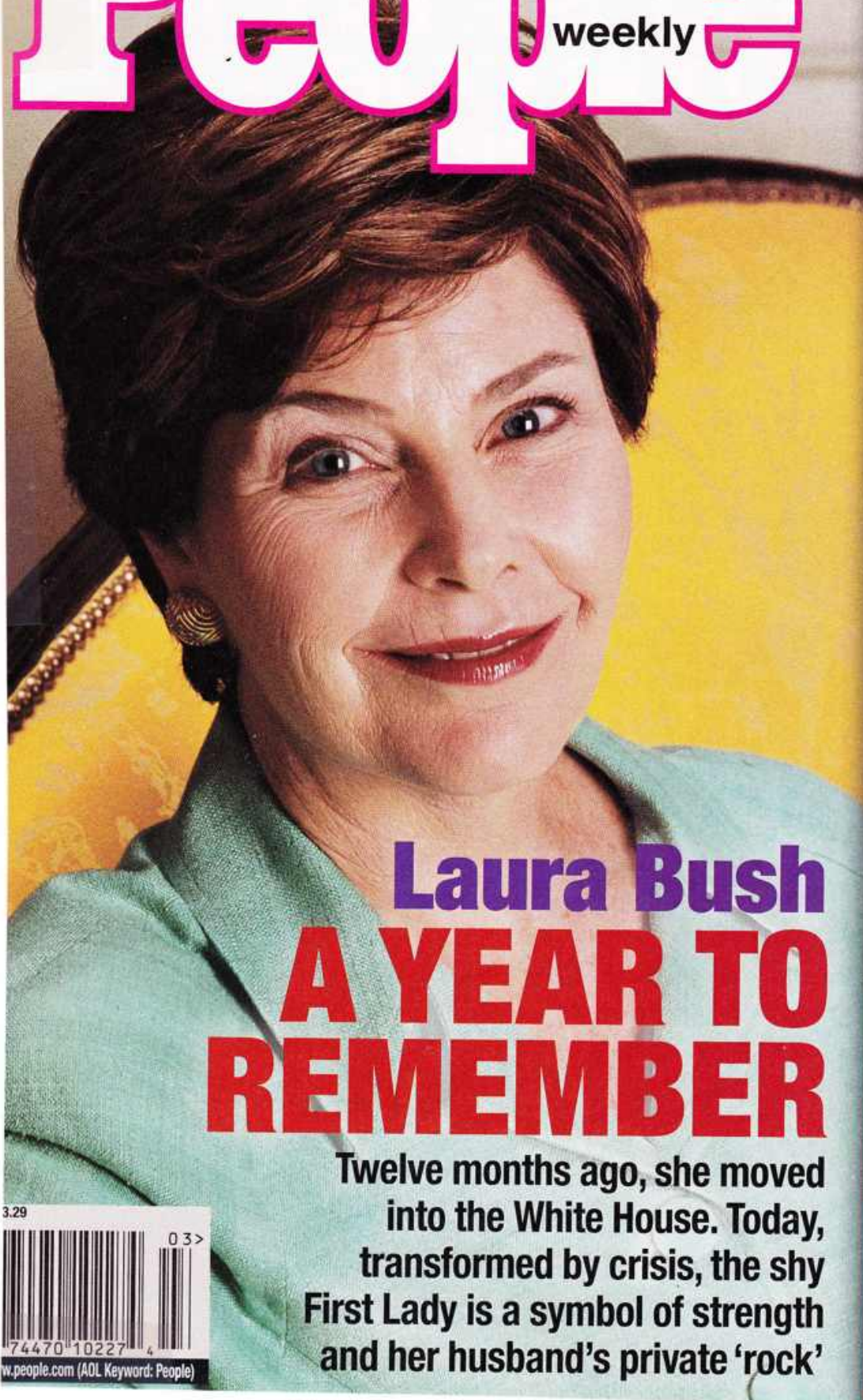


JANUARY 21, 2002

People

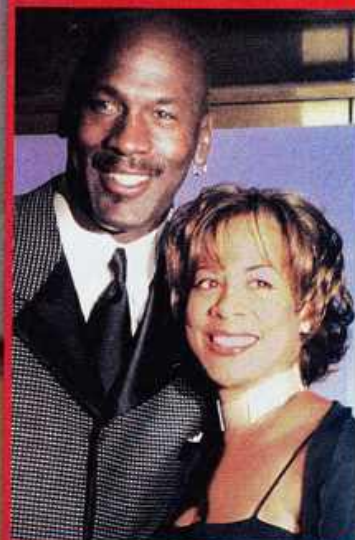
weekly



Laura Bush A YEAR TO REMEMBER

Twelve months ago, she moved into the White House. Today, transformed by crisis, the shy First Lady is a symbol of strength and her husband's private 'rock'

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At the Nov. 28 Rockefeller Center tree lighting, the First Lady (with Al Roker) proclaimed, "America loves New York."

