President George H.W. Bush
Oral History Project

Briefing Materials

David F. Demarest
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MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED OR CIRCULATED
1973  David F. Demarest earns his B.A. from Upsala College.

1973—1974  Demarest earns his graduate degree in Political Science from Drew University.


1984-1985  Demarest serves as the Director for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

1985-1987  Demarest is Deputy Under Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Department of Labor.

1987  President Reagan announces his intention to nominate Demarest to be an Assistant Secretary of Labor for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs.

1988  Demarest serves as Director of Communications for the Bush/Quayle campaign.

December  President-elect George H.W. Bush embarks on a nationwide search for new talent reflecting the country’s diversity. Demarest describes the new recruiting process as “the personnel version of a thousand points of light.” (The Washington Post, 12/03/1988)

1989  Demarest becomes the White House communications director. He is largely responsible for communications planning and strategy, outreach activities, and coalition building in support of President Bush’s policies. His office is also the primary White House point of contact for private sector organizations and constituent groups as well as governors, mayors, and local officials.

February  Peggy Noonan, reportedly one of President Bush’s favorite writers, indicates her decision to pursue her own writing projects rather than returning to the White House where she had been a speechwriter for President Reagan. As no clear choice for a chief speechwriter emerges after Noonan, Demarest argues that he can handle some of the chief writer’s functions himself. (The New York Times, 02/07/1989)

The Senate Armed Services Committee rejects the nomination of former Sen. John Tower as defense secretary. Demarest says that “it was only in the last 12 hours before the committee vote that the President’s aides became concerned that the panel’s Democrats would vote to scuttle the nomination.” He adds that “the
White House is confident of a solid Republican vote in Tower’s favor on the Senate floor and that the Administration will lobby for enough Democratic support, especially among Southerners, to allow Tower to squeak by.” (Los Angeles Times, 02/24/1989)

March

Demarest calls Jason Berry’s editorial piece in the New York Times, “Goodbye Klan; Hello G.O.P.,” rash and erroneous. Demarest asserts that the Bush-Quayle ’88 campaign did not create, pay for, or endorse the use of Willie Horton television ads. According to Demarest, “the ads Mr. Berry refers to were the result of independent efforts by Americans for Bush, a group with no ties to the campaign and the subject of a legal complaint filed by the Bush campaign for its tactics.” (The New York Times, 03/06/1989)

Demarest [in a post-presidency interview] says that during the campaign, he would go back to his staff and say, “OK, this what is up for tomorrow. And we would put together the line-of-the-day by about three or four o’clock that afternoon, clear it with everybody so that everybody was on board, and then distribute it to all [Republican] Hill members, and to the RNC and their computer network. We also had another twenty or thirty ‘level one’ surrogates— the John Towers of the world— that we would get to, as well as our senior staff.” (Interview conducted for John Anthony Maltese, Spin Control: The White House Office of Communication and the Management of Presidential News, Chapel Hill, 1994)

April

In response to media reports about the changing face of the Presidency under Bush, focusing on a declining media presence, Demarest says it’s not that President Bush does not want the coverage, but it’s “how much time do you invest in creating the congruence of the policy, the event, the picture to create the sound bite for the nightly news. It takes a substantial effort to do that and this Administration may be more discriminating. I think the President takes the longer view about the goals of this Administration.” (The New York Times, 04/04/1989)

President Bush’s speechwriters are criticized in press accounts for forgettable oratory. Also, Bush decides to cut the pay of White House speechwriters. Demarest defends this decision and says that “there certainly wasn’t any attempt to look at speechwriters, per se, and downgrade them.” He adds that only “commissioned officers”—assistants, deputy assistants and special assistants to the President—are given mess privileges, and speechwriters no longer hold these titles because of “budget realities.” (The New York Times, 04/07/1989)

President Bush reportedly develops a new approach to the press, conducting interviews with small groups of reporters, dropping into the White House
pressroom on short notice, and inviting reporters to impromptu lunches. Demarest says that “talks about the small-scale events over time” creates a favorable mosaic of impressions. (*Los Angeles Times*, 04/30/1989)

