



President George W. Bush Oral History Project

BRIEFING MATERIALS

Kevin Sullivan

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Prepared by Rob Martin, Senior Researcher
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Presidential Oral History Program

MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED OR CIRCULATED

KEVIN SULLIVAN NEWS TIMELINE

Prepared by Rob Martin

Miller Center, University of Virginia, 07/19/2012

1980 Kevin Sullivan earns a bachelor of science in management from Purdue University.

2004 Sullivan earns a master's degree in mass communication from Iona College in New York.

2005

March The newly-confirmed Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announces on the 4th she will reorganize the Education Department and create two new offices: the Office of Communications and Outreach, and the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development. The Office of Communications and Outreach is reportedly created to end the department's "decentralized and fragmented" communications operation and will coordinate all of the department's external relations with the press, education groups, and other government agencies. (*Education Week*, 03/11/2005) The new office will bring together the Education Department's Office of Public Affairs, the communications functions from all the program offices, and the Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs. The reorganization comes in the wake of the Armstrong Williams scandal, in which *USA Today* reported in early January that the Bush Administration, during former Education Secretary Rod Paige's tenure, had paid conservative commentator Armstrong Williams \$240,000 to comment regularly about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) during his TV and radio talk shows. Spellings condemned the use of "covert propaganda" and said one of her first objectives would be to repair the damage done by the scandal. (Bradley Patterson, *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008, p. 192)

April The NEA joins school districts in Michigan, Texas, and Vermont in filing a lawsuit on the 20th, charging that the Education Department has failed to provide adequate funding for NCLB.

The White House announces on the 28th that Bush will nominate Sullivan as assistant secretary for communications and outreach at the U.S. Department of Education. Sullivan had initially told Spellings, "Madame Secretary, you have the wrong guy," (*Chron.com*, 07/08/2009), but Sullivan eventually agreed to meet with Spellings for lunch. Sullivan later says, "I connected with her immediately," (*Chron.com*, 07/08/2009), and accepted the position. Spellings had initially heard about Sullivan from Tom Luce, an attorney and education reformer in Texas. (*Newsmax.com*, 08/17/2006) Before joining the Bush Administration, Sullivan had served as senior vice president for corporate communications and media

relations at NBC Universal and as a vice president for communications with NBC Sports. Sullivan had previously worked with the Dallas Mavericks for 18 years and had been honored with the NBA's "lifetime achievement award" for public relations. Spellings later says of Sullivan, he "kept the trains running on time, and, more importantly, heading in the right direction." (Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York: Free Press, 2007, p. 371; <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov>; *Education Week*, 03/16/2005; *Section 504 Compliance Advisor*, 04/01/2005; <http://www.ksullivancommunications.com>)

May On the 2nd, *USA Today* runs Spellings' editorial in which she pledges to be flexible on implementing NCLB as long as schools meet their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). (*USA Today*, 05/02/2005)

June-July The Education Department approves sixteen states to change their accountability plans under NCLB. (*The Washington Post*, 06/16/2005)

July On the 8th, Spellings states that NCLB could expand beyond math and reading. Testing in science is already set to begin in two years. She states, "In many ways we're in the infancy of accountability and education in our country." (*The New York Times*, 07/09/2005)

On the 14th, Spellings praises the "Nation's Report Card," or National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, as proof that NCLB is working. It states that African-Americans and Hispanic students are closing the gap at the elementary school level. However, the report also says little progress has been made at the higher grades. (*The Washington Post*, 07/15/2005)

August On the 8th, *USA Today* reports that Bush's "Reading First" program is being investigated for possible mismanagement and conflict of interest. There are allegations that the program forces schools to buy from large publishers, and recommend textbooks written by some reading experts in the program. (*USA Today*, 08/08/2005)

On the 22nd, Connecticut files a separate law suit, asking the federal government to cover the state's cost for NCLB and accusing the Education Department of acting in an "arbitrary and capricious manner" in denying the money. (*The New York Times*, 08/23/2005)

On the 25th, in another move to show NCLB flexibility, Spellings announces that four districts in Virginia will be allowed to run their own tutoring programs for low-income students, using NCLB money, even if the schools fail to meet academic goals. By the end of the year, Spellings allows Chicago, Boston, and New York City to use NCLB money for their own programs. (*The New York Times*, 09/02/2005, 11/08/2005; *Education Week*, 09/07/2005)

Hurricane Katrina strikes the Gulf Coast, making landfall in Louisiana on the 29th.

