



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 22, 2013

Helen Thomas: The Lady Was a “Watchdog”

“I’m not a lady, I’m a reporter” was the Helen Thomas (shown with President Obama) [retort](#) at being told ladies were not allowed at President Jimmy Carter’s Bible class. Thomas, the tough and wizened White House reporter who died Saturday at 92, grew up in a world where “ladies” and reporters were two very separate, even mutually exclusive, categories. As a pioneer in the world of journalism, Thomas achieved a number of “firsts,” becoming the first woman assigned to the White House full time by a news service; the first woman to be elected an officer of the White House Correspondents’ Association and the first to serve as its president; the first woman elected to the Gridiron Club, a bastion of male journalists for 90 years; the first female officer of the National Press Club.



But throughout her career until its controversial end in 2010 when she was still a working columnist at age 89, Thomas stood out from among her press corps colleagues in ways more significant than age or gender. During times when many reporters and most major news organizations were content to receive and report the official line on current events, Thomas demanded to know the truth behind facile White House explanations. In [Watchdogs of Democracy?](#), one of the four books she authored, Thomas took many of her fellow journalists to task for their willingness to accept the rationale offered by President George W. Bush and members of his administration for the war in Iraq that began in 2003 and lasted for nearly nine years. She was not noticeably bashful about confronting President Bush with the fact that the reasons given for the invasion of the country and the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime — primarily the claim that Iraq possessed and was further developing “weapons of mass destruction” — had proved untrue.

After she told another reporter in 2003 she was covering “the worst president in American history,” Thomas apologized for the indiscretion. Bush accepted the apology but did not recognize her for a question at presidential press conferences for the next three years, despite her front-row prominence and her status as the unofficial “dean” of the White House press corps. When he did finally call on her, he probably wished he hadn’t, as her words were as much an indictment as a question.

I’d like to ask you, Mr. President, your decision to invade Iraq has caused the deaths of thousands of Americans and Iraqis, wounds of Americans and Iraqis for a lifetime. Every reason given, publicly at least, has turned out not to be true. My question is: Why did you really want to go to war? From the moment you stepped into the White House, from your Cabinet — your Cabinet officers, intelligence people and so forth — what was your real reason? You have said it wasn’t oil — quest for oil — it hasn’t been Israel or anything else. What was it?



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As the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) recalled, “She and Bush went toe to toe, interrupting each other as the president attempted to respond.” Bush insisted Iraq under Hussein was a threat to American security. “I’m never going to forget the vow I made to the American people,” he said, “that we will do everything in our power to protect our people.”

A White House correspondent for half a century, Thomas challenged Presidents Kennedy and Johnson over [“news management”](#) and locked horns with spokesmen for both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. She argued tenaciously with [Bush Press Secretary Dana Perino](#) when Perino insisted at a White House press briefing that the United States had not used torture in interrogating terror suspects. In July 2009, Thomas vented her anger at Robert Gibbs, then the White House press secretary, after learning the administration had planted questions among reporters for Obama press conferences.

“We have never had that in the White House,” she said, [confronting Gibbs](#) at a press briefing. “I’m amazed at you people who call for openness and transparency,” she said. “What the hell do they think we are, puppets?” she said after the briefing. “They’re supposed to stay out of our business. They are our public servants. We pay them.”

“Michelle and I were saddened to learn of the passing of Helen Thomas,” Obama said in a statement released over the weekend. “Helen was a true pioneer, opening doors and breaking down barriers for generations of women in journalism. She never failed to keep presidents — myself included — on their toes.”

Ironically, the reporter who began the tradition of saying “Thank you, Mr. President” at the end of every presidential press conference was often accused of rudeness for her aggressive confrontational style in questioning presidents and their spokesmen. Asked in a 2006 [New York Times interview](#) to define the difference between “a probing question and a rude one,” Thomas replied, “I don’t think there are any rude questions.”

Her stern visage and frequently aggressive tone masked the joy she expressed at covering news from the nation’s capital. “I love my work,” she said in a speech to a women’s group in 1999, “and I think that I was so lucky to pick a profession where it’s a joy to go to work every day.”

After a decades-long career of reporting for United Press International, Thomas left the news agency in 2000, shortly after it was acquired by News World Communications, an organization founded by Unification Church leader Rev. Sun Myung Moon. “United Press International is a great news agency,” she said in announcing her departure. “It has made a remarkable mark in the annals of American journalism and has left a superb legacy for future journalists. I wish the new owners all the best, great stories and happy landings.”

For the next decade she was a columnist for the Hearst News Service, retiring in 2010 in the midst of an uproar she created by saying, in a statement captured in a video and posted on YouTube, that Jewish settlers should [“get the hell out of Palestine”](#) and go back to “Poland, Germany, America, and everywhere else.” She issued an apology, but it did little to quiet the controversy. Obama spokesman Gibbs called the comments “offensive and reprehensible,” and the White House Correspondents’ Association issued a statement calling her remarks “indefensible.”

The daughter of Lebanese immigrants, Thomas often questioned U.S. policy in the Middle East and was regarded by some White House officials as overly sympathetic to Arab views of Israel. Tony Snow, a press secretary during part of the George W. Bush administration, once [responded](#) to one of her



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questions with, "Thank you for the Hezbollah view."

Her long career and her willingness to cultivate unlikely sources kept Thomas at or near the center of many of the major events of the past half-century. When Attorney General John Mitchell was dismissing the 1972 break-in at Democratic headquarter at the Watergate hotel as a "third-rate burglary," his wife Martha was telling Thomas that the planning of the crime involved officials higher up than the perpetrators arrested, an account proved accurate when a number of high-ranking administration officials, including Attorney General Mitchell, were convicted and sent to prison for their roles in the scheme and its coverup. Thomas was also credited for breaking the news that Nixon was writing his resignation speech the day before he announced to the nation that he was resigning as president over the Watergate scandal.

Though at home in the world of politics and "hard news," Thomas did not neglect human-interest stories involving public figures. President Lyndon Johnson was said to be irate at learning from a Thomas UPI report that his daughter Lucy was engaged. "You announced Luci's engagement, you announced Luci's marriage, you announced when Luci was going to have a baby, and I resented it," he once told her. On at least one occasion, however, Thomas was the subject rather than the reporter of a White House "scoop." At a 1971 White House farewell party for retiring Associated Press reporter Douglass Cornell, Pat Nixon broke the news that Cornell and Thomas were engaged.

"At last," the first lady said with a tables-turned note of triumph, "I scooped Helen Thomas."



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