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Having a Ball While Thanking All the President's Lawyers for a Job Well Done: [FINAL Edition]

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▣ Abstract (summary)

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Baker later explained that Baker Botts and the Bushes have had a long history. Then-Sen. Prescott Bush, Bush's father, was represented by Baker's father, and the former secretary of state had worked frequently for the former president. Baker Botts represented [George W. Bush]. when he bought an interest in the Texas Rangers baseball team.

▣ Full Text

The inauguration of George W. Bush brought the usual quadrennial pomp and parties, balls and receptions, galas and gatherings in honor of the new president and his family. But coming in the wake of this extraordinary, anomalous post-election battle, there was something equally unusual, perhaps a rarity in presidential inaugurations: Parties to honor the president's lawyers.

Never before have the commander-in-chief's counselors been feted quite as much as they were over the weekend.

The prime and leading example was the lavish affair Friday night thrown by Baker Botts, the law firm founded by James A. Baker III's ancestors, at the Ronald Reagan Building in downtown Washington. There was also the Patton Boggs bash yesterday given by Ben Ginsberg's firm in thanks to Bush's Florida attorneys, who were in town for the inaugural weekend. And Bush's most prominent Democratic attorney, trial lawyer Barry Richard, was the featured guest at an Inauguration Day party in the D.C. offices of his firm, Greenberg Traurig.

It is usually the law firms that are throwing the inaugural parties and inviting their clients for big bashes. This is a big tradition, particularly for those firms with offices that overlook Pennsylvania Avenue, giving their best clients spectacular views of the inaugural parade.

The Greenberg Traurig party, for example, offered clients a chance to meet their new superstar. (When Bush was being sworn in Saturday, Richard had been lured away to meet some clients on the firm's balcony overlooking the White House. When he stepped

back indoors, Richard said, "So he did get sworn in. My client is president.")

Officially, according to the Baker Botts invitation, the reception was in honor of President Bush (that's George Herbert Walker Bush, the 41st president) and his wife, Barbara Bush.

The real guests of honor, however, were not the former president and his wife. They were the lawyers, chief among them Baker, whose far-sighted lawyering probably salvaged the election victory and ensured Bush the presidency.

Just one glance across the cavernous room at the Reagan Building and Hearsay could tell that this was no routine inaugural party. The last time this group was together was a month earlier at a paper-cluttered legal war room in Tallahassee. And now here they were on a Friday night, those same Bush campaign lawyers made famous during the legal fight for the presidency in Florida. It was like old home week. They traded courtroom war stories and reminisced about what many consider the most extraordinary case of their legal careers.

There was the crew from Baker Botts: Kirk Van Tine, the field general from Washington who coordinated the "motions factory" and made sure that people were dispatched to the latest firefights ("I would call up and say, 'I need somebody in Okeechobee County right away,' " Van Tine recalled. "I didn't even know where Okeechobee County was!"); and Irv Terrell and Daryl Bristow, the experienced Houston trial lawyers who handled the three main trials and turned more heads than the celebrity journalists in the crowd.

Fred Bartlit and Phil Beck of Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott, both Republicans but hardly your typical political sycophants, flew in from Chicago for the inaugural festivities. (Beck joked that he'd not been invited to the Illinois inaugural ball because "they don't know who I am.")

Even one of the expert witnesses in the case made an appearance. It was when Beck was trading greetings with Bush attorney Richard and his wife, Allison Tant, of Holland & Knight, when a familiar face jockeyed to catch his attention. "Laurentius!", Beck said in surprise. "Ladies and gentleman, this is Dr. Laurentius Marais, my star witness." Marais, who has a PhD and is from a San Francisco consulting firm, was Bush's statistician in the contested-election suit tried before Leon County Circuit Judge N. Sanders Sauls.

The recount camp was represented by Covington & Burling's Bobby Burchfield, a veteran of ballot-chad evaluation from Miami to Tallahassee. Burchfield recalled that when the Bush campaign in Austin sent him to Dade County's canvassing board, "They were convinced this would be over in 48 hours. I said, 'Have you read the statute? This could go on until Jan. 20.' "

It might have gone that long if not for Bush's appeals platoon. The appellate soldiers, one of whom joked that he was newly born again to the cause of equal protection, also was in full force at the party: Ted Olson, the Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher attorney who did Bush's U.S. Supreme Court work and now might be rewarded with an appointment as the next solicitor general; Mike Carvin, the pugilistic and wise-cracking counselor ("We have receptions like this every Friday night at Cooper, Carvin & Rosenthal," he said as he snacked on a portabello mushroom and Vidalia onion quesadilla); and George Terwilliger, whose White & Case probably ranked second in terms of firms throwing bodies into the legal fray.

As the senior Bush made clear, this was a party for his son's attorneys and they were enjoying it. Here is how the elder Bush described his conversation with Baker about plans for the reception. "You know, he called me up the other week and said, 'We want to honor you with a little reception.' I thought he said [it would be] at the office."

But Bush saw it in reverse, a time to thank the attorneys who had help his son get over "those terrible 37 days" in Florida. "I don't want you to honor me," Bush said. "What I want to do is come over there and say to all of you guys, the women and men who went and helped George, and thank you, and so, fine, that would be great."

The little reception, however, wasn't quite at Baker Botts's small but growing office in Washington. It was in the towering Grand Atrium of the Regan Building, where giant screens presented a slide show of the Bush family, including what appeared to be a photo of a much younger Bush Sr. playing ping-pong with someone who appeared to be Elvis. A quintet played classical music as guests consumed grilled tequilla-marinated Atlantic salmon and smoked Texas beef empanadas.

It was little more than Bush expected.

"The next thing I get is an invitation, black tie, 18,000 people," Bush said, only exaggerating by a factor of five or so. "Unbelievable reception!"

Bush then made it clear that the main reason he came "to this modest reception," was to personally thank the "many lawyers from Baker Botts and across the country who went down there at their own expense and did a fantastic job of getting out the truth and

protecting, I'd say, the rights of all of the voters in Florida."

Baker later explained that Baker Botts and the Bushes have had a long history. Then-Sen. Prescott Bush, Bush's father, was represented by Baker's father, and the former secretary of state had worked frequently for the former president. Baker Botts represented George W. when he bought an interest in the Texas Rangers baseball team.

The last time Baker Botts held an inaugural bash was in 1989. The honoree then was George W. Bush. "In 1989, on the eve of his father's inauguration, George W. Bush -- No. 43," Baker said, to laughter, "was honored by Baker Botts and he said before the crowd that his first paying job had been at the Baker Botts mail room in Houston, Texas. We knew then that he might amount to something."

After the short comments from the stage, Bush chatted freely with lawyers and guests in the crowd. Some funny stories were shared. For example, some joked about how Bush, who underwent hip surgery during the post-election episode, would phone Baker several times a day from his hospital room where all he had to do was flip through channels on his television.

The irony of the entire evening was that some in the Bush family were thought to have been angry at Baker for how he managed the re-election campaign of the elder Bush, who lost to Bill Clinton in 1992.

Now, it seemed, Baker and his firm were not only back in the family, they were closer than ever. That's because perhaps no other president has owed his presidency more to his lawyers than George W. Bush.

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