

Media Hit Job of the Year: Punishing White House Correspondent Helen Thomas for Criticizing Israel

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Our Media Experienced A Few Highs and Many Lows in 2010; None As Disgraceful As The Vitriol Against Helen Thomas

In 1960, I co-founded a student magazine at Cornell University called Dialogue. I was a wannabe journalist, fixated on emulating the courageous media personalities of the times from Edward R. Murrow to a distinctive figure I came to admire at Presidential press conferences, a wire service reporter named Helen Thomas.

In recent years, my faith in the power of dialogue in politics has been severely tested—as, no doubt has hers—in an age where diatribes and calculated demonization chills debate and exchanges of opposing views.

Once you are labeled and stereotyped, especially if you are denounced as an anti-Semite, you are relegated to the fringes, pronounced a hater beyond redemption, even beyond explanation.

You have been assigned a scarlet letter as visible as the Star of David the Nazis made Jews wear.

My career path took me from covering civil rights activism in the streets to later working in the suites of network power. I went from the underground press to rock and roll radio to TV reporting and producing at CNN and ABC.

As a member in good standing of an activist generation, I saw myself more as an outsider in contrast to Helen's distinctive credentials as an insider, as a White House bureau chief and later as the dean of the White House Correspondents Association.

Yet, beneath her establishment credentials and status, she was always an outsider too—one of nine children born to a family of Lebanese immigrants in Winchester Kentucky, who despite their Middle East origins, were Christians in the Greek Orthodox Church.

She became a pioneering woman, a modern day Helen of Troy, who broke the glass ceiling, infiltrating the clubby, mostly male, inside the beltway world of big egos and self-important media prima donnas, most supplicants to power, not challengers of it.

Her origins were more modest. She grew up in an ethnic neighborhood in Detroit, a city I later worked in, as an intern in the Mayor's office (I was in a Ford Foundation education in politics program in the sixties that also boasted a fellow fellow in another city, Richard B. Cheney. Yes, the one and the same.)

Helen received her bachelor's degree from Wayne State University in 1942, the year I was born. Earlier this year, her Alma Mater which had taken so much pride in her achievements, withdrew an award in her name in a striking gesture of cowardice and submission to an incident blown out of all proportions that instantly turned Helen from a shero to a zero in a quick media second.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center—not, by the way, linked to the legendary Nazi Hunter (who was unhappy with its work), put her on their top-ten list of anti-Semites after angry remarks she made about Israel went viral and blew up into one of the major media stories of 2010.

President Barack Obama who cheerfully brought her a birthday cake, hailing her long years of service to the American people, later labeled her remarks “reprehensible.” You would think that given all the vicious slurs, Hitler comparisons and putdowns directed at him, he would be more cautious tossing slurs at others.

But no, all politicians pander to deflect criticism whenever they fear the winds of enmity will blow their way.

But now it was Helen who was being compared to Hitler in a new furor over the Fuhrer even though she says she grew up in a home that despised him, and from which her two brothers joined the army in World War II. She says now “We didn’t do enough to expose Hitler early on. He was not just anti Jewish. He was anti-American!”

I might add if I considered it necessary, that I grew up in a Jewish family and am proud of that identity, our culture and traditions. But that was no big thing to Helen who worked alongside Jews all of her life in the media world, many as close friends. Her main concern as a child was with non-Jews who baited her in school as a “garlic eater,” a foreigner.

She may be a critic of Israel but never a hater of Jews, a distinction the world recognizes, but that right-wing backers of the Israel lobby (and the media that backs it) refuse to accept in the name of a black/white ‘you are with us or ag’in us” ideological agenda which has no tolerance for critics, differences of opinion or the anger of the dispossessed.

They only see themselves as victims, never the people they victimize. Prejudice often infects those who live in glass houses and who are quick to condemn others.

For many years, I admired Helen from afar, and later gave her an award for Truth In Media voted by my colleagues on Mediachannel.org. She was an institution, an icon of honor. We were impressed by her history of asking tough questions even when they embarrassed Presidents.

