

Charles Cooke, “Biden’s Media Campaign”

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Quite what the standards are was never made clear. Were anonymous sources acceptable, or were they a problem? Was stolen information fine, or was it dastardly? Was provocation the role of an opinion page, or was it a threat to the safety of staff? One could certainly have been forgiven for thinking that the answer was that the standards are whatever they need to be. In the *Washington Post*, Johns Hopkins’s Thomas Rid argued with a straight face that Americans “must treat the Hunter Biden leaks as if they were a foreign intelligence operation — even if they probably aren’t,” even as critics of the *Times*’ story on Trump’s taxes were being treated to the cold assurance that the paper had “declined to provide the records” to the campaign “in order to protect its sources.” At points, this imbalance became farcical. The use of “mostly peaceful” to describe the disastrous and never-ending riots that followed the killing of George Floyd culminated in CNN’s adding a “Fiery but mostly peaceful protests” caption on top of a video featuring a raging, man-made inferno and a marauding mob. Somewhere, Mel Brooks must have sighed.

When it couldn’t ignore a given story, the press took on the role of communications director. As soon as it began to look as if Biden’s refusal to disavow Court-packing might hurt him with independents, reporters and pundits alike began to use DSCC-approved euphemisms such as “fix,” “expand,” and “depoliticize,” and to suggest that the real villains were actually the Republicans, who, by having followed the existing Constitution and existing Judiciary Act to a tee, were supposedly guilty of “packing the Court” themselves. This sort of gaslighting was almost endless. From the moment he won the nomination, talking heads on every channel except Fox made sure to pretend that they believed that Biden was a moderate and that his age was of no concern whatsoever. This lasted until the *exact* moment Biden clinched his general-election victory, at which point the *same people* began to talk openly about his “bold” progressive agenda and the likelihood that he would soon die. Keen to get in on the action, professional fact-checkers became so obsessed by Trump’s perpetual lying that they seemed unable to comment at all when, during the second presidential debate, Joe Biden managed to match his rival’s mendacity blow for blow. This year, the process of transformation was finally completed. Until recently, the news shows merely featured “political strategists.” In 2020, they *absorbed* them.

To read through the election-season pieces linked from the *RealClearPolitics* aggregator each day was to gain a key insight into the coverage writ large. With a few exceptions, the pieces written by the “Right” were instructive and worthwhile, with each making a particular case about some fact of the contest, whereas those written in prestige outlets such as the *Times*, the *Post*, CNN, and so forth all said exactly the same thing: that Joe Biden was going to win big because the other side was evil. At times, the whole thing felt like a game of bizarre one-upmanship. After the vice-presidential debate, which Mike Pence handily won, Gayle King and Steve Schmidt took turns on CBS explaining that the fly that had landed on Pence was “a mark of the devil.” Nothing but elementary professionalism seemed beyond the press’s reach.

The idea that the election outcome was foreordained — and that it ought to be — was ubiquitous. Ron Brownstein echoed a common sentiment when he argued repeatedly at *The Atlantic* that President Trump was relying solely upon “a dwindling number of sympathetic white voters,” even as Trump was running around Florida, Texas, and everywhere else besides explicitly asking black and Hispanic voters to side with him. “It’s not 2016,” we were told incessantly, even as the evidence mounted that it might be. In *Time* magazine, Charlotte Alter even saw fit to compare Biden to FDR. So complete was the conviction that, during the final days of the campaign, it was grimly amusing to compare the rhetoric from the real Biden campaign — which insisted that the race was close and could still be won by either candidate — with the insistence of the press that all voters needed to do was to sit back with a cocktail and wait for the Democratic landslide.

When that landslide didn’t come, the reaction was panicked. In an instant, the press went from warning that the election would probably be stolen by the courts (by “Uncle Clarence,” said Joy Reid, subtly), by the Postal Service, by voter suppression, or by the ever-present Russians!, to expressing disgust that anyone in America could have any doubts about the legitimacy of the outcome. Not only was the press immediately sure that Biden had won fairly — a notable turnaround from its approach in 2016 — but it had an array of excuses for why he hadn’t won more convincingly. The intractable awfulness of “white people” was, of course, at the forefront. But there was more to it than that. Immigrants in South Florida had been “tricked” into worrying about socialism — a word that has apparently never been used by anyone in American history, and definitely not by anyone who ran for president this year. Worse yet, many Hispanics, long thought to hold the key to the Democrats’ permanent majority, had turned out to be white after all!

And on and on it went, as it was always going to. There can now be nobody left in America who believes that the press corps is neutral — or even that it is fair-minded. A while back, CNN's Chris Cillizza insisted indignantly on Twitter “for the billionth time” that “reporters don't root for a side. Period.” If anyone involved in the news business has told a bigger lie in the last decade, I'd be interested to hear it. Of *course* reporters “root for a side.” Moreover, pretty much all of them root for the *same* side — and they did so long before Donald Trump first came down that escalator. There are two blocs in the American media now: a small one made up of journalists who are explicitly conservative and are willing to admit as much aloud, and a huge one made up of everybody else. Structurally, we have returned to the era of a partisan press. This time, however, only one side will admit it.