



THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

WHHA PRESS ROOM | *Article*

A CONVERSATION WITH MIKE MCCURRY

A White House Press Secretary's Recollection

Q: Could you generally describe how the White House communications office operates on an average day?

A: The basic organization of the modern White House communications operation hasn't changed much since Herb Klein invented it for President Richard Nixon in 1972. A communications office think about the message and events and the press and photo offices deal with the White House press corps—and the press outside the White House. The communications office is the “product development” side of the White House and the press office is “retail and sales.” Obviously, the president's message doesn't get far unless it passes successfully through the filter of the press. A large part of White House operations is devoted to this primary responsibility of getting information, ideas, and arguments out to the American people.

Q: What is a “press gaggle?”

A: Each day the hand-to-hand combat between the press office and the press corps starts with the “gaggle” as in a gaggle of squawking geese. Reporters gathered around my desk and I ran through the president's schedule, took their temperature, tried to figure out if our plan for the day would work, reacted to any major breaking developments, and got a sense of what the press would be chasing that day. It was relaxed and informal, and I could joke around a bit because it was not on camera and no transcript was kept.

Q: You pioneered the practice of televising press briefings while you were press secretary. Why did you decide to start this practice and in retrospect do you think it was a good idea?



A: Dumbest thing I ever did! I had presented televised briefings at the State Department, and I thought the rules at the White House were weird when I first got there in 1995 (only the first five minutes at the beginning could be broadcast). The radio and TV folks (especially the radio guys who had to report every hour on the hour) were at a disadvantage since they could not use clips from the briefing. So I gradually increased the broadcast time until eventually the whole briefing was available.

I did not count on the Monica Lewinsky matter turning the press briefing room into the kind of circus show it became during 1998. In retrospect, I should have imposed some limits, like “no live coverage of the briefing.” Once TV could carry the briefing live, it became a daytime equivalent of a soap opera for the cable news channels. It became a “theater of the absurd” instead of a useful exchange of information for the press.

Q: In your view, what constitutes a good working relationship for the president and the press?

A: I believe the press secretary needs to work for both the press and the president. I like to say the geography of the West Wing is a metaphor for the relationship—the press secretary’s office is exactly half way between the Oval Office and the Briefing Room. The press office has to be an advocate for the press and the public’s right to know inside the White House. Sometimes you will lose out to other priorities, but at least the press will sense that someone is looking out for its interests. That is the way to best serve the president. The modern presidency cannot work effectively if it is constantly at war with the media. It helps the president to have a channel of communication available to the press. And the relationship—though it has to be adversarial—can be more amicable. Everyone can do their jobs and be professional, but I think it needs to be far less snarly.

Q: Which press secretary have you admired the most and why?

A: The gold standard everyone would say is Jim Hagerty who was Dwight D. Eisenhower’s press secretary. The transcripts of Ike’s press conferences are amazing. There are points where the text reads, “The president conferred with Mr. Hagerty.” Imagine a news conference today in which the president stopped mid-answer to go check with his press secretary! Hagerty was witty, knowledgeable, and knew the president and the White House inside out.

More recently, my two role models were Jody Powell because he mastered the art of being a presidential confidante and simultaneously kept the press well informed. And Marlin Fitzwater because he had a devotion to public information—he was a career government public information officer before working in the White House—and he understood the indispensable need for humor and a lighter touch.



Q: What would you like to be most remembered about your tenure as press secretary?

A: Well there is no doubt that I will be most remembered for the briefings I did in the aftermath of the Lewinsky story. That saddens me a bit because I think that whole tawdry business did no one any good. The thing I would prefer to be remembered for is this: I tried as much as possible to make every briefing the White House gave “on the record.” Briefings by unnamed “senior White House officials” confuse the American people. We should know who is talking and who is accountable for the information being provided. I don’t believe it ever detracts from the president to have his (or her!) senior aides talk on the record about the subjects they handle. Experts in the federal civil service can help the press and the American people understand difficult issues. We should see more of them and less of the “spin doctors.”

I hope my service as press secretary will be seen as a time when the White House tried to get authoritative and accurate information out the door. Maybe with a little spin now and then. But at least with a wink that made us laugh.

Mike McCurry today is the chairman of communications software company Grassroots Enterprise, Inc. and a principal of Public Strategies Group, LLC, a Washington D.C. based public affairs firm. He received his bachelor of arts from Princeton University in 1976 and a master of arts from Georgetown University in 1985. He is a veteran political strategist with more than 25 years of experience renowned for his public service as White House press secretary to President Bill Clinton (1995-1998), spokesman for the Department of State (1993-1995), and director of communications for the Democratic National Committee (1988-1990). McCurry is a member of the board of White House Historical Association.

