

Riki Parikh

Helen Thomas and I met at the Washington Bureau for Hearst Newspapers. The bureau is located on the tenth floor of the International Square office complex at 1850 K Street. Thomas and I met on Friday afternoon at 4 p.m. in a small conference room near the entrance. She told me as soon as I introduced myself "Don't ask me any bio questions, you can find it all online." She added, "And I've written three books." She also informed me that Friday was her deadline day, so she wanted to be asked just the questions. The interview lasted exactly 30 minutes.

So how did you get into the reporting business?

All this is written. It's just that I saw my byline in the high school paper and got hooked. [I] thought that that would be the profession I really wanted to follow.

You were a White House reporter for 57 years. Most people have the White House beat and then they get off of it. What made you stay?

What made them leave? What made me stay is because it's the center—everything comes to the White House. All news that affects the country or the world comes through the White House, so why not be in the center of it? There's never a day without news, and it always affects the White House. I was interested in the news and that was the place to be.

When you first started out, there weren't very many women at the White House.

Not too many. There were some and there have been women covering the news for 150 years, but there were not as many, of course, after— World War II was the turning point for more and more women got into it. And now, it's a big profession for women. Journalism schools, there are almost more women than men. Like law, even.

Were you treated differently?

I think that once you get there and you're doing your job, you're basically on par. The press clubs were all closed to us, so you really had to struggle and to picket and do whatever we had to do to get into these clubs. That applied to most of the exclusive clubs in this town, they were all male. So, I think that was a real handicap for women reporters. Sure, there was still real discrimination all over the place with women in the profession, but a lot of the battle has been won, but there's still a bit of a struggle.

What's your favorite story that you covered?

Well, you can't ask me that, because I've covered history every day. I covered—I wasn't in Dallas, but I was Washington—I covered the Kennedy funeral and the transition to the Johnson era. I covered Watergate, I covered the Iran-Contra scandal, Vietnam, how it affected the White House and across the country. Every major story that affected this country came through the White House, and I was writing about it from the Washington point of view and from the White House point of view.

Over the years, so much has changed in terms of information being contained and packaged by the White House. How easy was it to get information back in the Kennedy Administration, and how much has changed?

Every administration that I've covered has managed the news, tried to. But the current administration is state-of-the-art. The Reagan Administration did very well in terms of projecting one story a day, the story they wanted us to focus on. There is tremendous secrecy in the White House like never before. It's much more difficult to get at the real facts except for the spin that they want you to have. Everything is controlled and everyone is in lock-step with the president. They have to be on board or they won't be at the White House. Other administrations were a lot looser.

And, as part of the White House press corps, how have you as a pack tried to work through that?

This press corps fell down on the job. After 9/11, they were afraid of being called—this is my personal impression and it may not be true—that they were afraid of being called unpatriotic if they asked very penetrating questions and showed the proper skepticism. They really lost their watchdog role in terms of playing ball with the administration and not wanting to rock any boats. Then it segued into the war, which the White House certainly put a spin on to go into the war for two years before we actually went in. And then I think reporters didn't want to jeopardize the troops or didn't want to seem out of line patriotically again.

So, there was that long hiatus where, I think, reporters really defaulted on what were their proper roles or the weapon they should have used, skepticism, especially since so much has been proved, what they said at the White House about going into the war, about the imminent threat about lethal arsenals and so forth—all untrue. And we were their handmates. We sent it out as though it were authentically true. So we are participating—we participated in the very fraudulent view. Everything they said about Iraq, every rational turned out to be a falsehood.

How does this compare, then, with when you were covering Vietnam?

There was a lot of it, but Vietnam, you had reporters over there who were not under censorship. And you certainly had networks, TV networks, who were willing to tell the truth and they didn't feel like they were in the arms of the administration. So you had a lot of good, free reporting, no matter what the government—no matter what they were saying at the five o'clock follies in Saigon. So, the government briefings: yes we got them and so forth, but we also got a lot of independent reporting because reporters could jump on a helicopter and go to the front and see for themselves what was happening and tell the truth.

It was very different. They have played ball. They didn't even show the photographs. They play ball in terms of not going along, with not showing the caskets. They should have staked out Dover, even if you're just behind the gate. There is no reporting in depth about this war. The reporters have—I think they're coming out of their coma now, finally.

Do you think the reason they didn't do that is because they were afraid to lose access?

No, I don't think it's that. I think corporate heads had a lot to do with the sense that "you have to be an American first and a patriot first" and "why are you trying to—we're in the war, so we have to win it." That sort of thing; "stay the course." So I think that reporters basically went along with that.

So do you think that as we move toward more conglomerates and bigger media enterprises, journalism has really taken a hit over the years?

I blame the reporters. You have to have backbone. You can't be lapdog. The role is very unpopular. If you want to be loved, if you even want to be liked, don't go into journalism; if you want to do a good job, a decent job for the country.

Fifty-seven years ago, when you started out, did you expect the landscape to change as much it has now?

