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Essay by William Voegeli

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MENTAL LAPSES

Democracy dies in deception.



THERE WERE TWO PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS in 2024: one between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, and then one between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. The first began to end, and the second began to take shape, during the Trump-Biden debate held on June 27. The story of that debate was President Biden, who looked and sounded dreadful. His performance confirmed Democrats' worst fears and Republicans' best argument: Joe Biden, born eleven months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, was too old and cognitively diminished to discharge his presidential duties *now*, much less over the course of a second term that would last beyond his 86th birthday.

The debate triggered a panic attack among Democratic politicians and supportive journalists. The next day, *The New York Times* ran an editorial beseeching Biden to withdraw from the race. *The New Yorker*, another publication that had supported Biden's presidency, published a similar plea the following day. David Remnick, the magazine's editor, wrote that Biden "went to pieces on CNN, in front of tens of millions of his compatriots," who witnessed "the spectacle of a man of eighty-one, struggling terribly with memory, syntax, nerves, and fragility, his visage slack with the dawning sense that his mind was letting him down."

By the time Jill Biden helped her husband down the steps at the conclusion of the 90-minute debate, Biden's presidential campaign was in crisis. It took 24 days of public and behind-the-scenes pressure before he abandoned his quest for a second term. There is much yet to be learned about how a proud, stubborn man was ultimately induced to give up the office he began seeking in the 1980s. The story may never be known in full. But the simplest explanation is that Biden finally accepted that continuing to run for a second term would make Donald Trump's return to the White House likely, perhaps even certain. Since the beginning of his campaign in 2019, Biden had spent five years calling Trump a grave threat to the American experiment. Yet if he refused to stand down, Biden would be remembered as the vain, heedless politician who had instead guaranteed that Trumpism would revive, stronger this time than before Biden took office in 2021. In an Oval Office address on July 24, three days after he abandoned his re-election campaign by posting a message on social media, Biden came as close as he ever has to explaining his decision: "I believe my record as president, my leadership in the world, my vision for America's future all merited a second term, but nothing, nothing can come in the way of

saving our democracy, and that includes personal ambition."

Cover-Up and Scandal

THE FIRST REACTIONS TO DONALD Trump's victory over Kamala Harris indicate that if Biden's motive in ending his candidacy was to avoid blame for elevating Trump, he might as well have kept his own name on the ballot all the way through November. The case against Biden is that he stayed in the race too long and left it too late. Had he never run at all, either Harris would have conducted a better campaign than the one she began 107 days before the election, or the Democrats would have had truly contested primaries and selected a better nominee.

Some of the criticism is scalding. "He shouldn't have run," an aide to the late Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid told *Politico*. "He and his staff have done an enormous amount of damage to this country." *The New Yorker's* Isaac Chotiner was equally caustic. The "blame for Trump's victory overwhelmingly lies with one person: Joe Biden," he wrote. "Biden's arrogance remains astonishing to behold: well before 2024, he was quite simply too old to ask people, in good faith, to keep him in office through 2028."

These severe assessments are true, but not the whole truth. It wasn't just members of the Democratic establishment who denied the obvious facts about Joe Biden's diminished capacities and ignored or dissembled about the mounting evidence of his decline. It was also the "mainstream" or "legacy" media. Biden's disastrous performance at the June debate caused a shock, and also a meta-shock. It was astonishing that he was in such bad shape, and then it was astonishing that supposedly knowledgeable, reliable journalists, in the middle of an octogenarian's fourth year in the presidency, either were stunned or acted stunned at what they saw of Biden that night.

