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CARRIE
NORDLUND: In a news environment that's become very he said she said, have journalists forgotten that part of their job is to point out when a politician is actually lying?

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Join David Corn, chief of the Washington Bureau for Mother Jones magazine, and Carrie Nordlund of the Watson Institute as they explore what it's like to cover truth and lies during the Trump presidency, especially in light of the recent controversy over President Trump's handling of offering condolences to military families.

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So David, diving into today's news, so we heard this morning from Mrs. Johnson, the widow of one of the fallen soldiers from Niger. So two questions around this. Number one, what are you hearing about what happened in Niger?

DAVID CORN: There's still a fair amount of ambiguity or question. There's still a number of questions about what the mission was, what they were doing. I mean, I think basically 99.9% of Americans did not have any idea that we had troops, let alone special forces, in Niger. But we also have them in over 120, 130 countries now, all part of the war on terror. And I'm sure they are working very hard and they're making sacrifices for us.

But it's really not part of the public discussion about where they are, what they're doing, and is this the most effective way to confront the challenge in front of us. So while this is a tremendously tragic event for the loss of our countrymen, I'm hoping that it also leads to a broader conversation about our policies and what we're doing. In fact, I was even talking to some Pentagon correspondents just yesterday who are still trying to put together the accounts. And there are different accounts in the Niger government, and from the US government, and from inside the American military about what they were doing and what's to blame for the loss of life.

So I think that it's going to take a while to sort that out, and to what degree mistakes were

egregious or mistakes that could have been avoided. Obviously there were mistakes made, but obviously too in a situation like this, in a conflict ridden area, there's going to be violence, and there are going to be events and loss of life. But the big question is, what here was avoidable?

It's interesting they were in a 12 person team. And often how special forces work, particularly when they're in more isolated environments, and the ethos of these teams is often that they are independent, they can take care of themselves, so to speak. And one question might be to what degree did they need more outside support?

CARRIE

So it sounds like Jack Reed, John McCain, senators sitting on the Foreign Relations

NORDLUND:

Committee were not briefed on why the soldiers were there. Do you think this will prompt-- I mean, if Congress can get themselves together-- a review of the authorized use of military force?

DAVID CORN:

Well, they probably weren't briefed on special forces operations in 120 other countries, as well, any one of them probably where things like this could have happened and operations gone bad. So it's in some ways, I think, quite disturbing for any of us citizens out here to see that members of the Foreign Relations or Armed Services Committee in the Senate and the House are not up to speed on what's happening.

I mean, the system is pretty basic. That is the executive branch, which oversees the military, is allowed to do things in secret without publicizing it to the world, because that might make it harder to achieve what you want achieve. But they're allowed to do this, because another branch of government, the legislative branch representing us ignorant citizens, oversees these actions. So it's basically another set of eyes.

OK, is it worth the funding, is this right, is this wrong, is it effective? And so if we have this wide range of special operations forces and military actions around the world that are not really being vetted by Congress, then the system isn't doing as it's supposed to be doing, and we don't have representative government.

CARRIE

So let's talk about one of the other issues coming out of this. And this is the phone call that the

NORDLUND:

president had with the widow. And the larger question that I'd like to ask you is-- by the White House not backing down from their account, and I think the president tweeted this morning again about the phone call-- what does this tell you about this White House? Is this symptomatic of this larger in the Trump administration, and what is maybe that larger issue

within the Trump administration?

DAVID CORN: Well, the larger issue is the pathos of Donald Trump. And you say that, and it sounds hyperbolic, sounds like you're being overly partisan, and so on, but he has demonstrated time and time again that he puts his own personal interest, even his own personal feelings, ahead of the obvious better road to take. Before the election I did a story-- I went back and I looked at videos of many of the lectures he gave at the learning annex, and at these success seminars where people pay \$150 to hear Donald Trump and other businessmen tell you how to become rich and famous like them. And these are big auditorium events in big halls.

And one of the things that struck out to me again and again is that he had this riff that he always used, and he often said at the beginning of his lecture or his address-- calling it a lecture is almost giving it too much credit-- he would say, I'm going to tell you something that don't teach you at Wharton or at Harvard. I'm going to tell you, this like my number one rule of business. OK? And they don't teach you this.

But I'm going to tell you this, and you better remember this. And that is, if somebody screws you, you got to screw them back. But not just screw them back, you got to screw them back 10 times over, or 15 times over. He said this over and over again to people. It really seems to be his outlook on life, that if someone attacks you, or criticizes you, or you perceive they criticize you, not only do you have to counter-punch, you have to pulverize them, you have to annihilate them.

And it doesn't even matter if it's a POW in the case of John McCain, doesn't matter if it's a Gold Star family like Kaiser Khan's family at the convention, and it doesn't matter now if it's to the widow of Sergeant La David Johnson. His whole view of the world is you've got to destroy your enemies or perceived enemies, perceived critics, in such a fashion. I mean, all of us in Washington this week-- and I was at a fancy Washington book party on Saturday night with the media elite--

CARRIE I was going to say coastal elites.

