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PROLOGUE
The White House, June 15, 2017

The dinner with President Trump was to be kept confidential. He wouldn't talk about it. We wouldn't either. Our reporting staff was to be kept in the dark, and to this day the meeting has never been reported. No one in the newsroom ever suggested to me they were aware of it. Reporters who had dug up many secrets about the Trump White House somehow missed this one.

The black SUV with tinted windows carrying Jeff Bezos, owner of The Washington Post, would be allowed onto the White House grounds at 6:50 p.m.—waved in through a wrought-iron vehicle entrance gate—so that he could enter without being observed. On that clear June evening in 2017, with temperatures in the low eighties, The Post's publisher, Fred Ryan, its editorial page editor, Fred Hiatt, and I as the executive editor who oversaw news coverage would walk up to a gate at the northeast corner of the White House grounds, avoiding the Northwest Gate, where we would almost certainly be spotted by journalists entering and exiting.

This was not a dinner I was looking forward to. I had not met Trump, even though our reporters had spent many hours with him. Except for natural curiosity, I didn't feel a need to. I could assess him on what he said and did. And what good could come from spending time with him that evening? Surely he would see dinner as a favor and expect something in return. And surely he would conclude from our visit as a group that Bezos had a hand in news coverage.

Although Ryan had proposed the meeting to the White House, he sought to allay my concerns about how Trump would interpret it. He assured me that he had made one thing clear: The White House should not expect this get-together to influence coverage. And yet why else would the White House agree to have us over for dinner if Trump felt he had nothing to gain?

Ryan was taken with the idea of getting together face-to-face: Leadership of the dominant news organization in the nation's capital should meet with the new leader of the country. Ryan had even broached the idea of holding the meeting at his own home. Not likely. And sure enough the White House said no.

Trump would not be coming to us. We would go to him, five months into his position as the most powerful person on the planet. If word leaked out and there were press inquiries about the presence of The Post's owner, Bezos suggested just saying he "was invited" rather than, as a prewritten statement worded it, that it was appropriate for him to attend.

We must have been an odd-looking group: Bezos, the impressively fit Amazon founder who was among the richest people in the world, recognizable anywhere for his bald head, short stature, booming laugh, and radiant intensity; Ryan, an alumnus of the Reagan administration who was a head taller than my own five feet eleven inches, with his graying blond hair and a giant glistening smile; Hiatt, a thirty-six-year Post veteran and former foreign correspondent with an earnest and bookish look; and me, still a relative newcomer to The Post, with a trimmed gray beard, woolly head of hair, and what was invariably described as my dour and taciturn demeanor.

We were politely welcomed by Trump, First Lady Melania Trump, and son-in-law Jared Kushner. Ivanka Trump had planned to be with us but instead attended the annual Congressional Baseball Game, where thousands prayed for Representative Steve Scalise of Louisiana, who had been shot and severely injured the previous day during a practice game in Alexandria, Virginia. The shooter was a Trump hater.

Although Trump had visited MedStar Washington Hospital Center, where Scalise was in critical condition, he appeared at the game only on a big screen. “By playing tonight,” he declared, “you are showing the world that we will not be intimidated by threats, acts of violence, or assaults on our democracy. The game will go on … I know you all will be playing extra hard tonight for Steve.”

Ivanka’s place setting was removed from the table in the Blue Room—an egg-shaped reception room with blue and gold accents and a lavish chandelier—suggesting a last-minute decision on her part to attend the game (where media took particular note of her more formal wear). I wondered why Trump himself had opted to be with us rather than at the game. A strong supporter of his was in the hospital receiving blood transfusions and undergoing surgeries. A bullet had entered Scalise’s hip, the hospital reported, traveling “across his pelvis, fracturing bones, injuring internal organs, and causing severe bleeding.” His survival was in doubt. The baseball game provided a rare opportunity for bipartisanship. The president could have seized on the moment.

Trump’s press secretary at the time, Sean Spicer, later cited security reasons for Trump’s absence from the game. Maybe so, but the president’s image could not have been enhanced if, at such a fraught moment, the public knew he chose to spend his time with the very sorts of media people whom he called the “lowest form of life.” Away from the memorial, Trump would pass the evening with us—crowing about his election victory, mocking his rivals and even some in his own orbit, boasting already of imagined accomplishments, calculating how he could win yet again in four years, and describing The Washington Post as the worst of all media outlets. As we dined on cheese soufflé, pan-roasted Dover sole, and chocolate cream tart, he went on to disparage other media outlets—The New York Times came in just behind us in his ranking at the time—whose journalists he had labeled for months as scum and garbage.

As our visit commenced, at seven p.m. The Post published a report that was likely to secure our No. 1 spot for a while: Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III was inquiring into Kushner’s business dealings in Russia, part of his investigation into that country’s interference in the 2016

election. The story landed on top of a previous one by The Post that revealed Kushner had met secretly with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak and had proposed that a Russian diplomatic post be used to provide a secure communications line between Trump officials and the Kremlin. The Post had reported as well that Kushner met later with Sergey Gorkov, head of a Russian-owned development bank.

Jamie Gorelick, one of Kushner's lawyers who was also a director of Amazon, had previously called me to push back against the idea that her client was the "focus" or "subject" of an investigation. Kushner, for his part, was bristling at the attention, both from investigators and the press. He had called and emailed my boss, Ryan, fretting over what headlines might say and labeling as "jackasses" the national security reporters who were digging into his Russia contacts. He followed up with a series of agitated emails, even copying in Bezos ("Looping in Jamie who can vouch on this with Jeff since she knows him well," read one), while declining to speak directly to the reporters involved and steadfastly avoiding communication directly with me. In a meeting later that week with White House correspondents Philip Rucker and Ashley Parker as well as national editor Steven Ginsberg, he had pounded a table in fury, wailing about the good life he and Ivanka had left behind in New York and the potential injury to his reputation. As The Post's journalists made their exit, Kushner patted Steven on the back, declaring, "Well, that was therapeutic."

Also annoyed was Trump, who at our White House dinner derided what he had been hearing about our story on the special counsel and his son-in-law, suggesting incorrectly that it alleged money laundering. "He's a good kid," he said of Kushner, who at the time was thirty-six and a father of three.

As we were about to take our seats, twenty-eight-year-old Trump aide Hope Hicks handed Kushner her phone. Our alert had just gone out, reaching millions of mobile devices, no doubt including hers. "Very Shakespearean," she whispered to Kushner. "Dining with your enemies."

Hiatt whispered back, "We're not your enemies."

But Trump, his family, and his team had affixed us on their enemies list, and nothing was going to change anyone's mind. We had been neither servile nor sycophantic toward Trump, and we weren't going to be. Our job was to report aggressively on the president and to hold his administration, like all others, to account. In the mind of the president and those in his orbit, that most fundamental journalistic obligation made us the opposition.

There was political benefit to Trump in going further. We would not just be his enemy. We would be the country's enemy; in his telling, we would be traitors. Less than a month into his presidency, Trump had denounced the press as "the enemy of the American People" on Twitter. It was an ominous echo of the phrase invoked by Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Hitler's propagandist Joseph Goebbels and deployed for the purpose of repression and murder.

Trump could not have cared less about the history of such incendiary language or how it might incite physical attacks on journalists.

And it was clear from that moment, if it had not been earlier, that he saw all of us at that table as his foes—not just me as the one who directed news reporting, not just Fred Hiatt as the one who separately oversaw editorials, but also Fred Ryan, who was our superior as publisher, and Jeff Bezos. Perhaps most especially Bezos because he owned The Post and, in Trump's mind, was pulling the strings—or could pull them if he wished.

At our dinner, though, Trump sought to be charming. It was a superficial charm, entirely without warmth or authenticity. He did almost all the talking. We scarcely said a word, and I said the least out of discomfort at being there and seeking to avoid any direct confrontation with him over coverage in front of Bezos and Ryan. Anything I said could set him off. Since I didn't see any good that could come out of the meeting, perhaps at least I could avoid the bad. Why risk fireworks between us?

We had agreed to keep this meeting off the record. And yet Trump has by now said publicly largely everything he said then in private. What's more, we were exploiting an administration policy The Post itself had editorially condemned: Trump's refusal to follow President Obama's practice of releasing voluminous records on who visited the White House.

In an April 2017 editorial titled "The Secret Presidency," The Post declared that "Trump's decision to claw the White House logs back into the shadows follows several other moves that show contempt for the public." We were now party to one of those secrets. Trump's public statements since render moot the confidentiality accorded his comments. And to continue maintaining the secrecy of the meeting itself would be an act of persistent hypocrisy.

With the passing of years, nothing said at the meeting will still shock. Trump's rhetoric became only more inflammatory. His self-aggrandizement became only more routine. His belittlement of senior members of his administration became a signature of his presidency.

At the dinner, he let loose on a long list of perceived enemies and slights: The chief executive of Macy's was a "coward" for pulling Trump products from store shelves in reaction to Trump's remarks portraying Mexican immigrants as rapists; he would have been picketed by only "20 Mexicans. Who cares?" He had better relations with foreign leaders than Obama, who was lazy and never called them. Obama left disasters around the world for him to solve. Obama was hesitant to allow the military to kill people in Afghanistan; he told the military to just do it, don't ask for permission. Egypt needed a rough guy like President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi; otherwise, the country would be a disaster. And, foreshadowing Trump's remarks revealed in a book by Barak Ravid released almost a year after he departed the White House, the president said he was surprised to find that the Palestinians want a peace deal more than the Israelis. Fresh from visiting several weeks earlier with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem, Trump took note of the billions of dollars in aid the United States provided Israel and acknowledged asking early on whether it couldn't be leveraged to pressure Israel to make peace. "I was told 'there's no connection,'" he said. He was incredulous. "No connection?"

Attorney General Jeff Sessions, fired FBI director James Comey, former deputy FBI director Andrew McCabe, and special counsel Robert Mueller were slammed for reasons that are now familiar. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis was “the best.” (He’d later call him “the most overrated general.”) Trump went on at length about how devastating nuclear weapons could be, how the entire South would be demolished if Miami were hit, how Amazon would be turned to “shit” if Seattle were targeted. By his accounting, Russia’s nuclear weapons were all new and worked well—“not like ours, but we’re going to fix that.” And there was no real harm in being friends with Vladimir Putin, the Russian president. No one really knew for sure, he said, whether Russia was behind the election interference in 2016.

He promised to soon deliver a better health-care plan, a big tax cut, and a major infrastructure plan. (One of three turned out to be true.)

As Trump meandered from one subject to the next, Jared sat straight, impassive, and almost entirely uncommunicative. (So, we had that in common.) Melania was the same, only briefly interjecting to offer a thought about the investigation into Russian interference in the election: “There is no proof it was Russia.”

Two themes stayed with me from that dinner. First, Trump would govern primarily to retain the support of his base. He pulled a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket. The statistic “47%” appeared above his photo. “This is the latest Rasmussen poll. I can win with that.” The message was clear. That level of support, if he held key states, was all he needed to secure a second term. What other voters thought of him, he seemed to say, would not matter.

Second, his list of grievances appeared limitless. Atop them all was the press, and atop the press was The Post. We were awful, he said repeatedly. We treated him unfairly. And with every such utterance, he would poke me in the shoulder with his left elbow.

The physical jabs were annoying but harmless. Yet they were a hint of hard punches to come. Trump would move to disrupt and damage Amazon. Four days after Christmas that year, he called for the Postal Service to charge Amazon “MUCH MORE” for package deliveries, claiming Amazon’s rates were a rip-off of American taxpayers. He later intervened to obstruct Amazon in its pursuit of a $10 billion cloud computing contract from the Defense Department. Bezos was to be punished for not reining in The Post.

This book will recount the years of my editorship of The Washington Post, a news organization that has performed a singular role in American history as it demanded truth, honesty, transparency, and accountability from powerful individuals, particularly those entrusted to govern the country. Over the decades, it faced vilification and retribution for doing work that was central to its mission. That was true as well in my eight-plus years as its top editor, with an unremittingly weighty responsibility for all of its news coverage. I joined The Post at a moment of crisis, when its commercial viability was in doubt and its capacity to measure up to its journalistic heritage imperiled. In short order, I would be swept into a unique confluence of events: the takeover of The Post by Jeff Bezos, a technology titan who had radically changed the way Americans shop and would soon set the paper on a course of transformation,

restoration, and growth; and the assumption of the presidency by Donald Trump, who would upend the political system and govern with a mix of populism, nativism, and fantastical thinking that defied verifiable facts.

Taking shape was a collision of power: The occupant of the White House, the world's most powerful person, aiming to bring The Post to submission through ceaseless public attacks on our journalists and unrelenting pressure on our organization's owner; The Post's owner, with ample power of his own as one of the world's richest humans, seeking to avoid open confrontation with Trump but unwilling to succumb to his censure and coercion; and The Washington Post, famous for its role in felling a prior president, aggressively revealing the administration's unsavory secrets, persistent lies, flagrant constitutional sabotage, and pattern of incitement.

My personal experience will be a part of the story. I led a storied newsroom in its journalism and in its arduous journey toward a sustainable business model when newspapers were on a seeming death march. But this is not strictly my memoir. I was a participant in these events but also a witness and an observer during tumultuous years when politics, technology, and media would meet head-on in a critical, historic test of strength and will. The story of that collision continues to unfold, with enduring consequences for a free press, democracy, and the future of the country.

With no delay and without pause during his four years as president, Trump and his team would go after The Post and everyone else in the media who didn't bend to his wishes. In December 2019, Kushner would lean on Ryan to withdraw support for me and our Russia investigation. Kushner suggested The Post issue an apology and there be a "reckoning of some sort"—as he advised that he himself had made a huge mistake in once standing by a former editor of The New York Observer and one of its stories when he owned the publication. "Standing by my editor at that time was my biggest regret in the 10 years I owned the newspaper," he wrote in the email to Ryan. Kushner's intent was clear to me. "He aims to get me fired," I told Ryan.

Trump tweeted against Post reporters Ashley Parker and Philip Rucker by name, calling them "nasty lightweight reporters" who "shouldn't be allowed on the grounds of the White House because their reporting is so DISGUSTING & FAKE," subjecting them to even more harassment and threats. Trump had tweeted incessantly to vilify The Post and the press overall, and even to dehumanize us. And he piled on by saying "the Fake Washington Post" should register as a "lobbyist" for Amazon.

Over many decades as a journalist and as the top editor of three news organizations, I had never witnessed such a raw abuse of power. The mainstream press had always seen its role as keeping watch on those who had the means, motive, and might to profoundly influence the lives of ordinary people, above all politicians and policymakers. When the First Amendment was crafted, that's what the founders of this country had in mind. If Trump even understood that elemental idea of American democracy, he gave it no weight. His objective was to bring us to heel.

A few times during that dinner, Trump—for all the shots he had taken during the campaign at Bezos's company—would mention that Melania was a big Amazon shopper, prompting Bezos to joke at one point: "Consider me your personal customer service rep." Trump's concern, of course, wasn't Amazon's delivery. He wanted Bezos to deliver him from The Post's coverage.

The effort began gently and politely but the pace quickened the next day. Kushner called Ryan in the morning to get his read on how the dinner went. After Fred offered thanks for the generosity and graciousness with their time, Kushner inquired whether The Post's coverage would now improve as a result. Fred diplomatically rebuffed him with a reminder that there were to be no expectations about coverage. "It's not a dial we have to turn one way to make it better and another way to make it worse," he said.

Trump would be the one to call Bezos's mobile phone that same morning at eight a.m., urging him to get The Post to be "more fair to me."

"I don't know if you get involved in the newsroom, but I'm sure you do to some degree," Trump said. Bezos said he didn't and then delivered some lines he was prepared to make at the dinner itself if Trump had leaned on him then: "It's really not appropriate to … I'd feel really bad about it my whole life if I did."

The call ended without bullying about Amazon but with an invitation for Bezos to seek a favor. "If there's anything I can do for you," Trump said.

Three days later, the bullying began. Giants of the technology sector gathered at the White House for a meeting of the American Technology Council, created by a Trump executive order a month earlier. Trump briefly pulled Bezos aside to complain bitterly about The Post's coverage. The dinner, he said, was apparently a wasted two and a half hours.

In truth, it was. The White House get-together and its aftermath, however, also offered some welcome reassurance. We had an owner who would neither be courted nor clobbered into submission by President Donald Trump. We would need that. And we would need him for another mission as well: to save The Post from fiscal failure and its inevitable end result, journalistic irrelevance.

Chapter 11
WORK, NOT WAR

Everything about Donald Trump, starting with his campaign, told me that he had the makings of an autocrat. How he celebrated violence against protesters during campaign rallies. How he strove to dehumanize the press. His threats to use presidential power to punish, even imprison, opponents. His hateful language and racist dog whistles. His campaign's anti-Semitic imagery mixing cash, corruption, globalism, and power. His contempt for verifiable fact and democratic norms. His reckless, baseless claim that the 2016 election was being "rigged" against him—and his refusal, even then, to concede the outcome if he lost. How he conflated the public interest with his own. His praise for strongmen, first and foremost Russia's Vladimir Putin but also the

Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, North Korea's Kim Jong Un, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

"I can tell you, knowing the president for a good twenty-five or thirty years," the U.S. ambassador to Hungary at one point declared to Franklin Foer for The Atlantic magazine, "that he would love to have the situation that Viktor Orbán has." I myself listened as a Republican senator recounted how Trump, referring to the world's authoritarians, admitted that "he likes the strong ones."

As Trump took office, I felt the need to educate myself in a way I had never anticipated for an incoming president. The media had been unprepared for his brand of presidential campaign. I needed to get myself ready for his brand of presidency. All of my reading was concentrated on authoritarianism and the manipulation of public opinion.

On the list: It Can't Happen Here, the 1935 novel by Sinclair Lewis. (A populist president who ushers in the end of democracy and speaks of editors "in spider-dens" while "plotting how they can put over their lies.") The Plot Against America, the 2004 novel by Philip Roth. ("To have captured the mind of the world's greatest nation without uttering a single word of truth!") The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt's 1951 masterpiece on the subject. (Mass leaders who believe "fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it.") The True Believer, the 1951 reflections of Eric Hoffer on mass movements. ("The effectiveness of a doctrine does not come from its meaning but from its certitude.")The Image, where in 1962 Daniel Boorstin highlighted mass media's addiction to "pseudo events." (How Senator Joseph McCarthy commanded "diabolical fascination and almost hypnotic power over news-hungry reporters" while "building him up in front-page headlines." They were "co-manufacturers of pseudo-events" and "were caught in their own web.") Amusing Ourselves to Death, the 1985 book by Neil Postman that observed politics entering an Age of Show Business. ("Political leaders need not trouble themselves very much with reality provided that their performances consistently generate a sense of verisimilitude.")

