

Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power

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Sept. 4 — Inside a cold, foreboding structure of brown sandstone in New Haven, Conn., lives one of the most heavily shrouded secret societies in American history.

Yale's super-elite Skull and Bones, a 200-year-old organization whose roster is stocked with some of the country's most prominent families: Bush, Harriman, Phelps, Rockefeller, Taft, and Whitney. Journalist Alexandra Robbins, herself a member of another of Yale's secret societies, interviewed more than a hundred Bonesmen and writes about the rituals that make up the organization. Read an excerpt from her book 'The Secrets of the Tomb' below.

Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power by Alexandra Robbins

THE LEGEND OF SKULL AND BONES

Sometime in the early 1830s, a Yale student named William H. Russell—the future valedictorian of the class of 1833—traveled to Germany to study for a year. Russell came from an inordinately wealthy family that ran one of America's most despicable business organizations of the nineteenth century: Russell and Company, an opium empire. Russell would later become a member of the Connecticut state legislature, a general in the Connecticut National Guard, and the founder of the Collegiate and Commercial Institute in New Haven. While in Germany, Russell befriended the leader of an insidious German secret society that hailed the death's head as its logo. Russell soon became caught up in this group, itself a sinister outgrowth of the notorious eighteenth-century society the Illuminati. When Russell returned to the United States, he found an atmosphere so Anti-Masonic that even his beloved Phi Beta Kappa, the honor society, had been unceremoniously stripped of its secrecy. Incensed, Russell rounded up a group of the most promising students in his class—including Alphonso Taft, the future secretary of war, attorney general, minister to Austria, ambassador to Russia, and father of future president William Howard Taft—and out of vengeance constructed the most powerful secret society the United States has ever known.

Yale's secret society exposed

September 4, 2002 — Journalist and author Alexandra Robbins discusses her book "Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power" with "Today's" Ann Curry.

The men called their organization the Brotherhood of Death, or, more informally, the Order of Skull and Bones. They adopted the numerological symbol 322 because their group was the second chapter of the German organization and founded in 1832. They worshiped the goddess Eulogia, celebrated pirates, and plotted an underground conspiracy to dominate the world.

Fast-forward 170 years. Skull and Bones has curled its tentacles into every corner of American society. This tiny club has set up networks that have thrust three members into the most powerful political position in the world. And the group's influence is only increasing—the 2004 presidential election might showcase the first time each ticket has been led by a Bonesman. The secret society is now, as one historian admonishes, "an international mafia" . . . unregulated and all but unknown." In its quest to create a New World Order that restricts individual freedoms and places ultimate power solely in the hands of a small cult of wealthy, prominent families, Skull and Bones has already succeeded in infiltrating nearly every major research, policy, financial, media, and government institution in the country. Skull and Bones, in fact, has been running the United States for years.

Skull and Bones cultivates its talent by selecting members from the junior class at Yale University, a school known for its strange, Gothic elitism and its rigid devotion to the past. The society screens its candidates carefully, favoring Protestants and, now, white Catholics, with special affection for the children of wealthy East Coast Skull and Bones members. Skull and Bones has been dominated by about two dozen of the country's most prominent families—Bush, Bundy, Harriman, Lord, Phelps, Rockefeller, Taft, and Whitney among them—who are encouraged by the society to intermarry so that its power is consolidated. In fact, Skull and Bones forces members to confess their entire sexual histories so that the club, as a eugenics overlord, can determine whether a new Bonesman will be fit to mingle with the bloodlines of the powerful Skull and Bones dynasties. A rebel will not make Skull and Bones; nor will anyone whose background in any way indicates that he will not sacrifice for the greater good of the larger organization.

As soon as initiates are allowed into the "tomb," a dark, windowless crypt in New Haven with a roof that serves as a landing pad for the society's private helicopter, they are sworn to silence and told they must forever deny that they are members of this organization. During initiation, which involves ritualistic psychological conditioning, the juniors wrestle in mud and are physically beaten—this stage of the ceremony represents their "death" to the world as they have known it. They then lie naked in coffins, masturbate, and reveal to the society their innermost sexual secrets. After this cleansing, the Bonesmen give the initiates robes to represent their new identities as individuals with a higher purpose. The society anoints the initiate with a new name, symbolizing his rebirth and rechristening as Knight X, a member of the Order. It is during this initiation that the new members are introduced to the artifacts in the tomb, among them Nazi memorabilia—including a set of Hitler's silverware—dozens of skulls, and an assortment of decorative tchotchkes: coffins, skeletons, and innards. They are also introduced to "the Bones whore," the tomb's only full-time resident, who helps to ensure that the Bonesmen leave

the tomb more mature than when they entered.

