



INTRODUCTION

The story of the White House cannot be told without discussing interactions between presidents and the press. From cordial to confrontational, this relationship is fueled by the public's desire for news about the leader of the nation and the administration's work. Methods of news delivery have greatly changed over the centuries, from printed newspapers to the 24-hour television news cycle. The press even shaped construction at the White House by prompting the building of a dedicated briefing room in the West Wing. Explore the ever-changing history of the presidents, press, and the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

As the only government position that requires a national election, the president truly represents the country, both at home and abroad. Naturally, American citizens are interested in what the president does at the White House. In the nineteenth century, when newspapers were the main vehicle for information, presidents could more easily control their messages to the public. Andrew Jackson went so far as to offer journalists positions in the federal government to encourage positive coverage of his administration (**Image 1**). Newspapers also appeared more invested in Congressional activities, so there was no specific group or persons assigned to cover the White House until Grover Cleveland's second administration in the 1890s. At that time, reporters would stand outside the White House fence to seek meetings with the president and question visitors as they left the grounds. Nineteenth-century presidents knew the influence of the press, but they did not yet have the technological tools to fully wield that power.

The twentieth century brought more targeted efforts by presidents to create public support of their work through the media, particularly through press conferences. A double-edged sword, press conferences leave presidents more vulnerable than written statements or off-the-record conversations with a limited audience (**Image 2**). During a



Image 2

press conference, the president's words may be crafted beforehand, but speaking live to the nation allows the possibility of mistakes, criticism, and questioning. Still, press conferences provide an enormous opportunity for presidents to deliver their most important messages and present their leadership style directly to the public.

Since the completion of the original West Wing in 1902 under Theodore Roosevelt, members of the press have maintained a dedicated workspace at the White House, but the method and frequency of access to the president varied during the first half of the twentieth century. President Woodrow Wilson saw the press conference as an instrument for shaping public opinion in his favor and hoped the press would be his partner, not adversary, in this endeavor. To control his messages, Wilson restricted the framework of his press conferences: he spoke off the record, would not agree to be quoted, and only permitted official reporters in the room. He held the first formal presidential press conference in 1913 but threatened to end the practice after complaining that “certain evening newspapers” quoted remarks he considered off the record (**Image 3**). In response, a group of reporters in the press corps formed a group they called the White House Correspondents' Association in February of 1914 with a goal of keeping President Wilson from ending his press conferences. This group has since expanded its mission to advocate for openness and transparency in all aspects of reporting on the White House and the presidency.



Image 4

President Franklin D. Roosevelt maintained the closed press conference approach of his predecessors, which promoted a friendly line of communication but still controlled the message about policies during the Great Depression and World War II (**Image 4**). Roosevelt was also well known for his radio broadcasts, called Fireside Chats, which connected him directly to the American people (**Image 5**). While

informal in tone, they were scripted readings that provided no opportunity for inquiries or response. Unlike the Fireside Chats, the press conferences exposed the president to impromptu questions, but since these sessions were restricted, Roosevelt simply did not answer the difficult ones, and the public never knew what had been asked.

Closed press conferences were the standard procedure until new technologies forced adaptations. Televised press conferences, introduced during President Dwight Eisenhower's tenure, put an end to off-the-record remarks (**Image 6**). In 1961, President John F. Kennedy hosted the first live broadcast of a press conference (**Image 7**). Using live television, presidents found it difficult to say, "I don't know" or "I choose not to answer that question." Modern methods of communication, such as television and the internet, have increased the pressure of hosting a press conference, and therefore decreased the number of press conferences generally held by presidents.



Image 7

Following decades of increased press presence at the White House, President Richard Nixon authorized the construction of a press briefing room inside the West Wing (**Image 8**). Previously used spaces in the West Wing could no longer accommodate the press needs. Covering over an indoor pool built for President Franklin Roosevelt, the space between the main house and the offices of the West Wing provided the perfect place to build the White House Press Briefing Room (**Image 9**). Completed in spring 1970, the new Press Center featured the Briefing Room, reporter desks, direct-line telephones, and broadcast booths among other amenities. In 2000, President Bill Clinton

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renamed the space in honor of Ronald Reagan's press secretary, James S. Brady, who had been shot and paralyzed during the Reagan assassination attempt in 1981. This Press Center was entirely gutted and reconstructed from 2006-2007 (**Image 10**). The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room shows physical evidence of the impact the press makes on the presidency and White House.

The relationship between presidents and the press has changed over time and continues to evolve. The way in which the White House has communicated to the public, and the degree to which it has succeeded, directly impacts presidential leadership. Reports from the press on the White House and chief executive allow an analysis of not just the direct words of the president, but also how policies and messages are perceived around the country, especially in times of crisis (**Image 11**).

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Andrew Jackson	Ca. 1835	Ralph E. W. Earl	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Andrew%20Jackson/4.tif.info
2	Eisenhower at Press Conference	1955	Unknown	Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Dwight%20Eisenhower/8558.tif.info
3	Woodrow Wilson	Ca. 1913-1921	Edmonston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Woodrow%20Wilson/1112882.tif.info
4	Press Gathers Around Franklin D. Roosevelt's Desk	1939	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20Roosevelt/2913.tif.info
5	Franklin Roosevelt Broadcasting a Fireside Chat	1938	Harris & Ewing	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20Roosevelt/1649.tif.info

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6	President Dwight D. Eisenhower Before Announcing Reelection Campaign	1956	Abbie Rowe	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Dwight%20D%20Eisenhower/5090.tif.info
7	President Kennedy at a Press Conference	1962	Unknown	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/1163.tif.info
8	Press Room, Richard M. Nixon Administration	1970	Unknown	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/8516.tif.info
9	White House Indoor Pool, Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration	1933	Unknown	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1112.tif.info
10	Press Room, Barack Obama Administration	2009	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/9475.tif.info
11	JFK Addressing the Press during the Cuban Missile Crisis	1962	Robert L. Knudsen	Robert Knudsen, White House/John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/2551.tif.info



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Website: White House Correspondents' Association. [Click here.](#)
- Website: The National Press Club. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Reflect on the way press conferences were controlled under Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and other presidents in the first half of the twentieth century. How were American citizens served or hindered by that process?
- Create a class discussion on 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.
- Create a press conference in your classroom by splitting the class into three groups: the White House, the Press, and the American Public. (1) The White House group will craft a press conference speech about a change they want to make in the classroom. (2) The Press will attend the press conference and pose questions to the White House. Then, they must relay the message of the press conference to the American Public group with a news article summarizing the classroom change. (3) The American Public will not hear the White House press conference at first. They will learn instead from the Press group's news article. The American Public group can write letters to White House group sharing their opinions on the classroom change.
 - Lead a class discussion on this exercise. Questions to start: Did the American Public like the change proposed by the White House? Did the Press summary alter the message from the White House?