



Charles Ommanney / Contact for Newsweek

During his presidential campaign, George W. Bush said he'd been 'called' to seek higher office and talked openly about his faith

## Bush and God

**A higher calling: It is his defining journey—from reveler to revelation. A biography of his faith, and how he wields it as he leads a nation on the brink of war**

By **Howard Fineman**  
NEWSWEEK

March 10 issue — George W. Bush rises ahead of the dawn most days, when the loudest sound outside the White House is the dull, distant roar of F-16s patrolling the skies. Even before he brings his wife, Laura, a morning cup of coffee, he goes off to a quiet place to read alone.

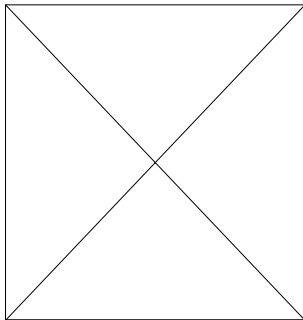
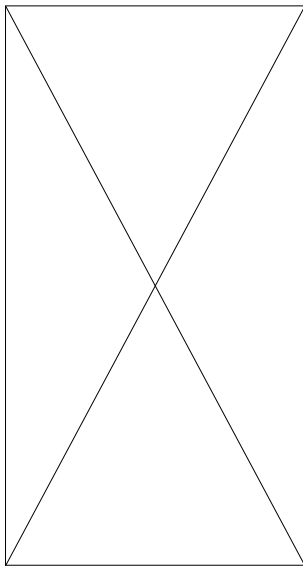
Cover Story



HIS TEXT ISN'T news summaries or the overnight intelligence dispatches. Those are for later, downstairs, in the Oval Office. It's not recreational reading (recently, a biography of Sandy Koufax). Instead, he's told friends, it's a book of evangelical mini-sermons, "My Utmost for His Highest." The author is Oswald Chambers, and, under the circumstances, the historical echoes are loud. A Scotsman and itinerant Baptist preacher, Chambers died in November 1917 as he was bringing the Gospel to Australian

and New Zealand soldiers massed in Egypt. By Christmas they had helped to wrest Palestine from the Turks, and captured Jerusalem for the British Empire at the end of World War I.

Now there is talk of a new war in the Near East, this time in a land once called Babylon. One morning last month, as the United Nations argued and Washingtonians raced to hardware stores for duct tape amid a new Orange alert, the daily homily in "My Utmost" was about Isaiah's reminder that God is the author of all life and history. "Lift up your eyes on high," the prophet of the Old Testament said, "and behold who hath created these things." Chambers's explication: "When you are up against difficulties, you have no power, you can only endure in darkness" unless you "go right out of yourself, and deliberately turn your imagination to God."



Later that day, the president did so. At Opryland in Nashville—the old “Buckle of the Bible Belt”—Bush told religious broadcasters that “the terrorists hate the fact that ... we can worship Almighty God the way we see fit,” and that the United States was called to bring God’s gift of liberty to “every human being in the world.” In his view, the chances of success were better than good. (After all, at the National Prayer Breakfast a few days before, he’d declared that “behind all of life and all history there is a dedication and purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God.” If that’s so, America couldn’t fail.)

After his speech in Nashville, Bush met privately with pastoral social workers and bore witness to his own faith in Jesus Christ. “I would not be president today,” he said, “if I hadn’t stopped drinking 17 years ago. And I could only do that with the grace of God.” The prospect of war with Iraq was “weighing heavy” on him, he admitted. He knew that many people—including some at the table—saw the conflict as pre-emptive and unjust. (“I couldn’t imagine Jesus delivering a message of war to a cheering crowd, as I just heard the president do,” one participant, Charles Strobel, said later.) But, the president said, America had to see that it is “encountering evil” in the form of Saddam Hussein. The country had no choice but to confront it, by war if necessary. “If anyone can be at peace,” Bush said, “I am at peace about this.”



**Does George W. Bush's religious faith inappropriately dictate policy?**

- Yes. Church and state are supposed to be separated.
- No. What's wrong with bringing morality to the White House?

