

George W. Bush discovers his 'inner Rembrandt' in homage to veterans

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Story highlights

- Bush is rolling out a book of paintings
- He's scheduled for a rare trip into the spotlight

Washington (CNN) Former President George W. Bush is back in the spotlight to promote a book of his paintings titled "Portraits of Courage," a collection of stories, 66 portraits and a four-panel mural that he painted to honor military veterans.

"I know each person I painted," the former President said in a wide-ranging interview Monday on NBC's "Today." "I was thinking about their backgrounds, their service, their injuries and their recovery."

After leaving office in 2009, Bush began to paint, but he kept his new hobby a secret. Inspired by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who painted extensively, Bush told friends and family that he found painting relaxing and that he hoped it would inspire others to try new things. Along the way, he hired an art teacher to help him with technique and, notably, told her he wanted to discover his "inner Rembrandt."

"It keeps me active, so I'm not on the couch chewing potato chips all the time," Bush told "Today" host Matt Lauer. "It's one of the great learning experiences."

Daniel Casara was a sergeant in the Army from 1994-2008. Bush's paintings became public after his sister Dorothy Bush Koch's email account was hacked in 2013 and several images were posted by a hacker known as "Guccifer." Eventually, it was revealed that "Guccifer" was Marcel Lazar, a Romanian who pleaded guilty to hacking the email and social media accounts of nearly 100 people, including political figures, business leaders and celebrities. He [was sentenced](#) to four years in prison in 2016.

Following the hack, Bush has grown increasingly comfortable with making his paintings available for public consumption.

Many of his portraits have been [displayed](#) at his presidential library in Dallas, including paintings of major world figures like Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Dalai Lama and his father, former President George H.W. Bush.

His [website](#) also hosts a picture of a painting he did of his dog Barney.

The paintings from "Portraits of Courage" will be exhibited at the presidential library starting March 2, according to [the George W. Bush Presidential Center](#). The proceeds from the book will go toward the George W. Bush Institute, a policy think tank that works on veterans' and other issues, Bush spokesman Freddy Ford said in a statement.

"People ask me, 'Do you miss being President?'" Bush said on "Today." "The answer is not really, but I miss saluting people who have volunteered to wear the uniform."

Leslie Zimmerman was a sergeant in the Army from 2001-2004. She was staged in Kuwait and then deployed to



Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

For the most part, the former President has avoided commenting on politics since leaving office. But in promoting his book, Bush is making appearances on shows like "Today," "Ellen" and "Jimmy Kimmel Live!," where will no doubt be asked about the new President as well as his paintings.

On "Today," the former President offered muted criticism of Trump, touching on Russia, the travel ban and Trump's war with the free press.

"I think we all need answers" regarding an investigation into reported ties between the Trump presidential campaign and the Russian government, Bush told Lauer. But the former President stopped short of calling for a special prosecutor, saying instead that if Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr made the recommendation, "it would have a lot more credibility with me."

Asked whether Trump's actions are helping to heal or divide the country, Bush noted that the President has "only been one month in office."

"You have to take the man for his word that he wants to unify the country," Bush added. "We'll see if he's able to do so."

Michael Joseph Leonard Politowicz is a sergeant in the Marine Corps from 2010 to the present.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, [CNN reported](#) that Bush told former aides that he was "worried" he was going to be the last Republican president. About a week after the election, Bush did offer a few thoughts on the political climate, lamenting the role of anger in the national discourse without mentioning Trump.

When asked whether he ever considered the media to be the enemy of the American people, as Trump repeatedly has said, Bush offered a defense of the press.

"I considered the media to be indispensable to democracy, that we need an independent media to hold people like me to account," Bush said. "I mean, power can be very addictive, and it can be corrosive, and it's important for the media to call to account people who abuse their power, whether it be here or elsewhere."

"One of the things I spent a lot of time doing (was) trying to convince a person like Vladimir Putin, for example, to accept the notion of an independent press," he said. "And it's kind of hard to tell others to have an independent, free press and we're not willing to have one ourself."

The former President has taken a fair amount of criticism from Trump, who has railed against the decision to invade Iraq, although Trump was on the record in [support](#) of the invasion in the run-up to the war.

CNN reported that Bush's father [backed](#) Hillary Clinton over Trump in the election, and the younger Bush [said](#) he wouldn't vote for Trump or Clinton.

The release of Bush's new book marks his most extensive foray into the public eye since he joined his brother, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, in South Carolina in a last-ditch effort to boost his flagging presidential campaign. Asked about his brother's paintings at a CNN town hall event last February, Jeb Bush said it was "really weird," but added, "He's gotten pretty good at it."

CNN's David Wright contributed to this report.

