

Specialized Writing
The Press and the Presidency
Sam Houston State University
Department of Mass Communication
Fall Semester 2017
3 Credit Hours
MCOM 3360, Section 02
Prerequisites: MCOM 1332 and 6 hours of English
2:00 p.m.-3:20 p.m., Tuesday & Thursday
Room 301
Dan Rather Communications Building

Instructor: Peter Roussel

Office Information: The instructor's office is Room #313, Dan Rather Communications Building Telephone: (936) 294-4502; (713) 668-2793 E-Mail: phr001@shsu.edu
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Office Hours: Tuesday, 12 noon.; Thursday, 12 noon. Also by appointment.

Course Description:

The course will conduct a critical analysis of the relationship between the press and the presidency—how the news media covers the White House and the role of the White House in responding to that coverage.

The course will focus on two critical questions:

Can the modern presidency survive the modern media?

Can the process by which the media covers the White House be improved to make it more productive for:

- The institution of the presidency?
- The American citizen and the quality of the news he/she receives?
- The American news media and the quality of the product they are able to generate?

There will be analysis of the daily exchange of information that occurs between White House spokespersons and reporters whose assignment it is to cover the presidency, including the challenges and responsibilities inherent in that process.

Other topics addressed will include: The White House press corps, the Office of the Press Secretary and its role, the daily news briefing, the various techniques utilized in covering the White House, the ground rules that overlay the process, presidential news conferences, the challenges in covering presidential travel and events, presidents and their press policies and coverage of presidential campaigns.

Course Objectives:

- To write about the press-presidency process
- To learn about, and achieve an understanding of, the process by which the news media covers the White House
- To learn about, and achieve an understanding of, the role of White House spokespersons
- To determine if this process can be improved
- If one is so interested, to help students prepare for a career as a press spokesperson

Textbook:

It is not necessary to purchase a textbook for the class. The material to be discussed in the class will be based on the instructor's firsthand career experiences.

Possible Choices for Written Book Report (Choose any one of these or any other book not on this list per approval by the instructor):

Twilight of the Presidency by George Reedy, New American Library, 1971

The Boys on the Bus by Timothy Crouse, Random House, 1972

Dateline: White House by Helen Thomas, MacMillan, 1975

Hold On, Mr. President! by Sam Donaldson, Random House, 1987

Speaking Out by Larry Speakes, Scribner, 1988

What I Saw at the Revolution by Peggy Noonan, Random House, 1990

Photo Op by David Hume Kennerly, University of Texas Press, 1995

Front Row at the White House by Helen Thomas, Scribner, 1999

All Too Human: A Political Education by George Stephanopoulos, Little Brown & Co., 1999

Hugh Sidey's Portraits of the Presidents, Time Books, 2000

Ask Not by Thurston Clarke, Henry Holt & Co., 2004

Taking Heat by Ari Fleischer, William Morrow, 2005

Note: The book used by students for the written book report can be chosen from this list or can be any other book approved by the instructor that is related to the subject of the class.

Video:

It is anticipated there will be periodic use of videos related to the content of this class.

Attendance Policy:

Since there is no assigned textbook, regular attendance and active participation in class discussions will be an essential factor in preparing for the midterm quiz, the written book report, the press briefing exercise and the term paper. Regular attendance is most strongly advised and will be recorded. For those that have to miss the midterm quiz, a make-up will be provided. For delay in turning in the term paper, an appropriate cause should be provided.

Midterm Quiz:

There will be one exam, a midterm quiz. The quiz will consist of 25 questions, utilizing a format of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank and true-false questions. It will be based on material that has been discussed in class up to that point. There will be no essay questions.

The tentative date for this midterm quiz is Thursday, October 5, 2017.

The midterm quiz will account for ten percent of the final grade.

Written Book Report:

For purposes of this exercise, the class will be divided into teams. Each team will submit a written book report based on one of the books selected from the recommended reading list, or any other book that is approved by the instructor. The written book report will be evaluated on two parts:

- a) Specific points that inform as to what the book is about; and
- b) Conclusions on what has been learned from the book about the press-presidency process

The tentative date for when the written book report is due is Thursday, November 2, 2017.

The written book report will account for thirty percent of the final grade.

Press Briefing Exercise:

For the purpose of this exercise, the class will be divided into teams, the same as those for the written book report.

