

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

FACING THE MEDIA: THE VIEW FROM THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS ROOM PODIUM

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INTRODUCTION:

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PROCEEDINGS

MR. WEST: Okay. If I could have your attention, we would like to get started. I'm Darrell West, Vice President and Director of Governance Studies at Brookings, and I would like to welcome you to this event entitled Facing the Media: The View from the White House Press Room Podium.

The job of the White House Press Secretary has to rank as the most unpredictable position in the world. I mean one day you may be dodging questions from Helen Thomas, and the next day you're dodging shoes from foreign journalists.

And, by the way, I was very impressed with President Bush's dexterity on that shoe. I mean he had that shoe tracked all the way from the hand to the podium. You know, the journalist didn't even come close to hitting the President. And, of course, now we have learned that there's some Iraqis who want that guy in prison because his aim was so bad.

But if the job has its unpredictable moments, it also is clear that the position is one of the most important in government. The press spokesperson is the daily face of the administration on a wide variety of issues, and how that individual performs has great consequences both for politics and policy-making. Today we have put together a distinguished panel of former press secretaries to provide their perspective on this unique job.

Moderating this event will be my colleague, Stephen Hess. As you know, Steve is one of our country's foremost authorities on media and government in the United States. He is the author of more than a dozen books, including *News and News Making*, *Organizing the Presidency*, and *The Ultimate Insiders, U.S. Senators in the National Media*. His most recent book on the presidential transition is entitled *What Do We Do Now*, and it has been getting rave reviews all across the country.

We have three distinguished panelists who will join Steve. Mike McCurry is a Partner at Public Strategies Washington. He provides counsel to the firm's various corporate and non-profit clients. Mike is a veteran communication strategist with nearly three decades of experience in Washington. He served as White House Press Secretary to President Bill Clinton from 1995 to 1998. And he also has been Spokesman for the Department of State and Director of Communications for the Democratic National Committee.

Ron Nessen is Journalist in Residence at the Brookings Institution. Ron was Press Secretary to President Gerald Ford from 1974 to 1977. After leaving the White House, he served as Vice President of News for Westwood One, the parent company of Mutual Broadcasting and NBC Radio Network. He's the author of three books, including *A History of the Ford Administration*, and two novels, and he serves on the Peabody Awards Advisory Board and has done that for eight years.

Our other panelist we are happy to welcome to Brookings for the first time is Dana Perino. Dana currently serves as Assistant to the President and Press Secretary at the White House. And we understand she had one of the best views at this famous shoe incident.

Prior to joining the White House as Deputy Press Secretary, she worked as a Social Director of Communications at the White House Council on Environmental Quality. She is a veteran of the communications area, having covered the State Assembly of Illinois, which we all know now is good preparation for the national political scene, and being a Press Officer in the U.S. Justice Department following the 911 attacks. So with that, I will turn the panel over to Steve.

MR. HESS: Thank you, Darrell. Well, Ron and Mike and Dana, you've all had the same job, the same title, even that same wonderful office on the first floor of the West Wing, about 25 feet away from your boss' office in the Oval Office, and yet beyond the profound difference, the fact that you served three different Presidents of the United States, there are vast changes that have been taking place over time in how our consumers, the nation, receives its information.

In 1974, when Ron became the Press Secretary, to 1994, was that it, 1995, I guess, when Mike became Press Secretary, and then Dana, who has that responsibility now and will turn it over in 2009 to Robert Gibbs. So the nation has gone through Walter Cronkite's world, to Larry King's world, to DailyKos'.

And this will be reflected, has to be reflected, we'll know how it's reflected, in the work of the Press Secretary. I want to go through that quickly so that we get a sense of the movement of this office over time in response to the changes, really the changes in technology.

But, Ron, back when Gerald Ford was President, when did you have to put a lid on the news, that is, telling the reporters that they could go home and you could go home, too; what was your day like?

MR. NESSEN: Well, in some ways I think my life was easier when you look at that aspect of it, because there was no 24 hour a day television, there was no internet, there were no blogs. Essentially, I had one deadline a day, and it was at 6:30 roughly in the evening, because that was when Huntley Brinkley and Walter Cronkite, the two network evening news shows went on the air, and that was the deadline for the first edition of the morning newspapers. Not that I went home at 6:30. In fact, I had a son then who was 18 months, and I would get home about 10:30, and I'd wake him up at 10:30 because that was the only chance I'd get to play with him.

MR. HESS: Okay. Well, let's move on to Mike's day. By now CNN had become big time in the Kuwait War.

MR. McCURRY: Well, see, it's interesting, just to remind everyone how rapidly the internet has come to dominate so much. When I left in 1998, the White House had just begun a web site. There really wasn't much on it except transcripts of my daily briefing, which Lord

knows, I didn't want to revisit at the end of the day. There was one all news channel, CNN, others beginning to be in formation at that point. But in no way had the internet come to dominate the transmission of news to the American people and turn the White House Press Office into the 24/7 operation it's become.

And also, significantly, the major players in the briefing room were still print reporters who worked for a thing called a newspaper, which you can see now at the Smithsonian, and it's just – it's stunning, how much change has happened in just ten years.

MR. HESS: Yeah; so that brings us to Dana, who represents the first 24 hour internet president. Do you ever get home?

MS. PERINO: Well, luckily, with the 24/7 news cycle, technology came along with it, so I can take my office anywhere with my Blackberry.

MR. HESS: Oh, I see.

MS. PERINO: But we don't really get a break. Every news outlet now acts like a wire service, and they're always on deadline, they all want it first, and I think that, in some cases, we've sacrificed accuracy for speed. But there's also some good benefits to it, too. I think more people are seeing the news and getting the news in different ways and we just have to adapt.

MR. HESS: What do you think the adaptation is going to be on January 20 at noon, when the first internet candidate for President

becomes the first internet president? Is the – bringing with him millions of names in a data base? Is that somehow going to even shrink the importance of the White House Press Corps?

MS. PERINO: In my opinion, it doesn't.

MR. HESS: It doesn't.

MR. PERINO: And I think that we shouldn't want it to, because there's something about having to show up every day at the podium and answer questions from reporters who are pushing you for answers and holding leaders accountable. And so I don't think that that fundamental part changes, but I think how people receive their news changes and is changing, and that we all have to adapt to that. But I'm hoping that the newspaper survives.

MR. HESS: Aren't we all? Anybody want to speculate about the world of the Press Corps when Barack Obama becomes President?

MR. McCURRY: I think one of, you know, there's been an evolution as the technologies of the web have come to change both the media and then those of us who are responsible for the public information function inside of government. But the main change is how interactive that technology can make an educated citizenry. You can have people, as President Elect Obama did the other night, conduct their own press conference online and send in, you know, questions that the citizens vote on. You know, what are the things that we really want to ask the

President Elect or the Transition Office, or you know, eventually the White House. So there can be a far more participatory mode.

And then the other thing that I personally hope, and I'd be interested in what Ron and Dana think about this, I would hope that less of the news of the federal government gets funneled through that choke point at the White House every single day.

I think it is really dangerous for all Americans that's so little coverage. And that was happening at all those federal agencies that are responsible for doing the work that they do. In fact, we've paid some price for that because I think people weren't paying attention of what was happening at some of the places that regulate our financial markets, people who are responsible for, you know, safety issues, certainly in one case, disaster relief probably needed more coverage. So I hope one change will be that the Obama Administration pushes the public information function out and empowers people at agencies to become more active in telling the story of all the work that occurs in the federal government.

MR. HESS: Well, Mike, we're on different wave lengths. Barack Obama becomes perhaps the most interesting President of our lifetime. Those that can afford it, like the Washington Post or Politico or Bloomberg or the Wall Street Journal are actually increasing their coverage of him. I would love to think of a president who didn't want to bring news into the White House.

I started with Eisenhower, who had that concept, thought it was a good one, but it sure hasn't been around long, so we have a little dispute going there. We can get back to it.

Then as we all know, you are about to lose your job. And you also know that jobs are hard to come by these days. I've been worrying about this for you, and I have come up with a suggestion, and that is, a new school for presidential press secretaries, Dana Perino proprietor. And until we approve a marketing plan for this, I'm going to serve as your Acting Dean. You recall from your college days that deans are the ones who try to avoid teaching and research. And your professors are here, Professor McCurry and Professor Nessen. So I'm going to outline a tentative schedule of courses, and then I'll ask each of you professors to try to attract potential students by telling us about the highlights of the course you're going to teach.

