

Prankster Bush can be shocking in receiving line

By Michael Posner
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Going through the White House receiving line could be a shocking experience for visitors the next four years. President Bush is a fan of the hidden handbuzzer.

In fact, the new president is known to old friends and associates as an enthusiastic amateur magician and prankster.

White House sources say Mr. Bush has sometimes surprised people by handing them dollar bills that mysteriously disappear or wallets that explode, and shaking hands armed with a vibrating buzzer that tingles and goes "bzzzzt!"

State dinners may be livelier in the new administration. The president has even stooped to such classic joke-shop novelties as the noisemaking "whoopie" cushion, according to one White House source.

Although Mr. Bush, 64, has been in the public eye for most of his adult life, relatively little was known about the private man. Only in the aftermath of the November election did the world realize that he is an avid, expert fisherman. And it took presidential politics to reveal his penchant for Chinese food, horseshoe pitching and jogging.

As far as anyone knows, Mr. Bush has no plans to take his handbuzzer along for summit meetings with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, or to perform magic tricks at Cabinet sessions. But sources said Mr. Bush did give President Reagan magic tricks for gifts on occasion.

Al Cohen, owner of Al's Magic

Shop three blocks from the White House, is sure of it. He said Mr. Bush once bought a \$39.95 "mirage" bowl and "I believe he gave it to President Reagan."

The covered bowl — which resembles a small wok with a hole on top — looks as if money or other objects placed inside can be grabbed easily from above. But it's an optical illusion and the items are really out of reach.

Prominently displayed in Mr. Cohen's shop window is a large photograph of himself and a smiling George Bush, with the words: "Congratulations to our most famous customer." The picture is flanked by a wiggly mechanical hand, a foot-long super toothbrush and a pair of spectacles promising X-ray vision to "see through clothing."

Al's Magic Shop, a Washington institution since Mr. Cohen's father started it in 1936, numbers celebrities such as Muhammad Ali and Lily Tomlin among its customers. Mr. Cohen said Mr. Bush has visited the store a number of times or has sent aides, usually around the Christmas season.

A White House source said Mr. Bush usually buys tricks and novelty items for his 10 grandchildren — but he plays with the items first.

According to Mr. Cohen, the new president doesn't buy cheap stuff. He said Mr. Bush once paid more than \$60 for a magic box. Put a deck of cards inside it and the cards disappear.

"He doesn't buy any trash," Mr. Cohen said. "Mainly magic, but he has bought gag gifts."

Joke items sold in the store range



President Bush jokes about his sore throat as he greets Navy Adm. Powell Carter yesterday aboard the carrier America in Norfolk. So far as is known, the admiral did not get a joybuzzer "shock" with the handshake.

from imitation fried eggs, stink bombs, candies that turn mouth and teeth blue, exploding cigars, rubber dollars, hot pepper gum and chattering false teeth.

"I believe the president is really into magic," said Mr. Cohen's son, Stan. Once, he said, Mr. Bush bought a complicated rope trick, and an aide later called the store to say his boss

needed more details on the trick, not an easy one to master.

During the last weekend of the presidential campaign, one of Mr. Bush's trick gadgets surfaced.

He closed off a session with reporters by holding up an electronic noisemaker that sounds like a screeching bomb and said: "I'm terminating this news conference."