THE JOHN PETER ZENGER AWARD
FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS
AND THE PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO KNOW

1992 HELEN THOMAS

THE VIEW
FROM THE
WHITE HOUSE

BY HELEN THOMAS

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ARIZONA
TUCSON ARIZONA
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Tucson, Arizona
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THE ZENGER AWARD WINNERS

1992 Helen Thomas, United Press International
1991 Peter Arnett, Cable News Network
1989 Robert C. Maynard, The Oakland Tribune
1987 Eugene L. Roberts, Jr., Executive Editor. The Philadelphia Inquirer
1986 John R. Finnegan, Editor, St. Paul (Minn.) Pioneer Press and Dispatch
1985 Thomas Winship, The Boston Globe
1984 Tom Wicker, Associate Editor, The New York Times
1982 Fred W. Friendly, Edward R. Murrow Professor Emeritus, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism
1981 Paul S. Cousley, Publisher, Alton (Ill.) Telegraph
1980 Walter Cronkite, CBS
1979 Jack C. Landau, Executive Director, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
1978 Robert H. Estabrook, Lakeville Journal
1977 Robert W. Greene, Newsday
1976 Donald F. Bolles, The Arizona Republic
1975 Seymour M. Hersh, The New York Times
1974 Thomas E. Gish, Editor and Publisher, The Mountain Eagle
1973 Katharine Graham, Publisher, The Washington Post
1972 Dan Hicks Jr., Editor, Monroe County Democrat
1971 The New York Times
1969 J. Edward Murray, Managing Editor, The Arizona Republic
1968 Wes Gallagher, General Manager, The Associated Press
1967 John S. Knight, Knight Newspapers, Inc.
1965 Eugene C. Pulliam, Publisher, The Arizona Republic and Phoenix Gazette
1964 John Netherland Heiskell, Publisher, Arkansas Gazette
1962 John H. Colburn, Managing Editor, Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch
1960 Virgil M. Newton Jr., Managing Editor, Tampa (Fla.) Tribune
1959 Herbert Brucker, Editor, Hartford Courant
1958 John E. Moss, Chairman of House Governmental Information subcommittee
1957 James R. Wiggins, Vice president, Executive Editor of the Washington (D.C.) Post and Times Herald
1956 James S. Pope, Executive Editor, Louisville Courier Journal
1955 Basil L. Walters, Executive Editor, Chicago Daily News and Knight Newspapers
1954 E. Palmer Hoyt, Editor and Publisher, The Denver Post
The department has been giving the Zenger award since 1954. The award recognizes work on behalf of the people’s right to know. It’s a First Amendment award, and past winners read like a Who’s Who of American journalism. Some of our previous winners have been Gene Roberts of the Philadelphia Inquirer, Katharine Graham of the Washington Post, Sy Hersh of the New York Times and many others.

Two years ago we honored Terry Anderson, then still a hostage And many of you were here last year when we honored CNN’s Peter Arnett, then fresh from behind the lines in Baghdad. I wish you could have been with us at the airport. The Zenger Award plaque set off the alarm on the metal detector, so Peter had to unwrap it and show it to the attendant.

He was delighted to show it, he was so proud. He was beaming and saying, “See my award?” to everyone in the vicinity. And he had wrapped it so carefully! It obviously meant a great deal to him and was not just another bauble. He loved it, and it was great to see.

It occurred to me that we may never have explained how the Zenger winner is selected. It’s not a case of selection by the journalism faculty, as the student awards you’re going to see later will be.

The department forms a committee of Arizona newspaper journalists and committee members nominate Zenger candidates. We also solicit nominations from past Zenger winners.

After we have a slate of candidates, the department sends ballots to 400 newspaper editors in all 50 states. Then the ballots are counted here and we have our winner. This is the University of Arizona’s award, but it is made more meaningful because it serves as an expression of admiration from 400 editors.

Though I cannot influence the outcome of the Zenger voting, I can certainly have a favorite candidate. And my favorite won.

We are not unaware on the faculty, in this year of the woman plus one, that women make up 61 percent of our total enrollment and only 22 percent of our permanent faculty. Knowing that, we take every opportunity we can to provide role models of successful women for students to learn from. The appearance in the department this year by Pulitzer Prize-winner Marjie Lundstrom was a step in that direction, and so will the visit by Florence Graves be next fall.

Here tonight, we celebrate the selection of Helen Thomas as winner of the John Peter Zenger Award and cheerfully observe that our pleasure is heightened because she is a woman.

