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PRESIDENTIAL PUBLIC APPEARANCES
AND
INTERCHANGES WITH REPORTERS

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PRESIDENTIAL PUBLIC APPEARANCES & INTERCHANGES WITH REPORTERS

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A strong presidential communications operation is not an option; it is a necessity. Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton had an average of 500 speaking appearances a year, which means an incoming President can expect to have at least a similar level of appearances and remarks. While Barack Obama has spoken many more times than that in the last year, most of his speeches were variations of a basic campaign speech with few changes in the text. It is not the number of appearances that is so impressive in the speaking demands on the President, but the variety of topics he addresses and the resonance of everything he says. After all, presidential speeches represent official policy statements and responses. Their reach is worldwide and their impact often immediate. His many appearances represent an important presidential opportunity and he needs a sophisticated and experienced communications staff to take advantage of the possibilities speeches represent.

While the number of major addresses a President gives, such as State of the Union and other addresses to joint sessions of Congress and major addresses to the nation, does not change from one President to the next, there has been an enormous increase in the number of times a President speaks and his words carried to the public. During President Eisenhower's eight years in office, he spoke approximately 750 times in his eight years in office with relatively few available for broadcast. Today a President can expect to be on the air six days a week, including his Saturday radio address.

PRESIDENTIAL SPEECHES AND REMARKS

The most important advocate of presidential initiatives and priorities is the President himself. Surrounded by critics who use television and other media to make their case to a recalcitrant public, presidents have stepped up their speaking schedules. The President and his staff have increasingly taken advantage of the additional opportunities to get on television when and where they want. With cable and network television, radio, wire services, and newspapers with constantly updated websites, the President has no shortage of opportunities to present his ideas. When President Eisenhower came into office, approximately 9.0% of American households had television.¹ By the end of his administration, the number rose to 87.1. By the Kennedy Administration, the presidency was ready for television. When Ronald Reagan was sworn in, a quarter of households had cable television. The number of households with doubled by the end of his presidency and reached 61% as Clinton came in. With cable an option for carrying their speeches, presidents have established and maintained a brisk rate of speechmaking. In Table 1, President Bush demonstrates the frequent appearance patterns of the modern presidency. In his first five and a half years in office, he averaged 1.4 speeches a day if you include his Saturday radio address. In four of his seven years in office, Bush

¹ Harold Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics, 2005-2006*, Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006:173.

Table 1. President George W. Bush – Addresses and Remarks, January 20, 2001 – July 20, 2008											
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008 ²	First Term (1-20-01 thru 1-20-05)	Second Term (thru 7-20-2008)	Total 1-20-2001 to 7-20-2008
Addresses to the Nation	7	4	7	1	7	3	3	1	19	14	33
Oval Office	1	0	1	0	1	2	1	0	2	4	6
Other White House	1	1	4	0	2	0	1	0	6	3	9
Joint Session of Congress	3	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	6	5	11
Other	2	2	1	0	2	0	0	0	5	2	7
Weekly Saturday Radio Addresses	48	51	52	52	52	52	52	27	206	180	386
Addresses and Remarks	453	485	331	482	361	471	377	271	1,772	1,459	3,231
Total Public Appearances	508	540	390	535	420	526	432	299	1,997	1,653	3,650

Source: Martha Joynt Kumar, *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation*. Baltimore, MD., Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, p8, 10-11.

Table 2. President William Clinton – Addresses and Remarks, January 20, 1993-January 20, 2001											
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000 2001	First Term (1-20-93 – 1-20-96)	Second Term (1-20-97 –1-20-2001)	Total 1-20-93 to 1-20-2001
Addresses to the Nation	7	5	3	2	2	5	3	3	17	13	30
Oval Office	4	4	2	0	0	1	2	1	10	5	15
Other White House	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	3	4
Joint Session of Congress ³	3	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	6	5	11
Weekly Saturday Radio Addresses	46	51	51	52	50	52	52	56	200	207	410
Addresses and Remarks ⁴	410	475	426	531	438	545	567	645	1,842	2,195	4,037
Total Public Appearances	463	531	480	585	490	602	622	704	2,059	2,415	4,474

Source: Martha Joynt Kumar, *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation*. Baltimore, MD., Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, p8, 10-11.

² Covers the year 2008 through 7-20-2008

³ This section includes State of the Union messages as well as Inaugural addresses and other addresses found in the Document Category, “Addresses to the Nation” found in the *Public Papers of the President of the United States, William J. Clinton*.

⁴ In many instances in the events listed in Addresses and Remarks, there are sessions before or after the event where the President had an Exchange with Reporters where he took a small number of questions from reporters, usually a pool of reporters coming into the meeting at a specified time for a brief session. Counted here are the Addresses and Remarks where the President did have an exchange with reporters as well as one where he did not talk with reporters afterwards.

gave over 500 addresses and remarks a year. In four of his seven years in office, Bush gave over 500 addresses and remarks a year. Of those, the numbers of speeches in the category of Addresses to the Nation - State of the Union, speeches to joint sessions of Congress, Oval Office addresses and other high-profile speeches marked by the National Archives as falling into this category - were fairly consistent between the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. Each were around 30 such addresses in their eight years in office.

President Bush’s appearances are very much in line with the number of public presentations President Clinton had, as we see in Table 2. Clinton averaged 1.8 addresses and remarks a day if one assumes a six-day week. Once cable television began carrying presidential speeches on a regular basis, presidents could count on reaching voters directly, because cable carried their speeches in their entirety rather than the brief snippets the three established networks play on their evening newscasts. It was during the latter half of the Clinton administration that cable news broadened beyond CNN to include MSNBC and Fox News. While CNN began in 1981, Fox and MSNBC established a White House presence in 1996 and almost immediately became an important part of White House communications plans. For both administrations, the high volume of presidential speeches called for a planning operation to control the flow and assure that the presidential speech venues were related to his goals.

