

HANGIN' WITH POTUS

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH
LOVES NOTHING MORE THAN TO
ESCAPE HIS DAILY GRIND WITH
A DOSE OF DIRT AND ADRENALINE.
WE'VE ALL HEARD ABOUT HOW
HE FALLS, BUT HERE'S HOW
HE RIDES. BY STEPHEN MADDEN

ILLUSTRATED BY
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There's a ritual to the Saturday-morning ride.
You and a group of like-minded people gather at the appointed
time in a parking lot or at a trailhead.
You wait for stragglers as you fiddle
with your gear.

An alpha rider,
often a guy, will start talking
slightly louder than everyone else about what route to take
and what pacing should be like.
He's the one who rolls out first. And chances
are, if you try to pass him,
he'll get mad.

So at 9 a.m. one Saturday in August,
as I am feverishly topping off my tires, a guy with a friendly but authoritative
voice yells to the small
group preparing for an off-road ride on the Texas prairie,

“Everybody got plenty of water?”
I don’t bother to respond, or even to look up. I just keep pumping, and
hoping that the 14 Texas goat head thorns I’ve just pulled from my
tires are the only ones I picked up on my ride the night
before in Waco’s Cameron Park, and that my flat
problems are behind me.

Apparently none of the other six riders
in our press group responds to the alpha guy, either. So he yells again,
just a little bit louder and with more command and less bonhomie:
“Has everybody got plenty of water?”

This time, I look up from my pump.

“Yes, Mr. President,”
I say. “I have two bottles.”

“Good,” says George W. Bush, President of the United States, or POTUS, resplendent in torn baggies, a Pearl Izumi Otis shirt, Lone Star socks and Sidi Dominator 5s. Then he extends his hand. “Thanks for coming to the ranch for a ride,” he says, the Texas twang thicker in his voice after a couple of weeks vacationing on his 1,600-acre ranch in Crawford. “I sure appreciate it.”

“Likewise, sir,” I think. Ever since the White House announced in December, 2003, that the President’s doctors had ordered him to stop running, and I learned that Trek CEO John Burke, a member of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness, had given Bush a zooty full-suspension Fuel, BICYCLING and *Mountain Bike* have been nagging the White House press office for an invitation to check out the President’s velochops.

Bush’s fitness has never been in question. The President has publicly noted that he kicked an addiction to alcohol with an addiction to exercise. His results have been impressive, at least for a 59-year-old guy with a stressful job. Bush’s prowess as a runner (20:29 for a 2002 5k) suggested the presence of a big engine, and the results of his most recent physical placed him in the 99th percentile of fitness for his age—his resting pulse of 47 would be the envy of any Cat 1 road racer.

But word got out that the President dumped his Fuel more often than an Airbus. Still, his enthusiasm cannot be denied: He

took heat earlier this year for not interrupting a ride in Maryland when a small plane violated Washington, D.C., airspace, and he showed up at his daughter Jenna’s college-graduation party with the results of a faceplant on his mug.

And yet we wanted—we needed—to answer a pressing question: Can the guy hang?

“Like a lot of Baby Boomers, my knees gave out” from running, POTUS tells our group in a pre-ride chat. “I like to stay fit. I think you can do your job better if you’re fit.” Bush says he was drawn to mountain biking because of “the exhilaration,” because “it brings out the child in you” and because “I like to get my heart rate up.” He sports a top-of-the-line Polar heart rate monitor and—a first, as far as I can tell, for the non-gravity set—a mouthguard, and explains that the rips in his baggies are a souvenir of July’s “Scottish incident” at the G8 summit at St. Andrews, in which he lost control on wet pavement and took out a bobby in the process. He says he’ll never be seen in “form-fitting Lycra” and that his newly installed clipless pedals have given him a 15-percent increase in efficiency. He says he’d like to road bike, but that the Secret Service can’t find the 40 to 60 miles of secure roads he’d need to get his workout. “Lance Armstrong gave me a road bike,” he notes, referring to one of the Treks that Armstrong rode in the 2001 Tour de France, and which should be in a museum. “I hook

"LANCE ARMSTRONG GAVE ME A ROAD BIKE," THE PRESIDENT NOTES—ONE OF THE TREKS THAT ARMSTRONG RODE IN THE 2001 TOUR DE FRANCE. "I HOOK THAT UP TO A STATIONARY WHEELING THING. I PUT IT ON AIR FORCE ONE."

that up to a stationary wheeling thing. I put it on Air Force One. It's a pretty neat feeling to be heading to wherever and to ride for an hour."