Each team will be given a scenario and guidance talking points to be used in conducting a simulated press briefing. Each briefing will be approximately five minutes. Once they have been given their scenario, each team will have five minutes to prepare. They will then conduct a press briefing based on the subject they have been given, with the rest of the class and instructor serving as reporters. Half of each team's press briefing exercise grade will be the result of the

other teams grading each other and the other half from the instructor, the combination of which will be each team's final grade for this exercise.

The tentative date for the press briefing exercise is Tuesday, November 14, 2017.

The press briefing exercise will account for thirty percent of the final grade.

Term Paper:

The term paper will be graded on three components:

- Organization. Is the material well organized in the way it is presented?
- Content. Does it *specifically cite various points on how the presidency is covered by the media—points covered during class discussions*. Extensive referencing of these points is highly encouraged. Example: Citing and discussing the seven ways by which reporters cover the presidency that will have been discussed in class.
- Conclusions/recommendations. Based upon the class discussions, students will provide their own conclusions--specific recommendations on how the process by which the press covers the presidency can be improved. Example: Should the policy on televising the daily briefing be revised?

The term paper will be due on the last day of class, Thursday, November 30, 2017.

The five-page term paper will account for thirty percent of the final grade.

Grading:

The grade received in the course will be based on four components: the midterm quiz; the written book report; the press briefing exercise; and the term paper. The material on which the quiz will be based is described under the **Midterm Quiz** section of this syllabus. For purposes of the written book report, students will utilize one of the books from the recommended reading list or any other book approved by the instructor. The grade for the written book report will be based on the criteria described in the **Written Book Report** section of this syllabus. The grade for the press briefing exercise will be based on the criteria in the **Press Briefing Exercise** section of this syllabus. The term paper will be based on the criteria in the **Term Paper** section of this syllabus. 90-100=A; 80-89=B; 70-79=C; 60-69=D.

Midterm Quiz--10 percent

Press Briefing Exercise--30 percent

Written Book Report—30 percent

Term Paper—30 percent

Academic Dishonesty:

All students are expected to engage in all academic pursuits in a manner that is above reproach. Students are expected to maintain complete honesty and integrity in the academic experiences both in and out of the classroom. Any student found guilty of dishonesty in any phase of academic work will be subject to disciplinary action. The university and its official representatives may initiate disciplinary proceedings against a student accused of any form of

academic dishonesty including, but not limited to, cheating on an examination or other academic work which is to be submitted, plagiarism, collusion and the abuse of research materials.

Americans with Disabilities Act:

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. They should then make arrangements with their individual instructors so that appropriate strategies can be considered and helpful procedures can be developed to ensure that participation and achievement opportunities are not impaired.

SHSU adheres to all applicable federal, state and local laws, regulations, and guidelines with respect to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If a student has a disability that may affect adversely his/her work in this class, then the student is encouraged to register with the SHSU Counseling Center and to talk with the instructor about how best to deal with the situation. All disclosures of disabilities will be kept strictly confidential. NOTE: No accommodation can be made until the student registers with the Counseling Center.

Religious Holidays:

Section 51.911(b) of the Texas Education Code requires that an institution of higher education excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. "Religious holy day" means a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Section 11.20, Tax Code.

Visitors in the Classroom:

Unannounced visitors to class must present a current, official SHSU identification card to be permitted into the classroom. They must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. If the visitor is not a registered student, it is at the instructor's discretion whether or not the visitor will be allowed to remain in the classroom.

Use of Telephones and Pagers in Academic Classrooms and Facilities:

The use by students of telephones and pagers or any device that performs these functions during class-time is prohibited unless specifically permitted by the instructor. Any use of a telephone or pager or any device that performs these functions during a test period is prohibited. If there is an emergency situation for a student, that student should inform the instructor and place himself/herself in a seat near the door where an exit for a phone call would be only minimally disruptive. Other arrangements for handling emergency situations may be granted at the discretion of the instructor.

Instructor Evaluations:

Students will be asked to complete a course/instructor evaluation form toward the end of the semester.

Assignments:

Please see information in the sections on **Midterm Quiz**, **Written Book Report**, **Press Briefing Exercise** and **Term Paper**.

Classroom Rules of Conduct:

Section 5.2.22 of the Code of Student Conduct and Discipline defines classroom disturbances.