September

Spellings announces that Bush plans to ask Congress for \$227 million for colleges and college students affected by Hurricane Katrina. The plan is later dropped, but these students are eligible for 25% of the \$36 million enacted last month. (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11/18/2005)

On the 7th, Spellings meets with fifty-four educational groups to coordinate relief efforts for the areas hit by Katrina. The Education Department launches a “Hurricane Help for Schools” website to link donors with schools. (*Education Week*, 09/14/2005)

On the 16th, Spellings announces that \$488 million out of a \$1.9 billion hurricane relief plan will be allocated to subsidize private-school tuition for families affected by Katrina. Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) offers a Senate bill on hurricane relief without vouchers and criticizes Bush for using such “a politically charged approach.” (*The Washington Post*, 09/17/2005)

On the 19th, Spellings declares the formation of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education to examine affordability and student academic preparation. She states, “We have a responsibility to make sure our higher education system continues to meet our nation’s needs for an educated and competitive workforce in the 21st century.” (<http://www2.ed.gov/news>) Some officials reportedly worry about more federal intrusion and the influence of business leaders on the commission. (*The Washington Post*, 09/19/2005; *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10/15/2005)

On the 29th, Spellings discloses that her agency will relax the NCLB accountability standards for Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida due to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. (*The Washington Post*, 09/30/2005)

On the 30th, the GAO issues a report that the Bush Administration violated the law by making payments to Armstrong Williams and sending out a prepackaged television presentation, saying Bush’s tutoring program “gets an A-plus.” The investigation also reveals that the Education Department commissioned a newspaper article on science literacy without informing readers it was behind the piece. The incidents occurred before Sullivan and Spellings had joined the Department of Education. The ruling has no penalty. (*The New York Times*, 10/01/2005)

October

The 2005 NAEP results are mixed: math scores for eighth-graders declined, but reading scores increased slightly, and the achievement gap between whites and minorities was slowly closing. Bush calls the report “encouraging” (*The Washington Post*, 10/20/2005), while Spellings says it “shows us that we’re going to need to accelerate our progress at all grade levels....” (*USA Today*, 10/20/2005; *The New York Times*, 10/20/2005)

On the 21st, Spellings announces that states would not lose federal funding if they cannot reach the goal of staffing highly qualified teachers in every classroom by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. States have been struggling to reach this goal because, before NCLB, each state had its own guidelines. The law demands that teachers have bachelor's degrees, obtain full state certification, and demonstrate knowledge in the teaching field. (<http://www2.ed.gov>)

November On the 23rd, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan rules on *Pontiac v. Spellings* in favor of the Bush Administration. The court says that the federal government has the right to require states to spend their own money to comply with the law. Spellings calls the ruling “a victory for children and parents all across the country.” (*The New York Times*, 11/24/2005)

December Sullivan defends Spellings against criticism that she has been too willing to make exceptions and relax NCLB regulations during her first year as secretary of education. Sullivan says that she has only been willing to work with states that are committed to the spirit of the law and that “she’s still extremely hawkish on accountability.” (*USA Today*, 12/29/2005)

On the 30th, Bush signs the Hurricane Education Recovery Act that provides three new grant programs to reopen schools affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and to help schools with displaced students. (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy>)

