Nothing fuels my sense of patriotism quite like watching Marine One fly over Washington, DC, to and fro the White House. I know that the sight of a few huge green helicopters over head would make most anyone stop and stare; but I feel something very particular each time I watch this President, and this group of Marines, fly over the buildings and bridges of our nation’s capital city. What I feel is awe – and pride. I’m pretty sure that every time I spy one of those proud flying contraptions, no matter who is inside, I will always think of Number 43.

He is, after all, my President. I was born during Carter’s Presidency, and I remember seeing Reagan when he rallied in my hometown. I was smitten with Barbara Bush and Millie the dog, and I met George H.W. Bush not long after he left the White House. Although I came of (voting) age during Clinton’s presidency, I was displeased with him and cast my first big vote for Dole. But President George W. Bush is my President, and I’m proud of it and proud of him. Still.

Clearly, it is a little bit controversial to still love President Bush. I’m not naïve about all of the headlines regarding our President. He had a bold, unifying vision when he began his presidential campaign. Unfortunately, the grandeur of his plan was blurred by tragedy and necessity. When reality set in after he became President, it turned out he would have much more to deal with then he could have ever imagined. America is going through a tough time, but we’ve had a solid leader who has helped us maintain overwhelming prosperity and safety.

The President has steered us well through so much: the space shuttle tragedy, hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, business scandals and a wavering economy. As the late, great Tony Snow said in his CPAC speech in February, “Conventional wisdom declares that the last seven years constitute a long sad tale of failure. History will remember it as one of our finest hours.” I couldn’t agree more. True, he is imperfect, he has made mistakes (as have other members of his Administration), and in my opinion, he could have made better domestic policy decisions. The vast expansion of Medicare and the housing bail out are massive mistakes, and I don’t have to like them; but I can trust that none of the President’s decisions are made lightly. When I voted for Bush, I didn’t think I was casting a vote in favor of government growth, but we have gotten that. However, I did vote for a man of faith and a strong leader and we got that, too. It is America, so I can feel what I want to feel and then I can say it; and so can everyone else. When our nation elects a President, we elect someone on their campaign promises, but it behooves us to elect someone who can handle whatever may come – because whatever and everything else – will come.

I remain a proud supporter of this President and his team, and I can be proud because I was part of it. My role was just a small one – but I was a tiny part of so much. For a few years, I served at the pleasure of the President, and that is an awfully nice way to start a career. It was an honor and a pleasure to be part of something that was so important and so much bigger than me.

When I moved to Washington, DC in March of 2000, I came here with every intention of getting George W. Bush elected. My attachment to him was strong by then. After
spending a day in 1999 with then-Governor Bush as he campaigned prior to the South Carolina primary, I developed a full blown political crush. For a girl who was about to graduate from college and was looking for direction, these feelings would have major ramifications. I joked around with him and thanks to an embarrassing but memorable set of circumstances; I received a nickname from him by the end of the day. He was clearly the future President and so I did what I had never done before for anyone besides my dad: I put a bumper sticker on my precious car. It was the original navy rectangular “Bush for President” sticker, printed up long before Cheney joined the ticket, and it stayed right there on my back window until 2003 when I upgraded to the cool oval W sticker. (Everyone had one.)

Having met George W. Bush, I was now committed. There was a fair amount of emotion involved in my decision but isn’t there always emotion in politics? Admittedly, some people were far more logical about their endorsements than me, but regardless of why, I was in. Maybe I am far too jaded now but I would really like to feel that way about a candidate again.

I graduated from Belmont in December of 1999 and spent the next couple of months praying for direction and looking for jobs. The internet was the new way to career shop and I marched into my future by sitting in front of my parent’s computer, drinking chocolate milk, wearing my pajamas, and e-mailing out hundreds of resumes. After doing in-person interviews in several cities up and down the east coast, I was offered a job on Capitol Hill in DC. It wasn’t the low salary that turned me off, it just wasn’t the right fit. Looking back, I know it would have been a solid move, but it wasn’t the one. I was soon offered the job that I did take – an opposition research job with the Republican National Committee (RNC).

After taking the job, I was subsequently offered positions with both the Associated Press and CNN. I stuck with my newfound political career, even though those would have been dream jobs and great preparation for a long-term career in journalism. The train had already left the station and I was on board. One of the journalism outfits told me to call them when I wanted a real job. Oh, so very smug.