Although the President and his handlers have declared the ride "a politics-free zone," the vans that carry us to the ride pass the encampment of Cindy Sheehan, the Gold Star mother who wants to talk to the President about the war in Iraq, just outside the gate of the ranch. One of the journalists asks Bush how he balances the weighty concerns of the protestors with a "trivial activity" such as cycling.

"I think it's important for me to be thoughtful and sensitive to those who have something to say," Bush begins. "But it's also important for me to go on with my life, to keep a balanced life. I think the people want the President to stay healthy. So I'm mindful of what goes on around me. I'm also mindful that I've got a life to live."

With that, he explains the day's course. "This is a chance for me to show you a little slice of heaven," he says. "To get outside the bubble." We're going to loosen up on asphalt, he says, then come back and drop down into some small "canyons" and "fool around on some trails." No one is allowed to pass the President, he notes with a half-smile. Then he adds, "This is not a race."

Then, in big dog, I-know-I-said-it's-not-a-race-but-try-to-keep-up fashion, POTUS pulls out onto the pavement to warm up, at about 21 miles per hour.

He pedals with a crazy-high cadence, and his knees jut out a bit. He wears a sweatband under his Giro. But he is strong and smooth on his bike. He motors up hills, leaving a couple of members of our party in his dust. He points out rows of trees he's growing in a commercial venture, and gestures in the direction of the part of the ranch where Mrs. Bush is growing native grasses as part of a prairie-restoration project. He asks those of us with heart rate monitors what our pulses are and proudly reports he's the low man in the group with 135. He reminds us to drink and takes a sip from his CamelBak. He yells out but doesn't necessarily offer hand signals when we're about to turn, and waves to neighbors and Secret Service guys. And we have nicknames. The President is renowned for giving nicknames, probably because he can't remember anyone's real name. I'm Bicycling Guy, possibly

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

A CENTURY OF PRESIDENTS AND BIKES

1901–1909: President **Theodore Roosevelt's** six children ride their bikes over the White House's hardwood floors. They also enjoy giving their pony, Algonquin, rides in the elevator.

Circa 1925: A young **John F. Kennedy** collides head-on with his older brother Joe during an impromptu bike race near their summer home in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. Joe is uninjured; John gets 28 stitches. Later, he'll say, "Nothing compares with the simple pleasure of a bike ride."

1933–1945: President **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** rolls around the White House in a wheelchair he designed himself, made with bicycle and tricycle parts.

1940s: Movie star and future president **Ronald Reagan** appears on the cover of a Schwinn catalog, with his then-wife, actress **Jane Wyman**.



1955: After President **Dwight D. Eisenhower** suffers a heart attack, his personal physician, Paul Dudley White, puts him on an exercise program, which includes cycling. White's other claim to fame: the Boston-area bike path that bears his name, which runs 17 miles along the Charles River.

1975: While serving as U.S. ambassador to China, **George H.W. Bush** writes, "The more I think about our U.S. domestic transportation problems...the more I see an increased role for the bicycle in American life."



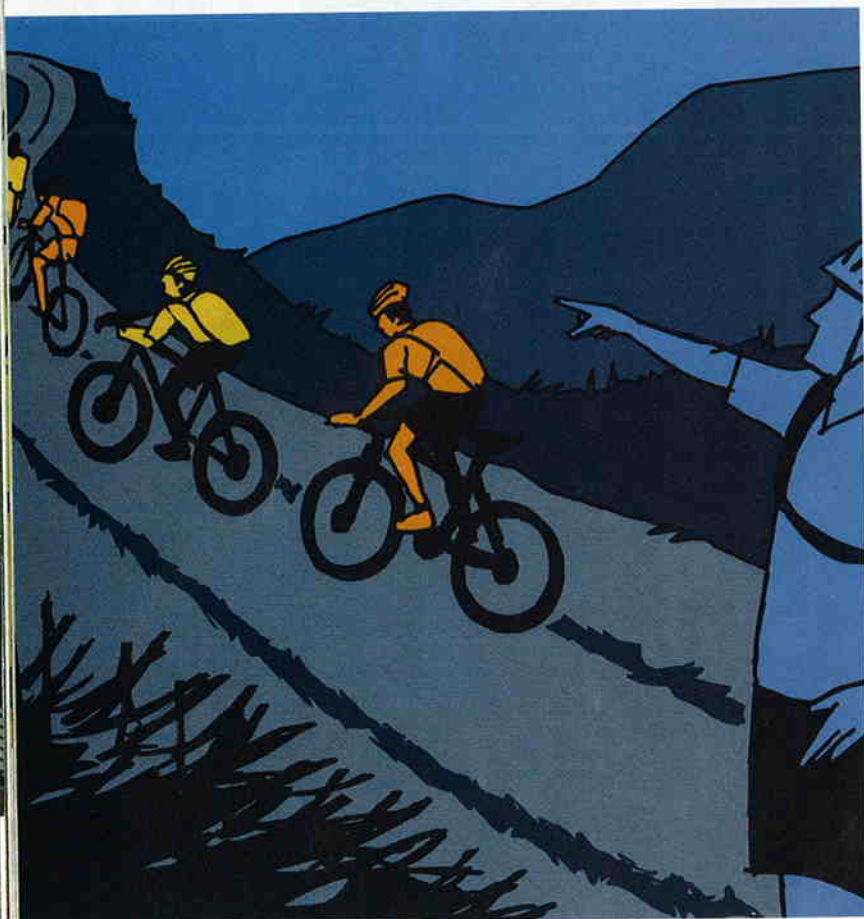
November 2000: President **Bill Clinton** demonstrates bicycle-helmet safety to schoolchildren in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

