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Crossing a Flashing Red Line

ON FEBRUARY 17, 2017, newly inaugurated President Donald J. Trump tweeted:

The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!

A few days later he unleashed another tweet:

I called the fake news the ‘enemy of the people’ because they have no sources—they just make it up.

Many Americans were surprised, some even shocked. Reporters, of course, could not believe what they were reading. Like most Americans, they had been raised on First Amendment assurances of “freedom of the press.” For the president, this might have been nothing more than a frightening bark

with no bite intended. But by using that phrase, “enemy of the people,” the president had crossed a flashing red line.

Reading the tweet, I was left wondering: did he not realize that only dictators, detached from democratic norms and values, would use such a phrase?

And yet, that was what he had tweeted—and much more. The press, he said, was a “disgrace . . . false, horrible, fake reporting.” It was “out of control . . . fantastic.” Reporters were “the most dishonest people.” Their coverage was an “outrage.” The *New York Times* was a “failing” newspaper; CNN, “terrible” with “lousy ratings compared to Fox”; *BuzzFeed*, “garbage.” Trump even questioned the press’s patriotism. “I really don’t think they like our country,” he said, adding the press was a “stain on America.”

On occasion, he personalized his critique of the media, calling NBC’s Chuck Todd a “sleeping son of a bitch” and the *Times*’s Maggie Haberman a “Hillary flunky, who knows nothing about me and is not given access.” (Haberman has in fact interviewed Trump quite a few times.)

A White House adviser, when questioned by reporters, stuck to the party line. “Yes,” he stressed, “that is exactly what the president means: the press is the ‘enemy of the people.’”

Yet a few days later, on February 22, during a speech before the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC), Trump tried to refine his attack on the press, explaining his target was really “fake news,” not the “press” as such. “The dishonest media did not explain,” he said, as CPAC members stood and cheered, “that I called the fake news the enemy of the people—the fake news. They dropped off the word ‘fake.’ And all of a sudden the story became, ‘the media is the enemy.’ They take the word ‘fake’ out.” His audience loudly applauded, as Trump continued, “Now I’m saying, ‘oh, no, this is no good.’ But that’s

the way they are. So I'm not against the media. I'm not against the press. . . . I am only against the fake news media or press—fake, fake. They have to leave that word [in].” While acknowledging there were “some great reporters around, honest as the day is long,” probably having Fox cable news in mind, Trump left the clear impression that in his mind the “press” was divided into two broad categories: those who are friends and those who are foes. The friends praise him regularly; the foes, dealing in “fake news,” criticize him. Since by his own definition most of the press was critical of him and his administration, they were to be considered foes, or “enemies of the people,” “doing a tremendous disservice to our country and to our people.” And they were to be attacked.

Soon the president's artificial distinction between friend and foe vanished.

From George Washington to . . . Donald Trump?

With an odd mix of pride and defiance, Donald Trump, the unlikeliest of presidents in a line dating back to George Washington, has set his own marker on American history. Rather than uphold the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of the press, as had all of his predecessors, both Republican and Democratic (except perhaps for John Adams with the Alien and Sedition Acts and Richard Nixon with his “enemies list”), he has chosen to attack the press as an “enemy of the people,” saying on more than one occasion that the First Amendment provides “too much protection” for the press. He has also threatened to “open up the libel laws,” which he called a “sham and a disgrace,” though this is beyond his authority, rooted as libel laws are in state, not federal, law. He urged James Comey,

at the time his FBI director, later a political enemy, to start more “leak” investigations and put more reporters in prison for publishing classified information. Indeed, his attorney general, Jeff Sessions, hoping to score a few points with his boss, boasted that the Justice Department was now conducting twenty-seven “leak” investigations, three times as many as the Obama administration, which itself had launched a record number.

As Trump might add in one of his now-famous tweets, “SAD!”

Trump seems to derive a special pleasure from smashing existing protocol, attempting to prove to one and all that he is an outsider who will “never lie” and will “always fight for the forgotten Americans.” That he also has proved, even while in office, to be a congenial liar and far more absorbed with the pleasures and profits of corporate executives than with the needs of jobless workers seems not to disturb him or his so far loyal base.

