

Writing for a special consumer

THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF

William Newton

When it began more than 20 years ago, the very existence of *The President's Daily Brief*, let alone its contents, was a carefully guarded secret. Then word gradually seeped through the Office of Current Intelligence that OCI was preparing something special for President Kennedy every day, intelligence tailored to his tastes and needs, a product designed and written for him personally. Several senior OCI analysts were obviously up to something. Ordinarily friendly, gregarious types, they had suddenly become recluses. (By this behavior they drew more attention to themselves than if they had marched around toting placards with their job descriptions printed thereon.) This was a strange sort of bait to dangle in front of intelligence officers, and frankly it posed a sort of dare to the rest of us. We were supposed to know—and up to a point did know—what Khrushchev and Nasser and Mao were doing, but what about these fellows in our very midst?

Little by precious little we found out. The first discovery—in the later stages of a cocktail party, where many things come to light in Washington—was that they were working on the “Dingbat.” Since it was not at all clear whether this was some newly discovered occupational disease that might wipe us all out or a code name for a new rating system, our appetite for discovery was whetted all the more. Before long we became aware of tell-tale schedule changes in the Print Shop, noted that one of our best typists was keeping weird hours, and heard that analysts were being besieged with insistent questions at unusual times of the day and night. From all this we deduced that some sort of new publication was afoot. Next, some analyst who always came in late (there were quite a few of these) noticed that one or another of our mystery colleagues, clutching a briefcase, was driven away from the front entrance in an official car at ten minutes to nine every morning. The clues kept thrusting themselves upon us until it was finally announced (ever so cryptically) in staff meeting that OCI was indeed putting out some “very special” intelligence assessments. The next week it was revealed that these were “for the President only.” Months later our Division Chief, still wide-eyed, came back from the staff meeting and announced that the Office Director had mesmerized the assemblage by holding up a copy of the “Dingbat”—in a “now you see it, now you don't” performance. In another month or two a garbled description of the publication surfaced in the *New York Times*.

This episode illustrates how nearly impossible it is to keep a secret even in CIA, not to mention other branches of the government. Inevitably other people had to be involved, unless the mystery squad members were going to do their own typing, run the presses, and drive their own cars to the White House.

Initiation to the PICKL

With only a sketchy idea of what I was getting into, I showed up one late spring day in 1963 to be initiated into the trio of "Picklers," those chosen to produce the PICKL (*The President's Intelligence Check List*). I would fill in for regulars who were taking summer vacations. Naturally the working room, a small one in the Front Office suite, was known as the "Pickle Barrel." It wasn't particularly inaccessible, and there were no forbidding locks on the door, but casual visitors and *voyeurs* were quickly made to feel uncomfortable. As usual the "snapping in" for this job consisted of looking over the shoulders of the regulars to see what they did and why, and reading several weeks' worth of back issues. There's nothing better than this sort of on-the-job training.

Even I, a slow learner, soon understood the routine. The three men rotate assignments and you are "it"—that is, the writer—every third day, if things go "normally," a word almost without meaning in Washington. You are simply in the way if you show up before ten o'clock, since everyone is still recovering from the effort of getting out the booklet that was delivered to the White House at nine. Even so, when you do appear, there is a pile of paper on your desk. Your "reader" has been scanning the incoming paper since eight-thirty, and has not forgotten you. You are supposed to work until around ten in the evening, with time out for what passes for dinner in the cafeteria, and go home for a nap. Then you must be up, bright-eyed, at three in the morning and come back to finish up the book. All the items—usually six or eight—are to be typed and arranged for the Front Office reviewer, who will wander in about six to curse, praise, damn, or laud—but almost certainly to change—most of them. Somehow they'll get retyped (by an unflappable secretary ungallantly referred to as "the Blonde Blizzard"), then run off and assembled into booklets in the Print Shop and delivered to you barely in time for a mad dash down the Parkway (if one can "dash" down a congested Parkway) to the White House and the West basement office of Bromley Smith, the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council. General Clifton, the President's military aide who will actually hand the booklet to Mr. Kennedy, will also be there, along with some representatives of the Defense Intelligence Agency bearing a sheaf of their own jewels. Everyone will discuss the items, General Clifton sometimes asking questions to be sure he can in turn answer the President's. When you get back to the office, you must write a brief memorandum about how the pieces were received at this meeting. Then you have the rest of that day off. But please stumble in at eight-thirty the next morning to do the scanning. As all this was explained, it sounded simple enough. When finally I tried it on my own, it wasn't simple at all. The battle to get the book out made for an active and interesting summer.