Then, suddenly, last June, I like everyone in the world of media, was stunned to witness her public fall from grace, partly self-inflicted, perhaps because of inelegant language used in response to an ambush interview by provocateur father-son Israeli advocates posing as journalists

They were following in the footsteps of the vicious comments by Ann (“You will find liberals always rooting for savages against civilization”) Coulter who earlier denounced her as an “old Arab” sitting yards from the President as if she was threatening him. She refused to dignify that smear with a response.

I didn’t know until she told me that she had also been hounded for years by Abe Foxman, a

leader of the Anti-Defamation League, who demanded she explain 25 questions she asked Presidents over the decades, “I didn’t answer,” “she told me, “because I don’t respond to junk mail.”

Foxman then sent the questions to her employer trying to get her fired, she says. Later, he recruited former Bush Press Secretary Ari Fleisher in his crusade against her. Ari and his boss disliked her “hostile” questions about Iraq on official claims that have since been unmasked as lies.

Helen always stuck to her guns. She was considered the granddame of White House journalists. Presidents respected her. She went to China with Nixon. You don’t survive in that highly visible pit of presidential polemics for as long as she did by backing down. Many correspondents assigned there turn into bulldogs for the camera. Maybe that’s why Helen can appear abrupt at times.

She has, however, always been polite enough to try to answer questions from strangers without always realizing who she was dealing with in a new world of media hit jobs, where “GOTCHA” YouTube videos thrive on recording embarrassing moments, what we used to call “bloopers.”

In her senior years, she was brought down by a kid looking for a marketable soundbyte like the one he extracted — as if he was a big game hunter in Africa who bagged a lioness. She had been baited and took the bait. Unaware of how the video could be used, she ventilated and then regretted doing so. It was too late. That one media hit job triggered millions of online video hits.

Helen later apologized for how she said what she did without retracting the essence of her convictions. But by then, it was too late. Her long career was instantly terminated. The perception became everything; the context nothing.

She tried to be conciliatory, saying, “I deeply regret my comments I made last week regarding the Israelis and the Palestinians. They do not reflect my heart-felt belief that peace will come to the Middle East only when all parties recognize the need for mutual respect and tolerance. May that day come soon.”

Those remarks were derided and dismissed, with the pundits and papers demanding her scalp. She had no choice but to resign after her company, her agent, her co-author and many “friends” started treating her like a pariah.

“You cannot criticize Israel in this country and survive,” she says now. She believes the Israel lobby controls the discourse on Israel. She cited, as an example, CNN firing a veteran editor in Lebanon for praising a popular cleric for his support for woman after he died. (CNN had no problems hiring Wolf Blitzer, a former executive director of AIPAC.)

I didn’t ask her but I am sure she is sympathetic to President Carter for speaking out on the issue the way he has, despite the way he was later dumped on. Once under predictable vitriolic attack began, even he was forced to back down away from some of his positions.

She was forced into retirement and thrown to the wolves in a media culture that relishes stories of personal destruction and missteps. It’s the old ‘the Media builds you up before they tear you down’ routine.

As blogger Jamie Frieze wrote, “I don’t think she should have been forced to resign. After all, the freedom of speech doesn’t come with the right to be comfortable. In other words, the fact that you’re uncomfortable doesn’t trump my free speech. Thomas made people uncomfortable, but that doesn’t mean her speech should be punished.”

But punished she was

As a veteran of one kind of real journalism, she may have been inexperienced in dealing with our volatile media culture that now thrives on hostile ‘drive by’ attacks and putdowns.

When I called Helen Thomas to ask if she might be willing to share some of her thoughts on what happened, I found her as eloquent as ever, supportive of Wikileaks, critical of Grand Jury harassment in the Middle West against Palestinian supporters and angry with President Obama for his many right turns and spineless positions.

This clearly was not a mea culpa moment for her, but what has she learned from this ordeal?

While she hasn’t written about the incident she did speak to me about it for publication.

I first asked her for her view about what happened?

She was, she said, on a path outside the White House on a day in which Jewish leaders were being honored inside, at American Jewish Heritage Celebration Day, an event she said she was unaware of. A Rabbi, David Nesenoff, asked to speak to her, and introduced his two sons who he said wanted to become Journalists. (One was actually a friend of his son Adam, also his webmaster.)

