

Reporting Trump

John Newsinger

'There had never been anything like this'

Unbelievable

My Front-Row Seat to the Craziest Campaign in American History

Katy Tur

New York: HarperCollins, 2017

Nothing prepared Katy Tur for the 2016 U.S. Presidential election campaign. A reporter for NBC, she was in the firing line and came in for more than her share of abuse as – with increasing incredulity – she covered first Trump's campaign for the Republican nomination and then for the Presidency. As she puts it: 'I've heard him insult a war hero, brag about grabbing women by the pussy, denigrate the judicial system, demonize immigrants, fight with the pope, doubt the democratic process, advocate torture and war crimes, tout the size of his junk [genitalia] *in a presidential debate*, trash the media, and indirectly endanger my life'. (p. 4). He 'invited Russian hackers to meddle in American politics . . . appeared to joke about gun lovers assassinating Hillary Clinton, and called President Obama "the founder of ISIS" [. . .] and linked Senator Ted Cruz's father to the Kennedy assassination'. (p. 202) There had never been anything like this. It is 'All of it. Utterly. Inescapably. Completely. Unbelievable.' (p. 5). Her chronicle of the Trump campaign, appropriately entitled *Unbelievable*, is essential reading for 2020.

At Trump rallies, his supporters 'call me ugly and dumb. They accuse me of sleeping my way to my job. They go after my family, and especially my father, who is transgender. They call me a "cunt". They threaten my life.' (pp. 173-174). And there is the actual violence, with Trump encouraging attacks on protesters, on one occasion musing himself 'how much he'd like to punch one particular protester in the mouth' and then going on to promise 'to pay the legal fees of a supporter who actually did punch a protester in the face'. (p. 176) She describes one rally where Trump actually pondered having journalists killed in front of his cheering supporters: 'I hate them, but I would never kill them'. He 'pauses ****again**** and makes a so-so gesture with his hand, as if entertaining a bloodbath in the press pen', but then rules it out, once again emphasising 'But I do hate them [. . .] some of them are such lying, disgusting

people'. The crowd respond to this incitement by turning 'as one to boo at us in unison. Six thousand Trump supporters railing against thirty or so journalists – caged in the center of the arena'. (p. 99). At another rally, Trump actually denounced Tur by name as a 'third-rate reporter' and pointed her out with everyone turning to look at her, jeering. She waves to them, noticing one woman in the crowd, just one, looking 'horrified' by Trump's behaviour. It was at this rally that Trump announced to tremendous applause that he was going to ban all Muslims from entering the United States. (p 82) And as time went on things got even rowdier and more threatening at his rallies, until 'I now have private security at all of them. Everyone covering Trump at NBC is under armed protection'. (p. 190) Indeed, 'Because of Trump's war on the media, networks have required a travelling security detail except for Fox News . . .' (p. 5)

In her account of a Trump rally in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, three days after the 'Pussygate' story broke, an enthusiastic crowd are chanting 'Drop dead, media' while they wait for the great man to appear. She looks around and spots a new T-shirt: SHE'S A CUNT, VOTE TRUMP. The man wearing it 'is with his wife and three kids'.¹ Support for Trump seems completely unaffected by his boasting of how he has routinely sexually assaulted women, even among his women supporters. Later Tur and a colleague abandon their meal in a nearby restaurant because 'It feels like we are being watched, and not in a friendly way [. . .] maybe we're just paranoid. . .' (pp. 244-245). Nevertheless, probably wisely, they move on.

One of the most telling of the episodes she recounts is a Trump victory party at his Mar-a-Lago resort. She remembers how, when he launched his campaign, he had to pay actors to make up the crowd wearing his T-shirts, but now at his victory parties there are 'real people in silk ball gowns and men in six-thousand-dollar tuxedos lightly pushing and shoving to get face time'. While the people at his rallies are there because their jobs have been shipped overseas, the people she saw at Mar-a-Lago were the people 'shipping the jobs overseas. These are the people slashing budgets and enhancing their own bottom line while the bottom falls out of everyone else's lives'. These are most decidedly not the people who queue to get into Trump's rallies. Those 'arrive in denim, flannel, and thick-soled boots. They wait for hours, eat whole pizzas in the

