

Diary of a Political Scientist IV, Winter 2006–2007: Southern Politics, Sid Milkis, and 'Sixty-eight

Michael Nelson, Rhodes College

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Tom Mann is, well, *beaming*. Five months ago he wrote a Sunday Outlook piece for the *Washington Post* arguing that “the prevailing view in Washington today”—namely, that “there’s probably no way congressional Republicans can lose this fall”—is “wrong.” Tom was vindicated on Election Day when the Democrats won control of both houses of Congress, and here at the “America Votes 2006” conference in Little Rock, co-sponsored by the Clinton School of Public Service and the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, he is accepting the congratulations of, among others, me. Other elections prognosticators at the conference, such as Charlie Cook and the *Washington Post*’s Chris Cillizza, have already moved on to speculating about what’s going to happen in 2008, but Tom is rightly enjoying the moment.

Tom Mann is one of the few political scientists here this weekend. For the most part, the conference consists of nonacademics, nearly all of them politicians, journalists, or national party operatives. They tend to think that what we in the academy do is unnecessarily arcane and abstract, and we typically return the favor by dismissing their insights as impressionistic and anecdotal. So what does it mean that I find myself taking note after note, jotting down insights and information from the speakers that I can’t wait to share with my Southern Politics classes on Monday?

November 29

“You know, I’ve been doing the same thing you have,” I tell the students as I hand back their papers, each an analysis of a different election in the South this

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fall. “I’ve just written a chapter about the Tennessee Senate race for a book that’s coming out next spring.”

The students are singularly unimpressed by my attempt to establish fellow feeling. “Writing is easy for you” seems to be the consensus verdict.

Would that it were! In truth, writing is one of the hardest things I do. When I write I revise endlessly. My goal, admittedly seldom realized, is that the writing go unnoticed, so clear is the meaning and so smooth the flow from one sentence to the next. Years ago I interviewed Sergiu Commissiona, then conductor of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, for an article about the orchestra. I met him right after a rehearsal and, to get the conversation going, I asked him what he hoped to accomplish when he rehearsed the musicians. “You rehearse and rehearse and rehearse so that when you play it sounds effortless,” he said. That became my watchword for writing: you revise and revise and revise so that to the reader it seems effortless.

So, no, writing isn’t easy. But I’ll say this: it sure did become *easier* with the advent of the personal computer. Writing for me used to be a matter of composing in longhand, editing what I’d written, typing it up, editing what I’d typed, re-typing and reediting, and so on. If I wrote 1,000 words in a day I was exhausted, and I just assumed that the exhaustion was mental. When I started writing on a computer and got to the 1,000-word mark, I often found I could keep going. Like an astronaut noticing how much gravity weighs him down only when he reaches zero-gravity, I now noticed how much physical labor was involved in old-style writing and typing only when they were gone, blessedly replaced by the light-as-a-feather keyboard, the cut-and-paste function, and the delete key. I often stop writing because I’ve run out of time or ideas, but seldom because I’ve run out of gas.

December 8

More than 15 years ago, Sid Milkis and I decided that what the subfield of presidential studies needed was a solid history of how the American presidency

originated and how it has developed as an institution. With great presumption, we also decided that we were just the ones to write it. CQ Press, uncertain that such a book would sell many copies, took a chance and gave us a contract for *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776–1990*. Gratifyingly, a good many presidency scholars felt the same way we did about the need for such a book. My fall semester classes having ended two days ago, Sid and I begin writing the fifth edition, with 2007 replacing 1990 (and, later, 1993, 1998, and 2002) in the subtitle.

Sid and I are about 750 miles apart, he in Charlottesville and I in Memphis, so collaboration is a long-distance affair. But we are such close friends and think so highly of each other’s work that I’ll be surprised if the process isn’t a smooth one. For the chapters covering the Constitutional Convention through the presidency of Bill Clinton, rewriting is mostly a matter of taking new scholarship into account, as well as bringing to bear our own evolving thinking. The chapter on the presidency of George W. Bush will require more than that. It was clear to us four years ago that Bush was a consequential president. It was much less clear what the consequences of his approach to governance would be.

