

DISTRACTION AND DISINFORMATION: THE STAKES OF LESSONS NOT LEARNED

The other night (I've lost track of which night – they've all blended together), when Trump's campaign first rolled out the rent-a-mobs and invent-a-law challenges to the MI election, I was frantically trying to get journalists I know and respect to do two things: stop reporting *that* Trump had sued until they had paperwork in hand, and stop using a term for the mobsters, "challenger," which has a specific legal meaning in MI.

Challengers are defined individuals provided credentials to operate under specific rules. While there are NGO challengers as well, each party gets two challengers in a precinct, but just one can watch the actual vote tally. The GOP had the designated number of challengers in the polling room when the rent-a-mob got called (indeed, aggressive challengers are reportedly what caused a delay in the counting of my own vote in Grand Rapids, assuming it did get counted), and yet the mobsters were referring to themselves as challengers.

The frivolous lawsuit filed well after the mobsters descended claimed that challengers weren't being given access.

In other words, the Trump campaign had created a disinformation event by obscuring the law and creating a media event for the media to cover.

That's not new. It has been going on for five years. Indeed, Trump's success at using disinformation and distraction to tell a false story of victimhood surely is part of why he did better in 2020 than he did in 2016. COVID Donny is a story-teller, and many Americans in the post-exceptionalism era gravitate to stories that explain away personal failures to

victimhood. (There has been some of this on the left, too, though usually with more basis in fact.)

To be fair, the press has done a less bad job of falling for Trump's distraction and disinformation since Tuesday than it has for most of his presidency. (That may be because they're increasingly certain they won't need to rely on access going forward.) Even Fox is insisting that Trump provide actual evidence for the claims being made – before, often, treating those claims as credible whether or not evidence supports it. Most outlets even turned away from a presser where Trump falsely claimed victory.

Still, one after another paranoid hoax – a red wagon pulling camera equipment, an alleged sticky note, former senior Administration officials sprinting away from cameras – has been floated and taken as credible long enough to make it appear like Trump's manic claims of fraud and those of his conspiratorial followers might have merit.

The press has done a good job demanding proof, and dismantling the claims by showing what would be necessary for proof one by one. GOP officials are adopting one of two stances – either admitting there is no proof, or stating that before Trump claims fraud he has to provide it (even while giving air to some of the claims that have been debunked) – that may eventually bring us to closure.

Still, the press is chasing every one of these claims without caveating that this delay was intentionally caused by the GOP, Trump telegraphed he'd be using this strategy even before the election, and all evidence suggests that when the counting is done Joe Biden will have a solid victory in the Electoral College and a far bigger one in the popular vote.

In any other election, we'd be pestering Biden to learn who will be Attorney General and who will be Secretary of State, but instead we're still chasing Donny's distractions.

Still, it is an improvement. It will likely get us through this period, possibly even before any of Trump's supporters succeed at unleashing violence (though a handful have been trying).

I wonder what it would have taken to accomplish this far earlier in the presidency, before Trump used it to undermine a very damning Russian investigation, before he used it to successfully beat back impeachment, before he used it to undermine any response to COVID, and before Trump used it in an effort to criminalize Joe Biden. We need to think about this because the right wing has gotten this manic hoax-chasing into its bloodstream, and for far too many of these hoaxes, the press just ignores the claims rather than shows how a basic adherence to truth will debunk them.

We need to find a way to better debunk and ignore this guy, otherwise he will become a dangerous martyr doing further damage to this country.