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The 2016 Election and the Demise of Journalistic Standards

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on April 20, 2017, in Atlanta, Georgia, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar.

I've been a journalist for a long time. Long enough to know that it wasn't always like this. There was a time not so long ago when journalists were trusted and admired. We were generally seen as trying to report the news in a fair and straightforward manner. Today, all that has changed. For that, we can blame the 2016 election or, more accurately, how some news organizations chose to cover it. Among the many firsts, last year's election gave us the gobsmacking revelation that most of the

mainstream media puts both thumbs on the scale—that most of what you read, watch, and listen to is distorted by intentional bias and hostility. I have never seen anything like it. Not even close.

It's not exactly breaking news that most journalists lean left. I used to do that myself. I grew up at *The New York Times*, so I'm familiar with the species. For most of the media, bias grew out of the social revolution of the 1960s and '70s. Fueled by the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, the media jumped on the anti-authority bandwagon writ large. The deal was sealed with Watergate, when journalism was viewed as more trusted than government—and far more exciting and glamorous. Think Robert Redford in *All the President's Men*. Ever since, young people became journalists because they wanted to be the next Woodward and Bernstein, find a Deep Throat, and bring down a president. Of course, most of them only wanted to bring down a Republican president. That's because liberalism is baked into the journalism cake.

During the years I spent teaching at the Columbia University School of Journalism, I often found myself telling my students that the job of the reporter was “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” I'm not even sure where I first heard that line, but it still captures the way most journalists think about what they do. Translate the first part of that compassionate-sounding idea into the daily decisions about what makes news, and it is easy to fall into the habit of thinking

that every person afflicted by something is entitled to help. Or, as liberals like to say, “Government is what we do together.” From there, it's a short drive to the conclusion that every problem has a government solution.

The rest of that journalistic ethos—“afflict the comfortable”—leads to the knee-jerk support of endless taxation. Somebody has to pay for that government intervention the media loves to demand. In the same vein, and for the same reason, the average reporter will support every conceivable regulation as a way to equalize conditions for the poor. He will also give sympathetic coverage to groups like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter.

A New Dimension

I knew all of this about the media mindset going into the 2016 presidential campaign. But I was still shocked at what happened. This was not naïve liberalism run amok. This was a whole new approach to politics. No one in modern times had seen anything like it. As with grief, there were several stages. In the beginning, Donald Trump's candidacy was treated as an outlandish publicity stunt, as though he wasn't a serious candidate and should be treated as a circus act. But television executives quickly made a surprising discovery: the more they put Trump on the air, the higher their ratings climbed. Ratings are money. So news shows started devoting hours and hours simply to pointing the cameras at Trump and letting them run.

As his rallies grew, the coverage grew,

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which made for an odd dynamic. The candidate nobody in the media took seriously was attracting the most people to his events and getting the most news coverage. Newspapers got in on the game too. Trump, unlike most of his opponents, was always available to the press, and could be counted on to say something outrageous or controversial that made a headline. He made news by being a spectacle.

Despite the mockery of journalists and late-night comics, something extraordinary was happening. Trump was dominating a campaign none of the smart money thought he could win. And then, suddenly, he was winning. Only when the crowded Republican field began to thin and Trump kept racking up primary and caucus victories did the media's tone grow more serious.

One study estimated that Trump had received so much free airtime that if he had had to buy it, the price would have been \$2 billion. The realization that they had helped Trump's rise seemed to make many executives, producers, and journalists furious. By the time he secured the nomination and the general election rolled around, they were gunning for him. Only two people now had a chance to be president, and the overwhelming media consensus was that it could not be Donald Trump. They would make sure of that. The coverage of him grew so vicious and one-sided that last August I wrote a column on the unprecedented bias. Under the headline "American Journalism Is Collapsing Before Our Eyes," I wrote that the so-called cream of the media crop was "engaged in a naked display of partisanship" designed to bury Trump and elect Hillary Clinton.