The first required course for all students will be called Briefing Skills 101. And you would, Dana, will be my chosen teacher, because of your remarkable calm nature on the podium. You may wish to call your course Anger Suppression. But while you're preparing your notes on your course, the next course, which will be only for advanced students, that will be Crisis Management. That will be taught by Professor McCurry. He will have case histories from the Clinton experiences. You're not going to need to prepare for that, Professor.

And then the final third course I'll call Recruitment or Career Choices. Professor Nessen will discuss the pros and cons of going directly from the White House Press Corps to being Presidential Press Secretary, the only one who's done that. But we'll have some guest lectures from Professor McCurry, who will talk about the track of being a professional public relations person, and, of course, from Professor Perino, who has a very – has had many options, as well.

So let's get going with our Briefing Skills, Professor Perino. What could you tell Professor Gibbs, and, of course, your perspective students? What does it mean, standing up there, looking out at these 50 or 60 happy, smiling people, and how do you keep it all going?

MS. PERINO: It's hard to boil it down to one thing. I've had a chance to get to know Robert just a little bit. We had a nice chat when he was over with the President Elect, and we've been in touch a little bit in the middle, in between times.

I've often heard people say, how do you stay so calm at the podium, and I think there's a few reasons, and one of the briefing skills I think that is important is to know your audience. And I try to make sure that I read everything that the reporters in their briefing room are writing. I take an interest in what they're interested in. I try to anticipate their needs. And often times a Press Secretary acts like a reporter themselves, because you get the question and then you have to go track down the information and make sure it's accurate before you give it back out to the

press. I've also started some things where I – I always want to know more than they do. And I study all the time, in terms of – I always read the Secretary of State's briefings every day and the State Department Spokesperson's briefing every day.

For a long time at the White House, before the financial crisis, about 80 percent of the questions we got in the briefing room were foreign policy related. And so I started about a year and a half ago meeting with the National Security Advisor every morning at 6:30. And I always said it would be a much more civilized meeting if it started at 7:00.

Something about getting there at 6:20 is very difficult for me, but it's paid off in spades, because we have 15 to 20 minutes every morning, and it's me, the National Security Advisor, my Deputy, a National Security Council spokesperson, Gordon Jondro, and then General Lute, who oversees Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Deputy National Security Advisor. And that way I'm not surprised by things that they might know about that are coming down the pike, and I can tell them about things I think I might need later on. And so I think it's made things a little bit more efficient for everybody.

MR. HESS: Do you still have what they used to call a gaggle? Maybe they still do.

MS. PERINO: The gaggle was started by Larry Speaks, I think that's right.

MR. HESS: Yeah, I think so.

MS. PERINO: In the Reagan Administration, and it was an on the record, more casual setting in Larry's office, in the Press Secretary's office, and basically they went over the schedule of the day. And this tradition continued for a while. And then there's always the briefing sort of in the middle of the day.

Well, with the 24/7 news cycle, just over time I felt that it became unnecessary, because people wanted that information the night before. And then Ari Fleischer, when he was doing the gaggle, there was so much interest, especially after 911, that there wasn't enough room in the office, so he moved it down to the briefing room, which meant that basically you were doing two briefings a day as the Press Secretary, and they were only about two and a half to three hours apart. And I found that the questions really didn't change that much, participation went down at the second briefing, and the quality I think decreased. So I combined the two. I don't know if Robert will continue that. I told him that I took a vote for him and that he should consider it because it will make his time – he'll be better able to spend his time I think if he does it.

MR. HESS: Okay. Professor McCurry, Crisis Management 101 or 102 or something.

MR. McCURRY: I have to quote Dana in talking about Briefing Skills 101 and a forthcoming article that's in the New York Times Sunday magazine, you've got a great quote, which is that you like to be like a duck, graceful on the surface and paddling like crazy underneath.

That is really exactly what it is. You like to affect the demeanor of the calm, detached, in the crisis, steady as she goes person, while your mind is furiously racing ahead to try to think what am I going to say that will get me out of here alive. And I found –

MS. PERINO: Or without a black eye.

MR. McCURRY: -- I found the first – without people throwing things at you. I found that the first and most important rule, particularly in a crisis atmosphere, and most of those were not having to do with hanky-panky at the White House, believe it or not, but more military action, that the initial things that you hear and the information that comes to you usually turns out to be inaccurate or somehow rather not all that you need. And the hardest thing to do amidst a crisis, where you're trying to get on top of things, there's a feeding frenzy underway, journalists are demanding answers, usually standing outside your door screaming questions, I mean quite literally, the hardest thing is to slow everything down, because the temptation is, with the adrenaline rushing, that you go faster and faster, but what you need to do at that moment is to stop and slow everything down and tell people there aren't going to be answers until later, which is – it requires a great deal of discipline to do that and it's very hard to do. But nine times out of ten, if you rush out and begin to brief, bad things happen.

MS. PERINO: And you never get in trouble for something you didn't say.

MR. McCURRY: That's right. And this is a constant irritant to me, and journalists hate this when I say that, but we are held to a different level of accuracy. We have to be 100 percent right, because if we get it wrong, we lose credibility.

MS. PERINO: We don't have a correction section.

MR. McCURRY: We don't have a correction box, you know, that we can go back and clean things up later. And the press can kind of report what they think is true on a given day and then move on and tell you something different tomorrow, and it makes it a very unfair fight.

MR. HESS: Well, Ron, you had a crisis to manage, too, if I remember, it's called the Vietnam War. Do you want to add your advice to the next Press Secretary, who has some wars?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I think, you know, it was a mixed blessing for me to have – I think being a reporter, and to actually have covered the White House, before then changing sides and being the Spokesman for the White House, I think the biggest problem with it was that I then wasn't trusted by either the reporters or the White House staff.

But, you know, the end of the Vietnam War did occur during the Ford Administration. And I'll never forget the day when I had to stand up and announce that the evacuation of the American Embassy and the American Ambassador had been completed, and that the war was over. And I think – I've listened to that tape and watched that tape over and over again, and having spent a lot of my life as a reporter covering the Vietnam

War, it was a very difficult moment for me, and on the tape I hear my voice like two octaves higher than normal announcing the end of the Vietnam War. You know, I'm going to put my professorial glasses on since we're supposed to be professors, you know, and give the sort of Charlie Gibson look. But I do think I have a couple of rules that I would just pass on.

MR. HESS: Shall we save rules for the end when we all have our rules?

MR. NESSEN: Save the rules to the end?

MR. HESS: Yeah, let's save the rules.

MR. NESSEN: That's fine.

MR. HESS: Because I'm –

MR. NESSEN: No problem.

MR. HESS: -- because McCurry over there has seemed to slip off his crisis, did you notice that? I mean he didn't mention anything about Monica and so forth the year he was there. Surely he had some crisis that he would like to –

MR. McCURRY: I'm very practiced at avoiding talking about Monica.

MR. HESS: Yeah; is this an example of what you are – the line you are famous for, which is telling the truth slowly?

MR. McCURRY: No, actually that was in response to a question from Helen Thomas at a function much like this, and it got me in a great deal of trouble, because the question is, are there any

circumstances under which the Press Secretary can lie, and I said no, and there's a good debate to have about that, because if Jody Powell were here, he would answer yes, because he once did for very good reasons, because lives need to be protected.

But I come down on the side that, no, you can never consciously let that Press Corps – steer them in the direction that you know is not correct. Once that happens, your own credibility never is recaptured, and you're marginalized at best in the role, and you cease to become the asset that the President needs to have at that podium.

Now, that doesn't mean that you just go out and blurt everything you know all the time. There are reasons when you have to, as I just said, you've got to compile a record, you've got to make sure that the information is accurate, what Marlon Fitzwater says, you have to have a process for verifying the information and make sure that that's regularly checked, but it means that sometimes you tell the truth slowly, and that's what – that was my answer, you can't lie, but you have to tell the truth slowly sometimes, and of course, that was interpreted to be that the White House is going to be conniving, withholding information, and it was darkly interpreted, when I actually, frankly, meant that you have to act in the interest of truth and make sure that you're steering the Press Corps ultimately to that destination.