2006

January On the 5th, Bush proposes spending \$114 million on teaching children Arabic, Farsi, Chinese, and other languages to help national security and to expand students’ cultural horizons. Spellings states, “We don’t know how to do it. This whole notion is in its infancy. But our hope is this is a start, and we can build on it.” (*The New York Times*, 01/06/2006)

On the 31st, in his State of the Union Address, Bush announces the American Competitiveness Initiative program. It funds training for 70,000 more teachers to teach Advanced Placement (AP) math and science classes and to give students more access to those courses. (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>)

February Charles Miller, the head of Spellings’ Commission on the Future of Higher Education set up last fall, says there is some consensus for higher accountability in colleges and universities. However, university officials are reportedly wary of proposals that require standardized national testing. Sullivan later states, “While the secretary won’t prejudge the work of the commission, there is no intent to suggest standardized tests or N.C.L.B.-style accountability for higher ed.” (*The New York Times*, 04/12/2006, 02/09/2006)

On the 6th, Bush unveils his education budget. He proposes to cut more than \$1 billion in the Education Department's discretionary budget over 42 programs. Spellings responds that the programs are small, and some are being replaced by larger initiatives. Title I money will be increased to help schools restructure under NCLB. (*The New York Times*, 02/07/2006)

March

Commenting on advocacy groups' calls for vouchers to be used to force school districts to meet NCLB requirements for quality education, Sullivan asserts, "We can all do a better job – the (Education) Department, states and school districts – to make sure strong public school choice and tutoring options are available to all parents, as provided by No Child Left Behind." (*USA Today*, 03/23/2006) Earlier last month Spellings had said that vouchers are "an idea whose time has come." (*USA Today*, 03/23/2006)

A preliminary statistical report for the Education Department finds that 27% of the nation's schools did not meet the federal requirement for AYP in 2004-2005. (*The Washington Post*, 03/29/2006)

April

On the 5th, Spellings warns she would withhold federal funds to states that do not make students aware of their options for free tutoring and school transfers. The Department of Education reports fewer than 1% of students who could transfer to another school actually do so, and only 17% signed up for tutoring, much lower than expected. (*The New York Times*, 04/06/2006)

On the 25th, Spellings meets with testing industry executives about recent errors in test scoring and their ability to handle the increased work load due to NCLB. Two major test scoring companies, Harcourt Assessments and Pearson, had encountered problems. (*The New York Times*, 04/26/2006, 05/05/2006)

May

On the 2nd, Spellings states that low-income students are eligible for a new \$790 million program to encourage math, science, and language study. With this program, Congress hopes to help states develop these types of programs in their schools. (*The New York Times*, 05/03/2006)

On the 17th, Spellings declares that Tennessee and North Carolina will be the first states to be in the federal pilot growth models program. (*The Washington Post*, 05/18/2006)

June

On the 12th, Spellings announces \$24 million to set up charter schools in Louisiana. (*The New York Times*, 06/13/2006)

Sullivan announces that the Department of Education might withhold federal funds from high-poverty schools in California for having inadequate transfer programs in the state's 20 largest districts. Spellings had initially taken a softer stance in working with states early in her tenure as secretary of education but, reportedly, has recently adopted a harder line. (*The New York Times*, 07/25/2006)

On the 27th, a draft report of the Higher Education Commission is released. It reports rising costs, an inadequate financial aid system, lack of accountability, and an “unacceptable number” of graduates entering the workforce without the right skills. The commission advocates testing and a confidential, national student tracking system. Some college officials criticize testing and claim that the tracking system is a violation of privacy. (*The New York Times*, 06/27/2006; *The Washington Post*, 07/07/2006)

