

# Rubio Destroys Trump at the Debate; Will it Matter?



It took a long time, but Donald Trump's GOP primary competitors finally figured out that battling for second place was an ineffective campaign strategy. With all but one of the early states going to Trump, and national polls showing more to soon follow, Marco Rubio and Ted

Cruz understood that they needed to focus their efforts on chopping away at the *big dog*.

They showed up at last night's CNN debate wielding axes.

Viewers who tuned in to hear about policy and fresh ideas were likely disappointed, but the reality is that the rise of Trump has proven that a significant portion of the base just doesn't care about such things anymore. They want attitude. They want soundbites. They want a fight. They got all of those things, but for the first time, it wasn't Donald Trump who walked out as the victor of such a contest. He was the decisive loser. And though Cruz did well and helped himself, it was Rubio who came out as the clear champion.

Rubio bested Trump in their head-to-head exchange of personal insults and one-liners. He made Trump look weak, portraying the billionaire's success as having been inherited rather than earned. He mocked Trump as a lightweight for his faux conservatism and his robotic repetitiveness (a criticism Rubio himself had to deal with a few weeks back). He effectively branded Trump as a hypocrite for his bulk-hiring of illegal immigrants. While Cruz attacked Trump for not divulging his tax returns, Rubio ridiculed Trump's business failures and his

inclination to liken the Middle East to a real estate venture.

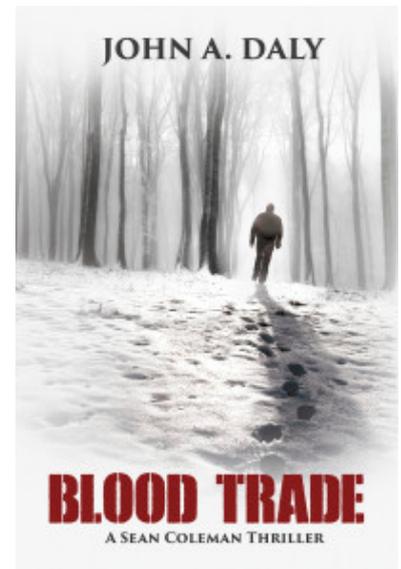
Perhaps most importantly, Rubio drew attention to some of Trump's controversies (like *Trump University*) that, up until today, had largely been overlooked by a media.

This is significant because the media hasn't been vetting Trump to the level they would typically vet a GOP presidential front-runner. Sure, journalists have been reacting to Trump's controversial, often dishonest rhetoric, but there hasn't been a serious effort to shed light on questionable business practices, lawsuits, associations, etc. (like there was with Mitt Romney). Now, with Rubio publicizing such topics in a high-profile, national debate, the media's going to have to react.

For Trump, the optics of the two-way assault were bad. He looked rattled. He flailed. He turned "low-energy" (as Trump likes to put it) fairly quickly, and he never quite recovered. He wasn't funny like he usually is, and he never landed any significant *counter-punches*.

As disheartening as it is that *style* and *optics* have become the most important elements in a run for the presidency, it was Trump who set these schoolyard ground rules. And last night, the bully got knocked to the ground.

As of this morning, Rubio hasn't let up. He's been mocking Trump on the campaign trail using the kind of attack-lines we'd previously only seen from Trump himself. He's been deriding Trump's tweets, proclaiming Trump had a meltdown backstage. Rubio even went as far as suggesting that Trump may have wet his pants at the debate. He's framing Trump as small and inconsequential, and he's doing it in front of roaring crowds. It's an all-around optics win.



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Is any of this conduct dignified? No. Is it presidential? Absolutely not. But it's an effective attack strategy against a man who has skated to front-runner status on little more than his crass, loud slogans, and a larger than life persona.

The big question is this: Has it come too late? Conventional wisdom says yes (and I'm inclined to agree), but if we've learned anything from this campaign, it's that conventional wisdom no longer applies.

If Rubio wants to win the primary, he'd better continue his roast of the front-runner. And it needs to be relentless.

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## Marco Rubio's Low Media-Bar

# for Failure



Anyone who has watched a majority of the GOP presidential debates can tell you that message repetition is a big part of the candidates' selling points. Front-runner Donald Trump often speaks in platitudes that include *building a wall*, *China*, *winning*, and *Making America Great Again*. Ted Cruz has recited his line about repealing "every word of Obamacare" countless times. John

Kasich often answers questions by invoking his record *in Ohio*. And Chris Christie, of course, has talked about being a federal prosecutor on 9/11 ad nauseam.

