



## O'Neill talks politics, PR and BC

**Bernie Zipprich, 3/30/06**

Drawing on his many years of experience in public service, former Massachusetts lieutenant governor Thomas P. O'Neill, III, BC '68, addressed students last night, sharing with the audience both insights into the nature of public relations within the political realm, as well as anecdotes from his days as a Boston College undergrad.

O'Neill, who is the founder and chief executive officer of the public affairs firm O'Neill and Associates, as well as the son of the late "Tip" O'Neill - former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and namesake of O'Neill library - credited much of his success to his preparation at BC.

He began by recalling a public speaking class, which at the time was a core requirement. Taught by professor John Martin - who wore a black cape daily in class while sitting in the back assessing speeches and smoking a cigarette - O'Neill told the audience about his attempt to put one over on Martin and give a speech off the cuff without preparation. "Mr. O'Neill, sit down!" was what Martin told him. O'Neill explained how it was a life lesson. "The lesson was that you have to go in prepared," he said.

He also drew another lesson from the class. "We had to go into the classroom and recite a poem," said O'Neill. "If. Right, Mr. O'Neill?" he recalled Martin saying to him as he walked in the door, predicting that he would be reciting the Rudyard Kipling poem.

"Make sure that you aren't ever predictable before going before an audience," said O'Neill.

O'Neill also devoted attention to his early political career. He ran for state-wide office in 1974, winning the lieutenant governorship, which he held until 1983.

Following an unsuccessful run for governor, O'Neill devoted his abilities to lobbying, though with some hesitation. "I really didn't like being a lobbyist. I didn't like how people felt about [someone who was] a lobbyist," he said. "I wanted to change it and to professionalize it."

He explained a crucial challenge facing political leaders. "You cannot be elected to any office today without being able to communicate. You cannot provide leadership once you are in office unless you can communicate."

To address this challenge as well as to "professionalize" lobbying, O'Neill and Associates was created, he said. By combining lobbying and public relations, the firm has been able to better serve its clients throughout the political realm. They called the combination public affairs. "We made it a pure communication business," he said. "We were the first to do it."

To illustrate what he considered to be the three most important elements to a person's communication, he began asking members of the audience about different political leaders and campaigns. Touching on different politicians' campaigns for both state-wide and national office - including John Kerry's 2004 presidential race, Tom O'Reilly's current gubernatorial campaign, and Ted Kennedy's 1980 presidential bid - O'Neill boiled it down to three points: you need to be prepared, to know who you are, and to know your audience.

As for "knowing who you are," he said that people need to be comfortable with who they are and need to put their skills to work for them. To know one's audience, "try to measure up your audience, try to get them somewhat excited about what you're talking about," he said.

O'Neill, who is also on the BC board of trustees, was asked to speak by the communications department's Special Events Committee. Titled "Politics and PR," the event was an opportunity for those who will be pursuing careers in communications fields to learn from an accomplished professional within the field.

Bill Stanwood, an adjunct assistant professor in the communications department who helped coordinate the event, thought it was particularly valuable for students.

"I think that BC should be a marketplace for ideas, and our special events program is a way to bring new ideas to campus," he said.