July

Sullivan is appointed assistant to the president for communications on the 11th, taking over for Nicolle Devenish Wallace. Sullivan’s appointment comes three months after Josh Bolten had taken over for Andrew Card as chief of staff. Dan Bartlett has been serving as counselor to the president since 2005, broadly overseeing the Communications, Media Affairs, Speechwriting, and Press Offices. Sullivan is hired after interviewing with Bartlett, Bolten and Bush. Sullivan is responsible as communications director for overseeing message development and communications planning, which includes “oversight of the White House Web site; the rapid response operation; outreach to regional and special media; and the production of Presidential events.” (<http://www.ksullivancommunications.com>) The rapid response operation was created in early 2005 to respond quickly to particular stories in the press by sending out short emails to target audiences, including party officials, congressional staffers, interest groups and leading media figures. The decision to release rapid response emails is typically made during the morning communications meeting, which is attended by about a dozen people, including Bartlett, Sullivan, Tony Snow, the White House press secretary, and Rob Saliterman, who heads the rapid response unit for Sullivan. The rapid response operation’s emails can be positive or negative, often highlighting a particular issue or responding to an inaccurate story in the press. In the case of the latter, Sullivan says, “The key is we want to get our response out before it becomes accepted, conventional wisdom.” (Martha Kumar, *Managing the President’s Message: The White House Communications Operation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 138) Sullivan also warns about the importance of not overusing the rapid response operation. “We don’t want to be like a barking Chihuahua in the middle of the night where you are always yapping. You have to pick your spots.” (Patterson, pp. 196-197; Draper, pp. 370-371)

On Sullivan’s first day as White House communications director, Sullivan later writes, “I stuck my head in Tony Snow’s office to say hello. He bounded from behind his desk and said, ‘Come on – I want to show you something.’ Tony, who had been press secretary a little over two months, led me out of the West Wing and up the driveway toward the Northwest Appointments Gate. ‘I do this almost every day,’ he said. When we got close to the Secret Service guardhouse on Pennsylvania Ave., Tony instructed me to turn around and look back at the North Portico of the White House. ‘Look at that,’ he gushed. ‘Isn’t that neat? That’s where we get to work. When I worked here the first time, for President Bush 41, I

was too young and too stupid to appreciate it. This time I'm not going to take it for granted or forget what a privilege it is.' Tony went on to explain that before we knew it, we'd all be back outside the gates on Pennsylvania Avenue looking through the fence with the tourists. 'And you don't want to be out there with any regrets, so you've got to give it everything you've got every day.'" (<http://www.ksullivancommunications.com>)

In one of Sullivan's first meetings with Bush, the president impresses Sullivan with his extensive knowledge of Muslim extremism. Sullivan tells Bartlett, "That was amazing!" Bartlett responds, "Yeah, that's the side of him that they don't see on TV." When Sullivan asks if there is a way to discourage Bush from taking jabs at the media, Bartlett responds, "No, there's really not." (Draper, p. 371)

August On the 22nd, Sullivan leads a press briefing on Gulf Coast rebuilding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov>)

October Bush meets with a group of conservative radio hosts in the Oval Office as part of a communications strategy to re-energize Bush's conservative supporters. Sullivan says the meeting is part of a wider effort to put Bush in front of more news media as his own best spokesman. (*The New York Times*, 10/17/2006)

Bush campaigns for Republican candidates across the country. Sullivan says that most of Bush's 30-minute stump speech comes from Bush's own handwritten notes from his own outline, which focuses on taxes and terrorism. Before each speech, speechwriters insert a message of the day, tying the stump speech to the specific candidate Bush is supporting. (*USA Today*, 10/17/2006)

2007

July Bartlett steps down as counselor to the president. He is replaced by Ed Gillespie.

