

How the Republicans Are Reviving the ‘Liberal Media’ Myth

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In the wake of last week’s CNBC-sponsored Republican presidential debate – and its alleged “gotcha questions” – the GOP and the Right are reviving their treasured myth of the “liberal media,” a claim that has been politically significant but almost entirely fictitious. There is not now nor really was there ever a “liberal media.”

Generations back, Americans understood that the major newspapers were owned by very rich men and generally represented their class interests. The wealthy owners would deploy their media properties to advance their mostly conservative – and pro-business/anti-labor – viewpoints.

There were always exceptions to this rule, but few Americans in the 1940s, for instance, would have considered the press “liberal,” with President Franklin Roosevelt garnering less than a quarter of newspaper endorsements in his last two races and President Harry Truman getting only about 15 percent in 1948.

The modern myth of the “liberal press” originated in the 1950s when many reporters in the national news media displayed sympathy for the idea that African-Americans deserved equal rights with white people.



Image: Talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh

Though some prominent journalists and many newspapers (especially but not solely in the South) supported racial segregation, many reporters (principally but not only from the North) wrote critically about Jim Crow laws and racist attitudes. A negative media spotlight was cast on the lynching of black men, brutality toward civil rights activists and violence by whites to keep black children out of previously all-white schools.

Northern reporters, for example, descended on Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, for the trial and acquittal of two white men for the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black youth who supposedly had flirted with a white woman. The critical coverage led the state’s whites to plaster their cars with bumper stickers reading, “Mississippi: The Most Lied About State in the Union.” [For more on the media’s coverage of the civil rights movement, see David Halberstam’s *The Fifties*. Or Taylor Branch’s *Parting the Waters*.]

In the 1960s, the U.S. mainstream media largely favored the Vietnam War, but skeptical reporting about U.S. tactics – from burning down villages and saturation bombing campaigns to the use of Agent Orange defoliants, assassinations under the CIA’s Operation Phoenix and

the massacre at My Lai – angered war supporters who viewed such journalism as undercutting the war effort.

By the late 1960s, the white backlash against racial integration gave rise to Richard Nixon’s Southern Strategy and his Silent Majority’s resentment of critical coverage of the Vietnam War strengthened Nixon’s political hand. Nixon personally had a huge chip on his shoulder about what he regarded as hostile press coverage, so he helped infuse the Republican Party with contempt for the “liberal media.”

The 1970s and 1980s

The landmark media events of the 1970s – the publication of the Pentagon Papers secret history of the Vietnam War, investigation of Nixon’s Watergate scandal, and revelations about the CIA’s “Family Jewels” secrets – pretty much sealed this image of a “liberal” press corps that would not reliably defend the actions of the U.S. government.

But this news coverage that so infuriated the Right and many Republicans was not “liberal”; it was accurate. It was a fleeting moment when American journalists were doing what the Founders had in mind with the First Amendment, informing the people about actions by their government so the people could have a meaningful say in controlling what the government was doing.

Nevertheless, the Right’s “liberal media” myth proved to be a powerful ideological weapon, wielded against reporters who uncovered unflattering information about right-wing policies and politicians. These reporters were deemed “unpatriotic,” “un-American,” a “blame-America-firster,” or just “liberal” for short.

I witnessed how this phenomenon played out in the 1980s. Contrary to the “liberal media” myth, the senior executives of news organizations that I dealt with were almost universally conservative or neoconservative.

At the Associated Press, its most senior executive, general manager Keith Fuller, gave a 1982 speech in Worcester, Massachusetts, hailing Reagan’s election in 1980 as a worthy repudiation of the excesses of the 1960s and a necessary corrective to the nation’s lost prestige of the 1970s. Fuller cited Reagan’s Inauguration and the simultaneous release of 52 U.S. hostages in Iran on Jan. 20, 1981, as a national turning point in which Reagan had revived the American spirit.

“As we look back on the turbulent Sixties, we shudder with the memory of a time that seemed to tear at the very sinews of this country,” Fuller said, adding that Reagan’s election represented a nation “crying, ‘Enough.’ ...

“We don’t believe that the union of Adam and Bruce is really the same as Adam and Eve in the eyes of Creation. We don’t believe that people should cash welfare checks and spend them on booze and narcotics. We don’t really believe that a simple prayer or a pledge of allegiance is against the national interest in the classroom.

