

The Breach 201: Why Trump's Media Vendetta Is Scarier than Nixon's

Lindsay: Welcome to the first episode of season two of "The Breach", your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in the era of Trump. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Before we get underway, I want to take a sec to congratulate Nora Hurley, our producer, on her recent move from Buffalo to New York City.

The so-called fake news media is Trump's evergreen excuse for his unpopularity. As his approval rating trends downward, he swings harder and harder against the press at home and overseas. The President's top spokespeople endlessly remind us that anyone who criticizes the President will be hit back 10 times harder, which is slowly normalizing the authoritarian idea that the president punishes his critics. Our guest today is historian Rick Perlstein, the author of several celebrated books on the conservative movement including "Nixonland" and "The Invisible Bridge". He's here today to compare Nixon's relationship to the media with Donald Trump's. Rick argues that Trump is a creature of the republican party that Nixon created. Rick, welcome to the program.

Rick Perlstein: Pleasure to be back.

Lindsay: It's become almost a truism that Trump's dealings with the media are Nixonian. What do people mean by that?

Rick Perlstein: Right. Richard Nixon was really the first modern American politician to frame the press as, in Trump's terms, "an enemy of the people". He didn't use those terms publicly, privately of course he did even worse, but he might as well have. Well, this is how his vice president put it in a very famous speech in 1969. That's kind of a difference between Trump and Nixon. Nixon sent out surrogates to do the really nasty stuff publicly. It was a real big watershed in November of 1969 when Richard Nixon was so angry at all three networks for doing immediate response to a big Vietnam speech that he did in November of 1969, that was the famous "Silent Majority" speech, that he just decided it was time to go nuclear. It was actually Pat Buchanan's idea to send out Spiro Agnew, who was this vice president who really had no public profile whatsoever until this point. He gave this speech that basically got covered live.

The White House guilted all three networks into covering it live. Using that sort of manipulation of the press in order to attack the press. He criticized, and I'm quoting here, "A small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed in one way or another their hostility to what he had to say. It was obvious that their minds were made up in advance," which of course it wasn't obvious. "Now I want to make myself perfectly clear. I'm not asking for government censorship or any other kind of censorship. I'm asking whether a form of censorship already exists when the news that 40 million Americans receive each night is determined by a handful of men responsible only to their corporate employers and is filtered through a handful of commentators who admit to their own set of biases."

This was brewing for a long time. The coverage of the riots of at the Democratic Convention the previous summer were criticized in much the same terms, but wasn't that a clever formulation? Right? That it's the media-

Lindsay: There's certainly a grain of truth in it, that there really is a corporate lead that is very cozy with power brokers.

Rick Perlstein: Right. This is, again, the big difference between how the Nixon White House did things and the Trump White House did things was the Nixon White House was able to frame things that just got so much more leverage from this kind of anger. With Richard Nixon, of course, it goes back quite a bit further than that. He was always angry that this so-called media elite sided with Alger Hiss, who was the very distinguished state department official who was accused of being a communist in the 1940's. Richard Nixon, as a member of the House on American Activities Committee, investigated him. Eventually got him to commit perjury, remember, the perjury trap is a big one, and so his Chambers case was kind of like the big political melodrama of the 1940's. He had decided way back then that the liberals and the press and the liberals in the press and the press who were liberal would never forgive him for that.

Even though he, in a lot of ways throughout his career, was a media darling, certainly in the pages of Los Angeles Times, which was a very powerful newspaper in Southern California where he came up, but in 1962, when he lost the Governor's race, they covered him in a more objective way. They covered him basically fairly instead of leaning on the scales in his favor. He was so disillusioned by this that he gave a very famous speech after he lost in 1962.

He was drunk. He had just lost the governor's race two years after losing the presidential race, and his press secretary begged him to go down and at least give some kind of concession statement, which is supposed to be gracious. Instead, he very famously said, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference. I hope the press recognize that they have right and responsibility, if they're against the candidate, give him the shaft," which was very foul stuff for the time. Also recognize if they give him the shaft, "Put one lowly reporter on the campaign who will report what the candidate says now and then."

He was on to something, right? He was onto something that a lot of people in the 1960's, in which the fashionable way the wind was blowing was in the direction of these movements of liberation, in a lot of ways were challenging the ways of thinking of Middle America. That the press seemed to be on the side of these liberation movements, which was very alienating for the people that Richard Nixon labeled the Silent Majority who really felt condescended to that their values were not considered moral anymore. That the moral people were the people who were causing these disruptions. He had something very potent, and of course he wasn't the only person during this period who was making these gestures, but he was the best. He was the most effective, and he influenced basically every conservative politician since.