Every president invokes God and asks his blessing. Every president promises, though not always in so many words, to lead according to moral principles rooted in Biblical tradition. The English writer G. K. Chesterton called America a “nation with the soul of a church,” and every president, at times, is the pastor in the bully pulpit. But it has taken a war, and the prospect of more, to highlight a central fact: this president—this presidency—is the most resolutely “faith-based” in modern times, an enterprise founded, supported and guided by trust in the temporal and spiritual power of God. Money matters, as does military might. But the Bush administration is dedicated to the idea that there is an answer to societal problems here and to terrorism abroad: give everyone, everywhere, the freedom to find God, too.

Bush believes in God’s will—and in winning elections with the backing of those who agree with him. As a subaltern in his father’s 1988 campaign, George Bush the Younger assembled his

I don't know.

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career through contacts with ministers of the then emerging evangelical movement in political life. Now they form the core of the Republican Party, which controls all of the capital for the first time in a half century. Bible-believing Christians are Bush's strongest backers, and turning them out next year in even greater numbers is the top priority of the president's political adviser Karl Rove. He is busy tending to the base with pro-life judicial appointments, a proposed ban on human cloning (approved by the House last week) and a \$15 billion plan to fight AIDS in Africa, a favorite project of Christian missionaries who want the chance to save souls there as well as beleaguered lives. The base is returning the favor. They are, by far, the strongest supporters of a war—unilateral if need be—to remove Saddam.

Now comes the time of testing. The war is controversial, more so every day, and the nuclear crisis in North Korea intensifies. The president hasn't played his diplomatic hand well, and is tied down by the likes of Hans Blix, the Philippine military and the Turkish Parliament, which late last week denied American troops transport rights through the country. Bush advisers know that many Americans—and much of the world—see him as a man blinded by his beliefs (and those of his most active supporters) to the complexities of the world as it is. He makes a point of praising Islam as “a religion of peace.” But to many Muslims, especially Arabs, he looks sinister: a new Crusader, bent on retaking the East for Christendom.

The Bush family attends church in Houston in 1964; George Sr. once taught Sunday school and George W. was an altar boy



Courtesy George Bush Presidential Library

Aides say the president's quiet but fervent Christian faith gives him strength but does not dictate policy. He's only seemed like preacher in chief, they say, because of what one called “a

confluence of events”: the horrors of 9-11, the terror alerts and the Columbia shuttle explosion. Still, belief gives him something more than confidence, says his closest friend, Commerce Secretary Don Evans: “It gives him a desire to serve others and a very clear sense of what is good and what is evil.”

How did he get that way? Consider this a “faith portrait” of the president, the story of the power of belief to save a life and a family—and to shape a political career and a national government.

### **GROWING UP—‘God’s Frozen People’**

The story begins in Connecticut. Protestants there long ago were a fiery breed, with Jonathan Edwards’s (Yale ’21—as in 1721) warning sinners to avoid the wrath of an “angry God.” But by 1946, when George W. Bush was born there, the old-line Episcopalians—Bushes among them—spoke in quieter voices. His dad was a “duty, honor, country” guy, a World War II hero and a punctilious churchgoer. But he was uncomfortable with public testimonies of faith, especially his own. The hoary joke among Episcopalians seemed apt: we’re “God’s Frozen People.”

The Bible belt was another story, but not for the Bushes. Moving in 1948 to the oil patch of west Texas, they joined other Ivy League immigrants from back East at the Presbyterian church in Midland. (Barbara Bush had been reared in the denomination.) It was staid compared with other churches there, more madras than denim. Dad raised money for the building fund, and taught in Sunday school. “Georgie” was a dutiful son and churchgoer. Years later, in an excess of spin, his mother claimed that he’d always shown an interest in reading the Bible. George smilingly said he was unable to remember such a fact. Sent back East to prep at Andover, he became a school “deacon.” But that role had long since lost any true religious significance; Bush used it to engineer pranks, not minister to the student flock.

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### **While past presidents have invoked the name of God in public**

Inaugural Address, Jan. 21, 2001

*"An angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm."*

Karen

Come-to-Jesus stories are more dramatic if the sinner is a pro. Bush was a semipro, a hardy partyer—his Triumph convertible was famous in Houston—until he married Laura in 1977. They joined her Methodist church. In most respects, he became what his father was, a respected member of the congregation. But he was a drinker, and a serious one. Only after work and at night, he told himself. But sometimes the nights were long. He could be famously obnoxious at parties, and, worse, a bore to his patient wife. The birth of his twin daughters in 1982 brought him joy. But, friends say, Laura grew increasingly fed up with his drinking. By 1985, as he approached 40, he needed to fix his relationship with the women in his life. “Nothing was broken,” Evans said. “But he wanted it to be better.” Mostly, he had to leave alcohol behind.

