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## White House 'Bonesman' leads nation into the dark

By Alexandra Robbins

"My senior year (at Yale University) I joined Skull and Bones, a secret society," President Bush wrote in his autobiography, "so secret, I can't say anything more."

He doesn't have to. He's practically turning the government into a secret society - an old-boy, throwback establishment that even holds its secret spy-court proceedings in an elaborately locked, windowless room that sounds similar to the Bones' elaborately locked, practically windowless "tomb," or campus clubhouse.

Bush, a loyal and particularly active member of Skull and Bones, a mysterious, historically misogynist Yale-based secret society, seems to have done almost all he can to promote a level of secrecy in government not seen since the Nixon administration:

- Last month, Bush-appointed Assistant Attorney General Robert McCallum, a member of Bush's 1968 Skull and Bones class, filed pleadings in U.S. District Court seeking to extend executive privilege to any government official in pardon cases; the move makes information on presidential pardons more secret than it has ever been.
- After 9/11, without initially telling Congress, Bush assembled a shadow government assigned to secret bunkers somewhere on the East Coast. He also tried to cut off some members of Congress from classified information about the anti-terrorist campaign.
- The USA Patriot Act Bush eagerly signed lets the FBI - with permission from a secret Washington "spy court" - view some customer records; store owners cannot reveal the review
- In October 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft released a memo encouraging federal agencies to withhold as much information as possible from the public.
- A month later, just before documents from the Reagan-Bush administration were to be released, Bush signed an executive order severely hindering public access to former presidents' records.
- Bush also signed legislation that jails or fines journalists who publish sensitive leaks, essentially reviving the Official Secrecy Act that President Clinton vetoed.

Bush has a "fetish for secrecy," Vanderbilt University professor emeritus Hugh Davis Graham, now deceased, told the *National Journal* earlier this year.

Granted, pressing issues of national security merit a level of secrecy. But security and secrecy are not always necessary companions, and some of these examples suggest secrecy for secrecy's sake, such as the pardons and the Reagan documents. Also, a government that operates in secret

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prevents its constituents from holding it accountable and so may be more prone to arbitrariness and ill-considered conduct. This administration may even be doing itself a disservice with its excess secrecy, which can cause people to conjure up much more malicious and elitist scenarios than may actually exist.

That is what has happened with Skull and Bones, which operates a powerful alumni network but, despite the lore, does not run a secret world government, collaborate with Nazis or require initiates to lie naked in a coffin.

Bonesmen have long helped Bush; he received a fair chunk of his early business financing from them and turned to them for help when he needed a job, investors and campaign assistance. Even his baseball-team purchase involved at least one Bonesman. As president, Bush has appointed fellow Bonesmen to high-level positions, such as Edward McNally, the general counsel of the Office on Homeland Security and senior associate counsel on national security. Yet, although one of his first social gatherings at the White House was a Skull and Bones reunion, Bush feigned ignorance when asked recently about Bones: "The thing is so secret that I'm not even sure it still exists," he replied.

Is it a coincidence that the federal government suddenly prioritizes secrecy when a Skull and Bones president is in power? Maybe. But there's no question that the Bush administration increasingly resembles the Bones' dark, locked tomb.

*Alexandra Robbins is the author of Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power.*



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