The increase in viewership for cable and the Internet has made it easier for the President to get to the public with full speeches rather than merely short video clips for the network evening news. The increase in viewership for cable and the Internet has made it easier for the President to get to the public with full speeches rather than merely short video clips for the network evening news. In addition, the large audience for local news has recent presidents traveling far and wide.

	Percentage of Respondents, per year							
	1993 ⁵	1996 ⁶	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008
<i>Listened to/ read yesterday</i>								
Newspaper	58	50	48	47	41	42	40	34
Radio news	47	44	49	43	41	40	36	35
<i>Regularly watch...</i>								
Cable TV News	--	--	--	--	33	38	34	39
Local TV News	77	65	64	56	57	59	54	52
Nightly network news	60	42	38	30	32	34	28	29
Network morning news	--	--	23	20	22	22	23	22
Go online for news 3 or more days a week	--	2	13	23	25	29	31	37

Source: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, August 17, 2008.

PRESIDENTS MEET THE PRESS

As with advocating for the President’s policies and programs, the most effective official to explain his thinking is the President himself. As with speeches great and small, presidents have

⁵ Newspaper and Radio News numbers for 1993 come from statistics from 1994.

⁶ Online news estimates for 1996 come from statistics for 1995.

increased the number of times they answer queries from reporters.⁷ There are three basic kinds of interchange presidents have with reporters. First, there are presidential press conferences. In recent years, press conferences have been divided into two types: solo press conferences and joint sessions, most often with foreign leaders though sometimes the President may appear with one or more Cabinet members. Solo press conferences are what one often thinks of as the traditional press session, where the President alone answers questions, usually for about forty-five minutes. In such sessions the President calls on anywhere from ten to fifteen reporters. Joint press conferences are generally held with foreign leaders during their official visits to the United States. Following a statement by the President and the visitor, each answers a limited number of questions from the visiting press corps as well as the White House press corps. The same sessions may occur abroad as well as in the United States.

The second type of presidential interchange with reporters is the short question-and-answer session. In those, the President meets with a pool of reporters, a rotating group of reporters who attend events in the White House and on the road where it is not practical to allow the whole press corps.⁸ Formed of reporters and photographers from the wire services, television networks, and print outlets, the pool might get to ask a question or two of the President in the Oval Office when he is meeting with a visitor, in the Rose Garden following an announcement of an appointment or initiative, or perhaps the South Lawn as he leaves for a trip. There is usually little official warning that the President will take questions, which differs from press conferences, where there is advance notice and all reporters are allowed to be present though only some are called on.

The third type of exchange with reporters that presidents use to discuss their thinking and their policies are interviews with individual reporters or groups of them. Sometimes presidents use those sessions as a place to explain a particular action or situation. When the CBS program “60 Minutes” carried photographs of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers in the Baghdad prison of Abu Ghraib, President Bush did an interview with Arab television network Al Arabiya. Before he went to St. Petersburg, Russia, for the G-8 meeting in July 2006, he met with reporters from Germany and Russia to talk about his priorities for his visits to the reporters’ respective countries. On the domestic front, when President Bush was facing criticism for his administration’s slow response to the unfolding Middle East crisis that summer, he agreed to an interview with Fox News talk show host Neil Cavuto on August 1, 2006. Presidents can use such sessions to defend an action or to shift the focus to a positive aspect of the President’s record. In the case of the interview with Cavuto, Bush talked about his administration’s role in improving the economy. His interview took place in Miami, where there is a substantial Jewish population interested in hearing his response to the Israeli missile strikes on Lebanon. In addition to talking with Cavuto, the President spoke with reporters from the local ABC and Fox affiliates.

The patterns of press interchanges found in Table 4 demonstrate the relatively high number of press contacts in the first year of the administration and then the different balances that are struck in different years among forums where President Bush entertains reporters’ queries. In 2001, he had a weekly average of 4.2 press contacts in a five-day week, while in 2004 it was down to 2.7. But in 2004, the President gave a very high number of speeches. The President gave multiple speeches a day during his reelection campaign, but his team wanted to reduce his vulnerability to unpredictable problems by reducing the occasions in which he responded to press queries.

In the early days of an administration, when the President was introducing his programs and his new appointees, there was little to fear in having the President answer a few questions on a regular basis. As critics emerge and the questions become tougher, the frequency of the sessions falls off. The election campaign is a time when short question-and-answer sessions and solo press conferences are cut back because they are relatively risky.

⁷ This section and updated Tables 3 and 4 come from *Managing the President’s Message: The White House Communications Operation*, 18-25.