According to the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker, Trump made 3,001 “false or misleading claims” in his first 466 days as president, an average of six a day.¹ The *New York Times*, which never before used the word “lie” to describe a “false or misleading claim” by a sitting president, has now begun to use the word “lie” to describe a “false claim” by Trump. On one of his first days in office, Trump told a lie that he was to repeat many times—that the crowd at his inauguration was much larger than the crowd at Barack Obama's inauguration. He ordered his new press secretary, Sean Spicer, to exaggerate the size of the crowd at his first White House press briefing. The *Times* checked Trump's public statements and found that he told a “public lie” or a “falsehood” every day for the first forty days of his presidency and, since then, on “at least 74 of 113 days.”² Editors determined that “lie” was an accurate if somewhat jarring word, and they have begun to use it when appropriate. But

no matter his lying, his outrageous personal conduct, or his disruptive policy proclamations, his 30 to 40 percent support among Americans held firm well into 2018.

Trump, we can hope, is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a real estate magnate who had never held political office, never served in the military (having received five deferments for college and a “bone spur”), and never demonstrated any serious interest in, or familiarity with, foreign or domestic policy. And yet he managed, in the totally bizarre presidential race of 2016, to diminish and demolish sixteen other GOP candidates and then, against the best Las Vegas odds, upset his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, leaving the experts in politics and journalism shaking their heads in disbelief. One big question was whether Russian interference in the 2016 election might have helped swing it in Trump’s direction. By the end of the campaign, Russians left little doubt they detested Clinton and by implication favored Trump, but definitive proof of their role awaited the result of ongoing investigations. James Clapper, the former director of national intelligence, while promoting a book, offered his opinion, based, as he said, on “logic and credulity,” that the Russians “actually turned it” in Trump’s direction, but not even he, as a top intelligence analyst, could be certain.

Throughout his career as a real estate huckster, Trump has always been intrigued with the media; notably, he cherished his anchor role on NBC’s *The Apprentice*. “You’re fired!” he enjoyed shouting. Television’s potential for self-aggrandizement fascinated Trump. It converted him into a national figure. Loving all publicity, good or bad, savoring an article or photo of himself like a connoisseur of good wine, boasting about how many times he made the cover of *Time*, Trump has always been happiest when he is center-stage—whether on TV or in headlines. Some presidents spend many lonely hours studying briefing books on arms control, climate change, and similar

weighty topics. Trump reportedly spends barely an hour, if that, on briefing books each day and as many as four to eight hours a day watching cable television, notably his favorite show: *Fox and Friends*. For him, television is a constant source of ego gratification, the fount of all knowledge, even the basis for snap policy decisions.

Of course, Trump denies watching a lot of television. “People with fake sources—you know fake reporters, fake sources” made the accusation, he said. “But I don’t get to watch much television, primarily because of documents. I’m reading documents a lot.”³ That would depend on the translation of “a lot.”

Trump’s senior staff at the White House understand that he likes to think of each day as a TV reality show in which he, the president, is shown conquering a policy dragon, looking like a strong leader, setting ratings records. Only then should the staff think about the next day’s theme. According to an agreed-upon plan of diversion, an official, who is theoretically pledged never to leak secret information to the press, leaks the “secret information” that next week the president is going to announce a change in, say, the country’s nuclear policy—one that would have the effect of creating chaos and confusion in every defense establishment around the world. The point is to hook the journalist on the next Trump adventure or misadventure, leaving him or her with little or no time to explore more deeply the current calamity. “Tune in,” as a TV tactic, rivets the reporter to the future. That keeps the reporter guessing, and that is part of the plan. After a while, reporters realized what Trump was doing, but they could not do anything about it. As professionals, they still had the responsibility to cover that day’s news—and ignoring Trump the president was not an option.

Still, after only a relatively brief time in office, there can be no doubt that he has changed the politics and culture of the country, introducing a style of governance utterly unfamiliar

to the American experience. (Will we be able to return, post-Trump, to something more familiar?) His style could be called creeping authoritarianism mixed with galloping inefficiency, a narcissistic sun king model of personal rather than institutional, law-based power. He believes he stands at the pinnacle of the American dream and deserves the respect of the people and the personal honor afforded him by the office. No other person, no institution inside or outside the government, should challenge him. Congress, the courts, the law, the press, the talk shows—all ought to be there to help him govern, not to complicate his life with questions or dissent. Subordinates rule their fiefdoms only after swearing unwavering fealty to him and his vision. He, by his own reckoning, is a “genius,” deserving his place in the sun. With all of his vulnerabilities, legal and moral, he still strides across a nation he might like, one day, to rebrand as “Trump.”

