



Everything About Skull & Bones Secret Society

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1. Introduction

The Skull and Bones society, officially known as The Order of Skull and Bones or Order 322, is one of the most enigmatic, influential, and controversial collegiate secret societies in the United States. Founded at Yale University in 1832, it has become synonymous with elite power, secrecy, and a mystique that has fueled both scholarly inquiry and conspiracy theories for nearly two centuries. The society's reputation is built not only on its clandestine rituals and exclusive membership but also on the extraordinary influence wielded by its alumni across the highest echelons of politics, business, law, and culture. This report provides a comprehensive, data-driven exploration of Skull and Bones, tracing its origins, historical development, rituals, membership, influence, controversies, and the many conspiracy theories that have surrounded it. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, including academic studies, journalistic investigations, and insider accounts, this analysis aims to separate fact from fiction and offer a nuanced understanding of the society's place in American history and contemporary life.

2. Origins and Historical Evolution

2.1 Founding and Early Years (1832–1856)

Skull and Bones was founded in 1832 by William Huntington Russell and Alphonso Taft, following a dispute among Yale's debating societies over the selection of Phi Beta Kappa award recipients. Dissatisfied with the outcome and inspired by secret societies he had encountered during his studies in Germany, Russell, along with Taft (father of future U.S. President William Howard Taft), established a new society initially known as the Eulogian Club. The society soon adopted the more evocative name "Skull and Bones" after a member sketched a skull and crossbones on a meeting notice to attract attention.^{1 2 3}

The society's early years were marked by a deliberate effort to distinguish itself from other campus organizations. It adopted a unique lexicon—members were "knights," alumni "patriarchs," meetings were held in a "temple," and outsiders were "barbarians".⁴ The society's badge, featuring a skull and crossbones above the number 322, became its enduring symbol. The meaning of "322" is debated, but the most widely accepted theory is that it references the year 322 BCE, the death of the Greek orator Demosthenes, which marked the end of Athenian democracy and the rise of oligarchic rule—a symbolic nod to the society's elite and secretive nature.^{5 6 7}

Initially, Skull and Bones met in rented rooms in New Haven, but by 1856, the society had amassed enough resources to construct its own headquarters, known as the "Tomb." This windowless, Egypto-Doric style building on High Street became the first freestanding fraternity house at Yale and remains a central locus of the society's activities.^{8 9}

2.2 Institutionalization and Expansion (1856–1900)

In 1856, the society was formally incorporated as the Russell Trust Association, a nonprofit entity that would hold title to the Tomb and manage the society's assets.^{10 11} The Tomb itself was expanded in 1883 and again in 1903, reflecting the society's growing membership and resources. The building's forbidding exterior—dark sandstone blocks, iron doors, and a nearly flat roof—became a symbol of the society's impenetrability and mystique.¹²

During this period, Skull and Bones began to exert a profound influence on Yale's culture and administration. Membership was highly selective, with the society tapping 15 juniors each year—typically campus leaders, athletes, and students from prominent families. The society's alumni network quickly be-

came a powerful force in American business, politics, and academia.¹³

2.3 The Golden Age and the Rise of the Bonesmen (1900–1960) The first half of the 20th century is often regarded as the golden age of Skull and Bones. The society's membership roster reads like a who's who of American power: three U.S. presidents (William Howard Taft, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush), numerous senators, cabinet secretaries, Supreme Court justices, diplomats, and business magnates.^{14 15} The society's influence extended into the highest echelons of government, finance, and media, with members playing key roles in the founding of institutions such as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Institution, and major universities.¹⁶

The society's internal culture during this era was marked by exclusivity, secrecy, and elaborate rituals. Initiation ceremonies reportedly involved macabre symbolism—drinking from a skull, lying in a coffin, and sharing intimate secrets—to foster loyalty and a sense of brotherhood.¹⁷

Skull and Bones' dominance at Yale was reflected in the fact that, from the mid-1800s to 1950, nearly every Yale president and many key administrators were Bonesmen.¹⁸ The society's alumni network became a pipeline to positions of power, with members supporting each other's careers and maintaining a lifelong commitment to the order.