¹ She discusses the T-shirts in evidence at Trump rallies that started out with TRUMP THAT BITCH, went on to HILLARY SUCKS BUT NOT LIKE MONICA and I WISH HILLARY MARRIED OJ. The man wearing the OJ T-shirt proudly posed in front of the press 'in a shirt that unsubtly conveyed that he wished Hillary Clinton had been brutally stabbed to death in the 1990s'. (pp. 239-240)

security line, tattoo Trump's face on their forearms'. What, she wonders, would they think of the people at his parties – of the people who really matter. (p. 156)

Where her book falls down, however, is when it comes to explaining the Trump phenomenon. She argues that while some of the people at Trump rallies are, to use Hillary Clinton's phrase, 'deplorables', the great majority are not. Instead, they are ordinary people with grievances 'your coworkers and your neighbors [. . .] your taxi driver, your fireman and your supermarket cashier', whose resentments are 'unchained' once they are part of a Trump audience, able to shout things they would never even whisper outside. (p. 244) For more of an explanation, we have to turn to Matt Taibbi's account of the 2016 campaign, *Insane Clown President*.

'Trump can't win'

Insane Clown President

Matt Taibbi

London: W H Allen, 2017

Rolling Stone's Matt Taibbi is always worth reading. In retrospect his earlier writings (e.g. *Spanking the Donkey* 2006, *Smells Like Dead Elephants* 2007, *The Great Derangement* 2009 and *The Divide* 2014) can be seen as providing a forewarning of the Trump phenomenon. Accordingly, he sets out to put Trump into some sort of context. In his 'Introduction' to *Insane Clown President*, he looks back at the campaign and sums Trump up as 'a figure of almost supernatural shallowness . . . who somehow became the vehicle for a collision of great and powerful historical trends'. He saw 'the rise of a racist revanchist movement in the heartland on one side (merging with a distinctly upper-class college-bred "alt-right" racist movement), and the collapse of the neo-liberal consensus on the Democratic side'. And this 'took place against the backdrop of a splintering and collapsing of the media landscape'. Trumps 'bellicose pussy-grabbing vulgarity and defiant lack of self-awareness make him, unfortunately, the perfect foil for reflecting the rot and neglect of the corrupted political system A system unable to stop *this* must be very sick indeed.' (pp. xxxiv-xxxv) It is hard to disagree.

According to Taibbi, in the good old days, politics used to be 'a simple, predictable con. Every four years, the money men in D.C. teamed up with party hacks to throw their weight behind whatever half-bright fraud of a candidate proved most adept at snowing the population into buying a warmed-over version of the same crappy politics they've always bought'. And the media not only went along with this con, but

made it possible by effectively excluding any alternatives. Now Trump has blown this up, turning first the fight for the Republican nomination and then for the Presidency into 'a pure high-school-style popularity contest conducted entirely in the media'. (pp. 34-35) While this reflected the right-wing populist insurgency – that manifested itself at Trump rallies, as a direct reaction to the bankruptcy of Democratic Party neo-liberalism – it was mightily assisted by changes in the media. The TV news in the United States had become a 'consumer business' driven by a compelling hunger for viewers rather than being informed by any notion of 'public interest'. What this meant was that the different channels presented news that was tailored to the prejudices of their target audience. As far as Taibbi is concerned, the liberal and right-wing media (he refers here specifically to CNN and Fox News) 'are really just two different strategies of the same kind of nihilistic lizard-brain sensationalism'. (p. 101). In this way, they have come to replicate the print media. And Trump, love him or hate him, was very good for viewing figures. The first Clinton-Trump debate was 'with a breathtaking 84 million people tuning in . . . the most watched political program in American history'. (p. 275)

What Trump did was exploit the despair and resentment of millions of Americans who, in the aftermath of the 2008 crash, had quite correctly come to regard the political system as rigged against them. Confronted with a system where people were 'only allowed to choose between candidates carefully screened by wealthy donors', they revolted and put the Republican Party into the hands of 'a dangerous race-baiting lunatic' who promised to protect American jobs and to roll back the special interests. (pp. 201-202) The insurgency against the effects of neo-liberalism and the rigged political system inside the Democratic Party was led by Bernie Sanders, a revolt from the left, led by a self-proclaimed socialist. According to Taibbi, Sanders was 'winning under-30 voters by consistently absurd margins, as high as 80 to 85 percent in many states'. (p. 165) But this revolt was successfully contained and defeated by the Democratic Party political machine. He does pose the question of the likely outcome if it had been Sanders versus Trump in the 2016 Presidential election. The outcome 'would probably be decided by which candidate the national press turns on first'. (p. 151) There can be no serious doubt that Sanders would have got the Corbyn treatment – with or without the great anti-Semitism Scam. When it came down to it, even the liberal media in Britain (the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman*) preferred a man like Boris Johnson, with all the character traits of a diseased rat, to a socialist like Jeremy Corbyn.

