

Helen Thomas ousted over anti-Zionist comments

Patrick Martin
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The ouster of veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas, after an anti-Zionist comment Sunday, is yet another demonstration of the politically foul and utterly conformist milieu of official Washington. Hearst Newspapers announced the “resignation” of Thomas Monday a day after her comments were widely publicized in the media.

Thomas, an 89-year old veteran reporter, made the statements May 27 when approached by Rabbi David Nesenoff, who was visiting the White House for a ceremony honoring Jewish Heritage Month. Asked what she thought of Israel, Thomas said, “Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine. Remember, these people are occupied, and it’s their land. It’s not German. It’s not Poland.” Asked where to go, she added, “They could go home...Poland. Germany. And America. And everywhere else. Why push people out of there who have lived there for centuries?”

Thomas’ comments were clearly wrong, however they were also made by an aged reporter in an unguarded moment. In her decades-long career as a White House reporter, no one has suggested that Thomas, known for her opposition to US wars and Israeli policy, is anti-Semitic.

The resulting media uproar was predictable and disgusting. It was prompted not so much by Thomas’ reference to Jews going back to Germany and Poland, but by her reference to the Palestinian people as suffering under occupation in the land they had lived in for centuries.

Thomas showed anger over the basic injustice that underlies the establishment of Israel, the dispossession of the Palestinians. She therefore violated the self-censorship rules of the American mainstream media, which effectively prohibits not only any challenge to the legitimacy of the state of Israel, but any questioning

of the predatory motives of American foreign policy.

The venom of the White House press corps against its senior member was expressed in the online posting of Washington Post media columnist Howard Kurtz, who noted snidely that “her hostility toward Israel has been no secret within the Beltway. Though she gave up her correspondent’s job a decade ago, she retained her front-row briefing-room seat, even as colleagues sometimes rolled their eyes at her obvious biases.”

In a 2006 article in the New Republic, cited by Kurtz, Jonathan Chait denounced Thomas for “unhinged rants,” including such supposedly bizarre questions, asked of Bush “Why are we killing people in Iraq? Men, women, and children are being killed there... It’s outrageous.”

CBS correspondent Mark Knoller made the clearest statement of the reasons for press hostility to Thomas, telling Kurtz, “She asked questions no hard-news reporter would ask, that carried an agenda and reflected her point of view, and there were some reporters who felt that was inappropriate. As a columnist she felt totally unbound from any of the normal policies of objectivity that every other reporter in the room felt compelled to abide by, and sometimes her questions were embarrassing to other reporters.”

No doubt her fellow reporters were embarrassed when she challenged Bush and Obama administration lies and propaganda for what they were. Helen Thomas was doing what any self-respecting journalist should have been doing, but few among the hacks and shills in the White House briefing room would dare to do.

Thomas was born to a Lebanese immigrant family on the east side of Detroit, in one of the oldest Arab-American communities in the United States. She has long been a critic both of Israel and of US military intervention in the Middle East. She was also a

pathbreaker as a female journalist, the first woman White House correspondent for a major wire service, network or newspaper, and the first woman to head the White House correspondents association. In 2000, when her longtime employer, United Press International, was bought by the ultra-right Unification Church, she quit UPI in protest and took a position at Hearst.

The campaign against Thomas was spearheaded by two of the most odious figures in Washington circles, Ari Fleischer, the former Bush administration spokesman, now working for a sports and entertainment firm, and Lanny Davis, a Clinton White House aide, who last year served as Washington spokesman for the Honduran military junta.

With his usual instinct for accommodating himself to right-wing bourgeois public opinion, President Obama joined in the pileup against Thomas after her resignation was announced, calling her comments about Israel “offensive” and her forced retirement from Hearst “the right decision.”



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