Our first order of postlanding business was to review our mission film and edit two separate movies, one intended for security-cleared eyes only, the other for the public. Because of the secrecy surrounding our orbit activities, the latter had little in it. We wanted to include the fun video we had taken of our satanic crewmember in hilarious poses, but Dan Brandenstein squelched that. “If we keep showing on-orbit pranks, headquarters is going to assume control of editing our postflight movies. They’re getting pissed the press only shows us screwing off in space.” We thought it was bullshit, but understood Dan’s position and honored it. The world would never see Beelzebub clamped on a shuttle toilet.

Our postflight travel was similar to that of STS-27. I journeyed to places I can’t mention to be congratulated by people whose office titles are similarly unmentionable. I received another National Intelligence Medal of Achievement from another “black world” Wizard of Oz that I could only wear in a vault. This citation (declassified years later) reads:

…Colonel Mullane’s superior performance led to the safe deployment and successful activation of a system vital to our national security. The singularly superior performance of Colonel Mullane reflects great credit upon himself, the United States Air Force, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Intelligence Community.

At one of our stops some spooks hosted us to a candlelit dinner in their black-world building. The office secretaries acted as servers since no caterers could enter. We showed our mission movie and, lubricated by wine, I added my own editorial comments. As space video of the Boston–Cape Cod area was shown, I injected, “Moscow doesn’t have as many communists as are living in this picture.” There was a peal of laughter. Hank Hartsfield would have been proud.

The highlight of our meager postflight PR tour was a visit to George Bush, Senior’s White House. We were shocked by the invitation. STS-36 had been virtually ignored in the press. There were no women on the crew, no minorities, no firsts of any kind that might have turned out the press to cover a presidential handshake. Whatever the reason, the invitation was sincerely appreciated.

We met the president in the Oval Office, taking seats in sofas set around a coffee table. Mr. Bush sat in a nearby chair. The questions he asked indicated that he was well briefed on our mission. But it was hard to carry on a conversation. A steady stream of

aides and secretaries were constantly coming to his side to get answers to questions and his signature on documents. I wondered if the man was ever alone, even on the toilet.

I knew my air force master sergeant dad was watching from heaven, his chest puffed up with button-busting pride. It was a proud moment for me, too. What my crewmates and I had done on STS-27 and STS-36 would probably remain classified for decades. We were the most invisible of astronauts. Nobody would sing “I’m Proud to Be an American” while we were raised on a platform before the cheering masses. Our names would never be in the lyrics of a Billy Joel song. But this was infinitely better. I was standing in the Oval Office of the White House while the president of the United States shook my hand and thanked me for my contribution to America’s security.

Later, we gathered behind the president’s desk to have a crew photo taken. The desktop was littered with documents bearing red-striped “Top Secret” covers. John Casper whispered, “Mike, look at his notepad.” I did. On it was written “Gorb dinner?”—obviously the president’s self-reminder about something associated with the upcoming visit to Washington by the Gorbachevs. I whispered back to John, “Maybe he’s looking for a joke to loosen up things at a state dinner. Why don’t you suggest a golfing joke with a cow’s ass in the punch line?”

“No” was John’s terse reply.

After we finished the classified discussions, Mrs. Bush ushered in our wives to meet her husband. We all posed for photos with the First Family. The president gave each of the crew a pair of cuff links embossed with the presidential seal and the wives received a stick pin with the same logo.

It was a beautiful May day and the doors to the Rose Garden were open. At one point during the photo session a bumblebee joined us and hovered around the president’s brightly colored tie. An aide shooed it away, and it found another target…a secretary who obviously had a phobia of buzzing insects. She screamed, threw a sheaf of papers in the air, and began to run in circles, flailing at her hair and trying to escape the insect. This was hardly a scene I expected to witness in the presidential Oval Office. I whispered to Pepe, “I sure hope she doesn’t fall on the button labeled ‘DEFCON 1.’”

We left the president to his never-ending work and followed Barbara Bush on a tour of the White House. If I had not been aware she was the First Lady, I would have never guessed it from her behavior. She was talkative, witty, and completely devoid of any air of celebrity. She reminded me of my mother. I could easily picture her baiting a hook or hoisting a beer or throwing another log on the campfire.

We stepped into an ancient elevator for a trip to the upstairs living quarters. With five astronauts, five wives, Mrs. Bush, and an assistant, we were cheek to jowl in the small

volume. Mrs. Bush was directly behind me and I did my best to resist being crushed into her front. Before the elevator door closed, Millie, the first dog, somehow managed to wiggle under our feet to make it an even tighter squeeze. As the box crept upward, the silence was total. In spite of Mrs. Bush's easy manner we were all very self-conscious of her company. To occupy the uncomfortable seconds we watched the elevator indicator panel with the same intensity as an astronaut watching a space rendezvous. Some of us moved slightly to accommodate the dog. Chris Casper, John's wife, finally cracked under the oppressing silence. She nervously offered an icebreaker—"Oh, I feel it between my legs." While it was obvious she was referring to Millie's wagging tail, the words hung over our sardined group like really bad flatulence. A reference to anything between a woman's legs was tough to comment on in polite company, much less in the company of the First Lady of the nation. Chris quickly realized her mistake and tried to recover by amending her words. She nervously added, "I mean I feel the dog between my…er…my legs."