Taibbi describes the same Wilkes-Barre rally that figures in Katy Tur's

memoir, noting that 'Trumpian licence has pushed hatred of Hillary Clinton beyond all reason'. Grown men and women throwing 'around words like "bitch" and "cunt" in front of their kids'. He particularly remembers Rudy Giuliani's performance at this particular rally: 'with his eyes spinning and arms flailing', he 'looked as though he's been experimenting with recreational botox'. Every time 'Trump said something nuts, Giuliani either co-signs it or outdoes it'. But Taibbi thought they are doomed to defeat and the best they can look forward to is 'after the election doing prostate-medicine commercials together'. (p. 269) The fact is that 'Trump can't win [. . . .] Not even America deserves that.' (p. 277) As he admits: 'Sometimes in journalism, you can't help looking like a buffoon.' (p. 253)

'America has changed right before my eyes'

The Enemy of the People

A Dangerous Time to Tell the Truth in America

Jim Acosta

New York: HarperCollins, 2019

Jim Acosta of CNN had also covered 'Trump's unimaginable rise to power', had been at rallies 'where Trump demonized the press, where he called us "disgusting and "dishonest"We had listened to the chants of "CNN sucks" from his crowds of supporters, seen them give us the middle finger, and heard them call us "traitors" and "scum"'. Such was the level of hatred being whipped up that he 'feared the day would come when the the president's rhetoric would lead one of his supporters to harm or even murder a journalist'. (p. 2) *The Enemy of the People*, though, is a chronicle of his reporting of the Trump Presidency, of how 'America has changed right before my eyes' and of his personal confrontations with Trump and his people. (p. 6)

Trump began as he meant to continue, with lie after lie. The first lie of his administration, told on his first day in office, was nothing to do with politics or political advantage but one that reflected his both his compulsive dishonesty and his narcissistic personality. He claimed that the crowd at his inauguration was larger than at Obama's, a lie that was easily disproved, but that his people were required to faithfully repeat and defend. It was this that destroyed Press Secretary Sean Spicer's credibility. By the end of his first two years in office, the *Washington Post* fact-checkers had catalogued 'nearly ten thousand false or misleading statements'. (p. 6) Clearly Trump is a pathological liar. He does not lie to secure political advantage; he lies because he cannot help himself. At the same time, there was a political strategy at work. Trump went after the

media, labelling them 'the enemy of the people', and after immigrants. As far as his attack on the media was concerned, Acosta considers whether or not journalists were right to respond. Was Trump laying a trap for them? He regards the debate as academic. They had no choice but to respond and it is hard to disagree. Many of his supporters saw his attacks on the media 'as a call to arms. My email inbox and social media accounts were routinely filled with threats of violence left by people who claimed to be part of the MAGA movement'. He goes on: 'Memes featuring me began showing up all over Twitter. In one meme, my face had been superimposed over that of a 1940s gangster lying dead from gunfire. In another, a computer-animated scene portraying Nazis sending people into a gas chamber, my face was placed over that of the character hitting the Start button'. It was, as he says, 'ghastly, psychotic stuff'. And there were the death threats. (pp. 77-78) All this was deliberately whipped up by Trump and it was impossible not to respond, not to call him out.

What of Sean Spicer? As far as Acosta is concerned, his credibility was blown when he defended Trump over the inauguration crowd size affair and this 'set the tone for both his duplicity and the confrontations with the press that would follow [. . .] Spicer fell into the Trump pattern of attacking the notion of objective truths'. (pp. 47-48) Why did he go down this road? Was he part of an attempt by the Republican Establishment to 'normalise' Trump, to save America from his worst excesses? It might have worked for a moment, but every time Spicer 'came out to the podium in the White House Briefing Room he looked like he was in a hostage video – reading from a script'. For Acosta, in the end, Spicer had a choice of 'resigning in protest' at Trump's behaviour or helping 'enable Trump as he divided the country in ways we had never seen before'. (pp. 130-131) He made his choice.

