



THE WHITE HOUSE
TRANSITION PROJECT
1997—2017

RICE UNIVERSITY'S
BAKER INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER

Report 2017—53

THE ORIGINS OF THE WHITE HOUSE BEAT

Martha Joynt Kumar, *Director, White House Transition Project*
Professor Emeritus, Towson University

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WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The genesis of the White House news beat is usually associated with the colorful story of Theodore Roosevelt taking pity on William Price, a reporter for the *Washington Evening Star*, and some of his fellow journalists as they huddled outside the front gate of the White House on a rainy winter day in the early 1900s. The reporters, trying to keep warm while waiting to glean morsels of news from visitors departing the White House after an audience with the president, caught the attention of Roosevelt, so the story goes, as he gazed out a window of the Executive Mansion. Aware of Washington's inhospitable weather outside, the president directed his secretary to allocate a special room in the White House for the sole use of the press.

Yet an examination of presidential relations with reporters over more than a century, based on firsthand accounts and other evidence, reveals that the White House beat was not established by a president's personal act of sympathy; rather, it evolved organically over time through the reciprocal institutional needs of presidents and news organizations.

Even before the press was given a dedicated space, reporters came to the White House on a continuous basis, and officials there allowed them space when it was in their mutual interest to do so. In the post-Civil War years, direct contact between presidents and reporters grew, occasioned by such events as the vigil for a wounded President James Garfield in 1881; presidents' increasingly frequent train trips around the country with the expansion of the railroads; and the custom of presidential interviews, initiated by President Andrew Johnson in the late 1860s. During the Spanish-American War, reporters were furnished with tables and chairs or allowed to occupy nooks and crannies where they wait for breaking news. Presidents (and their staffs) and reporters (and their news executives) all

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realized they needed the other in order to perform their functions effectively. The relationship endures because it has proven productive for both sides.

Along with the creation of White House space for reporters, regular relations between the White House and Washington correspondents gained in importance in tandem with several other developments: the growth of newspapers and the expansion of media to include news magazines, wire services, and photography; a rise in the interest of the public in the president, his family, his staff, his activities, and even in the White House itself; and the growing publicity demands of presidents and their expanding staff.

While a president can court the public through various channels, in the end a president deals most directly with the American people through the representatives of the White House press corps.



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INTRODUCTION*

“Today we received fresh news that our economy grew at a strong 4.2 percent rate in the last quarter,” President Clinton said from his podium in a blossoming Rose Garden.¹ “This robust growth, 4.2 percent, is touching the lives of all our people with 10 million new jobs, low unemployment and inflation in check. This is good news for America and more evidence that our economy continues to surge ahead and that our economic strategy is working.” Assembled behind him as he spoke were eight members of the president’s economic team, including the vice-president, and before him stood a press corps waiting to mark his words and broadcast his image and voice. It was a fine example of a well-orchestrated White House publicity rollout with the president and news organizations ready to play out their parts.

* An earlier truncated version of this article was published as “The White House Beat at the Century Mark,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 2 (Summer 1997): 10-30. It also contains material that appears in my book *Managing the President’s Message: The White House Communication Operation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

¹ “Statement by the President: The Rose Garden,” August 1, 1996, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary.

His announcement finished, the president had done his part. But his performance was not yet over as correspondents had their turn. The assembled reporters then demonstrated the manner in which the interests of news organizations and those of a president simultaneously merge and diverge. The president intended for the event to be his: his garden, his figures, and his team. For their part, reporters were willing to broadcast his words and image; yet at the same time they had their own list of questions they wanted to ask. And almost to a query, they were not ones the president was interested in discussing.

“Mr. President, will you call on the Senate to resurrect the bill to pay the legal expenses of the people who were fired from the Travel Office?” asked Bill Plante, a White House correspondent for CBS. “Democrats seem to have blocked it. And will you call on them to pass it? And will you sign it if it gets here?” Once Plante was finished, the president took a series of follow-up questions on the subject raised by Paul Bedard of the *Washington Times*. When Bedard said: “I just wanted to know if you were going to keep your word, sir,” the president lost all patience. “I didn’t—I never gave my word on that. You go back and see what I said when I was asked that question. I asked, are they going to pay the expenses of anybody else? That’s what I said. Don’t talk to me—go back and see what I said. What did I say? What word did I give, sir?” The president asked in a heated exchange. When pressed, he lost his temper and with it the opportunity to have his good economic figures serve as the lead story on television and broadcast news throughout the day.

The event demonstrated the way in which the relationship between the president, his White House staff, and news organizations is a curious tapestry with institutional needs and routines as its warp and individual performance its weft. The warp is the tapestry’s fill, the fibers that define the relationship. The weft is composed of the interwoven threads represented by the personal relations of presidents, their staffs, and the representatives of news organizations. The two elements are not equal; the warp is composed of the defining elements of the relationship with the weft representing its individual filaments. President Clinton and the assembled group of reporters were facing one another in the Rose Garden through the need each side had for the other. President Clinton wanted the public to have the good economic news, and reporters wanted to satisfy the news interests of their readers and viewers. Those twin needs are the basis of the relationship today, just as was true one hundred years ago when the White House became a place where reporters acquired space in order to cover the president and his staff. The relationship endures because it has proven productive for both sides. In fact, over the years its partners have adapted their behavior and routines to make full use of the advantages a continuing relationship can provide.²

The glue cementing the presidential-press relationship is the power and drama the office holds. Both make good copy. Writing now almost one hundred years ago, Henry Jones Ford, in his prescient work *The Rise and Growth of American Politics*, captured the power of the office as well as its allure for the public. “The truth is that in the presidential office, as it has been constituted since Jackson’s time, American democracy has revived the oldest political institution of the race, the elective kingship,” he said. “It is all there: the precognition of the notables and the tumultuous choice of the freemen, only conformed to modern conditions.”³ The White House is the presidency’s setting. It serves as a continuing

² For a discussion of the nature of the relationship in the period from President Franklin Roosevelt through President Carter, see Michael Baruch Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar, *Portraying the President: The White House and the News Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

³ Henry Jones Ford, *The Rise and Growth of American Politics: A Sketch of Constitutional Development* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 293.

metaphor for the manner in which American politics is driven by the intertwined threads of enduring institutional routines and the actions of the individuals we elect. As a residence and as an office, the White House captures and symbolizes the dual, and sometimes conflicting, aspects of its life. For during these hundred years, the public, as well those who report on presidential activities, speak of the building as if it breathed life.

What occurred during the period following the Civil War and leading up to century's end was the clarification of the needs and identification of the instruments of presidential leadership. Tracking the creation of the White House as a news beat means more than identifying some real estate. To do so is to peel open the process of the growing recognition of the demands and elements of command. Political scientists studying leadership often pass over the time from Rutherford Hayes to Theodore Roosevelt as dead time. It is a period during which leadership appears to be imperfectly exercised, if at all. But it is precisely for this reason that the period is such an interesting one to study. It is during this period that the need for presidential leadership comes forward and its instruments identified. What does not happen during the approximately 25 years from Hayes to Roosevelt is the coalescing of needs and instruments with a president to successfully bring off the merger of the two. That happens when Theodore Roosevelt becomes president. What is important about the period prior to his assumption of the presidency is the rising to the surface of the requirements of presidential leadership.

The point at which reporters are allowed sustained entry into the White House and provided with their own space within it is an important one. To discover the time when that happened, I am tracking the point at which one journalist, William Price, a reporter for the *Evening Star*, put his hat on the White House rack. The significance of when William Price came to the White House is found in his identity. He is not a media mogul like Whitelaw Reid or James Gordon Bennett or even Duff Green. All of them, and those of their kind, had presidential access throughout the history of the office. What sets Price apart is precisely his ordinariness. He is a foot soldier in the newspaper business. When he is admitted to the White House is important for what it symbolically tells us about the recognition of the demands of presidential leadership. When Price gets space, the president and his White House legitimate the position reporters occupy between them and the public whose opinions they seek to shape.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The White House is an institution moved by enduring patterns more than it is a place where chance, whim, or fancy call the shots. More often than not, patterns of presidential and staff behavior result from actions taken in increments rather than through one grand act. In this paper, I posit that the origins of the White House beat are in fact institutional, not personal, as has been assumed by legend. Reporters came to the White House on a continuous basis, and officials there allowed them space when it was in their mutual interest to do so. It was not through the intercession of one president on the behalf of one reporter that gave journalists the prime real estate they have enjoyed for the last century. When presidents, their staffs, reporters, and their news executives all realized they needed the other in order to perform their leadership and news functions, the White House beat was established. There were a series of presidents with publicity-savvy staff members who

gradually allowed the newsroom camel into the executive tent. Presidents Cleveland, Harrison, and McKinley all had private secretaries with strong experience in the news business, which they were able to effectively convert to fending off and channeling the growing demands for access made by news organizations.

What difference does it make when and how the White House beat was established? The difference in what the legend ascribes to the event and the manner in which it actually took place is the difference between institutional evolution and a unique event. Was it a matter of the synergism existing between President Roosevelt and William Price or of the confluence of the publicity needs of news organizations, a president, and his White House staff? If it was the former, then the establishment of the relationship was the result of a unique event. Consequently, in this area at least, the relationship could be viewed as a result of the specific undertakings of individuals and could be construed as not happening in the same way if it were not for the actions of the people involved. On the other hand, if the relationship grew out of the institutional needs of both the president and news organizations, that is important for what it tells us about the development of presidential relationships. With a strong institutional base as its background, the essential characteristics of the beat have changed less than one might imagine would be true over so long a period. There are differences, but the essential characteristics that served to create the White House beat in the latter part of the nineteenth century still hold true today. Each side needs the other, and as a result the White House and news organizations have maintained a relationship of close physical proximity for one hundred years. Had its origins been personal, relations between the White House and reporters would have altered as the principals inevitably left their posts.

THE ORIGIN OF THE WHITE HOUSE BEAT: EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION

Legend claims the White House metamorphosed overnight from a dowdy institution where news was only occasionally made into a place where an enterprising reporter could grind out a story a day for front-page consumption of his newspaper's readers. In reality, the genesis of the beat includes the following: the creation of White House space for reporters, developed through precedents of continuous coverage of specific events; the growth of newspapers and the expansion of media to include news magazines, wire services, and photography; a rise in the interest of the public in the president, his family, his staff, his activities, and even in the White House itself; and the organizational response to these growing publicity needs of presidents and their aides, most particularly their private secretaries, calling for established rules and routines governing press relations and the staff to effect them. All of these activities took place prior to Theodore Roosevelt's entrance into the presidency. Together they created a White House beat that evolved rather than sprang to life by dint of the actions of William Price and his typesetters at the *Evening Star*.

For many, if not most, who write about presidential-press relations, life begins with Theodore Roosevelt. Once he swoops onto the presidential scene, it is hard to step around him and see what existed prior to his entry. He is a chief executive who fills any discussion, whether it is concerning leadership, advancing specific pieces of legislation, or presidential-press relations. His predecessors did not exhibit his zest in their dealings with reporters, not even President McKinley, who enjoyed their presence while they were covering his

administration. Because the direct dealings reporters had with presidents were not routinely reported in the press, one can lose sight of the importance press relations had before Roosevelt entered the scene and what the contours were of their relationship. Yet the institutional demands, both on the part of reporters and those arising from a president's need for publicity, created regular relations between a White House and news organizations.

REPORTERS ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN PURCHASE IN THE WHITE HOUSE

A LEGEND BASED ON SECONDHAND ACCOUNTS

“One day in 1895, William W. Price, a reporter for the *Washington Star*, walked up Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House and took up a position outside the front gate,” noted Washington correspondent Delbert Clark.⁴ “When politicians calling on President Cleveland emerged, ‘Fatty’ Price buttonholed them and milked them of what news they were willing to give down.” Once there he was joined by others: “Before long reporters for other papers, and out-of-town correspondents, joined Price in front of the Executive Mansion and with him ambushed the great, fresh from their communion with the Burning Bush.” There they stood for seven years when “the little knot of men outside the old iron fence grew larger,” said Clark. “Seven years they walked their beat, in the rigors of winter and the ghastly summer heat, in rain, snow, and sleet. Then one day it rained, a cold, dismal rain characteristic of Washington winters,” Clark continued. Relief was on the way. “From a window in the White House, warm and protected from the elements, Theodore Roosevelt looked out and took pity.” Then the president “called in his secretary and then and there directed that a special room be set aside in the newly built Executive Offices for the sole use of the press. The Washington correspondents had come of age.”