Lindsay: It is interesting how that rhetoric of condescension comes in. It's so frustrating and potent, because there are fundamental moral disagreements in our society, and yet one side has decided that criticism is automatically condescending.

Rick Perlstein: Right. In a way this gets to some very basic, almost cognitively ingrained, ways of thinking that determine whether you're a left-wing person or a right-wing person. If the press in an enlightenment-based society is all about telling truth to power, it's a disruptive force. If you're a person who values stability over disruption, then you're going to be feel condescended to by people who think that your very longing for stability is somehow morally suspect.

Lindsay: How do we bring that out into a healthier kind of dialogue in which people can say, "Well, I value stability, and that's a thing, and I'm prepared to argue for it. You're going to argue for change and confrontation, and we can actually exchange ideas productively," instead of them feeling like they're being condescended to?

Rick Perlstein: I think, in a sense, it's structurally very difficult if not impossible for people who basically believe all is well in the world and have a Panglossian view of certainly America to be thinking about a mode of citizenship and patriotism which demands more accountability for America. To me, for journalists, for reporters, for commentators it, as I always put it, tell the truth as you see it without fear or favor, and devil take the high most. Basically put up the fact there's really no way that if you're doing your job right you're not going to get that charge hurled at you. Not to negotiate with yourself and not be intimidated by that fact. That that's just a natural part of being a truth teller, and that truth telling in that sense is an enlightenment value that will always be a challenging thing to people whose values are different than the enlightenment.

Lindsay: One of the really disturbing things about Trump is that he seems to be have these sort of para-paramilitaries online, and actual budding paramilitaries in the streets to enforce his will against journalists and anybody else who crosses him. Did Nixon have those kinds of rank and file operatives out the world enforcing his will, or is this a new development?

Rick Perlstein: No. He actually did have basically thugs doing that kind of intimidation for him whether it was a physical intimidation. There was recently a memo that was brought to prominence, I think it might've been discovered in the archives, but it didn't basically say anything we didn't already know, that he was sending out people to rough up people like Daniel Ellsberg, who wasn't necessarily a journalist but he was persona non grata because he had leaked the Pentagon Papers to journalists.

Lindsay: He was journalist adjacent.

Rick Perlstein: Right he was journalist adjacent, so in that case it was outright physical thuggery. He also, Richard Nixon, had a political enforcer named Chuck Colson. who was a really nasty guy who said he would run over his own grandmother to reelect

Richard Nixon. That's a quote. Who was doing things like showing up in the offices of William Paley, who was the CEO of CBS, and basically intimidating him with the power of the White House. He was going to people like Katharine Graham, who was the publisher at The Washington Post, and threatening The Post with losing their licenses, which were very lucrative, to operate local television stations if they didn't play ball.

Very early in the presidential term of Richard Nixon in 1969, one of his then White House officials who later became a reelection campaign official who went to jail, Jeb Stuart Magruder, for Watergate wrote a very detailed memo, it's called the "Shotgun and Rifle Memo", in which he laid out basically 12 ways to use the power of the executive branch to intimidate the press. We had Roger Ailes who also was a Nixon operative, who was talking about coming up with some sort of independent media infrastructure that was loyal to the White House. We had Patrick Buchanan who's been playing this game for a very, very long time, and of course started his career as a journalist, as an editorial writer, although one who was also a conduit for smears from J. Edgar Hoover against people like Martin Luther King. Pat Buchanan was talking about the same thing: "We need to come up with our own think tanks. We need to come up with our own media institutions."

Whether it was physical intimidation, which we see evidence of from the Nixon White House, or call bureaucratic or legal intimidation, this was serious business. It wasn't invented by Donald J. Trump.

- Lindsay: Then you've got Roger Stone, the resident chaos demon, who cut his teeth in the Nixon era and is still sowing that kind of chaos today.
- Rick Perlstein: That's right. He came out of that world, and his introduction to Republican politics was a dirty trick on behalf of the Nixon reelection campaign in the New Hampshire primary. People like that were not anathema to the Republican firmament. The rose in the Republican firmament. Roger Stone was running California for Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign in 1976.
- Lindsay: It's interesting how the New York Times just reported recently that unnamed White House aides are already threatening to thwart Time Warner's -- CNN's parent company -- merger with AT&T if CNN keeps giving them unfavorable coverage.
- Rick Perlstein: That's the Nixon playbook. That's the shotgun and the rifle. When Jeb Magruder was talking about, he said, "We're basically using a shotgun against the press," which means kind of like a high level sort of retail attacks on the press, "when we should be using a rifle." He meant we need to use these pinprick intimidation tactics. One of them was threatening the business interests of the people who own the media.
- Lindsay: Which does seem a lot more efficient, because if there was just one of these big regulatory cases where the DOJ stepped in and just made a lot of trouble, cost them a few hundred thousand dollars, the companies involved, there would be huge, chilling effects rippling all over the media food chain.