With regard to racism, for Acosta, Charlottesville was massive. During the Presidential election campaign, Trump had established himself as 'a beloved figure among the fringe, race-baiting segments of the far right' and the neo-Nazis, white supremacists and members of the alt-right had declared 'that their movement of hate had been reborn'. Both Trump's racist rhetoric and his refusal to condemn these groups 'had emboldened these dark forces'. And the result was Charlottesville and his incredible equivocation when it came to condemning the far right. As he puts it: 'Here we had the president of the United States failing to adequately condemn neo-Nazis and Klansmen who had felt comfortable enough to march across an American city . . . and create a violent spectacle so heinous that, by the time it was over, a young woman was dead in the street. It was the most disturbing moment of Trump's presidency to date.'

As he points out, 'to anyone who had followed his campaign or attended his rallies, it should have come as no surprise'. (pp. 152-154) According to Acosta, 'Trump's revolting behavior . . . rocked his own party, destabilizing his presidency. A senior GOP congressional aide told me that night that Trump's ability to govern was "diminishing" [. . .] Senior officials inside the West Wing were telling reporters that they were appalled by Trump's behavior'. (pp. 160-161) But Trump rode it out and the continued strength of his support among Republican voters and supporters in the country left him untouched.

Crucial in sustaining this support were his MAGA rallies that continued after he had taken office. Acosta covered these and often found them even more threatening than those held in 2016 during the election campaign. He was personally singled out for abuse. At one event in Columbia, South Carolina in 2018, an elderly woman came up to the press cage and told him to 'get the fuck out', prompting the crowd to take up the chant of 'Go home, Jim' while he was live on TV. People 'uttered the most horrible things that could possibly come to mind'. Nevertheless, he insists not all the crowd were so hostile with some coming up to him and apologising after the rally, some even wanting selfies. At a later rally in Tampa, the media were 'subjected to a bewildering mudslide of anger and abuse' with hundreds of people shouting "'CNN sucks" as I was broadcasting live'. There were Trump supporters 'screaming all sorts of insults, ranging from "you suck" to "traitor". Others were giving me the middle finger or wearing T-shirts that read "Fuck the Media." [. . .] One woman, who was giving me double middle fingers, briefly became something of an internet legend'. And all this was approved by the President who, along with his son Eric, retweeted film of what had gone on. Acosta was 'public enemy number one' for a while and 'the death threats were back with a vengeance'. (pp. 262-265)

How serious were these threats? The despatch of pipe bombs to a number of targets including George Soros, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Robert De Niro, John Brennan at the CNN offices and others, by a 'fanatical Trump supporter' in October 2018, shows the danger. Cesar Sayoc, the bomber, had actually used social media to personally threaten Acosta himself. This attack was, as he insists, at least 'in part, because of the poisonous rhetoric that had fueled Trump's rise to power [. . .] This was the end result of years of Trump's attacks on CNN [. . .] Trumpworld's hatred for CNN had become cancerous'. (pp. 287-289) And the attacks continued regardless after the pipe bomb episode.

For Acosta, his conflict with Trump and his people climaxed when the

administration suspended his 'hard pass', the press credentials he needed for access to the White House, in November 2018. This followed an altercation with Trump at a press conference in which he was accused of 'putting my hands on' a woman intern, when, in fact the opposite had occurred. She had been attempting 'to pull the microphone away from me'. And to support their case, the administration made the mistake of producing 'a doctored clip of my encounter with the intern'. This was so amateurish as to discredit a lie they might otherwise have got away with. Leaving aside the fact that the accusation against him was a fabrication, 'a disgusting smear', he was still amazed at the hypocrisy of the accusation coming from an administration headed up by a man who had boasted of sexually assaulting women and indeed 'had been accused of sexual assault by multiple women'. (pp 308-309, 313) CNN went to court over Acosta's victimisation and he eventually had his pass returned. He had won although those responsible for 'smearing me and attempting to destroy my career' never apologised, but 'I never expected that anyway'. (p. 342) Acosta has been accused of making himself the story in some circles, but, in fact, he deserves congratulations for taking the fight to a lying authoritarian President intent on cowering and intimidating critics and opponents.

There is much more of interest in Acosta's book than there is space to cover here, but he closes with a warning regarding the danger that Trump poses, a timely warning as November 2020 approaches.

