

THE

# Marlin Fitzwater Papers

**Marlin Fitzwater spent a decade in the White House, the only press secretary appointed by two presidents. Now, the K-State alumnus has donated his personal papers to the Richard L.D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections.**

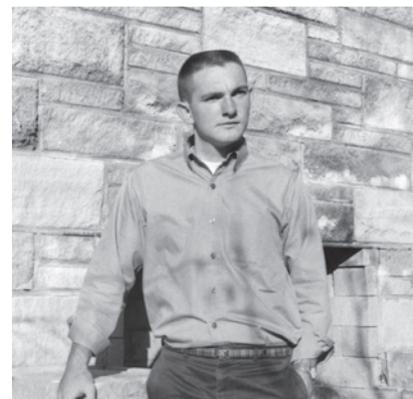
His roots twine across north central Kansas, along an 80-mile swath of I-70 and prairie, from his birthplace in Salina, through Dickinson county and Abilene, and into Manhattan, where he launched his journalism career.

On that same stretch, if you stop in at the coffee shops and cafes, you'll find a circle of locals, hashing the latest news. There is often a central figure—a farmer, business owner, retiree—who is quick with a joke, able to handle a story with a light touch.

Folks like these are Fitzwater's kin. Not the cable news talking head or the rulers of the Twitterverse, but the straight-talking, witty storyteller.

Add in a deep respect for journalism, innate political savvy and a fierce work ethic, and you have the elements that propelled Fitzwater, class of 1965, to a front-row seat at some of the most important moments in American history during the latter part of the 20th century.

Fitzwater earned his stripes with the Environmental Protection Agency during that organization's first decade. He led its press office through the Love Canal toxic waste crisis in the late '70s, and then served briefly in the Department of the Treasury before coming to the White House in 1983.



As a K-State journalism student circa 1962.



Fitzwater returned to K-State in 1985 when Vice President Bush gave a Landon Lecture.

Fitzwater arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1965 and worked in government communications through the day this photo was taken, January 20, 1993, when President Bush left office.

Fitzwater recently took time to tell us about a few of the thousands of photos in the collection and to reflect on his years with Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, two men who shaped his life and with whom he traveled to all 50 states and 65 foreign countries.

Of countless great experiences during his years in the White House, one event still stands out: The historic Washington summit between Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987. Fitzwater arranged to have joint press briefings with his Soviet counterpart in front of a press corps of more than 7,000.

“The briefings started three days before the actual summit,” Fitzwater said. “And I just remember being on the podium and saying, ‘You know this is one of those moments they always told me about where if you say the wrong thing you could affect the course of history.’”

With characteristic dry humor, he added, “Anyway, at least now with 20 years of hindsight, it seems like it went okay.”

