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About the Author

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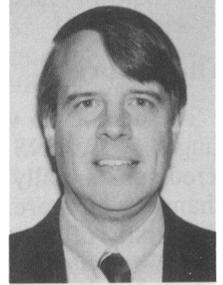
Press Briefings Exercise

Stephen Frantzich, *U.S. Naval Academy*

In this emerging world of "real time" information and media influence, new technology offers us an opportunity to provide our students access to once unavailable information. This press briefings exercise has been used over the last four semesters in courses on the presidency, but would also be appropriate in teaching American government or media and politics. The exercise sensitizes students to the nature of media bias, while opening their eyes to new data sources on the Internet.

Background for Faculty

Until the electronic age, press briefings were not regularly transcribed, indexed, or archived. There was little or no paper trail to follow when attempting to reconstruct the development of a news story. From formal White House speeches to organized briefings and informal comments or photo opportunities, an increasing number of events are now captured electronically. Access to such transcriptions allows students to almost experience being in the White House for these events.

Students who become familiar with the Internet show considerable facility in going beyond specific assignments and in recognizing its broader utility. While it is legitimate to encourage the use of new-technology cyber surfing—within limits—our specific assignments should be "demand" rather than supply driven. No instructor should introduce a new technology "just because it is there," but rather must justify it on the basis of supporting the teaching of course-relevant content or concepts.

Student Exercise Sheet

Press coverage of the executive branch of government is highly dependent on regularly scheduled briefings at which press secretaries make prepared statements and answer questions from the press. The most visible of these briefings occur daily in the White House. The permanent White House press corps gathers around the press secretary for an active interchange of information. Most of the information presented is "on the record" which means that it may be quoted and the source given. Other information is presented "off the record," in which case the reporter is not allowed to attribute the source. The press attempts to get more from the press secretary than he or she wishes to divulge, while the press secretary attempts to present the administration in the most favorable light. These briefings serve as the raw material for the next day's news.

A number of Internet and commercial on-line services provide full-text access to White House and Agency briefings. While the following exercise will focus on White House briefings, similar analyses could be used in relation to other agency briefings. Full-text access to briefings is a relatively new phenomenon. Until recently, such events were seldom transcribed, indexed, and/or archived. The Clinton White House has considerably accelerated electronic access to both its formal and informal records. Full-text transcripts are almost like being at the event itself.

The purpose of this exercise is to give you a feeling for White House briefings as a news source, and to follow the raw information from the White House into the media. White House press corps refuse to depend on official "handouts" and media events. The briefings serve as a first step, with the journalists selecting the material to cover and augmenting official statements with additional material from other sources.

Your task in this exercise is to identify a specific briefing, comment on its tenor, evaluate its content, and analyze the translation of the briefing material into a major media outlet. As you gather the necessary material, consider the

following questions which will serve as the basis for the short paper (under 5 pages) you will develop:

1. *What was the tenor of the briefing?* Was it cordial or filled with conflict? Did this seem to be a typical briefing or have there been recent major events affecting the relationship between the White House and the press? Who seemed to have the upper hand? Did the press secretary (or other official) have to give up more information than he wanted, or was he able to manage the news?
2. *What were the most important revelations?* Put yourself in the place of a reporter. What four or five major points would *you* report?
3. *What was the relationship between the White House briefing and the next day's news?* Choose a major newspaper or news magazine from the following day (or week) and compare the material presented in the briefing with what actually appeared in the printed source considering the following questions. (You may want to compare two or more sources.)

- How many of your major pieces of news from question #2 appeared? If some were missed, do you have any idea why?
- Was the briefing directly quoted? If so, was it quoted faithfully?
- Were the ground rules followed? (Were "off the record" statements kept off the record?)
- From this experience, are you satisfied or disturbed by the process of news selection and presentation?

A Step by Step Guide To Gathering The Necessary Information

Accessing Briefing Files.

A number of commercial services such as Legi-Slate, Congressional Quarterly's Washington Alert, and LEXIS-NEXIS provide access and indexing of briefings, but their cost limits availability. The following emphasizes free Internet sources. A number listed since the Internet

tends to get clogged, and each source allows only a finite number of users. To some degree, Internet searching offers less than meets the eye since many sources point to the same information. For each source, you will be given the ACCESS path needed to get from your computer system to the particular data base. Familiarize yourself with the particular methods for getting out of your computer system. The access information will be followed by a sample PATH of menus leading to the specific material you will need. Menu paths often change, so you will have to use your own judgment. Once you have become familiar with a particular path, you might want to experiment a bit.

American Political Science Association Gopher: The APSA Gopher includes a variety of sources of information for political scientists.

ACCESS: gopher apsa.trenton.edu
PATHS: American Government Gopher at Northwestern University/ Executive Branch/ Presidential Documents/ White House Press Releases/ 1994 White House Information (or another listed year)/ Press Briefings and Conferences/ Press Briefings by the President and Others (or Press Briefings by Dee Dee Myers, or the current press briefer/ Month (of your choice)

FedWorld: FedWorld is the National Technical Information Service's electronic marketplace of agency files and briefings.