Delbert Clark got the Washington weather right, but the remainder of his account provides a distorted portrayal of how the beat was created. Worse still, his story has been used by writers and scholars as a true rendering of how reporters established space in the White House. You can see the manner in which the story has become woven into the texture of our information base on governmental press relations. In his informative work on the nature and establishment of a Washington press corps, *The Fourth Branch of Government*, Douglass Cater repeated the basic elements of the myth: “The pioneer of modern press relations was the ebullient President Theodore Roosevelt, who, according to legend, one day saw several reporters standing outside the gates of the White House interviewing departing visitors . . . and promptly ordered an anteroom set aside for them.”⁵ Almost everywhere one turns looking for information on the creation of the White House beat, one finds the basic cast of characters and circumstances: President Roosevelt, William Price, and no White House space set aside for reporters. The various versions have in common their reliance for their information on the memories of secondhand storytellers rather than on original

⁴ Delbert Clark, *Washington Dateline* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1941), 53.

⁵ Douglass Cater, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 32.

documents and contemporary accounts.⁶ Even today, in recently written accounts of the creation of the beat, two works in particular serve as sources. Both are based on the memories of others rather than on contemporary documentary evidence. First is Delbert Clark's *Washington Dateline*. An equally colorful and misleading account is rendered by Earl Godwin, son of the editor at the *Evening Star*, who hired William W. Price. The Godwin article, "White Housekeeping," found in the *Goldfish Bowl*, a publication of the National Press Club, is no longer available. Even so, its misinformation has insinuated itself into contemporary work on presidential-press relations.⁷

The one point of accuracy in the two accounts of the creation of the White House beat is the presence of William W. Price. He is the first reporter to be identified with the White House beat. He, however, did not declare himself to be the first White House correspondent, nor does the evidence establish he alone was the first. A biographical entry in *Who's Who in the Nation's Capital*, which he was involved in preparing, noted that Price "was first reporter on any Washington paper to write a daily column of White House news under heading, 'White House.'"⁸ Even though his White House column does not begin until March 1, 1897, Price dates himself as serving at the White House for the *Evening Star* beginning in 1896.⁹ The description of Price's work provided in the accounts mentioned above also requires clarification. The portrait of Price standing at the White House gate scooping up morsels from visitors as they left the grounds does him a disservice. He described the process of developing a White House story quite differently: "As a matter of

⁶ A notable exception is William Seale, *The President's House: A History* (Washington, DC: White House Historical Association, 1986). The two-volume work has as its base rich contemporary documentary material, much of which is available in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

⁷ Earl Godwin, "White Housekeeping," *Goldfish Bowl*, July 1937, a publication of the National Press Club. The librarian of the archives of the National Press Club, Barbara Van Werkhem, searched their records this summer and found that particular issue of the *Goldfish Bowl* to be missing. The Library of Congress did not have it, nor did the archives of the *Washington Star* (Martin Luther King Branch of the District of Columbia Library), nor any of the Washingtoniana collections found at the local universities. If anyone can point me toward a copy, I would be most appreciative. In his superb account of presidential-press relations in the Progressive Era, George Juergens has the details from the Earl Godwin article. *News from the White House: The Presidential-Press Relationship in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 14-15.

⁸ *Who's Who in the Nation's Capital, 1923-24*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: W.W. Publishing Co., 1924), 311. The biographical information of those included in the volume was developed with their cooperation. "Many of the sketches have been revised by the subjects themselves, while others were written after personal interview," the editors stated (Preface, v). Consequently, one can assume Price himself was the source of the information here.

⁹ While I searched for William Price's White House column through many weeks of issues of the *Washington Evening Star* published during 1896, the first one I found was March 1, 1897. I did not go through each issue published for 1896, choosing instead to take selected weeks to review. The fact that the column did not start until many months after Price's arrival at the White House would call into question Godwin's account of the genesis of Price's column. In his account of Price's work, Godwin indicated Price went right from his first assignment to the typewriter and to a headline. As Juergens relates the Godwin account: "Within a few hours he had accumulated enough material to scrawl hurriedly a story that appeared in the *Star* that evening under the headline 'AT THE WHITE HOUSE' . . ." Since newspaper reporters only rarely had bylines in those days, it is difficult to tell just when his copy first appeared. On particularly important stories, such as one coming from a trip accompanying President McKinley to Nashville, Tennessee, Price's initials appear at the end of the story. See "Glory of Tennessee," *Washington Evening Star*, June 11, 1897, pp. 1 and 2. But occasions where authorship was identified were rare indeed, not just for Price but for all newspaper reporters. Godwin also indicated Price came to the White House not long after coming from an assignment in South Carolina. His biographical entry in *Who's Who in the Nation's Capital, 1923-24* indicates he came to Washington in 1885 (p. 311).

fact the news secured at the White House is nearly always the result of the efforts of the newspaper men themselves,” he observed.¹⁰ “There is no giving out of prepared news.” Instead reporters find it for themselves. “Their acquaintance with public men all over the country, with cabinet officers and departmental officials, enables them to get the first start or ‘tip,’ ” he said. “These same friends develop the story for them, upon inquiry. Sometimes it’s a question of hard digging, as the miner put it, to unravel a ‘story.’ ” While Price indicated he and his colleagues put official presidential callers “through a cross-examination process,” developing a piece included more than catching what was dropped to them. He is most generally portrayed as employing a technique, in effect, a modern-day stakeout, that never occurred to anyone else to do. There was already a practice of reporters waiting to talk with those leaving the White House following meetings with the president. White House exterior photographs of Frances Benjamin Johnston taken in the 1890s show bicycles belonging to news messengers lined up outside of the building while waiting for copy written by reporters who often waited to talk with people outside the north portico.¹¹

Price’s copy demonstrates an enterprise greater than simply holding ground. He was an active reporter who searched many venues for news, including the Cabinet rooms to be found next door in the State, War, and Navy building as well as the offices of the White House staff and that of the president. Price worked on the assumption that no one would provide him with a story. He described the presidential decision-making process in terms of the release of its results. While a president and his Cabinet members were reluctant to release information prior to making a decision, they were not much more forthcoming once the process was complete. “Even when this has been done there is no man who feels that it is his particular business to announce the fact,” Price observed.¹² “After the president passes upon it the subject passes from his mind. Cabinet officers are similarly inclined.” In such an environment, “it is the business of the White House reporter not to be far behind when matters of import have received the approval or disapproval of the President or are waiting to be acted upon by him.” Always keeping an eye out for a story, Price trolled for information on his trips through several executive branch buildings. In an article concerning President Cleveland’s health, for example, Price tracked down the Surgeon General of the Army, Dr. Sternberg, for a direct quotation on the chief executive’s bout with rheumatism.¹³ He also put Secretary Henry Thurber on the record. In a lead sentence that today would cause a precipitous drop in the Dow-Jones average, Price declared: “The President is a sick man.” His nose for a good story never left him, even if his choice of facts contained a sharp inflation factor. While he may have missed the last meeting of his Cabinet members, President Cleveland was present two days later for the inauguration of William McKinley.

In its many versions, the story of President Roosevelt rescuing William Price is a sympathetic yarn. “I always liked the idea that there was a President who took pity on

¹⁰ W. W. Price, “How the Work of Gathering White House News Has Changed,” *Washington Evening Star*, December 16, 1902 (supplement), p. 32.

¹¹ Johnston’s marvelous photography collection of White House interior and exterior shots, including ones of the president and some of his staff at work, are located in the Library of Congress. Her early White House photographs were used as illustrations in a two-part article she wrote, “The White House,” appearing in *Demorest’s Family Magazine*, May 1890 (Part I: Outside) and June 1890 (Part II: Inside).

¹² Price, “How the Work of Gathering White House News Has Changed,” 32.

¹³ “The White House,” *Washington Evening Star*, March 2, 1897. In the early weeks when a title first appeared, Price experimented using a title as a heading for his articles. His first was “At The White House”; others were “The White House,” but he sometimes used none, especially when traveling on the road.

reporters and came to their aid,” said Helen Thomas, senior White House correspondent for United Press International.¹⁴ While appealing to both reporters and to scholars as a demonstration of a president’s sympathy for reporters, the legend distracts attention from the institutional roots that in fact brought about its creation. The beat is created through evolution, not revolution. Documentary records found in the Library of Congress, including correspondence and materials relating to press relations, belonging to Presidents Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893), Grover Cleveland (1885-1889; 1893-1897), William McKinley (1897-1901), and Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909)—as well as similar materials of their secretaries, George Cortelyou, Elijah Halford, Daniel Lamont, and other White House staff members, Colonel Theodore Bingham and Rudolph Forster, and party functionary and Washington correspondent Perry Heath—provide an evolutionary portrait of the creation of the White House beat. The White House beat was created as a result of a combining of elements, including individuals with enterprise, the requirements of news organizations, and the growing publicity demands upon a president and his expanding White House staff.

WILLIAM PRICE, THE “GANG,” AND THEIR WHITE HOUSE TABLE

Writing in 1902 about the manner in which gathering news at the White House changed over time, Price said that six years earlier changes were made in how a chief executive was covered. “Up to six years ago, reporters and correspondents called at the White House at intervals through the day to see the President or his secretary, generally the latter, but there was not until that time an attempt to cover each detail and happening of the White House as now,” he said.¹⁵ Indeed 1896 was a watershed year, as it marked the point at which reporters established a White House location. In a letter dated 1896, William Price wrote to George B. Cortelyou, President Grover Cleveland’s assistant secretary, who handled the mundane aspects of White House relations with reporters. “Mr. Cortelyou,” Price wrote, “The newspaper ‘gang’ of the White House desires me, as ‘dean’ of the corps to thank you for your kindness in brightening up our table with a new cover.”¹⁶ It was signed by Price and two colleagues, R. H. Hazard and Cs. Richardson. Several points are established through Price’s letter to George Cortelyou. First, the press corps predates even the McKinley administration. It is not even a question of the Roosevelt administration. Second, clearly Price was not the only correspondent there in 1896. There were at least two others. In addition, they had a specified area provided for them to do their work. Their space was located in the business vicinity of the White House.

¹⁴ Helen Thomas, conversation with the author at the White House, July 17, 1996.

¹⁵ Price, “How the Work of Gathering White House News Has Changed,” 32. In the same article, Price muddies the waters of just when reporters got their table. Later on in the piece he said: “At the old White House, until Secretary Porter’s time, there was no table for the press” (p. 33). In fact, Secretary Porter was not there six years earlier because William McKinley was not yet president. George Cortelyou, who served as an assistant secretary to both men in 1896 and 1897, was there, and it was he to whom Price wrote his letter. Cortelyou was a very publicity-savvy staff member and was the person with whom they dealt on press comfort issues. Since Cortelyou held the same position at the end of the Cleveland administration, as he had in the beginning of the McKinley one, Price could easily have confused who was the secretary at the time. Because McKinley did so much more for reporters than did his predecessor, Price might have assumed that Porter was there at the time. With his own dating of the change in reporting as occurring in 1896 and his own letter to George Cortelyou, dated 1896, Price established the end of the Cleveland administration as the point at which they received White House real estate.

¹⁶ Correspondence, 1884, July–1896, Papers of George B. Cortelyou, Library of Congress.

