

Preface

For a Washington correspondent with initiative and imagination, covering the White House can be the best beat in town. Every national budget or policy decision must pass through the place, foreign policy is made there, and for the past two decades—coinciding with my time as a Washington reporter—the Oval Office has emerged as the communications center of the world. It was only natural that on September 11, 2001, and in the days that followed, foreign reporters based in a Washington would look to the White House for the official reaction to the attacks against the United States. But 20 years earlier, during Ronald Reagan's first months in office, the same thing happened when Pope John Paul II was wounded in St. Peter's Square. That day, the city's foreign correspondents gathered in the White House briefing room, where bulletins were duly issued by the press office—so much so that many of the stories on the assassination attempt published in European capitals carried Washington datelines.

I have been assigned to the White House beat full-time since in 1993, and was pressed into occasional spot duty there for the 10 preceding years as well. Some of the long-time regulars on the beat, especially the broadcast reporters closeted in tiny West Wing booths near the James Brady Briefing Room, have been known to get cabin fever in that building. But I have been fortunate enough to work for bureau chiefs and editors receptive to my expansive views of a White House reporter's range. I have tracked wolves in Yellowstone, interviewed labor union activists trying to organize in the *maquiladoras* along the Mexican border, talked to the "hard men" of the Irish Republican Army about why they were finally taking steps to trade their Armalite rifles for ballot boxes in Belfast—and wrote those stories as part of my job as a White

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House correspondent. The logic was simple: these events flowed out of specific decisions made by American presidents.

Having said that, I admit that there is something unnatural about covering a person—the President of the United States—with whom you speak only a few times a year, and then only in public. For that reason I jumped at the chance to write an article that would, with a little luck, entail talking privately with a sitting president—and communicating with most of the living former presidents as well. It came about when editors at *Forbes* magazine called me one day in the spring of 2001 to propose an interesting, if quirky, freelance assignment. Those editors, Patrick Dillon, Carol Pogash, and Rodes Fishburne III, wanted me to convince President George W. Bush and the living ex-presidents to write essays on what the concept of *the pursuit of happiness* means to them. In lieu of that, I was to interview them on the same subject. The results were to appear, along with the words of wisdom of other prominent Americans, in a special end-of-the-year issue *Forbes* called “The Big Issue.” It was an enticing prospect. In my time as a reporter, I had heard Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and both Bushes employ the phrase “pursuit of happiness” in perhaps a hundred speeches. But until the *Forbes* editors asked me to get in touch with these men and solicit their views on what the concept actually means to them I had never given much thought to what Thomas Jefferson expected Americans to *do* with the Declaration’s most soaring expression—or even what presidents had in mind when they repeated it.

Ultimately, I would communicate with all the living ex-presidents with the exception of Ronald Reagan, who was incapacitated in California with Alzheimer’s disease. The project, which lasted over the summer of 2001 and into the autumn, was a welcome intellectual diversion from the daily grist of the White House beat; at least that was true until September 11. Then, suddenly, the question of how and whether Americans could pursue their hearts’ desires somehow seemed to be at the crux of everything. It turns out that presidents knew this, and always had.

“The American people need to go about their lives,” President Bush told his countrymen at a White House ceremony a month after the attacks. “Our government will fight terrorism across the seas, and we’ll fight it here at home. And the American people need to fight terrorism as well by going to work, going to ballgames, getting on airplanes, singing with joy and strength . . . They will not take this country down!”

Prior to the attacks, I had persuaded Bush’s father (the elder Bush’s

staff refers to him as “Forty One” as a way of distinguishing him from his son, who is the 43rd president) to cooperate with our project. The former president agreed to write something himself, and to e-mail it to me, which he did on Thursday, August 9, 2001. His essay was a poignant missive in which he described the journey of his own life as one of striving for success and happiness—a happiness he had, late in life, actually found.

“Dear Carl,” the elder Bush began. “You ask about Pursuit of Happiness at a good time in my life. I have pursued life itself over many years now and with varying degrees of happiness. But now, at 77 I find that I am perfectly content to let history be the judge of those things I got right and of my mistakes in life as well.” Citing his pride in his children and grandchildren and, most of all, the love of his wife (“Our happiness together is . . . strong, unbendable and rock solid”) Forty-One went on to say that his quest was at a successful conclusion. “I have found happiness,” he wrote. “I no longer pursue it, for it is mine.”

“In competitive business I was very happy—though restless and somewhat driven,” Bush added. “In politics I had victories and defeats but for the most part I was happy. In big government jobs here and abroad I was fortunate to get to live my life’s creed which says public service is a noble calling.”

Despite this intensely personal rumination, Bush revealed a keen awareness that the concept of pursuing happiness has a broader, civic application as well; that although happiness may be an individual experience, the social contract that allows us to pursue this goal is part of all Americans’ heritage. Almost as if the right to pursue happiness is, in a sense, an obligation as well as an opportunity. Delia M. Rios, the only daily newspaper correspondent in Washington who covers American history as a primary beat, explained it to me this way: “This guarantee is, literally, in our founding documents. It’s on our birth certificate.” Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey often said virtually the same thing. So did Martin Luther King Jr.

Forty-One made the same point in an addendum to his first communication with me. It came about this way: After the nation was attacked—with his son as commander-in-chief—I worried that the first President Bush might find it jarring to read an essay he had penned prior to September 11, but which was being published *after* the world had changed so much. So I asked Bush’s chief of staff, Jean Becker, if the former president wanted to revise what he’d written. She thought he

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might. But after thinking about it awhile, Bush decided, defiantly, not to do so. He sent another e-mail, dated Thursday, October 18. Here is the former president's note, which he asked me to simply add to the words he'd written on August 9:

POSTSCRIPT: I wrote this "pursuit of happiness" essay before the tragic events of September 11th. When . . . asked [if] I wanted to revise it to reflect my post-September 11th thoughts, my first thought was that I probably should. But as I reread this, I realized that the "pursuit of happiness" is truly one of our inalienable rights as Americans. It's just as important now, as it was when I wrote this, that all of us participate in and celebrate one of our most treasured freedoms. It's just one of many reasons why I am so proud to be an American.

The elder Bush's response, in turn, made *me* proud to be an American, and whetted my appetite for further exploration of the meaning of Jefferson's evocative phrase. Where did he get it? What did he mean by it? How do we use it today, in a time of great wealth, but also a time of war and of great peril for ordinary American citizens? It was at this very time—after the war on terrorism had begun, but before the onset of the second war against Iraq in March of 2003—that Professor Larry J. Sabato, director of the Center for Government Studies at the University of Virginia, called and asked me if I wanted to write a book for a collection he was editing, a series called *American Political Challenges*. The challenges faced by the American nation in these times are manifest, the connection to the university founded by Jefferson seemed a good omen, and so I accepted Larry's offer. The respected publishing house of Rowman & Littlefield, in turn, enthusiastically accepted my book proposal. In the process of writing it, which occurred as the war in Iraq was unfolding, I learned a great deal about my own birthright: This book also allowed me to pursue my own happiness, even in times of war, and my hope is that it will enlighten my fellow Americans a bit as well.