MR. HESS: You –

MR. NESSEN: Well, I also think –

MR. HESS: -- the three of you are sounding awfully pure to me. Now, surely there are techniques to get around things. You know that that reporter over there is always going to ask a question about Pakistan when you really want to have -- get off the economy or whatever. Now, come on, give us a few trade secrets here. We don't have the opportunity to have the three of you together. Ron has his hand up.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I was going to say, just to follow up on Mike, what Mike was saying, you can never lie to reporters, you never should lie to reporters, you can't do it. And at the same time, there's going to be certain things that you just can't respond to, there's going to be certain questions, and I think you have to develop an answer which is something, some version of, you know, I can't talk about that right now, and you have to stick with that, and it keeps you from ever getting into the kind of jam.

And once you destroy your credibility, you can never get it back, so you can't lie. Sometimes you can't tell the truth either. So everybody works out their own little set of language that -- and for me what worked was, I can't talk about that right now. And, look, reporters here right now, they know what that means and they're going to check with you at 3:00 or 5:00 or 6:00 and see if it's -- you can talk about it now.

MS. PERINO: In the 24/7 news cycle, they ask you at 5:12 and 5:14, 5:16.

MR. McCURRY: You know, that's the interesting difference between the process of briefing at the White House and the State Department. It goes to your question at the State Department. The convention is, you get on a topic, and they just bore in, and the reporters there, who, frankly, are usually more substantive and more knowledgeable on the subject than the typical White House reporter who has to be spread across a lot of different subject matters, that they just peel the onion away until there's nothing left and you're the one crying. And at the White House – and then someone says new subject and then they move off and you bore in on the next subject.

The great thing about being at the White House is, you're right, you can manage the room by playing ping pong and calling on different reporters and doing things. The thing that irritated me a lot, they started, I don't know if they still do it, they started doing cutaway shots, where the camera guys would come up on the podium behind you, and it's, you know, it's hard enough to keep your concentration, but you've got these guys who are there, not to get a picture of you, but to take that picture of the correspondent rising in indignation to ask the question. And one –

MS. PERINO: When they practiced all –

MR. McCURRY: When they practiced all morning long to get this right. And my favorite thing to do, I used to do this to Scott Pelly, who was the unfortunate victim, but he'd rise up to voice his, you know,

serious question, and I'd say, Scott, I'll get right back to you, you know, I forgot on the last question –

MS. PERINO: Nice.

MR. McCURRY: So you mess with their heads as much as you can.

MR. HESS: Well, isn't it a little Orwellian here, all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others? Don't you –

MS. PERINO: Well, I got a great tip one time for a former Communications Director at the White House, who said that, if a reporter asks you a question about a story that you really don't want to be talking about too much, when you answer the question, just keep saying their name in the answer, and so they won't be able to quote it really because they won't want to have their name in the answer, so you just say, well, Stephen, as I said, you know, Stephen, it was the way that we talked about earlier, Stephen, and then you won't really get a clean quote. It's a little trick.

MR. HESS: Okay. Anybody else like to give – well, this is a trick, this is advice to the next –

MR. McCURRY: Hey, you know, look, this is the real school for Mr. Gibbs. We're giving up all of our secrets of our –

MS. PERINO: He'll learn them himself.

MR. HESS: Well, how about when we move on or you move on to presidential press conferences. Now, surely there are elements

there that you can pass on to Mr. Gibbs. You've got to prepare the President first; how do you go about that? You start with the meaning of the presidential press conference to you. You didn't use it very much, though, did you, Dana?

MS. PERINO: Well, we did up until the campaign got underway, and then the President made a conscience decision to withdraw himself from that, and so that meant, you know, not doing a lot of press conferences. It didn't mean he didn't answer questions from the press, but we didn't go down to the briefing room and do a lot of press conferences.

I can't tell you how many we've done under my tenure, but we certainly opened it up a little bit more, and we started doing about one or so a month. I think that definitely dropped off, though, in the campaign.

MR. HESS: Right; well, what's the procedure there, do you have Q and A's that you give the President to study?

MS. PERINO: Sometimes, like the night before. I mean remember one of the things I said is, I always listen to everything and watch and read everything that the reporters in the briefing room are thinking. And I can usually anticipate what their questions are going to be, and I usually get the tone just right, too, and then I can just prepare the President that way.

But, you know, once you get into the eighth year of a presidency, after somebody like President Bush who has been in public

office for – this is his 14th year in public office, he knows the answers, for the most part, it's just one of the things he likes to – politicians, in my experience, leaders, don't like to necessarily be surprised by a question.

So it doesn't necessarily mean that you have all the right answers, and I don't script them out and say exactly this, but we talk it through, and it's conversational, and I might flag a couple of things, but he's a remarkably – he's got a remarkable memory, and a great retail politician that he can remind people.

But he also spends time in his press conferences not just giving pat answers, but explaining the decision-making process he went through to get to a particular decision.

MR. HESS: Well, I've noticed, for example, in President Elect Obama's press conferences, and there have been quite a few of them, he has a little card and he calls on a particular reporter. Is this a good way for rewards and punishment? What's going on there?

MR. McCURRY: Well, it can. I want to make a slightly different point, not about the press conference itself, but the act of preparing for a press conference. Actually, I work through the College of Charleston, down in Charleston, we had a little series called the Bully Pulpit Series, and got most of the candidates for president to talk about how they would, you know, function as communicator and chief.

McCain, that's where McCain pledged to hold weekly press conferences, Obama didn't equal that pledge, but has promised to make

this one of the most accessible, transparent presidencies in history. But one of the things that they will all discover, and this is a point that William Saphire makes a lot, which I agree with, that the act of preparing the President for a press conference becomes a very important decision-making event, because when you sit at the President and say, okay, you're going to get this question, and you read what the established guidance is coming from the federal government, and the President says, well, that's just a bunch of hooey, which was very often the response, he said, well, that, Sir, is your policy, so if you want to change it, then get the Secretary on the line, and that happens. What happens in the course of getting a better answer to give, you actually bring some things to a head and make decisions and move on, and I think it serves a great purpose.

MR. HESS: Well, then how come your presidents had so few press conferences?

MR. McCURRY: Well, because they can also divert often to the wilderness of the things that you don't want to talk about sometimes.

MS. PERINO: And I don't think – I think that we had plenty of press conferences. I think we answered a lot of questions from the press. And when the President sits down with a leader – I think only one time since I've been Press Secretary have I seen when the press comes in, and we usually, not lately, but lately, you know, usually take two questions aside, I hardly ever see an American journalist ask a relevant question to the topic of the media, and it sometimes kind of embarrassing,

especially when we travel overseas and they want to ask something about something happening back home that's sort of petty politics, and here you are in the middle of Tanzania, and they can't possibly think of anything to ask about Africa. I mean so I think that the President takes a lot of – any President will take a lot of questions over the course of time, but the set press conference – I mean part of it for me was that you could do a press conference, but I like to have news when you go to a press conference, and that's not always the case.

Sometimes they just look at a date on a calendar and say, well, there's an open date and we have time for a press conference there, and then it's like putting a round, you know, a square peg into a round hole. I don't necessarily like to work that way, I kind of like to have news to announce at a press conference.

MR. HESS: But they always start with some message, don't they? They get the first crack at it.

MS. PERINO: It's not necessarily always news.

MR. HESS: Not news, okay.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I think every president prepares, just to go back to your preparation question, I think every president prepares differently. And I know it had been a custom to do these make belief press conferences; you'd get a bunch of aids sitting around your desk firing questions at you. President Ford preferred to prepare by being given written material on anticipated questions, and then he would just sit

quietly in the Oval Office himself and read that material and prepare, you know, what he was going to – what his answers would be if he were asked those questions.

MR. HESS: It's a good moment to talk a little for an audience who haven't necessarily become experts on this, on where the White House Press Office fits into the whole picture. Do you have – do you report directly to the President, for example, Dana?

MS. PERINO: We all report to the Chief of Staff.

MR. HESS: To the Chief of Staff, okay.

