

The Man Who Plays George W. Bush

Steve Bridges does the president better—and gets paid more—than the real Commander-In-Chief.



The face of George W. Bush, sliced into eleven salmon-pink fillets, is neatly arranged on a six-foot banquet table in the sunken living room of a suite at the Venetian Resort in Las Vegas. This sounds like a liberal fantasy but in fact it's a Republican one. The fillets are dusted with something that looks like coarse, blue- and red-tinted salt. Scissors, sponges, tongs, and other mysterious utensils complete this weird tableau. In a few minutes, makeup artist Mari Okumura will begin attaching the fillets, which are made out of latex, to the face of a comedian named Steve Bridges.

Over the last four years, Bridges has appeared on *The Tonight Show* more often than anyone not named Jay, Kevin, and maybe Gilbert, but if you saw him now, in his natural state, you wouldn't recognize him. For the record, he's approximately six feet tall, lanky, with fine, brown, thinning hair and light blue eyes. Dressed in a white v-neck T-shirt, jeans, and black ankle boots, and sporting a black corded necklace, the forty-two-year-old looks safely hip, like, say, a drummer in a Canadian rock band.

As he settles into a canvas director's chair in front of the presidential facial buffet, he picks at a plate of black beans and peppers and worries about the state of his voice, which is scratchy from a cold. Then, for the next two hours, he closes his eyes and goes into standby mode, not quite unconscious but definitely conserving energy, as Okumura transforms him into the most powerful man in the world.

On a table in the corner, there are color photos of the real President Bush for reference. Okumura moves quickly and surely, patting simulated cheeks and chin flesh onto Bridges' face with her fingers, tweezing a tiny nugget of adhesive from the nostril of his new nose. The flecks of blue and red on the facial prostheses are there to approximate the ruddiness and depth of real sixty-year-old skin. Once Okumura has secured all of the pieces to Bridges' face, she applies a topcoat of a more flesh-like color with an airbrush, then adds nuance and detail using several fine-bristled brushes and numerous shades of makeup and powder.

Upon completion, Steve Bridges is to George W. Bush what the canals in front of the Venetian are to the actual canals in Venice: The likeness is not exact, but it's a pretty spectacular simulation just the same. Because Bush's face is essentially piggybacking on Bridges' face, the resulting mug is a little oversized. And from some angles, Bridges has the plasticky,

oddly tinted look of an aging movie star who's had too much work done. But from across a room, or even closer, when Bridges assumes that familiar dusty drawl and starts cupping and pushing his hands in an effort to shepherd wayward thought fragments into something like a complete sentence, he does Bush as well as Bush does, maybe even better. The strong, crooked beak and untended eyebrows? That hardscrabble, are-you-shittin'-me squint? They're all there.

To complete the effect, Bridges changes into a crisp navy suit and fastens a tiny American flag pin to its lapel. He's ready for business. Tonight, that means entertaining fifteen hundred or so attendees at an open-bar reception sponsored by Cadillac, which is part of the International Limousine and Chauffered Transportation Show. When Bridges arrives outside the vast banquet room where the reception is taking place, a half-dozen Cadillac executives crowd around him, eager to shake his hand and snap photos.

In the real world, far beyond the glow of the Strip, morgues in Iraq are overflowing as the sectarian violence there escalates. Here at home, the Dubai ports deal has prompted bipartisan outrage. Republican officials are distancing themselves from their leader and Bush's approval rating has hit an all-time low. But at the Venetian, his facsimile is the most popular man in the building.

"Is it OK if I put this Cadillac pin on you?" asks one pompadoured bigwig. When Bridges gives his assent, the man attaches the pin to Bridges' lapel with great care and deference, just below the American flag pin.

"Can we get a photo of you all together?" asks a photographer for a trade publication.

There's a moment of indecision about how best to set up this shot; then Bridges gets presidential. "How about right here?" he says, pointing to the wall, and the executives nod vigorously, like it's the smartest thing anyone's ever said.

A few minutes later, when Bridges enters the banquet room to the strains of "Hail to the Chief," the leading lights of the international limousine and chauffeured transportation industry stand as one and cheer like fat ladies at an Il Divo concert.

Bridges smiles and waves as he strides across the stage. "First I want to thank you for having me," he exclaims after settling himself behind the podium. "And third, I want to apologize for forgetting my second point."

