

How the Media's 10 Rules of Hate Sow Discord and Make Us Despise One Another

By Matt Taibbi

PICK UP ANY MAJOR NEWSPAPER, OR TURN ON ANY network television news broadcast. The political orientation won't matter. It could be Fox or MSNBC, *The Washington Post* or *The Washington Times*. You'll find virtually every story checks certain boxes.

Call them the 10 rules of hate. After generations of doing the opposite, when unity and conformity were more profitable, the primary product the news media now sells is division.

The problem we (in the media) all have is the commercial structure of the business. To make money, we've had to train audiences to consume news in a certain way. We need you anxious, pre-pissed, addicted to conflict. Moreover we need you to bring a series of assumptions every time you open a paper or turn on your phone, TV, or car radio. Without them, most of what we produce will seem illogical and offensive.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky highlighted how the press "manufactured" public unity by making sure the population was only exposed to a narrow median strip of political ideas, stretching from Republican to Democrat (with the Democrat usually more like an Eisenhower Republican).

The difference now: we encourage full-fledged division on that strip. We've discovered we can sell hate, and the more vituperative the rhetoric, the better. This also serves larger political purposes.

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.

That's not why we do what we do. But it is why we're allowed to operate this way. It boggles the mind that people think they're practicing real political advocacy by watching any major corporate TV channel, be it Fox or MSNBC or CNN. Does anyone seriously believe that powerful people would allow truly

dangerous ideas to be broadcast on TV? The news today is a reality show where you're part of the cast: *America vs. America*, on every channel.

The trick here is getting audiences to think they're punching up, when they're actually punching sideways, at other media consumers just like themselves, who happen to be in a different silo. Hate is a great blinding mechanism. Once you've been in the business long enough, you become immersed in its nuances. If you can get people to accept a sequence of simple, powerful ideas, they're yours forever. The 10 Rules of Hate:

1. THERE ARE ONLY TWO IDEAS

There are only two baskets of allowable opinion: Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, left or right. This is drilled into us at a young age. By the time we hit college, most of us, roughly speaking, will have chosen the political identity we'll stick with for the rest of our lives.

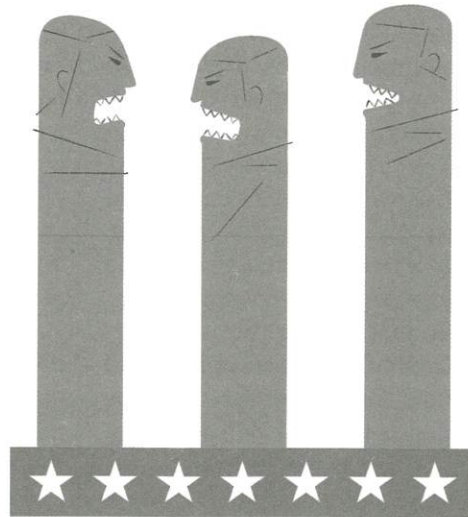
Open up a *New York Times* op-ed page if you want to see the contours. The spectrum of ideas is narrow. There is no Paul Goodman preaching revolutionary pacifism. There's no Thoreau, denouncing the spiritual bankruptcy of our work-centric lives, urging us to reconnect with nature. There are no Twains telling us that to "lodge all power in one party and keep it there is to ensure bad government." There are no Ambrose Bierces or Jonathan Swifts helping us laugh at the rich and powerful and pompous.

There is, however, always a Bret Stephens or a Ross Douthat representing the Republican side, along with the standard lineup of Paul Krugmans and Nick Kristofs repping the blue side. *The Washington Post* has George Will and Max Boot. "Intellectual diversity" in a major news outlet means "someone from both parties."

You will connect with one or the other. It doesn't matter which one.

2. THE TWO IDEAS ARE IN PERMANENT CONFLICT

It was a joke in the Seventies, with *Saturday Night Live's* "Point/Counterpoint." The *Saturday Night Live* news show pitted Dan Aykroyd and Jane Curtin, viciously railing at each other over issues no sane person could possibly care about. "Jane, you ignorant slut!" seethed Aykroyd, in a "debate" about actor Lee Marvin's palimony case. The skit was hilarious precisely because normal human beings don't dress up in suits and ties to yell



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insults at each other over issues that have nothing to do with their actual lives.

This joke became a formal part of the news landscape not long after. It began with shows like *The McLaughlin Group* on PBS, then continued more famously with *Crossfire* on CNN.

