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FEATURE

The Dark Prince of City Hall

First Larry Bush was a politician. Then he was a journalist. Then he was a politician. So now as editor and publisher of CitiReport,...

by *SF Weekly Staff* • 03/08/1995 4:00 am

Last November, Annemarie Conroy was primed to pull off a stunning political upset: Various pollsters said she would receive the most votes in the Board of Supervisors race and become the first Republican to serve as board president in more than a decade. Working against a tight deadline for SF Weekly's overnight election issue, I chased the story.

I could have saved myself a lot of work if I'd placed one extra phone call to Larry Bush, publisher of the political journal CitiReport. More than a month earlier, he had set wheels in motion that would lead to Conroy's political demise. Bush commissioned

his own poll in which he asked a killer question: How would San Francisco voters react if they learned Conroy's party affiliation? The supervisor had wisely downplayed her GOP membership and successfully wooed Democrats, particularly women. The Bush poll, which he published in the September 30 issue of CitiReport, showed that Conroy would lose thousands of votes if she were tagged a Republican. The week of the election, Democratic Party apparatchiks acted on Bush's cue and circulated hundreds of thousands

of “hit piece” fliers alerting voters to the Republican menace. On election night, Conroy sank like a pachyderm in cement pumps.

In the world of political big-game hunting, Conroy was quite a trophy: corporate lawyer, goddaughter of Mayor Jordan and champion of the city's right wing. But Bush eschewed credit for the kill, allowing obsequious Democratic Party chair Matthew Rothschild to preen and crow and display Conroy's tusks as his prize.

Larry Bush is the safari guide of San Francisco politics. He loads and cocks the gun, then lets others pull the trigger. Consequently, San Francisco has never been properly introduced to one of its most influential political players — the man who both allies and enemies call Cobrowoman.

Bush's newsletter, with a circulation of 500, makes a greater mark on local politics than both daily papers combined. And he has more vision than the mayor and most members of the Board of Supervisors.

Some call Bush a civic treasure, a muckraker who exposes hypocrisy and venality. “He's the I.F. Stone of San Francisco,” says Public Defender Jeff Brown. Others insist he's a mean-spirited and obsessive manipulator who uses the mantle of journalism to pursue a petty personal agenda.

In an unprompted moment during a recent conversation, Mayor Jordan departed from his well-rehearsed remarks to attack Bush. “He's ridiculous,” Jordan said. “He's never constructive. All he does is tear things down. For him, nothing is ever right; it's always wrong. Everywhere he goes all he sees is gloom and doom.”

Bush's enemies characterize him as an irrelevant gadfly, a preacher with no congregation. Some have gone as far as suggesting he's mentally ill.

But to underestimate Bush is to invite peril. Gauging by the fear quotient, Bush is a force to be reckoned with. Nearly every one of the 36 people interviewed for this story asked for anonymity. “I just got off his list,” said a staffer in the District Attorney's Office. “I don't want to go back on.”

A prominent gay activist in Washington, D.C., who has neither seen nor heard from Bush in more than a decade, cut an interview short, saying, “I'm a little nervous about doing this on the record.” Why? “Because I know Bush too well.”

Hanging from Larry Bush's office wall is a slightly yellowed poster from a Fire Island cottage where he and his friends trysted in the heady days of pre-AIDS gay America. “Mother's Rules,” it proclaims. “Article One: Mother is always right Article 11: You go into the kitchen with your personal ideas and you come out with Mother's ideas Article 13: The more you criticize Mother, the less favors you receive.”

Bush sits behind his desk, obscured by a mountain of papers and books, bills and binders. He greets me with a digital sampling of Peter Finch's famous line from the movie *Network*: “I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!”

For most of the past decade, Bush worked as an aide to Art Agnos, first in the state legislature and then in the Mayor's Office. After Agnos' defeat in December 1991, Bush embarked on a campaign of personal and professional rehabilitation. He found a comfortable base of operations at CitiReport and at the Examiner as an occasional op-ed columnist.