May 2004: President **George W. Bush** first suffers "minor abrasions and scratches" after falling off his mountain bike at his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Fall 2004: Late-night TV host Jay Leno gives former president **Clinton** a Santana bicycle as a get-well present after quadruple-bypass surgery.

2005: When he's not building houses with Habitat for Humanity, **Jimmy Carter** commutes around his town of Plains, Georgia, by bike; as president, he enjoyed rides around Camp David.

July 2005: At the G8 summit venue in Scotland, **Bush** is uninjured after colliding with a policeman, who suffers a minor ankle injury.—*Emily Furia*



because I'm wearing a jersey that has the BICYCLING logo printed on it six times, and Big Guy.

I rotate up next to POTUS and ask him if he wants to draft. "No thanks," he says. I tell him he won't have to work as hard if he tucks in behind me. "I want the workout," he says. "But thanks."

I turn to *Sports Illustrated's* Austin Murphy (California Surfer Dude), riding on my left and busy making note of where the official White House photographer is setting up so he can position himself next to POTUS and flex. "This is almost like any other club ride you can think of," I say.

Except that two of our fellow riders work for the Secret Service. Very fit Jason never says a word and never, ever leaves the President's wheel. Bruno, a tattooed, 250-pound former D.C. bike cop whose handguns and assorted secret-agent hardware jut from beneath his jersey, sweats out the climbs as graciously as he handles ribbing from POTUS about his ink.

And except for the eight vehicles that follow us every inch of the route, the first two being black Suburbans packed with fit young men with body armor and assault rifles and, probably, that thing that allows the President to launch nukes from way out here on the prairie. And a doctor. And a spare bike and several spare wheels for POTUS. And a bunch of souped-up golf carts.

And except for the fact that we pass a well-camouflaged observation tower manned by agents with huge binoculars and the ubiquitous automatic weapons. And except for the fact that as we career through the woods we come upon people standing in pecan groves and along the banks of creeks, heavily armed and

looking away from our group.

Other than that, though...

There's the normal amount of BS'ing and ball-breaking. When we descend a gnarly, rocky hill with an off-camber left turn, POTUS stops and waits for one rider to catch up. "Herman, we're waiting for you," he says to Ken Herman of the Cox News Service.

"Good news, Mr. President!" says Herman, who rides about 3,000 miles a year, mostly on the road. "I found the weapons of mass destruction!"

While the rest of us look at each other with did-he-just-say-that? looks, POTUS gives a good-natured laugh. "Maybe if you had a better bike..." he begins, but Herman, who apparently has compromising photos of the President, breaks in. "Sir," he says, "you go for a ride with the bike you have, not the bike you wish you had."

The President has us dismount and walk up a wooden bridge ("I built this stuff," he says) to show us a waterfall. "It's very unusual for the water to be flowing like this in August," he says. "But we got about seven inches of rain this week." We pose for pictures with POTUS, and he moves us back toward the bikes. "Course, all that rain means we're going to be moving through some mud."

About this time, Sal Ruibal of *USA Today* asks the President for permission to take a trailside leak. Permission granted.