December 15

Grades in, students gone, parking spaces . . . *everywhere*. I plan to work hard next week on my book with Sid and on a review I’m doing for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s Review section of *An Unreasonable Man*, a new documentary about Ralph Nader that opens in January. And then I plan to *not* work hard until the new year. Everything in its season.

December 21

A morning email asks me to stop by the office of Channel 5 News Director Peggy Phillip after my regular “Talk-back” segment of political Q & A on Thursday’s noon news program. I try to think of the right words of thanks and consolation to offer Peggy, who is in her

last week on the job after being fired by the station's new general manager. Instead Peggy says that he has fired me, too, and starts thanking and consoling me. I'm surprised and disappointed, but it has been a great 15 years and I've always expected that one of the roughly triennial regime changes at the station would sweep me out in its wake. The stakes are a lot smaller for a part-time talking head like me than for Peggy and several others who are now out of a job.

December 22

The end of the fall semester, tied up as it is to the end of the calendar year, seems to cry out for some stock-taking reflections about where I have been and where I am headed in my career.

Over the years, my academic career seems to have moved in roughly eight-year cycles, each one spanning a period that begins when I start feeling eager for a new challenge, continues until the challenge runs its course, and ends when I get itchy for the next one. I was originally hired at Vanderbilt in 1979 as the bureaucracy guy, but in the early 1980s Erwin Hargrove got me going on the presidency, starting with a book we wrote together (*Presidents, Politics, and Policy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) and continuing with *The Presidency and the Political System* (CQ Press, 1984, now in its eighth edition) and several other works.

When I left for Rhodes in 1991, the new challenge was to step outside my disciplinary comfort zone and teach in the college's famous great books-based Search course. By the end of the decade I not only had taught regularly in the course but also published two books inspired by it: *Celebrating the Humanities: A Half-Century of the Search Course at Rhodes College* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1996) and *Alive at the Core: Exemplary Approaches to General Education in the Humanities* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

In 1999, with friend, colleague, and former student Jay Mason, I ventured into an entirely new area of research: the politics of gambling. By the middle of this year it too had resulted in the writing of two books—*Governing Gambling: Politics and Policy in State, Tribe, and Nation* (Brookings Institution Press, 2000) and *How the South Joined the Gambling Nation: The Politics of State Policy Innovation* (Louisiana State University Press, 2007)—as well as a host of articles and chapters.

Much of the allure of the invitation to apply for a deanship last summer was that I was ready for the next Big Thing. Well, I'm still ready.

In the meantime my earlier interests live on. I still teach Search. I'm writing a paper on gambling for an October conference on the subject sponsored by Alan Wolfe and Boston College's Boisi Center. The other book I'll work on next year will be about the 1968 election for my American Presidential Elections series with the University Press of Kansas.

January 10, 2007

The spring semester began today, reminding me of, among other things, how obsessively I structure my mornings, especially when classes start. Ever seen the television show *Monk*? For the first few hours of the day, Adrian Monk has nothing on me. I wake up early—about 4:15 has been the norm for the past few years—and when I wake up I get up. I eat a light breakfast (yes, the same thing every day) while I check my email and visit my favorite web sites (nytimes.com, Slate.com, insidehighered.com, realclearpolitics.com). Then, until about 5:30, I read whatever book I'm working through at the time—Sean Wilentz's mammoth *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* took up most of my November and December early mornings, and now I'm partway into Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg's soon-to-be-published *Presidential Power: Unchecked and Unbalanced*. Next I get on our exercise bike for 50 hard minutes, where I read periodicals, then off to the gym at Rhodes (two blocks away) for another 50 minutes of lifting. Home to bathe, shave, dress, and bring in the newspaper for Linda (who, suffice it to say, does not get up at 4:15) and by 8:30 I'm launched into the day. Launched is the right word: when everything goes right at liftoff, the rest of the flight generally goes well.

Calling Doctor Freud ...

