

Slow Driving with George Dubya

Now that the Bush campaign has finally had to admit it, we all think we know what happened on that night in Kennebunkport so long ago.

In the very early hours of September 4, 1976, George W. Bush was heading erratically for home on Ocean Drive when his car was stopped by Officer Calvin Bridges. Also in the car were his sister, Dorothy, Australian tennis star John Newcombe, and Mrs. Newcombe.

“I was pulled over and admitted to the policeman that I was drinking,” Governor Bush told reporters with a frankness born of the fact that a Portland TV station had just dug up the arrest report. Officer Bridges, now retired, seemed to remember the occasion well, and added that the 30-year-old youth* had been a perfect gentleman during the pinch. Mr. Bush eventually pleaded guilty to operating under the influence of intoxicating liquor, for which he was fined \$150 and had his Maine driver’s license briefly suspended.

So that’s it. End of story, and no biggie.

•

BUT THEN THE NOVEMBER 20 issue of *Time* carried an interview by Hugh Sidey with the governor’s father, George Herbert Walker Bush. Here is his memory of that night:

“About three or four days before the election, the reports were beginning to get very positive, upbeat; then along comes the Kennebunkport incident with John Newcombe. I stayed awake all night and the next day. Barbara and I had totally forgotten about it.** Calvin, the police officer, came to our house and said, ‘George, I got to take you in.’ I don’t know what really happened that night. George was with John Newcombe, a black-belt beer drinker. He was arrested for driving too slow. He accepted the responsibility.”

I have turned this passage over to a retired deconstructionist from Harvard, and here is his close reading of the text.



“THE FIRST ITEM OF INTEREST is automatic pairing of ‘incident’ with ‘John Newcombe’ in the author’s mind. This pairing can scarcely be considered accidental, as it will recur later in the work. The more conventional pairing of ‘incident’ would be with the vehicle’s driver, which was in fact the linkage made by Officer Calvin in his own contemporary recounting of the episode on the police blotter.

“The narrator’s use of the words ‘Totally forgotten’ seems at first glance to be somewhat hyperbolic. If I may interject a personal note, at about the time of the Newcombe incident one of my sons called from a police station in Winsted, Connecticut, to inform me that he had run a red light and collided with a snow plow. I have not totally forgotten. To be fair to Mr. Bush, though, my memory seems to be better than his, as I have not forgotten Iran-Contra either.

“For similar reasons I am inclined to give the narrator the benefit of the doubt when he says, ‘I don’t know what really happened that night.’ Lack of curiosity, as well as memory, was a constant theme of his years in public service.

“His next three sentences afford the reader an artful specimen of innuendo—a deeper and fuller, although still oblique, development of the thesis advanced in the second half of the opening sentence. While never quite saying so, Bush senior manages to place the blame for the ‘incident,’ even more firmly on Mr. Newcombe. The role of Bush junior becomes, in this recounting, little more than to step up and ‘accept the responsibility’ for ‘driving too slow.’

•

“I SAVE FOR LAST this intriguing literary construction:

“*Calvin, the police officer, came to our house and said, “George, I got to take you in.”*”

“Although ‘George’, in this case, is a somewhat ambiguous referent, we may still make certain normative suppositions as to which George is meant. George Herbert Walker Bush was at the time director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Calvin Bridges was a police officer in Kennebunkport. A cat may look at a king, but a cop is unlikely to call him George.

“On the other hand George Walker Bush was a mere youth, and a legally drunk one. As such, you might expect a policeman to refer familiarly to him. You might also expect a ‘George’ to be ‘taken in,’ whereas you would suppose that a CIA director might be ‘given a lift,’ or even a ‘police escort.’

“But why would either George require transportation at all? The father presumably had access to many cars. The son was already *at* the police station, according to the account to be dragged out of him 24 years later. And yet there he is in his own home, according to his own father.

“Did Officer Calvin find someone in the car sober enough to drive it, and then follow along to the Bush compound? Did George perhaps never pull over at all, but rather continue to waver onward with a police tail? Or was the aging scamp

driven home after flunking his sobriety test at the police station and then rearrested later? If so, why?

“Application of the tools of literary analysis to the present text cannot provide with any reliability the answers to these or any other questions. The text is, alas, fragmentary.”



★ Asked earlier if he had ever been arrested for drunken driving, Governor Bush said only, “I do not have a perfect record as a youth.”

★★ At some point in the last seven years, apparently. Officer Bridges recently told the Boston Globe that the former president gave him a tie clip in 1993 and said the arrest was “the best thing that could have happened” to his son.

NOVEMBER, 2000