Until the new West Wing offices were opened in October 1902, the White House proper served as a residential and an official work space. Located in the east side of the White House above the East Room, the presidential office space was confined to one relatively small area. The table to which Price refers is most likely one sketched and discussed in an article by Ida M. Tarbell detailing White House arrangements for reporters during the Spanish-American War.¹⁷ The table was perched outside of the office of the president's secretary, who briefed reporters on a daily basis. With their own observed territory, reporters established a property claim in the White House. From that point forward, reporters had space they could call their own. The value of their space is found in its propinquity to the president and to his private secretary. They were outside the private secretary's office and a short walk down the hall from where the president had his office. Once William McKinley became president, he gradually expanded the area reporters could call their own. "McKinley had turned the second floor office corridor over to the press," noted William Seale, who has tracked White House space by the inch over the building's history.¹⁸ "Before that reporters had usually waited on the north portico, some fifteen at a time." Once they have inside space does not imply reporters did not use the outside area as well. Wherever was the best spot for gathering information was the place reporters were perched. The same holds true today. Members of the White House press corps have space inside the Press Room, but they routinely question official visitors in the stakeout area located near the front entrance of the West Wing.

CONTINUED WHITE HOUSE SPACE: ROUTINES BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

BEFORE THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

Once established, reporters maintained their White House space. In his instructions to the chief usher and his doormen, John Addison Porter, secretary to the president (the title changed in 1897 from Private Secretary to Secretary), warned them to keep an eye on reporters. Dated January 1, 1898, the instructions called upon the usher and the police to make sure reporters were corralled in their second-floor quarters. "Proper facilities for the press having been provided in the east corridor upstairs, lounging about the north portico, in the hallways and doorways, and on the steps and stairways, is prohibited and must be enforced," declared Porter.¹⁹ As some slight indication of the esteem in which reporters were held by those responsible for White House order, the advisory about the facilities for the press was to be found following a rule concerning the "placing of feet on window sills" and one stating, "No beggars, peddlers, or persons with apparatus of any kind will be allowed inside the Mansion." Whether the police actually enforced these rules is unknown. Reporters maintained their corridor space, however, until 1902, when they were able to get an upgrade to the West Wing.

¹⁷ Ida M. Tarbell, "President McKinley in War Times," *McClure's Magazine* 11, no. 3 (July 1898): 209-224. Discussion of the table with accompanying sketches can be found on pages 212 and 214.

¹⁸ William Seale, *The White House: The History of an American Idea* (Washington, DC: American Institute of Architects Press, 1992), 162.

¹⁹ John Addison Porter, Secretary to the President, "Special Instructions to the Chief Usher and Staff," January 1, 1898, Papers of Theodore A. Bingham, Library of Congress.

THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

With their space established, reporters were able to use their proximity to the president and his secretary to get as close to the story of the Spanish-American War as was possible. In her informative article on President McKinley's effort to discern and influence public opinion on the Spanish-American War, Ida M. Tarbell discussed press arrangements.²⁰ She laid out the existing arrangements in 1898 when no special events took place as well as what occurred when news was being made. First, the routine operations: "Accommodations are furnished him [the reporter] there, and his privileges are well-defined and generally recognized," Tarbell reported.²¹ "Thus in the outer reception-room of the business part of the White House, a corner containing a well furnished table and plenty of chairs is set aside for reporters. Here representatives of half a dozen or more papers are always to be found, and during Cabinet meetings and at moments of grave importance the number increases many fold." The sketch of a reporter at work at the desk shows that it stood right outside the doorway to the office of Secretary Porter under the watchful eye of his doorkeeper, Simmons.²²

On the big news days, reporters were to be found in almost every White House nook and cranny. "The day has been one of grave anxiety," noted Assistant Secretary George B. Cortelyou.²³ "In the morning when I reached the office I found many of the newspaper representatives on the porch, in the front lobby, on the landings and elsewhere waiting for some news from Madrid." Cortelyou gave a more precise picture of what the numbers rose to when news was in the air. "During the entire day nearly all the leading representatives of newspapers having offices in Washington were on hand awaiting developments," reads Cortelyou's diary entry.²⁴ "A low estimate would place the number at at least fifty." Ida Tarbell described the scene when reporters gathered outside. "It is in 'Newspaper Row,' as the east side of the great north portico is called, that the White House press correspondents flourish most vigorously. Here they gather by the score on exciting days, and, in the shadow of the great white pillars, watch for opportunities to waylay important officials as they come and go."²⁵ When the big days did occur, it was here that interviews with Cabinet officers and others took place. White House reporters had clearly defined routines, albeit different ones, whether the days were ordinary or events were fast-paced.

REPORTERS IN A WHITE HOUSE AT REST

Following the war, reporters held their White House positions. So routine was their presence that even when the president was out of town, reporters were there. Colonel William H. Crook, who served on the White House staff from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt, described what started as a routine day at the White House with President McKinley in Buffalo, New York, for a speaking engagement at the Pan-American Exposition. With not even the vice-president in town, the White House was operating at a very routine level. "Members of the office staff, of course, were attending to their duties in

²⁰ Tarbell, "President McKinley," 209-224.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

²² *Ibid.*, 212.

²³ Diary, Thursday, March 31, 1898, Papers of George B. Cortelyou, Library of Congress.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Saturday, July 30, 1898.

²⁵ Tarbell, "President McKinley," 214.

the White House, and business was going forward as usual, when a key in the telegraph room snapped out a few words which caught the ever-alert ear of Colonel Montgomery, Superintendent of the White House Telegraph Bureau," Crook said.²⁶ Colonel Montgomery then stepped out of his office and read to the fast assembling group the news of the shooting of President McKinley. "Somehow news of the startling tragedy flew like wildfire through the White House, and as Colonel Montgomery slowly and solemnly read the message the office became crowded with employees, officials, and newspaper men who hurried in." With no time for people to come in from outside, the group was assembled from among those then working within the White House. Reporters were at the White House even though the president was not there. Their routines called for a continuing institutional presence, no matter who was in town.

*PROPOSALS FOR WHITE HOUSE EXPANSION INCLUDE
SPACE FOR REPORTERS (1900 AND 1902)*

As proposals for new executive quarters surfaced, they included space for reporters. Once reporters had a White House location, even if it was an arrangement in a corridor, they never had to relinquish it. Instead, it became larger and more defined. When concrete proposals to enlarge the White House were suggested in the Benjamin Harrison administration, critics abounded, and little was done until the building's centennial celebration. On December 12, 1900, Colonel Theodore Bingham, an engineer who served as the Superintendent of Building and Grounds, announced a White House construction plan. In his speech outlining the building proposals, Bingham said that "at the extreme southeast end there is a room available for visitors, newspaper men, and other similar needs."²⁷ Bingham reworked the plan of Caroline Harrison and repackaged it as a solution to the residential, official entertainment, and office space needs of the time. Bingham's finalized plan called for the creation of quarters for newsmen. "On the east an office complex was envisioned with spacious work areas, meeting rooms, and, to reflect McKinley's masterful control of the news, quarters to house the press in comfort," observed William Seale.²⁸

While Bingham's plan met with immediate resistance from the architectural community, the plan to have a press room next to the public entrance to the office area was an idea that survived to be included in the plan created in 1902 by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White, which built the "temporary offices," now the West Wing. When the appropriation for the work was discussed in the Senate, the plan for temporary quarters was described as including the following: "A Cabinet room, President's office and retiring room, offices for two secretaries, a telegraph and telephone room, a large room for the stenographers, a room for the press, a main hall to be fitted as a reception room, file rooms and closets in the basement."²⁹ Once built, the West Wing included space for reporters close to the public entrance, just as Bingham had called for in his plan of 1900. It did not take the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt for these changes to come about, even though his consent was required for them to happen, and he gladly gave it.

²⁶ Colonel W. H. Crook, *Memories of the White House: The Home Life of Our Presidents from Lincoln to Roosevelt* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1911), 262-263.

²⁷ "Century's Close," *Washington Star*, December 12, 1900, p. 1.

²⁸ Seale, *The White House*, 161-162.

²⁹ Esther Singleton, *The Story of the White House*, vol. 2 (New York: McClure Co., 1907), 283.

THE EVOLUTIONARY PATH TO A WHITE HOUSE PRESENCE FOR REPORTERS

The White House was always an important stop for reporters. “Fifty years ago, newspaper reporters and correspondents went to the White House to see and talk with the President,” reported William Price in 1902.³⁰ “If he was easy of approach and their acquaintance with him warranted it they probably went often, or at least as often as was necessary to keep in touch with the day’s news so far as it related to the White House.” With the president himself available to reporters, correspondents had little need to deal with the private secretary, who at the end of the nineteenth century was the chief staff officer as well as a reporter’s chief White House contact. Even when they had access to a president, reporters found their usefulness to be limited because of the nature of their exchanges. The conversations reporters had with presidents were not for public attribution and occurred only sporadically, not routinely. As the president moved to the center of news, his distance from reporters became greater. Yet at the same time, reporters wanted to keep contact with him and increase their White House presence. They did so through his secretary and other members of his White House staff.

Building on their precedent of direct presidential contact prior to the Civil War, reporters got a toehold in the White House through the confluence of three separate institutional currents. First are the precedents set in presidential coverage of specific events, including the death of President Garfield, as well as the constant presence of reporters on presidential trips. Presidents and their White House staffs got used to having reporters hanging around and, finally, let them have some inside work space. The second current represents developments in the news business. Reporters came to the White House because of their developing sense of news. News organizations gradually came to view the president and his White House as subjects of continuing interest to their readers. The third current is the increased public awareness of presidential power as a force in our national political system. The public developed an interest in presidents at a time when the chief executive was called upon to provide direction in domestic and foreign policy on a more routine basis than had previously been the case.

FACE TIME WITH THE PRESIDENT: POST-CIVIL WAR PRECEDENTS

During the years following the Civil War, the president became a subject of continuing interest in the copy reporters filed. There are a variety of reasons for the heightened interest in the president as a news story, many of which can be traced to developments within the national political system and among news organizations. While presidents were not interested in formally committing time to meet with reporters, as became the pattern in the twentieth century, precedents were laid for correspondents to have direct contact with the president in certain situations. We shall look at three.

First is the precedent of “body watch” coverage of a president. That means full coverage of a president’s movements. The precedent set by the vigil for the wounded President James Garfield gives a portrait of such coverage. A second type of precedent in

³⁰ Price, “How the Work of Gathering White House News Has Changed.”

presidential relations with the press occurred with presidential travel routines. Train travel across an expanded United States allows reporters close proximity to the chief executive over a period of from one to eight weeks. During these trips reporters had their first continuing exposure to a president on a routine and anticipated basis. These occasions provided reporters with a sense of the president as a person. A third precedent, the presidential interview, is one that presidents slowly developed for policy uses. They gave interviews with reporters when they sought to explain policies and their official actions. While the interview comes into use during this period, it is not effectively used by presidents to promote their policies. That will come later. Together these precedents, and similar examples one might draw, lay out the tools presidents can use in seeking to publicize themselves, their policies, and their programs. What it takes to bring all of it together is Theodore Roosevelt's rise to the presidency.

*REPORTERS IN THE WHITE HOUSE: THE PRECEDENT SET BY
THE VIGIL OF PRESIDENT JAMES GARFIELD*

Before William Price took up his White House location, reporters had exercised full coverage of a president. They did so on the extraordinary occasion of the death of a president. When President James Garfield was shot on July 2, 1881, he was taken from Union Station back to the White House, where he remained until September 6. He was then taken to his summer home in Elberon, New Jersey, where he died on September 19. While he was slowly dying at the White House for his two months there, reporters provided what today would be called "body watch" coverage. They followed his case around the clock. "The waiting room of the office was given over to news reporters," said William Seale.³¹ "The reporters were allowed to send messages from the telegraph room in the northeast corner. Bulletins went out hourly during the day to papers all over the United States."

The president's private secretary, Joe Brown, established the rules governing reporters' conduct. Coverage was on a 24-hour basis. "After five p.m. the press left one representative, to send out bulletins every other hour through the night."³² The person who frequently had the task of night duty was the head of the Washington bureau of the National Associated Press, Franklin Hathaway Trusdell. In a letter to his wife, Trusdell described how close he was to the wounded president: "As I sit here now [the house] is quiet as death." He continued: "I listen to every sound. A dog barking in the distance is heard. A fountain splashes on the lawn. Not a step is heard in the mansion. The President sleeps."³³ Reporters were at the heart of the national vigil marking the president's every turn. And they did so from a vantage point close to him and his staff. While the event was clearly an extraordinary one, the presence of the reporters was viewed as a natural part of the need to regularly inform the public of the president's condition. With this event, an important precedent was established.

