

# A Private Journey Comes Full Circle

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*Rebellion and Return - Part 3 of 6*

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Five days after his graduation from Princeton, on June 19, 1965, Crystal City, Mo., declared Bill Bradley Day. Thirty-eight vehicles, among them a white flowered float, a marching band, Gov. Warren E. Hearnes in his limousine, and most of the fire trucks from Festus to Herculaneum, paraded down Eighth Avenue behind a red-and-white banner commanding, "SALUTE BILL BRADLEY."

Old home movies of the event, preserved by Bradley's scoutmaster, Red Bryant, show Bradley waving awkwardly to the crowds from an open coupe. That night, over roast beef and apple pie at a banquet held on the old high school gymnasium floor, the Chamber of Commerce presented him a set of matched luggage for his trip to the University of Oxford, where he would be a Rhodes scholar.

The journey turned out differently than his sponsors supposed. The British cared no more about Bradley's fame than most Americans did a cricket star's. Delighted, Bradley found an anonymity he had not experienced since grade school. He used it to experiment, raising fundamental questions about his life. Bradley lived out a postponed teenage rebellion and reconsidered every aspect of his headlong race toward accomplishment. When the two-year idyll ended, most of Bradley's goals were intact – but not all of them.

A few days after Bradley's arrival in Oxford, Bill Kingston wrote his old roommate with exactly the right question. "I shall be most interested in hearing all about . . . your response to the more normal environment," Kingston asked in the Oct. 25, 1965, letter. "I hope that you have been able to find the latter."

Had he ever. Bradley shed his celebrity before he even reached England's shore. Aboard the Queen Mary for the Atlantic passage, he shared a cabin with Jack Horton, a swashbuckling older Rhodes who had flown intelligence missions for the Air Force. Informed that the British press awaited the American sporting star at Southampton, Bradley winced. Horton offered to shake them.

"Jack put on a Sherlock Holmes hat and a pipe, picked up a violin case" and tucked a Bible and a volume of Shakespeare under his arm, according to Bart Holaday, who watched with stifled hilarity along with the rest of the arriving Americans. Horton then strode ashore and declared himself to be Bill Bradley in the flesh. "He had a lacrosse stick," Holaday said, "and he explained to the press that it was his basketball stick. He said you came down the court and rolled the ball down the stick and then up into the basket."

In the England of the mid-1960s, most reporters – like most Oxford students – could not have picked a basketball out of a lineup. "Nobody knew a thing about the American sport," said Richard Smethurst, then Bradley's tutor at Worcester College and now its provost. "We knew he was famous, but we had no idea what it all meant."

Bradley got away clean. Next time a reporter paid a call, knocking on his dormitory door, he stepped out his ground-floor window into a fountained garden and disappeared.

## Getting Away

Oxford was another world. Ducks and geese roamed the college lawns, and Bradley had no schedule to be slave to. On some mornings, Eduardo Garcia – Bradley's manservant in college, a role Oxford calls a

“scout” – would even find the habitual early riser asleep when he came to nudge him with the announcement, “Good morning, sir, it’s 8 o’clock!”

Bradley found himself departing in other ways from the timetable he had drawn up for his career. In the high school yearbooks of friends he admired, the highest praise he bestowed was to forecast, as he did to classmate Janet Biehle, that “you’ll succeed because you have that one intangible quality which many people lack – desire.” Bradley still had plenty of desire, but he found himself uncertain of its object.

To his close friend John Schwent, Bradley had written in 1960: “When the next ten years are up, then is the time to evaluate your accomplishments. Remember one thing: never let down, never give up and most of all work on your faith in God.” Halfway through that allotted decade, Bradley changed his mind, at least for a time. He let down. And his religion had become a source of more puzzlement than faith.

“I’m just a boy with my eyes wide open, absorbing all sorts of new things,” Bradley told one visitor that fall, who made notes of the conversation.

On the day of his arrival, he walked well past sundown with Michael E. Smith, a fellow Princeton Rhodes scholar who roomed across the hall from him in Stairway Eighteen of the brown brick New Building. Smith recalled, “It was discovery time. Bill was discovering Oxford and himself. It was the first day of his new life.”

What Smith observed in the coming months was “a lot of adolescent behavior that seemed odd. He was playing a lot, trying things out, goofing around.”

