



Helen Thomas accepts an engraving of the arch at the entrance to The University of Georgia in recognition for delivering the 17th Ralph McGill Lecture in the Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

THE MCGILL LECTURE

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Good morning. I am profoundly honored to be invited to deliver the Ralph McGill lecture and to be introduced by a dear friend and colleague John Holliman — a truly objective, straight reporter in the demanding spotlight of television from Baghdad to Washington or somewhere in space.

Ralph McGill was a giant in journalism when he was alive and he remains a newspaper icon long after he has left the surly bonds of earth. He was a columnist of magnificent courage and heart — challenging the tradition of segregation, the bilbos and others long after the Civil War was fought at such human cost to right the wrongs of our society. He was a crusader for civil rights in the finest sense, raising the conscience and consciousness of not just the South, but the whole nation. He made us more aware of the insidious, destructive nature of prejudice on all scores and mindless racial discrimination. One wonders how he would have dealt with the more subtle racism about us today that permeates our society — north, south, east and west. So we have miles to go to live up to his legacy.

But right now we are concerned with manning the barricades with yet another relentless assault against the media. Or did it ever end? Cannons to the right of us, cannons to the left of us. We have met the enemy and he is not us, but rather the newcomers to power on Capitol Hill who have targeted the “elite media” and who seem to be having a

hard time dealing with the reality of a free press.

President Clinton also has expressed his ire at times with the press. When he came into office he said publicly that he was going to make end runs around the White House Press Corps and would be communicating to all of us on "Larry King Live" or by holding a town meeting. Lots of luck. That lasted a couple of weeks and he soon found out that we were his 24-hour transmission belt. At times, Clinton has lashed out against the knee-jerk liberal press, as he put it, "who never give me a bit of credit for anything."

Actually, the president has been more accessible than many of his predecessors and since taking office he has had 84 news conferences and umpteen interviews, so he has found that we are not the only perpetual pipeline around, but the virtual reality.

Jefferson wrote, "And were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." He also said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." So it is no wonder that the struggle to remain unintimidated is never ending for the dwindling press. Yes, we have become a country of one-newspaper towns, and that is a regret, since competition is truly the lifeblood of journalism.

I know it has become fashionable to flagellate the press, even by those who practice it. Big newspapers have their mea culpa ombudsman pointing out their mistakes. Self-criticism for newspapers began in a big way after the Watergate scandal when certain forces determined that the press would not be able to depose a president again. In the aftermath of Watergate, the press became much more skeptical, much more cynical of government statements and spokespersons. After a siege with Watergate Press Secretary Ron Zeigler and Ron Nessen who followed him and who told us, "I will never lie to you," Peter Lisagore coined the expression, "Two Rons don't make a right."

So we have heard the cries — who is going to watch the watch dog? Our report card is on the front page every day, which is more than one can say for our detractors or even government.

That great jurist Hugo Black said that the government's power to censor the press was abolished so the press can censor the government. Jefferson also said, "No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free, none ever will."

I am not asserting the press is perfect. It has been able to maintain, however, high ethical standards and purpose. It is a regrettable fact that

talk-show hosts have been mistaken for journalists by a public that often misunderstands our role and our insistence on accountability and accuracy. But that is the price of an unfettered First Amendment and may it be ever so.

The press with its constitutional prerogative is the greatest defender of the First Amendment. No other constituency stands up for the First Amendment like the press, because we know it is the amendment from which so many blessings flow — freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of petition.

We know we are not loved, even liked. We know that we will never be popular — rating pretty low on the Gallup totem poll. To be understood may be asking too much of those who want to kill the messenger who brings the bad news. We also know that the pendulum swings in terms of the perception of the press — enemy sometimes, savior at other times. It is our job to follow the truth wherever it leads us. That is our Holy Grail. And I would say that compared to some other professions, we more than hold our own.

Granted, we are the self-appointed, self-anointed watchdogs of democracy. That has been proved time and time again in our proud history. When I first started out in journalism, people were still in awe of our profession. And they would come up to me at airports and I'd have so many press tags on you could send me C.O.D. anywhere in the world. And they'd say, "You meet such interesting people." During the Watergate era we got our taste of public derision fueled by the hostile Nixon administration. We were told falsehoods for months before the press secretary eventually had to acknowledge that everything he had said for nine months was "inoperative." Of course, Nixon was not alone in this department. Equally memorable was the credibility gap of LBJ during the Vietnam War and so many other government deceptions at the time.

So the lack of candor is not unique to one administration. It has been par for the course for as long as I've covered the White House. I recall that not too long after the Watergate nightmare had ended, we traveled to upper Michigan with President Ford. A man walked up to me and said, "You saved the country." He meant the national press had.

