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The End of Journalism

Sometime in 2008, journalism as we knew it died, and advocacy media took its place.

By Victor Davis Hanson

There have always been media biases and prejudices. Everyone knew that Walter Cronkite, from his gilded throne at CBS news, helped to alter the course of the Vietnam War, when, in the post-Tet depression, he prematurely declared the war unwinnable. Dan Rather's career imploded when he knowingly promulgated a forged document that impugned the service record of George W. Bush. We've known for a long time — from various polling, and records of political donations of journalists themselves, as well as surveys of public perceptions — that the vast majority of journalists identify themselves as Democratic, and liberal in particular.

Yet we have never quite seen anything like the current media infatuation with Barack Obama, and its collective desire not to raise key issues of concern to the American people. Here were four areas of national interest that were largely ignored.

CAMPAIGN FINANCING

For years an axiom of the liberal establishment was the need for public campaign financing — and the corrosive role of private money in poisoning the election process. The most prominent Republican who crossed party lines to ensure the passage of national public campaign financing was John McCain — a maverick stance that cost him dearly among conservatives who resented bitterly federal interference in political expression.

In contrast, Barack Obama, remember, promised that he would accept both public funding and the limitations that went along with it, and would “aggressively pursue an agreement with the Republican nominee to preserve a publicly financed general election.” Then in June 2008, Obama abruptly reneged, bowing out entirely from government financing, the first presidential nominee in the general election to do that since the system was created in 1976.

Obama has now raised over \$600 million, by far the largest campaign chest in American political history. In many states he enjoys a four-to-one advantage in campaign funding — most telling in his scheduled eleventh-hour, 30-minute specials that will not be answered by the publicly financed and poorer McCain campaign.

The story that the media chose to ignore was not merely the Obama about-face on public financing, or even the enormous amounts of money that he has raised — some of it under dubious circumstances involving foreign donors, prepaid credit cards, and false names. Instead, they were absolutely quiet about a historic end to liberal support for public financing.

For all practical purposes, public financing of the presidential general election is now *dead*. No Republican will ever agree to it again. No Democrat can ever again dare to defend a system destroyed by Obama. All future worries about the dangers of big money and big politics will fall on deaf ears.

Surely, there will come a time when the Democratic Party, whether for ethical or practical reasons, will sorely regret dismantling the very safeguards that for over three decades it had insisted were critical for the

survival of the republic.

Imagine the reaction of the New York Times or the Washington Post had John McCain renounced his promise to participate in public campaign financing, proceeded instead to amass \$600 million and outraise the publicly financed Barack Obama four-to-one, and begun airing special 30-minute unanswered infomercials during the last week of the campaign.

THE VP CANDIDATES

We know now almost all the details of Sarah Palin's pregnancies, whether the trooper who tasered her nephew went to stun or half stun, the cost of her clothes, and her personal expenses — indeed, almost everything except how a mother of so many children gets elected councilwoman, mayor, and governor, routs an entrenched old-boy cadre, while maintaining near record levels of public support.

Yet the American public knows almost nothing of what it should about the extraordinary career of Joe Biden, the 36-year veteran of the Senate. In unprecedented fashion, Biden has simply avoided the press for most of the last two months, confident that the media instead would deconstruct almost every word of “good looking” Sarah Palin's numerous interviews with mostly hostile interrogators.

By accepted standards of behavior, Biden has sadly proven wanting. He has committed almost every classical sin of character — plagiarism, false biography, racial insensitivity, and serial fabrication. And because of media silence, we don't know whether he was kidding when he said America would not need to burn coal, or that Hezbollah was out of Lebanon, or that FDR addressed the nation on television as president in 1929 (surely a record for historical fictions in a single thought), or that the public would turn sour on Obama once he was challenged by our enemies abroad. In response, the media reported that the very public Sarah Palin was avoiding the press while the very private Joe Biden shunned interviews and was chained to the teleprompter.

For two months now, the media reaction to Biden's inanity has been simply “that's just ol' Joe, now let's turn to Palin,” who, in the space of two months, has been reduced from a popular successful governor to a backwoods creationist, who will ban books and champion white secessionist causes. The respective coverage of the two candidates is ironic in a variety of ways, but in one especially — almost every charge against Palin (that she is under wraps, untruthful, and inept) was applicable only to Biden.

So we are about to elect a vice president about whom we know only that he has been around a long time, but little else — and nothing at all *why* exactly Joe Biden says the most astounding and often lunatic things.

Imagine the reaction of Newsweek or Time had moose-hunting mom Sarah Palin claimed FDR went on television to address the nation as President in 1929, or warned America that our enemies abroad would test John McCain and that his response would result in a radical loss of his popularity at home.

THE PAST AS PRESENT

In 2004, few Americans knew Barack Obama. In 2008, they may elect him. Surely his past was of more interest than his present serial denials of it. Whatever the media's feelings about the current Barack Obama, there should have been some story that the Obama of 2008 is radically different from the Obama who was largely consistent and predictable for the prior 30 years.

