

## *Whose Brand Does Bush Wear, and More Important, Why?*

Readers of Doonesbury learned recently that George W. Bush probably bears on his buttocks the brand of his Yale fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon. At the very least he must have presided while others were branded, since he was president of the chapter. Now that Mr. Bush is seeking his second presidency, one question is sure to dominate the race: What happens when you ram a red-hot iron into human flesh anyway?

Not many people know, but I am among them. George W. Bush still belongs (“Once a Deke, always a Deke,” is how we put it in the brotherhood) to the Yale chapter of DKE. I belong to the chapter at Middlebury College. In the mud season of 1955, I was a senior there.

Mud season in Vermont is when winter hasn’t gone out yet and spring hasn’t come in yet. There’s not a damned thing to do, as I once wrote elsewhere, but kick the dog or whip your son or rape your daughter or beat your wife, or just shoot yourself and all of the above to death, and the final hell with everything.

Well, you could get branded, too.

Before World War II branding had apparently been the custom in the Alpha Alpha chapter of Delta Kappa Epsilon.

When the veterans came back it became no longer the custom. They had seen enough of that sort of thing.

But in those pre-war days the real brother of one of our fraternity brothers had served as Brother Brand—the one who actually did the job. I'll call the younger brother Sammy, and will similarly change the names of the other brothers involved, on the chance that they may look back on their youthful selves without fondness.

Sammy maintained that great increases in self-esteem and tribal solidarity were to be experienced through third degree burns, an argument that seemed plausible to perhaps half of the brethren. To the rest of us, it seemed nuts.

In our gentle fashion, we suggested that Sammy ought to get his brand not on the haunch, where Middlebury's football coach had his, but on the forehead so that his Dekedom might shine before men. Or if this seemed overly boastful Sammy might elect a location allowing for more private contemplation, such as the inside of his eyelids. And thus, at increasingly inventive length, did we youngsters while away the lazy hours of college.

Nonetheless meetings were held on the absurd idea. Sammy's elder brother, Brother Brand, came by to explain it and to address the health concerns raised by certain Nervous Nellies among us. In his day only a few wounds had ever turned septic, he told us soothingly, and those were "guys who got infected from every little thing anyway."

Brother Brand offered to have the brands fabricated as a shop project in the private school where he taught. Those who wanted brands could then have them, while those who did not could get on with their pathetic lives. The brands were made and delivered. The date was set.

I had a senior English seminar that afternoon with Professor Richard Brown, a man of great knowledge and

wisdom. “The world is full of seminars,” he said, “but this is your only crack at a branding. Naturally you should go.”

The ceremony was in the secret room on the third floor, where even the windowpanes were painted black. Human bones hung on the black walls, along with mottoes or passwords or something, in a language that was Greek to us. Delta Kappa Epsilon was not about scholarship.

The furniture was old chairs, trunks and footlockers in storage, and a council table. On the table was Sammy, with four football players holding down his arms and legs in case Brother Brand’s human canvas should jerk about and spoil his artistry.

Our new Brother Brand was a hockey player named Ollie. His assignment was to brand each volunteer three times, once for each letter. Sammy’s older brother had explained to us that a single branding iron with all three letters wouldn’t work, as some of the fellows might prefer to be marked on curved surfaces. Consequently Ollie’s assistant was juggling three brands at once in the flame of a blow torch which hissed and stank.

Everyone in the room intended to get branded except for myself and a classmate called Pooh Bear. Pooh and I climbed on a trunk, from which we could stare down on a Thomas Eakins tableau—grave men of science bent over their patient, mulling whether the irons should be red-hot or white-hot. Meanwhile Sammy waited, spread-eagled under a lamp suspended from the ceiling. His torso was the milky color of a Japanese beetle grub.

Ollie had argued for white-hot, and once the irons reached that stage he ran out of excuses for delay. He plucked the brand from the fire (how often do you get the chance to use those words in their literal sense?), took a deep breath, and then struck while the iron was hot (or these words either?). To Ollie’s credit, his hand shook and

he failed to shove the iron properly home. Only one corner of the triangular brand actually made contact, searing a small caret rather than a proper delta above Sammy's left nipple.

"Oh, shit," Ollie said. "Sorry."

"Hang in there, Ollie," Sammy said, stoic as any Iroquois brave in the face of pain.

By the time Brother Brand was done, Sammy's white flesh bore a partial and a complete delta, and a passable kappa and epsilon.

Next up was Will, a distance runner with less body fat than a flayed whippet. He wanted the brand on his shoulder. Ollie's hand was still shaky, and Will's negligible anterior deltoid offered only a limited area for text entry. Ollie had to redo the first two letters and the last wound up practically in Will's armpit.

And on it went, as smoke rose from youth after callow youth and the smell, familiar to any barbecue chef, became overpowering. Only an involuntary flinch or two showed that the process might be anything more than mildly bracing. The brandees were too cowardly to show pain, a phenomenon later to be explored at length in G. Gordon Liddy's autobiography, *Will*.

Meanwhile Pooh Bear and I were less successful at controlling ourselves. Starting out with discreet smiles and nudges, we had moved rapidly into chuckles and from there to flat-out guffaws. At last one of us got to laughing so hard he fell off the trunk. I imagine I was the one, but I can no longer be sure.

Sentiment began running strongly against us, to the point where certain remarks made it appear that we might very soon find ourselves changed from spectators into participants. Before this proposition could be put to a vote, we beat it on out of there.

In the days that followed, the branded brothers talked very little about their experience, at least to the nonbranded. This may have been because the results were almost uniformly unsatisfactory—illegible smudges of scar tissue. Or perhaps, and this is the explanation I hope is right, regret and even shame had set in.

Has the governor of Texas ever had second thoughts along these lines?

This strikes me as a perfectly legitimate avenue of questioning for the press to pursue. Were you were branded yourself, Governor, and if so, where? Can we take pictures? George Schultz had a Princeton tiger tattooed on his buttocks, Governor Bush. What's your opinion on that? Is tribal disfigurement a Republican thing, Mr. Governor, or is it an Ivy League thing?

Where do you stand on piercing? How about tongue rings? Governor, governor! Over here! What will you do about assisted suicide if elected? Where should society draw the line between self-murder and self-mutilation? Between second and third degree burns? Between George and Gracie?

Fair questions, all of them, and relevant, too. I don't care a bit about whether Mr. Bush snorted cocaine during his unusually protracted adolescence. Personally I doubt if Mr. Clinton had the nerve to inhale, but I hope he did. I know Mr. Gore did, and so what? Boys will be boys.

But hey, George—mind if I call you George, Brother Bush?—I've got some real doubts about this branding thing.