

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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A MEMO TO THE FOURTH ESTATE

To: Members of the Fourth Estate

From: Kurt F. Stone

Re: Professionalism, Culpability and Journalistic Ethics

It is as both a producer and a consumer of political news and views that I compose this memo. Ever since I began writing essays for this blog back in February of 2005, it has been my intention to provide facts; to explore the "interior chess strategy" within the game called politics; to explore, to educate and to stimulate conversation based not on

gastric juice but rather on grey matter. And while I have never hidden the fact that my personal political preferences tend towards the progressive; that I am a partisan Democrat who hopefully possesses a dollop of satiric humor; and that as academically and psychologically fascinating as I may find conspiracy theories and those who spread them, I have precious little patience for those print, audio and visual "journalists" who cover the political scene more in the guise of partisan publicists and hacks than as professionally disinterested scriveners. Man, when you hone in on a particular candidate or issue, you go at it with all the manic gusto of one afflicted with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. And that, my friends, is neither ethical nor true journalism; it is hucksterism, plain and simple.

If, God forbid Donald Trump, the Platonic absolute of narcissism, actually manages to capture the Republican nomination for President of the United States, it will have as much to do with you, the Fourth Estate, who have given him billions upon billions of

dollars of free airtime - not to mention columnar inches - as it does the cadre of angry disenchanted voters who believe that what America needs more than anything is a growling bully, a man who is both outrageous and comes across like someone afflicted with [Verbal Dysdecorum](#). Just because Donald Trump is incapable (or chooses to be incapable) of censoring his most outrageous statements, comments and flat out lies, for the Fourth Estate to report on them *ad nauseum* as if it was all were truly newsworthy is just flat-out wrong. Trump's legions have no more idea of what his political program is - of what he plans to do about ISIS, education, the economy or the environment - than they do about the difference between [Sunni and Shi'a](#) or between a [jackal and a wolf](#). All they do know is the outer shell; the thin-skinned egoist who is far, far more shadow than substance. His minions don't seem to have any idea of just how embarrassing he is; of what a Trump presidency would mean to America's standing in the world. To much of the world, he is a joke. Less than two weeks ago, members of the British Parliament actually debated whether or not Mr. Trump should be banned from entering England due to hate speech. Responding to a petition which received more than 574,000 signatures, British MPs did what they do best: they took off the gloves and branded Trump a "buffoon, fool, demagogue and wazzock (a pejorative British term meaning roughly "a stupid or ignorant person"). As expected, the debate did not lead to a Parliamentary vote. James Brokenshire, the British Immigration Minister, responding to the debate on behalf of the government, stated that Trump's suggestion to ban Muslims from the United States ignores the fact that Muslims are victims of terrorism themselves. While the debate was taking place on the banks of the Thames, Trump was speaking at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, where he said not a word about Muslims and received the endorsement of university president Jerry Falwell, Jr. Trump wasn't too concerned about the debate; at least they were talking about him.



In an article published in *Politico* late last year, former [CNN anchor Campbell Brown](#) called upon TV news to stage a one-week Trump moratorium, because TV coverage was only making him stronger: "TV turns [Trump] on and only TV can turn him off," Brown wrote. "Let's stop being complicit in promoting his hateful and harmful demagoguery. Just for one week." I for one wholeheartedly agree. The role the Fourth Estate is playing in the rise of Donald Trump is both intellectually unconscionable and journalistically unethical. Yes, I understand that at root, all mass media is a witch's brew of sensationalism and salesmanship. However, when the spotlight of sensationalism turns a bigoted buffoon like Donald Trump into a beau ideal of leadership, perhaps it's time to ask "have we gone too far? Do we really want to give this billionaire carnival barker his props?"

Most of what the voters know about Donald Trump - not to mention Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, Ben Carson, Chris Christie, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders and the rest of the field - resides in the realm of shadow, rather than of substance. For most people, these candidates can be easily reduced to a word or two, like:

- Trump: "Fearless and plain-spoken."
- Cruz: "Born in Canada."
- Rubio: "Young and articulate."
- Carson: "A brilliant surgeon."
- Bush: "Yet another Bush."
- Christie: "Bridgegate" or "Bridgeghazi."
- Clinton: "Emails, dishonest, Monica Lewinsky."
- Sanders: "Socialist; honeymooned in the Soviet Union."

None of these zingers speak a whit about their positions, abilities, plans or lack thereof. The same goes in spades for Donald Trump. What the public "knows" about the man who has long called himself "The Donald" merely skims the surface. And you, dear members of the Fourth Estate, come in for a major share of the blame.

So what do I recommend? An embargo on covering him as suggested by Campbell Brown? Probably not; your editors - who are part of management - would never get the green light from their employers upstairs. After all, Trump sells ad time. Asking follow-up questions when Mr. We Shall Overcome attacks the media in place of issuing a response? Sure. Why not? Except in Trump you have a person who is seemingly immune to bad press. As my old boss Jess Unruh used to say, "Hey, talk about me good, talk about me bad, I don't give a rat's rump . . . just keep talking about me." Then too, asking an intelligent follow-up question just might get you disinvited to the next press gathering - not a great career move, to say the least.

Please, dear colleagues, tone down the coverage if you can, ask tougher questions, hold his feet to the fire. You don't have to run endless hours of Trump making asinine comments to crowds of adoring followers in Iowa. You don't have to devote endless inches to his every verbal belch as if it what he was saying has any substance. The man is neither a leader nor a person of political stature. He is a sideshow, an entertainer, a mammoth pile-up on some interstate that we can't keep our eyes off of.

But above all, be sure to look closely in the mirror every morning, noon and night. For who becomes the next POTUS is as much in *your* hands as it is in those of the mega-billionaires or even the voters.

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