The vigil for President Garfield was not the first occasion when reporters established "body watch" coverage of a presidential personage. The month following Abraham Lincoln's election, Associated Press correspondent Henry Villard was sent to Springfield, Illinois, to follow the president-elect until his arrival in Washington in early February. Villard took up a political vigil in Lincoln's Springfield law office observing the daily parade of

³¹ Seale, *The President's House*, vol. 1, p. 526.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Quoted in *ibid.*

political visitors. He followed Lincoln's selection of Cabinet members and watched him talk with political allies as he prepared to take office in early spring.³⁴ This was a precursor of the "body watch" coverage later presidents were to experience. During Lincoln's presidency, Villard came to Washington, but as a Civil War correspondent rather than as a White House reporter.

NEWS COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL SWINGS-AROUND-THE-CIRCLE: REPORTERS AS PRESIDENTIAL SHADOWS

Newspaper and wire reporters provided "body watch" coverage of another kind: full coverage of presidential trips. Reporters were an integral part of a nineteenth-century president's important publicity tool, the swing-around-the-circle. They were present with the traveling president throughout his journeys of sometimes many weeks' duration. As presidents became more active on the policy front, public opinion took on increased importance. Presidents were concerned with public opinion, both from the viewpoint of discerning it and of shaping it as well. Trips to various parts of the country gave a president and his staff information they otherwise might not have. While presidents beginning with George Washington made these trips, in the latter part of the nineteenth century reporters became a regular part of the presidential entourage. First they were present by presidential invitation, and fairly quickly their inclusion was an ingrained expectation of Washington reporters covering political news. Their presence worked well for both sides. Presidential trips gave reporters front-page space, and the stories they produced were almost invariably favorable ones for the president.

Presidential train trips in the post-Civil War era began on a somewhat inauspicious note with President Andrew Johnson's 1867 trip through the Midwest. One of the correspondents aboard the train, Elijah Halford, later became private secretary to President Benjamin Harrison. He was able to put to use what he learned aboard a rocky operation. In an article written many years later, Halford captured the flavor of the trip that oftentimes got out of hand. "At Terre Haute the crowd appeared so riotously inclined that the conductor started the train away from the station before the program arranged could be entered upon," wrote Halford.³⁵ The president was accompanied by Secretaries Seward and Welles as well as General Grant. They were joined by officials along the way. Traveling through Illinois and Indiana, a member of the House of Representatives, John Hogan, acted as a barker for the entourage when the train stopped at its various locations. Halford described the frame of mind of Hogan and Johnson as they met the crowds. "As he and Mr. Johnson were not total abstainers and there was plenty of liquid refreshment aboard the car, both were in a stimulated, resentful frame of mind when they met the crowds that awaited the train at the several stopping places," he said.³⁶ "Their manner was truculent to a degree." At the various stops, Hogan drew people near with the acclamation that Johnson "was 'a real live President of the United States,' and then Mr. Johnson went through his favorite role of 'Defender of the Constitution,'" reported Halford. The process was a painful one for the officials accompanying the president. Neither Welles nor Seward took part in the public ceremony beyond their introduction to the assembled groups. "There were always persistent calls for

³⁴ Henry Villard, *Memoirs of Henry Villard: Journalist and Financier, 1835-1900*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 140.

³⁵ Lieu.-Col. E. W. Halford, "Swinging Around *the Circle*," *Leslie's Weekly*, October 4, 1919, p. 548.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Gen. Grant, but he did nothing more than present himself in obedience to the demand of the President," he observed. "It was a painful spectacle throughout, and one evidently depressing to the members of the Cabinet, who kept themselves in dignified silence, and aloof from their chief, remaining each in his own seat in a different part of the car until forced to appear upon the platform." This was not a scene any president or his staff members wanted to repeat.

The growth in presidential travel and the reporters' expanded participation in it is evident in the trip records of the administrations of Presidents Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, and William McKinley. When President Harrison traveled to the Midwest for ten days in October 1890, for example, there were ten people in the presidential entourage, including the president. Two of them, A. J. Jones and George Grantham Bain, represented the two major press associations of that era, the Associated Press and the United Press. When press representatives traveled with President Harrison, they had unparalleled access to him. The exchange of letters between Charles A. Boynton, manager of the Associated Press, and President Harrison make clear the real access the press representatives had on the first presidential trip to California, made in the spring of 1891. The letters also make clear the tacit understandings the correspondents observed in their reporting. Mr. Boynton personally thanked the president: ". . . the Associated Press is not unmindful of the attention and assistance given its representative and thanks you earnestly for the good will shown us through your kindness to him."³⁷ In his reply, the president noted that Mr. Clarke, their representative, "won the respect and regard of every member of our party."³⁸ "We were very fortunate in Press representatives, as they were gentlemen who could be trusted not to commit any breach of the proprieties. Indeed we were without any restraint in their presence, and they freely mingled with us as members of the family."

There were clear routines journalists were to follow in what was reported and what was to remain out of bounds. And on this occasion the reporters most certainly observed the boundaries and were rewarded with presidential access. While the representatives were treated "as members of the family," the associations, not the White House, chose who would travel with the president. Two days prior to the October 1890 presidential trip to Cincinnati, St. Louis, Topeka, and Pittsburgh, the general manager of the Associated Press informed Elijah Halford, the president's private secretary, that A. J. Jones "has been detailed to accompany the President on his trip from Cincinnati."³⁹ Reporters may have been treated in a familiar manner, but they were there performing their job.

During his first term, President Grover Cleveland allowed the press similar access. When traveling on a three-week trip to the Midwest and South, including stops in Indianapolis, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Sioux City, Nashville, Atlanta, and Montgomery, reporters were at his side. In his account of the 1887 trip, the president's private secretary, Colonel Daniel S. Lamont, noted there were ten people, including President and Mrs. Cleveland. Traveling with the small group were representatives of two press associations and an artist.⁴⁰ All three were important for publicity purposes. The United Press and Associated Press representatives could describe the trip to those who would miss its passage through

³⁷ Charles A. Boynton to President Benjamin Harrison, May 21, 1891, Papers of President Benjamin Harrison, Library of Congress (hereafter, Harrison Papers).

³⁸ President Benjamin Harrison to Charles A. Boynton, May 23, 1892, Harrison Papers.

³⁹ — [signature unclear; on Associated Press letterhead], General Manager, Associated Press, to E. W. Halford, Esq., October 4, 1890, Harrison Papers.

⁴⁰ "Railroad Tour 1887," Papers of Daniel S. Lamont, Library of Congress.

their towns. In his summary, Lamont noted: “During the three weeks of his journey they traveled 4500 miles, passed through 17 states, crossing three of them twice, and the President has been seen by (variously estimated by different members of the party at from one to five million) of American citizens.”⁴¹ In a United States of between 50 and 60 million people, that is a large number of people.⁴² When one considers the local publicity generated by the president’s visit, the publicity value of such trips was substantial. With the resonance they provided, newsmen were worth having as companions on the trip.

In the ten-year period between 1891 and 1901 presidential travel rose enormously, both in terms of the numbers of trips taken and the extent of their distance. No longer were two correspondents sufficient for a presidential trip. When President William McKinley scheduled a trip to the Pacific Coast running from April 29 to June 15, 1901, his entourage was four times the size of the Harrison and Cleveland ones. There were 40 passengers on the trip, including nine press representatives, a photographer, two telegraph operators, and three stenographers. George Cortelyou, who made the trip arrangements, received so many requests from news organizations to join the trip that he limited press participation to three wire services, three Washington newspapers, and three news magazines. The opportunity such trips presented reporters to get to know a president remained as significant as was true in 1891 when the reporters for the two major press associations traveled with President Harrison. “When out on his trips, he was agreeable and jovial to the accompanying corps of reporters,” noted William Price.⁴³ “He had them visit him in his car at intervals, and about once a day he would walk into the car of the newspaper men, and sit and talk for a good while.” Price continued: “During this time, he would smoke, tell delightful reminiscences of men and affairs, charming everybody.” The copy that reporters filed reflected the good will generated by the presidential attention.

In addition to visiting with the newsmen, the president literally took reporters with him when he traveled around the towns he visited. In an instance that won the hearts of his press followers, President McKinley refused to enter the Vanderbilt mansion, the Biltmore, in Asheville, North Carolina, when the superintendent indicated reporters were not welcome. “The President courteously returned the answer that the newspaper correspondents were his guests, and that, unless they should accompany him, he would be unable to make his promised visit,” related Price, who was present.⁴⁴ The president then insisted that newsmen accompany him, which they did. The importance of these trips as opportunities for reporters to get to know the president they covered cannot be overestimated. In President McKinley’s case, the trips were even more important than was true of his predecessors because he spent so much time on the rails. In his four and a half years in office, President McKinley took at least 40 trips outside of Washington.⁴⁵ When trips were scheduled for as many as 48 days at a time, as was the case with the scheduled time for the Pacific Coast trip, reporters saw the president at least once daily for a long time indeed and had every opportunity to understand what moved him, what his plans were, and what were the elements of his personality. At the

⁴¹ “President Cleveland’s Trip 1887,” Papers of Daniel S. Lamont.

⁴² Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, “U.S. Population, 1790-1990,” *Vital Statistics on American Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993), 378.

⁴³ W. W. Price, “President McKinley’s Tours,” *Cosmopolitan* 34 (February 1903): 389.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ “Tour of the President to the Pacific Coast, April 29 to June 15, 1901,” Papers of President William McKinley, Library of Congress.

same time, they also saw the response the public had to the policies he discussed in his speeches.

*PRESIDENTIAL INTERVIEWS: DIRECT CONTACT BETWEEN
REPORTERS AND CHIEF EXECUTIVES*

With news organizations searching for a competitive edge and a public hungry for a personal view of officeholders, reporters added personal interviews to their tool kit. Interviews suited the mutual interests of reporters and officials. Reporters used personal interviews to establish their ability to get something their competitors could not. Officials found they could get to the public through an interview in a way not otherwise possible. In his discussion of the journalistic practices of Washington correspondents in the early years after the Civil War, Ben: Perley Poore, an important nineteenth-century Washington correspondent, noted the development of the personal interview as a resource for newsmen and for officials as well. "It was in 1867-68 that the present widely known system know as 'interviewing' may be said to have begun to be generally adopted," he noted. And it quickly caught on. With President Andrew Johnson in the White House and the impeachment matter warming up, readers wanted to find out what the president thought, and he believed a newspaper provided him with a clear shot to his audience. He regularly talked with a correspondent for the *Cincinnati Commercial*, John B. McCullagh, known as "Mack." "The matter discussed was nearly always the pending impeachment; the manner was that of a quiet talk, each party asking and answering questions in turn," Poore noted.⁴⁶ While the interviewer did not take notes, he queried the president at the close "if he was willing that the result of the conversation should go into print, and if there was any thing he desired to have suppressed."

With ground rules favoring him, the president was comfortable engaging in regular conversations with the correspondent. As a result, President Johnson occasionally sent for "Mack." President Johnson "said he preferred this to sending a message to congress, for 'every body seemed to read the interview, and nobody seemed to read his messages.'"⁴⁷ While Andrew Johnson's lawyers ultimately called an end to his habit of conducting interviews with an ever-expanding number of reporters, his successors saw interviews as a method for getting to a particular public they might be interested in reaching. Even if they did not use the device, they were aware it was available should they find it to their advantage to use. With the creation of the interview as an instrument for direct contact for the development of presidential news, an important precedent was set. The presidential interview served as a precursor of the routine conversations Theodore Roosevelt held with reporters when he took office in September 1901.

LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NEWS BUSINESS

The period following the Civil War was one of enormous development for the news business. Change came in the form of how news was gathered in Washington, the number of

⁴⁶ Ben: Perley Poore, "Washington News," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January 1874, p. 232.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

people involved in it, as well as in the subjects of news. Add to that the national growth of news organizations in terms of what media existed as well as the number of newspapers and those who read them. Simply every aspect of the news business was influenced by change. With more newspapers, news weeklies and monthlies, wire services, and photography added to the mix, all reached out for customers of their own. They did so by broadening the news terrain. The president, his family, his staff, and even the White House itself and activities occurring there, all became prime targets for an expanded Washington press corps. And the place to gather such information was at the White House itself.