Bradley got in food fights in Worcester’s vaulted dining room, heaving buttered rolls at Britons garbed for supper in the required black ties and academic gowns. He played contact sports with abandon, for the first time since breaking a leg in football at age 9. He bought a used Volkswagen and raced it, in blatant affront to local ordinance, along the quiet roads outside town. He and Smith squeezed onto a Vespa motorbike, large men both, ridiculous figures with knees bent to their chests. Gown flapping behind him, Bradley clowned and waved to passersby.

One night in Greece, vacationing between terms, Bradley drank a quantity of ouzo and stood up in a night club, attempting to speak phrase-book Greek. In a booming voice, switching to English, he introduced “the famous jazz pianist, Michael Smith,” to great applause. “What I did was to play ‘Blue Moon,’ “ Smith said. “It was pretty good. It was, however, my only song.”

Bradley did not only revel in escaping the limelight. He studied it. He discussed with Oxford dons, as former Worcester dean of men Harry Pitt recalls, the distorting effects of young celebrity. He assigned himself Daniel J. Boorstin’s book “The Image,” in which Boorstin described the transforming effects of high-speed printing, photography, radio and motion pictures. Combined, Boorstin wrote, they gave rise to “the means of fabricating well-knownness” and to the celebrity as “a person who is known for his well-knownness.” Boorstin noted: “Of course we do not like to believe that our admiration is focused on a largely synthetic product.”

“In that first year at Oxford,” Bradley said, “I remember reading Boorstin’s book, and that spoke directly to what I was trying to puzzle through in my life, which was one of the reasons I chose to go to Oxford as opposed to playing professional basketball: to get out of the environment of well-knownness and to puzzle through what it meant. How do you survive in such an environment and be true to yourself?”

Bradley packed a six-foot shelf of novels and read more of them than the philosophy, politics and econom-

ics he had signed up for, plunging into new worlds of imagination. (*Eventually, he sat for exams and got “third-class honors” in his own subjects, a barely passing degree.*) He read Albert Camus’ “The Fall,” then traveled to Amsterdam to examine its setting; Thomas Mann’s “Death in Venice,” then Italy. Joseph Conrad, with his themes of darkness beneath civilization’s veneer, made an impression on Bradley he talked about for years.

One of Bradley’s favorite activities at Oxford was a game Smith called “Let’s pretend.” He would strike up conversations with strangers, affecting to be someone he was not or to hold opinions that were not his own. “In my imagination, it’s like this,” Smith said. “He can’t have been confident that his understanding of the world and of others wasn’t false, because he knew the world’s understanding of him was false. If somebody says to you as a high school senior, ‘You’re going to be president’ – to be told crap like that, over and over, it seems to me it’s bound to sap your confidence...because you know the world is not responding to you. It’s responding to some part of itself that is projected upon you.” Bradley had to “touch the world, throw bread at it, find out how it reacts.”

Bradley did not quite abandon his past. “It’s possible to live life, close doors, but leave them ajar this much, so you’ve closed the door but you haven’t locked it,” Bradley said in an interview.

## **Edging Toward Home**

With all the experimenting, Bradley might have discovered “that he’s an altogether different person,” Smith said. “Of course it doesn’t exactly turn out that way.”

One door left ajar led to the gymnasium. Bradley had walked away from his first-round draft selection by the New York Knicks, in favor of the Rhodes, and he told friends as well as reporters that he did not expect to play pro ball when he returned. But Bradley left himself an opening.

Before he had been in England a month, he allowed himself to be talked into flying to Milan. The basketball team there – sponsored by the Italian meatpacker Simmenthal – recruited him to make a run at the European Cup, one weekend a month. When Simmenthal reached the championship, the Milanese crowds mobbed him and screamed “Super- Uomo.” Italy, unlike England, had fallen for basketball.

By the fall of 1966, as he began his second Oxford year, Bradley began to think more about the Knicks. He made contact with Larry Fleischer, a New York sports agent, and had dinner with Marty Glickman, Fleischer’s partner, at a riverside pub in Oxford.

In January 1967, the ball player-turned-politician Rep. Morris Udall (D-Ariz.) passed through Oxford. He looked up the 23-year-old Bradley, and told a local audience in Tucson about their conversation when he returned. “He said the professional basketball people are after him to sign and he wondered how pro basketball and politics might mix,” Udall said then. “I thought it might help him if he talked with [Supreme Court Justice Byron] ‘Whizzer’ White.”