Table 4. President George W. Bush – Interchanges with Reporters, January 20, 2001 – July 20, 2008 ⁹											
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008 ¹⁰	First Term (1-20-01 thru 1-20-05)	Second Term (thru 7-20-2008)	Total to 7-20-2008
Public Question and Answer Sessions Other Than Press Conferences	143	96	66	47	40	38	23	12	355	110	465
By Location											
White House, including Camp David, Air Force 1, Blair House	92	48	36	26	22	22	13	8	204	63	267
In Washington, D.C.	9	8	3	1	6	2	1	0	22	8	30
Outside of DC, inside the U.S.	32	31	18	18	7	8	7	0	99	22	121
Outside of the U.S.	10	9	9	2	5	6	2	4	30	17	47
Press Conferences	19	20	26	24	32	29	30	24	89	115	204
Solo	4	3	4	6	8	10	10	4	17	32	49
Joint	15	17	22	18	24	19	20	20	72	83	155
Interviews with news organizations ¹¹	49	34	45	69	46	59	62	51	210	205	415
Print	21	11	7	34	14	21	17	9	78	56	134
Television	18	19	26	31	24	27	34	33	100	112	212
Roundtable	10	4	12	4	7	7	6	9	31	28	59
Off the Record with Reporters	0	0	0	0	1	4	5	0	1	9	10
Total Interchanges with Reporters	211	150	137	140	118	126	115	87	654	430	1,084

⁹ The *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* and the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* has as two document categories, “Exchanges with Reporters” and “Remarks and Exchanges,” both of which refer to sessions where either the whole event is one where the President takes questions from reporters or remarks where he takes questions, usually following his speech. These sessions differ from presidential press conferences in their shorter length, their restricted access, and sometimes their restriction to a particular subject or subjects. Press conferences include those sessions included in the “news conferences” category in the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* and the *Public Papers*. The figures are calculated by calendar year rather than by elapsed time in office.

¹⁰ Covers the year 2008 through 7-20-2008

¹¹ The figures come from designations made by the National Archives in its *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* and, later, in *The Public Papers of President George W. Bush*. The categories include: “Address to the Nation,” “Radio Address,” “addresses and remarks,” “exchanges with reporters,” and “news conferences.” “Public question and answer sessions with reporters” in the second chart come from the “exchanges with reporters” category in the *Weekly Compilation*. While I accept the categorization of a news conference, I make a distinction between ones that are solo sessions and joint ones where another person, usually a foreign leader, participates in answers reporters’ questions. The interview numbers here are ones provided to me by the White House. The chart does not include off-the-record interviews for the first term, only the second. The numbers found in the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* and the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* reflect only a portion of the interviews conducted. Those conducting the interview traditionally own the recording and control its release. The White House, however, does release interviews with foreign reporters where a translation is involved. It has an interest in making certain there is an accurate record in English of what was said by the President. The figures for roundtables with reporters refers to sessions the President had with journalists from foreign countries prior to a trip to those countries and with specialty reporters, such as those focusing on economic issues and those from a state or region where the White House groups together several reporters for an interview with the President.

Table 5. President Clinton's Public Interchanges with Reporters, January 20, 1993 — January 20, 2001¹²											
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000 2001	First Term (1-20-93 – 1-20-96)	Second Term (1-20-97 – 1-20-2001)	Total
Public Question and Answer Sessions Other Than Press Conferences	242	142	107	125	122	88	99	117	616	426	1,042
By Location											
White House, including Camp David, Air Force 1, Blair House	202	92	84	88	90	58	62	82	466	292	758
In Washington, D.C.	5	2	1	6	1	1	3	4	14	9	23
Outside of DC, inside the U.S.	26	28	12	19	17	7	9	18	85	51	136
Outside of the U.S.	9	20	10	12	14	22	25	13	51	74	125
Press Conferences	38	45	28	22	21	13	18	8	133	60	193
Interviews with news organizations	52	79	34	24	16	32	36	95	189	179	368
Total Interchanges w/ Reporters	332	266	169	171	159	133	153	220	938	665	1,603

¹² See footnotes to previous table.

Joint press conference numbers are more consistent from year to year than solo sessions, as the latter have their own rhythms. Joint sessions have come to have more diplomatic than domestic political importance. These are occasions where the President and the visiting foreign dignitary describe their meetings. It suits the purposes of any administration as it reduces the possibility of the visitor stepping outside of the White House and giving his or her own explanation of events without the President present to give his.

The interchanges that President George W. Bush has had with reporters are less frequent than those of President Clinton, but Clinton had more interchanges with reporters than any recent President. Table 5 demonstrates the very high number of contacts he had with reporters, particularly in his first two years in office. In looking at their figures in terms of how their administrations progressed, President Bush increased the number of solo press conferences in his second term, while President Clinton had far fewer of them in his second. That is significant, as the solo press conference is the forum where presidents are most vulnerable to questions about issues and events they don't want to talk about.

No matter what the exact numbers, both Clinton and Bush answered reporters' questions relatively frequently. In order to prepare them for those sessions, they required a strong staff operation to gather information on possible questions and, of course, to develop responses. While the two presidents prepared for such sessions in different ways, in both cases their staffs did preparatory work.

PATTERNS OF PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES

From President Wilson on, press conferences have been a regular, if not always successful, fixture of presidential public relations. A President established the forum, but news organizations have been interested in seeing them continue, no matter who serves as President or what he says or does.

President Wilson warranted the unusual attention of reporters because he was a wartime leader. His successors, Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, dealt with no comparable crises, yet reporters continued to request news conferences because the presidency had come to be regarded, by both public and news organizations alike, as a continuing fount of important information. By the end of Coolidge's presidency, the press conference had become institutionalized. President Hoover did not enjoy them the way Coolidge seemed to, but he met with reporters all the same. Many of Hoover's sessions, though, were truncated ones with little interaction between the President and reporters.

It remained for Franklin Roosevelt to turn the press conference into a compelling event. He did so by explaining his policies and unfolding events. During the Roosevelt and Truman years, press conferences continued to operate under the off-the-record rules that had governed them since their start in the Wilson administration. The Harding-Hoover era requirement that reporters submit their questions in advance was abandoned. This rule change altered the dynamics of the sessions, for it allowed them to become forums in which presidents could talk about their own agendas in addition to those of reporters.