For better or for worse, most candidates use repetitive talking points, and it typically makes sense to do so. You never know, after all, if your audience is comprised of voters who may be closely paying attention to your case for the presidency for the very first time.

One candidate who hadn't struck me as being particularly repetitive (other than when it came to the inspiring story of his upbringing) was Marco Rubio. That of course changed last Saturday night, at the ABC debate, when he pivoted multiple times (while being heckled by opponent Chris Christie) to an obviously rehearsed line about Barack Obama's failures stemming from the president's ideology rather than his inexperience.

Rubio's intent was to address criticism of his own lack of governing experience by emphasizing his personal judgement and knowledge of the issues over his resume. His delivery, unfortunately for him, was atrocious and strikingly uncharacteristic of his typically nimble-minded demeanor. The

result was Rubio playing directly into Christie's narrative that U.S. senators don't have the necessary skill-set that state governors have to lead the nation.

Even though the rest of Rubio's debate performance that night was actually very good (especially in the realm of foreign policy knowledge), I knew his slip-up would be a compelling news item afterwards. I had no idea, however, just *how* compelling of a news item it would be.

*ABC News* pundits pounced on the incident the moment the debate ended, framing it as a devastating blow to the senator. "Rubio Chokes" read a headline in the *Politico*. The *Boston Herald* went with "Under fire, Marco Rubio crashes and burns". It was the lead debate story on all of the national news networks for the next 24 hours, with some pundits even referring to Rubio's conduct as a "meltdown." Others likened it to a malfunctioning robot. There was even speculation that Rubio's candidacy might have been permanently derailed.

The media's coverage of the Rubio incident was (and continues to be) weirdly obsessive – especially considering that the substance of what he was saying wasn't particularly controversial. And I'm not the only one who has noticed the oddity.

Renowned statistician Nate Silver, who has made a name for himself in recent years for nailing his predictions of high-profile election outcomes, tweeted that night: "I thought Rubio had a real bad night too but given the media groupthink on the issue I'm rapidly becoming less certain."

It was a good observation by Silver, one that he has qualified in other tweets over the past couple of days.

While it's undeniable that Rubio screwed up that night, the national media pile-on that ensued went far beyond a proportionate response to a newsworthy rhetorical misstep. The media was as thirsty for Rubio's blood as Chris Christie was,

and they made certain that an exchange that lasted probably less than three minutes in total defined his performance that night as nothing less than a political catastrophe.



Breaking: Presidential candidate Donald Trump endorses John A. Daly's new novel.

Part of the explanation likely comes from the matter that Rubio doesn't make many mistakes while campaigning. He typically presents himself intelligently and eloquently, and holds up well in back-and-forth arguments (as Ted Cruz would probably agree). Thus, the *surprise factor* was probably a contributor.

My guess is that the larger ingredient, as Silver eluded to, has more to do with the fact that many polls show Rubio as the GOP's best chance of beating the Democratic candidate in November. Because of that, his bar for failure has been set quite low. And it's been positioned there by the same profession that set a very low bar for *success*, eight years ago, when it came to another first-term senator who was vying for the White House.

This level of scrutiny really isn't all that inconsistent with the journalists and news organizations who believed Rubio's

boat purchase, and having earned four traffic tickets over the past 20 years, were hot-ticket news items.

*Was* Rubio's mistake at Saturday's debate worthy of news coverage? Absolutely. But had it been Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, or even a GOP candidate who polls poorly in general election match-ups, I don't think it would have gotten a quarter of the press.

When it comes to a GOP candidate that threatens the power of the Democratic Party, the media is always prepared to make a mountain. Unfortunately, on Saturday, Marco Rubio gave them their molehill.

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## Megyn Kelly Shouldn't Pay for Trump's Obsession



In 2013, a fascinating story out of Iowa about a dental assistant and her former boss made national headlines. The assistant – a woman named Melissa Nelson – was fired from her job, not because she didn't perform her duties adequately, but because her male boss no longer felt *he* could perform *his* duties around her.

What was his problem? Apparently, the dentist (Dr. James Knight) found Nelson so irresistibly attractive that he couldn't focus on his work. He thought about her night and day, and even worried that his fixation would end up ruining his marriage.

