

Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Bob Schieffer's "About the News" with H. Andrew Schwartz
Podcast**

Subject: "Ruth Marcus: A Matter of Opinion"

Speakers:

**Ruth Marcus,
Columnist,
The Washington Post**

Hosts:

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(Music plays.)

BOB SCHIEFFER: I'm Bob Schieffer.

H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: And I'm Andrew Schwartz.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And these are conversations about the news. We're in the midst of a communications revolution. We have access to more information than any people in history. But are we more informed, or just overwhelmed by so much information we can't process it?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Our podcast is a collaboration of the Bob Schieffer College of Communication at TCU and the CSIS in Washington.

MR. SCHIEFFER: In this first year of Donald Trump's presidency, we're talking to the reporters who are covering the president the closest.

(Music plays.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: Today on the podcast we have Ruth Marcus, an op-ed columnist for The Washington Post, who specializes in American politics and domestic policy. She's also the deputy editorial page editor. She went to Yale and then went to Harvard Law School. And if I'm correct, you started writing for the Post while you were in law school. And then did you ever leave, or is that the only place you've ever worked?

RUTH MARCUS: That's – well, I worked for a small legal newspaper before I went into law school, which kind of explains my detour. But the Post has been my home for 33 years now.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Have you ever seen anything like what we're doing now?

MS. MARCUS: Nope. Nope. And I've covered a lot of tumultuous times. I was not here for Watergate, but I was here for the Reagan administration, which was a big change in this town. I was here for the Clinton impeachment. I met my husband during the Clarence Thomas hearings. So I've seen a lot of moments. But I've never experienced a kind of constant explosion tornado of news like we're having now. And it's – I think those words are good, because explosion and tornado connotes some scariness. And I think it's a scary time for us.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Firehose would be another metaphor that comes to mind.

MS. MARCUS: Mmm hmm, yep.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I mean, it's just gushing out so fast that we can't keep up with it, even those of us who get paid to keep up with it.

MS. MARCUS: So I woke up this morning having thought a little bit about the extraordinary New York Times interview with the president, in which he essentially called on his

own attorney general to resign – (laughs) – or invited him to resign, wrote a column about this. And in the interim between when I wrote the column and when I arrived here, the attorney general said, thanks but no thanks, I think I'll stay. So, of course, I had to update the column. So this – the firehose gushes constantly.

MR. SCHIEFFER: What do you make of this? I mean, we have had other administration – every administration tries to shape the news. But we have never had any administration that sought to control it the way this administration seems to be trying to do. I mean, every unflattering story, they just brand as false.

MS. MARCUS: So every administration finds its own way to fight with the media that covers it. I would say the press corps but we're not just press anymore; we're multiplatform. So I think the Nixon administration is the one that was most similar to this one in terms of just simply trying to frame the media as enemy and taking it head-on. But certainly Barack Obama tried to do his way to go around the mainstream media, and had these kind of odd – I was a little bit offended by it, I have to say – interviews. He never gave an interview, by the way, to The Washington Post, President Obama, during his two terms while he was in office.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Really?

MS. MARCUS: He came, after much beseeching by me, to an editorial board session right after – right before his inauguration. And he never again gave an interview to The Washington Post. That tells you something about their attitude toward the mainstream media and their view of how they wanted to manage it. But to get back to your question, no. The degree of hostility and just direct attack is like nothing we've ever experienced before. And we need to remind ourselves, as Marty Baron our executive editor – I can quote him without fear of looking like I'm sucking up because I don't work for him – he says: We don't go to war, we go to work. And that's what our attitude needs to be.

MR. SCHIEFFER: How are you doing it now? Are you doing it in a different way than you did before? And I want to talk later about – because the Post really has taken a lead in shifting to the digital age and has done remarkable things, and you're thriving. There's no other way to look at it right now. The only newspaper – you hired, what, 60 reporters this year?

MS. MARCUS: Well, thank you, Marty Baron, because you can't have a great newspaper without a great editor at the helm of it. And the performance of the news side speaks for itself. Thank you, Jeff Bezos, for giving us the resources and the patience to see those resources really pay off. I think everybody understands they really have in this environment – our news side has just done terrific reporting.