Bush's fortnightly journal, which he publishes with the help of a graphic artist, is required reading for members of San Francisco's political elite. Journalists, politicians and activists

pay the \$45 annual subscription (\$65 for corporations and organizations) to see if their ox has been gored or if Bush has broken another big story. He runs circles around every other paper in town when it comes to covering City Hall, and does a better job of holding local officials accountable than any other reporter.

But Bush is more than a journalist. He's also a freelance viceroy to local pols. With increasing regularity, elected officials are crafting policy based on Bush's coverage. Thanks to him, campaign finance reform is at the top of the political agenda.

Bush practically wrote Proposition K, the 1993 ballot measure creating the city's ethics commission. (Supervisor Kevin Shelley championed the measure. But Bush had nursed the reform in the pages of CitiReport for months before Shelley adopted it.) Supervisor Terence Hallinan recently took a handoff from Bush when he proposed a package of campaign contribution limits.

Put plainly, Bush is San Francisco's self-appointed ethics cop. Like an angry school marm who checks beneath her pupils' fingernails, Bush follows the flow of political money down to the account numbers on canceled checks in his unyielding pursuit of violations and influence-peddling.

His watchdoggery is unrelenting, and San Francisco can be damn thankful. No one else is doing the job. Bush is a big guy, more than 200 pounds of big guy. But the political vacuum he fills is even bigger: San Francisco is a city where the avuncular district attorney jumps on his chair eek-a-mouse style whenever a potential political crime crosses his desk; the city attorney ain't much better; and most members of the Board of Supervisors are too busy schmoozing big donors to give a farthing for reform. [page]

What of the fourth estate? Well, most reporters have become inured to the pervasive influence of political money. For them, lucre is as much part of City Hall as the mortar and the marble.

That leaves Larry Bush, rooting around all alone in the musty public records room at the Registrar of Voters Office, poring over campaign finance records. More often than not, his

snooping pays off.

In 1992, Bush spurred an ongoing probe by three law-enforcement agencies into the funding of Mayor Jordan's 1991 campaign. This month, Bush's ferreting muddied the waters of Jordan's nomination of Jack Ertola to the post of chief administrative officer and raised new questions about the mayor's handling of political donations.

The latest flap began last year when Bush noticed that corporations like Chevron and Bechtel were giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to something called the San Francisco Citizens Inaugural Committee for the Mayor-Elect, a group headed until two weeks ago by Ertola, a retired Superior Court judge and former city supervisor. But the inaugural committee had never publicly reported receiving or spending any of this money.

Smelling a slush fund, Bush pressed for records. Ertola surrendered partial documents showing that corporate donors were coughing up as much as \$50,000 in one pop — which the mayor was spending on his VISA bills and on staff salaries during his transition period.

At the same time, Bush noticed that Chevron, a \$50,000 donor, secured the mayor's help in seizing control of an independent gas station. And development giant Catellus, which donated \$5,000, is about to ask for revisions in the Mission Bay development agreement that could release the company from toxic cleanup and housing construction requirements. “Raising this kind of money from people who stand to benefit from your decisions and not telling the public goes against all principles of open, democratic government,” Bush says.

The district attorney and the Fair Political Practices Commission are chasing Bush's lead. And his reporting on the issue — in the February 19 Examiner and in the February 27 CitiReport — led Supervisor Tom Ammiano to press Ertola about the inaugural committee during the nominee's confirmation hearing. “From the way he was asking his questions, I got the idea Tom had read CitiReport,” says a boastful Bush.

That same day, February 27, Bush visited the law offices of Reuben and Cera — Jordan's attorneys — to demand the committee's records. Because the committee had renewed its corporate charter in December, Bush felt he had a right to see if the mayor was still

collecting money for his, ahem, inaugural. The lawyers were not amused. “They told me they didn't have to show me anything,” Bush says. “I told them yes they did and if they didn't, they could get fined \$5,000.”