You don't think in those terms if you cover the news. There's going to be change everyday. I mean, why would I think that? We've had fantastic changes in electronics, in communication, and so forth. No, I didn't envision it, but I don't mind it.

Even when a large majority of the population says they get their news from comedy shows instead of—

Well, I think that's sad. I want them to read newspapers. I think they're missing a lot and I think that news is not entertainment and you should stick to the facts. And I think these corporations that take over the news divisions should be dedicated to the news and not to the profits. Money profits. Otherwise, forget it. Let somebody who cares about informing the American people handle it.

Where do you set the line in not naming sources? How often do you offer it?

First, you want to be able to quote someone. The best story you have is when you can quote them by name. But at the same time, I don't think you would pass up a story that you felt was very authentic but you don't want to jeopardize a person's job, or life, or reputation and so forth. So I think that the judgment has to be decided whether it's worth it or not. I certainly—I don't think you should go for the spin. We get that all the time. You have to make your own judgment. You can walk out and say "No, I'm sorry, I'm going to get the story somewhere else, I hope."

So what about the background briefings that the White House provides everyday?

We should always fight for naming the person, because they never tell you anything that is so dangerous or anything else. Those terms should be only used in protecting security or someone's life or in dire circumstances. If you want to say something, say your name.

So you think journalist's today offer anonymity too frequently?

Well I think that there's a lot of clamp down because of all the unfortunate things that have happened in the last couple of years. There's a lot more tightening up on the use of unnamed sources.

What about media bias? What is your opinion on people who say there is a liberal media?

[Laughter] I'm trying to suppress a—I want to find a liberal. I'm a liberal and I'll be one for the rest of my life and I was I was born. What is a liberal? A liberal cares about the poor, and the sick, and the hungry. A liberal cares about the government doing for the people what they cannot do for themselves, is what Lincoln said. A liberal seeks the truth and doesn't put the spin on anything and asks to look at the facts. *I think liberal correspondents are honest. I don't mean the others are dishonest, but what I mean is—I don't think that liberals. liberals have an axe to grind except they really do want a better world. And I think that the real dominance in this—*

Can I, can you, I take that back. I mean, let me try that again. Because I know what the ultra-right will do with it. Can you cross it out? I mean I know you'll have it here, but—I would like to retract—I want to put it another way.

I think liberals care about people and they also care about the facts. Liberals try to speak the truth and let the chips fall where they may. Sometimes it falls in their direction, sometimes it doesn't. But there's no such thing anymore as the liberal press. I'm searching for a fellow liberal. Look at the newspapers, look at the columnists; most of them are pretty, are very conservative, predominately so. Every newspaper got scared and has started hiring conservative columnists.

When do you think that happened?

Because of the accusations of liberalism and they want to prove that they're not liberal. Why not be liberal? It's the only way to go. What are you?

I'm liberal, I guess. I want to be a journalist also, so...

Why not? Don't be afraid to say you're liberal, although they may get you for it.

Do you think the country's more polarized now like everyone says it is?

Absolutely. Once upon a time, liberals and conservatives could get together and find a common meeting ground. But these conservatives are so far to the right that they make no concessions or compromises, and that's what politics is, the art of compromise.

And when do you think this trend started?

Since Reagan.

Do you think we'll ever go back to the way it was?

I think it's... well this administration has a conservative White House, a conservative Congress, and soon, a conservative Supreme Court. So I think that they got the, you know, triage.

 **You left in 2000. Did that have anything to do with Bush coming into office?**

No. It was a takeover by Reverend Moon, our UPI. It was a bridge I couldn't cross, a bridge too far. Philosophically.

Could you just explain...?

You don't know anything about the Moonies? The Flower Children?

No.

Well anyway, the Reverend Moon outfit; he owns the Washington Times and they bought the UPI. You look it up.

Yeah, I saw something about that. Okay.

They're very conservative. He's a Korean cleric, I think.

Who was your favorite president to cover?

Kennedy, most inspired. I thought that Johnson made the best, greatest contribution on the domestic side in the last half of the 20th century, but of course Vietnam was his dénouement. But they were the most; they made the greatest contribution, both of them.

That was pretty early on in your tenure. Do you think you just became a cynic of the White House and presidential politics?

I've always been a skeptic with great hope.

Do you blog?

No. I don't know what you mean by that. I don't have a blog, I just rant and rave.

Do you look at blogs?

I certainly do the Internet to find out—my mail is horrible. I have more detractors than....

Do you check up with what the blogs are saying, the web logs are saying?

I do read what everyone's saying. That's the essence of being a journalist, is to get the widest range of opinion and keep an open mind.

So what do you think of them? A lot of people are saying that's the future of journalism.

