

The Press, The Professors, and Postmodern Progressivism

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COMMENTARY

This is a chapter that appears in the recently released book, "Against the Corporate Media: Forty-two Ways the Press Hates You."

Postmodern progressivism occupies the commanding heights of contemporary American culture. It combines a commitment to rule by credentialed elites, an ever more expansive egalitarianism conceived in terms of group identities, and a repudiation of traditional moral principles. Progressive elites draw from these clashing convictions a license to do whatever is necessary to make Americans conform to their prescriptions for diversity understood as intellectual conformity; equity understood as differential treatment based on race, ethnicity, and sex; and inclusion understood as silencing or excluding those who disagree with the progressive agenda. Oscillating opportunistically between a moral relativism that haughtily disdains to judge and a dogmatic moralism that judges haughtily, this incoherent sensibility fortifies self-righteousness and induces ideological blindness. It drives the mainstream media's and the elite academy's efforts to banish opposition, stigmatize debate, control the flow of information, supervise public discussion, and establish authoritative and unchallengeable progressive narratives.

Postmodern progressivism undercuts liberal democracy in America. Freedom and democracy depend on a knowledgeable citizenry, which requires a self-aware press that reports the facts accurately and analyzes the issues fairly, and an educational system devoted to the transmission of knowledge and the cultivation of independent minds. However, the prestige press and the elite academy collaborate to cocoon citizens within a set of purportedly final and uncontestable progressive assumptions and conclusions. This drastic narrowing of moral and political perspectives erodes the conditions for public discussion and reasoned deliberation essential to responsible self-government.

Seldom does the onrush of events provide a real-time laboratory for testing claims about culture, politics, and society. But the mainstream media's starkly contrasting coverage of two grave accusations – the Russia-collusion accusation directed at candidate and then President Donald Trump, and the influence-peddling-scheme accusation directed at candidate and then President Joe Biden, his son, and other family members – demonstrates the lengths to which the mainstream media is willing to go to twist, suppress, or invent facts to advance progressive moral judgments and political interests.

From the 2016 presidential campaign through 2019, the mainstream media championed the falsehood that Donald Trump colluded with Russia to steal the 2016 presidential election. However, the “Report on the Investigation Into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election” Volume I and Volume II, submitted by special prosecutor Robert Mueller in March 2019 after nearly two years of work, failed to find evidence to establish that the Trump campaign engaged in a criminal conspiracy with Russia. Meanwhile, investigations by Department of Justice Inspector General Michael Horowitz – “A Report of Investigation of Certain Allegations Relating to Former FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe” (February 2018) and “Review of Four FISA Applications and Other Aspects of the FBI’s Crossfire Hurricane Investigation” (December 2019) – along with the “Report on Matters Related to Intelligence Activities and Investigations Arising Out of the 2016 Presidential Campaigns” (May 2023) issued by Special Prosecutor John Durham found abundant evidence of serious wrongdoing by law enforcement officials.

According to these reports, the Obama administration’s FBI and Department of Justice flouted standard operating procedures and abused their formidable law-enforcement powers in their investigations of candidate Trump. In no small measure driven by Obama administration holdovers, the FBI and Department of Justice continued to defy regular practices and protocols in investigations of Trump after he entered the White House. The mainstream media has tended to dismiss the significance of the Horowitz reports and the Durham report on the grounds that they did not uncover substantial prosecutable conduct, as if serious wrongdoing in politics is limited to crimes that can be proven in a court of law.

From the 2020 campaign to 2023, the same mainstream media ignored or suppressed the abundant evidence that Joe Biden’s son Hunter and other Biden family members conducted lucrative influence-peddling schemes while Biden was vice president. In October 2020, the *New York Post* reported that a laptop abandoned by Hunter Biden in a Delaware computer store and turned over to the FBI by the store’s owner contained on its hard drive – among sordid photos and extensive electronic communications – an email to Hunter Biden from Vadym Pozharskyi, “a top executive at a Ukrainian energy firm,” thanking the son for the introduction to his father, who was then vice president. The meeting took place “less than a year before the elder Biden pressured government officials in Ukraine into firing a prosecutor who was investigating the company.”

