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## How the New York Times Enhances Trump's Propaganda



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The mendacity of Donald Trump is without parallel in the history of American presidential politics. His lies, as tabulated by the Washington Post's fact checker, number in the thousands. U.S. truth tellers have become Trump's favorite targets as Inspectors General, federal judges, intelligence officers, and the nation's media face constant punishment and harassment from the White House, and the charge of "fake news" has created doubt and cynicism within the American populace. For these reasons, it is troubling to see the most prominent member of the mainstream media, The New York Times, highlight stories that turn on presidential lies while minimizing the seminal

statements of whistleblowers who take great personal and political risk in testifying to the ignorance and corruption of the president of the United States.

A current example of such bad journalism is the May 15, 2020 edition of the New York Times. On the front page of the Times (and “above the fold” to boot) is Peter Baker’s article on Trump’s latest campaign against President Barack Obama, now given the politically charged catchphrase of “Obamagate.” The charge is a typical Trumpian diversionary tactic that has no substantive or evidentiary basis in fact. Meanwhile, on the inside pages of the Times, we find the testimony of a courageous whistleblower, Dr. Rick Bright, the former director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, who documented the Trump administration’s dereliction of duty in responding to the Covid-19 crisis. Bright’s testimony was definitely front page news.

The “Obamagate” charge is disinformation, a total fraud. It should be confined to the echo chambers of Fox News and right-wing social media. But Baker’s article gives the story greater legs, and it is a perfect example of the false equivalence that has dominated the Times’ coverage of Trump since his campaign in 2015. Half the article was devoted to Trump’s grievances with his predecessor, and Senator Lindsay Graham’s immediate willingness to investigate the phony charges. And half was devoted to the fact that the accusations involved “undefined and unspecified crimes.” The following day, an article in the Times concluded that it was Trump’s “unbending...belief” that Obama was “personally involved in a plot against him.” It is impossible to know what Trump actually believes so why would the Times give him the benefit of the doubt?

Several months ago, the Times’ impeachment coverage similarly invoked false equivalence with front page articles that described the “different impeachment realities that the two parties are living in.” There was no mention of the fact that the Democratic reality was based on evidence and ground truth testimony; the Republican reality was woven out of conspiratorial cloth. Only the Republicans resorted to conspiratorial theory, but Baker speciously referred to “conspiracy theorists in the White House and the Congress.” Baker, moreover, described the impeachment of Bill Clinton in 1998 as the “ultimate drama,” whereas the Trump impeachment was dismissed as “bad entertainment and not terribly important.” Of course this is exactly what the Trump administration wanted Americans to believe.

The slighting of Rick Bright was even more egregious because Bright testified that “lives were endangered, and I believe lives were lost.” Bright as well as an executive of a medical mask maker in Texas, Mike Bowen, who described himself as a “Republican”

who “voted for President Trump,” testified on May 14, 2020 to a House subcommittee that they provided sufficient warning of the impending crisis that was worsened by the administration’s desultory and deceitful handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Last month, when the Trump administration replaced a top official at the Department of Health and Human Services who documented supply shortages and testing delays at hospitals all over the country, both the New York Times and the Washington Post buried this story on inside pages. Last Friday, moreover, the Inspector General of the Department of State, Steve Linick, was fired—the fifth firing of an Inspector General in the past several weeks. Linick’s “crime” was to open up an investigation of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for using a political appointee to perform personal tasks for the secretary and his wife. The Saturday editions of the Times and the Washington Post made no mention of the firing. In view of the presidential attacks on the CIA whistleblower who made possible the impeachment inquiry and the limited media support for whistleblowers, it is remarkable that this country can still count on testimony from such courageous and selfless individuals.

Without whistleblowers such as Dr. Rick Bright, the mainstream media would have great difficulty conducting investigative journalism; the congress would find it difficult to conduct genuine oversight and investigation; and the American public would be denied the information it requires to have informed opinions and make electoral decisions. Our best journalists, such as Michelle Goldberg of the New York Times, understand this. She wrote last year that “Trump’s weaponized disinformation” is “corrosive to democracy” regardless of its target, because it erodes the “political salience of reality.” Conversely, a senior New York Times correspondent, Elaine Sciolino, told me years ago that contrarians and whistleblowers make good sources only in the short run, but journalists must rely on policymakers for long-term access and therefore should be careful not to offend. This is the best explanation that I have ever received for the benign and conventional analysis provided by many in the press corps and their reluctance to challenge or simply embarrass high-level sources.

The media’s methodology of false equivalence and the failure to provide proper coverage of the testimony of whistleblowers serves to foster political ignorance and cynicism in this country. If we are to avoid such cynicism, it is essential that the mainstream media provide the kind of information that enables citizens to tell the difference between fact and fiction. The dangerous disarray of the Trump administration and its ill-prepared

national security team have made the importance of “telling truth to power” more essential than ever. This is true for both officials within the federal bureaucracy and the mainstream media.

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