Crossfire solidified the idea that politics is a fight and Democrats and Republicans must not only not come to an agreement about things, but debate to the end in a sportslike forum.

A dynamic to the show that was perfectly predicted by *Manufacturing Consent* was that the “from the left” actor usually spent most of the show sniveling and begging for compromise, while the “from the right” actor was always attacking. This sent the message to audiences that lefties were, basically, weenies.

Journalist Jeff Cohen, who would end up cast in a later version of the show and wrote a terrific book about the experience called *Cable News Confidential*, described it this way: “The libs were like boxers who didn’t know how to punch.”

Much like TV shows such as *M*A*S*H*, which habituated viewers to the Orwellian idea that Americans were always at war far away with some Asiatic enemy somewhere (this was why the director of the *M*A*S*H* movie, Robert Altman, hated the popular TV show), *Crossfire* trained us to see our world not just as a binary political landscape but as one permanently steeped in conflict.

“These TV debates are not about ideas or solutions or ideology, but simply partisan sniping and talking-point recitation,” Cohen says now. “I enjoy a genuine right-left philosophical debate, when it’s between serious analysts or journalists—as opposed to Democrat vs. Republican BS artists and party hacks.”

Cohen, in his book, referenced an old joke: What do pro wrestling and the U.S. Senate have in common? Both are dominated by overweight white guys pretending to hurt each other. He said, “The intellectual level of cable news is one step above pro wrestling.”

Today the news is *at* the level of pro wrestling (more on this in a minute). This is one reason we have a WWE performer in the White House. It’s the ultimate synthesis of politics and entertainment, and the core of all of it is the ritual of conflict. Without conflict, there’s no product.

3. HATE PEOPLE, NOT INSTITUTIONS

Trump is not just the perfect media product, he’s a brilliant propaganda mechanism. Though most of our problems are systemic, most of our public debates are referendums on personality. Not many

people can be neutral on the subject of Trump, so we wave him at you all day long.

Meanwhile, a vast universe of systemic issues is ignored. We’ve been steadily narrowing that field of view for decades, particularly in investigative reporting.

In the years after *Manufacturing Consent* came out, big corporate conglomerates bought up most major media outlets. The biggest outlets learned there’s no percentage in doing big exposés against large, litigious companies. Not only will they sue, they’re also certain to pull ads as punishment. Why make trouble?

Also, news audiences had by then been trained not to value this kind of work the way they once had. It was easy enough to sell something else instead—better weather graphics, celebrity news, faster delivery, etc. Papers and stations that had their own correspondents abroad or in Washington increasingly shuttered those offices and relied on the wires. Nobody much cared.

The message to reporters working in big corporate news organizations was that long-form investigative reports targeting big commercial interests weren’t forbidden exactly, just not something your boss was likely to gush over.

When media companies aren’t doing the right stories, they start self-sorting for the wrong ones. You could call this the Worthy and Unworthy Targets principle.

Worthy targets are small-time crooks, restaurant owners with rats, actors, athletes, reality stars, and other minor miscreants. In the Nineties, to this list of worthy subjects, we added two more: Either of the two approved political parties.

Fox struck gold with the Lewinsky story and the Clinton impeachment. Roger Ailes, the new CEO, was learning to cash in by terrifying elderly audiences with images of evil hippie power couple Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Hillary denigrated *baking cookies* while letting her husband run around with his pants around his ankles. Thanks in large part to Lewinsky and the Starr probe—stories that Fox rode to riches as white hat/black hat soap dramas—the network went from launch to top of the cable market in less than six years.

Fox nailed the formula of the modern news story. Forget just doing a cable variety show with conservatives and liberals engaged in ritualized fighting. Why not make the whole news landscape a rooting section?

It would be a while before other networks embraced Fox-style open political slant (and when they did, they did it in a different way). But

Ailes quickly had a lot of imitators when it came to the blame game, because:

4. EVERYTHING IS SOMEONE ELSE'S FAULT

Here's how we create political news content. Something happens, it doesn't matter what. Donald Trump nominates Brett Kavanaugh. A hurricane hits Puerto Rico. A massive humanitarian crisis hits Syria. Whatever it is, our task is to turn it into content, quickly running it through a flow chart:

BAD THING HAPPENS

Can it be blamed on one or the other party?