Interviewed on Tucker Carlson's podcast in October, veteran journalist Mark Halperin called the "cover-up" of Biden's decline the worst scandal in the history of American journalism. Americans naïvely assumed, Halperin said, that the days were over when journalists would, rather than exert themselves to uncover it, be complicit in concealing information the public deserved to know. The press's coziness with those in power made it possible to keep secrets about Woodrow Wilson's and Franklin Roosevelt's deteriorating health, or John Kennedy's reckless philandering. Such corruption was supposed to be a disgrace to avoid, not a model for today's journalists to emulate. Reporters failed in their professional obligations, according to Halperin, due to "some affection for Biden, the bullying of his staff, but primarily because of the desire to make sure Donald Trump doesn't win." Journalists covering the White House were, he said, fully aware that Biden's "acuity decline was substantial." But to say so in print, on the air, or even in their newsrooms was "impermissible."

His and Hur's

IN THE “HIPPI DIPPY WEATHERMAN” BIT that launched his comedy career, George Carlin said, “I imagine some of you were a little surprised at the weather over the weekend. Especially if you watched my show Friday night.” In the same way, one of the reasons the “Democratic establishment denied the obvious” regarding Joe Biden’s decline, to quote the *Post*’s editorial again, was that it would *not* have been obvious to anyone whose sole source of political information was *The Washington Post*.

In its editorial after the election, for example, the *Post* spoke warmly of special counsel Robert Hur and the report he issued in February 2024, which recommended that the Justice Department not pursue a criminal case against Biden for mishandling classified material after he finished his term as vice president in 2017 (and became a private citizen for the first time since 1972). Hur's report took the position that the statute against the improper use of classified documents required prosecutors to prove beyond a reasonable doubt a defendant's willful intent: mistakenly packing a classified file in a box of personal memorabilia was not a crime. For that reason, Hur felt it necessary to state in his report that, based on five hours of interviews with the president, a jury was likely to view Biden as "a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory." Any prosecution of such a defendant would be futile, pointless, and therefore even cruel.

Hur's brief comments about Biden's age and memory elicited Democrats' accusations that the special counsel had made a political attack on Biden for reasons unconnected to his duties in the case. According to the *Post's* November 8 editorial, however, "Hur has been repeatedly vindicated during the intervening nine months. The interview transcripts, when they came out, bolstered his conclusions. If anything, the truth was worse than what Mr. Hur described."

But that wasn't how the paper reacted when the report was issued. A February 9 editorial titled "The Special Counsel Says the President Is Old. Nothing New About That" said that "critics are right that Mr. Hur did not need to lay it on quite so thick," especially since "Republicans [are] milking the moment for all it is worth." After all, "there is nothing new about Mr. Biden's memory lapses, malapropisms, and rambling, sometimes embroidered anecdotes. This has been an aspect of his political persona since he was a much younger man. And it has plainly not improved with age."

And did the transcripts of prosecutors' interviews with Biden, released in March, really bolster Hur's conclusions, as the *Post* said in November? Was the truth even worse than what Hur described? Not according to the paper's news pages at the time. A March 12 story titled "Full Transcript of Biden's Special Counsel Interview Paints Nuanced Portrait" stated, "Biden doesn't come across as being as absent-minded as Hur has made him out to be." According to the November 8 editorial, Biden displayed "frequent forgetfulness and hazy answers" when interviewed by Hur. The assessment offered in the earlier news article, however, was that the interview was charac-

terized by digressions and banter. "Biden frequently joked with prosecutors in a setting that seemed more chummy than antagonistic."

Similarly, the November 8 editorial criticizes Vice President Harris for disputing the Hur report when it came out. “The way that the president’s demeanor in that report was characterized could not be more wrong,” she said at the time. But at least Harris’s motives were clear, as are the constraints on what a politician can or cannot say.

These extenuations do not apply to newspaper columnists. Though their political disposition is seldom kept secret, they are still regarded as journalists, not publicists for a party or candidate. Nevertheless, on February 9 the *Post's* Ruth Marcus denounced Hur's remarks about Biden's memory and demeanor as "not merely gratuitous" but "an egregious transgression of prosecutorial boundaries." That is, Hur had no business offering his opinion of Biden's memory, an opinion that meshed perfectly with GOP criticism of a Democratic rival. And, in any case, Hur's conclusions were factually dubious. "This portrayal of Biden as a doddering old man is inconsistent with what I hear from those who have frequent interactions with him," Marcus wrote.

