

POLITICS

I Was Ditched by Dee Long!

A neophyte reporter joins the bulldogs of the legislative press corps, and learns some awful secrets.

BY ADAM WAHLBERG

On my first day as a legislative assistant for KARE-11 News my boss, Dennis Stauffer, introduced me around to the Capitol press corps. Pat Kessler, how do you do. Eric Eskola, nice to meet you. Dane Smith, a pleasure. I remember thinking wow, here are the people who bring Minnesota its political news, these icons of Minnesota journalism, and I'm getting a chance to work alongside them. This should be exciting.

And indeed it was. While running with the pack, I got the chance to stick microphones in the most powerful Minnesota faces on the prairie. However, I have to admit that during my first few days with the press corps, I felt like an outsider, kind of like Jane Goodall waiting for acceptance from a colony of apes. It's not as if they're unpleasant people; down to a person they're all quite appealing. But in those first days, I knew they all had something I didn't. A kill in battle. They had all brought back to their respective news organizations a bona fide scoop. Oh, but I was determined to prove my worth. I saw battles everywhere. I psyched myself up each morning in a quixotic frenzy, determined to slay one of the giants of the Legislature.

Give me a lawmaker, any lawmaker. I'll have him in tears within minutes. I don't care what he's done up to the moment in his life when he meets me, I will extract some deeply hidden secret from his past or die trying. I AM MIKE WALLACE!

Well, I never did find my star-making interview, but the Capitol press corps did eventually grant me access to their unique world.

And what I found may surprise you. It certainly surprised me.

When I began my job in January, I had a romanticized vision of political reporting being a lot like politics itself, a cutthroat business in which everyone schemed to sabotage each other.

Sounded fun to me. I was more than willing to be Channel 11's dirty trick-

ster. Whether it would be by tousling Art Sasse's hair moments before his live report on Channel 5, hiding Jack Coffman's *Pioneer Press* notebooks or erasing Mike Mulcahy's Minnesota Public Radio cassettes, I was eager to go the extra mile to ensure that Channel 11 got the story first. I would be the Donald Segretti of the press corps.

But the Capitol press corps, to its credit, doesn't operate in that vein. While I expected to walk into a maelstrom of cynical reporters screaming bloody murder at each other (just the atmosphere perfect for my Machiavellian plans), I instead found a collection of amiable journalists more than happy to take me in as one of their own.

It astonished me to discover that members of the press corps are actually quite a close-knit group. Jokes and gossip are exchanged, friendly insults hurled about, impersonations attempted—what I expected was the Manson family; instead I got the Brady Bunch. But the thing is, they have all worked together for years, covered the same events, been fed the same swill, beat the same deadlines. They know how the game is played, and they have learned how to play it together.

One of the time-honored traditions of the press corps I was privy to was the regular hallway discussions of the day's events. This is where reporters, whose work ethically binds them to the journalistic commandment of objectivity, get the rare opportunity to share their own personal opinions. Would Alan Welle survive Phoneygate? Has Arne completely alienated himself from the right wing of the IR Party? Who is the most inept legislator? Not only were these bull sessions cathartic, they gave reporters an informal opportunity to compare notes.

However, despite the chumminess of the press corps, nobody ever lost sight of the main objective—to paraphrase Hamlet, "the story's the thing." It's tacitly understood that each reporter would gladly slit another's throat to obtain the journalistic grail: an ex-

clusive story. It is really quite a fascinating dynamic to work within, almost Mafia-like. Your friends are your enemies, and you have to make sure not to share too much or you'll get "whacked," or scooped. The best reporters are the ones who know how to walk this fine line.

Take Eskola for example. There is no more likable and respected reporter in Minnesota—it is well known in state politics that you are nobody unless Eric has called you on the phone and said, "Let me put a tape in and we'll talk." What makes him so good is his technique when gathering information. The guy is ferocious.

He constantly barks out "What do you got?" at any person who ventures near his less-than-tidy Capitol hovel. It absolutely gnaws at him not to know everything that is happening at the Capitol, and he will interrogate anyone within earshot if he feels he has missed something. But at the same time, he is usually willing to help truant reporters (including yours truly on a number of occasions) trying to catch up on a story. There is a lot of teamwork involved in the process, and to me, Eskola was the captain.

Looking back on the 1993 session, there were a number of highlights: I covered the press conference when Gov. Arne Carlson ripped into Big 10 officiating, interviewed Sen. Allan Spear moments after the Senate approved the gay rights bill and met former Ronald Reagan press secretary James Brady. But my unquestionably favorite moment of the 1993 legislative session was when I was ditched by Dee Long.

It was in the midst of Phoneygate and I was assigned to give her a surprise visit, an "ambush" as it's called in television, at a speech she was giving at a St. Paul hotel. She was scheduled to speak in a conference room on the second floor, and so that's where I staked her out. When she arrived, a few minutes late, I approached and told her of my intentions—to do a quick inter-

view regarding the future of Welle as DFL House majority leader. She told me sure, but could it be after her 10- to 15-minute presentation. Not wishing to sound unreasonable, I complied and said we would wait for her down in the lobby. Fifteen minutes passed. Then 30 minutes. Finally, after 40 minutes, I returned to the conference room and asked, "Is Dee still here?" "No, she left about 20 minutes ago." Now my cameraman and I had kept a keen eye on the lobby and parking lot, looking for any possible getaway car, and were confident she hadn't slipped by us. But somehow she had.

Was I upset? Hell no! I had struck fear into the heart of Dee Long. As Pat Kessler told me later, "Adam, you're a reporter now; you've been ditched." Needless to say, I was thrilled.

About Phoneygate, I was shocked at the vitriolic reaction politicians took to our reporting. I can certainly understand that legislators were feeling persecuted by the media blitz. After all, I'm the person who initially wanted to attack any elected official I could get my hands on because that was my stereotype of a Capitol reporter.

But from where I stood, there weren't any media witch hunts during Phoneygate. All we wanted, and what I think the public wanted, was a straight answer about the phone records. If the lawmakers had been up-front and forthcoming with the media from the beginning, I guarantee you the story would have played out in less than a week.

In retrospect, my time at the Capitol was fruitful on many levels: I received a lesson in television journalism 101 and a baptism in dealing with high-powered politicians, and I learned that reporters can work together without leaving a trail of booby traps and sniper fire. I'll always be thankful to those ink-stained wretches who showed me the ropes.

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