DEAN VAN TINE/CONCH FEATURES

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

When she became First Lady, Laura Bush wanted a low profile. Instead she's displaying courage and strength to a nation at war



Bush (with Afghan exiles on Nov. 27) said she wants people "to pay attention" to the plight of women in Afghanistan.

STEPHEN JAFFAR



On Sept. 12 Bush visited Pentagon victim Lt. Col. Marion Ward (with wife Gabrielle) at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

COURTESY WARD FAMILY

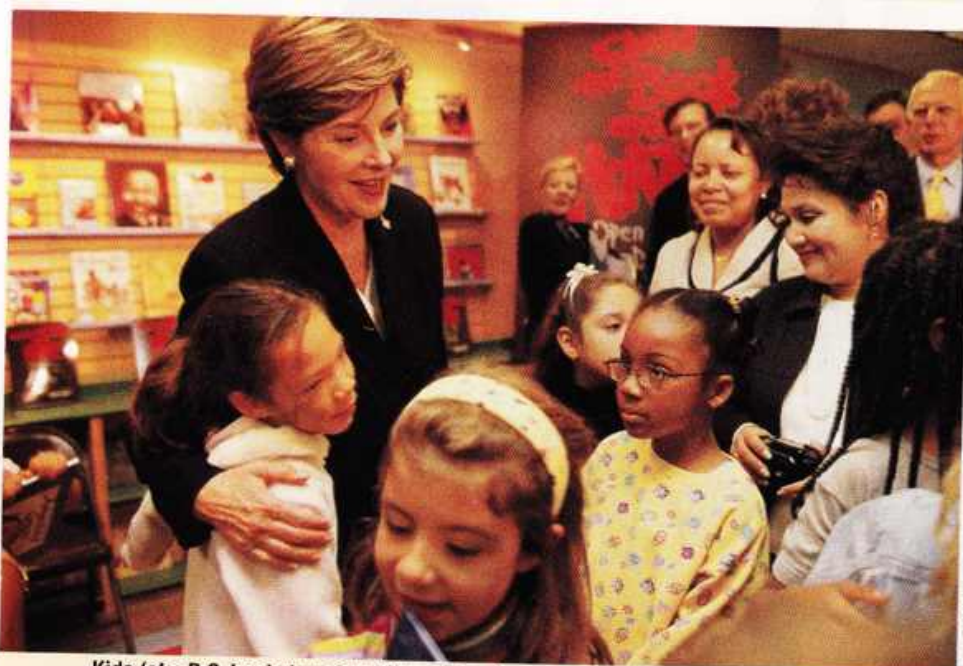
Like so many couples, they turned for comfort to tradition and family. On Christmas Eve they served tortillas and tamales—standard holiday fare in Laura Bush's family for years. The next day, Mrs. Bush and the President were joined by more than 20 members of the extended clan for a feast and bowling at Camp David. Then, on Dec. 26, the First Family traveled to their ranch in Crawford, Texas, where they took long walks, caught up on their reading and hosted a New Year's Eve dinner party for a half dozen of their closest friends. They were, in a sense, setting the example they urged the nation to follow: They had found a way to carry on.

Yet there is still ample evidence that life for them—and the nation—has undergone a profound change. Back in Washington, D.C., Secret Service snipers now occupy the roof of their White House home and bomb-sniffing dogs patrol its grounds. And as an added security precaution not seen since the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the popular White House tours have been discontinued for the foreseeable future. As the First Lady recently told a group of reporters, "It's lonely and sort of quiet in there."