The Roosevelt administration was a policy furnace, and its chief executive enjoyed talking with reporters because he believed that news organizations could help him inform the public about what he was doing. His explanations of the budget provide an example of his approach to press conferences. When President Roosevelt was ready to send his budget message to the Congress, he met with reporters to brief them about its contents. He told them what he thought was important about his product. His first press conference on a budget was held on January 5, 1934. He began by suggesting what the resulting stories should emphasize. "In regard to the Message, I suppose if I were writing your stories for you, I would say it is the most brutally frank Budget Message ever sent in. In other words, I am not mincing words or trying to hide anything," he said. His budget director was out of town, so he personally briefed reporters for approximately an hour. He likened a similar

session, held on January 4, 1936, to a “class” with himself as the “professor,” an analogy he occasionally used in his press conferences.

Roosevelt’s press sessions were so popular that administration figures attended them, as did out-of-town editors and visiting foreign dignitaries. Truman’s were not the magnet Roosevelt’s were, but they remained important sources of information for reporters. There was an ebb and flow to the number of sessions each President held, but from Woodrow Wilson through Harry Truman, off-the-record press conferences became a primary news source for White House correspondents.

Presidents and their staffs also found them useful, in part because they did retain some control what the President spoke about. If he did not want something published, he could retract an unwise statement or refashion it into one he preferred. A good example is the characterization of Senator Joseph McCarthy that President Truman tendered in the press conference held March 30, 1950: “I think the greatest asset that the Kremlin has is Senator McCarthy.” A reporter let him to know how controversial his statement was: “Brother, will that hit page one tomorrow!” Truman swiftly revamped his statement: “The greatest asset that the Kremlin has is the partisan attempt in the Senate to sabotage the bipartisan foreign policy of the United States.” With this modified quote, he was able to backtrack without harming himself. Once press conferences went on the record, there was no way to undo damaging statements. Table 6 demonstrates the consistent importance of the presidential press conference. Note, however, the sharp drop in their frequency following the Truman administration.

Dramatic changes transformed presidential press conferences during the Eisenhower administration. After December 16, 1953, they were on the record. Beginning on January 19, 1955, they were also televised for broadcast in the evening. These developments changed a low-risk exercise into a high-risk performance. As a result, presidents and their staffs began searching for ways both to reduce their vulnerability and to influence public opinion directly.

Once press conferences were on the record, presidents and their staffs adapted to the heightened risk of error and embarrassment by making changes in the press conference itself and then by developing alternate forums where the chief executive could respond to reporters’ queries.

In refashioning the press conference format, chief executives and their communications teams developed three strategies to diminish the potential negative impact from the event. First, they reduced the frequency and regularity of traditional press conferences. Second, they varied press conference settings in order to reflect the importance of what the President was going to say. This included developing certain settings to dramatize the event and certain other settings for more low-key sessions. Third, they reshaped this forum from an occasion where the President faced reporters alone to one where he appeared together with others. Gradually, the presidential press conference was transformed into a diplomatic tool by bringing foreign leaders onto the White House stage to answer questions alongside the President.

In addition to altering the press conference itself, presidents and staff members developed publicity strategies to provide them with alternate ways to respond to reporters’ queries. They developed short question-and-answer sessions as vehicles for answering reporters’ queries on a fairly regular basis and increased the number of one-on-one and group interviews they did with domestic and foreign reporters. Not all of these changes were made at the same time.

CHANGES IN FREQUENCY, SETTING, AND FORMAT

When press conferences were off the record, presidents did not worry, as they later did, about the difficulties of commenting on unfolding events, especially during a crisis. The President and his staff controlled the release of information. If they did not want something the President said to leave the room, it did not leave the room. Reporters respected the rules governing information.

Table 6. Presidential Press Conferences: 1913-2008							
President ^a	Dates	Total	Months in Office	Number of Press Conferences per month		Number of Press Conferences per year	
Wilson ^b	3-4-13 to 3-4-21	159	96	1.7	19.9		
Harding	3-4-21 to 8-2-23	--	29	--	--		
Coolidge	8-3-23 to 3-4-29	521	67	7.8	93.3		
Hoover	3-4-29 to 3-4-33	268	48	5.6	67.0		
Roosevelt ^c	3-4-33 to 4-12-45	1,020	145.5	7.0	84.1		
Truman ^d	4-12-45 to 1-20-53	324	94.5	3.4	41.1		
Eisenhower ^e	1-20-53 to 1-20-61	193	96	2.0	24.1		
Kennedy ^f	1-20-61 to 11-22-63	65	34	1.9	22.9		
Johnson	11-22-63 to 1-20-69	135	62	2.2	26.1		
Nixon ^g	1-20-69 to 8-9-74	39	66	0.6	7.1		
Ford ^h	8-9-74 to 1-20-77	40	30	1.3	16.0		
Carter	1-20-77 to 1-20-81	59	48	1.2	14.8		
Reagan	1-20-81 to 1-20-89	46	96	0.5	5.8		
G. H. W. Bush ⁱ	1-20-89 to 1-20-93	143	48	3.0	35.8		
Clinton	1-20-93 to 1-20-01	193	96	2.0	24.1		
G. W. Bush	1-20-01 to 7-20-08	204	90	2.3	26.8		

Notes to Table 6

^a Unless otherwise noted, the presidential press conference information comes from *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office). There are a series of volumes for Presidents Hoover, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton. President George H. W. Bush had a press conference not contained in the *Public Papers*, which was held at Kennebunkport, ME on August 16th, 1991. The transcript is in files in the Bush Library. Information for President George W. Bush comes from *The Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* published by the National Archives and Records Administration. The press conference transcripts of President Calvin Coolidge are found at the Forbes Library in Northampton, Massachusetts.

