

# New York Times apologizes for coverage of presidential election

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In two open letters last Friday, one addressed to its staff and another directed to its readers, the *New York Times* apologized for its coverage of the US presidential election and promised to approach the Donald Trump administration with impartiality and fairness. The letters represent a white flag of surrender to Trump and the extreme right unfurled by an important element of the American liberal establishment.

In his letter to “colleagues,” *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. referred to “one of the most momentous weeks in our nation’s recent history” and urged his staff to recall the “instructions” of Adolph Ochs (1858-1935), onetime owner and publisher of the *Times*, “to cover the news without fear or favor.”

It is, one might say, a little late in the day for that. The *Times* has been one of the principal voices of the American ruling elite for more than a century and a half, encouraging or approving countless crimes and injustices. In recent years, it has consistently served as a propaganda arm of the CIA and Pentagon, promoting US wars of aggression from Serbia to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria and leading the media campaign of war-mongering against Russia.

Sulzberger went on to claim that “fearless, hard-fought journalism will always stand as the backbone of the *Times*, no matter the president.” Getting to the crux of the matter, the newspaper’s publisher declared that “we also approach the incoming Trump administration without bias.” He continued: “We will cover his policies and his agenda fairly. We will bring expert analysis and thoughtful commentary to the changes we see in government, and to their ramifications on the ground.”

If the character of the incoming Trump administration remains an open question, then, first of all, how does Sulzberger explain the panic-stricken, self-deluded and blatantly pro-Clinton character of the *Times*’ coverage prior to November 8? The newspaper was at the head of the pack proclaiming that Trump’s bigotry and sexism made him unfit to occupy the White House, and, even worse, he was a political stooge of Russian President Putin. The newspaper insisted, moreover, that Hillary Clinton had a virtually

unassailable lead. If there was nothing to fear from Trump, why was the *Times* so fearful?

Every step Trump has taken since Election Day—the threat to deport millions of “criminal” immigrants, the attack on abortion rights, the appointment of fascist-racist Stephen Bannon as his “chief strategist,” the bruited about of Rudolph Giuliani and John Bolton as cabinet members—underscores the far-right character of the new administration. No one with any courage or principle would or could respond to this foul, illegitimate president-elect, the loser in the popular vote, who won the ballots of barely a quarter of eligible voters, “without bias.”

Sulzberger promised that the *Times* “will look within and beyond Washington to explore the roots of the anger that has roiled red and blue America.” He added, “If many Americans no longer seem to understand each other, let’s make it our job to interpret and explain. Our predecessors founded our singular newspaper for just this moment—to serve as a watchdog to the powerful; and to hold mighty institutions accountable, without fear or favor.”

This is doubletalk, intended to conceal the *Times*’ prostration, and that of the entire liberal and left-liberal media. The newspaper’s editors were not aware of “the anger that has roiled red and blue America” for definite *political and class reasons*, not because they experienced a temporary and mysterious failure of their sensory powers.

Wealthy, self-absorbed and pleased with the world, Sulzberger and his colleagues were distant from the widespread hostility toward Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and the Democrats, prompted by the assault on jobs, wages, pensions and health care, yawning social inequality and endless war. They self-servingly wished away the widespread mood of anger and protest.

Nor are they any more capable of taking an accurate measurement of popular feeling in the aftermath of the elections.

The notion that the *New York Times* might “hold mighty institutions accountable, without fear or favor” can only evoke bitter laughter. In November 2010, summing up the

*Times*’ attitude to the powerful and the mighty, then-Executive Editor Bill Keller, in response to WikiLeaks’ exposures of US government criminality, defended the “war on terror” and infamously acknowledged, “We agree wholeheartedly that transparency is not an absolute good. Freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity.”

Later on Friday, Sulzberger and executive editor Dean Baquet addressed an open letter to *Times* readers. Its message seems to suggest disorientation and bewilderment as much as anything else.

“After such an erratic and unpredictable election,” they wrote, “there are inevitable questions: Did Donald Trump’s sheer unconventionality lead us and other news outlets to underestimate his support among American voters? What forces and strains in America drove this divisive election and outcome? Most important, how will a president who remains a largely enigmatic figure actually govern when he takes office?”

No, it was not Trump’s “sheer unconventionality” that led the *Times* to get things wrong. How would that superficial concept explain anything? Again, the *Times* and other media outlets “underestimated” opposition to the status quo because they themselves were terribly pleased with the status quo and they chose to assume that wide layers of the American population were too. Whether or not they were genuinely convinced of that, or were merely feverishly trying to convince themselves and others, is a secondary point.

The unwarranted assertion that Trump is an “enigmatic figure” whose actions presumably need to be deciphered and presented “impartially and unflinchingly,” as Sulzberger and Baquet go on to say, seems to be an offer on the part of the newspaper to act as the new president’s interpreter and liaison with the public. They then pledge “to report America and the world honestly, without fear or favor, striving always to understand and reflect all political perspectives and life experiences in the stories that we bring to you.”

Words mean something. “All political perspectives and experiences,” including those of white supremacists, fascists, warmongers? To what and to whom is the *Times*, in fact, proposing to open its pages and columns?

Trump responded to the *Times* statement of repentance with more bluster and bullying. The right-wing media gloated about the newspaper eating crow. On November 14, the *Times* apparently began implementing its new policy of “fairness” and “impartiality” toward Trump with an article by Julie Hirschfeld Davis headlined “Donald Trump Appears to Soften Stance on Immigration, but Not on Abortion.”

The article, covering Trump’s appearance on CBS’s “60

Minutes,” was semi-friendly, semi-conciliatory, giving the benefit of the doubt to the president-elect wherever it could. Trump had softened “some of his hardest-line campaign positions,” it stated. In the “60 Minutes” segment, he “appeared to inch toward the political center.”

Furthermore, Trump now promised to be “very restrained” in his Twitter posts, and he had worked since his election “to project an air of seriousness and self-discipline, first in a victory speech early Wednesday and then in an Oval Office meeting the next day with Mr. Obama, whom he called a ‘good man’ for whom he had ‘great respect.’”

Peculiarly, in the middle of her article, Davis suddenly veered off into a defense of the *Times* against various criticisms of the newspaper Trump had posted on Twitter. She countered his claims that the *Times* had issued “an apology to readers” (which it had), had been “losing of thousands subscribers over its campaign coverage” and had “falsely reported that he believed additional nations should acquire nuclear arms.” This bizarre detour, taking up several paragraphs, suggests extreme nervousness and defensiveness, and perhaps fears that a Trump-Bannon administration will retaliate against the *Times*.

Davis’ piece concluded by asserting that the television interview “showed a side of the president-elect that he did not display during the campaign—a man awed and somewhat intimidated by the significance of the office to which he had just laid claim. ‘I’ve done a lot of big things; I’ve never done anything like this,’ Mr. Trump said. ‘It is—it is so big, it is so—it’s so enormous, it’s so amazing.’ Mr. Trump said he had been inaccurately portrayed as ‘a little bit of a wild man’ during the campaign, and he promised that he would be able to tamp down some of his more heated speech as president.”

This is how the *New York Times* proposes to respond to the coming to power of the most right-wing government in American history, with cowardice, appeasement and conciliation. Sulzberger, Baquet and company are a thousand times more frightened of the American working class knowing the truth and mobilizing itself than they are of any of Trump’s virulently right-wing policies and fascist cronies. The question of questions for the working class in the coming period is breaking with every illusion in miserable, decomposing liberalism and organizing on an independent, socialist basis.



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