REPORT OF THE COMMISSION
ON
PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES
1981

Miller Center Commission No. 1

Preface

The history of the Miller Center project on the Presidential Press Conference had its origins in discussions in the autumn of 1979 between Mr. Lloyd N. Morisett, president of the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, and Professor Kenneth W. Thompson, director of the Miller Center. The Foundation and the Center share a common interest in communication among the president, the press, and the public, and in the improvement of public understanding. The Center had launched its review of the subject in a forum conducted by Mr. Ray Scherer, vice president of RCA and former White House correspondent of the National Broadcasting Corporation. The forum was subsequently published in *The Virginia Papers on the Presidency*. Officers of the Markle Foundation expressed interest in the forum and generously provided funding for investigating the topic further.

The staff of the Center first organized interviews and roundtable discussions with a broad cross section of White House correspondents and press secretaries organized into two groups. In stage one of the project, the staff interviewed participants in press conferences conducted by Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower, with more limited attention to those of Herbert Hoover and Calvin Coolidge. The staff drew on the firsthand knowledge of living correspondents. In stage two, the staff turned its attention to the live televised press conferences conducted by Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, and Jimmy Carter. The review called attention to the growth of the White House press corps, greater specialization by reporters (including full-time coverage of the White House), and the impact of television on the press conference.

In the next phase of the project, a National Commission, co-chaired by Mr. Scherer and former Virginia Governor Linwood Holton, was created to examine and study the information collected in the first stages of the project and to make recommendations on the future of the presidential press conference. The co-chairmen selected Commission members who proceeded to consider whether the presidential press conference, having undergone important changes, continued to serve useful purposes. The Commission prepared a report based on the preceding discussion, setting forth the origins, evolution, and present function of the press conference. It weighed changes and modifications which might lead to improvements as well as alternatives to the present format.

The Miller Center looks forward to other activities based on the project, including the publication of a separate monograph by a Miller Center scholar, follow-up discussions and colloquia, and the maintenance of archival materials on presidential press conferences. Other projects relating to the president and the press are contemplated.

The officers of the Miller Center are indebted to numerous individuals for contributions of inestimable value during the course of the project. Governor Linwood Holton, the chairman of the Miller Center Council, encouraged the staff to embark on the project and graciously agreed to serve as co-chairman of the Commission. Ray Scherer gave intellectual leadership from the outset of the effort. Robert J. Harris, emeritus professor in the Department of Government and Foreign Affairs at

the University of Virginia, was the first staff member to call attention to the importance of the subject. The project would have been impossible without the wholehearted cooperation and assistance of the reporters and press secretaries listed in the appendix. Their dedication to the public interest in seeking to illuminate the central issues of the contemporary press conference was exemplary.

The draft report was written by Staige Blackford, the extraordinarily able editor of the Virginia Quarterly Review and special assistant to the president of the University of Virginia. Mr. Blackford, who had served as press secretary to Governor Holton, brought firsthand knowledge of the process of press conferences to the study. David Clinton, a staff member at the Miller Center, skillfully prepared and coordinated revisions to the draft report proposed in Commission meetings. Clyde Lutz assumed full responsibility for the management and administration of the project. Professor James Sterling Young, director of the presidency project at the Center, participated in all the discussions. Shirley Kingsbury, Cynthia Miller, and Catherine Stanley faithfully met all deadlines in preparing working memoranda and the report of the Commission.

Above all, we are indebted to Lloyd Morrisett and Mary Milton of the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation. Without their confidence, the project could not have been undertaken. Their encouragement, both intellectual and material, enabled the effort to go forward. At the same time, in the spirit of private philanthropy at its best, they respected the independence of the project participants to freely pursue their inquiries.

We also wish to express our appreciation to the following individuals and organizations (although this report does not necessarily reflect their views, their generous assistance was essential to its completion): Blair French, University of Virginia; Dr. George Gallup, the Gallup Poll; Gale Mattox, Miller Center; Professor Frederick Mosher, Miller Center; Jody Powell, White House press secretary; James Reston, Washington bureau chief, *The New York Times*; the Honorable Dean Rusk, University of Georgia; Congressional Press Galleries; RCA Corporation; Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press; Washington Journalism Center; and the White House, State Department, and Defense Department Press Offices.

