

16 August 2002

Dear Ben and Kay,

Ralph Carr has told me that you would like to know something of the background to our paintings of the mourning doves (titled "September 1st.") and the Cardinals (Plate XII of our folio "Of Birds and Texas.") So here goes

Actually to write about our mourning dove painting today is particularly appropriate, because at this time (9:30 AM) on August 16th, exactly a year ago, Scott and I were packing our Suburban for a trip to Crawford, Texas to meet President Bush for the first time. Most of that morning I had been spending time on the telephone with Andi Ball, Mrs. Bush's assistant, trying to wrangle an invitation for my dear friend Nancy Ferguson who somehow had been left out of the event.

I had been told that there simply was not room for her for the lunch that Mrs. Bush had planned. This seemed odd, since Alice Carrington, our San Antonio art dealer who had arranged the Bush portrait commission, had already given me the impression that there was going to be a big luncheon that day for important Republican contributors. I simply imagined that there was going to be some sort of buffet with lots of people standing around eating barbecue off paper plates. I also thought that we would

be lucky to spend ten minutes with the president as he stepped aside from his guests to examine Scott's portrait of him as governor, the portrait which was to hang in the Texas capitol rotunda.

I finally asked Andi Ball if we could skip the 11:30 lunch and come later in the day. Andi called me back a few minutes later and told me that would be OK with Mrs. Bush. She and the president would expect us at 1:30. All this negotiating made me nervous, since I did not think of this trip as a social event but strictly business. That is why I had not thought to include Nancy, who had accompanied me on several previous visits to Mrs. Bush in Austin and was with me when Mrs. Bush came to Fort Worth to meet Scott and to see our studio.

Along with Mr. Bush's governor's portrait which was framed but not yet quite complete we also brought an artists' proof of our mourning dove painting, "September 1st.". All the hoopla that had come with Scott's commission to paint the portrait and the high seriousness that seemed to surround the project as far as everyone was concerned, only made my brother and me look for some humor in the situation. A close mutual friend who was with the president when he chose Scott to do the portrait said that Mr. Bush was quite light-hearted about the project and delighted by the photographs of Scott's watercolor portraits of Perry and Nancy Lee Bass, Trammell Crow and John Roach. He did, however, have to sit for photographs

three times in the oval office before Mrs. Bush was satisfied with the correct pose.

Trying to find some humor in our situation amid all the high seriousness of presidential secretaries and Texas state officials, Scott and I could not help but recall a rather silly event that occurred during Mr. Bush's first gubernatorial campaign against Ann Richards in 1994. It was the opening day of Dove season, September 1st. and, as you well know, practically a national holiday in Texas. All the major networks had live coverage that morning of Mr. Bush in one end of the state and Governor Ann Richards somewhere at the other end, dressed to the teeth, armed with the appropriate over-and-unders, and perched at the edges of their respective pastures to await to official opening bell and the hoped-for onslaught of feathery targets.

It was easy to see by the way she handled her gun that Ms. Richards was out of her element and would probably need a lot of luck if a dove came her way. Mr. Bush on the other hand looked poised and comfortable. Governor Richards missed every shot, as I recall, and was probably wondering if this publicity stunt was a very good idea and might perhaps augur ill omens for her campaign. As I remember even her famous wit failed her, something we life-long dove hunters have developed in abundance to cover our own "occasional" misses.

After recording Governor Richard's nationally televised

disaster the stations switched to Bush. As if on cue, a small flock of doves appeared in the distance heading right for George W. Somebody off screen warned him of the approaching targets and the aspiring candidate stood his ground and looked cool. Just as the birds rocketed into range he fired. Out of the flock a bird folded its wings and plummeted to earth - stone dead! It had been a great shot and on national television! (I have no doubt that he had been kept informed of Governor Richard's miserable performance, and he must have been beaming with pride.)