She amplified this claim in a March column, which asserted that Hur had, in his report, “mischaracterized and overstated Biden’s alleged memory lapses. He consistently adopted an interpretation that is as uncharitable and damaging to Biden as possible.” Having read the Hur interview transcript “from the perspective of someone who’s watched Biden—and watched him stumble over his words—for decades now,” Marcus detected nothing worse than “Biden being Biden—working through out loud what the rest of us do silently.”

Post columnist Jennifer Rubin was, if anything, even angrier about the special counsel report. She wrote on February 12 that it was “Hur’s gratuitous smear about Biden’s age and memory—most egregiously, his far-fetched allegation that Biden could not recall the date of his son Beau’s death—that transformed a snide report into a political screed.” That Rubin’s conviction about Biden’s fitness for office was not shaken by the Hur report should not surprise us, since it was also not shaken by the president’s June 27 debate against Trump. Writing the next day, Rubin allowed that Biden “looked and sounded his age.” Nonetheless, the president “had his facts in a row.” He “recited his economic accomplishments, reiterated figures on the debt, pounced on Trump for getting *Roe v. Wade* overturned (and made the case Trump would sign a nationwide ban on abortion),

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repeated the details of his border plan and called out Trump for ‘lies’ on veterans and immigration.” All in all, Biden “did a workmanlike job, gaining ground as the 90 minutes ticked by.”

Older and Wiser

MARCUS AND RUBIN WERE NOT alone in rebuking those who asserted that Biden was in decline. As best as I can tell, the *Post*’s Fact Checker column, written by Glenn Kessler, has devoted only two pieces since Biden took office in January 2021 to questions about his cognitive state. The first, appearing in September 2021, awarded “Four Pinocchios”—Kessler’s severest rating, given to the most dishonest assertions—to the Republican National Committee and “right-leaning news organizations” for pushing a story about Biden staffers jumping in to prevent their boss from answering press questions. “Once again,” Kessler pronounced, “the RNC has made a mountain out of a molehill. The right-wing media, in an eagerness to keep alive a narrative of an elderly president controlled by his staff, quickly followed suit.”

The more recent Fact Checker column, published on June 14, 2024, amounted to an angels-on-the-head-of-a-pin examination of different versions of a film clip that showed Biden standing in an open field with other Group of Seven leaders, watching military skydivers. Kessler analyzes camera angles and edits to insist that Biden was merely conversing with one of the parachutists after his jump, rather than wandering away from the rest of the summit-meeting principals. It is not certain how Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni viewed the situation, since every version of the film clip showed her stepping away from the other leaders to gently take President Biden’s arm and turn him around to watch what the entire group was watching. Kessler discerns nothing ambiguous, however. He, again, awards RNC and conservative news outlets Four Pinocchios for an “especially pernicious” use of “manipulated video...intended to create a false narrative that doesn’t reflect the event as it occurred.”

Kessler’s interpretation aligned with that of a June 12 *Post* news article that took exception to the “selectively edited clips of [Biden] circulated online to paint the picture of a physically and mentally challenged commander in chief.” In any case, a *Post* article about mental health in general labored to put talk of Biden’s decline in a reassuring context. Published on February 10, at the height of the controversy over the Hur report, it offered the view of “memory experts” that “memory lapses at any

age are surprisingly normal and, for most people, aren’t a signal of mental decline.” Indeed, one said, “An older brain is a wiser brain. It has experience to draw on.”