ACCESS: Via Internet, type **telnet fedworld.gov**. First-time users will have to fill out and ID a password. (World Wide Web users can reach FedWorld by typing **www.fedworld.gov**.)
PATHS: Choose F from the main menu (Library of Files)/choose S to select a library/type **W-HOUSE** to select the White House Library/choose F to find specific files or L to list all files. If you choose F (find) you may search by file name (F), date (D), by files added since your last login (Q) or by the number of times the file has been downloaded (N). You will receive a listing of the size, date of inclusion and a brief

description of the selected briefings from which you may choose the one(s) to download full text.

University of Michigan:

ACCESS: **gopher gopher.lib. umich.edu**
OR
telnet una.hh.lib.umich.edu (login: gopher)
PATHS: **social sciences resources/ government and politics/ u.s. government resources: executive branch/ white house information/ 1994 white house information (or any other listed year)/ press briefings and conferences.** From this point you will have a number of options from which to choose. Initially you will need to choose the type of briefing and then the date range. You will then receive a short description of each briefing. Choose a briefing that looks interesting and you will get its full text.

University of North Carolina:

ACCESS: **gopher sunsite.unc.edu**
OR
telnet sunsite.unc.edu (login: gopher)
PATHS: **Worlds of SunSITE—by Subject/ US and World Politics/ Browse White House Papers/ Year (of your choice)/ Month (of your choice)** (You will receive a cryptic list of available titles to choose from.)

Analysis Steps

Task 1: Selecting a Briefing.

Your initial task is to find a White House briefing based on topic, person doing the briefing, title, or date. In most cases, you will have to depend on the descriptions from the database you use. Alternatively, you might want to work backward, looking for briefings following important events.

Task 2: Getting the Printout of a Briefing.

Printing will depend on the characteristics of your system. For most systems, pushing the **SHIFT** and **PRINT SCREEN** keys simultaneously will allow you to print page

by page. On many systems, pushing the **ALT** and **L** keys simultaneously will send everything to the printer from that point on (press the same keys again to turn off the printer dump). You may want to download the briefing to a disc for further analysis.

Task 3: Analysis.

After reading the briefing, answer the questions outlined at the outset of this exercise. Write your results in a brief paper. Where appropriate, include direct quotes from both the articles and the briefing.

About the Author

Stephen Frantzich is professor and chair of the department of political science at the U.S. Naval Academy. He has served as president of the Computers and Multi-Media Users section of APSA and directs the PoliWare program of the Association. He uses technology heavily in teaching and was chosen as the outstanding instructor at the Naval Academy in 1990. He is the coauthor of *American Government: The Political Game*, and *Congress: Games and Strategies* (Brown and Benchmark Publishers) both of which come with software designed by the author.
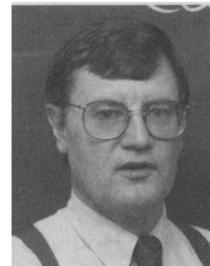
Teaching About American Democracy Through Historical Cases

Sheldon Appleton, *Oakland University*

Public reaction to "Whitewater" should remind us how fragmentary most citizens' understanding of American democracy is. How does Whitewater differ from Iran-Contra? From Watergate? From other less famous events in our country's political history? Just what was it that Richard Nixon did that led to his resignation under threat of imminent impeachment? Why wasn't Ronald Reagan impeached, too? What kind of findings in the Whitewater investigation would warrant the initiation of impeachment proceedings against Bill Clinton?

Not only the general public, but our students as well, have great difficulty coming up with a consistent set of answers to these questions, as most of those who have taught the introductory American government course can attest. Despite excellent discussions of the meanings of democracy in many introductory texts, a good number of students still cannot deal with these questions after completing the course, or even in some cases after completing a major in political science!

My experience has been that the most effective way for students to gain an understanding of democracy in the real world is to supplement their readings in democratic theory with cases. These cases require *them* to build and use theories to make determinations about which polities are "democratic" and which sets of decisions or policies have been made "democratically." How do we know that the political systems of the United States and Great Britain are "democratic," while those of, say, Iraq, the People's Republic of China or pre-Aristide Haiti are not? (Many students respond not by applying the "principles" of democracy outlined in their readings or in class, but via comparison with the United States. The more like our own a political system is seen to be, the more likely students are to consider it "democratic." For this reason, some first-year students may even be a bit skeptical of parliamentary systems.) The idea is to get students to develop sets of criteria that allow them both to begin to make such discriminations and to gain a fuller understanding of the meanings of democracy in practice.

Over many years of trial and error, I have found a number of cases or class exercises to be most useful in helping students learn to make these discriminations and gain this understanding. At the most elementary level, in the introductory American government course, a simple exercise is introduced early in the semester, just after students have read the chapters on democracy or ideologies and on the Constitution. Students are assigned to read the U.S. Constitution and to write a few paragraphs on whether they believe that document *as originally written*—including the Bill of Rights, but no subsequent amendments—is "democratic," and why. The students are asked also whether the Constitution today is more or less "democratic" than the original version, and why. This calls their attention to the changes which have taken place over the past 200 years and perhaps also to the need to have criteria beyond just "being like the U.S."

The students are then divided into small groups (of about eight) where they spend a class session discussing this issue. The instructor roves from group to group, listening, and occasionally commenting on what is said. Each group is asked to try to come to agreement on these questions and to state what they have agreed on a large index card. In small classes, or in those where assistants are avail-