

Behind the White House Curtain

A Senior Journalist's Story of Covering the President—
and Why It Matters

Steven L Herman

Foreword by Scott McClellan

Going behind the scenes with a veteran member of the White House
press corps

“Steve Herman is a dedicated journalist who understands the stakes when it comes to defending the truth at a time when the facts are under assault by powerful forces. This behind-the-scenes account is not just another Trump book. It’s an important reminder of why we need journalists like Steve on the front lines reporting the truth.”

—**Jim Acosta**, anchor and chief domestic correspondent for CNN

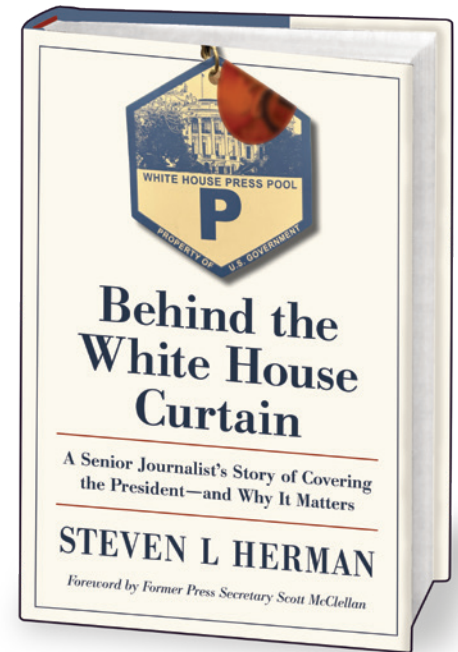
“Steve Herman has been one of VOA’s best journalists and a true leader in public diplomacy journalism. This memoir only begins to do justice to Steve’s extensive career reporting the news without fear or favor. It also touches on his devotion to the US Foreign Service through his membership of the governing board of the American Foreign Service Association, which includes VOA’s overseas correspondents and engineers. Steve’s work at the White House has been recognized as a true model for deadline journalism that is devoted to informing listeners and readers of the most important developments of the day. His book is important and a great read.”

—**Ambassador (Ret.) Eric S. Rubin**, former US Ambassador to Bulgaria
and president of the American Foreign Service Association

Steven L Herman, chief national correspondent for the nonpartisan, government-funded Voice of America (VOA), pulls back the curtain on the inner workings of the White House press corps, giving readers a rare glimpse into the historic and current relationship between the president and the press.

Herman traces the trajectory of his career as a journalist—from working as a novice reporter in the 1970s to facing the challenges of covering the Trump administration—reflecting on the experience of reporting on a president who once called journalists “enemies of the people.”

Throughout *Behind the White House Curtain*, Herman convincingly argues that public access to accurate, unbiased information is essential to a healthy and peaceful democracy and that journalists can and should play a key role in pressing government officials to be truthful and transparent. At a time when misinformation is rampant, Herman reminds readers that freedom of the press is a foundational American right.



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Steven L. Herman's long career in journalism includes covering the White House for Voice of America (VOA) during the Trump administration and the first eight months of the Biden administration. Currently VOA's chief national correspondent, he is the author of *Behind the White House Curtain: A Senior Journalist's Story of Covering the President—and Why It Matters*, coming in June 2024 from Kent State University Press. Herman talked with publicist Derek Krissoff.

One thing that makes your book vivid, I think, is your nuts-and-bolts perspective on the logistics and choreography of reporting on the presidency. Tell me something about the practical side of work covering the White House that might surprise readers.

We are confined to a relatively small portion of the White House West Wing and North Lawn except for the pool reporters who will go into the Oval Office, Cabinet Room, or Roosevelt Room for an event. We can stroll into some of the press offices to query the press staff. Some news organizations have their own cramped booths, and there's a common area with vending machines for eating next to the bathrooms. It is known as the "lavateria." The job is not for the claustrophobic.

A follow-up: "Press pool" is a phrase most people have probably heard, but maybe never have had explained clearly. What is it?

It is a group of journalists who cover the president up close on behalf of the rest of the media. It is only practical for a small number of reporters, videographers, and photographers to go into the Oval Office or ride on Air Force One, so there is a rotation of journalists who take that daily duty both at the White House and on trips. Some organizations are permanent in the pool every day, such as AP and Reuters. But for TV and radio, for example, it's a rotation. One day it's NBC, the next Fox. For radio, one day it's NPR, the next VOA, and so on. Organizations which compose the pool must commit to having their reporter cover for the pool for that day and can file their own stories at the end of the pooling day or when there is a break in the pooling duties.

