

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Primary Document Activities

The President and the Press – FDR's First Press Conference: March, 1933

Introduction

As the only single official elected by all citizens, the American president, in effect, represents us all – both at home and around the globe. What the president believes is the best course for our nation, and how we navigate that course, has always been vital knowledge to those who are engaged in the political process. Most often, the president has expressed these ideals through the press. Of course, 19th-century presidents all wished for – and to an extent were able to create – positive newspaper coverage. Andrew Jackson went as far as to offer journalists positions in the federal government as an enticement to paint a rosy picture of his administration. But the 20th century brought committed efforts by presidents to utilize the media to forward their programs and to gather public support. The way in which a White House has communicated, and the degree to which it has succeeded, directly impacts our ability to study the role of leadership in the American past. Press conferences are an important source for historical researchers because they lead to media interpretations of the chief executive, in addition to the words uttered by the president himself, which feed our understanding of his role in history.

Topic of Analysis

At a traditional Thanksgiving ceremony, the president of the United States exercises his authority by granting a pardon to a turkey at the White House. In 2002, President George W. Bush stood in the Rose Garden and commented on the skittish bird whose fate had yet to be determined: “He looks a little nervous, doesn’t he? He probably thinks he’s going to have a press conference.” A modern presidential press conference can certainly put a chief executive in the hot seat, as he opens himself to tough questions from the media as the world watches. In such a circumstance a president is most vulnerable, but at the same time he has an enormous opportunity to present his most important messages and portray his leadership style. As political scientist Martha Joynt Kumar states, there are “no off-the-record remarks, no statements made on background, or speeches to a limited audience. The presidency today is on the record and broadcast live to audiences around the world.”¹

This was not always so. Woodrow Wilson held the first formal presidential press conference in 1913 and saw it as a vehicle for uniting public opinion behind his

programs. He hoped the press would be his partner (not adversary) in this endeavor. He also thought that the press from around the nation might channel the concerns of their readers to the White House. Wilson would not agree to be quoted, he spoke off the record, and only reporters were allowed in the room.

This was, more or less, standard procedure in the 20th century until technologies forced adaptations. Televised press conferences, introduced in Dwight D. Eisenhower's tenure, ousted off-the-record remarks while enhanced transportation put the press conference on the road. Furthermore, especially in recent times, the president has expanded the opportunities to be seen, but, as always, he has sought to control his message. Recent trends show that presidents do fewer solo press conferences but offer up instead more joint press conferences when the president appears before the media with the leader of another nation or other official. Fewer questions are allowed in joint sessions and, if held in the Oval Office, fewer reporters are allowed to participate because of the confining space. There are also many informal "exchanges" when reporters can attempt to call out questions, for example, when the president is walking across the White House lawn to board the helicopter, Marine One.

Today, "presidential press conference" brings to mind a prime time televised Q & A in the elegant White House East Room, most often in response to a crisis situation. In fact, such events are relatively rare compared to the many other opportunities and venues available to the president. Calvin Coolidge once spent several months in the Adirondack Mountains, and held sessions there. Herbert Hoover received questions submitted by the press in advance. He selected only those which he was interested in answering. Many times Hoover would only make remarks and not answer questions at all. Harry Truman moved press conferences from the Oval Office, to the White House Theater, to the Indian Treaty Room in the Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House. John F. Kennedy liked the large State Department Auditorium, a number of blocks away. Lyndon Johnson used a dozen different locations for press conferences in the first six months of his presidency, including his Texas ranch.

Analysis

While a former aide wryly noted that if Lyndon Johnson "had three minutes with nothing to do, he called a press conference," Franklin D. Roosevelt had more press conferences – 1,023 – than any other chief executive. (Not-so-Silent Calvin Coolidge is a distant second, hosting 521.)² In his first press conference, March 8, 1933, FDR laid down the ground rules to the assembled reporters. He hoped to open a line of communication with the press that was informal and informative, although not as publicly revealing as modern press conferences, as students will see. Roosevelt had previous experience with the press as assistant secretary of the Navy and as governor of New York, as he notes. His press secretary, Steve Early, accompanied him at this and many other sessions. FDR's conversational tone, and his sense of humor, provided the atmosphere he hoped would lead to a positive relationship with the press. At the same time, it is clear that he wanted to control the use of information emanating from the White House.