Nelson, on the other hand, was happily married with children. She never had any romantic interest in her boss, and never led him to believe otherwise. She did her job well. She was a professional. Yet, she lost that job, and her career took a hit, because Dr. Knight simply couldn't deal with his obsession.

Last night, after four days of demanding unsuccessfully behind closed doors that *Fox News* remove Megyn Kelly from the moderation table at Thursday night's GOP debate, Donald Trump's campaign announced that their candidate will *not* be appearing at the event.

Many people are aware of Trump's history with Megyn Kelly, who is one of FNC's most popular personalities. In early August of last year, Kelly was one of three moderators in the very first Republican presidential debate of the 2016 election season.

That night, Kelly asked Mr. Trump an uncomfortable (but perfectly legitimate) question: How would he deal with criticisms surrounding some high-profile, derogatory statements he'd made about women – statements that would most certainly be used against him in the general election by Hillary Clinton?

This was a potential political liability that many observers had been talking about, being that the "War on Women" campaign strategy had worked well for the Democratic Party in recent years. The question may have surprised Trump, but I doubt it surprised Kelly's regular viewers.

As I said of Kelly in a column back in 2013 (shortly after Fox News had announced that she was getting her own prime-time show), she is "someone who is very much in touch with the concerns of her viewers. She listens to them, and does an excellent job of pinning down guests with the questions people want answers to."

That's what she was doing in the debate, not just with the GOP

front-runner, but with the other candidates as well.

No one could tell by Trump's response to Kelly that night just how badly the exchange had rattled him, but it became clear in the days that followed that his ego had suffered a major blow. And as we all know, Donald Trump doesn't take well to being slighted, even when the slight is a figment of his own imagination.

What began with a suggestion by Trump that Kelly's menstrual cycle was to blame for her debate conduct has extended into nearly six months of the candidate demonstrating a disturbing fixation (some would call it an obsession) with the Fox News host.

Trump has regularly trashed her on Twitter with hostile rhetoric that has included sexist slurs, the mocking of her personal life, and the encouraging of his supporters to pressure the network into taking disciplinary action against her. All the while, Kelly has soldiered on like a professional, and has continued to offer her nightly news coverage without participating in a tit-for-tat quarrel with Trump.

Trump had likely hoped his wild popularity with the Republican base, and his aggressive efforts to discredit her, would sink Megyn Kelly's media influence. Instead, the ratings for her show have only grown. She's as relevant and as credible as ever, and that has to just eat away at him.

While the basis of Trump's preoccupation with Kelly is quite different than that of the dentist and his assistant (I'm not at all suggesting a physical attraction), its effects are quite similar. In trying to get Kelly tossed off the debate stage, Trump was attempting to do exactly what Dr. Knight did in Iowa – rid himself of a manic distraction that he believed would keep him from delivering a successful performance. Unlike Knight, however, Trump wasn't the decision-maker. Roger

Ailes was.



Breaking: Presidential candidate Donald Trump endorses John A. Daly's new novel.

Trump of course says that Megyn Kelly is biased against him, and that *that's* the reason he won't appear. That rationale, however, is silly. Kelly asked tough questions of a number of candidates at the first debate (none of whom complained of bias afterwards). And while Kelly has indeed criticized Trump on her show, so has a plethora of other national journalists who Trump has happily appeared in front of (sometimes multiple times) to field questions.

No, the problem isn't Megyn Kelly; she's no more guilty of wrongdoing than dental assistant Melissa Nelson. The problem is Donald Trump's ongoing infatuation with Kelly, and his inability to get past whatever internal torment he suffered at her hands back in August. If he truly can't perform with civility and a clear head in her presence, it's probably best for everyone that he's not showing up at the debate.

There are things more important than television ratings. Journalistic integrity should be one of them. Roger Ailes made the right decision.

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# Bill O'Reilly Enters the 'Trump Spin Zone'



I wrote a piece last week on how some influential conservative pundits have been making excuses for (and even cheer-leading) Donald Trump's conduct in this presidential campaign, while holding the other GOP candidates to a much higher level of scrutiny. One name I left off that list was Fox News host, Bill O'Reilly.