He goes on to thank Cadillac for pimping his ride, and the crowd roars. One guy whips out his cell phone, punches in a number, and proceeds to repeat every line Bridges utters to the person on the other end of the call. Unlike the real Laura Bush, who stole the show at last year's White House Correspondents' Dinner with her same-sex horse-milking joke, Bridges works clean. Telling G-rated jokes to a couple thousand drunken car salesmen and limo drivers on holiday in Sin City may sound like a recipe for disaster, but Bridges maintains complete command of the room. "I'm a uniter, not a divider," he asserts, bear-hugging each syllable with folksy evangelical fervor, then cuing up his punchline with a pause and trademark Dubya head-bob. "Seriously, I can't divide."

Many of Bridges' jokes satirize Bush in this fashion, but no one would mistake him for Dick Cheney on a quail-hunting expedition. Instead he aims very, very carefully. Domestic spying? Outing CIA agents? The heckuva job Brownie did in the wake of Hurricane Katrina? Jon Stewart and his late-night colleagues have been gorging on such fare for months, but Bridges doesn't even take a nibble. Instead, his act is more homage than critique, a tribute to Bush as the charismatic dunce who's cagier than he seems. When Bridges finishes at the Venetian, dozens of people surge forward to meet him.

Meanwhile, in the nation's capital, the handlers for the real commander in chief are planning a new strategy to improve his image: a series of April roadshows that will present the president in a looser, more playful manner. The Washington Post will eventually dub this the "let-Bush-be-Bush strategy." Apparently the president is determined to give Steve Bridges a run for his money.

In the midst of his 1999 campaign run, the man who was once a Yale cheerleader scuffed up and spit-polished his Texas twang. Shortly before he was elected, he bought a sixteen-hundred-acre pig farm in Crawford, Texas, and transformed it into an old family homestead, complete with a man-made lake stocked with largemouth bass cross-bred so that they're easy to catch. When Bush became president, a private think tank, the White House Office of Strategic Initiatives, was established to tell him what to think. Five speechwriters were hired to tell him what to say. Sometimes accused of being

fed lines through an earpiece when speaking in public, he is most engaging during carefully choreographed pieces of reality TV: landing jets on aircraft carriers, liberating designer turkeys from Iraq, fielding canned questions at invitation-only town hall meetings that have been carefully cast, scripted, and rehearsed. To play the president of the United States, George W. Bush is paid \$400,000 each year.

To play George W. Bush, Steve Bridges earns substantially more. His fee for a private appearance like the one at the Venetian is \$18,500. Bridges only pockets a portion of that—his manager, his makeup people, and booking agencies get a cut as well—but he averages around ten to fifteen engagements a month. In addition, *The Tonight Show* provides a weekly check to keep him on exclusive retainer.

There are other surrogate Bushes who've been at it longer than Bridges has, but none who've been quite so successful. However, were it not for a chance encounter with a talent manager named Randy Nolen, this probably wouldn't be the case. Just as it now takes an army of advisors, consultants, work wives, counselors, media directors, and spokesmen to make a president, these days it takes more than one man to make a successful presidential impersonator. Randy Nolen is essential to the operation—he is Steve Bridges' Karl Rove, the man with the plan to turn a promising, but incomplete performer into the top man in his profession.

Like Rove, Nolen is a fifty-five-year-old former whiz kid who never finished college. He wears wire-rim glasses, he's graying at the temples and receding on top. Officially, he's Bridges' manager, but he likes to think of himself as more of a collaborator, a developer of talent, just as Rove does. Both men are energetic and focused, but unlike the pasty Rove, Nolen is tanned and tranquil, with a ready smile. And while Rove has a reputation for being ruthless, sneaky, cynical, and vindictive, the mastermind of whisper campaigns and dirty tricks, Nolen is quite candid. Even worse, he's nice. In theory, at least, that quality is a huge liability in his profession, but he seems to have overcome whatever obstacles it's presented.

Nolen got his start in the entertainment business in 1972 when, at the age of twenty, he turned his father's struggling restaurant in Madison, Wisconsin, into a successful rock 'n' roll nightclub. In the late 1980s, Nolen established his own talent agency, representing around twenty performers—jugglers, ventriloquists, comics, and singers—most of whom worked in the under-the-radar but increasingly lucrative niche serving meetings, conventions, and other private engagements.

In 1992, Nolen took on a real-estate professional named Tim Watters. Watters couldn't juggle or sing, but he did bear a striking resemblance to Bill Clinton. While Nolen was initially skeptical about working with a celebrity impersonator—"Look-alikes get booked at the county fair for \$750," he explained—he changed his mind after Watters displayed a knack for comedy. "A lot of look-alikes smile and wave at corporate receptions and that's it," Nolen said.