From more recent years: On Tyranny, the slim but powerful 2017 bestseller by historian Timothy Snyder. ("Post-truth is pre-fascism.") How Democracies Die, written in 2018 by Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. ("We should worry when a politician [1] rejects, in words or actions, the democratic rules of the game, [2] denies the legitimacy of opponents, [3] tolerates or encourages violence or [4] indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media.") And over time, as I saw Trump's deceptions maintain their hold on many Americans, I read Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum, Neil Harris's 1973 biography. ("The bigger the humbug," Barnum reportedly said, "the better the people will like it.")

All these books drew a picture of someone like Trump. They anticipated a politician who could whip up fears and animosities with rhetoric that targets supposed elites. They documented how the press might prove impotent at holding such a man to account—advancing his prospects even when that was not their intent. They envisioned how truth could be easily trampled.

With Trump, American politics had shifted off its traditional foundations. Within the world of journalism, a debate had now gained urgency: Should our profession shift off its foundations, too? Could old standards be any match for Trump's demagoguery and deceit? Hadn't they failed already?

Trump's comment to CIA officials that he was in a "running war with the media" had elicited a quote from me that became widely celebrated by many journalists: "We are not at war with the administration. We are at work." A story in Mother Jones, an investigations-oriented news outlet with historically progressive values, called it "a shrewd bit of verbal judo." As time passed, however, many journalists and media critics became less confident of its wisdom.

In the critics' view, journalists had to acknowledge that we really were in a war with Trump—over facts, press freedom, and democracy itself. If he waged war and we didn't, victory would be his. Journalists, in their estimation, were behaving like wimps: Too polite. Too passive. Too deferential. Too circumspect in our language. Too constrained by old rules in the face of a determined rule-breaker. Traditional principles such as journalistic objectivity were, they assessed, ill-suited to the challenge, if not counterproductive. Cautious (or, as they would say, tepid) language—describing Trump's assertions as "falsehoods" instead of "lies," for example—meant the public wasn't being told the plain truth and that the president wasn't being held properly to account.

James Risen, a former colleague of mine, declared in August 2018 in The Intercept that "crusading journalism is what is needed now." And with that cri de coeur, he recalled a German publisher, Hermann Ullstein, who had fled Nazi Germany for New York. In a 1943 book, Ullstein had taken the German press to task for failing to confront Hitler more aggressively—"especially," Risen wrote, "in comparison to the aggressive right-wing media that was rising during the 1920s and boosting Hitler's political fortunes." The failure of the pre-Nazi mainstream press, Ullstein had written, was "to a large extent due to mildness of language, to the tired and cautious spirit in which they fought."

Jay Rosen, a New York University professor and a prolific writer, emerged as one of the most acidic critics of traditional journalistic standards. In an extraordinary series of eighteen tweets in August 2018, Rosen contested how I had framed our journalistic mission:

Here I share some thoughts about what has become a famous phrase. It originates with Marty Baron, editor of the Washington Post, whom I regard as the unofficial leader of the American press, the tribal chieftain. His famous phrase is this: "We're not at war; we're at work"… It's great word smithing, a little gem of English composition. It has compression, rhythm, insight, alliteration. And it is memorable. More impressive is how Baron's phrase, "We're not at war; we're at work," captures the consensus in American journalism, striking his colleagues as the very definition of wisdom about how to cover Trump—and respond to his provocations, his insults, his trolling, his attacks … You're supposed to stay cool. Letting your emotions show is unprofessional and unwise. The right pose is unrattled, laconic. Serene and detached when under attack … He's trying to throw you off your game. Don't take the bait. And do not get caught up in the politics of the moment. You're not a hero of the resistance. Just do your job …

“We’re not at war; we’re at work” is genius. But its genius is incomplete … There is alive in the United States a campaign to discredit the American press and turn as many people as possible against it. It is led from the top. This campaign is succeeding. Before journalists log on in the morning, about 30% of their public is already gone. It is not easy to know what to do under these conditions. I certainly don’t. But to say, “we’re not at war; we’re at work” does not speak to the enormity of the problem. Somehow the press has to figure out how to fight back.

Rosen’s flurry of tweets was, most immediately, a response to a commentary in The Atlantic by Todd Purdum, who had been a longtime political writer of exceptional insight and elegance for The New York Times. Purdum had written of CNN reporter Jim Acosta’s confrontation with White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders on August 2, 2018, when he called on her to declare “right now and right here” that the press was not the “enemy of the people.” When Sanders repeatedly deflected Acosta’s question-cum-demand, and after he interrupted her several times, Acosta walked out of the White House press briefing in protest, later tweeting that her nonresponse was “shameful.” The New York Times reported that some White House correspondents “rolled their eyes” but that he was “cheered” by his CNN colleagues and liberals, particularly since he had just faced harassment at a Trump rally. Acosta’s face-off was exactly the sort of adversarial approach many Trump foes—and a growing number of journalists—felt was overdue.

Purdum’s article, however, called it a “dangerous brand of performance journalism.” He concluded, “The last thing Trump—or the press, or the public—needs is another convenient villain in the performative arena of the long-running reality show that is his administration. Acosta’s broadside blurs the line between reporting and performance, between work and war, at a time when journalists have a greater obligation than ever to demonstrate that what they do is real, and matters—and is not just part of the passing show.”

Acosta, Purdum allowed, had “ample cause to ask Sanders whether she subscribed to her boss’s Stalinist view of the press.” Agreed. The public should celebrate when reporters ask serious, pointed questions and sharply follow up. Good journalism requires it. But tenacity is possible without spectacle. Lecturing, interrupting, and walking out aren’t helpful additions to the journalist’s handbook. They may earn lusty cheers from those craving a good fight, but they are a welcome gift to critics who want us to be seen by the public as partisan warriors.

“Whenever a reporter who has not been kidnapped by terrorists, shot by an assailant, or won a big prize becomes an actor in her own story,” Purdum wrote, “she has lost the fight. Or in this case, reinforced the corrosive, cynical, and deeply dangerous feedback loop that has convinced Trump’s most fervent supporters that his relentless brief against the press has merit.”

Purdum was in my camp, and I in his. But as Trump laid siege to democratic norms, the opposing camp was gaining currency among mainstream journalists while ours was hemorrhaging support.

I never imagined words of mine gaining so much attention. Yet the phrase captured my feelings exactly. Trump was absolutely at war with us. I didn’t feel at war with him. But I knew with

certainty what our work was, and I was unhesitatingly committed to it: We had a duty to report vigorously on the president and tell the public without equivocation what he and his team were up to and what it meant for American citizens and the world. The American people would have to decide whether they wanted what he was selling.

We at The Post were not responsible for his election. There had been some lousy practices in the media, for sure: CNN and Fox News broadcasting his campaign rallies uninterrupted. Trump being allowed to prattle on during radio and TV interviews without being challenged on the facts. A nauseating revelry in Trump-driven television ratings. “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS,” Les Moonves, then executive chairman and chief executive of the network, said in February 2016. “Man, who would have expected the ride we’re having right now?… The money’s rolling in and this is fun … I’ve never seen anything like this, and this is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But bring it on, Donald. Keep going.” Moonves would later say, “It was a joke! It was a joke!” Yeah, sure.

And, of course, there was the endlessly reverential coverage of Trump by right-wing outlets. Fox News and Breitbart effectively made lavish in-kind contributions to his campaign.

But at The Post we had vetted Trump closely during the campaign, devoting enormous resources to a lengthy series of stories about his life and business career. We had published a book, Trump Revealed, that investigated him even more deeply and drew the wrath of the candidate and his media allies. Trump’s narcissism, vindictiveness, deceitfulness, and amorality were detailed for anyone who bothered to read it. Finally, our story about his vulgar comments on the now-infamous Access Hollywood tape had nearly torpedoed his campaign.

When Jonathan Chait in January 2019 published a New York magazine story headlined “Donald Trump Was Never Vetted,” my reaction was, “Really?” New information about Trump was unearthed after his election, but that it wasn’t uncovered before voters went to the polls wasn’t for lack of trying by reputable media.

My sense was that Trump was elected not because of what the press did or didn’t do but because so many Americans were in the mood for a bomb thrower. They wanted someone to upend the status quo. He talked like they did, thought like they did. And they counted on him to stick it to all the people (the “elite”) they resented the most, with the news media high on the list. They cared less, if at all, about the subjects of our attention—his bankruptcies, Russian connections, philandering (even boasting of sexual assault), boorish behavior, incendiary language, or decades of suspect schemes at tax avoidance—a subject that The New York Times began to unpeel a month before the 2016 election and fully detailed with a masterful exposé in October 2018.

The reporting methods and standards of outfits like The Post and The Times didn’t seem antiquated to me. You can’t adequately measure the quality of our work by the magnitude of its impact, especially in the short run. And I wasn’t about to react emotionally to Trump’s election. Days after Trump’s inauguration, strategist Steve Bannon had called the media the “opposition party.” He hoped we would be seen as exactly that. The more we were viewed as partisans, the

less our reporting would be believed. We could not fall into the trap that Trump and his close confederates had set for us.

Nor was it the time to discard journalism's fundamental principles. At a time of peril for democratic institutions, we needed to be good stewards of our own, reinforcing standards rather than abandoning them. The authors of How Democracies Die described how a demagogue who violates rules and norms can provoke others to do the same, further eroding democracy. Specifically, they cited a media that, feeling threatened, "may abandon restraint and professional standards." Much of the press was tempted to do just that.

Restraint and standards were, in part, the reason for our hesitancy to use the word "lie" in describing Trump's falsehoods, irritating press pundits and many readers. The Post had traditionally avoided using the word to describe the deceit of American presidents, although there had been plenty of it throughout history. "Lie," moreover, suggested we were certain that Trump knew what he was saying was false. And, for the most part, we couldn't be sure. Perhaps he was deluded, which hardly recommended him for the presidency. Or, being generous, he could have been grossly uninformed. Or maybe Trump was the ultimate bullshitter. A bullshitter "does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly," as philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt wrote in his 2005 book, On Bullshit. "He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose." By giving no attention whatsoever to truth, he argued, bullshit "is a greater enemy of truth than lies are."

Eventually, beginning for The Post in May 2018, there was no avoiding the word "lie." At the first major cracks in Trump's story that he knew nothing about hush money paid to women who alleged affairs with him, Dan Balz wrote, "Does it bother anyone that the president has been shown to be a liar?" The Post's Fact Checker column in August pointed to the now-documented fact that Trump was fully aware of secret payments to silence porn star Stormy Daniels and Playboy model Karen McDougal over allegations that he had carried on affairs with them. "Not just misleading. Not merely false. A lie," declared the headline. Trump had denied making the payments, and he got aides to issue denials on his behalf. He also denied having affairs with the women. In a guilty plea that August, former Trump attorney Michael Cohen admitted to the payments, to being reimbursed by the Trump Organization, and to Trump's knowledge of it all. It was, as The Post's Glenn Kessler wrote, "indisputable evidence that Trump and his allies have been deliberately dishonest at every turn." We were on rock-solid ground in using "lie." The word would make many more appearances in The Post's coverage of Trump.

A change in vocabulary might mollify at least some of our critics. Aggressive and revelatory reporting, however, is the only genuinely effective way for the press to hold power to account. I had witnessed straightforward, fact-based journalism do just that, most notably after launching The Boston Globe's investigation that exposed how the Catholic Church covered up sexual abuse by clergy for decades. It took time, process, and patience for the full scope of scandal to emerge and for the impact of the journalism to be felt. I had stripped stories of virtually all adjectives lest expressive language become ammunition for the Church and others to discredit our work. The facts alone could speak powerfully enough.

With Trump, my posture was the same: Report hard. Unflinchingly publish what we know. Avoid unnecessarily inflammatory language. Don't give Trump and his allies ammunition against us. The American people can then decide whether they want more of Trumpism. In a democracy, the call is theirs to make.

In the early months of his second year in office, Trump paid homage to a free press at a big gathering of Washington media, the annual white-tie Gridiron Club Dinner. It was an unusual statement, and an unusual setting, too. Trump had spurned other such events, every year declining invitations to attend the White House Correspondents' Dinner, the mammoth black-tie gala that traditionally draws thousands of journalists and a discordant heaping of celebrities. His staff would shun the event in "solidarity" with him in 2017, and two years later the president actually issued orders for Cabinet secretaries and senior staffers to stay away.

So it was a surprise when Trump agreed to appear in March 2018 at the Gridiron Dinner (an event I abhorred and avoided). And it was even more of a surprise when he had some praise for the press. "I have a lot of respect for a lot of the people in this room," he said, adding that there were "very few professions that I respect more." He granted that there were "some incredible, brilliant, powerful, smart, and fair people in the press." And, he said, "I want to thank the press for all you do to support and sustain our democracy. I mean that."

He didn't mean that. He would be back to his usual ways in no time at all. By July, he was accusing the "Fake News Media" of making up "stories without any backup, sources, or proof." Twenty-two minutes later, he claimed the media had distorted coverage of his relationship with Vladimir Putin because it "wants so badly to see a major confrontation with Russia, even a confrontation that could lead to war." Ten days later, the press he had praised in March for "all you do to support and sustain our democracy" was accused of being "very unpatriotic" and "driven insane by Trump Derangement Syndrome." The press, he said, had put people's lives "at risk" by revealing internal deliberations of government. "I will not allow our great country to be sold out by anti-Trump haters in the dying newspaper industry," Trump tweeted, specifically mentioning "the failing New York Times and the Amazon Washington Post."

In October, Trump all but encouraged violence against journalists when he applauded a Montana lawmaker for body-slamming a reporter, calling him a "tough cookie" and "my kind of guy." After sixteen pipe bombs were sent later that month to CNN, Trump critics, Democratic politicians, and former Obama administration officials, Trump went only as far as generically condemning "any acts or threats of political violence." And at a rally on the very night that news broke about the explosives, he blamed the media for "endless hostility and constant negative and oftentimes false attacks and stories."

The next day, Trump was, as usual, accepting no responsibility for inflammatory rhetoric that might have motivated such an attack, instead tweeting against the media for "a very big part of the Anger we see today in our society." That same day, authorities arrested Cesar Sayoc, a troubled resident of South Florida, who had plastered his van with stickers supporting Trump along with images of the president's critics that carried red targets over their faces. Five months

later, Sayoc pleaded guilty to mailing the explosives. He told a federal judge that Trump's rallies "became like a new found drug." In August 2019, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

When news broke of the pipe bombs, Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska, a Republican, argued for stopping "all this nonsense language about the press is the enemy of the people." Trump clearly didn't agree. To him, it was a good time to double down. When an ABC News reporter asked whether his rhetoric encouraged politically motivated violence, Trump suggested violence was the media's fault. "You're creating violence by your questions," he said, pointing to the reporter. A Post poll had just found that 49 percent of Americans felt "the way Trump speaks" encouraged violence. But Trump was speaking to his base. Two-thirds of Republicans felt "the way the media reports" encouraged violence.

By November, Trump was moving even more aggressively and vindictively against the press. The administration suspended the press credentials of CNN's Jim Acosta. It was, as journalists Peter Baker and Susan Glasser described in their 2022 book The Divider, "a brazen act of retribution unlike any taken by a modern White House."

The suspension came hours after a White House news conference, where Trump sought to cut off questioning from Acosta about the president's invective directed at a caravan of migrants. A White House intern attempted to grab the microphone from the correspondent, and press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders then accused Acosta of "placing his hands" on her. A video released by the White House to document her claim turned out to have come straight from Infowars, the site of right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, where a contributor manipulated it to portray Acosta as aggressive. Acosta had only raised his hand to shield the microphone, declaring "Pardon me, ma'am." Right-wing media personalities would spread the lie that Acosta had pushed and shoved the young woman. A federal judge rightly ordered the White House to restore Acosta's press pass on the grounds that it had been revoked without due process.

Trump's posture toward Black reporters was particularly ugly and disrespectful. When Abby Phillip, a CNN correspondent who had previously covered politics for The Post, asked Trump whether he wanted newly appointed acting attorney general Matthew Whitaker to "rein in" the special counsel's Russia investigation, Trump lashed out. "What a stupid question," he said, pointing his finger at her. "But I watch you a lot. You ask a lot of stupid questions." In Trump's mind, any question that put him on the spot was an offense.

By year-end 2018, Trump was ranking his war on the media as a signature achievement of his administration. "I think that one of the most important things I've done, especially for the public, is explain that a lot of the news is indeed fake," he told his advisers David Bossie and Corey Lewandowski in an interview for their book Trump's Enemies: How the Deep State Is Undermining the Presidency. (The following summer, he would envision his attacks on the press as "a big part of my legacy" in what he called the "Age of Trump.") The Committee to Protect Journalists, which typically monitored threats to press freedom in other countries, began to focus on Trump as a threat within U.S. borders. During the first two years of his administration, CPJ found, 11 percent of Trump's tweets denigrated the press. He insulted individual journalists via Twitter forty-eight times in the same period.

In September, Axios, citing a three-page fundraising pitch, reported that Trump's allies were raising $2 million to investigate reporters and editors. Damaging information would be furnished to "friendly media outlets" such as Breitbart and even traditional news organizations. Listed as "primary targets," Axios reported, were "CNN, MSNBC, all broadcast networks, NY Times, Washington Post, BuzzFeed, Huffington Post, and all others that routinely incorporate bias and misinformation into their coverage. We will also track the reporters and editors of these organizations." Days earlier, The Times had reported on a "loose network of conservative operatives allied with the White House" that was launching an "aggressive operation to discredit news organizations deemed hostile to President Trump by publicizing damaging information about journalists."

The operation, led by Arthur Schwartz Jr., a GOP consultant and adviser to Donald Trump Jr., had already dug up old social media posts by some journalists—anti-Semitic and racist tweets by a senior staff editor at The New York Times written while in college (he apologized); anti-Semitic tweets by a CNN photo editor (who resigned); antigay slurs by a CNN reporter when she was in college (she apologized); and an old, purportedly offensive tweet by a Post reporter that was actually written as irony (no action required). I had always expected Trump's allies to be digging through the backgrounds and old social media posts of our journalists. We scanned social media ourselves in researching job candidates. On occasion the results were startling and disqualifying. We did the same when vetting politicians and political appointees. The GOP effort, though, was designed with malicious intent. Some reporters' photos were posted by Trump allies merely to show they were being watched, as happened to The Post's Josh Dawsey, when a photograph of him sitting at a bar was posted to Twitter. It was an act of intimidation. "They wanted all the reporters covering him to live in fear," Josh told me.