Before and After

THE *POST*’S NOVEMBER 8 EDITORIAL DID not mince words about how bad the Democratic Party and Biden Administration looked in light of his shaky public performances. “Democrats tried to make fidelity to science, facts and truth their distinguishing characteristic as a party. The White House’s aggressive coverup of Mr. Biden’s decline undermined that claim.” In particular,

Biden’s allies concocted terms such as “cheap fakes” to dismiss embarrassing video clips in which Mr. Biden appeared dazed, confused, tired and inaudible. [The title for Kessler’s column about the 2024 Group of Seven meeting was “‘Cheapfake’ Biden Videos Enrapture Right-Wing Media, But Deeply Mislead.”] Allies of the president frequently labeled content they didn’t approve of as “disinformation,” cheapening the term. When a few journalists reported accurately on Mr. Biden’s decline, the White House fed critical talking points about their stories to others in the media.

A link in the online version of the editorial revealed that the *Post* editorialists’ idea of a good example of “journalists who reported accurately” on Biden’s decline is a *Wall Street Journal* story, “Behind Closed Doors, Biden Shows Signs of Slipping,” published on June 4, three weeks before the president debated Donald Trump.

It’s curious that the *Post* editorial page would direct readers and praise to a rival newspaper. There was, after all, a *Washington Post* story that reported accurately on Biden’s decline. But it appeared on July 5, eight days after the fateful debate. “Biden’s Aging is Seen as Accelerating; Lapses Described as More Common,” the headline announced. Five reporters spoke to 21 sources, most of them off the record, to produce the 3,000-word article.

The lede states that Biden “has displayed signs of accelerated aging in recent months.” He “moves more slowly, speaks more softly and has moments when he loses his train of thought more often than even just a year ago.” Further on, we learn that Biden “has exhibited occasional lapses in which he has appeared to briefly freeze up or suddenly veer off topic, instances some said they easily dismissed before the debate but have now caused

them to question his ability to do the job for another four years.” We also learn that at the 2024 Group of Seven meeting, “several European leaders came away stunned at how much older the president seemed from when they had last interacted with him only a year or, in some cases, mere months earlier.” (This was the same meeting where videos led to claims that Biden showed signs of being *non compos mentis*, an interpretation that *Post* stories had attacked.) Furthermore, “Biden’s aides...adjusted his schedule to avoid overly taxing him.” As a result, “most high-priority meetings and key events are scheduled midday, when aides believe Biden is at his best.”

Journalism and Politics

WAS THERE A JOURNALISTIC REASON why the subject of a sitting president’s ability to discharge his duties had been treated one way by the *Post* for three-and-a-half years before the Trump-Biden debate, and in a completely different way a week after that debate? It’s probable that more sources were willing to talk with some candor about Biden’s mental acuity after June 27 than before. The Biden White House was regarded as one with fewer “leaks” than any in living memory. (Though the reason it was buttoned up so tight became clear during the debate.)

But the simplest explanation for the *Post*’s conduct is that there was a compelling political reason to dispute, deny, and disregard Biden’s reduced mental and verbal capacities before the debate, and to attack the motives and honesty of those who raised the question. These political considerations were overturned by Biden’s ghastly performance, making it necessary to report on this topic aggressively. Before the debate, ensuring Donald Trump’s defeat in November required saying as little as possible about Biden’s decline, and making every effort to contend that he was still up to the job—and would be for an additional four years. Biden was in fact running already, his approval ratings were low but his vice president’s were even lower. Given that there was no evident way to deny Biden the 2024 Democratic nomination or find an alternative to him who was clearly more promising, criticism of Biden could only benefit Trump.

The debate, however, nullified these political calculations. It now seemed highly likely that insisting Biden was still fit for duty would wind up helping rather than hurting Trump. Pre-debate, maintaining that Biden was up to the job had been the best bet for preventing Trump’s return to the White House. Post-debate, Biden’s continuing can-

didacy, which had appeared to be the Democratic Party's least bad option, turned into its most bad option. (Following Trump's victory in November, Jon Favreau, a speechwriter in the Obama White House, said on his "Pod Save America" podcast that internal Biden campaign polling, reflecting the impact of the June debate, showed Trump on track to win 400 electoral votes if Biden remained the Democratic nominee.) With only 53 days between the June 27 debate and the opening of the Democratic convention in Chicago, the mission of driving Biden out of the race in favor of a candidate who could speak audibly and in complete sentences was daunting, but a risk that had to be run. The *Post* was prepared to do its part by publishing a long, detailed article about Biden's decline. A story that had been impermissible, in Mark Halperin's phrase, for more than three years became imperative within just one week.

