



Carl Golden, 1/23/2017 [Archive]

A Genuine Contempt for the Media

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By Carl Golden

In his first White House press room briefing after two days in office, President Donald Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, laid out the Administration's approach to the media with all the subtlety of a Louisville slugger between the eyes: "We don't like you, we don't want you, we don't need you, we intend to ignore you."

Spicer denounced news organizations for what he said was a deliberate misrepresentation of the size of the crowd on hand to witness Trump's inauguration and then delivered this whopper: "It was the largest crowd ever to witness an inauguration."

Photographic evidence as well as news accounts of prior swearing in ceremonies show clearly and convincingly that Spicer's comment was untrue.

The entire episode, though, raised the question of why Spicer took on an embarrassing and totally pointless fight over the issue.

Other high level White House staffers made the rounds of the Sunday morning television talk shows to defend Spicer, including advisor Kellyanne Conway who offered the astounding observation that the press secretary was merely offering "alternative facts" to the media narrative.

Say what? Alternative facts? The world is flat is an "alternative fact" as well, but an official White House utterance to that effect doesn't make it so.

Spicer's entire demeanor - angry, accusatory, threatening - was a deliberate attempt to put the media on notice that the Trump Administration would react swiftly and harshly to what it considers unfair coverage.

His comments were not those of an individual who was freelancing or giving in to stream of consciousness spontaneity. He was addressing the enemy, serving notice they would be treated as such if their coverage failed to reflect the thinking and wishes of the Administration.

Spicer's initial appearance before the press corps was brief and he ended abruptly without taking any questions. Even his departure sent a message - he turned his back on the assembled reporters and stalked off the platform like a royal personality dismissing the peasantry.

It's been tried before, of course, by Trump's predecessors who were unhappy or upset over media coverage and decided some sort of punishment was in order; i.e., denying access to Administration officials, declining interview requests, withholding invitations to accompany the President on foreign travel, etc.

Eventually, an uneasy truce descended and, while some ill will continued to exist, both the Administration and the media recognized an essential truth - their jobs and their responsibilities took precedence over perceived personal slights.

What sets the Trump Administration apart, though, is the genuine contempt in which it holds the media. As a candidate, Trump routinely pounded news organizations and individual reporters, calling them dishonest and driven by a partisan agenda whose principal goal was his defeat.

There were times when the media was its own worst enemy - rude, overly aggressive, and opinionated. Some reporters were victimized by their own words on social media, by an argumentative and disrespectful tone of their questions, or by attempting to lead interview subjects to criticisms of Trump.

There has never been a more rancorous relationship between candidate and media as both sides dumped poison in the well, inevitably culminating in the battle lines now drawn in the White House press room.

The dispute over the size of the inaugural crowd was but a harbinger of what is to come, the first shot across the bow of the media from an Administration cannon.

That the subject matter is of little consequence is irrelevant. The Trump Administration wanted to make its stand early on in a dramatic fashion, seizing on an issue, no matter how minor, to establish its predominance and to alert the media that any challenge will be met with a bloody playground brawl.

How many people stood on the National Mall or occupied the bleachers to witness Trump's assumption of power will quickly become a footnote in history, interesting only to scholars or those enchanted by presidential trivia.

Elected officials - be they presidents, governors or mayors - all strive to bend the media to their will, to influence public opinion through complimentary news coverage. Some succeed; others do not.

But, trafficking in the demonstrably untrue, engaging in real time revisions of history, or promoting "alternative facts" as official government policy have more serious and far reaching consequences.

The Trump Administration laid down its marker quickly and resoundingly - for the next four years, it's us versus them.

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