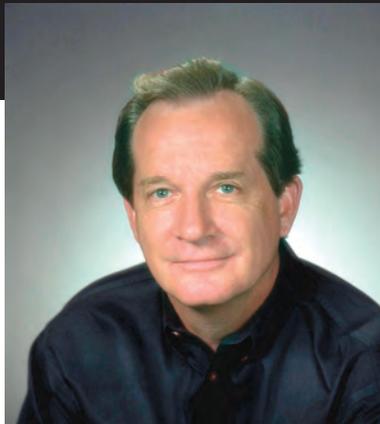


# ONE OF THE PRESIDENTS' MEN:

## PETER ROUSSEL



By Sue Mayfield-Geiger

**W**ith over 38 years of experience in business, government, politics and media, including two tours of duty in the White House and service as an assistant to Presidents Ford, Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Roussel is currently Editor of *Intown magazine* (published by the Intown Chamber of Commerce), a featured commentator on ABC's affiliate television station KTRK, published author, keynote speaker, and former Vice President of Neumann Roussel Public Relations. His articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and many others. His book, *Ruffled Flourishes*, published in 2002, draws on his White House experiences. In conjunction with the Intown Chamber, Peter also hosts a quarterly breakfast event, "Candid Conversations," offering croissants and chit-chat that features guests such as former Secretary of State Jim Baker, Mrs. Nolan Ryan, and coming this fall, Sam Donaldson and Helen Thomas.

If you've ever wondered what life might be like behind the scenes at the White House, here's your opportunity to get the dish.

**You started your career in the late '60s at an ad agency and eventually met the young congressman, George H.W. Bush that led to your Washington D.C. career. What was it like when you first arrived in D.C.?**

In 1969, the world of Washington D.C. was very different than the Washington D.C. today in terms of working with the media, because in those days coverage of most Washington entities was dominated by print news media instead of electronic news media. That was a major difference and one I enjoyed, because I come from a print media family.

**What about the White House?**

Well, I was working on Capitol Hill at that point, and I remember very vividly the first time I ever went to the White House. It was with then Congressman Bush, and this is something that says a great deal about him as a person and the respect that he had for the institution of the presidency. We

were driving to the White House for a meeting with President Nixon, and all of a sudden, he (Bush) said, "Oh my gosh, I just realized something!" We turned around and drove to his (Bush's) house, then went on to the White House for the appointment. I just waited in the car, and when he (Bush) came back out, I asked him what that detour was about. He said, "Well, I looked down and noticed I had on loafers. You know, Pete, you don't go see the President of the United States with loafers on." He (Bush) had changed from a pair of loafers to lace-up shoes. Now, that to me said a lot. It's just a little thing, but it said a lot about his personal perspective. Later, when I had an opportunity to serve twice at the White House, you never saw me in the Oval Office with loafers on.

**Describe a typical day working for Congressman Bush?**

Intense! Never a dull moment! He used to have a phrase that he uses to this day that pretty much sums up his approach to life and career, and it was, "On to the next event." He was and is tireless. I've never seen a harder worker.

**What specifically did you learn from Congressman Bush?**

Work discipline. And to apply myself to the maximum. A colleague of his once said, "Boy, that Bush can go, go, go!" That colleague was sure right.

**Why do you think Ronald Reagan was so admired and do you think we'll see that kind of president again any time soon? Who would be a close comparison as far as potential candidates?**

Ronald Reagan was admired for a number of reasons. Probably one of the essential reasons was because he had certain intangible qualities that were universally admired by people whether or not they agreed with him politically; he was admired as a person. Number one, he had conviction, which I think is a key ingredient for anyone seeking the presidency. People knew where he stood – there was a core conviction there. They may not have agreed with it, but they respected that, even if they opposed it politically. Also, he was just one of the most likeable people I've ever been around. I don't think he had a mean-spirited bone in his body. He had a way of diffusing difficult moments, difficult people, difficult reporters, especially with humor – it was just a God-given



talent.  
You can't  
manufacture that.

