Helen Thomas
LBJ Lecture April 11, 1996

Introduction of Helen Thomas
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We are delighted that all of you could be here this afternoon.

As you know, Lyndon Johnson envisioned this lecture series during one of his last visits to our campus. His passion was education, and he wanted to bring to students the ideas of outstanding people in a variety of fields.

And we think we have fulfilled his vision. In the past we have asked experts in government, theatre, music, civil rights, law enforcement, literature, and business to give this lecture. We have benefited greatly from their presence among us.

Some of our past speakers have known Lyndon Johnson, and that is the case this afternoon. As a reporter, Helen Thomas covered Lyndon Johnson, as she has covered every president since John Kennedy. She has been a keen observer of Washington politics since the early ’40s, when she arrived in town — fresh out of college — as a copy girl for the Washington Daily News.

In 1943, she joined United Press International, writing radio news about Capitol Hill, the Justice Department and the FBI. In 1960 she began covering John Kennedy while he was still president-elect.

She has watched and analyzed presidents and the office of the presidency itself through the administrations of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton. She has traveled with them, peppered them with difficult questions and gained their respect.

She has covered their press conferences. In that capacity, Helen Thomas may be the most powerful reporter in Washington because it is her trademark “Thank you, Mr. President” that cuts off not only the reporters’ questions but also the president’s answers.

In her long tenure, she has blazed trails for professional women, becoming the first female officer of the National Press Club and the White House Correspondents Association and the first female member of the venerable Old Gridiron Club. She has been honored for her talents and her contributions to the journalism profession with a long list of prestigious awards.

She is generous in sharing her reflections and her expertise with audiences around the country and through her book, Dateline White House. We feel particularly honored that she has agreed to share those reflections with us today. Lyndon Johnson would be proud.

Please join me in welcoming Helen Thomas.

Presidents I Have Known
by Helen Thomas
White House Correspondent

Thank you, Mr. President, but you don’t know the times that I’ve wanted to say, “No, thank you.”
Good afternoon. This is indeed a great honor for me and a sentimental journey in many ways.

I came here with President Johnson when he received an honorary degree, and I believe when he signed the Higher Education Bill. President Johnson loved to revisit his beloved alma mater.

I’ve covered a lot of presidents, but none felt as close to his home or returned to his roots as often as Lyndon B. Johnson. He was Texas personified, bigger than life. He was catapulted into the presidency as a result of a national tragedy and was one of the few men in our history who really was ready for the awesome burden. He rose to the occasion; he was the ‘can-do’ man. His greatest legacy to the country was his dream of a great society, where no one would go hungry, lack for medicine or shelter or an education.

Would that we had people like that today in politics! In fact, he pushed through most of his domestic programs—Medicare, civil rights, voting rights, federal aid to education at all levels, Head Start, public housing, you name it—with his legendary art of persuasion, the little arm twisting (out of the sockets, if necessary). He knew where the bodies were buried, and he called in the chips for good causes from Capitol Hill.

They broke the mold when Lyndon Johnson came on the scene. In that era, he monogrammed our society LBJ, and we were our brother’s keeper. No president since then has cared as much about the disadvantaged or has been as willing to stake so much on the poor, the sick and the maimed. Vietnam was his denouement. It was a war that divided the country.

But compassion seems to have gone out of style. Today it’s every man for himself, survival of the fittest, especially from those who want to complete the Reagan Revolution, the conservative philosophy that if you can’t make it, tough. Somewhere along the way to the forum, we lost our sense of unity, one nation indivisible. The federal government today is viewed as the enemy, an alien intruder, rather than what it really is: we the people.

Do we really want to see 50 separate state fiefdoms? Do we really view public servants who are so dedicated to the people as our enemy? My view from the bridge is that government workers are not insiders or outsiders but people who are working for the common good. Once upon a time, public service was considered the crown of a career. Today we see young people on campuses aspiring to make it big in business with an amazing passivity toward the issues that affect their lives, the future and the world around them. I remember a young man filling out an application that asked, “Why do you want to go into public service?” His reply was “I didn’t know there was an alternative.”

Distrust of government

Distrust of government, cynicism, may be warranted by the national disappointments we’ve had—Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra—but it is a luxury that we can’t afford. Particularly when we know that democracy, as Winston Churchill put it, may be the worst form of government but it’s the best that’s ever been invented. So ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for all of us.