YES (we do the story)

NO (we don't do the story—see rule #5)

The overwhelming majority of “controversial news stories” involve simple partisan narratives cleaved quickly into hot-button talking points. Go any deeper and you zoom off the flow chart.

We like *easy* stories. This is another reason why Trump has been such a savior to the news business, no matter how much Brian Stetler, CNN's chief media correspondent, wants to deny it. Every narrative involving Trump is perfect: easy enough for the most uneducated audiences to digest (it has to be, because Trump usually has to understand it as well), and prepackaged in crude binary format.

What, for example, about Donald Trump's border policies separating families? Aren't they inhumane, literally concentration camps?

Concentration camps on our border? Yes, say some outlets.

But Trump says it was Obama's policy! Not so, writes *The New York Times*, denouncing Trump in a “fact-check” for “again wrongly claiming Democrats are responsible.”

But, actually, yes, it was the fault of previous administrations, sort of, said *McClatchy*, noting that Obama even had “tent cities.”

No way, says Politifact, a fact-checking site preferred by liberal audiences. Well, sort of, says Obama's former Homeland Security Chief Jeh Johnson, who went on Fox and “freely admitted” the Obama administration did jail families and separate children in what he called a “controversial” policy.

If you weren't watching Fox but MSNBC, which ran “horrible” details of new DHS reports of “just plain inhumane” conduct, you'd be right back where you probably started if you belonged to its target demographic: outraged by a brutal Trump policy.

In the days when we had a public interest standard that mandated companies using the public airwaves to produce at least some nonsociopathic, noncommercial content, or when we had a Fairness Doctrine that required that reporters seek out credible representatives of different viewpoints, all of this back and forth would typically be weighed in one story.

Part of the reporter's job was to put aside the fault question and just describe the factual picture. The thornier the issue, the

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harder that job was. Immigration is a classic example of a story where blame for widespread misery and suffering is almost always diffuse and systemic, and very difficult to lay on any one politician or party.

The best news stories take issues and find a way to make readers think hard about them, especially inviting them to consider how they themselves contribute to the problem. You want people thinking, “I voted for *what*?” Most problems are systemic, bipartisan, and bureaucratic, and most of us, by voting or not voting, paying taxes or not, own a little of most disasters.

But we veer you off that mental alley and instead feed you stories about how someone else did the bad thing, because:

5. NOTHING IS EVERYONE'S FAULT

If both parties have an equal or near-equal hand in causing a social problem, we typically don't cover it. Or better to say: a reporter or two might cover it, but it's never picked up. It doesn't take over a news cycle, doesn't become a thing.

The bloated military budget? Mass surveillance? American support for dictatorial regimes like the cannibalistic Mbasogo family in Equatorial Guinea, the United Arab Emirates, or Saudi Arabia? Our culpability in proxy-nation atrocities in places like Yemen or Palestine? The drone assassination program? Rendition? Torture? The drug war? Absence of access to generic or

Continued on page 4 **HATE**

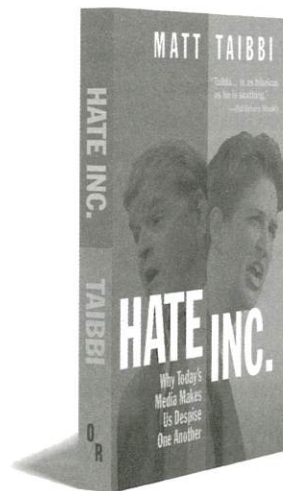
Hate Inc.

Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another

By Matt Taibbi

“Taibbi, a writer of striking intelligence and bold ideas, is as hilarious as he is scathing.”

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Continued from page 3 **HATE**

reimported drugs?

Nah. We just don't do these stories. At least, we don't do them anywhere near in proportion to their social impact. They're hard to sell. And the ability to market a story is everything.

Nomi Prins used to be a banker for Goldman Sachs. She left the industry prior to the 2008 crash and became an important resource for all Americans in the years that followed, helping explain what banks were doing, and why, from an inside perspective.

In Europe and the United States, she zeroed in on programs like Quantitative Easing that overworked the money-producing powers of the state and pumped giant sums of invented cash into the finance sector. She called this a "massive, unprecedented, coordinated effort to provide liquidity to [the] banking systems on a grand scale."

Prins's recent book on the topic, *Collusion*, describes a classic systemic problem, one that ought to have deep interest to "both" camps. For liberals, it's a story about an obscene subsidy of the very rich, while for conservatives, it's a profound story about the corruption of capitalism.

