

# Puzzling President

GEORGE BUSH has at least one thing that Bill Clinton doesn't have, a jigsaw puzzle made by John Madden of Wantagh. "He's a puzzler," Mr. Madden said, of the President. "Mrs. Bush buys the puzzles for him. I think they help him relax."

Mr. Bush successfully put together a puzzle of Babar the Elephant. "I thought it was appropriate," Mr. Madden said. The President didn't know it was Babar when he received his puzzle. Mr. Madden usually doesn't tell his customers what their puzzles are going to be. "I don't enclose a picture or anything," he said. "They don't want to know. They don't want any help. That's part of the fun."

With customers like the Bushes, the duPonts and the Fords (as in Model-T) Mr. Madden makes sure his customers receive just what they want. He will include their initials or a special greeting in their puzzles. For Mr. Madden's creations are not the do-the-blue-sky-last, fill-in-the-borders-first type of puzzles. In fact, his puzzles usually have no straight-edge borders. That would be too easy.

Mr. Madden makes Par Puzzles, "the Rolls-Royce of jigsaw puzzles," he said. Made of colorful lithographs backed by polished mahogany, Par Puzzles are so named because each puzzle comes with a par time. "It's like par in golf," Mr. Madden said. "You know what the average strokes it takes for a hole. Well, this is the average time to finish a puzzle. It's based on amount of pieces and degree of difficulty."

In his basement Mr. Madden makes that degree of difficulty with a scroll saw and a blade finer than a piece of dental floss. No jig saw is used for these jigsaw puzzles. It would be too big and cumbersome.

Mr. Madden cuts his puzzles as the spirit moves him. "But you never cut through the eyes," he said. "And I have to make sure I put in my characters." In each puzzle there are little figurines that stand up by themselves, a sea horse, a woman and carriage. Then there are the puzzles within the puzzle. In a majestic puzzle about the Statue of Liberty, Mayor Edward I. Koch comes apart. Put all the Mayor's appendages together, and he stands alone. "It makes the puzzler feel he's accomplished something when you have these little puzzles inside the big puzzle," Mr. Madden said.

His big puzzles do not come cheap. They cost \$1 a puzzle piece. A 1,500-piece puzzle costs \$1,500. But Par Puzzles can become works of art. Some sold back in the 30's and 40's, before Mr. Madden took over the company, have been auctioned off at art galleries. The rich and famous swore by the puzzles. "All the movies stars had them," Mr. Madden said. "Jimmy Durante was given a Cyrano de Bergerac one."

Those puzzles stay together when picked up. "It's all interlocking," Mr. Madden said. But before they can be interlocked by the customer, they have to be put together in Wantagh. Someone has to make sure all the pieces fit.

Who is the puzzler in the Madden home? "I collect baseball cards," said Mr. Madden's son, Justin, 11. "Well, I try," said Mr. Madden's wife, Karen. But she concedes that she is better at handling the business aspects of puzzling. "I'll be saying, 'Ah, where does this piece go?'" she said. "And my daughter Melissa will just pick it up and say, 'It goes right there, Mother.'"

And Mr. Madden? "You have to understand," he said, "puzzles are a business for me. I like creating them," but for relaxing "I watch television."



*John Madden at his house in Wantagh with two recently completed jigsaw puzzles.*