All the old pros on the faculty and all the news junkies in the room know Helen Thomas’s work, of course. Some of the students think they don’t know her but they do. Because we’ve all been watching her at work during televised presidential press conferences. We came to know Helen Thomas about the time we came to know John Kennedy.

As chief of the UPI White House Bureau, Helen Thomas sits this far from the president during news conferences. We’ve all seen her, eyeball to eyeball with the leader of the free world, asking the tough questions, because that’s what journalists do. And when the blood-letting stops and the press conference is over, it’s Helen Thomas who says, “Thank you, Mr. President.”

Behind the scenes, in the hallways of the White House, she has developed a reputation as a fighter to keep the information flowing from the White
House. Her fighting spirit in the interest of telling us what's going on there is in the finest tradition of John Peter Zenger.

In November of 1960, Ms. Thomas began covering then President-elect Kennedy, following him into the White House in January 1961. She was the only print journalist to travel to China with President Nixon on his historic trip of January 1972. She's been around the world several times with Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush and she has covered every economic summit.

Helen Thomas was the first woman officer of the National Press Club and its president in 1959-60.

She was the first woman officer of the White House Correspondents Association.

She was the first woman member of the Gridiron Club and its first woman president, a position she currently holds.

We're not the first people to recognize Ms. Thomas. She has received 15 honorary doctorate degrees and was named one of the 25 most influential women in America.

She's been given awards by Columbia and Wayne State universities, and the universities of Missouri, Ohio, Texas and South Dakota. And friends in the journalism program at Arizona State University tell me Ms. Thomas will be back in Arizona in the fall to accept that school's highest award, thus giving her a sweep of the state.

But we got you first, Helen, and we are absolutely delighted to name you the winner of the 1992 John Peter Zenger Award. Please step forward and receive your plaque.

Introduction by Jim Patten
Head of the Journalism Department
THE VIEW FROM THE WHITE HOUSE

BY HELEN THOMAS

Good evening. I am profoundly honored to receive this award and humbly aware that we in the press are only as good as our last story. So we can never rest on our laurels. The battle for information that legitimately belongs in the public domain never ends.

Peter Zenger, in whose illustrious name this award is given, said that no nation, ancient or modern, ever lost the liberty of freely speaking, writing or publishing their sentiments but forthwith lost their liberty in general and became slaves. And Adlai Stevenson said, “My definition of a free society is where it is safe to be unpopular.”

I know there is the widespread perception that we in the press have co-opted the First Amendment as our private preserve. But that’s not so. It is the amendment from which so many blessings flow: Freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and inherently freedom of thought.

I do like to think, however, that we are the guardians of the First Amendment wherever it is challenged, and we are in the front lines. Happily, we have seen in the last few years a transformation of the political world with the contagious concept of freedom sweeping the once Communist, totalitarian block in Europe. In most places, the American press is being emulated and even Russian reporters are questioning their leaders without fear of exile or going to Siberia.

But, alas, tyranny remains in the starkest terms in former Yugoslavia. And had it not been for the very courageous reporters and photographers, the horrors, the atrocities, the death camps in Bosnia would have been ignored by governments, including our own.

It took the press to awaken the world’s conscience, so it’s once more into the breach with the problem of ethnic cleansing and ago-old Balkan rivalries, hatreds yet once more forcing the West to act in a no-win situation but one that must be faced for humanity’s sake.

So ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for all of us. Our constant battle is for information. For a nation ignorant and free never, never will be a democracy, said Jefferson.

But secrecy still is the name of the game in government, especially in Washington. Secrecy has, in the end, destroyed many presidencies but that is a lesson from the past that yet has to be learned at the White House once again. When President Clinton first came into office, he admonished his staff, don’t talk to the press, don’t leak to the press, we’re going to work around them.

Well, the president recently boasted that he could stiff us by going on Larry King Live, or dead, I guess. And thus directly to the American people. That his views would not be filtered, therefore, he said, through the prism of the skeptical White House press corps, which has indeed a long memory of a few promises that he made on the campaign trail.

But no matter. This is a president who can hardly resist answering a question, I’m happy to say. And for him, a question seems to be a challenge. As a consequence, although he has had only two formal news conferences, far short of his predecessors in this time period, he is constantly being quizzed, from his morning jog to the end of the day.

Well, we in the press were shocked to find out that once the Little Rock baby boomers had moved into the White House, that we were cut off, cut off
at the pass, cut off from access to the press secretary’s office. Can you believe it? They tried to make up, however, by giving us three briefings a day but it does not make up for blocking free access. The briefings are heavy on the spin, as you can imagine.