From our point of view on the editorial side, we need to do two things simultaneously. We need, as editorial writers and our editorial board, to treat this president the same way we would treat any president, which is to say when he does things that we disagree with, we're going to say that. When he does things that we agree with, we're going to say that. We're not going to grade him on a curve so that if he does one teeny-weenie little thing good we'll go, oh, boy, sunny day. But we're not going to treat him more unfairly or use language about him that

we wouldn't use about any other president just because – and, you know, we were very vociferous.

Fred Hiatt, the editorial page editor, wrote an unusual and very powerful column. And he was a Pulitzer finalist for the editorials that he wrote inveighing against Donald Trump and trying to urge people, voters, not to elect him. He wrote a full column-length editorial – quite unusual – right after the Republican convention saying: Under normal times we would wait and assess the qualities of both candidates. But we need to tell you right now there is no way on Earth that we could endorse this man. Nonetheless, every president gets judged on performance. And so we have been trying to judge on performance. So that's on the editorial side.

On the op-ed side, it's a really, really interesting conundrum that we face, because we have a whole bunch of columnists – I think we have the best array of op-ed columnist of any newspaper on the planet.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I wouldn't argue with that.

MS. MARCUS: And here is the problem. All of our columnists, pretty much to a person, dislike Donald Trump – I mean, disagree with Donald Trump. So the conservative columnists – Michael Gerson, Charles Krauthammer, George Will – are at least as apoplectic about things that President Trump is doing as the most liberal columnists – E.J. Dionne, Gene Robinson. And so that is a problem because you want to have an editorial page and op-ed that reflects a diversity of views. And we live in a country – and we keep reminding ourselves of this – where 40 percent of voters voted for Donald Trump. And even if we don't agree with them, it's our responsibility to reflect their point of view, not in our editorial columns but on our op-ed page. And it's just awfully boring for readers, I think, to be constantly forced to read yet another I hate Donald Trump and here's why I hate him today column.

So we have gone out and aggressively solicited both individual pieces and regular columnists to help diversify our ideology and our geography. So, for example, we have this columnist who's been writing for us who's the editor of one of six papers across the country who – which endorsed Donald Trump. This is – he is an editor of a newspaper in Hillsboro, Ohio. His name is Gary Abernathy. And I called him up and said: Hey, you know, you wrote this editorial endorsing Donald Trump. Wondering how you're feeling now. Would you like to write about it for us? So he's been filling pretty much weekly dispatches from Trump country. And I think that's a value to our readers.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, the problem you face I think is a problem that all of us in journalism have faced. And that is in trying to find some way to bring balance to the coverage, even on the news side. And I know some of the cables, in an effort to bring balance, in my view, have put on people who were totally unqualified, who had no connection with the campaign. And I'm not going to name names here, but you listen to these people. You know CNN, I know why they're doing it. And yet, the person comes on and about 20 seconds in you understand this person has no connection whatsoever to the campaign. He's talked to nobody in the White House. And he certainly hasn't talked to Donald Trump. And so you just wind up wasting time in an effort to do just what you're trying to do.

MS. MARCUS: Well, I think in a sense, you've understated the problem of these commentators. And you know who you are out there. It's not simply that they are so peripheral that they have essentially no connection to the campaign. It's that they have – there is no argument, no matter how intellectually dishonest, that they're unwilling to make. So I will run a well-argued Trump column. I will put pro-Trump column. Our finger is on the scale in favor of a pro-Trump column. But I will not run one that has either factual errors in it or that has an argument that is just laughable on its face. So everybody's free to disagree but, you know, Moynihan – what Daniel Patrick Moynihan said about the facts – you're not entitled to your own facts. And you have to reach a certain level.

So I believe that the pro-Trump columns that we had have been at or exceeded that level. And that's what we're looking for. But I've gone around and talked to editors of conservative websites and conservative magazines. Everybody is out there looking for the decent pro-Trump columnist, because we all feel responsible for doing it, even though, to be honest, you know, what you see – and you've talked about this and thought about this a lot – is this siloization – sort of self-imposed siloization that people have. I only want to listen to the liberal podcasts. I only want to read the conservative website. Well, if we turned into that on our op-ed page and on our website, because we're not just a page anymore, we would be doing ourselves and our readers a disservice. You know, we can't force you to read it, but we have to offer it up to you.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But it is very interesting what you're saying here, because the fact is that George Will bailed early. Krauthammer was critical for a while, seemed to be coming back, but then in his most recent – man, he really lowers the boom. And here's the other interesting thing I was thinking about as I was thinking about interviewing you: Did you ever expect that you would see The Wall Street Journal somehow taking, maybe, at times, a harder line than The Washington Post has taken on a Republican president?

