THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Brookings Cafeteria Podcast: Trump's war on the press

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Host:

FRED DEWS

BILL FINAN

Contributors:

MARVIN KALB
Nonresident Senior Fellow - Foreign Policy

DAVID WESSEL
Director - The Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy
Senior Fellow - Economic Studies

DEWS: Welcome to The Brookings Cafeteria, , a podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

“The fake news media is not my enemy. It is the enemy of the American people.” President Trump tweeted this declaration less than a month after his inauguration. In recent weeks in both his rallies and in tweets, the president has repeated the charge that the American press is fake news, and the enemy of the people. What does this rhetoric coming from the president of the United States mean for the work of the press, for trusts in journalism, and for the health of our democracy? Today's guest on The Brookings Cafeteria is here to answer these and other important questions. He is Marvin Kalb, nonresident senior fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings, and senior advisor at the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

Kalb's distinguished career in journalism spans more than 30 years, and includes award winning reporting for both CBS and NBC News as chief diplomatic correspondent Moscow bureau chief, and anchor of NBC's Meet the Press. He was also on Nixon's “Enemies List”. Kalb is author of the book by Brookings titled: “Enemy of the People: Trump’s War on the Press, the New McCarthyism, and the Threat to American Democracy.”

Also on today's program, Senior Fellow David Wessel reflects on some of the lessons learned from the Great Recession that started 10 years ago. In fact I'm going to start today's program with Wessel, and then present the interview. So now here's Wessel’s economic update.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update. Anniversaries are occasions for reflection so you may hear quite a bit in the next couple of days about the tenth anniversary of the worst moments of the global financial crisis. I've been doing a bit of reflection myself as we at the Hutchins Center prepare for a conference at which some of the architects of the government's responses will discuss the reasons they did what they did, as well as alternatives they considered and rejected. We’ll be webcasting it live on

September 11th and 12th and archiving the video on our website if you want to watch.

Ten years is not enough time for the final verdict of history. Heck, economists and historians spent more than half a century arguing about the Great Depression. But 10 years does provide us with some perspective. Here's mine.

One: what happened in 2007 - 2009 the housing bust, the financial panic was economically catastrophic, and much of it was preventable. Sure, banking crises and panics occur throughout history, but this episode was a failure of almost every check on excesses, irresponsibility, and fraud. Regulators, legislators, boards of directors, chief executives, accountants, rating agencies, lawyers, the financial press, all failed. We let the financial system outgrow the regulatory apparatus, we borrowed too much, and we didn't appreciate just how vulnerable the financial system was to a disturbance like the bursting of a housing bubble. When we weigh the costs and benefits of financial regulation today—and there are costs—we should remember that the costs of too little oversight and too loose regulation can be enormous.

Two: The government, the Congress, the President, the Treasury, the Federal Reserve were slow, too slow to react. Even after the housing bubble burst around 2007, they didn't appreciate how bad things would get. Now, making decisions in real time is difficult, the decision makers didn't know then what we know now. Nevertheless, some folks worried about pumping too much water onto the fire too soon. They worried that cutting interest rates too much would spur inflation or provoke a crash in the U.S. dollar or that helping too many people would lead others to take unwise risks. They were wrong. We would have been better off had the most potent government responses in housing, monetary policy, fiscal policy, regulatory interventions had been taken sooner and with more force.

Three: For all the missteps, the changes in direction, and the political backlash we did not suffer a repeat of the Great Depression and we could have. Ben Bernanke, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve and now my colleague here at the Hutchins Center, says

that the 2008 financial panic was actually worse than the one in 1929. This time, every major financial institution was shaking. Now, no one ever gets applause for saying it could have been worse if not for me, but the fact is it would have been worse if not for the efforts of people like Bernanke, Hank Paulson, Tim Geithner, and their colleagues.

Four: The public knew that times were bad, but never understood what the government was doing and why. Some of this was inevitable. Rescuing financial institutions was crucial, but never going to be popular. Some of this reflects the tough decisions that had to be made about how best to deploy limited resources: how much for homeowners, how much for auto companies, how much for banks. Some of this reflects the anger that so few people were held responsible for this economic calamity. A lot of us really do want Old Testament justice. And some of this skepticism stems from the klutzy communications from the principals who never managed to explain clearly what they were doing. Whatever the cause, the crisis left a legacy of public distrust not only of Wall Street, but also of Washington. And that has lasted a whole lot longer than the Great Recession.

Five: A lot has been done to make the financial system more resilient to reduce the risk of a financial crisis as bad as the one we suffered ten years ago. The banks are better capitalized, regulation has been tightened, but the job is not finished and the pressure now is to weaken, not to complete post-crisis shoring up of financial regulation. As the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, put it the other day, “the system is safer but not safe enough.”