A collateral consideration was the need to restore the newspaper's credibility. It's bad enough to have a hack like Jennifer Rubin be a voice at the *Post*, insisting that despite what 50 million people thought they saw on June 27, what they really saw was Joe Biden delivering a successful performance that made clear he was a capable president, and would remain so through January 2029. But to make Rubin the voice of the paper, to have *all* its news and editorial judgments align slavishly with Joe Biden or the Democratic Party's interests, would make the *Post* a laughingstock.

And, coming full circle, doing so would also erase the *Post*'s political value to Democrats or liberal causes in general. If the *Post*'s contents are indistinguishable from Democratic National Committee or Center for American Progress press releases, that is, they won't get any more traction, or be taken any more seriously, than press releases. Democrats don't want *The Washington Post* to have journalistic integrity, to follow the evidence wherever it leads, regardless of who ends up looking bad. They want the opposite, for the *Post* to be a team player they can count on.

It's just that for this team membership to be of benefit to the Democratic Party, and progressives' efforts more broadly, *The Washington Post* must appear to have journalistic integrity. To be, instead, obviously biased in what it writes, covers, and ignores, defeats the purpose. So, the *Post* must walk a fine line: to support Democratic politicians and liberal causes reliably, but not blatantly. The swift transformation of the *Post*'s take on Joe Biden's ability to serve as president came in recognition that the coverage before the June 27 debate had left the paper exposed and hard

to take seriously, thereby negating its value in the fight against the GOP, conservatism, and, above all, Donald Trump.

Sharp and Confused

THE WASHINGTON POST WAS NOT ALONE in concealing the news about Joe Biden's decline. It may have been fairly typical, rather than one of the worst offenders. After all, there's no point in refusing to cover a story if your competitors are all over it. As in an economic boycott of a particular company, a journalistic boycott of a particular story is effective only if it is widely observed.

Which the boycott of the Biden story was. Media critic Drew Holden gathered some of the best examples in his Substack newsletter. In 2023, after Biden had announced his run for reelection, *Time* magazine ran a story lamenting "The Weaponization of Biden's Age." It appeared three months after a *New York Times* story, "Inside the Complicated Reality of Being America's Oldest President," which reported that "people who deal with [Biden]

By providing mood music in an echo chamber, legacy media is not just ineffectual but actively harmful for the Democratic Party.

regularly, including some of his adversaries, say he remains sharp and commanding in private meetings." Indeed, "[s]ome who accompany him overseas express astonishment at his ability to keep up." On July 3, 2024, six days after the debate against Trump, Associated Press couldn't pick a horse, so tried to ride them both: "Biden at 81: Often Sharp and Focused But Sometimes Confused and Forgetful."

But that outlet was one of the last to realize which horse was going to win. Stories like *The Washington Post*'s about Biden's decline began to appear regularly in July. A long piece in *Politico* stated that "inside the White House, Biden's growing limitations were becoming apparent long before his meltdown in last week's debate." Biden's reactions to discouraging material from subordinates had become so volatile, one official told *Politico*, that great care had to be taken to withhold information that might set him off. "It's a Rorschach test, not a briefing." *New York* magazine ran a piece nearly 4,000 words long, "The Conspiracy of

Silence to Protect Joe Biden: The President's Mental Decline Was Like a Dark Family Secret for Many Elite Supporters." It included the report of one such supporter, a guest at a 2023 White House event, who came away "open to an idea...previously dismissed as right-wing propaganda: The president may not really be the acting president after all."