Just a year ago, when her husband took office after the most controversial election in U.S. history, this woman who treasures her privacy was looking forward to keeping a comfortably low profile. In fact, in her first few months, she kept largely out of the public eye, decorating the house on the family's 1,583-acre ranch, unwinding with longtime girlfriends at the White House and promoting her pet project of raising the literacy level of the nation's children. But virtually from the moment that the first hijacked plane crashed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 55-year-old Laura Bush of Midland, Texas, only child, former school librarian and teacher, homemaker and devoted mother, faced a historic task: She has been asked to



The Bushes were joined by Laura's in-laws, Barbara and former President George Bush, at a memorial at the Washington National Cathedral three days after the attacks.



Kids (at a D.C. bookstore Oct. 11) are "captured by her spirit," says one of Laura's pals.

help comfort a nation that has suffered its most lethal and emotionally devastating attack ever, as well as preside over the White House during a worldwide war on terrorism that threatens to last for years. And in the midst of it all, she must provide a source of strength to the man at the helm. "Since Sept. 11 I've had the opportunity, or maybe I should say the responsibility, to be steady for our country—and for my husband," she acknowledged softly on *Larry King Live*.

Indeed, friends say that she and the President have come to rely on each other as never before. "George Bush depends on Laura for friendship, calmness, security and sustenance, and that private dynamic is so much more important than what she does publicly," says an acquaintance, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. "It's got to be enormously stressful sending young men and women to fight this complicated war, and only those who know them up close understand how he draws



Arriving at the Bush ranch Nov. 14, Lyudmila Putin (with husband Russian President Vladimir Putin) presented their Texas hostess with a yellow rose.

strength from her." Adds Kati Marton, author of *Hidden Power: Presidential Marriages that Shaped Our Recent History*: "No man needs a partner more than a President in a time of crisis. And for George Bush, Laura is his rock."

Her transformation began on a bright September morning when she was scheduled to make her speaking debut before Congress to discuss early childhood learning before Ted Kennedy's Senate education committee. Instead, as news of the disasters in New York City and at the Pentagon came crackling over a security radio, she found herself being swept from the Hill to an undisclosed location by a detail of Secret Service agents. In her public duties since, Laura has proved a calming, self-possessed presence at memorials, vigils and the WTC site itself, where she feels there should be a lasting memorial erected. "She told us that the toughest part was when they went to the hospital," says a Texas friend, re-



WIN MOHAMED/REUTERS



JASON COHEN/REUTERS

Laura (at Indian Lake, Pa., with then-Gov. Tom Ridge) honored those lost on United Flight 93.



OFFICIAL BUSH/WHITE HOUSE PRODUCTIONS

She and her husband talk issues "a little bit, but ... not that much," Laura told Oprah on Sept. 18.

ferring to the First Couple's visit to the burn unit of the Washington Hospital Center to comfort victims of the Pentagon attack. "It made her so sad seeing those guys wrapped up like mummies, trying to salute the Commander in Chief."

At other times, when simple grace under pressure is called for, she has provided that too. At a Dec. 3 White House Christmas party for 1,100 congressional members and their fami-

lies, Laura, in a red strapless gown, descended a spiral staircase and entered the East Room with her husband to the strains of "Hail to the Chief." She looked at him adoringly as they box-stepped around the dance floor to "Please Come Home for Christmas" and then smiled her way through 2½ hours of posing for pictures with every legislator and family member. At the end of what would have been a grueling event for even a

veteran campaigner, "she looked just as fresh as when she stepped into the ballroom," says James Cruz, leader of Rotel & the Hot Tomatoes, one of the Bushes' favorite Austin bands, which provided the night's music. "Eyes still twinkling, genuinely delighted, still 100 percent energy."