Ken Cera threatened to call security if Bush didn't leave and then personally escorted the muckraker to the elevator. “I was going to tell them I had been thrown out of better places, but it was an awfully nice law office,” Bush says, laughing.

Bush grew up in a well-to-do, politically connected Mormon family in suburban Washington, D.C. His maternal grandfather, Carl Karston, helped found the American Federation of Labor with Samuel Gompers. His father worked for the FBI and then later became director of finance for the CIA, after he was personally recruited by Wild Bill Donovan, founder of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA. (Bush's older brother currently works as a physician for the CIA.) His Sunday school teacher was columnist Jack Anderson, and his scoutmaster was Brent Scowcroft, a member of the national security team for five presidents. Bush even once dated Chief Justice Warren Burger's daughter, Margaret, who lived with her family a few doors down from the Bushes.

Bush's father, Lester, was in the vanguard of Mormons who made a push to take up positions of power in government during the 1950s. Both his sons would soon follow suit.

Larry Bush attended Brigham Young University, but dropped out in 1970 after he was called on the university president's carpet for writing an antiwar flier. “He did say it was eloquent,” Bush recalls.

After a brief stint at a Salt Lake City newspaper, Bush made a roundabout pilgrimage back to Washington and the bosom of government.

He recalls the incident that inspired him to leave Utah: “The editor took me aside one day and showed me a picture of Tricia Nixon on the steps of the Mormon church headquarters. She was wearing a pink dress with puffy shoulders and a big bow in her hair. He said, 'Isn't she just a princess?' And I thought, 'No. I'm a princess and I'm getting the hell out of here.’”

The princess headed for Finland, where he fulfilled his role as a dutiful Mormon son by serving as a missionary for two years. Bush then returned to Washington where he joined the Nixon Agriculture Department and for the next eight years worked as a speechwriter.

His work was limited to prosaic tracts on such things as Peruvian anchovy harvests. But he was simultaneously honing his skills for political intrigue.

In 1975, Bush discovered that the department had diverted food from famine-ridden India and Bangladesh to South Vietnamese military officers during the Vietnam War. Congress had forbidden the U.S. to pay the officers' salaries, so the White House secretly gave them food to resell.

Bush leaked classified documents to the New York Times, the Washington Post and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Page-one stories hit the same day in all three papers, exposing the secret program and drawing an FBI investigation into the leak. Bush chain-smoked through his interview with the investigators and survived unscathed. [page]

He later alerted the IRS to unreported foreign gifts Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz received from a rice dealer, which led a federal court to sentence Butz to 30 days in jail for tax evasion.

By 1977, Bush, who was still in the closet, began writing under the pseudonym Bill Evans for the Washington Blade, D.C.'s gay newspaper. His first story was about a fire at the Cinema Follies, a popular gay pornographic movie house in Washington, in which several prominent but closeted citizens were wounded or killed.

The blaze also singed the doors of Bush's closet. "This was a place that I had been," he says of the movie house. "I thought this could be how my family found out I was gay; that was very sobering."

Bush showed his news account to his therapist, who said he couldn't tell from the story that "Evans" was gay. "I said, 'Yeah, isn't that great,'" Bush recounts. "I was so proud of my journalistic objectivity. And he said, 'No, that's not the point. This is a community you are

supposed to feel something about.”

The fire kept playing on his mind, as did a film Bush saw as a young boy, *Advise and Consent*, which centers on a Mormon congressman who commits suicide when it's discovered that he's gay. Finally, Bush decided to come out, writing a letter under his own signature to the *Washington Post*, in which he criticized the paper's coverage of gay issues.

A few days later, he was summoned to the office of his Agriculture Department boss and asked about the letter. Yes, he said, it was his letter. And yes, he was gay.

Suddenly, Bush found himself undergoing a performance audit, despite his perfect record. When the review came back clean, another was ordered. His small staff was transferred and he found himself alone in a tiny office — “almost literally a closet” — and his phones were tapped. Being gay, he was told, was inconsistent with government service.