*COVERAGE OF THE WHITE HOUSE BEFORE THE BEAT SYSTEM:
THE WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT AS CROSS-CUTTER*

The Washington correspondent touched many bases during a day in the years prior to the great growth in newspapers and the increased numbers of reporters assigned to Washington. Lawrence A. Gobright, a Washington correspondent from the days before the Civil War, had no reluctance to check information with the president when he needed. In his recollections of his years covering Washington news in the period beginning in the 1850s, Gobright related a instance during the war when several reporters went to see President Lincoln. A telegram had arrived at the War Department with news of a Union battle win, but reporters were not given the specifics. “Failing thus to obtain them at the Department, several of the correspondents hastened to the Executive Mansion in order to secure the desired information from the President,” he recounted.⁴⁸ The Cabinet meeting concluded, officials were leaving the room. “The representatives of the press had no sooner sent in their cards to him than he welcomed them in a loud voice. ‘Walk in, walk in; be seated; take seats.’ The President then told them he knew why they were there: ‘I know what you have come for; you want to hear more about the good news. I know you do. You gentlemen are keen of scent, and always wide awake.’” One of them replied: “You have hit the matter precisely, Mr. President: that’s exactly what we want—the news.” Once the president had said all he was going to about the victory, the reporters left. “And, without unnecessary delay in bidding good morning, and thanking the President for his kindness, they hastened to the telegraph-office to flash over the wires the cheering intelligence,” Gobright noted.⁴⁹ While the example Gobright provided is not one involving routine news, the White House was a planned stop for reporters.

Ben: Perley Poore described the routines of the chief correspondent and the bases he touched daily in 1874: “A Washington chief correspondent is expected to be omnipresent himself, besides keeping his subordinates at work,” he said.⁵⁰ “He must daily visit the White House, haunt the departments, call at the hotels, drop in upon communicative Congressmen at their rooms—dine with diplomates [*sic*], chat with promenaders on the Avenue, listen to the conversation of those who may be his fellow-passengers in the street cars—in short, he must ever be on the *qui vive* for ‘items’ on week-days, Sundays, and holidays.” The Washington correspondent of Poore’s day was a cross-cutter who developed news through a general approach. Gradually, as more and more reporters came to town, each wanted to

⁴⁸ L. A. Gobright, *Recollections of Men and Things at Washington during the Third of a Century* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1869), 334.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁵⁰ Poore, “Washington News,” 234.

develop his or her own news niche. It was that need to be different, to “be on the *qui vive*” that led reporters to the White House on a permanent basis.

The development of the White House as a continuing center of news occurred at just the time newspapers were growing exponentially every decade following the Civil War. In the period from 1870 to 1900, the number of daily newspapers grew from 574 to 2,226.⁵¹ The growth in numbers was matched by an enormous increase in the percentage of the population reading newspapers. While in 1870 6.5 percent received a newspaper, thirty years later the figure was 19.8 percent of the population.⁵² There is no thirty-year period in which the newspaper growth equals these figures. The increase in the number of papers brought a growing group of correspondents based in Washington. In his discussion of Washington correspondents, Henry V. Boynton, a veteran correspondent for the *Cincinnati Gazette* and chair of the Standing Committee of Correspondents, observed that from the period following the Civil War to 1891, “the press congress has tripled the number of its representatives.”⁵³ In 1860, when correspondents first acquired official status in the *Congressional Directory*, the volume listed 60 correspondents.⁵⁴ While not all who worked as Washington correspondents sought entry into the congressional galleries, those who did increased in the ten-year period from 1888 to 1898 from 118 correspondents to 154.⁵⁵ O. O. Stealey, the veteran Washington correspondent for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, observed an increase in reporters in the press galleries in the period from 1883 to 1903 from 91 newspaper men when he came to Washington to 163 in 1903.⁵⁶

ORGANIZING THE EXPANDING GROUP OF CORRESPONDENTS AND ESTABLISHING PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

In a relatively brief period of time, Washington became a news center, and with it reporters came to find information the public wanted to read. Writing in 1869, Lawrence A. Gobright, manager of Associated Press, compared his early days in the late 1840s as a Washington correspondent with the post-Civil War period. “The New York papers, which were regarded, even at that time, as enterprising, rarely contained more than half a column of Washington news, Congressional proceedings included,” he said.⁵⁷ “And this was the complexion of all journals outside of Washington.” Twenty-two years earlier, he said, “I was, for six weeks, the only newspaper correspondent in Washington.” The Congress was not in session, and reporters saw little reason to stay in town.

Before reporters could establish a presence in the White House, they first needed to clean up their act. In the 1870s there was an odor to the news business that, if continued, would preclude their establishing a location there. Washington correspondents had first to establish their professional identities, their standards and practices, and their purpose. To get to that point, they would first need to think about their community of correspondents as a

⁵¹ Stanley and Niemi, *Vital Statistics*, 56.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ H. V. Boynton, “The Press and Public Men,” *Century* 42 (October 1891): 855.

⁵⁴ Crosby S. Noyes, “Washington Journalism, Past and Present,” *Washington Evening Star*, December 16, 1902.

⁵⁵ W. H. Michael, *Official Congressional Directory, Fiftieth Congress, First Session* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1888), 158. A. J. Halford, *Official Congressional Directory, Fifty-Fifth Congress, Third Session* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1898), 302-304.

⁵⁶ O. O. Stealey, *Twenty Years in the Press Gallery* (New York: Publishers Printing, 1906), 1.

⁵⁷ Gobright, *Recollections of Men and Things*, 400.

group and determine what standards to establish for themselves. They needed to deal with issues they previously avoided in spite of the fast clip at which they had stacked up, including the fallout over the roles played by reporters on both sides of the Credit Mobilier scandal. There were journalists implicated in the scandal, most especially Uriah Painter, while George A. Townsend (“Gath”) unraveled the puzzle in his news columns. The former cast a pall on the community of Washington correspondents while the latter made enemies of several important members of Congress. Correspondents practicing lobbying on the side and the recently acquired habit of purchasing news were two additional items on their plate. They established professional standards governing admittance to congressional galleries, such as prohibiting lobbying, and, in addition, they created organizations that would bring together Washington reporters and, at the same time, also include the officials they covered.⁵⁸ In 1885 the Gridiron Club was created with both of these purposes in mind.⁵⁹ Its humorous programs should not obscure the fact that the organization represented an early successful effort to bring reporters together as a group. Writing in 1902, Crosby Noyes, editor-in-chief of the *Evening Star*, noted that the Gridiron Club “has been one of the main causes for the higher standing of the corps and the better feeling existing between public men and correspondents.”⁶⁰ More important, reporters coalesced to establish common standards of conduct. The Standing Committee on Correspondents (1879), with the authority to grant admittance to the press galleries, continues to be the single most important press body in Washington, making decisions setting professional standards and then using them to decide who can use congressional news facilities. For correspondents to acquire White House privileges today, he or she must first be an accredited member of one of the congressional galleries.

BROADENING THE SCOPE OF NEWS: NEW READERS, NEW SUBJECTS

In addition to the number of correspondents, another change was the shift from a partisan press to an objective one. “The newspaper press of the country, without regard to party, has become, in the main, thoroughly independent in its criticisms of all public affairs and public men,” H. V. Boynton observed.⁶¹ The move to an objective press was solidified by the development of wire services, each responsible for disseminating information to a broad variety of newspapers. Speed and accuracy took priority over partisan positioning. It was not long, however, before the sensationalist newspapers reaped the rewards of an increased number of readers.

With a substantial increase in the percentage of the population reading newspapers, editors and publishers sought to appeal to the new readers. At just that time, the presidency seemed over and over again to be a scene where personal and political drama set the national stage. During the forty-year period from 1861 to 1901, there were two wars, three presidential assassinations, and the only impeachment trial in our history. In addition, the wife of President Benjamin Harrison, Caroline Harrison, died during her husband’s

⁵⁸ See Donald A. Ritchie, *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 109-110.

⁵⁹ Arthur Dunn Wallace, *Gridiron Nights: Humorous and Satirical Views of Politics and Statesmen as Presented by the Famous Dining Club* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1920), 2-3.

⁶⁰ Noyes, “Washington Journalism.”

⁶¹ Boynton, “The Press and Public Men,” 855.

reelection campaign. Scandals rocked the administration of President Grant and were a topic as Chester Arthur took office. On a brighter note, the only president to marry in the White House during his years in office, Grover Cleveland, married Frances Folsom, twenty-seven years his junior, a year after coming into office. In his second term Cleveland became the only president to have a child born in the White House. In addition to the personal dramas, presidents of this period gradually took a firmer leadership role in policy. Sometimes that meant the veto of legislation, as President Cleveland was known for doing, and at others times it called for the president to endorse reform, as President Chester Arthur did with the Pendleton Act of 1883, creating the Civil Service Commission. All of these developments, both in the news industry and in the individual presidential administrations taking office in the second half of the nineteenth century, led to the recognition of the White House as a consistently important venue for personal and policy news.

*PRECEDENTS ESTABLISHED THROUGH COVERAGE OF
WHITE HOUSE SOCIAL EVENTS: OLIVIA QUESTIONS THE
WHITE HOUSE GUESTS AND STAFF*

The White House was a consistent story each year for the duration of the social season. Beginning with a New Year's Day reception that brought together the official elite of Washington with the common folk who wanted to greet their chief executive, a president traditionally gave a series of approximately a dozen dinners and public receptions that went through February.⁶² Each one was covered by reporters representing newspapers from all around the country. The articles about the upcoming events were splattered throughout a newspaper—the front page, the social page, commercial pages, all had news of the occasions. Each had a piece of the story of who would come to Washington for the events, the merchants providing goods and services, the clothing styles, and the decorations of the White House as well as the food served there and the identities and actions of the official participants in the dinner and receptions.

Colonel Theodore A. Bingham, Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds at the White House at the turn of the century, served as the major domo for the handling of social events. His meticulous records provide a window on the events and the assembled multitude. His records are the one place where one can find documentary evidence of women as among those covering the White House as the century turned. In his lists of who was involved in coverage, he routinely kept two lists: "Newspaper Correspondents" and "Lady Correspondents." On January 10, 1900, for example, there were 119 "Newspaper Correspondents" and 17 "Lady Correspondents" included in the Diplomatic Reception. While there were generally no indications of which papers the men represented, there were for the "ladies." In a sample list, the publications included three papers in Washington, five in New York, two in Philadelphia, as well as *Harper's Bazaar*.⁶³ White House social events had a national audience.

⁶² The list of scheduled receptions planned for President and Mrs. Harrison to give in January and February 1892 included the following: January 1, President's reception; January 9, Mrs. Harrison's reception; January 12, diplomatic reception; January 19, Cabinet dinner; January 23, Mrs. Harrison's reception; January 26, congressional and judicial reception; February 2, diplomatic dinner; February 6, Mrs. Harrison's reception; February 9, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps reception; February 16, Supreme Court dinner; February 20, Mrs. Harrison's reception; February 23, public reception. Harrison Papers.

⁶³ Judicial Reception, January 24, 1900, Papers of Theodore Bingham, Library of Congress.

With a highly competitive field of reporters hunting for social news, correspondents needed to be particularly resourceful to unearth a nugget no one else could find. The routines developed for covering White House social events later leached into the realm of political coverage. One of the best known of the social correspondents was Emily Briggs, who wrote for the *Philadelphia Free Press* under the name “Olivia.” In her columns of social commentary, Briggs cast a wide news net, including in her copy information on the operation of a White House, the identities of a president’s visitors, and a sense of the rhythms of a White House. In her writing she worked with a broad sense of what was fair game in White House reporting. She regarded the White House as public property and what went on within its walls to be public business. The peoples’ messenger was the newspaper correspondent. When there is a private reception held by a Cabinet member, she wrote in 1870, “the newspaper correspondent dare not, cannot, without violating all delicacy and good taste, make a pen picture of the men and women whom the dear people at home like to know all about.”⁶⁴ But when the party is given by the president in the White House, it “is altogether a different affair. It is public. It belongs to the people. When we go to the Executive Mansion we go to our own house,” she said. “We recline on our own satin and ebony. We are received graciously by our own well-dressed servants, and the people have a right to know, through the columns of *The Press*, the exact state of the situation. Whoever goes to a levee at the mansion becomes public property, and has no more right to complain because he has been caught in the net of a newspaper correspondent than the fish who has swallowed the hook of an honest fisherman.”⁶⁵ Her approach became standard operating procedure for all White House correspondents, not just those tracking social receptions.