We believe the present project would have pleased the founder of the Center, Mr. Burkett Miller of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Mr. Miller had a vision of a Center which would contribute both to the advancement of knowledge and to the improvement of the presidency. We would like to think our review of presidential press conferences might prove helpful in both these respects.

Kenneth W. Thompson, Director
White Burkett Miller Center of Public Affairs

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES

Introduction

This report deals with the problems and suggested reforms of the presidential press conference.[1] While we are not calling for sweeping changes, we have felt it worthwhile to formulate and publish these proposals for a number of reasons. First, the age of the electronic communications has radically transformed the press conference, making it a much more public event. Second, despite these changes, the frequency and regularity of press conferences is important. Press conferences derive their credibility from the regularity with which they are scheduled, yet recent presidents have held them only irregularly. Third, the press, although it has as great a stake in the operation of the press conference as anyone, has been unable to arrive at recommendations to deal with these problems. Competitive pressures and other factors have made it impossible for the rugged individuals of the Fourth Estate to come to a consensus on reforms.

The great technological changes that have taken place in the setting of the press conference, the damaging effects of its scheduling in recent years, and the lack of response to these developments all led the members of this Commission to believe that they could make a contribution to the current discussion of presidential-press relations by collectively advancing some suggestions.

The Presidential Press Conference: A State of Disrepair

"If there is ever to be an amelioration of the condition of mankind," John Adams observed in 1815, "philosophers, theologians, politicians, and moralists will find that the regulation of the press is the most difficult, dangerous, and important problem they have to resolve. Mankind cannot now be governed without it, nor at present with it." While the First Amendment to the Constitution specifically forbids any law "abridging the freedom . . . of the press," and while such freedom is one of the glories of our heritage and our history, the problem about which Adams expressed concern 165 years ago, long before the birth of radio and television, is no less difficult, dangerous, and important today. It is difficult not only because government is far more complex, but also because the news media may have become truly mass, both in the pervasiveness of their message and in the multitude of those who spread it (there are 2,661 news gathering organizations in Washington alone). It is dangerous because, despite all their numbers and technological magic, news organizations right now are not popular. As one distinguished commentator has observed, the American people rank news organizations somewhere between undertakers and used car salesmen. Freedom of the press is less cherished and fear of the press more widespread. This is unfortunate because the security of our institutions and the survival of our liberties depend, perhaps more than ever before, on a well-informed public.

The dimensions of presidential-press relations are vast, and it is neither the desire nor the duty of the Commission to examine them all. We do feel, however, that one of the most important avenues of communication in this land runs from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to the rest of America, from the

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[1] In this report, the Commission is employing the term "press" to include all forms of mass communication, broadcasting as well as print.

White House to Main Street. We further feel—and with good reason—that this avenue has, in recent years, been beset by detours, pocked with potholes, and cluttered with rubble. Hence it is currently in a state of distressing disrepair.

Yet this state need not be permanent. On the contrary, ours is a most favorable time to commence the work of repair. The heat and passion of an election year have subsided, a new president has been elected, and the climate is propitious for new ideas, new initiatives, and new departures. Moreover, there is every indication that the American people, however great their alleged cynicism and distrust of government, long for a restoration of confidence. Clearly, the people are looking for leadership in which they can have belief, faith, and hope. And at the pinnacle of American leadership stands the president.

There are, of course, many ways in which a president can *exert* leadership. Equally important, a president must *express* leadership. Surely, one of the best means for such expression is the presidential press conference, where the chief executive has the opportunity to answer such questions directly, somewhat as a British prime minister does during the traditional "question period" in the House of Commons. Since an American president, unlike a British prime minister to the Commons, is not answerable to the Congress, the press conference is a significant process of communication: it not only offers the expression of leadership, it also serves the people's right to know. Still, if the people have a right to know and the press is the means by which they can gain that knowledge, members of the press, in turn, have a responsibility to conduct themselves with dignity and decorum. However, this responsibility is problematic because "the press" is not a monolithic institution. It has no hierarchy and no chain of command by which standards of behavior may be enforced. Yet the issue of the behavior of participants in the press conference must be addressed. Otherwise, the process, a delicate one at best, breaks down and the interests of the president, the media, and the people suffer accordingly. That breakdown has occurred in recent years.