After consulting lawyers, Bush decided against a protracted legal fight and resigned from the federal government in 1978. He still takes ironic pleasure pointing out that he survived the Nixon administration only to be drummed out of government service under Jimmy Carter's watch.

Bush rebounded, joining the eccentric world of freelance journalism. From a homebase in the nation's capital, he wrote for the *Washington Blade*, the *Advocate* and the *New York Native*. When Annemarie Conroy was still in high school, Bush was chopping off the heads of gay leaders he thought were too soft on prejudice or too blasé about the AIDS epidemic. “We called him the giant killer,” says one old colleague.

Bush excoriated Lucia Valeska, then-head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, for living under an assumed name at the same time she was calling on people to leave the closet. That revelation, coupled with other scathing articles in the gay press — one headline read: “Lucia Valeska to the Gay Community: Drop Dead” — led to her resignation. The same hard-hitting stories contributed to the downfall of the late Steve Endean, the visionary yet ineffectual leader of the now defunct Gay Rights National Lobby.

That Bush had indulged in the same “sin” he used to smear Valeska did not escape the attention of his adversaries. “He’s a hypocrite,” says a Clinton White House official who asked not to be named.

Bush’s current ethics crusade has elicited similar accusations on this coast. You see, when he worked for Agnos, Bush was known as one of the most imperious political operatives ever to stride the San Francisco scene. Even one of his best friends, the late Jerry Davis, routinely referred to Bush as “the dark side.”

One city employee remembers standing with Bush on the balcony of the mayor’s office in the winter of 1991, shortly after Agnos placed second to Frank Jordan in the general election. “Here’s what we do,” Bush said to the mayor’s police bodyguard, Paul Chignell. “First we win the runoff and then we destroy Carole Migden.”

The supervisor’s political crime? She had talked Angela Alioto into the mayor’s race and thereby undercut Agnos’ liberal support. (It’s interesting to note that at about the same time he was plotting her destruction, Bush was sending Migden a bouquet of flowers to thank her for endorsing Agnos in the runoff.)

Migden and another old Bush enemy, former supervisor Harry Britt, refuse to discuss Bush. “I’m trying to purge my life of all negative influences,” Migden says. The supervisor prohibits her staff from talking about Bush or even reading CitiReport.

When he worked for Agnos, Bush often found himself fighting his own community on behalf of a heterosexual politician — an unpopular spot to be in. “It’s understandable that he would attack opponents of his boss,” says Dan Willson, a former editor at the Sentinel who now works as communications director for Rep. Kweisi Mfume (D-Maryland). “What was so disturbing was that he had this pattern of singling out lesbian and gay opponents. It created a plantation politics dynamic that disturbed a lot of people in the community.”

Lesbian and gay leaders who wanted an audience with Agnos had to pass the Bush test first. One Agnos confidant said Bush would sneak peeks at the scheduling book and if

someone was meeting with the mayor without his benediction, he would get on the phone and smear them in the community. "He had to be the gatekeeper," the Agnos supporter says.

Sometimes, Bush's old adversaries say, he would undermine programs that would benefit the lesbian and gay community merely because they were advanced by someone he didn't like. Critics still blame Bush for the removal of medical programs from Britt's cherished HIV early-intervention center, a move they say rendered the center an ineffectual referral service. [page]

Britt's domestic-partners legislation was also a Bush target. Bush, whose lover had just died of AIDS, wanted to add health benefits to the 1989 package, a move that slowed the legislative wheels considerably. Britt's old allies say the real agenda was to delay the legislation until Agnos ran for re-election so the mayor could use it to rally lesbians and gays to his campaign.

Whisper campaigns also became a staple of Bush's repertoire, his old adversaries say.