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: --and we all kind of are scratching our heads, because to live in Washington now is like you can't turn off your outrage and your shock button, but you kind of need to, because every day is like Groundhog Day with Trump. It's like didn't we live through this yesterday? And kind of, yeah. Because the obvious play here for any decent human being, let alone any political

leader who just wants to do what's right politically, is to come out and say I don't get into a tit for tat over this.

This has been derailed. If I said anything that offended the widow, I'm going to call up and apologize, what I meant to say was this, if it came across the wrong way, the last thing I want to do is cause her an ounce of trouble, and if there are Congress people out there attacking me, I'm not going to address it. Because the one thing we should care about now is the family and friends of the fallen, and to make sure that others don't end up in the same position.

And I'm going to be a leader. Leaders lead. That means they look at what's best for the community that they're in charge of and make decisions based on that. Donald Trump seems completely incapable of thinking in those terms. And even worse, he seems incapable of even being guided by others to think in those terms. I mean, I've sat in meetings with politicians, and I have a lot of friends who do this as a profession, and say, listen, we know you don't want to do this, but this is what you got to do now.

CARRIE
NORDLUND: Well, and I was just thinking as you were saying that, that one of the qualities that he prioritizes almost above all is loyalty. So that even for his staff to suggest this may be seen as disrespect in some way.

DAVID CORN: Yeah. Well, one of the sad moments of last week was watching John Kelly, the White House Chief of Staff, retired general, who lost his son himself in the military. So he's a Gold Star family member. And he came out, and rather than trying to bring a resolution to this and talk about how to stop the breach and heal, he came out and he continued to attack Congresswoman Wilson, and did so by lying, or at least giving an inaccurate false description of something she had done at an unveiling ceremony for an FBI building.

I mean, it was ridiculous. I mean, this was like a hundred thousand million percent besides the point.

CARRIE
NORDLUND: If he would have stopped at his personal account, which was just gripping and heartbreaking, but then it seemed like he was given political talking points.

DAVID CORN: Yes. He had to go out and do Donald Trump's bidding. He had to destroy the enemy, pulverize, annihilate the critic, and thus continue the politicization of this tragedy. And he did so by saying something that was completely untrue. And then the issue became, well, is he going to admit that he was wrong or apologize for falsely accusing her of being a showboat? And he

wouldn't, because if he were to do that, that would to Donald Trump be the biggest sign of weakness.

Donald Trump has been asked in many interviews, is there anything you regret, have you ever had to say you're sorry? And he goes, oh, you know, I don't think so. I think, again, he is not capable of feeling regret.

CARRIE Nothing in his voice or change of tone [INAUDIBLE]

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: I mean, even on the Access Hollywood tape of him talking about grabbing women by the private parts-- basically boasting about committing sexual assault. When he gave a statement that night, he looked like-- we in the media refer to it as the hostage tape video. Because he's there like reading off a teleprompter, and just saying-- I'm not sure if he apologizes or not, I don't remember now, but he kind of goes this is locker room talk. I love women. I respect women.

But you could tell that it took the mightiest force in the planet to twist his arm to get him to even say that. When he's spoken in the past about apologizing, he's always said that he doesn't think he has anything to apologize for.

CARRIE Yeah. Yes.

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: So there's no way that John Kelly now can come out and apologize. There is this sort of mob-like cult that Donald Trump insists on, and often in criminal gangs they force the newbies to commit an act of violence to show that they'll do what you want. Sometimes it's killing a random person, sometimes it's doing something else.

CARRIE Personal sacrifice.

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: But that's how you prove you're loyal. And it seems like Donald Trump insists on the people around him going out there and saying things that are not true, or continuing an obscene politicization of an event to show that they're loyal to him, and that they're part of the gang. I mean, this has happened on day one-- I know I'm long winded here-- with Sean Spicer insisting it was the biggest inauguration audience, period. Ever. And Jesus couldn't have

brought more people out to the lawn that day.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CARRIE Do you agree or disagree with former President Carter's assessment that the media has been
NORDLUND: tougher on President Trump than any other recent president?

DAVID CORN: Well, I think you have to speak about before and after the election. Before the election, no. I think Trump largely got a free ride because much of the media was covering him as spectacle, in a horse race as a celebrity, and they were giving him lots of airtime without the annotations and the vetting that was necessary. I have to brag a little bit about Mother Jones-- we did lots of stories about how he lied about his ties to the mob, financial conflicts of interests with foreign banks, overseas deals that were problematic-- that nobody else did at the time.

And I've even had some people at other major media outlets come up to me in the time since and saying, you know, what you guys did before the election was great and really prodded us to make sure to look at this. But mainly it was after the election. And so I think before the election he was not vetted. His scandals were not treated the same way as Hillary Clinton's email server problem. And it was a problem. It was a story. But it wasn't the biggest story.