About the Instructor:

Peter Roussel has served twice in the White House and has had professional associations with President Ronald Reagan, President Gerald R. Ford, President George H.W. Bush, Secretary James A. Baker, III, and other national figures. He served as press secretary when Mr. Bush was U.S. Congressman, 1969-70, when he ran for the U.S. Senate, 1970, when he was U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, 1971-73, and when he was Chairman of the Republican National Committee, 1973-74. Mr. Roussel's first tour of duty in the White House was as staff assistant to President Ford, 1974-76. In 1976 Mr. Roussel was special assistant to James A. Baker, III when Secretary Baker was director of the Ford for President campaign. Mr. Roussel's second tour of duty in the White House was as special assistant and deputy press secretary to President Reagan, 1981-87. His duties as a White House spokesman included briefings of the press corps and accompanying President Reagan on domestic and foreign trips. These included summit meetings with Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev at Geneva in 1985 and Iceland in 1986. He helped plan the U.S. media participation at those events as well as for four Economic Summits. One of his first assignments in the Reagan White House was to handle media relations for the historic nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor as the first female Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court. In 1990 he was communications director for the Houston Economic Summit Host Committee. From 1996 to 2003 he was executive vice president and a managing partner of the Houston public relations firm, Neumann Roussel. His career in public relations and advertising began in 1966 with the firm of Rives, Dyke & Co. and has included professional experience with five firms in three cities. From 2004 to 2008 he was a columnist for *Intown* magazine, writing a monthly column and serving as editor from June 2005 to May 2008. He is an author, playwright, public speaker and radio-TV commentator and has served as an on-camera commentator for various media outlets. In August 2016 his play, *Ruffled Flourishes*, received its world premiere performances at SHSU as presented by the Department of Theatre & Musical Theatre. He is a 1965 graduate of the University of Houston where he was honored in 1983 as a Distinguished Alumnus. In 1986 he was selected to receive the first Distinguished Communications Alumnus Award presented by that university. In 2009 he was appointed to the Philip G. Warner Endowed Chair in the Department of Mass Communication at Sam Houston State University. In 2013 and 2016 he was recipient of SHSU's Sammy Award for Outstanding Student Organization (PRSSA) advisor.

Course Requirements:

A primary goal of this course is to encourage as much student participation as possible. Students are encouraged to ask questions, to express opinions freely, and to challenge the views of the instructor as well as fellow students.

Instructor's Comment: My goal is for students to enjoy this class, and most importantly, to learn from it based on firsthand experiences in the press-presidency arena that have been a part of the instructor's career.

Course Outline (Tentative):**1. The White House Press Corps: How the Process Works**

- Who covers the President of the United States on a daily basis?
- How do the assignments occur?
- From the campaign to incumbency—the transition
- Over 1,700 press passes issued. To whom? How are they utilized?
 - National, state, local, specialized, foreign, print, broadcast, internet, columnists, newsletters, etc.
- Sense of magnitude as exemplified by
 - Numerous “waves” for photo ops
- The dynamics of covering a president—how have they changed since the Eisenhower administration??

The primary changes:

- Print versus broadcast; size of press corps
- Examples of FDR & LBJ utilizing the Oval Office with the press
- Electronic media and size of press corps have made it 24/7
- Tom Johnson/LBJ: 25 daily newspapers versus handful now
- Two press planes required in 1984 campaign, one for electronic gear
- Example of Geneva in 1985 and 747 cargo hold with electronic gear

2. The White House Press Corps: Impact from State of the Art Changes?

- What impacts has this shift—print to electronic—had? How has it changed the news-gathering and news-generating process at the White House?
- What has been the impact of the disappearance of am/pm news cycles?
- Cable: a video wire service
- Example of instant, global communication: 1986 Tokyo Economic Summit
- The White House: the premiere news assignment. Why?
- Sam Donaldson—why did he stay there 12 years?
 - Helen Thomas: “All roads lead to Rome.”
- The front row in the White House briefing room
 - Friendship ends at the podium’s edge
 - Example of PR’s first briefing
 - Sam Donaldson: “No deals!”
 - And yet, there are other moments to note. Example: Jim Brady return to White House
- Examples of the White House media feeding frenzy and pack journalism
 - Bitburg, 1985
 - State of the Union speeches
 - Augusta

3. The Office of the Press Secretary

- A list of all those who have held the title of press secretary since the Eisenhower administration
- The window through which public impressions about the presidency are formed
- The necessity for change in the physical set-up at the White House’s West Wing—why?
 - To accommodate reporters and growth of press corps
 - Conversion of swimming pool to press room
- How are press secretaries selected? The staff?
- How is the office structured?
- The 14-16 hour day—what does it encompass?