T.J. Anthony, a former Britt and Hongisto aide who now works for Supervisor Barbara Kaufman, remembers how his opposition to Agnos' ballpark proposal in 1989 led to a vicious smear campaign that ruined his life for more than a year. The way Anthony tells it, Bush discovered that Anthony was placed in an orphanage by his destitute mother at the age of three. Bush so inflated the tale, Anthony claims, that by the time he heard it, he was portrayed as a emotionally disturbed child whose parents had to get rid of him. Bush then had a ballpark campaign aide visit Hongisto and attempt to persuade the then-supervisor to fire Anthony.

Bush denies all the charges of underhandedness contained in this article. "People love to put me in the picture," he says. "It's like I'm Forrest Gump, ending up in moments in history I never participated in."

Warming to the subject, Bush goes after his old enemy, Harry Britt. Responding to charges that he undermined domestic partners for political reasons, Bush says Britt begged Agnos

to take the measure off the calendar in 1988 when Britt was running for the board because he feared it would damage his campaign. “Britt put his own personal political future ahead of the needs of the community all the time,” Bush states.

He insists Britt's aim was to further his own political standing with the HIV center, not combat the epidemic. Bush says AIDS researchers and physicians finally convened a private meeting with Britt where they expressed concern over “ghettoizing” AIDS treatment.

None of this is to say Bush doesn't know how to play hardball — or that Agnos' opponents were so naive they expected to be left alone.

Bush helped stage coups at political clubs in the hopes of unseating Agnos' enemies before they could deny his boss an endorsement. “He used to sit in the front row at meetings and take notes just to scare us,” says one club member. “He was compiling his enemies list.”

When Anthony opposed Agnos' ballpark proposal, he said Bush called aides to then-senate president David Roberti, city attorneys and the district attorney and orchestrated an ethics probe into Anthony's Lesbian and Gay Voters project.

But above all, Bush was a master of manipulating the gay press through leaks and ghostwritten articles.

Most of the Bush leaks showed up in the Sentinel. “He would call up and drop the juiciest tidbits imaginable,” Willson says. “You know, the kind that make a journalist drool.” The chief targets of Bush's leaks were gay and lesbian leaders who opposed Agnos.

When he couldn't leak, Bush took over with his own prose. In September 1991, Bush wrote a story that was sharply critical of Alioto's ties to the police union. Bush had Agnos commissioner Paul Melbostad deliver his hard copy to the Sentinel with the proviso that publisher Ray Chalker put his byline on it. The plant would have gone off without a hitch were it not for Willson, who placed Agnos' byline on the piece in protest. The resulting flap, which generated stories in almost every newspaper in town, was gratifying for Bush's

enemies; it was one of the rare occasions his fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime.

By the time the 1991 mayor's race rolled around, Bush had created deep divisions in the gay community. Many gay leaders like Britt and Migden refused to support Agnos because of Bush's antics.

The conventional wisdom of the Agnos camp linked the mayor's defeat to Alioto's entry. But one reason Britt and Migden urged Alioto into the race was because Bush had pissed off so many lesbian and gay leaders. "He's the reason we couldn't support Art," says Dick Pabich, a retired political consultant who ran campaigns for Harvey Milk, Britt and Migden.

In the runoff between Jordan and Agnos, Migden and other gay leaders demanded Bush's head before they would support Agnos. Agnos obliged, moving Bush from the Mayor's Office to his fundraising operation. Bush says he left voluntarily without pressure from anyone.

Bush's troubled exit from government still eats at him. "It was a difficult period of my life," he admits. "I really allowed myself to become a lightning rod."

The apparent lesson of Bush's fall is that when he has his hands directly on the levers of power, his killer instincts can get the better of him. If he's one step removed, instructing others how to shift the gears, his excesses are kept sufficiently in check and he's more effective.

"When he was in the mayor's office, we all just wished he would use his considerable talents to fight the real enemies — the radical right," Willson says.

Bush's reputation as a basher of lesbian and gay leaders is largely his own fault. But his work to empower and defend his community is too often overlooked. In fact, it was in this guise, not as a mayoral operative, that he earned the moniker Cobrowoman.