But enough on these philosophical musings, I’m sure you want to know what’s going on in Washington today. Nothing! I remember President Ford once said that if Lincoln were alive, he would roll over in his grave. Well, if LBJ were alive he would be
appalled at the Congress that seems to care less about the general welfare of the American people. The Contract with America is a manifesto that seems to be devoted to reducing the power of the federal government to protect the health and safety of the people. In the name of downsizing big government, such agencies as EPA, OSHA, Food and Drug are on the chopping board. One might really question the priorities when, after several weeks of a recess, the House made its first order of business to lift the ban on assault weapons, particularly after the massacre in Scotland.

We are on a mission that Johnson understood so well, to improve the opportunities and the quality of life for everyone. Or we wish we could be. There are many goals, especially of those in power today, who would prefer the status quo. But no woman should rest until we have true equality in the work place, and the same goes for the mindless intolerance that we all face. But we shall overcome.

These days everything is being looked at through the prism of politics. It’s a campaign year. President Clinton and Sen. Robert Dole have locked up their party’s nominations for the presidency. There is still the question of whether Native Son Ross Perot will come into the picture and when Pat Buchanan will bow out. And there is the question of who will be chosen for the No. 2 spot on the Republican ticket. Dole is on bended knee urging Gen. Colin Powell to be his running mate. But, so far, Powell has been saying, “No, thank you.” Otherwise, midwestern governors, such as Michigan’s John Engler, Ohio’s George Voinovich are considered the best bets. But Dole is playing his cards very close to the chest on that score.

The election is being called the middle against the center. There is no question that the Republicans rejected the extremes for the tried and true. Columnist Mary McGuire has likened Dole’s view of the presidency to a gold watch—he earned it and he wants it. And anyone who would say as he did, “I’ll be anything you want me to be” surely does not think that the stakes are too high or the price too personal. Dole has yet to define his message to the people or to articulate why he wants to be president or where he would like to take the country. Clinton is ahead in the popularity polls, but his aides expect those numbers to tighten considerably after the campaign really gets under way.

Campaign year

Both candidates are well known to the electorate. Dole has the reputation as a deal maker. There aren’t many laws with his name on them, but his leadership has been in the field of compromise. His flip-flops on major issues are much more accepted than when Clinton waffles and zigzags as he often does. Clinton had a very rocky start as president and only now seems to be really winning his spurs. He has a number of new laws to his credit including the Family Leave Bill, the Motor Voter Bill, Education 2000, the Brady Gun Control Bill, the Crime Bill, NAFTA. In foreign policy, he has chalked up some successes—in Haiti, in South Africa. He has moved the peace process in the Middle East despite the setbacks and in Northern Ireland with bumps along the road. Bosnia is still iffy, but the massacres and the ethnic cleansing that shamed the world have been halted.

Both candidates have very bright, very articulate, ambitious wives who attended Ivy League law schools. Both wives have been delegated to the role of the little woman, preferably seen and not heard. Standing by their candidate husbands with that adoring look, that adoring gaze of the ‘50s. Not since Eleanor Roosevelt in her heyday has a first lady been so pilloried as Hillary Clinton. Granted, her 1300-page simple health plan did
not pass muster and was a disaster, easily targeted by the health industry, health insurance and the TV commercials, Harry and Louise, who put the fear of God in everyone. But, she did raise the threshold of understanding of a national health care crisis in our country, where some 40 million people have no health insurance. But she has had to retreat from up-front, in-your-face style at the assertion of a co-presidency. I must say I do a double take when Sen. Dole says, as he often does, “My wife will not be involved in health care.” She’s only head of the Red Cross. Mrs. Dole says she will return to the job even if her husband wins the election. But I’ve got news for her, or maybe Liz (Carpenter) does even more: Being first lady is a full-time job and then some. Well, neither woman is Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farms when it comes to some of her business dealings.

The polls also show that Dole is more trusted and respected for leadership. Clinton is plagued by the trust factor. President Clinton never had the traditional honeymoon that is usually accorded a new president. He had maybe a couple of weeks. But he came into office with a lot of baggage and allegations, such as the complex Whitewater land venture that has hung over his head like a sword of Damocles with no end in sight, at least not until the November election, if then. He would also be compared for avoiding the Vietnam draft while Sen. Dole did serve in World War II.