Two months later, in Washington, Udall introduced Bradley to White, a college football star who played in the NFL. “I went over and talked to him and he said he thought I ought to play, and I said, ‘You know, I don’t want to be just an athlete,’ “ Bradley told tennis great Arthur Ashe in a conversation televised by the ESPN cable network in 1987. “And he said...‘If you play basketball and use your time in the off-season, you can have the double benefit of doing something you love and at the same time develop other aspects of your life.’ “

First, Bradley had to face a decision on the draft. He had applications to Harvard and Yale law schools, and

he had solicited information about a possible teaching post at West Point. But law school might not shield him from conscription, Bradley wrote, because “my board has told me that another deferment after Oxford would be difficult.” Bradley turned to the Air Force Reserve.

Not long after meeting Udall in Oxford, Bradley flew home for a visit to New Jersey’s McGuire Air Force Base. He found a regulation enabling him to secure a reserve commission without prior military service. Introduced by an Air Force friend, he met Col. Campbell Y. Jackson on Jan. 12, 1967, and soon had a weekend reserve job in the 514th Troop Carrier Wing – commuting distance from Madison Square Garden, and a long way from Southeast Asia.

His two-year fling was over. Bradley picked up his career where he had left it – in basketball, with a view to politics after that.

## **Rebellion’s End**

Just before he left Oxford, Bradley had a visit from William S. Sword Sr., an investment banker and Princeton alumnus. He offered a variation on the advice Bradley had heard in White’s Supreme Court chamber, this time with a reading list.

Sword told Bradley he would tire of the traveling performer’s life and should prepare himself for politics by calling on someone interesting in every NBA city. There in the hotel dining room, Sword wrote out a list of politicians and intellectuals he could introduce. In Detroit, for instance, Bradley could “learn something about capitalism” from economists like Paul McCracken, Doug Hayes, Marina von Neuman Whitman. “On foolscap I also made a list of books for him to read, eight to 10 pages,” Sword recalled. Sword’s breakfast program became Bradley’s hallmark on the road. He seldom traveled without a volume of serious nonfiction and a list of people to look up.

Because of Bradley’s Oxford image and political hopes, Knicks trainer Danny Whelan took to calling him “Mr. President.” In the locker room it caught on. When President Lyndon B. Johnson withdrew from the 1968 presidential race in Bradley’s rookie season, teammates phoned Bradley to rib him, demanding to know whether he planned to throw his hat in for the Democratic nomination.

“He’d just smile, that same smile,” teammate Earl Monroe recalled. “That one eyebrow that he lifts all the time.”

Phil Jackson, another teammate who went on to coach the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers, said the speculation did not remain a joke. “A curious number of people started wondering, ‘Is this guy really going to run for office?’” he said.

Bradley, characteristically, neither discouraged nor encouraged the question directly. But by the time he ran for Senate, in 1978, he based his campaign on the slogan that he had taken “a different road” to politics. “I chose that road deliberately,” he told writer John L. Phillips then. “Basketball was a means to this end. It gave me the time and opportunity to prepare for politics. I chose it from the outset with this kind of jump in mind.”

Searching for an entry point in politics, the Missouri native began with his home state. Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton urged him to run for comptroller in 1972, and Bradley consulted a rising St. Louis alderman named Richard Gephardt. “He was really thinking about it,” teammate Dave DeBusschere said. “He wanted it.”

His first public opinion poll did not look promising. “He had done a survey to find out what his name

recognition was, and he found out there was a difference between Missouri and New Jersey,” Phil Jackson said. A lot of Missourians confused Bradley with his football namesake, who played for St. Louis. DeBusschere teased Bradley about the state’s fickle memory for its heroes.

The political establishment had not forgotten him, but part of it wanted to. After Bradley passed up the treasurer’s race on April 25, he sounded out prospects for the newly created 10th District congressional seat. Tom Hagan, his father’s deputy at the bank, arranged meetings with local Democratic stalwarts in Hagan’s kitchen.