The mainstream media largely declined to cover the story, based in part on an open letter that was ginned up by then-Biden campaign advisor Antony Blinken and signed by fifty-one former intelligence officials. With reckless disregard for the truth, the open letter dismissed the laptop and its contents as “Russian disinformation.” The mainstream media’s insistence that the story was of little public interest was buttressed by collaboration between federal law enforcement and social media: With the FBI’s encouragement, Twitter and Facebook censored the laptop story. The stubborn facts remained. Ample evidence indicated that Hunter Biden, who has been under federal investigation since 2018 for, among other things, improper business dealings, received millions of dollars from Ukrainian natural-gas giant

Burisma while his father was vice president and Obama's point man on Ukraine despite Hunter's lack of expertise on Ukraine and the natural gas industry. Meanwhile, other family members as well as Hunter received millions of dollars from companies connected to the Chinese Communist Party. Yet the mainstream media found few, if any, leads it regarded as worth pursuing about family members' efforts to cash in on Joe Biden's service as vice president.

These overlapping case studies throw into sharp relief an egregious journalistic double standard. In the case of the manufactured Russia-collusion false narrative, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the major broadcast networks, and cable-news outlets CNN and MSNBC – along with the local editors around the country who take their cues from these industry leaders – rushed to condemn Trump. Despite flimsy evidence and the steady unraveling of the case against him, the mainstream media persisted for years in fanning the flames of outrage against Trump's supposed Russia collusion, promulgating deceptive story lines to hamstring and delegitimize his presidency.

In contrast, the same media outlets concocted far-fetched justifications for ignoring or denying credible allegations of Biden family malfeasance while hushing up the *New York Post's* accurate reporting. Not even a video of former Vice President Biden boasting at a Council on Foreign Relations event that, by threatening to withhold \$1 billion of U.S. foreign aid, he compelled Ukrainian authorities to fire a prosecutor investigating his son's employer Burisma was enough to prompt the mainstream media to swing into action. Finally, in March 2022, leading news organizations began to belatedly acknowledge the provenance of Hunter's laptop. However, they continued to ignore, or slow-walk, reporting of the influence-peddling revealed by his emails and corroborated by the eye-witness testimony of Hunter's former business partner Tony Bobulinski.

While priding themselves on serving as the nation's watchdogs, America's prestige news and opinion organizations have demonstrated little recognition of, and offered scarcely a word of apology for, their opposite derelictions of duty in the cases of Trump and Biden. The likely explanation for the absence of public expressions of remorse is absence of private pangs of remorse. Publishers, editors, reporters, and columnists appear to believe, all things considered, that no apology is owed.

The starkly contrasting approaches to reporting the allegations against Trump and Biden followed a familiar pattern. Consider the mainstream media's coverage of several high-profile stories since Trump was elected: the never-substantiated charges of sexual assault slung at judge Brett Kavanaugh during his 2018 Senate Judiciary confirmation hearings; the false accusation advanced by the press in January 2019 that boys from Covington Catholic High School mocked a Native American on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial; the Jussie Smollett "MAGA" hoax a few weeks later; the much-derided hypothesis during the early months of the pandemic, now widely viewed as more likely than not, that Covid originated in a lab in Wuhan, China; the soft-peddling of the George Floyd protests, at many points lawless and

destructive, during the spring and summer of 2020; and the seditious portrayal of the January 6, 2021, Capitol Hill riots, involving three hours of criminal trespassing, as insurrection, which in common parlance means the effort to overturn a regime. In each case, the mainstream media promulgated a sensationalized version of events consistent with progressive prejudices and aims. As it became increasingly difficult to suppress the facts, the mainstream media lost interest and moved on. Nevertheless, its one-sided characterizations continued to echo through news accounts and op-ed pages and burrow into the progressive imagination and memory.

