

# PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: HELEN THOMAS

*A candid conversation with the disgraced dean of the White House press corps about her rage against Israel, her sympathy for Palestinians and why she was fired*

For more than half a century, Helen Thomas owned the most valuable piece of real estate in the White House briefing room. Her front-row seat at presidential press conferences and its attendant benefits—she was often called on first and usually ended the gatherings with a signature “Thank you, Mr. President”—made her the unofficial dean of the White House press corps. Her bold, irksome questions were like hot pokers to 10 U.S. presidents, and her fearless approach rattled press secretaries and set a tone for generations of straight-shooting, badgering reporters.

Last summer, still working full-time at 90, she saw her decades-long career fall to pieces after a two-minute video clip went viral on YouTube. A Long Island rabbi and blogger visiting the White House turned his camera on Thomas on May 27 and asked for “any comments on Israel.” Thomas instantly shot back, “Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine,” adding that the Jews “can go home” to “Poland, Germany and America and everywhere else.” Endless media outrage ensued, prompting Thomas to issue an apology and abruptly “resign” from Hearst Newspapers on June 7. Her speaking agency dropped her, journalism schools and organizations rescinded awards named in her honor and she lost that prized seat in the White House.

Thomas’s comments were not a complete shock to those who follow her. In recent years she practically

scolded presidents and their gatekeepers for favoring Israel. She had previously asked President Obama about Israel’s “secret” nuclear arsenal and why the White House did not condemn last May’s Israeli attacks on the aid flotilla in Gaza.

Born August 4, 1920, Thomas herself is of Arab descent. She was the seventh of nine children born in Winchester, Kentucky to Syrian-born immigrants from Tripoli, Lebanon. Her family soon moved to Detroit, where her father ran a grocery store even though he couldn’t read or write in English. News was often a topic around the house, and after college Thomas landed a job as a girl Friday at a Washington, D.C. newspaper at the end of World War II. That led her to the copy desk and a cub reporter position and eventually to a job covering government bureaucracy for the wire service United Press International. She remained at UPI for much of her career. As White House correspondent from the Kennedy administration on, Thomas had unusual prominence despite standing just under five feet tall.

Famously direct, Thomas was especially forceful with George W. Bush, whom she once called “the worst president in American history.” She was relentless about getting him to explain his decision to go to war in Iraq, asking over and over, “What was your real reason? What was it? Why did you go to war?” His minions promptly moved Thomas to the back row of the briefing room.

Thomas now writes a column for the Falls Church News-Press in Virginia. She still wakes early to read various newspapers delivered to her door, and she’s still out many nights talking politics at favorite D.C. haunts.

Contributing Editor David Hochman got the idea to call Thomas to see if she wanted to talk. “She picked up the phone and said yes immediately,” he says. “I think she really appreciated the opportunity to do a long-format Q&A to express her side of what happened.”

Based in Los Angeles, Hochman flew to Washington in the days after Christmas to meet Thomas at her apartment near Dupont Circle. They also broke bread at her favorite Palestinian restaurant. “I was curious whether I’d find the ranting woman from the YouTube video,” Hochman says. “She turned out to be a person in full possession of her faculties and impressively articulate. Mostly she was the Thomas the public has known forever: feisty, passionate and not afraid to speak up.” Does Hochman, who is Jewish, believe Thomas is an anti-Semite? “I’ll let the reader decide. But I did think it was amusing when she presented a plate of ham sandwiches and then said, ‘Oh, I hope I haven’t served the wrong thing.’”

**PLAYBOY:** So is this how you pictured retirement?

**THOMAS:** I’m not retired! I was fired. In fact,



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*“I’m not retired! I was fired. I’ll die with my boots on. I’m still writing and I’ll continue to write and ask hard questions. I will never bow out of journalism. I knew what I was doing—I was going for broke. You finally get fed up.”*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN CEDENO

I'll die with my boots on. I'm still writing and I'll continue to write and ask hard questions. I will never bow out of journalism.

**PLAYBOY:** Take us back to the White House courtyard on May 27 when Rabbi David Nesenoff pointed his camera at you and asked for your comments on Israel.

**THOMAS:** He pulled that thing out like a jackknife. I mean, he started out very nice, introducing me to these two young boys who wanted to be in journalism. He said, "Got any advice? Go for it." I didn't know it was Jewish Heritage Month, which is why he was at the White House and also why he asked "So what do you think of Israel?" That's when I said, "They should get the hell out of Palestine."

**PLAYBOY:** Did you realize how controversial those words were as you spoke them?

**THOMAS:** I knew I'd hit the third rail. You cannot say anything about Israel in this country. But I've lived with this cause for many years. Everybody knows my feelings that the Palestinians have been shortchanged in every way. Sure, the Israelis have a right to exist—but where they were born, not to come and take someone else's home. I've had it up to here with the violations against the Palestinians. Why shouldn't I say it? I knew exactly what I was doing—I was going for broke. I had reached the point of no return. You finally get fed up.

**PLAYBOY:** What was life like in the immediate aftermath as millions started viewing the video on YouTube?

**THOMAS:** I went into self-imposed house arrest for two weeks. It was a case of "know thyself." Isn't that what Socrates said? I wanted to see if I was remorseful—and I wasn't.