'I had to fight back'

Under Fire

Reporting from the Front Lines of the Trump White House

April Ryan

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018

April Ryan, the author of *Under Fire*, is a veteran African American journalist who has covered the White House for many years. She has covered the Presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, but nothing had prepared her for the Trump Presidency. His 'reckless disregard for the truth' was unprecedented and she feared that his 'fight against a free press could change the dynamics for the worse for years down the road'. For the first time, she felt that there was cause to worry 'about the fragility of democracies. All this because of this one person – Donald J. Trump'. (p. 2)

In the run-up to the 2016 Presidential election, the Republican National Committee had actually reached out to the black media and

black journalists in an attempt to improve the Republican Party's standing with the black community. Republican thinking was actually explained to black journalists at a meeting where Sean Spicer was one of the speakers. All this went out of the window with the rise of Trump who was to get just 8 per cent of the black vote in 2016. How did he win? It was Trump's use of race and racism that was decisive in winning him the Presidency. As far as Ryan is concerned, the whole 'birther' controversy that Trump prosecuted was a straightforward exercise in racism, a way of saying that a black man could/should not be President. Obama was 'guilty of being Black'. Trump sounded 'the dog whistle . . . and people ran to Make America Great Again'. (p. 18) She quotes Lyndon Johnson from back in 1968: 'If you can convince the lowest White man he's better than the best Colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you.' (p. 15) But, while racism was the bedrock of Trump's stand, it was not the only factor. He also embraced the pro-life, pro-gun, pro-marriage, anti-tax and anti-climate change agenda and promised his supporters 'change', change that was left vague enough that it could 'mean anything to anyone'. (p. 17)

Once Trump was installed in the White House, she saw her role as asking questions on behalf of the black community, confronting issues of race and racism. She was 'startled' by the 'level of aggression' with which the administration responded. What to do about this? 'There are times you must meet bullies on their level and be louder than they are if you want to survive savage attacks on your integrity, character, and career in this hostile political climate', As she puts it: 'I had to fight back'. (pp 48-49) Trump, of course, had token black people available who could be brought forward to deny that he was racist and Ryan chronicles her clashes with Omarosa Manigault, whose attempts 'to smear me with her lies in the summer of 2016 and continued through 2017'. This confrontation actually 'threatened to get physical' with Manigault trying 'to physically intimidate me because I had embarrassed her'. (p. 62) As for Sean Spicer, she saw him change in front of her eyes until he was 'almost unrecognizable . . . a Trump sycophant who looked for approval from what I termed his "father-boss" . . . an abusive and codependent relationship'. After six months he went out in 'a blaze of shame', as she had warned him he would. (p. 71)

Inevitably Ryan got death threats 'for simply asking questions' and had to take steps 'to protect myself and my family'. As she puts it: 'The toxicity in the atmosphere is at an alarming level, deadly'. (pp. 93-94) These threats precipitated another confrontation with a black Trump

appointee, the wedding planner who had organised Eric Trump's wedding and was subsequently appointed to head the New York and New Jersey offices of the Housing and Urban Development agency with a multi-million dollar budget! This Trump official treated the death threats as a joke in her tweets, copying Ryan in. She went on to 'fat shame' her, calling her Miss Piggy and as Ryan points out, her actions were supported by other black conservatives. Ryan's response was to 'shine a spotlight on her and her lack of integrity and qualifications for her job'. (pp. 84-85) This was just one of 'a barrage of efforts to discredit me and take me down'. (p 102) When she was personally named in a Trump reelection campaign ad, 'the only White House correspondent mentioned in an ad that called the . . . media "enemies"' and was approved by the President, it almost became too much. 'It was real and it was scary. I now had a target on my head, officially'. She curled up in a foetal position on her bed, 'afraid for about two hours'. (pp. 98-99) To her immense credit, she refused to buckle and famously went on to actually ask Trump 'the question no reporter has ever asked a sitting US president: "Are you a racist?"'. This was during a Martin Luther King Day event in the White House. He ignored the question. (p. 101)

One event that had a tremendous impact on her was the racist protests in August 2017. Here white supremacists 'clashed with people of good will'. A 'series of hate-filled marches of Nazis, Klansmen, and other White Supremacists. [. . .] left a woman murdered, a young White woman who believed in this country moving forward with all people together, not divided'. And Trump famously referred to there being 'some very fine people on both sides'. As she asks: 'Since when is a White supremacist or a member of the KKK or a Nazi a fine person? Well, if your dad was hooked up with these groups, as the president's father was, I guess that's what you would think'. (p. 121) Further proof of Trump's racism was provided, as if it was needed, by his dismissal of 'Haiti, El Salvador, and all of Africa' as 'shithole countries'. He did not want immigrants from these countries. Instead, he wanted them from Norway. (p. 123) Confronted with someone like Trump, she makes clear that she has come to regard her reporting as 'a form of protest'. (p. 171) She had no alternative.