All of this is why it is more than an academic exercise to ask questions relating to his distorted understanding of “freedom of the press”: how did he come upon the phrase “enemy of the people,” and what does it mean to him? And can American democracy survive if “freedom of the press” is systematically undercut and undervalued by the president and his minions?

After more than sixty years as a journalist, working at home and abroad, I have come to the conclusion that a free press and democracy are tightly intertwined, each sustaining the other. Lose one, and you lose the other. A free press guarantees a free society, a functioning and, one hopes, flourishing democracy. Therefore, when a president attacks the press as an “enemy of the people,” he is doing more than delegitimizing, demeaning, and trivializing the so-called fourth branch of government. He is also attacking the very foundation of American democracy—and he must be challenged and either stopped or somehow persuaded to change his ways.

The press has become a crucially important yardstick for measuring whether a nation tilts toward democracy or away from it. I remember, as a young reporter in the 1950s, writing about ambitious colonels in Central America staging a coup and immediately seizing control of the radio station to broadcast the news that a new day has finally arrived and it's now best to sit back, listen, and obey the new junta. Obviously, radio as an instant messenger to the people was considered more important than control of the local constabulary.

Or, whenever I arrived in a new country, I would pay a quick visit to the nearest news kiosk, usually located on the other side of passport control. One look was enough to know a lot about the political complexion of the government: whether it was a democracy or an autocracy, whether the press was free or a servant of the state. Not just the headlines but also the size and placement of front-page photos—especially of leaders—would tell much about the politics of the country.

Or, during the Soviet period, talking to a *Pravda* or an *Izvestia* reporter, who would tell me that, in *Pravda* (the Russian word for “truth”) there was no “truth,” and in *Izvestia* (the Russian word for “news”) there was no “news.” There was only what the state, in the person of an editor acting on behalf of the Kremlin, wanted the reporter to tell the people, no more, no less. Lenin always said that the press was not a doorway to democracy but an instrument of political control. It served only a utilitarian end; it was not a romance.

After 1991, when the Soviet Union fell apart and communist constraints collapsed, Russians saw the dawning of a new democracy. It proved to be a false dawn, but for a time it was intoxicating. People enjoyed the freest press they had ever known. They spoke their minds. But when Vladimir Putin began to solidify his hold on power, he moved quickly against

the television networks (the modern-day equivalent of the old radio stations) and then the newspapers, and Russia's brief experiment with freedom faded into history. Only a whimper of its memory can now be heard.

And the American press today, under Trump? Though still pressured by collapsing budgets, new technology, and greedy owners—and undermined by a president who labels it an “enemy of the people”—it remains a vigorous, free, and, most of the time, responsible press, fully capable of covering all aspects of an unprecedented presidency. Indeed, a look at American history strongly suggests that the press, along with the sanctity of the law, is the foundation of American democracy. When the press is attacked, so too is our democracy.

Enter Pat Caddell

So how did Trump, who rarely reads a book, come upon the phrase “enemy of the people”? He once explained his approach to book reading. “I’m an intuitive person,” he said. “I read passages [of books]. I read areas. I’ll read chapters.” Or, more likely, nothing at all.

It has been said, perhaps in jest, that the last person who has Trump’s ear is, for that moment, the most influential person in the country. While that may be true, it also seems that the future president continues to be influenced by a speech delivered years earlier by a brilliant, though angry, Democratic pollster, repeated in a *Breitbart* radio interview and then published on the *Breitbart* website. It was a speech delivered by Pat Caddell.

If, during the heat of the 2016 campaign, candidate Trump needed a reassuring pat on the back, he would turn, ironi-

cally, to the speeches or broadcasts of his new political buddy, Caddell, who four decades earlier had been a major force in propelling a little-known former governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, to become president of the United States in 1976. Caddell's message, in the 1976 campaign as well as in the 2016 campaign, was that the majority of Americans, 85 percent in his judgment, believed that the political and economic system was "rigged" against them, and a sweeping change, a "drain the swamp" revolution, was needed to right the wrongs so obvious to clear-thinking but forgotten Americans living in the heartland of the country. (Many of those on the East and West Coasts were described as satisfied with the existing system because it benefited them.)