**PLAYBOY:** Did the phone ring off the hook?

**THOMAS:** No. Nobody called. But I still have some friends in the White House press pool, who reached out to me. I understand they formed Jews for Helen Thomas at one point.

**PLAYBOY:** That's interesting.

**THOMAS:** I also heard from Jimmy Carter. He called a few weeks later.

**PLAYBOY:** He did? What did he say?

**THOMAS:** Basically he was sympathetic. He talked about the Israelis in the Middle East, the violations. It was very nice of him to call, but I don't want to get him into trouble.

**PLAYBOY:** His reaction certainly wasn't typical.

**THOMAS:** No. Every columnist and commentator jumped on me immediately as anti-Semitic. Nobody asked me to explain myself. Nobody said, "What did you really mean?"

**PLAYBOY:** What did you really mean?

**THOMAS:** Well, there's no understanding of the Palestinians at all. I mean, they're living there and these people want to come and take their homes and land and water and kill their children and kill them. How many are still under arrest in Israel—never been charged, never been tried, never been convicted? Thousands.

Why? Meanwhile, we keep giving Israel everything. Our government bribes the Israelis by saying, "Please come to the [negotiating] table and we'll give you this and we'll give you that." Obama's last offer to the Israelis was \$22 billion in new fighter planes [Editor's note: The offer was actually just under \$3 billion], a veto at the UN for anything pro-Arab or pro-Palestinian and a three-month freeze on the colonization and settlers. I mean, what is this? They gave away the store, just as Reagan and every other president did. Why do you have to bribe people to do the right thing? I don't want my government bribing anybody. I want them demanding. Stop all this aid to Israel when they're killing people!

**PLAYBOY:** It was your follow-up comment, when you said the Jews should go back to Poland, Germany and America, that really infuriated people.

**THOMAS:** Well, that immediately evoked the concentration camps. What I meant was they should stay where they are because they're not being persecuted—not since World War II, not since 1945. If they were, we sure would hear about it.

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Instead, they initiated the Jackson-Vanik law, which said the U.S. would not trade with Russia unless it allowed unlimited Jewish emigration. But the emigration was not to the United States, which would have been fine with me. It was to go to Palestine and uproot these people, throw them out of their homes, which they have done through several wars. That's not fair. I want people to understand why the Palestinians are upset. They are incarcerated and living in an open prison. I say to the Israelis, "Get out of people's homes!" It's unacceptable to have soldiers knocking on a door at three in the morning and saying, "This is my home." And forcing people out of homes they've lived in for centuries? What is this? How can anybody accept it? I mean, Jewish-only roads? Would anyone tolerate something like that in America? White-only roads?

**PLAYBOY:** You mean Israeli-only roads, not Jewish only, right? [Editor's note: Israel closes certain roads to Palestinians, but roads are open to all Israeli citizens and to other nationals, regardless of religious background.]

**THOMAS:** Israeli-only roads, okay. But it's

more than semantics because the Palestinians are deprived of owning these roads. This is their land. I'm sorry, but we're talking about foreigners who came and said, "God gave this land to us." [Former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak] Rabin said, "Where's the deed?" I mean, come on! Do you know that an Arab Palestinian trying to go home to see his mother has to go through 10 checkpoints and then is held there, while an American tourist can go through right like that? The Palestinian people have to carry their kids to hospitals and are not allowed to drive cars and so forth. What is this? No American Jew would tolerate that sort of treatment here against blacks or anyone else. Why do they allow it over there? And why do they send my American tax dollars to perpetuate it?

**PLAYBOY:** Do you acknowledge that some Palestinian behavior over the years, including hijacking and the use of suicide bombers, has been wrong and has added to the problem?

**THOMAS:** In an ideal world passive resistance and world disarmament would be great. Unfortunately we don't live in that world. Of course I don't condone any violence against anyone. But who wouldn't fight for their country? What would any American do if their land was being taken? Remember Pearl Harbor. The Palestinian violence is to protect what little remains of Palestine. The suicide bombers act out of despair and desperation. Three generations of Palestinians have been forced out of their homes—by Israelis—and into refugee camps. And the Israelis are still bulldozing Palestinians' homes in East Jerusalem. Remember, Menachem Begin invented terrorism as his MO—and bragged about it in his first book. That's how Israel was created, aided and abetted by U.S. money and arms. To annex and usurp an occupied people's country is illegal under international law. The Israelis know that, but their superior military force has always prevailed against the indigenous people.

**PLAYBOY:** What's your reaction to the changes sweeping through the Arab world as throngs of demonstrators take to the streets across the region?

**THOMAS:** I love the new revolutionary spirit in the Middle East and North Africa. The power of the people is removing ruthless dictators in Tunisia and Egypt—and that's only the beginning. There is no stopping this free new movement. The Arab world is waking up to the possibilities of democratic life and freedom for its people, and I am happy to see this happening in my lifetime.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you have a personal antipathy toward Jews themselves?