I can't remember if he walked out into the field and picked the downed bird up himself or if somebody else did it. But when it was brought over to the camera it soon became apparent that this was a most unusual looking mourning dove. Even the game warden inconveniently standing by was reluctant to declare the obvious. Mr. Bush's outstanding performance recorded on national TV for all to see had yielded a very dead killdeer, unfortunately a much protected species of plover. The embarrassed game warden had no choice but to fine the shooter which, as I recall, cost him \$350.00. This was perhaps Mr. Bush's first test as a leader "under fire" and he handled it with the kind of grace and good humor that was to carry him to victory in the fall elections.

That incident had stayed in the back of my mind for years. After Governor Bush became President Bush and after Scott received the coveted commission to paint his portrait for the

state capitol dome and amid all the tensions that followed, my brother and I would laugh when we thought of that dove hunting episode and the simple lesson it taught.

In the days of ancient Rome whenever a victorious general was given permission by the Senate to march in triumph through the forum, a slave was placed in the victor's chariot to occasionally whisper into his ear, "Remember, thou art only mortal." No matter how great one's victories and triumphs may be, a person should never forget that he is only human and always capable of making mistakes. Our painting "September 1st." was meant as a gentle and good-natured restatement of that ancient Roman theme. As well as I know birds, I myself have over a lifetime of dove hunting mistakenly shot at least two killdeers, a couple of scissor-tailed flycatchers, a pigeon hawk and dragonflies too numerous to mention.

While memories of that televised dove hunt incident sparked my interest in doing the picture, as soon as I began drawing the poses, it became a very serious effort. Scott and I have seen so many paintings of mourning doves over the years. Few artists, in our opinion, have ever come close to capturing the extremely subtle coloring of these beautiful birds. The picture soon became a challenge that also sparked Scott's interest. I essentially drew the birds and painted in the sky. Actually, the killdeer I drew was taken from a killdeer study drawing Scott had done years earlier. I think Scott's participation

in finishing the painting helped him to relax with his portrait of Mr. Bush. His pose in the small photograph sent to us by the White House was a formal one required by the strict setting of the other governors' portraits hanging in the capitol dome.. Scott understood this, of course, but secretly hoped that one day he just might be able to paint a more revealing portrait of the president.

So, as Ralph Carr, Nancy Ferguson, Scott and I and my Suburban finally pulled off the narrow road from Waco to the president's drive and passed the security check point, we had very little idea of what to expect. After getting lost on one of the ranch roads and being directed to the house by a secret service man in what looked like a telephone booth in the middle a field, we finally came to the main driveway. We were surprized to see only two vehicles parked by the house, a white van and the white truck I had often seen the president driving on CNN News. It was exactly 1:30. It was hot and dry. The temperature was 102 degrees.

Just as we came to a stop, the door to the screen porch opened and out came President and Mrs. Bush with four or five people laughing and chatting, obviously saying their good-byes to their guests. I kept thinking to myself how ordinary everything seemed, but there he was, the President of the United

States, the most powerful man in the world! He was dressed in blue jeans and a short sleeved khaki work shirt. As I recall, he looked over in our direction and motioned for us to come over.

We introduced ourselves and both the president and Mrs. Bush introduced us to their departing guests. I was later to learn that they had come from Indiana or illinois and had been major contributors to Mrs. Bush's library and literacy causes. Our friend, the San Antonio art dealer Alice Carrington, also came out to meet us. She is a close Bush friend and had spent the night at the ranch. The guests soon departed and there we were to our great surprise alone with President and Mrs. Bush, Alice and a couple of discreet security people.

As we entered the house I remember asking Mrs. Bush, whom I really knew as Laura, what was the proper protocol in addressing her. She said, "You must say Mrs. Bush first," she laughed, "then you may call me Laura." The president later told us to call him "Mr. President" simply out of respect for the office. I already knew that Laura did not like to be referred to as the "First Lady." Although I genuinely consider her a friend, I never call her Laura in public but only in private.

