



Meet the Press: from Yale to Washington

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Courtesy of POLITICO

Two years ago, Matthew Nussbaum '15 was a typical Yale student, living in Silliman College, writing his senior thesis and running cross country. Today, Nussbaum has traded the classroom for the press briefing room as one of Politico's top White House reporters. Nussbaum's career has skyrocketed, taking him everywhere from Washington

dogged reporting style and commitment to asking challenging questions in and out of the briefing room have distinguished him among Washington reporters. In the midst of Donald Trump's most recent announcements, I spoke with Nussbaum to discuss life on the campaign, "fake news" and the responsibilities of journalists in Trump's America.

Q: What first inspired your path toward journalism? Tell me a little bit about if, or how, your time at Yale encouraged you to pursue reporting.

A: In my time at Yale, I was never a staffer on the YDN, but I was a contributing reporter. I did some writing for the Yale Politic and the Herald but wasn't entirely sure if I wanted to follow the journalism path because both my parents were journalists. But I had always been familiar with the field and been intrigued by it and knew I liked politics, current events and writing so it felt like a natural fit.

Q: When did you know you wanted to be a political reporter? Essentially, what steps took you on the path to your current job as a Politico White House reporter?

A: My first real experience working full time in journalism came the summer after junior year through the program Yale has with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. I interned there over the summer and really just fell in love with reporting

summer after senior year I interned at the Denver Post and ended up covering a lengthy murder, death penalty trial. That was really a daunting experience but an incredibly helpful one.

After 12 weeks, I left the Post and took a job at the Philadelphia Inquirer where my dad had worked for a long time. I started in September 2015, but it was to be short-lived because soon after I arrived they announced big layoffs, and quickly into my journalism career, I experienced my first layoff. So it's the December after graduating in May, and I'm living at home and unemployed, which is not ideal. I thought about leaving journalism but did interviews with the Associated Press and Politico. The same day I heard back from an advertising firm, I heard back from Politico and decided that being in Washington for Politico was enough to keep me in journalism.

I moved down here in January 2016 and started by working on the federal budget. Then, a week before Mike Pence got picked, I got assigned to cover the GOP vice presidential candidate on the campaign trail. I got assigned to the White House team in October and bought a bunch of Hillary Clinton biographies I didn't end up having to read because of the way the election turned out. I've been covering this administration ever since election day.

you started working at Politico in January 2016. As a reporter, has this change been disheartening? Exciting? Empowering?

A: Well, it's undoubtedly an extremely exciting time to be here. I think in Washington you always feel like you're the center of the universe, but I think Washington's a little more justified in that belief these days. This story of the Trump presidency and what's happening in American politics right now is THE story. I don't know if there's ever been an administration, at least in modern times, that has received as much sustained attention. To be covering this story in this moment of upheaval, as a journalist, is obviously an extremely exciting and amazing opportunity.

That said, the aggressive and negative attitude that this administration has toward the press creates a challenging environment. You get used to it on the campaign trail, being booed and jeered at and getting nasty emails and Twitter messages.

Q: On that note, you are typically Politico's representative in the White House briefing room. Many of us have seen clips of briefings on TV, but can you walk me through exactly what it feels like to be in the room?

A: What's interesting is I've only ever known these briefings in the Trump era. The first briefing I ever went to had the

inspired memes and material on Saturday Night Live going forward. So it's interesting and almost comical to be in that environment now when briefings are must-watch TV. The briefings now tend to be a lot shorter [than those of the Obama administration] but a lot more feisty and fiery, and they get a lot more attention. It is funny to get texts from your friends while you're sitting in the briefing room. But I do think it's such an important tradition to hold these briefings daily and on camera and have a representative for the president addressing these questions live and in view of the country.

Q: In the briefing room, you made news last month when you pressed White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders on a Donald Trump tweet referencing a false story involving General Pershing executing Muslim terrorists with bullets soaked in pigs' blood. In these turbulent times, what do you think is the government's responsibility to speak the truth? What are the dangers you see in perpetuating false narratives?

A: This president, by objective measures, does not have a great track record of being truthful. Lots of presidents twist the truth, but this president also says things that are just factually inaccurate. Whether citing crime statistics or tax rates, he often makes comments that are simply false. Like

to historians who have actually studied it.

I think it's important for the press not to become callous to being lied to. And I think the press has done a good job of continuing to call out lies when we see them, but I think people can get to the point where they're just worn down. But we need to remember that this can't become the new normal. That it's not okay to stand at a White House podium and spread falsehoods. But like I said, when they're so frequent, these falsehoods just slip through the cracks and we, in the press, don't always have the time and the resources to appropriately challenge them.

Q: There are a lot of different types of political writing one can do. What pushes you toward reporting? Would you ever change to a more partisan style of political writing?

A: Right now, reporting is for me. I think to be in the front row here at this moment in American politics as a reporter, getting to just seek out the truth and figure out what's going on... there's no better position to be in.

Q: You've worked in Washington D.C. and on the campaign trail. Do you have a preference? How is reporting on the administration different from reporting on the campaign trail?

A: I loved covering the campaign. Working on a campaign is such a crazy lifestyle. You wake up in different states and

other reporters. I love being out on the trail, meeting so many different people in different places, that's a great experience. It's great when you're young, when you don't have a family or mortgage back home, but there is an end date. However, covering this administration has probably been more similar to covering a campaign than most administrations because this president, like me, very much enjoys the campaign trail and the campaign mode. So, as much as I'm enjoying covering this administration, I'm also looking forward to covering 2020 and getting back out on the trail.

Q: Speaking about reporting, many of Donald Trump's policies and announcements have made politics increasingly personal to many people. As you receive different reporting assignments, do you ever struggle with separating the political from the personal? Is there any tension there?

A: That's a hard question. Obviously, in our line of work, we have a duty to report things as objectively as possible. We're not here to share our opinions or tell people what's right or wrong. We just want to give them as accurate information as possible and call out un-truths when those are delivered, and they can make up their minds how to deal with this. But look, I think we try everyday to do a good

coverage we give. But that certainly is an everyday struggle.

Q: Right now, in the face of so much criticism of the press, it can be alternatively empowering or intimidating for students thinking of going into reporting and journalism. What would you say to young people looking to get involved in journalism at this moment in history?

A: I think it's a noble profession and I think anyone who believes in the mission of it should go into it. I think they should be empowered by some of the negativity and the rhetoric surrounding it. There's always going to be some sort of aggression from politicians toward journalists because this is how the system does and should work. But we're very lucky to live in a society that not only protects but treasures and cherishes journalism and a free press. And to be a part of that is noble and important but also a lot of fun.

So I think that young journalists, once they get a taste of how fun and exciting this profession is, I think a lot of them do want to go into it. I encourage them because this work has never been more important.

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