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William J. Clinton Presidential History Project

Briefing Materials

Dee Dee Myers

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DEE DEE MYERS TIMELINE

Prepared by Jessica M. Steiner

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 12/20/2004

- 1984** Myers works as a campaign assistant under Mickey Kantor, a Los Angeles lawyer and active Democrat, on Walter Mondale's (D-MN) campaign for the presidency. (Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, *Madhouse: The Private Turmoil of Working for the President*, New York: Times Books, 1996, pp. 155-156)
- 1988** Myers works as Press Secretary in Governor Michael Dukakis's (D-MA) presidential campaign. (Birnbaum, p. 156)
- 1991** Myers is Press Secretary for Dianne Feinstein's (D-CA) gubernatorial campaign. (*The Washington Post*, 01/20/1993)
- Myers works as Campaign Director for Frank Jordan's (D-CA), a San Francisco mayoral candidate. (Birnbaum, p. 156)
- October* Myers meets with Governor Bill Clinton (D-AR). She agrees to join his campaign for the presidency as Press Secretary following the completion of Frank Jordan's mayoral race. (Birnbaum, pp. 156-157)
- 1992**
- May* Avis Lavell, the Press Secretary to Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, is named Press Secretary for Governor Clinton's campaign. Lavelle will work out of the campaign's national headquarters in Little Rock, AR. Myers will work as the candidate's Press Secretary on the campaign trail. (*The New York Times*, 05/23/1992)
- July* As the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign prepare for their national convention, Myers states, "It's our chance to tell a story, to reintroduce Bill Clinton to the American people." (*The Washington Post*, 07/10/1992)
- September* Clinton serves as grand marshal for the Southern 500 stock car race. The candidate courts the close to 75,000 race fans in attendance and rides in the pace car. It is reported that the Clinton campaign recognizes these voters as an integral component in winning the election. Myers states, "These are the people in the middle." (*The Washington Post*, 09/06/1992)
- President George H.W. Bush and Governor Bill Clinton verbally spar during separate appearances before the annual convention of the National Guard Association. Neither candidate directly addresses questions surrounding Clinton's attempts to stay out of the military during the Vietnam War. Myers states that a

section of Clinton's speech responding to a direct attack on his draft record had been prepared, but was not used when an attack did not materialize. (*The Washington Post*, 09/15/1992)

The Clinton campaign uses speeches packaged as "policy initiatives" as a part of its offensive strategy. Myers maintains that the campaign plans for Clinton to give one or more such speeches a week. She explains, "They will not be a lot of new stuff, but [the speeches are] expansions of ideas we have already put forward, with a few new elements. They give us a hundred new weapons to talk about the economy and to say to voters that we've already put out a program, and Bush hasn't." (*The New York Times*, 09/27/1992)

November On the 2nd, Clinton is elected 42nd President of the United States.

The President-elect begins to structure his transition team. The transition organization announces Myers will retain the position she held during the campaign as Clinton's Press Secretary for the transition and inaugural. (*The Washington Post*, 11/12/1992)

On the 12th, President-elect Clinton outlines his agenda for the first several months of his presidency. The Administration's agenda ranges from the creation of investment tax credits for job growth to the loosening of immigration policies barring most Haitian refugees. In response to questions spurred by Clinton's statement, Myers's emphasizes that the President-elect does not intend to retreat from his middle-class tax relief promise. She explains, "He was reaffirming his intention to move forward with the plan as advanced in the campaign. He has not changed his position, nor does he intend to change his position." (*The New York Times*, 11/12/1992)

Clinton surprises local Washingtonians by taking an early morning jog on the Mall before dropping in at a McDonald's two blocks from the White House. Myers explains that Clinton plans to get out of the White House and get to know non-official Washington. She affirms, "Having *mano a mano* contact with people is very important to him. It's one of the ways he keeps his finger on the pulse of the people He goes to McDonald's all the time in Little Rock. And he likes to get out and jog. It's very much a part of his daily routine in Arkansas." (*The Washington Post*, 11/20/1992)