It's not because I don't think that O'Reilly has been taking it easy on Trump in his interviews and commentary. On the contrary. I feel like he's been fairly accommodating – at least by the “no spin” standards he has long established as a hallmark of his highly successful brand. I just felt that (despite his friendship with Trump) he was putting forth a decent enough effort to challenge the GOP front runner on his provocative rhetoric. Thus, I wasn't comfortable lumping him in with the others.

After listening to him on his show following last night's GOP debate, however, I've decidedly changed my mind. December 15, 2015 will go down as the day Bill O'Reilly closed the door on the *No Spin Zone*, and willfully entered the *Trump Spin Zone* – a place where shameless, political dishonesty and demagoguery are not only acceptable, but also admired. The display put forth was highly uncharacteristic and unexpected of a man who

has presented himself for years as straight shooter and a culture warrior. So much so, that Mr. O'Reilly might have quite a bit of trouble rebounding from the incident.

Last night's special airing of *The O'Reilly Factor* featured several guests who were brought on for some post-debate analysis. One of them was syndicated columnist and *Fox News* mainstay, Charles Krauthammer. Krauthammer's conversation with O'Reilly started out fairly uneventful, but that changed when the topic turned to a debate exchange between Donald Trump and Rand Paul.

A debate clip was aired featuring Paul criticizing Trump's proposed anti-terror plan of killing the families of terrorists. Trump's response to Paul was, "So, they can kill us, but we can't kill them?"

"I thought that was a pretty good comeback by Trump," said O'Reilly, commenting on the clip. "What do you think?"

"A pretty good comeback by Trump?" Krauthammer confusedly asked. "On the killing of the brothers and the sisters and the children of terrorists?"

"Yeah, he [Trump] just ignored it," said O'Reilly.

Krauthammer aptly pointed out that Trump had *not* ignored the question, and described Trump's answer of "*they can kill us, but we can't kill them*" as nonsensical.

O'Reilly worked to clarify Trump's position, saying, "You know, Trump never goes and says, '*I'm going to kill the families members.*' He says, '*I'm going to take them out, or treat them rough.*' You know what I'm talking about."

An astonished Krauthammer responded with, "No, I *don't* know what you're talking about. What does '*I'm going to take them out*' mean?"

O'Reilly explained to Krauthammer: "It's designed to get

votes. It's designed to get people emotionally allied with him. That's what it's designed to do. You know that."

At that point, Krauthammer felt that O'Reilly needed to a reminder of what his own "no spin" mantra meant. "Bill, you're in the business of saying words on television, and writing them. The intent is to convey an idea or a thought. Either you believe that or you don't. I don't care what the motivation is – *that I want to elicit an emotion*. He [Trump] says this stuff. *Take them out*. What does that mean? So he was asked about that. He was asked specifically by the moderator: *Do you want to kill them?*"

O'Reilly wasn't budging. "Do you believe that Donald Trump would murder people, if he were president of the United States?"

"If he doesn't want to, why would he say it?" Krauthammer asked.

O'Reilly answered, "Because he wants votes. He's doing all of this. It's theater to get votes. That's what he's doing."

*Note: I've put together a partial transcript below to detail the rest of the back and forth, eliminating only some brief sidebar remarks and some cross-talk that was hard to follow:*

**Krauthammer:** "So you're saying this is a candidate for the presidency of the United States, talking to the American people and the world, saying x, y, and z...and that the words he says are *meaningless*? I have no idea what he would do as president. All I have to go on is what he says."

**O'Reilly:** "He wants to win. And he's going to say, like almost every other politician... He's going to say whatever he thinks is going to put him over the top to win. But I'm not justifying it. I'm explaining it. And so, people can make their own minds on whether you want to vote for a guy like that, or you don't. But he's running as a rogue candidate."

He's getting people whipped up so that they will like him because their emotion and his emotion coincide."

(Sidebar discussion.)

**O'Reilly:** "It's almost a brilliant strategy. It's almost brilliant, if all you want to do is win. If all you want to do is win, it's brilliant, because he [Trump] marginalizes everybody else around him, because he's so provocative, and tapping into the fear and anger that is pervasive among the Republican adherence. It's brilliant."

**Krauthammer:** "If you're telling me that demagoguery, untethered to the meanings of the words being used, can be effective... Well, there's a long history in humankind of that kind of demagoguery working. Do you *approve* of it?"