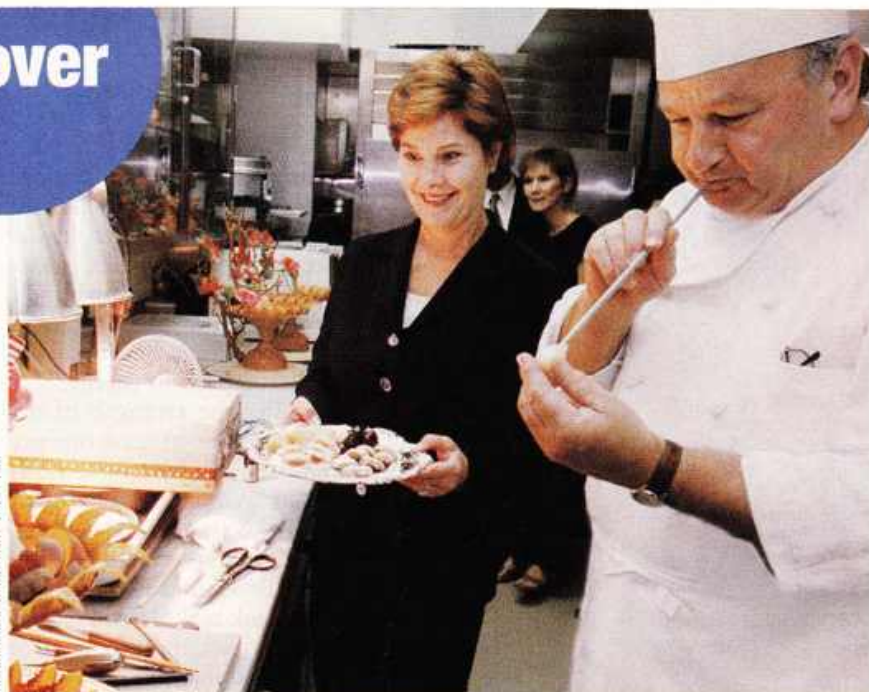
Still, despite the strength of her public performance, at least one political analyst finds the First Lady something of a cipher. "I don't have a clue who she is or what she believes," says Thomas Mann, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a nonpartisan think tank. "I don't know if she has any views about politics or public affairs. I don't know what she thinks." Yet for the most part, observers give her raves. "An A plus," says veteran Washington journalist Sally Quinn. "It hasn't been about 'Look at me. Look at me.' She's cared about the country, the American people and what she can do to help."

Of course, few are privy to what goes on behind the closed doors upstairs in the White House's private living quarters. "I'm sure this has been an emotional time," says one of Laura's many girlfriends since childhood. Even in public, she adds, the nature of the couple's close bond is obvious. "Those of us who have known them over the years can look at them and see they are communicating, even when they aren't talking. You see them together, and it's like they are reading each other's minds."

For a woman who often said that she had every intention of staying out of her husband's work, Laura has, by all appearances, been playing a far more active role in it. In an interview with Barbara Walters broadcast Dec. 5, she admitted that she and George talk privately about Ariel Sharon and the Palestinian question. And on Sept. 17, when Bush demanded the delivery of Osama bin Laden "dead or alive," Laura, thinking the remark made him sound hotheaded, sidled up with her gentle version of a reprimand: "Bushie," she said, using a familiar nickname, "you gonna git 'im?"

"I used to witness that kind of thing when Lyndon Johnson was upset or about to yell," says Goodwin of Lady Bird Johnson, named by Laura as one

JAMI CHIKWENDU/THE WASHINGTON POST



Six days before the attacks, Laura (with White House pastry chef Roland Mesnier) was busy preparing for her first official state dinner, for Mexican President Vicente Fox.



EMERCO OLIVERIO/AGF/STAMPALIA DELLA PRESIDENZA DELLA REPUBBLICA/ANSA

During a working holiday in Rome in July, Laura (with daughter Barbara) met Italian First Lady Franca Ciampi.

of her favorite role models among former First Ladies. "Lady Bird could put a hand on his knee and say, 'You don't mean that.' She would soothe him in a way that no one else could. Mrs. Bush is just like Lady Bird. She has a huge impact."

Bush himself recently noted that, contrary to popular opinion, his wife is no shrinking violet. "She doesn't get mad, she gets pointed," he told *Newsweek*. "If I do something she thinks needs to be toned down... she'll tell me." It's a dynamic that dates back to the couple's earliest days, says one longtime friend of Laura's. "George has always valued

Laura's West Texas common sense. She's always been so grounded, and that attracted him to her in their dating days." Veteran White House reporter Helen Thomas, referring to the period earlier in their marriage when Laura's influence stopped her husband's proclivity for partying, puts an even sharper point on the observation: "She put her foot down and said, 'Jim Beam or me,' and got him to stop drinking. And she's been a force in his life ever since."

Clearly he listens to what she says." More recently Laura has also become a self-styled intelligence gatherer, reading several newspapers a day and reporting relevant items to her husband, who gets his daily news fix from summaries prepared by his White House staff. And when an Oct. 2 photo in *The Washington Post* made him look as if he had horns, it was Laura who asked that a presidential aide look into the matter.