There was a myth perpetuated by the press that he (Reagan) read off cue cards at meetings. I saw just the opposite – times when his advisors might suggest he go a certain way on an issue and they'd be in uniform agreement, but Reagan might say, "You know I appreciate all that advice, but I think I'm going to go the other way on this." I saw a side of Reagan that a lot of people did not give him credit for. He was a great guy and human being. He could walk into a room and light it up.

As far as seeing another one like him anytime soon, I just don't know. Seeking the presidency now has a different aspect to it, because anybody seeking that office is going to have to immediately face 24-hour global media coverage, from the first day they announce their candidacy. So, from day one, you will be the subject of intense press/media scrutiny – including forms of instant electronic communication that didn't exist 25 years ago. There used to be sort of a honeymoon period of about a year (when a new president was elected), but those days are gone.

#### **Do you have a favorite Reagan story?**

Too many to mention, but here's one that shows his humor: Shortly after the assassination attempt on him, he was in a big arena giving a speech – I think in Indianapolis. We were all standing off to the side and all of a sudden, a loud sound went off, like a gunshot. We all heard it and thought, oh no, not again. Reagan never missed a beat, did not flinch or blink; instead, immediately after the sound (someone stomping on a paper cup) he said, "Missed me."

#### **Who were some of your favorite reporters to deal with at the White House and why?**

Two that immediately come to mind are Helen Thomas and Sam Donaldson. One was print and one was broadcast, and they are both living legends. They were tough reporters, but at the end of the day, in terms of what they wrote or put on the air, they were fair. And that's the way it should

be. Helen is no longer

a wire service reporter, but is now a columnist. As a wire service reporter, she did it by the book. I don't think I ever challenged one word she wrote. A third reporter I had the highest regard for was Hugh Sidey of Time Magazine who recently passed away. He was an eloquent writer and covered every president from JFK to George W. Bush. We will never see the likes of him again. He witnessed and reported on an incredible span in our country's history.

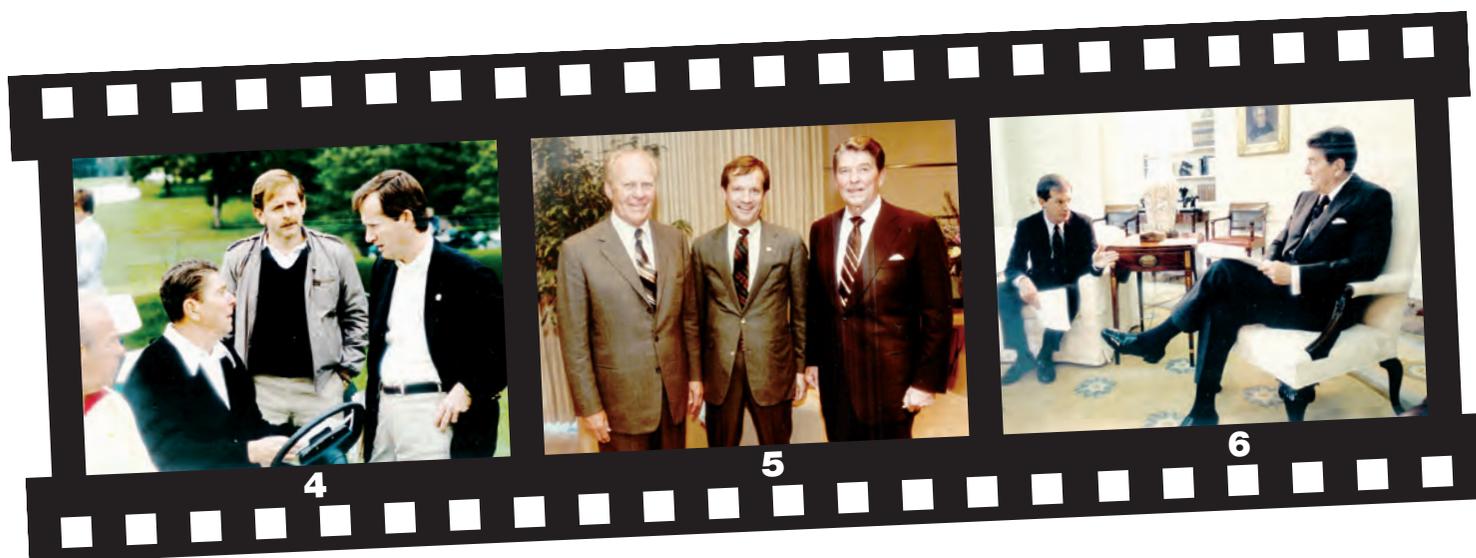
#### **What do you think Reagan would think of what's going on in America today, specifically regarding the war in Iraq and the immigration conflict?**