**May**

John H. Sununu, White House Chief of Staff, reportedly disparages a four-day trip Bush made in April that attracted little national news media attention and was called theme-less and ineffective. Sununu, in a Saturday morning meeting on April 29, implies that the only problem with the trip and the overall strategy was that “the people who deal with the press had not done a good enough public relations job.” Demarest says he “won’t comment on meetings that do or do not occur.” (*The Washington Post*, 05/02/1989)

Demarest admits that in some instances it may make sense for Cabinet officials to announce policies to reporters at their agencies rather than to work exclusively with the White House press corps. He further adds that when he worked as the assistant secretary of labor, there were a “lot of important issues we could manage in a better way than the White House, because we had lived them. Our chances of promoting an issue or defending an issue were better than the White House’s.” (*The Washington Post*, 05/07/1989)

**1990**

**January**

Demarest says that he believes that the five Bush speechwriters are Republicans but he is not 100 percent sure. He adds that he is certain that none of his speechwriters is an ideologue, and equally certain that speeches are a less important form of communication for Bush than they were for Reagan or many other presidents. He further adds that “we don’t try to over-rely on speeches to carry the president’s message,” and notes that Bush “has used news conferences, travel, short statements and other devices more than speeches.” Demarest says that “speechwriters should be anonymous and listeners should not be able to tell the work of one writer from another.” He cites the five speeches Bush gave on his NATO trip last June, each written by a different writer and none of them identifiable, as the desired norm. (*The Washington Post*, 01/31/1990)

On the question of “safely delivering” President Bush to the Andean nations’ drug summit in the violence-plagued Colombian resort of Cartagena, Demarest says that “there has been no suggestion from the top that this is a no-go.” He further adds that “Yes, we’re going, and that’s it.” (*Los Angeles Times*, 01/31/1990)

**May**

Demarest calls an editorial piece, “Dream, Yes, but Restore Rights,” an unjust criticism of President Bush’s civil rights policy. He says that the President has a record of strong support for civil rights dating back over 40 years. “From 1948, when he headed a drive for the United Negro College Fund at Yale, to his current...
support of several key pieces of civil rights legislation, President Bush has been a leading figure in the quest for racial equality.” He further adds that the President is “determined to help eliminate bias and bigotry by removing barriers to opportunity….The requested budgets for Head Start and aid for Historically Black Colleges and Universities have increased $500 million and $60 million, respectively. The President’s new HOPE initiative, a program aimed at giving all people basic shelter and affordable housing, is budgeted at $4 billion over three years.” (The New York Times, 05/12/1990)

July

In an interview, Demarest says that he talks to reporters but does not return calls about breaking stories. “I don’t want to get in that role because I’ll never get out of that role.” He adds that he deals with op-ed pieces and editorial boards and with Bush’s appearances and speeches. (The National Journal, 07/07/1990)

1991

June

Demarest says that formal speeches “are only one piece of the pie.” He adds that nighttime speeches to the nation are best reserved for dramatic announcements. Moreover, “the Oval Office address in this presidency has lent itself more to foreign policy,” as is evident from Bush’s speeches on the U.S. invasion of Panama and the Persian Gulf War. (The Washington Post, 06/22/1991)

December

Samuel K. Skinner becomes the Chief of Staff and expresses his interest in improving the domestic policy apparatus and the communications coordination at the White House. The status of David Demarest as the communications director reportedly remains unclear. (The Washington Post, 12/23/1991)

1992

January

Skinner says that communications and domestic policy formulation can be vital to a reelection campaign. He says that no decision has been made to replace Demarest. (The Washington Post, 01/08/1992)

Skinner reportedly asks Demarest to remain in his post and praises him lavishly in a senior staff meeting. (The Washington Post, 01/25/1992)

May

Bush takes a hard-line, “law and order” stance toward the Los Angeles riots. Demarest says that condemning the rioters and pledging to bring them to justice is more important than criticizing the not-guilty verdict returned in the Rodney G. King case or proposing new aid programs. (Los Angeles Times, 05/08/1992)

July

Demarest comes under continued criticism by some for failing to inject in Bush’s speeches the necessary energy and eloquence for an election year. Steve Provost, the head of public affairs for a fast-food company, is to be named assistant to the
President for communications, thus replacing Demarest. (Los Angeles Times, 07/09/1992)

Demarest becomes the director of public liaison, taking over in part for Sherrie S. Rollins.

