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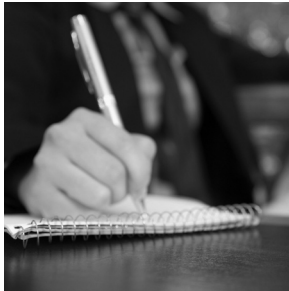
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CHAPTER 5



Dealing with The Media

If you have craved media attention, Washington is a great place to work – but watch what you wish for. Washington is awash in reporters, with 6,800 members of the media accredited by the congressional galleries, a number that has swelled by 1,800 in just the past eight years.

From newspapers and television networks to newsletters and trade publications that are the bibles of their industries, the federal government and its activities are tracked by an army of correspondents, producers and, yes, bloggers. What happens in Washington doesn't stay here. It is quickly reported to the nation and the rest of the world. Washington is a fish bowl, and if you want to make a name for yourself, this is the place to do it, although it may not be quite the name you had in mind.

Many nominees may have dealt with reporters in their previous jobs, in state capitals, the business world, the military or Congress itself. But no matter how much experience they have, the intensity of the scrutiny in Washington often comes as a surprise. Much of the news that fills nightly telecasts and the front pages of major newspapers emanates from Washington. Their viewership and circulation numbers are declining, but outlets are proliferating in the internet age. Make a gaffe at a news conference or at a Senate hearing and you can be almost certain the video will be on YouTube in a New York minute.

Covering the launch of a new administration, reporters often produce flattering profiles of the new folks in charge and their ambitious plans to bring change to their federal bailiwick. A few weeks or months later, the same reporters will be quick to chronicle the new team's every mistake. In the media spotlight, both beauty spots and blemishes get exaggerated.

During the 77-day transition between the election and Inauguration Day, the media



will vie for scoops on who is getting what jobs. They will report who is in the running for the plum positions, from short lists leaked by insiders. Some of these names are trial balloons; others may be little more than flattery or educated guesswork. A newspaper may carry a long account if it can break news of a senior appointment. But if the transition team or the White House announces it first to all, the same paper may not write more than sentence or two. Journalists prize their scoops, however small or short-lived.

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Nominees are well advised to refrain from talking with the news media, either on background or on the record, before they are confirmed. They should not give interviews. If a reporter is preparing a profile, ask someone else to run interference for you on the press calls and, if appropriate, to provide biographical information or other details in the public domain. Wayne Pines, a public relations executive and former spokesman for the Food and Drug Administration, said, “I see no benefit, in advance of being nominated, in speaking with the media. The only people who do that are those who feel their nomination is on the ropes and they have nothing to lose, or who are not going to take the job and want the visibility that goes with having been considered. If I asked someone I was considering for a job not to speak with the media, and he or she did, I would cross that person off my list.”

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Diana Huffman, a former staff director for the Senate Judiciary Committee and managing editor of National Journal, called it “a huge mistake” for people to let it be known publicly that their names are under consideration. “Don’t be in such a rush to have everybody know. You’ve got to make it through the vetting process. It’s to your advantage to be quiet and to let the process work.”

“You’re ahead in the game if the first publicity comes when the White House actually announces its intention to nominate you,” she said.

Gene Gibbons, executive editor of Stateline.org and a former White House correspondent for Reuters, cautioned against putting too much credence in short lists. “Names of people who don’t have a snowball’s chance of getting nominated are often leaked by the incoming administration to make those folks feel good,” Gibbons said. “It’s political puffery without a price tag. Unless you’ve heard from the horse’s mouth that you’re a serious candidate for a job, you probably aren’t.”

And if you do speak with reporters “on background” or “off the record,” make sure

both of you agree what those ground rules mean. Said Gibbons: “‘Background,’ ‘Deep background’ and ‘Off-the-record’ mean different things to different folks. Strictly speaking, ‘on background’ means the information can be used but not attributed to a specific individual. ‘Deep background’ means the information can be used, but without attribution of any kind. Most serious news organizations won’t agree to this, because it effectively makes them vouch for the truthfulness of the information and puts their credibility at risk. ‘Off the record’ means the information can’t be used — period. But, practically speaking, there is no such thing as off the record — a journalist with a nugget of news will find some way to get it out.”

Don’t make the mistake of thinking you can enhance your chances of being appointed and confirmed by courting press coverage. Brit Hume, the Fox News anchor and former ABC White House correspondent, said, “the chances of your saying just the right thing and having it come out sounding just the right way are sufficiently remote that it’s not worth risking.”

Freedom of the Press

As the press will gladly remind you, they have a job to do, and it is a job - like public service - of importance to democracy. Public officials at times may sympathize with the character in a Tom Stoppard play who says, “I’m with you on the free press. It’s the newspapers I can’t stand.” Reporters respond to such sentiments with their highest authority on these matters, Thomas Jefferson. In a 1787 letter, the author of the Declaration of Independence observed:

The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.

To those who believe that public discourse and the media have become debased in modern times, it helps to remember that the papers in Jefferson’s day often were slipshod and recklessly partisan, boiling with barbs and propaganda and hardly deserving of “such high praise as agencies of public enlightenment,” as Jefferson biographer Dumas Malone put it. Jefferson knew that, but he also understood the important role the press played in keeping the public informed about the activities of those who govern the Republic. The First Amendment gives the media certain rights to do their job. And when news erupts, those obstreperous reporters and camera crews camped outside your office and sometimes on your lawn won’t let you forget it.

CHAPTER FIVE **KEY POINTS**

- When in doubt, don't talk with reporters. It could cost you an administration post.
- When you do talk with reporters, do not lie or mislead them. Better to say no comment than to utter a mistruth.
- Don't expect reporters to report everything you said. Make your points succinctly.
- Don't be rude or dismissive. Reporters, too, play an important part in the workings of democracy.
- Don't believe everything you read – especially flattering portraits of yourself.

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