

Which President Held the First News Conference?

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When one thinks of a presidential news conference what comes to mind is seeing the president on TV. But there were press conferences long before TV.

The press began to have a presence in the White House during the second Cleveland administration in the early 1890s. A group of correspondents had their own table inside the building. A *Washington Star* reporter by the name of William W. Price referred to it in a letter to the staff of President Grover Cleveland. Under President William McKinley, the area where reporters could roam was further expanded. By 1898, journalists were found sitting about on the White House porch, in the front lobby and on the landings, according to accounts of the time.

Woodrow Wilson, president from 1913 to 1921, held the first press conference in March 1913. Things did not go as planned. Wilson's private secretary, Joseph Tumulty, advised the press in Washington that at 12:45 p.m. on March 15th, 1913 the president would talk with them. The new president, expecting a small group, wanted to greet each man one by one to foster a personal relationship. When President Teddy Roosevelt spoke to reporters it was at his barber's when he was getting a morning shave. But when the Wilson conference began it was obvious he had miscalculated. One hundred twenty-five newsmen showed up. "I did not realize there were so many of you," said Wilson. "Your numbers force me to make a speech to you en masse instead of chatting with each of you, as I had hoped to do, and thus getting greater pleasure and personal acquaintance out of this meeting." The *New York Times* headline reads: "Wilson wins newspaper men." From then on press conferences became a regular feature of presidential politics. All 17 of Wilson's successors have held them.

But each president handled press relations differently. Calvin Coolidge, though he was known as Silent Cal, held the most press conferences: 521 sessions or an average of 93 a year. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was famous for inviting reporters in for a chat around his Oval Office desk. He was on a first name basis with reporters and often charmed them – to his great political benefit. Harry Truman also got along well with reporters, but wasn't as agile as FDR. In a slip of the tongue, Truman gave his thoughts about the Republican senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy. Truman told the assembled press on March 1950, “ I think the greatest asset the Kremlin has is another McCarthy.”

The first televised press conference during the Eisenhower administration, happened January 19th, 1955, but it wasn't broadcast live. It was taped so the footage could be edited. Select clips were then distributed. Kennedy was more daring; he agreed to allow news conferences to be broadcast live. Comfortable with the medium, he turned in stellar performances marked by grace and wit. When difficult subjects came up he found clever ways to deflect the questions. As HNN reported years ago:

Kennedy was the maestro. Anytime he wanted to get the Washington press chorus to sing his tune, he called a press conference. Peter Lisigor, the Chicago Daily News reporter, complained, “We were props in a show. We should have joined Actors Equity.” At one memorable press conference—his ninth in his first four months in office—JFK wittily remarked about his negative press coverage that he was “reading more and enjoying it less.”

Televised formal news conferences have receded in recent years as presidents have learned to use other formats to get their message out to the public: Ronald Reagan inaugurated weekly radio broadcasts, Bill Clinton appeared on TV talk shows, and Donald Trump has turned to Twitter.

Sources

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