The evidence was on the front page, the back page, the culture pages, even the sports pages. It was at the top of the broadcast and at the bottom of the broadcast. Day in, day out, in every media market in America, Trump was savaged like no other candidate in memory. We were watching the total

collapse of standards, with fairness and balance tossed overboard. Every story was an opinion masquerading as news, and every opinion ran in the same direction—toward Clinton and away from Trump.

For the most part, I blame *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for causing this breakdown. The two leading liberal newspapers were trying to top each other in their demonization of Trump and his supporters. They set the tone, and most of the rest of the media followed like lemmings.

On one level, tougher scrutiny of Trump was clearly defensible. He had a controversial career and lifestyle, and he was seeking the presidency as his first job in government. He also provided lots of fuel with some of his outrageous words and deeds during the campaign. But from the beginning there was also a second element to the lopsided coverage. *The New York Times* has not endorsed a Republican for president since Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, meaning it would back a dead raccoon if it had a "D" after its name. Think of it—George McGovern over Richard Nixon? Jimmy Carter over Ronald Reagan? Walter Mondale over Reagan? Any Democrat would do. And *The Washington Post*, which only started making editorial endorsements in the 1970s, has never once endorsed a Republican for president.

But again, I want to emphasize that 2016 had those predictable elements plus a whole new dimension. This time, the papers dropped the pretense of fairness and jumped headlong into the tank for one candidate over the other. The *Times* media reporter began a story this way:

If you're a working journalist and you believe that Donald J. Trump is a demagogue playing to the nation's worst racist and nationalist tendencies, that he cozies up to anti-American dictators and that he would be dangerous with control of the

United States nuclear codes, how the heck are you supposed to cover him?

I read that paragraph and I thought to myself, well, that's actually an easy question. If you feel that way about Trump, normal journalistic ethics would dictate that you shouldn't cover him. You cannot be fair. And you shouldn't be covering Hillary Clinton either, because you've already decided who should be president. Go cover sports or entertainment. Yet the *Times* media reporter rationalized the obvious bias he had just acknowledged, citing the view that Clinton was "normal" and Trump was not.

I found the whole concept appalling. What happened to fairness? What happened to standards? I'll tell you what happened to them. The *Times* top editor, Dean Baquet, eliminated them. In an interview last October with the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, Baquet admitted that the piece by his media reporter had nailed his own thinking. Trump "challenged our language," he said, and Trump "will have changed journalism." Of the daily struggle for fairness, Baquet had this to say: "I think that Trump has ended that struggle. . . . We now say stuff. We fact check him. We write it more powerfully that [what he says is] false."

Baquet was being too modest. Trump was challenging, sure, but it was Baquet who changed journalism. He's the one who decided that the standards of fairness and nonpartisanship could be abandoned without consequence.

With that decision, Baquet also changed the basic news story formula. To the age-old elements of who, what, when, where, and why, he added the reporter's opinion. Now the floodgates were open, and virtually every so-called news article reflected a clear bias against Trump. Stories, photos,

headlines, placement in the paper—all the tools that writers and editors have—were summoned to the battle. The goal was to pick the next president.

Thus began the spate of stories, which continues today, in which the *Times* routinely calls Trump a liar in its news pages and headlines. Again, the contrast with the past is striking. The *Times* never called Barack Obama a liar, despite such obvious opportunities as "you can keep your doctor" and "the Benghazi attack was caused by an internet video." Indeed, the *Times* and *The Washington Post*, along with most of the White House press corps, spent eight years cheerleading the Obama administration, seeing not a smidgen of corruption or dishonesty. They have been tougher on Hillary Clinton during her long career. But they still never called her a liar, despite such doozies as "I set up my own computer server so I would only need one device," "I turned over all the government emails," and "I never sent or received classified emails." All those were lies, but not to the national media. Only statements by Trump were fair game.

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As we know now, most of the media totally missed Trump's appeal to millions upon millions of Americans. The prejudice against him blinded those news organizations to what was happening in the country. Even more incredibly, I believe the bias and hostility directed at Trump backfired. The feeling that the election was, in part, a referendum on the media, gave some voters an extra incentive to vote for Trump. A vote for him was a vote against the media and against Washington. Not incidentally, Trump used that sentiment to his advantage, often revving up his crowds with

attacks on reporters. He still does.