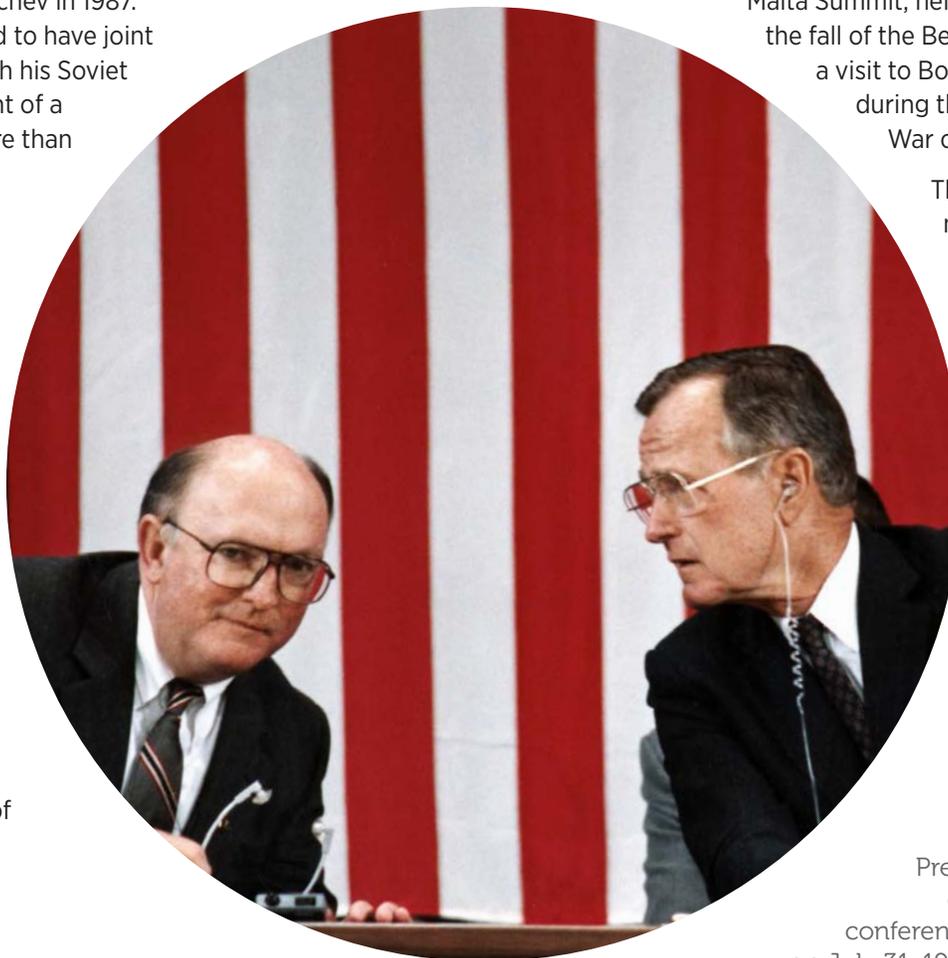
Ultimately, Fitzwater gave more than 850 press briefings and developed communication strategies for two presidents with vastly different styles.

President Reagan, ever the actor, liked to work from a script.

“President Bush was a little more surprising,” Fitzwater said, laughing. “Every once in a while [he] would want to talk to the press himself. He would just say let’s go down to the briefing room; I have some things I need to get off my chest.”

A scan of the collection further reflects the intensity of the job: Fitzwater’s notes from the Iran Contra scandal, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Gulf War. News clippings from the Malta Summit, held just weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and from a visit to Bogota, Colombia, during the height of the War on Drugs.

There were lighter moments, too, as evidenced by photos at Camp David, of meetings with dignitaries and celebrities ranging from Pope John Paul II to Michael Jackson, of friendships with Bush and Colin Powell.



Fitzwater and President Bush confer during a joint press conference with Gorbachev on July 31, 1991, the day the two leaders signed the bilateral Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I).

**1983-85**

Special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and deputy press secretary for domestic affairs

**1985-87**

Press secretary to Vice President George H.W. Bush

**1987-89**

Assistant to the president for press relations for Ronald Reagan

**1989-93**

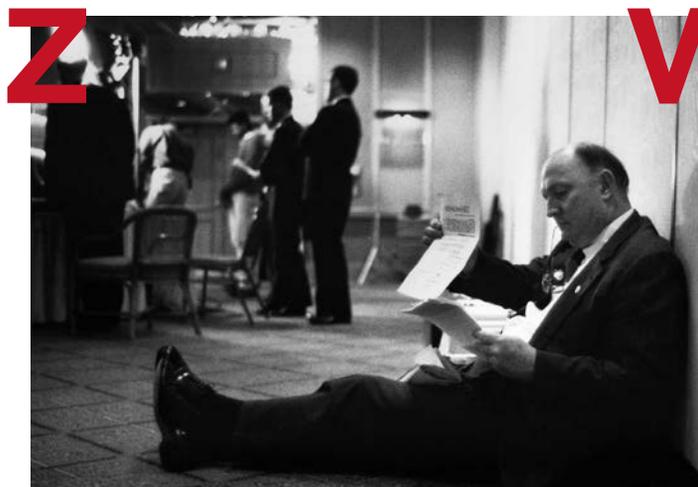
Press secretary to President George H.W. Bush



“I always tried to stand in the corner and pretend I could save the day. I don’t know what I would do—maybe just give a note to the president, ‘Here’s a better answer.’”



Fitzwater stood behind a podium of his own design to field questions from eminent White House correspondents such as Sam Donaldson and Helen Thomas at the daily press briefing.



