

Talking Turkey: A stark warning about threats to truth, science, and democracy

By JIM SMITH

Martin Baron is the former Executive Editor of *The Washington Post* and a highly respected journalist. On April 21st, he delivered a grim warning to an audience at MIT about the avalanche of lies and falsehoods permeating right-wing media outlets, posing a direct threat to democracy and civil society.

His comments mirror my own (or vice versa) so I'm going to devote this month's column to quoting his lecture, reprinting in edited form the following article by Peter Dizikes of the MIT News Office:

Baron focused many of his remarks on lies and misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the 2020 presidential election. ***"The path we are on today is an invitation to ruin,"*** said Baron, while delivering MIT's annual spring Compton Lecture.

Baron, who served as executive editor of *The Washington Post* from 2013 to 2021, before retiring, focused many of his remarks on lies and misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the 2020 presidential election. Propagation of those kinds of lies, he emphasized, not only undermines public health and governance in the near term, but undercuts our collective use of facts to help organize society.

"The truth is, we may not survive another crisis in public health if we don't come up with answers," Baron said. ***"And we may not survive another crisis in our democracy like the one we've faced."***

Champion of independence

Baron has been one of America's highest profile newsroom leaders for the last two decades. He began his journalism career at the *Miami Herald* in 1976 and worked for the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* before returning to the *Herald* as executive editor in 2000. He then served as executive editor of *The Boston Globe* for

over a decade before moving to the *Post*.

Baron was portrayed by Liev Schreiber in the 2015 film **"Spotlight,"** winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture. The film depicts the work of the *Globe's* investigative reporting team, published in 2002, which revealed decades of covered-up abuse cases in the Catholic Church.

At Thursday's event, Baron was introduced by MIT President L. Rafael Reif, who called the veteran editor a "champion of the independent press and its essential role in American democracy." He added: "Marty's distinguished career is a study in integrity, determination, and grace under pressure."

Sustaining enlightenment

Baron began his talk with some broad historical brushstrokes, emphasizing the 18th-century Enlightenment as the time when a commitment to empiricism and rational inquiry helped form contemporary society. "Not one of you would be here without the values that informed that period," he said.

That said, Baron added, today ***"verifiable fact, objective reality, is now underdetermined, deliberate, cynical, and malevolent assault. I can think of no greater threat to our system of governance, or to the public good."***

As a principal example, Baron cited the stream of lies disputing that former President Trump lost the 2020 presidential election.

"We know that Joe Biden won," Baron said. "There is a mountain of evidence proving that he did. There is no credible evidence that he didn't. There were multiple recounts, there were audits, some of them even real ones. There were court challenges to official results that failed one after another, and judges at every level cited lack of evidence. ***And yet, as of last December, one-third of the American public, and a stunning 71 percent of Republicans, believe the election was stolen."***

When it comes to the Covid-19 pandemic, Baron observed, we are suffering from a similar wave of falsehoods.

"We know that vaccines work," Baron said. "For decades, they have rid the world of devastating illness and death. And yet a substantial portion of the public believes vaccines will sicken and even kill you. Nothing could be more threatening to the public's health than to deceive people about which medicines are safe and effective, and which are quackery, with potentially fatal outcomes. Here at MIT you know that as well as anyone."

As a result of such large-scale lying, Baron said, the U.S. is losing its ability to properly govern itself.

"Ours is a country that rightly encourages vigorous debate about the problems we face and the policies required to address them," Baron said. "That is liberty. That is democracy. That is what has distinguished our country in the eyes of people throughout the world."

However, he added: "What happens when the underpinnings of that democracy are eroded? What happens when instead of debating policies, we find ourselves debating the most basic facts? ***What happens when we can't even agree on what constitutes a fact? What happens when all those elements we rely upon for determining what is a fact — expertise, education, experience, and evidence — are routinely devalued, dismissed, and denied? That's where we are today."***

Decline in confidence

As Baron emphasized, this is not simply a media or governance issue. He noted that there is a widespread decline in public confidence toward both the media and the medical professions, among many other institutions oriented around empirical reality.

"We in the press and you who are in science are in the same leaky, rickety boat," Baron said.

Observing that there is "a systematic effort to sabotage independent sources of fact," Baron noted that "the mission of these saboteurs ... is not the pursuit of truth. They seek something else: power. Political, personal, and commercial power."

Baron also listed a series of empirical questions about facticity, knowledge, and communication that he believes are worth pursuing, as one part of a larger societal effort to fight back against falsehoods and the accumulation of power they may abet.

"To get us back to a society firmly rooted in objective reality, I believe we will have to come up with answers to some urgent questions," Baron said. "Here are a few. ***What makes the human mind susceptible to falsehoods from nonexperts and resistant to evidence-based facts from people with expertise?*** How can we better signal to the public that knowledge is not static? ... How can we get the public to better understand and weigh the risks they face in daily life?"

He added: "How do we better signal that there is a distinction between scientific facts and policy decisions?... ***How can reality-based professionals disseminate information in a manner that is more persuasive to more people?"***

Impact on ordinary people

During the question-and-answer portion of the event, Baron further discussed the pursuit of truth in journalism, which he characterized as a process of searching for facts while questioning one's own assumptions.

"It's not so much maintaining a middle ground, it's maintaining an independent ground," Baron said. ***"Objectivity is a method. You want to make sure that your own preconceptions don't get in the way of an objective search for the facts."***

[End of article about Baron's lecture]

It seems obvious to me that one single individual is responsible for this situation, and that is Donald Trump. The Big Lie about the 2020 election only gained a following because he started it. It is his single worst legacy, and one that could bring America down. Shame on him.

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