If I haven't made it clear, let me do so now. The behavior of much of the media, but especially *The New York Times*, was a disgrace. I don't believe it ever will recover the public trust it squandered.

The *Times*' previous reputation for having the highest standards was legitimate. Those standards were developed over decades to force reporters and editors to be fair and to gain public trust. The commitment to fairness made *The New York Times* the flagship of American journalism.

But standards are like laws in the sense that they are designed to guide your behavior in good times and in bad. Consistent adherence to them was the source of the *Times*' credibility. And eliminating them has made the paper less than ordinary. Its only standards now are double standards.

I say this with great sadness. I was blessed to grow up at the *Times*, getting a clerical job right out of college and working my way onto the reporting staff, where I worked for a decade. It was the formative experience of my career where I learned most of what I know about reporting and writing. Alas, it was a different newspaper then. Abe Rosenthal was the editor in those days, and long before we'd ever heard the phrase "zero tolerance," that's what Abe practiced toward conflicts of interest and reporters' opinions. He set the rules and everybody knew it.

Here is a true story about how Abe Rosenthal resolved a conflict of interest. A young woman was hired by the *Times* from one of the Philadelphia newspapers. But soon after she arrived in New York, a story broke in Philly that she had had a romantic affair with a political figure she had covered, and that she had accepted a fur coat and other expensive gifts from him. When he saw the story, Abe called the woman into his office and asked her if it were true. When she said yes, he told her to clean out her desk—that she was finished at the *Times*

and would never work there again. As word spread through the newsroom, some reporters took the woman's side and rushed in to tell Abe that firing her was too harsh. He listened for about 30 seconds, raised his hand for silence, and said (this is slightly bowdlerized): "I don't care if you have a romantic affair with an elephant on your personal time, but then you can't cover the circus for the paper." Case closed. The conflict of interest policy was clear, absolute, and unforgettable.

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As for reporters' opinions, Abe had a similar approach. He didn't want them in the news pages. And if you put them in, he took them out. They belonged in the opinion pages only, which were managed separately. Abe said he knew reporters tended to lean left and would find ways to sneak their views into the stories. So he saw his job as steering the paper slightly to the right. "That way," he said, "the paper would end up in the middle." He was well known for this attitude, which he summed up as "keeping the paper straight." He even said he wanted his epitaph to read, "He kept the paper straight." Like most people, I thought this was a joke. But after I related all this in a column last year, his widow contacted me and said it wasn't a joke—that, in fact, Abe's tombstone reads, "He kept the paper straight." She sent me a picture to prove it. I published that picture of his tombstone alongside a column where I excoriated the *Times* for its election coverage. Sadly, the *Times*' high standards were buried with Abe Rosenthal.

Looking to the Future

Which brings us to the crucial questions. Can the American media be fixed? And is there anything that we

as individuals can do to make a difference? The short answer to the first question is, “No, it can’t be fixed.” The 2016 election was the media’s Humpty Dumpty moment. It fell off the wall, shattered into a million pieces, and can’t be put back together again. In case there is any doubt, 2017 is confirming that the standards are still dead. The orgy of visceral Trump-bashing continues unabated.

But the future of journalism isn’t all gloom and doom. In fact, if we accept the new reality of widespread bias and seize the potential it offers, there is room for optimism. Consider this—the election showed the country is roughly divided 50-50 between people who will vote for a Democrat and people who will vote for a Republican. But our national media is more like 80-20 in favor of Democrats. While the media should, in theory, broadly reflect the public, it doesn’t. Too much of the media acts like a special interest group. Detached from the greater good, it exists to promote its own interest and the political party with which it is aligned.

Ronald Reagan’s optimism is often expressed in a story that is surely apocryphal, but irresistible. He is said to have come across a barn full of horse manure and remarked cheerfully that there must be a pony in it somewhere. I suggest we look at the media landscape in a similar fashion. The mismatch between the mainstream media and the public’s sensibilities means there is a vast untapped market for news and views that are not now represented. To realize that potential, we only need three ingredients, and we already have them: first, free speech; second, capitalism and free markets; and the third ingredient is you, the consumers of news.

