

A photograph of Reince Priebus, then-White House Chief of Staff, smiling on a stage. He is wearing a dark pinstriped suit, a white shirt, and a striped tie. An American flag pin is on his lapel. Other people are visible in the background, also smiling.

JUST REINCE

From Wisconsin to the West Wing

By Rebecca Patrick

Then-White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus takes the stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2017 (*Michael Landon photo, licensed under CC BY 2.0*).

The last name isn't necessary – say “Reince” and most everyone knows who you are referring to.

From late 2015 through last summer, he was a frequent media presence and even topic: first as the Republican National Committee (RNC) chairman, then as President Trump's first chief of staff.

On February 13, Reince Priebus will share his unique experiences at the Indiana Chamber's 2018 Legislative Dinner. As a sneak peek, *BizVoice*® magazine caught up with him in late November.

What led you to a career in politics and to the Republican Party in particular?

RP: “The inspiration was my grandfather. Half of my family lived in Greece; my mother is Greek. My Greek grandfather loved politics and everything about it; (he) followed it every day. But he also loved everything about the United States. I was captured by that because he loved every little crumb and morsel of this country. That sort of pressed upon the rest of us how lucky we were to be here. So that's really what started my interest in politics.

“Then at a local level in Kenosha, Wisconsin, I got involved in the Republican Party. It probably had a lot to do with Ronald Reagan

being President at the time. And local officials that encouraged young people to get involved in politics in the local party made a big difference in my start.

“From there, I got involved in (current U.S. House Speaker) Paul Ryan's efforts (for Congress), and he and I became very close friends. I was his chairman for four or five years. I eventually went from state treasurer to state chairman in Wisconsin. And by then was general counsel of the Republican National Committee. And then ultimately chairman of the RNC for six years.”

What was your proudest achievement in running the RNC?

RP: “Building up the massive organization and building a data, infrastructure and turnout model that became the blueprint for national parties. It's what Donald Trump was able to tap into in order to be victorious. The Trump campaign didn't have the massive infrastructure we built, but they had the fortune of a national party that had its act together.

“You look at the DNC (Democratic National Committee); they had nothing. Hillary Clinton had nothing to tap into. The theory was that Hillary Clinton was going to be able to tap into something big once it became clear she was going to be the nominee, which was supposed to be very early. The problem is they never got around to building anything around her because they ended up in a dogfight with (Sen.) Bernie Sanders.

“There was no Obama data operation, no field operation for her –



Priebus says being the President's chief of staff is the "hardest job in Washington", but he is grateful for the unique experience with the Trump administration (bottom: official White House photo by Shealah Craighead).



there was nothing. We had an RNC that everyone understood as being one of the main reasons President Trump won, and on election night he mentioned it from the podium and surprisingly brought me up there to talk about it."

From your point of view as RNC chairman, what were the significant differences between the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections?

RP: "In 2012, the RNC was still coming along and wasn't fully prepared for the

presidential election as I envisioned it to be – and not what it became in 2016. I think that the bigger problem though was that (nominee) Mitt Romney wasn't able to capture the American electorate at a time when the electorate was fatigued enough to move on from an incumbent president.

"Obama himself, the Obama economy and Obamacare were sitting in front of the American people as a campaign issue. But it was only a campaign issue in theory in 2012; it wasn't a campaign issue people were

feeling and could revolt against at the time. Obamacare didn't take effect until (the following year). There wasn't as much of a backlash against Obama as people ended up feeling in 2013 and 2014 ... this idea of government and promises and no one standing up for the American worker. That theme didn't start metastasizing until (the) 2014 (election), which we did very well in, and then ultimately in 2016."

At what point on election night did you believe Trump had the victory?

RP: "We had pretty good data going through the weekend. The RNC data operation was an enormously accurate system in predicting voter turnout and helped us figure out we had a very good shot at winning.

"Personally, I was pretty nervous until I realized that we were within striking distance moving into the Florida Panhandle, Pensacola area, then that's when we knew things were starting to look up. And (the Democrats) were not making up any ground in North Carolina. I knew from the absentee ballot program that Ohio and Iowa were a done deal (for Trump) before Election Day.

"It was only a question of what was going to happen in Michigan and Wisconsin. And when (Sen.) Ron Johnson in Wisconsin was feeling very, very good at about 9 o'clock, we knew the President would run ahead of Hillary. It all started happening around 9:30-10 o'clock when everything was going in the right direction."

What was it like working for the President?

RP: "(I recall) especially initially walking into the Oval Office with the President and looking around and realizing in real time the enormous responsibility there would be in doing everything.

"I knew President Trump for years before he decided to run. I think I understood him a little bit more than many people. When we went through the presidential primary, you can't help but get to know people. By the time he became President, I knew exactly who I was dealing with and the person I became friends with during the years of interaction. I knew his style and I understood what I was dealing with when I accepted the job."

If you could do anything different about your time as chief of staff, what would it be?

RP: "There are always going to be things you wish were different, but that's not the way

life is and the way things were laid out. I was given an opportunity, and I made the best of the opportunity. I had an incredible time. I'm still very close to the President and the folks in the West Wing. I speak to them often."

What are the craziest experiences you've had in your political career?

RP: "One was digging the RNC out of debt in 2011. When I walked in the door, we were \$26 million in the hole, and we were going to have a hard time making payroll. That was surreal.

"The second thing was the 17-person Republican primary fiasco that I had to manage and do it in a way that was fair and honest and open for everyone to see. That was an amazing challenge.

"The third thing would be just the hardest job in Washington, D.C., which would be the (President's) chief of staff – the management and organizational challenge that brought about. When you look at a good man like (my successor) General John Kelly, who said the other day in a press briefing that this is the hardest thing he's ever done in his life – and he's a four-star general! That says a lot."

What do you want Hoosiers to know about President Trump?

RP: "I don't think he's getting enough credit for the things that are being done to improve the business climate and the economy in the United States. If you look at over 800 job-killing regulations that have been eliminated ... an economy that's on the move, you see the stock market business growth, employment is moving in the right direction. The next step is tax cuts so that wage growth can move forward.

"If people got to know the President, they'd see a pretty gracious, personable, fun,



Priebus speaking at the final Republican Party debate, hosted by Fox News, before the 2016 Iowa caucuses at the Iowa Events Center in Des Moines (Gage Skidmore photo, licensed under CC BY 2.0).

interesting, likeable guy. I know people can see it, but I think it gets clouded by some of the media coverage. It's also complicated. It's not a simple process in dissecting the administration and the daily course of events.

"President Trump doesn't care about pushing the envelope. He doesn't have a problem with controversy, doesn't have a problem with going through ups and downs to achieve his ultimate goal. He's not going to back down to turn into a boring, predictable person. He likes to live on the edge.

"He also likes to get things done and he's patient, but he's not patient to a fault."

What have you been up to since leaving the White House?

RP: "I'm president of my law firm that I was involved with for 12 years. I was a litigator

on the corporate group at Michael Best & Friedrich in Milwaukee. And I'm back there working with clients that need help both legally and strategically in either Washington or elsewhere.

"I'm loving spending time with my wife and kids – Jack is 12 and Grace is 7. It was a great time for me to get under the radar screen for a few months."

Would you run for office yourself?

RP: "I've spent way too much time in my life probably chasing and climbing in politics. So, I think if I were to ever run for office it would be only after time spent with the family and making a decent living first. So, if something fun and interesting comes along later, I would definitely consider running for office, likely back in Wisconsin, which is always going to be home for me."

RESOURCE: Purchase tickets to the February 13 Indiana Chamber Legislative Dinner at www.indianachamber.com/specialevents