“People seeking advice come to me a lot,” she explained, “and I told them about my love of journalism and that they should pursue their goals. I was gracious, and told them to go for it.”

Then the subject abruptly changed. “What you think of Israel they asked next. It was all very pleasant and I don’t blame them for asking,” she told me. But, then, she admitted, she didn’t know the people who she then said, “shoved a microphone in my face like a jack knife.”

It wasn’t just any Rabbi making conversation. Nessensoff is an ardent pro-Israel supporter who runs a website called Rabbi Live and can be a flamboyant self-promoter. He says, “even though I was born in Glen Cove and grew up in Syosset Long Island, Israel is my Jewish homeland. It is the homeland for all Jewish people.”

The Jewish Forward newspaper would later report,

“Nesenoff came under scrutiny for appearing in a video depicting a man of Mexican descent pretending to give a weather forecast while a bearded rabbi in a black hat and coat stands nearby.

The four-and-a-half-minute video, titled “Holy Weather,” features Nesenoff dressed as “Father Julio Ramirez,” an outsize caricature of a Mexican priest. The rabbi makes statements that fuel stereotypes, painting Mexican laborers as dishwashers. He speaks in an exaggerated rasp of a Mexican accent, saying, among other things: “The last time I saw a

map like that I was in an immigration office with three gringos down on the Mexican border, you know, right near New Mexico.” Fractured Spanish pops up from time to time, as when Nesenoff says the rabbi’s tendency to get better assignments is “no mucho bueno picnic.”

Though some critics used the skit as ammunition to portray him as a hypocrite and a racist, Nesenoff said he was dressed up because it was Purim.”

God, he said, likes humor.

Israeli officials were not in a laughing mood during this period for other reasons. Fox News reported: “A senior Israeli politician tells Fox News that Israel is currently in the midst of its worst international crisis since the creation of the Jewish state. The politician, who asked not to be named in order to speak more candidly, added that for the first time Israel’s legitimacy is being questioned by many in the international community.

“The official believes the lack of a viable peace process, combined with last week’s Gaza-bound flotilla incident, which killed nine, has brought Israel to this situation. The Israeli public doesn’t understand the severity of the situation, according to the politician. The official believes that Israelis should not react in a nationalistic way to recent events, because it is only weakening the Jewish state in this process.”

I don’t know If any of this was weighing on Helen’s mind but I do know that criticism of Israel was soon at an all time fever pitch because of the Gaza Aid Flotilla which left Turkey on the day of the “interview.”

Supporters of the humanitarian project feared Israel would attack the ships as they soon did. For media spin, Tel Aviv righteously and loudly defended its violent interception of the non-violent convoy as an act of legitimate self-defense but, later, quietly, paid compensation to the victims when the world media turned against them.

Soon, there would protests worldwide and furious exchanges in the media. Much of it was very emotional. There was also anger at President Obama for not denouncing Israel’s intervention on the high seas. But, by that time, Helen Thomas was silenced and silent.

(In some outlets, the incident “outing” Helen was used, bizarrely, as pro-Israel “balance” to show why Israel must act tough.)

Back at the North Lawn that day at the White House, Helen, who must have been following these evolving events, blew a fuse, or at least lost her usually professional demeanor. Here’s the now infamous exchange videotaped by an amateur cameraman, offering a deliberately unflattering and extreme tight close up of an 89 year-old woman.

Nesenoff: Any comments on Israel? We’re asking everybody today, any comments on Israel?

Thomas: Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine.

Nesenoff: Oooh. Any better comments on Israel?

Thomas: Remember, these people are occupied and it’s their land. It’s not German, it’s not Poland ...

Nesenoff: So where should they go, what should they do?

Thomas: They go home.

Nesenoff: Where's the home?

Thomas: Poland, Germany and America and everywhere else

Nesenoff: So you're saying the Jews go back to Poland and Germany?

Thomas: And America and everywhere else. Why push people out of there who have lived there for centuries? See?