1993

September  Demarest joins the Bank of America's San Francisco headquarters as head of corporate communications.

1994  Demarest, in a retrospective interview, says that reporters “genuinely liked Bush as a person.” But, he continues, “we were in a kind of conundrum early on, because whatever we did was compared to Reagan. The press wouldn’t just let us be ourselves. And by just trying to be ourselves, the media portrayed that as our making an implicit criticism of Reagan.” (Interview conducted for Mark Rozell, The Press and the Bush Presidency, Westport, CT, 1996)
• **Joining the Bush Administration**: Recruitment, previous experience with George Bush and other members of the administration. Role and responsibilities in the 1988 campaign and the presidential transition.

• **Early days in the Bush White House**: Defining the job of Director of Communications and setting up the White House Communications Office. The functions of the different parts of the Communications office. Nature of work in the Communications Office. Relations with the White House Press Office and the public affairs offices of other agencies. Working with Sununu and other key White House personnel.

• **Politics and Policymaking**: Major issues faced by the Communications Office. The 1990 Budget Agreement, the invasion of Panama, the Gulf War, State of the Union addresses, etc. Purposes of the reorganizations of the office, new hires. Effects of chief of staff changes.

• **The 1992 Campaign**: Describe role of the Communications Office in the 1992 campaign. How does it compare with the 1988 effort? What could have been done differently, particularly from a communications standpoint?

• **The Bush Presidency in Retrospect**: What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Bush administration. What features of the presidency were missed or misunderstood by the press? How should the Bush presidency be viewed in history?
TIMELINES

- David F. Demarest, Jr. Timeline, prepared by Rajat Rana, edited by Russell L. Riley, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 01/11/2010.
SELECTED WRITINGS BY DAVID F. DEMAREST


• Ann Devroy, *President’s Invitees left in the Lurch; 1,800 Cuban Americans told Ceremony Cancelled; Bush Sees 300*, WASH. POST, May 23, 1990


• John E. Yang, *For Bush’s Speech, A New Word Order; Complete Sentences Supersede Favored Fragmentary Bursts*, WASH. POST, June 22, 1991, at A1


• Ann Devroy, *Skinner May Seek Shake-Up; Communications Office Seen as Failing Bush*, WASH. POST, Jan. 8, 1992, at A1


• Jack Nelson, *After the Riots: The Search for Answers; Bush Reaction to Riots Splits Republicans; Unrest: President is Urged to Soften Approach, Support Serious New Efforts to Address the Racial and Social Problems Underlying the Disorders*, L.A. TIMES, May 8, 1992, at A4


• James Gerstenzang, *Bush Now Seen as Just One of The Crowd; Image: President Fails to Take The Lead At Munich Summit, Perceptions of Weakness On The World Stage Could Damage Him Politically at Home*, L.A. TIMES, July 9, 1992

• Christopher Madison, *Looking Back at Messages not Delivered*, NAT’L J., Nov. 28, 1992
SELECTED GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

- Memorandum to Governor Sununu, from David Demarest, February 7, 1989. Subj: Communications review.
- Proposed Communications Plan for the President's Address to a Joint Session of the Congress, February 9, 1989.
- Memorandum to Governor Sununu, from Kristin Clark Taylor (Director of Media Relations), through David Demarest, May 19, 1989. Subj: Increased outreach efforts to media.
- Memorandum for David Demarest, from Sichan Siv (Deputy Assistant to the President for the Public Liaison), December 7, 1989. Subj: Interagency meeting on P.R. strategy for presidential veto of H.R. 2712.
- Memorandum for Senior Staff, from David Demarest, September 4, 1990. Re: Communications task forces.
- Memorandum for Tony Snow, All speechwriters, and all researchers, from David Demarest, September 26, 1991. Subj: Political Speeches.
SELECTED GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS ON STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESSES

• Memorandum for the President, from David Demarest, December 11, 1989.
• Memorandum for David Demarest, from Deb Amend (Special Assistant to the President for Communications), January 29, 1990.
• 1990 State of the Union Draft Outline.
• Memorandum for the President, from David Demarest, December 13, 1991.