But TV bookers have struggled to figure out how to market Prins. She tells a story of a TV host who quizzed her off-air in a troubled voice.

"He was like, 'I can't tell if you're progressive or conservative.' And I thought, that's good, isn't it?"

In the Trump era, Prins has faced an even steeper uphill climb. Not only did she write a book called *Collusion* that isn't about *that* collusion, she's writing about a topic that really has no direct Trump angle. Although her book does explicitly talk about how central banking problems contributed to political unrest that led to both Brexit and Trump, that topic is not a popular one on lefty media.

When Ali Velshi (an exception, in part because he actually knew something about the issue) interviewed Prins on MSNBC, he made sure to tell viewers that her critique was different from the "secret society" conspiracism right-wingers often toss the Fed's way. He asked her why viewers should care about the issue. She talked about how banks take Fed largesse and use it to buy back their own stock and feed asset bubbles, creating danger and accelerating inequality.

All important—but no partisan angle, not really. The one partisan take you could point to is Trump taking credit for a soaring stock market when a lot of it is central bank dope in the economy's veins.

Nonetheless (and I'm sure it wasn't Velshi doing this), the taglines during the Prins interview were almost all about Trump:

TRUMP SET TO REMAKE FED TO REFLECT POLICIES.

TRUMP LIKELY TO LEAVE LASTING FINGERPRINTS ON FED.

AUTHOR: TRUMP'S FED MOVES COULD LEAVE GLOBE DEVASTATED.

"If it's not either for or against Trump, you don't get airtime," Prins says. "You kind of have to pick one side."

This is the WWE-ization of news, incidentally encouraged by Trump, who has striven from the beginning to inject himself into the headlines. The problem is that this has paid off tremendously for him, and for commercial media across the political spectrum. But it hasn't been so good for us.

The notion of a crisis caused by a bipartisan confluence of powerful interests doesn't fit in the way we cover news today. It upsets the format:

6. ROOT, DON'T THINK

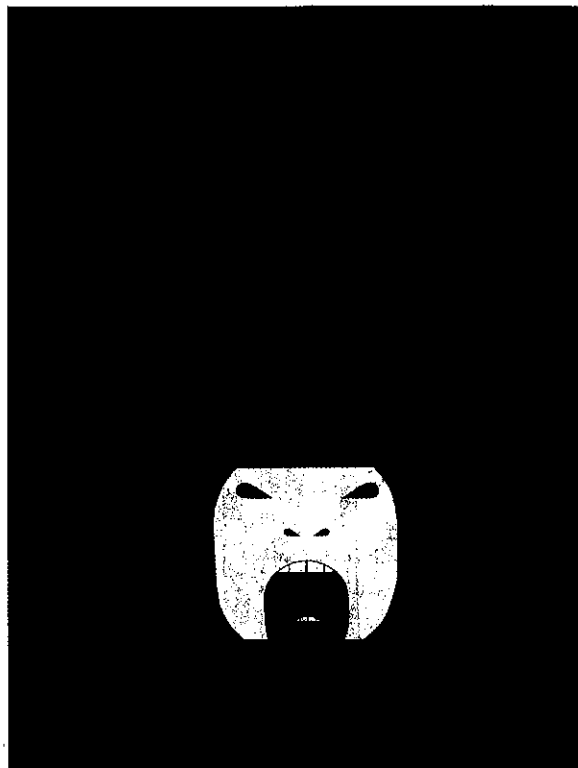
By the early 2000s, TV stations had learned to cover politics exactly as they covered sports, a proven profitable format. The presidential election especially was reconfigured into a sports coverage saga. It was perfect: 18 months of scheduled contests, a preseason (straw polls), regular season (primaries), and playoffs (the general), stadium events, a subgenre of data reporting (it's not an accident that sabermetrics guru—read baseball statistician—Nate Silver fit so seamlessly into political coverage).

TV news stations baldly copied visual "live variety" sports formats for coverage of primary elections, debates, election night, and soon enough, Sunday "discussion" shows like *Meet the Press*. If you've noticed, the sets bear an eerie resemblance to NFL pregame shows. There's a reason for that.

"Panels are typically two conservative advocates versus two mainstream reporters/analysts who are obviously moderate libs but not allowed to admit it or strongly advocate much of anything," is how Cohen, formerly of *Crossfire*, puts it.

