



Carl Golden, 12/12/2017 [Archive]

Time to Change the White House Press Briefing

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By Carl Golden

In the immediate aftermath of the resignation of Sean Spicer as White House press secretary, a discussion arose over whether to continue the televised daily press briefings.

The Administration decided to continue them with newly-appointed press secretary Sara Huckabee Sanders behind the podium.

After five months, the time has come to re-visit the issue. The briefings should continue, but the lights, camera, action element should be eliminated.

The entire rationale for the briefings - keeping the media and, through it, the American people informed of an Administration's response to national and international developments as well as to announce major new policy initiatives - has been ignored, cast aside and replaced by argument and confrontation.

The Trump Administration must shoulder much of the responsibility for the sorry state to which the briefings have fallen.

With goofy and demonstrably false assertions that President Trump's inauguration drew the largest crowd in history or that he lost the popular vote because five million illegal immigrants cast ballots, Spicer created an environment of open hostility toward the media and, not surprisingly, a considerable portion of the media responded in kind.

The briefings quickly became theater, distorting their entire purpose and doing a serious disservice to the audience which tuned in out of a genuine desire to gain knowledge and insight into the new Administration.

It's lost its value as a source of information and degenerated into a theater of the absurd starring an ensemble company of reporters who believe viewers are interested in their views and opinions rather than those of the public figures they are assigned to cover.

For many, the television cameras are irresistible. Playing to them overcame the sense of professionalism their occupations demand, leading to preening and intellectual prancing.

Arguing points of view became more important than eliciting information. Reporters who were as ill-mannered as they were ill-informed confronted first Spicer and now Sanders with long-winded soliloquies thinly disguised as questions, oblivious to the level of self-embarrassment they'd attained.

Interrupting Spicer or Sanders in mid-answer and challenging the spokesperson's points has become an end in itself.

If the Administration is to blame for creating the confrontational atmosphere at its very outset, the media shares in it by rising to the bait and engaging in the same kind of push and shove behavior.

The media seems unable to grasp that it is playing into the President's hands by assuming the role that he's assigned to it - that of a band of irresponsible ideologues who can't be trusted to report fairly and accurately to its readers and viewers.

It seems unable to understand as well that the President, with his early morning twitter commentaries, has seized control of the daily narrative. When his Twitter feed hits shortly after dawn, the media spends the day scurrying after it, chasing what Trump wants it to chase.

His constant refrain - "fake news"! - is seen as silly shtick by many, but in light of polling data showing that nearly half the American public believes the media deliberately fabricates reports about the President, it's had an impact.

A series of recent high profile and deeply embarrassing mistakes by both television and print media was quickly seized upon by the President as proof of its perfidy.

Critics used the incidents to renew accusations of sloppy journalism and reporters whose dislike for Trump led them to accept the word of less than reliable sources and blinded them to their professional obligations to accuracy and honesty.

Not surprisingly, the bitterness and hostility has spilled over into the briefing room, exacerbated by those who are driven to use television exposure to demonstrate they will not be cowed or intimidated. Unfortunately, their behavior too often comes across as petty and petulant.

Eliminating live television coverage of the briefings will actually work in the media's favor, freeing reporters to concentrate on pursuing stories without the temptation to play to the camera and impress the home audience with their insight and wisdom.

Coverage will not suffer in the absence of cameras in the briefing room and may actually be enhanced by producing news accounts based on fact and truth rather than theatrics.

The media has lost a good chunk of its credibility and public confidence in it has absorbed a serious hit.

Returning to what it has always done best - ferreting out information, discovering what some want to remain secret and presenting it factually and without a hidden agenda - is crucial.

And, it doesn't require a television camera to do that.

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