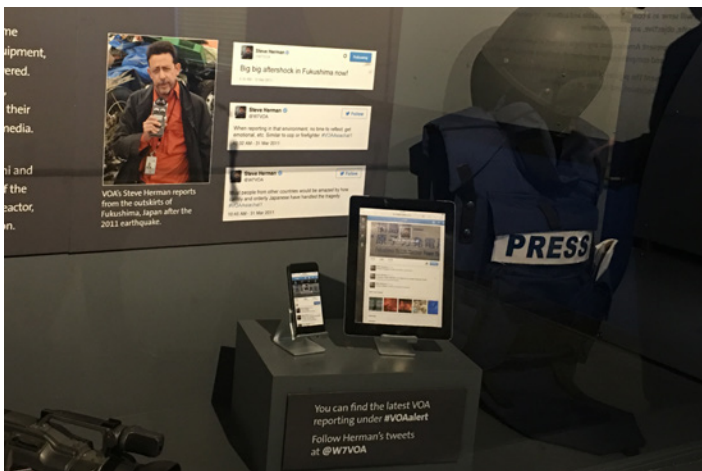


Over the course of your career, social media has emerged as part of what journalists do—and you've had tweets go viral, becoming stories themselves. What's that like? Would you go back to a pre-social media era if it were possible?

Social media definitely has its pros and cons. I can never predict what is going to go viral online. As I outline in my book, sometimes it's what I might regard as of little consequence or quirky. An example was when I issued what I thought was a humorous throw-away tweet about [a sinkhole on the North Lawn](#). It became international news and was picked up by the late night talk shows for their comedy bits. The 24/7 news cycle online and offline means there's a lot of pressure to get out tidbits quickly. These "hot takes" are not often nuanced and sometimes may be misleading. For me it's like walking on a tightrope.

Your book interweaves presidential history with your own experience reporting during recent administrations. What's a lesson from that history that informs your practice?

There is always tension in the symbiotic relationship between administration and the media. We need each other, but the goals can diverge. Too close of a relationship is not good for a democracy, but if the relationship gets too distant and hostile that is also unhealthy for properly informing the electorate.





Tell me about the Trump White House’s campaign against Voice of America. What precipitated it? What do you see as the lessons?

The White House sought to get Trump’s nominee to run our parent agency confirmed. Some Republicans on Capitol Hill were hesitant to confirm the nominee, so Trump and the West Wing began making it a political issue, calling VOA the “Voice of Russia” and the “Voice of China,” that sort of thing. The administration also wanted VOA to be less balanced and more of an instrument amplifying its views. Our charter forbids that, and there is a firewall that prevents such intrusions. Well, the firewall got scorched, but it did its job, thanks to courageous colleagues, hard-working attorneys, lawmakers from both parties, and the judiciary.

Since your book publisher is a university press, I wondered whether you saw any parallels between the work of UPs and of VOA. Was it important for you to publish with a university press, and with Kent State in particular?

I thought in publishing with a university press there would not be pressure to sensationalize the story, although the manuscript I submitted was not a typical academic read. I wanted to ensure this would be a book the general public, and especially students of journalism, would enjoy and find enlightening. As a native Buckeye, I am thrilled to have found a publisher in Ohio (also the home state of eight presidents) and have loved working with the professionals at the esteemed Kent State University Press.

What’s a book in a similar vein that you’ve enjoyed, or that perhaps served as a model for you as you were writing your own?

I would recommend that anyone seeking a deeper knowledge read the award-winning book [The Presidents vs. the Press](#) by Harold Holzer. I found Holzer’s insights so valuable that I began to use him as an interviewee to help put some of my daily news stories into historical context.

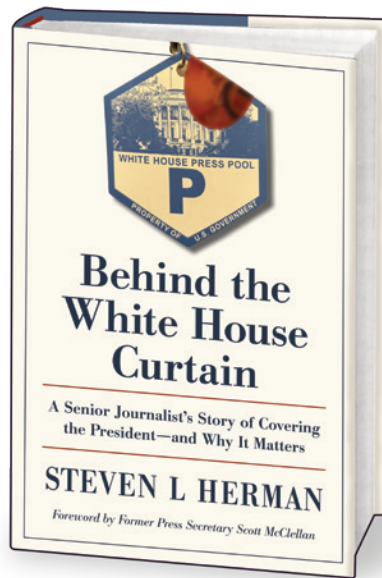


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From *Behind the White House Curtain*



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We might be in the Oval Office for 45 seconds or 45 minutes. It's all up to the commander-in-chief. Some presidents prefer our presence only for a grin-and-grab (handshakes). Others are loquacious. Trump was a marathon talker, crafting his messaging with bombast and grievances that appealed to the white, working-class voters who elected him.

While one of my hands keeps the boom in position, in my other palm is a smartphone. I snap a few photographs and immediately email them to the radio pool email list with a short summary of anything of great importance said. I then tweet the same information. It's a delicate digital juggling act I had taken some pains to master.

The president concludes his brief remarks and turns his gaze to the media gang. A half dozen of us begin to ask questions. The president sorts out one to answer. He has his favorite questioners—all presidents do— but eventually all the reporters, including me, are able to ask something.

In the Oval, decorum usually prevails and the tone and wording of the questions are respectful. It's more of a free-for-all on the South Lawn, where any journalist with White House credentials tries to shout over the din of helicopter engine noise.

Through trial and error, I found when competing with my colleagues for the forty-fifth president's attention—indoors or outside—I had the best shot of winning a reply if my question contained no more than seven words. Trump's patience with questioners was extremely limited, and a better question is concise, regardless of the president.