

## How Miami made Jeb Bush



Jeb Bush tries on a Cuban hat given to him by Pedro Garcia just before going through some Hialeah neighborhoods to canvas votes for his dad George Bush on Oct. 25, 1992. | **JON KRAL** - MIAMI HERALD FILE

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI

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Florida Gov. Jeb Bush stood inside the emergency operations center in Tallahassee in September 2004 when his transportation chief delivered the devastating news: The I-10 bridge east of Pensacola had crumbled into Escambia Bay, washed out by Hurricane Ivan.

Bush leaned over to the transportation chief, a Cuban-born engineer from Miami, and said the first thing that came to mind: "*Qué cagazón.*" What a sh--storm.

It was quintessential Cuban slang from a man who, nearly a quarter-century earlier, had arrived in Miami to strike it big in business and politics. But as much as Miami — and its Cuban-American culture — left its indelible mark on Bush, he, too, left his imprint on Miami: He transcended two cultures — one American, one Hispanic — and became an honorary Cuban American.

Jeb Bush, 62, will announce his Republican presidential campaign Monday at Miami Dade College's campus in Kendall, one of the many hearts of Cuban Miami, and introduce himself as a successful entrepreneur and politician in his own right to a country that knows him as the son and brother of two former presidents.

There is no argument that Bush got a leg up in Miami thanks to his family connections. But he is a product of the city just as much as he is of being a Bush.

In a 2016 Republican field that includes two Cuban Americans by blood — Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio — Bush is the only one who speaks Spanish at home. He referred to his Mexican-born wife, Columba, in a Mother's Day video last month as *Abue*, or Granny.

"He's practically Cuban, just taller," a young Cuban-American Republican state lawmaker said of Bush in 2002. "He speaks Spanish better than some of us."

The lawmaker's name? Marco Rubio.

Yet John Ellis Bush's assimilation into Cuban-exile culture goes beyond matters of language and style. It shapes his view of the world, with its sharp distinctions between good guys and bad ones, and helps explain his campaign pitch that people are meant to "rise up" — a message engrained in the aspirations of Miami immigrants and their progeny.

"We're a product in many cases of the political instability of many countries," said Jorge Arrizurieta, a decades-long Bush friend. "A lot of his closest friends are that way."

For Bush's Cuban-American loyalists, it's no betrayal to back Bush over Rubio, his one-time protégé.

"Jeb is Cuban. He's Nicaraguan. He's Venezuelan," said U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, one of three Cuban-American Republicans from Miami in Congress, all of whom have endorsed Bush. "The stamp of South Florida is in his DNA."

## An 'aspirational' city

Miami completed Bush's assimilation into Hispanic culture, but he arrived already as a Latino-in-waiting.

The Texas-born Bush moved to Miami fresh off his father's presidential race in 1980, when Jeb campaigned in Florida and Puerto Rico. Before that, Bush and his young family had spent two years in Caracas, Venezuela, where he worked for Texas Commerce Bank. He had majored in Latin American studies at the University of Texas to be closer to Columba Garnica Gallo, the woman he met on a trip to León, Mexico, in 1971 as a high-school student.

Miami, where Columba's sister and mother lived, was a city on edge in 1981, staggering through race riots and cocaine wars and grappling to absorb tens of thousands of Cubans — among them serious criminals — who had come ashore in the Mariel boatlift. Yet for a young man with a nascent political ambition looking to make it on his own, the city hummed with opportunity and a flourishing Latin culture.

At age 29, Bush, his wife and their two children, George P. and Noelle — they would later have a third, Jeb Jr. — settled in what was then East Perrine, now Palmetto Bay. Developer Armando Codina, a Cuban American who had been George H.W. Bush's local campaign coordinator, offered him a job as executive vice president of IntrAmerica, a real-estate investment firm.

In a city of dreamers and scoundrels, Codina and Bush's deals didn't always turn out as planned. One particularly egregious case involved notorious Cuban-American healthcare executive Miguel Recarey, who got Bush to intervene on his behalf to maintain his Medicare funding from the federal government. Recarey was later indicted on bribery charges and fled the country, remaining a fugitive to this day.

"At the time, I didn't feel like I was dealing with a crook," Bush said in 1994. He was never accused of wrongdoing.

Bush's association with Codina made him a wealthy man. His \$41,000 starting salary in 1981 had climbed to \$186,000 five years later. His income topped \$1 million by 1992, and his net worth was \$2.3 million two years later, when he first ran for governor.

The Bush campaign declined a request to interview the candidate. Asked about his formative years in Miami, he told reporters earlier this month that he and his wife have “loved it here.”

“It’s a place that is dynamic, aspirational. It looks like the future of the United States,” Bush said. “I’ll live here the rest of my life.”

## Growing the GOP

As he made his name in business, the young Bush couldn’t resist the lure of politics. By 1982, a year after his arrival, he was cutting a radio campaign ad aimed at Hispanics – especially Cubans, given their fledgling clout.

“This is Jeb Bush speaking,” he said in fluent Spanish. “Our President Reagan and my father, Vice President Bush... consider Cubans citizens of this country.... Our Republican Party wants you to join us. Register Republican.”

By 1983, Bush had been elected to the local GOP executive committee. By 1984, he was running for chairman.

“There were some in the Republican Party, believe it or not, who believed a Cuban should be chairman, and they didn’t want him,” said Tony Cotarelo, whom Bush would later hire as executive director. Bush’s opponent made an outlandish claim that Cuban President Fidel Castro would benefit from Bush’s election.

(Years later, Bush really would land on Castro’s radar. In 1991, Castro’s vice president blamed Bush for poisoning the relationship between Havana and Washington. And in 2005, Castro himself bad-mouthed Jeb – then significantly heavier than he is now – as “the fat little brother in Florida” of then-President George W. Bush. Jeb declared himself honored to be singled out as a villain.)