Though he had no interest in managing three-dimensional wallpaper, Nolen felt Watters had the potential to do more than that. To help Watters develop his performance skills, Nolen enlisted a comic named T.P. Mulrooney for a crash course in the craft of stand-up. Like the real Clinton, Watters was a quick study. He could sell a line, charm an audience, and conjure the spirit of the man from Hope, Arkansas. Reportedly, he even once prompted a double take from Hillary. In 1996, his best year, Watters played 177 private shows, grossed more than one million dollars, and landed a role in the movie *Contact*.

Then came Matt Drudge and his Code Red buzzkill. In the public sector, Monica's stained dress turned Clinton into the star of every late-night monologue for the next two years, but in the meetings-and-events realm, where any act more controversial than the average Successories poster is considered taboo, it was a problem. "In 1998, Tim's gigs dropped to around six a month," said Nolen. "That's still very good for a performer in the private sector, but it was nothing like it was."

But it wasn't just Monica who was holding Watters back, Nolen believed. Over time, the former real-estate agent had developed, in Nolen's opinion, a solid twenty minutes of material. Unfortunately, his act lasted thirty. "I was always trying to get him to hire writers, but he didn't want to invest money in that," said Nolen. Instead, Watters insisted on writing most of his material himself. "He was good, but I felt the act could go further."

Still, Watters showed Nolen that presidential impersonators were a perfect fit for the private market. There, audiences didn't necessarily share the same taste in entertainment; they just happened to be at the same event. The president was a

figure everyone recognized, one of the last true superstars. But who best to play the part? Saturday Night Live didn't rely on accidents of physiognomy when casting presidential impersonators, and Nolen began to think that he needn't do so either. The factor that had traditionally defined value for look-alikes—their striking resemblance to a famous person—wasn't really that important. What mattered, Nolen decided, was stage presence. Everything else could be outsourced. A prosthetic makeup artist could perfect the look. A writer could produce the jokes.

Nolen had begun to think like Karl Rove. As detailed in the book *Bush's Brain*, when Rove first identified George W. Bush as a potential political candidate, Bush knew more about major-league baseball statistics than he did about public-school budgets. He cared more about major-league-baseball statistics than he did about public-school budgets. But he was also engaging, he had family connections, he knew all the right potential donors, and he had stage presence. Everything else could be outsourced.

In 2001, shortly after September 11, Nolen found his Bush. "I was calling a booking agency on behalf of one of my clients," he said. "When I was put on hold, I heard Steve doing his impressions. He really had Bush down, I thought, so I wanted to find out more about him."

At the time, Bridges was thirty-seven years old. He was living, it turns out, a life that was in some ways the opposite of the president's. As a young man, he'd been full of serious purpose. The son of a Baptist minister, he had plans to follow in his father's footsteps, first earning an undergraduate degree in theology, then a master's in education while working as a part-time youth minister in Fullerton, California. As he grew older, however, he realized that what he really wanted to do in life was fool around. "During that last year at the church I was doing more and more comedy," he said. "I asked people what they thought and they all said, 'You gotta go for it. Your impersonations are good.' "

For the next decade, Bridges worked steadily, mostly in the private sector where his clean brand of comedy was in higher demand than it was in the clubs. But it was a tough way to make a living. Sometimes he took day jobs to make ends meet—working the counter at a deli, mowing lawns. When Nolen contacted him, he was renting a room in someone else's apartment. "Like most comics, I'd been looking for some kind of a break," he said. Suddenly, someone was telling him he could book fifteen gigs a month, appear on *The Tonight Show*, land roles in movies. All he'd have to do was learn to delegate.

"The more I thought of putting together a forty-five-minute show that was just one character, the more I was like, 'Yes, let's hire writers,'" said Bridges. First, however, came the face: In contemporary politics, appearance always trumps content. To create Bridges' new look, Nolen hired prosthetic makeup artist Kevin Haney, a movie-industry veteran who's won an Oscar for his work on *Driving Miss Daisy*, turned the elfin Martin Short into porky talk-show host Jiminy Glick, and, in the early 1980s, worked on the low-budget horror favorite, *Basket Case*.

But as hard as it may have been to design a tiny, murderous Siamese twin monster who lives in a basket, simulating the face of someone as instantly recognizable as George W. Bush presented a unique challenge. If Haney didn't nail the resemblance, the world would easily see it: Bush was simply too well-known to get it wrong. The development process took three months. The result of those initial efforts was a latex mask that looked like Dubya's face on the outside, while snugly conforming to Bridges' face on the inside.

If the Supreme Court had ruled in favor of Al Gore in 2000, a single-piece mask may have been sufficient. But it didn't offer enough flexibility needed to play a president whose face actually moves. So Haney deconstructed the mask into eleven smaller pieces. This gives Bridges the opportunity to wink, smirk, squint, glower, waggle his eyebrows, and generally contort his faux features in whatever way an occasion demands, just like Bush does.

