

# chris-meagher

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## SPEAKERS

Russ White, Chris Meagher

- R** Russ White 00:00  
Livonia, Michigan native and Michigan State University School of Journalism alumnus Chris Meagher is the deputy White House press secretary. And it's great to welcome Chris to MSU. today. Hello, Chris, congratulations on the job.
- C** Chris Meagher 00:13  
Thank you. Glad to be here.
- R** Russ White 00:15  
Before we talk a bit about that, Chris. No, just give us a bit of a snapshot of your career sort of from the time you graduated from MSU. In '05 to working in the White House in 2021.
- C** Chris Meagher 00:26  
Yeah, well, I actually started as a newspaper reporter, I worked at the State News, the second semester of my senior year, which was a great experience that kind of, you know, allowed me to take the next step after I graduated, I had a couple of internships, including one at the Oakland Press in Pontiac, and then became a reporter out in Santa Barbara,

California, first for a daily that is no longer in existence, and then an alternative weekly there. So I was a reporter for about six or seven years and had a conversation with the Congresswoman who represented the area out there one day and decided to come on to her staff and become the press secretary. So that's kind of how I, I flipped to political communications. And since then, I've worked in California, I worked on a couple of campaigns in Colorado and Montana, I worked on the mayor's race in Chicago in 2019. I had a brief stint in General Motors at General Motors in Washington, DC doing public policy communications. And then, in 2019, I was the national press secretary for Mayor Pete Buttigieg, in his presidential campaign, and had a few gigs in between and including with Governor Whitmer. Yeah, and I'm honored and lucky enough to have gotten the opportunity to work at the White House.

R

Russ White 01:41

And Chris, I wonder if you could kind of describe the exhilaration and excitement of working, you know, in the heartbeat of the new administration, and all the ways, you know, it's going about trying to help the American people, it's gotta be cool to be right on the inside of the everything.

C

Chris Meagher 02:07

Yeah, there's really nothing quite like it, you know, you sort of, you know, you get carried away in the midst of your job and what you're doing and the tasks that you have to accomplish. And then you look out the window, and you see kind of the front of the White House, you know, and you're like, wow, just what an honor to be here. And working hard to get things done, obviously, was a huge week, and not just the Biden administration, but in our nation's history, you know, one of the most important substantive, biggest relief packages that have ever been passed and signed into law that's going to get, you know, relief to folks who have been hurting over the past year from the pandemic. So, just even, you know, I've only been here a week and a half, but just to be a part of that history and, and helping, you know, make sure that our message is getting out to people about what this means to them. And we're seeing people with the relief showing up in their bank accounts already. You know, it's it's good. And it shows, you know, that the work that we're doing really does matter. So it's it's definitely one of those, you know, your your head down working hard, but then sometimes you look up and you pinch yourself about what you're done.

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Russ White 03:19

Yeah, I would imagine. Yeah, that's pretty cool. Well, Chris, describe some of your duties

and responsibility as White House Deputy Press Secretary, what does a typical day look like if there is such a thing? And really, what does it mean to be the Deputy Press Secretary at the White House?

C

Chris Meagher 03:35

Yeah, one of the things I like about, you know, back when I was a reporter, but now you know, on the other side of things, and communications, political communications is to your point, you know, ever, everyday is a little different. You never know what's going to happen. You never know what where the day is gonna lead, you can sort of have a vision for what you need to accomplish. And then something happens and you have to react to it, you know. And so I like that every day, offers something a little different in the White House. Jen Psaki, the press secretary, who's my boss, she has a daily press briefing. And so a lot of the first half of the day is preparing for that and making sure that she has the information that she needs to relay to reporters in the briefing room and just getting a handle on, you know, what we're trying to communicate, and if we're gonna have a guest at the briefing and, and just the message of the day, and then, you know, kind of what's happening in the world to make sure that she is able to answer those questions. The press briefings, usually, you know, around lunchtime, more or less, and then the rest of the day is just interacting with reporters more or less than dealing with the volume of inquiries that come in every day. I kind of have a portfolio of dealing with some of the more political requests, some of the bigger picture type questions that are coming in. So not necessarily in a beat per se, but kind of the you know, a potpourri of incoming questions and inquiries that that keep you on your toes. You never know what somebody is going to ask about, you know, so. But, you know, one of the cool things about the White House is just, it's a working building, right? So reporters are literally their offices and cubes are right down the hall from mine, and they can literally walk down the hall, open the door and walk right into my office, you know, so there's an accessibility there, which is pretty cool. You know, if a reporter has a question, you know, they don't even have to pick up the phone, they just walk down the hall and plop themselves in the seat in my office and, and we can have a conversation. It's a cool thing about working there, just kind of that interaction between reporters and the press team. We're all very closely situated.