**THOMAS:** No. I think they're wonderful people. They had to have the most depth. They were leaders in civil rights. They've always had the heart for others but not for Arabs, for some reason. I'm not anti-Jewish; I'm anti-Zionist. I am anti Israel

taking what doesn't belong to it. If you have a home and you're kicked out of that home, you don't come and kick someone else out. Anti-Semite? The Israelis are not even Semites! They're Europeans, and they've come from somewhere else. But even if they were Semites, they would still have no right to usurp other people's land. There are some Israelis with a conscience and a big heart, but unfortunately they are too few.

**PLAYBOY:** In the wake of your anti-Israel comments, a blogger from *The Atlantic* argued there's really no distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. He wrote, "Thomas was fired for saying that the Jews of Israel should move to Europe, where their relatives had been slaughtered in the most devastating act of genocide in history. She believes that once the Jews are evacuated from their ancestral homeland, the world's only Jewish country should be replaced by what would be the world's 23rd Arab country. She believes that Palestinians deserve a country of their own but that the Jews are undeserving of a nation-state in their homeland, which has had a continuous Jewish presence for 3,000 years...."

**THOMAS:** [Interrupts] Did a Jew write this? [Editor's note: The writer is Jeffrey Goldberg.]

**PLAYBOY:** "...and has been the location of two previous Jewish states. This sounds like a very anti-Jewish position to me, not merely an anti-Zionist position."

**THOMAS:** This is a rotten piece. I mean it's absolutely biased and totally—who are these people? Why do they think they're so deserving? The slaughter of Jews stopped with World War II. I had two brothers and many relatives who fought in that war against Hitler. We believed in it. Every American family was in that fight. But they were liberated since then. And yet they carry on the victimization. American people do not know that the Israeli lobbyists have intimidated them into believing every Jew is a persecuted victim forever—while they are victimizing Palestinians.

**PLAYBOY:** Let's get to something else you said more recently. In a speech in Detroit last December, you told an Arab group, "We are owned by the propagandists against the Arabs. There's no question about that. Congress, the White House and Hollywood, Wall Street, are owned by the Zionists. No question, in my opinion. They put their money where their mouth is. We're being pushed into a wrong direction in every way." Do you stand by that statement?

**THOMAS:** Yes, I do. I know it was horrendous, but I know it's true. Tell me it's not true and I'll be happy to be contradicted. I'm just saying they're using their power, and they have power in every direction.

**PLAYBOY:** That stereotype of Jewish control has been around for more than a century. Do you actually think there's a secret Jewish conspiracy at work in this country?

**THOMAS:** Not a secret. It's very open. What do you mean secret?

**PLAYBOY:** Well, for instance, explain the connection between Hollywood and what's happening with the Palestinians.

**THOMAS:** Power over the White House, power over Congress.

**PLAYBOY:** By way of contributions?

**THOMAS:** Everybody is in the pocket of the Israeli lobbies, which are funded by wealthy supporters, including those from Hollywood. Same thing with the financial markets. There's total control.

**PLAYBOY:** Who are you thinking about specifically? Who are the Jews with the most influence?

**THOMAS:** I'm not going to name names. What, am I going to name the Ponzi guy on Wall Street [Bernard Madoff] or the others? No.

**PLAYBOY:** Then how do you make the claim that Jews are running the country?

**THOMAS:** I want you to look at the Congress that just came in. Do you think [New York Democratic senator Charles] Schumer and Lehtinen—whatever her name is—in Florida [Republican representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a strong supporter of Israel] are going to be pro-Arab? No. But they're going to be very

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influential. Eric Cantor, the majority leader of the Republicans, do you think he's going to be for the Arabs? Hell no! I'm telling you, you cannot get 330 votes in Congress for anything that's pro-Arab. Nothing. If you're not in, you're eased out, just as [Senator William] Fulbright was in the 1960s [after claiming that millions of tax-deductible dollars from American philanthropies were being sent to Israel and then funneled back to the U.S. for distribution to organizations with pro-Israel positions]. Congressman Paul Findley from a little old rural district in Illinois made the mistake of shaking hands with Yasir Arafat years ago. It ended up costing him his reelection. He later wrote a book called *They Dare to Speak Out* about how impossible it is to have a position in this country that takes on Israel. Maybe there is a handful that can, but in general you cannot speak against any Zionist movement in this country.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you begrudge people like Steven Spielberg? He created the Shoah Foundation to chronicle the life stories of Holocaust survivors. What's your feeling about him?

**THOMAS:** There's nothing wrong with remembering it, but why do we have to constantly remember? We're not at fault. I mean, if they're going to put a Holocaust museum in every city in Germany, that's fine with me. But we didn't do this to the Jews. Why do we have to keep paying the price and why do they keep oppressing the Palestinians? Do the Jews ever look at themselves? Why are they always right? Because they have been oppressed throughout history, I know. And they have this persecution. That's true, but they shouldn't use that to dominate.

**PLAYBOY:** In America you're talking about a relatively small community. Jews make up roughly two percent of the U.S. population. On a worldwide level, the percentage is well under one percent. Those numbers don't exactly spell domination.

**THOMAS:** I get where you're leading with this. You know damn well the power they have. It isn't the two percent. It's real power when you own the White House, when you own these other places in terms of your political persuasion. Of course they have power. You don't deny that. You're Jewish, aren't you?