Myers tells the press that Clinton plans to use the presidency "as a bully pulpit to make broader points on issues like community development and homelessness." (*The Washington Post*, 11/20/1992)

December It is announced that, in celebration of his inauguration on January 20th, the President-elect plans to embark on a bus tour that evokes the memories of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Myers states that the bus trip is meant to show that Clinton aims

to appeal to people of all political backgrounds. She explains the importance of visiting both Jefferson's Monticello and the Lincoln Memorial: "It goes from the birthplace of the Democratic Party to the birthplace of the Republican Party. It cuts across party lines. It reminds us of our proud history." (*The New York Times*, 12/01/1992)

Myers attempts to dispel the perception that the transition process is disorderly and affirms Clinton's assertion that he will meet his Christmas deadline for making most Cabinet choices. The uncertainty around the remaining few positions reflects his method of making decisions. She explains, "His decision-making process is not simple. It does not lend itself to neat little boxes. That does not mean it is completely chaotic and out of control." (*The Washington Post*, 12/24/1992)

On the 24th, Clinton announces his final Cabinet selections and states that his choices "combine the energy and experience America needs." (*The Washington Post*, 12/25/1992)

1993

January

As President-elect Clinton begins to fill the top tiers of the White House staff, reports circulate that Myers is the leading candidate for White House Press Secretary. (*The New York Times*, 01/02/1993)

The President announces a number of White House staff appointments on the 14th. Myers will serve as Deputy Assistant to the President and Press Secretary, making her the first woman to serve as White House Press Secretary. Communications Director George Stephanopoulos will conduct the daily briefing, as he has done during the transition. (*The Washington Post*, 01/15/1993)

On the 20th, Clinton takes the oath of office as the nation's 42nd President. (*The Washington Post*, 01/21/1993)

The Clinton press operation orders White House guards to seal off the passageway between the press briefing room and the office suite of Myers and Stephanopoulos. This breaks a tradition dating back to John F. Kennedy, and leads to a near-shouting match between Stephanopoulos and White House reporters during his first news briefing. (*The New York Times*, 01/22/1993)

Clinton gathers his Cabinet at Camp David to discuss the Administration's legislative agenda for the first 100 days and beyond. According to Myers, the meetings are "planning sessions to improve efficiency, productivity and responsiveness to the people they serve." (*The Washington Post*, 01/31/1993)

March

On the 23rd, Clinton holds his first formal news conference since becoming President and fields unrestricted questions from the White House press corps.

Myers, responding to dissatisfaction among the White House press corps about the lack of formal news conferences, calls the criticism unfounded and notes that Clinton informally answers questions from the press and holds press conferences on specific subjects. She states, "This is our seventh or eighth press conference" since taking office. (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 03/23/1993)

April

President Clinton holds his first summit with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Myers tells the media that the two leaders hit it off because "they're similar. They both grew up in small towns. They're both fighters. In some ways, Clinton is the American Yeltsin." (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 04/05/1993)

President Clinton holds the second White House news conference of his Administration. White House officials make an attempt at damage control following the collapse of the President's \$16 billion stimulus plan and continuing questions about the deaths of Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. (*USA Today*, 04/23/1993)

May

Myers announces the firing of the seven-person staff of the White House Travel Office. The move stems from Vice President Gore's National Performance Review, which revealed "gross mismanagement," including "serious over billing" of the press. (*The Washington Post*, 05/20/1993)

On the 29th, Clinton names David Gergen as Counselor to the President. Reports circulate that one of Gergen's first tasks is to reorganize the Office of Communications. Senior White House officials speculate in the press that Myers "will have a broader role" in the White House briefings. (*The Washington Post*, 05/30/1993)

June

It is reported that White House Deputy Chief of Staff Mark Gearan will replace George Stephanopoulos as Communications Director as part of the continuing staff reorganization. Myers will continue to handle the morning briefings and Gearan will conduct the afternoon briefings several times a week. (*The Washington Post*, 06/07/1993)