MS. PERINO: Yeah; and one of the nice things about working for President Bush has been that he has always believed that the Press Secretary should be allowed to have a seat at the table if they want it, and I've taken full advantage of that. And being able to be there during a decision-making process helps you be a better Press Secretary because you understand how a decision was made and then you can – you have that foundation to draw upon when you're answering questions to the press. So, yeah, I get to see him when I need to, but I also – I try not to be a pest.

MR. HESS: Not a pest; well, how do you relate then to someone who is called the Director of Communications?

MS. PERINO: So Ed Gillespie and I work really well together. I sort of see it as, in any company there's marketing and retail sales.

MR. HESS: I see.

MS. PERINO: And that's kind of a simplistic way to look at it. But Ed Gillespie has a lot of responsibilities. There's the communications part of it, there's also the political angle that he does, and he oversees speech writing. But we have a very cohesive unit. We work very well as a team, and often times I try to preview the President's speeches, and I can call the speech writer, because I've seen him in the morning meeting, and ask for him to give me a little summary and talk about the speech and the meaning – the purpose of the speech and what we're trying to convey, and then I can translate that into the briefing, and then someone else in communications will maybe write up a fact sheet about it, and then it will go to the web site people who put it up there, so we all work really closely together.

MR. HESS: But you don't start – it's a question, I'm making it sound as if it's a statement. As, for instance, we were told with Ronald Reagan where the senior staff meets, and there's a message that goes out for the day, or you hope to?

MS. PERINO: Sure, we do do that.

MR. HESS: You do that.

MS. PERINO: We do, yes. There's lots of different ways to do it. You have a calendar where you plan three months out. I'll never forget the day about a month and a half ago when we started planning three months out and we ran out of days, and the meeting was much

shorter than usual. But you do try to do that, and you – sometimes there's events or anniversaries, like if it was the anniversary of the President's announcement of the surge, then you might talk about – you might plan on talking about the surge that day, and then – or like yesterday, the President went to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to the Army War College, and he talked about the transformation of the military and the future of hard and soft power working together, and so we worked things around that and did some echoing around that. You might have seen today that the Vice President did an interview yesterday with the Washington Times, in which he talked about how the President has kept us safe since 911. And Secretary Rice did an interview this morning with CNN around that.

So we try to work across the agencies and do everything in addition. Oh, I'm sorry, Secretary Chertoff also had a Q and A today in *USA Today* regarding the same subject. So we do try to message around things, but also, things just happen to you, news comes to you at the White House.

MR. McCURRY: It's interesting that that structure, which was largely what existed in the Clinton White House and I think probably for the Ford White House, too, is largely unchanged since the time of Richard Nixon. It was really Herb Cline in the 1970's that set up this parallel structure of a communications office that really was in product development, message development, and then a press office that had the press secretary out running the retail sales operation. One point I would

make, Steve, about the role of the press secretary, and I know you and I have talked about this before, it's very hard to be a participant in the policy-making process if you want to do the job effectively. You're much better if you are kind of the fly on the wall, in at every meeting, watching the interaction of the President's Cabinet officers and senior staff all arguing points of view. But once you enter into that process and have your own opinion, everybody in your – all your colleagues know that, and you lose something that I found very valuable.

I always wanted to be spun by the people who are actively in the policy-making process. I wanted to hear the Secretary of Commerce give his line versus what the Secretary of Health and Human Services might be saying, because they'd both comment, sort of say, here's what's really important, here's what you really need to know on this issue, because then you could then see how the President was going to sort it all out, and you'd lose that if you were, you know, sort of taking your own position, plus you would just suffer criticism from people who'd say, well, McCurry did a bad job on that issue because we know he disagreed with what the President decided to do at the end of the day, so you didn't want to expose yourself to that kind of criticism.

MR. HESS: Ron, I know we've talked about part of this before, the question of getting your information and getting access, not from the President, but from the rest of the staff, the idea that to talk to you is a sort of risky thing, because through your mouth, it goes out to all of

these nattering nabobs who call themselves reporters. Do you want to – is that the case?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I really think that's the single most important issue that we could talk about. And everybody has a different concept of the job. My concept of the job was that I was going to answer the questions. I was the President's spokesperson literally, and that I spoke for him.

Now, he couldn't come down to the briefing room every day and answer questions, so I was going to answer the questions as he would answer them if he were there, it's his view point. And I was often asked follow-up questions like, Ron, do you agree with that, and my answer was, who gives a damn.

MS. PERINO: It doesn't matter.

MR. NESSEN: I mean the Press Secretary is not a political figure, he's not an elected person, he is a spokesperson, he speaks for the President, and so I always kept that in mind, to answer the questions as I thought the President would answer them, which means, you know, the second part of your question is, so how do you get your information, and I think press secretaries get in big trouble when they go to somebody on the White House staff and say, you know, I was asked about so and so, what shall I say, and they get spun by somebody on the White House staff who has his own little ax to grind.

And I had covered the White House for NBC News before I was asked to be Press Secretary, and I had this conversation with Ford when he asked me, and I told him this, and I said, I need to get my information first hand and not second hand, and he said, that's the only kind of Press Secretary I want.

And I was free to attend all the meetings, listen to the conversations, discussions, and get my information that way. Now, you know, to make sure the historic record is correct, I did have a little more problem getting that done when Kissinger was the National Security Advisor and he wanted, in a way, to be his own press secretary. But basically, I think the press secretary has to get his information directly first hand or else he can get himself into big trouble.

MR. HESS: Everybody else shaking their head yes?

MS. PERINO: Well, I think that – yes, I think that that's true. We haven't had a lot of problems with that. Although I think that there are some people that, in policy-making positions, who think it's better for the press secretary, they think they're protecting you if you don't know something, because as we just said, you can't lie to the press, so they don't want to put you in a position where you're going to have to lie to the press.

But I think one of the things that I've done that I would think Robert Gibbs might want to consider doing is this relationship I have with the Chief of Staff and with the National Security Advisor and the Director

of Communications or Counselor to the President, Ed Gillespie, is very close, and we have a lot of trust, and they know that I have a compartment in my brain where things go and don't come out that helps me be a better press secretary.

But I do think that often times people think that they're helping you if they don't tell you something. But I think we've busted that myth, for the most part, around the Bush White House.

MR. NESSEN: It's not what you know that gets you in trouble at the podium, it's what someone forgot to tell you.

MS. PERINO: That's right.

MR. McCURRY And that's classically where people end up having a mistake. But it also requires, and Dana put it well, you get to study like hell every day, and you get – you're taking a graduate oral exam every day at 1:00 and mastering the material, really getting all the documents, reading the intelligence, reading the speeches that other Cabinet officials have given to kind of pick up language that's important, that all goes into the job.

MR. NESSEN: Well, one of the great lessons along that line that I ever learned on that job, when I first came in, and Al Hague was the Chief of Staff, but in his last week in getting ready to go to Brussels, to Nat, and I spent a lot of time with him trying to absorb a lot of information, and one of the things that I'll never forget he said, along the lines of what Mike just said was, he pointed to his head and he said, there are three

great computers in the White House who have to know everything, the President, the Chief of Staff, and the Press Secretary, and I really think that that, you know, Hague's rule holds true today, too.

MS. PERINO: Marlon Fitzwater had a great line, because he said – Terry Hunt of the Associated Press told me that Marlon told him one time, you only know 50 percent of what's going on in this building and I only know 80 percent.

MR. HESS: Okay. Now I'm going to ask you the most difficult question so far, the one most likely to get you in trouble, and that's going to be how you assess the White House Press Corps, your colleagues. And I'm going to ask you to quantify and then you can say on the other hand. So, Ron, on the scale of one being terrible and ten being terrific, how do you rate the White House Press Corps accuracy and fairness toward your President, Gerald Ford?

MR. NESSEN: Toward my President?

MR. HESS: Yes; I'll write down your answers right now.

MR. NESSEN: Well, do I get to explain my answer?

MR. HESS: No, later, that comes later. First you give me a score, then you explain.

MR. NESSEN: Fifty.

MR. HESS: Fifty, okay. Mike, Bill Clinton, fairness and accuracy towards your President?

MR. McCURRY: Seven point five.

MR. HESS: Seven point five, oh my goodness.

MS. PERINO: I have to work there for 32 more days.

MR. HESS: That's what I was worried about, I know that, you're right out – you can be as – well, I'll tell you what, we will give you some points for –

MS. PERINO: The White House Press Corps, the ones who sit in the room, I'd say about an eight.