2.4 Challenges, Reforms, and Modernization (1960–Present) The 1960s and 1970s brought significant challenges to Skull and Bones, as broader social changes forced the society to confront its traditions of exclusivity and discrimination. Amidst the civil rights movement and growing criticism of elitism, the society admitted its first Black member

in 1965 and the president of Yale's gay student organization in 1975.^{19 20} The most contentious issue was the admission of women. Although Yale became coeducational in 1969, Skull and Bones remained all-male until 1992, when a combination of undergraduate votes, alumni resistance, and legal challenges finally led to the inclusion of women.^{21 22}

The society's demographic composition has continued to evolve in the 21st century. Recent classes have included a diverse array of members, including Black women, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and first-generation, low-income students.²³ In 2020, Skull and Bones tapped its first entirely non-white class, reflecting a broader push for diversity and inclusion within elite institutions.²⁴

Despite these changes, the society has maintained its core traditions and secrecy. Membership remains highly selective, with 15 juniors tapped each spring during the ritual of "Tap Day." The society's affairs are still shrouded in mystery, and members are sworn to lifelong secrecy.¹³

3. Rituals, Traditions, and Symbols

3.1 The Skull and Crossbones and the Number 322 The most recognizable symbol of Skull and Bones is the skull and crossbones, often accompanied by the number 322. This emblem draws on a long tradition of memento mori imagery—reminders of mortality—used in Western art, religion, and secret societies.²⁵ In the context of Skull and Bones, the symbol is both a literal and metaphorical marker: it signals the society's preoccupation with mortality, secrecy, and the transformation of its members through ritual "death" and rebirth.²⁶

The number 322 is widely believed to reference the year 322 BCE, the death of the

Greek orator Demosthenes, marking the end of Athenian democracy and the rise of oligarchic rule.²⁷ Other theories suggest it refers to the society's founding in 1832 as the "second chapter" of a German university society, or to a Masonic lodge numbered 322 in Suffolk, UK.²⁸ The ambiguity of the number's meaning is itself a part of the society's mystique.²⁹

3.2 The Tomb: Architecture and Atmosphere

The society's headquarters, known as "The Tomb," is a windowless, Egyptian Revival-style building on High Street in New Haven, Connecticut, completed in 1856 and expanded several times since.³⁰ The Tomb is designed to be impenetrable to outsiders, with thick sandstone walls, padlocked iron doors, and no windows, ensuring absolute privacy for the society's activities.³¹ The interior is described as sepulchral and macabre, decorated with skeletons, skulls (both real and artificial), coffins, and other funerary artifacts.³² The most private room, the Inner Temple or Room 322, is said to contain a skeleton called Madame Pompadour and compartments holding the society's most cherished manuscripts, including the secrecy oath and instructions for conducting initiation.³³

The Tomb's design and décor are not merely for show; they serve to create an atmosphere of solemnity, otherworldliness, and separation from the "barbarian world" outside. This environment is central to the society's rituals, which are intended to impress upon initiates the gravity of their new status and the seriousness of the bonds they are about to form.³⁴

3.3 Initiation Rituals and Society Culture

Initiation is the most secretive and symbolically charged event in the Skull and Bones calendar. While the society's code of silence makes it difficult to verify every detail, a combina-

tion of journalistic investigations, leaked accounts, and rare first-hand testimonies provides a reasonably consistent picture of the proceedings.³⁵

Initiation takes place in April, often over a weekend, and involves both current members and alumni ("patriarchs"), who return to supervise and participate in the ceremonies.³⁶ The process is theatrical, elaborate, and designed to be both intimidating and transformative. Initiates are led, often blindfolded, into the Tomb, where they are subjected to a series of symbolic ordeals intended to represent death, judgment, and rebirth into the society.³⁷

Key elements of the initiation include:

