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How did Republicans learn to hate the news media?

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When donald trump slams journalists, which he does chronically and with gusto, I'm reminded of the times my father, a deeply conservative Republican, would rant at the TV set when stories aired about urban riots, civil rights protests, campus revolts, and the Vietnam War.

To him, the media were a bunch of lefties cheering on dysfunction and bent upon wrecking America. When CBS's anchor Walter Cronkite delivered his usual sign-off, "And that's the way it is," Dad would shout: "That's the way it isn't, Walter."

Not much has changed. For many Republicans, the existence of a liberal media bias is an established fact, like the temperature at which water freezes. Attacks by Donald Trump, like the one he made last week on CNN White House correspondent Jim Acosta, resonate loudly with his base. Scores of opinion polls show that Republicans think journalists favor Democrats and oppose the GOP. A late-2017 Cato Institute survey found that 63 percent of Republicans believe that journalists are an "enemy of the American people," reiterating a charge that first came from Trump.

The seeds of the republican media prejudice were planted in the 1950s, when Republican senator Joe McCarthy launched a campaign to discredit the US government as an institution infested with Communist spies. The press dutifully gave McCarthy a platform for his populist conspiracy-mongering until at last CBS's Edward R. Murrow exposed his lies, in a program in 1954. Afterward, in an attack that presaged the Trumpian line, McCarthy lashed out at Murrow, accusing him of Marxist affiliations, which were nonexistent. But McCarthy's fervent supporters were nevertheless livid that the media had dragged him down.

A decade later, at the 1964 Republican National Convention, former president Dwight Eisenhower got a rousing crowd reception when he condemned "sensation-seeking columnists and commentators" who "couldn't care less about the good of our party."

His reference was to media coverage of the extremist views held by the Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater, who called for making Social Security a voluntary program and proposed deploying nuclear weapons in Vietnam. Though Goldwater came across as much more amiable than the ever-seething Trump does today, and he didn't lash out at the press publicly, when he lost the election to Lyndon Johnson by a huge margin, his supporters were indignant at how the press had treated him.

A few years later, the discord of the 1960s helped elect Richard Nixon, who ran on a law-and-order platform and championed "the forgotten Americans," those who didn't burn their draft cards. The new Republican president had a built-in animosity toward newspeople, which started with stories about the Communist-baiting tactics he deployed as a congressional candidate in the McCarthy period.

So he unleashed Vice President Spiro Agnew on the media. Agnew complained about TV networks' "instant analysis" of Nixon's addresses on Vietnam and derided journalists (among others) as "impudent snobs." He repudiated the notion that reporters were neutral, calling it a mask for their liberal agendas.

During the Nixon administration, several conservative watchdog groups formed to monitor the press, notably Accuracy in Media, founded by onetime Federal Reserve economist Reed Irvine. In 1971, *TV Guide* writer Edith Efron published *The News Twisters*, a book that purported to demonstrate liberal media distortion in the 1968 presidential contest by analyzing network mentions of the candidates. Unsurprisingly, she concluded that Nixon received a paltry amount of favorable coverage, while Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey had been bathed in positive mentions. Although her methodology was questioned, and Efron was the sole judge of what was positive and negative, the Right convinced itself that it had scientific proof of liberal bias.

My father read *The News Twisters* with relish. As Watergate unfolded, he railed against the news media's "coup" against Nixon, a man who had won reelection in a landslide. For him and many like him, the media-fueled destruction of Nixon was the last straw.

And from that point on, Republican pols have used the base's prejudice against the press to fire up the ideological troops. President George H. W. Bush put out a bumper sticker when he ran for a second term in 1992: "Annoy the Media, Re-Elect Bush," it read. In her speech accepting the Republican Party's 2008 vice-presidential nomination, Sarah Palin won a rousing audience reception by saying, "Here's a little news flash for all those reporters and commentators: I'm not going to Washington to seek their good opinion." And in a 2015 debate among Republican presidential candidates, Florida senator Marco Rubio wowed the crowd with his declaration that "the Democrats have the ultimate 'super PAC'; it's called the mainstream media."

ICYMI: What if the right-wing media wins?

Academics and others have long sought to understand why this prejudice has taken root in the Republican worldview. Maybe it's simply a case of blaming the messenger for bringing bad news. Maybe it's to be found in historian Richard Hofstadter's essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." The piece, published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1964, during the Goldwater campaign, explored a tendency among some on the far right (and the far left) to identify all-powerful subversive conspiracies, usually involving elites.

Today, Republican media haters don't want to hear about the bad press Democrats have received, or other evidence contrary to their position. To bolster this selective perspective, the haters frequently skew poll findings. For instance, the Indiana University's 2013 survey of journalists found that just 7.1 percent identified as Republican, versus 28.1 percent who identified as Democrats. The Media Research Center, a conservative organization highly critical of the news media, touts that four-to-one ratio as *ipso facto* evidence of bias. Never mind that 50.2 percent of the journalists surveyed in the Indiana University study self-identified as independents and another 14.6 percent claimed themselves as "other."

But regardless of the precise breakdown, nearly all available data indicate that journalists are overwhelmingly *not* Republican. Does it then follow that they hate Republicans and can't report on the GOP honestly? In a time of increasing partisanship, where more and more Americans

believe you're either with us or against us, lack of devotion to the Republican tribe's line, as disseminated by programs like *Fox & Friends*, for instance, is perhaps proof enough of bias. For the media haters, at least, it is.

One of the defining characteristics of the right is a sense of grievance. The success of Fox News demonstrates that the "mainstream" media seldom run stories appealing to this resentment. Most journalists tend to roll their eyes at, say, Fox's perennial year-end coverage of the supposed "war on Christmas."

The truth is that journalists, particularly at the most prominent outlets, are a highly educated bunch. And they mostly live in cosmopolitan places like New York and Washington, where support is not strong for allowing nativity crèches on town-hall lawns and stopping immigrants from crossing the Mexican border. That doesn't make them Democrats' shills or hostile to the right. But it might make them view some of its concerns as less important. My father, a combat veteran, believed anti-war protesters were traitors and couldn't understand how the media didn't scorn them as such.

Is there any hope that Republican loathing for the media will abate? Perhaps when Trump leaves the presidency, some of the intensity will go out of it. But for GOP pols in general, media-baiting is such a good base rouser that it's sure to continue.

Here's the odd thing, though: Even though large numbers of Republicans think the news media are the enemy, their politicians, who deal with reporters in person, very often have a more nuanced stance, at least in private.

In *The Fourth Estate*, a four-part documentary program about the *New York Times* produced this year by Showtime, alt-right firebrand Steve Bannon is shown at a political rally condemning the "fake news" media, in which he includes the *Times*. But then he shares a car ride with *Times* political correspondent Jeremy Peters, and it's clear the two have an amicable relationship.

Call it hypocritical, call it love-hate, call it pragmatic. For whatever reason, elite Republicans—namely, those in national office and their high-level staffers—mostly court the media. Toward the end of his life, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Richard Nixon, the paradigmatic press hater, hosted small gatherings of reporters at his home in Saddle River, New Jersey.

Nixon, a brilliant man with deep knowledge of world affairs, wanted to improve his Watergate-tarnished legacy. The dinners he held with reporters were tutorials in which journalists would ask the ex-president about matters of state. After all, Nixon must have considered, the news media set the stage for the history books.

So maybe someday, like Nixon, Republicans will tire of press bashing. In the meantime, duck.