In a speech at Charleston Air Force base, Bush renews his efforts to highlight the connection between Al Qaeda forces in Iraq and 9/11. Sullivan says that Bush's remarks were devised as a "surge of facts" to combat criticisms of Bush's Iraq policy. (*International Herald Tribune*, 07/26/2007)

August Karl Rove steps down as White House deputy chief of staff and senior adviser to the president on the 31st. Rove's former deputy, Barry Jackson, takes over management of Rove's four offices: political affairs, intergovernmental relations, public liaison, and strategic initiatives. Gillespie takes over Rove's responsibilities providing strategic advice to the president, with support from Jackson and Sullivan. Gillespie also continues overseeing his broad communications responsibilities. Commenting on changes Gillespie expects to make regarding the number of speeches Bush gives, Sullivan notes, "Ed wants fewer speeches but speeches that are more impactful." (*The Washington Post*, 07/27/2007, 09/10/2007)

September Gillespie sets up daily White House conference calls each morning and afternoon with the Pentagon, State Department, the U.S. embassy, and U.S. military forces in Iraq. The conference calls are reportedly part of an effort to create a rapid-response public relations unit as part of a broader communications strategy to counter opposition to “the surge” in Iraq. Sullivan observes, “The whole idea is to take these things on before they become conventional wisdom. We have a very short window.” (*The Washington Post*, 09/09/2007)

Snow steps down as White House press secretary on the 14th. He is replaced by Dana Perino, who serves as White House press secretary through 2009.

October Bush signs an executive order banning commercial fishing of striped bass and red drum in federal waters. With the Democrats controlling Congress, Bush’s aides say this move is emblematic of the Administration’s new domestic political strategy, focusing on “kitchen table issues” during Bush’s last year in office. Sullivan discusses the popularity of smaller issues, such as the commercial fishing ban, outside the beltway. “You could tell from the coverage how it did strike a chord.” (*The New York Times*, 11/24/2007)

2008

January With the president set to deliver his final State of the Union address, Sullivan comments, “You go there to hit the big issues and right now the economy is the big issue.” (*CBS News Transcripts*, 01/28/2008)

April *The New York Times* reports that senior Defense Department officials have created a “key influencer engagement strategy” in which Administration officials recruited influential retired senior officials with military experience to generate positive news coverage of the Iraq war. The recruitment of the retired officials was reportedly kept secret from the regular Defense Department press office and handled by a small group of political appointees. (Patterson, pp. 193-194)

September Bush decides not to attend the Republican National Convention in person, opting instead to stay in Washington, D.C. until he can visit Louisiana to inspect the storm damage from Hurricane Gustav. Bush instead delivers an eight-minute speech via satellite from the White House to support the Republican presidential nominee, Senator John McCain (R-AZ). Sullivan says, “There was very much a proceed-with-caution approach here, that just because things seem to have gone pretty well, let’s not take our eye off the ball.” (*The New York Times*, 09/03/2008)

October Bush signs a \$700 billion economic relief bill creating the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). Sullivan comments on the president’s spirit while grappling with the economic crisis. “His high energy level and spirit sets the tone for the rest of us... He believes the American people expect us to finish strong and to

leave things in the best possible position for his successor.” (*The Washington Post*, 11/02/2008)

2009

January Sullivan travels with the president and first lady on the 8th to General Philip Kearny School in Philadelphia where Bush delivers a speech on NCLB. (*Dallas Observer*, 01/09/2009)

In the final days of the Bush Administration, Sullivan discusses with reporters the side of the president that is not always visible to the public. Commenting on Bush’s ability to ask tough questions in meetings that cut right to the heart of complex issues, Sullivan notes, “He can sniff it out a mile away if you don’t have the goods.” (*Associated Press*, 01/16/2009) Sullivan adds, “It was his spirit that propelled the whole place, and that’s the most amazing thing. He came here with a set of values he promised he was not going to veer from. He listens to people. He gets a lot of counsel and makes a decision based upon that. People who say he’s not inquisitive and stubborn, it’s a bunch of malarky. And to watch him make these difficult decisions knowing they were unpopular and believing they were in the best interest in the country was eye-opening, enriching.” (*Dallas Observer*, 01/09/2009)

President Barack Obama is sworn into office on the 20th.

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KEVIN SULLIVAN SUGGESTED TOPICS

Prepared by Rob Martin

Miller Center, University of Virginia, 07/17/2012

Origins of Relationship with Bush

- When did you first meet George W. Bush? What were your early impressions of him?