Carl Bernstein went on CNN a few days after the debate to relate that several people "very close to President Biden...are adamant that what we saw the other night...is not a one-off, that there have been 15, 20 occasions in the last year and a half when the president has appeared somewhat as he did in that horror show that we witnessed." Bob Woodward, Bernstein's *Washington Post* colleague from 50 years ago, and his co-author of the bestseller about Watergate, *All the President's Men*, wrote a book about the Biden Administration, *War*, published on October 15, 2024. He spoke to several people who attended Biden fundraisers in 2023. One said that "Biden was 'frighteningly awful.' It was 'like your 87-year-old senile grandfather' wandering around the room, saying to women guests, 'your eyes are so beautiful.'"

Democracy and Darkness

THOUGH THE WASHINGTON POST IS NOT a lone violator, I've chosen to discuss how journalists did, but mostly did not, cover the story of Joe Biden's decline by concentrating on that paper for a couple of reasons. One is that, to the best of my knowledge, no other media outlet that was AWOL on this story from 2020 through June 2024 has had the lack of self-awareness, or perhaps the surplus of disingenuousness, to scold the Democratic establishment for failing to be forthright with the public. If *The Washington Post* is not part of the Democratic establishment, then it is certainly the house organ or hometown paper for it, and has been for many years. Given that fact, and given the record of what the *Post* did and did not say about Biden during his presidency, it takes remarkable chutzpah for the *Post* to run an editorial three days after the election titled "Trying to Protect Biden, Democrats Sacrificed Their Credibility." Their credibility?

In 1982, when President Ronald Reagan was urging greater resolve against the Soviet Union, and the Solidarity labor movement was striving to secure human rights in Poland, Susan Sontag delivered a speech that shocked and dismayed fellow leftist intellectuals. Communism, she told them, is "Fascism—successful Fascism." In service of the overriding "wish not to give comfort to 'reactionary' forces," Sontag continued, "people on the left

have willingly or unwillingly told a lot of lies.” And many of those lies wound up in print:

Imagine, if you will, someone who read only the *Reader’s Digest* between 1950 and 1970, and someone in the same period who read only *The Nation* or *The New Statesman*. Which reader would have been better informed about the realities of Communism? The answer, I think, should give us pause. Can it be that our enemies were right?

We can update Sontag’s thought experiment. Imagine someone whose only source of news about Joe Biden between 2020 and 2024 was *The Daily Wire* or *The Washington Free Beacon*, and someone else in the same period whose only source was CNN or *The Washington Post*. Which news consumer would have been better informed about the realities of Biden’s cognitive decline? Which one would have been less surprised that the Biden who showed up at the June 27 debate appeared, in the language of the *Post*’s November 8 editorial, “dazed, confused, tired and inaudible”? The answer should give many people pause.

The other reason to focus on the *Post* is that, among legacy media outlets, it made one of the earliest, most aggressive commitments to fusing political journalism and political activism. “Democracy Dies in Darkness” became *The Washington Post*’s official slogan in February 2017, one month after Donald Trump’s inauguration. It was a clear signal that the *Post* was positioning itself as the primary news source for the anti-Trump “Resistance,” which became a political force at the same time.

The paper’s mis-coverage of Joe Biden’s decline strongly indicates that this synthesis has not been a success, and may not be feasible. It isn’t the only sign. On October 25, the *Post* announced that it would endorse neither Trump nor Kamala Harris in the presidential election. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who bought the *Post* in 2013 for \$250 million, a little more than one-thousandth of his currently estimated net worth, wrote in the paper on October 28 that his decision was a response to surveys showing that journalism was the least trusted profession in America. Given that reality, he said, presidential endorsements were a pointless self-indulgence: they swayed nobody’s vote, but did “create a perception of bias” and a “perception of non-independence.”