We never ride singletrack, but the jeep trails we

WE CLIMB ACHILLES' HILL, A SCREE PILE POTUS NAMED WHEN HE FELL AND CUT HIS HEEL. "TOOK 3 STITCHES," HE SAYS, "BUT I FINISHED THE RIDE."

pound have some good bogs, and as riders in mid-pack stall and fall, those of us in the back have to clip out. I'm gapped. I've lost contact with Peloton One. I can't get dropped by a guy almost 20 years older than I am, I think, even if he is the leader of the free world.

As I hammer and eventually catch back up, I marvel that, in addition to the group dynamics, this is an honest-to-goodness ride because of the gaps and chases, the sweat, mud and falls. Murphy dumps while trying to climb Achilles' Hill, a scree pile POTUS named when he fell trying to clean it and cut his heel. "Took three stitches when I got back, but I finished the ride," he says. Jason Reed, a Reuters photographer and the best rider in our group, cleans it.

The President tells us he has named other hills and features on the 10 or so miles of jeep track on his ranch. Morse Code is named for White House photographer Paul Morse, whom Bush calls "a great rider," and the first guy to "crack the code" of how



A VEHICLE SLOWS TO TELL ME THERE IS NO NEUTRAL SUPPORT IN THE TOUR DE CRAWFORD. SO I RUN UP THE HILL TO TELL POTUS I'M DONE. "I'M FLAT, SIR," I SAY. POTUS TELLS THE SECRET SERVICE: "GIVE HIM THE SPARE." AND JUST LIKE THAT, THE BIKE PREVIOUSLY DENIED ME IS MINE.

to mount the hill. Balkan Hill is so named because it is there that Condoleezza Rice explained the mysteries of the Balkans to Bush during a 1999 walk.

There may soon be a stretch named Flat-Tired Bicycling Guy. As we zip back and forth across a creek, I realize I may not have extracted all the goat heads, because my rear tire is slowly going down. I pull off to the side and do something I've always wanted to do: I simply raise my hand. I figure that with all those vehicles with all those extra wheels, the Secret Service will just give me a replacement. But the caravan passes me until one vehicle—maybe the fourth—slows to tell me there is no neutral support in the Tour de Crawford. The spares are only for the President and his escorts. I used all my spare tubes before the ride. My day is over.

I throw my bike in the bed of a pickup and sulk. A few minutes later, we stop. I figure I should tell POTUS I'm done for the day, so I run up a hill to where Peloton One is having a drink.

"Where's Bicycling Guy?" POTUS is asking.

"I'm flat, sir."

"Get the spare," he tells me. "Give him the spare," he tells the Secret Service. And just like that, the bike previously denied me is mine.

As I adjust the saddle height, I say I'm sorry for the delay. "No need to apologize," Bush says before adding, under his breath, "but we're not exactly moving, either."

The last couple of miles are a sufferfest. The backup bike, which apparently last saw a wrench during Bush's first term in office, is equipped with toe clips and has an inoperative front fork. I ride as hard as I can, but the caravan slowly, inexorably passes me by. I'm not last, but I'm close.

We crest Balkan Hill, and after two hours and 17 miles, POTUS brings us back to where we started, dismounts and has the Secret Service hand out water bottles. "That's a great way to spend a Saturday morning, isn't it?" he asks of no one in particular. It's clear that the guy just plain loves riding. He looks at his Polar and offers his stats for the day: "One-seventy-seven max, and 139 average. And I burned 1,493 calories."

Bush, covered in mud, glistening with sweat, hands out Peloton One socks to all of us, poses for more pictures and keeps making noises that he has to leave, and some junior press officer keeps saying, "Last question." But like anyone who has just had a

good ride and wants to bask in its glory, POTUS lingers to dissect the high and low points of our trip, playing it over and over, ribbing Herman and praising Reed, whom he refers to simply as Dude.

Finally, he says with a grin as an aide hands him several folders, "Well, I think I'll go read a philosophical novel." He adds, "Thanks. I enjoyed it. A lot of fun."

George Bush is a polarizing figure. Nobody seems to be lukewarm about him or his policies. But in the same way that most cyclists don't share every political or religious or moral belief of those we ride with, we're able to put those divisions aside when we enjoy, together, the thing we all believe in: the bicycle's ability to provide some blessed relief from the pressures and responsibilities of our lives, however complicated they may be. To connect with the Earth, to have some fun, to laugh. We all have a right to that, regardless of whom you vote for. Bush lived it today during his Saturday-morning ride.

And one more thing. The guy can hang. ■