

Don't 'misunderestimate' Josh Brolin

The actor is uncanny as Bush in Oliver Stone's biopic — and whether he likes it or not, the parallels don't end there

BY XAN BROOKS
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I'm barely in my seat before Josh Brolin is reeling off the reasons why he almost said no to playing US President George W. Bush. First off, he is no fan of the sitting president. Second, he was wary of working with director Oliver Stone, who has a reputation as a loose cannon, "a leftist hammer." And if that weren't enough, he had to listen to Stone's constant, clamoring insistence that Brolin actually had more in common with Bush than he cared to admit. "Oliver kept talking about the similarities between Bush and I, which really pissed me off. I don't see them," says Brolin. "I don't understand it."

But let's look at the evidence. *W* tells the tale of a reckless, feckless playboy who follows his father into the family business, makes an ass of himself for a decade or two and then abruptly turns his life around on his 40th birthday. He is played by the eldest son of Hollywood mainstay James Brolin. Junior spent 20 years spinning his wheels in largely unremarkable movies before ascending to the A-list. By a happy chance, Josh Brolin turned 40 just weeks after signing on the dotted line.

There's no denying he's earned his spurs. In person, Brolin looks every inch the movie star; a toned, rangy alpha male who parries questions with an easy drawl that is one part good ole boy, one part stoner. And yet on screen there can be something low-key — even anonymous — about him. You might have caught him in his film debut as a teenage jock in *The Goonies*, or as the gay cop who licks Patricia Arquette's armpit in *Flirting With Disaster*. More likely you first clocked him in *No Country for Old Men*, although even here his character was so deeply embedded in the warp and woof of the film that it was easy

to overlook in favor of Javier Bardem or Tommy Lee Jones. "Yeah," he says when I mention this. "But that's a compliment in a roundabout way."

W is different. Brolin's performance is a showstopper, a firework display. It catches Bush's hesitant vocal rhythms and fidgety physical tics with an accuracy that is rather eerie. Judged as a film, Stone's movie is a bit of a Horlicks. Viewed as an acting masterclass, it's endlessly entertaining. Brolin's co-stars include Richard Dreyfuss as an implacable Dick Cheney, Scott Glenn as Donald Rumsfeld and Thandie Newton as the Uriah Heep-ish Condoleezza Rice. At one stage our merry band get hopelessly lost on the dirt tracks of Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, while plotting the war on Iraq.

I suggest that Bush is something of a construct himself — an East Coast aristocrat playing the part of the Texas

cowboy. But Brolin is having none of it. "No," he says. "He really is that guy. He didn't grow up in the east, he grew up in Texas. That's where his roots are, and I do think his intentions are pure. I think he's surrounded by, you know, very, very ... I don't want to say evil."

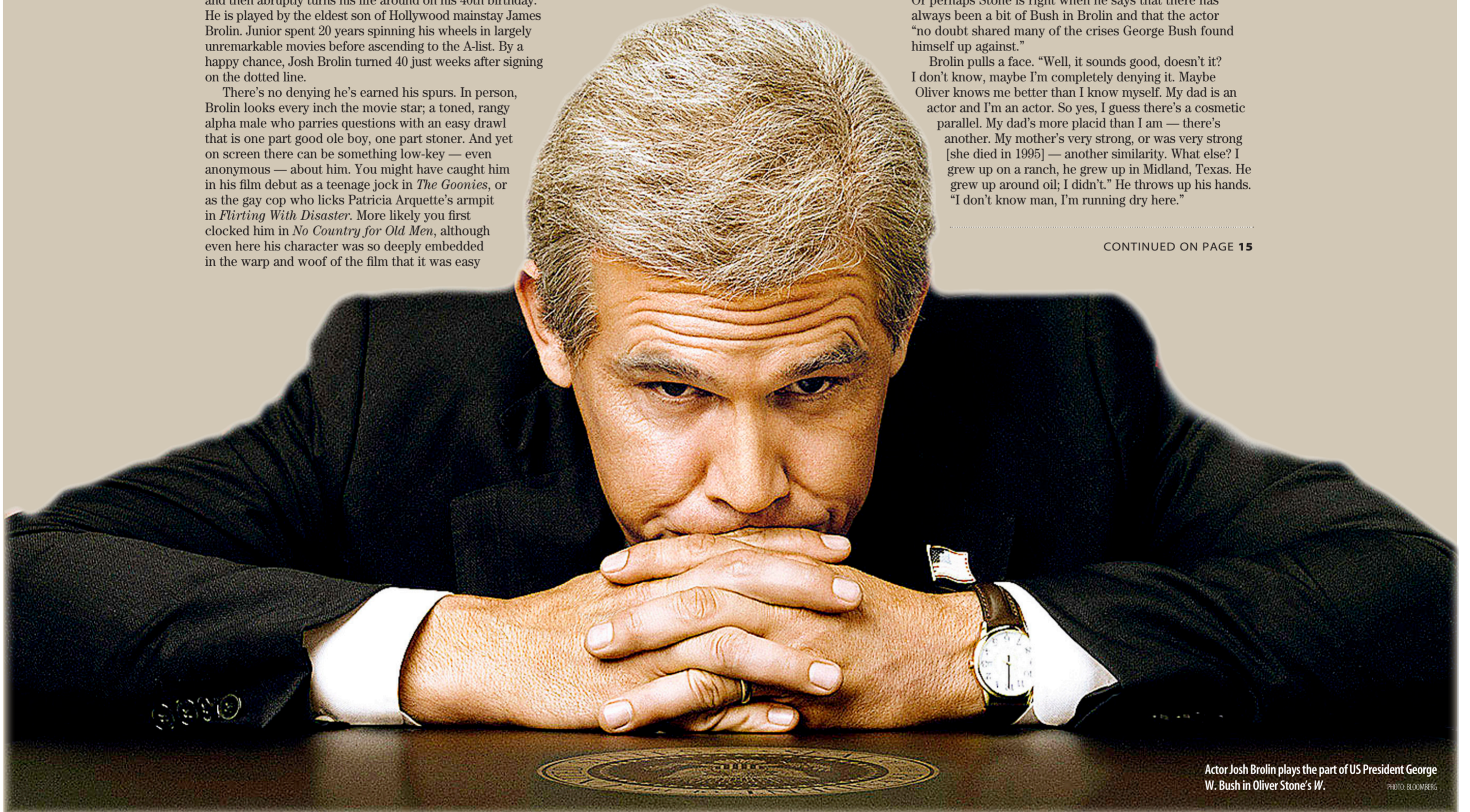
Oh go on — say evil.