- **Symbolic Death and Rebirth:** Initiates are placed in a coffin or crypt, sometimes naked, and carried or led through the Tomb while members chant "reborn, reborn".³⁸ This act symbolizes the "death" of the initiate's old identity and their "rebirth" as a member of the Order.³⁹
- **Kissing the Skull:** Initiates are required to kneel and kiss a skull—sometimes said to be the skull of Geronimo, the Apache leader whose remains were allegedly stolen by Bonesmen in 1918.⁴⁰ This act is both a gesture of submission and a memento mori, reminding initiates of their mortality and the seriousness of their new allegiance.⁴¹
- **Confession and Autobiography:** Each initiate must deliver a detailed oral autobiography, including their most intimate secrets and sexual history, to the assembled members. This confessional practice, known as "Connubial Bliss" (CB), is intended to forge deep bonds of trust and vulnerability among members.⁴²
- **Mock Rituals and Theatrical Tableaux:** The initiation features costumed members playing roles such as the devil, Don Quixote,

the Pope, and Uncle Toby (the ritual supervisor).⁴³ Scenes include mock throat-slitting, symbolic murder, and other death-centered imagery, accompanied by chanting of the “death mantra”: “THE HANGMAN EQUALS DEATH! THE DEVIL EQUALS DEATH! DEATH EQUALS DEATH!”⁴⁴

- **Oaths of Secrecy:** Initiates swear solemn oaths never to reveal the society’s secrets, with the threat of expulsion and social ostracism for any breach.⁴⁵
- **Assignment of Secret Names:** Each new member receives a secret name, which is used within the society and may be passed down from previous generations.⁴⁶

The initiation is designed to be both humiliating and bonding, breaking down individual ego and forging a sense of unity and loyalty among the new class.⁴⁷ The confessional aspect, in particular, creates a web of mutual vulnerability, ensuring that members are bound together by shared secrets and the implicit threat of exposure.⁴² The death and rebirth symbolism serves to mark the transition from outsider (“barbarian”) to insider, reinforcing the society’s sharp distinction between members and the rest of the world.³⁹

3.4 Regular Meetings and Society Culture

After initiation, Skull and Bones members meet twice weekly, typically on Thursday and Sunday evenings, for dinners, debates, and further rituals.⁴⁸ Meetings begin with supper in the Firefly Room, where members drink from skull-shaped cups (never alcohol, as the society enforces a strict dry rule).⁴⁹ The leader of each meeting is called Uncle Toby, a role that rotates among members.⁵⁰

The core activities of regular meetings include:

- **Debates:** Topics are drawn from a skull called Yorick, and each member is required

to speak, fostering intellectual engagement and rhetorical skill.⁵¹

- **Connubial Bliss (CB):** Members continue to share updates on their romantic and sexual lives, maintaining the confessional tradition.⁵²
- **Life Histories (LH):** Each member delivers a detailed autobiography, often over several nights, deepening the bonds of trust and understanding within the group.⁵³
- **Ritual Elements:** Meetings include the sounding of a gong, the opening of secret texts, and the singing of sacred anthems.⁵⁴

The society also maintains a “black book” in which every meeting is recorded, with records dating back to the 19th century.⁵⁵ This archival practice reinforces the sense of continuity and tradition that is central to the society’s identity.

3.5 Symbols and Artifacts Beyond the skull and crossbones, Skull and Bones is replete with symbolic objects and artifacts, many of which are displayed within the Tomb:

- **Geronimo’s Skull:** The most infamous artifact is the skull said to belong to Geronimo, the Apache leader. According to persistent rumors and some documentary evidence, Prescott Bush and other Bonesmen exhumed Geronimo’s remains from his grave at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1918 and brought the skull, femurs, and other items to the Tomb.⁴⁰ The society has never confirmed or denied the story, and the authenticity of the skull remains disputed.⁵⁶
- **Madame Pompadour:** A skeleton named Madame Pompadour is said to reside in the Inner Temple, guarding the society’s founding documents.⁵⁷
- **Elihu Yale’s Gravestone:** The original gravestone of Yale’s founder, Elihu Yale, was reportedly stolen from St. Giles’ Church in Wrexham, Wales, and is now displayed in a

glass case inside the Tomb.⁵⁸

- **Other Skulls and Relics:** The Tomb is rumored to contain the skulls of Pancho Villa and Martin Van Buren, as well as Hitler's silverware and other macabre trophies.⁵⁹

These artifacts serve both as symbols of the society's power and as objects of veneration, reinforcing the themes of mortality, secrecy, and the transgression of social norms.⁶⁰