U.S. Department of Education

- How did you come to join the U.S. Department of Education as assistant secretary for communications and outreach? Discuss the reorganization of the Education Department in 2005 and your selection to head the newly created Office of Communications and Outreach. Why was the Office of Communications and Outreach created?
- What were your primary responsibilities? Describe the differences in your coordination of external relations with the press, education groups, and government agencies. What were the biggest challenges you faced working at the Department of Education? Comment on the public relations problems that the Education Department was facing prior to your arrival, such as the Armstrong Williams scandal. How did you hope to address and respond to these problems?
- Tell us about your work with Margaret Spellings. What goals did she hope to accomplish as the newly confirmed Education secretary?
- What issues occupied most of your time at the Education Department? Tell us about your work with No Child Left Behind. Comment on the lawsuits filed by the NEA and school districts in Michigan, Texas, and Vermont, charging that the Education Department had failed to provide adequate funding for No Child Left Behind. Tell us about your work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf States, and on the question of greater accountability in higher education.

White House Communications Director

- How did you come to serve as assistant to the president for communications? What were your primary responsibilities? Did you have any conversations with Bush about his expectations of you as communications director?
- Tell us about your relationship with Bush. How often would you meet with the president?
- Comment on the president's management and decision-making style.
- Tell us about your typical day working in the White House.
- How was communications strategy set in the Bush White House? What role did the president himself play? With whom did you work most closely? Tell us about your relationship with Josh Bolten, Karl Rove, Dan Bartlett and Ed Gillespie, as well as White House press secretaries, Tony Snow and Dana Perino. Discuss your relationship with the press.
- Describe how developments in communications technology (the Internet, email, 24-hour news channels, social media) affected the White House communications operation.
- Comment on the challenge of coordinating the White House's message throughout the Administration and maintaining discipline in communications. Comment on the challenge of coordinating the message and maintaining discipline within the White House staff.
- Tell us about your work as communications director to build support for the Administration's legislative agenda, such as immigration reform. Discuss your work dealing with the fall-out

from controversial issues, like Bush's decision to commute the Scooter Libby sentence. Tell us about your work responding to inaccurate stories in the press and misperceptions held by the public about the Administration and its policies.

- Describe the Communications Office's rapid response operation. What was the purpose of the operation? Was it effective? Comment on your work overseeing the White House website, as well as overseeing outreach to regional and special media and the production of presidential events.
- Tell us about how the Administration's communications strategy regarding the war in Iraq was set. Comment on the Administration's effort to counter opposition to "the surge."
- How did the White House try to deal with the fall-out from the reports that the Pentagon had recruited military experts to speak positively about the Iraq war in the media?
- What was your role in responding to Congress' failure to pass immigration reform?
- What changes did Gillespie make when he replaced Bartlett as counselor to the president? How did Rove's departure affect the internal operations of the White House? How did these personnel changes affect your responsibilities as communications director?
- Tell us about the challenge of delivering the State of the Union address in Bush's eighth and final year in office.
- Discuss the Administration's communications strategy regarding the financial crisis. Tell us about the challenge of selling the rescue packages to the country.
- Comment on Bush's decision not to attend the 2008 Republican National Convention and, instead, deliver his speech via satellite from the White House.
- How did the Bush Administration's priorities change during its final year in office?

The Bush Presidency in Retrospect

- What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments in the Bush Administration?
- What were Bush's greatest assets as president? Assess his strengths and weaknesses as a communicator, domestic policymaker, a legislative leader, and a leader of public opinion. Which of his attributes served him best in the presidency?
- Comment on the public's perception of Bush. In what ways was it accurate? What did it get wrong?
- Why didn't the breadth of Bush's knowledge on political issues transmit through television to viewers, according to Dan Bartlett?
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Bush presidency.
- How should the Bush presidency be viewed in history? What were its most significant achievements?
- Is there anything you wish you had done differently in the Administration's last few months to shape views of its legacy?