If you can’t beat them, join them. So, after the 1994 Democratic debacle, when the Republicans swept both houses of Congress after 40 years in the wilderness, Clinton hired a Republican strategist, who helped him to redefine himself as a new Democrat again. So much so that in an interview, Clinton said that he would not necessarily fight to restore Democratic control of Congress. No Give ‘em Hell Harry Truman, he. The president has been successful in jump starting the economy, and he likes to say that since he’s been president he has created 8 million new jobs. That reminds me of a recent cartoon that shows Clinton at a lectern, and he is saying, “Since I’ve been president, I have created 8 million new jobs.” A waiter is standing by, holding a tray with glasses on it, and he is saying under his breath, “Yeah, and I’ve got three of them.”

Life at the top

Anyone who lands in the presidency will find, of course, it’s not easy at the top. I can still hear President Johnson: “It’s easy to do the right thing, if you know what the right thing is.” Without a doubt, the presidency is on-the-job training, and there’s no such thing as an instant president.

But, as you can see, I don’t waste my sympathy on presidents because I think they have the greatest honor that can come to anyone, and that is the trust of the American people. The next president will be in a historic position of leading our nation into the 21st century and in keeping this country in its unique role of world leadership. But no one can look at our country today and not know that something is desperately wrong. The widespread violence—it’s Russian roulette on the American streets, rampancy of crime, obsession with guns, drugs, no place to hide and no risk-free schools for children anymore.

But, all is not lost if people care enough to tackle the problems. As the suffragettes used to say, “Failure is impossible.” Yes, we have come a long way from the caring society that President and Mrs. Johnson believed in, worked for, nurtured. Lady Bird Johnson’s contribution to this country with her National Beautification Program will live on forever. Come to Washington any spring. A magnificent legacy for a great first
lady, and in this retrospective, I must say that her press secretary, Liz Carpenter, understood more than anyone how White House power could be used for good to move the mountain if necessary. She made us climb every mountain, ford every stream. She was our major domo, and she put P.T. Barnum to shame.

Clinton and the press

Clinton has found that the presidency is no bed of roses. But he wouldn’t trade it for anything, and he does confide that even the bad days are good. After all, he has instant helicopters, Air Force One which is a flying hotel, every wish is a command, and all designed to make him think he’s really president. So many presidents have moaned and groaned about their lack of privacy in the White House, but all we promised them was a Rose Garden. President Clinton shook President Kennedy’s hand when he came to a Rose Garden ceremony for Boys Nation at the age of 16, and he decided then and there, 1963, that he wanted to be president. I shook President Kennedy’s hand in 1963, and I didn’t think I was going to be president. I guess I lacked that “vision thing.”

Well, Clinton has never met a hand he didn’t want to shake. He wants to be loved. He chafes at White House restrictions. But he has been true to one promise—to have a Cabinet that looks like America, with women, blacks, Hispanics.

As you know, the president is a runner. We in the press don’t run with him. We ride in vans in the motorcade; every once in a while, we jump out of the van, ambush him, throw a question and get back into the van. He can run, but he can’t hide. President Bush used to invite my younger colleagues to jog with him. Better them than me. I got invited to the dedication of the horseshoe pit.

This president came into office with a big chip on his shoulder against the media, and in those early bad days, one of his aides accused us of wanting to know everything, to see everything. He called us voyeurs, and he said that we even wanted to see Clinton in his bathrobe. Well, after seeing him in his jogging shorts, I’ll pass.

We in the press know that we are not loved. To be respected might be asking too much of those who want to kill the messenger who brings the bad news. But we believe in following the truth wherever it leads us. Our mission is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Incidentally, the presidential news conference is indispensable because, believe it or not, it’s the only institution in our society where the president can be questioned on a regular basis and held accountable. There is the widespread perception that the press has somehow co-opted the First Amendment as its private preserve. That’s not true. What is true is that we are its greatest defenders because we know it is the amendment from which all blessings flow—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of petition. President Johnson used to complain, “You all have the First Amendment,” as if it were some special weapon against presidents. Come to think of it, it is.

I’m often asked how I prepare for a news conference. Well, first I go to the hairdresser. Your family and your friends don’t care what you ask, but they want to be sure you’re well groomed, especially for television. I confess we did not really enjoy LBJ’s walkie-talkie news conferences around the South Lawn, round and round, which we dubbed the Bataan Death Marches.

No love for the media
I have always felt greatly privileged to cover the White House and to have that ring-side seat to instant history. And I’ve often thought everyone today is on camera, everyone is wired. So if you decide to run for public office, you should decide at the age of 5 and live accordingly. Sadly, it also occurs to me, after looking at Little Rock, that when you become president, you should forget you ever had a relative or a friend. You will be doing them a favor. I am reminded of a Christmas Day in Plains, Ga., when President Carter was playing on the front porch with his grandchildren. He was obviously playing for the cameras, and his senior son Jeff walked over to us, and a cameraman said, “Don’t you feel sorry for your dad, the burdens, the press always watching?” “No,” Jeff said, “he asked for it.”

