.

Such is the case with George W. Bush, who "clearly was not one of the top students at Andover, [but] ... was the descendant of two of Skull and Bones' favorite sons" — his father, George H.W. Bush, and his grandfather, Senator Prescott Bush. In 1968, as a shallow youth given to drunkenness and indifferent to his studies, George W. was accepted into Skull and Bones and given the secret name "Temporary." Bush's Skull and Bones connection proved useful when, as a Yale graduate, his application to the University of Texas Law School was rejected: Fellow Bonesman Robert Walker hired Bush as a management trainee at Stratford of Texas, a Houston-based agricultural firm.

When Bush formed Arbusto Energy Inc. in 1977, "he once again sought the help of Skull and Bones," writes Robbins. A Bonesman uncle, New York investment banker Jonathan Bush, arranged \$565,000 in financing for the oil firm; \$172,550 came from California investor William H. Draper, another Bonesman. These investments were water poured into sand, since Arbusto went bust by 1984. When Bush was negotiating to purchase the Texas Rangers baseball team in 1989, one of the

four major co-investors was Dudley S. Taft. President of Taft Broadcasting and grandnephew of Bonesman President William Howard Taft, Dudley was "a member of the one family with more Bones members than the Bushes," Robbins points out.

As would be expected, Skull and Bones members figure prominently in the

donor lists from George W. Bush's political campaigns. Fifty-eight Bonesmen donated a total of \$57,972 (the legal limit) to the 2000 Bush presidential campaign, and several others offered contributions in their wives' names. Bonesmen helped lay the foundation for George W. Bush's formidable 2000 war chest.

Thirty-three years after the boozy, underachieving son of a Bonesman was "tapped" to fill one of the "legacy" slots in the society, the newly inaugurated President George W. Bush hosted a reunion of fellow "Bonesmen" in the White House.

### Means of Ascent

George W. Bush's career could be summarized by a line from the 1970 television film *The Brotherhood of the Bell*, which portrayed an occultic campus society modeled after Skull and Bones. In the film, Professor Andy Patterson (Glenn Ford) is given an assignment from "The Bell" to blackmail a refugee scholar into withdrawing his candidacy for a prestigious academic post. The Bell, Patterson is told, intended that post for one of them. After the despairing refugee commits suicide, Patterson tells his "senior," financier Chad Halmon (Dean Jagger), that he wants to resign from the secret society.

"You had your option 22 years ago," Halmon tells Patterson. "You have received every [advantage], every fellowship, every post you've ever wanted. You have never competed for anything in the last 22 years, since you took that oath at sunrise." Indeed, as Patterson himself had told a young student undergoing his own initiation into The Bell, accepting the society's discipline meant having "anything that one can get with money, power, and the best connections."

The real-life connections of the Skull and Bones were first forged in 1832 by

Yale Student William H. Russell, scion of an immensely wealthy family that ran a world opium empire. While living in Germany, "Russell befriended the leader of an insidious German secret society that hailed the death's head as its logo," Robbins recounts. "Russell soon became caught up in this group, itself a sinister outgrowth of the notorious eighteenth-century society, the Illuminati."

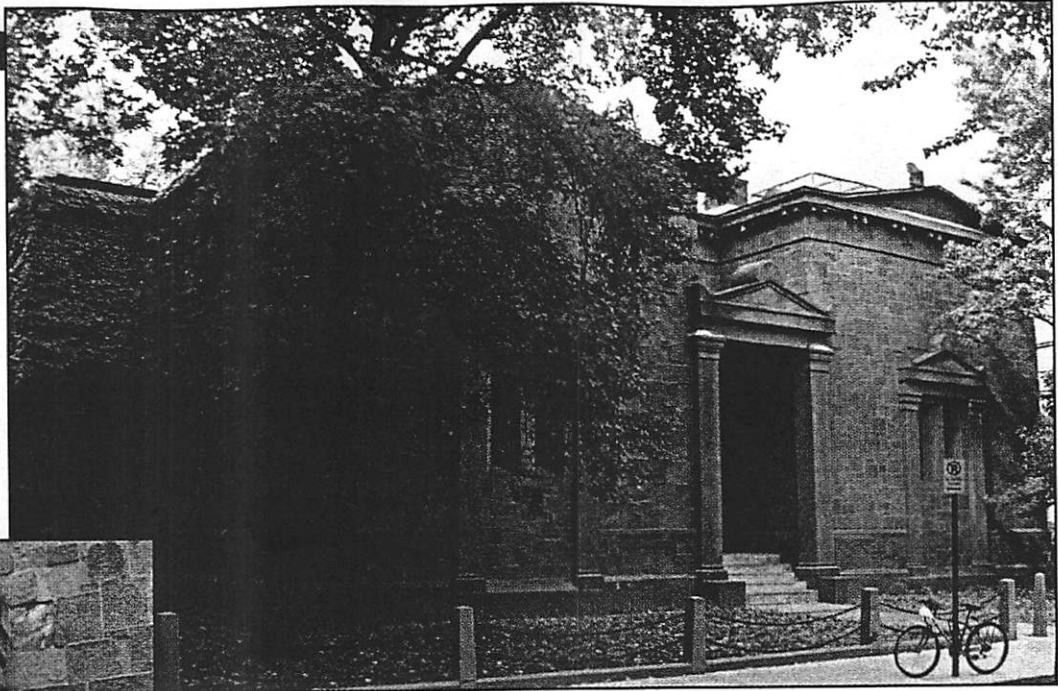
This is more than a little ironic, given that a few decades earlier the president of Yale College had warned of the sinister influence of revolutionary secret societies, especially the Illuminati, which he identified as the engine driving European social and political upheavals, particularly the French Revolution. In his Independence Day address in 1798, President Timothy Dwight warned that the doctrines and activities of the Illuminati "strike at the root of all human happiness and virtue ... [seeking] the overthrow of religion, government, and human society civil and domestic." The Illuminists consider their objectives "to be so good, that murder, butchery, and war, however extended and dreadful, are declared by them to be completely justifiable, if necessary for these great purposes."

