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Alumnus & Former CIA Officer Pens Book on Intelligence Secrets

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Alumnus & Former CIA Officer Pens Book on Intelligence Secrets

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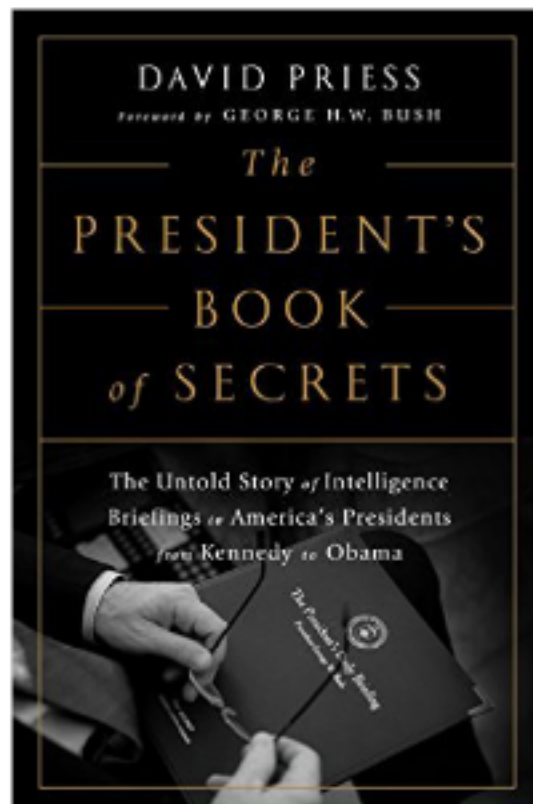
BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — As a CIA officer, Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus [David Priess](#) '93 wrote, edited and personally delivered to top policymakers many items for the President's Daily Brief (PDB), a top-secret summary of the most pressing international events. Yet these reports, presented to the president and his top advisors, remain shrouded in secret, due to their highly classified contents.

Priess tells the story behind the PDB in his new tome [The President's Book of Secrets](#) (PublicAffairs, 2016). For his research, Priess interviewed every living former president and vice president as well as more than 100 former top-level policy and intelligence officers from the past 50 years; indeed, George H.W. Bush provides the book's foreword. Readers learn how the contents of these vital daily intelligence briefs are developed and processed, often in the words of the very people who produced or received the PDB.

Each day, Priess explains in the book, CIA analysts pick through raw classified intelligence reports as well as open sources, synthesize that information, and present it in brief articles to tell the president what he needs to know about key developments around the globe. Priess wrote such items for two presidents — Bill Clinton and George W. Bush — and edited others when managing an analytic unit on a high-interest Middle Eastern country. Even now, years after moving on from the CIA, Priess is not allowed to divulge which one.



David Priess



The PDB is personally delivered to the president and other senior advisors by intelligence briefers. Some presidents preferred to listen to their briefer orally deliver the contents; others chose to read the material first and ask questions later. As George H.W. Bush writes in the foreword, "...each President's relationship with his PDB has depended upon his background, his challenges in office, and the influence of his closest advisors."

During the George W. Bush administration, Priess personally briefed Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller and served as a substitute briefer to the national security advisor and her deputy.

In an interview about his new book, Priess said his experiences as author and briefer "showed me how much value this top secret daily intelligence conveys to senior officials, whose schedules allow little time for anything less than essential. But after leaving government service several years ago, it struck me that the most important daily document in history had not been written about comprehensively."

He writes in the book: "Because the PDB has been the most tightly guarded daily publication on the face of the earth for the past half century, this book is a little like the biography of a recluse: only glimpses of the subject from long ago exist, with recent views more difficult to come by." Yet, he says, the most fascinating stories around PDBs don't involve their specific contents, but rather the windows they provide into the daily work of national security and the personalities of their readers. In a review of Priess's book, *Publishers Weekly* notes, "Readers accustomed to CIA skullduggery will be surprised to find it admiringly portrayed as an organization of experts devoted to delivering unbiased information to a grateful president."

Some of the best anecdotes in the book stem from Bush 41 and his time in office. "Because he saw his CIA briefers every working day, he was so comfortable with them they could all have some fun with each other," Priess said. One of the author's favorite stories is about the bet Bush made with his CIA briefer that the PDB's prediction of an election outcome in Nicaragua would be wrong. "The briefer, naturally, took the wager, and ended up bringing the president an ice cream cone into the Oval Office to pay up when the president was right," Priess said.

Priess traces his interest in international relations back to his days as a student at Normal Community High School. As he contemplated his college choices, Duke University seemed particularly impressive. During a campus visit in Durham, however, a discussion with a Duke professor specializing in international relations took an unexpected turn.

"He told me Duke was a great school, but that if I was thinking about getting a graduate degree anyway, I might be better off going to a liberal arts school, where I would interact with professors from day one and really learn how to think," Priess recalled. "Illinois Wesleyan had a reputation as a top liberal arts university. That Duke professor nailed it. I learned to think critically at Illinois Wesleyan, which served me well going forward."

Majoring in [political science](#) at IWU, Priess went on to earn master's and doctoral degrees in political science, specializing in international relations, at Duke after graduating summa cum laude from IWU.



President George H. W. Bush started each day with his PDB briefing in the Oval Office; on February 15, 1989, attendees included (clockwise from Bush) CIA briefer Chuck Peters, CIA director William Webster, White House chief of staff John Sununu, deputy national security advisor Bob Gates, and national security advisor Brent Scowcroft. (Courtesy George Bush Presidential Library)

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"I didn't fully appreciate it while at IWU, but the different personalities and approaches of my professors helped to broaden my views and prepare me for work at Duke and then in government service afterward," said Priess, citing retired political science professor Bob Leh's mastery of international systems and Professor of History Mike Weis's infectious enthusiasm for the study of foreign policy as particularly influential.

The liberal arts education he received at IWU helped Priess explore global issues from multiple angles. For example, he first became acquainted with a Henry Kissinger book through a history course. And an independent study on literature from or about the Middle East introduced Priess to the work of Salman Rushdie, among others. "Those experiences outside of political science have come full circle," Priess reflected. "My agent, Andrew Wylie, also represents Kissinger and Rushdie."

Priess now directs analytic services for a Virginia-based consulting firm offering training, mentoring and consulting to the intelligence community, other government offices, and the private sector.

Illinois Wesleyan and Duke "helped me develop an appreciation for studying the world as it is, not as we'd like it to be," Priess said. "That sense of realism is useful when dealing practically with international issues that have no easy solution."

