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Essential Reading

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Essential Reading

A book by David Priess '93 sheds light on the world's most vital and tightly guarded publication: the President's Daily Brief.

BY TIM OBERMILLER

One week into his job as president, John F. Kennedy was handed a heavy packet of briefing materials containing highly classified intelligence reports. Citing his busy schedule, the young president responded: "Do I have to read this?"

That simple question launched production of an entirely new kind of intelligence document — one that, for more than five decades, has been essential reading for occupants of the highest office in the land and their closest advisors. Known as the President's Daily Brief (PDB), this concise yet essential report is the subject of *The President's Book of Secrets*, written by former CIA intelligence officer David Priess '93.

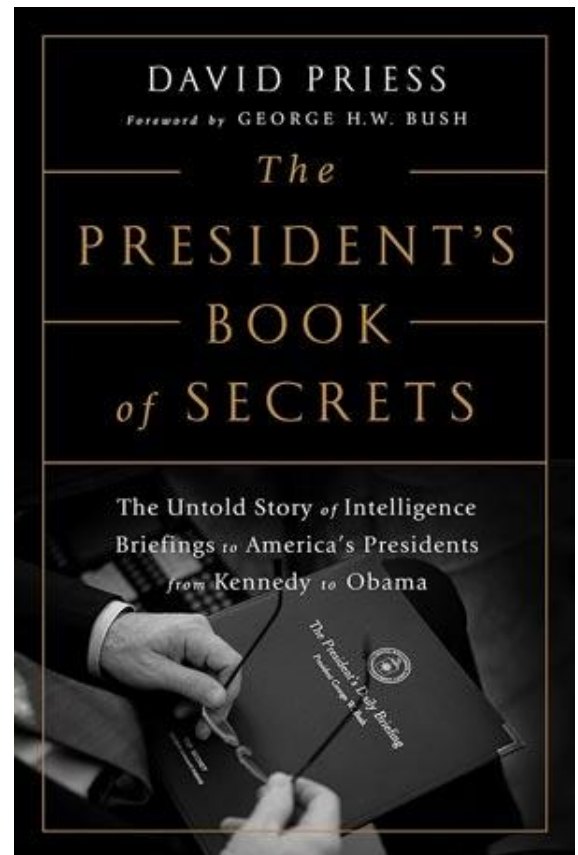
The President's Book of Secrets has created a buzz of interest. Priess has given interviews about his book on cable news shows and to newspapers across the country, while the book has garnered positive reviews. In the *Wall Street Journal*, former CIA and FBI analyst and executive (and frequent CNN contributor) Philip Mudd wrote: "Anyone interested in how decisions get made by the most powerful person in the most powerful country in the world will relish the details in *The President's Book of Secrets*."

For his book, Priess interviewed every living former president and vice president and more than 100 former top-level policy and intelligence officers from the past 50 years.

He also dug through files housed at presidential libraries and scanned thousands of declassified CIA raw intelligence reports, analytic assessments and memos.

Priess wrote the book, he says, to give the public a glimpse into "the little-understood world of daily intelligence." Priess left the CIA several years ago and eventually became director of analytic services for Virginia-based Analytic Advantage, a private company that offers specialized training, mentoring and consulting to the intelligence community, other government offices and the private sector. As he reflected back on his CIA career, Priess was struck how the President's Daily Brief — "the most important daily document in history" — had not been written about comprehensively.

"This report has influenced the most momentous foreign policy decisions of the past 50 years, and yet it has remained largely unknown outside national security circles," says Priess, who served at the CIA during the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. As an intelligence officer, manager and daily intelligence briefer, Priess wrote many items that went into the President's Daily Brief, and edited PDB pieces as a manager of analysts covering "a high-interest Middle Eastern country" (he's not allowed to say which). For the Bush administration, he personally briefed the attorney general and FBI director on PDB contents.



Priess is the author of *The President's Book of Secrets*, published this spring.



While at the CIA, Priess contributed to the PDBs and also met with high-ranking officials to discuss their contents.

