Beat: Vips

Veteran White House reporter Helen Thomas dead at 92

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USPA News - Veteran White House reporter Helen Thomas, who covered every U.S. president since the later years of the Eisenhower administration and broke barriers for other women in journalism, died Saturday after a long illness, her colleagues said. She was 92. Carl Leubsdorf, the secretary of the Gridiron Club which is one of the most prestigious journalistic organizations in the country`s capital, said Thomas died early Saturday morning at her apartment in Washington, D.C. Her niece, Judy Jenkins, said Thomas had been suffering from kidney failure.

"Former Gridiron Club president Helen Thomas, our first female member, died Saturday morning at her Washington apartment after a long illness," said Leubsdorf, who was previously the Washington Bureau chief of The Dallas Morning News. "She would have been 93 next month." Thomas began working as a radio writer for United Press International (UPI) in 1943, at the height of World War II, and moved to the news wire`s White House bureau in 1961 after John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as president. Her hard work and persistence allowed her to succeed in a male-dominated field in which women were usually assigned to work human interest stories while men went after the real news. It led Thomas to become UPI`s White House bureau chief in 1974, making her the first woman in the United States to hold such a high position at a major international news organization. But Thomas abruptly resigned in May 2000 after UPI was acquired by an organization with links to the Unification Church. Having already traveled around the world with U.S. presidents and becoming famous for trying to hold the leaders accountable by asking them blunt and straightforward questions, Thomas decided to continue her work by joining Heart Newspapers as a columnist until she retired in June 2010. U.S. President Barack Obama, who was the last president to face Thomas, said he and his wife were saddened to learn of the reporter`s death. "Helen was a true pioneer, opening doors and breaking down barriers for generations of women in journalism. She covered every White House since President Kennedy`s, and during that time she never failed to keep presidents - myself included - on their toes," he said. Obama added: "What made Helen the "Dean of the White House Press Corps" was not just the length of her tenure, but her fierce belief that our democracy works best when we ask tough questions and hold our leaders to account. Our thoughts are with Helen`s family, her friends, and the colleagues who respected her so deeply." Former U.S. President Bill Clinton and his wife, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, also said they were saddened by the news. "Helen was a pioneering journalist who, while adding more than her share of cracks to the glass ceiling, never failed to bring intensity and tenacity to her White House beat," Bill Clinton said. Clinton added: "Throughout her career she covered the issues and events that shaped the course of our world with perseverance and a tough-minded dedication. Her work was extraordinary because of her intelligence, her lively spirit and great sense of humor, and most importantly her commitment to the role of a strong press in a healthy democracy." Thomas, who was also referred to as the "First Lady of the Press," abruptly announced her retirement in June 2010 after her controversial anti-Israel remarks caused an outrage around the world. Her comments were videotaped and widely disseminated on the Internet, causing even elected officials to call for her resignation. The reporter, while speaking on American Jewish Heritage Celebration Day, had said Israelis should "get the hell out of Palestine" and "go home" to "Poland, Germany... America and everywhere else." Then-White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs described the comments by Thomas as "offensive and reprehensible." After the outrage, Thomas released a brief apology on her official website, 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 pace will come to the Middle East only when all parties recognize the need for mutual respect and tolerance. May that day come soon." Thomas will be buried in Detroit and a Washington memorial service is expected to be held later this year.

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