

How did American media and Republican politicians lose their spines?

Amid capitulation and cowardice, the Wall Street Journal showed something rare: Courage under pressure.

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If you believe, as I do, that American democracy needs a strong, robust press to survive, there's a lot of reason to feel depressed right now. News organizations (or their corporate owners) are tumbling like so many dominoes as President Trump tries to show them who's boss. And Republicans in Congress seem incapable of standing up to the president, no matter how much his actions directly hurt their constituents.

It's a far cry from the era of Watergate and the Pentagon Papers. At that time, some 50 years ago, the nation's biggest newspapers and most dominant TV networks were far more capable — and willing — to hold power to account and stand up to threats. And Republican politicians (such as Senator Howard Baker, for one) could put patriotism ahead of party. I talked about this a while back [in a podcast conversation](#) with Garrett Graff, author of "Watergate: A New History." He's fantastically knowledgeable and engaging on this subject. You might have a listen as he sheds light on the tragic effect that Fox News has had on the Republican spine.)



Emma Tucker, editor in chief of the Wall Street Journal, held her ground after Donald Trump threatened retaliation over a front-page story on his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein / Getty Images

These days, by contrast, it's one example after another of cowardice.

Just last week, the parent company of CBS News — Paramount Global — continued its apparent capitulation to the Trump administration as it [decided to discard](#) the most popular show in late-night television: The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. This happened just days after Paramount settled a suit filed by Donald Trump — one they should have fought in court and very likely would have won. Colbert had declared the \$16 million settlement "a bribe," and the next thing you knew he was tossed out the door. Cause and effect? Certainly, it's part of an overall trend.

This on top of ABC News's earlier capitulation in a settlement with Trump. And of course, the decline of the Washington Post's opinion section under Jeff Bezos, who seems so eager to kowtow to the president. And similar troubles at the Los Angeles Times with its billionaire owner.

By the end of the week, the Republicans in Congress — also spinelessly — followed Trump's orders by agreeing to the "claw back" of [more than \\$1 billion](#) that had already been approved to fund public radio and television. That this hurts small-town radio stations in many places represented by red-state Republicans made no dent in their relentless cowardice.

Amid all that, it was heartening to see the Wall Street Journal publish a [front-page story](#) that shed light on the tawdry relationship between Trump and the late child-sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Publishing it took fortitude, as was demonstrated when Trump immediately sued the paper, its parent companies and the individual reporters.

The Journal's response was exactly what it should have been: They stood by their story and said they're completely ready to aggressively defend it in court.

That the Journal is controlled by Trump's longtime ally, Rupert Murdoch, makes this even more remarkable. I [wrote in the Guardian](#) last week about how hard Trump tried to kill the story, and why:

It's not just that the 50th birthday card he reportedly penned for the future convicted child-sex offender is so damning in itself, with its bawdy sketch and references to shared secrets and "enigmas" that "never age."

It's not just that Trump has been denying a tight friendship with Epstein – who died in jail in 2019 – for some time, and that this would clearly put the lie to that.

It's not just that he really, really wants this scandal to go away since it has been turning swaths of his normally cult-like base against him.

No, there's another element – and a brutal one for the president. It's where the story was published: in the Wall Street Journal, whose conservative opinion side has often backed him and whose news side has a reputation for ensuring that explosive stories are bulletproof: accurate in their facts and fully prepared to stand up under legal scrutiny.

What's more, the newspaper is controlled by Rupert Murdoch, Trump's most important media ally.

So it was remarkable to see the Journal show a backbone. Kudos to its top editor, Emma Tucker, who I'm sure had some intense conversations with Murdoch after Trump lobbied both of them personally.

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I was also heartened to see that Trump was handed a defeat over one of his efforts to stamp out reporting that he doesn't like. He [lost a case](#) over the audio version of Bob Woodward's 2020 book, "Rage." The winners were not just Woodward, but the legendary reporter's publisher, Simon & Schuster; the audiobook, which included tapes from Woodward's interviews, was published in 2022.

But why is this relative courage such a rarity now? What has happened to the American press and its willingness to challenge the pinnacle of power?

As with so many things, it comes down to money and who is in charge. American media, these days, is far more driven by the desires of corporate ownership than in the past. The Washington Post, at the time of the Watergate reporting that helped to bring down a corrupt president, Richard Nixon, was controlled by the Graham family. The final decisions were those of publisher Katharine Graham. (If you've never read her Pulitzer-winning autobiography, "Personal History," I'd recommend it.) These days, Bezos calls the shots, and he appears focused on protecting the interests of Amazon and his space-tech company, Blue Origin.

