

Bush takes mild line on abortion issue;
He urges GOP to soften stance on immigration

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Body

Republican presidential candidate George W. **Bush** said Monday he would not require his Supreme Court nominees to pass an anti-**abortion** "litmus test." He pledged to uphold the dignity of the presidency, raising his right hand in an oath-swearing flourish when questioned about his character.

In a wide-ranging news conference on his maiden campaign trip, **Bush** said he swore an oath as a twice-elected Texas governor to uphold the state constitution and respect the dignity of his office.

"It is a pledge that I have upheld, so help me God," **Bush** said, his right hand still raised. He refused to discuss rumors about his personal life, dismissing them as part of a "game in Washington" that he won't play. Constitution

The Republican front-runner said he was opposed to racial quotas and preferences and was concerned about the Kosovo peace implementation plan. He said he was determined not to raise corporate or income taxes and eager to work with the Republican-led Congress.

Bush spoke in Spanish as he challenged his party to adopt a softer **stance** on **immigration**. "Our party somehow has gotten the imagery that we don't welcome legal immigrants," he added in English.

Abortion is the most divisive **issue** in Republican politics, pitting social conservatives against the more moderate establishment wing of the **GOP**. **Bush** is trying to straddle the gap between the two factions without alienating independent and Democratic voters he would need to win the general election.

"What I'm hearing right now from the governor is waffling on the one **issue** that can clearly explain compassionate conservatism," said **GOP** presidential rival Gary Bauer. "If compassionate conservative means anything, it has to mean do anything we can to stop the loss of 1.5 million unborn children every year."

Democrats still argue that **Bush** is too extreme on **abortion** for most voters. "Republicans try to avoid the **issue** to get nominated," Democratic Chairman Joe Andrew said Monday. "They never can."

Bush has said he is opposed to **abortion** and would support a constitutional amendment making the procedure illegal --- except in cases of rape, incest and when a woman's life is in jeopardy. But he also says Americans don't support the measure, thus there is no need to pursue it.

Bush told reporters he would nominate Supreme Court justices based on three criteria: judicial temperament, "do the judges share my overall philosophy, and will the judges strictly interpret the Constitution as opposed to using the bench to legislate?"

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Strict interpretation of the Constitution has come to stand --- for some candidates and voters --- for the philosophy of judges who traditionally take a conservative stance on issues, including abortion.

Bush was asked how he interprets the Constitution on abortion, and whether he would require his nominees to agree.

"There will be no litmus tests, except for whether or not the judges strictly interpret the Constitution," he said. "I am not a lawyer. My job is to pick judges who are qualified to serve on the bench."

Press Secretary Karen Hughes said afterward that Bush feels it is unethical to require a nominee to cement his or her views on any potential case --- including those on abortion --- before being nominated.

In contrast, GOP rival Pat Buchanan is "a 'yes' on an anti-abortion litmus test," according to Buchanan spokesman Bob Adams. New Hampshire Sen. Bob Smith has pledged "only to nominate pro-life justices for the Supreme Court," spokeswoman Karen Hickey said. And Steve Forbes said, "I believe you should appoint justices on matter of principle. One of those principles is belief in the sanctity of life."

On affirmative action, his relationship with Congress, taxes and character, Bush left more room than he did on the abortion question.

Appearing relaxed and confident, Bush:

Said he opposes quotas and racial preferences but believes both the private and public sectors should be encouraged to reach out to minorities. He declined to state his position on a California law that eliminated affirmative action programs.

Promised not to raise corporate or income taxes but did not extend the pledge to other taxes. Having supported two tax cuts in Texas, Bush said, "It's a record I'm proud of and a record I plan to run on."

Expressed concern about the peace plan in Kosovo and urged President Clinton to set a date for withdrawal of U.S. troops in the region. Bush declined to say what that deadline should be.

Bush has the support of many of the state's leading GOP politicians, including Sen. Judd Gregg and Public Safety Director Richard Flynn. He released endorsements from 250 local leaders Monday.

Graphic

Photo

On his maiden campaign trip, Texas Gov. George W. Bush greets an enthusiastic crowd in New Hampshire, traditionally the nation's first primary state. / ERIC DRAPER / Associated Press

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