The year was 1986. The AIDS epidemic was still a new terror and Bush was working for Agnos in Sacramento. George Deukmejian, the Republican governor, had just vetoed an Agnos bill outlawing discrimination against those infected with the virus, and Bush was pissed.

He hit the phones and within a day had 22 papers up and down the state savaging Deukmejian on their editorial pages. The governor was running for re-election and dropped 10 points in the polls. Later that year, AIDS organizations convened a dinner where they awarded Bush and christened him with his reptilian appellation. “They called me Cobra because I was quick and effective and Deukmejian didn't know what hit him,” Bush says.
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In 1987, Bush arranged a visit by C. Everett Koop to an unprecedented joint session of the state legislature, where the surgeon general addressed the representatives about the AIDS epidemic. Coming at a time when Koop's boss, Ronald Reagan, was ignoring the epidemic, the visit was quite the PR coup. Bush had embarrassed a political enemy and enlightened the public at the same time.

Bush spends many a weekend at Butterfield & Butterfield auction house keeping an eye out for silver antiques. “Little objets,” he says, using the French pronunciation. A collector of Christmas tree-ornaments and a master chef, he prepares what is said to be a perfect beef Wellington and some outstanding curries.

Not exactly the stereotypical hard-hitting, populist muckraker. But this establishment brat has staked much of his reputation on attacking his own kind. Last summer, for example, Bush made life extremely uncomfortable for the city's corporate elite.

He was on the phone with his good friend Gwenn Craig, an administrator in the research department at UCSF, when he stumbled on an idea that would eventually bollix the plans of corporate leaders and realign political power in San Francisco.

Bush was bitching to Craig about the Committee on JOBS, a group of 23 corporations to which UCSF belonged, and how it was attacking liberal ideals like progressive taxation

and governmental checks on the power of the mayor. “How do you like that, Gwenn?” he asked. “These are your people and they're contributing taxpayers' money to defeat all the things you stand for.”

Suddenly, the proverbial light bulb clicked on. UCSF's communications with JOBS' CEOs and the group's hired gun — lobbyist Don Solem — were public records! Bush made a California Public Records Act request and UCSF was forced to cough up 1,000 pages of documents. In the July 5, 1993, issue of CitiReport, Bush drew back the curtain on a previously unknown political juggernaut. He showed how the group:

- * wooed lesbian and gay leaders at the same time it was funding the campaigns of moderates and conservatives.

- * snuck an intern onto Supervisor Angela Alioto's staff in an attempt to control the budget process.

- * spent two years and \$90,000 to control the revision of the city charter in a way that would disempower neighborhood groups.

- * worked its way into the mayor's good graces and won the right to interview possible appointments to a vacant seat on the Board of Supervisors.

The San Francisco Bay Guardian picked up on Bush's scoop in its July 13 issue with this screaming cover headline: “Hostile Takeover. Exposed! The secret downtown plot to crush progressive politics in San Francisco.” The Guardian compared JOBS to Oliver North's contra resupply network.

With its trademark fondness for overkill, the Guardian had stolen Bush's thunder. And he was loving every minute of it.

Less than a month after Bush pantsed JOBS, the group's number-one policy initiative, charter reform, went down to defeat at the board. Neighborhood activists accurately portrayed it as a JOBS “power grab.” In the 1994 elections — which one CEO hailed as

JOBS' "coming of age" — the group suffered major setbacks.

Progressives swept the Board of Supervisors race, creating an eight-vote supermajority to overturn mayoral vetoes and JOBS was forced to spend close to \$1 million to defeat Proposition O, which would have levied extra taxes on downtown businesses for their heavy use of Muni services.

JOBS lobbyist Don Solem walked into a meeting of CEOs the next morning huffing and puffing about how he'd kicked ass on progressives. The CEOs angrily pointed out the composition of the new board and the Prop. O price tag, making it clear they didn't share his rosy view. Weeks later, Solem was stripped of many of his duties when the group hired an executive director.

