

The President vs. the Press

From George Washington to Donald Trump, presidents have long had a complicated relationship with the media that cover them

By Bryan Brown | March 13, 2017

ALSO...

Friends & Foes

On his first full day in office in January, President Donald Trump put the news media on notice: A new sheriff was in town.

“I have a running war with the media,” Trump said. “They are among the most dishonest human beings on Earth.”

Other members of the Trump administration also lashed out. Sean Spicer, the press secretary, clashed with reporters during his first press briefing. Stephen Bannon, the president’s chief **strategist**, called the media “the opposition party” and suggested the press should “keep its mouth shut.”

Trump has had an ongoing battle with the mainstream media. He says traditional media institutions, such as newspapers and TV news, have a liberal bias and treat him unfairly. During his campaign, Trump allied himself with conservative alternative media outlets. One is Breitbart, formerly run by Bannon, which many media experts say publishes misleading and unsubstantiated information.

Mainstream reporters and commentators have pushed back at the combative tone of the new administration. They say they are treating Trump with the same level of scrutiny as any other president or public figure.

In some ways, the face-off between a president and the media that cover the White House isn’t new. The role of the press as a check on government power has long been integral to American democracy, going back to the Founding Fathers.

“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787, “I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

When relations are running smoothly, according to Mark Feldstein, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland, presidents and the media recognize that they both benefit from cooperation.

“Presidents need the media to get their message out,” Feldstein says. “The media needs the president for supplying the information that’s newsworthy.”

But from the nation's beginning, the forces have clashed. The first U.S. newspapers were highly **partisan**—less interested in truthful reporting than in attacking political opponents, according to Louis Liebovich, a media historian at the University of Illinois.

“Their language was stark and personal if the president was from the party opposite of the newspaper's allegiance,” Liebovich says.

Even George Washington felt the sting. The hero of the American Revolution and the first U.S. president (1789-97) was enraged by some newspapers' accusations that he sought the power of a king.

During the presidency of Washington's successor, John Adams (1797-1801), clashes with the press helped lead to Congress's passage of the Alien and **Sedition** Acts of 1798. The nation was dangerously close to war with France, and the acts were largely aimed at keeping foreign enemies from infiltrating the U.S. But they were also meant to stifle criticism of the government by limiting press freedoms.

The Alien and Sedition Acts didn't last long, expiring by 1801. Still, they resulted in the arrest of dozens of newspaper publishers. And the fact that Adams backed this attack on civil liberties damaged the **credibility** of his presidency.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivering one of his famous fireside chats on radio, circa 1942

The 'First Media President'

Not every president has been at war with the press, however. Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09), who Feldstein calls “the first media president,” would often gather his favorite reporters in the afternoon while he was getting a shave.

“Frequently, in mid-shave, the excitable president would spring out of his armchair, lather flying off his face, to lecture the newsmen on an issue,” historian David Greenberg writes.

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45) also loved the give-and-take with reporters. The press mostly protected FDR’s image as a strong leader by not emphasizing how severely polio had disabled him. Photos showing the president in his wheelchair were extremely rare.

But FDR, a Democrat, did have his media battles, especially with newspapers owned by conservative Republicans. At the same time, he discovered that a new technology—radio—allowed him to speak over the heads of those papers, directly to the people. Roosevelt’s famous fireside chats were broadcast into millions of homes and endeared him to the American public.

Two decades later, John F. Kennedy (1961-63) was the first president to use television to do the same thing, with live TV news conferences. He also understood the power of imagery, and gave the press controlled access to cover his glamorous family, which fascinated the public.

By JFK’s time, says Liebovich, most journalists had long stopped being tied to a political party. Instead, they saw their reporting as an objective, or unbiased, search for facts. And for the most part, the White House and the press worked together peacefully.

That began to change, say historians, during the Vietnam War (1965-75). Reporters accused President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-69) of creating a “credibility gap”—in effect, lying—about U.S. successes in a conflict that bitterly divided the American people.

Relations got even worse under President Richard Nixon (1969-74). Nixon “harbored a deep resentment against the news media,” which he believed had never taken him seriously, says Feldstein, the journalism professor. He “viewed the press as the enemy and vowed revenge.”

In 1971, *The New York Times* published the first of the Pentagon Papers, top-secret documents about the origins of the Vietnam War. Furious about the leak, Nixon escalated his attacks on the press. Reporters he disliked were placed on an “enemies list.” His White House banned some reporters, wiretapped some, and planted false leaks to attempt to **discredit** others.

Nixon’s deep suspicions of the media resulted in his operatives breaking into and bugging the Democratic Party’s headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. The press’s investigation of the scandal—now referred to as Watergate—and Nixon’s lies about covering up the break-in finally led to his resignation in August 1974.

The Media's Challenge

Under the next seven presidents, relations with the media were less dramatic. Though there were conflicts, according to experts, a basic sense of cooperation remained—until now. In the Trump era, they say, the news media is facing perhaps its biggest challenge ever. It's not that the press isn't used to hostility from the White House, according to Feldstein.

"But this is on a whole new level," he says, because Trump isn't attacking just individual reporters or news outlets, but "the news media as an institution."