**PLAYBOY:** Yes.

**THOMAS:** That's what I thought. Well, you know damn well they have power.

**PLAYBOY:** Why did it take you so long to speak out like this?

**THOMAS:** It hasn't taken that long. I've told all my friends and so forth. This has been an issue for me since I first came to Washington.

**PLAYBOY:** You've kept quiet publicly since the 1940s?

**THOMAS:** It was certainly on my mind back then. The United Nations Partition Plan was being debated at the UN and in the Arab community, and I knew what the Arabs were going through since I have an Arab background. I was part of that community. Like I said, I've never hesitated to tell my views to all my friends. They knew exactly where I stood. But I finally wanted to speak the truth. And I think I'm old enough to get away with it. Well, almost. Not quite.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you surprised that people like David Duke and even Hezbollah came out and said you were courageous and a hero for them?

**THOMAS:** I don't want to be a hero to anyone. I just want to be me, and I want to tell the truth. I want everyone to accept the truth. It's horrible to say some of my best friends are Jews, but they are and they have been.

**PLAYBOY:** Don't take this the wrong way, but the question many people have is, Has Helen Thomas lost her mind? You're 90, after all. Do you still have all your faculties?

**THOMAS:** I resent that question! I thoroughly resent it. Why are you interviewing me if I'm crazy? It wouldn't be worth it to you, would it?

**PLAYBOY:** It's not an unreasonable question.

**THOMAS:** I resent it. You should apologize.

**PLAYBOY:** But it's the question everyone wants answered—and you're the one who always tells journalists to ask hard questions.

**THOMAS:** They want to know if I'm crazy? You have to be crazy to criticize Israel? You have to be crazy to criticize tyranny? I learned before Hitler that you have to stand up for something. You have to stand up. We always have to take a stand against human tyranny wherever it occurs. [*pauses*] Would you like a Coke or a ginger ale?

**PLAYBOY:** No, thank you.

**THOMAS:** We have Diet Coke. Wine?

**PLAYBOY:** No, we're good.

**THOMAS:** Scotch?

**PLAYBOY:** No, thank you. How's your health, by the way?

**THOMAS:** I'm a little rickety.

**PLAYBOY:** Do people live a long time in your family?

**THOMAS:** I had a brother who just died at 100.

**PLAYBOY:** Wow. How long did your parents live?

**THOMAS:** Into their 60s. I'd like to live a long life.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you fear dying?

**THOMAS:** No, but I'm not ready to go. You never know, though. It's fate.

**PLAYBOY:** Life is unpredictable, that's for sure.

**THOMAS:** There's an Arab expression, "*Maktub*."

**PLAYBOY:** Which means?

**THOMAS:** "It is written."

**PLAYBOY:** Meaning whatever will be will be?

**THOMAS:** I don't know if I'm that fatalistic, but yes.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you picture heaven in any way? What would heaven be for you?

**THOMAS:** I never thought about heaven per se. I think when you're dead, you're dead. If anything happens after that, you just hope you don't go to hell.

**PLAYBOY:** When people write your obituary—

**THOMAS:** [*Eyes suddenly fill with tears*] Oh, I know what they're going to say: "anti-Semite."

**PLAYBOY:** That has to bother you after all your years of hard work.

**THOMAS:** [*Starts to cry*] I'm a reporter.

**PLAYBOY:** What's making you emotional?

**THOMAS:** I'm a reporter. [*sobs*] I know damn well what they're going to say because they have their print, they have their ink. They don't give a damn about the truth. They have to have it their way, and they'll be writing my obituary.

**PLAYBOY:** Isn't that their job?

**THOMAS:** Well, I don't want to be treated that way. [*pauses but continues to cry*] I'm sorry. But what am I supposed to do, love every Jew because they want to take Palestine? It's a real cause with me. They should have a conscience and they don't if that's what they're going to do. Is there such a thing as a conscience? I think there is. Stop taking what doesn't belong to you! Stop killing these people, these children

who throw stones at them, and they shoot them. Where is the Jewish conscience? I want to know. Have some feeling. They can't just come in and say, "This is my home," and knock on the door at three in the morning and have the Israeli military take them out. That's what happens. And that's what happened to the Jews in Germany. Why do they inflict that same pain on people who did nothing to them? [*takes another break to compose herself*]

I sure didn't want to cry. But I do care about people. And I don't care what they write about me. They've already written it. My family will be disappointed in me for crying.

**PLAYBOY:** We in the public never get to see you cry. Helen Thomas has always been the picture of toughness and strength.

**THOMAS:** Oh, I've cried all my life. I'm a crybaby. It's not that I'm soft. I just cry at the drop of a hat.

**PLAYBOY:** Let's shift gears. You've literally had a front-row seat on the presidency. What should the American people know about how the White House really operates?

**THOMAS:** They don't know how intense the pressure from different special interests is

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on the president and congressmen. Politicians more often than not give in to that pressure. These elected officials are supposed to be doing what we want them to do. But I suppose that's the reason we have the Tea Party. People are unhappy. The trouble is, swinging to the right is always dangerous. We end up losing so much in the rush to conservatism. But even Obama has fallen down that hole. He's pushing a conservative agenda.