One reason, argued Caddell, was that the American press had lost its connection to the people. It had become hopelessly "corrupt," refusing to run stories critical of the Washington establishment and was "in bed" with the political and economic elite. Worse, the network anchors and newspaper columnists themselves had become part of the elite, and they had to be made the target of an angry, outlier candidate, the candidate Caddell now saw in Trump.

The Caddell playbook contained the strands of the erratic populism soon to define the Trump presidency. It also echoed antimainstream media themes dating back to the Nixon administration, when Vice President Spiro Agnew branded the media as the "nattering nabobs of negativism" and the northeast corner of the country—the Boston-New York-Washington corridor—as a place of wild, incestuous liberalism. "We" ordinary Americans were recognizable and familiar; "they" were foreign and hostile, the we/they split defining a central theme in conservative campaign rhetoric to this day. Nixon claimed to represent the "silent majority" of Americans; Trump the "forgotten" Americans.

Though a Democrat who had earlier labored for Joe Biden, Jerry Brown, and Gary Hart, in addition to Carter, Caddell appealed to Trump, himself a former Democrat. Caddell was a regular contributor to Fox News. He was the subject of countless favorable articles on the conservative *Breitbart* website, which Trump read regularly, and he was heard often enough on *Breitbart* radio to become a good friend of Stephen Bannon, who had been *Breitbart's* chief before becoming, for a time, Trump's ideological Darth Vader. (*Time*, in a cover story, called Bannon "The Great Manipulator," and NBC's *Saturday Night Live* showed him as a skeleton in a black cloak, dictating policy to a smaller, shriveled Trump.) Bannon had become a Caddell soulmate, sharing nuggets of wisdom, or nuttiness, about the state of the nation's press and politics. It was Caddell's notion of the press as the "enemy of the American people" that eventually found its way into Trump's mind.

On July 31, a notable Sunday in the 2016 campaign because it followed the official coronation of Trump as the GOP candidate for president, Caddell again appeared on the *Breitbart News Daily*, a radio program distributed by Sirius/XM Satellite radio. Host Alex Marlow reminded his listeners that Caddell was one of the very few pollsters who had correctly predicted Trump's emergence from the crowded GOP field to become the party's nominee. Marlow hoped that now the American people would see how "rigged" the system really was, how Hillary Clinton "lied through her teeth," how the Benghazi "victims" were being forgotten, and how "innocent Americans" were being "murdered by illegal aliens." To say, on reflection, that Marlow loaded his question with Trump's campaign rhetoric would be a modest understatement, but Caddell seized on the opportunity to trumpet his favorite criticism of the press.

"They are . . . they're making themselves, as I've said before, *the enemies of the American people*, and the American people

don't think much of them now and won't think much of them," opined Caddell. "But you cannot let them get away with this, the way people like Romney and others roll over and take a beating, because their consultants want to make sure they preserve their relationships in Washington with the political media."⁴

Obviously pleased with Caddell's response, Marlow then went on to describe Caddell as "a Democratic pollster and a contributor to *Breitbart*, one of the most knowledgeable men in politics." Caddell added that he, Fox News, and the *Wall Street Journal* had all come up with "a lot of numbers and things" that proved that "the real message here" was that "if [Trump] can learn to hit big ground . . . and discipline himself, he is the man to beat in this election, not her [Clinton]. She ain't got anywhere to go in my opinion, unless Trump blows himself up." Most other pollsters reckoned at the time that Hillary Clinton would win easily.