^b Woodrow Wilson held only two press conferences in his second term thus his percentages may lead to a misimpression of how frequent they were for his first term: 3.3 per month and 39.0 per year. The press conference numbers differ in some respects from earlier lists. The Wilson figures include the press conferences found in Volume 50, "The Complete Press Conferences, 1913-1919," edited by Robert C. Hildebrand [Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1985] as part of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* as well as two other press conferences found in volume 39 and one each in volumes 40 and 61 in the series, the particular volume edited by Arthur Link as well as one short one found in the Princeton University Library files of Charles Swem, White House stenographer during the Wilson years. The conferences on January 26th, June 22nd, July 13th, 1914 and January 8th, 1917, and June 27th, 1919, were not in the Hildebrand volume and the short session on November 13th, 1913 was found in the Charles Swem files.

^c The Roosevelt numbers vary from the standard number of 998. That figure, which comes from the numbering done by the stenographers at the time. The last conference was numbered 998. That figure includes two press conferences from 1934 – numbers 138 and 139 – that did not take place. The stenographer left room for three conferences when he went on vacation, but only one was held. The error was not discovered until some time later and a decision was made to retain the numbering as it was. I have added 22 press conferences that were listed as A or B by the transcribers. By year, the ones I have added include the following. 1933, I include 14 A and 14 Band 49 A. The first two are sessions held in the President's office at the behest of the President with Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald (Great Britain). While the two sessions do not both involve regular questions and answers as later develops, these are the first two sessions where the President brings reporters to talk to a foreign leader. They establish an enduring pattern calling for joint press conferences with foreign leaders to have a different format from his regular solo sessions with reporters. They are shorter in length and usually involve statements from one or both foreign leaders. Included in the 1933 count is a short session on September 6th [49 A], which probably took place shortly after the conclusion of an earlier one. In 1934, in addition to numbers 138 and 139 that did not take place, we can add in 129 A and 161 A, which are not really different from a regular press conference. Others falling into the general press conference categories include 193 B, 530 A, and 703 A. Additionally, I have added in sessions with business editors as they were counted into the 998 total in the latter years. From 1941 on, sessions 744, 858,

903, and 956 with business editors were counted as regular sessions as were ones with the American Society of Newspaper Editors [879] and the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association [933]. I have included such sessions in the early years of Roosevelt's presidency when they were noted with an A or B. The session with such groups include the following ones counted in these numbers: 98 A, 193 A, 275 A, 360 A, 448 A, 449 A, 452 A, 452 B, 540 A, 557 A, 614 A, 636 A, and 652 A. There are others include in the totals including 485 A where Press Secretary Steve Early was instructed by an ailing President Roosevelt to conduct the press conference in his place. It turned out to be an experiment not repeated. Also in the totals are 356 A with a Canadian official and 399 A held in Canada responding to reporters from that country. Introduction by Jonathan Daniels, *Complete Presidential Press Conferences of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York, NY: DeCapo Press, 1972).

^d The Truman press conferences include in their numbering a series of sessions much like those with President Roosevelt. While the text of several of sessions were not included in the *Public Papers of the Presidents*, the numbers remain. Thus, cumulative totals for President Truman include all of the sessions designated as press conferences. Those include numbers 11, 39, 61, 103 [American Society of Newspaper Editors], 13 [Association of Radio News Analysts], 36 [Editors and Publishers of Gannett Newspapers], 42, 81 [National Conference of Business Paper Editors], 51 [Negro Newspaper Publishers Association], 52 [editors of monthly magazines of Standard Railroad Labor Organizations], 73 [editors and executives of McGraw Hill Publishing Company]. Later in his presidency, sessions with these groups were included in the *Public Papers* as press conference, including numbers 121 and 177 with the National Conference of Business Paper Editors, 179 with the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 124 with the National Conference of Editorial Writers, 202 with the Association of Radio Analysts. Also included in our totals though the text was not are 109, which was a joint press conference held in Canada with Prime Minister Mackenzie King and 82 where he corrected a previously made statement though did not take questions. That session was similar in its lack of questions to 114 where he simply thanked reporters for the courtesies they extended to him when his mother died. He did not take questions. In the *Public Papers* 114 is included with text as well as its number.

^e The press conference on December 16th 1953 was the first to allow direct quotation of the whole press conference. The press conference held on January 19th 1955 was the first to be televised although it was not broadcast live.

^f August 30th 1963 President Kennedy had a "special news conference" in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. I have added it to the 64 press conferences designated with numbers.

^g President Nixon had two sessions titled "Unscheduled News Conference" on March 21st and July 20th 1970. I have added them to the 37 numbered press conferences.

^h October 21 1974 President Ford had a "News Conference of the President and President Echeverria of Mexico" in Tubac, Arizona. I have added it to the 39 press conferences designated with numbers.

ⁱ President George H. W. Bush had a press conference not contained in the *Public Papers*, which was held at Kennebunkport, ME on August 16th, 1991. The transcript is in files in the Bush Library.

When press conferences went on the record, presidents had to respond to questions on world crises still under way and policy initiatives stuck in Congress. Earlier, chief executives were free to discuss closely held strategies and people if they liked, but not once the sessions became part of the official record. Presidents became sensitive to the timing of the sessions. Sometimes they wanted to avoid an issue, and other times they used the press conference setting to confront one.