The president also persisted in lambasting reporters by name when their stories didn't match his own self-serving version of events. When The Post's White House reporters Philip Rucker and Ashley Parker delivered a story describing Trump's "lost summer" of 2019, Trump went ballistic. Phil and Ashley wrote of "self-inflicted controversies and squandered opportunities" and went on to list them: "Trump leveled racist attacks against four congresswomen of color dubbed 'the Squad.' He derided the majority-black city of Baltimore as 'rat and rodent infested' … His visits to Dayton, Ohio, and El Paso after the gun massacres in those cities served to divide rather than heal … His trade war with China grew more acrimonious. His whipsaw diplomacy at the Group of Seven summit left allies uncertain about American leadership."

A few days later, White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham and principal deputy press secretary Hogan Gidley condemned The Post's journalism in an op-ed in the conservative Washington Examiner that was headlined, with childish mimickry, "The Washington Post's Lost Summer." Covering the administration often seemed less like war than tit for tat in elementary school. The aides argued that The Post ignored a list of accomplishments provided by the White House when, in fact, their story had included the more consequential items on the list. Verbal sparring in the pages of a newspaper could never be enough for Trump, however. He promptly took to Twitter to rebuke Rucker and Parker as "two nasty reporters" who "shouldn't even be allowed" at the White House. When Trump called out our journalists by name, we spoke out

forcefully. “The Washington Post,” I said in a statement, “is immensely proud to have these two superb journalists on staff … The president’s statement fits into a pattern of seeking to denigrate and intimidate the press. It’s unwarranted and dangerous, and it represents a threat to a free press in this country.”

Concerned about the president’s “deeply troubling anti-press rhetoric,” the young and still-new publisher of The New York Times, A. G. Sulzberger, accepted Trump’s invitation to meet with him on July 20, 2018. “I told the president directly that I thought his language was not just divisive but increasingly dangerous,” Sulzberger recounted. “I warned that his inflammatory language is contributing to a rise in threats against journalists and will lead to violence. I repeatedly stressed that this is particularly true abroad, where the president’s rhetoric is being used by some regimes to justify sweeping crackdowns on journalists.”

Sulzberger added, “I warned that it was putting lives at risk.” Indeed, it was. When a brutal regime murdered one of our Post colleagues, we saw just how little Trump cared.

Chapter 17
TWITTER STORMS

When Twitter was founded in 2006, I was leading The Boston Globe’s news staff. Few of us could envision then what the social media platform would mean for our profession. In almost no time at all Twitter became central to news and the daily lives of journalists. The most alert and adaptable journalists quickly saw how Twitter could aid their reporting, boost readership, and offer them a direct, more personal connection to readers.

At The Boston Globe in 2011, I was urged to put someone in charge of our efforts to use social media. Adrienne Lavidor-Berman became the paper’s first—and, for years, only—social media editor. Central to her mission was evangelizing for Twitter’s possibilities, educating staff on how to use it, encouraging them to be active users, and developing their own social media personality. I became one of her early students—“intimidating but willing,” as she remembers me. Although only a sporadic tweeter myself, I encouraged our newsroom to make full use of Twitter.

We could no longer count on readers picking up the newspaper or even going directly to our website. Increasingly, they spent time on Twitter and Facebook, regularly getting their news there and on other social media networks. We had to get our stories onto those platforms where they would be seen. “You saying we had to do this was a big deal,” Adrienne recalls. Less than a decade later, while I was leading the newsroom of The Washington Post, my message to staff took a sharp turn, not entirely reversing course but moving in that direction: Be more careful with what you say on social media. You don’t have to post there. If you do, don’t violate our standards.

Official discipline at The Post for unacceptable behavior on Twitter was rare. Formal warning letters averaged only one a year. But our limited measures to enforce standards in one instance were enough to provoke a full-scale staff revolt. Hundreds signed a petition protesting a single

enforcement action of mine, leading to a broader uprising against our social media rules. In twenty years running a newsroom, I'd experienced nothing like it.

I remain unrepentant, more convinced of the need for strict guidelines. Over the years, Twitter had moved to the center of civic discourse. It allowed journalists to promote themselves and their insights on a gigantic public stage. It drew public attention to the work of news institutions like ours. Yet too often it became a venue for personal opinions, advocacy, anger, snark, sniping, failed humor, virtue signaling, personal animus, and a rush to judgment—never more so than during the Trump years, when newsroom values of inclusiveness, tolerance, equitable treatment, and an independent press were under attack.

For my entire career, reporters and others on news staffs had been expected to keep their personal views to themselves under any circumstance where they might be seen as representing their organizations. They could provide analysis of news events but were to refrain from pure opinion, which was the province of editorial writers and certain columnists. They were to keep in mind at all times that, whenever they spoke publicly, their remarks would likely reflect on the institution that employed them. That called for care and restraint. Traditional media companies, after all, hadn't hired them to make a public show of their opinions. They were hired for their ability to cover the news. Their stories—published only after review by editors to ensure that institutional standards were met—were to do most of the talking. Those age-old principles were established policy at The Post when I signed up to be its executive editor. Rules crafted before I arrived there governed what was permitted on social media and what wasn't. New employees were briefed on The Post's expectations for proper behavior.

Social media platforms like Twitter, however, made it nearly impossible to exercise effective supervision over reporters' public remarks. At The Post, hundreds of journalists were tweeting multiple times per day and at all hours. Prepublication vetting of all of those postings would have required a sizable full-time team; monitoring afterward, the same. The vast majority of Post journalists had no problem abiding by our standards. They were cautious and showed sound judgment. But others—dozens—pushed the boundaries of what was allowed, periodically busting right through them out of impulsiveness, thoughtlessness, recklessness, and, at times, a heartfelt repudiation of the idea that journalists should be prohibited from speaking their minds. There were many hundreds of journalists in our newsroom, but the actions of a relative few begat needless controversy and, at times, outsized damage to the reputation that The Post wanted for itself.

A rising generation of young journalists had grown up on social media. Speaking out on Twitter and elsewhere figured in how they defined themselves. They saw it as an extension, and expression, of their own identity. They didn't accept that when they came to work they had to be a "different person" than the one they were at home or out with friends. We were headed for a clash of values: the traditional ones I had absorbed and embraced throughout my career versus an ascendant view that journalists should not be barred from bringing their "whole selves" into the workplace and shouldn't "hide" who they really were and how they really felt.

In January 2014, only one year after I became The Post's executive editor, we hired Wesley Lowery to join a political team covering Congress. Wes was only twenty-three. I had known Wes from his time as a college intern at The Boston Globe while I was its editor. His work demonstrated impressive talent and energy. The Globe later lured Wes back to Boston after a year he spent reporting for the Los Angeles Times. At The Post, where we were seeking gifted journalists, greater staff diversity, and reporters who were savvy about the latest digital-era ways of reporting, I urged managing editor Kevin Merida to explore Wes's interest in employment at The Post. The Post had already been tracking Wes as a job prospect since his college years. Having expressed a wish to become a national political reporter, he was a natural for our newsroom.

Even in his first weeks as a full-timer at The Globe, Wes had excelled in covering the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013, volunteering for a twenty-four-hour cycle of reporting from Watertown and Cambridge as police chased the two suspects. In one of his interviews with editors at The Post, Wes recounted how he live-tweeted from the scene to keep readers up-to-the-minute and then relied on his tweets as notes for the story he wrote for The Globe's website and the next morning's newspaper. He exemplified the speed, agility, digital smarts, and resourcefulness we were looking for in new hires. Jennifer Peter, The Globe's deputy managing editor overseeing local coverage, informed her newsroom of Wes's departure "with a heavy heart" and "no shortage of ill-will for our former editor" who had engineered his move to The Post only nine months after his return to Boston.

Wes spent several months on his congressional beat at The Post but in August 2014 was dispatched to help cover civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, after the fatal shooting of unarmed Black teen Michael Brown by a white police officer. The violent clashes between law enforcement and protesters raised the profile of the Black Lives Matter movement and helped animate the cause of racial justice that intensified amid fatal police shootings of Black citizens in the years that followed. For Wes, a Black journalist, the coverage was a defining moment as well. His national profile rose dramatically, and much of his later coverage at The Post was inspired by what he observed while on the ground courageously reporting from Ferguson.

The harsh tactics of the police were felt by Wes personally. Along with reporter Ryan Reilly of the Huffington Post, he was arrested by St. Louis County police officers while working out of a McDonald's where he had gone to charge his mobile phone. Police entered the McDonald's even though it was a peaceful retreat from the unrest on the streets, ordering the restaurant shut and people to leave. Wes used his phone to shoot video of the encounter, an entirely legal (and sensible) act of journalism, but it angered the cops. As he tried to gather his belongings, police moved to arrest him, falsely accusing him of resisting, slamming him against a soda dispenser, and then handcuffing him in plastic ties. He was taken with Reilly—who suffered similar mistreatment—to a Ferguson Police Department holding cell. Though released after a half hour, charges of trespassing and interfering with a police officer were filed a year later.

Immediately after the arrest, a reader emailed Jeff Bezos a question: "Will you SUE for FALSE ARREST and protect your reporters?" Bezos, always remarkably attentive to reasonable emails from customers, forwarded the message to me, inquiring whether the facts would support such

a case. We needed time to see whether anything would come of the arrest. Once formal charges were filed and as the case dragged on, the reader's suggestion made ever more sense. I recommended to our lawyers that we threaten a lawsuit for wrongful arrest. A draft complaint was emailed to the county in the middle of settlement negotiations, and in May 2016 the charges were dropped. Under terms of the settlement, the two reporters agreed not to sue. The charges constituted, as I said at the time, "contemptible overreaching by prosecutors."

With Wes's vivid coverage of what unfolded on the streets of Ferguson and his deft use of social media to tell the story in real time, his Twitter following exploded. A journalist still in his early twenties, who had only recently arrived at The Post with eighteen thousand followers, began to acquire them in the hundreds of thousands. His high profile during an intensely polarizing news event also made him a natural target. Not only did Wes have to endure tear gas and rubber bullets while witnessing protesters' injury and grief, he endured invective on social media, on air, and from right-wing critics intent on tormenting him and disparaging The Post. It would have been a lot for anyone to handle; more so for someone at the start of his career. Post journalists are expected to take a lot of shit, mostly suppressing their emotions and continuing with their work. That was not Wes's approach. To his nastiest critics, he responded in kind, provoking more attacks. He didn't handle it according to our standards.

Twitter fights were one piece of the overall picture. Perhaps nothing received as much notice as his reaction to Joe Scarborough when the host of MSNBC's Morning Joe suggested that Wes bore blame for his arrest because he failed to "move along" as instructed by police. "I don't sit there and have the debate and film the police officer," Scarborough said, "unless I want to get on TV and have people talk about me the next day." It was a callous and ill-informed thing to say, and Scarborough later admitted, "I should have kept my mouth shut." Wes, immersed in covering a story of high emotions, didn't respond with the composure we expected of staff. "I would invite Joe Scarborough to come down to Ferguson and get out of 30 Rock where he's sitting sipping his Starbucks, smugly," Wes told CNN. "Let me be clear about this—I have little patience for talking heads," he added. "This is too important. This is a community, a community in the United States of America, where things are on fire. This community is on edge. There's so much happening here, and instead of putting more reporters on the ground we have people like Joe Scarborough running their mouth and have no idea what they're talking about." Wes's combative instincts were understandable. They were also unhelpful. At The Post, where we wanted readers to focus on what we were covering rather than ourselves, Wes himself became a story.

Editors on our national staff urged Wes to exercise restraint, as did managing editor Kevin Merida. Supervisors encouraged him to use his rapidly rising Twitter following as a tool to acquire sources for stories rather than as a platform for pointed, unnecessary, and counterproductive public combat with his critics. For a while, it looked as if he had taken the message to heart. On January 1, 2015, Wes posted to the Tumblr and Instagram platforms a set of goals for the new year. The first: "More writing, less Twitter." The second: "Assume the good in people. (No social media fights.)"

Yet over time, the issue recurred, followed by more conversations between editors and Wes about controlling his social media impulses. By the summer of 2015, Washingtonian magazine published a story headlined “Why Does Everyone Want Wesley Lowery to Shut Up?” profiling a “Washington Post rising star” who was a “terrific reporter” but who also was “pretty good at driving his critics crazy.” The piece rightly noted that Wes had “become a parachuter par excellence: establishing deep sources, writing colorful solo pieces, and contributing to team coverage.” And the Washingtonian also took note of tweets that were “ill-advised, even ill-tempered.” In one, he said, “black ppl don’t work for @politico.” Another, Washingtonian noted, called “a detractor a crude name.”

By then, Wes had been given a new, high-visibility beat: “the interactions between law enforcement officials and their communities.” It was an ideal match of reporter and subject. As Wes investigated the circumstances around the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, he was astonished to discover that data on fatal police shootings was scarce. He proposed to make that the focus of his reporting and urged our newsroom to log every police shooting in 2015. It was a smart idea, and The Post responded with the resources it deserved. The project became what was then the largest in The Post’s history, involving about seventy journalists, including reporters from multiple departments, researchers, database experts, photographers, and graphics specialists. The reporting yielded essential insights into the circumstances around some 990 fatal police shootings across the country in 2015, and it earned Wes and his Post colleagues a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting.

As a central figure of a Pulitzer-winning team, Wes saw his public profile once again rise. He continued to do superb work. He also became more outspoken, and no less rash. Over the years, editors delivered Wes the same sorts of cautions that he received during his coverage of Ferguson. The Post wanted Wes’s journalism. We had put unprecedented institutional support behind it. And we wanted the journalism to speak for itself.

The issue came to a head in 2019 after a series of caustic Twitter blasts and other commentary by Wes left editors exasperated. He was defying our counsel. On July 14, a day after Trump lambasted four progressive congresswomen of color and called on them to “go back” to the “totally broken and crime infested places from which they came,” Wes used his Twitter account to accuse the media of being “cowardly” for not immediately using the term “racist” to describe Trump’s remarks. He slammed those “calling the shots in MSM [mainstream media] newsrooms” and the “people writing the articles.” Among editors at The Post, the tweet seemed aimed not just at the press in general but also The Post in particular. We hadn’t used the term “racist” immediately. The Post’s practice wasn’t to apply categorical labels like that without considerable discussion, even when we found comments detestable, as Trump’s were. Our guidelines for language were primarily within the purview of our copy desk chief, who happened to be Black. Within a day, managing editor Cameron Barr assembled a diverse group to thoroughly discuss whether to label Trump’s comments “racist.” We made the decision to do so.

Deliberativeness isn’t cowardice; it’s a guardrail against the perils of impulsiveness. Nor was there unanimity within journalism about the wisdom of sticking the “racist” label on Trump. Keith Woods, NPR’s chief diversity officer, who is Black, argued against his own organization’s

decision to apply the term to Trump's remarks. His commentary—headlined "Report on Racism, but Ditch the Labels"—wondered where labeling of Trump's offensive comments on a variety of subjects might lead over time: "Weren't some misogynistic? Vulgar? Homophobic? Sexist?" Such judgments, he wrote, "belong in the space reserved for opinions."

When Trump later that month denigrated the city of Baltimore as a place where "no human being would want to live," Wes turned to Twitter again. "Black & brown ears can hear the racism clearly while our white colleagues engage in fruitless, if earnest, pedantic games." An article in Politico said Lowery "hoped decision-makers in his newsroom and others got his message."

Wes subsequently turned to Twitter to criticize a New York Times story examining a decade of the Tea Party movement: "How do you write a 10 years later piece on the Tea Party and not mention—not once, not even in passing—the fact that it was essentially a hysterical grassroots tantrum about the fact that a black guy was president. Journalistic malpractice." In the same time period, he mocked New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd for hosting a book party attended by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and for a column she'd written dismissing criticism that she and her co-author were "decadent aristocrats." Wes tweeted: "look, if you're a 25-year New York Times political columnist who pals around with the Speaker of the House you are, in fact, a 'decadent aristocrat.' If you don't have the self awareness then I'm not sure what to tell you."

Editors lost their patience. All the warnings over five years were being ignored. Maybe a formal disciplinary letter would do the trick. I didn't write it, but I volunteered to deliver it in hopes that he'd at long last take our social media policies seriously.

The final version of The Post's letter, given to him by my deputies, laid out our concerns plainly: "The issue here is where and how to provide your perspective on issues facing the media, including coverage of race. You should not use social media to send messages to your colleagues in the newsroom. You should not use social media to criticize competitors for their coverage. You should not use social media as a forum to express what, by any reasonable reading, would be viewed as your political opinions. You should not use social media in a way that jeopardizes your own ability to cover certain public figures and groups or the ability of The Post to cover those same public figures and groups. Above all, what we ask of you is restraint. You may appear in public forums to speak generally about media issues, including coverage of race. That is a valuable contribution to our profession. However, you need to be careful not to step into the role of an opinion journalist. As with any other reporter, your reporting, subject to the customary editing process, should do most of the talking—illuminating important and sensitive issues."

First, though, came a confrontational meeting in my office. Wes rejected the idea that he had done anything improper, asserted that he wasn't expressing political views (just facts), declared that The Post didn't "own" him, and advised me that my own "behavior" was what deserved rebuke. I advised him that his job was as a news reporter, not a commentator, activist, or advocate. As the meeting quickly deteriorated, I cut it short as "not constructive," telling him that he was being "insolent" and instructing him to abide by our policies. The letter itself

concluded with boilerplate legal language included in every Post disciplinary letter (and that is common in the corporate world): “Failure to address this issue will result in increased disciplinary action, up to and including the termination of your employment.” In Wes’s later telling, I had threatened to fire him, a high-drama overstatement of the disciplinary process at such an early stage. I knew of no one at The Post who had ever been fired for social media violations, despite receiving letters like his. In advance of my meeting with Wes, I had asked our legal department to remove the “termination” language but was rebuffed. To my regret, our dispute was exacerbated by some factual errors in an original version of the letter. Understandably, Wes seized on the mistakes in his letter of response.

Wes’s letter began by acknowledging his “past conversations with editors about our social media policies.” And he added, “It is clear now that top Post editors are more upset than had previously been made clear.” Our enforcement of the “sweeping social media policies,” he said, was inconsistent. And he claimed that his championing of diversity in hiring and coverage “appears to increasingly run afoul” of The Post’s expectations for reporters’ behavior. “Generations of black journalists, including here at The Washington Post,” he wrote senior managers, “have served as the conscience not only of their publications but of our entire industry: their authority derived from the experience navigating this world while cloaked in black skin; their expertise earned through their own daily journalism. Often those journalists have done so by leveling public criticism of both their competitors and their own employers. News organizations often respond to such internal and external pressure.”