By the election of 2016, virtually all the sports graphic ideas had been stolen. There were "countdown to kickoff" clocks for votes, "% chance of victory" trackers, "our experts pick" charts, a "magic number" for delegate counts, and a hundred different graphic doodads helping us keep score in the game. John King fiddling with his maps with Wolf Blitzer on the "magic wall" has become as much a part of our election mindscape as watching ex-athletes like David Carr or Jalen Rose chart football or hoops plays with civilians like Zach Lowe or Rachel Nichols.

By 2016 we'd raised a generation of viewers who had no conception of politics as an activity that might or should involve compromise. Your team either won or lost, and you felt devastated or vindicated accordingly. We were training rooters instead



of readers. Since our own politicians are typically very disappointing, we particularly root for the other side to lose.

In this business, everyone is on a side, and we're always fighting, never looking for common ground. It ruins everyone's suspension of disbelief if we do.

7. NO SWITCHING TEAMS

The concept of "balance," which used to be considered a virtue, has been twisted all the way around to mean a taboo trade practice, a form of dishonesty.

Roger Ailes at Fox started this. He made the whole concept of "balance" an inside joke on right-wing media. It's the reason the preposterous slogan, "Fair and Balanced," was so effective, both for recruiting conservative viewers and infuriating liberals.

Ailes used to say: "The news is like a ship. If you take hands off the wheel, it pulls hard to the left." Translation: you needed to pull hard the other way to achieve "balance" overall.

"Fair and balanced," in other words, was a rip on the idea that standard dull third-person *New York Times*-style media already *was* balanced. Twenty years before it would become a popular rallying cry on the other side, Roger Ailes was essentially using an argument about "false balance" to market Fox.

In recent years, but especially during the 2016 election, an array of Soviet-sounding terms started appearing to describe a new brand of thought-crime. Reporters had always taken lots of criticism from right-wing audiences for showing bias. In the last election, those same criticisms started to come from college-educated, liberal-leaning audiences.

They started to throw around terms like "false balance," "false equivalency," and "both-sideism."

In late 2016, *New York Times* public editor Liz Spayd started to get lots of angry mail about "false balance." Mainly, they were accusations that the *Times* over-covered Hillary Clinton's emails and legitimized Clinton Foundation stories. There was enough of this that she felt a need to respond to charges in the paper.

"The problem with false balance doctrine is that it masquerades as rational thinking," she said, adding: "What the critics really want is for journalists to apply their own moral and ideological judgments to the candidates."

After Trump won, Spayd made what many considered the unforgivable offense of going on Tucker Carlson's TV show. Carlson opened by brandishing the day-after *Times* headline about Trump's win: "DEMOCRATS, STUDENTS, AND FOREIGN ALLIES FACE THE REALITY OF A TRUMP PRESIDENCY."

The *Times* of course is not obligated to celebrate a Trump presidency, but this headline was a major stylistic departure. Spayd pushed back when Carlson called this "advocacy" and said it was something more subtle and maybe worse: an "unrecognized point of view that comes from . . . being in New York in a certain circle, and seeing the world in a certain way."

He quizzed her on reporters' political bias. Spayd had protested that the paper's reporters tried hard to be fair and professional,

but Carlson scoffed. "I would believe you," he said, "except that I know for a fact it isn't true."

He then read off a series of horrified anti-Trump tweets written by *Times* line reporters. Liam Stack's "The electoral college was meant to stop men like Trump from taking office" was an example. "Are you kidding me?" Carlson snapped.

Spayd nodded and said, "Yeah, I think it's outrageous." This was a line that would be much howled over, because it gave pro-Trump types and people like Carlson a talking point, another unforgivable offense.

But Spayd's point was not that having political views is bad, or that too many reporters are liberals. Rather, she was saying a reporter airing personal political views in public was unseemly, at least according to that paper's venerable standards.

In the age before social media, most reporters didn't have to expose their political opinions to the world. Today everyone is effectively an op-ed writer. Spayd's take was, this isn't necessarily

a good idea and exposes both reporters and papers like the *Times* to accusations of bias in ways we never had to worry about before. Not only did the *Times* end up firing Spayd, they eliminated her position.

Two years ago, unnerved by a lot of the same comments about "false balance," I wrote: "The model going forward will likely involve Republican media covering

Democratic corruption and Democratic media covering Republican corruption."