Far be it from me to think for Ronald Reagan. That's a tough question. Every situation, every time, is different; I do know this. Reagan had core beliefs. Whatever the issue might be, he would find a way to articulate his convictions, and that's why they called him the great communicator. And nowadays, that's a key part of the presidency, because most of the time your relationship with the American people is occurring through electronic media. The public rarely gets the chance to see a president in person anymore.

#### **Of all the high profile people you encountered and events that occurred during your years at the White House, can you share the stories that stand out in your mind the most?**

Two have particular significance for me. The first day I was at work in the Reagan White House, Jim Baker summoned me to his office and dispatched me to Phoenix, Arizona to handle the historic announcement of Sandra Day O'Connor to the United States Supreme Court. I had two thoughts: One, that I'd been given one of the most unique assignments ever given a press spokesman; and two, this was only going to happen once. So I went to Phoenix and got to know Judge O'Connor in a hurry, and hopefully earned

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her confidence. It all turned out fine and in the end, I made a lifelong friend. The way it unfolded was that Reagan was going to make the announcement from the White House at 10 a.m. At that exact moment, I was downtown with her (O'Connor) in a traffic jam in Phoenix. We switched the radio on and heard, "That was President Reagan announcing the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor to the U.S. Supreme Court." I said to her, "Let me be the first to congratulate you!" So I leaned over and gave her a kiss. I later told her it was the best car date I ever had.

The other incident was October of 1983 when Reagan went to Augusta (Georgia) to play golf. While there, a gunman crashed the front gate and held hostages in the pro shop, two of whom were members of the White House staff. Fortunately, no one was injured. I ended up doing two briefings late into the night, got back to my room about midnight and got a call from Bud McFarlane (National Security Adviser) telling me that 250 marines had just been killed in Lebanon. So, by 2:30 a.m., I went downstairs and called the press together. About 4 a.m., Jim Baker called and said that due to the magnitude of the situation, we should return (to D.C.). So, at 4:30 that morning, we formed a motorcade through rainy, downtown Augusta, and it was probably the only time in history when a presidential motorcade went right through the middle of a town with not a soul around.

**"Expect the unexpected" was your motto at the White House. Does that still stand for you in the media world today?**

Yes. I still get calls today from the media and others, asking, "Did you hear what just happened in Washington?"

**Tell us about *Ruffled Flourishes* and what inspired you to write it. Also, explain the title.**

There are two pieces of music played for a ceremonial event when the President enters the room. Ruffles and Flourishes followed by Hail to the Chief, so my book is *Ruffled Flourishes*, which is a metaphor of how things sometime get a little intense when you are confronting the White House press corps.

There is a daily taffy pull of information that occurs between the press and the spokesperson for the President. And out of that I saw unexpected dramatic and sometimes humorous moments that the public never got to see. That's what inspired me to write about it in a fictional novel. I really did not base any of the characters on any one person. I used bits and pieces of a lot of different situations.

