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National Treasure: Helen Thomas

The tiny dynamo of the White House press corps

By Barb Guy

The 86-year-old tiny dynamo of the White House press corps, Helen Thomas, a woman whose independence and dogged lifelong quest for truth and substance in presidential reporting is legendary, visited Salt Lake City on October 7.

She's a tough old gal, which of course is a compliment. We can all see her, bobbing among the other reporters of the White House press corps, clamoring to be called upon during presidential news conferences. She is known for her humor, her respectful tone, and her tenacity.

She's the daughter of Syrian immigrants, born in Kentucky in 1920 and raised in Michigan. She's often honored for her intellect, her thorough preparation, and her unequalled length of service in the White House, serving since Kennedy was President-elect. At the time I was born 46 years ago, Helen Thomas was already at the White House and she's still there. She has earned buckets of honorary doctorates from America's institutions of higher learning.

Helen Thomas says we're in deep doo-doo. The woman who has

covered many of the lowest of American moments-- Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra, says we've never been so low in public opinion. She's worried that we've lost our way; we've lost our halo.

"The high cost of this unwinnable war is beginning to sink in," Thomas said. Her speech at Rowland Hall-St. Mark's brought a packed house that ranged from a handful of grade-school age children and a few millennials or Generation Y-ers-- adults born during the Reagan years-- to a crowd made up primarily of my own contemporaries and on up another 40 years to those of Ms. Thomas's generation.

"We went into this war under false pretenses," Thomas pointed out. "Where is the outrage in this country? The passivity now is unfathomable." Thomas takes blame as well as dishing it out. She says the White House and Pentagon press corps let the country down, not providing us with inquisitive reporting about the genesis of the Iraq war. She attributes this to news organizations' unwillingness to be branded un-American, a sinister tactic employed by the

Bush administration to quell curiosity and dissent. Thomas reminded us the greatest sin of all is silence. She said, "Democracy dies behind closed doors."

I was amazed to learn from Helen Thomas that more members of the news media have died covering George Bush's Iraq war than died in all of World War II, upwards of 80 people and still counting. She says dryly, "George Bush wanted to be known as a war president. He is."

Thomas's speech was the inaugural McCarthy Family Lecture, kicking off a series promising to highlight the finest in independent journalism. The McCarthy family owned The Salt Lake Tribune for 100 years, and they continue their commitment to the community through philanthropy. This free lecture series promises to expose Utahns to journalists who have demonstrated the highest level of courageous, thoughtful, and unbiased reporting.

Helen Thomas provided a fine beginning for the series. She calls it like she sees it, and not in a partisan way. She praised

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President Bush's father, George Herbert Walker Bush, for having a better idea about how to handle Iraq. She said, "He refused to go to Baghdad because he predicted there would be house-to-house fighting and civil war."

Thomas was also quite funny during the hour or so that she spent speaking to Salt Lakers last month. She told a story about her friend, a cash-strapped fellow woman reporter during the 1940s. The friend, on the plump side, wrote her brother, "Please send me \$200 or else I'll have to sell my body." The brother sent a check but also enclosed this note: "Sell it by the pound."

About President Johnson, Thomas said that when a speech writer gave him a draft copy of a speech quoting Voltaire, the notoriously low-brow LBJ frowned at it and simply changed "Voltaire" to, "as my dear old daddy used to say."

But Thomas spent most of her time on serious matters. After detailing the litany of problems our country faces right now, problems generated by President Bush and rubber stamped by the Republican-led House and Senate such as an unprovoked war, the unprecedented use of torture, and extra-constitutional wiretapping, Thomas looks at us,

exasperated, and asks, "Who are we?"

It's a great question.

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