It soon became obvious that the original offer—"help out by writing three or four booklets"—was subject to drastic revision: I remained in the regular rotation until early October. A couple of years later I was asked to do a regular tour with the group that was then writing the *Daily Brief* for President Johnson. In trying to "tune in" on two different Presidents and produce booklets that each would find interesting enough to read and informative enough to serve his particular needs, I found challenges and rewards.

President's Brief

Contrasting Schedules

Not the least of the challenges was getting used to the hours—which seemed to change about the time you had really settled in. The Kennedy summer was the easiest. You had plenty of time in which to get the pieces ready, and the advantage of the after dinner solitude. The telephone seldom rang, and not too many people came dashing in with some sort of rubbish that would make a “marvelous” piece. I made one hard and fast rule for myself—have two items finished before supper. If you got those two items done, you could keep up. Then about nine o'clock you get tangled up in a different piece. There are soon wads of crumpled paper, relics of one abortive attempt after another to find the handle. Your nerves are frayed, and the after effects of that barely warm chicken cacciatore are becoming more insistent. Why not wait 'till morning? This is the kiss of death. It will be no easier then, and it will be just your luck to have three late items facing you when you return. I found this out the hard way one night when I put a troublesome piece aside at quarter to eight to go see my son play football for his high school. I staggered back at three in the morning to find the item still troublesome, major changes necessary in two others, and material for a complicated new one that the Senior Duty Officer had dumped on my desk at what was probably the end of the third quarter. Never again!

In the Johnson days, we generally left to deliver the booklet to the White House about five-thirty or six in the afternoon. This meant a shorter time in which to do the job, even if you started at nine-thirty. (It also meant that most of the traffic on the Parkway was going in the other direction.) The trouble here was that when “one of those days” came along, you sat there pen in hand but with nothing happening as the afternoon wore on, your miserable little pile of pieces getting no larger.

Then one morning the White House made a “suggestion.” Suppose the booklet were delivered at seven in the morning rather than in the evening. The chances would be better that it would contain intelligence the President had not already seen. Also, it might be easier to corner him long enough to get him to read it then and there. The President, we were told, “wondered” if this could be done. He didn't “wonder” very long. The next edition arrived at seven the following morning. This stripping of the gears may sound like a big order, but it really wasn't. There was simply a low-key meeting of all concerned—our team of readers and writers; someone who could speak for the Print Shop and the couriers; the Chief of the Watch Office; and of course the Front Office, for if someone from there was to review what we wrote in the wee hours (and that had to get to the Print Shop not an instant later than six in the morning) he had to be on hand early. This all got talked out and arranged in twenty minutes, and by ten-thirty that morning we were on the new schedule.

Writer's Routine

The writer would now appear about ten in the morning, and get drafts completed by about six. This gave all the regular reviewers—including Mr. Helms, whom we affectionately referred to as “The Great Editor in the

Sky"—a chance to see and mark up most of the book before they left. The writer was to return at one o'clock next morning and (quite probably) start over again if things were really popping, or produce entirely new items. (This was supposed to be one of the advantages of the early morning delivery.) But the Front Office excused itself from participating at 0500. Instead, it delegated the honor of reviewing the book to senior OCI officers, Division Chiefs and the like, whom the writer was to call when he was about to have the book ready. This arrangement created some stirring scenes. The writer then had to hang around until seven, so that he could phone over any vital last-minute changes.

I liked the new routine, most of the time. Coming back in at one o'clock could be a little short of ideal on bitter nights when snow drifts or blizzards clogged the Parkway. It was better on moonlit summer nights. Fortunately, our two children were old enough not to make pests of themselves over this schedule, my wife could cope with anything, and our house was arranged so that one could sleep in the master bedroom even when a near riot was in full swing in the family room. I'd be up and dressed by midnight, ready to eat. No one could figure out what to call this collation, so it became known as "my meal." (My wife never complained about slinging up four meals every fourth day.) The part of this schedule that I remember most fondly were the days off. After the writing stint I'd sleep till noon and wake up feeling very foggy. In an hour, I'd get with it again and be fancy free for the rest of that day and all of the next one. Every four weeks you got a "long weekend"—that is, you finished writing on Friday morning and then they let you alone until Tuesday morning. The free time, especially on weekdays, was marvelous. You could buy a pane of glass or a new mailbox at the hardware store without fighting hordes of Saturday do-it-yourself nuts. You could work all day on a mountain for your model train layout or ransack hobby shops for that rare Central of Georgia hopper car, or slip down to the Potomac Yards to watch the freight trains being made up. You could go out to watch the Redskinettes practice their routines. When our basset presented us with nine pups, I was home to struggle with most of the feedings after the unregenerate mother lost interest in the project. That seven-thirty meal, after I had just set the President right on the world's trouble spots, was generally quite a happening. The nine balls of fur would pour out from their pen three deep and fall into the bowls of pabulum. It was a hilarious way to unwind after a taxing night.

