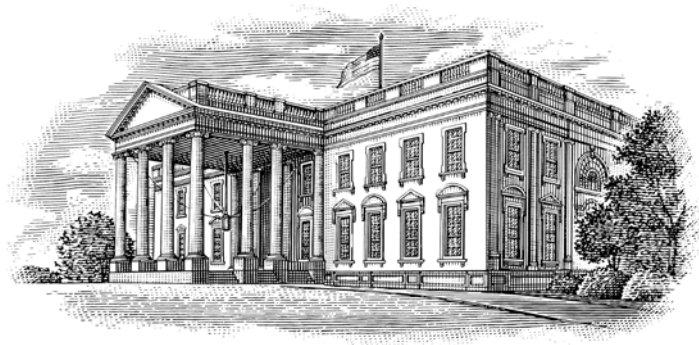


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Presidential Press Conferences Windows on the Presidency and Its Occupants

by Martha Joynt Kumar

Since Woodrow Wilson held the first presidential press conference in March 1913, all sixteen of his successors have used the sessions as a basic part of their publicity strategies. The sessions have survived because reporters found them useful for developing information, citizens saw them as valuable for making judgments about their chief executives, and presidents and their staffs saw them as a primary strategy for explaining their policies. Presidents could give speeches laying out their policies, but press conferences became a major way to explain the intricacies of those policies as the proposals made their way through the legislative process.

In a representative government, citizens expect to see their leaders respond to questions from others. Reporters act as surrogates for the public. President Coolidge discussed with reporters why he held press conferences. “I regard it as rather necessary to the carrying on of our republican institution that the people should have a fairly accurate report of what the president is trying to do, and it is for that purpose, of course, that those intimate conferences are held.” [September 14 1926]

Press conferences give the public the best opportunity to see what presidents know (and don’t know), what makes them angry, what makes them laugh, and what their brand of leadership is. Those are all points people want to see, not just read about. Beginning with President Kennedy’s daytime and early evening press conferences fifty years ago January 25, people could tune in approximately twice a month and watch live press conferences. By 1960, 87% of the public had television sets so Kennedy came into most living rooms and offices around the country. These sessions were uncut and live—as opposed to the ones Eisenhower had that were kept for later broadcast where clips were used. With Kennedy, the public got to see him as he spoke.

THE PERIOD PRIOR TO PRESIDENT KENNEDY

President Kennedy stands midway between Presidents Wilson and Obama with seven presidents before him and nine following him. In the period preceding the Kennedy presidency, the rules governing press conferences favored the president. The sessions were off the record events from Woodrow Wilson through Harry Truman. If the president said something he believed unwise, he could alter the quote. President Truman, for example, was able to back away from a comment about Senator McCarthy that he made in a March 30, 1950, press conference. Truman said: “I think the greatest asset that the Kremlin has is Senator McCarthy.” When one of the reporters commented that the president’s observation would “hit page one tomorrow,” Truman realized he had better soften the statement. He “worked” with reporters and allowed the following as a direct quotation: “The greatest asset that the Kremlin has is the partisan attempt in the Senate to sabotage the bipartisan foreign policy of the United States.”

When the rules governing press conferences were off the record, chief executives held them from once or twice a week. In fact, Calvin Coolidge, who held the most press conferences for the number of years he was in office, had 521 sessions or an average of 93 a year. But once they went on the record in the Eisenhower administration, the numbers dropped drastically. Now they had to take time preparing for the sessions and then be careful what they said when answering questions. Eisenhower and Kennedy respectively had 24 and 23 press conferences a year.

The first televised press conference was held January 19 1955 President Eisenhower came into the Indian Treaty Room, a room with poor acoustics and limited seating and announced the “experiment” they were about to be part of.

In fact, television made an enormous difference in the significance of press conferences in presidential publicity. It has been a “disturbing influence”—presidents have made mistakes though only rarely—but the sessions also have been an enormous resource for presidents as they seek to explain policy and themselves to the public. President Kennedy was able to assimilate the new technology into an invigorated presidency, much as he had during the campaign and in the presidential debates. Kennedy’s press conferences were in many ways a symbol of his successful use of television to promote his active agenda. The image of a fast-paced presidency was not an illusion in the Kennedy years. It was real. Take the pace of their public speeches. President Eisenhower and President Kennedy had a few more than 700 speeches and remarks, big and small, during their presidencies. For President Eisenhower those public remarks covered eight years and for Kennedy, it was less than three years. Many of those speeches got to the public either through their being televised or through news broadcasts.