### **BORN AGAIN—Walking ‘The Walk’**

<b>Bush and God</b>
<b>March 10th issue</b>
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In campaign biographies, ghostwriters highlight the role that Billy Graham played in launching Bush on what he and Evans call his “Walk.” The truth is more prosaic, and explains far more about Bush’s evolving views, not only of faith but of government. Evans, married to a Bush elementary-school chum, was the key. He had been the golden boy of Midland, a handsome straight arrow, a “Cowboy” at the University of Texas (the Skull and

Bones of Austin). He had gone home to climb the ladder of Tom Brown Oil Co., a booming concern in a booming economy. But in 1984 the oil business caved in. “It was the worst industrial collapse in the history of the American economy,” says Evans, who was left with the task of plowing through piles of corporate debt. Personal life was hard, too. By that time, he’d learned that a daughter, born severely handicapped, would need lifetime care.



**The Presidency: Bush & God**

- Audio: Ken Woodward, NEWSWEEK Contributing Editor, and Martin E. Marty, Professor Emeritus University of Chicago Divinity School, author Modern American Religion
- Audio: Listen to the complete weekly On Air show

As a west Texan, Evans did what came naturally in a storm: he joined a nondenominational Bible-study group. He coaxed his friend George to come along. The program was called Community Bible Study—started, ironically, in the Washington, D.C., area in 1975 by a group of suburban women. By the time it got to Midland, it was a scriptural boot camp: an intensive, yearlong study of a single book of the New Testament, each week a new chapter, with

detailed reading and discussion in a group of 10 men. For two years Bush and Evans and their partners read the clear writings of the Gentile physician Luke—Acts and then his Gospel. Two themes stood out, one spiritual, one more political: Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, and the founding of the church. Bush, who cares little for the abstract and a great deal for people, responded to the conversion story. He liked the idea of knowing Jesus as a friend.

The CBS program was a turning point for the future president in several ways. It gave him, for the first time, an intellectual focus. Here was the product of elite secular education—Andover, Yale and Harvard—who, for the first time, was reading a book line by line with rapt attention. And it was ... the Bible. In that sense, Bush is a more unalloyed product of the Bible belt than his friends, who may have deeply studied something else in earlier days. A jogger and marathoner for years, Bush found in Bible study an equivalent mental and spiritual discipline, which he would soon need to steel himself for his main challenge in life to that point: to quit drinking.

Bush says he never considered himself to be an alcoholic, and never attended an AA meeting. But it turned out he didn’t have to. CBS was something akin to the same thing, part of what has since come to be called the “small group” faith movement. It’s a baby-boomerish mix of self-help, self-discipline, group therapy (without using what, for Bush, is a dreaded word) and worship. Whatever, it worked. As the world knows, Bush did quit drinking in the summer of 1986, after his and Evans’s 40th birthday. “It was ‘goodbye Jack Daniels, hello Jesus,’” said one friend from those days.

## **THE POLITICS—Making New Friends**

Bush turned to the bible to save his marriage and his family. But was he also thinking of smoothing his path to elective office? We'll never know for sure. But he knew the political landscape of his near-native Texas. He knew that, by 1985, the South had risen to take control of the GOP, and that evangelical activism and clout was rising with it—indeed had been instrumental in making it possible. He also knew that his father's way—Episcopalian reserve, moderation on cultural issues, close ties to back East—was a tough sell, to say the least. Bush the Younger had experienced it firsthand, in 1978, when he impetuously ran for Congress in Midland. He was a proud alumnus of Sam Houston Elementary and San Jacinto Junior High. But he had been clobbered as an Ivy League interloper nonetheless.

When Bush moved to Washington in 1987 to help run his father's campaign, he seized the main chance: to take over the job of being the "liaison" to the religious right. He quickly saw that he could talk the talk as well as walk the walk. "His father wasn't comfortable dealing with religious types," recalled Doug Wead, who worked with him on evangelical outreach. "George knew exactly what to say, what to do." He and Wead bombarded campaign higher-ups with novel ways to reach out. Wead slipped Biblical phrases—signals to the base—into the Old Man's speeches. Dubya, typically, favored a direct approach. He wanted to feature Billy Graham in a campaign video. Dad nixed the idea.