MR. HESS: Okay.

MS. PERINO: But I think it's outside of the briefing room, and the numerous opinion bloviators, I guess they call them, that are not fair at all, I give them a zero.

MR. HESS: Okay. Bloviators, zero, press, your own friends, eight. And it's interesting, because Ron back then, years – in ancient history, you gave them a lower mark.

MR. NESSEN: A five.

MR. HESS: Yeah.

MR. NESSEN: Yeah, but don't forget, Steve, you have to remember when that was, it was right after Watergate, it was right after Ziegler, it was right after Jerry Terhorst, my immediate predecessor, had resigned to protest the pardon of Nixon. And you had just had all these years, when two guys who never went inside the White House gate, Woodward and Bernstein, broke the biggest story in decades. The people who were in the White House, covering the White House, were shut out of

that story, and they were angry about it, and they, you know, wanted to show their anger.

And the reason I gave them a five is, I had covered the White House as a correspondent, under Lynden Johnson and under Jerry Ford, and I was an old fashioned journalist, and I guess in some ways still an old fashioned journalist, and I thought you asked questions to get facts that you could sit down and write a story from.

I think what happened during that era and what continues until today and why I give it a five is, how many questions have we all had to answer that start off with something like, do you mean to try to convince me that, or why in the world would the president do da, da, da, da, da, accusatory questions, or questions that are based from a point of view, and that's why I – and I think it all goes back to Watergate, I think that's changed the relationship, and that's why I gave it a five.

MR. HESS: Well, that's fair enough. And I'll give Dana a buy on her eight. But I am a little surprised, Mike, on your 7.5.

MR. McCURRY: Well, I mean it's a more complicated answer --

MR. HESS: Give an answer.

MR. McCURRY: -- then that, because I agree with Dana, that the reporters who kind of show up who are regularly assigned to that beat, who worked there day in and day out, are among the finest journalists that you can find anywhere in the world --

MS. PERINO: Absolutely.

MR. McCURRY: -- because they are really at the top of that profession, which now is, unfortunately, a very troubled profession. But they did good work, they were capable of doing outstanding reporting. They often were caught in the circumstance where they couldn't convince editors and others that there were other things going on.

I mean during the Monica Lewinsky matter, which was, you know, fortunately only one year of the four years that I had the job, they couldn't find the off button on that story, and they all hated it, and they got sick and tired of covering it. Many of them knew that their skills as some of the best reporters in the world were being squandered on a story that, you know, the American people had largely moved beyond, and yet they couldn't kind or reorient the work they were doing. So I don't fault them. That's why I give the reporters who were actually there 7.5.

Now, I agree, their news organizations, the commentariate surrounding that White House Press Corps might get a different grade when it comes to the totality of the coverage of Bill Clinton, but, you know, look, they I think, on balance, were fair to him.

MR. HESS: You have the last crack at that question then.

MS. PERINO: Well, I think one thing that's interesting, just to talk about the 24/7 news cycle and what's happened, one thing you'll find, that newspapers increasingly have news analysis pieces, and for a press secretary, those are really hard to deal with, because in many

cases, though some analysis can be well done, often times it's just thinly veiled opinion. And so you have a journalist who, if a story breaks at 8:00 in the morning, it takes somebody from one of the daily papers. They will have written about that story three times before 5:00 p.m., because they have to file for the web. And so their editors want something new and different for the morning. Well, news doesn't really change that much over a 24 hour period, so the only thing that's new for them to write is analysis.

And then the next day they come back and want to be treated like an objective journalist. And it's become a real problem for us. And I think that the next president will have that issue, too.

MR. HESS: Now, we can come back, Ron, I cut you off before, about the question of proposals or suggestions, how did you phrase it, for the future, for the –

MR. NESSEN: Some suggestions for the new Press Secretary?

MR. HESS: Yeah, fair enough, so you've got some suggestions?

MR. NESSEN: Oh, well, I jotted a few down.

MR. HESS: Okay.

MR. NESSEN: And some we've talked about, never lying, never cover up, you know, and I can't talk about that right now. Never give a reporter information off the record unless you want to see it on the front page of the Washington Post, because I don't think anything stays off

the record in Washington these days. Leave the leaking to others. The Press Secretary is the official public spokesman. Everything you say should be on the record and available to everybody covering the White House. Never expect to see your family until the term of the president is over. Develop – well, I already talked about get your information first hand. And I guess my last rule would be, develop a very thick skin.

The current honeymoon will be over eventually and you'll need a thick skin. I didn't have a very thick skin in those days, and I was a little testier than I should have been, but that would be my other suggestion.

MR. HESS: Okay. Mike, your turn.

MR. McCURRY: Well, that is a great list, and I don't disagree with that. I think the only thing I would add to it would be to figure out how to undo something that I am mostly responsible for, which was making the daily press briefing available for television coverage. Now, I did that for good reason, I did it, frankly, not for television, I did it for the radio reporters who had to go out and report hour on the hour from the White House and needed availability of sound just to kind of make their news reports more interesting during the day. But what I failed to do was to – I should have implemented the rule that exists at the State Department, which is that the briefing is not a live news event, it is something that is part of the source material that a reporter uses to figure out how to cover whatever the story is that's being covered. It's not in and

of itself an event that is worthy of, you know, being transmitted immediately.

And if I could go back and undo something, I would say, look, we're going to have the same rule here that exists at the State Department, which is no live transmission or coverage of the briefing until it's over unless there's critical breaking news that gets made somehow or other, in which case the senior correspondent who is in the room requests what's called a filing break, I think that's what they call it.

MR. HESS: It might be a good point. But when the mantra is transparency with a new president coming in, could you really seriously go back and close the door on –

MR. McCURRY: Yes, because what –

MR. HESS: All right.

MR. McCURRY: -- the purpose of this briefing is to illuminate and provide additional material information help to people who are trying to cover what the president has done, and the president is not in the room. So it's like any other material that a reporter would gather, whether they'd go check their information with other sources, interview other people, it's one of the ingredients that goes into what the work product is, which is the story about whatever is being covered.

And my argument would be, that doesn't have to, you know, that's the sausage being made, you don't need to put that and blast that out on live television. During the Monica Lewinsky matter, I got told by

more than one executive editor that the reason – the only reason it was being carried live by CNN was because it boosted their ratings, you know, it became a soap opera, and that's not a good reason to do it.

MR. HESS: Can I make a suggestion to you, Mike?

Tomorrow morning on the netroots, if not within 12 seconds, it will say, McCurry says you're not entitled to any presidential news unless you're there, unless you can afford to be sitting there in that room in front of the spokesman.

MR. McCURRY: No, that's not what I'm saying, because there's a transcript that gets made. I mean people would have access to that material. But it's just, you know – and frankly, they'd have to show up then. A lot of the best reporters do phone it in, because they don't, you know, they don't think that a lot of the briefing turns into Mickey Mouse stuff, so they don't go and attend, and it would actually force some of them to come down and participate, which I think would be a good thing.

MR. HESS: Okay.

MS. PERINO: Unfortunately, I think the horse is out of the barn, but –

MR. McCURRY: I know.

MS. PERINO: I think it's an interesting – it's interesting to think about, because I do think that there are some people that play to the cameras and they don't show up. And one news organization ended up getting moved back in the briefing room, which is a big deal, but it was

because they didn't show up. And it wasn't my decision, it was the WHCA Board decision, but it does happen.

MR. McCURRY: The White House Correspondents Association.

MS. PERINO: Right.

MR. McCURRY: They made the decision.

MR. HESS: But, you know, what you read on the front page of the New York Times today, on the shrinking Washington Bureau, you go to my little book, plug for my little book, What Can We Do Now, and you would find in it, on two pages, the Press – there it is, page 108 and 109, this is the 2008 White House Press Corps. There is Dana right up on top at the podium. These are the people she faces across there. Take a look at this book tonight, if you want, and then look at it again on January 20th.

MS. PERINO: So many changes already.

MR. HESS: And you can already see the gaps just happening. November 30th, close down the San Diego Union Tribune, there it is, cross it out, find another job for George Conden in –

Cox, closing down April 1st, somebody needs another job there. Already, *Houston Chronicle*, where is Julie Mason today, well, she's had to go to the *Examiner*, we can move her down there, and so it goes.