Free speech is under assault, most obviously on many college campuses, but also in the news media, which

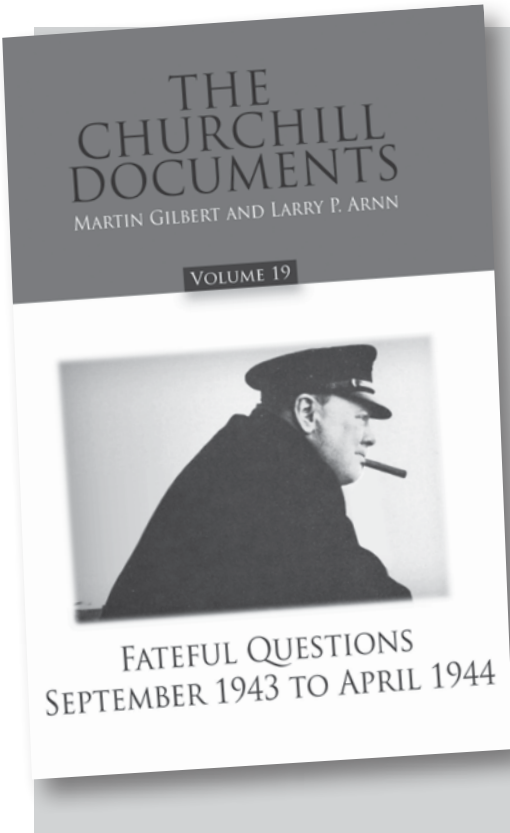
presents a conformist view to its audience and gets a politically segregated audience in return. Look at the letters section in *The New York Times*—virtually every reader who writes in agrees with the opinions of the paper. This isn’t a miracle; it’s a bubble. Liberals used to love to say, “I don’t agree with your opinion, but I would fight to the death for your right to express it.” You don’t hear that anymore from the Left. Now they want to shut you up if you don’t agree. And they are having some success.

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But there is a countervailing force. Look at what happened this winter when the Left organized boycotts of department stores that carried Ivanka Trump’s clothing and jewelry. Nordstrom folded like a cheap suit, but Trump’s supporters rallied on social media and Ivanka’s company had its best month ever. This is the model I have in mind for the media. It is similar to how FOX News got started. Rupert Murdoch thought there was an untapped market for a more fair and balanced news channel, and he recruited Roger Ailes to start it more than 20 years ago. Ailes found a niche market alright—half the country!

Incredible advances in technology are also on the side of free speech. The explosion of choices makes it almost impossible to silence all dissent and gain a monopoly, though certainly Facebook and Google are trying.

As for the necessity of preserving capitalism, look around the world. Nations without economic liberty usually have little or no dissent. That’s not a coincidence. In this, I’m reminded of an enduring image from the Occupy Wall Street movement. That movement was a pestilence, egged on by



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President Obama and others who view other people's wealth as a crime against the common good. This attitude was on vivid display as the protesters held up their iPhones to demand the end of capitalism. As I wrote at the time, did they believe Steve Jobs made each and every Apple product one at a time in his garage? Did they not have a clue about how capital markets make life better for more people than any other system known to man? They had no clue. And neither do many government officials, who think they can kill the golden goose and still get golden eggs.

Which brings me to the third necessary ingredient in determining where we go from here. It's you. I urge you to support the media you like. As the

great writer and thinker Midge Decter once put it, "You have to join the side you're on." It's no secret that newspapers and magazines are losing readers and money and shedding staff. Some of them are good newspapers. Some of them are good magazines. There are also many wonderful, thoughtful, small publications and websites that exist on a shoestring. Don't let them die. Subscribe or contribute to those you enjoy. Give subscriptions to friends. Put your money where your heart and mind are. An expanded media landscape that better reflects the diversity of public preferences would, in time, help create a more level political and cultural arena. That would be a great thing. So again I urge you: join the side you're on. ■