No president has ever liked the press, dating back to George Washington (I wasn’t covering him). But Kennedy said, “I’m reading more, I’m enjoying it less.” What LBJ said was unprintable. Nixon looked up when we walked into the Cabinet Room and said, “It’s only coincidental that we’re talking about pollution when the press walks in.” Carter always seemed to be saying, “Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And when the Sandinistas fired on a press helicopter near the Honduran border, Reagan said, “There is some good in everyone.” When Clinton was asked why the press always went along in the motorcade when he went jogging, he laughed and said, “They just want to see if I drop dead.” That’s true! I remember asking Mike McCurry, the president’s press secretary, the other day, if he would ever lie to us. And he said, “No, but I might tell you the truth slowly.”

Memories of chief executives

I have many memories in covering the White House. There have been times to laugh, times to cry, and times to wonder. I remember a dinner at the LBJ Ranch when President Johnson asked Bill Moyers, who had been a Baptist minister and was then his press secretary, to say grace. Moyers bent his head and began to pray. Johnson commanded, “Speak up, Bill.” “I wasn’t talking to you, Mr. President,” Moyers replied. And I remember when President Johnson was taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital for gallbladder surgery, and the psychiatric ward had been transformed into a press room. Johnson asked Moyers, “What happened to the patients?” and Moyers replied, “We gave them all press cards.”

And I remember Martha Mitchell who said, “Politics is a dirty business” or her attorney general husband, who said at the time of Watergate, “Watch what we do, not what we say.”

And I remember the Martin Luther King March on Washington in 1963, when a rabbi said that the greatest sin of all in the Nazi era was the sin of silence. And I remember when we went to Moscow with President Reagan, and he was to hold a summit meeting with Gorbachev. And suddenly the evil empire was no more in Reagan’s eyes. He noted that the Russians laughed and they cried and they were human. When we got back to Washington, I said to him, “Mr. President, do you think maybe if you’d gone to Moscow 10 or 20 years ago, you might have found out that they laughed and they cried and they were human?” “No,” he said, “they’ve changed.”

And I remember that Gerald Ford said that if God had created the world in six days, that on the seventh day he could not have rested, he would have had to explain it to Helen Thomas. And I hope I would have been asking my favorite question, “Why?”
I remember going to a Christmas party at Sam Donaldson’s house three years ago, on the very day the Washington Post said that Gen. Colin Powell would become Clinton’s secretary of state. Well, Powell was at the party and in my usual shy way I marched up to him and I said, “General, are you going to become the next secretary of state?” To which he turned to another guest and said, “Isn’t there some war we can send her to?” Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

I remember someone saying, “I don’t mind Carter being born again, but did he have to come back as himself?” And I remember asking Billy Carter if he, too, had been born again, and he said, “Once is enough.” And I remember when the dark clouds of the Iran-Contra scandal hung over the White House, Reagan said, “I’ve been shot, had colon cancer, skin cancer, prostate surgery—those were the good ole days.” Then there was my all-time favorite, Carter’s mother, Miss Lillian, who said, “Sometimes when I look at my children, I wish I’d remained a virgin.” On the day that Carter was elected, a reporter ran up to Miss Lillian and said, “Aren’t you proud of your son?” And she said, “Which one?”

Even in this new world disorder, we do know that peace is wonderful and war is hell. And we should know as we head into the 21st century, we can look back on many glorious achievements. We landed on the moon, we’re going to Mars, we made great breakthroughs in civil rights, women’s rights, human rights. We’re robotized, computerized, taxed, but we also have to know that we fought two great world wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War and others. And so many made the ultimate sacrifice so that we might remain a free people.

I always think of newspapers as shared pain, sometimes shared horror. Justice Brandeis once said that a constant spotlight on public officials lessens the possibility of corruption. He also said that if the government becomes a law breaker, it breeds contempt for the law. Lincoln said, “Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe.” Jefferson said, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” Engraved in the mantle in the State Dining Room at the White House, below a magnificent portrait of Lincoln, is a prayer by John Adams that says, “May only good and wise men live here.” We all vote for that, and I believe that people can handle the truth and they deserve no less. We should keep an eye on presidents who have life and death power over all humanity today, to keep the people informed and democracy alive.

Thank you.

*Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant, 2007-08*