

THANK YOU, MR PRESIDENT: HELEN THOMAS AT THE WHITE HOUSE

Resources to Support the Use of “Thank you, Mr. President” in the Classroom

SYNOPSIS

“You can't have a democracy without an informed people.”

Helen Thomas

For over 60 years, legendary journalist Helen Thomas has covered Washington politics in an effort to keep the American people informed. A pioneer in the field of journalism—the first woman to be an officer of the National Press Club, the first woman to serve as president of the White House Correspondents Association, and the first female member of the Gridiron Club—Ms. Thomas has been fearless in her questioning of every U.S. President from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush. In this documentary, filmmaker Rory Kennedy profiles Ms. Thomas in order to underscore the complex relationship between the media and our government and draw attention to the central role of the Press in democracy.

TO EDUCATORS

“Thank you, Mr. President” provides a glimpse into the life and times of iconic journalist Helen Thomas. At the same time, the film provides a significant historical backdrop for understanding the changing relationship between the White House and the Press. Consequently, the film can be used for a range of educational purposes across multiple academic disciplines. For instance, civics educators who are interested in teaching about the First Amendment may find this film to be a useful starting point for further discussion. Additionally, journalism teachers and media educators may find the film to be particularly relevant in motivating students to think more critically about media bias or censorship.

To that end, the resources that have been assembled in this packet are intended to be adapted for your particular classroom context. The first set of materials—**In Preparation For Viewing the Film**—is suggested activities to be done prior to screening the documentary with your students. The second resource—**During Viewing**—is meant to help students focus on specific themes or concepts that you are interested in exploring further. Both resources have been designed to examine a particular aspect of the role of media in democracy.

The materials included in this packet are not intended to be exemplars but rather a point of inspiration for further curriculum development and instructional adaptation.

In Preparation For Viewing the Film

ACTIVITY 1: HELEN THOMAS BACKGROUND

Depending how you plan to use “Thank you, Mr. President” with your students, you may find it useful to share some background information about Helen Thomas’s career. Some facts include:

- Helen Thomas began working for United Press International (UPI) in 1943, writing about women's issues.
- She was bestowed the honor of ending press conferences by saying, "Thank you, Mr. President." The first conference she concluded was for JFK in 1961.
- She was the first woman officer of the National Press Club, the first woman to be President of the White House Correspondents Association, and the first female President of the Gridiron Club.
- She has been a part of the White House Press Corps since 1961 and has worked through 9 Presidential Administrations: Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, and Bush II.
- She left UPI in 2000. She now works for Hearst Newspapers.

ACTIVITY 2: KEY TERMS

You and your students might find it informative to conduct research on the following concepts and/or organizations prior to watching “Thank you, Mr. President:”

Key Concepts

- Freedom of Speech
- Freedom of the Press
- Media Bias
- Wire Service
- Managed news
- Democracy

Key Organizations

- White House Press Corps
- Associated Press
- Heart Newspapers
- United Press International
- National Press Club
- White House Correspondents Association

ACTIVITY 3: THE ROLE OF THE PRESS AT THE WHITE HOUSE

Learning about the history of the Press at the White House can be an effective way to prepare students to view “Thank you, Mr. President.” One possible way to accomplish this would be to structure a research opportunity using multiple resources (e.g., newspapers, primary sources, media clips). Use the “White House Press Timeline” handout on the next page (pg. 3) to have your students learn as much as they can about any of the events on the timeline. As an additional challenge, have your students develop an alternative timeline with other significant moments in White House Press history.

White House Press Timeline

<p>1800</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Washington, D.C. becomes the nation's capital -<i>The National Intelligencer</i> (newspaper) is created 	<p>1861</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The Press shifts its coverage from Presidential and Party interests to stories that have wide public appeal
<p>1896</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The White House Press Corps is created 	<p>1901-1918</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Executive Offices move to a different building, now known as the West Wing, and contain a new element—the Press Room -Woodrow Wilson holds the first formal, public press conference in 1913
<p>1914</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The White House Correspondents' Association is created 	<p>1918-1933</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -In the 1920s, press conferences are the main channels of communication between the President and American public -Calvin Coolidge is the first President to use the radio to talk directly to the public -1930: The position of Press Secretary is created
<p>1933-1941</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Eleanor Roosevelt is the first wife of a President to hold an official press conference -FDR marks the beginning of the modern era of President-Press relations by holding long, informal conferences in the Oval Office 	<p>1941-1952</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1945: Truman reduces press conferences to once a week and they become more scripted
<p>1952-1963</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -1955: Eisenhower's press conferences are fully televised. However, the Press Secretary edits the content based on what he finds to be the most noteworthy 	<p>1963-1980</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -LBJ conducts impromptu sessions that allow reporters to communicate with him in a conversational manner, as opposed to the usually stringent format of a formal press conference - Nixon holds infrequent formal press conferences
<p>1980-1993</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reagan prefers to hold press conferences informally in the East Room in the evening -George H.W. Bush holds frequent press conferences in his first three years (three per month). He also begins the practice of holding joint conferences with visiting Heads of State 	<p>1993-2005</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Clinton and George W. Bush continue George H. W. Bush's practice of holding joint press conferences with foreign leaders -1995: Press Secretary Mike McCurry begins televising daily press briefings

During Viewing

ACTIVITY 1: DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Help your students to organize their thoughts on a specific theme or concept by providing open-ended exploratory questions to be discussed after viewing “Thank you, Mr. President.” For example, if you are using the film as part of a unit on the impact of media in politics, you might ask your students to respond to one or more of the questions below while watching the film:

- *Do you think the relationship between the Press and the White House has changed for the better over the last nine Presidents? Explain.*
- *How has the Press impacted the public perception of U.S. Presidents?*
- *Should Freedom of the Press be absolute? Are there certain stories that you think the Press should not include as part of its coverage?*
- *In what ways have technological advancements impacted the media and its coverage of local and national politics?*

ACTIVITY 2: THANK YOU, MS. THOMAS

Enhance your students’ viewing of “Thank you, Mr. President” by asking them to play the role of a journalist. Provide students with the following directions so that they can prepare for an interview with Helen Thomas.

DIRECTIONS: Imagine you are preparing for an interview with Ms. Helen Thomas. Part of your preparation involves doing background research on your subject. The first part of your research involves watching the documentary, “Thank you, Mr. President.” While watching the film:

- 1) *Take careful notes on what is being discussed in the film.*
- 2) *Write down topics that you want to discuss with Helen Thomas.*
- 3) *Generate a list of questions to ask Helen Thomas.*

ACTIVITY 3: WHAT MAKES A GOOD REPORTER?

“Thank you, Mr. President” provides audiences with an opportunity to think about the qualities that make for an exemplary journalist. Ask students to use the worksheet “Characteristics of Helen Thomas” on the next page (pg. 3) to compile a list of her qualities as a journalist. Afterwards, use the student responses as a basis for a debate about Helen Thomas’s career. As a follow-up activity, you can have students research various journalists and prepare an explanation for why s/he is effective.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HELEN THOMAS

DIRECTIONS: Helen Thomas is considered by many to be an iconic journalist. Do you agree? While watching “Thank you, Mr. President,” focus on the qualities of Helen Thomas that you find to be effective and/or ineffective. Record your thoughts in the chart below. Be prepared to explain your views.

What qualities make Helen Thomas an effective journalist?	What traits do you think negatively impact Helen Thomas as a journalist?