The RNC was my launching pad. In this job, from my tiny corner of the cramped headquarters, I got to work on the Bush campaign – a recent graduate’s dream come true. I was given a way to channel the logic and the emotion of politics, an avenue to use my skills in research and writing, and the use of my very first Blackberry. People were so excited about Bush – everyone in the office, everyone at the rallies; our candidate was motivating and encouraging.

It was my first post-collegiate job and I had a lot to learn, but I did a lot of work and I’m sure I (eventually) did much of it well. The work, and the people, were incredibly intense. Because of all the time spent together, and because of the importance and the constant pressure of our deadlines, everything was on display for everyone else to behold – flaws and triumphs, screeches and laughter, stress and glory. Education and health care issues were my main focus, but as a junior staffer, I spent time writing, editing, researching, learning, watching, and doing whatever someone told me to do. It
was a crazy time that included late nights, strong personalities, passion for a cause, long hours in libraries, and work travel. Even in the worst of times, I absolutely loved it.

As you may recall, the 2000 election didn’t end when we thought it would and before I knew it, I was in Florida for the recount. Never before and never since has it been so important to know how to count. (A big thank you to my parents and teachers.) I saw a lot of suspicious ballots, hanging chads, and generally found it to be a high pressure, miserable situation. I remember eating one good steak while I was down there, but that was the best thing about the whole trip – that and being a part of history. The extended election was very stressful and I could not bring myself to interact very much with friends or family. We had all worked so hard, believed so fully, and at the time, logically thought that Election Day, win or lose, was to be just one day. We were wrong.

While the legal battles were brewing, the next step after Florida, even though the Supreme Court had yet to decide who the President would be, was to start the transition. I volunteered for the transition team and I had to work hard to even get in as a volunteer. Though I was an eager face, I was just a face in the crowd. With the arrival of all the staff from Austin, any glory stemming from being part of the team or being known at all quickly dissipated. Having left the safety of my RNC research team, I felt lost, but I knew I needed to be there. I met people who were to be very important, and people who would be dismissed or become disenchanted long before me. They’d never in a million years remember – those who I talked to or made copies for there at Transition.

Eventually, I was tasked to the press office and that was a lot of fun. I seriously wanted a job. These people had jobs that I would strive to have during that time in my life and even now. I recall having a long and interesting phone conversation with Greta Van Susteren. She was calling in for Ari Fleischer and he was busy, so she stuck with me until he was free. I did not divulge any important information, but it sure was nice to talk to someone who had a “real job.”

Christmas of 2000 was the shortest holiday vacation of my life just so I could come back to my unpaid position. If I was going to be truly invested, and I was, I intended to make what I considered to be great personal sacrifices, like missing time at home with family.

We prepared for Inauguration, and thankfully, I got to enjoy that time fully. It was freezing cold that day as my family and friends and I stood outside to watch our new President get sworn in. Rain kept falling and freezing, and it would have been miserable if it hadn’t been so moving. The Inaugural balls were fun, though overwhelming. The city was bustling and I had never so many people celebrating simultaneously. Everything was exciting, everyone was merry.

Soon, the party, as most of them do, ended. After Inauguration, I was unemployed for a little while. Everything coming to a halt so quickly was mildly depressing but the rest was welcome. For a short time, I was able to go back to the RNC to help with some post-election work. While I was working there, I wrote letters and filled out forms to speed up the getting-into-the-Administration process. There were no guarantees and
patience and determination were required. Also necessary: good contacts and heroic mentors. I got my hard fought for interview and then a position at the US Department of Education and began work there early in April of 2001.

Once again, I was starting something new, and I had a lot to figure out. What I did know is that I was a part of a winning team, and these were the spoils, though every single victor still had to fight for his little piece of the jackpot. I was on the ground floor of the new Administration but I was on the top floor at Education. Once I landed, there was work to get down to and I did that from an office with a view of the national mall. All seemed right with the world, though new and slightly uncomfortable. No more campaign drama or short term anything (unless you consider a four year term short). We were now onto the business of forming and promoting No Child Left Behind, which was to be the new President’s first legislative priority. It was a thrill to be on the front lines of the new frontier, and I was so grateful for the job and the opportunity to serve at the pleasure of the President.

