

# Interview

## White House Experience

An Interview with Ed Gillespie,  
Former Counselor to President George W. Bush, and founder of Ed Gillespie Strategies



Ed Gillespie

**EDITORS' NOTE** Ed Gillespie began his political career as a Senate parking lot attendant. He later worked for a decade as a top aide to former House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-TX). In 1996, he became Director of Communications and Congressional Affairs for the Republican National Committee under Haley Barbour, with whom in 1997 he formed Policy Impact Communications. From 1999 to 2008, Gillespie served as a political strategist to several American politicians. In 1999, he worked as an advisor for the Presidential exploratory committee of John Kasich. In 2000, Gillespie served as Senior Communications Advisor for the Presidential campaign of George W. Bush. In 2002, he was general strategist for Elizabeth Dole's winning North Carolina Senate campaign. In 2003, Gillespie was elected as Chairman of the Republican National Committee, serving in that role through the 2004 elections. His book, *Winning Right*, was released in September of 2006. He served as Chairman of the Republican Party in his home state of Virginia from December 2006 to June 2007. He played a visible role in the 2006 Virginia Senate elections as a confidante of defeated Virginia Senator George Allen. In late June 2007, President Bush brought Gillespie into the White House on a full-time basis as Counselor to the President. In February 2009, Virginia Attorney General Bob McDonnell announced Gillespie as General Chairman of his campaign for Governor. Gillespie is a graduate of The Catholic University of America in

Washington, D.C., and now serves on its board of trustees. Gillespie, along with former White House Counsel to President Bill Clinton, Jack Quinn, founded Quinn Gillespie & Associates in January 2000. Ed Gillespie's next project involves launching his own strategic consulting and public relations firm that will help companies, industries, and associations anticipate change, communicate strategically, and manage crises.

**As a leader of the Republican Party for many years, are you concerned with the state of the party today?**

I am concerned, but I also believe that these are times of opportunity for the party. Pendulums swing in politics, and it has swung away from us at this moment, so how you react to that is important. But I've seen the Republican Party declared dead at least twice before in my lifetime and I'm only 47. The aggressiveness of the Obama administration and their overreaching on federal spending, as well as some of their policies on energy, health care, and other areas provide the Republican Party an opportunity to offer alternatives to show how we would solve problems and address issues from a more conservative, market-oriented perspective. There's impatience because we live in an information-age society where everybody wants answers right now. But we have a year and a half until the midterm elections, and that's an eternity in politics.

**Are you concerned about the long-term effects of the policies of the current administration?**

I worry when Rahm Emanuel says that in every crisis there is an opportunity to do more than you could otherwise, and that they're leveraging concerns about the economy for that purpose. In the long term, that is not going to help us recover. We all need to be Americans first, so although I'll work as hard as anyone in 2012 to try to elect a Republican President, I would rather have low unemployment, high economic growth, and a safe country than to have the opposite and have it be easy for us to beat the incumbent President. But I fear that's not going to be the case. I fear that we're not going to have done what needs to be done in order to turn our economy around. I fear that we're going to have imposed too much debt, too much spending, and too many taxes on the economy when we should have been trying to free up entrepreneurship. I also worry that President Obama's policies are making us less safe.

**At the end of the Bush administration, did you know what you wanted as your next career step?**

I didn't know. The White House environment doesn't allow much time to put your feet up and think about what's next. But I'm launching a new firm that will help companies, industries, and associations anticipate change, communicate strategically, and manage crises. Working at the White House at that level gives you a broader horizon and understanding of developing trends – you can spot some things as they're coming. Top companies, industries, and trade associations need to anticipate change and position for it, and they also need crisis management. We're in a time in our economy and in our media culture where even the most upstanding companies and individuals can find themselves very quickly facing reputational damage. Crisis management, happily or not, is something I've had a lot of experience with over the years. So I can offer insights and add value for people facing some pretty high stakes situations.

I'm very proud of my previous firm, Quinn Gillespie & Associates, as it's one of the premier public affairs firms in Washington, D.C. But after leaving the White House, I decided I didn't want to go back to lobbying, which is a big part of the Quinn Gillespie business model. I wanted to stay focused on the strategic communications, public relations, and crisis management aspects. In addition, I wanted to have a smaller number of clients and to be the person who was the client lead in every case – the one responsible for working directly with clients. So this will be a smaller shop, more focused on communications and messaging.

**No matter what the relationship to the President, it seems it would be most difficult to give him bad news. Do you need to get past that to maintain an open dialogue?**

You do. I remember shortly after I got to the White House urging President Bush to do something that I knew he probably wouldn't want to do, but also knew that he would likely recognize that it was something he needed to do. So I made my case and he listened and he said he would do it. And I thanked him and told him I thought it would turn out well. And as he was leaving, he yelled back over his shoulder, "I trust you, Eddie." And I realized then that he was telling me very early on in my tenure that he was counting on me to tell him things he may not like to hear. ●