'One of the things I love about the president'

A Year at the Circus

Jon Sopel

London: BBC Books, 2019

A *Year at the Circus* is the second in a threatened trilogy of books about the Trump Presidency, written by the BBC's Jon 'Soft' Sopel. It has to be said that it is not as bad as the first volume, *If Only They Didn't Speak English* (2018), but that is not much of a recommendation. Not even the BBC's man in Washington DC is able to completely ignore the way that Trump is 'changing the way that America is governed . . . is challenging the liberal democratic institutions'; but on the same page that he could write this, he comments that one had to 'marvel' at the President's 'insouciance'. Trump, he writes admiringly 'can scent weakness from a mile away', he is 'the norm shatterer *par excellence* – thrilling his supporters and terrifying his opponents'. (pp. xviii-xix) Sopel puts his cards on the table when discussing those people within Trump's administration who claim that they are trying to either thwart or contain his excesses. Trump was elected by 62 million people and 'no one could say he wasn't doing what he promised. Renegotiating trade deals, tougher immigration laws, cutting taxes, exiting the Iran nuclear deal and winding back regulations. These are precisely the policies he promised during the campaign'. (p. 32) This, despite everything, seems to be the position that he in the end goes along with. But perhaps the best indicator of the weakness of Sopel's approach is his discussion of the Charlottesville episode. He gives it some twenty words, yes twenty words. Sopel does not seem the slightest bit concerned about Trump giving encouragement to the Far Right, but rather discusses the episode as an instance of General John Kelly, Trump's then chief of staff, and his poor relations with the President: 'Kelly could be seen folding his arms and hanging his head'. (p. 57)

He finds Kelly's relationship with Trump much more interesting than the Far Right starting to come out of the shadows now that someone they regarded as their man was in power. Sopel writes at some length about Kelly's clash with Trump about whether the US flag should be flown at half-mast over the White House when Senator John McCain died in August 2018. Kelly ordered the flag be lowered in honour of his friend and Trump went 'berserk . . . the air was thick with F-bombs'. The President ordered it raised. Trump eventually backed down because of the outcry at his spiteful pettiness. Sopel describes relations between Trump and McCain as having been 'Arctic'; those between Trump and his chief of staff were decidedly frosty too. (pp. 63-64) It is worth remembering here that McCain was not some sort of liberal, but a right-wing warmongering conservative who just could not stomach Trump's ignorance, dishonesty and corruption. This, one cannot help but thinking, is what Sopel considers the limit of legitimate opposition to Trump.

Sopel does have the measure of Trump's cabinet though. He writes of the June 2017 cabinet meeting where Trump required all his appointees to publicly abase themselves before him, praising his genius, in 'an exercise in fawning' that was really without precedent. (p. 81) And this cabinet that was going to listen to the common people and look after their interests just happened to be 'incredibly wealthy It was flush with billionaires, multi-millionaires It was the richest group ever assembled'. (p. 94) He singles out Betsy DeVos, the incredibly wealthy and unbelievably ignorant secretary of education, charged with dismantling the public school system. She got a lot of sympathy when vandals set adrift her family's \$40 million yacht, sympathy that turned to derision when it was realised that 'the family owned nine other vessels'. (p. 96) And, of course, there is Vice President Mike Pence, someone who 'knows his place', takes care to always keep in Trump's shadow; indeed Sopel actually writes of 'Two men creating only one shadow'. Pence does his best to hold the administration together while relentlessly pursuing what Sopel describes as his 'social conservatism'. (pp. 233, 235) This is not good enough. In fact, Pence is the Christian Right's man in the administration, an administration that has more representatives from this particular Republican Party faction than any previous administration, including Betsy DeVos, Mike Pompeo and many others. Without the support of the Christian Right, Trump would never have secured the Republican nomination nor won the Presidential election. And as far as they are concerned, he is delivering on the promises he made in return for their support. The Trump administration's policy regarding the Palestinians and Israel, for example, has nothing whatsoever to do with concern for US national interest, but is all about consolidating his support on the Christian Right, support which is still holding firm. For reasons best known to himself, Sopel whitewashes them out of the picture.

