WASHINGTON, Feb. 19 - As George W. Bush was first 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 a personality.

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

Variously earnest, confident or prickly in those conversations, Mr. 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 a "fabulous" vice president. And in exchanges about his handling of questions from the news media about his past, Mr. Bush appears to have acknowledged trying marijuana.

Mr. Wead said he recorded the conversations because he viewed Mr. 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, Mr. 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, Mr. Duffy said, "That has been asked and answered so many times there is nothing more to add."

The conversations Mr. Wead played offer insights into Mr. 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. Mr. 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 September 1998, Mr. Bush told Mr. 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 Mr. 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, Mr. Bush complained to Karl Rove, his political strategist, "What the hell is this about?"

Mr. Bush, who has acknowledged a drinking problem years ago, told Mr. 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 he blamed his opponents for stirring rumors. "If nobody shows up, there's no story," he told Mr. Wead, "and if somebody shows up, it is going to be made up." But when Mr. Wead said that Mr. Bush had in the past publicly denied using cocaine, Mr. 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, Mr. Bush said: "I wouldn't answer the marijuana questions. You know why? Because I don't want some little kid doing what I tried."
He mocked Vice President Al Gore for acknowledging marijuana use. "Baby boomers have got to grow up and say, yeah, I may have done drugs, but instead of admitting it, say to kids, don't do them," he said.

Mr. Bush threatened that if his rival Steve Forbes attacked him too hard during the campaign and won, both Mr. Bush, then the Texas governor, and his brother, Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida, would withhold their support. "He can forget Texas. And he can forget Florida. And I will sit on my hands," Mr. Bush said.

The private Mr. 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.

Mr. Wead said he withheld many tapes of conversations that were repetitive or of a purely personal nature. The dozen conversations he agreed to play ranged in length from five minutes to nearly half an hour. In them, the future president affectionately addresses Mr. Wead as "Weadie" or "Weadnik," asks if his children still believe in Santa Claus, and chides him for skipping a doctor's appointment. Mr. Bush also regularly gripes about the barbs of the press and his rivals. And he is cocky at times. "It's me versus the world," he told Mr. Wead. "The good news is, the world is on my side. Or more than half of it."

Other presidents, such as Richard M. Nixon and Lyndon B. Johnson, secretly recorded conversations from the White House. Some former associates of President Bill Clinton taped personal conversations in apparent efforts to embarrass or entrap him. But Mr. 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 political strategy and priorities.

Mr. Wead first acknowledged the tapes to a reporter in December to defend the accuracy of a passage about Mr. 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.

Mr. Wead eventually agreed to play a dozen tapes on the condition that the names of any private citizens be withheld. The New York Times hired Tom Owen, an expert on audio authentication, to examine samples from the tapes. He concluded the voice was that of the president.

A White House adviser to the first President Bush, Mr. Wead said in an interview in The Washington Post in 1990 that Andrew H. Card Jr., then deputy chief of staff, told him to leave the administration "sooner rather than later" after he sent conservatives a letter faulting the White House for inviting gay activists to an event. But Mr. Wead said he left on good terms. He never had a formal role in the current president's campaign, though the tapes suggest he had angled for one.

Mr. Wead said he admired George W. Bush and stayed in touch with some members of his family. While he said he has not communicated with the president since early in his first term, he attributed that to Mr. Bush's busy schedule.

Mr. Wead said he recorded his conversations with the president in part because he thought he might be asked to write a book for the campaign. He also wanted a clear account of any requests Mr. Bush made of him. But he said his main motivation in making the tapes, which he originally intended to be released only after his own death, was to leave the nation a unique record of Mr. Bush.

"I believe that, like him or not, he is going to be a huge historical figure," Mr. Wead said. "If I was on the telephone with Churchill or Gandhi, I would tape record them too."

**Summer of 1998**

The first of the taped conversations Mr. Wead disclosed took place in the summer of 1998, when Mr. Bush was running for his second term as Texas governor. At the time, Mr. Bush was considered a political
moderate who worked well with Democrats and was widely admired by Texans of both parties. His family name made him a strong presidential contender, but he had not yet committed to run.

Still, in a conversation that November on the eve of Mr. Bush's re-election, his confidence was soaring. "I believe tomorrow is going to change Texas politics forever," he told Mr. Wead. "The top three offices right below me will be the first time there has been a Republican in that slot since the Civil War. Isn't that amazing? And I hate to be a braggart, but they are going to win for one reason: me."

Talking to Mr. Wead, a former Assemblies of God minister who was well connected in conservative evangelical circles, Mr. Bush's biggest concern about the Republican presidential primary was shoring up his right flank. Mr. Forbes was working hard to win the support of conservative Christians by emphasizing his opposition to abortion. "I view him as a problem, don't you?" Mr. Bush asked.