Gergen announces to the White House press corps on the 7th that Gearan will take over as Director of Communications. It is reported that "the infamous closed door separating the staff from the press room will reopen. The press once again will be free to loiter in the hallway outside Gearan's new office." It is speculated that Gearan's elevation is an attempt to improve the relationship between the press and the Administration. Gearan will replace George Stephanopoulos, who will become Senior Policy Adviser to the President. (*The Washington Post*, 06/08/1993; *The Boston Globe*, 06/08/1993)

On the 14th, the President announces the nomination of Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Supreme Court, but abruptly ends the news conference following a question from ABC's Brit Hume. Hume asks the President if his decision-making process

has “a certain zigzag quality.” Clinton responds, “I have long since given up the thought that I could disabuse some of you of turning any substantive decision into anything but a political process. How you could ask a question like that after the statement she just made is beyond me.” (*The Washington Post*, 06/15/1993)

On the 15th, President Clinton gives an official press conference and defends his decision-making style. He asserts, “This is the most decisive presidency you’ve had in a very long time on all the big issues that matter.” ABC and CBS decline to carry the news conference, a break with the long tradition of giving the president access to the airwaves. NBC chooses to carry the broadcast but cuts away after 25 minutes of the 45-minute event. Only CNN and C-SPAN air the entire session. (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 06/18/1993; *USA Today*, 06/18/1993)

President Clinton and Defense Secretary Les Aspin discuss a possible compromise on the issue of gays in the military. White House officials state the President has not made a final decision, but Myers reiterates that a complete lifting of the ban is not an option because of congressional opposition. She maintains, “I think it’s clear that there are certain obstacles. Members of Congress don’t support an entire lifting of the ban. I don’t think that is a possibility.” (*The Washington Post*, 06/25/1993)

Myers receives sharp criticism from the news media for appearing to have misled reporters over inquiries about military action in Iraq. During a White House briefing, Myers admits the Administration’s failure in handling the media’s questions. She asserts, “There was never any intention to mislead the media” about last weekend’s U.S. missile attack on Baghdad; rather, “It was an oversight and something that we’ll work to correct.” (*The Washington Post*, 06/29/1993)

July

Gergen takes responsibility for not adequately briefing Myers on the Administration’s recent actions in Iraq, leading Myers to unintentionally mislead the press. (*The Washington Post*, 07/06/1993)

Clinton accepts the broad outlines of Aspin’s proposal, which allows homosexuals to serve in the military as long as they do not reveal their sexual orientation. Myers states that the President believes the new policy will “meet the broad objectives . . . that people not be eliminated from the service on the basis of their status alone.” (*The Washington Post*, 07/16/1993)

On the 29th, members of the White House press corps ask 138 questions about Vince Foster’s death during a White House press briefing. Evidently contradictory statements by White House aides, including Myers and Gearan, lead to press speculation and confusion. (*The Washington Post*, 08/01/1993, 08/08/1993)