"I don't want to say evil, even though I just said it. Let's just say that they are people with massive agendas. But I don't think this was the impact that he initially wanted to have on the world. I think he wanted to have a positive effect."

Against the odds, he found himself admiring certain aspects of Bush's personality: the way he battled his demons, the way he treats his family. Maybe that's a hazard of the job. Maybe the longer you spend in someone's skin, the more you come to identify with him. Or perhaps Stone is right when he says that there has always been a bit of Bush in Brolin and that the actor "no doubt shared many of the crises George Bush found himself up against."

Brolin pulls a face. "Well, it sounds good, doesn't it? I don't know, maybe I'm completely denying it. Maybe Oliver knows me better than I know myself. My dad is an actor and I'm an actor. So yes, I guess there's a cosmetic parallel. My dad's more placid than I am — there's another. My mother's very strong, or was very strong [she died in 1995] — another similarity. What else? I grew up on a ranch, he grew up in Midland, Texas. He grew up around oil; I didn't." He throws up his hands. "I don't know man, I'm running dry here."

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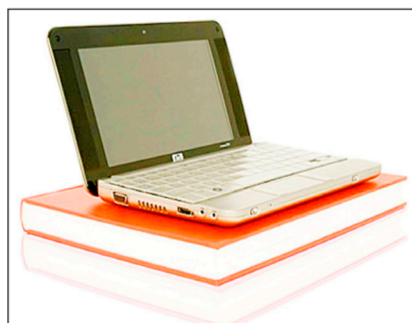
Actor Josh Brolin plays the part of US President George W. Bush in Oliver Stone's *W*. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

[TECHNOLOGY REVIEWS]



Amex's BDR-2.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Hewlett-Packard's Mini 1000.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



The iConvert Slide and Negative Scanner.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



Samsung's TruDirect DVD recorder.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



Ipevo's TR10 speakerphone.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES



Toshiba's Portege R600 laptop.

PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

NOW YOU CAN BURN YOUR OWN BLU-RAY HD DISCS, ON MAC OR PC, FOR LESS MONEY

The high-definition format wars are over, but if all that corporate combat got you excited for Blu-ray HD DVDs, you'll be pleased to see the relatively low-cost BDR-2 by Amex, a US\$389 portable Blu-ray recorder for Macs and PCs.

The drive burns CDs, DVDs and Blu-ray discs at standard speeds. It plays back all Blu-ray discs and even supports double-layer Blu-ray disc reading and writing, for storing up to 10 gigabytes on one disc.

The drive requires Mac or Windows software — it includes only a cable and drivers — and connects to any USB port. It weighs 340g and is 12.7cm wide by 12.7cm long. It comes in black or white.

Amex is a small company that sells home media devices including larger Blu-ray players for the Asian market. Most of its products, including the BDR-2, are expected to be available online next month. Blu-ray may not have a terribly long future (because of the increasing availability of HD downloads), so buying a BDR-2 for less than other Blu-ray burners cost may be a smart move.

