

Helen Thomas quits after Israel comments

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[UPDATE: Helen Thomas has resigned.]

Journalist Helen Thomas, who has covered every administration since Eisenhower's and occupies front-row center in the White House briefing room is taking heat for comments she recently made on Israel.

The latest Thomas controversy erupted Friday after a rabbi asked her and other attendees at a Jewish American Heritage Month celebration, held May 27 at the White House, "Any comments on Israel?" A portion of her interview was posted online (a week late because the rabbi's webmaster son was taking finals), and Part 2 is "to come soon," RabbiLive.com promises.

Thomas, a longtime critic of Israeli policy, replied: "Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine." She continued to say that the Palestinians are "occupied" and that the Jews should "Go home" — to Germany, Poland, America and "everywhere else."

The speaker's agency representing Thomas has dropped her, and a high school canceled her commencement speech. Members of the White House Correspondents Association, which oversees seating in the briefing room, discussed the Thomas situation over weekend emails and were meeting Monday to hash out a response, according to a source with knowledge of the situation.

"I deeply regret my comments I made last week regarding the Israelis and the Palestinians," the 89-year-old Thomas wrote on her website. "They do not reflect my heartfelt 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."

Thomas continued apologizing in the Washington Post, telling its media critic, Howard Kurtz, in a Monday column: "I'm very sorry for my remarks. I think I crossed the line. I made a mistake."

Apologies aren't enough for some.

Rabbi David Nesenoff, who interviewed Thomas and published the clip on his RabbiLive.com site, told Yahoo! News that she should lose her job with Hearst Newspapers. "Of course they've got to get rid of her," he said.

Hearst, asked by the Washington Post's Greg Sargent whether it would remove Thomas, issued a statement over the weekend: "We deeply regret Helen Thomas' remarks, which in no way reflect the views of Hearst Newspapers or its employees. Helen has expressed her own profound regret over the incident." Its spokesman refused to go further.

Since going viral, the short clip of Thomas has spawned criticism across the political spectrum.

Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.), on Monday's "Morning Joe," said her comment "borders on anti-Semitism" and "anyone who runs her stories has a credibility issue."

Sarah Palin took to Twitter to condemn Thomas (and the media): "Helen Thomas press pals condone racist rant? Heaven forbid 'esteemed' press corps represent society's enlightened elite; Rest of us choose truth."

Ari Fleischer, who tangled with Thomas when he was press secretary during the Bush administration, told the Huffington Post that Hearst should drop the veteran journalist.

“She should lose her job over this,” Fleischer said. “As someone who is Jewish, and as someone who worked with her and used to like her, I find this appalling.”

On Fox News, Fleischer said: “I look at this as an employee-employer matter. Who would want an employee who espouses what is tantamount to religious cleansing to work for them?”

And Craig Crawford, who co-wrote a book with Thomas (“Listen Up, Mr. President: Everything You Always Wanted Your President to Know and Do”) told Politico he wouldn’t work with her in the future.

So what about her colleagues in the White House briefing room?

CNN’s Ed Henry, a board member of the White House Correspondents Association, said in a weekend email to fellow reporters, obtained by Yahoo! News, that Thomas’s “remarks were shocking and indefensible.”

But Henry also cautioned that there are other factors to weigh, including the barriers she broke as a woman in political journalism — and that it scarcely befits an organization like the correspondents association “to police speech.” He added that the association didn’t have the power to take away her press credentials — that decision would fall to the White House.

Henry wrote that once they met Monday, the board would be “in a better position to issue an appropriate response.”

It’s unlikely that the board will make a decision Monday on possibly removing Thomas from the front row. Such a call could lead to a slippery slope, with journalists’ comments sparking immediate policing from the press corps. More likely, the board will issue a harsh statement, take her position in the room under review, and wait to see if Hearst keeps Thomas on the payroll. The Bush White House denied Thomas her traditional question in press briefings in 2003, apparently in reaction to her barbed and critical questions and frequent slams at the administration in her columns.

The White House had not responded to Yahoo! News’ request for comment on the Thomas situation. [UPDATE: But Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, asked at Monday’s daily briefing about her remarks, called them “offensive and reprehensible.”]

— Michael Calderone is the media writer for Yahoo! News.