As a person who believed the Executive Mansion to be a newspaper correspondent’s terrain, Briggs was at the White House the day before President Garfield was shot. She described the entrance of Cabinet members for their meeting with the president and then Garfield’s reception of members of the public. She did so from inside of the White House, capturing the whirlwind atmosphere that dominated the occasion. Since this day was to be the President Garfield’s last in the White House before his summer vacation, a large number of people was assembled. “Both branches of Congress, Army and Navy, governors of States and Territories, with the odds and ends of humanity all unknown to fame, were collected in an indescribably, whirling kaleidoscope,” she observed.⁶⁶ “The stairs once free from the descending mass would be instantly filled with the same kind of material in an upward flight, to remain until hope was dead, and the first result would be enacted again.” During her years covering the Washington social scene in the post–Civil War period until the twentieth century, Briggs worked from a broad notion of what information should be included in reporting on White House activities. In fact, she provided early institutional coverage of the White House in addition to her reporting of receptions.

In her quest for White House information, the staff proved to be an informative and colorful resource. She spoke with those whose duties involved putting together the events, as well as those who attended. She queried White House steward Valentino Melah, for example, in a column exploring White House household operations. He let it be known that

⁶⁴ Emily Briggs, “Levee at the Executive Mansion, Cabinet Ladies Take Part in Assisting Mrs. Grant,” February 5, 1870, in *The Olivia Letters: Being Some History of Washington City for Forty Years as Told by the Letters of a Newspaper Correspondent* (New York: Neale Publishing Co., 1906), 168.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Emily Briggs, “President Garfield’s Cabinet Day, Members of the Official Family—A Soldier’s Disappointment,” August 22, 1881, *Olivia Letters*, 425.

the White House was somewhat short on porcelain and silver flatware. “Why, madame,” says Melah, “there isn’t enough silver in the White House to set a respectable free-lunch table.”⁶⁷ Others who reported in the political realm mined similar sources. So nettled was the White House by such interviews that instructions to staff written at the turn of the century warned employees not to talk with reporters. In his 1902 pamphlet, “Special Instructions to the Chief Doorkeeper and Those Under His Immediate Supervision,” Secretary George B. Cortelyou directed: “The giving of information to representatives of the press or to any others, except in the strict line of official duty, concerning any matter relating to the White House or the Executive Office is strictly forbidden.”⁶⁸ He then added: “With this exception all persons making requests for information must be referred to the Secretary to the President.”

WHITE HOUSE RESPONSE TO INCREASED DEMANDS FOR PRESIDENTIAL INFORMATION: EXPERIENCE AND ESTABLISHED ROUTINES

“It is the rule of our politics that no vexed question is settled except by executive policy,” noted Henry Jones Ford in *The Rise and Growth of American Politics*.⁶⁹ Originally published in 1898, Ford noted the unique position of a president as a person who can shape opinion on an issue. “The evidence which our history affords seems conclusive of the fact that the only power which can end party duplicity and define issues in such a way that public opinion can pass upon them decisively, is that which emanates from presidential authority.” The period from the Civil War to the end of the century was one in which the need for presidential leadership clarified itself. Congress was often unwilling to tackle divisive issues that would put in danger the electoral base of its members. Tough issues, such as those of public order, required presidential direction, as did the difficult questions of pension requests, trade policy, and currency policy. They were matched by the growing need for presidential leadership in the arena of world affairs. In order to successfully lead on these and other issues, the president needed to understand the publicity demands of leadership and then make effective use of the resources available to him.

One of the basic requirements of leadership came to the surface during the years leading up to century’s end: make effective use of the news organizations providing the public with its news. Writing in 1891, Henry Boynton, the first head of the Standing Committee on Correspondents, noted the importance of the press to successful public officials. “Of that small body of public men who make up the most successful class,” he noted, “with few exceptions, they have made the closest study of the machinery of the press and the facilities which it offers.”⁷⁰ For the president, that meant effectively using newspapers, both through their reporters coming to the White House and the wire services

⁶⁷ Found first in Seale, *The President’s House*, vol. 1, 465. Emily Briggs, “Professor Melah, the Functionary in Charge of State Dinners at the White House,” March 8, 1870, *Olivia Letters*, 199.

⁶⁸ “Special Instructions to the Chief Doorkeeper and Those Under His Immediate Supervision.” The instructions are dated December 13, 1902, and signed by George Cortelyou. Executive Files, Theodore Roosevelt 1902-03, Papers of George B. Cortelyou, Library of Congress.

⁶⁹ Ford, *Rise and Growth of American Politics*, 283.

⁷⁰ Boynton, “The Press and Public Men,” 856.

that carried information to newsrooms around the country. If an official effectively used the press, Boynton argued, both would benefit. “Thus every man whose abilities give him power to command public attention finds the means of securing it at his disposal, and so the value and importance of the press are beginning to be better understood by men in the public service, and its power and influence are correspondingly increasing.”⁷¹ Once presidents figured out how news organizations functioned and developed proficiency in their dealings with reporters, correspondents did benefit. Among other rewards, they got space in the White House.

Since presidents did not want to deal directly with reporters on a routine basis prior to President Theodore Roosevelt, they developed alternate strategies to respond to the increased demands made by news organizations for information about the president, his policies, and his family. Almost uniformly, Presidents Cleveland, Harrison, and McKinley responded in two ways. First, they assembled a White House staff organization capable of providing the response while retaining the president’s advantages in his relations with news organizations; and, second, they developed rules and routines that served the interests of both partners, most particularly their own. But first presidents had to realize the value of news organizations to achieving their own policy ends. In 1896, the year William Price established quarters in the White House, William McKinley reaped the benefits of a political campaign that relied heavily on news organizations to carry coordinated themes along with supporting information targeted to specific audiences. The instrument used to deliver the campaign messages was newspapers. Once he assumed the presidency, he already had a successful example behind him of the rewards of a media focus.

NEWSPAPERS AS A CAMPAIGN RESOURCE: THE MCKINLEY CAMPAIGN OF 1896

When William McKinley ran for the presidency in 1896, he made use of newspapers to carry his themes. Campaign officials placed ads in newspapers and made sure reporters had advanced copies of his speeches. Literature was directed to specific audiences, and mailings were sent to newspapers with issues in mind. The records of Perry S. Heath, a Washington correspondent who was in charge of publication and printing for the Republican National Committee in 1896, make clear the sophisticated use the campaign made of specialized materials. In a letter to Governor McKinley in August 1896, Heath indicated they had prepared materials on “the various phases of the tariff question.” They were targeting their material with designated recipients in mind. He indicated of the materials, “Five or six of them will strike home to the interests of the farmer, and 8 or ten of them will be addressed to mechanics and laboringmen.”⁷² He continued his roundup of their communications efforts: “arrangements perfected for reaching all classes of newspapers, from the dailies in cities of thirty thousand inhabitants down to the smallest ready-print country publications.” Their work included putting out their materials to the foreign-language press, an important component in a country with a rapidly increasing immigrant population. “I have also a department under me that is looking after the foreign newspapers. Of course the publications in foreign languages form a very large part of our work,” Heath indicated to McKinley. “We are publishing our documents in from six to eight languages.” In addition to

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 857.

⁷² Perry S. Heath to Governor William McKinley, August 17, “Republican Party, McKinley, Wm. S., 1896 Campaign,” Papers of Perry S. Heath, Library of Congress.

their targeted mailings, the McKinley campaign was the first to use film of the candidate as a campaign resource.⁷³ With a strong press effort as an important component of his campaign for the presidency, McKinley came into office knowing newspapers to be a rich political resource. They could effectively be used in governing just as they had been helping him acquire the top post. They could aid in keeping him there. When President-Elect McKinley left Canton, Ohio, for Washington in early March, his train of seven cars contained one reserved for newspaper men.⁷⁴ He was well aware of the importance of newsmen to achieving his political goals and made sure to keep them close to him as he made the transition from Ohio to Washington.

*WHITE HOUSE SECRETARIES COMPLEMENT THEIR
PRESIDENTS: PRESS KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL APLOMB*

Beginning with Cleveland's first term in 1883 down to Theodore Roosevelt's assumption of power, the president's secretaries were men with substantial experience in the news business. In addition, the successful ones also served as a buffer for their president and smoothed over what their chief executives may have made rough. Experience was an important factor for President Cleveland's secretaries—and for most of his fellow chief executives at that time because they had no interest in personally dealing with reporters. His secretary would have to fill in for him as well as set about creating strategies to enhance the president's reputation. "I looked upon my table or my parlor as my own, places reserved for my friends and for the congenial men whom they might send to me, and proper mediums for bringing me support for public acts or policies," said Grover Cleveland to his friend, newspaperman George F. Parker.⁷⁵ Believing appeals to public opinion to be a call to vanity, Cleveland eschewed developing public approval of his policies. "If an official, with a duty to the whole public, so far forgets his own dignity or that of his great office to court some part of the people by appeals to that vanity which, for reasons I could never understand, wants to shine with a reflected light, retribution is certain to come when power has gone," he said.⁷⁶ Courting people, whether they were reporters or officials, was not something Cleveland did. In a discussion with a member of the Senate, for example, Cleveland responded to the senator when questioned about his appointment policy: "I suppose you mean that I should appoint two horse-thieves instead of one."⁷⁷ Such an approach made persuasion more difficult, whether the president was dealing with congressmen or newsmen.

With views such as these, Cleveland required a staff support structure that could do the work he was unwilling to do and smooth over relations with those he offended. Daniel Lamont was so important to Cleveland because his skills complemented the president's weak points. Lamont was superb at advancing publicity on policy, and the president knew it, even if he was unwilling to discuss the importance of his secretary's skills. In addition, where the president was abrasive, Lamont had a smooth stroke. "Lamont also owned a big bump of diplomacy, and knew how to manage men and affairs," observed O. O. Stealey, who knew

⁷³ Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), 3, 11-12.

⁷⁴ "Farewell to Canton," *Washington Evening Star*, March 2, 1897.

⁷⁵ George F. Parker, *Recollections of Grover Cleveland* (New York: Century Co., 1909), 360.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁷⁷ Harry Thurston Peck, *Twenty Years of the Republic, 1885-1905* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1907), 78.

both men.⁷⁸ “During his stay in the White House, and while Secretary of War, he was a sort of ministering angel to the wounded feelings of public men, and smoothed over and rubbed out many differences which might have become serious and embarrassing to the Administration.” He also had a sense of the resonance of presidential difficulties, including ill health. President Cleveland was diagnosed as having a tumor in his mouth at a time of great financial instability, the Panic of 1893. He left for an operation to remove the tumor three days after the stock market crash on June 27. It was not a time when the president or Lamont thought the public could easily absorb such presidential news without an adverse reaction. Consequently, they engineered a presidential operation outside of public view. The surgery took place on the yacht *Oneida*, owned by the president’s business associate, Elias C. Benedict. With Congress not in session until early August, the president had several weeks to recover in his summer home on Cape Cod. Since the tumor proved to be malignant, the surgeons removed a large section of the president’s jaw. Even so, the details of the event did not become public until 1917 when one of the doctors wrote an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* describing the operation.⁷⁹

Beginning with Daniel Lamont, who first served Grover Cleveland when he was governor of New York, presidential private secretaries of the period from 1885 to the turn of the century had a newspaper background. Almost all were people who were able to turn their experience to a president’s advantage. Lamont worked for the *Albany Argus* as an editorial writer. He was followed by Elijah Halford, who served as a correspondent for the *Indianapolis Journal*, prior to becoming private secretary to President Benjamin Harrison. As a former newspaperman, Halford had respect for his former colleagues and enjoyed their company. William Price said of him: “Halford’s newspaper training stood him in good stead while he was Harrison’s secretary.”⁸⁰ “The coldness of the Chief was often overlooked out of regard for the warm-heartedness of the secretary, for Halford was the personal friends of every correspondent in the newspaper world.”