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Russ White 05:47

Yes, I'm Russ White. This is MSU Today, I'm talking with MSU J. School alumnus and White House Deputy Press Secretary Chris Meagher. So Chris, take me back, you're coming out of high school? Why was MSU the place for you?



Chris Meagher 06:01

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, I sort of looked around to a few different universities, both in Michigan and sort of I guess in the Midwest region, I didn't want to venture too far away. But you know, my dad went to Notre Dame. So I kind of grew up a Notre Dame football fan, but had a lot of family that went to Michigan State. And, you know, I really wanted to study journalism. And I knew that Michigan State had a great journalism school. And so I went, and it was exactly what I was looking for in a college experience. You know, it was, I lived in Wilson, my freshman and sophomore years, so not too far from the School Journalism. And, yeah, I have absolutely no regrets about attending Michigan State and still get back there as often as I can.



Russ White 06:46

Well, tell me more about how your time here did prepare you for where you are, and really where you're going.



Chris Meagher 06:52

It's interesting how much has changed in journalism and communication since I attended school, you know, I remember my senior year, I took a photo journalism class, at least for a couple months, until I broke my hand, and I couldn't really hold a camera that well, but it was the last year that they were offering a class where you actually made your own prints, you know, that they didn't use digital cameras. And so something like that, you know, is a skill that reporters or photo journalists don't necessarily need anymore. But even then, you know, I think it was preparing me as a reporter for sort of those situations where, you know, especially these days is a lot of news institutions are becoming more digital, or requiring their reporters to have sort of all the above skill set, you know, knowing that I would have to take photos or find the right, you know, kind of shot for the story that I was also going to be writing so, but I also remember, you know, sitting in one of my early journalism classes, and, and the professor was just kind of talking about the nuts and bolts of like, conducting an interview and taking notes, and how he had developed the shorthand, you know, and at the time, I was like, That's crazy. How do you, you know, how do you read this? How do you understand it? And lo and behold, you know, I developed my own shorthand, what's nothing like is, but I also realized, like journalism is all about people, you know, and, and that it's the people behind the stories that really matter. in journalism, you're often like sitting instead of city council meetings, or county board meetings, or, you know, watching what's happening on the statehouse floor, or, you know, in the halls of Congress, but I think what Michigan State, you know, and my journalism education really taught me and something that I tried to carry with me throughout my reporting career, and, and it continues, even on the other side is, it's all about the people,

you know, and like, the American rescue plans, a great example where like, we're making these decisions about huge pots of money, and you know, where they go, and you can sort of forget about what we're really talking about. And that's, you know, checks in people's bank accounts for, you know, families who have lost jobs or getting like kids back in school for my friends who, like have had to make difficult decisions about what you know, where to send their kid or what to do with their kid while they're working from home. And, like, the decisions that we make impact people's lives, you know, and I really learned that on the reporter side of things, and Michigan State, and trying to relay that in my reporting, and now kind of on the other side understanding, you know, that's a great story to be able to tell.

R

Russ White 09:47

That's a really good reminder, Chris, it's all about the people. And you sort of led me into my next question about how have you seen journalism and public relations changed since 2005. You graduated about the time Facebook and Twitter were coming on. And I just where is this media landscape now? And where do you see it going?