**PLAYBOY:** The right doesn't see Obama that way. How is Obama conservative?

**THOMAS:** Look at Guantánamo. With a stroke of a pen, the day after Obama took the oath he should have said, "We're getting the hell out of here." Same thing with Iraq and Afghanistan. There's no reason for us to be in a war. "They'll all come here if we don't go there." That is balance. Go halfway around the world to kill and die? Why? Now the veterans can't get jobs. I see stories every day about soldiers being liberated from Iraq only to end up unemployed. Where is Obama? How can he continue these Bush policies that were so mean and rotten and unjust? People had this impression that

Obama would be a peaceful president, but there he is, as hawkish as any of them. And Hillary Clinton is no liberal either. She put out the word to "capture or kill" for Afghanistan. What would she do that for, really? Capture or kill? What does this mean? I thought, naively perhaps, that she and Obama would bring change, that they would be different. I assumed wrongly that they would be liberal because he's black and she's a woman. It's maddening.

**PLAYBOY:** Who's the greatest president you've covered?

**THOMAS:** Well, I think Carter was most impressive from the perspective of pure intellect. He was the smartest, if not the most effectual. A man of bold ideas and great wisdom. But that doesn't mean he was a great president. He wasn't a schmoozer. He didn't know how to do that part of the job.

**PLAYBOY:** Incidentally, Carter recently said America is ready for its first gay president. Do you think that's true?

**THOMAS:** Why not? Absolutely. Don't underestimate America.

**PLAYBOY:** So who was the greatest president you've covered?

**THOMAS:** I'd say it was a draw. Kennedy and Johnson both impressed me the most for knowing the country, knowing how to legislate and how to get things done and for having monumental ideals. They were presidents who served during remarkable times and lived up to those times.

**PLAYBOY:** And then there was Richard Nixon. Why didn't you see Watergate coming?

**THOMAS:** Because we were on the body watch.

**PLAYBOY:** Meaning what?

**THOMAS:** When you're with a wire service, you're always with the president. You're always trailing him; you're always there when he's in public. You don't have time to chase the backstory. I mean, I didn't think Nixon was totally honest, but I didn't know Watergate per se because when you're following the president you can't go digging.

**PLAYBOY:** You were the only female print reporter to accompany Nixon on his landmark visit to China in 1972. What's your lasting memory from that trip?

**THOMAS:** Everything. It was a magnificent trip—eight days when you never wanted to sleep you were so afraid to miss something. Everything was a story: what the Chinese wore, what they ate, even what I ate. I would call my office and say President Nixon was going to meet with so-and-so, and they'd say, "No, wait a minute. We want to know what your room is like and what you're having for breakfast." Every reporter in Washington wanted to be on that trip, but it was very limited.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you explain your ability to get access like that? Nobody else had the front-row spot at the White House as long as you did (continued on page 000)

or got to ask the first question at press conferences. What was your secret?

**THOMAS:** I thought it was my due, actually. [*laughs*] I worked hard. And while I've always felt privileged to go to the White House, I felt this was what I was supposed to do, which is ask hard questions. So many people outside the White House gates wonder what's going on in there. When I walk in or out, they always say, "Is the president there? Is he working?" You want to just say, "Come in. It's your house. This is your house." [*points to plate of ham sandwiches*] Here, have a sandwich.

**PLAYBOY:** No, thank you. Did you go into journalism because you wanted to make a difference?

**THOMAS:** Hell no. I got into it because I am very nosy, very curious and because I thought it was a great profession. It's an education every day to be in journalism, and it's given me a great life.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you the kid in the front row at school, asking questions the teacher didn't want to hear?

**THOMAS:** No. That came later. I was afraid of authority as a kid. I certainly wasn't going to challenge teachers. But I had great parents who taught me never to be seen as less than anyone else. My mother and father couldn't read or write English, but they were very involved with their friends in talking politics. We were thrilled when my father made a checkmark for Roosevelt to be elected. He was a proud man. He ran a small grocery and fed our whole ethnic neighborhood in Detroit—Italians on one side, Germans on the other, everybody hungry. It's the classic immigrant story, but they were more liberated than most. They always told me I didn't need to get married or have children to be successful. That was unusual in those days and still is. And I saw from an early age that women weren't being treated right, weren't getting opportunities. I wanted to be a newspaperwoman, and I got on the high school paper. I worked on the college paper at Wayne State University and loved it. When I came to Washington I got a job as a copy boy, running for coffee, cutting copy. This was during World War II. Soon enough, I was covering politics. Perhaps there was some element of wanting to do good. I saw what was happening with blacks, civil rights and everything else. Something had to be done in our country, by God, and I was going to help any way I could.

**PLAYBOY:** What's your earliest memory of being at the White House?

**THOMAS:** I sort of assigned myself to the White House. I went to cover the Kennedy family on Inauguration Day. I covered men, women, children, animals, everything that moved in the Kennedy White House. I was like the woman who came to dinner; I never left. After the inauguration, UPI said, "Okay, Thomas, you're assigned." It was a three-person staff: Merriman Smith, Alvin Spivak and myself. Merriman Smith was the brilliant reporter who won the Pulitzer in Dallas the day Kennedy was killed.

