

Day by Day, Tales That Define America & Earn Trust

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An NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll released in late June contains bad news for the country. Only 37 percent of Americans trust the Trump administration “a good amount” or “a great deal.” Worse, substantially fewer—30 percent—trust the media a good amount or a great deal. Worse still is that the public’s distrust is justified.

The immediate causes are not hard to detect. President Trump achieved his improbable victory partly despite and partly because of his outlandish and unrestrained pronouncements on the campaign trail and his constant flurry of juvenile and incendiary tweets. These included brutal attacks on the media for rank partisanship and for distorting events through sins of commission and omission.

The media played into Trump’s hand by doubling down on rank partisanship and distorting events. Journalists had their reasons. Proceeding from the top and fanning out through the business, many persuaded themselves that Trump is a menace who is destroying liberal democracy in America by unleashing the forces of bigotry and hatred. This narrative—as it is popular to say these days—was adopted by reporters and TV talkers, editors and producers, and publishers and network executives. They seemed to believe that resistance to Trump and his removal from office as soon as possible justified the abandonment of elementary standards of professional journalism: get the facts right; question critically sources, especially those who insist on anonymity and have axes to grind; tell more than one side of the story.

Distrust of the media—which correlates with the much-discussed disintegration of civility in American politics and the intensification of partisanship—long antedates Trump and partly accounts for his rise. According to Gallup, trust in the media has declined dramatically over the last four decades. In 1976, following widely admired investigative reporting on Vietnam and Watergate, 72 percent of the public trusted the media. By 1999, that number had dropped precipitously: 55 percent of the public had “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in the media. Over the next 17 years, trust plunged further. By September 2016, only 32 percent—barely above what the Marist poll found last month—told Gallup they had confidence in the media.

By damaging their own credibility over the last 40 years, journalists paved the way for a figure like Trump, who built his campaign around opposition to them. Many journalists who came of age in the 1980s and ’90s embraced a new view of their professional responsibilities,

just as many young scholars who joined university faculties during those decades adopted a transformed understanding of the academic mission: They regarded themselves as engaged in politics by other means.

Since the mainstream media, like the academy, leans overwhelmingly to the left, this stance fostered an adversarial relationship with half of the country. Like their counterparts in the academy, journalists lost touch with those on the right and those who live outside urban metropolises; stressed what divided Americans; and neglected or scorned what unites, or potentially unites, Americans across the political spectrum.

Increasingly uncommon these days is the journalist—or professor—who is open to America in all its extraordinary diversity of taste, judgment, and thought; is eager to listen to and learn from blue America and red America alike; and who understands that journalism's highest service in a liberal democracy is to present citizens accurate reports on what is actually happening and to offer a variety of well-argued opinions about what ought to be done.

Carl Cannon is among those increasingly uncommon journalists. His new book, "On this Date: From the Pilgrims to Today, Discovering America One Day at a Time," shows the country as it really has been. It is also a love letter to America. At a particularly acrimonious and fraught moment, it will give those who have been deprived of the experience the opportunity to fall in love with their country. For those who have been more fortunate, it will provide a chance to fall in love all over again.

A veteran reporter, Cannon is RealClearPolitics Washington bureau chief and executive editor (and my regular editor at RCP). He may be D.C.'s hardest-working journalist. His daily RCP "Morning Note" contains an original vignette, a book page or two in length, drawn from that date in American history; he produces it at sunrise so readers can enjoy it fresh with their morning coffee. In addition, Cannon manages and edits a team of reporters, columnists, and contributors. On top of his RCP duties, he writes a weekly column for the Orange County Register that, while more than a few of his fellow journalists have been flipping out, has established him as among Washington's most even-handed and well-grounded commentators.

Cannon's book is drawn from previously published Morning Notes, one for every day of the year. To those who have been receiving his missives in their email inboxes for several years, these uplifting dispatches are, to paraphrase what Cannon says in his book about electric lights in 1920s America, no longer a novelty. However, especially when gathered together in a single volume, they are a marvel.

A natural-born storyteller, Cannon recounts uncommon tales about wonderful characters. Presidents and other political personages on both sides of the aisle are well represented. So too are obscure figures such as Wilma K. Russey who, on Jan. 1, 1915, became New York City's first female taxicab driver. Then there are Robert L. May, the Montgomery Ward

copywriter who, in 1939, wrote the story of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” for a coloring book for kids; his brother-in-law Johnny Marks, who composed the tune; and free-market champion Sewell Lee Avery, the Montgomery Ward chairman who, though he had no legal obligation to do so, made May a wealthy man in 1949 by signing over to him the copyright for “Rudolph.” And there are the entwined stories of World War I soldiers Henry Johnson, an African-American, and William Shemin, a Jew, who in 2015 were posthumously awarded by President Obama the Medals of Honor they earned on the battlefield nearly a century before but because of bigotry were denied in their lifetimes.

Cannon also chronicles forgotten dimensions of a remarkable range of events. He recalls John Winthrop’s 1630 “city upon a hill” sermon, which inspired Presidents Kennedy and Reagan to declare that the United States had an obligation to serve the world as a beacon of liberty. He brings to life George Washington’s daring and morale-boosting victories at Trenton in December 1776 and at Princeton in January 1777. He presents the 1854 diary entries of Johannes Remeeus, which relate the Dutchman’s adventures that summer crossing the Atlantic, settling in Milwaukee, and becoming an American citizen. And he throws into sharp relief the costs of the 2009 battle against the Taliban for the town of Dananeh in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in which 40-year-old Marine Staff Sgt. and father of twins Bill Cahir, a reporter until his enlistment following the Sept. 11 attacks, lost his life.

In addition, Cannon celebrates a splendid array of movie and TV stars, musical greats across several genres, male and female sports heroes, legendary journalists and major literary figures, titans of business, explorers and conservationists and comedians, forgotten slaves and civil rights icons, Native American warriors and peacemakers, women who helped forge a political order that respected women’s rights, and much more. Many of his stories depict valor on the battlefield. Many others salute the quieter forms of heroism involved in caring for the orphaned, the ill, and the elderly and lifting up the poor and downtrodden. And he provides an abundance of tender love stories, profiles in courage, and exemplars of grace under pressure.

Cannon does not force his snapshots of America into an artificial mold, but his book does revolve around several great themes, which are also America’s great themes: liberty equally for all; toleration for different points of view and delight in the diversity of ways of being human; appreciation of rugged individuals and of tight-knit communities; admiration of human excellence in its many forms and readiness to assist those who encounter difficulty in assisting themselves. Acutely aware that again and again America has fallen short of its lofty promise, he is just as mindful that the nation’s astounding progress is rooted in dedication to its fundamental principles.

Cannon writes that he learned “to truly love his country” on a trip to the coastal towns of Normandy in 2004. There, while covering President George W. Bush, he encountered among the locals an abiding warmth and gratitude toward America for liberating France from Nazi

occupation. He came away with a new sense of obligation to repay his good fortune of having been born an American “by aiding in the task of telling America’s story.”

Cannon has discharged his obligation and then some. His sparkling mosaic of stories gives citizens good cause to take pride in America’s accomplishments, to feel gratitude for the blessings their country confers, and to shoulder the responsibility to contribute to the unending work of fulfilling the nation’s lofty promise.

The well-balanced mix of pride in, gratitude for, and responsibility toward America might even be a prerequisite for journalists and politicians to be deserving of the people’s trust.

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