Members of Skull and Bones must make some sacrifices to the society—and they are threatened with blackmail so that they remain loyal—but they are remunerated with honors and rewards, including a graduation gift of \$15,000 and a wedding gift of a tall grandfather clock. Though they must tithe their estates to the society, each member is guaranteed financial security for life; in this way, Bones can ensure that no member will feel the need to sell the secrets of the society in order to make a living. And it works: No one has publicly breathed a word about his Skull and Bones membership, ever.

Bonesmen are automatically offered jobs at the many investment banks and law firms dominated by their secret society brothers. They are also given exclusive access to the Skull and Bones island, a lush retreat built for millionaires, with a lavish mansion and a bevy of women at the members' disposal.

The influence of the cabal begins at Yale, where Skull and Bones has appropriated university funds for its own use, leaving the school virtually impoverished. Skull and Bones' corporate shell, the Russell Trust Association, owns nearly all of the university's real estate, as well as most of the land in Connecticut. Skull and Bones has controlled Yale's faculty and campus publications so that students cannot speak openly about it. "Year by year," the campus's only anti-society publication stated during its brief tenure in 1873, "the deadly evil is growing."

The year in the tomb at Yale instills within members an unwavering loyalty to Skull and Bones. Members have been known to stab their Skull and Bones pins into their skin to keep them in place during swimming or bathing. The knights (as the student members are called) learn quickly that their allegiance to the society must supersede all else: family, friendships, country, God. They are taught that once they get out into the world, they are expected to reach positions of prominence so that they can further elevate the society's status and help promote the standing of their fellow Bonesmen.

This purpose has driven Bonesmen to ascend to the top levels of so many fields that, as one historian observes, "at any one time The Order can call on members in any area of American society to do what has to be done." Several Bonesmen have been senators, congressmen, Supreme Court justices, and Cabinet officials. There is a Bones cell in the CIA, which uses the society as a recruiting ground because the members are so obviously adept at keeping secrets. Society members dominate financial institutions such as J. P. Morgan, Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, and Brown Brothers Harriman, where at one time more than a third of the partners were Bonesmen. Through these companies, Skull and Bones provided financial backing to Adolf Hitler because the society then followed a Nazi-and now follows a neo-Nazi—doctrine. At least a dozen Bonesmen have been linked to the Federal Reserve, including the first chairman of the New York Federal Reserve. Skull and Bones members control the wealth of the Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford families.

Skull and Bones has also taken steps to control the American media.

Two of its members founded the law firm that represents the New York Times. Plans for both Time and Newsweek magazines were hatched in the Skull and Bones tomb. The society has controlled publishing houses such as Farrar, Straus & Giroux. In the 1880s, Skull and Bones created the American Historical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Economic Association so that the society could ensure that history would be written under its terms and promote its objectives. The society then installed its own members as the presidents of these associations.

Under the society's direction, Bonesmen developed and dropped the nuclear bomb and choreographed the Bay of Pigs invasion. Skull and Bones members had ties to Watergate and the Kennedy assassination. They control the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission so that they can push their own political agenda. Skull and Bones government officials have used the number 322 as codes for highly classified diplomatic assignments. The society discriminates against minorities and fought for slavery; indeed eight out of twelve of Yale's residential colleges are named for slave owners while none are named for abolitionists. The society encourages misogyny: it did not admit women until the 1990s because members did not believe women were capable of handling the Skull and Bones experience and because they said they feared incidents of date rape. This society also encourages grave robbing: deep within the bowels of the tomb are the stolen skulls of the Apache chief Geronimo, Pancho Villa, and former president Martin Van Buren.

Finally, the society has taken measures to ensure that the secrets of Skull and Bones slip ungraspable like sand through open fingers. Journalist Ron Rosenbaum, who wrote a long but not probing article about the society in the 1970s, claimed that a source warned him not to get too close.

"What bank do you have your checking account at?" this party asked me in the middle of a discussion of the Mithraic aspects of the Bones ritual.

I named the bank. "Aha," said the party. "There are three Bonesmen on the board. You'll never have a line of credit again.

They'll tap your phone. They'll. . . " . . . The source continued: "The alumni still care. Don't laugh. They don't like people tampering and prying. The power of Bones is incredible. They've got their hands on every lever of power in the country. You'll see—it's like trying to look into the Mafia."