Well, none of those in the press office, only one that is, of a dozen press aides has had any newspaper experience. Or cherished what I like to think is our ideal of truth and the people’s right to know. Hillary Rodham Clinton apparently has taken to heart Barbara Bush’s warning about the press when she came on her first cook’s tour during the transition period to see the White House, to see her future home.

Barbara Bush told Hillary Clinton, “Avoid them like the plague,” and she has, in spades, and we have had very few sightings of her in the White House. Elvis more.

She has, of course, been put in charge of one of the nation’s most daunting problems, health care reform, universal health care. But her closed task force meetings are being challenged by newspapers. She has, in short, given us a wide berth. She answers no questions, and while there are 13 persons on her press staff, the simplest questions go unanswered.

It could be a carryover from the campaign when she made it clear she was not going to be the traditional first lady. No housewife she, and she wouldn’t be baking cookies—I never met a first lady who did—or give teas. So she is setting her own style, her own agenda. Fair enough. But she, too, has to be accountable since she is a quasi government servant with public funding.

Some 50 years ago, Justice Brandeis said that a constant spotlight on government officials lessens she possibility of corruption. I believe that. He also said that if the government becomes a lawbreaker it breeds contempt for the law. So we in the press are the self-appointed, self-anointed watchdogs of freedom, seeking the truth wherever it leads us.

We do not expect to be loved. We could not delude ourselves that way. Besides, that would be asking too much of those who want to kill the messenger who brings the bad news.

Making a president accountable is our job at the White House because believe it or not, the presidential press conference is the only forum in our society where a president can be quizzed on a regular basis.

I’m often asked how I prepare for a news conference. Well, first I go to the hairdressers. Your family and your friends don’t care what you ask but they want to be sure you’re well-groomed.

I’ve had my moments at news conferences. I remember the first time that I got to say, “Thank you, Mr. President.” Merriman Smith, my boss, was out of town so the role fell to me. And Kennedy was trying to work his way out of a question and he kept talking hoping to hit on the answer. Finally, I got up and said, “Thank you, Mr. President, at which he said, “Thank you, Helen.” He gave me a big smile.

In the old days, when the formal news conferences were limited to 30 minutes by agreement between the networks and the White House—after all, you wouldn’t want to miss “As the World Turns”—I would wear two watches, and I recall one Reagan news conference where every question was focused on our naval, or then new naval build-up in the Caribbean and the assumption that we were about to invade Nicaragua.

Reagan was sweating and definitely wanting to end the ordeal, and it was 25 minutes into the news conference—he does have a little clock on his podium—he kept looking down at me like, isn’t it time? And I finally held up my hand (and said) “Five more minutes. Keep talking, man.” That’s power, telling a president to keep talking.
I've always felt greatly privileged to cover the White House with a ringside seat to instant history. We do write the first draft of history. And I am deeply aware that presidents are human beings, too, with their highs—as patronizing as that sounds—and their lows, their good days and their bad days. On the other hand, I don't waste my sympathy on them, since they have the highest honor that can come to anyone, and that is the trust of the American people. Besides, more crassly put, they asked for it.

No president has ever liked the press, going back to George Washington. (I wasn't covering him them.) There is a photograph of FDR in our press room at the White House, inscribed To Reporters, From Their Devoted Victim.

Truman said, "When the press stops abusing me, I'll know I'm in the wrong pew." Kennedy said, "I'm reading more and enjoying it less." Nixon, as we know, had his enemies list. I didn't quite make it, and I never understood why. What LBJ said is unprintable. Ford said that if God had created the world in six days on the seventh day he could not have rested. He would have had to explain it to Helen Thomas. And I hope I would have been asking my favorite question: Why? Carter always seemed to be saying, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

When the Sandinistas fired on a press helicopter near the Honduran border, Reagan said there's some good in everyone. I went to a Christmas party at Sam Donaldson's last Christmas and Gen. Colin Powell was there and the newspapers that day had said that Powell was going to be named secretary of state in the Clinton administration. And in my shy way I went up to Powell, and I said, "General, are you going to be the next secretary of state?" to which he turned to another guest and said, "Isn't there some war we can send her to?"

We no longer run to the phone. We've got one in our hand. The typewriter is obsolete. CNN's cameras go live in five minutes, anywhere in the world. But for all the robots, computers, the journalists' role today is very much what it's always been: To afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

And as Lincoln said, let the people know the facts and the country will be safe. I want to thank you for this wonderful award. I hope that I can live up to it.