MR. McCURRY: But, look, that is about the failure of an economic model that is today's journalism. What we are missing is the new economic model that turns providing information to the American people into a profitable business again, and that's going to come. You know, Google will buy the New York Times or something will happen that will refashion the way in which the news product is provided, because there's no less interest in the American people and what is happening in Washington, particularly in the middle of some of the things our country is facing.

MR. HESS: Okay. But Robert Gibbs is going to look out on a lot of empty chairs.

MS. PERINO: No, I don't think so.

MR. HESS: You don't think so?

MS. PERINO: Absolutely not.

MR. HESS: Okay, go on.

MS. PERINO: I think that the briefing room will be packed, I think it will be standing room only for about eight to nine months, maybe ten months, and then it will drop off after that, because people will come on a day-to-day basis. I think it will be a huge interest.

MR. McCURRY: And there will be new media.

MR. NESSEN: But the Obama organization has already demonstrated that it is very much aware of the fact that more and more people are getting their news from the internet, and they have taken

advantage of that. Now, for readers and for reporters, there's a huge disadvantage, and that is, all my life as a journalist, I couldn't get anything on the air, I couldn't get anything in the paper until it went through a final editing process by an editor or a producer. With the internet, you write whatever you feel like writing, you hit the send button, and it goes to three billion people around the world. That's a big change in journalism and that's something that the Obama White House is going to have to cope with, I think.

MR. HESS: Can I give – the others had their suggestions; would you like to add some?

MS. PERINO: Well, one thing I would mention, and it happened to me this weekend when we were in Iraq, I – we left Saturday night at 9:00 p.m., it was in the cloak of darkness, and right – during the first meeting, when the President was meeting with President Talibani, I had several young Iraqi's come up to me and ask if they could get their picture with me and I said sure.

So we're getting our picture taken, and they said, we listen to you every day on Voice of America, and that phrase caught me. I know it's a brand, right, and it's an agency, a government agency, but the Voice of America is a really important thing to think about, because whereas before all of this great technology that we have today, the White House Press Secretary would say something, and maybe, you know, a week later it would make it overseas. But we say something now and it impacts

somebody instantly. And I remember having someone from Lebanon tell me, it means so much to us every day to hear that the President is standing with us during the Cedar Revolution, and I've heard that in Japan and South Korea regarding North Korea, and I've heard it in Israel, and Africa, when we went to Africa.

So it really is an opportunity to talk to the whole world at the same time. So whereas you need to know your audience that's right there, those 25 people, and those are the people you have to answer the questions from, you really are speaking on behalf of America, and it's a very important position to keep and something to keep in mind.

MR. HESS: Okay. Let's open up for some questions. Back there, hand up, can we get a microphone over to – tell your name for the record, for the rest of us, as well.

MR. BERGER: My name is Joe Berger. I wanted to talk a little bit about the future, like the Obama Press Office, that Mr. Nessen brought up. Over the summer we saw more and more videos being put up on the campaign web site, little two minute shots of Obama speaking directly to supporters. That list is going into the new White House, they have access to it. And looking at this, I've been thinking about this recently, this sort of provides a way for the White House to go directly to the people without having to go through the press and the media.

And mixing this with something else, there's a practice in the internet of emailing questions and having them answered, and I wondered

if you're Robert Gibbs, do you think about this and think to yourself, what if we do a peoples' press conference, have people supporters email in their questions and then have two minute shots or videos every week of Obama answering selected questions specifically, that's one idea.

But I was wondering for all three of you, where do you see the future of like press office strategies going and does the media get out?

MS. PERINO: I think that's certainly – I think that's a possibility. I mean we do something at the White House now called Ask the White House, which is – it's like a log thing where people email in, and you don't know who they are, but there are questions, and we invite guests from all across the administration and allow them a chance to talk about things. So doing that through – on video, I think that's probably the way of the future and the way it's going to be. But I just think that there is something important about the free press and a vibrant free press. I've been with the President to a lot of countries that are nascent democracies, and one of the things he always tells their leaders, and if we meet with a group of young journalists, is that in any country, democracy is so important to have a strong national defense, but it's even more important to have a strong free press.

And I think the demise of the media, I shouldn't say demise, but the troubles that they're in right now and what we see in terms of the drop offs, I don't think that's necessarily good.

I think it's fine to talk directly to the people, look, we would love that, you didn't have to go through the media and you could just tell everybody exactly what you think, but the media play a very important role, and I hate to see it. I want more reporters, not less.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I think what you describe is the dream of every president and every press secretary, which is to be able to go over the heads of the press and talk directly to the people, and I, you know, without having the filter and the – of the news media. And I think we are very fast approaching that because of the technology and the internet and so forth. And to me, one of the key questions that is going to have to be answered in the next few weeks is, will President Obama get to keep his Blackberry.

MR. McCURRY: I agree that you – having a more interactive dialogue with the American people is one of the things that the internet allows and that is important. That could actually be a really important feature of how a White House communicates.

But I think distinguishing between that, which is almost a process of governing, versus the public information function, the public's right to know and the obligation of those in elected positions to make information available and to make processes transparent, I think that is a very critical place to think, and I think the press is the entity that is most responsible for holding accountable people who are elected to office for that public information function.

And so I don't think we should ever lose that. In fact, as I would argue, we've got to increase the availability of information and empower people in other parts of government to tell their story to get their information out to make their records available. And I would hope that in the future we do that, because I believe that there is much more information that the American people deserve to get than they are getting currently and a model in which they all kind of come and talk to the press secretary at the briefing room every day instead of going out there where these stories actually reside.

MR. HESS: There was a hand over here, yeah, back there. And your name?

MR. BLUM: Thank you; David Blum from American University. To Mr. McCurry and to Mr. Nessen I'd ask, how have – who actually has followed the President into retirement – White House Press Office? I guess also – but also to Ms. Perino, then I would ask, how will President Bush be following into his retirement speaking to the press?

MR. McCURRY: Well, I think – you mean President Clinton, how has he interacted with the press in retirement? He's had – he has a press office at the William J. Clinton Foundation that processes requests much like the White House Press Office did. In fact, veterans of the White House Press Office from his tenure as President have served as his spokesmen at his foundation, and they interact with the press that covers him. And he has, you know, done a lot of work in which he's been in the

public eye and wants to be in the public eye. So he's maintained some level of accessibility, although, obviously, things have changed for him as his career changed, and it will change even more going forward.

MR. NESSEN: He'll get the first gentleman's press secretary. No, he's not going to get that.

MR. McCURRY: I think there are probably some very elaborate rules that have been negotiated about how available he's going to be for the press. I will only speculate on that.

MR. HESS: Was there a second part to that question? I'm sorry.

MS. PERINO: The President will be opening what he's going to call the Freedom Institute, and it will be built on the campus of Southern Methodist University, which is where Mrs. Bush went to university, and the President and Mrs. Bush will live in Dallas, and they'll have their ranch in Crawford, as well.

But he plans to bring in and create a public policy institute, one that is non-partisan and that helps leaders from around the world learn how to be better leaders. And he's already tapped people like Tony Blair and former President Asnar to come and be a part, to train leaders like Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, who doesn't need much more training, but obviously came to America and was educated here, went back to his country, and is trying to build a democracy, and he's facing a lot of head

winds right now, but he's doing very well under the very stressful circumstances.

The President wants to bring people like him back and help him train other leaders. So I think that's one of the things that he'll do. And, of course, he's going to need to continue to talk to the press, and he'll write a book.

But I think that there's still a market out there for good stories, and people want to hear from their leaders and understand some of the big consequential decisions that he made.

MR. HESS: Do you have a question here? And then we'll get the question there.

MR. MEE: My name is Josh Mee, I'm with the Saban Center here at Brookings. I have a question. Earlier, Ms. Perino, you said that press secretaries have a seat at the table and that's something that they're afforded. And, of course, this was an issue of serious debate a while ago when Scott McClellan came out with his book, do they actually have a seat at the table, what does that table actually mean. And so I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about how the president, particularly, you know, President Bush, what does he allow the press secretary to sit on, has that changed over the course of time?

And maybe just generally to the other panelists, what is it that the press secretary is privy to, and what is it that they're not, and what

do you think that you need to sort of take the extra step to say, I need to be privy to this, I'm curious as to what that tension looks like.

