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SECTION E

President's mimics aren't Bush league, by George

By Patrick T. Butters
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Rich Little was in a cold sweat. George Bush had just been elected president, and Mr. Little's impression of him was not very good. "And I think everybody knew it," he recalls. But in sweet first lady Barbara Bush to the rescue. At a party in early 1989, the presidential wife-to-be showed Mr. Little a few tricks. "How to stand, put your hand in your pocket, make sure you use your right [index] finger, wave the arm around, punctuate the air, always have at least one hand in the pocket, run your sentences together," he remembers in a phone interview from the West Coast. "This is the wife telling me this."

"I noticed George was peeking around the corner, listening to this,

and getting a little annoyed. Finally he came up and said, 'Mr. Little here launches into the familiar 'Bush nasality.' 'Well, whatta ya tellin' him all this for? For God's sake, he's gonna have me lookin' like an i-di-ot.'"

But isn't that what impressionists are for, Mr. President? Ever since the '60s, when Vaughn Meader parlayed his JFK imitation into a 7 million-selling record album, "The First Family," everyone from David Frye (Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon) to "Saturday Night Live's" Chevy Chase (Gerald Ford), Dan Aykroyd (Jimmy Carter) and now Dana Carvey (George Bush) have

found that folks enjoy seeing and hearing impressions of Mr. No. 1.

"He's our king," says Mr. Carvey, 34. "He's the ultimate symbol of the authority figure in this country, like the queen of England. Music plays when he enters a room, and all his clothes are done perfectly."

Local comedians — David Werner of the Capitol Steps troupe and John Simmons and Ed Henley of the Gross National Product players — also find that kinder, gentler, prudent guy a tempting target.

Jim Morris specializes in the president for "Crossfire" and also does him for corporations and small theaters in New York.

"I'm into absurd humor, and I'll have the president say some real scary things," Mr. Morris says. For instance? "I dunno, I saw this Gorbachev fella and I told him to go to hell. Really."

For some, Mr. Bush is only part of a repertoire: The musical Mr. Werner also does Bruce Springsteen and Elvis.

"I have to do Elvis outrageously because everyone's heard him," Mr. Werner says. "With Bush, your humor can be more subtle."

Mr. Henley, 25, does dead-on Peter Jennings, David Brinkley and Tom Brokaw imitations when not being Mr. Bush for GNP's "Scandal Tours,"

which takes tourists to various risqué Capitol stops. Mr. Henley takes news conference-type questions on the bus ("Way in the back there") and says that fumbling for a response gives him time to come up with an answer and still sound like Mr. Bush.

"You can — just — start — saying — absolute — NONsense," he says in his squeaky Bushspeak.

The Bush walk (sounds like a dance, huh?) and gestures can be vague, but Mr. Simmons, 34, has

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■ "For a while, the lamest joke about broccoli could've been a hit."



Dana Carvey as George Bush: "He's our king."

MIMIC

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them dangerously down pat. He also has some experience mimicking Ronald Reagan and even has trained other comics to do Nancy's husband.

Mr. Little, at 51 the granddaddy of the current crop of impressionists, appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show" at 19. He's been doing presidents and almost everyone else ever since.

A skilled raconteur, Mr. Little brims with presidential anecdotes, like when he took over a news conference for Mr. Reagan so the commander-in-chief could finish dinner. Not bad for a resident of Canada who can't even vote here.

'Wouldn't be prudent'

Probably the best-known Bush imitator, though, with his nationwide, weekly television exposure, is Mr. Carvey. (And he's relieved that he's not just known for the wildly successful Church Lady.)

Mr. Carvey's impression stresses the president's Texas twang, the slow drawl and phrases such as "wouldn't be prudent" and "na ga da" — Bushese for "not gonna do it").

"I like the way he changes the subject on himself," Mr. Carvey says. "I heard a story that reminds me of that military thing. And then the last thing I saw I picked up on was his real breathy laugh."

"I took that and exaggerated it." No kidding. Mr. Carvey filled his phone interview from New York with that breathy, snortlike laugh, almost like conversation filler. Like other comics, he studies tapes of Bush news conferences and the presidential debates, preferring natural mannerisms to speechy gestures.

On "Saturday Night Live," Mr. Carvey wears a bald cap and a \$2,000 Bushlike hairpiece, crafted by a "forensic" wigmaker from stacks of photos of the president. ("It looks like 'Quincy' designed it.")

The Capitol Steps don't get that elaborate with the president. Mr. Werner's impression is more frenetic, his mouth wide open, and he runs on and off Chelsea's stage, where the Capitol Steps perform.

"Our show is more like a political cartoon," he says. "It's more of a caricature, not an impersonation."

"There's a sort of goofiness about him, so I exaggerate this with a lot of gestures."

