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*There is no substitute for access  
to the President.*

## GERALD FORD AND THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF

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In the late spring of 1974, when it became apparent that President Richard Nixon would not survive the Watergate scandal, the Director of Central Intelligence saw both a responsibility and an opportunity. Director William Colby decided that CIA should help Vice President Gerald Ford prepare for his elevation to the Presidency. Colby's initiative later afforded CIA unprecedented direct and daily access to the President when Mr. Ford moved into the Oval Office.

Colby invited the Vice President to visit CIA Headquarters. Mr. Ford came, on June 12, 1974, and was given wide-ranging briefings on intelligence operations and assessments. In response to his request, Colby agreed to send him *The President's Daily Brief* (PDB), in addition to *The National Intelligence Daily* (NID) he had been receiving. I was assigned to facilitate intelligence support to the Vice President.

Mr. Ford accepted my suggestion that the PDB be brought to him directly, acknowledging that this would be the most secure way to receive the sensitive document. He specified that he would like to see it early each morning, preferably as his first appointment. Beginning on July 1, that became the regular routine.

It was altered only occasionally by such diversions as a Vice Presidential breakfast with Mr. Nixon or by a speaking engagement out of town. On a few occasions I saw Mr. Ford at his Alexandria home before he flew off to keep such an engagement. Always a gracious host, he, himself, brewed and served instant coffee.

### THE OVAL OFFICE

When Mr. Nixon resigned and Mr. Ford was sworn in as President on August 9, 1974, we were uncertain whether the briefings would continue. It seemed probable that Dr. Kissinger would intervene and terminate the sessions, substituting some other arrangement. (He was described to me later as "furious" when he learned of the CIA briefing routine, of which he hadn't been informed.) The uncertainty was short-lived; that evening Mr. Ford passed the word that he wanted his usual briefing the next morning at the White House.

That Saturday morning Mr. Ford seemed as awed as I was when he entered the Oval Office to begin his first full day as Chief Executive. With us was General Haig, who was to carry on as principal assistant to the President. The walls and furniture in the Office were bare—thanks to the removal of Mr. Nixon's pictures and possessions. The famous desk had only a telephone console on it, promoting the new President to tell Haig that he would rely on him to help keep the desk uncluttered.

Somewhat to my surprise in view of General Haig's presence, the President first asked for his intelligence briefing. I gave him a status report on a sensitive operation that interested him, after which he read the PDB, punctuating his perusal with a couple of questions.

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**SECRET***President's Daily Brief*

He asked Haig for his views on how the intelligence briefing should fit into the daily Presidential schedule. Haig replied that President Nixon had received the PDB along with several other reports, cables, and overnight summaries to read as time permitted during the day. The General went on to say, however, that an early daily intelligence briefing was a better idea. Mr. Ford agreed, expressing satisfaction with the routine that had been established and observing that such an arrangement would help prepare him for a subsequent daily meeting with Mr. Kissinger. The new President evidently felt at some disadvantage in discussing foreign affairs with his Secretary of State and wanted as much advance support as he could get. Accordingly, I would continue to be the President's first appointment each morning.

That initial session in the Oval Office ended on a mildly embarrassing note for me. I exited the Office through the nearest door—only to find myself at a dead end. A second door, which I later learned led to a smaller, more private office for the President, was locked, trapping me in the passageway. The Presidential lavatory was on one side opposite a pullman kitchen where stewards prepared refreshments. It was obvious that unless I was prepared to stay indefinitely I would have to reenter the Oval Office, where the President and General Haig were still conferring. I knocked, opened the door with apologies and sheepishly explained my predicament. Mr. Ford laughed and professed that he didn't yet know his way around the West Wing very well, either. He directed me out another door to the hallway. I observed that this door had no frame and was papered to blend with the wall.

#### A SECURE CHANNEL

For two days during that first week of the Ford Presidency I met alone with the President each morning. On the third morning General Brent Scowcroft, then Kissinger's assistant as National Security Adviser, informed me that henceforth he would accompany me. While this arrangement probably was prompted in part by Kissinger's desire to know what CIA was telling the President, Scowcroft's presence undoubtedly enhanced the value of the intelligence briefing for Mr. Ford. The President would raise questions about the policy implications of the intelligence we were providing, and Scowcroft either would provide the answers or undertake to obtain an early assessment. It soon became evident that no previous President had derived such prompt benefit from the Agency's current intelligence reports.

The daily contact with Mr. Ford facilitated CIA's ability to respond to his intelligence needs. Immediately after each briefing session, I would report via secure telephone to my immediate boss, the Director of the Office of Current Intelligence, who would relay any Presidential queries, messages or comments to the DCI's daily staff meeting at 9:00 a.m. With that kind-of communication, the Director and his senior aides could get rapid feedback, and the President's needs could promptly be served.

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A further advantage of the direct contact with the President involved the security of the PDB. By carrying it away after he read it, we were able to maintain complete control of his copy of the publication. Coupled with the more stringent controls that were applied to a second copy I handed to General Scowcroft, which he later showed to Dr. Kissinger and we subsequently retrieved, we were able to terminate the wide exposure that the PDB had among members of the White House and National Security Council staffs under Mr. Nixon.

