



Winter 2-3-1994

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Recommended Citation

Aaron, Bob, "Dateline: White House UPI's Helen Thomas to Keynote Founders' Day Convocation" (1994). *News and Events*. 7200.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/7200>

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February 3, 1994

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309-556-3181

Dateline: White House

UPI's Helen Thomas to Keynote Founders' Day Convocation

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--She's covered eight presidents over 30 years on the White House news beat.

She was the only print journalist assigned to report from Beijing on President Richard Nixon's historic 1972 summit conference with the legendary Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong.

During the Watergate scandal, she scooped the competition with stories of White House in-fighting as the Nixon administration unraveled--courtesy of late-night phone calls from the wife of the Attorney General.

At White House news conferences, she typically asks the first question and ends those encounters with her trademark, "Thank you, Mr. President."

Helen Thomas, United Press International's White House bureau chief, will deliver the keynote address at Illinois Wesleyan University's Founders' Day Convocation. Her presentation, will be at 11 a.m., Feb. 16, in Westbrook Auditorium, Presser Hall. It is open to the public; there is no admission charge.

An Honorary Doctor of Laws degree will be awarded to Thomas at the convocation, commemorating the 100th anniversary of IWU's weekly student newspaper, *The Argus*. She has received 17 other honorary degrees.

IWU President Minor Myers, jr., said, "Helen Thomas is a Washington institution--an example of what's best about journalism and the relationship of journalism to government. Her visit to Illinois Wesleyan will give all of us--but particularly our students--a chance to meet and listen to someone who has been an eyewitness to history for decades."

Marking the Centennial of *The Argus*

Founders' Day also will mark publication of a new history of the student newspaper, "Through the Eyes of *The Argus*: 100 Years of Journalism at Illinois Wesleyan University," written by Chris Fusco, a senior majoring in English from Oak Lawn, Ill., and Jennifer Barrell, a senior majoring in English from Carol Stream, Ill. Barrell is editor-in-chief and Fusco is assistant editor of *The Argus* this year.

The 256-page, fully illustrated book was commissioned last summer by Myers, as the fifth in a series of histories about the 144-year-old university.

In accepting Myers' invitation, Thomas wrote: "I consider it a particular privilege [to speak at the convocation] because you have chosen that date to be the centennial of the student newspaper. I have a very special feeling for school newspapers having received my first impetus for a career in journalism as a result of working on my high school paper in Detroit, Mich. I also have a special affection for liberal arts colleges and the broad view they take of education."

"Ring-Side Seat to History"

Thomas, dean of White House correspondents, joined the White House beat in 1961 after having covered John F. Kennedy during the transition between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, following the November, 1960, election. She succeeded Merriman Smith, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of Kennedy's assassination, as UPI's top White House reporter after Smith committed suicide in 1970. Thomas was promoted to bureau chief in 1974, becoming the first woman to head a wire service's White House staff.

In a 1982 presentation to students at Brown University, Thomas characterized her career covering presidents and politics as a "ring-side seat to history."

Thomas Profiled

Thomas, born in 1920 in Winchester, Ky., is the daughter of Lebanese immigrant parents. She grew up in Detroit, where her father ran a small grocery store. She was the seventh of nine children. After graduating from Wayne State University in 1942 with a bachelor of arts degree in English, Thomas landed a job with the now defunct *Washington Daily News*.

Thomas joined United Press, the worldwide wire service, in 1943 as a radio news writer; work days typically began at 5:30 a.m. and her salary was \$24 a week. Thirteen years later, she joined UPI's national staff, covering some of Washington's hottest news beats: the Justice Department; FBI; the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; and Congress.

The White House beat was chaotic in the 1960s: Kennedy's assassination; Lyndon Johnson's succession to the presidency; the launching of the Great Society's social programs like Medicare and the wrangling over the 1964 Civil Rights Act; and the growing military role of the United States in Vietnam.

Over the years, Thomas has reported many big stories--the Vietnam War, the invasions of Grenada and Panama, and the Persian Gulf War--from the White House vantage point. One of her biggest stories came in 1972, when she was the

only print journalist to travel to the People's Republic of China with President Richard Nixon on his historic diplomatic mission. Subsequently, she returned to China with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and Presidents Ford, Reagan, and Bush. She also has covered many other summit conferences worldwide with every president since the Nixon administration.

During Watergate, the political scandal that forced Nixon to resign the presidency, Thomas was the recipient of a string of late-night phone calls from a talkative Martha Mitchell, wife of Attorney General John Mitchell, who was deeply embroiled in the controversy. Mitchell called Thomas with angry stories about how the White House was undermining her husband. A 1990 *Washington Post Magazine* profile of Thomas observed: "Mitchell's stories were big news--shocking and sensational--and Thomas' already solid career emerged into the limelight. She became not just a reporter but a 'personality.'"

The *Washington Post* profile of Thomas described her as taking "the vacuum cleaner approach" to sweeping up news at the White House. An approach that once resulted in First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy asking her husband to try to get UPI to send Thomas overseas. Lyndon Johnson once told Thomas that he resented the fact that he learned so much about his daughters--such as their engagement and marriage announcements--from UPI.

ABC News Correspondent Sam Donaldson, who covered the White House from 1977-89, said: "Those of us who had access to the wires were always impressed that Helen, on a day-in and day-out basis, would be, say, 20 minutes ahead of what we knew in the press room."

Tough Questions

Aside from her hustle, Thomas is renowned for her direct and pointed questions. Two days into the invasion of Panama, with the manhunt for strongman Manuel Noriega under way, Thomas asked President George Bush this question: "Did you expect the casualties to be so high on both sides and was it really worth it to send people to their death for this? To get Noriega?"

The *Washington Post* profile of Thomas observed: "It is her chutzpah at news conferences that has earned Thomas a certain amount of celebrity and a large coterie of fans--many Americans like seeing their president pressed for explanations on television. Yet even some reporters who have no quarrel with taking the president to task believe Thomas' questions occasionally cross the line between inquiry and advocacy."

Douglas Cornell

While Thomas has racked up a long list of scoops over the years, she was scooped in 1971, when First Lady Pat Nixon announced Thomas' engagement to Douglas B. Cornell, Associated Press' much-honored and longtime White House correspondent. The announcement was made at a White House party for Cornell, who was retiring.

Cornell, 14 years older than Thomas and a widower, had covered the White House since Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration. A gifted writer, Cornell was widely respected for his ability to tackle big stories. He wrote AP's wrap up stories when World War II ended and covered every national political convention between 1936 and 1968. Cornell died in 1982, at age 75, after a long Alzheimer's-related illness.

Thomas' Awards and Honors

Thomas, a pioneer among women journalists, has won many professional honors. She was president of the Women's National Press Club and the first woman officer of the National Press Club after it opened its doors to women. Thomas was the first woman officer and president of the White House Correspondents Association.

Thomas is the author of a memoir, "Dateline White House."

Among Thomas' journalism awards are the National Press Club's Fourth Estate Award (1984); Columbia University's journalism award (1985); University of Southern California's Distinguished Achievement Award for Newspaper Journalism; Aldo Beckman Award for White House News Coverage; and the William Allen White Foundation Award.

NBC News Correspondent Andrea Mitchell, who reported from the White House for seven years, described Thomas this way in the *Washington Post* profile: "The average burnout for a White House correspondent is after one term or at most two terms. No one can do it on a sustained basis, except Helen Thomas."

<p>Editor's Note: Helen Thomas will be available to meet with the news media at 10:30 a.m., Feb. 16, in the first floor reception room, Presser Hall.</p>