“He ran into that kind of attitude that you’re shooting too high, you need to pay your dues at the local level,” said John Anderson, a county judge who received one such summons. Bob Freese, then and now a political sponsor, said local officeholders “wanted him to start at the bottom like the rest of the good ol’ boys. They weren’t in any mood to coronate him as the next congressman, governor, senator, just because his name was Bill Bradley.”

Bradley did not even manage to land a slot as delegate to the 1972 Democratic convention. Oscar “Bud” Kasten, punishing Bradley for his Aunt Elizabeth Partney’s attempt to unseat Kasten as local assessor, turned fellow members of the Democratic machine against a young man “trying to jump in,” according to Anderson.

## **A Surprise Wedding**

Knicks captain Willis Reed, today senior vice president of the New Jersey Nets, said he became convinced that Bradley would really run for office when he heard that his teammate had flown secretly to Florida and married on Jan. 14, 1974. “At that time,” Reed explained, “all politicians were married.”

Apart from traveling roommate DeBusschere, not one of Bradley’s friends knew of his wedding plans. The Rev. Samuel M. Lindsay of the Royal Poinciana Chapel, Palm Beach’s oldest church, officiated at the noontime ceremony. The only witnesses were Bradley’s parents and the legally required third party, Lindsay’s secretary. Warren Bradley, the groom’s father, told a reporter afterward that the bride was “a professor at some college up there.”

Ernestine Schlant, a German-born scholar of comparative literature at New Jersey’s Montclair State University, did not fit most expectations for Bradley’s life mate.

“One way I can track the way Bill has changed is by the kind of woman I thought he’d marry at different times,” said Daniel Okimoto, Bradley’s Princeton roommate. “In college it would’ve been someone like Diane Sawyer – beautiful, a celebrity herself, smart. When he was playing for the Knicks, I thought it would be a psychologist, a social worker, someone concerned with the environment or civil rights- -a social activist – but someone who deeply cared about relationships.”

In the early 1970s, Bradley was a man of strong political views and scant private life. His 18th-floor apartment at 888 Eighth Ave. in Manhattan had bare floors, an orange crate for a bed stand and posters of Malcolm X, Bobby Kennedy and the waifish model, Twiggy, on his wall. Approached constantly by attractive female fans who hoped to be more than friends, he fell instead for an academic eight years older who had never heard of him or watched him play.

“For Bill, having a woman of her quality attracted to him was exciting,” Okimoto said. “She was not attracted to him out of image or celebrity.” Bradley, many friends said, was far more awed by her than she was by him.

By the time he married, Bradley had given up on Missouri politics. He stopped reading Missouri history and started a multivolume statistical abstract of New Jersey. He and Schlant bought a house in Denville, N.J., inconveniently distant from Manhattan but set in the 13th Congressional District of Republican Rep. Joseph J. Maraziti. Democrats thought Maraziti vulnerable in that Watergate midterm election, and in fact he went on to lose. Bradley made elaborate preparations to run, but decided at the last minute to pass.

He and his friends have disparate explanations why. Jackson blamed “his internal whatever he wanted to be in touch with.” Sword said Bradley found out in firehouse appearances that even congressmen get mostly questions about constituent services, and “he just decided he didn’t want to worry about bridges over creeks.” By the time he ran for office – straight to the Senate, in 1978 – he had come full circle on celebrity. He was comfortable making use of it now, while drawing strict lines of defense against personal intrusion. He invited Robert Redford, Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, even John Belushi, to campaign for him.

Asked what he could bring his state that the Democratic establishment’s choice, Richard Leone, could not, he said this: “I would better represent the state and focus more national attention on New Jersey. In some sense I would use what well-knownness I have.”

He even employed an icon of himself for fund-raising. Pop artist LeRoy Neiman painted his portrait, and Bradley made hundreds of prints.

Neiman, chief fund-raiser Peter J. Burke told supporters in an April 9, 1978, letter, “has done a painting of Bill exclusively for this campaign. We have made very fine 28 x 42 [inch] color prints of this painting.... We appreciate your support of the campaign to date, but ask that you make an additional contribution of \$50 or more, and we will send you one of these prints.”

The letter did not mention it, but \$500 contributors got something better. They got the print with Bradley’s autograph.

*Staff researchers Madonna Lebling and Mary Lou White and special correspondent Christine B. Whelan in Oxford, England, contributed to this report.*

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