- August* On the 10th, U.S. Park Police and FBI agents close their investigation into Vince Foster's death. The investigation conclusively finds Foster's death was a suicide. (*The Washington Post*, 08/11/1993)
- On the 12th, President Clinton and Pope John Paul II meet for the first time at Jesuit-run Regis University in Denver, Colorado. It is reported that the major point of contention between the two is over abortion. Myers states the Pope did not talk directly about abortion, but instead "tried to make his point without being confrontational." (*The Washington Post*, 08/12/1993)
- Myers and Gearan begin to share daily briefing duties. This new arrangement is the Administration's third version of the press briefings. Some White House officials reportedly believe that Gearan needs to brief more regularly so he can assume the task at important and complicated periods. After Stephanopoulos's departure, Myers became the sole briefer. (*The Washington Post*, 08/26/1993)
- September* President Clinton launches his effort to reform the nation's health care system with an address to a joint session of Congress. He tells the American people that it is time to fix a "badly broken" health care system and replace it with one that will guarantee health care "that can never be taken away." (*The Washington Post*, 09/23/1993)
- October* The President defends himself against charges that his 25 percent staff cut is a sham and claims his staff is "doing more work and carrying a bigger load than this White House has carried in more than a dozen years, and doing it with fewer people." Myers clarifies the President's statement by saying he is referring to the "activism" of the White House on domestic policy, including national service, health care reform and economic policy. (*The Washington Post*, 10/01/1993)
- Mack McLarty sends a memo to "all White House staff" asking them what they do. The memo is part of a management study of the White House underway by Matthew Miller, Special Assistant to the Deputy Director in the Office of Management and Budget, at McLarty's request. Miller is a former management consultant. The memo is part of a management review to evaluate the overall White House operation. (*The Washington Post*, 10/12/1993)
- Myers states that the White House hopes to send the Administration's health care legislation to Capitol Hill as soon as possible but that there is no "hard deadline." Ira Magaziner, Senior Advisor to the President for Policy Development, says the legislation, including details on new taxes, is likely to reach Congress by "next week." (*The Washington Post*, 10/13/1993)
- The White House announces that future appearances by President Clinton at major political fund-raising dinners will be open to the press. The move is in response to the press lockout imposed by the White House when Clinton mingled with lobbyists at the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee's recent \$1,500-a-head fund-raising dinner. (*The Washington Post*, 10/20/1993)

A pool of journalists under Pentagon escort is sent to cover the American intervention in Somalia in an effort to give reporters a clear picture of military operations. Myers's emphasizes that the White House is "absolutely not" trying to engage in spin control. (*The New York Times*, 10/12/1993; *The Washington Post*, 10/14/1993)

December President Clinton and AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland attempt to put aside their differences in a face-to-face meeting. Clinton and Kirkland meet in private for about 45 minutes. Myers states that the two men spent their time talking about labor's agenda for the coming year. The issues include striker replacement legislation, worker safety laws, and health care reform, an issue on which labor has been particularly supportive of the Administration. (*The Washington Post*, 12/11/1993)

1994

January Stephanopoulos announces on ABC's *This Week with David Brinkley* that the Department of Justice has the requested Whitewater files. However, following this appearance, he is told the papers still are in the possession of Clinton's lawyer, David Kendall. Myers is designated to "fix" the mistaken report, and announces that the files are still being cataloged and will not be handed over for another two weeks. (*The Washington Post*, 01/07/1994)

Press reports note that Myers is noticeably out of sight during the President's European trip. Instead, Donald Steinberg, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director of African Affairs at the National Security Council, is the one circulating with the press, arranging interviews with senior officials, and getting questions answered. (*The Washington Post*, 01/24/1994)

April The President goes on the road to sell his health care program to the American people. Clinton visits twelve states and holds campaign-style town meetings where he answers citizens' questions. (*The Washington Post*, 04/09/1994)

Hillary Rodham Clinton, in a news conference at the White House on the 22nd, offers a defense of her business activities in Arkansas and her actions as First Lady by answering more than an hour's worth of questions. Among the White House staff, few, if any, outside of Clinton's personal staff appear to have advanced knowledge of the news conference. It is reported that Myers, Gergen, Stephanopoulos, and Gearan were out of the loop in planning this event. (*The Washington Post*, 04/23/1994)

June President Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton establish a defense fund to help pay legal fees resulting from the Whitewater investigation and the Paula Jones lawsuit, which could run as high as \$2 million annually. Myers states that the Clintons decided to establish the fund because "it's in the best interest of the

country and the President” to have the large legal bills paid, and the Clintons could not afford it on his \$200,000 salary. (*The Washington Post*, 06/29/1994)

Leon Panetta will replace Mack McLarty as White House Chief of Staff. Gearan states on the 28th that most White House officials were “excited” at the prospect of a revamped and more orderly White House under Panetta. However, it is reported that what is more evident is anxiety among those whose fate Panetta now controls. (*The Washington Post*, 06/29/1994)

July

Leon Panetta replaces Mack McLarty as White House Chief of Staff. Panetta had previously served as Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). When asked on *Larry King Live* whether he plans to replace Myers, Panetta responds, “It’s likely, obviously....I’m going to be bringing in some of my own people to try to assist me in that effort.” Panetta subsequently begins discussions with State Department Spokesman Mike McCurry about the Press Secretary position. (W. Dale Nelson, *Who Speaks for the President? The White House Press Secretary from Cleveland to Clinton*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998, pp. 249, 269).