- Roles:
 - Role of foreign policy/domestic policy deputies in providing guidance
 - Role of the News Summary (examples provided)
 - Camp David assignment
 - Website
- A list of the primary responsibilities of the Office of the Press Secretary
- What about coordination with Cabinet agencies to assure “speaking with one voice?”
- The Office of Communications—how different from the Office of the Press Secretary?
- In addition to the daily briefings, what are the press spokesman’s primary responsibilities to the press?
- Credibility. The essential responsibility that must remain untarnished
 - Examples
- Accuracy. A spokesman is only as good as the information given
 - The quest for information—senior staff meetings, etc.
- Responsiveness.
 - Can be a positive for the long term

4. The Daily Briefing: Lifeblood of the White House Press Corps

- The best free show in town
- Is it necessary? Is it productive?
- How much news is actually generated from these sessions?
- What is the goal of each briefing? Offense or defense? Proactive or reactive?
- Purposes of the daily briefing?
- The format. The 9:15am session. Originally, a “whisper” session for the wire services. Purpose?
- On camera vs. off camera? Is this a good idea?
- Sam Donaldson quotes about the process

- How are press secretaries a reflection of the president they represent?
- Briefing transcripts—examples of different subjects

5. Seven Ways to Cover a President

- The daily briefing
- News conferences
- Photo Ops
- Pools
 - Their purpose?
 - Are they a necessity?
 - How do Air Force One and trip pools work?
- Sources
 - Where do they come from?
- Instinct
 - Example: Helen Thomas/ Sandra Day O'Connor
- Intensity
 - Example : Andrea Mitchell/Sam Donaldson
- How does the coverage of presidents differ? Or does it? Reporters in the briefing room change as do presidents
- Key questions for each new president:
 - Accessibility. Should presidents utilize the briefing room?
 - Press conference policy?
 - Personal approach to press relationship (s)?
- Does accessibility diminish impact of the office? Mystique? Helen Thomas' reference to always wanting more access

6. Ground Rules of the Game

- What are the basic ground rules that are followed by reporters at the White House?
 - How do those ground rules work—and sometimes not work?
- A review of the four ground rules:
 - On the record
 - On background
 - Deep background
 - Off the record
- Review White House briefing transcript for example of where a certain ground rule has been invoked. Why?
- The use of on background as related to leaks
- Leaks. Why?
- Can they be controlled?

7. Press Spokesperson or Public Relations Flack?

- The essential rule: keep the message focused
- The challenge: the White House message versus the story the press is pursuing
- The use of photo ops. Effective?
- The PR impact from Saturday radio broadcasts and the additional coverage they receive from print media
- East Room luncheons for out of town media. Are these effective? .
- Press plans—their purpose and effectiveness?
- Press plans for presidential debates, summit meetings, etc. Similar techniques from the opposition?
- “Spin patrols.” Effective? Or have they become a story in themselves? Too obvious now?

8. The Presidential News Conference

- The prime time presidential news conference—its role? Does this format adequately serve the press and the presidency?
- How have recent presidents utilized it—or avoided it? East Room or briefing room? Most effective?
- Why won't the FDR/LBJ/Oval Office format work now?
- White House preparation process, seating chart
- Has all sense of spontaneity been lost?
 - What about follow-ups?
 - The time /question issue
 - The futility of going for the “home run” question
 - Post news conference “spin patrol”
- The “I gotcha” factor
- What alternatives? Lottery?
- Are prime time news conference reporters being reviewed, too?
- The impact of cable analysis on presidential news conferences? Similar to post-debate analysis?

9. Coverage of the White House on the Road

- Marine One
- Air Force One
- The chartered press plane
- Different venues require different forms of adaptation for working with the White House press corps and other media. Examples: China, Geneva, Economic Summits, Santa Barbara, Augusta, etc.
- The travel schedule
- The 13-member Air Force One press pool.

10. Coverage of Presidential Campaigns

- The overwhelming logistics of press coverage of a presidential campaign
- Are campaign rallies still viable? Or is it the “talk show” campaign trail now?
- Is the press a factor? Or is advertising, particularly negative advertising, the deciding factor now?
- What impact results from the debates and their coverage? Is it all about “the big mistake?”
- The leverage of the incumbency
- Does the media coverage sometimes impact events at conventions?
- Presidential elections and the transition of reporters at the White House

11. A Final Footnote: Expect the Unexpected

- Even in the White House, the unexpected can occur, and when it does the press is usually there to cover it