By the time Russell returned to New Haven for his senior year, an anti-Masonic movement had taken root across the nation. Prompted in part by the backlash against Freemasonry, Yale authorities had divested all of the campus fraternities — including Phi Beta Kappa — of their secrecy. Undaunted, Russell (who would go on to be Yale's 1833 valedictorian) assembled a group of the most promising Yale students and created the Order of Skull and Bones as an American chapter of the German secret society to which he had been introduced.

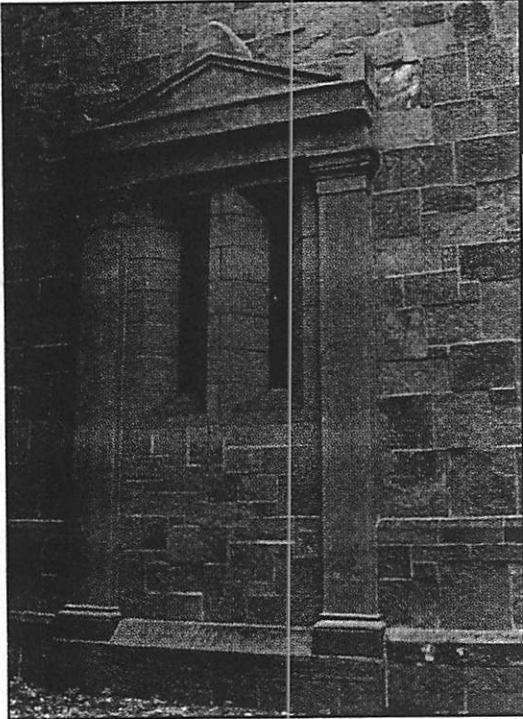
Since the time of its founding, the Order's origins, rituals, and purposes have been the subject of speculation. According to some accounts, each initiate into Skull and Bones is required to lie naked in a coffin, describe in detail his sexual history, and wrestle naked in a mudpile with fellow initiates. Some exposés insist that "The Tomb" is adorned with "Nazi memorabilia" as well as "dozens of skulls ... coffins, skeletons, and innards," writes Robbins. Others have claimed that initiates receive a \$15,000 graduation gift, and engage in



**Lair of the "Bonesmen":** The "Crypt," a gothic sandstone building on the Yale campus, serves as headquarters for the Order of Skull and Bones, a powerful secret society. Since the Order was founded in 1832, hundreds of Yale seniors have undergone its esoteric rites, graduating to become highly placed members of the international Power Elite.



Thomas R. Eddlem



of Skull and Bones," those tapped for Skull and Bones are inducted into "an underground conspiracy to dominate the world."

While Robbins admits that Skull and Bones is an important element of the Establishment, she belittles those who take the Order's "legend" seriously. Skull and Bones, insisted Robbins in a *USA Today* op-ed column, "does not run a secret world government, collaborate with Nazis or require initiates to lie naked in a coffin." Sober analysts of the partially submerged international Power Elite do not believe that Skull and Bones is running that hidden network. Yet there is very good evidence — some of which Robbins mentions — that Skull and Bones serves as a primary recruiting ground for that covert elite.

Robbins notes that "a relatively large number of Bonesmen have achieved influential positions that control foreign policy; several members have served on the Council on Foreign Relations, including Winston Lord, its president from 1977 to 1985." The Order's role as a farm league for the CFR was confirmed by an October 7, 1996 *New York* magazine profile of the organization by Eric Konigsberg, which noted that the council's recruiters find "fertile ground in the Porcellian Club [at Harvard] and Skull and Bones."

In *America's Secret Establishment*, a 1986 Skull and Bones exposé cited by Robbins, scholar Antony C. Sutton describes

how Bonesmen and their covert colleagues have abetted conflicts — including world wars — as part of a "dialectical" process of consolidating global power. In that process "a clash of opposites brings about a synthesis," Sutton explains. "There is no question that the so-called establishment in the U.S. uses 'managed conflict' [and that] decisions of war and peace are made by a few in the elite and not by many in the voting process...." In that book, and in previous studies of aid to the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Sutton documented the actions of Western elitists in creating and sustaining foreign "threats" as part of that grand dialectic.

Robbins makes a valuable contribution (one she does not seem to appreciate fully) to our understanding of Bonesmen's role in this insidious process. In 1989, the Export-Import Bank balked at extending credit to Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime. Then-President George H.W. Bush "was determined to push through credits," notes Robbins. In September of that year, the Senate approved a foreign aid bill that supposedly prohibited aid to Iraq. But that bill contained an amendment sponsored by Republican Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania — who, like Bush, was a Bonesman — permitting Bush to allow aid to Saddam if he regarded it "in the national interest." Bush exercised that waiver on January 17, 1990 — almost exactly one year before American fighting men were sent into battle against an Iraqi war machine built with U.S. aid. ■

extravagant parties at the group's Deer Island retreat, complete with the purchased attentions of beautiful women. This aspect of the Skull and Bones legend is depicted — with an almost comical lack of subtlety — in the 2000 film *The Skulls*.

### World Domination?

Regarding the rumors of macabre initiation rites and lucrative perks, Robbins writes: "I learned through my interviews ... that the majority of those rumors were carefully planted by the Bonesmen themselves." Assuming this is true, this would be a cunning piece of spin control because it would focus public attention on what members of the Order do for recreation, as opposed to what they do as part of their vocation. According to what Robbins calls "the Legend