It was just too much for me to keep my mouth shut. She had served up a ball just begging to be spiked. I couldn't resist. "Are you sure it's not John's hand?" I inquired. My comment elicited a few snickers and an elbow jab from Donna. As had frequently been the case in my life, I immediately wished the joker in me would have kept quiet.What was Mrs. Bush thinking? I wondered. Maybe this time I had gone too far.

I need not have worried. As regret shot through my brain, I felt Mrs. Bush's hand lightly pat me on a butt cheek as she said, "That'sJohn's hand." Then she winked at Donna and said, "I've got him right where I want him." I was stunned. She was a Mike Mullane clone. She couldn't let a perfect setup fall to the sand—she had to nail it.

Upstairs her joking continued. She halted in front of a painting of some daughters of a forgotten nineteenth-century president. "What do you think about this portrait?"

We were all mute. The women in the painting had a striking resemblance to hogs wearing wigs and gowns. They were creatures right off of Dr. Moreau's island of horrors. As our collective silence was fast approaching embarrassment, Mrs. Bush took the heat off and answered her own question. "This is the ugliest painting I've ever seen. The women were part of the First Family, for God's sake. They could have requested some artistic license. What were they thinking? For my official portrait I intend to get an artist who will make me look good."

She led us to a room with a view of people waiting to begin their White House tour. The crowd screamed in delight and grabbed their cameras when they saw Mrs. Bush waving. She was a queen who deported herself in every way as a commoner.

She was also a proud mother and grandmother. On every table and mantel were framed photos of her family. I didn't see a single photo of her posed with any of the multitude of stars she had certainly met in her life. Clearly her VIPs were her children

and grandchildren. She spoke of her philosophy of life: “In your old age you will never regret the contract never signed, the trip never taken, the money never earned, but you will definitely regret it if your children turn out poorly because of neglect.” She used Ronald Reagan as an example. “He’s a wonderful man but he has four children who won’t speak to him.” Maybe she was giving us the unsolicited advice because she could see in our eyes how driven we were. If there was ever a collection of men vulnerable to neglecting their families, it was astronauts.

We sat for tea and cookies and she told us stories about some of the people she had met and unusual places she had traveled. She volunteered her thoughts on a controversy in which she was embroiled and that was being given significant press coverage. She had been invited to give the commencement address at Wellesley College, but, after accepting, some of the students had organized a movement to disinvite her. These women considered her a poor role model since her only identity was through her husband. Apparently, for them, being a wife and mother were not qualifying credentials for a commencement speaker. Mrs. Bush was completely gracious and accepting of their dissent, but from the first moment Donna had seen the story in the newspaper she had been furious. Donna had spent her life as a wife and mother and didn’t consider herself a second-class woman for having done so. I worried she was going to offer an opinion to Mrs. Bush along the lines that those Wellesley girls were just a bunch of small-minded, immature bitches, but she maintained her composure. Fortunately Donna didn’t have my hair-trigger mouth.

After tea, Mrs. Bush led us downstairs to finish our tour, giving us a running commentary on the history of the rooms we passed. But she skipped over some recent history I was privy to. An astronaut who had made an earlier White House visit had told of entering a room in the company of Mrs. Bush and being brought to a sudden halt by the overpowering stench of fresh dog shit. Everybody had quickly fixated on the source…Millie’s deposit. The astronaut witness had recounted how a silence as heavy as the odor had enveloped their group. Nobody wanted to acknowledge the obvious, that Millie had desecrated the carpet. But, without missing a beat, Barbara Bush turned to look at her astronaut visitors and jokingly warned, “If I read about this in thePost tomorrow, you’re all dead meat!”

Mrs. Bush would have fit perfectly into our TFNG gang. I could see her at the Outpost and Pete’s BBQ and on the LCC roof. There are some things the trappings of wealth and power and great political office can never dissolve. Among these are the bonds of the military family. As the wife of a WWII naval aviator, Barbara Bush had long ago experienced everything we had lived and were continuing to live…fear, the heartache of hearing “Taps” played over friends’ graves, and consoling grieving widows and fatherless children.

As we walked away, I thought of those dissident Wellesley women. They had been right about one thing—Mrs. Bush shouldn’t have been invited to speak at their

commencement merely because she was the First Lady. Any woman could be one of those. Rather, she should have been invited because she was a member of the Greatest Generation, because she had kissed her man off to war and been left to wonder if she would ever see him again, because—as the loving and supportive wife of a WWII naval aviator—she had done her part to save the world. Those were commencement address qualifications for any college, even Wellesley.