

Raging Bulls

By James Como (May 2018)



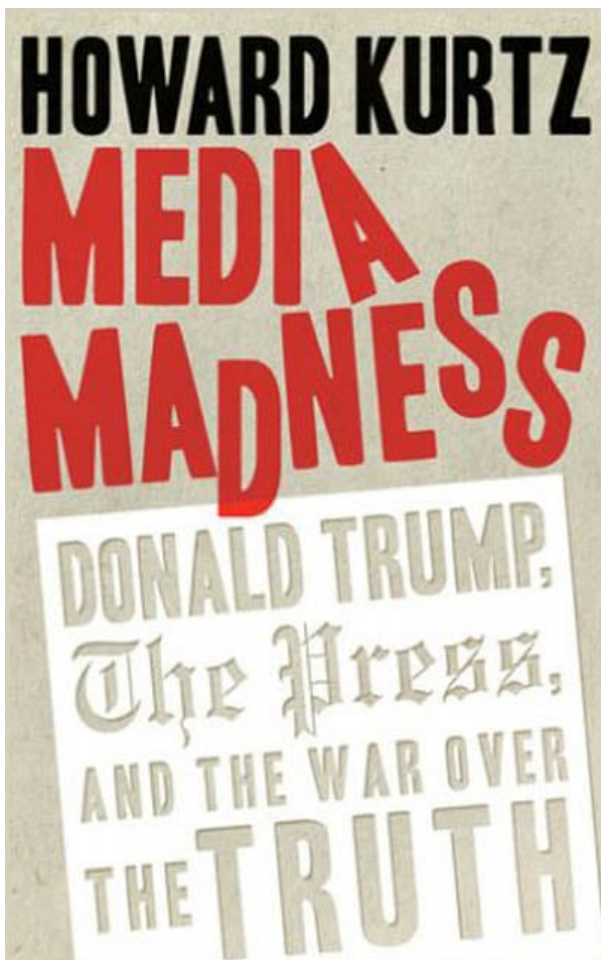
The Tube Train, Cyril Power, 1934

Book Review: Howard Kurtz, *Media Madness: Donald Trump, The Press, and the War Over the Truth* (Regnery Publishing, 2018, 271pp+index, \$28.99)

Admirable for its astuteness and useful for its timeliness and spot-on reporting, this book documents the duel to the death now regnant in the Republic. The twenty-seven chapters (with names like “A Catastrophic Media Failure,” “Trump Trauma,” “White House Game of Thrones,” “Collusion Confusion,” “Investigative Overreach,” and “The Media go to DEFCON 1”: most of these under ten pages) give the reader behind-the

scenes and off-mic interactions that routinely dismay, especially those betrayals by media folk of long-time friends now working for Trump. Every enormity (e.g. Charlottesville, the Comey firing, the Mooch's nano-tenure, the dossier) is covered.

Kurtz does not delve into political theory (what constitutes good governance), journalistic history (how ferocious presidential politics have been from the very beginning of the Republic), or conceptual standards for presidential leadership. His focus is tight, and he doesn't allow mission creep.



But the last—standards of leadership—merits some attention, for from them emerge purpose and direction, unifying themes, coherent internal structure, and a congruent tone (really a set of attitudes). I suggest four (obvious) standards and invite you to make your personal scorecard. The first is the Personal Standard, including character, temperament, intellect, and preparation. The second is the Political Standard, including ideology, programs, policies, and inclinations (e.g. I am not a Conservative but am certainly conservatively inclined, the difference being

either attachment, or not, to a Movement. Here all sorts of cross-cutting sub-categories emerge: cultural, social, fiscal,

military). The third is the Methodological Standard: whether one seeks to govern or to rule, and how.

The fourth is the Vision Standard. How does one see—that is, define—America? Is it simply a machine, say, to re-distribute wealth? Or is it an organism, variegated but whole and, finally, identifiably itself—bountiful, mindful of its roots (including its blights), thoughtful, strong, and both self-assured and -correcting. Each of us may determine the differing weight of each standard and check the boxes for a given president: that's the scorecard. When I do that I am very glad that Trump beat Hillary (who is craven, fraudulent, and venal) and is mostly undoing the Obama Project (Obama being as close to a Manchurian Candidate as I hope we ever get).

In his history with Kurtz, the president had been erratic (as when he claimed that Fox News is slanted against him), often capricious and impulsive (as with his on-again-off-again-on-again interview with the *Times*), sometimes fraudulent (as with his claims about crowd numbers), but never covertly vindictive: he's in your face, not behind your back. He vastly over-values pop culture and its ephemera and so overreacts to passing stimuli, a vestigial immaturity. He is intuitive and intelligent, can be quite charming (as a parade of interviewees attested to during the transition), but is sometimes personally imperious and vulgar.