The new president has shown that he can sidestep the mainstream media completely to convey his message to the American public by using Twitter. The situation is unprecedented, say experts. Reporters and news organizations are now all wondering with a new urgency whether the president and the press can work together at all.

One reason is the recent explosion of alternative media. For many years, most Americans relied on a limited number of news outlets. Today, says Liebovich, there are an endless number of websites and cable news sources, many with a specific political bias. Much of what they produce is either not fact-checked or simply false. With so many options to choose from, it's easy for consumers to read only the news sources they already agree with.

"Alternative media outlets make the White House less reliant than ever on the smaller number of mainstream news organizations that used to be the 'gatekeepers' of [news]," says Feldstein. The administration can also rely on spreading its message via "more sympathetic outlets like Breitbart," he says. Internet websites also have a far greater reach than traditional media ever did.

Social media has changed the landscape too.

"Donald Trump's Twitter account is the greatest bully pulpit that ever existed," said Corey Lewandowski, one of the president's campaign managers. The phrase bully pulpit was coined by Theodore Roosevelt to describe a president's unique power to influence the public.

Indeed, Trump's ability to broadcast his message without being questioned by the press is beyond any previous president's. That has many observers worried, especially since mainstream media outlets have **disputed** the truth of many of Trump's statements. Presidential adviser Kellyanne Conway has called the administration's version of accounts "alternative facts." NBC correspondent Chuck Todd, interviewing Conway, **retorted** that "alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods."

Ann Marie Lipinski, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, recently spoke about the new challenges the media face. She said the political climate has become so contentious that every phrase the media uses to describe the new administration is being scrutinized and debated.

The big question now, she added, is, “Can we find a common language at this point in such a divisive moment?”

FRIENDS & FOES

Some presidents used the media to their advantage. Others have gone to war with the press.



○

John Adams (1797-1801) Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which limited press powers, making it illegal to “print, utter, or publish . . . any false and malicious writing against the government.” The Acts expired by 1801.



Teddy Roosevelt (1901-09)

More than any previous president, Roosevelt saw the press as a vehicle for self-promotion. He invited them along when he attended military football games, negotiated peace treaties, and went to Panama to work out details for the Panama Canal. *Teddy Roosevelt makes a speech as reporters take notes.*

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45) Stricken with polio at 39, FDR used a wheelchair for the rest of his life. But the press largely kept his secret from the public, partly to protect his privacy. FDR is also the first president to take full advantage of radio. In his fireside chats, he spoke informally with Americans in their living rooms.



John F. Kennedy (1961-63) JFK was a master of the media. He used TV to connect with Americans, who followed his glamorous family's every move. He also developed close ties with some reporters, and the media looked the other way when it came to his extra-marital affairs.

Richard Nixon (1969-74)

After *The Washington Post* exposed his role in the Watergate scandal, Nixon banned some reporters from the White House. But the press had the final word: *The Post's* reporting on Watergate led congress to begin impeachment proceedings. Faced with removal from office, Nixon became the first and only president to resign.

QUIZ

For use with "The President vs. the Press" on p. 18 of the magazine

The President vs. the Press

Choose the best answer for each of the following questions. For the analysis section, refer to the article as needed.

CHECK COMPREHENSION

1. Which statement best describes America's earliest newspapers, according to the article?
 - a They were known for objective reporting.
 - b They were published by the government.
 - c They were partisan and often attacked opponents.
 - d They did not cover politics or government.

2. Who is described in the article as the "first media president" for inviting reporters to informal gatherings?
 - a John Adams
 - b Theodore Roosevelt
 - c Franklin D. Roosevelt
 - d John F. Kennedy

3. Reporters heavily criticized President Lyndon B. Johnson for
 - a leading a glamorous life and not focusing on policy.
 - b banning all news media from the White House.
 - c misleading Americans about the Vietnam War.
 - d failing to hold a single press conference.

4. The phrase "bully pulpit" is often used to describe
 - a the press's tendency to criticize presidents.
 - b the influence of TV news as compared with newspapers.
 - c the objective reporting of facts in the press.
 - d a president's power to influence the public.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

5. In paragraph 4 of the article, which word or phrase best provides context for understanding the meaning of the word *mainstream*?
 - a conservative
 - b alternative
 - c unsubstantiated
 - d traditional

6. When Thomas Jefferson said that he would prefer "newspapers without a government" to "a government without newspapers," he was most likely emphasizing that
 - a the U.S. government was beginning to struggle.
 - b he was an avid reader but had little interest in government affairs.
 - c newspapers play a pivotal role in checking government power.
 - d newspapers depend on government support.

7. The author discusses the Alien and Sedition Acts to
 - a explain why the press is now limited in its ability to criticize government.
 - b provide an early example of the government clashing with the press.
 - c show that John Adams had a good relationship with the press.
 - d none of the above

8. How does the sidebar "Friends & Foes" relate to the main article on the presidency and the press?
 - a It gives specific examples.
 - b It offers a contrasting point of view.
 - c It provides a timely update.
 - d It offers a firsthand account.

IN-DEPTH QUESTIONS Please use the other side of this paper for your responses.