C

Chris Meagher 10:07

It's a great question. Again, you know, 2005, I was like one of the first people, I mean, not, you know, first, like, top 10. But like, first 1000s of people in the country to join Facebook, you know, because at that point, it was limited to people who attended universities, and then it kind of obviously grew from there. But it was something that we didn't really have when I was in college. And now, you're right. I mean, Twitter and Facebook have completely changed things. I think, from my perspective, as a communicator, it has just totally completely changed the news cycle. It's nonstop, frankly, between cable news, you know, CNN and MSNBC and Fox, just 24/7 around the clock coverage to some of the digital components of the networks. These days, CBS has a digital platform CBSN. You know, NBC has theirs, ABC live. So they're reporting online never stops, you know, and then Twitter obviously never stops. You know, it's not like you are working until you know, the New York Times deadline approaches at 6pm. You know, or whatever the time is, on a weeknight, and then you can kind of like, take a second to breathe, you know, it just keeps going keeps going. And you're always monitoring Twitter. I think one thing I think we really understood on the Pete Buttigieg campaign, and one thing that the Biden campaign also did really well was remembering that while helpful, and while important, the vast majority of the American population isn't on Twitter, right? Like Twitter is a valuable tool in your toolbox. It's a valuable tool to reach reporters, it's a valuable tool to reach thought leaders, and people who can really drive a conversation. But at the same time, you can't react to every little thing that you see on Twitter, or else you'd go crazy. You know, and it's

a good I mean, we reminded ourselves on the Pete campaign constantly, you know, that something like 6% of the United States population is active on Twitter. And so while Yes, that's a lot of people, when you're trying to reach people where they are and communicate a message that isn't necessarily where everyone is, and so you can't let what's happening on Twitter always dictate what you're doing, or what you're responding to. Sure. It's important, and it is a it is a way to reach people where they are. But it's not the only way. And it shouldn't be the only way.

R

Russ White 12:40

So what would you say then, is kind of the state and future of journalism. It's no secret it took a little bit of a beating in the last presidential administration. But what concerns you, what are you hopeful about, where do you see journalism headed?

C

Chris Meagher 12:54

I mean, I think it's an exciting time, right, that there's no question that news organizations have endured, especially on the local level, have endured difficult times, and, and are sort of battling these questions themselves. But I think there's always going to be an appetite for information, I think there's always going to be an appetite for people shooting straight with the American people. And I think there's, you know, there's an importance, and I think you've seen it prioritized by the by the Biden administration, you know, bringing back daily press briefings, you know, every single day of the week, well, you know, Monday through Friday, because we understand that reporters have a job to do and that job is to relay what, what is happening in the White House to the American people, you know, that's always going to be valuable, I think. And I think people are always going to be seeking information, the way that they seek it is fluid and changing, obviously, like, some people go to Twitter for all of their information, some people go to Facebook, some people, you know, have their five websites that they check, some folks still, you know, get the newspaper delivered every day. So we're sort of working our way through those questions right now, and like how to sort of fund sustainable journalism. And I don't know that I have a good answer for that. But I think the need for information is never going to subside, you know, and the need to hold power and government accountable for the decisions that are going on. Always needs to happen, you know, and the First Amendment and the rights of journalists is always going to exist, and I think that that's really important.

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Russ White 14:43

This is MSU Today, I'm Russ White, catching up with MSU J school alumnus, and White House Deputy Press Secretary Chris Meagher. And did you always know you wanted to

work in politics and you've touched on it a bit, but talk about how rewarding it is for you?



**Chris Meagher 14:59**

Yeah. It's a good question. I wouldn't say that I always did. You know, I really liked being a newspaper reporter, it was a lot of fun. You know, you just always felt like you were in the mix and learning about new important things. You know, I had some family who were in politics. And so it always sort of interested me and I will, I'd be lying if, you know, I, I said, there wasn't a small part of me that thought of it from time to time. But I do find it really rewarding. And I've managed to work for, you know, some, some great people, my first boss in Congress, she was routinely voted the nicest member of Congress, you know, which was just always nice, you know, the, there's a lot of personalities and people who are there for different reasons, she was there for the right reason. And she was there to improve the lives of her constituents. And she did it with a smile on her face, you know, she wasn't there for any other reason. But that and I feel like I've been really lucky to work for a really great senators who represent their constituents well, and members of Congress. You know, like I mentioned, I worked for Governor Whitmer, I had a great experience working for her, I loved working for her, you know, I came on board, right, as the pandemic was really starting to take off, and she had to make a lot of really tough, difficult decisions, you know, that she knew were going to be challenging politically, and that not everybody was going to like, but every day her driving force was the health and safety of the people of the state of Michigan, you know, and she made the decision that she thought was best based off the data and the science to keep people safe, you know, and that doesn't mean that she didn't wrestle with it every single day, you know, or that, obviously, there, she got a lot of feedback in response to those decisions, you know, but just being able to be there for that, and help with the message on that and getting the message out, especially in my home state. But with somebody who really deeply cares about the people that she represents was it, I don't know what to call it other than a true honor. And it's those moments where you just really appreciate the work that you're doing. And, and like, it's a good reminder of why you're there in the first place, you know, and that's to, to get stuff done, to make people's lives better, you know, a little bit better, even, you know, every single day.