“We’re sick of your social engineering. We’re fed up with your tolerance of crime, drugs and pornography. But most of all, we’re sick of your self-perpetuating, burdening bureaucracy weighing ever more heavily on our backs.”

Fuller's sentiments were not uncommon in the executive suites of major news organizations, where Reagan's reassertion of an aggressive U.S. foreign policy was especially welcomed. At The New York Times, executive editor Abe Rosenthal, an early neocon, vowed to steer his newspaper back "to the center," by which he meant to the right.

There was also a social dimension to this journalistic retreat. For instance, The Washington Post's longtime publisher Katharine Graham found the stresses of high-stakes adversarial journalism unpleasant. Plus, it was one thing to take on the socially inept Richard Nixon; it was quite another to challenge the socially adroit Ronald and Nancy Reagan, whom Mrs. Graham personally liked.

The Graham family embraced neoconservatism, too, favoring aggressive policies against Moscow and unquestioned support for Israel. Soon, The Washington Post and Newsweek editors were reflecting those family prejudices.

I encountered that reality when I moved from AP to Newsweek in 1987 and found executive editor Maynard Parker, in particular, hostile to journalism that put Reagan's Cold War policies in a negative light. I had been involved in breaking much of the Iran-Contra scandal at the AP, but I was told at Newsweek that "we don't want another Watergate." The fear apparently was that the political stresses from another constitutional crisis around a Republican president might shatter the nation's political cohesion and would not be "good for the country."

Building a Right-Wing Media

Still, the notion of a "liberal media" persisted, getting even more absurd as the years went by. Under President Reagan, the recurring complaint on the Right about the "liberal media" gave rise to an overtly right-wing media - a vertically integrated structure from newspapers, magazines and book publishing to talk radio, TV networks and later the Internet.

By the 1990s, this right-wing media was arguably the most important political force in the United States, with talk-show host Rush Limbaugh working as a national precinct chairman for the GOP, rallying conservatives behind various causes and candidates. When the Republicans won control of Congress in 1994, they made Limbaugh an honorary member of the GOP caucus.

The same was true in the upper reaches of corporate media. Collaborating [directly with Republican politicians](#) since the 1980s, Rupert Murdoch built a massive media empire based on newspapers (including now the Wall Street Journal), magazines (such as The Weekly Standard), book publishing (HarperCollins) and TV (most notably Fox News).

But Murdoch was far from the only network chieftain to be an ardent Republican. On Election Night 2000, General Electric Chairman Jack Welch revealed a favoritism for George W. Bush while visiting the election desk of GE's NBC News subsidiary. In front of the NBC staff, Welch rooted for a Bush victory, asking apparently in jest, "how much would I have to pay you to call the race for Bush?" according to witnesses.

Later, after Fox News declared Bush the winner, Welch allegedly asked the chief of the NBC election desk why NBC was not doing the same, [a choice NBC did make and then retracted](#). Though premature, the pro-Bush calls colored the public impression of Bush's entitlement to the presidency during the month-long Florida recount battle. Welch denied pressuring NBC

to call the race for Bush and defended his other behavior as a reaction to younger NBC staffers who Welch thought were favoring Vice President Al Gore.

Pro-Republican bias did not stop with Murdoch and Welch, as columnist Joe Conason has noted. "So was Larry Tisch when he owned CBS. So are Richard Parsons and Steve Case of CNN (and Time Warner AOL)," Conason wrote at Salon.com. "Michael Eisner (Disney ABC) gave to Bill Bradley and Al Gore, but he gave more to Bush and [John] McCain - and he supported Rick Lazio for the Senate against Hillary Clinton."

Meanwhile, many of the publications that were denounced by the Right as "liberal" bastions (the likes of The New York Times and The Washington Post) shifted fully into neoconservatism - hawkish on foreign policy though more tolerant on cultural issues such as gay marriage and more accepting of science on topics like global warming.

Both the Times and Post advanced President George W. Bush's bogus claims about Iraq's WMD as a justification for invading Iraq in 2003. Today, both newspapers toe the neocon line when it comes to aggressive U.S. policies regarding Russia and Syria. Neither makes any effort to conceal their hostility toward Russian President Vladimir Putin and other foreign leaders who are singled out for U.S. demonization.

From the news columns to the op-ed pages, the Times and Post have presented deeply biased coverage that favors more aggressive U.S. interventions abroad. On economic issues, they are generally centrist, favoring "free trade" deals and "reform" of Social Security - neither position shared by most "liberals" or "progressives."