**PLAYBOY:** Where were you that day?

**THOMAS:** I was getting ready to go on a vacation and was in a fancy restaurant on Connecticut Avenue [in D.C.] with someone

from Jackie's office and an AP reporter and rival who was my closest friend. We ordered lunch and I heard a radio. It sounded like a sporting event, football maybe. But I thought, It's Friday; how strange. So I went over to listen, and that's when I heard "Kennedy's been shot." We all shot out of that restaurant and left Jackie's staff with the bill. The AP girl ran to her office and I ran to mine. I walked in and they said, "You're on vacation." I said, "No, I'm not." They said, "Okay. Get in a cab and go to Andrews Air Force Base. You're going to Dallas." It was assumed that Kennedy was still alive. By the time I was in the cab, it was formally announced he was dead.

**PLAYBOY:** So you stayed in Washington?

**THOMAS:** I stayed at Andrews and waited there until *Air Force One* came in with the body. I saw Jackie and the pink suit and the blood. I was brokenhearted like everyone else. Kennedy was as brilliant as he was charming, and I had a wonderful personal relationship and rapport with him. He teased me a lot. I remember on St. Patrick's Day one year JFK came over to the press pool, and I said, "It's a great day for the Irish, Mr. President." And he said, "Well, what are you doing here, Helen?" I mean his wit was that quick.

**PLAYBOY:** What was it like being inside the White House during that time?

**THOMAS:** The days after the assassination were surreal. Jackie hadn't yet moved out of the White House and LBJ hadn't yet moved in, so every day we were going to LBJ's home and talking to him in the motorcade. It's funny thinking about it now. Today Biden rides by like a monarch with all sirens blaring. He has eight outriders, two scout cars and I don't know how many police trailing in the back. LBJ demanded total silence for his motorcade around town and into the White House.

**PLAYBOY:** What does that say about Joe Biden?

**THOMAS:** It was Cheney who started it, I think. That was his MO. Now, there was a vice president. [laughs] The idea that he could have been president. I think Cheney is diabolical. How much money has he made from Halliburton? Now they're all in hiding, he and his men. They've all slipped away into corporate life, universities or think tanks.

But getting back to LBJ, he used to do these moving press conferences, which was especially hard since I was in heels and would be falling this way and that trying to keep up with him. He had this habit of whispering, so we had to stay close. On walks around the South Lawn he would let his hair down. We were privileged because we were getting what was really on his mind. Then he'd say, "You know, this is all off the record." Well, none of us thought it was off the record. We knew, whatever he was trying to tell us, that he wanted the story out but not attributed to him. We'd have to go and find the information on our own. It was quite a study in press relations. You had to work hard not to be manipulated.

**PLAYBOY:** You certainly never had a problem asking hard questions. George W. Bush moved you to the back of the briefing room to get you off his back.

**THOMAS:** Actually, it was Ari Fleischer, the

number one liar in the White House. He didn't like that I was asking too many mean questions about where the Israelis were getting their arms and whatnot. So I got pushed to the back. But the first opportunity I had to challenge Bush, I did.

**PLAYBOY:** You asked him a bold question in 2006. You said, "Your decision to invade Iraq has caused the deaths of thousands of Americans and Iraqis, wounds of Americans and Iraqis for a lifetime. Every reason given, publicly at least, has turned out not to be true. My question is: Why did you really want to go to war?" He danced around the answer. Did you have an answer in mind when you asked that question? What do you think has driven America's involvement in these recent wars?

**THOMAS:** You tell me.

**PLAYBOY:** No, you tell us.

**THOMAS:** Well, no president has ever told the truth about why we're there. I think oil has a lot to do with it. I think there's an Israel connection. Our government feels compelled to protect Israel. With Bush, some people say it was George Jr. avenging for Daddy. At least Bush's father understood what war was about. He had been in war. He was more cautious. He certainly lined up the Arab countries to support fighting the invasion of Kuwait. The Bush family has always been rich people in search of a job, but George Sr. had been head of the CIA and chairman of the Republican National Committee. He knew politics and he knew foreign policy, but he didn't give any of that to his son. Dubya was a hip-shooter. If you look at the Downing Street Memo from 2002, you see the chief of British intelligence had come here just before George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. It concludes that the president simply was determined to go to war and that he wanted to fix the facts to do it. But there were no facts. We just went to war for no reason.

**PLAYBOY:** So you never believed the line that the world would be "a safer place" without Saddam Hussein?

**THOMAS:** I think it was wrong to hang Saddam Hussein. He should have been put before an international court for war crimes and everything else. But for us to just bypass the law and have him hanged was wrong. Not that the press called the president on it. The press rallied around the flag on that one.

**PLAYBOY:** Who's your most trusted news source, by the way?

**THOMAS:** Nobody, really. I like the liberal press. I like E.J. Dionne Jr. in *The Washington Post*. I like Sam Donaldson. I believe he's an honest man. I loved Walter Cronkite. I certainly loved Ed Murrow. But I don't see replicas around.

