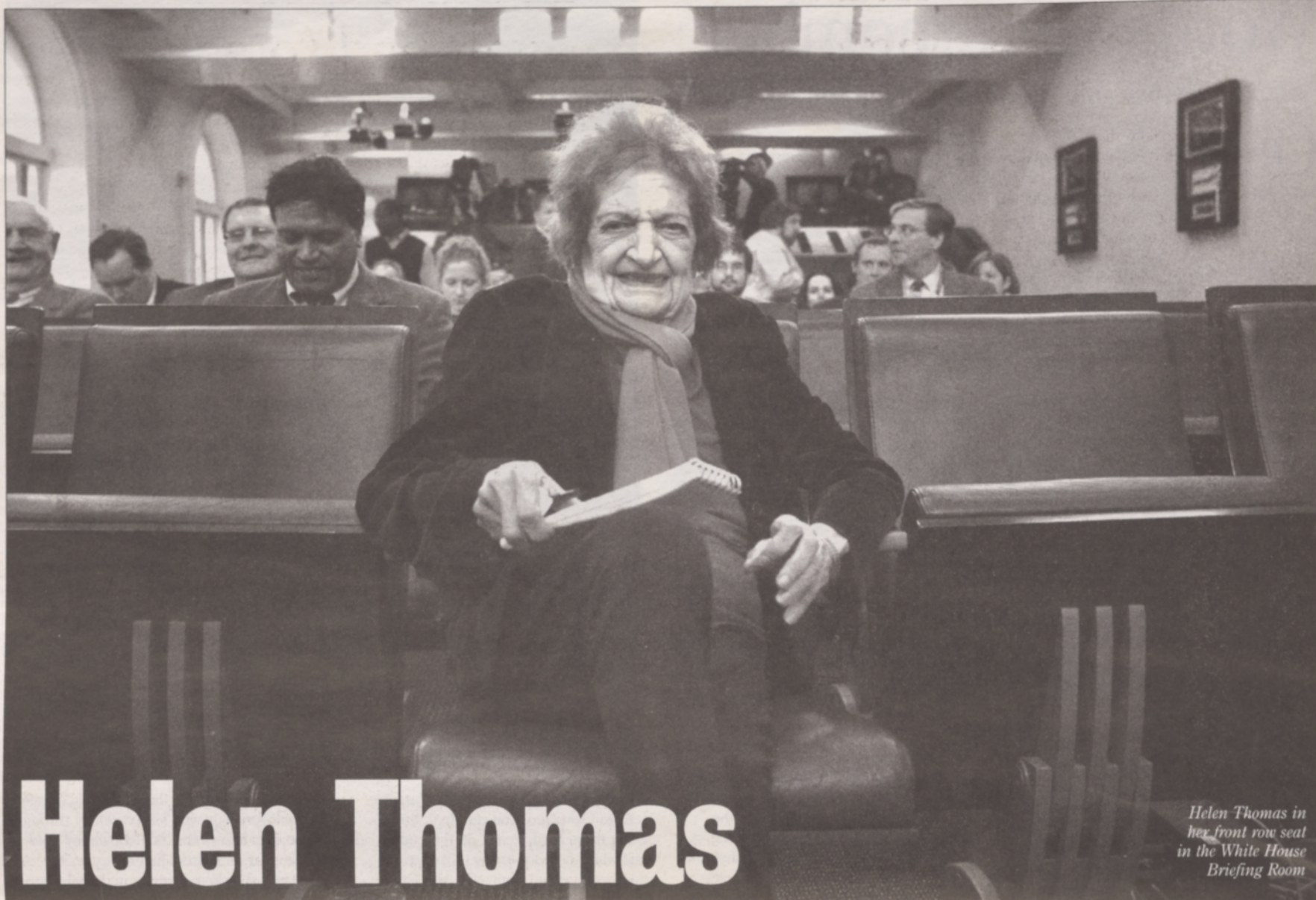




Helen Thomas in her front row seat in the White House Briefing Room

REUTERS/JOSHUA ROBERTS

Helen Thomas

The First Lady of the White House press corps takes her seat for another term

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Helen Thomas has the reputation among journalists for asking the uncomfortable question – and fortunate for us her target is the President of the United States. She has covered every White House administration since John F. Kennedy, becoming in 1960 the first female member of the White House press corps. While she wrote for the news service, United Press International, Thomas' tenure was honored with the first question during White House briefings. In more recent years, her journalism has turned to commentaries in newspapers and books, her most recent being "Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning Washington Press Corps and How it has Failed the Public."

Thomas now prepares to cover her 10th administration, and in a recent interview shortly before the inauguration, she reflected on the Bush administration, and her hopes for her newest target – Barack Obama.

