

**Remarks by Chris Wallace
Accepting The Media Institute's
2018 Freedom of Speech Award
October 24, 2018**

First of all – I want to thank The Media Institute for this award and the important work you do. Your efforts these last 40 years to support free speech and a free press have never been more important.

I want to thank my colleague Brit Hume for your kind introduction. Brit – you read it just the way I wrote it.

We all know how evenings like this tend to go these days. The person getting the award tells you what a threat President Trump poses to a free press – how dangerous his comments are about – “fake news is the enemy of the American people.” And if the person getting the award is anywhere near the center – he also warns his colleagues to stay in their lane – and not get drawn into arguments with the President – not to become advocates. I know – because I have given speeches like that.

I will get there in a few minutes. But first – I want to talk about the good news – how fortunate those of us who work in this business are – in what we do for a living. I want to remind you why we got into journalism in the first place – the excitement of learning something important – and then getting the chance to share it with everyone else.

My first job – if you can call it that – was in 1964 – at the Republican Convention in San Francisco. I was Walter Cronkite's “go-fer” – go for coffee, go for pencils. I remember watching Dwight Eisenhower berate the media (some things don't change). Nelson Rockefeller was booed off the podium. And the Republican nominee – Barry Goldwater – said – “Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice.”

I was 16 at the time. And I remember thinking: I can't believe people get paid to do this.

That was more than half a century ago. And ever since – I feel like I've been on a magic carpet ride that has taken me around the world – to meet extraordinary people – to see remarkable events – and then, yes, get the chance to share it with everyone else.

I spent a week with Mother Teresa at her mission in Calcutta – just after she won the Nobel Peace Prize. She took me to what she called the “Home for the Dead and the Dying” – in effect, the first hospice – where she cared for people – the elderly, babies – who had been left in the street to die. With no medical care – just a place to sleep and some food to eat – fully half of the 36,000 “dead and dying” recovered – and went back to lead their lives.

I covered four Reagan-Gorbachev summits – from Iceland to Moscow – and reported on how a longtime Cold Warrior built a relationship with the head of the Communist Party – that led to the first reduction in nuclear arsenals in history – and eventually to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

I moderated the third Presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton – watched by 80 million people – the third biggest audience for a debate in history.

And this summer, I interviewed Vladimir Putin just after his summit with President Trump. When he denied any Russian government interference in the 2016 election – I presented him with the indictment of 12 GRU military intelligence officers – charged with doing just that. He wasn't pleased. And afterwards, I took my wife Lorraine on a week's vacation to St. Petersburg and Moscow.

What an adventure it has been! I feel so lucky – so blessed – to be in this business!

Now – let's get to President Trump. Having grown up in journalism – having spent half a century as a reporter – you can imagine how I felt when I saw that Trump tweet on February 17th of last year: “The fake news media (failing NY Times, NBC News, ABC, CBS, CNN) is not my enemy. It is the enemy of the American people.” To say I never imagined the President of the United States would say that about a free, vigorous, adversarial press is a big understatement.

I was especially struck by the reaction from retired Admiral Bill McRaven – a Navy SEAL for 37 years – the former head of U.S. Special Forces – who ran the missions that captured Saddam Hussein – and killed Osama bin Laden. It turns out McRaven graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in journalism. And here's what he said: “Both the President and I swore an oath to the Constitution. And the First Amendment of that Constitution is freedom of the press. When the President says the media is the enemy of the people, to me that undermines the Constitution. So I do think it is a tremendous threat to our democracy.”

But what's most alarming is – a Presidential tweet that was so shocking just 20 months ago – is now part of the national bloodstream. A Gallup Poll in June on attitudes toward the media – found 69 percent said their trust had decreased. An Axios poll found 70 percent of Americans now agree – “traditional major news sources report news – they know to be fake, false, or purposely misleading.”

Lord knows, we can't stop the President from tweeting – especially when he finds a line of attack that's working so well. The question we have to ask ourselves is – how do we react. And I think too many of our colleagues have taken exactly the wrong approach.

Too many of us have decided the way to respond to a President who goes so far over the line bashing the media – is to fight back. To respond to his invective with attacks of our own. I don't have any problem with fact-checking President Trump – with calling balls and strikes. That's our job. But I now see reports coming out of the White House – both print and television – that are grounded more in opinion than fact. And when we fall into that trap – we are playing the President's game.

Let's remember: Donald Trump may be larger than life. But all of us have seen Presidents come and go. They capture the spotlight – grab the nation's attention – and then pass from the scene. And we need to think where our business will be when Mr. Trump is no longer in the White House.

Will we look back on our coverage with pride – or regret? Will we say we played our role as impartial observers – or as players who crossed the line into advocacy? During a time of divisive, tribal politics – did we fall into our own tribal news coverage?

I want to close by reminding you what's at stake here. Jamal Khashoggi wrote his final column for the Washington Post – before he disappeared October 2nd. He wrote this about the repression of free speech and a free press in much of the Arab world. “Arabs living in those countries are either uninformed or misinformed. They are unable to adequately address, much less publicly discuss, matters that affect the region and their day-to-day lives. A state-run narrative dominates the public psyche, and while many do not believe it, a large majority of the population falls victim to this false narrative.”

Could it happen here? No time soon. But when 70 percent of our fellow Americans believe major news outlets “report stories they know to be fake” – it is past time to be vigilant. A free, fair, and fiercely independent press is essential to democracy. And we must never forget that.