HELEN THOMAS:
The view from the bridge

Edited excerpts from the lecture by Helen Thomas, White House bureau chief of UPI, at The Freedom Forum World Center, Arlington, Va., on Sept. 23, 1999.

Helen Thomas has covered every president since Kennedy.

The business of the newspaper business is business these days, it seems.

There have been and still are publishers and editors who protect the inviolability of the news sections. Once upon a time there were the Paleys and the Sarnoffs who ran successful businesses and yet kept their hands off the news output.

Journalism has always been exciting, demanding, and there will never be a day without news as long as people inhabit the planet Earth. It is a profession that has always drawn the infinitely curious and those whose quest for knowledge never ends. Yes, it used to be a man's work. In the past many editors would not hire a woman to cover hard news or foreign news. Now women are 50-50 in journalism schools and in the newsrooms. Reporters and photographers have not hesitated to report man's inhumanity to man. And many have lost their lives in trying to tell the world.

Once obscure and anonymous on a national scale, although the local byline may have been known, many of the correspondents have been transformed by television into personalities. It has given them an ID they never had before. It has polarized the press, and inevitably many have crossed the line into opinion-making and being pigeonholed for their politics.

I am often asked the difference between today's reporter and yesterday's newspaperman — and newspapermen they were in the past. If I am allowed to generalize for an overview, I'd say today's journalist is much better educated, probably better informed, better dressed and sober. They seem to lack compassion, however, and understanding that they have the power to ruin lives and reputations.

Yesterday's reporter was often less educated, sometimes only a high school education, but more attuned to the community, and often they moved from one town to another where newspapers were thriving. They often had a pint in the desk drawer or on the floor, and they appeared to have more heart and tolerance. Or am I romanticizing the past?

I always think of newspapers as shared pain, sometimes shared horror. Justice Brandeis said that a constant spotlight on public officials lessens the possibility of corruption. He also said that if the government becomes a law breaker, it breeds contempt for the law.

Lincoln said: "Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe."

I believe that. And I believe that people can handle the truth, and they deserve no less. And we should keep an eye on public servants — presidents especially, who have life and death power over all humanity today — to keep the people informed and democracy alive.

FRANK E. GANNETT LECTURE
The Freedom Forum traces its roots to 1935 when newspaper publisher Frank Gannett (1876-1957) endowed the Frank E. Gannett Newspaper Foundation with 1,500 shares of Gannett Co. stock. The foundation began by supporting journalism, education and philanthropy in 14 New York cities served by the 19 newspapers in Gannett's company. In 1989, the foundation moved its headquarters from Rochester, N.Y., to Arlington, Va., and in 1991 became The Freedom Forum. The annual series of lectures in Gannett's name began in 1978. (For a list of previous lecturers, see Appendix.)

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