We're used to being on the firing line, but we do not bow to intimidation by government officials, politicians or talk show hosts. "Dissing" the so-called "liberal media" is an anachronism. I say where are they? The conservative columnists have cornered the market and they domi-

nate the air waves to boot. Where are the Ralph McGills when we really need them? Harper Lee said, "The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience." I still go with Mr. Dooley who saw that the role of the press is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

The prime qualifications of good reporting still are: curiosity, courage and compassion. Should we be condemned for caring for our fellow man, or the poor, or the sick or the disadvantaged? We know that a nation ignorant and free never was and never will be a democracy. It is up to the press to challenge the secrecy so endemic in government and to challenge officials who come into government posts and consider information their private preserve. Information is golden and it belongs in the public domain. Millions of documents remain stamped top secret in our archives and presidential libraries. And we ask, "Why?" As for information, I do believe in the people's right to know almost everything. But in this age of high-tech, managed and controlled news, the powers that be still have the upper hand. News is tightly held except for selected leaks.

Information is not easy to come by. I remember President Bush's press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, who told a TV interviewer, "The press only know 10 percent of what goes on around here." I used to repeat that in speeches and one day he came to me and told me that I didn't finish the sentence — "the other 90 percent is not worth knowing."

But of course no president has ever liked the press since George Washington. I wasn't covering him then, but John F. Kennedy said, "I'm reading more and enjoying it less." And when we asked Kennedy on Air Force One what would happen if the aircraft crashed, he said, "I know one thing, your name will be just a footnote." What LBJ said about us is unprintable. He always used to complain, "You all have the First Amendment as though it was some special weapon against presidents." It is. Once when we walked into the cabinet room, President Nixon looked up and said, "It's only coincidental that we're talking about pollution when the press walks in."

President Ford said, "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 asked my favorite question, "Why?" Carter always seemed to be saying, "Lord forgive them for they know not what they do." And when he was told that the Marxist Sandinistas had fired on a press helicopter near the Honduran

border, Reagan said, "There's some good in everyone." President Bush had a slogan in the last election, "Annoy the press. Elect George Bush." And when a friend asked President Clinton why the press always covered him when he was jogging, he replied, "They just want to see if I drop dead." That's true.

The presidential news conference, incidentally, is the only institution in our society where a president can be questioned on a regular basis and held accountable. Without such interrogation he could rule by edict. Under the British Parliamentary system, a prime minister is questioned twice a week in the House of Commons.

I have always felt greatly privileged to cover the White House and to have that ringside seat to instant history. I'm often asked how I prepare for a formal news conference. Well, first I go to the hairdresser. Your family and your friends don't care what you ask, but they want to be sure you're well groomed.

Kennedy was the master of the televised news conference, marked by his wit and warmth. But one wonders what it would have been like to really cover under television FDR, who held two news conferences a week even at the height of World War II. Of course most of it was off the record, but he was a very charismatic character. LBJ dreaded the formal news conference, but he loved the informal stem-winders where he could get a lot off his chest. He used to summon us, along with his dogs, and we used to walk around and around the South Lawn in those walkie-talkie news conferences. They came to be known as the Bataan death marches.

Presidents have come to accept us as a necessary evil, an albatross. But to this day they bemoan their lack of privacy. And my answer to that is if you want your privacy in this day and age, don't run for public office. Years ago President Herbert Hoover said, "There are only two occasions when Americans respect privacy, especially in presidents. Those are prayer and fishing." Anyone who seeks public office today has got to know his or her life will be an open book. So if you've decided to run to become a public servant, you should decide at the age of five and live accordingly. Considering what President Clinton has been through for evading the draft, it would also be good to have a little military experience.

For reporters today, nothing is sacred. If, on principle, a command decision is made not to run a story, others may not have such constraints — such as the tabloid press or tabloid television — and the floodgates

would be open. No place to hide. At the same time, any reporter worthy of the profession should always be aware of the power of the press to ruin lives and reputations — a responsibility that should never be taken lightly. No headline, no byline, no beat on any story is worth that.

We who are in the profession know that we are lucky to be in a position to learn something every day and to know that you are only as good as your last story. And because we are on her home territory, I'd like to recall two anecdotes involving Miss Lillian, President Carter's mother. After Carter had won the election in 1976, a reporter asked Miss Lillian, "Aren't you proud of your son?" And she said, "Which one?" And I remember interviewing Miss Lillian in Plains in 1976 while she was still fuming over a French woman correspondent who had belabored Carter's campaign promise never to lie. "Do you lie?" she asked Miss Lillian. "Well, I might tell a little white lie," Miss Lillian acknowledged. "What do you mean by a little white lie?" the reporter persisted. In total exasperation, Miss Lillian said, "Do you remember when you came through that door and I told you how beautiful you looked? Well, that's a little white lie."

Some 50 years ago, Justice Brandeis said that a constant spotlight on government officials lessens the possibility of corruption. Lincoln said, "I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts." That's our credo. And I believe that people can handle the truth and they deserve no less. And we should keep an eye on presidents and public servants to keep the people informed and democracy alive.

Thank you for this great honor.