Each Obama metamorphosis in itself might be attributed to the normal evolution to the middle, as a candidate shifts from the primary to the general election. But in the case of Obama, we witnessed not a shift, but a complete transformation to an entirely new persona — in almost every imaginable sense of the word. Name an issue — FISA, NAFTA, guns, abortion, capital punishment, coal, nuclear power, drilling, Iran, Jerusalem, the surge — and Obama's position today is not that of just a year ago.

Until 2005, Obama was in communication with Bill Ayers by e-mail and phone, despite Ayers reprehensible braggadocio in 2001 that he remained an unrepentant terrorist. Rev. Wright was an invaluable spiritual advisor — until spring of 2008. Father Pfleger was praised as an intimate friend in 2004 — and vanished off the radar in 2008. The media might have asked not just why these rather dubious figures were once so close to, and then so distant from, Obama; but *why* were there so many people like Rashid Khalidi and Tony Rezko in Obama's past in the first place?

Behind the Olympian calm of Obama, there was always a rather disturbing record of extra-electoral politics completely ignored by the media. If one were disturbed by the present shenanigans of ACORN or the bizarre national call for Americans simply to skip work on election day to help elect Obama (who would pay for that?), one would only have to remember that in 1996 Obama took the extraordinary step of suing to eliminate all his primary rivals by challenging their petition signatures of mostly African-American voters.

In 2004, there was an even more remarkable chain of events in which the sealed divorce records of both his principle primary rival Blair Hull and general election foe, Jack Ryan, were mysteriously leaked, effectively ensuring Obama a Senate seat without serious opposition. These were not artifacts of a typical political career, but extraordinary events in themselves that might well have shed light on present campaign tactics — and yet largely remain unknown to the American people.

Imagine the reaction of CNN or NBC had John McCain's pastor and spiritual advisor of 20 years been revealed as a white supremacist who damned a multiracial United States, or had he been a close acquaintance until 2005 of an unrepentant terrorist bomber of abortion clinics, or had McCain himself sued to eliminate congressional opponents by challenging the validity of African-American voters who signed petitions, or had both his primary and general election senatorial rivals imploded once their sealed divorce records were mysteriously leaked.

SOCIALISM?

The eleventh-hour McCain allegations of Obama's advocacy for a share-the-wealth socialism were generally ignored by the media, or if covered, written off as neo-McCarthyism. But there were two legitimate, but again neglected, issues.

The first was the nature of the Obama tax plan. The problem was not merely upping the income tax rates on those who made \$250,000 (or was it \$200,000, or was it \$150,000, or both, or none?), but its aggregate effect in combination with lifting the FICA ceilings on high incomes on top of existing Medicare contributions and often high state income taxes.

In other words, Americans who live in high-tax, expensive states like a New York or California could in theory face collective confiscatory tax rates of 65 percent or so on much of their income. And, depending on the nature of Obama's proposed tax exemptions, on the other end of the spectrum we might well see almost half the nation's wage earners pay no federal income tax at all.

Questions arise, but were again not explored: How wise is it to exempt one out of every two income earners from any worry over how the nation gathers its federal income tax revenue? And when credits are added to the plan, are we now essentially not cutting or raising taxes, but simply diverting wealth from those who pay into the system to those who do not?

A practical effect of socialism is often defined as curbing productive incentives by ensuring the poorer need not endanger their exemptions and credits by seeking greater income; and discouraging the wealthy from seeking greater income, given that nearly two-thirds of additional wealth would be lost to taxes. Surely that discussion might have been of interest to the American people.

Second, the real story was not John McCain's characterization of such plans, but both inadvertent, and serial descriptions of them, past and present, by Barack Obama himself. "Spreading the wealth around" gains currency when collated to past interviews in which Obama talked at length about, and in regret at, judicial impracticalities in accomplishing his own desire to redistribute income. "Tragedy" is frequent in the Obama vocabulary, but largely confined to two contexts: the tragic history of the United States (e.g., deemed analogous to that of Nazi Germany during World War II), and the tragic unwillingness or inability to use judicial means to correct economic inequality in non-democratic fashion.

In this regard, remember Obama's revealing comment that he was interested only in "fairness" in increasing capital-gains taxes, despite the bothersome fact that past moderate reductions in rates had, in fact, brought in greater revenue to government. Again, fossilized ideology trumps empiricism.

Imagine the reaction of NPR and PBS had John McCain advocated something like abolishing all capital gains taxes, or repealing incomes taxes in favor of a national retail sales tax.

The media has succeeded in shielding Barack Obama from journalistic scrutiny. It thereby irrevocably destroyed its own reputation and forfeited the trust that generations of others had so carefully acquired. And it will never again be trusted to offer candid and nonpartisan coverage of presidential candidates.

Worse still, the suicide of both print and electronic journalism has ensured that, should Barack Obama be elected president, the public will only then learn what they should have known far earlier about their commander-in-chief — but in circumstances and from sources they may well regret.

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