The *Post*’s subscribers were neither convinced nor appeased. By October 29, according to National Public Radio’s media reporter, 250,000 had canceled their subscriptions,

about 10% of the entire subscriber base, causing, in NPR’s words, “something of a calamity” for the paper. Though it was easy to find appeals on social media asking subscribers not to take their anger at the *Post*’s owner and management out on its employees, there was a certain logic, even integrity, to the cancelers’ decision—especially those who were part of the 2016-17 “Trump Bump,” the surge in subscriptions to news sources regarded as Resistance allies. Such readers were responding to the *Post*’s decision not to endorse Harris by saying, in effect, “I thought we had a deal. An understanding.” They did not come up with that idea by themselves, nor did they have any real problem with either the perception or the fact of bias and non-independence if it meant resisting Donald Trump.

It’s always tempting and almost always futile to want things both ways. Like other legacy media outlets, *The Washington Post* aspires to be viewed as an honest, rigorous evaluator of competing arguments and murky or disputed factual questions, but also as an active participant in the political contest, reliably supporting the forces of light by opposing the forces of darkness. Among the reasons this doesn’t work is that when a legacy media outlet does a better job at providing a safe space for the children of light, assuring them that their sensibilities will be respected and reflected in the soft glow of their laptops and smartphones, it does a worse job of getting any other voters to pay attention and reconsider their views. In a *New York* magazine issue devoted to the media industry, published just before the November election, one television executive said, “If half the country has decided that Trump is qualified to be president, that means they’re not reading any of this media, and we’ve lost this audience completely. A Trump victory means mainstream media is dead in its current form.”


There was a Trump victory and mainstream media is not dead, at least in the sense of being out of business. Whether it retains any ability to make a political difference, which is what the executive was talking about, is a separate and harder question. If comparing Trump to Hitler for the past nine years did not prevent the 2024 comeback, there’s no reason to believe that saying the same thing even louder will move any needles in the next four years. I predict: a) that at some point between November 2024 and January 2029, a legacy media outlet will publish an op-ed contending that Trump is not merely like Hitler, or as bad as Hitler, but actually worse than Hitler; and b) that five days after it appears, people will have forgotten it.

With no apparent way to change the thinking of people who don’t already share its worldview, mainstream media can do little more than flatter and increase the insularity of its core audience, the NPR-tote bag demographic. One popular lawn sign in the 2024 campaign season read, “Harris-Walz: Obviously.” In other words, if you would even consider casting a vote for Donald Trump, you’re worth disdaining but also so dense and/or bigoted that efforts to persuade you would be a waste of time. By providing mood music in an echo chamber, legacy media is not just ineffectual but actively harmful for the Democratic Party, encouraging the dubious but perilously comforting belief that the appeal of its politicians, policies, and rhetoric is quite broad. Thus misled, Democrats come up with ploys like Tim Walz or White Dudes for Harris, which squander opportunities or succeed in insulting a target audience.

Even though the legacy media’s forfeiture of political significance is self-inflicted, one can view its decline as both justified and lamentable. It remains the case that Americans who love Trump, Americans who loathe Trump, and Americans at various points in the middle must find a way to share a country. And because that country is a republic, the sharing requires not just forbearance and restraint but also some basis on which collective deliberation can be coherent. We’re entitled to our own opinions, Daniel Patrick Moynihan often said, but not to our own facts.

But if every institution that pronounces on which facts are real and which are bogus turns out to indulge its partisan or ideological bias, we end up on a slippery slope where skepticism leads to cynicism and culminates in solipsism. Since I’m just as good as you, my facts are just as good as your facts. This attitude, seemingly proud and defiant, turns out to jeopardize republicanism. The lack of trust, and the lack of institutions that are trustworthy, reinforce each other. This downward spiral renders a republic more susceptible to shrewd manipulations of public opinion, as people are disposed to believe what confirms their worldview rather than what is true—or, rather, to believe that the only test of whether a statement is true is that it confirms their worldview. A self-governing nation that travels this road will eventually vindicate Thomas Hobbes’s contemptuous opinion that democracy always turns out to be “no more than an aristocracy of orators.”

William Voegeli is senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.



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