Rick Perlstein: Isn't that how mafias always operate? They are terrorists. The idea is that you create examples as public as possible. You make sure that they die in the streets.

Lindsay: Have you felt, just in the last couple weeks, that the pitch of Trump's hostility towards the media has increased dramatically? It was always bad from the very beginning of his career as a casino magnate even and as a candidate it was bad, but it seems like there's been a kind of inflection point after the fake news gif that Trump circulated where it's just become fever-pitched and really scary.

Rick Perlstein: That's true. Before addressing that, let me actually rewind a little bit and make the same point about Trump that I made about Richard Nixon. That these people are products of the very media they attack. In Trump's case, obviously his ability to get in the media and use it as a lever for his own sense of himself is absolutely crucial to his rise. When it comes to the presidential campaign, without CNN chasing after ratings by basically becoming Trump TV during the 2016 presidential election, it's inconceivable he'd be president. Just like it's inconceivable that Richard Nixon ever would've become a senator in California or a congressman before that without the Los Angeles Times. It's really the withdrawal of consent in the media that freaks these people out rather than the media as such.

Lindsay: You think Trump is basically sort of a spurned lover of CNN essentially?

Rick Perlstein: He's a spurned lover of CNN. Exactly.

Lindsay: The New York Times never gave him that kind of deference.

Rick Perlstein: Right. Now he's an abusive lover. The gif with CNN, which justifiably people are horrified by, especially since it really seems like one of his ugliest cretins in the White House, Dan Scavino the Head of Social Media who used to be Trump's caddy, seems to troll Reddit. Troll in the sense of trawling. Trawls for trolls. Reddit's defining white-supremacist lunacy in order to pass onto the president. The way this CNN video went down really is a message from, as they say, the highest levels that it's open season on the media not just in terms of criticism but possibly onto physical abuse. That does seem to be a watershed. All of us who work in this field being critical of Trump or even objective about Trump know what it's like to have this invective hurled at us. That's the challenge.

I don't want to be a whiner, but it really makes me think twice about what I write, which is awful and horrifying, and really makes me glad that I live in a building that has a gate around it for the sake of my family. It's real. People have been ... Who's the guy who wrote recently on a series of posts on Twitter about what happened to him?

Lindsay: I was just going to ask you about that. Jared Yates Sexton.

Rick Perlstein: Yeah. How did that go down? Remind me.

Lindsay: It was just awful. He's got a piece in Politico that just went up yesterday about the reaction. Basically he said, "Hey, you know, HanAssoholeSolo," the guy who was the author of the gif, he just noticed that, "Hey, know how, he's got a bunch of hardcore anti-Semitic things in his back catalog essentially. It was a particular expose or anything that was in dispute. It was like, "This same guy, this same poster, this same account, created a bunch of overtly anti-Semitic stuff. Then a bunch of anti-Semites descended on him and abused him in extremely anti-Semitic terms because they were angry that they mentioned that their guy was an anti-Semite, which I'm still trying to wrap my mind around.

Rick Perlstein: It's not about logic. It's about domination. This guy's an enemy, so he's going to be treated like an enemy. Like I say, going back to the enlightenment values, the idea is that there's a neutral field, the Republic of Letters, in which all the arguments are entertained for basically on their merits, that's the ideal, unattached to authority of the person who makes them. If you're saying, "This person is hurting my guy, and I don't care if it's true or not. I'm going to hurt you for hurting me," that's a different set of values that are totally antithetical to the enlightened values that basically modern journalism is founded upon.

Lindsay: It's funny because the term fake news itself has become kind of a Rovian attack on the opponent's strengths. Remember around the time of the election, the left or in the center were very concerned about out-and-out frauds and fabrications from Moldovan teenagers and pizza-gate and that kind of stuff being circulated as fake news and complained about it and the influence it might've had on throwing the election. Then Trump turned around and used fake news to apply to stuff that's unquestionably true, that even ... His partisans are ... Nobody's denying that HanAssholeSolo created anti-Semitic gifs, and yet that's called fake news.

Rick Perlstein: Not even getting to the issue of collusion between Putin and Trump, that seems to be one of the masterful things that the Kremlin does. The disinformation is all about dissolving any neutral standpoint by which truth can be evaluated by hijacking the very terms of description. Fake news equals bad.