Mr. Bush knew that his own religious faith could be an asset with conservative Christian voters, and his personal devotion was often evident in the taped conversations. When Mr. Wead warned him that "power corrupts," for example, Mr. Bush told him not to worry: "I have got a great wife. And I read the Bible daily. The Bible is pretty good about keeping your ego in check."

In November 1999, he told his friend that he had been deeply moved by a memorial service for students who died in an accident when constructing a Thanksgiving weekend bonfire at Texas A & M University, especially by the prayers by friends of the students.

In another conversation, he described a "powerful moment" visiting the site of the Sermon on the Mount in Israel with a group of state governors, where he read "Amazing Grace" aloud. "I look forward to sharing this at some point in time," he told Mr. Wead about the event.

Preparing to meet with influential Christian conservatives, Mr. Bush tested his lines with Mr. Wead. "I'm going to tell them the five turning points in my life," he said. "Accepting Christ. Marrying my wife. Having children. Running for governor. And listening to my mother."

In September 1998, Mr. Bush told Mr. Wead that he was getting ready for his first meeting with James C. Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, an evangelical self-help group. Dr. Dobson, probably the most influential evangelical conservative, wanted to examine the candidate's Christian credentials.

"He said he would like to meet me, you know, he had heard some nice things, you know, well, 'I don't know if he is a true believer' kind of attitude," Mr. Bush said.

Mr. Bush said he intended to reassure Dr. Dobson of his opposition to abortion. Mr. Bush said he was concerned about rumors that Dr. Dobson had been telling others that the "Bushes weren't going to be involved in abortion," meaning that the Bush family preferred to avoid the issue rather than fight over it.

"I just don't believe I said that. Why would I have said that?" Mr. Bush told Mr. Wead with annoyance.

By the end of the primary, Mr. Bush alluded to Dr. Dobson's strong views on abortion again, apparently ruling out potential vice presidents including Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania and Gen. Colin L. Powell, who favored abortion rights. Picking any of them could turn conservative Christians away from the ticket, Mr. Bush said.

"They are not going to like it anyway, boy," Mr. Bush said. "Dobson made it clear."

**Signs of Concern**

Early on, though, Mr. Bush appeared most worried that Christian conservatives would object to his determination not to criticize gay people. "I think he wants me to attack homosexuals," Mr. Bush said after meeting James Robison, a prominent evangelical minister in Texas.

But Mr. Bush said he did not intend to change his position. He said he told Mr. Robison: "Look, James, I got to tell you two things right off the bat. One, I'm not going to kick gays, because I'm a sinner. How can I differentiate sin?"
Later, he read aloud an aide's report from a convention of the Christian Coalition, a conservative political group: "This crowd uses gays as the enemy. It's hard to distinguish between fear of the homosexual political agenda and fear of homosexuality, however."

"This is an issue I have been trying to downplay," Mr. Bush said. "I think it is bad for Republicans to be kicking gays."

Told that one conservative supporter was saying Mr. Bush had pledged not to hire gay people, Mr. Bush said sharply: "No, what I said was, I wouldn't fire gays."

As early as 1998, however, Mr. Bush had already identified one gay-rights issue where he found common ground with conservative Christians: same-sex marriage. "Gay marriage, I am against that. Special rights, I am against that," Mr. Bush told Mr. Wead, five years before a Massachusetts court brought the issue to national attention.

Mr. Bush took stock of conservative Christian views of foreign policy as well. Reading more of the report from the Christian Coalition meeting, Mr. Bush said to Mr. Wead: "Sovereignty. The issue is huge. The mere mention of Kofi Annan in the U.N. caused the crowd to go into a veritable fit. The coalition wants America strong and wants the American flag flying overseas, not the pale blue of the U.N."

As eager as Mr. Bush was to cultivate the support of Christian conservatives, he did not want to do it too publicly for fear of driving away more secular voters. When Mr. Wead warned Mr. Bush to avoid big meetings with evangelical leaders, Mr. Bush said, "I'm just going to have one," and, "This is not meant to be public."

**Past Behavior**

Many of the taped conversations revolve around Mr. Bush's handling of questions about his past behavior. In August 1998, he worried that the scandals of the Clinton administration had sharpened journalists' determination to investigate the private lives of candidates. He even expressed a hint of sympathy for his Democratic predecessor.

"I don't like it either," Mr. Bush said of the Clinton investigations. "But on the other hand, I think he has disgraced the nation."

When Mr. Wead warned that he had heard reporters talking about Mr. Bush's "immature" past, Mr. Bush said, "That's part of my schtick, which is, look, we have all made mistakes."

He said he learned "a couple of really good lines" from Mr. Robison, the Texas pastor: "What you need to say time and time again is not talk about the details of your transgressions but talk about what I have learned. I've sinned and I've learned."

