

Wrestling With the Press

U.S. President Trump's adversarial media relations look set to continue **By Rick Dunham**



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U.S. presidents have vented their frustration at the media for just about as long as the nation has existed. "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper," Thomas Jefferson, the third president and chief author of the U.S. *Declaration of Independence*, wrote in a letter to an editor in 1807. President U.S. Grant, a military hero of the American Civil War, complained that he had been "the subject of abuse and slander scarcely ever equaled in political history." Richard Nixon, even before he was enmeshed in the Watergate scandal, kept a list of enemies which included hostile journalists, whose telephones were tapped and whose tax returns were meticulously scrutinized.

But, the love-hate relationship between presidents and the people who monitor them on behalf of the U.S. public has hit rock bottom in the early months of the new Trump administration. At a contentious press conference on February 16, the new president accused reporters of spreading "fake" news—20 times in 77 minutes. He called *The New York Times*, the nation's most prominent daily newspaper, a "failing" venture. He also dismissed reporters as "dishonest," "disgraceful," "discredited" and "a joke." The new president took to Twitter to repeatedly condemn the news media as "the enemy of the American people," adapting a favorite epithet of Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. His press secretary barred reporters from frequently critical news organizations such as CNN, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Politico* from a February 24 press briefing. A day later, in a symbolic snub, Trump announced he would skip an annual dinner hosted by White House correspondents, the first time in 36 years a U.S. leader has missed the event.

Target selection

What makes Trump's malice in the palace different than the on-again, off-again feuds of administrations past? His unceasing verbal assault is one of the fundamental organizing principles of his White House. Trump has chosen the news media — along with "bad hombres" from Mexico and "evil" Muslims — as top political targets he seeks to delegitimize in an attempt to consolidate his political power. Trump's chief political strategist, Steve Bannon, told a conference of hard-core conservatives on February 23 that he views the media as "the opposition party" and that the press is "absolutely dead wrong about what's going on today."

International journalism groups have denounced Trump's words and deeds, saying his behavior threatens the moral legitimacy of the United States on issues such as human rights and free speech. "It is not the job of political leaders to determine how journalists should conduct their work and sets a terrible example for the rest of the world," said Joel Simon, Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The persistent and increasingly crude criticisms from the White House have prompted some political analysts to question whether the checks and balances of U.S. democracy, as enshrined in the United States Constitution of 1787, can survive in an era of fractured media consumption and alternate universes of contradictory "facts" and "fake" news. "Donald Trump accepts the existence of the formal and informal institutional structure that constitutes American democracy only as long as that suits his purposes," essayist James Fallows wrote recently, "and disdains or directly attacks it when it gets in his way."

The roots of antipathy

The hostility between Trump and the media elite has only grown since he entered the political arena in 2015. Many political reporters treated his nascent candidacy as a joke. *The Huffington Post* even relegated it to its "entertainment" section. Mainstream journalists reported how Trump had spent years spreading

a lie that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and made other false statements that would have disqualified traditional candidates. As the presidential election unfolded, Trump accused the media of being agents of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and said they were intentionally downplaying the size and strength of his political movement.

No doubt, many in the media failed to understand the seething grassroots anger about a system "rigged" against average citizens. Republicans see the tensions of 2017 as a direct outgrowth of the media's off-key coverage of one of the biggest upsets in U.S. political history. "The national media had a very bad 2016, and they are taking it out on the current president of the United States," Republican consultant Matt Mackowiak, host of the "Mack On Politics" podcast, said in an interview. "They feel guilt for not covering his candidacy more seriously in the [Republican] primary and regret allowing circumstances to develop where Trump could narrowly defeat Hillary Clinton in a shocking election result."

Despite the tensions of 2016, Washington journalism veterans insist that they were prepared to ease into a normal relationship with the new president—adversarial but not antagonistic. They blame Trump for poisoning the public discourse. "We're not at war with the administration, we're at work," *Washington Post* editor Marty Baron said at a February 14 conference in California. "We're doing our jobs." But Baron's rhetoric grew more heated when the administration blackballed certain media outlets on February 24. "This is an undemocratic path that the administration is traveling," he said in a statement.