We had no intention to “muzzle” Wes, as he later characterized it. But we weren’t going to back off standards that governed how The Post’s journalists handled themselves in public settings. Their individual behavior—on air, on social media, in speaking engagements, wherever—influenced the public’s image of The Post overall. The Post then employed 850 news department reporters and editors. If each of them acted both as newsperson and commentator, it would be a cacophonous, unprofessional mess.

We wanted Wes to keep working at The Post. Our view of him as a talented journalist was not at all diminished. But in January 2020, several months after receiving the first and lightest variant of formal discipline, an aggrieved Wes informed us that he would be quitting in a few weeks to take another job. There was widespread lament in the profession that we were losing a journalist of his abilities, and I was sorry our dispute had ended this way. I was the one who had identified him as someone we should hire. We had previously taken measures to keep him from jumping ship to another media outlet. And he had done superb work with our full institutional backing. But the decision to leave was his, not ours. I also expected that, had he stayed, it would not be long before we had the same social media conversations, probably again in vain.

New York Times media columnist Ben Smith promptly championed Wes’s outspokenness as placing him at the vanguard of a younger, more diverse generation of journalists challenging the profession’s archaic, failed notions of neutrality and objectivity—and supposedly old-school, outmoded editors like me. In Wes’s words, news organizations’ “core value needs to be the truth, not the perception of objectivity.”

No one, though, was aiming for the perception of objectivity. The goal was the reality of objectivity—which means thoroughly, open-mindedly, and honestly looking at all the evidence and then unhesitatingly publishing what we learn to be true (while acknowledging what we don't yet know). Seeking answers rather than supposing we possess them from the start is at the heart of good reporting. No one had abandoned the idea of truth as was cartoonishly portrayed. The first of The Post's core principles, dating to 1935, declares, "The first mission of a newspaper is to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained." That principle, affixed to a wall facing Post journalists as they enter the newsroom, affirms that truth exists but recognizes that its pursuit is a process, requiring not only hard work but some humility and often more time and thought than might be first imagined.

The intemperate manner in which Wes expressed himself on social media was in conflict with the identity The Post desired for itself. Institutions have as much right as individuals to define themselves. Over many decades The Post overwhelmingly chose to express its own identity with sober, independent, and energetic news coverage, expecting that its public image would not be undermined by random, unbridled commentary from any single member of its staff. For decades that is how The Post operated, holding the powerful to account to great effect. Well-reported, well-edited stories were more powerful than any impulsive tweet. The Post was entitled to hold on to its reputation and the standards that gave rise to it. My responsibility as executive editor was to make sure it did.

Social media headaches were a constant. A day after the House voted on December 18, 2019, to impeach Trump for pressuring Ukraine for political favors, political reporter Rachael Bade tweeted a photo of Post staffers cheerfully enjoying a round of beers with the line "Merry Impeachmas from the WaPo team!" It was a joke. Both Republicans and Democrats were using the line on Capitol Hill. But the public wasn't in on the humor. Outrage followed. The Trump campaign, predictably, jumped to discredit The Post. "Ladies & gentlemen, your fair and objective press corps in action! What a joke," Trump's 2020 campaign manager Brad Parscale tweeted. Rachael received the usual informal warning from managers and responded with a note of mature remorse. "No excuses," she emailed her bosses. She deleted the tweet with a note to followers: "To be absolutely clear, we at the Post are merely glad we are getting a break for the holidays after a long 3 months."

Another talented Post political reporter, David Weigel, in early 2020 responded to a Twitter user who encouraged New Yorkers to beat the deadline for registering as a Democrat so they could vote for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries. For whatever reason, Dave felt compelled to offer this tweet in reply: "tfw [that feeling when] you change your party registration," attaching an image showing what appeared to be male sexual torture. The image, readers relayed to me, had previously been used in a homophobic attack on Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg. Understandably, the public reacted with disgust. Dave deleted the tweet and apologized, but it didn't mollify critics. "I could not in good conscience subscribe to WaPo again if there can't be consequences for this type of behavior," one reader wrote me. Dave was officially warned about his social media misbehavior. It was hardly the first time. Notoriously, Dave in late 2017 had tweeted out a photo that left a false impression of a small crowd at a Trump rally in Pensacola, Florida. The photo, he quickly learned, was taken before the venue

filled up. Trump went on the attack, demanding his dismissal. Dave had promptly deleted his tweet when alerted to his error, and he then apologized to the president on Twitter. But the damage to The Post's reputation was done. Trump would repeatedly point to the tweet as deliberate "fake news." Once again, we had hand-delivered Trump ammunition to fire at us.

Well after I'd left The Post, in June 2022, Dave committed another social media blunder, retweeting a sexist joke. Again, The Post's PR department tried to clean up the mess, offering assurances that "reprehensible and demeaning language or actions like that will not be tolerated." The episode kicked off days of mortifying public feuding on Twitter among Post staffers. Dave was suspended for a month without pay, a penalty that may have reflected a yearslong accumulation of disciplinary warnings. When I was at The Post, our worries over his social media behavior once caused us to take drastic action: An editor was required to review every tweet of his before he could post it. In the fall of 2022, a few months after his most recent Twitter dustup, Dave left The Post for news start-up Semafor.

Day after day, Twitter seemed to bring out reporters' worst, most unthinking impulses. It was hard to fathom why smart people couldn't exercise more self-control. Most of the time, staffers were merely told to delete an offending tweet and be more prudent. Most of the time, they expressed regret, committed to observing the rules, and sought to move on. And then there was our most notable exception: Felicia Sonmez, who ultimately opted to file a lawsuit against The Post and six top editors, including me, citing restrictions on what she could cover because of her nonstop social media commentary.

Typically, I interviewed every finalist for an open news position at The Post. A single hire could make a big difference for the better, or for the worse. For some reason I was not available when Felicia came through our newsroom for interviews in May 2018. But The Post was eager to fill an opening on our breaking-news desk for politics, and national editors vouched for Felicia. She had worked at The Post previously. She had gone on to report from Beijing, working first for the wire service Agence France-Presse and then for The Wall Street Journal. So I gave my go-ahead, and she started in mid-June.

The Post knew when editors interviewed Felicia this time that she had identified herself as a survivor of sexual misconduct. Her allegations against the Los Angeles Times bureau chief in Beijing, Jonathan Kaiman, had been publicly disclosed, including on her Twitter account. Before visiting The Post, she had sent a letter containing her allegations to the Foreign Correspondents Club of China, with a copy to the Los Angeles Times, which then suspended its reporter and initiated an investigation. She accused Kaiman of sexual misconduct after she drove him home on her scooter following a correspondents club party the previous summer. In her account, some of the evening was consensual, some not, and other memories were lost to the blur of too much alcohol consumption.

"Even though parts of the evening were consensual, while on the way, Jon escalated things in a way that crossed the line," her letter said. She made allegations of digital penetration on a public street without her consent and asserted that she repeatedly told him no. She also said she subsequently walked up the six flights of steps to his apartment. "I don't remember what was

going through my head as I went upstairs, whether I wanted to take a nap or get some water or maybe make out." By her account, she had "unprotected sex" with him, and then added, "I am devastated by the fact that I was not more sober so that I could say with absolute certainty whether what happened that night was rape." Felicia told a Hong Kong news site that she made no report to Beijing police: "It was over the course of months, from September 2017 to January 2018, that I realized what happened to me was wrong. By the time it had fully sunk in, I was back in the U.S. for a long visit and had already decided to leave Beijing. So, it didn't seem like going to the Beijing police was a viable option."

Felicia came forward with her allegations after she read a January 2018 post on the Medium publishing platform from another woman who claimed "sexual misconduct" by Kaiman. In that post, the woman described how the two had returned to her Beijing apartment, flopped down on the bed, and "began making out and undressing." After a few minutes, she said, she changed her mind, got up from the bed, and insisted she no longer wished to continue. She wrote: "I clearly remember feeling confused and dismayed that he wasn't leaving, or even moving, and that he didn't seem to believe that I knew what I wanted. The back and forth continued for several minutes, and he began to whine. I remember that he made me feel very pressured and very awkward, like it was too late to back out … I am still so upset that I concluded the easiest, least confrontational way forward was to place male satisfaction above my own desire and to go back to the bed … We had sex, and I felt gross for all of it. He left immediately after." She described what transpired as "being pressured into sex by an opportunistic friend," and had come to the conclusion that "this was not my fault … and I do not share the blame." She publicly disclosed the encounter on Medium, she said, "to add my voice to the broader outcry against sexual misconduct."

After the Los Angeles Times conducted its investigation, it sent Kaiman an email declaring that his "treatment of women brought undue negative publicity on your news organization." He was given the choice of resigning or being fired, choosing the former in August 2018. Kaiman returned to the United States without a job. The Los Angeles Times kept the results of its investigation confidential as a personnel matter, but several weeks later The New York Times and other media outlets learned of Kaiman's resignation and published stories. Felicia provided a statement, at once thanking the Los Angeles Times for "taking my allegation seriously" and chiding the publication for not doing enough. "In the case of the L.A. Times' handling of this situation," she wrote, "several questions remain unanswered. The newspaper has not been transparent about the results of its investigation. It has not made clear whether Mr. Kaiman was fired or resigned voluntarily. And it has not addressed questions about the extent of its knowledge of Mr. Kaiman's actions in January and its decision not to further investigate at the time." She added that she stood "in solidarity" with the other Kaiman accuser "who took the brave step of speaking out first, paving the way for others to follow."

Early on Kaiman had said his perception and Felicia's of the encounter "differ greatly" and "all of the acts we engaged in were mutually consensual." After resigning, Kaiman described a devastating toll from the accusations against him. While "the allegations against me involved no violence, threats, coercion, or power imbalance of any kind," he said, they "irrevocably destroyed my reputation, my professional network, my nine-year career in journalism, and any

hope for a rewarding career in the future; they have branded me with a scarlet letter for life, and driven me to the brink of suicide."

In August 2019, Reason magazine published an eight-thousand-word examination of the allegations against Kaiman. Author Emily Yoffe forcefully challenged the idea that either of the two publicized sexual encounters that had felled Kaiman, including the one with Felicia, constituted sexual misconduct. "The entire feminist enterprise is undermined if society comes to the conclusion that women bear no responsibility for their choices in the sexual realm," she wrote. From Yoffe's perspective, Kaiman had been unjustly accused. "We are now in a time," she wrote, "when a sexual encounter can be recast in a malevolent light, no matter whether the participants all appeared to consider it consensual at the time and no matter how long ago it took place." Yoffe's skepticism elicited a furious reaction from Felicia, who penned a six-page letter to Reason that labeled it "misleading and error-laden." She then appended the letter to a series of eighteen tweets one day, followed by a series of thirteen tweets a couple of days later. Reason responded with three minor corrections.

Five weeks later, Felicia took to Twitter again to criticize another reporter's comments that she felt were directed at her and suggest her employer "reconsider its association" with that journalist. In another long series of tweets, she also positioned herself as speaking for women accusers in general, with other women "watching and taking notice."

All of this played out publicly on social media. Felicia not only accused other journalists of shoddy work, she effectively called for firing one of them. She had expressed "solidarity" with a previous Kaiman accuser whose allegations had never been adjudicated and most likely never would be. She criticized Kaiman's employer, the Los Angeles Times, for what she considered an inadequate response to her allegations. She portrayed herself as carrying the torch for other women accusers. All of this involved her personal life, and yet she pinned one of her tweets about it to the top of the Twitter account she used in her professional capacity at The Post, mixing personal and business matters. Despite newsroom managers' requests, she declined for weeks to remove the tweet.

None of this was normal behavior for Post journalists, regardless of the trauma or injustice they experienced in their personal lives. It also ran counter to our code of standards and ethics that called on reporters to "remain in the audience … to report the news, not to make the news." And her unrelenting advocacy on Twitter raised concerns among her managers about whether she could be seen as impartially covering the subject of sexual assault and harassment. The Post's ethics code barred "conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict of interest wherever and whenever possible." Standards of that sort have been common at all five news organizations where I have worked over four and a half decades. Life experience informed our journalism, but commingling our personal lives and professional endeavors was a step too far. Public advocacy was strictly prohibited, as was anything that could be perceived that way.

When Felicia was hired, The Post placed no restrictions whatsoever on any subjects she could cover, knowing full well about her accusations against Kaiman. For several days in September 2018 she was among the Washington Post reporters covering Christine Blasey Ford's sexual

assault allegations against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. But with the release of her statement about Kaiman's exit from the Los Angeles Times, her immediate supervisors and our standards editor concluded that she could not simultaneously engage in that sort of public advocacy while also covering the nation's most high-profile dispute over sexual assault allegations—or anything similar. Our coverage was being closely scrutinized, above all for fairness.

Months later, after a lull in Felicia's social media commentary about her own case, The Post allowed her to resume covering stories about sexual abuse and harassment. But the stream of Twitter postings that followed the August 2019 publication of the Reason magazine story led us to impose the prohibition once again. Her dozens of tweets, in the view of senior editors, collided with our policy on conflicts of interest as well as involvement in partisan causes. Her attacks ran counter to another policy that barred using Twitter accounts associated with The Post to criticize other journalists and their news organizations. A disciplinary letter in October called for the "immediate cessation" of such activities. Felicia, with the support of the newsroom's union, filed a grievance and complained of unfair treatment even as she continued to cover a wide range of other breaking news in the realm of national politics.

A month after I retired from The Post in February 2021, six senior newsroom managers, yielding to pressure from newsroom staff, allowed Felicia to once again resume covering stories of sexual assault and harassment. Weeks later, again to placate staff, they also acceded to her public insistence on an apology, expressing remorse "for the way we have handled your situation. We imposed limitations on the scope of your work that we've concluded are unnecessary. We see the ways in which we should have supported you more than we did." Having retired, I didn't participate in the decision to write that letter. It wasn't one I would have sent. We had enforced traditional journalistic standards to safeguard The Post's reputation. That's not something I would ever apologize for.

My former colleagues, however, hoped to put the long-running conflict with Felicia and her newsroom allies behind them. I knew it wouldn't, and sure enough it didn't. Felicia wrote back, calling upon two superb editors who were candidates to succeed me to withdraw from consideration. "I view your actions in my situation as disqualifying," she said, "and I do not think either of you should be elevated to a role where you will potentially be leading this newsroom for the next ten years … Your actions are an outrage, and all Post employees deserve better." (Neither got the position, but both were later promoted by my successor, deservedly so.)

The next step came in July 2021 when Felicia filed a lawsuit against six top editors individually, including me, as well as The Post for "unlawful discrimination and a hostile work environment based on her gender and her protected status as a victim of a sexual offense." The lawsuit was widely covered, and much of the coverage credulously took as fact Felicia's core allegation that we had banned her from covering sexual misconduct cases simply because she was a sexual assault survivor. But that was fiction, as a District of Columbia Superior Court judge made evident in dismissing her claims eight months later.

News organizations, Judge Anthony C. Epstein wrote, “have the right to adopt policies that protect not only the fact but also the appearance of impartiality.” The facts of the case, even as Felicia alleged them, made it “affirmatively implausible that her victim status or gender was a reason for the Post’s decisions concerning her assignments.” Felicia’s appeal of that decision was pending as this was written.

After the solid lower-court victory, The Post made no public comment. But I wasn’t going to let the moment pass without saying something on my own behalf. Felicia had been speaking freely. As a defendant, I was hamstrung. The only wise course had been to keep my mouth shut until the judge ruled. However, news coverage of the case had dismayed me. It was gullible, agenda-driven, unfair, and nasty, in many instances depicting The Post, my colleagues, and me as insensitive, if not cruel, toward a sexual assault survivor. Now, with one dry sentence, I hoped to make a point: Fact, law, and reason had finally prevailed in court, even if they hadn’t in the press. “I am grateful,” I said, “for a legal process that allowed the claims in this lawsuit to be evaluated objectively.” At least a judge understood the rationale behind ethics standards, even if too many journalists in The Post’s newsroom and elsewhere didn’t.

I skipped over one notable episode because it deserves a discussion all its own. It began on January 26, 2020, with news that basketball legend Kobe Bryant died at age forty-one in a helicopter crash on a hillside near Calabasas, California. His thirteen-year-old daughter, Gianna, and seven others, including the pilot, were also killed. I was in Madrid at the time, and the shock and grief there ran deep, as it did around the world.

Close to midnight, I received an urgent call from Post editors. A tweet by Felicia had ignited a furor on social media. Seventy-eight minutes after Bryant’s death was first reported by the TMZ news outlet and thirty-eight minutes after the Associated Press provided confirmation of that report—as calculated for the 2022 edition of The Ethical Journalist textbook—Felicia had tweeted a story from the Daily Beast news site headlined “Kobe Bryant’s Disturbing Rape Case: The DNA Evidence, the Accuser’s Story, and the Half-Confession.” Pieces of the aircraft were still smoldering, and many people were just learning the news of the crash. Public outrage over Felicia’s perceived insensitivity, and The Post’s, was immediate. She and The Post were targeted with hate, seen as heartless and tasteless.

Felicia responded to the public furor with yet more tweets. “Well, THAT was eye-opening. To the 10,000 people (literally) who have commented and emailed me with abuse and death threats, please take a moment and read the story—which was written 3+ years ago, and not by me. Any public figure is worth remembering in their totality even if that public figure is beloved and that totality unsettling. That folks are responding with rage & threats toward me (someone who didn’t even write the piece but found it well-reported) speaks volumes about the pressure people come under to stay silent in these cases.”

Other senior editors and I were livid. Her tweets threatened to become the face of The Post’s coverage in lieu of the stories written by the reporters actually assigned to write about Kobe Bryant’s death. She needlessly stirred up animosity toward The Post when people were grieving and in shock, many having just learned the news. She had injected herself crassly into a story

that no one at The Post had asked her to cover or comment upon. She had seized on Kobe Bryant's death to press a cause close to her heart. To me, her tweet was atrociously timed and conceived.

Felicia and her supporters argued that she was merely tweeting an accurate story—what could possibly be wrong with that?—and that the rape allegations against Bryant were being, as she put it, "erased." Accuracy is, of course, central to high-quality journalism, but journalists thankfully have long respected other standards, too. Tone and timing also matter. In the case of deaths, the public expects from us sensitivity, empathy, and humanity. Felicia's tweets showed none of that. By my reading and much of the public's, there was an implicit but inescapable message in her simple posting of the Daily Beast's rape story so soon after Bryant's death: The man you're mourning was a monster.

