

White House

While presidential politics is consuming the news across the U.S. this year, it's always a focal point of life here in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Many sites around the region serve as venues for presidential speeches, campaign events, and television specials. Here at George Mason University, just outside the District in Northern Virginia, we have become accustomed to hosting many of these high-profile visits, from the president of the United States to presidential candidates and other prominent politicians and government leaders.

Most of the visits have similarities when it comes to security, traffic, parking, media, and occupancy codes, yet each has its own nuances based on location, time of day, day of the week, whether classes are in session, and other events that might be occurring at the same time. As with most things that happen on campus, parking and transportation plays a central role or is somehow involved (whether we like it or not!).



of hosting a big political event, a lot goes into planning and coordination ahead of time, starting with negotiations on where best to hold the event. Tours of event venues and security discussions with the advance teams and the event teams are held. Part of the challenge is that the desires of the event organizers are often in conflict with what security teams would prefer. Factor in the desires of the media covering the events and the many groups that want to be part of a high-profile event, and we find ourselves managing conflict and meeting multiple competing demands—which is not entirely unlike every day on a large college campus.

How It Starts

What has often happened is that we get a call from a campaign or the White House about wanting to have an event on campus, often with just a few days' notice. In addition to the basic logistics

and we find ourselves managing conflict and meeting multiple competing demands—which is not entirely unlike every day on a large college campus.



Calling

The unique challenges posed to parking professionals when the president and friends pay a visit.

By Josh Cantor

Mum's the Word

The first George Mason presidential visit I was involved with 11 years ago wasn't even for an event on campus. President George Bush was attending a fundraiser at a private residence across from campus but used one of our athletic fields to land Marine One, the president's helicopter. The field was at the end of a road adjacent to our remotest parking lot, which was where our freshman resident students and campus shuttles parked.

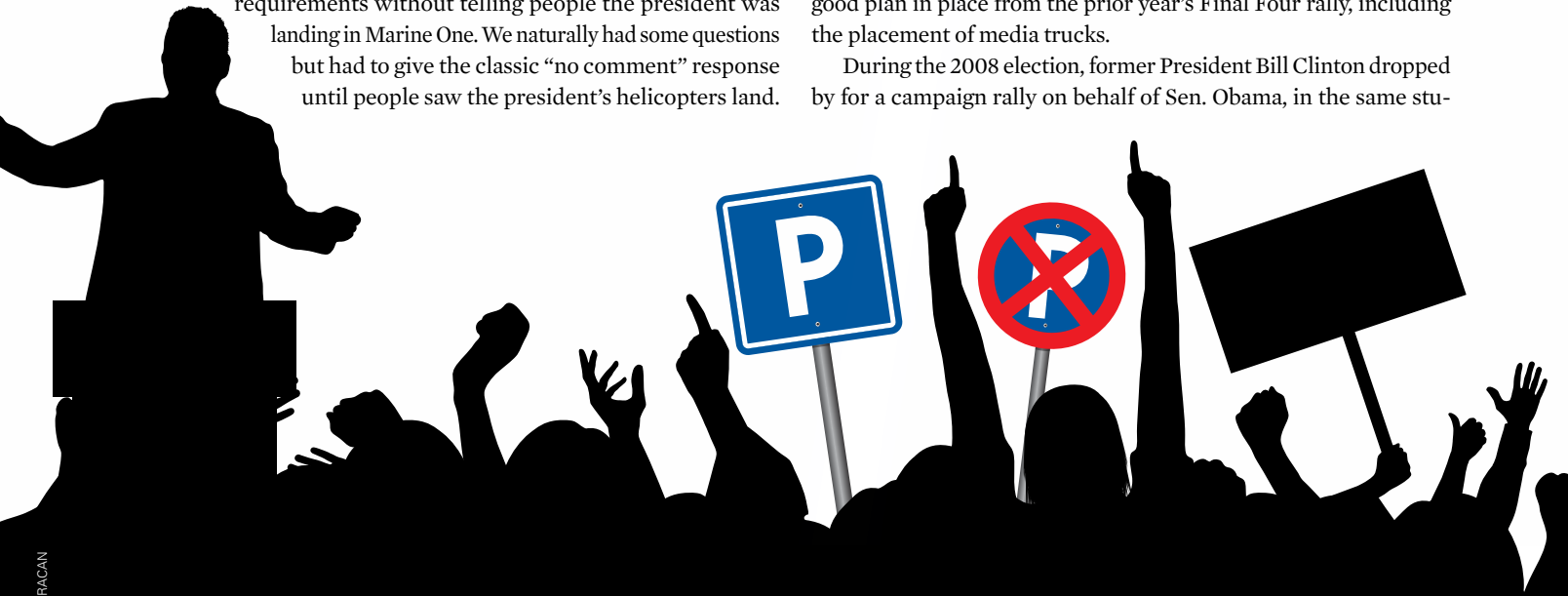
The first objective was to clear the parking lot of all vehicles. Then, we closed a half-mile of road and that parking lot entrance to traffic. Perhaps there are places one can close down a street and not face questions, but a college campus is not among them. Putting up signs to indicate the closures as we do with other events or for construction was easy. Drafting an email to the parking lot permit holders and the rest of campus without giving out the reasons for the closure was a different story, especially because the event wasn't open to the public. I finally had to have the email approved by the White House communications office—it alluded to law enforcement requirements without telling people the president was landing in Marine One. We naturally had some questions but had to give the classic “no comment” response until people saw the president's helicopters land.