9. What role did the press play in the downfall of President Richard Nixon?
10. How has the rise of alternative media outlets affected the relationship between the president and the press?

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VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

For use with "The President vs. The Press" on p. 18 of the magazine

Get a Clue

Paying attention to context can help you infer the meanings of challenging words you encounter in texts. Use context clues in this excerpt from the article "The President vs. The Press" to figure out the meanings of the boldfaced words.

In some ways, the face-off between a president and the media that cover the White House isn't new. The role of the press as a check on government power has long been **integral** to American democracy, going back to the Founding Fathers.

. . . But from the nation's beginning, the forces have clashed. The first U.S. newspapers were highly **partisan**—less interested in truthful reporting than in attacking political opponents, according to Louis Liebovich, a media historian at the University of Illinois.

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John Adams (1797-1801), clashes with the press helped lead to Congress's passage of the **Alien** and **Sedition** Acts of 1798. The nation was dangerously close to war with France, and the acts were largely aimed at keeping foreign enemies from infiltrating the U.S. But they were also meant to stifle criticism of the government by limiting press freedoms.

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1.

PART A

The word **partisan** most nearly means ____.

- a breaking down into individual sections
- b strongly favoring a particular group or person
- c a lack of support from constituents
- d interested in hearing all sides of an issue

PART B

Which word or phrase from the article provides the best support for the answer to Part A?

- a "forces have clashed"
- b "nation's beginning"
- c "attacking political opponents"
- d "media historian"

2.

PART A

The word **alien** most nearly means ____.

- a someone from another country
- b a person who has been to war
- c someone who works for a newspaper
- d a quick-thinking person

PART B

Which word or phrase from the article provides the best support for the answer to Part A?

- a "dangerously close"
- b "criticism of the government"
- c "press freedoms"
- d "foreign"

3.

PART A

The word **sedition** most nearly means ____.

- a devotion to democracy
- b the crime of doing something that encourages people to disobey their government
- c a belief in a free press
- d an interest in hearing all sides of an issue

PART B

Which word or phrase from the article provides the best support for the answer to Part A?

- a "press helped lead"
- b "dangerously close"
- c "criticism of the government"
- d "attack on civil liberties"

GOING FURTHER Use context to explore these additional words from the article.

4. Infer the meaning of the word **integral**: _____

Now use that word in an original sentence: _____

5. Infer the meaning of the word **expire**: _____

In addition to a law, what other kinds of things can expire? _____

PAIRING A PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCE

For use with "The President vs. the Press" on p. 18 of the magazine

'A Free and Unrestrained Press'

One of history's most famous clashes between the president and the press revolved around the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. These papers were a study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam that had been prepared by the Department of Defense between 1967 and 1969. They were highly classified and not at all flattering to the American presidency: They showed that for years, presidents had misled the American public about the situation in Vietnam. In 1971, as American sentiment against the war mounted, a defense analyst who had worked on the report leaked

the papers to *The New York Times*, which published them. To President Richard M. Nixon, this was the last straw in an already strained relationship with the press. Though Nixon's presidency was not covered in the report, his administration ordered the press to halt publication. This order was soon overturned by the Supreme Court in a historic First Amendment ruling. Below are two excerpts from the Court's ruling. Read them in conjunction with the article on the presidency and the press, then answer the questions at the bottom of this page.

New York Times Co. v. United States

Justice Hugo Black wrote one of six concurring opinions that formed the majority decision*:

In the First Amendment the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors. The Government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell. . . . [W]e are asked to hold that . . . the Executive Branch, the Congress, and the Judiciary can make laws . . . abridging freedom of the press in the name of 'national security.' . . . To find that the President has 'inherent power' to halt the publication of news . . . would wipe out the First Amendment and destroy the fundamental liberty and security of the very people the Government hopes to make 'secure.' . . . The word 'security' is a broad,

vague generality whose contours should not be invoked to abrogate the fundamental law embodied in the First Amendment. The guarding of military and diplomatic secrets at the expense of informed representative government provides no real security. . . . The Framers of the First Amendment, fully aware of both the need to defend a new nation and the abuses of the English and Colonial governments, sought to give this new society strength and security by providing that freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly should not be abridged.

Justice Harry Blackmun wrote one of three opinions that dissented from, or disagreed with, the ruling:

The First Amendment, after all, is only one part of an entire Constitution. Article II of the great document vests in the Executive Branch primary power over the conduct of foreign affairs, and places in that branch the responsibility for the Nation's safety. Each provision of the Constitution is important, and I cannot subscribe to a doctrine of unlimited absolutism for the First Amendment at the cost of downgrading other provisions.

*In the 6-3 ruling in this case, each justice wrote an opinion.

Discussion Questions

Answer the following? on the back.

1. What is the purpose and tone of each excerpt?
2. What does Justice Black see as the role of the press in this country?
3. How does Justice Black respond to concerns about the press and national security?
4. What does Justice Blackmun mean by "unlimited absolutism" for the First Amendment, and why does he argue against it?
5. Based on the *Upfront* article and the excerpts above, why do you think so many presidents have had contentious relationships with the press?