Nor were the rape allegations against Bryant being erased. The Post and other media, of course, would write about them. Even in obituaries about the most accomplished and admired individuals, The Post had never shied from revisiting chapters of dishonor. In Bryant's case, a nineteen-year-old hotel employee in Colorado had accused him of sexual assault in 2003. He was arrested, but prosecutors dropped the case in 2005 shortly before a scheduled trial because the accuser declined to testify, despite strong evidence against Bryant. "Although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual," Bryant said at the time, "I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way I did." He and his accuser agreed on a confidential settlement. The Post had written in depth about the sexual assault allegations against Bryant, most recently in November 2018, in what was essentially a psychological portrait of the athlete. So probing was reporter Kent Babb on the subject that, before publication, Bryant's representative emailed me to accuse The Post of "deceitful tactics in order to create a sensationalist story about Kobe in the #MeToo era." In polite but firm terms, I told her to pound sand.

If Felicia felt that, seventy-eight minutes after the deaths of Bryant and his daughter were first reported (and thirty-eight minutes after confirmation), we were overdue for turning a spotlight on the rape allegations, she had avenues other than Twitter to make known her concerns: She could have directly emailed, called, or walked over to Post reporters and editors responsible for the coverage. From my hotel room in Madrid, I wrote, "Felicia, A real lack of judgment to tweet this. Please stop. You're hurting this institution by doing this." When I look back today at that message, my opinion hasn't changed a bit, despite the torrent of criticism I received when my email was disseminated to other media.

Felicia was advised to delete what she had already said on Twitter and to stop posting more tweets. Our security team had consistently counseled journalists not to respond to abuse and threats online. Retorts from our journalists only made matters worse, increasing safety risks. Managing editor Tracy Grant, who had the thankless task of enforcing newsroom standards, gave that advice to Felicia. It was urgent that her social media posts not continue to stir things up. On the evening of her first tweet about Kobe Bryant, noting that her home address had been posted online, Felicia inquired about personal security. Tracy advised her to go to a hotel or a friend's home for her safety. The Post's security team was then contacted. However, that team

is tiny. When necessary, it arranges with outside firms to provide full-time protection for an employee. Dispatching guards can take time. When I needed them (twice) at my own residence, about twenty-four hours passed before they arrived. In Felicia's case, she remained in the hotel for three days, with The Post paying the cost. A Post security officer accompanied her daily from the hotel to the office and back. After that, security was at her residence for ten days.

The Post's security consultants also engaged in a weeks-long effort to identify individuals who had harassed and threatened Felicia in emails and tweets, all the while expressing exasperation that her irrepressible Twitter activity was merely drawing additional threats. In her public comments and subsequent lawsuit, Felicia suggested The Post was unconcerned about her safety and treated male reporters' security more seriously than women's. The facts, I am confident, show The Post responded appropriately.

My management colleagues and I could have ignored her tweet about Kobe Bryant, sparing ourselves internal conflict, but my view was that her behavior was reckless and offensive. Post policies urged respect for "taste and decency." They called for employees to reflect on the impact that social media posts might have on the institution's reputation. The Post put Felicia on administrative leave, with full pay, as we investigated whether her Twitter behavior violated our social media guidelines. Members of the union that represented Post news staffers, on the other hand, saw no wrongdoing on her part, only on the part of management. A petition signed by several hundred Post journalists listed one grievance after the next: Felicia had received "insufficient guidance" on how to protect herself. The Post was failing to provide her adequate security. We should have issued a statement of support for her when "articles attacking her" on the Kaiman matter were published elsewhere. Managers had shown "utter disregard for best practices in supporting survivors of sexual violence." The social media policies were "arbitrary and over-broad." And Felicia's administrative leave amounted to "being censured for making a statement of fact."

To my astonishment, a writer for the Columbia Journalism Review, which is associated with Columbia University and purports to be an advocate of high standards, weighed in with the opinion that social media rules were a form of "tyranny"—nothing but a "tool of management control"—while ludicrously labeling this whole episode "Sonmezgate." Another CJR writer, designated by the publication to be the "public editor" critiquing our work, advised getting rid of all social media standards, and mocked our policy that forbade posting anything "that could objectively be perceived as reflecting political, racial, sexist, religious or other bias or favoritism." The CJR columnist suggested such judgments were beyond our intellectual capacity, and we should stop trying: "Maybe God is up to that job, but Marty Baron is not." A column in Harvard's Nieman Reports, associated with a prestigious journalism fellowship, accused me of "tradition bias" and then pronounced my actions "a chilling message to sexual assault survivors: if the man is powerful and popular enough, even journalists will turn a blind eye to the harm he's caused, and we will do it even in the era of #MeToo."

All of this commentary was nonsense. We didn't use the social media policy as a "tool of management control," nor did I or anyone in senior management believe that we should turn a "blind eye" to sexual assault by powerful and revered men. Plenty of journalism under my

direction stood as proof to the contrary. Still, The Post's senior management hoped to quiet an uprising among the staff. As I was flying back to the United States from Spain, my colleagues in senior management were hoping to put the matter behind us. The social media policy posed an obstacle, too: No policy could cover every circumstance, and ours contained no specific provision about tweeting out an accurate story, regardless of how disruptive, insensitive, and abominably timed. So Felicia was reinstated after a day, and a statement was issued under Tracy's name that declared her tweets "ill-timed" but not in "clear and direct violation" of our written policy.

The differences I had with some Post journalists on standards seemed at that moment like a chasm. I couldn't agree with what I was hearing. I had strong convictions on how journalists at a news organization like The Post should carry themselves: Reporters and editors, in my view, should not use social media platforms afforded them by jobs at The Post to inject themselves into stories they weren't responsible for covering—substituting their judgment for how coverage should be conducted over the editors'. One person's desire for self-expression should not take priority over the institution's right to protect its reputation by setting limits. Journalists in the news department should not use Twitter accounts associated with The Post to advocate for causes close to their heart, no matter how meritorious.

I didn't consider our standards too strict, too broad, too vague, or arbitrarily enforced when the spirit of the standards—exercise care and restraint—seemed obvious from any plain reading and when formal discipline was demonstrably rare. I didn't think The Post should rush to its staffers' defense when they got into Twitter fights that had nothing to do with their employer. I couldn't abide absolving journalists of personal responsibility when their thoughtless behavior on social media provoked an entirely understandable, and predictable, public furor. And none of us, I firmly believed, should be dismissive of the public's sensitivities when there is a tragic death, as if we lived by a unique moral code that can't find room for both accuracy and empathy.

I also had to wonder: Did the staff really believe I and my fellow senior managers were so coldhearted, so uncaring about sexual assault survivors and cavalier about the safety of the staff? If so, there wasn't merely a chasm between my views and theirs. There was a chasm between their views and reality. And if this was how the staff genuinely felt—after all The Post's hard-won accomplishments and after all they knew of me—why would I choose to make this my professional home any longer?

I was especially appalled by the attacks on Tracy, whose responsibilities covered a vast territory beyond standards to recruiting, hiring, training, and budgets. No one in Post management pushed harder for greater diversity, better employee benefits, staff security, and special accommodations when staffers suffered personal tragedies. She also believed in our guidelines for proper employee behavior, and that without enforcement they were rendered meaningless. She did all this while raising two boys as a single mom after the 2007 death of her husband and serving as the primary caregiver for her mother. I feared she would quit. And if she did, I would, too, in protest against how shabbily she had been treated by a segment of the staff. I drafted a resignation note. "This turn of events has revealed something about our newsroom that had

been unfamiliar to me," I wrote. "I had always taken pride in our collegiality and the collaboration that led to our best journalism. Now what I see is that, in justifiably seeking equity and justice for all people, some people are willing to commit a grave injustice against a single good individual. I can't abide a newsroom that would do that, and so I am letting you know that I, too, will be leaving The Post immediately."

Reading my emotions must have been easy. Even journalists who felt my enforcement of social media rules had been too quick and heavy-handed tried to buck me up and discourage any thought of quitting. "We know your intent: to defend and strengthen The Post institution and brand that you have made synonymous with accuracy, excellence and public service above reproach," wrote one who felt I had acted wrongly. Another emailed: "I know it must feel like much of the newsroom is against you, but I want to assure you that it is not. The great majority of people, of course, did not sign that letter and every day brings more who regret doing so … I am sure right now you are having a pretty epic 'who needs this?' moment—and who could blame you? But I hope it won't last." A third wrote: "I know it's been a rough week but please know that you have the support of so many people. Yes there is a vocal minority. It's temporary. Don't let it color your feelings about the newsroom or the relationships you've built over the years."

Tracy didn't quit, and I concluded I shouldn't either. I couldn't let this episode define my tenure at The Post. But I also concluded I shouldn't stay beyond another year. Meantime, I was obligated to say something to the staff. I was seething inside, but I had to keep my emotions in check. I wrote a note that began to outline my views:

"The Post is more than a collection of individuals who wish to express themselves. It is an institution with a common set of values and principles and a history of appropriate practices. When we cover stories, editors together with reporters and other colleagues agree on an approach that aims to uphold our institutional reputation. We seek and honor the truth always. We also strive to be fair and furnish context. Routinely our journalism requires sensitivity, empathy and humanity … We count on staffers to be attuned to how their social media activity will be perceived, bearing in mind that time, place and manner really matter."

Shortly afterward, we announced three one-hour sessions where we would hear staff concerns about the social media policy. At the first session, I was determined to only listen closely and take notes. So I did just that, staying quiet and suppressing any temptation to dissent. But maintaining my silence just earned me further criticism. What I heard at that session and the others that followed, where I spoke up, only served to trouble me more. I couldn't accept an assessment that our judgments on activism, objectivity, and perception of political bias were almost entirely subjective. I heard an ardor for sharing views on social media platforms, with such expression framed as an extension of staffers' "humanity," "identity," and even "soul." The Post, some contended, needed to somehow "extricate" its institutional reputation from the individual speech of its journalists. I didn't see how that was possible.

Younger journalists were the ones who spoke up most, and there was consensus among them. I knew from private comments that many veteran staffers who were raised on traditional

standards had a view more in sync with my own. To my disappointment, they kept quiet, skittish about finding themselves in conflict with newsroom colleagues.

After I left the last of those meetings on February 14, I jotted down my own reaction to all that I had heard: “Never have I felt more distant from my fellow journalists … The staff’s feelings about social media, to me, valued individual expression over the interests of the institution. The emphasis was on I, me, my—not we, us, our … The whole thing was depressing, and I was more convinced than ever that this was a good time to leave daily journalism. I love the profession, but it now seemed to be going astray. I could not explain the behavior of some of my colleagues on social media. I couldn’t justify it. I didn’t want to defend it. Because to defend it would be to embrace it on behalf of the institution.”

We had promised that we would begin rewriting our social media policy. But I couldn’t bring myself to try. The task seemed impossible. What I heard in those meetings was a staff seeking to evade accountability for their own wreckage. In the final weeks before I retired in February 2021, publisher Fred Ryan asked me to quickly issue a revised policy so that my successor wouldn’t inherit the thankless task. His own views, I was confident, were in line with mine. We had discussed the subject from time to time. I also knew I had the backing of Bezos. In the throes of the social media controversy in February 2020, he sent me a reassuring note: “I hope you can feel the support from afar. You’ve done so much for this institution as a whole, this newsroom in particular, and indeed the whole field of quality journalism everywhere, which … to me feels more like an endangered species all the time.”

Despite the support, I refused Fred’s request to complete a social media policy rewrite before retiring. We had promised the staff full involvement in crafting new standards, and my deliberate delay had left no time for that. There were other reasons for that delay: The epic year of 2020 was not a time to take our eyes off news coverage as we struggled to resolve internal, and possibly irreconcilable, differences. The divide between my views and much of the staff’s seemed unbridgeable. Their sentiments on acceptable journalistic behavior were not mine. I didn’t want to defend what I thought was indefensible, nor be held responsible for what I thought was irresponsible. Let a new editor find a way forward.

Over time, I have felt the tide turning a tiny bit in the direction of my traditionalist (and, in another era, entirely conventional) views. The BBC, under instructions from a new director general, issued strict new guidelines in October 2020. “If your work requires you to maintain your impartiality, don’t express a personal opinion on matters of public policy, politics, or ‘controversial subjects,’” the policy read. “Avoid ‘virtue signaling’—retweets, likes or joining online campaigns to indicate a personal view, no matter how apparently worthy the cause,” read another provision.

In April 2022, New York Times editor Dean Baquet issued a memo calling for a “reset” on Twitter. After calling for Times journalists to “meaningfully reduce how much time you’re spending on the platform, tweeting or scrolling, in relation to other parts of your job,” Baquet said he wanted to “emphasize that your work on social media needs to reflect the values of The Times and be consistent with our editorial standards, social media guidelines and behavioral

norms. In particular, tweets or subtweets that attack, criticize or undermine the work of your colleagues are not allowed."

Tougher standards like the BBC's and reminders like The Times' were overdue. By June The Washington Post had become a mortifying case study in anarchic social media behavior. Its journalists were feuding openly with each other on Twitter instead of having face-to-face conversations among themselves about disagreements, as expected in any typical workplace. This latest episode began with Felicia Sonmez posting tweets that reproached her colleague David Weigel and The Post for his foul sex joke on Twitter. Soon, others on staff came under her Twitter fire.

My successor as executive editor, Sally Buzbee, ultimately invoked The Post's standards and promised a crackdown on "colleagues attacking colleagues." When Felicia persisted, she was fired "for misconduct that includes insubordination, maligning your co-workers online and violating The Post's standards on workplace collegiality and inclusivity." While many journalists covet more freedom on social media, the embarrassing Twitter storm at The Post added to a mountain of evidence that they should be granted less.

Later that year, the newsroom settled on an updated social media policy. Though better written than the one I inherited, it was not materially different. The paramount issue now for The Post and other news organizations will not be how their ethics and social media policies are written but whether they are meaningfully enforced. The public has ample reason to wonder whether these are standards in name only.

Chapter 18
UPRISINGS

The nation exploded in rage after the May 25, 2020, police killing of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street corner. Video captured Officer Derek Chauvin driving his knee into Floyd's neck. He kept at it for about nine minutes as Floyd was handcuffed and gasping for breath—and even for nearly four minutes after Floyd had taken his last one.

Perhaps no single image in American history has had such an immediate and profound impact, due to cell phone video taken by seventeen-year-old bystander Darnella Frazier that was disseminated through social media. The footage was, as Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism curator Ann Marie Lipinski said, "one of the most important civil rights documents in a generation."

We all became eyewitnesses to police brutality that left a Black man dead, and this time it set off the largest movement for racial justice since the 1960s. Weeks of protests were predominantly peaceful but also descended into violence, destruction, and theft. Police and National Guard troops responded with massive and often brute force. On May 29, President Trump tweeted, "When the looting starts, the shooting starts." Blood was spilled on America's streets. The country's divisions deepened.

Washington Post reporters, photographers, and videographers were deployed across the country—in the midst of a pandemic that had already killed a hundred thousand Americans—to investigate Floyd's killing, explore the bitter emotions it ignited, and document the explosive street unrest that continued unabated for weeks. In Washington, D.C., thousands marched to Lafayette Park, at the northern edge of the White House grounds, for days of demonstrations and confrontations with police. So nervous was the Secret Service on May 29 that it moved Trump into a secure bunker under the White House, humiliating a president who liked to project strength when it was disclosed only two days later by The New York Times. On June 1, shortly after Trump called for "total domination" of protesters and a half hour before a seven p.m. curfew, law enforcement and military forces moved aggressively to empty the park, firing gas canisters and tossing grenades that contained rubber pellets. Protesters were chased by police on horseback. It was a shocking scene. In front of the White House, a wide array of federal forces, many with shields that said "military police," were on the attack against fellow American citizens who had protested peacefully.

With the path cleared, Trump—having just proclaimed himself "your president of law and order" and promising to send "thousands and thousands" of heavily armed soldiers to Washington, D.C.—walked one block to St. John's Church, which had been partially burned by a group of rioters. He was accompanied on the walk by Attorney General William Barr, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, and Chief of Staff Mark Meadows. In front of the church, he grimly held up a Bible for a few seconds, all for a photo op. It would be weeks before the nation returned to a veneer of calm. Yet the anger remained as intense as ever, boiling beneath the surface—aimed not only at police brutality but at a society that had failed to eradicate its deep-rooted racial disparities.

I was proud of The Post's staff. Over the previous months, our journalists had reported on a worldwide pandemic and resulting economic calamity, the impeachment of a president, and an accelerating presidential campaign that would be among the most contentious and consequential in memory. Now—with George Floyd's killing, masses expressing outrage, and fierce clashes with police—they were covering a story that tested their stamina and threatened their safety. Members of the news media were regularly assaulted by police—manhandled, pepper-sprayed, and hit by rubber bullets. Post journalists had performed "brilliantly, with courage and dedication and resourcefulness," I wrote in a message to the newsroom. "Our entire staff has been mobilized to cover this story and all the others unfolding at the same time. There seems to be no limit to the tests you've been required to face—and no limit to your capacity to rise to the occasion."

The note reflected my genuine gratitude. I quickly learned, though, that it was not well received. I had written of the racial justice protests as if they were just another huge story, failing to recognize that they were far more than that. I had omitted any mention of the deep pain felt by our Black journalists. The killing of George Floyd represented more than an act of police brutality. It was emblematic of the injustices, indignities, and inequities they themselves had experienced in their own lives. To them, this story was personal. And my failure to grasp and reflect that was, in their view, symptomatic of what was missing in our own newsroom: No Black journalists among three managing editors and two deputy managing editors. Too few among

department heads. Too few overall in our newsroom. Coverage that failed to adequately communicate the Black experience. Not enough leaders who were able to see the world from a Black perspective. Leadership that had not done nearly enough to set things right.

They were tired of waiting, they said, their patience exhausted. They were furious, with The Post and with me. This was not a moment when they would ask for change. They demanded it.

By the time The Post held a virtual town hall with employees in early June 2020, its senior management had been challenged with questions by a staff insistent on unequivocal answers: “Will The Washington Post make a statement in regards to George Floyd’s death at the hands of police?” “What does The Post plan on doing to support its Black employees during this trying time?” “What specifically is The Post doing to prioritize hiring more people of color?” “Other large organizations have persons and leadership positions dedicated to promoting diversity and facilitating tough conversations and change. What structural/management changes is The Post making to do the same?” “Are donations to Black-centered charities such as Black Lives Matter allowed under company policy? If not, can a policy change be revisited?”

The Post’s most senior executives endeavored to show sensitivity to the staff’s heartache. Publisher Fred Ryan emphasized that our company stood against racism but, as a news organization, we did that through our journalism, where we revealed injustices and held the powerful to account. He spoke of The Post’s commitment to not only hiring and promoting people of color but also of supporting them in difficult times.

