

On talk circuit, George W. Bush makes millions but few waves

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By MICHAEL
KRUSE



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Politico Magazine

Toward the end of his presidency, George W. Bush told Robert Draper, reporting for a book called *Dead Certain*, that he intended after vacating the Oval Office to “replenish the ol’ coffers.” He said he could make “ridiculous” money on the lecture circuit.

“I don’t know what my dad gets, but it’s more than 50, 75” thousand dollars a speech, he said.

“Clinton’s making a lot of money,” he added.

As critics over the years have chided Bill Clinton and also his wife for the industriousness with which they have pursued opportunities to get paid a lot of money in this manner, Bush, too, has been doing exactly what he said he would be doing.

Since 2009, POLITICO has found, Bush has given at least 200 paid speeches and probably many more, typically pocketing \$100,000 to \$175,000 per appearance. The part-time work, which rarely requires more than an hour on stage, has earned him tens of millions of dollars.

Relative to the Clintons, though, he’s attracted considerably less attention, almost always doing his paid public speaking in private, in convention centers and hotel ballrooms, resorts and casinos, from Canada to Asia, from New York to Miami, from all over Texas to Las Vegas a bunch, playing his part in what has become a lucrative staple of the modern post-presidency.



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He has talked to the National Grocers Association and the National Association for Home Care and Hospice and the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. He’s talked to global wealth management firms and multinational energy companies. He has talked to motivational seminars and boat builders and something called the Work Truck Show. He has talked to the chambers of commerce in San Diego and Wichita.

“Evil is real,” he [said](#) at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas.

“Bowling is fun,” he [said](#) at a get-together for the Bowling Proprietors’ Association of America in Orlando.

“History will ultimately judge whether I made the right decisions or not,” he [said](#) at a gathering put on by the Advertising Specialty Institute in Dallas.

He [listed](#) for the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs in a talk at Tulsa’s Hyatt hotel the three best things his father ever gave him — “being raised in West Texas, no money and unconditional love” — and then got back into a motorcade of a couple SUVs and cop cars and flew home on a private plane.

“We paid his regular fee,” Lynne Sipiora told POLITICO. She’s the executive director of the Samaritan Inn, a homeless shelter in McKinney, Texas. “Which is \$100,000.”

The Washington Speakers Bureau, which [represents](#) Bush (and his [wife](#), and his [sister](#), and his [daughter](#)), says only that his fees “vary.” From what to what? Bureau co-founder Harry Rhoads Jr. didn’t return three messages left at his office. For a talk to the Western Riverside Council of Governments’ General Assembly, Bush [got \\$175,000](#), a sum that was cobbled together by private donors but was nonetheless public because the WRCOG is a consortium of public organizations. For a series of talks done under the tag “Revitalizing America,” Bush and Clinton appeared together, and Clinton [got \\$225,000](#). For a talk this spring in Las Vegas to the Republican Jewish Coalition, [one report](#) put Bush’s fee at \$250,000, although the RJC refused to confirm that. Bush’s staff at his office in Dallas and at his foundation and his library at Southern Methodist University say he gets paid nothing when he’s representing the library or the foundation and that none of what he makes when he does get paid goes anywhere other than his own bank account. They say they don’t comment on what that number might be.

Most of the folks on the hook are similarly mum.

“I signed a confidentiality agreement,” said Frances Atchison, the co-chair of the Distinguished Lecturer Series in Vero Beach, Florida.



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“We’re precluded by contract from sharing any of the particulars,” said Carol Walden, a spokesperson for FARE, a conference about the business of food at which Bush spoke.

Pat Fitzpatrick, the head of Plumstead Christian School in Plumsteadville, Pennsylvania, said he couldn’t discuss money — but he did say that Bush’s going rate went up “substantially” during the time the school was talking to him about coming and that he still “honored the older price tag with us.” That was three years ago.

There were other rules as well in the contract, said Dawn Shurmaitis, from the Advertising Specialty Institute: “We were not allowed to record it, so there is no recording, video or audio.”

Bush learned this from his father, who learned it from Ronald Reagan, whose Hollywood success was a natural antecedent. And if turning money into power into money is the game, Bill Clinton is the greatest of all time. But the first president who made no longer being president into a fat gig was Gerald Ford. He went out on the “mashed potato circuit,” according to Mark K. Updegrave, who wrote [Second Acts: Presidential Lives and Legacies After the White House](#), at first getting \$10,000 per talk, then \$20,000, then \$40,000. He got guff. He didn’t care. “I’m a private citizen now; it’s nobody’s business,” he [told](#) the *New York Times*. An aide of his explained that Ford always had been “a strong devotee of the free enterprise system.”

Harry Truman balked at the prospect of a post-presidential buck-rake.

“I have a very strong feeling about any man, who has the honor of being an occupant of the White House in the greatest job in the history of the world, who would exploit that situation in any way, shape or form,” he once [wrote](#).



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He even [used](#) fountain pens he paid for himself lest anybody think he was endorsing a particular brand.

Truman died the day after Christmas in 1972, not quite 17 years before Reagan, out of office for a mere nine or so months, [took \\$2 million](#) to give a few talks in Japan.

“The commodification of the post-presidency,” said Gleaves Whitney, the director of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Michigan’s Grand Valley State university.

“The post-presidential industrial complex at work,” said Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston.

George H.W. Bush was asked about the paid speaking circuit in 1989. “Everybody’s got to make a living,” he [said](#).

Bill Clinton was asked about it last month. “I gotta pay the bills,” he [said](#).