DEWS: You can find more of Wessel’s economic updates on our SoundCloud channel. And now on with the interview. Here's my colleague Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, with Martin Kalb.

FINAN: Marvin, good to see you.

KALB: My pleasure.

FINAN: You begin your book with two tweets Donald Trump issued days after he's

inaugurated President of the United States. The first is the “fake news” and that's all in caps. “The FAKE NEWS media is not my enemy. It is the enemy of the American people!” The second, which he issued a couple of days later, as you know, “I called the fake news the enemy of the people because they have no sources they just make it up.” Why did that so trouble you with those words “enemy of the people”?

KALB: Well for a couple of reasons. First of all, anyone who knows anything about 20th century history knows that that phrase was used only by dictators; used by Adolf Hitler, used by Joseph Stalin, used by Mao Zedong. It has never been used by the leader of a democratic country. So when the leader of a democratic country actually says that about the press, two thoughts immediately jump: where did he get this phrase from, and the second what impact is it likely to have. And I did a great deal of work on the origin of the phrase in Trump's mind. He has said very often that he doesn't read a lot of books, he's acknowledged that himself. So where did the phrase come from? It came from his listening to Pat Caddell. Pat Condell was a very skillful pollster working for Jimmy Carter's election as president way back in 1976.

FINAN: So he's a Democratic pollster.

KALB: A Democratic pollster. But over the last thirty to forty years, Pat Cadell has shifted his political allegiances far to the right, and he would appear quite regularly on Breitbart, Breitbart radio, Breitbart website—the far right website. Donald Trump listens to that Web site quite often. And he heard Pat Caddell use the expression “enemy of the people”, and Pat used that expression in his mind, what was happening was that the press was somehow or another being detached from its prime responsibility which is to stay close to the people who watch and listen to you. I don't know where he got that idea, but he did. And he talked about it with a great deal of passion. The President heard it, and the phrase stuck in the President's mind for use at the right moment, and the right moment for him was right after he became President of the United States.

FINAN: So Caddell must have known or knows the genealogy of this phrase, don't you think?

KALB: I have absolutely no doubt he knows where the phrase comes from. Pat Caddell was with Jimmy Carter a young, dynamic pollster that you love to talk to a reporter. He was very smart, gave you all kinds of insights. Today, he's a different sort of man. We all are after 40 years or so. But Pat is now in the right corner of the political dialogue. The president is there. I don't know if they talk together, but the president picked up that phrase that stuck in his mind. Where is this going to go is what is terrifying to me. Why would he use such a phrase? Does he really believe it? And my own feeling is that he uses it to be exploited.

He uses it as a way of advancing his political agenda, of strengthening his ties to his own political base. And the terrible, unfortunate thing is that over the last thirty to forty years, ever since President Nixon and his Vice President Spiro Agnew denouncing the quote nattering nabobs of negativism, the right center wing of the American political system has begun to use the press as a kind of enemy. The press covered the Vietnam War in a way that the right wing did not like. We covered it as it happened. It was a loss. In 1975, Americans had to get out of Vietnam because they took over. But in the mind of the right wing, it was an unacceptable proposition. We don't lose wars, America wins wars. So who's saying we lost it?

FINAN: The media?

KALB: The media, right. So the media became kind of in the negative image immediately.

FINAN: So you would put its origins point back with the Vietnam War, that's when it became most pronounced as anti-media bias on the right.

KALB: On the right. And it was pronounced after the Watergate scandal, and then after the CIA hearings in the late 1970s. If you wanted to find a reason for America's

problems, blame it on the people who were giving you the information, and that's the media what. Donald Trump has done. In other words, he hasn't created a feeling on the part of the right wing that the press is the enemy of the people, he is exploiting something that has been developing now for twenty to thirty years, but he's done it very skillfully so that right now, I believe the latest polls indicate that fifty-one percent of the Republicans believe what the president says that the press is the enemy of the people. 43 percent of Republicans say that the president ought to have the right to shut down news organizations that behave improperly. What does that mean? It means if you criticize the president, and the president went on also to say recently that ninety-one percent of the press, ninety-one percent of the press is fake news, and you can't believe them don't trust them at all. Only nine percent of the press can you trust. And who's the nine percent? Fox News. Now, I have nothing against Fox News, I used to do analysis for Fox News. But, the reporters who work there do not consider themselves part of a political crusade. They are journalists and they want to cover the news. The guys who are part of the crusade are the pundits who come on at night. That's their job, do it very effectively.