In my own remarks, I expressed my very real empathy. “The death in Minneapolis—on top of previous horrifying events—has had a deeply personal and devastating impact on so many of our journalists, particularly our Black journalists and other journalists of color,” I said. “For them, a pattern of racial and ethnic inequities, indignities and discrimination is not a distant abstraction. They have lived it, as have their family and friends. So, in a stressful news environment, the stress becomes compounded through yet another infuriating and sorrowful reminder, as if one were needed, of how our society fails them. As journalists, we can give voice to that anguish through our reporting among communities that are feeling so much pain. As colleagues, we want to be as comforting and supportive as we can.”

I lamented my failure to recognize their pain while acknowledging the need for “deeper discussions about issues of race and inclusion that are now front and center.” But staff members remained dissatisfied; some, angry. They wanted firm commitments to immediate change, and admittedly my response was well short of that. In increasing our staff at that point from 580 people when I arrived to almost 1,000 by then, I noted, we had “opened up opportunities at The Post for journalists of color from around the country. We’ve done a lot of hiring.” When it came to greater diversity in leadership, I was seen as offering excuses in lieu of action. “There is no question that we have not done well enough. We need to do better,” I said. “The challenge has been that these senior leadership positions don’t open up frequently and we can’t just move people out of their jobs when they’re performing well in order to make room for others. We also don’t want to have an excessive number of managers. When we’ve expanded our staff, we tried to hire more people for frontline work.”

My remarks came across as defensive and detached. They provoked a response I should have anticipated. And yet what I told the staff was true. Throughout my tenure under Bezos's ownership and with Fred Ryan as publisher, getting approval for new editing jobs—especially those with fancy titles and higher salaries—had been borderline impossible. Early in his ownership, Bezos had sought to place employees in two categories—those who had a "direct" impact on readers and the rest who had an "indirect" impact. Within the newsroom, reporters were among those who obviously fell in the first category. Editors, however, were generally seen by those in charge of The Post's business operations as "indirect." The classification system was a misreading of how newsrooms worked, and I forcefully said so. Still, the direct/indirect philosophy hovered over all budgeting for new staff positions, making extra editor positions hard to come by.

There was a logic behind it: Ever since Bezos bought The Post, the single-minded goal of management was to pull us out of the deep, and ominous, hole we were in financially and strategically. Our hiring centered on what could most immediately accomplish a turnaround and then propel growth over the long run. The layer of newsroom managers was to stay lean—and get even leaner, if possible. Contrary to public perception, Bezos wasn't spending with abandon. His investments in The Post were selective, strategic, and disciplined. Nor was The Post his charity. Every proposal for a new position had to be justified and required approval by my own bosses. As we began the town hall meeting in June 2020, I had no idea whether I would be authorized to hire more senior-level managers in our newsroom. My experience to date suggested I wouldn't.

How was I to effectively explain that to the staff? I couldn't. One Black reporter let me have it. "I was disappointed, maybe even offended, at your comments during the townhall last week about why we can't improve diversity among the top level of managers in the newsroom," she wrote me in an email. "Suggesting that the only way to address this concern is for our white colleagues to lose their jobs 'to make room' for journalists of color is unfair and unnecessarily antagonistic … And your other argument—that you don't want to have 'an excessive number of managers'—is unconvincing and insulting. Like it would be a ceremonial appointment just to appease a special interest group."

She continued, "I love you've brought a great deal of journalistic vision, purpose and integrity back to our newsroom. We got our swagger back!" But the praise was a two-sentence exception in a long message of admonishment: "The lack of African Americans, and other journalists of color, who are readily associated with The Post's brand makes people inside and outside the newsroom wonder how much we value diversity." It didn't help that all the senior executives who spoke at the town hall were white.

One reporter, Jessica Contrera, said that she had "decided to reach out to my colleagues and former colleagues of color, asking them to share their stories with me, through a Google submission form." She was now forwarding their accounts in the form of a thirty-two-page compilation of their experiences over a long period with The Post, including ones that preceded my editorship. "Certainly," she wrote us, "I have heard stories and snippets of discrimination or

racism in our company that made me shudder. But I hoped—as perhaps you have—that those situations were rare. They are not."

The stories made for difficult reading: "Yes, we have one of the most diverse newsrooms in America, but that diversity is superficial when people of color who come through these doors feel ignored, slighted and unvalued." "Speaking out honestly about anything but especially about a possible racially biased headline, caption, photo or paragraph or calling out a racial blind spot would be met with some form of punishment." "How can we feel safe and equal and valued when our own criticisms are ignored—or fall on deaf ears?" "It feels like I'm told to stifle my identity, like only some parts are okay to express. It makes me question how long I can be at the Post." "Colleagues constantly comment on our hair and clothing choices, but do not take the time to look at our work and give productive feedback." The Post and I were falling grievously short in making journalists of color feel respected, fully consulted on coverage, and equitably treated in promotions and reassignments.

The Washington Post Guild, the union that represents employees in the newsroom and in certain commercial operations, sent its own "11 evidence-based, actionable solutions … to address discrimination and inequality at The Post." Employees, said its letter signed by 450 employees, "deserve leaders who are clear-eyed about the reality of racism and take ownership of the systemic bias that exists in our company."

Less than seven years earlier, only a month after I joined The Post as executive editor, I appointed Kevin Merida, fifty-six, as managing editor overseeing all news and features departments—that is, the vast majority of reporters. A twenty-year veteran of The Post, Kevin was a hugely popular figure. He was also a keen listener and a judicious manager of people, with an instinctive sense for good stories. An elegant writer himself, he could coach others in how to tell them. He was also the first Black managing editor in The Post's history. Journalists of color at The Post had longed for such a moment.

Kevin had covered the White House and national affairs and overseen The Post's coverage of some of its biggest stories: the killing of Osama bin Laden, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the 2012 presidential campaign, mass shootings in Fort Hood, Texas; Aurora, Colorado; and Newtown, Connecticut. He had coordinated a penetrating series titled "Being a Black Man." His roots in the region ran deep. As a tenth grader, in 1973, he was among the first class of students bused to schools outside their neighborhoods to achieve racial integration in public education in Prince George's County, Maryland. In a nuanced and reflective Post essay in 1998, he recounted the experience of being yanked from his neighborhood Central High School and bused twelve and a half miles to Crossland High School, which until then was only 5 percent Black:

"Occasionally," Kevin wrote, "when I pause to assess my life—and consider that my job has enabled me to survey the crumbled Berlin Wall, jog with a president, and shoot jumpers with a top NBA draft choice—I wonder whether busing was the linchpin to so many rich and varied adventures. My mother assures me that if I had stayed at Central and strayed at Central, she and my dad would have steered me back on course, found ways to keep me motivated. I

believe her. But it is also easy to see myself evolving mostly as an athlete at Central, never working for the school newspaper, never being encouraged to develop my writing talent, accepting a basketball scholarship at some small college. And from there, who's to say?"

Kevin's experience was radically different from my own: a Jew born in Tampa, Florida, to parents who had immigrated from Israel, by way of France, only three months earlier. I had attended public school through sixth grade but then was placed in a small nearby prep school of only 250 students in grades seven through twelve. Its affiliation with the Episcopal Church meant that I sat through years of Communions. Unlike Kevin, I had manifested no athletic talents. As early as junior high school, I had imagined becoming a journalist. My only connection to busing was through an editorial I wrote as editor of the high school paper in 1971. "Although the headmaster has annually stressed that we are desegrated," I wrote, a Black person at the upper and middle division was "nonexistent," and in the lower division "not in the least a common one." I went on to endorse busing, which had no impact on students at a private school: "Those obstinate parents who race … to the suburb should no longer have the opportunity to envenom their children with the racial suspicions that result from segregation."

Kevin's appointment gave the staff a lift and early hope that The Post might be correcting course on multiple fronts, well beyond diversity. A practitioner of the art of gentle persuasion, Kevin could tell me what I didn't know or fully appreciate about subjects of varied sorts. Staffers confided in him, particularly journalists of color. He and I developed a strong, trusting, and highly productive relationship. So, like legions in the newsroom, I was heartbroken when he informed me in October 2015 that he was leaving to take a high-paying job as senior vice president of ESPN and editor in chief of The Undefeated, its digital site centered on the intersection of sports, race, and culture. I had done everything possible to keep him. We had raised our compensation offer as high as possible. And then I privately told Kevin that I was willing to retire early—in two years—if he stayed, with the goal of him becoming my successor. I suggested he use those years to build relationships with the publisher and hone digital and business skills that would make him the preferred candidate.

Kevin's departure was a blow not only to me but also to the morale of Black journalists on our staff, made worse by his move to recruit a half dozen of them to his new employer (at substantially higher salaries). His replacement, Cameron Barr, was an exceptionally talented and deeply experienced newsman. That didn't reassure journalists who were mourning the loss of a Black editor of Kevin's plentiful talents from such a powerful leadership position. Black staffers at The Post then grew upset that, after Kevin's departure, no Black journalist held one of the newsroom's most senior positions.

In April 2016, Black journalists asked to meet with Tracy Grant, then a deputy managing editor, and me about what they perceived as our failure to adequately address diversity in the newsroom, particularly in the upper ranks. A top priority of the group was adding a senior-level editor to oversee diversity and inclusion. At the same time, they advocated for a set of "policies, programs and strategies to advance diversity."

That year at The Post, two and a half years after Bezos's purchase, we were still early in the effort to achieve a turnaround. Every newsroom department was pleading for more staff. They needed the resources if we were to ever challenge our most formidable competitors. There were signs that we were on the right course—our digital readership and subscription numbers were rising—but we had a long way to go. The painful truth was, if we didn't succeed, there wouldn't be much hiring of any sort.

So, I was reluctant to add another senior-level manager and a set of costly programs when funding was sorely needed for additional reporters, graphic artists, social media experts, and an array of other frontline positions that seemed most likely to boost our immediate commercial performance. And when I discussed the staff's diversity demands with the publisher, he was no more enthusiastic than I about shifting resources to pay for another high-priced newsroom executive. It all made financial sense at the time, but the staff's frustrations are also understandable.

The posture toward extra editors would change shortly after I retired in February 2021, after Black Lives Matter protests and mounting pressure to diversify the newsroom's leadership. Seven months later, The Post announced it would add forty-one editors, including two for senior-level positions. That was welcome news. But there was zero chance anything like that would have happened in 2016—or for years afterward.

I had always believed that a newsroom composed of people with varied backgrounds and life experiences—from race, ethnicity, and gender to class, education, military service, and religious beliefs—was essential for understanding and covering our communities and the country in all their complexity. I could see that from my first job at the Miami Herald in the late 1970s, when South Florida was already experiencing rapid demographic change due to immigration from Cuba and Haiti. I later spent years learning to speak Spanish fluently (though not perfectly) so that I was more able to connect directly to the community where I worked. When I returned to Miami as the Herald's editor in 2000, the city was sharply split over whether young Elián González should be returned to his father in Cuba or allowed to stay in the United States. I was gratified when my publisher at the time, Alberto Ibargüen, said twenty years later that I had "a good sense for the town and what was happening and how [racially] divided the town was. It was really a divided place, and so was the newsroom … Marty didn't shy away from those discussions."

Varied perspectives on newsroom staffs meant deeper insights, more illuminating stories, and a more thorough realization of our mission. By 2016 we had significantly boosted overall staff diversity at The Post above the level when I was hired, putting us well ahead of The New York Times and keeping us among the most diverse major newsrooms in the country.

None of that ultimately mattered. I had not been the good listener I regularly urge others to be. Black journalists at The Post were telling me we had not done nearly enough—that their voices weren't being heard at senior levels and that our diversity efforts needed to go deeper than a top-level appointment or overall numbers. I should have assessed our newsroom with a wider lens. Our immediate growth needs were existentially pressing, but other needs should not have

been ignored. Whether I expected to be successful or not, I should have advocated for a top-level editor who could lead our diversity efforts, not just for purposes of hiring but also to strengthen our coverage of long-standing, unresolved issues of race, ethnicity, and identity. Success at getting the resources might have eluded me, but failing to try was regrettably the most serious error of my tenure at The Post.

In the aftermath of the town hall meeting in 2020, as my standing with Black journalists and others on the staff suffered, it was imperative to name a managing editor to ensure we made significant, consistent progress on diversity and inclusiveness in everything we did: coverage of race, ethnicity, and identity as well as improved recruitment, retention, and career advancement for journalists of color. After a national search, I named Krissah Thompson, an accomplished writer in our own features department, to that position. In the meantime, managing editor Cameron Barr had been listening closely to staff concerns and proposed that we do far more—add almost a dozen positions to focus on race, ethnicity, and identity in a variety of ways, from the administration of justice to environmental and health inequities. It was the right idea but a big budget request. I presented it to Fred Ryan as publisher with my strong endorsement. The world had changed, and within days it was approved. The hiring was an important signal that The Post would take concrete steps.

Even so, I felt that some on staff were still aiming to portray me as grossly insensitive on matters of race. It was painful then, and remains painful now. I feared that my professional reputation, more than four decades in the making, was about to be unjustly shredded. I also had grown weary of well-meaning but moralistic young journalists—and their forever enabling union—lecturing me on best management practices when precious few had ever managed anyone, had any experience with budget constraints, had ever been tasked to compete in hiring and retaining diverse talent, had ever worked for bosses as demanding as my own, or had any appreciation for the difficult task of meeting ambitious growth goals that bestowed benefits on all of them.

I had never led a staff with the express goal of being liked. Too many newsroom managers did, in my estimation. I saw it as a serious flaw when our industry's survival demanded tough, inevitably upsetting, decisions. I only cared to be respected for journalistic and commercial achievement in an environment that was humane, fair, professional, collegial, and civil. Not everyone's wish could be fulfilled, even if the union seemed to regard that as my obligation. I had become hardened over many years to being attacked by powerful figures who received press scrutiny, but the invective leveled against me by colleagues—whose skill and bravery I admired and whose news organization I had busted my butt for eight years to turn around—was tougher to take. Nothing was more hurtful.

I was also feeling physically vulnerable and drained. I suffered from a steadily worsening genetic bleeding disorder called hereditary hemorrhagic telangiectasia (HHT) that can cause sudden, severe, and seemingly unstoppable nosebleeds, often multiple times a day. Twice over the previous year, but unknown to all but a few colleagues, I had lost so much blood that I rushed myself in the early-morning hours to the emergency room at George Washington University Hospital. Once I had to receive two units of blood. There were days, before the pandemic had

us working from home, when bleeding was so severe and unsightly that I had to leave my glass office and go home. I reflected on how my father died of the same condition twenty-four years earlier at age seventy-four, his bleeding having eventually manifested in the gastrointestinal tract. I was sixty-five, and I was losing the emotional desire and physical strength to continue working at a job that demanded so much of me—almost every waking hour—but was now yielding such a dispiriting level of censure. My bonds with the staff, I feared, were frayed beyond repair. My desire to continue working at The Post was disintegrating.

In a mood of despondency in June 2020, I offered publisher Fred Ryan my resignation. There was an excellent natural successor internally in Cameron Barr, managing editor for news. I had fought in 2015 for his promotion from national editor, threatening to quit if Fred didn't let up on resistance that I found unfathomable and his demand for a formal national search that I considered unnecessary. But the moment called for someone different. Working alone from home during the pandemic, I suggested to Fred that he lure Kevin Merida back from ESPN and name him as my replacement. Kevin, I emailed him, was "better equipped than I to lead this newsroom through the fraught period we are in."

I went on: "This moment of anguish, anxiety and anger, by the way, is not going to dissipate anytime in the near future. For a variety of reasons, I don't believe getting through this plays to my strengths. And, with the inevitable and unceasing rancor, it's not really how I wish to end my career. I'd like to end it doing something constructive for The Post. Being an editor of a major news organization right now brings almost unbearable burdens. The pressures mount by the day, along with the volume of work. The pleasures are real and at times thrilling, but they are fewer. Some of the pressures, including those brought to the surface by the protests of our time, defy quick or easy resolution. The painfully slow progress brings more frustration on the part of the staff. A lot of that gets directed at me. I get angry at becoming a target when I feel it's undeserved and when I feel our remarkable achievements are unappreciated or taken for granted. That leaves me in a dark mood, which is where I am right now. It is not a good place for me or for our organization."

Fred refused my resignation offer, declaring it good for neither me nor for The Post. He expressed the hope that I would stay years longer. I did stay, but my plan was to not stay for long. A year and a half earlier, I had told Fred I expected to retire sometime after the presidential election. Now I told him we needed to set a specific date. I offered him three: immediately after the November election, at year's end, or shortly after the inauguration on January 20, 2021. He picked the last of the three options but said we'd revisit the subject to see if I changed my mind. Within days, I had. I wanted to go back to leaving by year's end. "I've done my duty here," I told Fred. "I never expected it to be reciprocated this way. But it is what it is. I can think of better ways to spend my time." Fred asked me to reconsider. "You have served The Post and American journalism with honesty and integrity. You've devoted your life to that," he wrote back. "I just hope we can get past the heat of the moment and make a reasoned and thoughtful plan that gives you the dignity you deserve, whenever you depart, and positions The Post to build on your enormous achievements." His judgment was more levelheaded than mine, and I relented. Fred checked on my intentions from time to time, and again in early January 2021. I was ready to go. I'd had enough. I would leave at the end of February.

My suspicion that the attacks wouldn't subside was confirmed when New York Times media critic Ben Smith published a column in late June 2020 about how I was "grappling with a moment of cultural reckoning." That was true. I was. But the "previously untold stories" he promised readers left the noxious impression that I, as the "ultimate old-school" editor, had presided over, if not tolerated, a cesspool of racial discrimination even while helping to engineer "perhaps the greatest news business success story of the past decade."

Smith's "previously untold stories" were uniformly detached from reality. One suggested that a Black video editor was required to ask for permission to go to the bathroom while white colleagues were not. It was defamatory nonsense. As Smith was told, all video editors on a breaking-news team had to have someone cover for them when they expected to be away for extended periods. I had no involvement in setting the policy (nor did I have any interactions with the video editor), but it represented customary practice in journalism. Newsrooms can't afford delay in covering unanticipated news. Smith also implicitly tied me to The Post's decision not to include a Black editorial writer's pieces in a staff submission for a Pulitzer Prize, even though the opinion pages were outside my area of oversight and the decision wasn't mine to make.