**PLAYBOY:** What do you think of Fox News?

**THOMAS:** I don't watch Fox and I don't follow Fox.

**PLAYBOY:** Not even Glenn Beck?

**THOMAS:** Who?

**PLAYBOY:** Glenn Beck. He's on Fox.

**THOMAS:** No, don't know him.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you know who Bill O'Reilly is?

**THOMAS:** Yes, I do. He sent me flowers after insulting me for something or other.

**PLAYBOY:** Is anyone asking the tough questions about Israel?

**THOMAS:** We're still not getting the full story on Israel. I asked both President Obama at a news conference and Hillary if they knew of any nations in the Middle East that had nuclear weapons. Obama danced around it and said, "I don't want to speculate." Hillary said, "Oh, Helen, you're cute" or something to that effect. She laughed it off.

**PLAYBOY:** Why would our government remain quiet if Israel had nukes?

**THOMAS:** Years ago we made a pact with Golda Meir never to say it. In her era, they would never say it. And they can't say it now because they can't tell Iran and all these other countries that they have it. That's my opinion. Our government won't tell the truth, and neither will the Israelis. Everyone knows, but I can't write "Everyone knows." You have to attribute it to somebody. Again, you don't see these stories in the news. You have to go to a magazine like *The Nation* or the offbeat press to find out what is really happening. They don't say that in *The New York Times*.

**PLAYBOY:** Or we can get our news from comedians like Jon Stewart. What's your take on him?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. He called me anti-Semitic. What is this crap? Anti-Semitic? What is he?

**PLAYBOY:** What about Bill Maher?

**THOMAS:** I like Bill Maher. Remember when he said the 9/11 bombers were not cowards? He lost his job temporarily, but he was right: Anybody who flies an airplane into a building isn't a coward. That was too logical for people, though. You can't be that honest. *[laughs]* It's like the Japanese kamikazes in World War II. They were diabolical, flying right into ships, but they certainly weren't cowards. There's two sides to every story. I guess the trouble is, certain stories just don't sell newspapers.

**PLAYBOY:** Nothing's selling newspapers these days.

**THOMAS:** And it's a tragedy. I still like a newspaper in my hand. I get *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* outside the door every morning and run to it. I like the print press. You don't get anything in depth anymore without a newspaper. Everything is a headline, a sound bite. I worry about young people really getting to know what's going on in our world.

**PLAYBOY:** How much time do you spend online?

**THOMAS:** Uh-uh. I'm a paper-and-pencil person. I probably should look at Facebook and Huffington Post and these other things, but I don't. Everyone with a laptop thinks they're a journalist and everyone with a camera thinks they're a news photographer. Where are the standards? How can we get back to the ethics and standards of journalism? There's no editing, no oversight. It's just thrown to the wind. I'm afraid of what's happening.

**PLAYBOY:** But you can't deny the power of the web. Look at WikiLeaks. What did you think of those diplomatic revelations?

**THOMAS:** I think it's great. It's important to reveal what's going on behind the scenes. We wouldn't have known half this stuff without this information, and it's going to change everything as far as diplomacy. It's hard to believe we didn't know some of this

stuff before. Maybe I should have been digging into these things myself. I'm probably not a good reporter. *[laughs]*

**PLAYBOY:** By the way, did you ever see Marilyn Monroe backstage at the White House?

**THOMAS:** *[Laughs]* Now these are the questions I like, not the ones that make me cry. No, I never saw Marilyn. But I saw a lot.

**PLAYBOY:** What about Monica Lewinsky? Was there talk in the pressroom that Bill Clinton was having sex with someone before that news got out?

**THOMAS:** There's always talk, but I never assume anything. That's the first law of journalism. Your mother says she loves you, check it out. So no, I didn't suspect.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you surprised?

**THOMAS:** No. I knew how women liked Clinton very much.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you think it's the public's right to know what's happening in the president's private life?

**THOMAS:** Absolutely. We need to know everything a president's up to. He's on our time, on our payroll. He's a public servant.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you all aware that President Reagan was taking naps in the White House when he should have been at meetings?

**THOMAS:** We knew he fell asleep a lot. But I still feel he was making the decisions, even if some of them weren't great. Ketchup was a vegetable on the school lunch program. I think Reagan was so conservative, he really believed people could pull themselves up without any government assistance, get out of wherever they were to find a job and so forth. That created a real underclass in this country. But there were also things I liked about Reagan. He began to bend toward the Soviet Union. It was Nancy who pushed him on that. She convinced him to go to Russia to see for himself that these people were real. That began a whole transformation personally for Reagan. He saw that the Russians laughed and cried and were human. After he came back from meeting Gorbachev for the first time, I said to him, "Mr. President, to think that if you had gone to Moscow 10 or 20 years ago, you might have found out back then that they laugh, they cry, they're human." "Nope," he said. "They're the ones who've changed."

**PLAYBOY:** How much was Nancy Reagan controlling things behind the scenes?

**THOMAS:** Nancy certainly was important and powerful, but I think it's because their marriage was so close. Everybody liked Reagan, but he wasn't particularly connected to anyone aside from Nancy. It was morning in America and all that jazz, but you never got the feeling he was warm. He'd rather be alone with his wife up in the family quarters.