January 12

So much for taking time off: I spent a good part of the Christmas holiday updating half the chapters of *The American Presidency* (that's why I was reading the Wilentz and Crenson-Ginsberg books), and today I send the last of these to Sid, who is working hard on the other half. Editing contributors' chapters for the fourth edition of *Guide to the Presidency*, a massive reference work that I do for CQ Press, has been another scholarly activity of these past few weeks and, happily, that job is nearing the finish as well. Much harder was the essay on *An Unreasonable Man* that I wrote for the *Chronicle Review*. Never mind the four books I read about Ralph Nader to pre-

pare myself to watch the film, and never mind that I'm an inexperienced reviewer—the really hard thing was changing my mind about Nader's presidential candidacies in 2000 and 2004. I had regarded them as the misguided ego trips of a once-great, then tragically fallen crusader. Now I'm persuaded that they were instead the latest chapter in the life of a crusader who has been consistently dedicated to economic liberalism even as both of the major parties have moved rightward.

January 22

I drive to the downtown Hampton Inn and pick up the first candidate for our new tenure-track political philosophy position, one of three whom we have invited to visit the campus this week and next. We chat briefly about the flight, the accommodations, and, more to the point, about Memphis, which I am proud to show off on the three-mile drive to Rhodes. Each candidate is sentenced to a long day: half-hour meetings with every member of the department, outside members of the search committee, and the provost; a morning class and an afternoon research talk; a student-led tour of the campus; and lunch and dinner with faculty.

The payoff for us and the candidate is that we will know each other much better by the end of the day than we do at the beginning. Equally important, perhaps, is that the sense of ownership in whatever decision we make will be widespread on campus. We have high standards for tenure at Rhodes, but our every hope when we hire at the tenure track is that tenure will be earned and granted at the end of six years. That's why it is so important to get things right at the front end.

What a difference between our interview process, which I think is pretty standard nowadays, and the process—make that “process”—through which I got my first job 28 years ago at Vanderbilt: one talk (the so-called job talk, drawn from my dissertation) and a small number of individual meetings with dean and faculty members.

The old boy network worked to my advantage then in ways that it would and should not be allowed to work today. Once the key person filling the position at Vanderbilt got my name from his friend and my adviser at Johns Hopkins, the wheels were greased.

Strange as it sounds, not being on the market in any serious way turned out to be another major plus. I was contentedly living in Baltimore, free-lancing for a number of national magazines and

newspapers, and planning to do so for another year. (The job market was as bad then as it is now, so what was the rush?) My attitude all through the interview at Vanderbilt was . . . not blasé exactly, but certainly relaxed. In hindsight it was a kind of Zen job-seeking: getting a job by not being sure I wanted one, persuading people to hire me by not trying to persuade them to hire me.

Fortunately, the Vanderbilt department of the 1980s was as committed to nurturing junior faculty to tenure as we are at Rhodes. I spent a happy 12 years there.

January 26

I read the foreword Ted Lowi has written for *How the South Joined the Gambling Nation*, and I'm just bowled over by it. Ted hasn't merely said the requisite nice things about the book. He also has offered insights of his own on the subject. Ted's foreword means that the book is now guaranteed to make at least one important contribution to scholarship.

January 29

I open my student course evaluations for the fall 2006 semester, when I taught Southern Politics (a new course) and the third semester of Search, and . . . they're good, real good. In fact, they are as good as any I have ever received. For years I have vowed to stay in the classroom for as long as—but no longer than—the experience is satisfying for both me and my students. I hope the day that it isn't satisfying doesn't come for another 15 or 20 years (I'm 57 now), and results like these reassure me that this hope is at least not ridiculous. As for the semester now three weeks underway, in which I am teaching fourth-semester Search (Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) and the American Presidency, it seems to be off to a great start.

Seems doesn't always mean *is*, of course. I vividly remember the first large-lecture course (the American government survey) that I taught at Vanderbilt in 1989. I had just won the university's major teaching award and was determined to live up to that reputation. Not only did I write a whole new set of lectures, but I also used a wireless mike so that I could speak in a conversational tone intended to make the big hall feel smaller. Throughout the semester, I was convinced that things were going extremely well. Then came the evalua-

tions: "He speaks in a monotone," "He seems bored with what he's saying, so how can he expect us to be interested?" "Try harder!" What I realized is that a big hall calls for a big voice and big gestures. You're on a stage where students expect to see you working, and anything less than that will come across as indifference to the subject and to them. The next time I taught the course I turned off the mike, bellowed my lectures, waved my arms, and, as the hour wore on, successively stripped off my jacket, rolled up my sleeves, loosened my tie, and mopped my brow. The course, now a bit mildewed, was frankly not as good. The students loved it.

