Carl Hulse ’76 is a major voice in American political journalism

BY ELAINE GRAYBILL

Carl Hulse’s day begins with some of the most important people in the United States calling him at home or stopping him as he walks to work past his neighborhood Starbucks and down Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation’s capital to complain about what he wrote the day before.

The complaining voices are those of politicians. Hulse ’76, a communication graduate, replies, in essence, that “we don’t do your bidding.” The “we” is the New York Times, for which Hulse is chief congressional correspondent. The New York Times, universally read on Capitol Hill, is considered by many to be the country’s
most influential newspaper. Politicians feel it is important to make their point if they are unhappy with one of Hulse’s stories “for the sake of the next time,” he said. “The New York Times is a big, unique institution ... that is really hard to influence,” Hulse said, “and it tends to drive politicians mad.”

The rigors of working for the New York Times or any other newspaper on Capitol Hill can burn people out fast, Hulse said, but he’s not there yet. “The biggest pressure of this job is the pressure to be right all the time,” he said.

Hulse joined the New York Times Company in Washington in 1986 and became a congressional correspondent in 2002. Being fair—“slicing it down the middle”—is not easy, Hulse said, but “if I’m not fair on Capitol Hill I’m out of business, because [the interviews] would dry up.”

Politically conservative entities such as the online TimesWatch, which bills itself as “documenting and exposing the liberal political agenda of the New York Times” also keep Hulse under the microscope and provide online critiques of his stories, so a thick skin is an asset. Capitol Hill has yet another type of pressure. Because news often breaks close to his 6 p.m. deadline, Hulse is under the gun to write fair and accurate stories quickly. At age 52, he said, “I’m one of the old guys around. I’m surprised I’m still here now, to tell you the truth. ... I’ll be here until I run out of gas or lose interest. Right now it’s pretty interesting.”

One of his most interesting days on Capitol Hill was June 29, 2006, when Hulse himself became news. That day the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning the New York Times and other newspapers for releasing details of the Bush administration’s anti-terrorist program of tracking financial transactions through a program called “Swift.” Some legislators called for a revocation of Times employees’ press credentials. “It was surreal,” Hulse said. “They were talking about me.”

Hulse’s morning walk takes him to the entrance of the United States Capitol. “There are very few days I don’t get a kick out of walking into the building itself,” he said. “It’s a privilege to work there.” As a lover of history, Hulse said he “can almost feel the ghosts sometimes” in the Capitol building when he is working there by himself late at night.

The ghosts of reporters of yore aren’t difficult to imagine upstairs in the press room, which Hulse describes as the “nerve center of Congressional journalism.” Rows of desks crowd the room, and a bank of obsolete telephone booths lines one wall. A door on that same wall leads to the Senate chamber press gallery, which is empty because reporters are sitting at their desks watching the proceedings on television screens. Hulse and the other New York Times reporter, Kate Zernike, occupy a small space in the corner of the press room with a telephone, two computers, and a small television. “Here’s our motto,” Hulse said, pointing to a sign above the computers: “Know-Nothing Reporter Writes Another Meaningless Story on Short Notice.”

Hulse is known for his sense of humor. New York Times former White House correspondent and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Maureen Dowd, who has worked with Hulse 20 years and considers him a close friend, depends on his judgment on humor and other matters.

“He’s a de facto editor for my column,” Dowd said. “No matter what time of the day or night I ask his advice, he’s always there. He knows what’s funny. He has an incredible sense of fairness. He’s got a perfect tuning fork to know, ‘Is it fair? Is...
it funny? Is it true?” Furthermore, Dowd said, “He has the best gut on political stories. I’ve never seen him be wrong. Carl has a great sense of politics, which requires another whole level of instinct and a knowledge of human nature. You could drop him anywhere—India, Iraq—and he would still be good.”

Hulse’s skillful balancing of humor and gravity is not lost on others. “People look to him as someone who understands the dynamics of this place,” said Zernike, who has been the second New York Times congressional correspondent since June 2006. Hulse has “the ability to recognize the fun and the theater of the place, but also keep in mind the important things going on here,” Zernike said. “That makes him an astute observer of politics and makes him very good at what he does.”

Conservative Republicans on Capitol Hill frequently criticize the New York Times as being a liberal voice. However, Bob Stevenson, spokesman and communications director until mid-2006 for Tennessee Republican and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, praised Hulse. He described Hulse as “eminently fair” and “in the upper echelon of those reporters who have ever covered Congress.”

Stevenson, a communications strategist in Washington, said, “Carl is very bright and quick in his understanding of how Capitol Hill works. He understands exactly what the issues are: the subtleties, impact, and motivation involved. He also cuts through the smoke and gets to the heart of the issues.” In addition to all that, Stevenson said he is astounded at how quickly Hulse writes under pressure. “You look at his story the next day and say, ‘How the hell did he do that? He only had 15 minutes to write the story.’”

Hulse’s influence can reach far. “If Carl writes an exclusive story, the media around the country are going to key off of that for their day’s news,” Stevenson said. “It could have a huge ripple effect on the country.”