(Keep in mind that this is Bill O'Reilly, a man who has built an entire career off of demanding accountability for the words and actions of powerful people in our country.)

**O'Reilly:** "Do I approve it? I can't really say whether I approve of it or not."

**Krauthammer:** "As an American – as a citizen – do you think it's a *good* thing?"

**O'Reilly:** "I think what Donald Trump is doing is both good and bad. In the sense that he is destroying a corrupt system, it's good. And it's bad in the sense that he goes overboard – that he goes too far. But our system is corrupt, and people know it. He's destroying it."

**Krauthammer:** "And the cure for corruption is to say things that you are admitting he doesn't really mean?"

**O'Reilly:** "I don't think he... Some of it he means."

**Krauthammer:** "That's the way he goes after a corrupt system?"

**O'Reilly:** "He's going to build a wall. He's not going to be able to deport people, but he doesn't care, because that's what he *wants* to do. He's not going to be able to ban Muslims, but he doesn't care, because that's what he *wants* to do. Look. I don't approve of *all* of this. But I'm just telling you that its a brilliant strategy, and he's winning with it."

**Krauthammer:** "Look. There have been a lot of brilliant strategists in the past, and many of who have succeeded, but it doesn't mean that one has to accept it as the only way to go after a corrupt system."

(Some brief back and forth, with Krauthammer pointing out that Ted Cruz also talks about there being a *corrupt system*, without suggesting we kill terrorists' families.)

**O'Reilly:** "And that's what you have to evaluate. Do you want Ted Cruz, who's not as extreme as Donald Trump, but he's running as a conservative. But I'll tell you this: It's corrupt, Charles. The whole damned system is corrupt. And Trump is blowing it up. You get the last word."

**Krauthammer:** "I'm not arguing here that the system is not a corrupt system. I'm only arguing that demagoguery works... That when someone says things that *you* admit he doesn't mean, but is doing it entirely for effect, that one ought to go back and say, '*Well that's just politics.*' It *is* politics, that's true. And it's done to some *extent* by other politicians, but I think it ought to be called out for what it is: Demagoguery. And unless you're going to stand behind what you say, and say 'I mean it'... It's rather surprising that you would think it's perfectly okay."

**O'Reilly:** "I don't say it's perfectly okay. I say it's a brilliant strategy. I say that there's some worthiness to exposing a corrupt system. I have been very tough on Donald Trump and you know it...when I've interviewed him. I've told him flat out he's not going to be able to deport people, in mass,

an he's not going to be able to ban Muslims from the United States. He's not going to be able to do it. Alright? Because the legal system would prevent that. I've told him that. But on the other hand, I know what he's doing, and what he's doing is shaking everything up, and maybe these people...something good will come out of it, because we can't just keep going the way we're going, Charles. We can't . This country's in desperate trouble."

(Segment ends with Krauthammer left essentially speechless.)

So there you have it. In the eyes of Bill O'Reilly (a longtime political watchdog and self-appointed seeker of justice), it's now okay for politicians to engage in blatant dishonesty and demagoguery to achieve power, as long as the motivation is that person's perception of *the greater good*.

This is precisely the type of corrosive, dishonest conduct O'Reilly has (for years) prided himself on exposing and aggressively condemning on national television. And by doing an about-face now, in order to condone (and even promote) Trump's behavior, isn't he guilty of not only shameless hypocrisy, but a level of cronyism so significant that he has called into question his very authority to present himself as an honest broker of news?

*Special Report's* Bret Baier seemed just as taken back by O'Reilly's remarks as I was, and he challenged the host's stance (as Bernie Goldberg did as well) later in the show:

**Baier:** "I listened to your conversation with Charles earlier, and what you were saying was that Trump is willfully misleading on a couple of key issues. And he's trying to fire people up to get votes – to get in office. But he knows...he knows...that those things are not going to happen..."

**O'Reilly:** "Here's the deal. He's not willfully misleading, because he *wants* it to happen. He *wants* it to happen."