Task of the Scanner

In the usual sequence of things, before you got to be the writer you spent a day as the scanner. You arrive at eight-thirty, to be confronted with a basketful of paper, no matter whether in the Kennedy or Johnson days. No President, no Emperor, no revolution, no earthquake could stop the stuff. Piles of it descend on you all during the day, until you feel that if you were to doze for an instant the flow might well engulf you. In moments of near despair, you suspect that Egyptian intelligence must have invented paper as a "dirty trick" to bring this country to its knees. It appears as though you are the unfortunate recipient of anything and everything that has what looks like words on it:

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So, assuming that your eyes don't give out or that your ability to discriminate is not numbed into uselessness, you scan through these piles of variously colored paper and pass on the "important" things to the writer. But there is a catch here. Above and beyond the perfectly obvious winners (Vietnam, major developments in the Soviet Union, wars in progress, and the like), each writer has his own notion of what is important. Some will concern themselves only with truly earthshaking events—and generally end up with short books. Others have their own private manias that you must cater to. One makes you swear in advance that you'll pass on every word concerning China, no matter how inconsequential (or incomprehensible) it may appear to you. Another writer is a Latino fanatic who can be swept away by anything that mentions bananas or coffee beans, let alone a revolution. Then, inevitably, there are some pieces of paper that intrigue you—and you convince yourself that if they don't also intrigue the writer, they ought to. So you slip them into his collection.

Other readers also had their own ideas as to what would make a great piece. One of the group during that Kennedy summer was a more or less self-appointed reader, who went for the strange and esoteric tidbits. He was always around. He apparently never slept, and lived by nothing approaching any sort of schedule. He would pop in at all hours of any day or any night. His happy hunting ground was the reject pile that the regular reader had created, from which he would extract "very interesting" or "really great" reports. These

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One evening our volunteer reader honored me with his presence at about ten o'clock, after having written that morning's book and not slept since. At eight-thirty next morning, he charged in as the regular reader—still not having slept.

As the scanner, you have to be tuned in on the writer you are reading for, and you have to give him enough paper so that he, not you, is really deciding what to use. (This means that you pass on twice as much as you should.) Now and then, of course, you'll foul things up by failing to send on something that,

for a reason you never did understand, was important. (Maybe some otherwise innocuous-looking cable came from a great and good friend of Mr. Helms'—and why didn't we write about it?) Naturally, the writer takes the heat for all the errors of omission or commission occasioned by the reader's carelessness, drowsiness, or bad judgment. Friendships sometimes hung in the balance after some reader had really dropped the ball. A day of this and you are quite willing to be the writer, or just about anything else.

It Is for the President

The next day you are indeed the writer. But just what do you write about, and in what style? The very nature of the product pretty much answers these questions for you. If you remember one cardinal fact you're over the hump right away: The booklet is for the President.

This means, first of all, that you write about subjects and developments that are important enough to warrant his attention, or that you have good reason to believe are of special interest to him. The first part of this statement is simply the classic distinction between national and departmental intelligence; the second part reflects our effort to tailor the PDB to the President's tastes.

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Secondly, whatever we wrote had to be brief, and the language must be strong and direct. No tedious buildups, no hair-splitting qualifications, and no useless repetition. The PDB was printed on regular 8½ x 11 paper, but we used only the right-hand side for the text, with the title of the item on the left-hand half. This made for a less forbidding mass of words and for quick and easy reading. We sometimes had as many as four items on one page—so you had better be brief. Unless you were going to foretell with some assurance the end of the world, six sentences were considered the limit.

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Strict adherence to our rule of thumb—importance and brevity—led one of the writers to produce a classic item.

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Then one day nothing at all occurred. Our writer thought of what the President would want to know, and wrote one word: "Quiet."

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The what-does-he-need-to-know principle helped in other obvious ways. Other publications, attuned to their more general audiences, said "President Thieu" or "Chairman Khrushchev." For the President, we could skip the titles. Just "Thieu" or "Khrushchev" would suffice.