Bush won the GOP chairmanship and worked to grow the party in what was then a Democratic bastion. “We’ve got to make this party not a party of Cubans or of Anglos,” he said at the time, promising to unite the GOP’s warring factions.

He seized on Cuban Americans’ love of Reagan, a vowed anti-Communist, to bring more of them into the party – a strategic move that helped his father when he ran for president again in 1988 and won.

Bush embarked on a campaign to get Democratic voters to switch their registrations to Republican, at one point delivering 2,000 “switch cards” to the elections office himself. Two high-profile Cuban Americans, who changed over during Bush’s tenure, are now among his biggest supporters: U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart and his brother, former Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart.

“He was really the godfather of the growth of the Republican Party in South Florida,” said Ros-Lehtinen, who at the time was one of only a few Miami GOP state lawmakers.

Taking advantage of new single-member districts, which made it easier to elect conservatives, Bush targeted six Miami-area seats held by Democrats. He put together a candidate slate for the November 1984 election, set up a phone bank and reduced Democrats’ registration edge over Republicans to 2-to-1 from 3-to-1.

On Election Day, Republicans ousted three Democrats and won a fourth seat, doubling their representation in Tallahassee. Bush’s star began to rise.

## Ambassador for exiles

In 1986, new Republican Gov. Bob Martinez appointed Bush commerce secretary. Bush lasted two years on the job, returning to Miami to help his father secure the presidential nomination.

The father needed his son: Cubans had never felt the same enthusiasm for the elder Bush as they did for Reagan. Jeb took to Spanish-language radio to reassure them: No, his father wouldn't normalize relations with Cuba. It was Democrat Michael Dukakis who might do so, Jeb warned at the 1988 Republican National Convention.

With dad in office, Bush became an ambassador for Miami's exiles — Cubans and Nicaraguans alike — who leaned on him even more than they already had for access to the White House. Bush delivered.

In 1989, Bush paid a visit to the son of detained Cuban extremist Orlando Bosch, William Bosch, who had staged a hunger strike demanding attention from the president. Jeb's "humanitarian" meeting was seen as a sign of support that made it more difficult for President Bush to deport Bosch, who was eventually released from prison.

In 1991, Jeb pushed his father to back a U.N. resolution cracking down on human-rights violations in Cuba. That came on the heels of helping dissuade U.S. authorities from denying political asylum claims and deporting Nicaraguan refugees en masse.

(That same year, Bush's maid, who had a work permit, was deported to Honduras after her asylum claim was denied. Immigration agents picked her up from his home; Bush had paid her federal income and Social Security taxes as required by law.)

After losing his first gubernatorial bid in 1994, Bush remained faithful to the Cuban community.

His devotion may have been one of convenience — no Miami-Dade Republican could get elected without Cuban-American support — but by then Bush had adopted exiles' cause as his own.

Cotarelo recalled that Bush attended a memorial service at the Orange Bowl in 1996 for the four Cuban Americans who died when two Brothers to the Rescue planes were shot down by Cuban jets over the Florida Straits. Bush went alone, like any other Miamian.

"People started recognizing who he was, but he was just there to manifest his support for the Cuban cause," said Cotarelo, who later told Bush he should have told organizers he was coming. "They would have had him speak! But he didn't want to."

### 'First Cuban-American governor'

Bush was elected in 1998 and re-elected in 2002 with strong support from Hispanic voters, a sign of their appreciation for his commitment to their community. He would eventually be christened by U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez as Florida's "first Cuban-American governor."

In Tallahassee, Bush criticized his brother — the president — for returning 12 suspected boat hijackers back to Cuba as part of a deal with the Castro government. He signed legislation banning public universities' travel to Cuba, the only law of its kind in the nation.

It wasn't all serious. Bush, who had a Cuban espresso maker in his office, also liked to banter with the few people in the Capitol who spoke Spanish. He often spoke Spanish with a Cuban accent, though sometimes it sounds more neutral.

"I'm walking by and I see him and I say, 'Hey, governor, how are you?'" said Jesse Manzano-Plaza, a former Bush staffer. "And he would say, '*Jodido pero contento*, Jesse.'" Screwed but happy.

Among those in Bush's Cuban posse was the transportation secretary who informed Bush about the downed bridge during Hurricane Ivan — José Abreu, a self-described "Jeb-ublican."

As a joke about lawmakers' pet projects, Abreu had a stamp made especially for Bush. It read "*GUISO!*" a Cuban colloquialism (its literal translation is "corn stew") about getting rid of something — in this case, so-called budget turkeys.

"It's a Cuban veto stamp!" Abreu told Bush when he presented him with the gift. "And he, oh my God, he got this thing and he stamped every page."

On Monday afternoon, the former governor will share his personal story with the country — something he has at times struggled with since he began gearing up for a campaign in December. Central to that story will be Miami, which has embraced him through it all.

Last month, after his toughest week so far in which he repeatedly fumbled answers on his brother's 2003 decision to invade Iraq, Bush found solace in the tiny Latino enclave of Sweetwater, at a low-dollar fund-raiser that felt more like a big Hispanic family party. A live band played salsa standards. Cuban pastries and sandwiches, *pastelitos* and *bocaditos*, covered the refreshments table. Bush donned a white *guayabera*.

Flanked by his wife and youngest son, he warmly thanked "*la vieja guardia*" — the old guard — for showing up. When he stepped off stage, the sweaty crowd engulfed him, clamoring for autographs and selfies.

The honorary Cuban American was home.

Alex Leary of the Tampa Bay Times contributed to this report.

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