FINAN: Yes, the Sean Hannitys–right?. So, to go back to the phrase enemy of the people, then. You don't think Donald Trump has any sense of the totalitarian baggage that phrase has embedded in it?

KALB: I don't believe he does. I believe he uses it and exploits it to advance his own political agenda. I don't believe that the president is an Adolf Hitler or Mao Zedong or anything like that. That is not where his mind is. His mind is very much on retaining political power to advance his own interests and his vision of the nation's interests.

FINAN: No American president has ever used that phrase

KALB: No American president in my judgment would ever use that phrase is totally foreign to the American experience

FINAN: And foreign is what I wanted to come to is because that's where you first saw

it, as a matter of fact.

KALB: Exactly. That's a fascinating story. In 1956, in the last book I did in fact, called “The Year I Was Peter the Great”, the aspect of it that caught my eye was Nikita Khrushchev, then the leader of the Soviet Union, 1956. He made a very major speech attacking Joseph Stalin, the dictator of the Soviet Union. Why? Because Stalin, he said, was a terrible man, a murderer and then picking up specifics, he said that one of the things he wants to end—this is Nikita Khrushchev—wanting to end was the use of the phrase the Stalin phrase “enemy of the people” because Khrushchev thought it was so awful, it was so wrong.

And then here I am, hearing the President of the United States say that I felt it was extremely important for me to write this book. This is my 16th book, but the first time that I have ever expressed my deepest personal feelings and fears. I am worried about a president who speaks of the press in this way not realizing that the press is one of the foundations of American democracy. And I got that thought from my schooling, from my parents, but also from Edward R. Murrow, the man at CBS News who hired me way back in the 1950s.

FINAN: So that brings me to talking about the book's subtitle of it. The subtitle is “Trump's War on the Press, the New McCarthyism, and the Threat to American Democracy.” We've talked a bit about Trump's war on the press but it's the new McCarthyism which is where Edward R. Murrow will come into. That is a substantial aspect of the book where you look back at Joe McCarthy in the 1950s and his anti-communist crusade, which was the first time that we'd seen anything even similar to what we're seeing unleashed now. You spent a considerable amount of time talking about this old McCarthyism and what was needed to bring it to an end. You have an especially compelling account of Edward R. Murrow, and what he did to bring an end to that McCarthyism. Can you briefly tell us a little bit about him and what he did?

KALB: McCarthy, starting in 1950 became by 1954 a huge force in American political life and people were terrified of him, and people were terrified of what it is that he was doing.

But the people in the Republican Party, even President Eisenhower, were afraid to take him on. They were afraid to be accused of being communists, and so they let him say whatever he wanted to say. And it was an extremely destructive force, McCarthyism, in American politics at that time. Very few reporters, unfortunately, took on McCarthy, but there were a few. And leading that few was Edward R. Murrow, who was the great journalist reporting from World War II from Europe, creating radio news, creating television news as it were at that time.

FINAN: I just want to come in here for a moment because you tell the story of Murrow, and actually it's riveting to read to be honest about Murrow, and radio, and what Murrow did himself as a journalist to call attention to what was happening in Europe as Hitler was coming to power, and then the beginnings of the war itself. He was an amazing journalist and had made his name for him because of that reportage.

KALB: One of the things to bear in mind about Edward R. Murrow is where he comes from. Murrow is from a small town, a log cabin in North Carolina, raised in the state of Washington and came back to North Carolina and threw his life into the idea of education and then journalism. All of this started in the mid-1930s in Europe. Murrow saw the rise of Adolf Hitler. It had a profound impact upon him. He always worried about the rise from the right of a force of a personality who would come to dominate the political scene and would do terrible things to freedom, and terrible things to our sense of who we were. And when he saw the rise of McCarthy, starting in 1950, it immediately arose in him fears that he was watching once again what was happening in Europe, in Germany in the mid-1930s, and he was determined to stop it if it could. How does a journalist stop it?

The only thing a journalist can do is to cover the news accurately and what Murrow decided to do using his radio program, and then his weekly television program was to focus a lot of attention on what McCarthy was saying how he said it, the impact of what he said upon the American people. And then finally when he thought the time was right, on March

9th, 1954, he came in with this extraordinary broadcast on Murrow and that was the beginning of the end of Senator McCarthy. And one of the things to bear in mind before that broadcast was aired, forty-six or forty-eight percent of the American people believed that McCarthy was the second most powerful man in America behind President Eisenhower. After the Murrow broadcast that number fell down to thirty-two, and that is where it stayed throughout the Army-McCarthy hearings for the next three months. That gave the Republicans up on the Hill who were terrified of that time to move. They feared McCarthy. Suddenly, they realized that he was a journalist who could affect the opinion of the Americans about this man, and they felt a little bit of courage to stand up and Murrow did that. That was a phenomenal moment in the history of American journalism, the history of American politics. It says so much about what good journalism can do in a troubled political environment.