This is more or less where we are now, and nobody seems to think this is bad or dysfunctional. This is despite the fact that in this format the average person will no longer even see—ever—derogatory reporting about his or her own "side."

Being out of touch with what the other side is thinking is now no longer seen as a fault. It's a requirement, because:

8. THE OTHER SIDE IS LITERALLY HITLER

Shortly after 9/11, Fox began a long streak atop the cable ratings. Beginning in the first quarter of 2002, the company would stay #1 for over 15 years straight.

A crucial part of its success was its reaction to 9/11. Post-attack America was afraid and needed someone to blame. Fox and its minions were more than happy to comply. They began using language about liberals that was extreme even by their standards.

Their fellow Americans, leading conservative thinkfluencers told them, were not just lily-livered suck-ups who pretended to be enlightened. They were actively in league with al-Qaida. Murderers. Traitors. Not just wrong, but evil.

Fox promoted Sean Hannity as their perfect vision of conservative manhood. The rectum-faced blowhard was celebrated for his daily fake victories over the intellectual patsy that was Alan Colmes.

Unlike Rush Limbaugh, who in his early days was a serviceably witty top-40 disc jockey in Pittsburgh, Hannity was charmless. He was not literate like William Safire or Bill Buckley, nor was he an entertainingly unstable wreck like Glenn Beck, nor could he talk volubly about Marx and other thinkers like Michael Savage,

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a person who clearly has read more than three or four books.

Hannity won fake arguments, preened, and spewed constant aggression. After 9/11, one of his signature attack lines was that liberals were in league with terrorists.

He wrote a book called *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism and Liberalism* that came out in 2004. It was a paint-by-numbers hate-your-neighbor manual whose blunt cover was just Hannity's coiffed head floating under the Statue of Liberty's armpit.

The main argument was that liberals, by refusing to accept the existence of terrorist evil, were themselves part of the nexus of wrongdoing. They were insufficiently stoked about the capture and hanging of Saddam Hussein and, let's face it, wimps. He held off for two whole pages before bringing up Neville Chamberlain.

Glenn Beck would take Hannity's Neville Chamberlain thread and run lap after lap with it, pioneering the "Your neighbor is literally Hitler" movement. Beck was awesome at this. Al Gore was Hitler. Obama was constantly Hitler.

The National Endowment of the Arts was Hitler! ("It's propaganda... you should look up the name 'Goebbels.'") ACORN was Hitler. The bailouts were Hitler (well, they actually were a little bit Hitler). Comedian Lewis Black had a hilarious *Daily Show* freakout when Beck even compared the Peace Corps to the SS!

Beck was a mixed-metaphor enthusiast who was capable of calling a target both fascist and communist, Hitler *and* Stalin, in the same telecast. But his money gimmick was Hitler. It won him a huge audience, until it also ruined him.

His Fox show was canceled in 2011 after he said Barack Obama had a "deep-seated hatred for white people." Within two years he was apologizing for being divisive—but still carrying around a napkin that supposedly contained Hitler's bloodstains.

There's nowhere to go from Hitler. It's a rhetorical dead end. Argument is over at that point. If you go there, you're now absolving your audiences of all moral restraint, because who wouldn't kill Hitler?

You can draw a straight line from these rhetorical escalations in right-wing media to the lunacies of the Trump era. As Chomsky points out, Trump's campaign was a familiar authoritarian pitch: "Go after the elites, even while you're supported by the major elites."

He preached that modern life was a decadent failure (this from a man whose personal life was a monument to tacky consumption). A strong hand was needed to help our return to national values. In a debate with Hillary Clinton, he threatened to jail his opponent, a stunt that would have impressed Mobutu.

Anyone with an education saw the parallels. But Trump was legally winning elections, and he was aided by the fact that his riffs on corrupt elites rang true with audiences.

The financial bailouts had been an extraordinary betrayal of the population by the political class, which is why Trump scored when he painted Ted Cruz and Hillary Clinton as creatures of Goldman, Sachs. *Citizens United* meant political bribery on a

grand scale was legal, and this theme helped Trump knock out Jeb Bush and Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio.

He ripped the Koch Brothers, and denounced his primary opponents as sock-puppet fronts for corporate PACs. Then he did the same to Hillary Clinton. These clowns are just fronts for someone else's money, Trump told voters. With me, I am the money.

Trump, like all great con artists, depended upon true details to sell lies.