While Dan Lamont served in the Cabinet as secretary of war during Cleveland’s second term, he continued to advise and arrange any major publicity work the president required, such as the publicity strategy for dealing with the president’s major surgery. Henry Thurber served as the secretary during Cleveland’s second term, but Lamont was the man to see on important publicity matters. When President McKinley took office, he brought in as his secretary John Addison Porter, who had owned a Connecticut newspaper, the *Hartford Post*, prior to his White House service. While his successor, George Cortelyou, did not have newspaper experience, by the time he took the chief post he had had a great deal of experience dealing with correspondents coming to the White House for their news. Cortelyou was the first White House secretary with a knowledge of publicity operations derived from his earlier on-the-job experience. And it served him well, as it did the three presidents for whom he worked. In a period of eight years, Cortelyou advanced from the position of stenographer to President Cleveland to an appointment by President Theodore Roosevelt to serve as the first secretary of commerce and labor. His efficiency and effectiveness as an official was complemented by his strong sense of publicity. It was a proficiency that aided him in his quick journey to the top.

⁷⁸ Stealey, *Twenty Years in the Press Gallery*, 34.

⁷⁹ See Seale, *The President’s House*, vol. 2, pp. 604-607, for a discussion of the efforts to keep under wraps the details of the operation.

⁸⁰ W. W. Price, “Secretaries to the Presidents,” *Cosmopolitan* 30, no. 5 (March 1901): 491.

The press experience of the secretaries paid off with their ability to establish a set of rules and routines benefiting their presidents. It was really with the personal aspects of life in the White House that the need for rules became most apparent. With reporters clamoring for news on the personal side of White House life, such as the latest steps of “Baby McKee,” President Harrison’s grandson, a White House resident, and later “Baby Ruth,” President Cleveland’s daughter, gradually rules were set. Even though President Cleveland was upset by reporters’ setting up a stakeout to follow him and his wife on their honeymoon to Deer Park, Maryland, the interest of news organizations in the wedding trip of the first president to marry in the White House while in office was indeed natural. Reporters followed the prenuptial preparations beginning with Frances Folsom’s arrival in New York from a trip to Europe with her mother. President Cleveland, 27 years older than his bride of 23, wanted to keep Miss Folsom out of the public eye as she returned home. Dan Lamont’s understanding of press routines gave President Cleveland what he wanted. Knowing that reporters would wait on the dock for her ship to arrive, Lamont hired a tugboat, boarded the ship, and took Miss Folsom and her mother by tug to an alternate landing spot where they arrived without fanfare and continued on to their hotel.⁸¹ He may have bypassed reporters in this instance, but during the honeymoon restraining the press was difficult.

ROUTINES ESTABLISHED FOR PRESIDENTIAL NEWS: EMBARGOES, BRIEFINGS, AND TACIT UNDERSTANDINGS

Presidents give speeches and present messages because they want the public to understand their policy goals and proposals. An accurate understanding of presidential policies is important if the proposals are to sell. Consequently, presidents and their staffs place a great deal of importance on reporters getting it right when proposals are first presented. Reporters long pressed for advance texts of important presidential statements. But presidents were slow to cooperate. When the Associated Press asked President Lincoln for an advance copy of an open letter to be read to the members of the Illinois Republican party meeting in convention, he refused to do it, saying, “I have found that documents given to the press in advance are always prematurely published.”⁸²

EMBARGOED SPEECHES

Wire services and newspapers received advanced texts of presidential speeches and messages in President Cleveland’s first term. As a former newsman and as an adviser to Cleveland when he was governor of New York, Daniel Lamont was aware of the publicity advantages for a president when reporters got the story straight. So ingrained a habit did the advance texts become that when Elijah Halford came in as private secretary to President Harrison and misunderstood a request for an advance text of the president’s annual message, the managing editor of the *Philadelphia Daily News* let him know what the release process provided. “I requested nothing outside of the usual routine, only speaking of this as one of several papers that usually receive a copy of the President’s message from the Secretary,” he wrote in November 1890.⁸³ Rufus Root then detailed exactly how the process of early release worked: “The copies are always handed the papers by postmasters some hours before

⁸¹ See Seale, *The President’s House*, vol. 1, p. 563.

⁸² Gobright, *Recollections of Men and Things*, 337.

⁸³ Rufus Root to Elijah Halford, November 22, 1890, Harrison Papers.

the delivery of the document to Congress, but the message is not published until it is before Congress, and this fact, ‘the reading’ is announced to all the daily papers in the United States by telegraphic messages called ‘releases.’” He continued his informative discussion: “A special messenger leaves Washington with the copies of the message for this city [Philadelphia], New York, and Boston, a day or two before Congress meets.” Having gone through the details, Root gets to the bottom line: “The point I want to get at is, can we expect a copy of the message through your courtesy and can we with the other papers here receiving it from you, have it at the usual early hour, say before 7 a.m.?” As Root makes quite clear, there was a process in place, prior to President Harrison coming into office in spring of 1889, providing for direct distribution to newspapers of the president’s annual message.

For a secretary to agree to prior release of presidential texts was to take a risk that all would not play by the rules. Yet it was worth the risk, as a breach of faith could always be punished. News organizations feared retribution. Elijah Halford acceded to requests by news associations for embargoed texts, even if he was reluctant to give them out directly to newspapers. His exchange of letters with the general manager of the Press News Association demonstrates that he was providing them with texts from the time of Harrison’s first message to Congress in late 1889. James Townsend, the general manager of the association, wrote to Halford explaining to him that the organization did not prematurely release the message. “I think if you look into this matter carefully you will find that any feeling on your part that we committed any breach of faith, or did not protect the President or yourself in the matter was based upon erroneous and false reports, and would be unjust to us if retained,” he said.⁸⁴ The problem lay in the requirement by Western Union that it receive a copy early to send out to the association’s group of newspapers. The following year Townsend was clearly worried that a breach from the previous year would hurt the Press News Association’s chances of receiving an advance text of the presidential message. After reminding Halford that his association had the same need for an advance text as the Associated Press and United Press, he pointed out that “since last Spring the Association has increased over 25% in size, and now serves over One Hundred newspapers many of which are large and important journals.”⁸⁵ If knowing the reach of their wire into newsrooms across the country was not sufficient, Townsend told Halford, “I pledge you my word that we shall respect and obey and see that our papers obey your confidence.”

With breaches in the release rules, the White House finally resorted to having reporters sign pledges that they would not use the material they were given prior to the specified time for its release. In the McKinley administration, for example, a sample release provided:

The speech of President McKinley at _____ is received by the undersigned, in advance, under the express condition that it is to be held in confidence, and no portion, synopsis, or intimation of it published or given out until after its delivery has been begun by the President on _____; or if, for any reason, the said speech shall not be delivered until a later date, then, under the same conditions, no portion, synopsis, or intimation of it shall be published or given out until its delivery has been begun by the President upon such later date.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ James Townsend to Elijah Halford, December 5, 1889, Harrison Papers.

⁸⁵ James B. Townsend to Elijah Halford, November 24, 1890, Harrison Papers.

⁸⁶ September 5, 1901, Papers of President William McKinley.

While such pledges to observe an embargo might have kept some reporters in line, ultimately such a formal procedure fell out of favor and was replaced by the more informal tacit understanding that the information would be held confidential.

BRIEFINGS

“Newsmen nowadays have access to the President, but they do not intrude upon his privacy, except in cases of absolute necessity,” observed William Price.⁸⁷ “They usually get all the information that is to be had by talking with the secretary or an assistant.” If reporters needed the president himself, they could get to him: “When, however, they need to reach the fountain head of news he is accessible,” Price assured. On a daily basis, it was the president’s secretary to whom reporters directed their queries. The president’s private secretary routinely provided reporters with a briefing in which correspondents were advised of presidential positions and responses to events. Speaking on a regular basis with reporters, the secretary was responsible for imparting the nuance of presidential positions as well as their facts. David Barry, who served as a correspondent during the latter part of the nineteenth century, noted that if Cleveland “had something to communicate to the public he wrote it out and give it to his private secretary to hand to representatives of the press associations.”⁸⁸ Lamont provided reporters with information the president wanted them to have, but he also was willing to respond to the queries of reporters and make sure they had their facts straight. O. O. Stealey of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* described Lamont’s value to reporters: “He let the ‘boys’ do most of the talking and guessing, but never allowed them to leave the White House with a wrong impression, or without thinking that they had got about all there was in the story.”⁸⁹ In fact, Lamont could be fairly creative in responding to reporters’ queries when he wanted to hold down a story, as was evident in Lamont’s handling of President Cleveland’s cancer surgery.

Briefings became such a regular feature of White House press operations that one could anticipate regularly receiving information from the president’s secretary. In her discussion of White House news routines in place at the end of the nineteenth century, Ida Tarbell explained the process in 1898 when President McKinley was in office and John Addison Porter served as his secretary. Speaking of the area outside of Porter’s office where reporters gathered and wrote at their table, Tarbell observed. “Here they write, note the visitors who are admitted to the President, catch the secretaries as they come and go, and here every evening about ten o’clock they gather around Secretary Porter for a kind of family talk, he discussing with them whatever of the events of the day he thinks it wise to discuss.”⁹⁰ The regular release of substantive information, with accompanying explanations in response to reporters’ queries, lies at the heart of a White House press operation. It was true at the end of the nineteenth century and remains so at the beginning of the twenty-first. What is released today and how it is accomplished is somewhat different now than it was in the time of McKinley and Porter, but the basic routine for the release of information and the expectations of reporters remain fairly similar.

⁸⁷ Price, “How the Work of Gathering White House News Has Changed.”

⁸⁸ Quoted in James Pollard, *The Presidents and the Press* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 26.

⁸⁹ Stealey, *Twenty Years in the Press Gallery*, 34.

⁹⁰ Tarbell, “President McKinley,” 214.

TACIT UNDERSTANDINGS

By the end of the century, presidents, their staffs, and reporters developed a set of common understandings serving at the base of their relationship. Each needed the other, and as a result both sides made efforts to accept the presence of the other on a basis of trust. In order to increase the chance of accuracy in the stories reporters filed, the president and his staff were willing to provide them with texts of presidential speeches and messages with the proviso that they not report the material prior to the time when it was publicly released. Reporters generally abided by that restriction as they did by the conceit that what presidents said in their meetings was to be kept confidential. Being brought into the presidential information loop, however, had its price. President Theodore Roosevelt talked freely with William Price and other White House reporters, but on a not-for-attribution basis. “While it is pleasant to the newspaper reporter thus to have the confidence of the chief executive or of a cabinet officer or member of Congress, he frequently regrets that he is the custodian of facts that he is prevented from using,” Price said.⁹¹ A reporter who has “not been placed in a similar position is often at liberty to write the story whenever he has secured it from a source that does not place the inhibition of confidence on him.” Ironically, being close to a president could lead a reporter to being scooped by a competitor who did not enjoy the same access.

One of the tacit understandings in operation, then as now, allows a news organization to use material acquired from a source other than the one binding the correspondent. George Cortelyou provided an example of a case in which a news organization escaped White House retribution for publishing a secured prized document. The bureau chief was able to demonstrate that the material they used did not come from the White House. When the report of the Court of Inquiry into the sinking of the *Maine* came into the White House, it was carefully secured by Cortelyou, who was then the assistant secretary to President McKinley. In his diary he described how the document was prepared and then secured. “Began work [typing the report] at about five o’clock and finished the necessary number of copies at about ten o’clock P.M. took a hasty dinner and was at the Executive Mansion a little before eleven o’clock delivering the original and ten copies, where they were seamed up and tied and then put in the safe.”⁹² That was Saturday. On Monday, an accurate account of its findings was published by the Associated Press. Secretary Porter brought in the Washington manager of the wire service and demanded information about his source. If he had received a copy of the secured document from a source other than the White House, the news organization had every right to print it. Cortelyou was brought in to assess the situation. “I went to the safe, which Colonel Crook opened and took the findings of the Court of Inquiry . . . which had not been out of the safe since Saturday night and was still in the condition it was in when placed there, seamed and tied up, showing that that copy at least could not have been the copy to which the representative of Associated Press said he had had access ‘for a day’—Sunday.”⁹³ In order to make certain the White House copy was not the one used by the Associated Press correspondent, Porter required Boynton to sign “a cast iron statement that the information upon which their extract was made was not obtained directly or indirectly from any one connected with the Executive Mansion.”