Bush and Rove built their joint careers on that new base. Faith and ambition became one, with Bush doing the talking and Rove doing the thinking on policy and spin. In 1993—the year before he ran for governor—Bush caused a small tempest by telling an Austin reporter (who happened to be Jewish) that only believers in Jesus go to heaven. It was a theologically unremarkable statement, at least in Texas. But the fact that he had been brazen enough to say it produced a stir. While the editorial writers huffed, Rove quietly expressed satisfaction. The story would help establish his client's Bible-belt bona fides in rural (and, until then, primarily Democratic) Texas. As a candidate, Bush sought, and got, advice from pastors, especially leaders of new, nondenominational "megachurches" in the suburbs. His ideas for governing were congenial to his faith, and dreamed up in his faith circles. The ideas were designed to draw evangelicals to the polls without sounding too church-made. "Compassionate conservatism"—mentoring, tough love on crime, faith-based welfare—was in many ways just a CBS Bible study writ large. The discipline of faith can save lives—Bush knew it from personal experience—and undercut the stale answers of the left.

The presidential campaign was Texas on a grander scale. As he prepared to run, in 1999, Bush assembled leading pastors at the

governor's mansion for a "laying-on of hands," and told them he'd been "called" to seek higher office. In the GOP primaries, he outmaneuvered the field by practicing what one rival, Gary Bauer, called "identity politics." Others tried to woo evangelicals by pledging strict allegiance on issues such as abortion and gay rights. "Bush talked about his faith," said Bauer, "and people just believed him—and believed in him." There was genius in this. The son of Bush One was widely, logically, believed by secular voters to be a closet moderate. Suddenly, the father's burden was a gift: Bush Two could reach the base without threatening the rest. "He was and is 'one of us'," said Charles Colson, who sold the then Governor Bush on a faith-based prison program.

For his public speeches, he hired Michael Gerson, a gifted writer recommended to him by Colson, among others. A graduate of Wheaton College in Illinois ("the Evangelical Harvard"), Gerson understood Bush's compassionate conservatism. More important, he had a gift for expressing it in stately, lilting language that could appeal, simultaneously, to born-again and to secular boomers searching for a lost sense of uplift in public life.

The Bush campaign conducted its more-controversial outreach below radar, via letters and e-mail. Only once was it forced to reach out in a raw public way. After John McCain won the New Hampshire primary, Bush made his infamous visit to South Carolina's Bob Jones University, the ultrafundamentalist and officially anti-Roman Catholic school. Strategists were opaque in public, unapologetic behind the scenes. "We had to send a message—fast—and sending him there was the only way to do it," said one top Bush operative at the time. "It was a risk we had to take." Bush won.

### **THE RECKONING—Forged in the Fire**

Faith didn't make Bush a decisive person. He's always been one. His birthright as a Bush gives him a sense of obligation to serve, and a sense of an entitlement to lead. West Texas, where dust storms and the gyrating economy buffeted the locals, left him with a love of straight shooters and a come-what-may view of life. A frat man at Yale in an increasingly radical time—the late 1960s—he came to loathe intellectual avatars of complexity and doubt—especially when they disparaged his dad. He is a Pierce, too: a quick-to-judge son of a quick-to-judge mother.

Still, faith helps Bush pick a course and not look back. He talks regularly to pastors, and loves to hear that people are praying for him. As he describes it, his faith is not complex. In recent weeks he has added a new note to his theme of the personal uses of faith, drawn from CBS. Now there is a sense of destiny that approaches the Calvinistic. "There is a fatalistic element," said David Frum, the author and former Bush speechwriter. "You do your best and accept that everything is in God's hands." The result is unflappability. "If you are confident that there is a God that rules the world," said Frum, "you do your best, and things will work out." But what some see as

solidity, others view as a flammable mix of stubbornness and arrogance. "No one's allowed to second-guess, even when you should," said another former staffer.

The atmosphere inside the White House, insiders say, is suffused with an aura of prayerfulness. There have always been Bible-study groups there; even the Clintonites had one. But the groups are everywhere now. Lead players set the tone. There is Gerson, whose office keeps being moved closer to the Oval. Chief of staff Andrew Card's wife is a Methodist minister. National-security adviser Condi Rice's father was a preacher in Alabama.