Lindsay: People don't feel safe anywhere.

Rick Perlstein: Feel safe basically. People don't feel safe in terms of-

Lindsay: Asserting things.

Rick Perlstein: Ontologically safe.

Lindsay: Physically safe or ontologically safe.

Rick Perlstein: What's real.

Lindsay: Nothing is safe to assert or point to or conjecture.

Rick Perlstein: As someone who reads a lot of bold media, one of the most enriching civic

experiences I've had this year is reading Sidney Blumenthal's so far two volumes, eventually four volume, biography of Abraham Lincoln. Interestingly enough, the press then was avowedly partisan. All newspapers were organs of political parties, but at the same time, if you could beat someone in a debate using the techniques of rhetoric and using their own words against them or getting to admit they were wrong or humiliating them by catching them in contradictions, they kind of stayed beat. There was that kind of discourse ethics in place that words were very important. They were very sacred. Abraham Lincoln certainly treated language almost like a religion. Truth and falsehood were values, even in a highly partisan era, that could be agreed upon a way that has become less possible. In an era, ironically, in which we don't have partisan media, at least the mainstream media is not explicitly partisan, but we still basically can't stage a debate in which someone who objectively and logically loses can count themselves as a loser and feel shamed for that.

By shame, I mean when Abraham Lincoln or someone else beat someone in a platform debate, you'd see them crying. They would almost literally be retreating with their tail between their legs. There's so much shameful among the people who think like the Roger Stones of the world or Donald Trump, that truth among Trumpies counts for nothing.

Lindsay: What does that mean if we can't even discuss things in logical ways anymore? What's left in terms of people who disagree with each other and how they're going to deal with that?

Rick Perlstein: Were it the case that we can't agree on anything, then that would be an apocalyptic situation, but I don't think we're quite there yet. It was very interesting to see a conspiracy committed against the truth in 2002 and 2003 by the Bush White House. We remember how Dick Cheney would make something up about the intelligence involving Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. He would feed it to Judith Miller at the New York Times. It would be printed in the New York Times, and then he's go on the Sunday show saying, "This is true because it was in the New York Times." This was the kind of lying that got us into the war in Iraq, but we still all understand that the Bush administration lied us into the war and the Iraq War was a disaster. That's pretty much I think a consensus of most of society.

Truth can still out. I think that shows with Donald Trump's approval ratings. That shows the fact that people overwhelmingly say Donald Trump should stop using Twitter, which is his main vector for lies.

Lindsay: The epistemic chaos generally.

Rick Perlstein: I think, in a lot of ways, Twitter the medium is the message. When you have this mode of communication in which really the only way to get across a message is to blurt, it create a discourse situation made of blurts. It's just a machine for miscommunication, for misunderstanding, for a kind of gladiatorial combat situation with discourse. In a lot of ways the medium is the message, but we also have people like you, the kind of stuff that you do, that are flourishing in this long-

form stuff. We have the Indivisible Resistance generally that is getting out very powerful messages using the disintermediated tools of videos, of confrontations between congressmen and their constituents. We're not that bad yet.

Lindsay: Speaking in the old-fashioned language of vote counting and policy proposals and very empirically based stuff. They're doing incredibly well. How many groups do they have? 5,000 or something like that nationwide?

Rick Perlstein: Right. I'd compare that to the Watergate situation where people became very civically engaged. There was an equal and opposite or even greater reaction to the action by Richard Nixon. People were disgusted, and they did something about it. For a while, and maybe this'll happen post-Trump, the forces of deception were really knocked back on their heels. If you look at the world of 1974, 1975, 1976, you have the Church Committee Hearings in the Senate, which completely blew the lid off the abuses and the deceptions of the Intelligence Committee. You had campaign finance reform. You had a real culture of investigative journalism. I don't think that suddenly we're holding up our hands in surrender and defeat. I don't think the situation for communication generally is in fact a chaotic one. I think it's a war of position, and we're not doing all that bad.

Lindsay: Do you think that Trump's self-isolation from the truth and the facts could ultimately be his downfall? I mean, his attacks against the media are basically a way of insulating himself from all criticism and all actual, real information and data from the world that he doesn't like. How sustainable is that when you're governing a country?