The 49-year-old Bush has been savaging people on and off the printed page since he was in his early twenties. People have resigned and lost their jobs because of him. But like most reporters, he grew nervous about the prospect of being profiled. Better than most reporters, Bush knows the feral code of behavior they observe and the savage tactics they employ. "He called me and asked if I had any Valium," says one Bush confidant. "He said he wasn't expecting to get any sleep the week the story came out."

I got a taste of Bush's angst a few days before this story went to press. He rang me at home and for no apparent reason told me about an exposé he had written for Penthouse in the 1980s. After a Reagan official claimed that his wife had been beaten and raped by a black man, Bush found documentation indicating the man possibly had done the deed himself. Worse yet, the man was part of Ed Meese's anti-pornography squad and was found to have an extensive personal porno collection.

Why was Bush telling me this story, I wondered? Then he got to the real point of his call: "I had a hard time taking such an intimate look at someone," he said. "At one point I threw up. I had this terrible sense that, gee, I had this guy's life in my hands. How in the world is he going to react to seeing all this in print."

Here was the Cobra, the feared spewer of venom, asking for leniency.

Two years ago, City Desk producer Jon Bernstein was uncomfortable when Bush asked to appear on his cable show on local politics. Bush's partisan attacks on Agnos' political enemies crossed the line, Bernstein believed. So Bush took him to lunch and won him over. [page]

But now that Agnos is talking about running for mayor, Bernstein is nervous all over again about Bush's frequent appearances on City Desk. Before taping a recent show with the Cobrowoman, Bernstein unburdened himself. "Just let me know if Agnos announces his candidacy for mayor, because we'll take you off the show," he said to Bush in the green room.

"No, no, no, I'm not going to work for Art," a startled Bush replied.

"Come on, Larry, if he offers you a job you'll take it," Bernstein retorted. "No, I won't," Bush insisted. Bernstein is still unsure if he'll allow Bush to remain on the show if Agnos enters the race.

Bush is vocal about his desire to be "the local Bill Moyers," a man who worked in politics and then made a clean break into journalism. But Bush's political instincts — and his past — continue to haunt and define him.

Bernstein's anxiety is emblematic of the general critique of Bush's work: CitiReport is seen by many as a vehicle for political revenge. "I can't believe anyone sees him as anything more than an instrument of an administration in exile," says Mayor Jordan's press secretary, Noah Griffin.

This criticism is unsophisticated (and itself politically motivated). Bush may spend an inordinate amount of ink wreaking havoc on the Jordan administration. But, hey, they're the ones in power.

Bush theorizes politicians are offended that he has the temerity to have an agenda at all. "The kind of journalism I do is more than just 'he said/she said,'" Bush says. "I try to get issues on the agenda. Politicians are threatened by that. They think that's their exclusive domain and it's an uppity journalist or a journalist with political ambitions that forces them

to answer questions they aren't ready for.”

True. But while his reportage is hard-hitting, smart and accurate, Bush often shows a bias that's as clear as the bells on Grace Cathedral. Case in point: The February 27 CitiReport — published the day Jordan's nomination for chief administrative officer, Jack Ertola, was heading into his first confirmation hearing — was devoted to Ertola-bashing.

Bush often loses his sense of scale, too. It's one thing to attack the powers that be. But the latest issue of CitiReport goes to great pains to mention that Mayor Jordan's son, Frank Jr., couldn't pass muster at the police or fire departments and had to settle for an apprenticeship with the plumbers union.

When Bush finds himself compared to campaign consultants and other political professionals, he looks mildly perturbed. “My question for you,” he responds, “is why do you compare me to other political players? Why don't you compare me to other journalists?”

To reinforce this point, Bush hands over a binder of his Examiner columns. Reviewing the articles at home, I find clipped to them a letter Bush wrote to Examiner Executive Editor Phil Bronstein and then-Ex Publisher Will Hearst.