4. Membership: Selection, Demographics, and Notable Bonesmen

4.1 Membership Selection: Process and Criteria

Traditional Selection Historically, Skull and Bones selected its members based on a combination of campus leadership, athletic achievement, academic distinction, and social prominence. The process, known as "Tap Day," involved the outgoing senior class of Bonesmen choosing 15 juniors to join the society for the following year. Selection was often influenced by legacy (descendants of previous members), athletic prowess (football captains, star athletes), and leadership roles (editors of the Yale Daily News, presidents of student organizations).⁶¹

Membership was, for much of the society's history, restricted to white, Protestant men from elite backgrounds, with only occasional exceptions for standout Jewish or Catholic students.⁶²

Modern Selection and Recent Changes In the past two decades, and especially since the late 2010s, Skull and Bones has undergone a dramatic transformation in its membership selection criteria. The society now ex-

plicitly prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), seeking to admit students from a wide range of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender backgrounds.⁶³

Key changes in the selection process include:

- **De-emphasis of Legacy and Traditional "Tap Lines":** The society has moved away from favoring descendants of alumni and traditional pipelines such as athletic captains and student government leaders. Instead, it seeks to identify students who represent the diversity of the Yale community and broader society.⁶⁴
- **Focus on First-Generation, Low-Income, and Minority Students:** Current selection criteria emphasize first-generation college students, those from low-income backgrounds, and members of minority groups. Progressive activism and left-leaning political views are now considered assets for membership.⁶⁵
- **Unanimous Approval Requirement:** Membership selection requires unanimous approval by the current senior class, which has facilitated the shift toward a more ideologically and demographically diverse group.⁶⁶
- **Publicly Documented Diversity:** In 2020, Skull and Bones admitted its first entirely nonwhite class, and subsequent classes have included a majority of women, LGBTQ+ students, and students of color. The class of 2021 reportedly included no conservatives, reflecting a broader leftward shift in the society's political composition.⁶⁷

The selection process remains highly competitive, with only 15 students chosen each year from a pool of several thousand juniors. The names of new members are sometimes published in campus publications such as the Yale Daily News or the Rumpus tabloid, though official rosters have not been released since the

early 1980s.⁶⁸

Internal and External Pressures The shift in membership selection has not been without controversy. Alumni, particularly those from older generations, have at times resisted changes to the society's identity, especially the admission of women in 1992 and the recent emphasis on DEI. In 1991, a group of alumni led by William F. Buckley Jr. sued to block the admission of women, and the Russell Trust Association temporarily changed the locks on the Tomb to prevent the entry of the newly tapped female members.⁶⁹ More recently, alumni have expressed concern or dissatisfaction with the society's increased diversity and the perceived abandonment of traditional values. Some have attempted to moderate the diversity push, but with limited success, as the current undergraduate members retain control over selection.⁷⁰

4.2 Notable Members and Their Influence

U.S. Presidents and Political Dynasties

Three U.S. presidents—William Howard Taft, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush—were Bonesmen, each leaving a distinct mark on American history.⁷¹ The Bush family's multi-generational involvement in Skull and Bones—spanning Prescott Bush, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush—epitomizes the society's role in perpetuating American political dynasties.⁷²

Senators, Cabinet Members, and Diplomats

Skull and Bones' influence extends deeply into the U.S. Senate, cabinet, and diplomatic corps. Notable members include Robert A. Taft, Prescott Bush, John Kerry, Henry L. Stimson, W. Averell Harriman, and McGeorge Bundy, among many others.^{73 74 75 76}

Supreme Court Justices The judiciary has also been shaped by Bonesmen, most notably Morrison R. Waite (Chief Justice) and Potter Stewart (Associate Justice).^{77 78}

Business and Industry Members have founded, led, or significantly influenced some of the most important corporations and financial institutions in the world, including Morgan Stanley (Harold Stanley), Time Inc. (Henry Luce), The Blackstone Group (Stephen Schwarzman), and FedEx (Frederick W. Smith).^{79 80 81 82}

Culture, Media, and Academia Skull and Bones' influence is not limited to politics and business; it has also left an indelible mark on American culture, media, and academia. Notable members include William F. Buckley Jr. (founder of National Review), David McCullough (Pulitzer Prize-winning historian), Archibald MacLeish (Pulitzer Prize-winning poet), and Paul Giamatti (actor).^{83 84 85 86}

