

Secret tapes give peek of the future president

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WASHINGTON - As George W. Bush was moving onto the national political stage, he often turned for advice to an old friend who secretly taped some of their private conversations, creating a rare record of the future president as a politician and personality.

In the past several weeks, that friend, Doug Wead, an author and former aide to Bush's father, disclosed the tapes' existence to a reporter and played about a dozen of them.

Variouly earnest, confident or prickly in those conversations, Bush weighs the political risks and benefits of his religious faith, discusses campaign strategy and comments on rivals. John McCain "will wear thin," he predicted. John Ashcroft, he confided, would be a "very good Supreme Court pick" or "fabulous" vice president. And in exchanges about his handling of media questions about his past, Bush appears to have acknowledged trying marijuana.

Wead said he recorded the conversations because he viewed Bush as a historic figure, but he said he knew that the president might regard his actions as a betrayal. As the author of a new book about presidential childhoods, Wead could benefit from any publicity, but he said that was not a motive in disclosing the tapes.

The White House did not dispute the authenticity of the tapes or respond to their contents. Trent Duffy, a White House spokesman, said, "The governor was having casual conversations with someone he believed was his friend." Asked about drug use, Duffy said, "That has been asked and answered so many times there is nothing more to add."

The conversations Wead played offer insights into Bush's thinking from the time he was weighing a run for president in 1998 to shortly before he accepted the Republican nomination in 2000. Wead had been a liaison to evangelical Protestants for the president's father, and the intersection of religion and politics is a recurring theme in the talks.

Preparing to meet Christian leaders in 1998, Bush told Wead, "As you said, there are some code words. There are some proper ways to say things, and some improper ways." He added, "I am going to say that I've accepted Christ into my life. And that's a true statement."

But Bush also repeatedly worried that prominent evangelical Christians would not like his refusal "to kick gays." At the same time, he was wary of unnerving secular voters by meeting publicly with evangelical leaders. When he thought his aides had agreed to such a meeting, Bush complained to political strategist Karl Rove, "What the hell is this about?"

Bush, who has acknowledged a drinking problem years ago, told Wead on the tapes that he could withstand scrutiny of his past. He said it involved nothing more than "just, you know, wild behavior." He worried, though, that allegations of cocaine use would surface in the campaign and blamed his opponents for stirring

up rumors. "If nobody shows up there's no story," he told Wead, "and if somebody shows up it's going to be made up." But when Wead said that Bush had in the past publicly denied using cocaine, Bush replied, "I haven't denied anything."

He refused to answer reporters' questions about his past behavior, he said, even though it might cost him the election. Defending his approach, Bush said: "I wouldn't answer the marijuana questions. . . . Because I don't want some little kid doing what I tried."

The private Bush sounds remarkably similar in many ways to the public President Bush. Many of the taped comments foreshadow aspects of his presidency, including his opposition to both anti-gay language and recognizing same-sex marriage, his skepticism about the United Nations, his sense of moral purpose and his focus on cultivating conservative Christian voters.

Wead's recordings are a rare example of a future president taped at length without his knowledge talking about matters of public interest like his strategy and priorities.

Wead first acknowledged the tapes to a reporter in December to defend the accuracy of a passage about Bush in his new book, *The Raising of a President*. He did not mention the tapes in the book or footnotes, saying he drew on them for only one page of the book. He said he never sought to sell or profit from them. He said he made the tapes in states where it was legal to do so with only one party's knowledge.

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