In the letter, sent sometime before the November elections, Bush suggested how the Examiner could maximize its coverage to undermine Proposition J, a measure advanced by the Independent that wrested the lucrative public notices contract from the Ex. “Here's a quick snapshot of what the [poll] numbers show that will get you the best advantage — and suggest the best buttons to hit,” Bush wrote. “Republicans hate this measure more than anyone else. Hit them with the city cost, and you up your side of the argument.”

Bush went on to recommend Examiner endorsements for the Board of Supervisors: “Don't endorse Mabel Teng. She will simply be Migden's second vote on everything, and she is even less honest than [Migden] is.”

By manipulating institutions that command larger audiences, Bush amplifies the small

megaphone of CitiReport into an air-raid siren.

To this end, Bush still regularly tips off other reporters to hot stories. The first appearance of the Jordan inaugural committee came in the Chronicle's "Matier and Ross Report." Ganahl and Taylor's now defunct "Insiders" column at the Examiner was also a frequent beneficiary of Bush's tips.

One such leak led to the downfall of former police chief Dick Hongisto two years ago. After learning from cop sources that Hongisto was in the Mayor's Office trying to explain how thousands of copies of the San Francisco Bay Times disappeared from their racks overnight, Bush tipped off a Chronicle reporter. "Reporters started asking embarrassing questions before [Hongisto and company] had a chance to get their stories straight," Bush says. "Timing is very important."

When first interviewed about his tipster antics, Bush spoke freely, saying that his deal with the Examiner requires him to produce a column and regularly feed the paper tips. But asked about the arrangement a few days later, he clammed up. "Don't take me there," he said. "I don't want to go there."

Over at the Examiner, Bush's tipster gig has upset some of the reporters. "Ninety percent of what he tells us is completely false," one Ex staffer says. "Sometimes the reporters spend all day chasing his wild geese and they come up with zilch. And when they tell him the tips aren't true, he treats them like they're stupid."

But what Examiner reporters don't understand is if they canvass the city to confirm an embarrassing rumor about a Bush target — even if the rumors are completely untrue — it magnifies the rumor a hundredfold, which gets to a key point about Bush: Sometimes he just likes to fuck with people.

One evening Bush and pollster David Binder were walking out of an Embarcadero Center restaurant when a gaggle of tourists approached. "Where can we go to get a great view of Lombard Street?" one of them asked. Bush replied that they should go down to the Embarcadero and walk north and eventually the famous street would come into view. After

the tourists departed, Binder realized there was no view of the Crookedest Street in the World from the Embarcadero and that Bush had just sent the hapless crew on several miles of fruitless trekking. [page]

“Larry, they aren't going to see Lombard Street from the Embarcadero,” Binder announced. “I know, David,” Bush replied. “But they're gone, aren't they?”

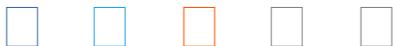
Bush commands 24 drawers full of files in his tiny office, collecting so much information on people that he's become both archivist and J. Edgar Hoover of the city's political set. If you're a politician and you generate a paper trail, Bush is a professional hazard. Just ask Frank Jordan.

Last year, Bush was digging for evidence to support his allegation that Mayor Jordan's 1991 campaign didn't report all its contributions when he heard about a former Jordan aide who had six boxes of documents Jordan left behind in his campaign office.

Both Bush and the City Attorney's Office, which was investigating Bush's charges, wanted a look-see. So Bush and a city investigator dug through the boxes together. Suddenly Bush noticed confidential police surveillance reports. Yeehaw, he thought, a violation of state law. Bush snuck out of the office and phoned Phil Bronstein. “Get those things over here,” the Ex editor commanded, resulting in a page-one story calling into question why Jordan possessed the secret police files and announcing district and city attorney probes.

The mayor defused the story by saying he inadvertently boxed and moved the documents when he left the Police Department.

But Bush promises more revelations from the cache as Jordan runs for re-election this year. “I'm not through with him yet,” Bush says with a wicked smile. “I'm never through.



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