At the Department, I started out in speechwriting, working alongside and learning from great superiors and colleagues. With some tinkering and tutelage, I began to develop actual skills. It was not akin to being in the compact room at the RNC and I didn’t have to work all night with my new colleagues, so there was no forced bonding, an aspect of the job that was both an advantage and a disadvantage. Almost immediately, I began to see how (and how difficult it would be) the different groups of people would have to interact to make anything work inside that agency. Civil servants had been there, they’d seen it all, and they knew how to do it all. The Texans were old friends of the President or had been interns on the campaign, and who much like me, were just starting off their careers. Some of us had been in DC for a short while; some people had been out on the campaign trail in important states. I met plenty of smart people, worked on some great initiatives, and began to develop actual and long-lasting friendships, all the while pulling quotes and learning talking points.

It was during my first few months at Education that any vague feelings of disenchantment (i.e., reality) began to sink in. Great work products were being created by the team at large, but we all saw what it took to get things done in Washington, or at least what people thought it would take. Somewhere along the line, politics, the President, and my job became more than emotion – more than a political crush - I began to care intensely and dig deeper into the campaign promises and the promising policies of our young President.

Any problems I had with the changes in No Child Left Behind, or with anything else on the job, mattered little in the grand scheme of things and were miniscule compared to all the good that was being done. The little things, and my maturation as a conservative, mattered even less when the calendar flipped to reveal all that September 2001 would bring.

The morning of September 11 was beautiful. We’ve all heard that a million times but it is true. I dropped off some dry cleaning and came into work on time, maybe even a little early. It was going to be an exciting day for me and I was in the grandest of moods.
By this time, we plebeians had been moved out of our big offices and into more age/position appropriate cubicles. I was chatting away with my friend and colleague over the cube wall when it started. It was shocking more than frightening at first, because we have all been trained to see and dulled by destruction on the screen. Americans watch massive accidents and warfare on TV and on movies, but unlike some of our friends around the world, we weren’t used to enduring days like these in real life. Not in our homeland. But there it was: death in New York, a gaping wound in our defense stronghold in Arlington, and a devastating crash in a field in Pennsylvania.

We were evacuated from our buildings…eventually. Cars were stopped all over town, people were running, wandering, screaming, and staring. The fear was palpable and paralyzing. I think most of us in DC were convinced that the third plane was coming for us, so that’s when the shock wore off, and the terror became real. Communication systems were not reliable, and I was relieved when I randomly ran into my dad on the streets of Capitol Hill. Spending the rest of the afternoon with my friends and loved ones meant we were glued to the TV, half-expecting something else to happen. Bringing back the emotions of that day is easy, the actual moment-to-moment movements are harder to recall. I do remember when the President flew over the city on the way back to the White House in Marine One – it was something I will never forget – I felt hopeful, knowing he was back. It was like watching a father come home to take care of his weary, broken family.

Everything felt different after that day, at least for a little while. I still went to work, but now I took running shoes with me. Bathroom trips weren’t made without my cell phone. Be prepared, isn’t that what the Scouts say? We had blood drives, we made emergency escape plans. I even moved out of the District and into Virginia, thinking I’d be a little safer. Once upon a time, I had dined at the top of the World Trade Center and the next time I saw that place, years later, it was still a gaping hole in the earth. The Pentagon had a distinct smell for a while – the smell of fire, death, and sadness. All the while, our President was amazing. He was everywhere, and he was brave when he was there. When everyone’s world was spinning out of control, our leader was resolute, and relied heavily on God. The faith of our nation’s leader was evident, and for a time, so many were grateful that the President believed in a power greater than himself. After all, no one could really comprehend what was happening to us. The criticism of the man who had become President after a Supreme Court decision remained, but it was just not strong enough to matter. The media captured images of our President reassuring, working, hugging, and orating. His humanity and his strength in our country’s most frightening hour were there for everyone to see – but how quickly appreciation would turn to blame.

Somewhere along the way, life returned to an adjusted normal, and my paranoia decreased. I probably forgot my emergency plans and went on with every day life. On the work front, I remained at the Department of Education for the next few years, and it was a remarkable experience. Working in several different offices within the Department allowed opportunities for growth, for understanding, and for further development. In addition to speechwriting, I was able to work on a special commission and then on high school policy projects for a couple of years. Career and technical
education, and planning educational events for our constituents, became particular passions for me, and I developed a deeper understanding of the challenges that high schools and colleges face. The things I got to do on the job – taking work trips, planning events, communicating with educators, and putting policy into real words - were all very fulfilling. With all the bad stuff happening, it was reassuring to see my life, the country, the government, and the President keep moving along.

