Who’s in charge here anyway?

by James Bowman

The biggest mistake conservatives make is to suppose that Democrats control the media. In fact, the power relationship is the other way around: the media control the Democrats. That, I would argue, is the legacy of Watergate. Since then, the media’s self-conceit that they brought down the Nixon presidency, though not quite true, has been true enough for them to reap the benefit and, with it, the right to lead the Democratic caucus when in opposition. That’s why the opposition has so often taken the uniquely media-friendly form of what Bill Clinton once called “the politics of personal destruction”—and Oliver North before him called “the criminalization of policy differences.”

The result has been that the media have also, to a greater or lesser extent, damaged or destroyed all subsequent presidencies as well—except that of President Obama, who was so far their creature as to make plausible Joe Biden’s boast that his administration was scandal-free. Of course the former vice-president is himself little more than a media sock-puppet, so he naturally adopts the media’s point of view, which is that scandal can only be what they say it is. With that power in their pocket, they could make anyone scandal free, even Joe himself, who doubtless looks for similar treatment to that of his former boss as a reward for being so compliant.
At any rate, he is already getting it. Just look at today’s New York Times headline: “Biden Faces Conflict of Interest Questions That Are Being Promoted by Trump and Allies.” In that sentence, “That Are Being Promoted by Trump and Allies” is what, if you are as old as I am, your English teacher used to call a “restrictive” or a “defining” relative clause—which means that the “Questions” in question are not, in the headline writer’s view (or, by implication, that of the article itself) real Questions, Questions independent of who is raising them, which would otherwise be an incidental matter. No, they are only “Trump and Allies” Questions, “Promoted” in their own interest rather than raised, as decent folks would raise them, and therefore safely to be disregarded by all right-thinking Times readers. They need only to be told that those dastardly Republicans have now stooped so low as to try to tar with scandal one belonging to the apodictically scandal-free party.

Now politicians compete with each other for headlines by lending their names and reputations to the kind of conspiracy theories and other hidden knowledge that are the media’s bread and butter, though they are utterly destructive to the process of governing. Bernie Sanders was doing it as long ago as 1976, when he “floated a conspiracy theory about the U.S. government orchestrating domestic bombings for political purposes . . . suggesting that government agencies were behind a string of attempted bombings across the country.” But that was when he was running for governor of Vermont and such speculations were still mostly frowned on where the writ of the national media ran. No more. Now the Democrats of the Senate Judiciary committee allege the most appalling crimes against Attorney General Barr to his face, in a forum supposedly devoted to congressional oversight as traditionally understood, and the media only show where such outlandish ideas come from by congratulating them for it, implicitly if not explicitly.
And, of course, even worse things continue to be said about the man who appointed him, whose toady Mr. Barr is reckoned to be merely because he repeats Mr. Mueller’s conclusion that the president is not guilty of the “collusion” with Russia that the media have been alleging against him for over two years. Of course the media, touched upon the point of honor as to their own truthfulness, will be duly grateful for their Democratic creatures who so vehemently defend them, even at the cost of looking like idiots—even as idiots such as Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI), who yesterday accused the attorney general of lying to Congress on the basis of nothing more substantial than a mendacious headline in The Washington Post.

If any Democrat may be supposed to think for herself and not to outsource her opinions to the media, it surely must be Nancy Pelosi. Mustn’t it? She, after all, is (according to the media) almost single-handedly restraining the zealots of anti-Trumpery in her caucus from the potentially suicidal course of initiating impeachment proceedings against the president in spite of Mr. Mueller’s failure to discover any misdemeanors, let alone high crimes, that he has committed. And yet today, Mrs. Pelosi took up Senator Hirono’s slander by claiming to believe that “The attorney general of the United States was not telling the truth to the Congress of the United States. That’s a crime.”

Such imbecility, as Dr. Johnson would say, is not in nature. Not in Mrs. Pelosi’s nature anyway, or else she could hardly have accomplished what she has in her life. No, like Senator Hirono and her fellow Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Madam Speaker is obviously playing to the media gallery. And, like them, she may be expected to be rewarded for it—if only in their muting any criticism of her for declining, so far, to impeach President Trump. Even when, therefore, on strategic grounds the media’s imperatives encounter Democratic resistance, it is clearer than ever that the media are calling the shots.

James Bowman is the author of Honor: A History (Encounter).