

Donald Aaron Baer '76

A visit with the President of the United States can be a very persuasive event. Just ask Don Baer. Until that visit—a visit at which the President wanted to talk to Don *about Don*—the journalism path seemed sure. The *U.S. News and World Report* had just come across with a beautiful offer: co-national editor managing all political and domestic policy coverage.

Now that was a job Don Baer had prepared himself for since childhood, combining two early loves: politics and writing, especially writing about politics. At age six, he watched a roundtable discussion of presidential historians and decided he wanted to be one. That same year, he was on a bull horn from his father's car urging people to vote for Terry Sanford '39 and John Kennedy. In high school he was editorial director for the student paper and at the same time became a devoted political liberal, influenced by the views of his father, a progressive Democratic lawyer in his military hometown of Fayetteville. At Carolina, he was the main reporter for *The Daily Tar Heel* covering the University administration and he was the student campaign manager for Jimmy Wallace's '44 successful bid for mayor of Chapel Hill in 1975.

There was that sidestep into the law, occasioned by a journalist set back. In his senior year, he and a running mate lost in a runoff election in their bid to be co-editors of the *DTH*. Disappointed by that turn of events, Baer went on to law school at the University of Virginia and then to law practice in a major New York law firm, representing news media corporations. Law practice at that level is an all-consuming endeavor. Nonetheless, even in those days, politics and writing continued to make their demands on Baer. He found the time, for instance, to help organize a Manhattan fund raiser for Jim Hunt '64 in his 1984 Senate race, and, at the invitation of a friend at the *New York Times*, he wrote several op-ed pieces on national politics.

Finally, in 1984, after three years of law practice, the writing bug was too strong to deny. Baer became a reporter for *The American Lawyer* magazine, breaking a big story about young lawyers involved in insider trading. That kind of journalistic skill brought him to *U.S. News*, and the politics it focuses on so heavily. There, Baer covered the Justice Department and the FBI during the Iran-contra investigations, and, later—and fatefully—the White House. In September 1991, Baer interviewed presidential candidate Bill Clinton and wrote an article for the magazine that caught the attention of the future President.

In the fall of 1993, *U.S. News* celebrated its sixtieth anniversary at the Library of Congress and the President attended the party. He spoke with Baer about that article and pretty soon negotiations were under way to bring Baer into the White House as Deputy Assistant to the President for Speechwriting and Research. There was a sense among many on the President's staff that the speechwriting operation was somewhat adrift and that Baer could bring cohesiveness to day-to-day operations and that he could help the President better articulate his vision for the nation. It was the hope that the President could move from merely presenting individual speeches (and he gives more than 400 a year) to presenting a coherent theme in many different venues.

But it was at that same time that the magazine offered Baer the national editor job. The choice was a tough one until that personal meeting with the President. Baer believes in the directions that President Clinton wishes to move the country, and he believes in Bill Clinton as a leader who can bring those wishes to reality.

So now, it is still writing and politics. But it is no longer writing *about* politics. For now, the writing is the politics.