**Baier:** “But he *knows* it’s not going to.”



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**O’Reilly:** “I don’t think he intellectualizes to that degree. And I’ve talked to him – we have him on tomorrow. He’s going to be here tomorrow, okay? And I’ve talked to him, and you’ve seen the interviews. And I’ve said you can’t deport 11 million people. The courts will stop you. And his reply is, ‘*No they won’t,*’ and then he leaves the room. You’re not going to get any more than that. So what he’s doing in saying, ‘*Look, it’s enough for me to voice what Americans want, and if it doesn’t happen down the lane, it’s not my fault. It’s the corrupt system’s fault.*’”

In other words, according to Bill O’Reilly, when Trump lies, it’s not *really* a lie because Trump *wants* that lie to be true.

Are you as confused as I am? And have you ever seen O’Reilly go to such lengths to spin (yes, *spin*) for any public figure (let alone a politician), as he did for Trump?

The truth is that O’Reilly deeply degraded himself last night, and it was a shame to watch. In addition to the hypocrisy, any sense of objectivity he’s tried to bring to his coverage of this presidential race was essentially forfeited.

I hope whatever personal relationship he has with Trump was worth it.

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## The Self-Martyrdom of John Harwood



I probably spend too much time on Twitter.

That's an admission I would have never envisioned myself making about three years ago, when I had absolutely no interest in the popular social media service. I didn't get its appeal, I didn't understand the point of using it, and I was honestly kind of irritated by its repeated mention on practically every news and entertainment show I watched.

When my first book was in the process of being published, however, my publisher emphasized to me the importance of self-branding and public engagement. They explained that if I wasn't on Twitter, I was ignoring an important marketing tool. So, I gave it a whirl.

It took me a while to get used to the culture. I didn't like it very much. A lot of what I read was either self-

congratulatory drivel or angry rants about trivial topics. Eventually, I figured out which accounts were worth following and which ones weren't, and I've come to appreciate and enjoy the daily banter ever since.

With my obvious interest in politics, I've found myself drawn to the thoughts of national reporters and commentators, who are often more candid, outspoken, and entertaining on Twitter than they are on-air and in their columns. They're also more likely to react to public criticism of their job performance in a 140-character tweet than in a prepared statement.

So, following the widespread criticism of the CNBC moderators in Wednesday night's Republican presidential debate, I was curious if John Harwood (the snarkiest one of the bunch) would comment on his conduct on Twitter. The next morning, he did just that. Well, kind of:

*"Moderating GOP debate in 2015 enriched my understanding of challenges @SpeakerBoehner has faced and @RepPaulRyan will face."*

*In other words: I did nothing wrong. Those mindless, irrational conservatives are skewering me for simply doing my job.*

And in case I somehow misinterpreted Harwood's meaning, he solidified his sentiment with this retweet:

*"RNC can bash moderators all they want. The real problem with these debates is there are too many damn people on stage."*

You see, it's not Harwood's fault for lacing debate questions with insulting personal commentary, interrupting candidates mid-sentence, and heckling their responses. The problem was with the sheer number of candidates that had to deal with it.

Unbelievable.

Media bias is everywhere. It's nothing new, but the problem

has grown far worse over the years. You would think that at a time in our country's history when the news media is respected even less than our politicians, there would be a conscious attempt by old-school journalists like Harwood to exercise a little self-discipline – especially when it comes to something as important as a nationally-televised presidential debate.

I suppose it all goes back to an analogy for media bias that Bernie Goldberg often uses: Journalists don't look at themselves as being biased, just like fish don't look at themselves as being wet. A fish doesn't have the frame of reference to recognize what "wet" is. Neither does someone like Harwood, apparently.



Breaking: Presidential candidate Donald Trump endorses John A. Daly's new novel.

Amazingly, Harwood even took it a step further in a later tweet regarding the GOP debate:

*"Last night reminded me of '88 Indiana trip when Bush campaign put our press avail w/Quayle on loudspeakers so hometown crowd could boo us."*

Oh John... you brave, self-sacrificing soldier for your

profession. The things you must endure. Talk about a martyr complex!

A man named David Burge, who responded to the tweet, perhaps summed it up best:

*“Every man is the hero of his own story; it takes someone special to be Jesus of his own Passion Play.”*

Amen.

—

**UPDATE:** A couple of hours after this column was posted, Mr. Harwood responded to the below tweet directed at him:

*“Who seriously imagines John Harwood is not a straight-down-the-middle interviewer, moderator?”*

Harwood’s reply?

*“A lot of people on Twitter, evidently! (but they’re wrong)”*

You can’t make it up, folks! Enjoy your Halloween weekend!