How does the BBC's man actually assess Trump? He asks: 'how much is deliberate strategy; how much is impulse and how much is this a chess grandmaster planning several moves ahead. On most things you feel that the President has a sixth sense, just an incredible political gut sense of which way the wind is blowing'. (p. 134) The BBC's man in Washington DC actually thinks that Trump might be a 'chess grandmaster' when it comes to politics! Clearly he is completely out of his depth in the Washington DC posting and should be given something less demanding, perhaps as the BBC's Royal correspondent. To be fair, while he thought that there were times when Trump could be 'brilliant', there were other times when he was 'left wondering whether the President had the faintest idea what he was doing'. (p 128) And, of course, 'one of the things I love

about this president is how authentic he is'. This is an authenticity he apparently puts on display every time he tweets because when he tweets, you know it is *him*; you can hear his voice, and you know it comes from the heart'. (p. 166) Incredible!

Certainly, Trump's attacks on the media are part of a 'deliberate strategy', and Sopel writes of Trump's 'sustained onslaught' on the media and how successful it was with his supporters. In the summer of 2018 a CBS poll found that 91 per cent of strong Trump supporters trusted him to tell them the truth and only 11 per cent trusted the media. He does not, of course, really explore the crucial responsibility that Fox News, 'which holds a particular place of affection and respect in the President's heart', has had in bringing this situation about. (p. 134) Sopel acknowledges how Trump regularly whips up hostility towards the media at his MAGA rallies. Indeed he has been on the receiving end, when Trump has urged the crowd to direct their attention towards the journalists at the back of the auditorium: 'And the atmosphere is ugly. We are jeered and booed, insulted and spat at'. (p. 133) How should journalists respond to such behaviour and the danger it puts them in? Sopel seems to think they should report it but not fight back. He goes out of his way to condemn Jim Acosta, for example, for practising 'journalism as provocation'; he is 'a Clooney lookalike [. . .] guilty of grandstanding'. He actually writes that Acosta 'had a book to write' and that his clashes with Trump 'would have probably added significantly to the advance he would be able to demand. Brand Acosta had had a good day'. And this is from a man with a three book deal! What Acosta was guilty of was seeing journalists 'as tough we are somehow part of the resistance'. The venom is palpable. Trump might not be very nice sometimes, but Acosta is just too much. April Ryan does not get so much as a mention in Sopel's book.

All this raises the interesting question of whether journalists should take sides against an unbalanced, lying, corrupt, racist, criminal, sexist, right-wing bullying authoritarian who preaches hatred against them and whose environmental policies are a threat to the whole planet. This, Sopel would argue, is not their job, certainly not at the BBC. Trump is 'not our foe' and 'nor should [journalism] be the enemy of the President'. (pp 141-143) Sopel's book does not really inspire much confidence in the BBC's ability to stand up to the Johnson-Cummings government, even as it moves to dismantle the organisation, clearing the way for a British equivalent of Fox News. As I write, the BBC has just announced massive cuts to its news provision. And Murdoch is getting ready to launch a national radio station.

'Two Baskets of Allowable Opinion'

Hate Inc

Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another

Matt Taibbi

New York: OR Books, 2019

Which brings us back to Matt Taibbi. His *Hate Inc* is an attempt to theorise the media coverage of the Trump Presidency two and a bit years into his first term. Reducing his argument to its bare essentials, he argues that during the Cold War there was a media consensus that was centred on celebrating the Pax Americana. Anything that challenged this was marginalised, ignored or misreported. This consensus began to fracture with the emergence of Talk Radio and Fox News. What emerged were two rival poles of opinion: the liberal or 'pseudo-left' media and the 'genuine-right' media. (p. 79) Both of these were committed to reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes but for very different audiences. And this, he argues, kept 'our audiences from seeing larger problems'. (p. 21) He writes that, instead of there only being one Cold War consensus, there are now 'two baskets of allowable opinion'. What the news media does today is 'sell hate' and this not only builds audiences and generates profits, but 'also serves larger political purposes' – i.e. it keeps the American people divided and hating each other. He goes on: 'So long as the public is busy hating each other and not aiming its ire at the more complex financial and political processes going on off-camera, there's very little danger of anything like a popular uprising. [. . .] The news today is a reality show where you're part of the cast: *America vs. America*, on every channel'. People, as he puts it, 'think they're punching up, but they're actually punching sideways. [. . .] Hate is a great blinding mechanism'. (p. 42) As far as he is concerned both Fox News on the 'genuine-right' and MSNBC on the 'pseudo-left' are a party to this, waging a fake culture war in order to camouflage the predatory pillaging of the American people by the super rich.