An assessment of Hulse’s importance “depends on how important you think newspapers are,” Zernike said. “The New York Times is the way a lot of people get their news about Capitol Hill.” As chief correspondent, Hulse plays a major role in determining the newspaper’s coverage of Congress. Staff in the Washington Bureau of the Times, located in another building in the city, rely on Hulse to be their eyes and ears on Capitol Hill.

Hulse generally works from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. Once upon a time newspaper reporters could go home after turning in their stories, but modern technology now requires the reporter to file stories for the Internet, including audio and video products for online readers.

The newspaper’s online site, www.nytimes.com, often has an audio interview with Hulse about that day’s story. Hulse doesn’t see this as a good thing, and doesn’t even enjoy watching a video clip of himself on the New York Times Web site. “If I had wanted to be on T.V. I would have been a television reporter,” he grumbled, in the gruff style that gets him at least part way to the stereotype of a hard-bitten newspaper reporter.

Hulse fails to fulfill that cranky stereotype completely, however, which is
where the nickname “Mayor of Capitol Hill” enters in. He earned that informal title with his two-decade tenure living and working on Capitol Hill, and his affable style of walking around the neighborhood, greeting people by name and asking about their families. Some think Hulse’s style is rooted in his upbringing in the small Central Illinois town of Ottawa, where family members still live.

Hulse doesn’t have to pause before naming the two most important stories of his career. On September 11, 2001, two close friends were on American Airlines Flight 77 that crashed into the Pentagon. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack Hulse, as night editor at the paper’s Washington Bureau office, coordinated nighttime coverage. “We were putting out two papers a day. Even people who don’t like the New York Times liked the way we covered it,” he said.

The other story peaked in mid December of 1998, when the House voted to impeach President Bill Clinton. That same week the United States and Britain were attacking Iraq with air strikes. The day of the House impeachment vote House Speaker-elect Bob Livingston, Republican from Louisiana, resigned from Congress at the start of the session because of disclosure of his past extramarital affairs. “The place was up for grabs,” Hulse said. “I would not have been surprised to see a coup. It was that unsettled.” At the end of the impeachment hearings in February of 1999, the Senate did not remove the president from office.

Though the New York Times job never really goes away and he lives next door to one of the senators he covers, Hulse has a full life outside the office. He spends time with wife, Kimberly, a National Geographic Society education specialist; and sons, Nicholas, 12, and Benjamin, 9. He walks the dog, plays sports, and is a Chicago Cubs and Bears fan. His friend Dowd described him as “a fantastic father raising amazing kids.” Hulse also indulges his interest in history—an interest that led him to name Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History John Freed as his favorite Illinois State University professor.

That interest in history spawned a screenplay that is on its way to becoming a Hollywood movie. “Working with Hollywood has been an experience,” he said.

It all started when Hulse was walking his dog at one of the early cemeteries in Washington and saw workers replacing a tombstone on the grave of William P. Wood, the first chief of the Secret Service, which was established in 1865. He
learned that the association of retired Secret Service agents was replacing the stone, and he wrote a story about it for the New York Times.

As a result of the story a movie development company called him and asked him to write a screenplay, which was something he had always wanted to do. He described it as an action movie based on Wood and the early days of the Secret Service, whose original purpose was to catch counterfeiters. “It was really fun to make stuff up,” he said. “It’s very liberating.” Someday Hulse would like to write a novel about politics.

As a child Hulse made up pretend newspapers, and his earliest front-page story appeared in the St. Columba Crest, his school paper when he was a third-grader. “The buzz started then,” he said.

Hulse has been a government reporter since his days with the Vidette, Illinois State’s student newspaper. He started with the Vidette as wire brief reporter under editor George Dobrik ’76, and was promoted to news editor under editor Brian Adair. He earned a salary and tuition waiver. His last semester, fall of 1976, the Vidette went from four to five days a week. Hulse had spent so much time working on the newspaper that he stayed that extra semester to earn enough credits to graduate.

At Illinois State he covered the Academic Senate. One thing he has always liked about covering politics is that he is not invading the privacy of innocent people thrust into the news through some misfortune or event. “The politicians signed up for it,” he said.

Hulse was employed at the News Tribune in LaSalle-Peru as soon as he graduated. He credits his opportunities at the Vidette for making him a newspaper reporter. “You need to get in there and do it and see if you want to do it,” he said. “You’ve got to know that you can get on the phone and talk to people.”

From LaSalle-Peru he went to the Daily Journal in Kankakee, and did an early story on local politician George Ryan, who later became Illinois governor and in 2006 was sentenced to prison after convictions on 18 federal corruption charges. Hulse said way back then he “saw what was coming” for Ryan.

While in Kankakee Hulse won a United Press International Investigative Reporting Award for stories about the 1978 riot at the Pontiac Correctional Center, for which he went into the prison and interviewed prisoners who were involved.


Now and then Hulse can think of a down side to his job on Capitol Hill. It surprised him that the job is physically exhausting because of having to run around the Capitol all day chasing sources. Also, he said, “We are sitting in one of the top terrorist targets in the world.” Other than that, he deadpanned, “It beats working for a living.”