Signaling his flexibility to a Congress struggling to write health care legislation, Clinton calls for a “phased-in, deliberate effort” to provide insurance to all Americans and for the first time says he could accept coverage of “somewhere in the ballpark of 95 percent upwards.” Myers and other aides indicate that Clinton is not retreating, changing his position, altering his principles or doing anything more in the address than what McLarty calls “showing flexibility.” (*The Washington Post*, 07/19/1994)

August

Under the direction of Leon Panetta, the White House staff attempts to change its image from what some have called the “youth brigade,” which includes Myers, Stephanopoulos, Gearan and others. It is reported that Panetta and Counsel to the President Lloyd Cutler will now serve as the primary television spokespeople for the Administration. (*The Washington Post*, 08/10/1994)

In an attempt to reach out to the White House press corps, Clinton holds a series of private, off-the-record sessions with selected journalists, in some cases soliciting advice about his troubled presidency. Journalists in attendance are White House reporters Terence Hunt of the Associated Press, ABC’s Jeff Greenfield and Brit Hume; NBC’s Andrea Mitchell; CBS’s Rita Braver and CNN’s Wolf Blitzer. Myers, Gearan, and Stephanopoulos are regular fixtures in these meetings. (*The Washington Post*, 08/26/1994)

Reports circulate that Myers is resisting suggestions that she leave the Administration despite growing calls for her departure. She and other Administration insiders argue that the President’s inner circle has not given her access to the information she needs to do her job. “She won’t go without a fight,”

one official says. Reportedly, Panetta fears that if he fires Myers, the move will alienate women voters. (*Time*, 08/29/1994)

Late Summer After participating in a conference call on the situation in Haiti with Myers, McCurry informs Myers that Panetta has contacted him about joining the White House. (Nelson, p. 269; Birnbaum, p. 182)

September The media reports that Clinton is considering further staff changes. According to press accounts, Mike McCurry is likely to replace Myers as White House Press Secretary. This change is part of a realignment that Panetta has been planning since June. Nevertheless, officials caution that Clinton has not yet given final approval to Panetta's recommendations. An announcement of the changes is likely to come in the next few days. (*The New York Times*, 09/22/1994; *The Washington Post*, 09/23/1994)

On the 21st, McCurry meets with Panetta to discuss the Press Secretary position. Panetta proposes McCurry as White House Press Secretary, placing Myers in a secondary role under McCurry. McCurry is reportedly skeptical that the arrangement would work. Myers meets with Clinton in the Oval Office later that evening, after which Clinton decides not to replace Myers. Myers persuades the President that she should first be given a chance to do her job with the authority she has been denied. (Nelson, p. 250; Kurtz, p. 22; Birnbaum, p. 184; *Reuters*, 09/22/1994; *U.S. News & World Report*, 10/03/1994)

On the 23rd, Panetta announces Myers's promotion to Assistant to the President and Press Secretary. The Press Office is brought out from the Office of Communications and is recreated as the Office of the Press Secretary. Myers had reportedly been arguing that the Press Secretary position needed to be restored to its traditional level regardless of who should hold the position. However, Panetta reportedly continues to block Myers's access within the White House. Reports persist in the press that Myers will be leaving her position in the near future. (*Fall 1994 Federal Yellow Book*, Washington, D.C.: Monitor Leadership Directories, Inc., 1994, pp. 1-9; Birnbaum, pp. 188-189; *The Washington Post*, 09/23/1994)

November The Republicans win control of both houses of Congress in the 1994 mid-term elections. The press continues to report that significant changes are expected in the White House staff. (*The Washington Post*, 11/14/1994)

