The Right’s Long War on Media

Exclusive: A danger from the mainstream media’s Russia-gate obsession is that it reinforces a longstanding right-wing meme about a “liberal media” out to get conservatives, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

Never in modern American history has a president so frontally gone to war with the media as Donald Trump, whose speeches and tweet storms blast critical stories as “fake news” and mainstream news outlets as “the enemy of the American people.”

“Get used to being stigmatized as ‘opposition,’” the head of media at Human Rights Watch warned reporters and editors shortly after the election. “[Trump’s] basic idea is simple: to delegitimize accountability journalism by framing it as partisan.”

So far, the Trumpian strategy seems to be working, at least with his base. A recent poll found that fewer than 10 percent of Republicans trust the media a lot, and 6 in 10 complain that the media “keep political leaders from doing their job.”

Trump’s critics, particularly in the media, portray his assault on the Fourth Estate as a “gift to tyrants everywhere” and as part of a radical campaign to “build an autocracy,” in the words of former Republican speechwriter David Frum.

I share their concerns, even as I readily acknowledge, and have often condemned, the major media’s widespread and sometimes blatant failings to report some subjects as accurately or fairly as they should.

But many of today’s righteous condemners of Trump fail to see that his attacks on the media are really the culmination of a relentless campaign over the past half century by conservatives to undercut institutions that stand in the way of their grab for power.

Leading the Charge

Although presidential attacks on the news media date back to the earliest days of the Republic, the modern conservative war on mainstream media was launched on Nov. 13, 1969, when Vice President Spiro Agnew condemned TV news broadcasters for daring to subject one of President Nixon’s speeches on Vietnam policy to “instant analysis and querulous criticism” instead of allowing him the “right to communicate directly with the people who elected him.”
Ironically, Agnew’s speech was broadcast in prime time by all three major networks. Nixon was thrilled, telling his chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, “SOBs of net[works] must have died when [they] had to carry that.”

The public response strongly favored Agnew’s charges, making the network bosses sweat. White House speechwriter Patrick Buchanan reported happily that “where the Veep is scoring is with the center and right; he has become the acknowledged spokesman of the Middle American, the Robespierre of the Great Silent Majority.”

In his speech, Agnew pointedly remarked that the big broadcasters enjoyed “a monopoly sanctioned and licensed by government,” raising the specter of federal sanctions against them. Walter Cronkite of CBS News called Agnew’s comments “as an implied threat to freedom of speech in this country.”

Cronkite didn’t know the half of it. Nixon ordered up a sustained public campaign to reinforce Agnew’s message, telling aides, “The idea that the press is militantly, viciously against [me] must be hammered home.”

Within days of Agnew’s speech, Haldeman reported that an aide “has asked our most trusted sources at the FBI to get pertinent information from their files and other available sources” on network commentators. At White House direction, 17 reporters were wiretapped on flimsy “national security” grounds. And Washington Post publisher Katharine Graham suspected, but could not prove, a White House role in challenging the licenses of her two Florida television stations, an act she called “the most effective” of all “threats to the company during Watergate.”

Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne recalls that Agnew’s “signal political achievement was igniting a campaign that endured for more than four decades painting the mainstream media as biased, liberal and elitist. . . . Rarely has a concerted political effort been more successful. Ever since, reporters, editors and producers have incessantly looked over their right shoulders, fearing they’d be assailed as secret carriers of the liberal virus.”

Accuracy in Media

One key to the “concerted political effort” that followed Agnew’s incendiary speech was the founding in 1969 of the right-wing watchdog group Accuracy in Media (AIM). Through a twice-monthly newsletter, daily radio commentary, weekly newspaper column, newspaper ads, and speakers’ bureau, AIM pounded the mainstream media relentlessly.

One of its signature successes was its hounding of New York Times reporter Raymond Bonner for his exposé of the El Mozote massacre of hundreds of civilians by Salvadoran troops in December 1981. Backed by senior officials in the Reagan
administration, and the right-wing editorial page of the Wall Street Journal, AIM contested his reporting and declared that Bonner was “worth a division to the communists in Central America.”

The Times, reeling from the criticism, reassigned Bonner to an innocuous financial desk and he eventually resigned. Later investigations by a United Nations-sponsored “truth commission” fully vindicated his courageous reporting.

A decade later, AIM trained its guns on the Clinton administration. AIM was in the vanguard of conservative muckrakers who charged the Clintons with a role in the “murder” of White House staffer Vince Foster, contrary to all official findings. The organization also “argued that the explosion of TWA Flight 800, ruled an accident, was caused by an Iranian missile, which President Clinton supposedly covered up to win re-election.”

In the Obama era, AIM and its director Cliff Kincaid – a former researcher for Oliver North’s Freedom Alliance foundation – spread right-wing conspiracy theories that President Obama was secretly a socialist Muslim, and that Marxists had taken over the Catholic Church to promote a “foreign invasion of the U.S.” by Latino immigrants. AIM also lambasted media reporting – even by Fox News – about the reality of global warming.

What makes AIM so noteworthy is not its familiar right-wing message, but the millions of dollars in funding it received over the years from major corporations to propagate that message. Its funders have reportedly included major oil and chemical companies (Chevron, Exxon, Getty, Mobil Foundation, Phillips Petroleum, Texaco Philanthropic Foundation, and Union Carbide), as well as Bethlehem Steel, Kaiser Aluminum, IBM, and right-wing foundations such as Coors, Scaife, and Smith Richardson.

The Powell Memorandum

Their support reflected a clarion call to arms in August 1971 by Lewis Powell, a prominent corporate lawyer who was nominated later that year to the Supreme Court by President Nixon. In an influential memo to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Powell warned that the “American free enterprise system” was under “broad attack” by “Communists, New Leftists and other revolutionaries who would destroy the entire system, both political and economic.”

Saving the system, he warned, would require “careful long-range planning” and political power that could only be achieved with the “united action” and the full financial backing of corporate America. Powell advocated a multi-decade strategy to target the media, colleges and universities, textbooks, advertising, newsstands, and political financing to reshape attitudes and political power in
Among other steps, he recommended, “The national television networks should be monitored in the same way that textbooks should be kept under constant surveillance. This applies not merely to so-called educational programs . . . but to the daily ‘news analysis’ which so often includes the most insidious type of criticism of the enterprise system. . . .

“This monitoring, to be effective, would require constant examination of the texts of adequate samples of programs. Complaints – to the media and to the Federal Communications Commission – should be made promptly and strongly when programs are unfair or inaccurate.”

In short, he urged major corporate funding for the very mission AIM was pioneering. AIM now lives in the shadow of other more prominent conservative media organizations that pump out conspiracy theories and even fake news to counter mainstream media narratives. Thus Trump didn’t start the conservatives’ war on the media; he is the result of their longstanding and destructive campaign, as some in their ranks now admit.

“Over the years, we’ve effectively brainwashed the core of our audience to distrust anything that they disagree with,” acknowledged conservative radio host John Zeiger. “And now it’s gone too far. Because the gatekeepers have lost all credibility in the minds of consumers, I don’t see how you reverse it.”

Rebuilding trust in the media – and in the truth – will likely require as many decades and as much collective effort as it took conservatives to tear down that trust in the first place. The job will require constant self-examination by the media to attain higher standards of truth and fairness. It will require new financial models to sustain careful and courageous reporting through challenging political times. And, not least, it will require a degree of sympathy toward the media from progressives, even as they continue offering constructive criticism to keep the media honest.

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