“All of these experiences,” he says, “showed me how much value this top secret daily intelligence conveys to senior officials, whose schedules allow little time for anything less than essential.”

Priess describes the “extraordinary efforts” that go into producing each day’s PDB. Intelligence analysts sift through a mass of information — including reports from CIA spies, listening posts of the National Security Agency and space photos from the National Reconnaissance Office — to compile an assessment that is usually no longer than a single page, “focused on what the president needs to know.”

In his foreword to the book, former President George H.W. Bush writes how he came to admire “the remarkable men and women who make up our intelligence community. . . . Without any expectation of credit, they put extraordinary time and effort — and too often their lives — on the line every single day. It is all too easy to forget why they collect and interpret intelligence information: to provide accurate, timely and objective information from all sources to help top decision-makers defend the United States and protect its interests abroad.”

Bush told Priess that briefings with intelligence officers about PDB contents was a daily highlight in his busy schedule. Though delighted by his interest, those officers

recalled to Priess that “you had to have your ‘A’ game” when briefing Bush — who, as a former CIA director, “knew the strengths and weaknesses” of the intelligence he received. Bush memorably bet one briefer an ice cream cone that the PDB prediction of an upcoming election in Nicaragua was wrong. After the election, the briefer found himself walking into the Oval Office with an ice cream cone in one hand the President’s Daily Brief in the other.

When his book was published this spring, Priess was invited to Bush’s Houston office to present a copy to him in person. “What an honor,” Priess says, “and a great chance to chat and catch up.”

The world as it is

Working for the CIA wasn’t in Priess’s mind as an Illinois Wesleyan student. Still, he says, his IWU experience had a strong impact on his later career choices.

As a senior at Normal, Ill., Community High School, Priess was especially impressed by Duke University. Visiting the campus, he got unexpected advice from a political science professor who suggested he instead attend a liberal arts school, like IWU, “where I would interact with professors from day one and really learn how to think — and then come *back* to Duke for my advanced degree.” Priess did just that, later receiving his Ph.D. from Duke in political science, which was also his major at Illinois Wesleyan.

“Illinois Wesleyan and Duke jointly helped me develop an appreciation for studying the world as it is, not as we’d like it to be,” he says. “That sense of realism is useful when dealing with practical international issues that have no easy solution.”

Priess holds special fondness for IWU political science and history professors who helped “broaden my views and prepare me for work at Duke and then in government service afterward. Bob Leh’s mastery of international systems, Michael Weis’s pure enthusiasm for the study of foreign policy, John Wenum’s class and dignity — I’ve come to appreciate all of them more over time.”

He also explored global issues from other angles, through classes in history, business and even literature. “My minor in Middle Eastern studies helped me for the region that was the focus of most of my CIA and State Department work,” he says, “and my minor in business administration gave me the foundation for the private sector work I have done in recent years.”

Priess traveled in the Middle East for his dissertation research and realized he wanted something “more hands-on” than university teaching. In 1998, he joined the CIA as an analyst and was later promoted into management. Before and after his work in intelligence, he published articles and book reviews on a variety of subjects reflecting his broad interests.

Priess, who enjoys the process and challenge of writing, says he’s considering tackling another book, probably involving national security. It’s a tricky subject, given that so much of the material remains

top secret — including PDBs that were the subject of *The President’s Book of Secrets*.

“The actual contents of the Presidential Daily Briefs, for the most part, remain classified,” he explains. “We can’t see what the president saw every morning.” Instead, he focused on what the PDBs revealed about each president who received it.

Richard Nixon mostly ignored his PDBs, partly due to his suspicion that the CIA was full of left-wing liberals who hated him. In contrast, Nixon’s predecessor, Gerald Ford, was an avid PDB consumer who introduced the custom of having it presented by “a senior intelligence officer who would sit with the president, answer questions and present particularly sensitive intelligence that the agency didn’t want on paper.”