MS. MARCUS: It's pretty extraordinary. I think, if I'm correct., that The Wall Street Journal called for the president to fully divest of all of his – which is quite complicated. And I don't think we editorially went quite that far. Look, it is not a coincidence that the conservative political class has been pretty muted for the most about Donald Trump, certainly since he became president, but the conservative commentariat, at which The Wall Street Journal is close to the apex, has been willing to go after him when they deem it necessary because they're going to continue to be conservatives after Donald Trump is come and gone.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yeah, here is an example that caught my eye the other day. In a Wall Street Journal editorial: Don Jr. is a political dunce who took a meeting that went nowhere. Now, I would question whether The Washington Post editorial page would actually use that kind of language.

MS. MARCUS: It's pretty good language. I am a really big believer in actually that the power of your argument is really stronger when you don't do one of two things – when you don't use invective about people. So I'm not sure “he's a political dunce” is going to do anything except for make the editorial writer feel good and satisfied. But it's not going to convince anybody who disagrees with you. And it's always a bad idea, this doesn't do that, to ascribe

motivation to people. So we – I try to stay away from that in my own writing. I try to counsel the columnists who will accept counseling – (laughs) – to stay away from that. And I think the editorials and the voice of the editorial board really try to stay away from motivation also.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So we fast forward to when the Times, your competitor – I'm sure you all weren't as happy as – (laughs) – as a lot of people were to see that interview, which – let me just say that – let me interject this. The Times and the Post are making each other great newspapers right now. There's nothing like a little competition to –

MS. MARCUS: It's a great newspaper war. Like, the old-fashioned way.

MR. SCHIEFFER: It really is.

MS. MARCUS: And I'm a big believer in competition. I feel – when I wake up in the morning what I think is: What op-ed, who could write the most extraordinary, powerful, compelling op-ed for us today or in the days ahead. And I want to convince that person to write for us. And when I see that person, on the rare occasions when it happens, go to a certain other paper, I'm somewhere between angry and sad. And that's a competitive instinct that fuels good journalism, whether it's on the news pages or the opinion pages.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Absolutely. Absolutely. And stories like this do make great reporters. I mean, you know, that's when the enrollment in journalism schools went up, was during Watergate, and because of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. And that's just part of the fallout. But as I read this interview that he had, my first question was: Why did he do this interview? I mean, I'm glad he did interviews. I mean, I'm for politicians doing interviews. But if somebody asked me to do an interview – just like I invited you to do the podcast – the first thing I say to myself is: Why do I – why am I doing this? I mean, I think that's what everyone should ask themselves. Why am I doing this and what is the message, especially if you're a politician, that I hope to convey? There are various reasons to do interviews. And why did he do that?

MS. MARCUS: So the why did he do that question is, of course, the continuing, recurring question of the Trump administration, because sometimes it is not so clear. Because in a normal White House, yes, you would have a communications and messaging strategy. And you would know that you wanted this – I don't know what week this is. It's not infrastructure week and it's not energy week. It must be something week. It's not fire your attorney general week, as far as I knew. (Laughs.) So you would have a message –

MR. SCHIEFFER: It's make America week.

MS. MARCUS: Yeah. Oh, make – oh, yeah, get in the fire truck week.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yeah.

MS. MARCUS: OK. So you would have a communications strategy that would be built around that. And if you were prepared – you were going to have an interview, you would be

preparing for the interview and say, OK. And this is what you really want to hit. And maybe there'd be a question that would come at you from out of left field and you'd make some news that you weren't intending to make. But at least you'd have kind of a game plan going into it.

This White House has been just the improv White House. It's, let's put on a show. So, with this interview, I think there's one of two possibilities. The president said, hey, let's – he has this thing with The New York Times Maggie Haberman. Let's, like, bring them in and talk to them. And then he just pops off and he hasn't thought it through. Certainly, it doesn't seem that the communications staff knew this was coming. Or else, another possibility is they've clearly let out with Attorney General Sessions for months now that the president – he hasn't said it directly – but they've let it be very clear to Attorney General Sessions, sending the message: We're not happy that you recused yourself. Maybe he decided that it was time to get this message out. It was so full-force that I'm kind of inclined to the this one had a strategy behind it.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But if you wanted to get rid of your attorney general, why wouldn't you call him in and say, you know, it just hasn't worked out. And why don't you resign? I mean –