MS. PERINO: Well, I've always said I think that you can be, in our administration, as active a press secretary as you want to be. And for me, that has meant getting there at 6:20 in the morning to meet with Steve Hadley, which has been a huge benefit to me and to the press, because they know that I know the answers to the questions that they have.

Yes, there are things that I don't know about, there's things I don't need to know about, there's things that only very few people in our government who are working very hard to protect us know about. But I'll give you an example. The night of the Mumbai bombings, it was a Wednesday night, that was the night before Thanksgiving, the next morning we were in the situation room, and I was there, and I was there Friday and Saturday and Sunday, and I was there, and I was able to give a flavor for the work that we were doing to try to help the Indians and the Pakistanis avoid conflict and try to work things out.

But I didn't tell them everything that was going on, but I was there. But I'm sure, you know, there are things that – you can't be everywhere all at the same time. But one of the things that's also helped us a lot is, I have a Chief of Staff, Josh Bolton, who welcomes me everywhere. I've never – I think I've only had to ask to be included in

maybe a couple of meetings where I thought I was being excluded or just forgotten, you know. I don't think – I've never had that problem.

MR. McCURRY: I think you have to learn discernment about what meetings you really need to be at. I mean there were endless scheduling meetings that, you know, I, frankly, would send one of my staff people to because I didn't want to be a part of it. But then there were also moments where you had elected not to attend a meeting, and I will credit, I also had Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles, John Podesta, and Leon Panetta, three of them that I work with, who were very protective of my interests, but so was the President. I mean President Clinton would stop meetings sometimes and say, well, you all better get Mike in here because the press will be all over him on this, I want him, you know, to hear this.

And having someone looking out for your interests, to make sure that you are going to be able to capture some of the flavor of the decision-making, is very, very important.

MR. HESS: Right behind you.

MR. FALK: I'm Stanley Falk; Ms. Perino, does the Vice President have a press person and how do you interrelate?

MS. PERINO: Sure, he does, he has Leann McBride, who's Director of Communications, and Meagan Mitchell, the Press Secretary. It's interesting, I saw one of the things that he said in the Washington Times this morning, one of the reasons he hasn't said much is because the way he set it up with the President is that he was there to give

confidential advice and confidential advice is not something he was going to talk about. But he's a man of few words, but he does have a press secretary. And we have a morning meeting every day at 8:00 that Ed Gillespie hosts, and they're always there.

MR. FALK: Do you talk back and forth about how you're going to answer or handle certain stories or –

MS. PERINO: Sometimes; I mean but we're usually all on the same page, so it hasn't been a problem.

MR. NESSEN: We had interestingly – Al Gore participated, we were talking about preparing for press conferences, Vice President Gore used to attend all of those sessions when we were preparing for a press conference, and invariably he would have suggestions for answers, and he would also be the one person in the room that, when the President got really angry about a question he was like to be asked, Vice President Gore was the person who could probably best calm him down a little bit.

MS. PERINO: Sometimes the Vice President joins us for those, too, but not all the time.

MR. NESSEN: Well, President Ford's Vice President was Nelson Rockefeller, and Nelson Rockefeller, I think the great thing he brought to the White House was that he had a core of people, very talented, very dedicated, very smart people that he brought into the White House, and that was a great help for the Ford Administration.

MR. GOOD: My name is David Good, and now I work for an Indian multi national group called the Tartar Group. I used to be in the State Department doing work with Mike McCurry, which was a great thrill. My question is, and I guess it's to Ms. Perino, and that is, how many of those 25 or 30 seats in the briefing room are held by what you might call the new media and by internet based, and how open is the White House Correspondents Association to having the new media there?

MS. PERINO: There's not as many as there might be in the future. I think they're probably quite open to it, especially as Steven was saying, that when some of those other news organizations have fallen off, the seats open up. Part of coming to the briefing room every day and actually having a seat with your name on it means that you come every day, you're serious about it, you're a serious journalist, and you know, they make some of the judgments.

So I think that they're probably going to be very open to that in the future. Politico has a seat. They also produce a hard copy. But I'm trying to think of any others, but I can't think of any off the top of my head that actually have a seat in the briefing room right now. I apologize for the one that is, and I'm not mentioning them.

SPEAKER: Remind me, wasn't there some sort of dispute or history about bloggers getting credentials to the White House?

MS. PERINO: Well --

SPEAKER: Fill that one in for me.

MS. PERINO: -- sometimes -- you know, I didn't -- it's very hard sometimes. How do you decide who's a journalist and who's not? I'm not saying that bloggers can't be -- a blogger can be a journalist and journalists can be a blogger, but there's only so many seats in the briefing room, and so how do you make those decisions? I mean that's really hard, and I think that's something that the new administration is probably going to have to grapple with a little bit along with the White House Communications Association, just because the room is really not that big, so you can't accommodate everybody.

MR. McCURRY: I always felt that those kinds of decisions you sent back to the White House Correspondents Association, which is the committee that represents the interest of the press that cover the White House on a full-time basis, because inevitably, if you made a decision like that, they would claim that you were playing favorites off against each other. And even though I think, unlike you, I didn't -- I refused to get involved in where people are going to sit in the room.

MS. PERINO: Well, I haven't either, but Ari did, Ari Fleischer did, and I -- he's braver than I am. I just don't get involved.

MR. McCURRY: I would always get back. I would invariably be asked by news organizations that were up and rising, some of the, you know, newer creations, can't we get a seat that's closer to the front, and I'd say that's a very good question, you should have the White House Correspondents Association present me a plan and I will duly consider it.

And, of course, they could never agree amongst themselves, it was a good way of killing them.

MS. PERINO: Good strategy.

MR. HESS: There's a question right here.

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks; Gary Mitchell from the Mitchell Report. And I want to ask a question that comes to the point about one never lies, one never misrepresents from the podium. And I want to use two examples from the Clinton Administration and the Bush Administration. And I hope that the question will be viewed as a positive attempt to get at something, but I won't pretend it's an easy one. There was a long period of time when the President, when President Clinton was maintaining that things that happened didn't happen. I don't think I need to go into the details. And I believe –

MR. McCURRY: You might as well, everyone else does, the Monica Lewinsky matter, and I'm watching at home.

MR. MITCHELL: Right.

MR. McCURRY: Turn down your TV's if you've got children in the room.

MS. PERINO: For those too young to not know. It might be something unfamiliar.

MR. MITCHELL: And I believe that a large chunk of the American public knew that was the case. I would say the same thing is

true with President Bush on – limited to issues relating to whether the United States was involved in torture, et cetera.

The official point of view from these two White Houses was not true. The perception in the public was, we don't believe that. And as it turns out, the public was right. And my question is, how then does – it must be extraordinarily difficult for a press secretary to be in a situation where, as I've described it, you're free to disagree with that description, but I'm interested to know, how do you negotiate, how do you navigate the fundamental commitment you have not to dissemble from the podium, not to mislead, and yet be forced to deal with a situation where it is clear that the truth is not forthcoming from the White House?

MS. PERINO: Want me to go first?

MR. McCURRY: I have an easier time of that, so I'll go first. We've talked a lot about the process by which you do that job and scrounge to get the information that you need and have to kind of go pry it out of people sometimes in order to make sure that you've got what you need as you step up to answer questions.

Now, everything about the Monica Lewinsky matter for me was the complete reverse of that, because from the moment the story broke in January of 1998, and not until eight months later did President Clinton have to come before the American people and apologize for having misled them, did we get to the place where you could actually say comfortably that we know now what he had said back at the beginning

was not true or involved the tortured definition of sexual relations that probably wouldn't pass muster in most American homes, to put it charitably. Now, I elected early, from the very first day of that matter, to say I am not going to answer questions on this or go beyond or probe or have conversations with the President that will expose him to legal jeopardy, because he was under investigation in a very determined way by Judge Kenneth Star in the Office of Independent Council, and I was not going to expose myself to a raft of legal bills because I would get subpoenaed by said Judge Star if I stood up and said, well, I talked to the President about this and here's the matter.