Abruptly, presidents reduced the frequency of press conferences. Instead of once a week, as was Truman's practice, Eisenhower held his press conferences twice a month. While President Truman had an average of 41.1 press conferences a year, President Eisenhower averaged 24.1. Press conferences became less frequent in the Nixon and Reagan years, with 7.1 and 5.8 per year, respectively. Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush have held press conferences more frequently than did Presidents Nixon and Reagan, but a large portion of their sessions were joint press conferences with foreign leaders, not solo sessions. President George H. W. Bush held an average of 35.8 press conferences a year, President Clinton 24.1, and President George W. Bush 24.5.

While President Eisenhower reduced the frequency of his press conference appearances, he held them on a regular basis. Eisenhower held press conferences in 85.4% of the months in his eight years in office. Reagan, by way of contrast, held press conferences in only 46.9% of his months in office. One of the reasons President Reagan held relatively few press conferences was that he invested so much in the ones he chose to have. Instead of low-key morning or afternoon sessions held in the Indian Treaty Room in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, he opted to hold 67.4% of his conferences as evening events in the East Room. Carried live on the three major

networks, they attracted a large audience. Reagan's polished performance was a match for the pomp and polish of the East Room décor. So what if his answers were sometimes muddled and error-prone--the public enjoyed watching the spectacle.

His successors have shied away from such formal extravaganzas except when a national moment promises to draw an audience looking to the President for guidance. President George W. Bush has held four sessions of this kind in his eight years in office. All dealt with war issues the public expected him to address. George H. W. Bush held two in his four years, while Clinton held four evening East Room sessions in eight years.

One of the ways in which presidents adjusted to the advent of on-the-record sessions was to reduce their exposure to a wide assortment of questions. What was traditionally a session in which the President appeared alone to answer questions is now usually a joint one. The practice of joint press conferences began when the President appeared with important domestic advisers, especially budget officials. Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Johnson regularly held such sessions. Now it has become common for the chief executive to hold joint press conferences with foreign heads of state. Instead of answering questions from perhaps twenty reporters, as in a solo session, in a joint session the President and his visitor answer questions only from two or three reporters apiece.

As shown in Table 6, joint appearances were occasionally held prior to the George H. W. Bush administration, although not often with foreign leaders. President Truman liked to hold press conferences with budget aides as well as an occasional visiting foreign official. In 1946, for example, he had others participate in seven of his press conferences. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy refrained from this practice. But Lyndon Johnson resurrected it. In sixteen of his 135 press conferences, he had officials alongside him who answered some of the questions. Budget Director Charles Schultze would deal with budget details. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara handled some Vietnam questions in joint sessions with President Johnson. President Johnson also held joint sessions with state officials.

Presidents Nixon, Carter, and Reagan avoided inviting other officials to their press conferences. They sometimes had foreign leaders join in short question-and-answer sessions, but not press conferences. President Ford developed the current trend by appearing with a foreign head of state. On October 21, 1974, in Tubac, Arizona, he appeared before the press with President Luis Echeverría of Mexico. The format was closer to today's joint press conferences, with reporters posing questions on any subject to both leaders in a shorter session, than to solo press conferences.

Since the administration of President George H. W. Bush, presidents have made joint press conferences with foreign leaders a staple of a White House visit by a head of state, or of a presidential trip abroad. Joint sessions now account for over half of all press conferences a President holds. Of the three most recent presidents, joint press conferences account for 41.3 percent of those held by President George H. W. Bush, 67.9 percent of President Clinton's session, and 73.3 percent of those held by President George W. Bush.

This kind of joint press conference is an adaptation to the needs of reporters, foreign leaders, and the President. Before the joint appearance, President George H. W. Bush made it standard procedure for a scrum of reporters to meet with each leader separately. Each leader, or more generally their surrogates, would respond to reporters' questions about the meeting. These sessions with reporters did not draw public attention, as they were not usually televised; this was before the advent of cable television.

Table 7. Presidential Press Conferences by Term: Joint and Solo Sessions 1913-2008¹³

President	Dates		Total	Solo	Joint	Joint as % of Total	% of Months Press Conference held	
							Solo & Joint	Solo
Wilson	3-4-13	to 3-4-17	157	157	0	0	62.5	62.5
Wilson	3-4-17	to 3-4-21	2	2	0	0	4.2	4.2
Harding	3-4-21	to 8-2-23	--	--	--	--	--	--
Coolidge	8-3-23	to 3-4-25	130	130	0	0	100.0	100.0
Coolidge	8-3-25	to 3-4-29	391	391	0	0	100.0	100.0
Hoover	3-4-29	to 3-4-33	268	267	1	0.4	95.8	95.8
Roosevelt	3-4-33	to 1-20-37	344	332	11	3.2	97.8	97.8
Roosevelt	1-20-37	to 1-20-41	389	377	10	2.6	100.0	100.0
Roosevelt	1-20-41	to 1-20-45	279	267	12	4.3	100.0	100.0
Roosevelt	1-20-45	to 4-12-45	8	8	0	0	100.0	100.0
Truman	4-12-45	to 1-20-49	165	157	8	4.8	97.8	97.8
Truman	1-20-49	to 1-20-53	159	154	5	3.1	97.9	97.9
Eisenhower	1-20-53	to 1-20-57	99	98	1	1.0	83.3	83.3
Eisenhower	1-20-57	to 1-20-61	94	94	0	0	87.5	87.5
Kennedy	1-20-61	to 11-22-63	65	65	0	0	97.1	97.1
Johnson	11-22-63	to 1-20-65	36	35	1	2.8	100.0	100.0
Johnson	11-22-65	to 1-20-69	99	83	15	15.3	89.6	85.4
Nixon	1-20-69	to 1-20-73	30	30	0	0	56.3	56.3
Nixon	1-20-73	to 8-9-74	9	9	0	0	36.8	36.8
Ford	8-9-74	to 1-20-77	40	39	1	2.5	72.4	72.4
Carter	1-20-77	to 1-20-81	59	59	0	0	75.0	75.0
Reagan	1-20-81	to 1-20-85	27	27	0	0	54.2	54.2
Reagan	1-20-85	to 1-20-89	19	19	0	0	39.6	39.6
G. H. W. Bush	1-20-89	to 1-20-93	143	84	59	41.3	89.6	85.4
Clinton	1-20-93	to 1-20-98	133	44	89	66.9	93.8	66.7
Clinton	1-20-98	to 1-20-01	60	18	42	70.0	75.0	37.5
G. W. Bush	1-20-01	to 7-20-05	89	17	72	80.9	77.1	33.3
G. W. Bush	1-20-05	to 7-20-08	115	32	83	72.2	95.2	64.3