The temptation should be resisted to attribute the mainstream media's two-tiered system of reporting to ordinary bias or to the hastiness bound up with producing the first draft of history. Elite news organizations' acts of commission and omission are not haphazard; they consistently advance progressive interests and goals, simultaneously demonizing the Right and running interference for the Left. Rank partisanship cloaked as morally righteous truth-telling has become a regular feature of the mainstream media's work product.

Another error is to view the mainstream media's subordination of accurate reporting to activism as a return to the past. It's true that for much of American history, newspapers frankly served one party's interests or another's. It's also true that in the twentieth century, the media establishment resolved to professionalize its operations and to make objective reporting its mission. And it's true that thanks to the internet, which places abundant partisan content to fit nearly every taste and style within easy reach of a few clicks or taps, the days are gone in which a handful of newspapers and networks controlled the nation's access to news and opinion. Nevertheless, the twenty-first-century mainstream media retains a substantial influence on the nation's elites and popular discourse. That influence, however, does not stem from a return to the frank partisanship of early American newspapers or from a doubling down on the professional commitment to objectivity that marked mid-twentieth-century reporting. Instead, the mainstream media contradictorily combines covert partisanship with pious attestations to its own dispassionate professionalism. While riding roughshod over the truth to advance progressive ends, it persists in claiming that it reports reliably on the world as it really is.

To the extent that they own up to a change in their political coverage, members of the mainstream media tend to blame Trump. For example, in the summer of 2016 in "Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism," *New York Times* journalist Jim Rutenberg brought to the public's attention a question echoing through the media: "If you're a working journalist and you believe that Donald J. Trump is a demagogue playing to the nation's worst racist and nationalistic tendencies, that he cozies up to anti-American dictators and that he would be dangerous with control of the United States nuclear codes, how the heck are you supposed to cover him?" The obvious answer was that journalists should recommit themselves to getting the story right, scrupulously reporting the bumptious billionaire's wild rhetoric and erratic conduct, the better to equip voters to make an informed decision on his qualifications for the highest office in the land.

Instead, the mainstream media proceeded in the opposite direction. Rutenberg suggested that it was “unavoidable” for reporters to cover Trump as an “abnormal” eruption into the political system: “No living journalist has ever seen a major party nominee put financial conditions on the United States defense of NATO allies, openly fight with the family of a fallen American soldier, or entice Russia to meddle in a United States presidential election by hacking his opponent (a joke, Mr. Trump later said, that the news media failed to get),” the *Times* journalist wrote. “And while coded appeals to racism or nationalism aren’t new—two words: Southern strategy—overt calls to temporarily bar Muslims from entry to the United States or questioning a federal judge’s impartiality based on his Mexican heritage are new.”

There is, however, a world of difference between covering Trump’s abnormalities and covering Trump abnormally. It is one thing to unsparingly report Trump’s deviations from the norm. It’s quite another to conclude that Trump’s deviations compelled journalists to deviate from traditional reportorial standards.

How would the public have been harmed or journalism betrayed if the mainstream media had accurately reported that Trump wanted to put financial conditions on NATO allies because he recognized that they were not paying their fair share for the collective defense; that it was indecent for Trump to mock a fallen soldier; that in context it sounds like Trump is speaking facetiously when, at a large political rally, he invites the Russians to hack Hillary Clinton’s email; that a temporary ban on Muslims’ entering the United States was a crude response to plausible threats (President Trump issued a ban on nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries to the United States on the grounds that they posed a terror risk); and that vulgar as it is to question a federal judge’s impartiality based on his or her heritage, Trump’s accusation reflects the practice all-but institutionalized among progressive elites of ascribing opinions to individuals based on their ethnic and racial identity (a sitting Supreme Court justice appointed by President Obama stated that her Latina ethnicity gave her an advantage in adjudicating cases and controversies, and elite law-school professors, overwhelmingly progressive, routinely disparage white judges as implacably racist)?