A third staffer, who held one of the most coveted investigative reporting jobs in the country, expressed irritation on Twitter over not being named an investigations editor, seeing it as a slight and a strike against diversity. Her job was one of two in the investigative unit that I had saved in 2014 when foundation funding for them was cut off and I refused the publisher's order to eliminate the positions because they were unbudgeted. I understood her grievance and regretted her disappointment. But she also happened to be someone who had good things to say about me and her time at The Post. She later solicited, and received, my advice shortly after she took on an important editing position elsewhere. Placing me "at the top of the list" among "the great role models I've been fortunate to have," she emailed, "I am grateful for my time at the Post, which prepared me for this next step; and for the wisdom I received from you and all the excellent people I worked with."

The Post had ample work to do to advance diversity in all its forms, and as the top editor I was rightly held accountable for the ways we fell short. But Smith's column was a prejudicial caricature. The Post, especially during recent years of fast growth, had also provided abundant opportunities to many journalists of color. Honesty and objectivity required acknowledging both realities. There was a broader context, too, even if it yielded me—or the staff as a whole—no comfort. America's racial reckoning was unfolding in just about every institution. Though The Post and I were getting disproportionate attention, few major media organizations were exempt.

The top editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, Stan Wischnowski, resigned that June after dozens of staff members walked out when the paper ran the headline "Buildings Matter, Too" over a piece by the architecture critic about damage to structures from civil disorder. Dozens of journalists of color signed a letter of protest to management. "We're tired of shouldering the burden of dragging this 200-year-old institution kicking and screaming into a more equitable age," they wrote. "We're tired of being told of the progress the company has made and being served platitudes about 'diversity and inclusion' when we raise our concerns. We're tired of

seeing our words and photos twisted to fit a narrative that does not reflect our reality. We're tired of being told to show both sides of issues there are no two sides of." The Inquirer published an apology for the headline.

At the Los Angeles Times, a newly formed Black Caucus of its newsroom's union that June wrote an open letter to owner Patrick Soon-Shiong that Black journalists there were "often ignored, marginalized, under-valued and left to drift along career paths that leave little opportunity for advancement. Meanwhile, we're hearing the same empty promises and foot-dragging from management." In July, the Latino Caucus wrote Soon-Shiong that the organization had failed "in its staffing and coverage, to reflect a region where nearly one of every two residents is Latino … For decades, we've asked management to hire more of us, promote us and make us editors. But those calls have largely gone unanswered." In November, the Los Angeles Times and its previous owner, Tribune Publishing, agreed to pay $3 million to settle a class-action lawsuit by journalists of color who alleged they were paid less than white male counterparts.

A group of Wall Street Journal staff members that July dispatched a letter to editor in chief Matt Murray calling for changes in coverage of race, policing, and business overall. "In part because WSJ's coverage has focused historically on industries and leadership ranks dominated by White men, many of our newsroom practices are inadequate for the present moment," the letter said. It called for "more muscular reporting about race and social inequities," more journalists to cover "race, ethnicity and equality," more diversity in newsroom leadership, and a study that would evaluate whether The Journal's reporting resources were deployed sufficiently to cover people who weren't white men. The following month, The Journal announced that it was establishing the new position of senior vice president of inclusion and people management and conducting "a comprehensive review of diversity, equity and inclusion across our business."

That summer, James Bennet, the editorial page editor of The New York Times, resigned after staffers expressed outrage over an op-ed authored by Republican senator Tom Cotton. Headlined "Send in the Troops," it called for "an overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter lawbreakers" during protests against police brutality and racial inequities. Reporters tweeted some version of "Running this puts Black @nytimes staff in danger." New York Times reporter Jazmine Hughes tweeted, "as if it weren't already hard enough to be a black employee of the New York Times." And Pulitzer winner Nikole Hannah-Jones took to Twitter to say, "As a black woman, as a journalist, I am deeply ashamed that we ran this." New York Times publisher A. G. Sulzberger and Bennet initially offered a defense for publishing the piece, then backed off with an editor's note saying the essay "fell short of our standards and should not have been published." In February 2021, The Times released an internal report that found, "The Times is too often a difficult place to work for people of all backgrounds—particularly colleagues of color, and especially Black and Latino colleagues. It calls for us to transform our culture." And a letter to staff signed by the publisher, CEO, and top editor promised to pursue "a bold plan for building a more diverse, equitable and inclusive New York Times."

By mid-July, The New York Times was writing about largely identical tensions within ESPN, where more than a dozen current and former employees "described a company that projected a diverse outward face, but did not have enough Black executives, especially ones with real decision-making power. They said the company did not provide meaningful career paths for Black employees behind the camera and made decisions based on assumptions that its average viewer is an older white man, in spite of its audience trends."

The demand for greater diversity was accompanied by an effort by many journalists to overturn traditional standards that set boundaries on their public activities. Some newsroom staff wanted to donate to Black Lives Matter and other advocacy organizations. Some wanted to join in the Black Lives Matter protests sweeping the country. Neither was permitted under long-standing rules at The Post and most other mainstream media organizations.

One Black staff member at The Post, a rising talent, made an impassioned argument that foreshadowed an emerging assault among many journalists on the very idea that we should strive for "objectivity" in our work: "I have remained publicly 'objective' during overt displays of violence, prejudice and hatred. I was objective about Nazi rallies and black children being killed and women being assaulted. All the while knowing that the definition of objective followed by our entire industry is the objective truth of white men. It cannot be bias to stand up against a societal structure based on the systemic oppression of entire groups of people … I urge you to consider making space for the objective truth of a good number of your news staff, none of whom are really in power and many of whom never will be in the way that you are. Can we protest? Can we donate funds to humanitarian groups that can help empower people? Can we say Black Lives Matter? Can we be honest about who we are and what experiences shape our worldview?" Later that year, she left The Post. Her new employer was The New York Times, with a history, ethic, and rulebook largely identical to our own.

The Post's long-standing guidelines were brief, clear, and absolute: "We avoid active involvement in any partisan cause—politics, community affairs, social action, demonstrations—that could compromise or seem to compromise our ability to report and edit fairly." But a segment of the news staff was arguing for what would represent a drastic revision of our ethics code to accommodate protesting, donating, and petition-signing. At The Post's town hall that June, I was asked whether I would consider permitting that. My answer was a firm no. "We don't allow donations to activist, advocacy and political groups, and we don't allow participation in marches and protests. When we lose the perception and reality of independence, we give the public a reason to question our authority as well," I said. "They will see us as activists or partisans. As journalists, our role should be to observe, inquire, investigate, document and effectively communicate. That's core to the profession we chose to pursue. Every profession comes with some constraints, and we have ours."

Every place I had ever worked in journalism had a policy of that sort, and historically the policies were strictly enforced. Journalists were to accurately and fairly cover the news, not be participants in the very events we were covering. In 2020, however, what had been foundational principles in our profession were being challenged as antiquated and inadequate to a fraught moment in history. "There is a new generation in this field who want to take journalism at The

Post, the NYT and other organizations in an activist direction," I wrote a former boss that summer after he encouraged me to stick to my guns. "I'm adamantly opposed. Rigorous journalism held to high standards should do the talking." With principles under siege, however, ethics policies were giving way to all sorts of exceptions. Pressed by staff, editors felt the need to demonstrate their wholehearted commitment to the cause of racial justice.

In June, a week after the killing of George Floyd, the head of Axios announced in a companywide email that the news site would allow its staff members to participate in public protests. Responding to an anonymous question, co-founder Jim VandeHei wrote that "we proudly support and encourage you to exercise your rights to free speech, press, and protest." And then his email added that the company would cover bail if staff members were arrested and would pay medical bills if they were harmed. "As a company we condemn police brutality and racism," he wrote. And he added, "We'd be proud if you wanted to wear Axios gear while exercising your rights." VandeHei told me later that he had heard from staff about "how devastated and tormented and sad they were, and you're looking for a response to show your solidarity."

The June 2020 email about protests seemed to conflict in spirit with a stern warning only two years earlier from VandeHei regarding self-expression by staff, at that time on social media: "News organizations should ban their reporters from doing anything on social media—especially Twitter—beyond sharing stories. Snark, jokes and blatant opinion are showing your hand, and it always seems to be the left one. This makes it impossible to win back the skeptics." But VandeHei told me he viewed the racial justice protests, at least initially, as different and not in violation of Axios rules against political activity or, as its ethics policy states, anything that might give the public "reason to doubt our trustworthiness or impartiality."

VandeHei allows that the protests over George Floyd's killing quickly became a partisan political issue, but he argues that there was a "fleeting moment" when they weren't. "There was a moment—and it only lasted let's say a week—where it wasn't really a political topic … There was this moment where you had national solidarity: Something needs to be done." Although VandeHei subsequently told his staff that it was always clear that they couldn't do anything "overtly political" during the protests, his email was silent on the subject, didn't suggest that permission to protest might expire under certain circumstances, and set no boundaries on what could be protested. It only called upon staff to "use the same sound judgment you always have when representing Axios and keep our higher calling top of mind."

Journalists seeking to blow up the old, stricter ethics policies typically said they were looking for greater clarity. For the most part, however, what they were really seeking was permission, a green light to express themselves as they wished. Even if the new policies wouldn't give staff carte blanche, they could still be drafted with so much nuance and so many loopholes that accountability became impossible. Journalists who proudly sought to hold public officials, business executives, and an array of others to account for violating rules and regulations were lobbying for gauzy ethics codes that made accountability ever less likely for themselves. Rules were being rendered largely unenforceable (not that editors showed much will to strictly apply them anyway).

One argument among journalists was that under the old rules they could not bring their "full selves" to work, forcing them to be one version at home and another in the office. But that sort of thinking wasn't something they'd likely tolerate from certain other professions—judges or police, for example. Or, for that matter, from colleagues who might embrace ideas that most in the newsroom would find objectionable. Or from their own newsroom supervisors. I can only imagine the reaction among staff if I, as executive editor of The Post, had chosen to march for a cause that ran counter to the views of many in our newsroom.

The profession's traditional ethics standards had been fashioned with one overriding idea: How can news organizations earn the public's trust? As revisions were cobbled together in 2020 and beyond, another idea took hold: How can news organizations placate a restive staff? The two ideas aren't axiomatically compatible. Satisfying the wishes of a staff isn't the same as winning confidence from the public. They might well be in conflict. As time passed, it was encouraging to see at least some editors reminding their staffs that public trust had to take precedence over their desire for self-expression, no matter how strongly individual staffers felt or how worthy the cause.

Recruiting and retaining a more diverse staff would help news organizations like The Post deliver better journalism. Staffers who have lived very different lives could help us see the world from perspectives that had been missing, ignored, or only casually and clumsily addressed in our newsrooms for too long. Their experiences could better inform conversations among ourselves about race, ethnicity, gender, identity, sexuality, and spirituality, inspiring more sophisticated, sensitive, and trailblazing coverage.

One goal of greater diversity had to be inclusiveness: Allowing all Americans to see themselves, their concerns, and their aspirations more accurately and fully reflected in our stories. Another had to be understanding: Giving Americans the means to see the world from the vantage point of others whose background and experiences were very different from their own.

However, participation by journalists in the very events our news organizations covered—whether through marches or donations or social media—risked undermining public confidence in the independence and professionalism of our work. The cause of public understanding would not be well served if our journalists were seen as indistinguishable from activists. Within the news department at The Post, our mission was to inform, not to advocate. Good journalism would have to do the talking, as it had for decades. For us, there was no more effective form of speech.

EPILOGUE

For eight years I have observed Donald Trump upend American politics. Faced with the challenge he has posed to democracy, I find my conviction about the need to hold powerful leaders accountable is as strong as ever. So, too, are my convictions about the standards that journalists should meet as they endeavor to do that.

I staked out a position in the early days of Trump as president. One day into his presidency, he declared himself to be in a “running war with the media.” My response, when asked shortly afterward, was straightforward: “We are not at war … We are at work.”

Many fellow journalists enthusiastically embraced the idea that we should not think of ourselves as warriors but instead as professionals merely doing our job to keep the public informed. Many others, though, came to view that posture as naive. One critic went so far as to label my statement an “atrocity” when, after my retirement, publisher Fred Ryan had my quote mounted on the wall overlooking The Post’s national desk. Like it or not, in the view of some, journalists are in a war for truth, decency, and democracy, and the only proper response is to be more fiercely and unashamedly bellicose ourselves.

I agree that responsible journalists should be guided by fundamental principles. Among them: We must support and defend democracy. Citizens have a right to self-governance. Without democracy, there will be no independent press, and without an independent press, there can be no democracy. We must work hard and honestly to discover the truth, and we should tell the public unflinchingly what we learn. We should support the right of all citizens to participate in the electoral process without impediment. We should endorse free speech and understand that vigorous debate over policy is essential to democracy. We should favor equitable treatment for everyone, under the law and out of moral obligation, and abundant opportunity for all to attain what they hope for themselves and their families. We owe special attention to the least fortunate in our society, and have a duty to give voice to those who otherwise would not be heard. We must oppose intolerance and hate, and stand against violence, repression, and abuse of power.

I believe journalists can best honor those ideals by adhering to traditional professional principles. The press will do itself and our democracy no favors if it abandons what have long been bedrock standards. Too many norms of civic discourse have been trampled. We should uphold ours.

For the press to hold power to account today, we will have to commit to what constitutes our moral core. But more belongs on our agenda. A few thoughts: We as a profession will need strong, principled, and innovative leadership. We will need to build and maintain institutions whose finances are as sturdy as our values, with the capacity to ensure our commercial future and withstand the persistent, malevolent attacks against us. We must devote far more resources to legal strategy, regularly seeking access to documents that those in power seek to hide, and should more aggressively defend our reputations in court, finally going on the offensive against those who defame us. We must invest far more resources in investigative reporting and acquire new tools that can help us do that work more effectively.

At all times, we will have to hold fast to standards that demonstrate that we are practicing our craft honorably, thoroughly, fairly, with an open mind and with a reverence for evidence over our own opinions. In short, we should practice objective journalism.

In championing “objectivity” in our work, I am swimming against what has become, lamentably, a mighty tide in my profession. No word seems more unpopular today among mainstream

journalists. A report in January 2023 by a previous executive editor at The Washington Post and a former CBS News president argued that objectivity in journalism is outmoded. “Objectivity has got to go,” a former close colleague of mine told them.

Objectivity, in my view, has to stay. Maintaining that standard does not guarantee the public’s confidence. But I firmly believe it increases the odds that we will earn it.

The principle of objectivity has been under siege for years, but perhaps never more ferociously than during Trump’s presidency and its aftermath. Several primary arguments are leveled against it by my fellow journalists: None of us can honestly claim to be objective, and we shouldn’t profess to be. We all have our opinions. Objectivity also is seen as just another word for neutrality, balance, and so-called both-sidesism or “on the one hand, on the other hand” journalism. It pretends, according to this view, that all assertions deserve equal weight, even when the evidence shows they don’t.

Finally, critics argue that objectivity historically excluded the perspectives of those who have long been among the most marginalized in society (and media): women, Black people, Latinos, Asian Americans, Indigenous Americans, the LGBTQ+ community, and others.

Genuine objectivity, however, does not mean any of that. This is what it really means: As journalists, we can never stop obsessing over how to get at the truth—or, to use a less lofty term, “objective reality.” Doing that requires an open mind and rigorous method. We must be more impressed with what we don’t know than with what we know, or think we know. We should not start our work by imagining we have the answers; we need to seek them out. We must be generous listeners and eager learners. We should be fair. And by that, I include being fair to the public: Report directly and fearlessly what we find to be fact.

The idea of objective journalism has uncertain origins. But it can be traced to the early twentieth century in the aftermath of World War I, when democracy seemed imperiled and propaganda was developed into a polished instrument for manipulating public opinion and the press during warfare—and, in the United States, for deepening suspicions about marginalized people who were then widely regarded as not fully American.

Renowned journalist and thinker Walter Lippmann helped give currency to the term when he wrote Liberty and the News, published in 1920. In that slim volume, he described a time that sounds remarkably similar to the United States of today. “There is everywhere an increasingly angry disillusionment about the press, a growing sense of being baffled and misled,” he wrote. The onslaught of news was “helter-skelter, in inconceivable confusion.” The public suffered from “no rules of evidence.” He worried over democratic institutions being pushed off their foundations by the media environment of his time.

Lippmann made no assumption that journalists could be freed of their own opinions. He assumed, in fact, just the opposite: They were as subject to biases as anyone else. He proposed an “objective” method for moving beyond them: Journalists should pursue “as impartial an investigation of the facts as is humanly possible.”

That idea of objectivity doesn't preclude the lie-detector role for the press; it argues for it. It is not an idea that fosters prejudice; it labors against it. "I am convinced," he wrote, in a line that mirrors my own thinking, "that we shall accomplish more by fighting for truth than by fighting for our theories."

Journalists routinely expect objectivity from others. Like everyone else, we want objective judges. We want objective juries. We want frontline police officers to be objective when they make arrests and detectives to be objective in assessing evidence. We want prosecutors to evaluate cases objectively, with no prejudice or preexisting agendas. Without objectivity, there can be no equity in law enforcement, as abhorrent abuses have demonstrated all too often.

We want doctors to be objective in diagnosing the medical conditions of their patients, uncontaminated by bigotry or baseless hunches. We want medical researchers and regulators to be objective in determining whether new drugs might work and can be safely consumed. We want scientists to be objective in evaluating the impact of chemicals in the soil, air, and water. Objectivity among science and medical professionals is at the very heart of our faith in the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the medicines we take.

In business, we want objectivity, too. Applicants for bank loans and credit cards should be evaluated on valid criteria, not on biases about race or ethnicity or other factors that are similarly irrelevant.

Objectivity in all these fields, and others, gets no argument from journalists. We accept it, even insist on it by seeking to expose transgressions. Journalists should insist on it for ourselves as well. The public expects that of us. It has every right to. If we hope to effectively hold the powerful to account, we will have to show that we are objective in how we go about our work.

The lightning-fast spread of misinformation, disinformation, and crackpot conspiracy theories of today makes the pursuit of truth more essential, and more difficult. Efforts to deceive are more numerous and sophisticated, resources dedicated to deception more abundant. The field of journalism must respond by becoming more investigative in nature.

Investigative reporting has been a ripe target for cost-cutting in an industry where resources are scarce. It is expensive, takes a lot of time, cannot guarantee results (or even a story), and may not quicken the digital traffic that is prized currency in the internet era. When journalists abdicate their role as watchdogs, however, unscrupulous behavior is encouraged. Readers have demonstrated, with the purchase of subscriptions, that they want wrongdoing brought to light.

News organizations will need adequate staff, greater technical prowess, and state-of-the-art technological tools to penetrate the dark arts now increasingly deployed to instantly spread lies and baseless suspicions with the aim of political and commercial gain. They will have to collaborate more effectively among themselves and with independent specialists who possess expertise in artificial intelligence and the manipulation of social networks. Fabrications of every

sort, including visual images, inevitably will become more frequent, dangerous, and challenging to detect and disprove.