FINAN: Can we have a moment like that again?

KALB: Well, the trouble is we don't have an Edward R. Murrow today. Ed would not be hired today by CBS. The only combination I can think of is that if the New York Times and The Washington Post ever got together to want to accomplish a certain thing in the political area, maybe it could happen. But the press today is so scattered, it is in so many different areas. There's Internet, there's all social media. We don't even know any longer what good journalism is. That gives the President the opportunity to go after them. I got to add one more thing about Murrow. He used to talk to me at great length, I was very privileged in that way.

Murrow always said that an Oxford don once asked him: what is the definition of America? And Murrow answered freedom. One word. Freedom. He said yes, but spelled that out. And Murrow said, “Freedom will be maintained. First Freedom is fragile, but it will be maintained if there is the sanctity of the courts and the freedom of the press. If either one of those two is weakened, the whole structure of democracy is weakened.” And that is why

for me, as a writer, it was terribly important for me to sit down and write “Enemy of the People.” I had to express that.

FINAN: And I think that explains the third party, or subtitle to how this is a threat to American democracy, by weakening free press these attacks coming from the presidency itself. I'm wondering though if there is no Murrow today, what can the press do? Some have argued the press should not even report on a tweet, so what do you think of that?

KALB: No, I think the press has to report on the tweets, not all of them, but those that are of interest to the American people. It's not a matter of whether the press likes the tweets, the press just should report on what it is that has news value. At this point, because there is no possibility of a new Edward R. Murrow, I believe that the only thing the press can do is what it has always done and depend somehow on the good judgment of the American people to appreciate what is news, what is “fake news” and keep phrases like “enemy of the people” in history books, not as a tool of contemporary politics.

FINAN: Another concern is the radicalization, it seems, as some people hearing this language. There have been reports Bret Stephens of New York Times noting that he has been threatened, Brian Stelter on CNN, there was a phoned in message to an Associated Press Bureau recently where someone left the message at some point “we're just going to start shooting you effing a-holes”. What are we to make of that? Was that level of vitriol, that level of threat there in the Nixon years when you were a member of Nixon's Enemies List when the press was vilified the last time, but now to a degree it is now, I think.

KALB: There is no doubt that during the Nixon years, the press was subject to a great deal of intimidation. But Nixon is so different from President Trump. Nixon was a professional politician, a lawyer. He respected the American system. When he realized that he had lost the support of the system, not just in polling, but when three key senators came to him and said “Mr. President we cannot support you anymore, you've got to go”, he left. The question is: what if three senators went today to President Trump and they said, “Mr. President you've

got to go". What will he do? Will he throw the three out of the White House? Will he listen to them? That danger, that question mark to me, is at the heart of this book.

At the end, I quote something that the late Justice Douglas of the Supreme Court wrote, that he was concerned that the system itself was changing. And what happens? What happens is that at the beginning of the change, everything looks the same everything is familiar, but you begin to sense something is wrong. It is in that period of time that you have an individual responsibility to stand up and say something, because once that period is over and if indeed you end up in a very dark space you will have lost that chance. Then you will not be able to stand up and say anything. So while that opportunity is there, speak up.

FINAN: I have in my notes here a quote from Murrow, and I'd like to end with this too because it fits in exactly with what you were just saying. "No one man can terrorize a whole nation unless we are all his accomplices." And that's exactly what you're telling us here.

KALB: Yes, I feel very strongly that Murrow's great importance now is that he can help us point the way out of the current dilemma, but it's going to end up ultimately being in the wisdom of the American people, who they vote for and who they don't vote for.

FINAN: There are no happy endings in this book. There's no silver lining except for the fact that you see there's a resilience in America and the American people, I guess is what we can take away.

KALB: Well I feel very strongly that given the history of this country, given its commitment to freedom, given the fact that for most of its life, it has been the beacon for the rest of the world sending a message of individual opportunity, hope, freedom, religious freedom, all of that and so many people around the world have looked to us and I want them again to look to the United States for the realization of all of those wonderful things that have always defined the essence of this country.

FINAN: Marvin, thank you for coming by this afternoon to talk to us.

KALB: My pleasure.

DEWS: You can find Marvin Kalb's book, "Enemy of the People," on our website or wherever you'd like to buy books.

The Brookings Cafeteria podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. The producers are Brendan Hoban and Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews. Jessica Pavone and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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