All the hassle didn't come without a big perk: After the president landed and was whisked away in his waiting motorcade, we had a chance to tour Marine One.

Visit Logistics

A couple years later, on the day before his formal announcement to become a presidential candidate, then-Sen Barack Obama held a major rally at the Johnson Center, which is the largest student union located in the middle of campus. While this event didn't mean dealing with Secret Service as we would during his future visits, we still had the need for security and keeping roadways clear. The rally filled our student center to the top floor—something the Secret Service would never allow later on. Luckily for us, we had a good plan in place from the prior year's Final Four rally, including the placement of media trucks.

During the 2008 election, former President Bill Clinton dropped by for a campaign rally on behalf of Sen. Obama, in the same stu-





Presidential and campaign visits pose parking challenges ranging from landing Marine One to parking buses to keeping garages and perimeters clear.

dent center. While the challenges that day were not on the same level as a visit by a sitting president, this event was its own logistical issue based on the limitation of what building doors, sidewalks, and roads we could keep open to funnel the crowd.

In classic Bill Clinton form (and I can say that as a former staffer of 1992 and 1996), he refused to leave before he had said hello to everyone and shook everyone's hands. Well, by the time Clinton left (well past midnight), a snow storm had hit the D.C. area. As many know, folks in D.C. don't drive well in snow. By the time I headed home around 1:30 a.m., about half the cars were sliding off the roads, offering a stark reminder that I wasn't in upstate New York anymore. I opted for a hotel room instead of risking sliding off the road unnoticed in the middle of the night.

After the 2008 election, as the D.C. region started preparing for the inauguration of all inaugurations, we got a call that the president-elect wanted to deliver a major economics speech at Mason and that this speech would include several governors and several dozen representatives and senators. The speech was scheduled for our Center for the Arts, which seats 2,000, but only the lower section could be used, making tickets scarce.

One of my favorite Secret Service moments happened during this event: The original plan was to allow two of the governors to park in the same area as the president-elect. However, one of the governors was running late and arrived too close to Obama's arrival to allow him and his security detail down the street leading to the venue, which had already been closed off. The governor's detail, which is made up of state troopers, isn't used to being told no, and they pleaded to be able to park down the street. Finally, the Secret Service agent

told the governor, "Sorry, you're not my governor." End of discussion. The governor got out and had to walk. In the meantime, we were looking for a few representatives who hadn't been accounted for.

Two weeks later, we, like many in the D.C. region, were part of the inaugural efforts and served as a stand-by site should there be a mass evacuation from the city. Fortunately, our services were not needed.

When the President Visits

During the next few years, we continued to have visits from the president, including the announcement of the post-9/11 GI Bill, where we not only had the president, but also the vice president, secretary of defense, secretary of veterans affairs, and the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. This event occurred behind one of our parking garages on campus, located near the center of campus. Not only did we have to block and close the roads on either side of the garage, but we also had to close the garage as it was in the bomb-blast perimeter. While these closures were dictated to us by Secret Service, of course some permit holders didn't care and let us know, although we had arranged for alternate parking. One permit holder yelled that the president should go back to D.C. and leave us alone and then asked who he could talk to about parking since he didn't like my answer. I pointed to the agent nearby and said, "If that guy in the suit with a gun says it's OK, it's OK with me."