**PLAYBOY:** Press secretaries are paid to obscure the truth, are they not?

**THOMAS:** *[Laughs]* Tell me about it. But we had a few good ones. I loved Pierre Salinger—loved his joie de vivre, his intelligence, his wit—though he was really the first press secretary to attempt to control the press. He exerted tremendous influence in shifting the story to places he wanted it to go. Bill Moyers tried to do the same, and I had to fight him on it. I once accused him of not being honest and he said, "Well, I might

shade the truth a little.” Shade the truth? There’s no room for shading the truth in journalism. What’s funny is that so many of these guys ended up working in journalism. Look at George Stephanopoulos. He’s Mr. Journalism now, which is ironic because he started closing the door to the press secretary’s office his first week on the job. “Journalists keep out!”

**PLAYBOY:** Sounds like he wasn’t your favorite gatekeeper.

**THOMAS:** I was very unhappy with him when he came to the White House. Dee Dee Myers was the press secretary under Clinton, but Stephanopoulos was head of communications and he kept forcing her out of the way and taking over. He ran the office with tight control, and since he made the mistake of wanting his briefings to be on TV, I kept asking, “Why have a press secretary if we can’t freely go and ask them private questions?” And it was heard from coast to coast. He didn’t treat us civilly. But then immediately after he’s out of the White House, he wants to go into our profession. It’s like he couldn’t stand being out of the limelight. I mean, why should George Stephanopoulos have been a great journalist? Well, he’s not, in my book. The way he treated us. I don’t want to sound like I hold a grudge, but you do have a memory for certain personalities.

**PLAYBOY:** Has there ever been an honest press secretary?

**THOMAS:** Jerry terHorst. He lasted one month. He was President Ford’s press secretary. He had covered Ford in Washington. He had been here for 29 years as a reporter from the Grand Rapids paper and then *The Detroit News*. He understood the press. But he was incapable of lying, and he quit when Ford pardoned Nixon, on the very day. He couldn’t take it. Poor Jerry Ford. He just wasn’t ready to be president. He had prepared himself to be Speaker of the House and stepped into those shoes okay, but he just wasn’t equipped for the big job. We saw that Betty Ford struggled too, of course.

**PLAYBOY:** You and Douglas Cornell [a White House correspondent for rival Associated Press] were married for 11 years before he died, in 1982. Did you ever regret not having children?

**THOMAS:** Well, until Doug, boyfriends weren’t exactly beating down the door, so I had a clear path to be a reporter. I worried about having children, actually, what it would have meant for them to have someone working all the time. I know I should have done it, but I feel I didn’t miss anything. Can I get you some wine?

**PLAYBOY:** It’s still pretty early in the day. No thanks. By the way, is it true what they say about political journalists being big drinkers?

**THOMAS:** It used to be. Not so much anymore.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you ever a drinker?

**THOMAS:** I don’t think I’m a heavy drinker, but I like to drink.

**PLAYBOY:** What’s your beverage of choice?

**THOMAS:** Scotch. On the rocks. I like wine too, and I like vodka and tonic. [laughs] With lots of limes. Sure you don’t want something?

**PLAYBOY:** No, thank you. Do you miss being at the White House every day?

**THOMAS:** Of course I do. There's nothing to replace being there as a reporter with your eyes and your ears. You see things. You're not always in the know, but you get the atmosphere and so forth. I've had a great career.

**PLAYBOY:** What's your hope for the future?

**THOMAS:** On a political level, I hope for disarmament. Billions and billions are being spent every week on the war in Afghanistan. We have 700 military bases around the world. What do you think it costs to keep that war machine running? It's not working. I thought Obama would be for peace, but he's not. There are no peacemakers left. There's no anti-war movement to speak of. America just keeps going, keeps fighting, keeps spending. I want the killing to stop.

**PLAYBOY:** How would you like to be remembered?

**THOMAS:** As the person who asked why. That's what I want on my epitaph: "Why?" It's always been my favorite question, even though it rarely gets answered. As I said before, because of what happened recently, people are going to remember me a certain way. The truth is, I don't hate anybody. I care deeply about people. I care for the poor, the sick, the lame, the harmed, those who've been treated unjustly. I like the fact that you asked me if I'm nuts. People think you're nuts if you take a stand in this life. I've always cared what happens in the world, and I think what the Israelis are doing is wrong. We have to care about our fellow man, and we don't. Somehow we've lost that sense. It's become almost a sin to care. But we are all God's children, right? *[laughs]*

**PLAYBOY:** Do you believe in God?

**THOMAS:** Who knows? I was raised Greek Orthodox, but I never understood what was going on. In college I moved away from religion, and then when I went to work I would go to church with the president. I'd pray to whatever god the president prayed to. I prayed to all of them—just in case. Now I just pray in hopes that something good will happen. I pray to whoever the gods may be.

**PLAYBOY:** That makes sense. One last thing: I heard you once say journalists shouldn't say thank you after an interview with a politician. But you famously said "Thank you, Mr. President" for almost 50 years.

**THOMAS:** I was following a tradition. My old colleague Merriman Smith was the one who invented the phrase during the Truman era. After that, whoever was the senior reporter at a news conference would say it. That was my role for many years. It's okay to say thank you.

**PLAYBOY:** Well, thank you, Ms. Thomas.

**THOMAS:** Thank you.