Taibbi demonstrates this with some powerful examples. He looks at the media coverage of Trump's 2019 military appropriations bill (\$716 billion) which involved a 'two-year increase of \$165 billion'. This increase in spending was, incredibly, 'higher than the entire military budget for either China or Russia'. It had bi-partisan support in Congress. And how did the 'pseudo-left' media cover it? The *Washington Post* led the way, focussing on how Trump had snubbed 'the senator the legislation is named after – John McCain'. This snub became the story, not the massive increase in military spending that even 'eclipsed the peak of annual Iraq

War spending'. It 'was picked up by the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *ABC*, *The Hill*, *CNN*, *CBS*, the *AP*, and others'. (p. 79) The real debate was excluded, successfully suppressed. He looks at CNN coverage of Africa between 2004 and 2008: 'of the forty-four Africa segments on *Anderson Cooper 360* during that four year period only sixteen did not involve either Angelina Jolie or the plight of gorillas'. And this was at a time when some 50,000 people a month were dying 'from war, genocide, and associated problems like disease' in the Congo. And how many Americans know that 'we have special forces deployed in 149 nations right now That we have ongoing combat operations in eight nations'. There are 'so many massive stories that the national press ignores on a daily basis [. . . .] child labor, debt slavery, human rights atrocities (particularly by US client nations), white collar-crime, environmental crises involving nuclear or agricultural waste, military contracting corruption (the Pentagon by now cannot account for over six trillion dollars in spending), corporate tax evasion and dozens of other topics'. (p. 84) He returns to this point further on, writing of how 'Today we bomb people basically nonstop and it never makes the news'. (p. 168) Even more incredible is the ignoring of collateral casualties in drone strikes. Drone strikes targeting twenty four men, not all of whom were killed, in Pakistan, for example, 'resulted in 874 people dead, including 142 children'. (p. 170) This is powerful stuff. He also savages the 'pseudo-left' media for going after Trump's supporters rather than asking why ordinary people supported this billionaire (allegedly) conman, asking 'What created an opening for Trump'. It was put down to racism and nativism with Trump's talk of 'exported jobs, soaring drug costs' and elite political corruption being played minimised. His rallies were – indeed still are – 'clearly designed to Hoover up long-simmering frustrations'. (p. 181)

Although he comes from a radically different place than the BBC's Jon Sopel, Taibbi also minimises Charlottesville and Trump's response and criticises other reporters for 'calling out' Trump, singling out Jim Acosta in particular. (p. 132) Where he goes completely over the top, however, is in his characterisation of the reporting of the Russia Collusion or 'Russiagate' story as being 'many orders of magnitude more stupid than any in the recent past, WMD included'. (p. 236) He acknowledges that the WMD scam lead 'to over a hundred thousand deaths and trillions in lost taxpayer dollars', but as an instance of 'journalistic failure . . . WMD was a pimple compared to Russiagate'. (p. 255) And he follows this up with an appendix comparing Fox News's Sean Hannity with MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, who he describes as 'a depressingly exact mirror of Hannity'. (p. 258) Whatever criticisms one might have regarding her recent political

trajectory, you cannot seriously condemn Maddow, the author of *Drift* (2012) and more recently *Blowout* (2019), as no better than a Murdoch slime like Hannity. What Taibbi has done is allow his absolutely spot-on indictment of the liberal media to blind him to the enormity of Trump and the threat that his MAGA movement poses. His minimising of Trump's racism and nativism, for example, does not take into account the impact this has on the communities that he has targeted. One can go so far with Taibbi and indeed learn a lot from him, but in the end resisting Trump is necessary and urgent.