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He's Got the Bad-Boy Vote Sewed Up

By JIM SLEEPER

I am looking at a photo of the George W. Bush that you've probably never seen before. It's a sports-action close-up of him at Yale, over a caption written prophetically by a fellow undergraduate more than 30 years ago: "George Bush delivers illegal, but gratifying right hook to opposing ball carrier."

Never mind that this is a rugby game, alien to most Americans, and that the caption writer's assessment wasn't political. I think it explains one reason why Bush hasn't slid in the polls since John Kerry reported for duty: He owes more than a little something to the "bad boy" vote that no pollster captures as well as this photo and caption do.

What I have in mind here isn't the bad guy in a detective story or the stand-up guy in "The Sopranos," or even some rock-band poseur. He may actually be a good guy most of the time, like millions of this country's mischievous frat boys who like getting away with things but who aren't *that* bad as long as they don't get into anything too far over their heads.

As president of his chapter of the DKE fraternity, Bush sounded a classic bad-boy note when he said he "didn't learn a damned thing" at Yale. "The reason was that he didn't try," Jacob Weisberg reported this spring in Yale Alumni Magazine. "One year, the star of the football team spotted him in the back row during [course-] shopping period. 'Hey, George Bush is in this class!' Calvin Hill, '69, shouted to his teammates. 'This is the one for us!'"

I was in that room that day. Bush gave them a grinning thumbs up and, I have to admit, everyone laughed. He had a certain charm about getting away with things, like DKE's custom of "branding" new members' on the butt, a less-than-noble tradition he managed to protect when it came under fire.

Being that kind of bad boy may be OK if you're cutting a history class or smirking behind your hand at some radical grad student leading your discussion section — but not when you're staging a commander in chief's flight-deck landing or a Thanksgiving Day pop-up in Baghdad.

Bad boys don't get that far



George Bush delivers illegal, but gratifying right hook to opposing ball carrier.

YALE YEARBOOK: *George W. Bush, left, playing rugby.*

very often, of course, and Bush would tell you that he's changed a lot since college. But I don't think the difference matters much to the bad boys he's left behind, including some classmates I know who are raising money for him, not to mention the up-and-comers I taught at Yale last year. Whether they cheered Bush's flight-deck landing or are reliving the joys of intramural rugby, they think he has shown them how to mess up yet still swagger off the field with an impish grin.

I am not being partisan here. This really is an apolitical, "guy" thing, like the thunderous welcome Bill Clinton got from a huge crowd of college boys, with their baseball caps on backward, at the University of Illinois' Urbana-Champaign campus on Jan. 28, 1998, only days after rumors of his Monica Lewinsky affair surfaced. Just the day before, 120 million Americans had been riveted, watching him pull off a

triumphal, almost defiant, State of the Union address.

"Yeah, Bi-i-i-ll!" the college boys roared lustily, and not because Al Gore had just warned them up with news of Clinton's tuition loans, Hope scholarships and his plans to add slots for more AmeriCorps volunteers. Bad Boy Bill entered the hall to a booming rendition of the rock band Kansas' "Carry On My Wayward Son." He was greeted like a rock star, with no boos or catcalls.

Whoever wrote that caption under George's rugby photo would understand. What he shouldn't understand is how anyone could act as if Iraq were just rugby or a dalliance. A history lesson ignored might be more like it.

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