It took no special insight to understand that Trump loved Caddell's projection, and he began to listen to the Democratic pollster more regularly on *Breitbart* and Fox News. Trump especially loved Caddell's praise of his campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," Caddell calling it "the greatest slogan of my lifetime." Bannon, already a friend and admirer of Caddell, pointed out to Trump that Caddell had been singing this same anti-elite, antimedia tune for years. In 2012 Caddell had delivered a speech based on an article he wrote for *Breitbart* called "The Audacity of Corruption," in which he ripped into the press for rupturing the "thin balance" between a "free democracy" and a privileged autocracy. Trust between the press and the public was rapidly evaporating, he said, posing a "fundamental danger" to the republic. Sixty percent of the American people, according to Gallup, trusted the press "not very

much” or “not at all.” “The press’s job,” stressed Caddell, “is to stand on the ramparts and protect the liberty and freedom of us all from . . . organized governmental power.” But when the press “deserts those ramparts” and becomes “active participants” in the political process, telling you “who to vote for” and what is truth and what is not, then “they have made themselves a fundamental threat to the democracy, and, in my opinion, made themselves the enemy of the American people.”⁵

Caddell, in 2012, had a nightmarish vision—that one day a frightening composite of George Wallace and Huey Long would run for president and claim, on the campaign trail, that the press was “biased” and “out to get me,” and “this First Amendment stuff” had gone “too far and “we need to make [the press] serve the people.” The press was losing its value to the people, hypothesized Caddell, and the people would soon lose their faith in the press. “Why do we need a First Amendment?” Caddell fancifully quoted the composite candidate as asking. Without a satisfactory answer, the pollster believed, the country would go into a “deep slide” toward authoritarianism.

Caddell stressed that “we desperately need a real free press,” one that would tell the truth and reclaim the trust of the American people. Or else, “at the end of the day, somebody’s going to say, ‘Enough of this [democracy]!’ And somebody will carry the day, and that’ll be that.” In other words, Caddell’s deep-seated fear in 2012 was that an autocrat would rise to take advantage of a failing press and overturn American democracy. How he could reconcile his apparently genuine fear of a Wallace-Long autocrat with his amazing admiration for Trump never made much sense, but there it was. Four short years later, Caddell would be the inspiring wordsmith who pulled “enemy of the people” out of communist mothballs and put it in the contem-

porary employ of a Wallace-Long-type candidate from New York who had little to no respect for or knowledge of First Amendment guarantees of “freedom of the press,” and who one day might himself conclude “enough of this” democracy stuff, and, as Caddell predicted, “that’ll be that.”

Bannon’s “Alt-Right” Monstrosity

It was not Caddell alone who persuaded Trump that the press had become the “enemy of the people.” A larger role was played by Bannon, who proudly referred to his *Breitbart* empire as the “platform of the alt-right,” a controversial movement of right-wing, antiblack, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim conservatives who felt their time had come because of their attachment to Trump’s startling political emergence. Shortly after Caddell hammered his press-as-enemy slogan on the *Breitbart* masthead in July 2016, Bannon himself was recruited by candidate Trump—who was troubled by falling poll numbers—to inject more energy and new ideas into his faltering campaign. Bannon became the chief operating officer, and Kellyanne Conway, a veteran GOP pollster and strategist, became campaign manager. Trump seemed not in the least bothered by the fact that Conway had never before run a presidential campaign or that *Breitbart*, under Bannon’s leadership, had been poisoning the political well with racist and white supremacist conspiracy theories. “I’ll do whatever I can to win,” Trump said, justifying his selections.

Bannon was a firebrand America Firster and populist who was at different times in a busy life a U.S. Navy officer, a vice president at Goldman Sachs, and a writer or producer of eighteen Hollywood movies—including such winners as *Destroying*

the Great Satan: The Rise of Islamic Fascism in America and The Chaos Experiment. He served Trump's needs for only a year—four months on a victorious campaign, then eight months in a turbulent White House—before being banished into political exile for crossing Trump once too often, including by taking too much of the attention that Trump wanted for himself. It was a relatively brief political marriage. But during the time he stood at Trump's side, he was a significant force in White House deliberations.

Bannon represented what he considered big ideas, and many of them overlapped with Trump's. Those ideas that were very controversial, such as expelling illegal immigrants and restricting legal immigration, whenever possible, to white people, were sugarcoated with evasions intended to appeal to Trump's base. (Trump opened his campaign by referring to "Mexicans" as "rapists.") They both opposed trade pacts, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and they even had questions about NATO, which shocked many of America's traditional allies. Bannon, who had at one time hustled in Southeast Asia for big business deals, came to distrust China; he argued, for example, that one day Chinese aggression in the South China Sea would lead to a war with the United States. Both men favored rolling back regulations, or, as Bannon put it, the "deconstruction of the administrative state." The "deep state," as he later called it, was perceived as an enemy force composed of entrenched career bureaucrats—all liberals and Democrats in this fantasy—who were out to get Trump, to deny him the policy successes he had already earned and to sabotage his chances of future success.