MS. MARCUS: This – you know, he – oddly enough, this president doesn't seem to enjoy confronting people. He seems to be oddly reticent about saying those words: You're fired. He likes to either send messengers to get people to do it. There's this really gripping story about how it was left to Donald Trump, Jr. to tell Paul Manafort that he was out. And he likes to send messages through Twitter and through the media. But, you know, getting inside the mind? Beats me.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I just can't – it's inexplicable to me. And it raises questions, to me – I mean, a couple of questions. The first one is – and let's preface this, I do not hold a degree in psychiatry – but is he stable? I mean, this almost goes beyond bad judgement. You think, you know, what is his mindset right now? I mean, does that strike you that way?

MS. MARCUS: Well, I too don't have that degree in psychiatry. But I would observe that one thing that's fascinating about this interview is the president talks about the terrible conflicts of interest that Jim Comey and Bob Mueller, he says, have. And so he's exquisitely sensitive to appearances and conflicts when it might be something that would cause harm to him. And so he's very sensitive to those. But he completely is oblivious to the notion that of course the attorney general who was at the head of your campaign, one of your senior advisors and your first Senate endorser, can't oversee this investigation. And of course, if you look at the Justice Department guidelines, you're going to need to have a special counsel. That's why we have these special counsel regulations, is for precisely situations like this. So his inability to see the world except through the prism of his own self-interest is constantly fascinating.

I think the other thing that's psychologically fascinating to me, and it's related to this, is he has told us numerous times that he is a counterpuncher, and when he is attacked it's not that he chooses to, it's that he does. He has a compulsion to strike back. So, for example, last March during the campaign he came in to give an editorial board interview. And it was left to me to ask the hard questions, which were: So, why did you raise that stuff about the size of your hands?

And why did you talk about it in a debate? And he said – this is almost an exact quote – well, I had to. And I said, well, you didn't have to. You chose to. He said, but, well, he attacked me. And that is the way I think he sees the world. When someone attacks you, you must push back. You almost can't restrain yourself from pushing back. So I think that's things that we see here. He sees the attorney general as having done something disloyal and he can't control his anger about that.

MR. SCHIEFFER: The other question that keeps coming back to me, and it came back again last night when I started to read that interview, is I have no evidence to suggest that he's done anything illegal or immoral or wrong, but he acts like someone who has a lot to cover. There's something going on here. There's something he doesn't want us to know about. He acts like someone who's done something wrong. And every action suggests that.

MS. MARCUS: It does. And the more information comes out, the more you incline in that direction, even those of us who are – I'd put you in this category – not kind of natural conspiracy theorists. At the same time – and I go back to this psychobabble that we were doing – he – the notion that his presidency might be illegitimate, that his election might be tainted by the fact of Russian intervention, I think is so damaging to his sense of self that maybe that will turn out to be alone the explanation for this bizarre refusal to accept the reality that the intelligence community has told us that Vladimir Putin directed this Russian effort to meddle in the election. He can't – he seems actually incapable of accepting that. So maybe it's a mix of psychic and – psychic issues and something really going on there. I hope someday we'll know.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But here has taken on the intelligence communities, the law enforcement community, and his own Justice Department. I can never, ever recall a president who found himself in that position – six months into his presidency.

MS. MARCUS: Well, I guess – no. The closest we have – the closest analogy we have is Richard Nixon, Elliot Richardson, William Ruckelshaus, and the firing of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. And, boy, the more I listen to the president – because he raised the question about Mueller and you'll hear more about conflict of interest, you heard it from his lawyer Jay Sekulow over the weekend – this Mueller, you know, it's a kind of inappropriate, invalid appointment because it was engineered by Comey. I'm just hearing a lot of hoofbeats of trouble coming there.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yes. And you know what's another kind of interesting thing? And you're probably not old enough to remember this, but –

MS. MARCUS: Thank you, Bob.

MR. SCHIEFFER: – I can. And you know, I'm – I go back to the Cold War and to communist dupes and Hollywood black lists, and the House Un-American Activities Committee. And suddenly it's all this flipped upside down. Now you have the Trump people who are – I mean, I've never thought that Donald Trump, Jr. or Jared Kushner were saboteurs or anything like that. I don't think they are. But the fact that they would allow themselves to be manipulated – I mean, they're being played. And they're dealing with trained espionage agents and trained

intelligence agents. And my sense is that, for want of a better word, they're so naïve that they don't really understand what they've gotten themselves involved in here.