Ask students to read the excerpt of FDR's press conference of March 8, 1933, held just four days after his first inauguration. This excerpt accounts for just the opening remarks. The president went on to discuss emergency measures to combat the dire economic crisis that afflicted the nation. The entire transcript – and the transcripts of all FDR's conferences – is found in *Complete Presidential Press Conferences of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1972. Some transcripts can be found online at:

<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/index.html>

In particular, students might be interested to know that FDR's Lend Lease program was first revealed in his press conference of December 17, 1940. At this session, FDR told the now-famous parable of lending your neighbor a garden hose to put out his fire. Visit:

<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/odllpc2.html>

Concluding Questions

- FDR is well-known for his fireside chats, those radio messages that he used to connect with the American people throughout the Depression and World War II.

While informal in tone, they were scripted readings. On the other hand, his press conferences exposed him to inquisitors. It would have been difficult to prepare for questions that had not been conceived; however, FDR could simply say he could not or did not want to answer, and citizens would never know of these responses. Keeping in mind FDR's ground rules, how were American citizens served, or hindered, by this process?

- With live television, presidents have found it difficult to say, "I don't know," or "I choose not to answer that question." And few presidents want to turn to an aide and ask them to provide the answer. History shows that presidents tend to have fewer press conferences as their time in the White House moves forward. Why do you think this is the case? Would it be better to go back to the days of FDR?
- Consider that many presidential aides now speak "off the record," in essence conveying a message from the president. Are they simply replacing the FDR model?
- Discuss the balance between the need for a president to reveal his ideas to American citizens through the press and journalists' obligations to objectively report the news.

1. Martha Joynt Kumar, "The White House and the Press: News Organizations as a Presidential Resource and as a Source of Pressure," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no.3 (September 2003): 669-670.

2. Kumar, "'Does This Constitute a Press Conference?' Defining and Tabulating Modern Presidential Press Conferences," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (March 2003): 228.

Excerpt from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's First Press Conference

CONFIDENTIAL

Press Conference #1

At the White House, Executive Offices

March 8, 1933, 10:10 A.M.

(Mr. Young introduced the members of the Press to the President.)

THE PRESIDENT: It is very good to see you all and my hope is that these conferences are going to be merely enlarged editions of the kind of very delightful family conferences I have been holding in Albany for the last four years.

I am told that what I am about to do will become impossible, but I am going to try it. We are not going to have any more written questions and of course while I cannot answer seventy-five or a hundred questions because I simply haven't got the physical time, I see no reason why I should not talk to you ladies and gentlemen off the record just the way I have been doing in Albany and the way I used to do it in the Navy Department down here. Quite a number of you, I am glad to see, date back to the days of the previous existence which I led in Washington.

(Interruption – “These two boys are off for Arizona.” [FDR's sons] John and Franklin Roosevelt saying “good-bye”.)

And so I think we will discontinue the practice of compelling the submitting of questions in writing before the conference in order to get an answer. There will be many questions, of course, that I won't answer, either because they are “if” questions – and I never answer them – and Brother Stephenson will tell you what an “if” question is –

MR. STEPHENSON: I ask forty of them a day.

THE PRESIDENT: And the others, of course, are the questions which for various reasons I don't want to discuss or I am not ready to discuss or I don't know anything about. There will be a great many questions you will ask about that I don't know enough about to answer. Then, in regard to news announcements, Steve [Early] and I thought that it was best that street news for use of here should always be without direct quotations. In other words, I don't want to be directly quoted, with the exception that direct quotations will be given out by Steve in writing. Of course that makes that perfectly clear.

Then there are two other matters we will talk about: The first is “background information”, which means material which can be used by all of you on your own authority and responsibility and must not be attributed to the White House . . . Then the

second thing is the “off the record” information which means, of course, confidential information which is given only to those who attend the [press] conference. Now there is one thing I want to say right now on which I think you will go along with me. I want to ask you not to repeat this “off the record” confidential information either to your own editors or associates who are not here because there is always the danger that while you people might not violate the rule, somebody may forget to say, “This is off the record and confidential”, and the other party may use it in a story. That is to say, it is not to be used and not to be told to those fellows who happen not to come around to the conference. In other words, this is only for those present.

Now, as to news, I don't think there is any. (Laughter)

Source: The American Presidency Project –

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/pppus.php?admin=032&year=1933&id=9>