Presidential pardon

But the impression goes beyond the voice, gestures and makeup. Ma-

Local comedians and Bush mimics Chris Russell (left) and John Simmons hold court at the National Press Club.

Accept no imitations: Bush mimic tips

If the interests of full disclosure, let it be known that even this reporter has taken a stab at mimicking President Bush at local clubs such as the Comedy Cafe and Garvin's.

The tall hybrid of Texas and Connecticut isn't hard to imitate, but he's no lazy day in Kermabunkport, either. Care to try?

■ First, do his voice: a pinched, tiny, nasal sound (let's give the chief a complex, shall we?) that's clipped and bounces a lot.

■ Next, purse your lips subtly, and sometimes — all of a sudden, now — break into a wide, geeky grin.

■ Wear wire glasses and comb your hair neatly over.

■ Finally, and this came to Mr. Bush after months of media training, point the index fingers "presidentially" for emphasis.

"That's called the finger thing," says Gross National Product's John Simmons. Dana Carvey calls it the "six-shooter."

Do all of the above and — quicker than you can say "a thousand points of light" — you've got the pork-rind man down.

— Patrick T. Butters

terial counts as well. There haven't been many juicy scandals.

"For a while, the lamest joke about broccoli could've been a hit," says Mr. Werner, 30.

It's hard to make fun of a president whose popularity is in the 80 percent range. To make matters worse, Mr. Bush laughs at himself.

Mr. Little, who sent the president a wire — "Welcome to my act" — after the election, was mentioned by the president during a news conference when Mr. Bush caught himself, kinda...gesturin'...like...himself.

Mr. Carvey also found it "thrilling" and "kinda neat" that Mr. Bush

cited him in a humorous speech several months ago.

"He really enjoys the job, and it shows," Mr. Carvey says. "I'd like to meet 'im."

Presidents have reacted differently to impressionists. John F. Kennedy reportedly enjoyed Mr. Meador, quipping, "He sounds more like Teddy."

At Debbie Reynolds' insistence, Mr. Little imitated his classic gruff, jowly Richard Nixon for the president at a San Clemente, Calif., party.

"He gave me a phony smile and shook my hand and walked away," Mr. Little recalls. "To this day, I think he really wasn't sure who I was doing. Pat [Nixon] said, 'Why is that young man making those weird gestures?'"

Mr. Morris, 32, got a better reaction out of Mrs. Bush.

"Barbara thinks I'm great," he says. "She said, 'You are so good and you are so young. I'm taking you home with me.'"

Mr. Werner met Mr. Bush when he was vice president after imitating him at a Christmas party. He had parodied him in a sendup of Harry Chapin's song "Cat's in the Hat" with the refrain: "I just wanna be

Harder than it looks

But nice guys can be difficult subjects; each impressionist talks about "a hook," a mannerism to latch onto that is the key to the impression. Mr. Bush may be the hardest president to imitate since Gerald Ford. (Fred Travalena combined Lyndon Johnson and Burl Ives to get Mr. Ford.)

Mr. Little said he had trouble with Mr. Reagan until a presidential aide told him to start everything with "Well."

Actually, Mr. Morris found Mr. Bush easier to nail than Mr. Reagan. Mr. Morris was living in Boston in 1980, so when the New Hampshire primary came around he was bombarded with Bush commercials.

"The problem with doing Bush is he's not as polarizing a figure as Reagan," says Mr. Morris, who explains that he works "from the inside" to get his impressions down.

Mr. Carvey says it took nine months to get his Bush impression right, and he still stammers when he talks of it.

"I didn't have the drawl. But then I put Mr. Rogers and John Wayne together —" he slips into Mr. Bush

— "and started doin' that thing. That whole area there."

Mr. Carvey laughs again, thinking of yet another Bushism.

"He also likes to mention [legislative] programs no one ever remembers," citing bureaucratess such as the "Interior Exterior Bill" or the "Kakasky Act."

It didn't make imitating him easier that Mr. Bush was not particularly well understood as vice president.

"If you're a vice president that doesn't say much, and particularly now when they don't want him to say much, then that's tough," Mr. Little says. "Probably the hardest thing is to do a president when he first gets elected, because you don't know enough about him."

"When he started out, [Mr. Bush] was sort of this diminutive Reagan," Mr. Werner says. "People thought of him as Reagan with this high voice."

Mr. Henley found that Mr. Bush's voice has changed a lot since he assumed office in January 1989.

"During the nominating process, he was a lot higher," Mr. Henley says, going into an eerily exact imitation of Mr. Bush chiding Dan Rather for "ex-HAUST-ively" grilling him on Iran-Contra. "Now, they've brought him way down, and he's a lot more relaxed."

"He's not as whiny."