Rick Perlstein: That's a really important point. In order to convince someone, you have to start with a ground. A set of axioms that they can buy. If you can't buy the axioms on which he's basically basing his lies upon, then you really can't go along with that he's saying. That's kind of a long-term process, but as the kind of salvation that he promises to deliver to his constituents isn't delivered, he becomes more and more... harder to trust. I think we really are seeing that in the polls when we see 51% in the latest polls of white, working-class voters disapproving of Trump. When we see his hard, hard-core support going down in the polls. I think that a lot of that, you're right, does come from a fact that he's, in a very visceral sense, out of touch from reality. He can't even find axioms upon which to build something that people can believe.

He can say, "Fake news", when people attack, say, him for lying about job statistics, but if you don't have a job ... Ronald Reagan had a great line about this: "If your neighbor doesn't have a job, it's a recession. If you don't have a job, it's a depression." That's the kind of truth that may have, in the long term, more blunt force impact than the kind of sketchy sort of hall of mirrors stuff that Trump is trading in.

Lindsay: One thing though that I find very dismaying is that the Republican establishment, particularly congressmen and senators, are not doing anything to check Trump yet in any serious way. They'll scold him for his manners on Twitter, and that seems to

be about it.

Rick Perlstein: By the same token, they have an axiom to build upon, and that's really their support in the polls. They're losing that. Yes, they're morally shameful. This can't be blamed on Trump. This is a devolution in the Republican party that dates back to Nixon. A lot of ways the Republican party is the party of Watergate and not the party of Goldwater. Goldwater, in this sense, being someone who really did shoot from the hip and was allergic to basically un-plain speech and deception. He was a pretty darn honest guy. He said what he thought, and that's why he lost in a landslide. When we get to the next generation of conservatives, especially the 1970's and the new right, which was involved in basically institution-building around direct-mail communication that was based on sensationalist lies, "The liberal educrats are teaching their children that it's okay to be a cannibal and a wife-swapper," in order to raise money for the National Conservative Political Action Committee, that's a culture on the Republican side. Hopefully, if the fever ever breaks, it may be because basically Trump places too much stress on the system.

Lindsay: It might also be that the limits of opportunism might elapse. If he fails to bring both Obamacare repeal and tax reform, the Republicans may stop humoring him so much even regardless of what's going on in the polls.

Rick Perlstein: That's right. I think the cynicism of the Republican Party is they know, and every smart Republican elite conservative knows, that what they're selling isn't popular and has never been popular. That shredding of even middle class solid entitlements, there's no way that they could sell that if they were just saying what they actually intended. It's always been in the figure of either gutter-snipes or Panglossian, smiling optimists like Reagan or someone like Trump that they see as a viable front man to slip this in under the radar. When they saw Trump, like, "Wow. Here's this guy who can really distract them by flashing these shiny objects in front of the hoi polloi while we slip Obamacare repeal and tax repeal under the wire when they're not looking." Once that proves ineffective, I wonder how useful Trump will be to them. He basically didn't deliver what they thought they were buying.

Lindsay: It does concern me that tribalism is so ascendant that it's not policy that people are voting for when they vote Republican. When you actually poll people on the various sub-things that voting Republican entails, they have very weak or limited support. What people are really buying, what people are really voting for, is the idea of being a tribe of white, patriarchal, domineering individuals.

Rick Perlstein: That's tricky, and of course that goes back in American history. We've had periods of extreme political tribalism before, and one of the ways the Democrats have prevailed, although can't be glib about this either because a lot of that was backed by a lot of racism too, was basically we back this tribe, i.e., the New Deal Democrats, because they're the people who have given us secure jobs and secure homes and protected us from the depredations of the workplace. I'm not really giving up on that while we struggle for an anti-racist polity too.

Lindsay: That's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for coming on the program.

Rick Perlstein: Cheers. Be well.

Lindsay: You too. This week's recommended reading is the piece we talked about in the interview by Jared Yates Sexton entitled "I Found HanAssholeSolo's Anti-Semitic Posts and Then the Death Threats Started." You can check that out in Politico. It's part of a burgeoning genre of post-mortem to right-wing media pile-ons of Trump-critical journalists. It's notable not just for the volume and vitriol of the abuse heaped on Sexton personally, but for the globally anti-press ideology of his tormentors. Some call for an outright slaughter of journalists or a journo-caust. Get it? Sexton even stumbled across a sub-Reddit with thousands of members called "Physical Removal" that's dedicated to fantasies of removing journalists and leftists. Disturbing reading but well worth your time. That's it for recommended reading.

"The Breach" is produced by Rewire Radio. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti. Our theme music is "Dark Alliance", performed by Darcy James Argue's Secret Society. I'm your host Lindsay Beyerstein. Tweet your suggestions, comments and questions to @Beyerstein, B-E-Y-E-R-S-T-E-I-N, on Twitter. See you next week.