The major challenge for reporters in covering Trump was to explain him. Trump was a vote for anyone with a grudge, and in America, there is a spectacularly wide spectrum of grudges. I met one voter in Wisconsin who said the following: "I usually don't vote, but I'm going Trump because fuck everything."

The major challenge for reporters in covering Trump was to explain him. Trump was a vote for anyone with a grudge, and in America, there is a spectacularly wide spectrum of grudges.

The conventional wisdom was that Trump *was* Hitler, effectively, even before he got elected. "Is Donald Trump a fascist?" asked a *Times* Book Review headline shortly before the vote. (Several authors said "yes.")

After the fiasco of Charlottesville, when Trump couldn't bring himself to denounce open racists and said "both sides" were at fault, the term "white supremacist" and "white nationalist" became common to describe Trump's tenure.

It was one thing to apply the terms to Trump, who deserves all of these epithets and then some. But his voters? Did it really make sense to caricature 60 million people as *racist white nationalist traitor-Nazis*?

The new party line was that we could turn off the thinking mechanism and move to pure combat. Charles Taylor of the *Boston Globe*, in a column under a scary photo of a man waving a swastika, summed it up when he scoffed:

Those bent on understanding Trump supporters—as if there is something deep to understand—wonder how his working-class acolytes can vote against their own economic interests. What they refuse to see is that all Trump supporters, from the working class to the upper class, have voted their chief interest: maintaining American identity as white, Christian, and heterosexual.

Before you can argue the justice of this point, realize what it means. If we're now saying all Trump supporters are mainly bent on upholding the supremacy of white, Christian heterosexuals, that's miles beyond even Hillary Clinton's take of just half of Trump supporters being unredeemable scum.

It's a sweeping, debate-ending dictum. There is *us* and *them*, and they are Hitler.

When I first started to hear this talk among reporters during the 2016 contest, I thought it was just clickbait. *Of course* race was a dominant factor in Trump's rise. But racism as the sole explanation for Trump's rise was suspicious for a few reasons.

Trump doesn't happen in a country where things are going well. People give in to their baser instincts when they lose faith in the future.

A significant number of Trump voters voted for Obama eight years ago. Also, the Trump phenomenon was about a political

and media taboo: class. When the liberal arts grads who mostly populate the media think about class, we tend to think in terms of the heroic worker, or whatever Marx-inspired cliché they taught us in college.

Because of this, most pundits scoff at class, because when they look at Trump crowds, they don't see *Norma Rae* or *Matewan*. Instead, they see *Married With Children*, a bunch of tacky mallgoers who gobble up crap movies and, incidentally, hate the noble political press.

If all Trump supporters are Hitler, and all liberals are also Hitler, this brings *Crossfire* to its natural conclusion. The *America vs. America* show is now *Hitler vs. Hitler*! Think of the ratings!

It's a fight for all the marbles. Politics is about one side against another side, and only one take is allowed now—pure aggression:

9. IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HITLER, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

Cohen's take on *Crossfire* was right. The early staged TV battles depended for their success on a propaganda trick. The "fight" always involved a ferocious, deregulation-mad, race-baiting right-winger pounding the crap out of a spineless, backpedaling centrist masquerading as a "leftist."

Cohen's Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) did a "field guide to TV's lukewarm liberals" that explained how this works. Michael Kinsley, probably the most famous "from the left" voice, once described himself as a "wishy-washy moderate" and added, "There is no way . . . that I'm as far left as Pat Buchanan is right."

Cokie Roberts played the "liberal" on *The Week*, but her main liberal credentials were that she was a woman who'd been on NPR. Her advice to Bill Clinton after the midterm losses of 1994: "Move to the right, which is the advice that somebody should have given him a long time ago."

After years of this phony debate, along came Trump, who could easily have been a *Crossfire* actor (although the Nineties version of "very pro-choice" Trump probably would have played "on the left").

The modern Trump is pretty much exactly Buchanan, right down to the race views and the appropriation of trade issues, only he's better at playing the heel. For most of liberal America, the election played out like an old *Crossfire* episode.

Trump pounded away at Clinton and refused to take back even the most shameless behaviors. Meanwhile Clinton tried to observe decorum, apologized for her "unforced errors," like the "deplorables" comment, and was unrewarded for her efforts.

Meanness and vulgarity build political solidarity, but also audience solidarity. Breaking barriers together builds conspiratorial closeness. In the Trump age, it helps political and media objectives align.