December On the 15th, Myers officially tells the President that she will leave her job as Press Secretary on the 31st. The transfer completes a shuffle reportedly put in motion by Panetta. It remains likely that the leading contender to succeed her is McCurry. (*The New York Times*, 12/15/1994, 12/17/1994)

On the 22nd, Myers delivers her last press briefing as Press Secretary. President Clinton makes a surprise appearance at Myers final briefing. Clinton states, “We’ve had a wonderful professional relationship. We’ve had a good personal friendship. I think she is one of the best people I have ever had the privilege of working with.” (*The New York Times*, 12/22/1994; *USA Today*, 12/24/1994)

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DEE DEE MYERS SUGGESTED TOPICS

Prepared by Jessica Steiner

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 12/20/2004

The 1992 Campaign

- When did you first meet Bill Clinton? Describe your early impressions of him.
- How did you come to join the Clinton campaign?
- Discuss your work in the Clinton campaign and your role as the “traveling Press Secretary.” In what ways did your responsibilities differ from Avis Lavel’s?
- How would you characterize Clinton’s relationship with the press during the campaign?
- What lessons from your prior presidential campaign experience were especially useful to you in 1992? Compare those earlier campaigns to the 1992 Clinton campaign.
- What impact did Ross Perot have on the Clinton’s campaign? What communications strategies were employed to counter Perot’s and President George H.W. Bush’s candidacies?

The Transition

- Describe your role as Clinton’s spokeswoman for the transition and inaugural. Did you have any broader role in the transition is policy making process or in staffing decisions?
- Describe the process of transitioning from the Bush Administration into the Clinton Administration in 1992. What difficulties did you encounter?

Press Secretary

- How did you come to serve as White House Press Secretary? How did you prepare for the position?
- Did you have any substantive discussions with the President-elect about what he wanted from his White House Press Secretary? How closely did you work with the speech writing staff? Describe the division of responsibilities between the Communications Office and the Press Secretary within the Clinton White House.
- How did you view your relationship with the press? Comment on the ritual of the daily briefing. Discuss the morning gaggle and other informal channels you used in your work with the press. Discuss the use of the Presidential Press Conference as a communications channel. What other White House staffers played key roles in your work with the press?
- How did you inform yourself about the multiple issue areas you had to address as Press Secretary? Were you comfortable with your level of access to the President and to the key decision-making processes you had to speak about as Press Secretary?
- How would you describe the Clintons’ attitude towards the press? How was this shaped by the 1992 campaign? Discuss your efforts to help better the President’s relationship with the press.
- What changes were made in the structuring of the Office of the Press Secretary during your time in office? How did the addition of David Gergen and Leon Panetta affect the internal workings of the White House? Describe your relationships with Mark Gearan, Mack McLarty, the First Lady, George Stephanopoulos and others.
- How did members of the Counsel’s Office come to serve as chief spokespersons on scandal-related issues? Discuss the role that the Counsel’s Office and Clinton’s private attorneys played in setting press strategy.
- How problematic were leaks in this White House? Did the Press Secretary have any role in trying to police leaks?
- Describe how developments in communications technology (talk radio, the Internet, 24-hour news channels) affected this White House and its communications strategies.

- Discuss any special problems, or memorable recollections, from your work on any of the following issue areas: healthcare, gays in the military, Somalia, Haiti, NAFTA, economic policy, Whitewater, etc.
- Discuss your decision to leave the Clinton Administration.

The Clinton Presidency in Retrospect

- Evaluate Clinton as a public leader, a legislative leader, and party leader. Compare Clinton's leadership and communications styles to those of other politicians you served.
- How did Clinton respond to adversity and setbacks?
- What role did presidential rhetoric play in the Clinton presidency? How effective was Clinton's use of the bully pulpit?
- Was Clinton's relationship with the press more adversarial than usual for a president? If so, why? Can you identify any missed opportunities that might have led to improved relations with the press?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Clinton presidency?
- What features of the Clinton presidency were missed or overlooked by the press? How should the Clinton presidency be viewed by history?