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Last Page

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a script for tipper

By Jonathan E. Kaplan '94

For six months this year, I put together Tipper Gore's briefing book.

A briefing book tells Washington politicians that they have joined the Beltway elite. It means they should no longer consider themselves politicians but actors and actresses. Their days are soap operas, choreographed and scripted in minute detail from dawn till dusk.

You didn't know that? Don't feel bad; I didn't either.

Not that I was a new to politics. Prior to working for Mrs. Gore, I had worked for several politicians, most recently for Congressman Ken Bentsen, a Texas Democrat. I arrived in this new job via Colby's network of Washingtonians. A friend of mine from Colby lived down the street. One of his roommates was Vice President Al Gore's speechwriter. One thing led to another, and last October I started putting together Tipper Gore's briefing book.

Let me tell you, nothing prepares one for the jump from Congress to the White House, where the stakes are higher, the elbows sharper and the egos larger.

At first glance, the job requires stuffing reams of paper into a three-ring binder. Schedules are the most important part of Mrs. Gore's briefing book. Policy and political briefings support every event listed on that day's schedule, which to the untrained eye is unreadable.

One of my first days on the job, I was in a meeting where everybody was speaking in code: "MEG is RONing in Boston, AGJ will RON at NAVOBS."

Need some help? Well, MEG is an acronym for Mary E. (Tipper) Gore. RON means "Remain Over Night." So Mrs. Gore is spending the night in Boston and Albert Gore Jr., the vice president of the United States (acronym, VPOTUS), is spending the night at the Naval Observatory, where the Vice President's residence is located in Washington.

Once I learned to talk the talk, or at least read it, I found the schedules incredibly detailed. Every event was broken down into nanoseconds. If it were on film, it could be easily spliced. An hour of a day might look like this:

10:05 a.m. Depart Location
10:35 a.m. Arrive Location
10:35-10:45 a.m. HOLD
10:45-10:50 a.m. Enter stage left. Mayor X introduces Congressman Y.
10:50-10:55 a.m. Congressman Y introduces MEG.
10:55-11:10 a.m. MEG Remarks.
11:10 a.m. MEG Departs. No ropeline.

The staff could labor for hours scripting every movement. Although some level of coordination is necessary, I often thought, "Why not just go with the flow?"

But going with the flow is not part of a politician's playbook. Politicians—Republican or Democrat, dogcatcher or president—are control freaks. This is what makes the briefing book such a thankless, heart-stopping task. It is an attempt to control the uncontrollable. Everything is scripted for the camera and the printed word.

This gives the staff leeway to micromanage the VP and Mrs. Gore. It also swells the size of the briefing book: Al Gore's can range from 50 to 250 pages; Mrs. Gore's ranged from 30 to 120.

Managing this much paper takes a keen eye, which I usually lacked, especially late at night. I committed so many briefing-book faux pas, I could have starred in a sitcom, "When Smart People Do Really, Really Dumb Things."

The staff always found something wrong, like a missing page, a page placed out of order and briefings with contradictory information. These mistakes had no real consequences because only staff read the book cover to cover.



Jonathan Kaplan '94, at right, shares an unscripted moment with Vice President Al Gore.

Mrs. Gore read most of her briefing book, but she always seemed to read what the staff least expected. Once, right before the Iowa caucuses, a briefing book was returned with a memorandum on farm policy marked and underlined in Mrs. Gore's finest cursive. Reporters rarely ask her major policy questions: they stick to the big political questions. What made her bone up on farm policy? I'll never know.

Often, depending on the amount of cooperation I got from the tired White House photocopiers, which always, always broke down, I would call the Air Force sergeants around 8 p.m. They would deliver the book to Mrs. Gore at The Residence. If she was traveling, I would fax it to the hotel where she and her staff were RONing. Once the book is faxed, as they say in Hollywood, "it's a wrap."

And that's the problem with the briefing book: it is one manifestation of how politics is becoming show business. I wasn't learning to become a George Stephanopolous or how to write a better speech or develop more effective policy; I was learning to write and edit a screenplay like a "B" movie director in Tinsel Town.

I learned from Colby professors that politics is a noble endeavor. Cal Mackenzie, who crisscrossed the Northeast for Bobby Kennedy, taught me that by applying economics and statistics, policymakers could change the world through cost-effective and efficient public policy. Tony Corrado, who tried to prepare me for politics with Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Aristotle's *Politics*, told war stories of presidential campaigns lost. He seemed to say that there's some nobility to political campaigns, even in losing. And there is. But it's hard to see the effort as noble when you're staffing a celebrity and the big question is whether there's a rope line.

In the end I concluded the briefing-book job wasn't for me. I lacked the patience (and the skill-set) for the scut work demanded in the boot camp they call the White House. Alas, my Colby education neglected two increasingly crucial aspects of modern-day politics. I should have learned how to fix broken photocopiers, and I should have studied theater and dance.

Editor's note As of this writing, Jonathan E. Kaplan '94 had left his position at the White House and was training for the World Championship Ironman Triathlon to be held in Kona, Hawaii, this October.