

## Science Moves to Center Stage

Bush's Fascination With Technology Is More Evident

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Saturday, February 4, 2006; Page A06

RIO RANCHO, N.M., Feb. 3 -- Finally there may be an answer to the question of why President Bush spends so much time clearing brush at his Texas ranch.

Maybe he's collecting it to fuel his next truck.

Everywhere he goes lately, the president likes to talk about how vehicles soon will be running on ethanol made from wood chips, switch grass or even weeds. Hydrogen cars are another Bush favorite. The other day in Minnesota, he recalled visiting Brazil, where cars run on a fuel made out of sugar. Why not cleared brush?

"Technology is changing the way we think," Bush said here Friday.

The president's fascination with the gee-whiz breakthroughs of modern science may not be new, but it has certainly been more evident in the days since he made unleashing the power of research and innovation a central element of his State of the Union address. As he tours the country promoting his plan to encourage more laboratory advances and improve science education, Bush has been fixated with some of the most tantalizing new technologies in the works.

He visited a laboratory in Minnesota and a high school science classroom in Dallas. He talks about "flex-fuel" cars and solar beams and nanotechnology. ("I'm just beginning to understand what that means," he said Friday.) He waxes on about the possibilities of cellulosic technologies. ("Big word for a history major," he said Thursday. "I don't want to try to spell it.")

And, like many people about to turn 60 years old, he reflects on how fast technology has been changing the world around him. "Twenty-five years ago, most Americans used the typewriter," he said at a forum hosted at an Intel facility here, outside Albuquerque. "Isn't that interesting? Twenty-five years ago, they had such a thing as a pay phone. Now we're using cell phones. Carbon paper was used. For those youngsters here, carbon paper was kind of a messy way to duplicate things. Now we're using laser printers."

His favorite my-how-life-has-changed example is the new-generation family road trip. "I remember driving across Texas playing the license-plate game," he said, "and they're driving across Texas watching a DVD."

Bush is hardly the first president to become enthralled with the magnitude of technological change and its impact on his own presidency. His predecessor, Bill Clinton, loved talking about supercomputers, the Human Genome Project and the Internet, though at the time he didn't even know how to send an e-mail.

In some ways, it may be a recognition on the part of the occupant of the Oval Office that time marches on beyond his own power to influence it. And it may be an understanding that presidents' legacies rest in part on the developments of the eras they preside over. Clinton wanted to fashion himself as the leader ushering in the information age, the figurative bridge to the 21st century.

For Bush, the American Competitive Initiative he unveiled Tuesday allows him to respond to economic anxiety among many of his constituents about the future in a time of outsourced jobs and competition from China and India. And it allows him to hold forth on at least one relatively depoliticized subject, during an age when most everything else he has done has been surrounded by toxic partisanship.

Aides said Bush became interested in promoting such an initiative after a pile of reports stacked up on his desk lamenting the erosion in the U.S. technological advantage globally. The most influential came out in October, issued by a National Academies committee headed by retired Lockheed Martin Corp. chairman Norman R. Augustine. The report, "Rising Above the Gathering Storm," recommended a dramatic boost in research funding and science education.

Sens. Pete V. Domenici (R-N.M.), Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) followed up by meeting with Bush at the White House in mid-December, urging him to meet the Augustine challenge. Bush agreed, and he outlined a \$136 billion, 10-year plan in the State of the Union to double research spending on physical sciences, train more science and math teachers and enact a permanent research and development tax credit.

Bush has embraced the initiative with gusto. He had dinner with Domenici, Bingaman, Augustine and others in Albuquerque on Thursday night, and the two senators joined him at Friday's event at the Intel facility. Also on hand was Gov. Bill Richardson, a possible candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008.

"Here's a chance for Republicans and Democrats to put aside all the foolishness that's going on in Washington and come together and get something done for the future of this country," Bush said.

Still, as he goes about selling it, Bush likes to play off his own anti-intellectual reputation.

"Don't speak in initials," he playfully chided one participant in Friday's roundtable.

Later, talking with a high school student who enjoys math and science, Bush offered up his own experience. "You know, a lot of people probably think math and science isn't meant for me," he said. "It kind of seems a little hard, algebra. I can understand that, frankly." The audience chortled.

"I'm looking for a mentor, by the way," he added. More laughter. "Both in math and English."