No one party in particular is to blame for this breakdown in communications, yet all involved share some of the guilt. Too often, particularly in the Vietnam and Watergate years, the president appeared devious and his relations with reporters were distrusted. During this time, many reporters occasionally demonstrated an instinct more for the jugular than for journalism. In this atmosphere of mutual dislike, press conferences have sometimes confused rather than clarified the issues of our time. Despite their positive features, they sometimes collapse into a babble of sound and fury, informing nobody. Finally, the public's expectations have been too great. A presidential press conference, however long and however frequent, cannot answer all the questions or solve all the problems.

What then can be done to improve the present precarious condition of the presidential press conference? Obviously, as a physician must "heal thyself," so the healing here must be largely done by the president, aided by the press secretary and the reporters assigned to cover the White House. However, there may be a role in the healing process for a group of outside, objective, and qualified observers, and that is the reason for this Commission. Asked to serve by the White Burkett Miller Center of Public Affairs, itself charged with the study of the presidency in all its aspects, the Commission's members do not consider themselves strangers to public affairs—or to the White House itself. James Rowe has a history of public service dating back to his years as a member of Franklin D. Roosevelt's staff. Carroll Kilpatrick was a White House correspondent during a period spanning the administrations of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Gerald R. Ford. Douglass Cater was the Washington editor for *The Reporter* magazine before becoming a special assistant to Lyndon B. Johnson. The Commission's co-chairmen are former Virginia Governor and Assistant Secretary of State Linwood Holton, and former NBC White House Correspondent and now Vice President of

RCA Ray Scherer. Julius Duscha and Robert Pierpoint are old hands on the Potomac beat, while Felicia Warburg Rogan has long been active in journalistic and community endeavors in New York City and Charlottesville, Virginia.

The Commission began its deliberations at the outset of last summer and has since held a series of meetings in Washington and Charlottesville. The purpose of these meetings, some of them daylong, was to explore the whole issue of the president and the news media with past and present White House correspondents, presidential press secretaries, and staff assistants. Each meeting was taped, and the transcripts of the tapes fill more than 400 pages. Additional research material and assistance were provided by the staff of the Miller Center under the able guidance of its director, Kenneth W. Thompson. At its penultimate meeting in Charlottesville in early October 1980, the Commission decided to limit its recommendations to the press conference alone, without getting into such matters as the media's various requirements (e.g., those of a news magazine vis-a-vis a wire service or a television network, dinners for selected reporters like those in Eisenhower's time or one-on-one interviews à la Cronkite, Chancellor, and Walters.) Two points should be emphasized: 1) rather than acting alone from the vantage point of some lofty ivory tower, the Commission has had the generous assistance and advice of those who have participated in White House press conferences since the administration of Calvin Coolidge; and 2) the Commission does not offer its recommendations as the be-all and end-all solutions to the conduct of presidential press conferences, but rather as suggestions as to how the conduct—and accordingly the product—of such conferences can be improved. A final point is this: we are not so naive as to think our recommendations will be received with reverence, but we trust that our report will be given the care and consideration which went into its making. We offer our suggestions fully cognizant that the press conference is the president's prerogative. There is nothing in the constitution which directs him to meet reporters. He can lay down any rules he wishes. He can even choose to hold no press conferences at all. We are not directing him in this report to do anything. Again, we ask only that it be considered. Before offering our recommendations, however, we believe that a short history of the presidential press conference is in order.

The Presidential Press Conference: A Brief History

The presidential press conference is an institution whose long and distinguished history has given it a prominent place in the American political firmament. Although earlier presidents may, on occasion, have had casual meetings with editors and reporters, the press conference as such is a phenomenon of the 20th century. For 80 years presidents have, in one forum or another, answered questions from reporters in an effort to communicate with both the news media and the public at large. Theodore Roosevelt first brought groups of reporters into the White House for interviews from time to time—often while he was being shaved in the morning. After a four-year lapse during the Taft administration, the press conference returned in 1913 to Woodrow Wilson's White House, where it has since remained. Wilson introduced regular meetings with the press and equal access for all accredited reporters. Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover continued these sessions, although they required that questions be submitted in writing to them in advance.

