



The Spin Stops Here



At the office of **Nathan Gonzales '00** in Washington, D.C., the walls are completely covered in campaign material, from bumper stickers to flyers to T-shirts and maps showing U.S. election results going back to 1994. They are the colorful reminders of his seven years as political editor of the *Rothenberg Political Report*, a non-partisan newsletter which gives in-depth analysis of congressional, senatorial and gubernatorial races across the country.

“Nathan has become a highly regarded, increasingly visible political analyst in his own right,” says Stuart Rothenberg, the eponymous founder of the bi-weekly newsletter, and a highly regarded political analyst. “He came in and wanted to learn. He picked it up very well. He has built up a stable of sources around the country. He knows the right questions to ask and has a good instinct for politics.”

Gonzales has been quoted in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, the front page of *USA Today* and many regional papers. He has lent on-air analysis to Fox News Channel, CNN and Good Morning America Weekend, and is one of ABC News’ behind-the-scenes election analysts, helping the network decide when to call races on election night.

At the *Rothenberg Report* his job is to try to identify and handicap the most competitive races in the country in each election cycle. Major corporations such as Exxon and PepsiCo rely on the analysis to help them decide which candidates to support. In 2006, the *Rothenberg Report* was one of the first to predict that Democrats would gain between 25 and 40 seats in the House. Democrats ended up gaining 30 seats.

“People are looking for a non-partisan assessment of what’s happening in a specific race or in the political environment in general,” Gonzales says. “There’s a lot of emotion in politics but people are looking for what it really means, for somebody dispassionate, who isn’t invested in a race, to boil it down into understandable terms or to cut through spin or rhetoric from the campaigns.”

Gonzales came to VU from Oregon as “a writer without a cause” and honed his skills at *The Voice*, the student newspaper.

“At Vanguard, I learned to make my faith my own,” he says. “One of the most important lessons I learned was the value of leaving campus. Every week, a handful of us would go to Riverside to minister to kids at juvenile hall. It was there that I learned to care for people who were less fortunate. At Vanguard, I discovered that there is more to learning than sitting in a classroom.”

His career goals came into focus when he went to D.C. for a semester with the American Studies Program through the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

“I caught Potomac fever,” he says. “Living in Washington, you get the sense that you could make a difference.”

He interned at the White House press office, located in the West Wing. After graduating from VU he got a job with CNN for the 2000 election, then worked as an associate producer on *The Capital Gang*.

“It was my first job out of college. I thought I’d made it,” he says. “How could it get any better as a journalist than working for CNN?”

But the schedule made having a normal life impossible, and he wanted to get back to writing more than 45-second leads into segments. He applied for the position at the *Rothenberg Report* and was hired in 2001, based in part on the strength of writing samples from *The Voice*.

Now he researches and reports on competitive races in lengthy articles for the *Report*. He and Stuart also meet with and interview hundreds of candidates, to get a sense of their message and prospects for winning. Gonzales has met at least 75 current members of the House, 17 governors and 27 senators, including Barack Obama, whom he met in the fall of 2002 when he was starting his bid for the U.S. Senate.

“There are not a lot of jobs in D.C. where you can talk with people on both sides of the aisle and have candid conversations with them,” Gonzales says.

Sometimes he gets a scoop. He was one of the first to report (in February 2007) on Obama’s “present” votes in the Illinois state legislature, ten months before it became a campaign issue. CNN recently interviewed Gonzales about the subject.

One of the challenges of the job is to not become jaded, he says.

“I get tons of emails that are just spin or what they call ‘message’ — half-truths,” he says. “Sometime you get frustrated wondering how they can put this out there with a straight face. The political process is messy [which is why] we need people to sort through the information. ... We try to take a deep breath, step back and not fall into the trap of doing instant analysis.”

Today happens to be the “Potomac primary” election in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia, so the city is abuzz with predictions. The *Boston Globe* and CNN call the Rothenberg office

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within minutes of each other for analysis. Alhurra Network, the U.S. government-sponsored network to the Middle East, has asked Gonzales to give a live interview, so he heads down the block to the building where several networks have headquarters, including Fox News, NBC and C-SPAN.

The producers have chosen an unusual setting for the interview: the top of the building with the Capitol building as the backdrop. At 3 p.m. Gonzales is seated with the host under a small canopy with space heaters at their feet. It is below freezing and beginning to sleet, turning the roof into a slippery mess.

The host opens the program by introducing Gonzales and several other off-site guests. Over the next hour, in the freezing rain, Gonzales weighs in on the various candidates’ prospects in upcoming primaries. Much of the discussion takes place in Arabic, with Gonzales getting live translation in an earpiece. During a break the host and Gonzales stuff hand warmers inside their gloves as the wind blows harder.

An hour later, having dissected the race for Arabic viewers around the world, Gonzales is back in the warm *Rothenberg Report* offices. He and Stuart talk about getting in contact later that night when the results have come in. Gonzales is looking forward to working again on the ABC Decision Desk as he has for the last three election cycles.

“It’s like Christmas morning for a political junkie,” he says.

Outside of his work, Gonzales has attended National Community Church since 1999, and plays bass on the worship team. Last summer he and his wife Heather, who works for the National Association of Evangelicals, traveled to Kenya for a missions trip (VU alum **Robin Landauer ’01** was also part of the group). The Gonzaleses are also small group zone leaders.

Nathan’s other passion is baseball, and in 2005, he and others in his church started volunteering to keep the grounds for a local baseball field. Every other Saturday during the summer they mow the grass, pull weeds, pick up trash and paint baselines.

“We put a lot of work into it because we

want these inner-city kids to be proud of their home field and be excited to play, when their life circumstances might not be the best,” Gonzales says. “It’s been amazing to see God cultivate relationships with some of the coaches as they hopefully see a selfless example from our group.”

Gonzales has a master’s degree in political management from The George Washington University. He and Heather “love what we do. We like going to work,” he says.

“I feel like I’m a living example of God’s faithfulness,” he says. “I could have never planned this for myself. And I can’t wait for what God has next.”



(l to r) On set with the Capital Gang: Mark Shields, Robert Novak, Gonzales, Margaret Carlson and Al Hunt.