**Russ White 17:36**

So Chris, for students in MSU's J School today, and really, throughout the College of Communication Arts and Sciences, this whole communications world is kind of blurred a bit, as you've said, but what's your advice for people who may think they want to get into political communications in some way?



Chris Meagher 17:52

Yeah, it's a good question. You know, I always say that my time at the State News just really allowed for me to take that next step toward getting a job, toward getting my next internship. And then that internship led me to my next internship, and that led me to my job, you know, and it wasn't an easy path to get there. You know, and I don't even know if I would have been on that path. If it wasn't for that semester, at the State News, you know, whether it's, you know, journalism and reporting, or whether it's communications and politics, I'd say, you know, take those opportunities, while you're still in college, to the extent that you're able to find a way to, to get your foot in the door and, and show them that you're willing to do what it takes, you know, with an internship or taking a job as an assistant or, or whatever, and then just, you know, head down and working hard and, and putting yourself in a position to be successful, you know, you're not going to know everything, right out of the gate, but you're there to learn and to grow and to build a new experience. And like I said, without the state news, I don't even know, if I would have gotten, I don't know if I would have ever gotten a job in journalism, you know, but that really, like, allowed for me to take the next step. And, you know, a lot of the the younger folks that I encounter and, and political communications these days, you know, they take that step while they're in college, you know, and they do that summer internship or they take, they take a semester off to go work for their Congresswoman or whatever the case may be, you know, and if that's something that you're interested, I would totally recommend that I would also recommend working on a campaign. If you do want to do political communications, it's a once in a lifetime experience. There's really nothing like just really, you know, spending six months a year of your life just building up towards something and fighting for something every day. And it's sort of all culminating, and whether you win or whether you lose on Election Day, and just really feeling part of a team that's working hard to improve representation in our elected officials, either, you know, in Michigan or in Washington DC, or at the city council level, you know, like, if it's something that you're passionate about, just dive in and get involved, it doesn't even have to be communications. But there's a lot of different types of jobs in politics that are interesting to people.



Russ White 20:27

So Chris, as we wrap up, just anything else you'd like to get you warmed up some thoughts you want to leave us with about what you're working on, or just just anything you'd like to leave with the audience.



Chris Meagher 20:35

No, I really appreciate you taking the time. And, you know, I'm a proud Spartan, I try to

get back to campus once or twice a year for a football game and to see some old friend, but you know, I'm, I'm really proud of my time at Michigan State and all the exciting things that the university is doing, and that alumni are doing, you know, here and around the world and proud to be able to represent the university and of the work we're doing in the administration, you know, and to folks who might be trying to figure out if political communication is for them. I'd say just dive in and give it a shot and and see what happens and you work hard and you make the right connections and you keep building that resume and you never know where you might end up.



Russ White 21:25

Well, Chris, it's really been a pleasure getting to know you a little bit and congratulations again on being White House Deputy Press Secretary and Spartans Will.



Chris Meagher 21:35

Yeah thank you.



Russ White 21:36

Go Green!



Chris Meagher 21:37

Go White!



Russ White 21:37

That's Chris Meagher. He is an MSU alumnus School of Journalism from 2005 and he is the White House Deputy Press Secretary, if you want to follow Chris on Twitter, @ChrisMeagher and I'm Russ White, this is MSU Today.