The 2004 election cycle was just as intense as 2000 had been. The difference for me was that I was in the Administration now, and I was too involved in work to be involved in the fight for the President’s job (and mine). It mattered to me, for sure, but we were asked to keep doing the people’s work, and I was immersed in big projects like the high school summits. Some Bush appointees left their government jobs to rejoin the campaign and a whole new crop of youngsters helped fend off the Kerry attempt for the Presidency. I had small doses of exposure to the Presidential campaign, and I missed the thrill, but I was being pulled in so many directions. It just made sense to stay put. After the election ended satisfactorily, the Administration went through a lot of natural and expected changes. New hires appeared, people left, ranks shifted. We had a change of leadership at the Department, the outgoing and incoming Secretaries were and are both outstanding public servants, but the change was a bit awkward. With a new team in place, I had a lot of things to reassess. Fueled by the need for change and by my superiors’ departures, I began looking for jobs and ended up leaving the Administration in August of 2005.

It is not fair to sum up a four plus year experience in so few words. I don’t know how to adequately describe the magnificence or minutiae of it all without making this a boring tell-all or without turning every paragraph into a book. These were powerful years, those years in the Administration and at Education. It was my twenties and I was in the middle of something good. Many of my closest friends now were ones I met in that timeframe, and it turns out that a colleague at Education was my future husband’s roommate. It was a big world to work in, but it was manageable and enjoyable. I was part of a big family. Some people lived and breathed it like it was all that they had. Some people enjoyed it and took it all in stride. Regardless, we all had a connection and a shared a mission. To be sure, there was a mystique about the whole thing. I had exposure to and knowledge of some of the scandals, complaints, and White House gossip. Some of it – most of it – is just like the garbage that happens to everyone at work. It’s just a bigger fish bowl and the disgruntled fish have better access to the media.

Now, on the outside, it is hard – maybe impossible – to recreate the overwhelming sensation of being inside the Administration. Perhaps it is something not worth replicating. Through the campaign and subsequent government experience, I learned that being a part of something worthwhile is essential to me. It makes work worth doing. In the years that I have been away from government, I’ve gone on to other projects and gainful employment, but my sense of belonging is not as strong. It’s different when you helped build something, and I flatter myself to think I helped build the Bush Administration and helped better the nation. For now, having a job is a necessity, a blessing, and a pleasure.
Because the Administration has continued up until now, and because I have peripheral involvement through friends and through proximity, I have not had to completely let go of the family or the thrill of commenting on everything that goes on at the White House. Soon enough, I’m not going to have any connection to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. I admit to feeling a bit nostalgic about the end of Bush’s term (and my twenties). It has been an adjustment to the outside world, but I don’t mind it so much, and I will always have the memories and the strong opinions informed by my time on the campaign and in the Administration. For now, though I have lost the benefits of the family, I have the flexibility to color outside of the lines. The parameters are not set and that is as scary as it is exhilarating.

President Bush was the chief reason I moved to Washington, D.C. and when he and his fellow Texans move on, I will be loosened of my connection. When I went to school in Nashville, I went for the music business major Belmont University offered. In no time flat I changed my major, and thus, my reason for being in Nashville. But I stayed, finished school, and had a great time. Now it would seem that the same thing has happened here, and yet again, I remain. The campaign was a big reason for moving here, but fortunately, God has revealed other reasons why He brought me to DC. It has become something vastly more interesting and intricately more perfect than an after-college job. I met the love of my life here and that was pure providence. I didn’t come here to hunt for a husband but in addition to the thrill of campaigning and the rigors of policy implementation, God brought him into my life and I am very grateful.

Now, it is 2008. I’m married, I’m thirty, it is time for a new President... but I don’t want to be involved in a campaign this year. Nearly a decade ago, it was a no-brainer. For me, life has moved on. I am by no means out of the political game, but for now, I am involved on more personal and fewer professional levels. I leave the grassroots efforts to the younger folks – the ones who don’t need sleep!

I am grateful for time in the Bush Administration. It was a wonderful, hard fought-for, intense first set of jobs, and they left an indelible impression on me. My expectations for the workplace have been altered, my love of country greatly increased, and my beliefs strengthened. Politics is not for everybody (though everybody should vote), but for me, it was a way to hone skills, to be challenged, and ultimately, to discover much more about who God has made me to be. I do not know where He will lead me next, but I know he has equipped me for wherever He is taking me. He always has. And maybe, just maybe, before I leave Washington, DC, I’ll get a ride in Marine One.