

INTRODUCTION

The story of the White House cannot be told without discussing the relationship between the president and the press. From printed newspapers to the 24-hour television news cycle, methods of news delivery have greatly changed over time as technological advancements transformed the way people connect with the president and the White House. The press even altered the physical space of the White House, prompting the building of a dedicated press briefing room in the West Wing. The press is a cornerstone of American democracy and White House history. Explore the relationship between presidents, the press, and the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Compared to today, presidents in the 1800s had far more control over their public image and messaging. Printed newspapers were the main source of information and reporters were more focused on Congressional activity. President Andrew Jackson, seen in **Image 1** in the chart below, went so far as to offer journalists federal government positions to encourage positive coverage of his administration. Further, there was no specific group assigned to cover the White House until the 1890s. During President Grover Cleveland's second administration (1893-1897), William Price became one of the first reporters to frequently visit the White House for news stories. At that time, reporters would stand outside the White House fence, seeking meetings with the president and questioning visitors as they left the grounds. By the end of the 1800s, President William McKinley allowed reporters to work at a table on the Second Floor of the White House. Although early presidents understood the influence of the press, they did not yet have the technological tools to fully utilize that power.

Members of the press have had an official workspace in the West Wing since its original completion during the 1902 Theodore Roosevelt Renovation. But the methods and frequency of access to the president varied during the early 1900s. In the 1900s, presidents took targeted steps to build relationships with the press while still maintaining control of shared information—particularly through the use of press conferences. Press conferences allow presidents to deliver their most

important messages and showcase their leadership directly to the public. Speaking live to the nation, however, leaves the president more vulnerable to mistakes, criticism, and doubt.

President Woodrow Wilson, seen in **Image 2** in the chart below, held the first formal presidential press conference in 1913. President Wilson saw the press conference as a way to shape public opinion in his favor and he hoped the press would be his partner in this effort. Wilson greatly restricted the format of his press conferences to control his messages—he spoke off the record (meaning it could not be mentioned in public press), did not agree to be quoted, and only permitted official reporters from approved news outlets in the room. He even threatened to end the press conferences after complaining that “certain evening newspapers” quoted remarks he considered to be “off the record.” In February 1914, a group of White House reporters responded by forming the White House Correspondents’ Association (WHCA). The WHCA initially aimed to keep President Wilson from ending his press conferences but has since expanded its mission to advocate for transparency in all aspects of reporting on the White House and the presidency.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt continued the closed press conference approach of his predecessors, promoting a friendly line of communication with reporters but still maintaining control over the message. **Image 3**, to the right, features President Franklin D. Roosevelt meeting with members of the press in the Oval Office in 1939. President Roosevelt also used his well-known radio broadcasts, known as Fireside Chats, to connect with the American people and provide updates on the Great Depression and World War II. Although informal in tone, Fireside Chats were scripted readings that provided no opportunity for questions or responses. Refer to **Image**



Image 3. President Franklin D. Roosevelt meets with members of the press in the Oval Office as they gather around the President's desk for a press conference (1939).

4, in the chart, to see a photograph of President Roosevelt delivering his 13th Fireside Chat in 1938. Franklin D. Roosevelt wasn't alone in his outreach to the press and the American people. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt held women-only press conferences with female reporters to advance women's initiatives and support the growing role of women in the news media.



Image 5. Photograph of President Dwight D. Eisenhower listening to a reporter's question during a press conference (1955).

Closed press conferences held in the president's office remained the standard practice between the Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) and Harry Truman administrations (1945-1953). To accommodate the growing number of reporters, press conferences were moved to the larger Indian Treaty Room—located in the Old Executive Office Building across the street from the West Wing—during the Truman (1945-1953) and Eisenhower (1953-1961) administrations. It was not until the arrival of new technologies, like television which allowed the president to directly speak to the American people live, that off-the-record remarks were ended. On January 19, 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower held the first televised press conference. **Image 5**, above, features President Eisenhower listening to a reporter's question during a press conference in 1955. **Image 6**, in the chart, is a photograph of President Eisenhower listening to instructions as he prepares to announce his run for a second term during a televised speech in 1956.