To squeeze the essence out of a mass of information is never simple. For example, one Monday morning at one o'clock I had to create a late item

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Walking the High Wire

In the Johnson days we thought we had been doing pretty well, until Mr. Helms, then the Deputy Director, said he would receive all the writers at two-thirty in the afternoon. Such announcements seldom breed confidence. What was up? Were we going to change the schedule again? Or were we all going out to pasture? To our surprise, he told us that the President (or, more likely, Bromley Smith—it was never clear which) felt that the booklets were getting a trifle dull. Could we jazz them up a bit, without diluting their value as intelligence? Perhaps we could even insert a "funny" every now and then. After all, the President was human, and didn't always have the time (or possibly the inclination) to read Art Buchwald's columns. This sounded like a task we could handle, and we returned to our desks each determined, in his own way, to become a cross between Oscar Wilde and Josh Billings. That day's writer had left in the middle of a rather pedestrian piece about

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We used down-to-earth language for Johnson.

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As with other assignments, writing the PDB was a sort of boom or bust operation. When the world was not falling apart—and there were such periods—we had trouble turning out pieces that were fresh and important. It also took some doing to stay awake on nights when the flood of paper became a mere trickle, and all your writing was long since done. The opposite side of the coin was a night in early February, 1968. The Tet offensive in Vietnam had begun on the last day of January. The *Pueblo* had been boarded and captured by the North Koreans on the 23rd, causing tremendous concern within the government and something close to rage in the country at large.

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(b)(3)(n) I tore back to our office, trying to block out any second thoughts about the piece, and arrived just in time to get it typed and make the Print Shop's deadline. Whew! And why did my car pick that morning to have a flat tire?

Contributions of Review

The PDB pieces, like anything else, had to be reviewed. (This is an innate, incurable bureaucratic passion.) And review usually meant change. Occasionally one had to review the reviewers, to make sure their changes hadn't altered the sense of the piece.

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The reviewing process did improve our product and saved us from what could have been some painful slips. Someone a little farther from the travail of creating the piece or less emotionally involved in its subject matter can spot cryptic sentences, errors, or an inappropriate phrase or tone that the writer would never notice. Sometimes the changes amounted to no more than substituting "police" for "lawmen," or deleting a phrase about "devastation" in China when the accompanying photograph showed no such thing. But the reviewers' contributions were generally more substantial than this. Like the day I let my feelings show through by writing a bitterly sarcastic piece about

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In half an hour I returned with an unslanted piece that nevertheless managed to convey the impression that

(b)(3)(n) This *was* our judgment, and it was our duty to pass it on to the President, but in an objective way.

The reviewers could also throw cold water on other offerings which were great in themselves, but just wouldn't have made it with President Johnson. (Remember, this was *his* book.) There was, for instance,

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Here was a real gem, I thought. Let's shorten it a bit and include it as an Annex to the booklet. The reviewer nixed this proposal, pointing out that it was unlikely to help the President.

In Retrospect

Was the hassle of producing the PDB worth it from the point of view of those involved? Well, as this narrative indicates, at the very least the job did furnish an almost inexhaustible supply of anecdotes. On slack days (and there were some) an institution called "Memory-Lane Time" was developed for whiling away the period in the late afternoon when the articles were finished and we were waiting for the reviewers to do their thing. War stories new and old were brought out, burnished, and recirculated. Most PDBers left the job better prepared for their anecdotage than when they came.

Doing the PDB garnered substantial rewards. Few institutions in the history of bureaucracy were so close to the center of things and still gave you so much individual freedom. When you had the book in the middle of the night you were *it*: you could do anything you wanted, as long as you were willing to take responsibility for it the next day. If new information came in, it was up to you and no one else to decide what to do with it. The thought was intimidating, but also heady.

At the same time, the PDB staff in the sixties and early seventies also served an institutional function of some importance, one that the logarithmic increase in the flow of information has now made impossible. The staff saw essentially *every* piece of priority traffic that came into the Intelligence Community—State cables, CIA reports, NSA products, the small numbers of imagery reports that by then were coming out. Thus the Director of OCI (who in those days briefed the DCI's morning meeting) knew that he had a staff of experienced analysts double-checking (second-guessing, if you will) to make sure that line analysts were not missing anything. This has never been a popular process among the line analysts, but it remains true that the PDBers every once in a while turned up a report or an idea that had not yet attained its rightful place in the sun.

The last question is both the most important and the hardest to answer: did the PDB—often referred to as the most expensive newspaper ever produced—do its job? Sometimes articles got kudos, more often they got brickbats, and most often there was no response at all. All one can confidently say is that the demand for the product has continued—and that suggests that some function is being served.