Intelligence and National Security Bonesmen have played pivotal roles in the creation and leadership of the CIA and other intelligence agencies, including George H.W. Bush (CIA Director), James Jesus Angleton (CIA Counterintelligence), and Robert Lovett (Secretary of Defense).^{87 88 89}

Social and Philanthropic Impact Members have contributed to social change, philanthropy, and public service, including Angela Buchdahl (Rabbi), Austan Goolsbee (economist), and Dana Milbank (journalist).^{90 91 92}

Family Dynasties and Interconnected Networks

The society's membership rolls read like a "who's who" of American aristocracy, including the Tafts, Bushes, Rockefellers, Harrimans, Whitneys, and Vanderbilts.⁹³ These families have used their connections within Skull and Bones to secure positions of influence for successive generations, reinforcing the society's status as a gatekeeper to the American establishment.⁹⁴

4.3 Diversity and Recent Changes in Membership

While Skull and Bones was long criticized for its exclusivity and lack of diversity, the society has made significant strides in recent decades. The first Black member was admitted in 1965, and the first women were tapped in 1992 after a contentious alumni vote and legal dispute.¹⁹ Recent classes have included a majority of women and people of color, reflecting broader changes in American society and at Yale.⁹⁵

5. Influence on American Politics, Law, and Culture

5.1 Political Power and Networks The society's alumni network has played a significant role in shaping American politics, business, law, and culture. Bonesmen have held key positions in government, including the presidency, cabinet posts, ambassadorships, and leadership roles in intelligence agencies such as the CIA.⁹⁶ The society's alumni have been instrumental in founding and leading major institutions, including the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, and the Bilderberg Group.⁹⁷

The true power of Skull and Bones lies less in formal decision-making than in the informal networks of patronage, mentorship, and mutual support that it fosters among its members.⁹⁸ Bonesmen are known to assist each other in securing positions, advancing ca-

reers, and navigating the corridors of power, both in government and in the private sector.⁹⁹

5.2 Legal Influence Skull and Bones' impact on American law is evident in the number of its members who have served as Supreme Court Justices, Attorneys General, and legal scholars.¹⁰⁰ William Howard Taft, the only person to serve as both President and Chief Justice of the United States, exemplifies the society's reach into the highest levels of the judiciary.¹⁰¹ The society's alumni have also played pivotal roles in the development of American legal education and professional associations.¹⁰²

5.3 Cultural Impact Members have founded and led major media organizations, including Time, Life, Fortune, and Sports Illustrated (Henry Luce), shaping public discourse and the flow of information.¹⁰³ The society's mystique has inspired countless works of literature, film, and television, from Tom Wolfe's "The Me Decade" to the "Skulls" film series and episodes of "The Simpsons," "Family Guy," and "Gossip Girl".¹⁰⁴

The society's rituals, symbols, and secrecy have become enduring motifs in American popular culture, fueling both fascination and suspicion.¹⁰⁵ The image of the secretive, all-powerful elite manipulating world events from behind closed doors has become a staple of conspiracy theories and fictional narratives alike.¹⁰⁶

5.4 Education and Elite Formation Skull and Bones has played a significant role in shaping the culture of Yale University and, by extension, the American elite.¹⁰⁷ The society's emphasis on tradition, hierarchy, and exclusivity has influenced the development of other secret societies and honor organizations, both at Yale and at other institutions.

¹⁰⁸ The society's members have been instrumental in founding and leading major universities, research institutions, and philanthropic organizations, contributing to the evolution of American higher education and intellectual life. ¹⁰⁹

6. Critiques, Investigations, and Public Scandals

6.1 Secrecy and the Challenge of Investigation

The very structure of Skull and Bones is designed to resist outside scrutiny. Members are sworn to lifelong secrecy regarding the society's rituals, internal affairs, and even the identities of fellow members. This culture of silence is so pervasive that, according to multiple sources, members are expected to leave a room if the society's name is mentioned in conversation. ¹¹⁰ The society's headquarters, the windowless "Tomb," and its alumni organization, the Russell Trust Association, further insulate the society from university oversight and public accountability. ¹¹¹