The joint press conference gives the White House control over both the extent a President is questioned by reporters and the range of responses available to a foreign leader when addressing reporters about his or her meeting with the President. As Marlin Fitzwater said, “Both parties were more careful when standing next to each other; it minimizes discrepancies.”¹⁴ The joint press conference afforded certain advantages: both leaders could count on its happening, descriptions of the meeting from different parties would not conflict, and reporters would get an opportunity to query the President himself, rather than an anonymous senior official, about the meeting as well as about other subjects.

¹³ In both the Roosevelt and Johnson administrations there were press conferences that did not reveal transcripts, so the totals for those presidents are slightly higher than the combined total of listed solo and joint sessions. For Franklin Roosevelt, there are three press conferences for which there are no transcripts: one in his first term, no. 41 held August 7th, 1933, and two in his second, nos. 473 and 474, held July / August 1938. For President Johnson, the transcript is missing for no. 48, which was held on August 19, 1965. President George H. W. Bush had a press conference not contained in the *Public Papers*, which was held at Kennebunkport, ME on August 16th, 1991. The transcript is in files in the Bush Library.

¹⁴ Marlin Fitzwater, interview with the author, by telephone, November 22, 2002.

Since it is easier to control the format when time is shared with another, presidents can focus on a few queries secure in the knowledge that he will not be grilled repeatedly on one subject. During the scandals of his second term, President Clinton could regularly avoid answering the full number of queries posed in a regular press conference. In a February 1999 press conference with President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, for example, President Clinton answered only three questions, all posed by wire service reporters from the Associated Press, United Press International, and Reuters. Whether they occur in the United States or abroad, the sessions are divided equally between the two leaders.

With reporters divided up according to their country, the leaders alternate calling on reporters. That reduces the number of questions the President has to answer from the White House press corps. By calling on the wire services, President Clinton was sure that he would get not only scandal-related questions. At least one if not two of the wire reporters will ask about policy, especially foreign policy. Rarely do wire reporters have the same political edge in their questions that is true with some other reporters, particularly those representing the television networks.

The President and his staff were well aware of reporters' disquiet over the limitation. In the press conference with Rawlings, a Ghanaian reporter complained that American correspondents did not pose queries about Africa. President Clinton responded: "It's my fault because I don't let them ask me enough questions on other occasions, so I'm forcing them to use this opportunity to pepper me."¹⁵

ADDITIONAL VENUES FOR MEETING WITH REPORTERS

Ever since television has become the primary vehicle for presidential communications, thus putting press conferences on the record, the trend has been for presidents to hold fewer sessions in which they stand alone and respond to reporters' queries for a televised half hour or so. Instead they hold brief question-and-answer sessions. These sessions are similar to joint press conferences in that not many questions are asked. Yet they are different because only a small number of reporters are invited to each session, and there is no assembled audience brought together in advance, as at a joint press conference. Even if the President calls on three reporters in a joint press conference, the whole press corps is present for the session.

In some short question-and-answer sessions, the President takes anywhere from one to five or six questions from a pool of reporters invited into the Oval Office (or some similar setting) at the beginning of a President's meeting with congressional leaders, members of the Cabinet, or a visiting head of state. The reporters' questions generally deal with just an issue or two, the identity of which the President typically will have been alerted to and briefed on beforehand. Wire service reporters representing the Associated Press and Reuters are usually the ones invited to pose the questions, and they tend to be interested in the hot topic of the moment.

Short question-and-answer sessions are a fairly recent development in the presidential-press relationship. When the President met regularly with reporters in solo press conferences, there was little need for such sessions. Reporters knew they would have an opportunity to question the President extensively, even if it was only a couple of times a month. The transcribed short question-and-answer sessions date from the Nixon period, when press conferences became infrequent. Reporters wanted answers to questions, and the White House did not want to provide them in a press conference setting. The short session with a pool of reporters was a way to release some of the pressure building up among reporters for a press conference. As cable television grew, so too did the number of short question-and-answer sessions--cable networks became a ready outlet for them.