They're not going to replace real journalists because they're not journalists. Journalists seek the truth, no matter what. It's not often the thing they're really looking for, but they try and I think the dedication to the truth is the difference. A blog: you can say what you want, nobody's checking on it and it doesn't have to be accurate. But reporters: if you're on the front page with something that's not true, you're finished. You will not have a job tomorrow. There are different ethical criteria, different standards, that every reporter knows they have to follow. You will not be working as a journalist if you write untruths. You can make mistakes, but if it's a pattern, as we've seen a couple people. You can't fabricate stories. A blog can write anything it wants and I'm sure they're writing what they think is the truth, but it's still not journalism. You can have a point of view, anybody wants to say—Everybody with a laptop thinks they're a journalist, but they're not.

When you worked for UPI, have you noticed that— Over the years, the news cycle has sped up a lot. Did you find it difficult over the years to keep up with everything?

Nope. You just read a lot of newspapers and stay on top of the news. If you give your time and you're willing; I go to work every 5:30 in the morning just so I do my homework. I didn't have to be at work at that hour but I did feel that I had to be informed. Try to read as many newspapers as you can. If you want to be a reporter, you have to read as much as you can everyday. News keeps changing, that's why it's news.

But do you think the speed at which people try to compete with one another now is a disservice also?

V It's always been like that. AP and UPI competed on seconds. If we beat the AP by one minute, there was a big celebration. Two minutes was nirvana. That's how competitive it was, getting on the wire first.

Newspapers would use the one that came in first, the most accurate story first. The whole cliché is get it first, but first get it accurate. First get it right.

I forgot to ask you who your least favorite White House was to cover.

Well, I mean, I don't like to say. I think all of them tried. I think every president comes in with the best of intentions, but I really regret that some don't understand, when they reach the top of the mark, there's no other place to go and they should only want to do the right thing. And too many have faltered. At the same time, in the whole system, you don't get there without making so many promises that you try to keep, you owe a lot of people a lot of things, and so forth. And so you're really under tremendous pressure to pay off and still do the right thing, so it doesn't always happen that way.

And do you think the current president is doing a good job compared to the other presidents you've covered?

Much too conservative. He went into a war that he wanted to go into; he didn't have to go into this war. He should admit that everything he said about the war is not true. And now he's changed the rationale for the fifteenth time, we're "spreading democracy." He didn't tell the American soldiers they were going to go in and spread democracy with the barrel of a gun.

And do you think the conservative movement will finally see a backlash in 2006?

I honestly don't know, but I think there's a real turnoff on how he handled, not so much the war, per se, although there is definitely a downsizing of enthusiasm for this war. It's Russian Roulette. And it's not war, per se; it's going— You can't go from the airport to Baghdad to the Green Zone without total armor, you don't know where you're going to be attacked. What are we doing there? How can you justify taking over someone else's country? I think Katrina will play a bigger part in the judgment of people in this administration.

And you said, you think the media's finally coming out with Katrina, you think they're finally coming out of their shell?

Well I think they started to break it on Karl Rove. And now they're getting more confrontational.

And what's your opinion about journalist's being jailed?

I think it's terrible. It's killing the messenger. Why should the messenger be taken instead of the leader. Let's hope this special prosecutor understands his role. You're not supposed to be taking the reporters, there should be a federal shield law to protect—it's true, it should be a privilege, but people have a right to know, so there should be some protection for reporters.

And last question: What do you like better: the White House beat or your column?

Well I go to the White House all the time. You can't write a column out of thin air. So I'm doing both.

What's your goal with this column? Because before, as White House correspondent, your goal was to bring out the message, to tell the people—

That's still the goal, to let people know, but they get my opinion, and it's not worth anything. It's kind of fun to express yourself, but at the same time, I think that people get much more when they get the straight story, the factual story, the news story, not my opinion.

And how much longer will you be writing?

I knew you'd get to that. I don't think it's your business in the first place, but I do think I'd like to work as long as I can. Why is it that, I mean, do you mind my working?

Oh no, of course not.

Well, I'll tell you, most people put you in a category. I like working and I don't know why I can't continue. Fate may intervene in any minute.

And what's your column about this week?

This week I wrote about how, he's a senator now, but a Congressman from L.A.—not L.A, but Louisiana, Republican—he slipped into the No Child Left Behind clause where military recruiters could go to high schools, approach juniors and seniors, high school kids, and their parents, and try to recruit them. And I just think—I said that “until this administration puts a higher priority on peace instead of a war, an unnecessary war, I hope the recruiters for colleges and future employers vote with the hearts and minds of the youth.

Yeah, I remember them coming into my school.

I hope you said no.

Yes, I did.

What is this? Why should you go shoot people in every country, when they did nothing? I mean, there are times when you have to go to war. I would have to go to war if they came here and bombed us and I mean we'd all be at war. But why go to someone's country and kill them? Because they have a bad leader?

You can't kill them for democracy. We won the Cold War, with the Pope, blue cheese, rap music, exchange students, exchange teachers. Ideas. Okay, you took sixty years, but we kept our powder dry, people lived. We go shoot everybody and get killed. People have a right to live. I mean, they were under tyranny but it's up to them to throw out their—not us with their oil, you know.