The Obvious Takes Longer: George Clooney, Edward Murrow, and the Decline of Media Integrity

By Patrick Keeney

The American actor and director George Clooney recently appeared on CBS's *60 Minutes* to promote a new Broadway adaptation of his 2005 film *Good Night, and Good Luck*.

Both the stage play and the original film chronicle the story of Edward R. Murrow, the legendary CBS newsman who, in the 1950s, challenged Senator Joseph McCarthy during the height of the Red Scare and helped define television journalism as a force capable of speaking truth to power.

Mr. Clooney, a long-time critic of President Trump, used the interview to share several reflections, chief among them a

spirited defense of journalism and its essential role in a democratic society.

“When the other three estates fail,” Clooney said, “when the judiciary, the executive, and the legislative branches fail us, the fourth estate has to succeed.” He added, “Journalism, and telling truth to power, has to be waged, as war is waged.”

These are stirring words, and Clooney is, of course, correct in the abstract. In theory, the press in a democracy serves a vital function: a guardian of the public interest and a truth-teller in the face of power.

But noble sentiments, while admirable, do not erase recent history. Clooney’s declaration comes after a decade or more in which much of the American media has fallen short of its ideals. Mr. Clooney’s road-to-Damascus moment comes late in the day, rather like a firefighter arriving just in time to admire the ashes.

Consider only a few recent high-profile examples.

The obvious senescence of Joe Biden, long obscured or outright dismissed by the legacy media, is only now being openly acknowledged. For the better part of his presidency, journalists and commentators largely ignored or rejected age-related decline as either irrelevant or off-limits to serious scrutiny. Yet the question now becomes inescapable: if Biden was not in charge, then who was?

The Russian collusion narrative, once treated as a settled fact, ultimately collapsed under the weight of its own evidentiary deficits. The Hunter Biden laptop story, initially dismissed as “Russian disinformation,” was later authenticated, but only long after the 2020 election.

The origins of COVID-19, once confidently attributed to a natural spillover from a bat or pangolin, are now more plausibly linked to a laboratory leak. Both the U.S.

Department of Energy and the FBI have concluded, with varying degrees of confidence, that a lab-based origin is the most likely scenario.

The point is that these were not trivial oversights. They were pivotal moments—central narratives that dominated public discourse, were widely reported, and carried significant political consequences. Major media outlets repeated them with near-unanimity, only to have these narratives later be revised, quietly retracted, or outright reversed.

And so when Clooney calls upon journalism to "succeed," one is left to wonder: where was this note of urgency when it mattered most?

To be clear, this is not an *ad hominem* against Clooney. His recent remarks calling for President Biden to step aside were motivated, he says, by a fundamental ethical imperative:

"I was raised to tell the truth," he explained. "I had seen the president up close at a fundraiser, and I was surprised. And so I feel as if there were a lot of profiles in cowardice in my party through all of that."

That is an honourable position.

The more profound concern lies not with Clooney but with the Fourth Estate itself. Too often, journalism today seems less interested in telling truth to power than in coordinating with it. Like the Red Queen, elements of the contemporary American media have come to demand that the public accept a growing list of implausible propositions—"six impossible things before breakfast," as it were. Among them: that biological males can become pregnant; that the Covington Catholic student was emblematic of white supremacy; that that surges in border crossings were seasonal; that Jussie Smollett was the victim of a politically motivated MAGA hate crime; that the George Floyd and BLM protests were "mostly peaceful" despite widespread rioting and property destruction; and that all

differences between the sexes are purely social constructs, devoid of any biological basis. And so on.

In such a climate, empirical reality appears increasingly subordinate to ideological coherence. So long as the narrative is preserved, factual contradictions can be tolerated—even encouraged—as a sign of moral sophistication.

If journalism is to be "waged like war," as Clooney urges, then one must ask: war on whom? Or on what? If the answer is lies, disinformation, and dishonesty, then excellent. But if the battlefield is truth itself—sacrificed in the name of narrative cohesion or ideological loyalty—then the public becomes not the beneficiary, but the casualty.

The tragedy lies in the fact that journalism's foundational duty—truth-telling—is, in principle, disarmingly simple. Or at least it ought to be. That one "is raised to tell the truth," as Mr. Clooney remarked of his own upbringing, remains a widely shared moral ideal in our culture. It is instilled in children, enshrined in our schooling, and solemnly affirmed in courtrooms.

And yet, this fundamental moral obligation has been eclipsed—sacrificed to ideology, tribalism, and the churn of the 24-hour news cycle. Over time, journalism's core commitment has been displaced by partisan loyalties, algorithmic incentives, and the smug certainty that virtue lies solely with one's own side. The result is a press that behaves less like a guardian of democratic accountability and too often like apologists for entrenched power.

Still, one dares to hope. The Fourth Estate may yet recover its true vocation—not as curator of consensus or enforcer of orthodoxy, but as a patient and principled seeker of truth. It may yet return to the quiet, painstaking, and frequently unfashionable and often unwelcome work of telling the truth without fear, without favor, and without apology.

As Edward R. Murrow once observed, “The obscure we see eventually. The completely obvious, it seems, takes longer.” Perhaps the time has finally come to see what should never have been obscure at all: that journalism’s first duty is not to power, nor party, nor narrative, but to the truth itself.