On occasion, Bannon surprised even his White House colleagues, driven as he was by dark visions of an onrushing global apocalypse or imagining himself as a Russian revolutionary de-

terminated to uproot the old order and install a new one. Once, in conversation with a Russia scholar, he bluntly proclaimed, “I am a Leninist.”

The scholar was stunned. “Leninist?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

Bannon replied, “Lenin wanted to destroy the state, and that’s my goal too. I want to bring everything crashing down and destroy all of today’s establishment.”

Working in the White House, Bannon was in an excellent position to realize many of his “Leninist” dreams.

Manipulating the Media

Even though he was, in his latest incarnation, a media man, Bannon, like Caddell, was deeply suspicious of the mainstream press. He fully shared Trump’s belief that most of the media had abandoned any pretense of objectivity during the 2016 campaign and openly sided with Hillary Clinton’s bid for the presidency. Major newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, not only ran long editorials favoring a Clinton triumph but, in Trump’s view, underplayed Clinton’s email problems while overplaying his own problems, of which there were many. In fact, Trump “owned” one of the most important media franchises, the Fox News channel. He appeared on it more than any other campaigning politician and received endlessly favorable coverage on it—and he attacked Fox competitors CNN and MSNBC for being “unfair” and refusing to give him a “fair” amount of air time, which was simply not true. On all three cable news channels, Trump was seen and heard almost anywhere at any time. He was covered not only as a presidential candidate but also as a TV rock star. He was, in

a way, his own TV producer, deciding when and how he would appear, and he almost always got his way.

For example, on morning interview shows, Trump, rather than appear in person, would simply call Fox or another television news program and speak to the host on the phone. His photo would be shown, his voice heard, and his policies explained. That made life easier for Trump during a heavy campaign day. Normally the networks would have insisted that a candidate show up in person at the studio. I remember, when I hosted *Meet the Press* in the 1980s, that guests would have to appear in person or they would not have been welcomed on the program. But in 2016, for Trump, who seemed to make news even when he said nothing of substance, the networks changed their rule books. They were so eager to have Trump on air, they took him whenever he chose to call. He was their meal ticket during the campaign, and he remains so now that he is in office.

According to the respected *Tyndall Report*, the three big TV networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—also twisted their rules to show as much of Trump as they could, all to his political advantage. Because Trump was so unusual a political character, he attracted eyeballs and boosted network ratings, and the three networks made a lot of money. They helped elect Trump in 2016 by giving him 1,144 minutes of free TV coverage compared to only 506 minutes for Clinton, more than double the time.⁶

One remarkable aspect of Trump's coverage was that he generated high ratings even when the news about him was decidedly negative. It didn't seem to matter. Many of his supporters distrusted the media so much they refused to believe critical reporting about him—and critical reporting merely reinforced their negative views of the media. Likewise, many

of his critics were so tantalized by Trump's latest outrage that they, too, could not get enough of him. Even when his critics were disgusted by something Trump said or did, as in the *Access Hollywood* tape when he boasted that his "celebrity" allowed him to "grab" women "by the pussy," they still watched him, or read about him, and that has been a source of his continuing political strength. Experts have been waiting for his inevitable collapse; they are still waiting.

"Their Finger on the Scales"

Trump is a totally self-absorbed political phenomenon. Though once a Democrat who favored birth control and gun control, he now appeals to a solidly conservative base, including many other former Democrats who have veered to the right along with him. After his election, he could have extended an olive branch to the media, so instrumental were they in his victory. But instead, almost from day one of his presidency, Trump has declared war on the press—the "opposition party," as he repeatedly puts it, the "enemy of the people." He apparently believes the media has always been out to get him, and he is determined to fight back. That was what Roy Cohn, his mentor and counsel in New York, had always advised. Fight back, Cohn would say; never admit a mistake. Kellyanne Conway has a ready explanation, too (she always does), and, not surprisingly, it goes back to the 2016 campaign, when Trump, in her judgment (and his), was the most "vilified and attacked politician" ever, subject to horrible "negative coverage." The press, she argues, "suspended the objective standards of journalism," putting "their finger on the scales" for Clinton. They were "unfair," she says, using one of Trump's favorite words. Added a White House colleague, "I

don't think he will ever be treated fairly. I don't think he ever was treated fairly."