The answer, toward which Rutenberg gestured but never forthrightly stated, is that the mainstream media felt obliged to use all means, fair and foul, to besmirch Trump because its members saw him as an unprecedented threat to their political convictions and priorities. Although they flirted in print with the need to renounce objectivity in their treatment of Trump, they believed that he objectively menaced all they held dear. Therefore, they refrained from reporting facts or considering opinions that might lend support to Trump’s campaign and validate his voters’ views while hastening to publish wild accusations and flimsy speculations to damage Trump. Since the objective truth in their eyes was that a Trump presidency would overthrow progressivism’s righteous hegemony in America, the corporate media considered itself duty bound to spare no effort in using its extensive powers to shape the narrative to defeat Trump and, if he were elected, to straitjacket his presidency.

In “The Press Versus the President,” a deep dive into the Russian collusion narrative that appeared in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in early 2023, veteran journalist Jeff Gerth dispassionately analyzed the extraordinary extent to which the mainstream media abandoned dispassionate analysis to construct the false Trump collusion narrative. The prestige press, he demonstrated, published stories riddled with inaccuracies, uncritically reported mendacious statements by FBI Director James Comey and California’s Democratic Representative Adam Schiff, hyped accounts that contained false claims “without any attribution or sourcing” and “significant omissions,” greatly increased their reliance on anonymous sources, excluded exculpatory evidence and explicit denials by key actors while presenting statements out of context to make them seem incriminatory, and stood by error-riddled reporting for months despite mounting evidence of erroneous details and misrepresentation of the larger picture. In 2018, the Pulitzer Prize Board awarded journalism’s most prestigious honor jointly to the *Times* and the *Post* in the face of coverage that systematically betrayed traditional journalistic standards. Its judgment and conduct in convicting Trump in the court of public opinion having been spectacularly rewarded, the mainstream media proceeded to bury the Biden influence-peddling scheme, the better to exonerate its party’s leader.

“My main conclusion is that journalism’s primary missions, informing the public and holding powerful interests accountable, have been undermined by the erosion of journalistic norms and the media’s own lack of transparency about its work,” wrote Gerth. “This combination adds to people’s distrust about the media and exacerbates frayed political and social differences.” Accordingly, Walter Lippmann was right to worry in his 1920 book *Liberty and the News* “that when journalists ‘arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable.’” But Gerth offered no explanation as to why, a century later, our prestigiously credentialed and highly educated journalists believe that their job is to determine what the public needs to know, what it should feel, and what it is better off not knowing.

One crucial factor inspiring journalism’s abandoning of its primary mission to inform the public and impartially hold powerful interests accountable is the postmodern progressivism inculcated by higher education in America. Since at least the late 1940s, colleges and universities have been reshaping the curriculum by putting it in the service of progressive priorities. Since the 1970s, colleges and universities have come to function as the indispensable credentialing institution for journalism’s higher echelons. And since roughly the 1980s, they have injected into the curriculum the postmodern demotion of reason and repudiation of authoritative norms and standards. Eventually, the progressivism and the postmodernism coalesced into a single sensibility, committed to empowering government to emancipate individuals from traditional moral virtues and judgments. Few are the members of the mainstream media who, during their passage through the credentialing institutions of American higher education, have not imbibed the spirit of postmodern progressivism.

Thanks to instructive writings by predominantly – but by no means exclusively – conservative authors, four stages stand out in the establishment of postmodern progressivism as higher education’s governing ethos.

The process began in the soft dogmatism that then-recent-Yale-University-graduate William F. Buckley documented in 1951 in his book *God and Man at Yale*. Buckley’s examination of course syllabi from the social sciences, particularly economics and political science, demonstrated the faculty’s determination to portray what Buckley called collectivism – a preference for larger government staffed by supposedly disinterested technocrats seeking the people’s good often contrary to the people’s expressed interests – as preferable to individualism, or the traditional American view of individual liberty and limited government. At the same time, Buckley’s review of syllabi from Yale’s humanities curriculum as well as from the Yale Divinity School’s course offerings, disclosed readings and assignments that did not merely teach the arguments and influences of atheism but consistently advocated a secular point of view. While assuming basic principles of objectivity and academic freedom, Yale’s overall curriculum gently eroded them by presenting the faculty’s preferences for collectivism and atheism as objectively correct and the alternatives, by their silent omission, as unworthy of serious exploration.

