

# The Briefing Room: Decoding the White House in the Age of Trump

Margaret Talev

Wednesdays | 4:30 - 5:45 PM | Harvard IOP

*In this study group, I'll share with you what I've learned on one of the wildest and establishment-shaking rides in American political history, as **senior White House correspondent for Bloomberg News, CNN analyst and immediate past president of the White House Correspondents' Association.***

*Our study group's name references the iconic James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House, where the press secretary holds the exchanges that are live-streamed, televised and parodied on Saturday Night Live. But President Donald Trump's real "briefing room" extends to all of the theaters where he takes his message. In defying the norms of presidential communication, he is compelling politicians, foreign governments, law enforcement, business leaders, pop-culture figures, journalists, voters and advisers working inside his own administration to reconsider what it means to interact with an American president.*

*Over the course of the semester, we'll go behind the scenes. We'll draw on the experiences of a cross-section of key figures who are learning to navigate Trump's brand of communications inside the U.S. and around the world. I'll share some of my own experiences as well. I've worked to protect the public's access to information and officials and navigate coverage disputes in all manner of venues: the briefing room, the Oval Office, Twitter, Air Force One, the Trump hotel, Mar-A-Lago and Bedminster, Saudi palaces, and meetings with Vladimir Putin. I've traveled the country talking to voters from Kansas City to California about their hopes and concerns in this time of heightened polarization and their interest in the White House, the media and the intersection of the two. What I hope to learn from you: What White House reporting do you find most valuable? How can my colleagues and I do the best job of reporting and contextualizing information about what our government is doing and how it affects you?*

## **Week 1 – Sept. 19 – Inside the Briefing Rooms**

Welcome! A survey of the actual and virtual venues. How President Trump uses the Oval Office, Roosevelt Room, South Lawn departures, Air Force One press cabin visits, specific television and radio shows and Twitter to shape his message – and how his engagement compares with past presidents. A qualitative and statistical dive into how

Trump has used his briefing rooms; who follows him; and which key figures have fared best, worst and most from these interactions.

*Guest:* Martha Joynt Kumar, Director of the White House Transition Project (via Skype)

### **Week 2 – Sept. 26 – Sourcing**

Rethinking what it means to cover the White House has been one of the biggest challenges for mainstream political reporters in the era of a reality-TV star president. In this session, we'll look at his inner and ever-widening outer circles and discuss sourcing in the Trump administration. Aides come and go, but for the most part they're never really gone.

*Guests:* Carol Lee of NBC News, and Joshua Green of Businessweek, author of "Devil's Bargain"

### **Week 3 – Wednesday, Oct. 3 – Translating Trump**

The press secretary, administration officials and Trump surrogates translate Trump to the public, but how do they speak for a leader who sticks to no script including his own?

*Guest:* Gary Cohn, former chief economic adviser to President Trump and National Economic Council director and former COO & President of Goldman Sachs

### **Week 4 – Oct. 10 – Engage or Ignore?**

Trump's presidency has been riddled with public feuds. Join us for a conversation on how politicians, business leaders and foreign governments decide to respond when Trump takes them on or takes positions they believe cross a line.

*Guests:* CNN Washington bureau chief Sam Feist, Bloomberg Washington bureau chief Craig Gordon, Joseph Plenzler, American Legion (via Skype)

### **Week 5 – Oct. 17 – Mar-A-Lago, Bedminster and Trump Hotels**

International summits, golf, charity events and other interactions the public can't see. These represent a crucial part of Donald Trump's presidency. How do these engagements shape President Trump's agenda?

*Guest:* Newsmax CEO Chris Ruddy (via Skype); photographer Al Drago

### **Week 6 – Oct. 24 – The First Family**

Melania, Ivanka, Don Jr. and the rest of the family. How does this president's relationship with family – and his wife and daughter's public roles – compare with what Americans have come to expect?

Guest: Kate Andersen Brower, author of “The Residence,” “First Ladies” and “First in Line.”

### **Week 7 – Wednesday, Oct. 31 – The Legal System**

President Trump has carried out the majority of his presidency under the cloud of Robert Mueller’s investigation. He’s openly challenged the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement communities, fired his FBI director, threatened his attorney general, hired private attorneys to represent him, and set up a structure inside the White House counsel’s office to deal with Russia requests. And he’s broken the mold for presidents by talking and tweeting about all of this.

Guest: Former Trump White House lawyer Ty Cobb.

### **Week 8 – Wednesday, Nov. 7 – Peers**

Donald Trump is the face of American international affairs. In this session, we’ll discuss how foreign leaders and the living former U.S. presidents do or don’t interact with President Trump and what it means for civility, continuity and governance.

Guest: TBD

### **Week 9 – Wednesday, Nov. 14 – Final Session**