The audience for such face-to-face briefings expanded under Reagan to include the vice president and senior



When his book was published this spring, Priess was invited to George H.W. Bush’s Houston office to present a copy to the former president in person (*above*). Bush provided the book’s foreword, in which he praised “the remarkable men and women” responsible for compiling intelligence provided in the President’s Daily Brief.

cabinet officials, setting a precedent, writes Priess, that future administrations followed. Because Reagan was primarily a visual person, the CIA also produced short films regarding PDB content. However, storied copies of Reagan's PDBs, featuring his written comments, questions and corrected typos, show that he read his printed briefs with care.

Compared to George H.W. Bush's sharp focus, Bill Clinton's briefers found his attention more erratic, though Clinton insisted that he read "the PDB carefully, seriously and thoroughly." Clinton also disseminated the PDBs more widely than any previous president, sending it to dozens of people.



Barack Obama is the first U.S. president to read his daily briefings on an iPad.

That practice changed with George W. Bush, who limited its distribution. The second Bush was an avid consumer of the PDBs and accompanying briefings, even taking briefers with him when he traveled. "I learned best through the Socratic method," Bush said. "I loved to question the briefers." Vice President Dick Cheney also recalled "asking a lot of questions," and often requested supplementary reports.

After decades of secrecy, the PDB became a subject of public scrutiny after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. When the 9/11 Commission called for release of PDBs in the days leading up to the attacks, the Bush administration pushed back hard, arguing that such unprecedented exposure would discourage candor in future PDBs. The commission agreed to receive summaries of about 100 briefs, along with a word-for-word reprint of the Aug. 6, 2001, PDB titled "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in U.S."

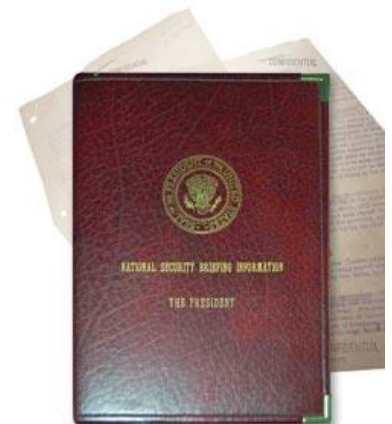
In his book, Priess writes extensively about the context for the now infamous Aug. 6 brief, which was part of a wider body of analysis received by Bush and his team addressing

Bin Ladin's threat to the U.S. Left out of those briefs, for the most part, was FBI evidence of Bin Ladin's growing capability to carry out such attacks. The omission revealed a larger dysfunction in how intelligence was shared between the CIA, the FBI and other departments, leading to creation within a few years of the Director of National Intelligence to manage collaboration across the intelligence community.

The daily briefings were adapted yet again to the needs of the president when newly elected President Barack Obama requested a daily Economic Intelligence Brief and later requested that the PDB switch from print to electronic, so he could read it on his iPad. The final hard copy was published Feb. 15, 2014, just 10 months shy of its 50th anniversary.

In concluding *The President's Book of Secrets*, Priess contemplates the PDB's future. Its continuing value, Priess observes, will derive from its ability to evolve to meet the individual needs of its VIP readers. Whatever form the President's Daily Brief takes, however, Priess predicts it will continue to help presidents tackle the toughest, most complex international decisions facing the United States.

Any president "who dismisses the PDB outright does so at great peril," Priess writes. "If nothing else, declining an important input into vital national security issues would provide fodder for political opponents. But it goes deeper than that. As each president learns that the PDB really is *his* book, he discovers that his engagement motivates analysts to deliver



deeper insights.” Such engagement will continue to be best served with in-person meetings, he adds. As former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates told Priess, such meetings “allow the leadership of the CIA and the community to have a better idea of what’s on the president’s mind, where he is coming from on issues, what’s on his agenda and what he needs to know.”

Whatever its future, Priess is convinced the PDB’s primary goal should remain the same as when it was first conceived: to provide truth to power. “That has been, and will remain, the guiding philosophy of the president’s daily book of secrets.”

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