Most modern media is owned by large corporations or, in a few cases, wealthy families. So, it continues to make sense that these outlets would share the prejudices and interests of the rich, as in the old days of FDR and Truman. Indeed, CNBC, the cable network that has prompted the recent right-wing ire, is famously pro-business and anti-government.

CNBC is dedicated to the proposition that "the market" knows all, except when there is an urgent need for the U.S. government to bail out the major investment banks after they tanked the economy in 2008 and crashed Wall Street stock values. Then, the government's trillions of dollars were deemed essential, though the bank executives still bristled at any political criticism or suggestions that their compensation should be restrained.

The Tea Party Rise

In the first month of Barack Obama's presidency, CNBC was on the front lines of promoting this arrogance of the super rich, attacking the new president even as he was confronting the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, with millions of Americans losing their jobs and millions more losing their homes.

Yet, while the huge Wall Street bank bail-out under President George W. Bush was popular with the CNBC crowd - all the better to reverse the plunge in stock prices - there was a fury against Obama's plans to restrict executive compensation and help stanch the surge in joblessness and home foreclosures.

On Feb. 19, 2009, CNBC reporter Rick Santelli took to the trading floor of the Chicago commodities exchange and [fumed about Obama's plan](#) to help up to nine million Americans avoid foreclosure. Santelli suggested that Obama set up a Web site to get public feedback on whether "we really want to subsidize the losers' mortgages."

Then, gesturing to the wealthy traders in the pit, Santelli declared, “this is America” and asked “how many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills, raise their hand.” Amid a cacophony of boos aimed at Obama’s housing plan, Santelli turned back to the camera and said, “President Obama, are you listening?”

Though Santelli’s behavior in a different context – say, a denunciation of George W. Bush near the start of his presidency – would surely have resulted in a suspension or firing, Santelli’s anti-Obama rant was hailed as “the Chicago tea party,” made Santelli an instant hero across right-wing talk radio, and was featured proudly on NBC’s Nightly News.

Santelli’s rant against helping “losers” inspired the Tea Party movement, which tapped into the populist frustrations of many alienated whites but was largely funded by rich right-wingers, including the Koch Brothers, who viewed it as a way to advance their own anti-regulatory agenda and promote more tax cuts for the rich.

That CNBC would now be attacked as a bastion of the “liberal media” shows how far this myth has slid from reality. CNBC is now part of NBCUniversal, which is co-owned by Comcast (51 percent), a major international media conglomerate, and General Electric (49 percent), a founding member of what President Dwight Eisenhower called the Military-Industrial Complex.

So, the notion that CNBC is a hotbed of leftist journalism is delusional. But that is what the Republican Party and many of its top candidates are selling to their “base.”

‘Gotcha’ Complaints

The complaints from last Wednesday’s debate have focused on alleged “gotcha” questions, such as challenges to Dr. Ben Carson, one of the GOP frontrunners, about whether his budget proposals add up and what was his relationship with a shady nutritional supplement company called Mannatech.

While such queries would seem relevant to business reporters, the questions became the target of New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and other candidates who won the audience’s cheers for lambasting the “liberal media.”

The “liberal media” accusations prompted the Republican National Committee to [suspend](#) its relationship with NBC regarding future debates. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Florida, even added a button at his Internet site for his supporters to “stand against the liberal left media.”

That CNBC would become the new faux standard bearer for the “liberal left media” might be considered comical, but the furor is indicative of how millions of Americans have accepted the Right’s decoupling from the real world and have surrendered their political judgment to demagogues like Rush Limbaugh and corporate masters of the universe like Rupert Murdoch.

How this happened is, of course, complicated and includes the failure of the mainstream press to defend the times when it has fought on behalf of the American people to keep them informed with important information so they can do their job as citizens in a democracy.

Instead, the mainstream media seems significantly disengaged from the public, treating

Americans like a commodity to be manipulated rather than the “We the People” owners of the democratic Republic to be respected and served.

Given the arrogance and elitism of many top news personalities, there is an understandable distrust and disdain for the major media. But that populist revulsion toward the overpaid talking heads has been exploited by skillful right-wing media figures who have rallied millions of confused Americans to become foot soldiers in an ideological army that marches to defend a wasteland of false and factually flimsy information.

The answer to this dilemma must be a recommitment among journalists to get back to the basics — providing citizens with information that they need to do their job — and to take on the powers-that-be in the name of the people.

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