Potential conflicts of interest with the speeches and who’s paying for them exist for past presidents Bush(es) and Clinton in a way they didn’t and don’t for their fellow “formers.” They have relatives [running](#) or [about to finally officially run](#) for the same office. The families’ situations aren’t quite commensurate, though, because of Bill Clinton doing it at the same time his wife was Secretary of State and because of Hillary Clinton making paid speeches as well when she wasn’t a “former” but was a possible “future.” It’s one reason the Clintons more than the Bushes have [disclosed](#) their speaking schedules and compensation. Bush seems not to make as many foreign trips, either, preferring Texas and Mandalay Bay and the Golden Nugget in Vegas to the rest of the world.



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The second Bush president, as of May 2011, had given some 140 talks, for at least \$15 million, [based on an estimate from his office](#), according to the Center for Public Integrity. Since then? “I don’t have such a record of his speeches,” current spokesman Freddy Ford said. His non-paid speeches given under the auspices of his library and foundation are [logged](#) with transcripts at bushcenter.org. His paid speeches, though, are much harder to track, forcing interested parties to collect snippets from local media and company websites to paste together an invariably incomplete list.

From the first paid speech of his post-presidency, in March 2009 in Calgary, Alberta, and facilitated by a Canadian events management firm, he traveled to the Boao Forum for Asia in Boao, China, and the Economic Club of Southwestern Michigan, and the “Let Freedom Ring 2009” July 4 celebration at a rodeo facility in Woodward, Oklahoma, and the “GET MOTIVATED!” seminar in a basketball arena in San Antonio, Texas, where he told the sold-out crowd to “be confident” and that the Oval Office has “no corners to hide in.” He said that once he made a decision as president, according to scratchy bootlegged [video](#) shot by a rule-breaking YouTuber, he expected people to do what he wanted, “and if they don’t agree with you, it’s probably time for them to find another job.”

Other scraps from his talks have trickled out mainly in company press releases and blogs and [occasionally on Twitter](#).

In November 2011, at his talk to the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce, he joked with a crowd of 5,000 that it was a bummer having to stop at stoplights again after enjoying eight years of the benefits of a road-clearing motorcade. He also [told](#) them that “getting rid of Saddam Hussein was the right thing.”

In April 2012, at the annual meeting of the chain drug store organization in Palm Beach, Florida, he [said](#), “You

cannot lead without being optimistic.” The importance of a glass-half-full outlook is one of Bush’s favorite mashed potato circuit refrains.

In November 2012, he was at the Cayman Alternative Investment Summit at the Ritz-Carlton on Grand Cayman Island, the offshore tax haven. Who knows what he said? “We’ve got a complete blackout on discussing the Bush details,” a spokesman for the conference [said](#) at the time. Bush’s presence alone was enough to cause a dust-up. The presidential election was days away, and the location of the event was not a good look at a time when many considered Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee, an elitist multimillionaire.

He was at the University of Denver’s school of international studies in September 2013, and the National Retail Federation’s “Big Show” in New York City in January 2014, and at an ASI powwow in Dallas a month after that, when he sat on a stage with the company’s CEO and [winked](#) at him several times and [told](#) him to “have fun.” He [said](#) to the audience of 1,200 people that he had stopped smoking cigars and that he had taken up painting.



Getty

In June 2014, he was at the Bowling Proprietors’ Association of America event, at the Rosen Shingle Creek resort in Orlando, where he gave the sport his A-OK. He told the people he used to bowl at Camp David. Said Cathy DeSocio, the president of the organization, in a [statement](#) at the time: “President Bush is one of the most influential individuals of our time, and his presence at our annual meeting reflects the enduring popularity, impact and cultural relevance of bowling.”

In a recent phone conversation with POLITICO, DeSocio said, “He focused on how he made decisions and why he made the decisions he did. He was very politically correct in that he never once made one derogatory comment about the current administration.” She recalled that Laura Bush was in Orlando the same day, over at the Orange County Convention Center, giving a talk, too, at the annual conference of the Society for Human Resource Management. “There’s nothing more fulfilling than real work,” the former First Lady [said](#) to the gathering of HR professionals.

In February 2015, he was at the gala for the Texas homeless shelter, at the Intercontinental Hotel in Addison, outside Dallas. Sipiora, the executive director of the Samaritan Inn, called Bush’s fee of \$100,000 a “bargain.”

“We looked at many entertainers and political figures, and they were much higher,” she said. “Hillary Clinton was, like, \$250,000.

“We’re a homeless shelter, so it was a hefty fee for us, but we ended up netting over \$1 million,” said Sipiora, who identified herself as one of the few Democrats in her area. “It was not a very political conversation. I’m sure he’s answered the same questions a million times. But he was very popular and charming and pleasant.” She said Bush sent her a prompt thank you note in which he mentioned her father by name.

Four days after that, he was at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, where he said evil was real. Drayton McLane, a longtime backer of both Bushes and a big-time donor who has a net worth of [approximately \\$2 billion](#), covered the cost of the talk. He wouldn’t say how much. He’s been sponsoring Christian lectures at the school for the last decade and a half. “Generally I recruit somebody I’ve known,” McLane told POLITICO. “I had his father as a speaker, back in ’95 or ’96, and then I had his mother a couple years later.”

Two and a half weeks after the McLane talk, Bush traveled with his wife to Christ’s Church in Jacksonville, Florida, for an event [pitched](#) as “a fireside chat.” Tickets cost \$300. The backdrop on the stage on which they sat [appeared](#) to be a fireplace with no fire and two jumbo video screens showing images of bookshelves.

Last month, at SMU, Bush gave the commencement [speech](#).

He opened by saying the president of the university had called him and asked him if he “believed in free speech.”

“I said, ‘Yeah,’” he said.

“He said, ‘Perfect. Here’s your chance to give one.’”

People laughed and cheered.

He applauded the honors graduates. “And as I like to tell the ‘C’ students,” he said, “you, too, can be president.” More laughing. More cheering.

Matt Yurus contributed to this report.

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