

# Here's an Idea, Mr. President

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Sometime in 2011, I got a call from Donald Trump. He said he was thinking of running for president and wanted to know what I thought of the idea. I'm guessing he also called a million other journalists, but I had reported a story on his golf course in Scotland (for HBO's Real Sports) and after it aired he told someone, "Bernie didn't do me any favors, but he was fair." Maybe that's why he called. Who knows?

Anyway, I told him that because I'm a journalist I don't give advice to people thinking of running for president (or any other office). We chatted for a few more moments and that was the end of it.

If he asked my advice now – he won't! – I'd relent and tell him that since that conversation he has become the most disruptive president at least in our modern era and probably in all of our American history.

I'd tell him his war with the press is especially troubling. He says his critics in the media peddle "fake news." Not really. A lot of them, though, do peddle "biased news." They hate him and it comes out in their decisions about what to cover and how to cover it (though he gives them plenty of ammunition).

But I'd tell him that there's a better way to deal with the press than waging non-stop war against journalists.

First, no more tweets about Mika "bleeding badly from a face-lift" she says she never had. And no more videos of businessman Donald Trump body slamming a guy with the CNN logo imposed on his face.

Someone needs to remind the president that he holds the same

office as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. A little dignity is in order.

Let's acknowledge that many of the president's most loyal fans love it when he attacks the press, when he fights fire with fire, to use the term his press person used at a recent briefing. But appealing to the base isn't getting him anywhere.

Mr. Trump won the election with 46 percent of the vote. Now his approval numbers are in the 30s, which means that even a lot of people who voted for him – the ones who weren't crazy about him but who couldn't bring themselves to vote for Hillary – even those people are abandoning ship.

The 25 or 30 percent who think he's a messiah are not the kind of friends he needs right now. Yes, they give him the adulation he craves. But they'll be there for him no matter what. And if they're all he's got he can forget about turning his vision of making America great again into a political reality. If the pols in Washington aren't afraid of him – and they won't be if his numbers stay in the 30s – they won't put their necks on the line to support his agenda.

So here's an idea for the president, an idea for a national TV address that his loyal fans might not embrace – who cares? – but just might win over moderates who aren't in the Never Trump crowd. Imagine if he said something like this:

“My fellow Americans, my focus tonight is on one of the most important institutions in our great country: the news media.

“We all know we can't have a free country without a free press. But neither can we have a free country without a fair press.

“Let me be clear: Journalists not only have the right, but they have an obligation to hold me accountable for my actions. With that, I have no problem.

“But let’s not pretend that journalists don’t have an agenda, one that goes beyond simply telling the truth. And just as I’ve been charged with trying to delegitimize the media, too many in the media have been trying from Day One to delegitimize my presidency.

“Joe Scarborough has called me a ‘schmuck’ on national television. He has said I remind him of his mother who has dementia. Mika Brzezinski has said I don’t love my country. Others have called me a thug, a pig, Hitler and a whole bunch of other less-than-flattering names.

“Tonight I acknowledge that my tweets in response too often have been needlessly vindictive – and counterproductive. But journalists “haven’t merely defended their reporting, they’ve doubled down on attacking” me, as a writer in National Review put it.

“So, as Monty Hall used to say, Let’s make a deal: I will continue to point out what I believe is false news about my administration and me. But I will stop the personal attacks on members of the press.

“But it wouldn’t hurt if journalists showed some contrition, too. It wouldn’t be so terrible if reporters acknowledged that because they think I’m “unfit to be president,” they also think it’s okay to inject bias and malice into their stories without fear of consequence.

“Someone has to put an end to this. Someone has to say ‘Enough.’ I’m saying it right here, right now.”

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If he delivered that speech, his poll numbers would head northward – regardless of how his critics in the media reacted.

But no, I’m not Pollyanna. I understand that Donald Trump may be incapable of *not* fighting back, often in childish ways.

And too many journalists see themselves on a noble mission to save the nation from this president – especially now that he tweeted about Mika’s bloody face and circulated that video of him beating up on the guy with the CNN head.

The more Mr. Trump attacks journalists the more they attack him. And the more they attack him the more he attacks them. He won’t stop unless they stop first. And they won’t stop unless he does, if then. This reminds of me third grade: You started first. No, you started first.

