



Man Friday

## A Salute To Those Who Stayed

Peter Robinson, 01.09.09, 12:00 AM ET

Sometime before leaving office a week from this coming Tuesday, George W. Bush will deliver his final speech. (As I write, this final event has yet to be scheduled.) A member of the White House stenographer's office will record those remarks, and eventually they will join every other speech the president has made during the last eight years in a series of volumes entitled *The Public Papers of the Presidents: George W. Bush*. (**The first seven volumes** have already appeared. They cover not quite all of Bush's first term.)

Thousands upon thousands of words, all attributed to Bush himself—a reminder that the presidency embodies, in the words of political scientist Henry Ford Jones, "the oldest political institution...elective kingship."

Yet this semi-royal office depends on the several hundred perfectly ordinary Americans who serve on the White House staff. Consider just eight, the current members of the speechwriting shop. They tell us something about the White House. They also tell us something about the man who is about to move out.

Chief speechwriter Marc Thiessen, 42, began his Washington career on Capitol Hill, where he worked for the late Sen. Jesse Helms, and then spent most of Bush's first term at the Pentagon writing speeches for Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

He has worked in the White House for most of the second term. The Capitol, the Pentagon, the White House: No one possesses a deeper knowledge of Washington—or would have proven more marketable among lobbyists on K Street a couple of years ago, when Bush remained the dominant figure in the capitol. Yet Thiessen will remain with the chief executive until his term expires.

Before joining the White House staff, Thiessen's deputy, Christopher Michel, 27, held only one job: editor of the *Yale Daily News*. The man is so lavishly talented that in the space of five years he has served in the speechwriting shop as an intern, researcher, junior speechwriter, full speechwriter and, now, deputy to the chief speechwriter.

A year ago, Michel intended to go to Yale Law School in the fall of 2008. When the time came to leave Washington for New Haven, though, Michel decided law school would have to wait. He, too, will remain on the staff until a week from Tuesday.

Jonathan Horn, 26, Meghan Clyne, 27, Troy Senik, 25, Gena Katz, 24, and Nikki McArthur, 25, are all, like Christopher Michel, talented enough to have assumed responsibility despite their youth.

Horn is known for his deft touch with humor, Clyne for the emotional depth of her work, Senik for his capacity for sheer hard work. Katz started as a researcher, then wrote for Mrs. Bush before joining the president's staff.

McArthur replaced Katz on the First Lady's staff. If interested only in advancing their careers, each would have spent just a year at the White House, gaining a plum credential, then gone on to grad school or into the private sector. Each will instead remain a member of the Bush administration until the administration itself ceases to exist.

John McConnell, 44, stands in a category by himself. He has served as a speechwriter for President Bush and as the chief speechwriter for Vice President Cheney since the administration began.

He was with the vice president on Sept. 11, 2001, when Secret Service agents burst into Cheney's office, told him a terrorist plane had slammed into the Pentagon and hurried Cheney to a bomb shelter. He was also a member of the speechwriting team that composed the finest speech George W. Bush ever delivered, the president's address to the joint session of Congress on Sept. 20.

A graduate of Yale Law School, McConnell could have spent the last eight years making rain at a Washington law firm. Instead he has labored in intentional obscurity. Whereas certain members of the White House staff sought attention in the press only too avidly, McConnell shunned it.

Brilliant, warm, funny and loyal, McConnell commands the utmost respect of everyone who knows him. He, too, will remain on the staff until one week from Tuesday.

These eight speechwriters have watched President Bush's approval ratings sink, then remain low longer than those of any other chief executive. They were aware that entire segments of the population simply stopped listening to the chief executive. They must have felt at times as if they were composing speeches less for the audiences to whom Bush would deliver them than for the nameless historians who might someday find them useful.

Why, then, have they remained at the White House? In part because of the esteem in which the nation holds the presidency. These eight speechwriters understand that for the rest of their lives knowledgeable Americans will be grateful to them for helping keep the office functioning, giving this administration the coherence that only the carefully considered use of language--only good writing--can confer. But there is a second reason: their loyalty to George W. Bush himself.

Working with him on draft after draft; answering his sudden telephone calls when, examining a speech draft, he wants to question an assumption, challenge a fact, or rewrite a transition; finding themselves summoned to the Oval Office twice a day for a week at a time before a State of the Union Address, these eight young men and women have come to know Bush as well as anyone in the White House. They have seen him in all moods and all seasons. And they have decided that serving him is worth the sacrifice.

In doing so, they have created a historical datum--a marker, so to speak, for the record--that may prove as important in its way as the thousands of words they have helped the president compose.

Those who worked with him the most closely, historians will recognize, loved George W. Bush the best.

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