Too often he either fails to understand or willfully ignores the rituals that regulate political discourse. Kurtz explains:

Organized journalism is built around rules, traditions, and the careful parsing of words. Traditional politics is built around polling, spinning, and the careful deployment of words . . . often drained of meaning to avoid giving offense . . . the two sides are ;joined in a mutually dependent relationship. They speak the same language. They know they will be penalized for reckless rhetoric, for statements that can be proven wrong.

That ritual is in ruins. "The media takes everything literally, and Trump pitches his arguments at a gut level. It is asymmetrical warfare." As a result, "my profession keeps moving the goalposts." To paraphrase the late Senator (and sociologist) Daniel Patrick Moynihan, one side would "define deviancy" up but its own deviancy down.

A *Time* political reporter Jonathan Martin accuses Trump and his supporter of being racists, fascist, and nativist; when Trump's golf course was defaced the Washington Post headline read, "Environmental activists pull off a daring act of defiance"; Julia Ioffe, about to join the *Atlantic*, thought that Trump might be "fucking his daughter" and, when Sean Spicer called Jeffrey Goldberg, the incoming editor at that magazine, he was told she would not be fired, because "she apologized." (Examples of this sort proliferate.)

Of course, Trump's racism and fascism are taken as premises not requiring defense: the question is begged from the beginning. That is why Jim Rutenberg, a *Times* columnist, justifies what he allows is the massive imbalance of coverage of the president. "Because," he famously wrote, " if you believe all those things, you have to throw out the textbook American journalism has been using for the better part of the

past half-century, if not longer. . . . If you view a Trump presidency as . . . potentially dangerous then your reporting is going to reflect that.”

It falls to the staff to contain the president. For example, if a well-honed message were not enough fun for Trump, he would become impatient. This would lead to what the staff called “defiance disorder.” Unfortunately, that gave a hostile press openings—including lies. Kurtz includes it all (sometimes failing to distinguish between the rabid pop culture figures, like Colbert, Handler, Griffin, and Silverman, and the merely febrile, like MSNBC), but he does document the apologies and the scoldings, demotions, and firings that befell certain reporters.

Still, too many posturing opportunists seem off the hook. Kurtz documents the depredations of Jim Acosta, the cowboy who will clean up Dodge, the mocking jokester, the gaggle insulter-in-chief. Well, “why not?” Acosta might have asked himself. After all, according to Chuck Todd, the game was now *The Truth v. Donald Trump*: a self-issued double-0 license to kill to some commentators. A major victim was neutral language; the sheer vulgarity of some in the media hit new lows: much of the public language of the press would be X-rated. (Apparently not too many of them have heard the Spanish expression, *lo cortés no quita lo valiente*—courtesy does not diminish valor.)

Kurtz does show the (often willful) media failure to distinguish the vital from the trivial, as though mischievously: throw it against the wall, enough will stick and it will all look equally bad. In my eyes, the worst offenders—Scarborough, Cooper—are those with pretensions to

genuine journalism using self-righteousness as a cover, as when Cooper called the President of the United States “shmuck.” What a fascinating, important book it would be if a similar study were done about Obama and the press. I would call it, “Mr. President, May I Kiss the *Other* Buttock Now?”

At the end of his book, Kurtz concludes that “a common refrain among Trump’s antagonists in the press is that they must resist normalizing his presidency [and I note the priestly presumption, as though their function were sacramental]. But in the process, they have abnormalized journalism . . . Too many journalists have subjected him to trial by Twitter, overreacted to his personal invective, and lost sight of what truly matters in people’s lives . . . the media’s reputation . . . might never recover.” Truth be told, the story becomes tiresome and that, despite Kurtz’ crisp sentences and quick pace, Kurtz really is *reporting*. This is old-school journalism, a refreshing departure from the New Normal. (I would have welcomed some discussion of the people and outlets—mainstream or not—that are *not* part of the disease.)

The noted political philosopher Robert De Niro has stated categorically that he does not want to hear “the other side” (this after asserting that he wants to punch the president in the face). Clearly this consummate method actor is channeling his inner Travis Bickle, the paranoid, alienated, self-righteous, homicidal taxi-driver who gave us one of the screen’s great blood baths. Kurtz shows us, systematically and with a great wealth of evidence, that the mainstream press is perpetrating its own version of Travis. (Of course, the president too often channeling Loki, the shape-shifting Norse god of, among other traits, mischievousness, is not helpful.)

That is why deep down the book is a lament: the Fourth Estate has sold its hallmarks of independence, objectivity and a truth-telling purpose for a pot of message. The deconstruction of ritual is about to become ritual deconstruction—and, finally, just destruction. Even Jimmy Carter has allowed that the press has gone too far in this case and, at the end of the day we should, I think, agree with the final comment of one of Trump's severest critics, Charles Krauthammer: ". . . on the day he's sworn in [he is] president. I want him to succeed. I am a patriotic American."

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