Because of the high demand by reporters for seats, the conferences had to be moved from the White House compound where they were held first in the president’s office – Wilson through to Truman – and then moved to the larger Indian Treaty Room in the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Even that room turned out to be a cramped space. Kennedy moved them here in the State Department auditorium where there was more space for the 200+ reporters covering him and his press conferences.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY AND PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES

President Kennedy’s press conferences brought with them the glamour of a young leader, an activist policy agenda, and a tension between the president and his press corps. Young reporters flocked to Washington to cover the new president. Reporters were more willing to challenge the new president than was true in the Eisenhower years when the goodwill from World War II was still in the air. At the end of the Eisenhower administration, reporters lost their willingness to take at face value the government’s accounting of events. The U2 spy plane incident changed the relationship for many reporters with their government. It was an incident where the US government was caught in a lie – it was a spy plane the Soviets shot down, not the weather plane the White House said it was. When reporters found out they were lied to, they became wary of the accounts they received from White House officials. The incoming team of reporters, many of whom followed Senator Kennedy as he campaigned for the presidency, caught the public eye as did the new president. They all prospered from press conferences where each side sought to establish control in its relationship with the other.

POST KENNEDY YEARS

In the period following the Kennedy administration, presidents have gradually adapted to high-risk high-reward nature of the on the record press conference. For Presidents Nixon and Reagan, they cut back the number of press conferences they held to approximately one every two months. At the same time, the press conferences they did hold differed from those of their predecessors by holding them at night in prime time in the East Room. That way, the president did indeed get to the public. Before Nixon, no president had held a prime time press conference. Gradually, news organizations were less willing to give over their profitable entertainment time to the news division for ad-free time for presidential news conferences.

Since the Reagan years, presidents have searched for ways they can respond to reporters’ queries but do so in environments that suit their own strengths. President George H. W. Bush brought in a variation of the presidential press conference that suited the diplomatic and personal needs of chief executives. President Bush established the joint press conference, most often with foreign leaders. When heads of state made an official visit to Washington, the two leaders held a joint news conference. With a limited number of questions asked two for each side in this administration, the joint news conference is seen as of limited value to reporters but an important diplomatic tool for presidents.

It is the solo news conference reporters want to take part in. With solo sessions less frequent than in Kennedy’s era, White House officials gradually added in short question and answer sessions where the president answered a few questions between press conferences on current events. With press conferences held relatively frequently in Kennedy’s time, there was little need for the exchanges with reporters that presidents have today. Recent presidents have also added in interviews with individual reporters or groups of reporters. Instead of holding a standard press conference, presidents today can choose from among the type of press session where they feel most comfortable responding to reporters.

One can see the variation among the presidents in the forums they choose to answer reporters' questions. Looking at the last four presidents at the two-year mark, we see the choices presidents now have in the venues where they meet reporters. With live television a presidential resource, presidents have increased their contacts with reporters. But they do so on their own terms.

In his first two years, President Obama held 21 solo conferences, President George W. Bush 7, President Clinton 29, and George H.W. Bush 56 solo sessions. They had real variety in their use of the sessions. With technology constantly developing to bring the president even closer to the public, President Obama can choose to answer reporters in venues of his choice. Just as long as he holds press conferences from time to time. For President Obama who prefers answering questions in depth with one interviewer, his choice is to respond to reporters' queries in interview sessions, particularly televised ones. In his first two years, he held 269 such sessions compared with far fewer for his predecessors. There were 83 for President George W. Bush, 136 for President Clinton, and 87 for President George H. W. Bush. At the same time, President Obama has met relatively infrequently with reporters to give answers in short question and answer sessions. He answered a question or two on unfolding events and in response to other points on reporters' minds on 75 occasions while President George W. Bush held 243 and President Clinton 390.

What this brief history shows is that the presidency is an institution making use of the latest technology to benefit the president. For President Kennedy, that meant answering questions from reporters' in a press conference setting while gradually that changed so that presidents developed other forums and have favored those that personally work well for them. The live solo press conference suited President Kennedy just right. He demonstrated his command of the facts of policy, his ability to explain them as well as doing so with a sense of humor and a strong leadership style.