Joanne Zuhl: Today you attended the last press briefing of President Bush, and you weren't called on. If you had been called on, what would you have asked?

Helen Thomas: I was going to ask about Gaza and the very fact that he has played a big role in giving the Israelis F-16s, bombers, Apache gunships, cluster bombs, God knows what else, maybe phosphorous and so-forth, used on a helpless people. He complains about smuggling for the Palestinians – we're doing wholesale weaponry to the Israelis to kill.

J.Z.: Was that addressed during the conference?

H.T.: No. It was very nostalgic. I think the questions were good about how he felt about things and so forth, so it was very warm and sympathetic, and he had his say, which was very self-serving.

J.Z.: You have been among the throngs of people very critical of the White House Press Corps. You titled your 2007 book "Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning Washington Press Corps and How it has Failed the Public." Why do you say the press corps failed the public?

H.T.: Because they did. They let this country go to war without asking why.

J.Z.: You had asked why and the answer wasn't really an answer, was it?

H.T.: That's right. Because any reason they had was unacceptable, whether it's oil, or Daddy or Israel or whatever – you don't give people's lives.

J.Z.: But there was a great deal of coverage over the build up of the war, but it was seen by many in hindsight as toeing the administration's line. What stories would you have like to have seen covered that perhaps could have altered history in that sense?

H.T.: I would like to have had the truth to see what was worth dying for. You don't take a country to war unless you have some good reason? Unless your defending – unless it's the truth. There were so many lies told. There were no weapons of mass destruction, no Iraqis in 9/11, no ties between Iraq and al Qaeda and the terrorist organization, so called. Everything was a falsehood. And everybody got away with it, and scared the hell out of the American people for how many years now? Since 2003. Thousands and thousands and thousands are dead.

J.Z.: Could the media have altered that? Do you think we'd be in a different situation if they media would have reported on that?

H.T.: Absolutely. The media is very powerful if they come out with the truth and let people know. Outrage the people. You have to have a reason to go to war, to kill 10,000 miles away, who you don't know, who have done nothing to you.

J.Z.: You covered the Kennedy administration and every administration since then, and we had wars during that period as well. How is this different?

H.T.: I would never justify the Vietnam War. I was against it every inch of the way. And also I think President Kennedy was right to turn around and not invade Cuba during the Bay of Pigs. I also think that he played his cards right, along with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader. Both had known war. Both knew to step back and be statesmen instead and save the world. Each had nuclear arsenals and could have blown us all up.

J.Z.: The coverage then was much more hard core. What the media was covering back then, leading up to the Vietnam War and the Cold War – it was much more of a watchdog role than it is today. Can you compare the situation, the way the media reacted and why is there that difference?

H.T.: 9/11 scared the hell out of everybody. Reporters didn't want to be called un-American, and unpatriotic and so forth. So you had to go along with what the administration was saying and don't even question the patriotism. Don't question if it's really true. Don't ask for an exhibition of the arms that they said they had.

J.Z.: You've been the target of that. In questioning Bush's intentions in going to war you've been labeled anti-American and bias. You've questioned Israel's actions against Palestinians and you've been called anti-Israel. Recently you questioned the policies in Iraq and you were accused of denigrating the military. Isn't that always the price of asking the uncomfortable question, or is this something different?

H.T.: Well, I do write an opinion column, so I probably wouldn't ask it the same way if I was still working for a wire service. But I do have an opinion and I'm allowed to have it.

J.Z.: But do those kinds of labels really have a stifling effect on the media?

H.T.: I think it's really bad to call somebody a name because you don't agree with them. But that has become our way of life. If you don't believe in what you're saying then you cave to that kind of attack. I've been called Hezbollah and everything else. I don't say it doesn't effect me but I must say I don't retreat. Why should I? I have a right to my opinion in this country.

J.Z.: Looking back over the past eight years under the Bush administration, what do you think are the biggest botched stories? What did the media miss and do wrong?

H.T.: I think the media retreated, they should have fought the administration which locked them out of any photographs of coffins and the war itself. They submitted meekly totally, to everything that was really happening abroad. They tried to act like it wasn't happening at all. People were unaware of what we did in Iraq. We destroyed a country.

J.Z.: Your parents were immigrants from Syria, and you've written about your own experience as a youth dealing with prejudice and bigotry. I wonder how that shaped your viewpoint in the aftermath of 9/11 when Arab-Americans were being targeted for investigations, interrogation and arrest?

H.T.: I think that my background, obviously, I'm much more interested than the average person on what goes on in the Middle East, but I can assure you that I was born here, I grew up on the whole idea of what it means to be an American, and I believe in the Bill of Rights, and I believe in fighting against injustice across the board.

J.Z.: I want to look now into some of the news that has happened under the Bush

See THOMAS, page 13