In the 1980s, a man known only as Steve had contracts to write two books on the society, using documents and photographs he had acquired from the Bones crypt. But Skull and Bones found out about Steve. Society members broke into his apartment, stole the documents, harassed the would-be author, and scared him into hiding, where he has remained ever since. The books were never completed. In Universal Pictures' thriller *The Skulls* (2000), an aspiring journalist is writing a profile of the society for the New York

Times. When he sneaks into the tomb, the Skulls murder him.

The real Skull and Bones tomb displays a bloody knife in a glass case. It is said that when a Bonesman stole documents and threatened to publish society secrets if the members did not pay him a determined amount of money, they used that knife to kill him.

This, then, is the legend of Skull and Bones. It is astonishing that so many people continue to believe, even in twenty-first-century America, that a tiny college club wields such an enormous amount of influence on the world's only superpower. The breadth of clout ascribed to this organization is practically as wide-ranging as the leverage of the satirical secret society the Stonecutters introduced in an episode of *The Simpsons*. The Stonecutters theme song included the lyrics:

Who controls the British crown?
Who keeps the metric system down? We do! We do. . .

Who holds back the electric car?
Who makes Steve Guttenberg a star? We do! We do.

Certainly, Skull and Bones does cross boundaries in order to attempt to stay out of the public spotlight. When I wrote an article about the society for the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 2000, an older Bonesman said to me, "If it's not portrayed positively, I'm sending a couple of my friends after you." After the article was published, I received a telephone call at my office from a fellow journalist, who is a member of Skull and Bones.

He scolded me for writing the article—"writing that article was not an ethical or honorable way to make a decent living in journalism," he condescended—and then asked me how much I had been paid for the story.

When I refused to answer, he hung up. Fifteen minutes later, he called back.

"I have just gotten off the phone with our people." "Your people?" I snickered.

"Yes. Our people." He told me that the society demanded to know where I got my information.

"I've never been in the tomb and I did nothing illegal in the process of reporting this article," I replied.

"Then you must have gotten something from one of us. Tell me whom you spoke to. We just want to talk to them," he wheedled. "I don't reveal my sources."

Then he got angry. He screamed at me for a while about how dishonorable I was for writing the article. "A lot of people are very despondent over this!" he yelled. "Fifteen Yale juniors are very, very upset!" I thanked him for telling me his concerns.

"There are a lot of us at newspapers and at political journalism institutions," he coldly hissed. "Good luck with your career"—and he slammed down the phone.

Skull and Bones, particularly in recent years, has managed to pervade both popular and political culture. In the 1992 race for the Republican presidential nomination, Pat Buchanan accused President George Bush of running “a Skull and Bones presidency.”

In 1993, during Jeb Bush’s Florida gubernatorial campaign, one of his constituents asked him, “You’re familiar with the Skull and Crossbones Society?” When Bush responded, “Yeah, I’ve heard about it,” the constituent persisted, “Well, can you tell the people here what your family membership in that is? Isn’t your aim to take control of the United States?” In January 2001, New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd used Skull and Bones in a simile: “When W. met the press with his choice for attorney general, John Ashcroft, before Christmas, he vividly showed how important it is to him that his White House be as leak-proof as the Skull & Bones ‘tomb.’”

That was less than a year after the Universal Pictures film introduced the secret society to a new demographic perhaps uninitiated into the doctrines of modern-day conspiracy theory. Not long before the movie was previewed in theaters—and perhaps in anticipation of the election of George W. Bush—a letter was distributed to members from Skull and Bones headquarters. “In view of the political happenings in the barbarian world,” the memo read, “I feel compelled to remind all of the tradition of privacy and confidentiality essential to the well-being of our Order and strongly urge stout resistance to the seductions and blandishments of the Fourth Estate.” This vow of silence remains the society’s most important rule. Bonesmen have been exceedingly careful not to break this code of secrecy, and have kept specific details about the organization out of the press. Indeed, given the unusual, strict written reminder to stay silent, members of Skull and Bones may well refuse to speak to any member of the media ever again.

But they have already spoken to me. When? Over the past three years. Why? Perhaps because I am a member of one of Skull and Bones’ kindred Yale secret societies. Perhaps because some of them are tired of the Skull and Bones legend, of the claims of conspiracy theorists and some of their fellow Bonesmen. What follows, then, is the truth about Skull and Bones. And if this truth does not contain all of the conspiratorial elements that the Skull and Bones legend projects, it is perhaps all the more interesting for that fact. The story of Skull and Bones is not just the story of a remarkable secret society, but a remarkable society of secrets, some with basis in truth, some nothing but fog. Much of the way we understand the world of power involves myriad assumptions of connection and control, of cause and effect, and of coincidence that surely cannot be coincidence.