During the John F. Kennedy administration (1961-1963), press conferences were held in the State Department auditorium. In 1961, President Kennedy hosted the first live press conference. See a photograph of President Kennedy delivering a press conference at the State Department auditorium in 1962 in **Image 7** in the chart below. **Image 8**, also in the chart, shows President John F. Kennedy

gathered in the Oval Office with reporters during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, demonstrating the important role of the press during times of crisis.

Modern methods of communication, such as television and the internet, have allowed for more public access to information from the president and the White House across different platforms. Because of this, the frequency of traditional press conferences held by presidents has declined. While press conferences invite criticism and negative feedback, they also allow presidents to engage with the American people, explain their policies, and receive feedback.

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 as previously used spaces could no longer accommodate press needs. The space that housed the indoor pool built for President Franklin D. Roosevelt—located between the main residence and the offices of the West Wing—was converted into the White House Press Briefing Room between 1969 and 1970. **Image 9**, in the chart below, is a photograph of the indoor pool of the White House built in 1933. The empty pool remains underneath the new Press Room floor and a new outdoor pool was built in 1975. Completed in spring 1970, the new Press Center featured the Briefing Room, reporter desks, direct-line telephones, and broadcast booths among other amenities. **Image 10**, above, shows the first layout of this new press room in the West Wing.



Image 10. Photograph of the new press room after completion in 1970. The old indoor pool is still preserved and used as a storage and utility space beneath the floor. (1970)



Image 11. Photograph of the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room during the Barack Obama administration (2009). Note the similarities and differences with Image 10 above.

In the early 1980s, the Ronald Reagan administration replaced the couches and coffee tables of the Press Briefing Room with auditorium-style seating and a permanent speaking platform. President Bill Clinton renamed the White House Press Room in honor of James S. Brady in 2000. Brady, press secretary during the Ronald Reagan administration, was shot and paralyzed during the Reagan assassination attempt in 1981. Between 2006 and 2007, during the George W. Bush administration, the entire Press Center was gutted and

reconstructed. **Image 11**, above, features the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room—more commonly known as the Press Room—during the Obama administration in 2009. The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room is physical evidence of the integral role the press plays in the presidency and the White House.

Conclusion

Since the Reagan administration, presidents have continued to find new ways to engage with the press and the public. President George H.W. Bush frequently held joint press conferences with foreign leaders as a tool to underscore the importance of international cooperation and cast diplomatic efforts in a positive light. Recent presidents, including Barack Obama and Donald Trump, have also participated in more in-depth interviews with individual reporters or groups of reporters. The relationship between presidents and the press has changed over time and continues to evolve. With continued technological advancements, the White House continues to bridge the gap between the president and the people.

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	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
3	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%20D%20Roosevelt/2913.tif.info
4	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%20D%20Roosevelt/1649.tif.info
5	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%20D%20Eisenhower/8558.tif.info

PRESIDENTS AND THE PRESS



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	JFK Addressing the Press during the Cuban Missile Crisis	1962	Robert L. Knudsen	Robert Knudsen, White House/John F. Kennedy Presidential		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John
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, Richard M. Nixon Administration	1970	Unknown	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/8516.tif.info
11	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



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Article: “Presidential Press Conferences: Windows on the Presidency and its Occupants” by Martha Joynt Kumar for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Essay: “The Press at the White House Overview” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Website: White House Correspondents’ Association. [Click here.](#)
- Website: The National Press Club. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Watch a clip from the first televised news conference in 1955—during President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration. [Click here.](#)
 - Does this press conference look and sound like one the president might give today? Why or why not?

For older learners:

- Reflect on the ways in which press conferences were controlled during the administrations of President Woodrow Wilson, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and other presidents in the early 1900s. Did controlled press conferences help or hurt American citizens? Use examples to support your decision and discuss your thoughts with a classmate, family member, or friend.

For younger learners:

- Host a press conference in your classroom. Split your classmates into three groups—the White House, the Press, and the American Public. *(see next page for more details)*

PRESIDENTS AND THE PRESS



- The White House group crafts a press conference speech about a change they want to make in the classroom.
- The Press attends the press conference and poses questions to the White House regarding their “policy.” The Press must then relay the message to the American Public with a news article that summarizes the proposed classroom change.
- 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.
- Reflect on the exercise as a group. Did the American Public like the change proposed by the White House? Did the Press summary alter the message from the White House? What is 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?