Nesenoff does not repeat her use of America, but only to Poland and German. He has nothing to say about her reference to occupation,

Clearly, the question triggered something deeper in Helen, feelings that she had perhaps bottled up for many years in the White House where every reporter has a built in radar that teaches them to be careful about what they say and how they say it, especially on a subject like Israel that Helen considers a "third rail," almost an "untouchable issue." She earlier told one college audience, "I censored myself for 50 years when I was a reporter." (She was then an opinion columnist and perhaps freer to speak her mind,)

Israel was not a new subject for her to comment on either. Anyone from the Arab world tends to have a very different understanding of the history there, a perspective that we rarely hear or see. It's a narrative driven by anger at unending Palestinian victimization.

She told me she had been in Israel in 1954 and visited the Palestinian village of Kibia that was invaded by Israel in which local residents were driven out and many killed. She told me she personally met many Palestinians forced from their homes. She is not the only one angry about this often hidden legacy, especially because many Israelis justify expelling Palestinians in biblical terms and are supported by Christian Evangelicals in saying so.

That's ironic, isn't it, because in our media, fanatical fundamentalists are only pictured as Muslims, rarely as Jews.

Her historic memory was clearly triggered although her views are hardly extreme. She says Israel has a right to exist, and so do Jews "like all people. But not the right to seize others lands." She says Israel has defied 65 UN resolutions on these issues. She was frustrated when so many Presidents danced around the issues and in her view, "caved" on human rights.

To Nesenoff and many viewers oriented to see the world only through a unflinching pro-Israel narrative, Helen had crossed the line in their view from being anti-Israel to being anti-Semitic. The reason: the inclusion of Poland and Germany into the mix were considered "obviously anti-Semitic."

She agrees that by citing Germany, she opened the door to accusations of insensitivity, lumping her in with holocaust deniers, but denies being one or hating Jews. She says she was startled by that charge because she is, she says, a Semite so how can she be anti-Semitic? (Another irony: Jewish emigration to today's Germany has increased 10 fold since the fall of the Berlin Wall to 200,000 with many leaving Israel. This "reverse exodus" troubles Israeli officials.)

Helen told me her thinking on this subject goes back to being moved by a Rabbi who spoke alongside Martin Luther King Jr at the March on Washington in 1963. I was there also, and heard him speak too, and so I looked him up,

It was Joachim Prinz of the American Jewish Congress who made a speech that influenced a younger Helen Thomas. He said, "When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not .the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence."

Helen says her whole career has been about combating the sin of silence. She says she has now been liberated to speak out. And "all I would like is for people to know what I was trying to say, that Palestinians are living under tyranny and that their rights are being violated. All I want is some sympathy for Palestinians."

Had she said it like that, if she had perhaps made a distinction between Israel as a State and its settlers on occupied lands, she might still have her job. Unfortunately, what she did say, and how she said it, brought all the attention on her, not the issues she was trying to expose.

Now it's the holiday season, allegedly a time of peace and forgiveness when Presidents issue pardons to convicted criminals and reflection is theoretically permitted, a time when its been suggested that even a State Department hawk like Richard Holbrooke could, on his deathbed call for an end to the Afghan war that he had dogmatically supported.

We have watched the rehabilitation of so many politicians over recent years who have stumbled, taken money or disgraced themselves in sex scandals, including Senators, even Presidents.

Helen Thomas is not in that category.

Yet, many of those "fallen" are back in action, tarnished perhaps, but allowed to recant, to work and then appear in the media.

But, to this day, there has been almost no compassion, empathy or respect shown for one of our great journalists, Helen Thomas, who has been presumed guilty and sentenced to oblivion with barely a word spoken in her defense. She admittedly misspoke and is now officially "Missing" like some disappeared priest in Argentina

A whole world may be critical of Israel. Millions may believe that the occupiers should withdraw or that that Israeli rejectionism of the peace process must end. But when a "mainstream" American reporter of great stature touches these sentiments, she is consigned to Dante's inferno, and turned into a non-person.

How can we expect Israelis and Palestinians to reconcile if our media won't set an example by reconciling with Helen Thomas?

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