With the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, the press conference entered its most productive, and perhaps most colorful, era. Roosevelt's conferences contained very little that was wholly new. His submission to a spontaneous question-and-answer period, willingness to speak off the record and provide extensive background information, and the availability of direct presidential quotes to

reporters, were all devices that had been used previously by one president or another. But Roosevelt's skillful mixing of these elements when he met with one hundred or so reporters gathered around his desk gave the press conferences of his day a distinctive flavor—informal yet informative—which they had not enjoyed before and which they have rarely recaptured since.

Over the past 35 years, the press conference as an institution has continued to evolve, responding to continuing changes in communications, particularly the advent of television, and in the American political system. With the United States emerging as a superpower from World War II and Washington becoming the capital of the so-called Free World, the number of reporters attending White House press conferences increased enormously. As a result, Harry Truman had no choice but to stand before the assembled reporters rather than speak to them as they clustered about his desk, and much of the Rooseveltian air of intimacy was lost. Radio taping and, to a greater extent, television filming for delayed airing were inaugurated under Dwight Eisenhower and made it more difficult for presidents to provide extensive background information off the record. They also became more reluctant to speak freely, fearful of being caught in a slip of the tongue. John F. Kennedy's decision to televise press conferences live accelerated these trends. Projected in black-and-white, later in "living color," a president was directly in the public eye and seemed to feel that he could neither seek a delay for more information nor say, "No comment." Kennedy's immediate successors only contributed to a worsening in relations between the president and the members of the Fourth Estate (or what one member of this Commission has called "the Fourth Branch of Government"). What many in the press regarded as deceptions, as with Lyndon Johnson's reports about the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon's duplicities about Watergate, raised a curtain of distrust between the president and the press. If the role of the news media in their relationship to the White House had hitherto been adversarial, it now became downright antagonistic.

Meanwhile, the presidential press conference turned into a shouting contest among reporters for the president's eye. Although reporters had clamored for attention before, the presence of television added a new dimension to the turmoil of the press conference. Such conditions continued to prevail, for the most part, under Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, with reporters jumping and yelling for attention like children on a playground. Thus *Broadcasting* magazine was prompted to headline its September 29, 1980 story, announcing the formation of this Commission, "Trying to Create Order Out of Chaos."

The Presidential Press Conference: Recommendations

Creating order from chaos does not have to be a monumental undertaking, provided there is a willingness on the part of both parties, the president, and the news media to agree that a) the status quo is unacceptable and should not be continued, and b) some give-and-take from each side is required to make the necessary innovations and/or improvements. We believe that such a willingness may exist, and we therefore trust that our recommendations will not be consigned to that great dustbin of unread proposals. Our proposals may seem almost too simple at first glance, but they can, we unanimously believe, be of benefit to all concerned—the president, the media and, most of all, the American people.

The key to success of any presidential press conference strategy is frequency. The more often a president meets reporters and the greater the interchange, the less chance there is for communication to break down. We are encouraged by President-elect Reagan's declaration at his November 6 post-election Los Angeles press conference to "do our best to have them on a fairly

regular and consistent basis."

We recommend that 1) the president should have a *regular monthly* press conference available for live television coverage and open to all reporters and; 2) in addition, the president should have weekly informal meetings with reporters in a setting of his choice, with or without radio and television equipment. Here we reprint with commendation the opening remarks made by Franklin Roosevelt at his first presidential press conference on March 8, 1933:

> THE PRESIDENT: It is very good to see you all. 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 75 or 100 questions because I simply haven't got the time, I see no reason why I should not talk to you ladies and gentlemen off the record in just the way I have been doing in Albany and in the way I used to do 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.
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> And so I think we shall discontinue the practice of compelling the submitting of questions in writing before the conference in order to get an answer. There will be a great 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.
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> MR. STEPHENSON [Reporter]: I ask forty of them a day.
>
> THE PRESIDENT: And the others, of course, are the questions which for various reasons I do not want to discuss, or I am not ready to discuss, or I do not know anything about. There will be a great many questions you will ask that I do not know enough to answer.
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> Then, in regard to new announcements, Steve [Early, assistant secretary to the President,] and I thought that it would be best that straight news for use from this office should always be without direct quotations. In other words, I do not want to be directly quoted, unless direct quotations are given out by Steve in writing. 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, not to be attributed to the White House, because I do not want to have to revive the Ananias Club. [Laughter]
>
> 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 conference. Now there is one thing I want to say right now, about 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 to your 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, it is only for those present.[2]

We believe that these ground rules provide the best opportunity for the two types of press conferences to serve their somewhat different purposes. The formal conference lets the president communicate directly with the people of America and of the world. It also serves the important symbolic function of displaying a president's continuing mental and physical vigor, as shown by the ability to handle a series of unrehearsed and probing questions with the nation as witness. The informal weekly conference is an opportunity for more reflective, candid discussions of issues and events. It allows the president to educate the public indirectly and, by providing reporters with the necessary background on important topics, it enables them to ask more informed questions which better protect the public's right to know.

