

The President vs. the Press

By Irv Sternberg

Politicians and reporters have always had an adversarial relationship. As a very young reporter in New Jersey, I recall a ham-fisted farmer and school board member welcome me with a bone-crushing handshake in a transparent attempt to intimidate me. The mayor of a suburban town promised to break my nose the next time he saw me, and the mayor of a town on the Jersey Shore threatened to bar me from covering City Council meetings. After a cooling off period, reasonableness and discretion prevailed.

Lately, we've become aware that our President has chosen to climb into the ring with the media – newspapers, magazines and TV – identifying them as "the Opposition." He has labeled them fabricators of fake news and "the enemy of Americans." In doing so, he has taken the media's traditional role as adversary to a new level. The question this raises is: Why?

Donald Trump is not the first occupant of the White House to be annoyed by the media. Almost every commander-in-chief in recent memory wished he didn't have to subject himself periodically to tough questioning – and provide convincing answers. They coped in various ways. Richard Nixon, for example, despised the press and assumed a confrontational attitude during the Watergate episode. JFK, on the other hand, seemed to relish his press conferences, either jousting with or teasing reporters despite such critical encounters as the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

But our current leader has demonstrated more than discomfort. He's taken a new path. He has called the press dishonest and insisted their stories are false. His advisor, Steve Bannon told the press to "shut up and listen." And Trump assails the press almost daily. Why?

Let's look at Trump's history. As a self-made businessman (with a handsome starter-gift from his father), he is accustomed to having his way when anyone opposes him. Witness the ease with which he destroyed more than a dozen other Republicans seeking their party's nomination, and convinced millions of Americans to vote for him. But the press is a different kind of opponent. He can't bankrupt or fire them. He can't intimidate them with insults, or threaten them with arrest. He can't buy them out – at least not the biggest among them. And he can't issue an Executive Order shutting them down and therefore silencing them.

So he faces a reality that every President before him learned very quickly. That no matter what you say about the press, they always have the last word. Because tonight there is always a late breaking story on cable TV and tomorrow there's always a new edition of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* which offers a new revelation and requires a response. His solution: Diminish the power of the press by destroying its credibility. Convince the public that reporters are lower than used-car salesmen and divorce lawyers. Recently, he assumed a victim's role, asking for sympathy because the press "hates" him.

Our current President seems to have forgotten that our Founding Fathers, in their wisdom, recognized a free press as a bulwark of democracy. It is no coincidence that they addressed and confirmed that conviction by inserting it the Constitution as the First Amendment. And for good

reason.

One of the first things a reigning despot, dictator or even an elected leader with an insatiable desire for power will do is shut off unpleasant inquiries. Look at the world today. Wherever there is no free press, there is no democracy.