After a few minutes of small talk the president finally said he was ready to look at his picture. While I went out to the car to fetch it somebody removed a picture from the wall to provide a display space. The portrait was a hit. Everybody

ooing and aahing. Mrs. Bush discreetly sensing that this was her husband's moment said very little. She stepped close for a better look. Scott asked the president what he thought. Mr. Bush, looking a little embarrassed, noted that he felt funny making comments on his own likeness but then offered a few suggestions which Scott thought were very helpful. By this time Scott was looking very intently at the president's face quite up close, apologizing for his scrutiny which amused Mr. Bush. Scott has a nearly photographic memory when it comes to painting. He then looked at me and I could tell by the confident look on his face that he had just seen all the details he needed to properly finish the portrait.

While Scott discussed the portrait with his hosts I looked around the large living room. The Crawford or I should say Prairie Chapel Ranch house was an attractive contemporary building that cleverly recalled the pioneer dog-run log cabins of the 1840's. The house was essentially two structures separated a screened-in porch, the sleeping quarters on one side and the living room and kitchen on the other side. The whole effect was of an elegant simplicity, very tasteful and soothing to the eye.

The dining area was part of the living room, and I could see why Nancy's coming at lunchtime would have caused a problem. The table accommodated only about ten or twelve people, and we could now see that the luncheon we had originally been

invited to was a seated meal. I was disappointed that I had turned down a chance to break bread with the president of the United States and Mrs. Bush. Nancy told me later she was horrified that the lunch I had discribed to her as probably a large buffet was instead such a small affair. She never would have begged me to include her.

When the timing seemed right I brought in the large cardboard portfolio with the beautiful giclee print of our dove painting "September 1st". Everybody gathered around for the unveiling. When I pulled back the sheet of cover paper revealing the print there was a moment of silence. The President then burst out in laughter. Laura looked at him in an amused but puzzled way. She didn't get it, but he did. "Did you paint that?" he asked me somewhat incredulously.

After explaining the pictrure to Laura the president took Scott aside and the two sat down together almost in a huddle and talked for several minutes. A telephone call interrupted their conversation and when the president rejoined us Scott and I were already thinking that it was probably time to take our leave. But President Bush had other plans.

"Are we ready for a tour of the ranch?" he said.

We all looked at each other in amazement. We were apparently getting the royal treatment, a huge honor, especially since I well knew that this was the president's nap time. I too like to take naps after luch when I can, so I fully appreciated the

sacrifice the president was making. Scott did too. I also realized that had we come earlier for lunch as originally planned, we probably would have not gotten the tour but would have departed with the other guests.

We took our leave from Laura who stood barefooted in the doorway waving goodbye. We all piled into the president's white truck, Mr. Bush insisting that Scott sit up in the front seat with him. Ralph, Nancy and I sat in the back seat and the president drove. A security car quietly joined us and followed at a discreet distance. It was dusty and dry and just about as hot as an August day in central Texas can be. The president was clearly enjoying himself as we headed away from the flat terrain around the house and began to descend into a surprisingly beautiful valley covered by lush stands of cedar and american elms, red cedar trees and occasional Sycamores rising from dried creek beds. It was obvious that this place must be lovely when blessed with rain. Among the many cul-de-sacs, little dead-end canyons of limestone cliffs, there was one spot, more lovely than the rest, which the president called "the Cathedral." We all got out of the truck, and our presidential guide led us back into the gulley. There were a couple of workers clearing underbrush and completely ignoring us.

Although dry as a bone, a creek flows through here in good times. At the end of the gulley rising perhaps eighty feet above us was a cliff from which a waterfall emerged in the rainy season

cascading into a large but now empty basin. Overhead thick grape vines depended from nearby trees. The effect of the place must be like a little piece of paradise, especially after the spring rains. I was impressed by the president's knowledge of trees. He corrected me on several occasions. And he was beginning to study the local bird life as well.