6.2 Major Journalistic Investigations and Exposés

Notable works include Alexandra Robbins' "Secrets of the Tomb," which is based on interviews with dozens of current and former members, as well as access to society documents and previously unseen photographs. ¹¹² Robbins debunks many of the more outlandish conspiracy theories about Skull and Bones, while confirming the society's role as an elite networking club that has historically facilitated the ascent of its members to positions of power. ¹¹³ Antony C. Sutton's "America's Secret Establishment" takes a more conspiratorial and critical approach, arguing that Skull and Bones is a secret society with a deliberate agenda to control American political, economic, and educational institutions. ¹¹⁴

6.3 Public Scandals and Legal Issues

The Geronimo Skull Controversy The most prominent public scandal involving Skull and Bones is the persistent allegation that members, including Prescott Bush, exhumed the skull of Apache leader Geronimo from his grave at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1918 and brought it to the Tomb as a trophy. ¹¹⁵ In 2009, twenty descendants of Geronimo filed a federal lawsuit against Skull and Bones, Yale University, and the U.S. government, seeking the return of the remains. ¹¹⁶ The lawsuit was ultimately dismissed on technical grounds, and the controversy remains unresolved. ¹¹⁷

Financial and Political Controversies Skull and Bones has also been implicated in several financial and political scandals, primarily through the activities of its members rather than the society as an institution. The most notable example is Prescott Bush's involvement with the Union Banking Corporation, which was seized by the U.S. government during World War II for trading with Nazi Germany under the Trading with the Enemy Act. ¹¹⁸ Other Bonesmen have been linked to controversial events such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Vietnam War, and the formation of the CIA. ¹¹⁹

Lawsuits and Legal Disputes Beyond the Geronimo case, Skull and Bones has been involved in several legal disputes, most notably over the admission of women. In 1991, a group of alumni led by William F. Buckley Jr. obtained a temporary restraining order to block the initiation of female members. ¹²⁰ The dispute was eventually resolved by a second alumni vote, and women were admitted beginning in 1992. ¹²¹

6.4 Critiques and Cultural Impact Skull and Bones has long been criticized for its elitism,

exclusivity, and perpetuation of social privilege. For much of its history, membership was limited to white, Protestant men from wealthy families, and the society played a central role in maintaining the social hierarchy of Yale and, by extension, American society.¹²² Critics have argued that the society's networking functions serve to concentrate wealth and power among a narrow segment of the population, reinforcing systemic inequalities and limiting opportunities for outsiders.¹²³

In recent decades, the society has made efforts to diversify its membership, admitting women, minorities, and students from less privileged backgrounds. These changes have been met with both praise and resistance, with some alumni lamenting the loss of tradition and others celebrating the society's adaptation to contemporary values.¹²⁴ Nonetheless, critics argue that diversity alone does not address the deeper issues of exclusion and privilege inherent in secret societies.¹²⁵

7. Conspiracy Theories, Speculative Accounts, and Controversies

7.1 Theories of Elite Control and the "Power Elite" One of the most persistent conspiracy theories about Skull and Bones is that it serves as a training ground or recruitment center for a shadowy "power elite" that controls American—and even global—politics, finance, and media.¹²⁶ This theory is fueled by the undeniable fact that many Bonesmen have gone on to occupy positions of extraordinary influence: three U.S. presidents, numerous senators, Supreme Court justices, cabinet officials, CIA directors, and business titans.¹²⁷

Proponents of this theory argue that the society's network extends far beyond Yale, forming a kind of "old boys' club" that ensures its

members' advancement and exerts covert influence over key institutions. Some accounts go further, suggesting that Skull and Bones is not merely a network of mutual support, but an active cabal that manipulates world events to serve its own interests, including the creation of the Federal Reserve, the Council on Foreign Relations, and even the CIA.¹²⁸

Books such as Antony Sutton's "America's Secret Establishment" and Kris Millegan's "Fleshing Out Skull & Bones" have been instrumental in popularizing these theories, alleging that the society's members have orchestrated wars, revolutions, and economic crises to further a "New World Order" agenda.¹²⁹

7.2 The Illuminati, Freemasonry, and Occult Connections Another major strand of conspiracy theory links Skull and Bones to older secret societies, particularly the Bavarian Illuminati and Freemasonry.¹³⁰ The society's use of the number 322, its adoption of Masonic-style rituals, and its Germanic origins have all been cited as evidence that it is either a branch of the Illuminati or closely allied with it.¹³¹ Some theorists claim that Skull and Bones is the American chapter of a larger, transnational secret order, with the number 322 denoting its status as the "second chapter" founded in 1832.¹³²

