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Not all White House reporters are pushovers

At 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., reporters usually shuffle along to a snoozy beat. But anyone who denigrates the mainstream media in general, or the White House press corps in particular, should acknowledge that exceptional journalists do strive to ask deeper questions while most colleagues go through the motions.

The latest in a long line of presidential spinners, Ari Fleischer, began a news conference on January 6 with a nice greeting: "Good afternoon and happy New Year to everybody." But his bonhomie didn't last more than a minute.

"At the earlier briefing, Ari, you said that the president deplored the taking of innocent lives," Helen Thomas began. "Does that apply to all innocent lives in the world?"

It was a simple question – and, unfortunately, an extraordinary one. Few journalists at the White House move beyond the subtle but powerful ties that bind reporters and top officials in Washington. Routinely, shared assumptions are the unspoken name of the game. In this case, Thomas wasn't playing – and Fleischer's new year wasn't exactly off to a great start. His tongue moved, but he declined to answer the question. Instead, he parried: "I refer specifically to a horrible terrorist attack on Tel Aviv that killed scores and wounded hundreds."

Of course that attack was reprehensible. But Thomas had asked whether President Bush deplored the taking of "all innocent lives in the world." And Fleischer didn't want to go there. But Helen Thomas, an 82-year-old journalist who has been covering the White House for several decades, was not to be deterred by the flack's sleight-of-tongue maneuver. "My follow-up is," she persisted, "why does he want to drop bombs on innocent Iraqis?"

On a dime, Fleischer spun paternal and nationalistic. "Helen, the question is how to protect Americans, and our allies and friends ..." What Fleischer had just called "the question" was actually his question. He had no use for hers. Thomas responded: "They're not attacking you. Have they [the Iraqis] laid the glove on you or on the United States ... in 11 years?"

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Fleischer laced his retort with sarcasm. "I guess you have forgotten about the Americans who were killed in the first Gulf War as a result of Saddam Hussein's aggression then."

"Is this revenge," Thomas replied, "11 years of revenge?"

The man in charge of White House spin revved up the RPMs. "Helen, I think you know very well that the president's position is that he wants to avert war ... "

But the journalist refused to jettison her original, still-unanswered question. She asked: "Would the president attack innocent Iraqi lives?"

"The president wants to make certain that he can defend our country ... "

Thomas would not back off. She demanded to know whether Bush thinks the Iraqi people "are a threat to us." At that point, Fleischer went off message with a weird statement. "The Iraqi people are represented by their government," said the man speaking for the president of the United States. A journalist's persistence had led him to put foot in polished mouth.

Some people like to play "Hail to the Chief." I would prefer to say "Hail to the dean of the Washington press corps – Helen Thomas." She knows that asking truly tough questions involves a lot more than echoing partisan ping-pong.

After 57 years as a reporter for United Press International, she quit UPI in 2000 when it was bought by News World Communications, a firm affiliated with the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's right-wing Unification Church. (Among its holdings is The Washington Times.) Since then, Thomas has been writing an incisive syndicated column for Hearst Newspapers.

In a speech at MIT a couple of months ago, Helen Thomas told the audience: "I censored myself for 50 years when I was a reporter." Media professionals are frequently unwilling to say in public what they know in private. When a mainstream journalist breaks out of self-censorship, the public benefits.

Day in and day out, Helen Thomas is conspicuous for her fortitude at White House press conferences. And let's also give credit to an intrepid newcomer at such press follies. The other day, Russell Mokhiber of the Corporate Crime Reporter was asking a simple question that went unanswered: "Ari, other than Elliott Abrams, how many convicted criminals are on the White House staff?"

You can find transcripts of Mokhiber's many exchanges with Fleischer posted at www.commondreams.org – under the heading "Ari and I" – examples of unflinching questions and slimy evasions at the White House.

Thank you, Helen Thomas. Thank you, Russell Mokhiber. It sure is refreshing to see journalists doing their jobs instead of going along to get along. ■