On our way back to the house we stopped by another of the president's favorite spots among the cedars and Hackberries at the top of another dry waterfall. I could tell that the heat was getting to all of us. Only Mr. Bush seemed totally unaffected. He really loved being out there. The president and Scott were discussing landscaping options. He was sitting a few feet away in the partial shade. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Scott was subtly gesturing to me. He wanted me to take some portrait photographs. I had hardly used my camera the whole afternoon, but Scott had picked the right moment. The president was at complete ease and continued talking to Scott as my camera shutter clicked away. It was from these photographs that my brother painted the portrait that was displayed at our farewell show in our little gallery. That picture is not yet finished.

Mrs. Bush was still napping on the couch when we returned to the house. The president went into the kitchen and brought out bottled water for everyone. It was then that he told Scott how grateful and pleased he was with his gubernatorial portrait.

He then declared, " I know that you don't like to leave your house or go to parties or public events. I wasn't even sure that you would come down here with your portrait. I really do want you to come down to Austin sometime in September or October for the official unveiling. Laura and I really want you to be there. You are coming aren't you?"

"Yes, Mr. President. I will be there."

"Good. It won't be a long ceremony, just a few remarks and then the unveiling."

As we were packing up, the president told Scott that he wanted him to paint his presidential portrait for the White House and that of Mrs. Bush as well. He thanked us for the Giclee print of the mourning doves. Then surprisingly he asked Scott if he could keep the small photograph that the White House had sent for the governor's portrait. Scott had brought the photo with him to the ranch so that it could be compared with the painted portrait. Apparently he had the only copy, and that the original negatives had been misplaced or lost.

Laura said goodbye to us and remained in the air-conditioned house while the president followed us out to our car. After Scott took his seat, the president came over and peered into the car. "Now Scott, you do promise me that you will be coming to Austin early in the fall for the unveiling?"

"I will be there, Mr. President."

As we drove out onto the ranch road and back through the

security checkpoint hardly anyone in the car spoke. We had just spent four hours practically alone with the President of the United State, and it was a difficult experience to digest. Everything had seemed so normal. I have known Laura Bush for several years and admired her immensely. My first meeting with the president had been an equal delight. The man we met on that hot August afternoon, a man whose politics were often different from mine, was a good man. I was glad that I voted for him.

Little did any of us know how things would change in less than a month. On September 9th Nancy and I flew to Florence for a short vacation. We were there when we heard on the street the terrible news of September 11th. The unveiling of Governor Bush's portrait in Austin was to be postponed until January 6th.

I'll never forget passing through the tightest security at the Texas capitol and finally taking our seats under the dome to await President and Mrs. Bush's appearance. Governor Perry introduced several important state legislators and finally the special guests of honor. After the long standing ovation, the president took his seat on the dais. As the speeches began Mr. Bush started scanning the audience with a serious look on his face that was almost a frown. He looked over the entire audience from right to left until he finally reached our end in the front row at the far left. The instant he saw Scott his

face lit up with a broad smile and he gave us a slight wave with the tips of his fingers.

Later the following January Nancy, Scott and I were invited to the White House to dine privately with President and Mrs. Bush in the family quarters. Scott was working on a painting that he didn't want to leave, so at the last minute he decided not to go. Our dinner with the Bushes took place on the night before he was to deliver his first State of the Union address to Congress. As Nancy and I were escorted into what is called the Treaty Room upstairs, the president got up from the table and came forward to greet us. I can remember that the first thing he said to me was "I see that Scott didn't come. I guess we were lucky to get him to come to Austin afterall"

Such is the tale of our strange and wonderful encounter with the President of the United States. Our painting of the mourning doves, "September 1st." played an important part in our experience. What began as a kind of gentle parody became a serious painting that we think is one of the finest bird paintings that Scott and I have ever done. It is certainly one of our favorites. The Bushes have asked us to paint two large bird paintings for the White House Solarium. We have chosen birds and backgrounds from the Bush ranch so that when the President goes up there to smoke his cigar (apparently it is the only place where he is allowed to do so) he will have a bit of home to look at.