Once they'd perfected the look, Nolen hired a group of writers, led by comedian Evan Davis, to help Bridges approximate Bush's unique brand of lexical alchemy. "Basically, it ends up costing us around a thousand dollars for a minute of new material," Nolen says. So far, he's invested more than \$150,000 in the writing alone. Here, Bush has him beat—the highest-paid White House speech-writer earns \$161,000 annually, and throughout his reign, Bush has always employed at least three speechwriters and sometimes as many as five.

But Nolen has arguably gotten a better return on his investment. Bridges debuted as Bush in early April, 2002, first at a

series of local and state election wrap-up parties in Illinois, then at several showcases for private-event bookers around the country. By the end of the month, Judy Woodruff was interviewing Bridges on the street in front of the White House for a segment that appeared on CNN's Inside Politics. That summer, he made his Tonight Show debut, and in the fall, he started playing private engagements for a ten-thousand-dollar fee. This figure soon rose to \$18,500, and in the fall of 2004, when Bridges was in peak demand due to the presidential race, it hit twenty-five thousand dollars.

Nolen and Bridges have talked about releasing a DVD, and sometimes, especially when he's working out new material, Bridges plays a comedy club in the Los Angeles area as Bush. Except for his appearances on The Tonight Show, however, he mostly stays out of the public realm of entertainment; corporate shows and other private events are his bread and butter. "I think if he did public shows or a college tour, people would yell things, try to disrupt him," says Nolen. "He doesn't need anyone throwing pies at him, or anything like that."

To this end, even President Bush himself has weighed in. In February 2003, just a few weeks before the invasion of Iraq, Nolen and Bridges received an invitation to the Oval Office. "It was surreal," says Bridges. "We were giddy as schoolchildren." Bush said he appreciated the humorous-but-polite tone of Bridges' portrayal, and even invited him to do some fishing in Crawford. "He also gave us some advice," said Nolen. "He said we should be careful about how we use this, because in the wrong hands, there was a chance it could be used against the best interests of Americans."

So far, however, in the insular, relatively controlled realm of private entertainment, Bridges has only been a force for unity. When Norman Lear hired him to play a birthday party for his former production partner, he had a roomful of

Hollywood liberals in hysterics. "Dustin Hoffman was doubled over laughing the whole time," said Nolen. At a book-signing event that Jerry Seinfeld organized, Eliot Spitzer, attorney general of New York and a front-running Democrat in this year's race for governor, loved Bridges' routine.

"I remember one lady who told me to go F- myself, but that hardly ever happens," Bridges said. "Usually, it's the other way around. People are speechless. They're stuttering. They know I'm not the real president, but they love him so much they just can't stop hugging me. I've even had a few women grab my butt."

One person who has yet to succumb to Bridges' charm, however, is fellow fake president Martin Sheen. Last year, Bridges was asked to appear at a charity benefit in Beverly Hills. "The people who were organizing it were trying to get Martin Sheen to come out and make an appearance with Steve," Evan Davis recalled. "They were asking me if I could write some lines that Sheen could say about Steve's impression of the president. But then they called back and said, 'Martin Sheen will not be seen on the same stage with someone who even looks like Bush.' "

Team Bridges is a bipartisan affair. Nolen and Bridges are conservatives; Evan Davis and many of the other writers are liberals. Ultimately, however, they insist that Bridges' act is nothing more than entertainment. "For me this is not about politics at all—this is comedy," Bridges insisted. "Our goal is to keep the act non-partisan and fun," echoed Davis. "I deal in character and relationships. That's where the humor comes from."

For some liberals, however, a simulation as accurate as Bridges' is too compelling to deploy in such gentle fashion; it's like using a sixteen-wheeler as a grocery cart. "We've received a few calls from Democratic candidates to basically bash President Bush," Nolen said. "I got a request for Steve to read a script as part of a classroom project for young kids. The whole thing is anti-Bush—we're not even going to respond to it. We're not any sort of political arm of the president, but we want what we do to be respectful."

Sometimes, Nolen said, they wonder if they cross that line, but they really shouldn't worry: Bridges is the best ambassador the president has. Indeed, during the photo op that followed Bridges' performance at the Venetian, a woman made a telling remark. "We hope you take over for the guy who's in there now," she exclaimed, clearly fed up with the genuine article but nonetheless smitten with his latex doppelganger.

That's because Bridges isn't playing Bush circa 2006. Instead, he's playing an earlier, more appealing Bush, a Bush unsullied by history. His Bush is the cocksure charmer who doesn't take himself too seriously. The middle-aged corporate slacker who cluster-bombed sentences into verbal rubble but would be hard pressed to find Iraq on a globe.