The problem is, there's no natural floor to this behavior. News and commentary programs will eventually escalate to boxing-style expletive-laden pre-fight tirades and open incitement of violence.

If the other side is literally Hitler, this eventually has to happen. What began as *America vs. America* will eventually move to *Traitor vs. Traitor*, and the show does not work if those contestants are not eventually offended to the point of wanting to kill one another.

10. FEEL SUPERIOR

We're mainly in the business of stroking audiences. We want them coming back. Anger is part of the rhetorical promise, but so are feelings of righteousness and superiority.

It's the same premise as reality shows. The most popular programs aren't about geniuses and paragons of virtue, but instead about terrible parents, morons, people willing to be filmed getting ass tucks, spoiled rich people, and other freaks.

Why use the most advanced communications technology in history to teach people basic geography, or how World Bank structural adjustment lending works, when you can instead watch idiots drink donkey semen for money?

People forget that as far back as 1984, the Republican Party was urging people to vote Reagan because Walter Mondale was a "born loser." On the flip side, the name of George McGovern became so synonymous with "loser" that it birthed an entirely new

brand of "Third Way" politics, invented by the Democratic Leadership Council and people like Chuck Robb, Al From, Sam Nunn, and Bill Clinton. The chief principle of the new politics was that it had a chance of winning.

The media started following along. We invented the "Wimp Factor" for George H.W. Bush and saddled Dan Quayle with the "bimbo" tag. This was propaganda, of course, as the idea was that politicians could only not be losers by bombing someone. But we were also telling audiences that a loser was someone who didn't attack.

Politicians should be fair game. But the obsession with winners and losers runs so deep in the press that it has become the central value of the business.

It's not an accident that Trump won the presidency on "winning" and spent much of his political career calling people "losers"—from Cher to Richard Belzer to Graydon Carter to Rosie O'Donnell to George Will to Michelle Malkin.

Continued on page 8 HATE

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Trump sells the vicarious experience of being a “winner” compared to other schlubs. His lack of empathy is often cited as evidence of narcissistic sociopathy, and maybe it is, but it’s a chicken-and-egg question. Was he always like this? Or did he become *more* this way because among his other weaknesses, he’s clearly addicted to the worst kind of political media?

We can excuse almost anything in America except losing. And we love a freak show.

Trump was the best of both worlds, as far as the press was concerned: a *Crossfire*-style attacker on the one hand, and a lurid and disgusting monster-freak for audiences to look down on on the other. There is no better commercial situation for the American media than a president about whom a porn star can write, “I had sex with that, I’d say to myself, *Eech*.”

Leo Tolstoy, in a story called the *Kreutzer Sonata*, once described a character who visited a P.T. Barnum circus in Paris. The character went into a tent promising a rare “water-dog,” and paid a franc to see an ordinary canine wrapped in sealskin.

When he came out, Barnum used the man to sell more tickets, shouting to the crowd: “Ask the gentleman if it is not worth seeing! Come in, come in! It only costs a franc!” And in my confusion I did not dare to answer that there was nothing curious to be seen, and it was upon my false shame that the Barnum must have counted.”

We count on your shame in the same way. We know you know

the news we show you is demeaning, disgusting, pointless, and not really intended to inform.

But we assume you’ll be too embarrassed to admit you spend hours every day poring through content specifically designed to stroke your point of view. Like Tolstoy’s weak hero, you’ll pay to hide your shame.

The idea behind most political coverage is to get you to turn on the TV and within minutes have you tsk-tsking and saying, “What idiots!” And, from there, it’s a short hop to, “Fuck those commie-loving tree-huggers!” or “Fuck the Hitler-loving freaks!”

We can’t get you there unless you follow all the rules. Accept a binary world and pick a side. Embrace the reality of being surrounded by evil stupidity. Feel indignant, righteous, and smart. Hate losers, love winners. Don’t challenge yourself. And during the commercials, do some shopping.

Congratulations, you’re the perfect news consumer. ■

Matt Taibbi is a contributing editor for Rolling Stone and winner of the 2008 National Magazine Award for columns and commentary. This essay is adapted from Hate, Inc., Why Today’s Media Makes Us Despise One Another, Taibbi’s forthcoming title from OR Books. See the ad on page 3 of this issue of The Washington Spectator for information on how you can pre-order this much-anticipated new book.