

Inaugural Martel Lecture brings presidential speechwriter to TU

By R.J. Corby

The war on terrorism, Sept. 11, the State of the Union and the 2000 election were just a few of the topics discussed by White House speechwriter John McConnell with the Temple University community during a Sept. 25 speech in Tomlinson Theater.

The lecture, funded by Dr. Myles Martel (M.A. '67, Ph.D. '74), the School of Communications and Theater and the Provost's office, brought a principal speechwriter from the Bush administration, and a personal friend of Martel's, to campus to offer the university community insight into the president's daily communications with the world.

Not surprisingly, McConnell's most dramatic experience while working for the president was Sept. 11 and the events surrounding the tragedies.

McConnell characterized Sept. 11 as, "A singular moment in this presidency, and I would argue *the* presidency, where the man met his moment."

Recalling the morning of Sept. 11, McConnell shared memories with an attentive audience of approximately 200 guests and members of the university community about where he was and what he was feeling.

"I was scheduled to meet with Vice President Cheney at 8:30 a.m.," McConnell said. "I walked into his office and sat down and someone called in and told the vice president to turn on the television. We just sat there in silence and watched the TV.

"Soon thereafter, the vice president said into the phone, 'I need to talk to the president,'" he said.

At that point, McConnell returned to his office. It was also at this point in his remarks that he decided to add a little humor.

"I went back to my office and sat down. What do you do in a situation like this? You call your mother. My mom said she heard that the White House had been evacuated, and I told her that I was here and that everything was all right. And," McConnell added, to laughter

from the audience, "my mom, knowing me like she does, told me to go out into the hallway and make sure.

"So, I put down the phone and went out into the hallway, and sure enough, people were leaving at a quick pace, and a Secret Service agent said we'd have to leave. Soon, a Secret Service agent told us we had to leave immediately, that a plane was headed straight for the White House."

Even though the plane headed for the White House never made it, the evacuation brought home the severity of the attacks to McConnell.

Following the attacks, McConnell spent the rest of the day working on a draft for the president's address to the nation. This draft would not be the draft that would eventually be read by President Bush, but McConnell's chance to contribute on a historic speech would soon come.

On Monday, Sept. 17, 2001, the president informed his speechwriting team that he wanted to address Congress that Thursday.

"We said that would be impossible, but at the end of the day on Monday we had a draft for him," McConnell said. "On Tuesday it was deliverable, on Wednesday we did a read through and on Thursday we did two more read throughs."

McConnell accompanied the presidential motorcade to Capitol Hill, where he heard President Bush deliver the historic speech in the Senate Chamber. McConnell described the evening as "very emotional."

McConnell said that the current presidential speechwriting team is small compared to previous administrations.

"President Bush's speech team is smaller than most," McConnell said. "Historically, there are eight [writers], with three more serving the vice president. This team has six writers, and they do all of the writing for the president and Dick Cheney."

Typically the team pens between one and three



John McConnell, a speechwriter for President Bush and Vice President Cheney, paid a visit to Tomlinson Theater in late September for the Myles Martel Leadership in Communication Lecture. McConnell offered insight into what it is like being a presidential speechwriter, including his experiences visiting ground zero in New York and flying over Baghdad with the president.

speeches for the president each day, but they aren't all State-of-the-Union speech length. Some speeches are simply a few minutes long. These are for when the president appears in the Rose Garden for a ceremony, for example.

McConnell stressed that the team works very hard, saying, "We are the office that never goes dark," but he seemed happy to be helping the president articulate the administration's goals and key messages.

A graduate of Yale Law School, McConnell previously worked as a speechwriter for former Vice President Dan Quayle. He also worked with former Sen. Robert Dole during the final months of his 1996 presidential campaign.

McConnell's advice for the aspiring speechwriter is simple—get to know the person you are writing for, keep things simple and seek lots of feedback.

"The best feedback, if not from the principal, is from the people who have been with him the longest," he said. "A good speech can be read by anyone. If the sentences are clear and simple, and I don't mean baby simple, but simple ideas, anyone can read it. You try to hear a person's voice as you write a speech. And you have to get to know him."