Short sessions for a pool of reporters set in a restricted space are relatively easy to plan. Generally, each of the major wire services is represented (Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg) plus one reporter representing the television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox) plus one reporter representing the major print publications. Since the President will generally take no more

¹⁵ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Joint Press Conferences by President Clinton and President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, February 24, 1999. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws.

than two or three questions from familiar figures, their focus is easy to anticipate. On August 23, 2005, for example, President Bush took four questions from reporters during a vacation at the Tamarack Resort in Donnelly, Idaho. Standing in a forest clearing with Idaho governor (today secretary of the interior) Dirk Kempthorne at his side, Bush made a statement and answered reporters' questions for twelve minutes. With war protester Cindy Sheehan camped outside of his Crawford ranch, it was not difficult to anticipate the first question. The Associated Press correspondent asked about Sheehan, and then the Reuters reporter asked a question about the unfolding Israeli withdrawal of the settlements in Gaza. A Bloomberg reporter and a Fox reporter asked about the roles of the Sunnis and women in the development of the Iraqi constitution, respectively. All of the questions were on hot topics and therefore predictable.

In addition to press conferences and short question-and-answer sessions, presidents began conducting face-to-face interviews with individual reporters and specially selected groups of reporters. Until recently, journalists tended to object to such singling out of individuals and groups on the grounds that it was unfair to everyone else. But those exercises in presidential discretion have become standard practice, as we shall see.

Complete counts of presidential interviews are difficult to come by, because the interviews are regarded as the property of the news organizations, not of the White House. The White House does make a transcript, but it provides it solely to those reporters who attended the session. It is not distributed to the whole White House press corps unless the attending news organizations consent.

Table 4 presents internal White House figures with a breakdown of the interviews President Bush conducted in his first term. The numbers are divided into three types of interviews, which include both interviews with a single reporter and ones with a group from the same news organization. The three types of interview sessions are print, television, and round tables. Interviews with reporters from print publications include those with U.S. and foreign newspapers and magazines. Television interviews consist of all of the five television networks, plus many from abroad. Generally, the President does an interview with one television news organization at a time, although several reporters from that network might participate. Round tables are interview sessions with a group of reporters. Often the groups are based on state, region, or country. Before going on vacation in the summer of 2005, for example, President Bush had an interview with five reporters from Texas print publications.

A President will also do round tables with reporters before he travels abroad. Before he left for the G-8 summit in Scotland and a stop in Denmark in July 2005, President Bush did interviews with the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, ITV of London, the *London Times*, and a round table with reporters from several European countries. The interviews serve as a lead-in to presidential visits in the United States or abroad to appear prior to his arrival.

As these totals suggest, television has become the dominant medium for interviews as well as events. Here, as elsewhere, pictures have become more important than words.

President Clinton observed the same practices, although he had a large number of radio interviews in addition to the print and television ones. He had approximately 189 interviews with reporters during his first term though these figures contain only some of the print interviews in which the President participated.

PRESIDENTIAL APPEARANCES AND EXCHANGES WITH REPORTERS

The volume of presidential appearances and exchanges with reporters is tremendous. Based on presidential patterns found in the last two administrations, President-elect Obama can anticipate just how many remarks and speeches he will give as well as the number of occasions he will respond to reporters. No matter if a President is a Republican or a Democrat, a liberal or a conservative, he will take advantage of both types of presidential publicity opportunities. There may be hazards

accompanying these opportunities, but presidents have been willing to take the risks. News organizations are the vehicle they use to explain themselves and their policies to public. If the President is to reach the public, news organizations are the route he uses. When the public wants to hear a President answer questions about his policies and actions, reporters are the ones who pose them. The consistent surrogates the public has querying the chief executive are the reporters who cover him.

THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT



WHAT WHTP DOES

The White House Transition Project unites the efforts of academic institutions with those of the policy community and private philanthropy into a consortium dedicated to smoothing the transfer of governing essential to a functioning American republic. It manages two related programs, one on institutional memory and best practices and one on presidential appointments. In both programs, the White House Transition Project brings to bear the considerable analytic resources of the world-wide academic community interested in the viability of democratic institutions on those problems identified as critical by those experienced hands who have held the unique responsibilities for governing. As such, the White House Transition Project brings ideas to bear on action.

The White House Interview Program

A common problem of the democratic transfer of power, the White House has no mechanism for maintaining an “institutional memory” of best practices, of common mistakes, and needed background information. Partisanship and growing complexity of the selection process exacerbate the natural tendency to avoid passing from one administration to the next the vital experiences necessary to carry on governing from one administration to the next. The lack of an institutional memory, then, literally turns the hallmark of the American constitutional system, its peaceful transfer of power, into a breathe-taking gamble. The White House Interview Program bridges the gaps between partisanship and experience by providing a conduit for those who have borne the extraordinary responsibilities to pass on their judgments to those who will enter the American nerve center. Its briefing materials compile these lessons from the practitioners with the long-view of academics familiar with executive organizations and operational dynamics. Provided to the transition planners for the national presidential campaigns and then to the president-elect’s newly appointed management team, these materials provide a range of useful perspectives from those who have held the same positions and faced the same problems that they cannot get on their own or from government resources.

Nomination Forms Online Program

Detailing the complex problems involved in nominating and then confirming presidential appointments, the WHTP’s Nomination Forms Online program provides the best available expertise on the nomination and confirmation process. Its software, *NFO*, constitutes the only fully-functional, open-architecture, completely reusable software for making sense of the morass of government questions that assail presidential nominees. In one place, this software presents nominees with all of the some 6,000 questions they may confront. Provided free as a public service by WHTP, *NFO* prompts nominees for needed information and then distributes and customizes answers to all of the forms and into all the questions that the nominee must answer on a subject.

HOW TO HELP SMOOTH THE NEXT PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

Originally funded by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts, WHTP manages its operations with the help of private philanthropy. To assist in that effort, please contact WHTP at WHTP@unc.edu.