

Fake News and Fake Innocence

At a rally in Phoenix a few weeks ago, President Trump went rogue. He stopped reading his prepared remarks off the teleprompter and for 30 minutes went on a tirade, taking aim at his favorite target: journalists.

The crowd, of course, loved it.

But as I listened on television, I kept thinking that Donald Trump was reminding me of someone. But for a while, I couldn't think of who it was. Then it hit me.

Donald Trump was sounding like Joe Pesci. Not the goofy Joe Pesci in *Home Alone*, but the Joe Pesci in *Goodfellas*.

No, I'm not comparing Donald Trump to the gangster Pesci played in the movie. It's just that there are times when Mr. Trump sounds more like a wise guy from Queens than a dignified man who occupies the Oval Office.

I was a journalist at CBS News for 28 years and during that time I witnessed liberal bias; I witnessed liberal elitism; and I witnessed a few mistakes. But I never saw anything resembling the fake news the president is constantly wailing about. I never saw any journalist just make something up out of nothing.

During his rant in Phoenix Mr. Trump said journalists attribute stories to unnamed sources that don't exist. Sure, there have been a few bad apples over the years that made up quotes from non-existent sources. But that's extremely rare.

To Donald Trump, fake news, more than likely, is simply news about him that he doesn't like.

As for mistakes, there have been a few big ones since Mr. Trump became president. But they've been the result of flimsy reporting not a conspiracy to concoct make-believe facts to

hurt the president – no matter what Donald Trump and his most passionate supporters believe.

In early June, the president's favorite piñata, CNN, reported on its website that James Comey, the former FBI director, would contradict President Trump in testimony before Congress.

CNN said Comey would contest the president's assertion that Comey had informed him three times that he was not under investigation.

CNN's Gloria Borger repeated the assertion on the air.

CNN got the story wrong and issued a correction.

Then in late June, CNN reported that Trump adviser Anthony Scaramucci had ties to a Russian investment fund that had attracted the attention of investigators in the United States Senate.

CNN wound up retracting the story. And three of the network's top investigative reporters had to resign. As the New York Times reported: "The retracted story and ignominious exits of three prominent journalists was an embarrassing episode for CNN, particularly at a time when there was widespread mistrust in the media and Mr. Trump was regularly attacking the press."

Breitbart called the story "very fake news" – and President Trump tweeted, "Wow, CNN had to retract big story on 'Russia,' with 3 employees forced to resign. What about all the other phony stories they do? FAKE NEWS!'"

Not really. No one who knows how it works believes that the CNN journalists simply made up the story. But it's undeniable that too many journalists don't like anything about this president – and that can lead to mistakes that look like fake news.

Journalists, as I've noted before, are not good at looking inward. Introspection is not a strong suit, Circling the

wagons is. So they don't spend a lot of time examining their biases and how those biases affect the way they cover the news.

And so, if the president has an obligation to be fair in his criticism of the media – and not cavalierly throw the words “fake news” around the way he does – then journalists also have an obligation (as obvious as it may be): to be fair to the president *even if they don't like him*.

While it's true that President Trump deserves a lot of the criticism the press heaps on him, the press needs to acknowledge that too many reporters have such animosity for this president that it influences their journalism.

Here's how Jonathan Tobin put it in National Review: “Since Trump took office, the willingness of journalists to mix opinion with news reporting has grown. Opposition to Trump and his policies is now seen as justifying any breach of the church–state divide between news and opinion. Any efforts to rein in this bias is denounced as buckling under to Trump's intimidation even if those doing so are merely asking the press to play it straight rather than to signal their disgust and opposition to the president.”

In a free country like ours, people need to have confidence in the press; they need to know that reporters are honest brokers of information. They need to know that journalists are holding powerful people accountable – and not settling scores.

So, it would help if President Trump stopped delegitimizing the mainstream media; it would help if he would stop channeling Joe Pesci when he's ranting about “fake news” and the press.

And it would also help if reporters acknowledged what a lot of news consumers have already figured out: that too often, too many journalists have abandoned the role of objective observers and taken on the role of anti-Trump activists.

Shouting fake news is no way to deal with a press Donald Trump doesn't like. And proclaiming fake innocence is no way to deal with a president reporters don't like.