⁹¹ Price, “How the Work of White House News Gathering Has Changed.”

⁹² Diary, March 26, 1898, Papers of George B. Cortelyou.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, March 28, 1898.

The White House accepted accuracy of information as the coin of the realm for reporters. To that end, the president and White House staff checked out queries presented by reporters, most especially those representing major news organizations. Cortelyou's diary again tells the tale. When Colonel Boynton asked Cortelyou to check out the timing of the release of the report from the Court of Inquiry, he did so with the president himself. When Boynton called shortly thereafter with an additional query, Cortelyou again went to the president.⁹⁴ When the secretary responded to reporters, he too was concerned with warning reporters off of inaccurate reporting. As O. O. Stealey pointed out, Porter made sure reporters did not go away from the White House with a wrong take on a story. While a reporter could check out a story with the president, in most instances when a reporter saw the president he did so without speaking to him. There were tacit understandings relating to questioning the president. Ida Tarbell described the rules: "It is part of the unwritten law of the White House that the newspaper men shall never approach the President as he passes to and fro near their alcove or crosses the portico to his carriage, unless he himself stops and talks to them," she observed.⁹⁵ That is a tacit understanding no longer observed by either the president or by reporters.

THE INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONSHIP: CLEVELAND TO CLINTON

When President Cleveland was traveling on his 1887 swing-around-the-circle through the Midwest and South, he and his wife were inadvertently left behind at one point. "On leaving Memphis the train went several miles before it was discovered that the President and Mrs. Cleveland were not aboard," recorded private secretary Daniel Lamont in his trip notes.⁹⁶ "It backed up to the station." Today no train needs to back up to the station to get the president. No train, governmental or mechanical, leaves without him. Today almost any problem seems to make its way to his desk. Whether it is exercising the initiative on legislation, expressing the national outrage over acts of violence against the nation's people, or making sure airplanes are safe, the president's door is where issues make their final stop. The same was not true for Grover Cleveland. The growth in importance of the presidency as the national nerve center for news has changed the presidential stakes in the relationship the chief executive has with the news media. Today communications, including the ability to make use of news organizations as a vehicle for his messages, is an integral part of presidential leadership. He simply can't lead without them. If he doesn't effectively use news organizations to shape the voyage of his policies, programs, and goals, he is left at the station—just as was President Grover Cleveland, who demonstrated little sense of the connection between active White House relations with news organizations and the fate of his policy interests.

The last two Democratic presidents of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Grover Cleveland and Bill Clinton, are people who expressed a special contempt for segments of the press. Six months in office, Cleveland commented upon the low state of American journalism: "I don't think there ever was a time when newspaper lying was so general and so

⁹⁴ Ibid., March 22, 1898.

⁹⁵ Tarbell, "President McKinley," 214.

⁹⁶ Lamont, "President Cleveland's Trip 1887," 5.

mean as at present,” he said.⁹⁷ At a similar point in his presidency, President Clinton angrily commented to a reporter who questioned him about the efficacy of his decision-making process: “I have long since given up the thought that I could disabuse some of you of turning any substantive decision into anything but a political process,” he commented before ending a news conference with reporters.⁹⁸ Both presidents expressed annoyance with the press and, early in their terms, had little regard for the role the press might have in the disposition of policy. As they took office, neither understood the press to be an institution critical to the development and aggregation of public support for their policies.

Both thought of the press in terms of their most recent experience, their first presidential election campaign. Both felt bruised by news organizations. In Grover Cleveland’s case, he was battered by charges of having fathered a child out of wedlock and having avoided service in the Civil War by paying \$300 to a substitute, a practice condoned by the draft laws at the time. In Bill Clinton’s case, the charges represented a potpourri of allegations calling into question the candidate’s character. Smarting from what they considered stings administered by news organizations, both wanted to cut their opponents dead. But both learned they could not afford to do so. Although certainly in different ways and degrees, each responded by learning something of the routines of news organizations and by hiring staff complementing their weak points, including a sense of the role played by the press in governing. While President Clinton did not appear to always enjoy himself in the process, he dealt directly with the members of the White House press corps, something Grover Cleveland would not do. That difference goes to perhaps the most important change in presidential-press relations since the end of the nineteenth century: today almost daily a president deals directly with members of news organizations and does so in public settings with his words and theirs on the record.

While neither President Cleveland nor President Clinton experienced a press epiphany, both adapted their relations with the press to the reality of the importance that news organizations hold in resonating the presidential voice. While there are clear differences in how each dealt with news organizations from their first years in office, both presidents designated staff members to deal with reporters and the news organizations they represented. In Cleveland’s case, Daniel Lamont focused on keeping the press at bay and limiting the damage correspondents might do the president. Whether it was keeping the lid on information about the president’s extensive surgery to remove a malignant tumor or preventing reporters from getting close to his fiancée, Lamont sought to keep information out of the public realm. He was successful in limiting the flow of news and channeling information in directions he sought. While neither Lamont nor Parker was successful in persuading Cleveland to give his time to reporters, they did get his consent to their speaking and acting on his behalf.

Cleveland never changed his attitude about reporters and the wisdom of direct dealings with them, but he did learn to appreciate and work within their routines. The following is a good example of the way in which Cleveland was actually involved in the preparation of materials for distribution to news organizations. After Cleveland lost the 1888 election and was preparing his first major address since leaving office, Daniel Lamont called in George Parker, who had written the “Democratic Campaign Text-Book,” a volume of nearly 700

⁹⁷ President Grover Cleveland to Joseph Keppler, editor of *Puck*, December 12, 1885, as quoted in Peck, *Twenty Years of the Republic*, 149.

⁹⁸ “The One-Question News Conference,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 1993, p. A13.

pages cataloguing the administration's first-term accomplishments.⁹⁹ With the task of advising Cleveland on how to get maximum exposure for the speech by way of effective distribution, Parker called for distribution through press associations rather than releasing it to 20 or 30 specified newspapers, as Cleveland wanted. Cleveland acceded to Parker's request, allowing Parker to provide the associations with advance copies of the speech text. Cleveland was mistrustful, telling Parker: "You will find yourself betrayed by some one, and I will be speaking an address which has been published somewhere."¹⁰⁰ All the same, he took Parker's advice. In addition to no prior release of the address, the text was printed just as it was delivered. "The suspected editors had had time to study what he said and to comment upon it with intelligence," said Parker. "And he was both pleased and surprised at the reception he had commanded in the country." So satisfied was Cleveland that Parker subsequently handled the release of 60 to 70 speeches and letters without any violations of the embargoes. As this case illustrates, Grover Cleveland was very aware of staff operations on his behalf, even if he maintained an appearance of being aloof from them. Cleveland made the adjustments that could be borne by staff, but that was not sufficient. The president himself needed to be involved in directing and promoting the case for his policies.

President Clinton, as frustrated as he was by reporters in his first year, changed course and developed a sense of the needs of news organizations in order to advance his policies. He continued to complain, sometimes heatedly, as his Rose Garden outburst attests, but he also met on a regular basis with representatives of news organizations. When he blew up at reporters, he swiftly made amends. Following his August 1996 exchange with Bill Plante of CBS and then Paul Bedard of the *Washington Times* regarding travel expenses, President Clinton spoke with Plante almost immediately after the event. Plante said the president told him he had had less sleep than usual. With the TWA crash, a series of events began that required his attention at all hours of the day and night. The following day President Clinton again appeared in the Rose Garden; this time he kept his temper. All the same, the symbolic message of his appeal to Plante and of his reappearance the next day in the same location was his recognition that the assembled group of news people was the straightest shot he had to the public, whose attention he really did require, most especially at a time when he was a candidate for reelection.

In his years in office, President Clinton became comfortable with communications tools and effectively used them. During the summer of 1996, for example, President Clinton and his White House staff combined communications technology with complementary messages. Approximately two days a week, using the White House as a backdrop, the president harnessed communications resources to highlight an issue he established as a priority in his campaign for reelection. Community policing, curfews for school-age children, school uniforms, housing for middle-class families, college tuition rebates, all were issues he articulated from his White House platform. By carefully spacing out the issues and ranking them in importance, Clinton used the combination to shape his image as a president seeking to restore the faith of people in their communities. He portrayed himself as a centrist leader concerned with making government work effectively. His fourth year in office contrasted sharply with the poor sense of the effective use of communications he exhibited in his first year. Directly and indirectly the president was responsible for the change. In the intervening

⁹⁹ See Parker, *Recollections of Grover Cleveland*, 106-121.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

years, he became settled in his White House environment and consequently comfortable using its resources.

President Clinton further increased his effectiveness by putting together an able staff capable of maintaining an effective relationship with news organizations. Bringing in Mike McCurry as press secretary served as a recognition by the president that he needed an experienced hand to guide the press operation. With a sense of the resonance of language and a grasp of the nuances of an exceptionally broad range of policies, McCurry was able to provide what the early Clinton press operation could not: a consistently articulate and authoritative accounting of presidential actions and policies. Combined with a well-coordinated campaign and White House communications operation, the fourth year of the Clinton administration proved to be an effective one where communications was a tool more than it was a resource used by other to influence White House responses. In the first year, Senator Bob Dole had used congressional communications resources to define White House actions. Regularly rising on the Senate floor and demanding explanations for the firing of employees in the Travel Office, Senator Dole appeared to be the defining component in many news stories written and aired concerning White House activities. By the fourth year, with a different communications team and a president who had grown to appreciate, if not like, press routines, the White House used the publicity operation to define Senator Dole, by then the presumptive Republican presidential candidate. It was almost as if one morning Senator Dole awoke to find his policy pocket had been picked. He lost the edge with the public on what had been the Republican Party's traditionally strong issue areas, including crime, schools, the budget deficit, and, finally, even welfare reform. The transition from being defined by Senator Dole to defining him marked the communications transition of the Clinton White House.

Cleveland, too, had an able staff, but he limited what they could do on his behalf. Cleveland lost his first reelection bid, in part because he could not do what President Clinton brought off: effectively using publicity resources to fashion presidential messages. Cleveland was unwilling to explain either to the people or to the Congress why he took the actions he did. What the two cases demonstrate is that the press was important at the turn of each century, but today, no matter what their antipathy for the press, a president knows he has no choice but to establish a press operation capable of advancing his policies. What Cleveland saw as optional was not really the case even in his years in office. The comparison of the reactions toward the press of two presidents a century apart serves as an illustration of the basic similarities that lie at the base of the presidential-press relationship, no matter who is in office or who is doing the reporting. But the two presidents demonstrate the importance of the personal component of leadership. Presidents do make a difference, and how they present themselves is important to their level of achievement.

There is no William Price today, but there are others who cover the White House in much the same manner as he did, seeking to combine straight reporting of events with "enterprise" stories providing depth to what readers and viewers know of the president and his White House. It is to these people that chief executives and their White House staffs direct information on presidential goals, policies, and actions. While a president can court others, as Bill Clinton did early in his term, in the end a president deals most directly with the public through the representatives of the White House press corps. They are the people who daily report from the White House, and it is they who are seen by viewers, heard by citizens as they listen on their radios going to and returning from work, and read by people who pick up their newspaper from the front steps or get it from a street corner box. A president can have an occasional chat with a talk-show host, but on a routine basis it is the

people assigned to cover the White House who provide us with the portrait of what it is the chief executive is doing, thinking, and planning. And for that reason, presidents and their White House staffs have learned to pitch their stuff to the news organizations and to the people who regularly cover the chief executive, whether or not their names are familiar to readers and viewers.

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