MS. MARCUS: And just to add to that, in the – people without experience may make bad, naïve judgements in the heat of a campaign. I think one of the things that upset me the most last week, and I wrote about the notion that we're having this kind of out – we're under-outraged. We're having – so many troubling things are happening that we're kind of suffering from outrage overload. One of the things that I thought we did not respond to with enough outrage was the president's statement that first it was many, now it's most people, would take this meeting.

Boy, you know, you could – now, I understand – I'm am the biggest, fiercest momma grizzly around when it comes to criticizing my kids. So I understand that instinct. But, boy, a president of the United States looks at an email that says the Russian government wants to help your campaign and so we are going to have this meeting and your son says: Bring it on. And your response, as president of the United States, is: Most people would have had this meeting. That is not OK. I'm just going to come right out and say, I don't find it to be patriotic. And that's a terrible thing to say about a president.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And I would add to that, it is not normal.

MS. MARCUS: Also that, yes. (Laughs.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: It is not what people would do. I mean, I've been a reporter for a long, long time. And if somebody had called me up on the phone and said: Hey, I've just been talking to the Russian government. They're really for you. We really want to help you. We've got some dirt on Hillary Clinton. When can we get together? You know what my response would have been? I'm being set up here. I would have been – I mean, I would have taken three steps back because – and you know why I would have felt that way? Because people have tried to set me up. (Laughs.)

MS. MARCUS: Sure.

MR. SCHIEFFER: As you and I both know, these things happen. You would have – you would – you know, you would have blanched. I mean, I would have. And the idea that your response would be, oh, let me call him on my cellphone – who would call on the cellphone about something that sensitive? And knowing that – do they not understand that U.S. intelligence and world intelligence monitors everything that we can – we can monitor, in countries that we consider to be our adversaries?

MS. MARCUS: I totally agree. But my question is, why can't we say – you know, Donald Trump, Jr. himself had at least the decency to say, in hindsight, I would have done it differently. The president doesn't seem to be able to say really he should have done it differently. That seems to me to be the minimum that you should be able to say.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So where do you think all this goes? What happens now?

MS. MARCUS: Well, where it should go is for Special Counsel Mueller to do his job. It is going to take, in my view, a very long time to get that fully done. It's going to require an understanding of the Trump organization's finances, for example. It's going to involve a lot of interviews with a lot of people, some of whom may not be immediately available because they're living in other jurisdictions. It's going to require a lot of patience on that. Meanwhile, I think it's really important to continue to understand that Mueller has one job. And we've had a lot of conversation, because of the Comey press conference and letter, about the importance of criminal prosecutors sticking to their brief, which is to decide whether or not there's enough information and evidence to bring criminal prosecution, which is why we simultaneously need to also have these congressional investigations. Because even if there's not a crime here, we need to understand what happened.

My fear is, as I suggested before, that something is going to happen to short-circuit the Mueller inquiry. One of two things: Either – they could both happen – either he will be fired or the president will use his very broad pardon power to pardon a whole bunch of people, possibly including himself, and say, OK, look, I need to pardon these people because the Russian investigation is interfering with my ability to make America great again and it's a drain on the presidency; so I'm pardoning everybody, so there's no longer anything to investigate. Thank you very much for your service, Mr. Mueller. Everybody, let's proceed. I think that should create a firestorm in Congress, if that happens, but I am not certain where things go if that occurs. And I think that's a very big worry of mine.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Would there be a move at that point to impeach him?

MS. MARCUS: Well, there would be a move, the question is whether there would be enough people – I mean, if and when this happens – and I'm imagining sort of the darkest possibilities here – does that finally get Republicans in Congress to get moving? One would hope so, if something that extreme were to happen. But I have to say, that the very muted reaction to these very disturbing emails has raised serious questions about whether that would happen.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I think we're a long way, at this point, from impeachment.

Ruth Marcus, thank you so much.

MS. MARCUS: Thanks, Bob.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You and The Washington Post are making all of us proud to be a part of journalism.

MS. MARCUS: Thank you.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And we thank you for that.

Andrew Schwartz was not with us today, but this is Bob Schieffer with Ruth Marcus.

Thanks for listening.

(Music plays.)

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