So if you recall, I had this nice little piece of paper, a statement embedded by the President's lawyers in a setting of privilege, so that he had legal privilege, and I refused to say anything beyond what was on that piece of paper, and famously said over and over again, I'm not going to parse this statement or try to interpret this statement. And the Press Corps was obviously very angry about that and wanted more, but I knew there were things that I didn't know. And there was one case where, in fact, I did not want to know. And so as a result, I don't think, I mean others can address my record, but I don't think I ever dug the hole deeper that President Clinton had put himself in because he was not truthful with the American people from the beginning. And, of course, you all know the end of the story, he had to come forward, had to tell the truth, had to apologize for misleading the American people. And I think as he has

written himself, he knows that he paid some price in history for his own behavior, and that's something that he wrestles with even still today.

But the danger – I remember very clearly thinking to myself, this is where press secretaries, you know, can die a lingering death, once they try to explain things that they're not confident that they know the truth about. This is what happened to Ziegler in Watergate, it's what happens, you know, had happened to other press secretaries. I said I am going to avoid that dilemma by just basically absenting myself from any effort to get more information.

That was the painful thing, was I took, as you can tell, I took some pride in being on top of the information. And so to be in a place where you consciously said I know nothing, I will tell you nothing, was not a happy place to be. And, you know, and I – the President apologized to all of us for his behavior, but the apologies that he gave to his staff were especially appreciated and especially warranted.

MS. PERINO: I couldn't disagree with you more. I think that the record on this will show that the administration sought and got legal opinions to allow interrogations of hardened terrorists who knew information that could lead to other attacks on our country. And 911 changed this president in a way that none of us can understand.

When you're responsible and you take a solemn oath to protect the United States citizens, and 3,000 of your fellow citizens die in one day because 19 men flew airplanes into buildings, he swore to the

American people that he would do everything he needed to do to protect this country, and what he did was legal.

I think that some people unfortunately have conflated. Well, you can disagree with me and shake your head, but I'm telling you that the legal opinions were there, and Secretary Rice has said the same, President Bush has said that, and I believe that the record will show it.

And I have no problem standing up at the podium and saying, yes, there was interrogation of hardened terrorists who were determined to kill Americans, I have absolutely no problem with it at all. I do think that some people conflate the atrocities of – which was not the policy of the United States, these were wayward flag officers. It was not the policy of the United States. And I see heads shaking in the room, but I ask you to go back and look. That was not something that President Bush authorized, not something discussed in the National Security Council, and those soldiers paid a price for their mistake, and so did America. But that was not the policy of the United States, and I have no problem standing up and saying it.

MR. HESS: There's a hand back there, yeah, right on the – Charles.

MR. IRVIN: I'm Charles Irvin. My question really relates to something that has been brought up repeatedly, about the effects of the decline of the 25 people who are receiving the news from the President and assisting, in effect, the President presenting a presidential policy for

the United States. Because we've all seen West Wing, we understand what the importance of that is in subject after subject. But the subjects that are chosen are by the press, they're the ones that appear in the New York Times, they are the ones that appear in the Washington Post, and then obviously the President seeks to present other subjects that are just not followed or not exciting. The new world has the possibility of, as you've suggested, more important press officers in each of the 170 agencies that report to the President, each of whom would be presumably presenting the news of that agency to a client base that commercially was developing around those agencies.

In the process of that centrifugal, or actually the opposite force, there's the possibility that the President loses what he currently has, the ability to communicate a consistent set of themes to at least some of the press and to the public, which leaves the President only the authority of the Buddy Pulpit to make a speech, and the speeches are obviously more difficult as the administration ages and more problems eat away at the President.

What I am asking you is this concept of obviously a decline of essentially the central authority and its – instead, the authorities being divided to each of the agencies with their own press offices, not in the long run going to weaken the power of the President to communicate, a policy, or a direction, or a philosophy to a public at large. I pose that as a question.

MR. HESS: I'm sorry, Ron, you wanted to speak.

MR. NESSEN: I was just going to say, I think you touch on a number of conflicting trends in society. Now, the old traditional newspaper is really fading from the scene. And you, you know, I'm sure read the stories this morning, another list of newspapers, and another list of cut backs on staff in Washington.

One of the effects of this is, I can remember the days when I was at the UPI at one point, and we had full-time reporters covering the Agriculture Department, the Commerce Department, and you know, House and Senate, and other agencies and so forth, they became experts on these topics, they wrote as experts, and they developed sources and stayed on those beats for a long time. That whole system is gone, and you have generalists, and generalists know a little bit about a lot of things, and I think this is a trend.

Now, at the same time, because of the internet, you've got a proliferation of people who can call themselves journalists. What is a journalist? You know, as I said before, a journalist is somebody who's got a keyboard and is hooked up to the internet and can write anything they want to. There are a whole lot of different trends, some of them conflicting, that are going on now. But one thing you can be sure of, it is changing drastically the way the news is covered and the way people get their news.

MR. McCURRY: I don't think there's anything about more information being made available that's bad. So if more agencies use technology and empower people who can tell the story of what those agencies are doing, how they're serving the American people, what issues they are looking at or examining, what regulatory processes they have underway, I think that is a good thing.

And I agree with you, there will be kind of pockets that will develop around those specialties, there will be some commercialization of that process, there will be newsletters and folks who, you know, cover their specialties, in fact, there already is a really robust trade press that covers a lot of the work of these agencies.

But I think you'll also see new actors, getting to Ron's point, there will be a new definition of what really constitutes journalism. I do some work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and they are keenly interested in how do we report on the things that are happening in places like Sub-Saharan in Africa and let people in the United States know that the investments that we make through foreign assistance and the programs that we have to try to help people are actually making a huge difference and saving lives. But that's not, you know, none of the networks – the networks are closing their bureaus in places like Africa, not opening them, well, they're going to think about how do we, you know, how do we hire people who will put those stories together and make them more available and how do we find ways to disseminate those stories.

So I think we're going to be in an environment where there's a lot of new types of story telling that will engage the American people, and the quality stuff will rise to the top, and the media will develop editorial standards so that we sort out what's the good stuff, what's accurate, what's verifiable versus the bad stuff, and I am very encouraged by that.

I think it's discouraging to walk down the street and run into all of our friends who are being, you know, fired as bureau chief, but there's going to be an explosion of new things created where their ability to capture and report and tell a story will, you know, blossom somewhere else, and we're going through that shake out, and it'll be different, but I think it'll be better.

MS. PERINO: I'd say there's no shortage of press officers at all of the agencies who have tried desperately to try to get some attention from some of the mainstream media and they have a very hard time doing so, there's just not enough space in the shrinking newspapers, and so they've had to try some alternative ways, and – but there's still something about getting a story and something that is branded.

You know, if you – if the AP says it, if you get your news from the AP, you know that it's probably solid, ABC news, NBC news, CBS news. And maybe that will evolve over time in terms of the standards, but I think it'll be interesting to see how it plays out. I don't have a lot of answers for how it will look.

MR. McCURRY: But to your point, will there be any diminution of the voice of the President and all that, no, because the President, you know, you said it, the President still has that Bully Pulpit, still has the ability to articulate large themes that tie it all together. In fact, a critical role of the President is to help people see all of the work that's being done and bring it together coherently, so you have some idea of the direction that the administration is attempting to move and the policies the President is trying to implement, and I think that's the task really for any president as a communicator and chief.

MR. HESS: Now, with that I will close the program in this way. When our guests were here in our equivalent of the green room, when we greeted them, I asked them if they would play this little game. I said would they take out a calling card. Dana didn't have a calling card, but I – and I said, would they write on this, on the back, and I made sure it was a calling card so that they couldn't write more than that, what is the most important piece of advice you can give Robert Gibbs for survival as the President's Press Secretary, and they would sign their name.

I said that we would read it at the end of this program. Melissa Skolfield, our Vice President for Communications, would then gather these up, and along with a DVD of this event, she would send this to the White House Historical Association, with a copy to Robert Gibbs. So here are the responses. From Ron Nessen, I haven't read these before, develop a very thick skin, the honeymoon will end. From Mike

McCurry, hire a great joke writer, because humor is usually your last line of defense. And finally, always take your wife's phone calls, it will make everything easier.

To our wonderful guests and the opportunity they have given us to really get inside the White House Press Office, as we promised, we thank you very much. We thank C-SPAN for being here so that people around the United States can also have had this opportunity. Thank you again.

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