February 6

An item in this morning's *New York Times* catches my eye: indicted Canadian media mogul Gordon Black, the author of an excellent biography of FDR, has a new book about Richard Nixon coming out this spring at the very time he is scheduled to go on trial for mail fraud and racketeering. I email Alex Kafka, my editor at the *Chronicle Review*: Is there a piece here? Maybe, he replies: Are any other Nixon books about to be published? I go to Amazon and hit paydirt. A half-dozen works are slated for release between now and May. The authors include historians Robert Dallek and Margaret Miller and journalists Jules Witcover, James Reston, Jr., Elizabeth Drew, and Black. I don't know the occasion for this outbreak of Nixonmania. Nixon was born in 1913, elected president in 1968, and forced out in 1974, none of which happened 25, 50, or 100 years ago. In any event, the confluence of new books persuades Alex to assign me a review essay, which pleases me enormously.

February 8

I drive from Memphis to the Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock to hear NCAA President Myles Brand give a lunchtime talk and, I hope, to persuade him to give a Sports and Society lecture at Rhodes next year. Bad news: Brand's flight and thus his talk have been canceled. Apologies all around from the good people running the speakers series, and a welcome invitation to return in the fall and give a talk about *How the South Joined the Gambling Nation*, which has a chapter on Arkansas.

Instead of driving straight home, I poke around for a couple hours in what has become familiar territory, dropping in on Skip Rutherford, the energetic dean of the Clinton School, Melissa

Walker, the wonderfully helpful supervisory archivist at the Clinton Library (I'll have three Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies students working there again this summer), and the Clinton Foundation's Bruce Lindsey, a friend and Rhodes alum. Talking with Bruce about this and that gets me wondering: If I'm going to write a book about a presidential election, should I do 1992 instead of 1968? Nah, I think. Well, maybe.

February 10

I'm on the baseball team bus in Montgomery, Alabama, en route from Huntingdon College, which Rhodes has just swept in a weekend series, to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church before making the six-hour trip home. The idea for visiting the church and the adjacent state capitol came from Chris Catalanotto, a junior pitcher who is taking a history class on the civil rights movement. The other day Cat casually told me, as the team's faculty associate, that it would be great if we could see these sites while we were in town. I asked Coach Cleanthes, and he was all for it. Afterward Derek King, a freshman from Birmingham, tells his teammates about how his grandmother marched with Martin Luther King.

February 15

Years ago I had occasion to listen at length to the late-afternoon discourses of a senior colleague. He was a person of genuine accomplishment who had been honored with the presidencies of regional associations, the editorship of major journals, and appointments at prestigious institutions as chair and dean. He had a devoted family. Yet his entire conversation was of the honors he had not obtained and the slights he thought he had received. His was not the classic pessimist's view of the glass half empty; his was the misery of one unsatisfied by a glass nearly full. He had all the ingredients of a happy life and yet somehow had brewed them into misery. I resolved then and forever that no matter how much or how little I might ever achieve in the way of recognition, doing my best as a teacher, scholar, colleague, citizen, churchman, and family man would be reward unto itself.

I didn't know how good a year this would be when I began writing this diary last February, and I don't want to leave the impression that I spend every year of my life at such high altitude. Accounts of some other years would have centered on the abandoned book, the tedious and

time-consuming committee assignment, or the seminar that never took wings. Years to come may offer frustrations and failures even greater than these. At a minimum, few if any years will include so many satisfying culminations (wrap-

ping up eight years of work on the politics of gambling book) and exciting beginnings (the election book) as the one now ending.

So what? What a fool I would be not to enjoy my time on the mountaintop just

because it's not my permanent address, and what an ingrate not to be thankful for what I have rather than resentful because I don't always have it.