LAPTOP LITE WITH WINDOWS XP (AND SOON LINUX)

Hewlett-Packard is getting small. A gaggle of miniaturized notebooks, announced last week and collectively called the Mini 1000, will be available in various configurations that begin at US\$379. The group is described as less capable than full-fledged laptops, but ideal for using the Internet on the go.

Most models operate with Windows XP, including a US\$399 version available this week, fitted out with an 8.9-inch screen and an 8-gigabyte solid-state drive. For US\$50 more, buyers can get a 10.2-inch screen without increasing the case size (26cm by 16.8cm by 2.5cm). Other variations include larger-capacity solid-state and revolving hard drives.

A Linux version with mobile applications will be US\$379 when it ships in January. All have Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth is an option. A cellular-data version is due out next month. Weighing in at 1kg to 1.08kg, depending on screen size, these devices can almost go from shoulder bag to purse — or even a generously sized pocket.

TURNING NEGATIVES AND OLD SLIDES INTO DIGITAL MEMORIES

Preserving memories made in the digital age is easy and inexpensive. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about that pile of slides and negatives from your 1984 Halloween party.

The iConvert Slide and Negative Scanner from Brookstone is a welcome alternative to paying a professional to do such work for you. Plug the 35mm scanner into your computer's USB port, hit scan and the iConvert will use its 5-megapixel sensor and 3,600-dots-per-inch enhancement to save the images to your desktop.

The digital converter works with both Windows XP and Vista and comes with its own photo-editing software (though serious photo enthusiasts might be better off using Adobe Photoshop or a similar program). Patience is definitely a virtue when using the scanner because the holder accommodates only three slides at a time. You can buy additional slide trays from Brookstone's Web site.

The iConvert Slide and Negative Scanner is US\$130. The picture of you as a member of Prince and the Revolution is, of course, priceless.

DVD BURNER FOR VIDEOS AND SLIDE SHOWS

Samsung expanded its TruDirect line of DVD burners last month with a low-profile external drive. The Slim External TruDirect DVD recorder (US\$109), which started shipping last week, works only with the Windows operating system. No A/C adapter is needed to power the drive. Instead, it connects to a PC with a USB connection (but it requires the use of two USB ports).

Samsung said that transfer speeds can be up to 10.8 megabytes a second, and that one hour of video can be burned in 30 minutes. With the bundled editing software from Nero, you can create videos, slide shows or audio slide shows, burn DVDs and CDs, or back up data. But the software is limited in its audio and picture-editing capabilities. Samsung said the drive was compatible with any editing and burning software on the market today, and once your new DVD was created, it could be viewed on any computer or DVD player. The DVD burner also prints discs.

The DVD burner supports only discs with LightScribe technology, which etches images directly onto the disc. The label-making software is preloaded on the drive, which prints only in gray scale.

FINALLY, A SPEAKERPHONE MADE JUST FOR MACS

It's a frustration that vexes many Apple users. Some products just aren't made for Macs. Until now, Ipevo's TR10 speakerphone was on that list.

The TR10, previously made for Skype users only, has been introduced for iChat. Marketed as the first speakerphone made exclusively for iChat use, the TR10 also acts as a personal handset and recorder, depending on how you position it. When upright, the TR10 works as a personal speakerphone. Rest it flat next to your desktop to record podcasts using Apple's GarageBand.

The TR10 can also be toggled to handset mode for more private conversations. The speakerphone comes with echo cancellation, a 1.5m voice reception range, one-touch iChat answering and hanging-up mode and a conference option that can handle up to four calls simultaneously.

You can also use the TR10 to listen to music on iTunes. Sorry, PC users, the US\$80 TR10 for iChat is Mac-compatible only.

A LIGHTWEIGHT SUCCESSOR PACKS A PORTABLE PUNCH

With all eyes on Apple last month, some other noteworthy product introductions did not get their fair share of fanfare. Take the Toshiba Portege R600 laptop.

In case you missed it, the R600 is 1.96cm thick and a lightweight 1kg, and still includes a DVD-SuperMulti drive. Unlike owners of the MacBook Air, R600 owners don't have to give up their optical drive for portability's sake.

The R600, successor to the R500, can run 7 1/2 hours on its battery, and features a 12.1-inch diagonal widescreen display and a centered touchpad. At US\$2,100, the laptop offers a 160-gigabyte hard drive; for US\$3,000, you get a 128-gigabyte solid state drive. The R600 also comes with technology that continuously checks battery life and CPU temperatures, and sees that the hard drive is functioning properly, which should help the laptop last longer.

Also of note are its LED-backlight display, built-in webcam and microphone, 3 gigabytes of memory and Intel Core 2 Duo Processor. Perhaps you can compare apples to oranges after all.

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