

The Media Versus Trump

Today's crop of journalists don't bother to hide their partisanship.

by Conrad Black



Almost the entire country is relieved that the president has shortened his daily press briefings and reduced his own role in them. Those who support the president feel that he has made the point that he is completely unintimidated by media hostility and has no significant trouble fielding their questions, no matter how nasty, baiting, and repetitive, and that he need not submit himself or the dignity of his great office to any more of the outrageous discourtesy and distortions of his media enemies. Those who oppose the president will generally be relieved not have to watch any more of these sessions of lengthy bloviation by the president, where important news is revealed but where too much of the time is monopolized by the president with discursive and self-

serving answers, frequently to questions that were not asked.

There is some merit in both views, and few people on either side will miss Mr. Trump's wandering ruminations and his jousts with his media picadors. Given the right question and encouragement to answer thoughtfully, most people would agree that Trump is certainly not afraid of the press, as has been suspected of some presidents, and that he is reasonably on top of the subjects discussed. This president is more articulate and forthcoming with the press than were Presidents Eisenhower, Ford, Reagan, and the Bushes, though it seems that President Eisenhower, as his press secretary James Hagerty claimed, often deliberately replied to reporters in syntactically confusing terms.

The underlying fact in Trump-media relations has not changed: He detests most of them, and most of them detest him. Again, they are all within their rights to have these opinions, but this stand-off implies an inaccurate balance of propriety. There is only one president of the United States; there have only been 44 since the promulgation of the Constitution of the United States in 1789, and every occupant of that post has come to it by popular election to national office (president or vice president, except Gerald Ford, who was constitutionally chosen to fill a vacancy as vice president and acceded on the resignation of the incumbent president). There is no remote equality of status or exclusivity or right to the benefit of protocol between the chief of state and head of government of the United States of America and any number of accredited White House journalists. Mr. Trump is under no obligation to speak to the press, and presidents rarely did prior to Franklin D. Roosevelt. The entire free press and media bulk up to an aggregated level of legitimacy and importance that is considerable, but the people at a White House press briefing can scarcely claim to be the personification of the world's right to newsworthy information opposite the person they are questioning.

It would have been inconceivable, prior to 2017, that any president of the United States would have been peppered with insolent and provoking "questions," or interrupted so rudely, or debated with so aggressively, by the White House journalists, as this president has through many of these coronavirus briefings. Obviously, the circumstances of Donald Trump's election are unique, as he had never held any public or military office, had no political background, and although a much-publicized celebrity, gained the Republican nomination and won the election with a campaign based on severe criticism of the governing political class, the national political media prominent within it. Those media had almost uniformly disparaged him as a candidate and continued to do so. Many in the media jumped at once onto the fiction that he owed his election to illegal collusion with Russia. Trump's grievances with the media were real when he denounced them as a candidate for soft-pedaling the failures of the Obama regime and completely missing the equity bubble until it blew up, more than a decade after President Clinton first inflated it. He accused them of failing to criticize adequately the failure of policy in the Middle East and the disadvantageous trade arrangements, especially with China and Mexico, and for failing to note the shrinking American work force, the decline of American economic growth, and the increase in poverty, welfare dependence, and violent crime under Obama. He was right – the media had underreported all of this, which is one reason why they were so astonished when Trump was elected.

The media had a chance, in the aftermath of the election, to take up the lessons of the surprising result, and give the incoming president the customary media honeymoon. Instead, they sandbagged him from the start, attaching unwarranted credence to every negative report about him, claiming he hadn't visited gravely wounded congressman Steve Scalise when he had; CNN even found a doctor who said Trump has heart disease when his check-up showed nothing of the kind, and most of the media treated the preposterous Steele dossier as a bona

fide intelligence report down to its tawdriest details, until that claim became unfeasible. There was no retraction or even correction, just a shift to a new line of spurious attack. When the whole Russian collusion canard collapsed, there was scarcely a word of acknowledgement that 80 percent of the national political media had been pushing a defamatory fiction for the last three years. On November 10, 2016, Will Rahn of CBS Digital posted a piece entitled "The Unbearable Smugness of the Media," in which he chastised his colleagues in the press for failing to notice the strength of the Trump movement and for selling the Clinton view that most of Trump's supporters were louts and failures. He correctly predicted that their response to the election result would not be self-reflection at how badly they had miscalled the result and unprofessionally slagged off the Republican candidate, but dismay that there were more louts and failures in the country than they had realized.

This war continues, and illustrative of it is last week's effort to ridicule the president for supposedly urging people to drink bleach to ward off the coronavirus. What he did was ask Bill Bryan, acting under secretary of homeland security for science and technology, in the presence of the press, if there was any way to internalize the combined force of light and disinfectant. It was a musing, and was indiscreet given the media's penchant for using anything to discredit and ridicule the president, but the treatment of the subject was an outrage. One of the most irritating outbursts of self-praise from a prominent media figure in many years came on the weekend from Andy Lack, chairman of NBC News and the infamous MSNBC, roost of rabid Trump-haters such as Rachel Maddow, Lawrence O'Donnell, and Joe Scarborough. His opening gambit was that "President Trump came into office railing against many of the foundations of our democratic institutions, including a free press." He continued with a sequence of similarly collectively self-serving assertions, such as: "He hasn't laid a glove on serious journalism" and that the

current pandemic has made “powerfully clear . . . that the heart of journalism has never been stronger.” He invoked Woodward and Bernstein, possibly the two most notorious myth-makers in American history, in promoting the media’s mission to “seek the best obtainable version of the truth.” He concluded with the gag-line (in the sense of preparing to throw up) about journalism as a “public trust.”

Trump has his infelicities, but he never assailed any foundations of American democracy and he is the president. He is often untruthful, but he is genuine and has done more of what he promised to do when seeking the office than any president since Coolidge. The national political media are primarily a sewer, accorded about a third of the level of approval from the public that the president enjoys. Their chief purpose appears to be to misinform and to destroy the first president in living memory who has called them the unprofessional rag-tag band of hypocrites that many of them are. It is the media who have disgraced and are endangering the free press, not the president they have so grossly and lengthily defamed.

First published in