These theories are often intertwined with claims of occult practices. The society's rituals are said to involve symbolic death and rebirth, the use of human skulls and bones, and the invocation of fictional or mythological deities such as Eulogia, the supposed goddess of eloquence.¹³³ Accounts from break-ins and leaks describe rooms decorated with black and red velvet, pentagrams, and German inscriptions, further fueling rumors of occult or satanic activity.¹³⁴

7.3 The CIA, Espionage, and Intelligence

Networks A particularly persistent set of theories concerns Skull and Bones' alleged role in the creation and operation of the U.S. intelligence community, especially the CIA.¹³⁵ It is a documented fact that many early CIA operatives and directors were Yale alumni, and several were Bonesmen, including James Jesus Angleton, the legendary head of CIA counter-intelligence. This has led to speculation that Skull and Bones serves as a recruiting ground for intelligence agencies, with its rituals and confessions functioning as a form of psychological vetting or even blackmail.¹³⁶

7.4 Rituals, Hazing, and Occult Symbolism

The society's initiation rituals are the subject of endless fascination and speculation. Leaked accounts, break-ins, and even covert video recordings have described a variety of bizarre and sometimes disturbing practices: initiates lying naked in coffins, recounting their sexual histories, being berated and humiliated by senior members, kissing skulls, and participating in mock killings or symbolic death-and-rebirth ceremonies.¹³⁷ The Tomb itself is rumored to contain a collection of human skulls and bones, including those of Geronimo, Pancho Villa, and Martin Van Buren, as well as Nazi memorabilia, coffins, and other macabre artifacts.¹³⁸

7.5 Political Influence, Scandals, and the "Deep State"

The disproportionate representation of Bonesmen in positions of power has led to widespread speculation about the society's role in shaping American policy and history. Conspiracy theorists have blamed Skull and Bones for everything from the creation of the nuclear bomb to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.¹³⁹ The society's alleged control over the CIA, the Council on Foreign Relations, and other elite institutions is a recurring theme in both popular and aca-

democratic accounts.¹²⁸

The 2004 U.S. presidential election, in which both major party candidates (George W. Bush and John Kerry) were Bonesmen, brought the society to unprecedented public attention and fueled suspicions of a hidden, bipartisan elite controlling the country.¹⁴⁰ Both candidates refused to discuss their membership, citing the society's code of secrecy.¹⁴¹

7.6 Racism, Elitism, and Social Exclusion

Skull and Bones has long been criticized for its elitism, exclusivity, and history of discrimination. For most of its history, the society admitted only white Protestant men, with Jews, African Americans, and women excluded until the mid-20th century or later.¹⁴² The admission of women in 1992 was the result of a bitter internal struggle, with alumni lawsuits and public controversy.¹⁴³ The society's connections to families with histories of slave ownership and its alleged role in naming Yale residential colleges after slaveholders have also been sources of controversy.¹⁴⁴

In recent years, the society has made efforts to diversify its membership, with recent classes including women, people of color, and students from less privileged backgrounds.¹⁴⁵ These changes have sparked internal debates and generational conflicts, with some alumni lamenting the loss of the society's traditional identity and others supporting the push for greater inclusion.¹⁴⁶ Critics argue that diversifying membership does not fundamentally change the society's underlying structures of exclusivity and power.¹⁴⁷

7.7 The Role of Skull and Bones in Popular Culture

The mystique of Skull and Bones has made it a frequent subject of books, documentaries, films, and television shows. Works such as Alexandra Robbins' "Secrets of the Tomb," Antony Sutton's "America's Secret Es-

tablishment,” and Kris Millegan’s “Fleshing Out Skull & Bones” have brought the society’s lore to a wide audience, blending investigative journalism with conspiracy theory.¹²⁹ The society has been satirized in “The Simpsons,” “Family Guy,” and “Doonesbury,” and dramatized in films such as “The Skulls” and “The Good Shepherd”.¹⁴⁸

