

“He’s Going to Be Very Interactive”

Interviewee: Michael Hayden

Interviewer: Stephen F. Knott

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As George W. Bush’s director of national and then central intelligence, Michael Hayden oversaw preparation of the President’s Daily Brief (PDB), a daily summary of high-level national security information and analysis. Hayden describes tailoring the PDB to Bush’s learning style to provide him with greater depth on issues.

Michael Hayden: [I said] “The President has got to decide the style in which he learns. Some people read. Some people learn orally. You know you’ve got to give some slack here.” President [George W.] Bush was an interactive learner. So Josh [Joshua Bolten] hit upon something called “deep dives” for the last two years of the administration. The PDB [President’s Daily Brief] is a bit better than CNN headline news in terms of depth, but it is never BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation]. Josh was afraid that the President was so reliant on this that he wasn’t getting enough depth on some issues.

How do we do depth but respect the President’s time? We hit upon this concept where we would give him the longer articles, magazine length, not newspaper length, *Atlantic* length, not *Washington Post* length the day before. He would read that overnight and then he would come into the Oval [Office] and we’d talk about that article. In the PDB process he’s paging through the book, reading while you were talking. We thought, *Oh, these are too long*. Give it to him the day before, he reads it the night before he comes in. And then rather than having the PDB briefer brief him, we brought the authors of the article in, so it was an opportunity for him to be face-to-face with the analyst. It was wonderfully successful.

Knott: Interesting.

Hayden: They came away with a deeper understanding of what the President needed, how the President thought about issues, and so on. Most of the time the briefers were CIA, and very often I would talk to them the night before. The article is written, it’s gone, the President’s got it. They give me a courtesy copy and then I say, “OK, have you done this before?” “No, sir.”

I start drawing the Oval Office for them and I say, “There are two chairs in front of the fireplace. Don’t sit there, but do sit on the couch, right next to the Vice President. It’s the Vice President, President, you sit here, [Stephen] Hadley is going to be over here, you sit here. Now, what’s your most important sentence?” And they go ba-ba-ba-ba. “No. What’s your most important sentence?” Ba-ba-ba-ba. “No, no, *sentence*.” They give me a sentence. I say, “Good, because that’s all you’re going to get. Let me tell you how this works. You start talking and this man starts interrupting, and now you’re in a scrum, and so you’ve got to be able to present this in the dialogue, not in the monologue, because he is going to be very interactive.” That’s not somebody who is disinterested, that’s not somebody who is unintelligent, and certainly not somebody who is unknowledgeable.

End of excerpt.

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