And with each new, nasty tweet the press he so despises feels more emboldened so save the nation from Donald Trump. If you think the war is ugly now, stay tuned.

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## **Memo from POTUS to MSM: This is War!**

Donald Trump wasn’t shooting from the hip at the Conservative Political Action Conference the other day when he launched a blistering attack on what he calls dishonest and fake news. This wasn’t something the president came up with on the fly. It wasn’t part of his usual rambling stream of consciousness that we’ve come to expect.

No, this was a focused, intensified broadside. It was a declaration of war. Mr. Trump has been bad-mouthing the media for a while now, but this was a ratcheted up, coordinated assault on the news media that Donald Trump claims make up bad news about him.

“And I want you all to know that we are fighting the fake news. It’s fake. Phony. Fake,” the president told CPAC. “A few

days ago I called the fake news the enemy of the people, and they are. They are the enemy of the people.”

The crowd loved it.

Here’s a good rule of thumb: You will never go wrong bashing the mainstream media to a conservative audience.

And one day before the president spoke at CPAC, the philosophical force behind a lot of his ideas, Steve Bannon, fired off a few rounds of his own. The media is the “opposition party,” he told CPAC, and warned that, “It’s going to get worse every day for the media.”

In the Washington Post, Chris Callizza wrote that, “Bannon doesn’t want to change the media. He wants to totally dismantle the media. He wants to break its back and leave it for dead by the side of the road.”

The Trump-Bannon war strategy isn’t complicated: Eviscerate what is left of the news media’s credibility, get the message into the national bloodstream that journalists cannot be trusted, that they make stuff up, and then when they report something about the president he doesn’t like – something that may do grave damage to his presidency – they can always say: *“You can’t believe them. They’re fake news.”*

Here’s the Cliffs Notes version of the war plan: Donald Trump and Steve Bannon want to bring down the media before the media bring them down. Period!

And while adversarial relationships between the press and the White House are nothing new, and while liberal journalists are tougher on Republican presidents than Democratic presidents, this is different. The animosity level this time around – on both sides – is in the unhealthy zone. A lot of journalists viscerally detest Donald Trump as much as he detests them. More than a few think he’s unfit for office and salivate at the prospect that he won’t last.

I don't know if Nick Kristoff of the New York Times is one of them, but he did write this in his column: "Trump howls at the news media, not just because it embarrasses him, but because it provides an institutional check on his lies, incompetence and conflicts of interest. But we can take his vitriol: *When the time comes, we will write Trump's obituary, not the other way around.*" (Emphasis added)

I get the impression Mr. Kristoff can't wait for that day. And I'm pretty sure he's not alone.

The president told CPAC that he's not against the media in general; he just wants reporters to be fair. "I'm against the people that make up stories and make up sources," Mr. Trump said. "They shouldn't be allowed to use sources unless they use somebody's name."

That's interesting since Donald Trump is no stranger to anonymous sources. His campaign staff often spoke off the record when he was running for president; he invoked unnamed sources when he fueled speculation that Barack Obama was born in Africa and wasn't a legitimate president, and oh yeah, just a few hours before Mr. Trump spoke at CPAC, his top aides held a press briefing at the White House, on the condition that they remain ... anonymous.

Is there bias at mainstream news organizations? Absolutely. But fake news isn't biased news, as poisonous as bias can be. Fake news isn't news with a mistake in the story – or even news that quotes an anonymous source that got a fact wrong.

Fake news is fabricated nonsense, like the story that claimed Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of a pizza parlor in Washington.

And fake news isn't real news that makes Donald Trump look bad.

Yes, there have been times when journalists working at

reputable news organizations put words in the mouths of people who didn't exist. But, despite what President Trump's loyal fans believe, it's extremely rare.

When I was a correspondent at CBS News, I complained privately about bias and I wrote publicly about how it infected mainstream media coverage of all sorts of issues.

But it's fantasy to believe that journalists arrive in the newsroom in the morning, get their coffee and meet in a dark room where they pull the shades and map out a strategy to make up sources and fabricate news to hurt this or any president. It just doesn't happen that way.

At the risk of sounding like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, democracy works best when we trust our president – and when we trust news reporters to keep an eye on government.

Right now too many Americans don't have much trust in either. And how exactly is this good for the country?