Papers of Former Press Secretary Added to the Cohen Collection

Desiree Butterfield-Nagy
I don’t have any real contribution to make in Washington anymore except bitterness,” wrote Thomas Bright, a man who had been press secretary for William S. Cohen since 1975. His parting thoughts were offered in a November, 1979, article written for the *Washington Post*. Despite having many fond memories of his ten years in D.C.—a place he had called home since the age of 17, where he had met and married his wife, and where their son had been born—the mounting anti-government sentiment of the American people had finally cost him his faith; having held on as long as he could to a belief that government could do real good, he now counted himself among those desperate to get out, “depressed at being outnumbered and powerless in this brave new Washington.”

“The capital has always been the butt of jokes and complaints from the countryside,” he wrote, “But now the mood has soured. The jabs at government have grown more acid. The country has found itself in need of energy shortages, inflation, economic stagnation—that seem to defy government solution. Chappaquiddick, Watergate and the disgrace of innumerable congressmen from Wilbur Mills to Herman Talmadge have laid bare the failings of once respected leaders and institutions.” He concluded that Cohen, like Supreme Court Justice Blackmun, his predecessor, had “ample reason to abandon Capitol Hill for the beaches of Maine. It is more satisfying to build a chapel,” he said, in the past year’s money-printing top hat to long on as long as we could to a belief that government could do real good, he now counted himself among those desperate to get out, “depressed at being outnumbered and powerless in this brave new Washington.”

Within a few months, we received the addition of Thomas Bright’s papers, which have now been processed and are available for research. Bright’s files included many annotated drafts of speeches, news releases, editorial columns, and news clippings. Memos and correspondence reflect the internal workings of the office and its interactions with members of the press in the 1970s. One memo titled “How to be a Flack” (a sometimes disparaging term for a press secretary) welcomed Bright and provided detailed instructions in taking over his new position. In a similar memo written some years later, he offered instructions for his successor, creating an overview of the prominent reporters of the day along with hints on working with each of them. Another early memo spelled out the philosophy and details of coordinating Cohen’s walks through Maine’s second congressional district. “In order to achieve the desired effect,” it noted, “the walk must be done right, and that means doing it the hard way.” Cohen would walk every step of the way, returning each morning to the precise location where he had stopped the night before. An advance person would be sent one week prior to Cohen’s arrival in town to find a place for him to stay. “Hotels are out,” it stated, and “so are prominent Republicans. He is out to meet the people, not his supporters.”

Other items relate to the heated 1978 campaign for the Senate against William Hathaway—whose papers also happen to be held at Fogler Library. Bright had saved an exchange of telegrams between the offices of Hathaway and Cohen regarding a scheduled visit of President Jimmy Carter. Hathaway sent Cohen an invitation to join him in welcoming the President to Maine. Cohen responded that unfortunately, due to the last minute nature of the invitation—giving him only one day’s notice to organize travel from Washington to Bangor—the only way that he was likely to make it was if Hathaway could help with logistics and see if Cohen could travel along with the President on Air Force One. Also saved in this file is the story clipped from the *Bangor Daily News* where on February 16, 1978, reporter John Day noted, “Hathaway’s press secretary reacted this way: (Loud laughter) ‘This has got to be a rib.’”

Other topics covered in the collection include Loring Air Force Base, the Maine Indian Land Claims dispute, the Dickey-Lincoln hydroelectric project, the declining shoe and textile industry in Maine, and Cohen’s opposition to a United Nations anti-Zionist resolution.

Fortunately for researchers, despite Tom Bright’s apparent bitterness as he left Washington, he saved his records. Before turning them over to the library, he said that he spent some time going back through them and on reflection, realized they were “interesting stuff.” Those of us who may wonder whether any sense of nostalgia has replaced his disillusionment may simply have to go on wondering. His final comment was, simply, “I’ve had a good time on this project, but I’m happy to get two more boxes out of my attic.”

Anyone interested in accessing the Thomas Bright subsseries of the William S. Cohen Papers may contact Desiree Butterfield-Nagy at 207-581-2665 or desiree_butterfield@umit.maine.edu.