In response to the argument that weekly informal meetings and at least one, large, monthly, televised conference are too much of a demand on a president's time, we might point out that Roosevelt—a very active executive during the difficult Depression and war years—met the press twice a week. Both Truman and Eisenhower regularly held sessions once a week. It is only in the past twenty years that the frequency and regularity of press conferences have declined. Furthermore, meeting reporters more frequently and more informally might give them a better comprehension of what the president is seeking to attain and the president a better idea of what issues concern the public. More frequent meetings might also help the president to better understand the demands on the media and the media to better comprehend the demands on the president, thereby retaining the traditional adversarial relationship between government and the media, but minimizing antagonism.

The manner in which presidential press conferences are presently conducted on live television—with reporters jumping up, waving their hands, and shouting, "Mr. President! Mr. President!" in an effort to gain the president's eye and the opportunity to ask a question—is what so many viewers (and participants) find appalling. The easiest remedy for this requires little more than an exercise in presidential leadership: the president could enforce order by refusing to acknowledge or answer any reporter who shouts. He answers only those who raise their hand, and he also allows follow-up questions.

Another option which might be considered would be to have the questioners at a televised press conference chosen by lot. This has worked well on presidential trips. Reporters would submit their names, but not their questions, before the conference. The list of randomly chosen names would be posted and the president would follow a copy of the list to call on members of the press. He would allow each chosen reporter to ask and follow up one question. At least two exceptions could be made: the Associated Press and the United Press International correspondents would retain their traditional right to ask the first two questions.

To those who say the president benefits in the eyes of the public from what is now perceived as a confrontation with the arrogant and obstreperous behavior of correspondents, we would offer an eloquent rebuttal, made by British author Godfrey Hodgson in his new book, *All Things To All Men: The False Promise of the Modern American Presidency*. In his chapter on the president and the media, entitled "The Electronic Mephistopheles," Hodgson concludes, "The media's interest in the president seems increasingly tinged with cynicism. The public seems increasingly skeptical and indifferent. A cycle of diminishing returns seems underway, perhaps irreversibly so."

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[2] *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt,* 13 vols. (New York: Random House, 1938), 11:30-31.

Although we believe the last, best salvation for a modern president is the exercise of effective leadership—and leadership he clearly enjoys exercising—we cite Mr. Hodgson to show that the president has a great deal to gain by getting away from the circus-like atmosphere of today's press conferences.

There is much to be said for renewing the informal gathering of correspondents that took place during the 1930s and 1940s. We realize, of course, that the size of the present news corps precludes gathering around the president's desk. But we see no reason why the president cannot have a weekly informal meeting with reporters. In some circumstances, the president could speak for attribution but not for direct quotation. Reporters would, though, have the right to check with the press secretary in certain instances to see if the president would permit a quote.

So we hold that these innovations—a minimum of one monthly, live TV conference with a better method of questioning, and weekly informal meetings—can have a substantial and significant benefit.

We hope these recommendations will be received as we have endeavored to formulate them—thoughtfully, thoroughly, and sincerely. We do not offer these proposals as though they were engraved in marble and not subject to further contemplation and change. Nor do we assert that the ideas which underlie them are wholly new or original. We do offer them secure in our belief that if there is a will to explore them, there is a way to turn them into realities.

The Presidential Press Conference: An Afterword

We opened this report with a quotation from one of America's founding fathers. We close with a quotation from another, one intimately involved with the University of Virginia, of which the Miller Center is a part. The Virginian who is the father of that institution had many great expectations. One of the expectations Thomas Jefferson envisaged for his university was this: "here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it." That, we submit, is the standard to which all involved in the presidential press conference must adhere.

Commission Co-Chairmen

Linwood Holton

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Appendix

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