In his 1988 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom illuminated the soft relativism that, with the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, had conquered the campuses. This relativism – which derived in part from Nietzsche’s assertion that morality expresses the desire for power, and in part from the neo-Marxist doctrine that morality reflects institutionalized structures of power – was soft because of its transparent insincerity and inconsistency. Students and professors invoked moral relativism to disarm the claims of inherited authority and to disparage the achievements of Western civilization. But students and professors maintained firm convictions about the falseness and harmfulness of biblical faith, the irrelevance of classical political philosophy, the goodness of the liberation of sexual mores from the tyranny of traditional norms and practices, and the evilness of Ronald Reagan’s presidency.

In the 1990s, campus dogmatism turned hard. In their 1998 work *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America’s Campuses*, University of Pennsylvania history professor Alan Charles Kors and Boston lawyer Harvey Silverglate explored an outbreak of cases across the country in which university administrations, often joined by faculty, conspired to deprive students of rights basic to a liberal education: liberty of thought and discussion, and the right to due process in the adjudication of allegations of misconduct, particularly sexual misconduct. Underwritten by the emancipation from the standard norms of free societies thought to be conferred by Nietzsche and the neo-Marxists, administrators and professors justified crude infringements on liberty by dubious progressive interpretations of social reality. Speech codes sought to protect historically discriminated-against minorities and women from

supposedly hateful opinions and ideas. The curtailment of due process for males accused in cases involving women's allegations of sexual misconduct was intended to compensate for the pervasive inequalities that, it was said, society had imposed on women.

In practice, as Kors and Silverglate exhaustively showed, university administrations rode roughshod over the facts to censor speech that deviated from orthodox progressivism and to convict students accused of sexual assault on the grounds that the achievement of equality for women demanded belief in whatever they said. Students internalized the implicit lesson: Objectively true progressive ends justified authoritarian means, including the promulgation of gross falsehoods. Despite their hope that the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) – established in 1999 by Kors and Silverglate to combat the assault on rights on university campuses – would complete its work within a decade, the organization's case load has only grown and now extends beyond the world of higher education. To reflect the proliferation of challenges to free speech and due process that it has been compelled to address, FIRE has recently changed its name to The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

Over the past twenty years, political correctness has metastasized into “wokeness,” in which dogmatism has become militant. Wokeness combines an idiosyncratic interpretation of postmodernism according to which only the West's grand historical narrative has been thoroughly discredited with a dogmatic grand historical narrative of its own. According to woke doctrine, America's political ideas and institutions—and indeed those of the Western civilization from which they emerged—serve white people's interests in domination, are permeated by racism and sexism, ineluctably usher in colonialism and imperialism, and must be overcome by all means necessary. Wokism builds on identity politics, which teaches, on the one hand, that truth is relative to racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, and gender backgrounds and, on the other hand, that some racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual and gender backgrounds – those that embody progressively endorsed accounts of oppression – bestow moral superiority. No book has done more to expose the woke spirit's militant dogmatism than *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*. In that 2021 work, Columbia University professor of linguistics John McWhorter explained how elites' redefinition of “truth” as that which serves the empowerment of socially approved oppressed groups harms those it purports to benefit, poisons the public square, and undermines the quest for knowledge.

The declension of higher education in America over the past seventy-five years make it a great irony that the mainstream media blamed Donald Trump for undertaking a war on the very notion of truth. In fact, the prestige media are exemplary products of a system of higher education that—through the partisan content of its curriculum, the tendentiousness of its teaching, the slant of its scholarship, and the canons of illiberal conduct on its campuses—has for decades self-righteously subordinated the search for truth to politics.

Progressive opinions deserve a respectful hearing in a liberal democracy. However, the indoctrination of students to use the press to indoctrinate citizens in progressive opinions is anathema to liberal democracy. To overcome the postmodern progressivism that has corrupted the mainstream media by institutionalizing a two-tier system of news coverage and opinion – one for the progressive party that the mainstream media serves and one for the conservative opposition – the nation must reform higher education.

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