

At Home in the West

An Interview with Denis McDonough '92

By Albert Eisele '58

As if John Gagliardi hasn't won enough honors in his coaching career, he can now claim that one of his former players is the first Saint John's graduate to work in the White House.

That would be Denis McDonough '92 who helped Gagliardi's Johnnies compile a 28-4-1 record while winning two MIAC titles as a hard-hitting strong safety on the 1989, '90 and '91 gridiron teams.

But the 39-year-old Stillwater native is playing in a much tougher league now after being named deputy assistant to President Barack Obama in charge of strategic communications for the National Security Council (NSC).

McDonough, who was a senior foreign policy adviser for Obama's presidential campaign, heads a staff of about a dozen people in the office of the president's

national security adviser, retired Marine Gen. James Jones. As such, he will play a major role in defining the Obama administration's national security and foreign policy agenda, just as he did during the campaign.

His influential role was evident when he was quoted, just two days before Obama took the oath of office as the nation's 44th president, in a *New York Times* article exploring the challenges facing Obama, including how he can avoid being misled, in dealing with Iran, by the kind of faulty intelligence that predicted Iraq dictator Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

"He approaches the intelligence reports the same way he approaches a lot of the things he reads, whether it is the *New York Times* or a report from the ground," said McDonough, whom the newspaper described as "a longtime foreign policy aide who is often charged with finding answers to questions Mr. Obama raises."

(The same article also quoted an anonymous official who, it said, "is widely reported to be headed for a senior position" defending Obama from those who criticized his willingness to engage the Iranians in direct talks, unlike President Bush. Insisting that this "was the right thing to do," the unnamed official predicted that "if the Iranians don't come to the table, he's prepared to talk about cutting off their gasoline and squeezing them on sanctions." The words sounded suspiciously like McDonough's, whose new job had not been announced at the time.)

Whether it was or not, McDonough is clearly a player in the new administration. "My job is to make sure we have a very clear message about what we hope to accomplish for national security and the country, and to tell the American people

about it," McDonough told me as he prepared to move into his office in the West Wing of the White House in late January.

McDonough compares his worldwide responsibilities to playing in one of the Johnnies' big games. "It's a great honor, and I very much look forward to working in the White House, but I can't help but feel the pressure," he said. "Like any big game, if you don't feel the pressure, you're probably not ready to play to the best of your ability."

It's a pretty good bet that McDonough will bring his best game to his new job, given his foreign policy expertise, whose origins he traces to his time in Colledgeville before he graduated *summa cum laude* as a history major in 1992.

He says it was Ken Jones, CSB/SJU professor of history, "who really got me interested in history, and especially modern U.S. history." And it was Thorpe Running, CSB/SJU professor of Spanish and a scholar on Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, who sparked his interest in Latin America, where he traveled extensively after graduation and taught high school in Belize.

McDonough credits the late SJU President Dietrich Reinhart, OSB, for spurring his curiosity in the world beyond Stearns County and Stillwater, as well as his exposure to Gagliardi's renowned coaching philosophy, which he says fired his sense of competition. "You cannot get into politics and public policy debates and not be a competitive person," he declares.

But two other Saint John's graduates "probably got me most interested in foreign policy," he recalls.

One was Mike Zumwinkle, a football star who graduated in 1986 and is now an executive of Cargill, Inc., and the other was the late Cleveland Cram, who was



Photo courtesy McDonough family

McDonough with children Addie, on his shoulders, and Liam. (Not pictured are his wife, Kari, and youngest son, Teddy.)

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a top official in the Central Intelligence Agency before retiring in 1975.

Zumwinkle, who was working at the State Department, took McDonough under his wing when he came to Washington to study at Georgetown University, where he earned a master's in 1996. Zumwinkle played an even more important role in McDonough's life when he introduced him to his future wife, Kari, with whom he lives in suburban Maryland with their three children, Addie (7), Liam (4) and Teddy (1).

Cram, the avuncular former CIA station chief in London, Amsterdam and Canada and a confidant of the late Sen. Eugene McCarthy, wrote the still-secret 12-volume history of U.S. counterintelligence. McDonough still keeps in close touch with Cram's daughter Vicki, a lobbyist for the city of Seattle.

But McDonough owes his most important connection to two other people – former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota, for whom he was senior foreign policy adviser after working on the House International Foreign Relations Committee staff, and the person he calls his “best buddy,” Mark Lippert.

Proving once again the Washington adage that it's not what you know but whom you know, he became friends with Lippert after Daschle, one of Obama's earliest supporters, was defeated for reelection in 2004.

“I got to know Barack then, when he was first elected to the Senate, through Mark Lippert, who advised Obama on Latin American policy,” McDonough says. When Lippert, a Navy reservist, was deployed to Iraq in 2007, he brought McDonough on as a foreign policy adviser to Obama's presidential campaign. The rest,



Photo Credit: AP Photo/Charles Dharapak

Foreign policy adviser Denis McDonough '92 accompanies President Obama as he leaves a meeting last November.

as they say, is history.

Lippert returned from Iraq last July and is now the NSC chief of staff and McDonough's nominal boss. Their standing among Washington's new power brokers was certified by the *New York Times Magazine* on Jan. 18 when it published a “Who's Who” series of photographs of 52 key people around Obama.

McDonough was number 24, looking like he'd just done an all-nighter, with dark bags under his eyes and a pencil tucked behind his right ear. On the page directly across from him was a somber-looking Lippert, followed by their boss, former Gen. Jones. In Washington, that kind of attention is as good as having the Pope give you his imprimatur.

If McDonough needs help in navigating the Byzantine byways of the Washington

bureaucracy, he can always call on two of his former bosses. There's Daschle, and he can also reach out to the new secretary of Interior, former Sen. Ken Salazar of Colorado, for whom he was legislative director after Daschle's defeat. In fact, McDonough appears to be as well-positioned as anyone in the Obama White House.

And while McDonough may find himself wondering, in the months ahead, how he ended up in such a powerful position, he is confident that Obama, virtually a political unknown only four years ago, will live up to the high expectations surrounding his presidency. “Knowing what I know about him, I wasn't surprised that he got elected. I'm obviously elated and ecstatic, because I think his election is a sign that the country is ready for change, and hopefully, we'll deliver it.”