Even now, in Trump's second year in office, Conway has not changed her tune. "It's incredible to watch people play armchair psychologist," she says, "outright ridiculing the president's physicality, his mental state, calling him names that you won't want your children to call people on a playground . . . and then all of a sudden feigning shock when he wants to fight back and defend himself."⁷

Bannon, characteristically, was even blunter in his criticism of media coverage. "The media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while," Bannon told a reporter. "The elite media got it dead wrong [about the 2016 election], 100% dead wrong," he added, saying this was "a humiliating defeat that they will never wash away, that will always be there." Bannon clearly enjoyed attacking the press. The tension among Trump, his people, and the media, then as now, has been palpable, sometimes even painful.

For example, when the annual black tie dinner of the White House Correspondents' Association took place in the springtime of Trump's first year in office, a few thousand card-carrying members of the Washington elite were at a big downtown Washington hotel, expecting fun-and-games between the president and the press. So it had been for thirty-six years in a row, whether the president was a Republican or a Democrat. But that year Trump turned down the association's invitation, and many of his staff, sniffing the president's hostility toward the press, decided they would also keep their distance. Instead Trump journeyed to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a city he'd described during the campaign as "just rotting . . . it's just a war zone," but now called a "wonderful, beautiful place." At a dinner there with local Republicans, he blasted the Washing-

ton dinner he'd chosen to stiff as a "large group of Hollywood celebrities" and the "Washington media," phrases that drew instant jeers, boos, and laughter. "I could not possibly be more thrilled than to be more than a hundred miles away from the Washington swamp," he paused, and "with much, much better people." His carefully selected audience cheered his every word of derision.

Meanwhile, in the Washington swamp, the dinner proceeded happily. The correspondents' president, Jeff Mason, told the assembled reporters: "We are not fake news. We are not failing news organizations. And we are not the enemy of the American people." The last line received a standing ovation.

Then, to the surprise of many "ink-stained wretches," as reporters were once called, Trump decided in year two of his administration that he would attend the 2018 Gridiron Dinner, where several hundred of Washington's most prominent journalists by tradition roasted the president and other senior officials, and where the president roasted the journalists—all in good fun, of course. The question was whether Trump could joke about himself, and it turned out that he could—once or twice, anyway.

Every reporter knew that Trump needed an enemy, someone to blame when things went sour. He would never accept any blame himself. He saw himself as perfect. The media was his ideal enemy. So it had been for nearly every Republican leader since Nixon's time.

Though Trump has been at war with the media, most reporters do not see themselves as being at war with the president. Most would like simply to cover him, rigorously but fairly. As *Washington Post* editor Martin Baron put it, "We're not at war; we're at work." There were others, no doubt, who would throw themselves into the task of toppling him from power.

Another contrived enemy for Trump is the “deep state,” the concept first brought to the president’s attention by Bannon. It was not heavy lifting for someone like Trump to believe in this fantasy—he can imagine and tweet, for example, that the Robert Mueller investigation is “the single greatest WITCH HUNT in American political history, led by some very bad and conflicted people.” To find these people, he urged his cabinet officers to dig down into their departments for people who were not doing their jobs, meaning in this context people who were not loyal to administration policy and the president.

In April 2018, Trump set his sights on the State Department, a place he regarded with the deepest suspicion. As a step toward “draining the swamp,” a much more difficult task than he had first imagined, he approved the hiring of Mari Stull, a beverage-lobbyist-turned-wine-blogger, who operated under the name of “Vino Vixen.” She was to be a “senior adviser” to the Bureau of International Organization Affairs, based in Foggy Bottom. She quickly plunged into a quiet but determined effort to vet dozens of career diplomats as a way of checking on their loyalty to the president’s agenda and policies. According to *Foreign Policy* magazine, one source disclosed, “She is gunning for American citizens in the UN to see if they are toeing the line.” And if they were not, they would either be transferred to other less glamorous posts or be asked to resign.⁸