**I know you have other projects in the works, like a second novel; a stage play being written based on *Ruffled Flourishes*. Can you elaborate?**

I am finally getting around to writing my career memoirs. I've got several titles in mind. Also, I'm working on a stage adaptation of *Ruffled Flourishes* as a comedic play and have been in discussions with a theatre here in Houston about a possible production.

**Do you see George and Barbara Bush very often, and how are they doing these days?**

Yes, I see them periodically. They are doing great. I occasionally enjoy a ballgame with them; they have also been gracious in inviting me to Maine. It's a terrific experience to get out on the Atlantic waters and chase bluefish. Of course, the Bushes are huge Astros fans and you see them a lot at games. Mrs. Bush knows the intricacies of keeping a box score (with symbols) the way it's supposed to be kept.

**How about Nancy Reagan?**

I've haven't seen her since President Reagan's funeral. I'm hoping to go out to the Reagan Library soon and see the recently opened Air Force One exhibit.

**Do you claim a political party preference that you can share with us?**

I always try to vote for whom I feel is the best person. Remember, I grew up in Texas when there was no Republican party. You were either a conservative or liberal Democrat. As an on-the-air media commentator these days, I try to view the political scene from an objective standpoint rather than a partisan one.



**What are your thoughts on the next presidential election?**

The 2008 race will be very interesting. For the first time in a long time, there won't be a Vice-President running or an incumbent; it's going to be wide open with new faces and that's a healthy thing. Hopefully, there will be a lot of good choices on both sides. I have great regard for anybody who submits themselves for public office, especially the presidency. The physical aspects, not to mention the mental and emotional aspects, are very, very tough.

**What about Hillary Clinton as a candidate?**

I'd have to say in all fairness that right now she would be the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination. But something may happen tomorrow over which no candidate has any control that could change the landscape. You're asking me these questions in 2006 – for a presidential election that's two years away. So, who really knows?

**Would you go back and do it again (be press secretary)? Why/why not?**

One thing about this business, you never say "never." But I've had my turn. I feel very fortunate to have worked with the people I worked with – elected officials, media, all of them. I have no ambition to go back; you have to give it your all when you are there. That's what I tried to do. Then you take that experience and build on it in other aspects of life and business – there's always a new challenge out there.

**Do you have a favorite quote?**

It's on the side of the National Archives Building: "What is past is prologue," a line inspired by Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*: If you want an indication of what might happen in the future, look to the past.

**Any parting words?**

We have a system that works. It has survived for over 200 years. Yes, it has problems; we all recognize that. There are excesses that people get upset about – sure. But, at the end of the day, it's a pretty darn good system – it's still going. I believe in it. If I have any message for people it is that I've seen it up close and it works.

When I was leaving the White House, one of the things I said (referring to his brother who was killed during World War II) was that I felt like what I did there was my way of finishing the job for him. He served in his way, and I served in my way. When I walked off the podium in the press room for the last time, I said quietly under my breath, as if I were talking to him, "This was for you; I have finished the job for us." And I do believe that.

- 1** Judge Sandra Day O'Connor, Roussel and then Attorney General William French Smith outside the U.S. Senate chamber as the vote is being taken on her nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court.
- 2** Then Vice President Bush and President Reagan meeting the press on the south lawn of the White House.
- 3** Roussel with Raisa & Mikhail Gorbachev, Geneva 1985, during the historic Reagan-Gorbachev meeting there.
- 4** Roussel confers with Pres. Reagan, Augusta, GA, Oct. 1983. A series of unexpected events would unfold later that day making it one of Roussel's most memorable White House experiences.
- 5** Roussel with the two presidents for whom he served in the White House - Ford & Reagan.
- 6** Roussel briefing Pres. Reagan in the Oval Office for a press interview.
- 7** Roussel with Pres. Reagan and then Chief of Staff Jim Baker in the Oval Office.
- 8** Helen Thomas, Roussel, former President George Bush, the late Hugh Sidey at a dinner in Houston.

**– Official Photographs, The White House**