Unique Situations

The 2012 election cycle brought multiple presidential visits as Virginia was a battleground state. During the last month of the election, we had two visits from the president and another from candidate Mitt Romney on the day before the election. These campaign visits were considerably larger than past visits we'd hosted. During one of the president's campaign events, we also had a Disney on Ice event at the on-campus arena, a few hundred yards away. As our luck would have it, the campaign event and Disney on Ice were ending at the same time. Many parents and children weren't able to

leave the Disney event as traffic was held for the president's motorcade, which seemed to get larger on each visit, often numbering around 30 or 40 vehicles.

While many of the visits were similar in terms of their security and transportation requirements, each always seemed to bring its own unique requests. For one visit, we cleared a parking lot that was used to bring the president and his motorcade in. We had to cover the windows of a residence hall that overlooked the parking lot and then line up 15 buses on a adjacent sidewalk to shield the parking lot from view of an nearby roadway. When asked to handle this request at the last minute, our staff jumped right in without hesitation.

Gov. Romney's event on the day before the election was the first and only time that our campus literally ran out of parking, as we had opened up every garage and lot while having classes on a Monday. We had employed every backup plan for overflow parking we had ever put together and still had hundreds, if not thousands, of people streaming onto campus for class as well as hoping to attend the Romney event. After that event, we realized that as the hosts of the event, which are technically just rentals of our facilities, we are still responsible for the crowd management and the public relations associated with it.

The 2016 Election Season

While we had a few presidential visits during President Obama's second term, the 2016 primary elections brought us a rush of presidential candidate visits in a relatively short time. Last fall, Sen. Bernie Sanders came to campus and while not at the level of a presidential visit, it brought road and parking lot closures and lots of media trucks. Besides just clearing lots and roads, communicating on often short notice with information on where permit holders can park, inevitable changes to shuttle routes, and coordination with various construction projects is all part of the work that parking and transportation undertakes.

Last spring brought a rush of more visits from presidential candidates, with visits from Gov. John Kasich and Secretary Hillary Clinton on consecutive days, followed by a second visit from Kasich the following week. One particular highlight was making a space for Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine, who is now a vice presidential candidate, and escorting him into the event venue. While these were not on the same level as the larger events we have often hosted, the campaigns chose smaller venues that required a balance of tight security and the ability to keep the remainder of the buildings open. Not unlike our everyday mission, we had to have a balance of allowing access to those who needed it, including dozens of media vehicles

on a small road, while redirecting many everyday users to alternative access points.

Another lesson learned for us concerned wayfinding to venues not typically used for public events, especially when parking isn't convenient. Pedestrian wayfinding from various parking lots and decks was more extensive given that we had a much larger audience that wasn't as familiar with our campus as most event attendees we host. Many of these lessons learned from hosting high-profile presidential visits carries over to things that we can improve every day, as well as prepares us for emergency planning.

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In addition to these visits by candidates, we also hosted a live town hall on CNN with President Obama and Anderson Cooper. This was intense—CNN came in and had to build a set where we often hold freshman orientations and awards ceremonies, with multiple semis and multiple satellite trucks. We then had to work with the Secret Service to set up a landing area for Marine One across campus.

On the night of the town hall, the weather was raining and foggy. At one point, the decision was made by Secret Service to not have the landing because of the weather, which required the motorcade to head back to the White House. Amazingly, the one-way trip only takes them 20 minutes (they don't have to stop for traffic lights). Overall, it was a success, with many of us getting the chance to meet Cooper. After these events, my appreciation grows for the challenges the media and the Secret Service must overcome as they move from town to town. I certainly have learned a lot about the needs of satellite trucks, securing perimeters, and crowd control, after closely working with the university police, environmental health and safety department, events management, facilities, media relations, and external partners.

The summer was quiet, but George Mason University is ready for the inevitable campaign visits we'll host this fall, having already spoken to advance teams. Being part of the D.C. metropolitan region, hosting political events is a given, but it's also exciting and a privilege, even though we might not be thinking that in the midst of it! 



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