“Being press secretary means that you have to learn so much so fast. So this is kind of a classic ‘grab a few minutes to catch up on the information of the day.’”



Fitzwater during a cabinet meeting with a Polaroid camera loaned to him by the Washingtonian Magazine. His photos were published in a “behind-the-scenes” spread.



“The historic moment in 1987 when George Bush took me over to the Oval Office to President Reagan and told him, ‘I’m turning him over to you, sir.’”



“Colin [Powell] and I are helping prepare for the 1988 Moscow Summit, where the president said, ‘I no longer believe the Soviet Union is an evil empire.’”

Dean of Libraries Lori Goetsch says that the collection has immense potential to inspire generations of K-State students.

“We are profoundly grateful for Mr. Fitzwater’s donation,” said Goetsch. “It won’t just be preserved; students and researchers will use it to immerse themselves in the geopolitical landscape of the ‘80s and ‘90s.”

Those students will come to know an astute spokesman who navigated political allegiances, earned the

respect of the press corps and never lost his sense of awe at being part of the president’s team.

**“ONE OF THE GREATEST THINGS I LEARNED WAS THAT A PERSON—ANY PERSON—CAN ABSORB SO MUCH MORE INFORMATION THAN THEY THINK THEY CAN. I’M GLAD I HAD THAT EXPERIENCE, BECAUSE UNLESS WE’RE PUSHED IN LIFE, WE DON’T DO IT. WE MAKE ROOM FOR OURSELVES, OR WE GET INVOLVED IN OTHER THINGS, BUT IF YOU WANT TO WORK IN THE WHITE HOUSE, THE JOB IS YOURS 24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK.”**

— MARLIN FITZWATER

Consider a 1988 Fourth of July celebration at which Fitzwater sat with an Abilene classmate who became the national archivist.

“The fireworks are going off; the

White House was 10 feet away—you could touch it. All I could think was, ‘Is America a great country or what?’

Here’s Marlin Fitzwater and Don Wilson on the south grounds just like we own the place. Who would have ever guessed?”

Today, Fitzwater

and his wife, Melinda, split their time between Maryland and Florida. He still writes, and he’s completed several novels and an autobiography, “Call the Briefing!”



Fitzwater shared a close, often teasing, relationship with Bush, and still does.



An advance man recognized Kansas’ native son at a stop during Bush’s campaign for re-election.



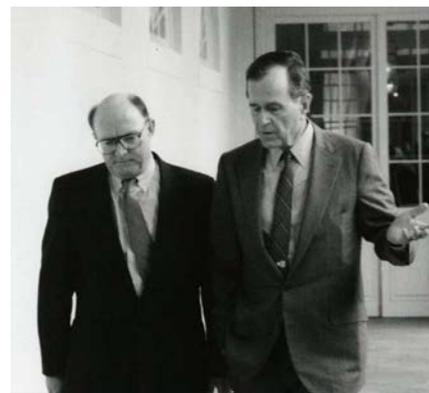
Reagan staged photos that took advantage of Fitzwater’s habit of catching up on sleep during flights.



Reagan loved to celebrate birthdays, and this was one of Fitzwater’s held during a flight on Air Force One.



After Fitzwater’s early years on the farm led to skin cancer, a brimmed hat became part of his uniform.



Fitzwater and Bush during a more serious moment after a meeting about the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

PHOTOS BY WHITE HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHER



# MARLIN FITZWATER EXHIBIT

> October 4, 2016

Coming this fall, the public will be able to experience highlights from the Marlin Fitzwater Papers in an exhibit that highlights the spokesman's path from rural Kansas to the White House.

Fitzwater will visit Manhattan for the opening on October 4, and plans for additional public programs are underway.

Details will be posted at [lib.ksu.edu/events](http://lib.ksu.edu/events) as they become available.



Fitzwater has visited with special collections faculty, including curators Volodymyr Chumachenko (top) and David Allen (bottom), to give them background on the 74 boxes of donated materials.

## ■ MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Want to support special collections like this one?

Contact Nicole Askew at 785-532-7530 or [nicolea@found.ksu.edu](mailto:nicolea@found.ksu.edu).

[www.found.ksu.edu/give/specialcollections](http://www.found.ksu.edu/give/specialcollections)