But since the election, I think in lot of ways he has generated tough media coverage that is completely warranted. I mean, finally, I've been saying for-- I hate to say this, because it makes you sound like an old codger-- but for decades that one responsibility of the media should be to say when politicians are lying--

CARRIE Seems like a basic--

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: --and not to just put everything into a he said, she said, or he said, he said context. And I think that's really an important job of being a reporter. And it was finally towards the end of the campaign, and certainly since the election where folks, outfits like *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and others, are getting out there and saying what the president said today was a lie. He knew better. He was told otherwise. He still said it.

A couple months ago *The New York Times* listed all Donald Trump's lies to date. That was their word. They put a list of 200 or so lies at that time. *The Washington Post* has kept a list of his factual inaccuracies. I think they are well over 1,000 now just since he was inaugurated.

So I think that type of coverage, which is tough, is warranted. Because he pushes the envelope more than anyone else. IF Stone, a great columnist, Izzy Stone-- worked at *The Nation* magazine and other places in the '40s, '50s, and '60s, had his own newsletter, had a line. All governments lie. And that's true. They all lie.

But some lie a lot more and about much more important things than others. And I think Trump has really raised the bar tremendously in this front, and has forced major media outlets, mainstream media if you want to call them that, that don't like to be evaluative, don't like to say that something is a lie, they'd rather put it in a more gentle way, but he's really forced them to confront the president's inaccuracies and the statements in a much tougher way, because they are just so excessive.

CARRIE

To your point about people's outrage meters, and that we feel sort of on a daily basis there's something new to be outraged about, and stunned that something is happening, in that vein of thinking, what are the similarities that you're finding between covering this White House and the Obama or Bush White House?

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN:

Well, George W. Bush is in high regard these days, because he's--

CARRIE

A complete legacy overhaul. Yes.

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN:

He gave a speech basically accusing Trump of trafficking, and bigotry, and conspiracy theories, and divisiveness, and he was completely right about this. And I wish he had been that open on this during the campaign. I think the Republican Party is really to blame for Trump, because they keep enabling him. Even those that aren't on his side, many of them are still not being as critical as they ought to be.

But when I hear George W. Bush speak that way-- I did a book called *The Lies of George W. Bush*, but more importantly, I did a book called *Hubris* with Michael Isikoff was about the run up to the war in which we went behind the scenes and reported out how the Bush Administration-- don't forget Dick Cheney-- basically pedaled one false assertion after another to bring the country into a war that has led to four million Iraqis displaced, maybe over a million Iraqi civilians killed in one way or the other, premature deaths, and of course, the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans.

And that's really almost as bad as you can go as a president. So up against Trump, he looks

better, at least, as a person. And at least he abided by some of the norms of civilized political life. But at the time, it was very, very difficult to cover the run up to the war in 2002, 2003 right after 9/11. A lot of reporters wanted to give the Bush Administration the benefit of the doubt, and I was one of the handful of reporters who was trying to be skeptical and find reasons or find holes in their argument, and say, listen, there are other alternatives to a full scale invasion.

These days, most of the media is indeed highly skeptical of anything Trump says or does. And there's been a pretty good amount of good coverage of all the various policy things, and what's going on certainly inside the White House. And that's why Donald Trump--

CARRIE Russia.

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: --is bent on this fake news campaign of his. He wants the third of the public that's still with him to not listen to the rest of the media, because what's coming out there is negative, because it's accurate.

CARRIE So in our closing minutes, since we're sitting here in Providence, and we're sitting here on

NORDLUND: campus, and as an alum--

DAVID CORN: Go Brown.

CARRIE --yes, what lessons do you take from your undergraduate career? You started at the *Brown*

NORDLUND: *Daily Herald*. Are there any lessons or any memory you have that still stays with you?

DAVID CORN: As much as I want to like tout the wonderful academics that I engaged in when I was at Brown-

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CARRIE [INAUDIBLE]

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: --really to me probably the most formative experience was I worked for the *Brown Daily Herald*, but I worked for an alternative weekly too that went out throughout the state back in those days that doesn't exist anymore. But I covered Buddy Cianci. I knew Buddy well. He offered me a job once, which was a good way to get me off his back. And I saw what it was like to cover a fellow who was pretty corrupt, very corrupt, but also very popular--

CARRIE [INAUDIBLE]

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: --and knew how to be a demagogue. He was an effective demagogue in some ways, and did get some things done, which is more than I can say for Trump. And he wasn't a hate-driven person. He could be very hateful, and of course, he went to jail for being violent and corrupt.

But covering him, and the press pool in Rhode Island was not very big. And so I got to play a larger role than I would have had I gone to school elsewhere, a bigger state. But that really taught me a lot about political journalism, and in retrospect now, it taught me a lot about how to deal with a big political figure.

CARRIE Right. Well, thank you, David, so much for your time.

NORDLUND:

DAVID CORN: It's great to talk to you.

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CARRIE This has been Trending Globally, Politics and Policy. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you
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