Between a rock and a hard place

Most U.S. reporters continue to do their jobs without questioning the president's motives, but many feel they are in a no-win situation: If they repeat untrue White House claims, they are serving as propagandists for the regime. Yet, if they debunk falsehoods or report inconvenient truths, they are effectively calling their president a liar. And, if they report anything



White House spokesman Sean Spicer holds a press conference on January 23 in Washington, D.C.

remotely critical of the president, they risk a backlash from the White House. "I don't think that the press' relationship with Trump will ever be 'normal,' since it's become clear that he has an almost pathological hatred towards them and how they cover him," said John Connolly, a financial writer and editor.

Still, the tone of the exchanges between Trump and his media targets has left some journalists uneasy. The incessant combat between media outlets and Trump has reinforced the view among some that the media has a political agenda—the delegitimizing of the Trump presidency. "The press seems a bit unhinged," said Mary Don, author of *The Idiosyncraticist* blog and a former business journalist. "Members of the traditional press really do seem to believe that they are part of the meritocratic elite, bringing the truth on the tablets. In an election about change, their plumping for the more-of-the-same candidate made them natural targets for Trump and his supporters."

A misguided strategy

In the United States, public trust in the mass media fell to an all-time low of 32 percent in

2016, according to a Gallup Poll. But, despite widespread suspicion of the press, Trump's message is not resonating beyond his political base. Another survey conducted in late February found that 37 percent of people said they trusted Trump to tell the truth, while 56 percent said they trusted the media more. A majority, 58 percent, expressed embarrassment at the behavior of their president. Some longtime Trump allies at conservative Fox News and other right-wing media organizations are warning the president to change course. "I think it's a mistake on the administration's part to be so confrontational with the media," Chris Ruddy, CEO of the conservative news site Newsmax Media, told ABC News.

Thus far, the confrontational approach seems to have yielded less-favorable coverage, not the more positive tone sought by Trump. "Trump will reap the whirlwind with his relentless media-bashing combined with constant lying," said David McCumber, editor of the *Montana Standard* newspaper and former Washington bureau chief for *Hearst Newspapers*. "The press is an essential part of our democracy. We are not the enemy of the American people, but we are the watch-

dog. And, there is much for us to bark about. We will not be cowed or muzzled."

Hope and change?

News organizations seem unlikely to soften their tone any time soon. "American media should never reconcile with a president—any president," said Cragg Hines, a retired Washington bureau chief for the *Houston Chronicle*. "That's not the media's role. That doesn't mean the relationship has to be hostile, but better hostile than too chummy or acquiescent."

Trump seems unlikely to change, either, for both personal and political reasons. The New York businessman is notoriously thin-skinned and cannot restrain himself from raging at critics. "If somebody hits me, I have to hit them back," he explained last year on Fox News.

Politically, Trump's hostile attitude toward the media has done little to damage him among his core backers, as 87 percent of Republicans approve of his job performance and 75 percent of Trump supporters view him as more credible than his media adversaries. "You lost," was the taunt conservative author Anna Maria Perez dished to the media in a February 26 social media missive. "Get over it." As long as Trump remains popular with Republican voters, the party's leaders in the U.S. Congress are likely to remain loyal to the Trump agenda, from immigration curbs to trade tensions with China.

Republican consultant Mackowiak acknowledged that both the Trump White House and the media have made mistakes, both factual and tactical. "Part of me says this pace and hysteria cannot be sustained for four years, and so therefore, I expect that we will settle into a more traditional manner of White House coverage with a better relationship between the White House and the press corps," he said.

But, signs of rapprochement have yet to appear. Jake Tapper, a CNN anchor, on February 24 directly challenged Trump's media strategy. "There's a word for that kind of thinking," he told his viewers. "The word is un-American." The White House, too, seems to be reveling in the rugged repartee. Top Trump aide Bannon predicts the situation is "going to get worse everyday."

Mackowiak said the rising tensions are corrosive to the U.S. system of government. "We need a vibrant, honest, ethical, dogged and independent media in the United States," he said. "But in many ways, the press corps is behaving like an opposition party, and that is not good for the country." ■

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