The president is known to welcome questions about faith that staffers sometimes have the nerve to share with him. But he's not the kind to initiate granular debates about theology. Would Iraq be a "just war" in Christian terms, as laid out by Augustine in the fourth century and amplified by Aquinas, Luther and others? Bush has satisfied himself that it would be—indeed, it seems he did so many months ago. But he didn't do it by combing through texts or presiding over a disputation. He decided that Saddam was evil, and everything flowed from that.

The language of good and evil—central to the war on terrorism—came about naturally, said Frum. From the first, he said, the president used the term "evildoers" to describe the terrorists because some commentators were wondering aloud whether the United States in some way deserved the attack visited

## World News

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upon it on September 11, 2001. “He wanted to cut that off right away,” said Frum, “and make it clear that he saw absolutely *no* moral equivalence. So he reached right into the Psalms for that word.” He continued to stress the idea. Osama bin Laden and his cohorts were “evil.” In November 2001, in an interview with NEWSWEEK, he first declared—blurted out, actually—that Saddam Hussein in Iraq was “evil,” too.

The world, and the Bush administration, are focused on Iraq. But as a matter of politics and principle, the president knows that he needs to deliver on his faith-based domestic agenda, especially since his party controls Congress. The wish list compiled by Rove is a long one. It includes conservative, pro-life judicial nominations; new HUD regulations that allow federal grants for construction of “social service” facilities at religious institutions; a ban on human cloning and “partial birth” abortion; a sweeping program to allow churches, synagogues and mosques to use federal funds to administer social-welfare programs; strengthened limits on stem-cell research; increased funding to teach sexual abstinence in schools, rather than safer sex and pregnancy prevention; foreign-aid policies that stress right-to-life themes, and federal money for prison programs (like the one in Texas) that use Christian tough love in an effort to lower recidivism rates among convicts.

While Rove and Hill leaders work the domestic side, Bush is dwelling on faith-based foreign policy of the most explosive kind: a potential war in the name of civil freedom—including religious freedom—in the ancient heart of Arab Islam. In the just-war debate, he has strong support from his base. Leading advocates for the moral virtue of his position include Richard Land, the key leader of the Southern Baptist Convention’s political arm. Another supporter is Michael Novak, the conservative Catholic theologian. Novak recently journeyed to Rome to make his case at the invitation of the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, Jim Nicholson, a former chairman of the Republican National Committee. All politics is local.

But the president is facing a mighty force of religious leaders on the other side. They include the pope (Bush will meet with a papal envoy this week, NEWSWEEK has learned), the Council of Bishops, the National Council of Churches, many Jewish groups and most Muslim leaders. “People appreciate his devotion to faith, but, in the context of war, there is a fine line, and he is starting to make people nervous,” says Steve Waldman, the editor and CEO of Beliefnet, a popular and authoritative Web site on religion and society. “They appreciate his moral clarity and decisiveness. But they wonder if he is ignoring nuances in what sounds like a messianic mission.”

Muslims are especially wary. Bush has gone to great lengths

to reassure them that he admires their religion. He has hosted Ramadan dinners, and periodically criticized evangelicals, including Franklin Graham, who denounce Islam as a corrupt, violent faith. Still, evangelical missionaries don't hide their desire to convert Muslims to Christianity, even—if not especially—in Baghdad. If one of the goals of ousting Saddam Hussein is to bring freedom of worship to an oppressed people, how can the president object?

For Bush, that's a nettlesome question for another time. If he's worried about it or other such weighty matters, it wasn't obvious at dinner upstairs in the private quarters of the White House the other week. He and Laura had invited close friends and allies such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Bush, as usual, was a genial, joshing host. Also, as usual, he didn't want the evening to last too long. "He tends to rush through cocktail hour," says a friend. "One quick Coke and he wants to eat." The president asked Rumsfeld to say grace. ("Can you help us out here, Mr. Secretary?") As 10:30 p.m. approached, the commander in chief seemed eager to turn in. Knowledgeable guests understood that he wanted to catch at least a few minutes of his beloved "SportsCenter" on ESPN. But he also needed to get up early, very early. He had some reading to do.

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*With Tamara Lipper, Martha Brant, Suzanne Smalley and Richard Wolfe*

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