28

**SECRET**

Thus, we enjoyed to Mr. Ford a secure and expeditious channel for sensitive compartmented information, some of which would have been sent to him by less direct means, but with no assurance that he would actually see it. The advantage of having direct access was not lost on the Director and others at CIA.

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An ancillary benefit from these daily meetings with President Ford was the closer cooperation that developed between the PDB staff and the White House Situation Room, which provides round-the-clock support to the President on foreign developments and national security affairs. At General Scowcroft's request, after each briefing session I would give an account of the meeting to Situation Room personnel so they could get a better insight on the President's interests and concerns. In addition, our PDB staff began to inform them each evening of the topics to be covered in the PDB the following morning so they would not duplicate coverage of any current development in the Situation Room's morning summary for the President.

One morning Mr. Ford's dog, Liberty, was in the Oval Office. While the President read the PDB, the friendly and handsome Golden Retriever padded back and forth between General Scowcroft and me until I calmed her by patting and scratching her neck. All was quiet and peaceful until her wagging tail struck the President's nearby pipe rack. The clatter of pipes and other smoking paraphernalia brought swift Presidential retribution; Liberty was banished, never to appear again during a PDB meeting.

#### **A BEARER OF BAD NEWS**

The President soon became acutely conscious that our reporting was problem-oriented. After I told him once that we didn't have much to tell him that day, he replied that he wasn't disappointed because "when there is more to report that usually means you have more bad news."

On one occasion the bad news preceded me into the Oval Office. It was in March 1975, the day after Bill Colby had testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the situation in Cambodia, where the Lon Nol regime was under heavy attack by Khmer Rouge forces. The President's first words to me that morning were

**SECRET****President's Daily Brief**

that he was unhappy about "what your boss said on the Hill yesterday." He had read an account of the Director's testimony in the *Washington Post*, which quoted Colby as saying the Lon Nol regime would have little chance to survive even with the supplemental U.S. aid the President had requested from Congress.

General Scowcroft pointed out that the advance text of the Director's statement did not include any such remark. Scowcroft offered to find out what had happened. After the session I called to forewarn the DCI. As we had speculated, his response to a question from the Committee had been quoted out of context.

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The PDB was not confined solely to current intelligence. Selected National Intelligence Estimates and memoranda occasionally were summarized in annexes to the *Brief*.

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### THE BRIEFINGS END

President Ford gave every indication that he liked the briefing sessions, but this did not save them from becoming an incidental victim of the shake-up he instituted on November 3, 1975, among his senior National Security advisers. Director Colby and Secretary of Defense Schlesinger were replaced, respectively, by George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, until then the President's White House Chief of Staff. General Scowcroft was elevated to Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, the position Secretary Kissinger had retained, with Scowcroft as his deputy, after assuming stewardship of the Department of State.

As part of the new arrangement, Scowcroft gave up his early morning meetings with the President during the PDB sessions. With his absence from that session, the CIA presence ended too. The fact that our briefings had originated under Colby's aegis probably contributed to their expendability. Thereafter, President Ford read his PDB in private, without either Scowcroft or me in attendance.

What we at CIA lost was the President's immediate reaction to each PDB. Thereafter, I delivered it to General Scowcroft, who immediately would take it to the Presidential receptionist for delivery to Mr. Ford. It was also retrieved from her. Because he was not present when the President read the PDB, although he saw him on other occasions, Scowcroft had little to pass on in the way of the President's views and questions relating to the intelligence we were giving him. As a consequence the PDB could no longer be tailored as well to suit Mr. Ford's personal needs.

There was no indication that President Ford felt seriously deprived after the daily PDB sessions ended. The appointment of George Bush as DCI soon put the Agency and the Intelligence Community in regular weekly contact with the President regarding the whole gamut of intelligence activities, and Mr. Bush provided feedback that was helpful to the PDB staff. Bill Colby had met Mr. Ford less frequently. (On several occasions he had me convey personal messages to the President.)

The experience of 14 months of daily meetings with President Ford, and the succeeding months without those meetings, suggest that CIA and the Intelligence Community as a whole can serve a President best if at least one or two means of access to the Oval Office exist. First and foremost is regular and personal contact with the President by the DCI. This ensures that the Intelligence Community viewpoint on all relevant issues is presented directly to the Chief Executive by the Community's authoritative voice. These contacts, moreover, can be an invaluable aid to producers of the PDB when the DCI in turn regularly advises them on its preparation. This kind of guidance is provided by Admiral Turner.

The second existed during the original arrangement with Mr. Ford: a CIA representative in attendance when the President receives the PDB each day. This facilitates immediate responses to his current intelligence needs and makes it possible to produce a *Brief* that is more relevant and useful.

There is, in short, no substitute for direct access. Indirect feedback, filtered and interpreted by others, leaves us ill-informed and unsure. At times in the past that is all we've had. *The above article is Secret.*