

Getting to the other side of the iron fence

Walk to West Wing, vice president's office reveal formality, humanity of how executive branch conducts business.

By Thomas Dewell

WASHINGTON – Office of the Vice President Deputy Press Secretary Megan McGinn steps toward the black iron fence at the North West Gate to the White House. From behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, her eyes scan the crowd.

A group of what look like Africans carry signs, march and chant for an autonomous Somalia. An older couple sings for peace and men and women in neatly pressed suits, clutching umbrellas on this cool, gray Friday in Washington, D.C., wait for their escort into the center of the nation's executive branch.

McGinn makes eye contact with me and I step toward the gate. We know each other only through e-mails exchanged in the weeks leading up to my meeting with Vice President Dick Cheney.

Reporter's Notebook

"Nice to finally meet you in person," she says. McGinn carries a clipboard and wears a black skirt and jacket – professional yet stylish attire. For my trip to the White House I had only one outfit choice: The blue suit I wore to my wedding rehearsal dinner and the one I wear to funerals and weddings. For the record: I am not wearing my most expensive suit, my Orvis, Simms, Cloudveil fishing gear. The vice president might be comfortable seeing such outerwear, but security would keep me far from anyone important.

The guard behind a glass window in the low, white security station accepts my passport and confirms that I may enter the grounds. Another officer hands me a metal pass card that dangles like large dog tags from a metal chain. The weapon detection system resembles one found in an airport, and I pass through quickly, leaving the confines and returning to open air.

The White House stands to my left – bright in the dull light having been recently painted and primped ahead of the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. As we stride toward the West Wing and past trees and mown green grass, McGinn tells me she used to work inches away from Jennifer Mayfield, the vice president's former deputy press secretary, who recently came to Jackson to work in public relations. McGinn, who had left the West Wing to work for the Republican National Committee, returned when Mayfield suggested she take the job.

A soldier in a red-, white- and blue-accented uniform waits at the entrance of the West Wing. As we approach, he steps forward and reaches a hand toward the door handle. It is not the sort of leaning or bending the eye is used to seeing when someone clears the way for you. The motions are linear and precise and, of course, formal.

I say "Thank you" – as does McGinn – and step into the West Wing. A group of men and women stand in the lobby. Their eyes immediately and unabashedly meet my gaze, and I notice that everyone is wearing some sort of lanyard around his or her neck, or bearing some identifying document on or near their chest. Paintings of river scenes and mountains hang on the

wall and *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* sit on a coffee table. I ask if I can go to the bathroom but not because I have to go. My palms and fingers sweat from excitement and feel somehow greasy. I don't want to shake Vice President Cheney's hand and have him think I just finished a plate of baby back ribs.

The couch where I have been told to wait sits in the corner of the West Wing Lobby and lets me watch those who come and go. An informally dressed couple and their roughly 4-year-old son enter the room, and immediately the young person's energy defines others awaiting their appointments. While the youth moves from parent to parent and from couch to lap, one notices how still everyone else in the room stands and how quiet they are. The parents pull a plastic bag from a large canvas bag and reveal a toy still encased in its packaging. This must be a bribe for good behavior. The boy takes the package from his father and says, "Dad, don't touch it. Don't touch it."

Lea Anne McBride, the vice president's press secretary, steps into the lobby trailed by McGinn. She extends her hand, and I present my cleaned fingers and palm. She directs me toward the West Wing offices, and, as we turn through the halls leading to the vice president's office, she says, "You know the Scarletts. The vice president speaks very highly of them."

"They are fierce friends," I reply.

And McGinn looks at me and smiles, I think knowingly.

The vice president sits at his desk and reviews a document with what I assume is an aide. A map depicting the U.S. early in its history colors the wall behind his desk. (Later, I learn his daughters commissioned the piece that shows the route the vice president's great-grandfather, Captain Samuel Fletcher Cheney of the Ohio volunteer infantry, traveled from 1861 to 1865 during the Civil War.) Cheney rises from his desk, strides toward me and extends his hand. I introduce myself, and he directs me toward the sitting area and a high-backed chair. He takes its twin to my right and asks for a diet Sprite. A digital recorder seems to appear on the table between us, and I take this as an invitation and place my recorder on the table.

Vice President Cheney does not have to wear an identifying lanyard around his neck. On his lapel one finds only a small American flag pin. He is dressed in a pin-stripped suit, wears a gold Rolex watch and has a Band-Aid covering one of his fingernails. The outward appearance is unimportant. What one notices, most of all, is that the vice president seems comfortable.

I have interviewed him at the One-Fly banquet after he left the Secretary of Defense post and in the basement of a downtown Jackson hotel before Sept. 11. During this interview I notice what I noticed before: He speaks clearly and without halting. He uses history to explain contexts surrounding the day's pressing issues, all the while delivering his message in an even-toned, easy to understand manner. His answers to many questions are not long – they are huge. His replies consume my allotted 15 minutes in big chunks. He has addressed only three of my main topics when McBride and McGinn, sitting on a nearby couch, signal I have time for only one more query. I really haven't talked to the vice president about the personal side of the job, part of what I want to cover since I am from his hometown. I quickly flip to a question on energy development in northwest Wyoming.

He tells me I get another five minutes.



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