Online forums, particularly Reddit, are hotbeds of speculation and rumor, with users debating the society’s connections to the Illuminati, the CIA, the Vatican, and even extraterrestrial or occult forces.¹⁴⁹ These discussions often blend fact, fiction, and fantasy, reflecting the enduring power of Skull and Bones as a symbol of hidden knowledge and elite control.¹⁵⁰

7.8 Critiques, Debunkings, and Skeptical Perspectives Not all accounts of Skull and Bones accept the more extravagant conspiracy theories. Many journalists, historians, and even former members argue that the society is best understood as a collegiate fraternity for the elite, whose influence is more a product of social networking and mutual support than of secret plots or occult power.¹⁵¹ The society’s real power lies in its network of alumni and the culture of mutual support and loyalty that it fosters.¹⁵²

8. Recent Changes and Internal Tensions

8.1 Demographic Transformation The most significant recent change in Skull and Bones is its demographic transformation. The society’s 2020 cohort was composed entirely of people of color, and subsequent classes have included only one or two white, cisgender, straight men. This shift has been described as a deliberate move to diversify the society and atone for its exclusionary past.¹⁵³

8.2 Internal Activism and Symbolic Acts

Current members have engaged in acts of internal protest, such as removing portraits of former all-white members from the Tomb and replacing them with signs criticizing the society’s history of exclusion. In 2019, members confronted former President George W. Bush, a Bonesman, about his actions in office, leading to the cessation of alumni retreats and a period of strained relations between current members and alumni.¹⁵⁴

8.3 Ideological Shifts The society’s political composition has shifted markedly to the left, with most members now identifying as progressive or left-of-center. Conservative students are rarely admitted, and the society is described as functioning like a “cult” of DEI ideology by some critics.¹⁵⁵ This has led to debates about whether the society’s transformation represents genuine progress or simply a new form of exclusion based on ideological conformity.¹⁵⁶

8.4 Alumni Engagement and Financial Support Despite internal tensions, alumni continue to provide generous financial support to the society, with recent donations totaling over \$3 million. These funds have been used to improve accessibility at the Tomb and support members’ advancement, often aligned with DEI goals.¹⁵⁷

8.5 Legal and Institutional Challenges The society’s changes have led to lawsuits and debates about the value and management of Yale degrees and secret societies. Some members and observers argue that the societies have not fundamentally changed their exclusionary structures but have merely diversified the types of members admitted.¹⁵⁸

8.6 Ongoing Secrecy and Ritual Despite these changes, Skull and Bones retains its core rituals, secrecy, and exclusivity.

Members are still sworn to lifelong secrecy about the society's activities, and the Tomb remains off-limits to outsiders. The society's meetings, initiation ceremonies, and bonding activities continue to be central to its identity, even as the composition of its membership evolves. ¹⁵⁹

9. Conclusion

The Skull and Bones society occupies a unique and enduring place in American history and culture. Founded in 1832 as a response to campus rivalries and inspired by European secret societies, it has evolved into a symbol of elite power, secrecy, and influence. Its membership has included presidents, senators, business leaders, and cultural icons, and its rituals and traditions have become the stuff of legend and speculation.

While much about Skull and Bones remains shrouded in mystery, careful research reveals a complex institution that has both reflected and shaped the changing dynamics of American society. Its history is one of adaptation and continuity, balancing tradition with the pressures of modernization and inclusion. The society's influence is not the result of a hidden cabal orchestrating world events, but rather the product of a powerful social network that perpetuates privilege, consolidates power, and influences the selection and training of America's leaders.

In recent decades, Skull and Bones has undergone profound changes in its membership selection and internal culture, now prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion, and admitting students from a wide range of backgrounds. These changes have been driven by both internal activism and external societal pressures, leading to tensions between current members and alumni. Despite these challenges, Skull and Bones remains an elite, in-

fluent network, providing its members with mentorship, resources, and lifelong connections.

The fascination with Skull and Bones is unlikely to abate as long as questions about the legitimacy and consequences of secret societies persist in the public imagination. Its legacy is a testament to the ways in which secrecy, ritual, and exclusivity can shape not only individual destinies but the trajectory of a nation. For those seeking to understand the deeper currents of American power and privilege, the story of Skull and Bones offers a compelling—and cautionary—window into the interplay of secrecy, ambition, and legacy at the heart of the nation's elite institutions. ¹⁶⁰

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