Disney owns ABC News. And CBS News? It is owned by Paramount Global, which is intent on merging with another media giant to become even bigger and more profitable.

Corporate profits rule the day. And in the internet age, the way media companies make money has changed drastically, too, with revenue no longer nearly as driven by traditional advertising.

Is there an answer? Certainly, there could be far greater restrictions on corporate ownership of media companies. There could be more protections for public-spirited journalism, and for local journalism. But with a Congress not even willing to protect essential news sources such as small public radio stations, it's almost impossible to imagine those restrictions would ever get any traction.

The American press (and therefore the American public) gets a lot of help from the First Amendment. But even that has its limits. The founders never envisioned our current media world with its incentives for all the wrong things, including the eagerness to kowtow to power at the highest levels. And with individual owners who don't do their duty to the public.

So, kudos to the Wall Street Journal, and to the others in publishing and media who are still doing their jobs, despite the pressure. They give me hope.

Readers, a related question that I'll ask you to comment on here. How important do you consider the Trump/Epstein story that is so dominating the news right now? Is it nothing but a distraction, or does it have within it the seeds of Trump's demise?

Thank you for being here. Your support and interest are hugely encouraging and appreciated. Welcome to new subscribers!

My background: I am a Lackawanna, NY native who started my career as a summer intern at the *Buffalo News*, my hometown daily. After years as a reporter and editor, I was named the paper's first woman editor in chief in 1999, and ran the 200-person newsroom for almost 13 years. Starting in 2012, I served as the first woman "public editor" of the *New York Times* — an internal media critic and reader representative — and later was the media columnist for the *Washington Post*. These days, I write here on Substack, as well as for the *Guardian US*, and teach an ethics course at Columbia Journalism School. I've also written two books and won a few awards, including three for defending First Amendment principles.

The purpose of 'American Crisis': My aim is to use this newsletter (it started as a podcast in 2023) to push for the kind of journalism we need for our democracy to function — journalism that is accurate, fair, mission-driven and public-spirited. That means that I point out the media's flaws and failures when necessary.

What I ask of you: Last fall, I removed the paywall so that everyone could read and comment. I thought it was important in this dire moment and might be helpful. If you are able to subscribe at \$50 a year or \$8 a month, or upgrade your unpaid subscription, that will help to support this venture — and keep it going for all. Thank you!

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Yvonne Caruthers Jul 22 ...
I'm grinning like a Cheshire cat over your phrase "relentless cowardice." I've only ever seen the word relentless used to describe things like hurricanes (relentless winds destroyed the town during the night), ocean waves (relentless waves smashed the sailboat), or athletes (she trained relentlessly to reach her goal), but now you've used it to describe members of the GOP: "relentless cowardice." Such perfection of word choice! I'm in awe. As for Epstein—if it wasn't important, why would everyone involved try so hard to suppress it? Kudos to one of your colleagues, Julie Brown at the Miami Herald, for not giving up on the story years ago.

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3 replies by Margaret Sullivan and others

Patti Gunderson Jul 22 Edited ...
You asked about the Trump/Epstein story: "Is it nothing but a distraction, or does it have within it the seeds of Trump's demise?" and within the story you cited Bob Woodward's recent expose of Trump and Woodward's successful defense against Trump's lawsuit.

I don't know that anyone has the crystal ball to make that prediction. The social landscape in the U.S. makes so little sense, nowadays. Any sane person would have thought that Woodward's excellent, exhaustively-sourced reporting of Trump's shocking words and appalling actions — and the reportage of dozens of other top-notch journalists over the last decade or more— would have spelled Trump's demise. Easily.

Maybe the Wall Street Journal can use this attention on Trump's infantile sexual appetites and gross denials to point to the even bigger stories hiding in plain sight? It seems that Fox News and several major conservative commentators are already bending to Trump's will, and declaring this dumb sketch to be fake news. That's been successful for Trump in the past.

No report of Trump's stupidity, cruelty, ignorance or incompetence has broken through before. I don't have confidence this dumb birthday card will do the trick. But I will accept ANYTHING that exposes Trump and provides even a small foothold for maga to turn.

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