

“You Want It to Be Instinct”

Interviewee: Dan Bartlett

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Daniel J. Bartlett started his tenure in the Bush 43 administration as deputy to Communications Director Karen Hughes. Bartlett was traveling with President George W. Bush in Florida on September 11, 2001, when the president’s entourage had to handle the 9/11 attacks remotely while potentially being at risk themselves. Bartlett describes the challenge of separating the personal from the professional during the crisis, noting how important it was that the military personnel and Secret Service working with them were trained specifically to deal with the disorientation of such events.

Dan Bartlett: This is the thing; it’s just in general the first year. For the first six months or so I felt like Forrest Gump. I’m the guy in the picture who is not supposed to be there. The whole thing. So now you have this national historic moment unfolding right in front of your eyes, and it really hit home for me why the military and Secret Service do so much training. At moments like that you want it to be instinct, and they just act.

The stark contrast between those who had trained their whole careers for a moment like that and those who hadn’t could not have been more obvious. I tell this to people all the time. In a crisis, the ability to divorce the personal from the professional, how do you compartmentalize this? It’s very hard. You’re sitting there trying to think of how you’re going to advise the President during a period like this and then inevitably your mind drifts to your wife and what does this mean. It’s not an easy process. All of us—I don’t know if struggle is the right word, but had to deal with it. Then you see the other ones are just [snapping fingers]. They’ve trained themselves to do that. I didn’t really appreciate that until later thinking back on it.

End of excerpt.

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