"I said, 'James' - he stopped - I said, 'I did some things when I was young that were immature,' " Mr. Bush said. "He said, 'But have you learned?' I said, 'James, that's the difference between me and the president. I've learned. I am prepared to accept the responsibility of this office.' "By the summer of 1999, Mr. Bush was telling Mr. Wead his approach to such prying questions had evolved. "I think it is time for somebody to just draw the line and look people in the eye and say, I am not going to participate in ugly rumors about me, and blame my opponents, and hold the line, and stand up for a system that will not allow this kind of crap to go on."

Later, however, Mr. Bush worried that his refusal to answer questions about whether he had used illegal drugs in the past could prove costly, but he held out nonetheless. "I am just not going to answer those questions. And it might cost me the election," he told Mr. Wead.

He complained repeatedly about the press scrutiny, accusing the news media of a "campaign" against him. While he talked of certain reporters as "pro-Bush" and commented favorably on some publications (U.S. News & World Report is "halfway decent," but Time magazine is "awful"), he vented frequently to Mr. Wead about what he considered the liberal bias and invasiveness of the news media in general.
"It's unbelievable," Mr. Bush said, reciting various rumors about his past that his aides had picked up from reporters. "They just float sewer out there."

Mr. Bush bristled at even an implicit aspersion on his past behavior from Dan Quayle, the former vice president and a rival candidate.

"He's gone ugly on me, man," Mr. Bush told Mr. Wead. Mr. Bush quoted Mr. Quayle as saying, "I'm proud of what I did before 40."

"As if I am not!" Mr. Bush said.

**Sizing Up Opponents**

During the primary contest, Mr. Bush often sized up his dozen Republican rivals, assessing their appeal to conservative Christian voters, their treatment of him and their prospects of serving in a future Bush administration. He paid particular attention to Senator John Ashcroft. "I like Ashcroft a lot," he told Mr. Wead in November 1998. "He is a competent man. He would be a good Supreme Court pick. He would be a good attorney general. He would be a good vice president."

When Mr. Wead predicted an uproar if Mr. Ashcroft were appointed to the court because of his conservative religious views, Mr. Bush replied, "Well, tough."

While Mr. Bush thought the conservative Christian candidates Gary L. Bauer and Alan Keyes would probably scare away moderates, he saw Mr. Ashcroft as an ally because he would draw evangelical voters into the race.

"I want Ashcroft to stay in there, and I want him to be very strong," Mr. Bush said. "I would love it to be a Bush-Ashcroft race. Only because I respect him. He wouldn't say ugly things about me. And I damn sure wouldn't say ugly things about him."

But Mr. Bush was sharply critical of Mr. Forbes, another son of privilege with a famous last name. Evangelicals were not going to like him, Mr. Bush said. "He's too preppy," Mr. Bush said, calling Mr. Forbes "mean spirited."

Recalling the bruising primary fight Mr. Forbes waged against Bob Dole in 1996, Mr. Bush told Mr. Wead, "Steve Forbes is going to hear this message from me. I will do nothing for him if he does to me what he did to Dole. Period. There is going to be a consequence. He is not dealing with the average, you know, 'Oh gosh, let's all get together after it's over.' I will promise you, I will not help him. I don't care."

Another time, Mr. Bush discussed offering Mr. Forbes a job as economic adviser or even secretary of commerce, if Mr. Forbes would approach him first.

Mr. Bush's political predictions were not always on the mark. Before the New Hampshire primary, Mr. Bush all but dismissed Senator John McCain, who turned out to be his strongest challenger.

"He's going to wear very thin when it is all said and done," he said.

When Mr. Wead suggested in June 2000 that Mr. McCain's popularity with Democrats and moderate voters might make him a strong vice presidential candidate, Mr. Bush almost laughed. "Oh, come on!" He added, "I don't know if he helps us win."

Mr. Bush could hardly contain his disdain for Mr. Gore, his Democratic opponent, at one point calling him "pathologically a liar." His confidence in the moral purpose of his campaign to usher in "a responsibility era" never wavered, but he acknowledged that winning might require hard jabs. "I may have to get a little rough for a while," he told Mr. Wead, "but that is what the old man had to do with Dukakis, remember?"

For his part, Mr. Wead said what was most resonant about the conversations with Mr. Bush was his concern that his past behavior might come back to haunt him. Mr. Wead said he used the tapes for his book
because Mr. Bush's life so clearly fit his thesis: that presidents often grow up overshadowed by another sibling.

"What I saw in George W. Bush is that he purposefully put himself in the shadows by his irresponsible behavior as a young person," Mr. Wead said. That enabled him to come into his own outside the glare of his parents' expectations, Mr. Wead said.

Why disclose the tapes? "I just felt that the historical point I was making trumped a personal relationship," Mr. Wead said. Asked about consequences, Mr. Wead said, "I'll always be friendly toward him."