Early in this millennium, as the business model of most legacy news organizations suffered under the crushing impact of the internet, many newspapers cut back on the sort of investigative journalism that had been heavily inspired by The Washington Post's Watergate reporting in the early 1970s. Investigative reporting, however, underwent a renaissance after the 2015 release of the film Spotlight, which portrayed The Boston Globe's investigation into the decades-long cover-up of clergy sexual abuse within the Boston Archdiocese. Almost fourteen years after the investigation itself, the movie rekindled a commitment among owners, publishers, and editors to investigative reporting. The movie highlighted for the public why we need investigative journalism, and the difficulty of doing it correctly. News leaders were also reminded that we have a civic duty to hold power to account.

Shortly after Spotlight's release, the publisher of the San Francisco Chronicle, Jeffrey Johnson, stepped into the office of the paper's editor in chief, Audrey Cooper. He mentioned that he had just been to a screening of the movie, and he wondered how much it might cost to build the investigative unit she had long proposed. "Are you kidding me? You want to start an I-team after watching a movie?" Cooper asked.

The Chronicle had previously boasted a powerful investigative unit. But advertising revenue had dried up, and by the end of 2009 the last member of that team left the paper. With the team rebuilt post-Spotlight, it delivered high-impact results within a year. "I always meant to email Marty Baron and say, 'you probably hear this all the time, but it inspired our newsroom to start an I-team,'" Cooper told the Poynter news organization in late 2016. "What a great legacy for that movie."

While investigative reporting is thriving in some corners of journalism, particularly at the national level, it is being starved to death in others. Local news outlets continue to see their primary sources of revenue dry up, leaving them poorly resourced to fund ambitious journalism of any type. Too many local newspapers have been taken over by private equity firms and hedge funds. Those owners seem determined to milk their properties for every last penny they can cough up, without regard for the public interest. Investigative journalism at the local level is threatened anew.

The future of local investigative reporting may depend heavily on whether new journalism nonprofits receive adequate support from readers and philanthropists as well as on collaborations between national news organizations and local ones. The national investigative nonprofit ProPublica has established investigative reporting hubs around the country and joined forces with local newsrooms on accountability journalism, with impressive results. The Washington Post in February 2023 worked with the Las Vegas Review-Journal on an investigation that was left incomplete when highly accomplished reporter Jeff German was assassinated outside his home. The New York Times announced in April 2022 that its former top editor, Dean Baquet, would head a fellowship program to promote local investigative reporting, with projects offered without charge to local print, digital, and broadcast outlets.

“The decline of local investigative reporting is a national tragedy,” Times publisher A. G. Sulzberger aptly put it at the time. “It means that fewer and fewer people across the country have access to essential information about their communities—too often there is no one to track school board meetings; comb through court documents; or reveal the significance of everyday developments in towns, cities and states. No watchdog to keep local governments honest … As a result, it’s almost certain that corruption, injustice and wrongdoing go unnoticed.”

Financial concerns are destined to remain a plague for the entire media industry. Any threat to economic strength jeopardizes the ability of the press to fulfill its watchdog role. Those who aim to cripple us will exploit perceived weakness. Everyone at a news organization—from chief executives to union chiefs—has a duty to help ensure its sustainability. The business, perpetually disruptive, punishes stasis. No one should be surprised if strategy has to shift, sometimes painfully, every few years.

As I was completing this book at the end of 2022, questions were being raised about The Post’s own future. It was recording heavy losses, setting off skepticism about its leadership and doubts about its strategy. A financial recovery in the years since Bezos’s acquisition in 2013 had endowed The Post with the resources to keep close watch on a bullying and capricious president. Now, red ink tarnished an image The Post had built for itself as a powerhouse capable of meeting any commercial, journalistic, or political challenge.

Adversity underlined how suddenly and radically fortunes could shift in the media business. Leadership at The Post could take pride in previous achievements but not comfort. Losses exposed severe shortcomings in how The Post was positioned for a predictable post-Trump readership drop-off and against a savvy, well-resourced, acquisitive rival in The New York Times.

At The Post, six years of profitability had underwritten an increase of dozens of journalists every year, given life to a wide variety of new initiatives, and boosted its investigative reporting capacity. Earnings in 2021 were the highest since Bezos took possession of The Post, bringing cumulative profits to a level that fully covered his $250 million purchase price. The profits were plowed back into the business.

The year 2022 saw further expansion of The Post’s newsroom—“the biggest investment year in our history,” publisher Fred Ryan told me—but the extra costs were incurred as the country threatened to tumble into a recession. Digital advertising for media and tech companies tanked. After Fred used a town hall just before Christmas to announce imminent layoffs, angry Post journalists stood to pepper him with questions. They got no answers. Fred walked out, only pausing a few seconds to say that he would not turn the town hall into a union “grievance session.” Video of his dreadful retreat went viral.

Troubles for The Post had been building for some time. Subscriptions had fallen by nearly 500,000 from a peak of 3 million, and monthly digital traffic plunged to 58 million users by the end of 2022 from 139 million in March 2020. At one level, less-committed readers who had

bought subscriptions at sharply discounted introductory rates were not sticking with The Post when required to pay full price. But the business challenge was far bigger than that: Donald Trump was out of the White House, easing fears of many readers about his threat to democracy. Public interest in politics, the beating heart of The Post's coverage, sagged. The "Trump bump" became the "Trump slump."

A report in Axios that former New York mayor Mike Bloomberg was "interested in acquiring" The Washington Post or The Wall Street Journal's parent company, Dow Jones, set off speculation that Bezos had lost interest and might sell. The Post, however, wasn't for sale. Bezos, in my assessment, is firmly committed to its long-term success.

It was stunning to observe in late 2022 and early 2023 how easily The Post's remarkable commercial turnaround in prior years was forgotten, among media pundits and even among staff who had witnessed far worse times. Only ten years earlier, when I joined The Post, its woeful condition was common conversation in Washington and in media more broadly. The Post's stature as a news heavyweight was in question. Dozens of its journalists were losing their jobs every year. The Post's inability to extract itself from a financial sinkhole was why the paper was sold in the first place.

When Fred Ryan took over as publisher in 2014, the preexisting five-year forecast showed losses escalating to terrifying levels. With massive perpetual losses unacceptable to Bezos, Fred committed to getting The Post to the breakeven point in his second full year, I've since learned, and into profitability after that. With innovative digitally oriented initiatives, improved technology, and Trump's engrossing dominance of the political landscape, that is what happened.

At the moment of Bezos's purchase, The Post was unnervingly far behind its archcompetitor. The New York Times, having already made itself a national newspaper, launched digital subscriptions in 2011, more than two years ahead of The Post. By the time of Bezos's purchase, The Times already had 727,000 digital-only subscribers; The Post had hardly any.

The Post's digital traffic soared in the following years, at one point topping The Times's, and digital subscriptions took off as well. The turnaround explains why Bezos placed so much confidence in Fred as publisher. Fred was the only one at The Post to meet one-on-one with Bezos, and my understanding is that almost never have they had a serious disagreement.

In my final few years at The Post, however, it was becoming obvious that the paper faced a seemingly insurmountable competitive gap with The Times. The previous September Ryan announced that paid digital-only subscriptions had passed a million. But that was still far behind The Times, which had 2.5 million. The Times was already making big bets on ways other than news to lure subscribers. It had invested heavily in developing a stellar cooking app (launched in 2014, with digital subscriptions introduced in 2017) and built a successful subscription model for its long-famous crossword puzzle that was a precursor to a broad portfolio of digital word games like Wordle (acquired in January 2022). It was on the hunt for acquisitions, too. In late 2016, it purchased the Wirecutter product-recommendation service. The Times was, as its

then-CEO Mark Thompson said, “creating products that are an indispensable part of our readers’ lives.”

By 2018, I was making the case to Bezos and Fred that The Post needed to significantly broaden its coverage. In a teleconference that fall, the newsroom proposed a major boost to our technology coverage. Eleven tech reporters, editors, and videographers were approved. Far more was invested in subsequent years, giving The Post a muscular reporting presence in technology. When we also asked for support to build up our popular cooking offerings, though, Bezos was unenthusiastic. How would we differentiate ourselves from the many competitors such as Epicurious, Bon Appetit, and, now, The New York Times? Other lifestyle proposals—for expanded wellness coverage, for example—received paltry budget appropriations until, nineteen months after my retirement, major initiatives were announced.

In late 2019, The Post invested heavily in a travel initiative and, only hesitatingly, in a section on video games and e-sports. Meanwhile, we were given approval to add foreign correspondents, building their ranks to the highest level in The Post’s history. By any measure, Bezos was staking substantial sums on The Post’s future. It was immensely gratifying. And yet it was not nearly enough. The Post had not made big strategic bets. No active efforts were made to identify potential acquisitions, though we entertained pitches from struggling digital sites. Importantly, unlike The Times, we had not insinuated ourselves into people’s daily, non-news routines.

Several times over my final two years at The Post, I implored Fred to pull Bezos into a thorough, long-term strategy conversation. There was an urgent competitive threat, and we needed his counsel. And whatever we settled on doing, we needed his bank account. To my frustration, that meeting was never proposed to Bezos. In early January 2023, I asked Fred why. He didn’t give me a direct answer, only saying: “Whenever we have Jeff’s time, I’ve never missed the opportunity to take it.”

The Post, however, remains a journalistic dynamo. Its staffing is among the most robust of any news organization in the world. It continues to break agenda-setting stories one after the next. It boasts a deep reservoir of extraordinary talent, and rightly continues to be a magnet for top journalists. Few news organizations can claim to be as innovative. The Post also has a historic record of resilience, having transformed itself in a few short years from a regionally focused news outlet of deflated ambitions to a trailblazer in technology and journalism. And it has the backing of one of the world’s richest and smartest entrepreneurs.

When Bezos stepped down as CEO of Amazon in July 2021 to become executive chair of the board, he signaled he’d be devoting more “time and energy” to The Post, Blue Origin, and his charitable endeavors. Blue Origin and philanthropy got the extra attention. The Post did not, even as it badly needed it. I suspect The Post is getting it now. In one-on-one meetings with key staffers, he has been apprised of deep internal discontent.

Few news organizations in American history have played as important a role as The Post in holding power to account. The country needs a healthy, growing, and confident Washington Post. I feel sure it will have one.

The mainstream media's legal strategy deserves a rethink, too. Libel suits increasingly have been used as a blunt weapon against media outlets. They cost time, money, and mental well-being, just the sort of pain Donald Trump openly hoped for as he proposed to "open up" the libel laws. Most recently, Florida governor Ron DeSantis has advocated making libel suits easier, even floating the idea of legislation requiring courts to treat the statements of anonymous sources as false.

Legacy media have always vigorously defended against libel suits. Rarely have they brought defamation lawsuits of their own. What good could come of pursuing the sort of litigation we deplored? However, those who smear us find comfort in the expectation that, while we might complain, we're unlikely to sue. We have rendered ourselves sitting ducks for slander.

I don't want mainstream journalists to behave like warriors in the practice of their craft, but neither do I want us to suffer attacks on our character without fighting back. Winning in the court of public opinion may require, at times, going to court. If DeSantis, and copycat governors, make it easier for defamation plaintiffs to prevail, perhaps we should make some of those victories our own.

I was intrigued in 2022 by a legal maneuver of The New York Times. A year after my retirement, a lawyer representing Times reporter Charlie Savage, a Pulitzer-winning former colleague of mine at The Boston Globe and The Miami Herald, implicitly threatened a libel suit against the Washington Examiner while demanding corrections to "knowingly false statements."

The lawyer's February letter to the Washington Examiner objected to an opinion column headlined "Charlie Savage Is the Reason No One Trusts Journalists." The piece was a rebuke to Charlie's story a day earlier about a recent court filing by special counsel John H. Durham, who was digging into the origins of the Russia-related investigation of Trump's 2016 campaign. The motion by Durham, Charlie wrote, had "set off a furor among right-wing outlets about purported spying on former President Donald J. Trump. But the entire narrative appeared to be mostly wrong or old news—the latest example of the challenge created by a barrage of similar conspiracy theories from Mr. Trump and his allies." The Examiner's commentary editor accused Charlie, whom I know to be scrupulously honest and honorable, of doing "everything in his journalistic power to bury this story from readers and obfuscate the truth."

The letter from Charlie's lawyer, who was actually compensated by The Times, contained all the standard language that implies a potential libel suit: "defamatory statement … defamatory conclusion," "immediately take steps to retain and preserve all documents," and "I hereby demand." The Washington Examiner made one correction, after failing to do so when first alerted to the error, and declined to make others, arguing they constituted opinion.

In the scheme of things, the letter was small potatoes. But the saber-rattling was a worthy experiment that carried greater symbolic import. The Examiner had to spend money on a lawyer, just the sort of penalty Trump and his political allies had sought to inflict on less Trump-friendly news organizations, and it felt pressure to correct an error. I'll be curious to see if The Times tries the maneuver again. I hope it does, and that other news outlets go on the offensive, too.

I had raised with The Post's lawyers for several years whether the time hadn't arrived to bring libel suits against our organization's most shameless, reckless, and loathsome accusers. Why should we unilaterally disarm? The lawyers would chuckle, seeming to humor me. But one, James McLaughlin, deputy general counsel, began to draw me out on the subject when I made annual guest appearances at his Georgetown University law school class. Typically, I was invited a week or two after Jim's students had heard from one of the name partners for the aggressive defamation litigators Clare Locke, which proudly boasts on its website of facing off against major media companies like The Washington Post.

And when news organizations prevail in defending against litigation brought by powerful individuals for no purpose other than harassment, they should consider seeking sanctions against the plaintiffs. A $1 million fine imposed by a federal judge in January 2023 against Trump and his lawyer Alina Habba for a frivolous lawsuit represents just the sort of retribution that may well be necessary. "Mr. Trump is a prolific and sophisticated litigant who is repeatedly using the courts to seek revenge on political adversaries," wrote U.S. District Judge Donald M. Middlebrooks in explaining the sanctions he ordered. "He is the mastermind of strategic abuse of the judicial process."

As I was writing this epilogue, I traveled to Bogotá to spend time with journalists of Central and South America. Their countries are among the most dangerous places to work for people in my profession, and serve as a warning of how government-imposed press restrictions and politicians' intimidation tactics against media can expedite the erosion of democracy.

I went to Colombia in January 2023 to help with a training program for editors that was organized by Carlos Eduardo Huertas, a top-notch investigative journalist whom I had befriended when he was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University in 2011 and 2012 and I was editor of The Boston Globe. Carlos Eduardo was then building Connectas, a nonprofit network for journalists across Latin America and a platform for in-depth and investigative journalism. The training program was later created to assist editors with the innumerable challenges they face—from adapting to the digital era to managing their teams of reporters and contending with the expectations of owners and publishers. The young participants eagerly aspired to become better leaders and to elevate the quality of journalism in their countries, even as they struggled with precious few resources.

One afternoon, we packed into a few vans and headed to the mountain of Monserrate, which towers above Bogotá. Outside the sanctuary that stands at its peak, I was touched when the journalists proposed to have their photos taken with me. The first photo was with the editors from Venezuela. Second were the editors from Nicaragua. "Próxima dictadura!" someone then shouted, setting off howls of laughter. Next dictatorship! Then came the editors from El

Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Bolivia, Mexico, and Brazil, the last of which had just survived a coup attempt by supporters of Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right former president who refused to concede his recent election loss.

The dark humor was telling. Authoritarianism is once again on the march in Latin America. Some of the editors' countries have sunk into dictatorship. Other nations are moving fast in that direction. And, among the rest, leaders have exhibited authoritarian behavior, subjecting editors, reporters, photographers, and videographers to daily attacks as fake news and enemies. Journalists in all these countries are targets of harassment, surveillance, or violence by police, the military, government's powerful allies, and ordinary citizens responding to their leaders' repeated incitements. Across much of the region, as in so much of the world, journalism is being criminalized.

In Venezuela, President Nicolás Maduro is reinforcing the media-suppression policies of his predecessor, Hugo Chávez. Newspapers long ago were denied the paper and other supplies required to publish. Broadcast licenses were withheld. Media outlets were taken over by government allies. News outlets practicing genuine journalism are now blocked from access to internet providers.

In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega has waged a war of brutal repression against independent journalists, forcing most to flee the country. Some now run digital sites that seek to cover Nicaragua from their homes in exile. Honduras is described by Reporters Without Borders as "one of the most dangerously murderous" countries in the Americas for journalists. Charges of defamation have led to imprisonment, and journalists are frequently assaulted and threatened with death by the military police and the army. Organized crime poses an additional, and mortal, threat.

In Guatemala, the government of President Alejandro Giammattei in July 2022 arrested illustrious journalist José Rubén Zamora on bogus charges of money laundering, influence peddling, and blackmail. His outlet, elPeriódico, had courageously focused on corruption at the highest levels of government—practicing the sort of journalism that had been its hallmark for twenty-six years, despite being subjected to defamation campaigns, kidnappings, an assassination attempt, and, most recently, a government-imposed commercial boycott that denied it access to advertising. Under unrelenting legal pressure, the paper shut down in May 2023.

Just south, in El Salvador, media pioneer Carlos Dada and other journalists at his digital news site El Faro have gone into exile after their phones were hacked with the notorious Pegasus spyware, allowing their communications and physical movements to be surveilled. Under the country's president, Nayib Bukele, journalists have been routinely assailed and threatened.

"Why do we do what we do?" Dada reflected in late 2022. "This is a serious question to ask in the middle of the crisis a lot of our colleagues are going through all around the world. But we need to defend our reasons for doing journalism, and that means each one of us needs to look deep inside and around, and find those reasons. We all have the right to decide not to do

journalism anymore, since the price for doing it is getting higher. It may actually be the sane, healthy decision to make.

“But if you decide to go on, you must know that silence is not an option. Our word is our power, our contribution to our communities, and our fate. And we must use our word to break the monologues of power. We cannot renounce the search for truth.”

The work of the young journalists I joined in Bogotá is informed by a simple idea: Citizens are entitled to know what is happening in their community, country, and government. Merely for committing themselves to that task, those journalists and their colleagues have faced perils that are unimaginable to most of us in the United States. And yet they persevere, with inspiring enthusiasm, dedication, hope, and even humor.

In assessing how journalists can best hold powerful individuals and institutions to account, I doubt I will identify anything more essential than what I found in the young Latin american editors I met in Colombia: an indomitable spirit. Idealism, determinations, and courage like theirs are what we are likely to need most.