The death of Joe Paterno and the Penn State scandal

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Thousands attended a public memorial for former Pennsylvania State University football coach Joe Paterno, held Thursday in State College, Pennsylvania. Paterno died of complications from lung cancer on January 22 at the age of 85. Renowned for his coaching abilities and his commitment to promoting academic achievement amongst his players during his six decades at Penn State, Paterno had been demonized in the press recently following last year's highly publicized scandal at the university.

That scandal, which rapidly attracted the media's full attention, erupted in November, when retired Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was arrested and charged with sexually abusing eight children over a 15-year period.

It soon emerged that in 2002, graduate student Mike McQueary went to Paterno and told him he had seen Sandusky abusing a child in the showers of a campus locker room. Paterno then informed Penn State Athletic Director Tim Curley. He also set up a meeting between McQueary, Curley and Gary Schultz, the university's senior vice president for business and finance. Although informed by McQueary of what he had seen, Curley and Schultz allegedly never reported the incident to authorities. Paterno reportedly never followed up with Curley and Schultz, and never passed on the information to police himself.

The allegations against Sandusky are extremely serious, as is the terrible damage he inflicted, if the charges are true. Questions can certainly be raised as to whether Paterno acted forcefully enough. However, the subsequent intervention of the media and the university/political authorities was not aimed at getting to the truth of the situation, honestly apportioning blame and seeking redress for those who had suffered.

The media rapidly swarmed around the disturbing events with the kind of sensationalist coverage that has by now become standard. The coverage was a tawdry and vindictive affair in which the media sought to encourage the worst impulses in the general public. Paterno, along with Sandusky, became the latest in a long series of boogeymen onto whom could be diverted the pent-up anger of an increasingly discontented population.

Under conditions in which the living standards of masses of people have steadily worsened, while all the great questions of life go undiscussed by a sclerotic (and generally despised) political elite, the need to live vicariously through celebrities, be they sports figures, actors or popular musicians, has also grown. The mass media encourages and exploits this, turning a considerable profit in the process. An admiration for athletic accomplishment turns into fanaticism and the importance of sports figures and events is blown far out of proportion.

When figures such as Paterno, who have been placed on pedestals, turn out to be less than perfect, admiration can quickly turn into resentment and hostility. The media assumes the role of chief prosecutor, leading the charge against the public figure in question. Profits also stand to be made in tearing him or her down. The process all occurs with remarkable swiftness, only the faintest hint of blood in the water is required.

Had last year's scandal never occurred, there is no doubt Paterno's life and career would now be subject to the most unreserved and fawning tributes in the media. Until very recently, Paterno, like Penn State itself, was held up as a great "American institution."

Paterno was the winningest coach in Division 1 College Football, with 409 victories to his credit, and he held the record for coaching the most seasons of any college football coach. He twice led Penn State to national championships, in 1982 and 1986.

The New America Foundation's Academic Bowl Championship Series ranked Penn State number one academically in 2009 and 2011. During his time at the university, 47 of Paterno's players made Academic all-American, the third highest of any school.

There is no need to paint Paterno as a saint. While his salary was modest compared to the most highly paid coaches in college football, and he turned down numerous lucrative offers from professional teams and colleges in order to stay at Penn State, he earned more than a million dollars a year at the university. American college football, nominally an "amateur" sport, has become a billion-dollar business in recent decades. It would be naïve to imagine that any top-ranked program could remove itself entirely from a football system dominated by big business and the corrupting pursuit of the almighty dollar.

In any event, when the Sandusky scandal came to light in November, all that mattered were the mistakes Paterno had made. Those who had once honored the esteemed coach now hypocritically sought to distance themselves as far as possible. Paterno's name was removed from the Big Ten Conference's Stagg-Paterno Championship Trophy. The Maxwell Football Club discontinued its Joseph V. Paterno award, which was to be given out each year to the college football coach showing the greatest dedication to academic achievement among athletes. Pennsylvania Senators Bob Casey and Pat Toomey withdrew their support for the nomination of Paterno for the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The Penn State Board of Trustees, as might be expected, acted hastily and shabbily. Soon after the Sandusky story broke, Paterno announced he would retire at the end of the season—later the same day the university fired him, along with Penn State president Graham Spanier. The trustees and the administration were obviously terrified of the media and essentially decided to make Paterno a sacrificial lamb. There was not even the pretence of a fair process and consideration for the legendary coach's rights.

Curley and Schultz, for their part, were arrested and charged with perjury and failing to report the allegations against Sandusky to authorities.

As the media persisted in demanding an explanation for his behavior, Paterno attempted to tell his side of the story. "I didn't know exactly how to handle it and I was afraid to do something that might jeopardize what the university procedure was," Paterno told the *Washington Post* in his first interview after his firing. "So I backed away and turned it over to some other people, people I thought would have a little more expertise than I did. It didn't work out that way."

In another statement released after his firing, Paterno said, "At this moment the Board of Trustees should not spend a single minute discussing my status. They have far more important matters to address. I want to make this as easy for them as I possibly can. This is a tragedy. It is one of the great sorrows of my life. With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more."

The media continued to wring as much as possible from the scandal until the very last minute of Paterno's life. Such was the thirst for new developments around which to bloviate and moralize, that Paterno's death was prematurely reported by CBS Sports, which based itself on reports in a student publication whose source was a hoax email. The false news of Paterno's death spread quickly as many other media outlets, including *Huffington Post* and MSNBC's BreakingNews.com, picked up the story. Paterno's family was forced to issue a correction. The former coach died the following day.