Along with supporting her husband, she's also been more comfortable stepping out on her own. On Nov. 17 she became the first wife of a President ever to deliver the tradi-

tional Saturday-morning radio address. Ten days later she met in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House with 11 exiled Afghan women and urged political leaders to remember human rights and the status of women in establishing a post-Taliban government.

All that occurred just days after she became only the third sitting First Lady (after Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosalynn Carter) to speak at Washington's National Press Club, giving (at 30 minutes) the longest public speech of her career. Relaxed and chatty, she charmed a crowd of journalists. "I've been working out," she said, referring to the daily three-mile treadmill regimen and thrice-weekly White House visits by a personal trainer that are responsible for her newly slimmed-down silhouette. "Can y'all tell?" On a more serious note, she told reporters that she was immersing herself in books: "I read all the time... for inspiration, but also for diversion, when I'm anxious."

Some pundits attribute the First Lady's new visibility to a publicity push from President Bush's longtime aide Karen Hughes. Others, like Goodwin, think it may be of her own design: "Sept. 11 created a different opening for a different role. Once you take a step in a different direction, it creates confidence. And it makes the next step easier." Whatever the reason, she seems more genuinely at ease. "This is Laura Bush's defining moment, and she's meeting it head-on in her own way," says Bush family biographer Bill Minutaglio. "At a point in history when reality has been so twisted, this First Lady seems very real."

Mrs. Bush is also adept at combining domesticity with statesmanship. The week before her husband's critical mid-November get-acquainted meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the family's Prairie Chapel ranch, she flew to Texas to personally oversee last-minute preparations for what she jokingly called a "chuckwagon supper": mesquite-smoked beef tenderloin, southern-fried catfish and Blue Bell vanilla ice cream (a cult favorite in Texas), all served on the screened-in breezeway of the low-slung limestone ranch house. Later

Putin and his wife, Lyudmila, both animal lovers, were obviously delighted when Laura made a point of introducing them to Barney and fellow White House dog Spot, a 12-year-old English springer spaniel.

She has joked that she's not much for the kitchen. "I haven't had to cook in a few years," she told the Press Club. "It's been a great relief for my family." But just three days after the Putin visit, Laura presided at a Thanksgiving meal at Camp David, making it the first time in seven years that the extended Bush clan had spent the holiday away from friends in Austin. On hand were 20-year-old twin daughters Jenna, a sophomore at the University of Texas, and Barbara, a sophomore at Yale, who had also come to celebrate their Nov. 25 birthday.

Even constricted by wartime, the First Couple managed to spend nearly every weekend this fall at Camp David,

the wooded retreat in Maryland's Catocin Mountains, where they usually arrive by mid-afternoon Friday, often accompanied by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. Billeted at Aspen Lodge, one of the compound's largest cabins, the Bushes host casual dinners with family and friends at a table that seats up to 20, serving chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, soft tacos and, for lunch, tomato soup and sandwiches. Afterward they watch movies, nap or go for walks in the woods.

And it is there that the First Family and clan celebrated Christmas in typical fashion. "They had quite a competitive bowling tournament—the kids are getting quite good," says a friend. Volleyball, horseshoes and tennis were thrown into the mix as well. "She's been working so hard," says her mother-in-law and another of her model First Ladies, Barbara Bush. "She had us all over for Christmas. We were

26, plus her mother, so that makes 27. She helped make it a very, very nice Christmas."

Presents were opened Christmas morning—not a moment before. "George is very adamant about that," Laura recently told *Family Circle*. "So we can't even open one present on Christmas Eve!" If the President's wife chafes at that long-standing rule, it seems only in jest. After all, it is gentle traditions like those that seem to have all the more significance now, for a country and a First Lady making their way through uncharted waters. "Laura Bush never groomed herself for this," says her friend, art dealer Adair Margo. "But whatever it takes, she'll reach the heights."

- Susan Schindehette
- Jane Sims Podesta in Washington, D.C., Laurel Brubaker Calkins and Gabrielle Cosgriff in Houston, Chris Coats in Dallas, Anne Lang in Austin, Michael Haederle in El Paso and Lori Rozsa in Boca Grande, Fla.



"She's becoming the exemplar of dignity and calmness under pressure," says presidential historian Douglas Brinkley of the First Lady (with Spot last spring at the Texas ranch).



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