

The Media Botched the Covington Catholic Story

And the damage to their credibility will be lasting.

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Classes resume at Covington Catholic High School on January 23, 2019, following a closing due to security concerns. (JOHN MINCHILLO / AP)

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On Friday, January 18, a group of white teenage boys wearing MAGA hats mobbed an elderly Native American man on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, chanting “Make America great again,” menacing him, and taunting him in racially motivated ways. It is the kind of thing that happens every day—possibly every hour—in Donald Trump’s America. But this time there was proof: a video. Was it

problematic that it offered no evidence that these things had happened? No. What mattered was that it had happened, and that there was video to prove it. The fact of there being a video became stronger than the video itself.

The video shows a man playing a tribal drum standing directly in front of a boy with clear skin and lips reddened from the cold; the boy is wearing a MAGA hat, and he is smiling at the man in a way that is implacable and inscrutable. The boys around him are cutting up—dancing to the drumbeat, making faces at one another and at various iPhones, and eventually beginning to tire of whatever it is that’s going on. Soon enough, the whole of the video’s meaning seems to come down to the smiling boy and the drumming man. They are locked into something, but what is it?

Twenty seconds pass, then 30—and still the boy is smiling in that peculiar way. What has brought them to this strange, charged moment? From the short clip alone, it is impossible to tell. Because the point of the viral video was that it was proof of racist bullying yet showed no evidence of it, the boy quickly became the subject of rage and disgust. “I’d be ashamed and appalled if he was my son,” the actress Debra Messing tweeted.

A second video also made the rounds. Shot shortly after the event, it consisted of an interview with the drummer, Nathan Phillips. There was something powerful about it, something that seemed almost familiar. It seemed to tell us an old story, one that’s been tugging at us for years. It was a battered Rodney King stepping up to the microphones in the middle of the Los Angeles riots, asking, “Can we all get along? Can we get along?” It was the beautiful hippie boy putting flowers in the rifle barrels of military policemen at the March on the Pentagon.

[*Read: Stop trusting viral videos*]

In the golden hour at the Lincoln Memorial, the lights illuminating the vault, Phillips stands framed against the light of the setting sun, wiping tears from his eyes as he describes what has happened—with the boys, with the country, with land itself. His voice soft, unsteady, he begins:

As I was singing, I heard them saying, ‘Build that wall, build that wall.’ This is

indigenous land; we're not supposed to have walls here. We never did... We never had a wall. We never had a prison. We always took care of our elders. We took care of our children ... We taught them right from wrong. I wish I could see ... the [young men] could put that energy into making this country really great ... helping those that are hungry.

It was moving, and it was an explanation of the terrible thing that had just happened—"I heard them saying, 'Build that wall.' " It was an ode to a nation's lost soul. It was also the first in a series of interviews in which Phillips would prove himself adept—far more so than the news media—at incorporating any new information about what had actually happened into his version of events. His version was all-encompassing, and he was treated with such patronizing gentleness by the news media that he was never directly confronted with his conflicting accounts.

When the country learned that Phillips was—in addition to being, as we were endlessly reminded, a “Native elder”—a veteran of the Vietnam War, the sense of anger about what had happened to him assumed new dimensions. That he had defended our country only to be treated so poorly by these MAGA-hatted monsters blasted the level of the boys' malevolence into outer space.

The journalist Kara Swisher found a way to link the horror to an earlier news event, tweeting:

And to all you aggrieved folks who thought this Gillette ad was too much bad-men-shaming, after we just saw it come to life with those awful kids and their fetid smirking harassing that elderly man on the Mall: Go fuck yourselves.

You know the left has really changed in this country when you find its denizens glorifying America's role in the Vietnam War and lionizing the social attitudes of the corporate monolith Procter & Gamble.

Celebrities tweeted furiously, desperate to insert themselves into the situation in a flattering light. They adopted several approaches: old-guy concern about the state of our communities (“Where are their parents, where are their teachers, where are their pastors?”: Joe Scarborough); dramatic professions of personal anguish meant

to recenter the locus of harm from Phillips to the tweeter (“This is Trump’s America. And it brought me to tears. What are we teaching our young people? Why is this ok? How is this ok? Please help me understand. Because right now I feel like my heart is living outside of my body”: Alyssa Milano); and the inevitable excesses of the temperamentally overexcited: (“#CovingtonCatholic high school seems like a hate factory to me”: Howard Dean).

[*Adam Serwer: The Trump-era overcorrection*]

By Saturday, the story had become so hot, and the appetite for it so deep, that some news outlets felt compelled to do some actual reporting. This was when the weekend began to take a long, bad turn for respected news outlets and righteous celebrities. Journalists began to discover that the viral video was not, in fact, the Zapruder film of 2019, and that there were other videos—lots and lots of them—that showed the event from multiple perspectives and that explained more clearly what had happened. At first the journalists and their editors tried to patch the revelations onto the existing story, in hopes that the whole thing would somehow hold together. CNN, apparently by now aware that the event had taken place within a complicating larger picture, tried to use the new information to support its own biased interpretation, sorrowfully reporting that early in the afternoon the boys had clashed with “four African American young men preaching about the Bible and oppression.”

But the wild, uncontrollable internet kept pumping videos into the ether that allowed people to see for themselves what had happened.

The New York Times, sober guardian of the exact and the nonsensational, had cannonballed into the delicious story on Saturday, titling its first piece “Boys in ‘Make America Great Again’ Hats Mob Native Elder at Indigenous Peoples March.”*

But the next day it ran a second story, with the headline “Fuller Picture Emerges of Viral Video of Native American Man and Catholic Students.”

How had the boys been demilitarized from wearers of “Make America Great Again” hats to “Catholic students” in less than 24 hours?

O, for a muse of fire.

It turned out that the “four African American young men preaching about the Bible and oppression” had made a video, almost two hours in length, and while it does not fully exonerate the boys, it releases them from most of the serious charges.

The full video reveals that there was indeed a Native American gathering at the Lincoln Memorial, that it took place shortly before the events of the viral video, and that during it the indigenous people had been the subject of a hideous tirade of racist insults and fantasies. But the white students weren’t the people hurling this garbage at them—the young “African American men preaching about the Bible and oppression” were doing it. For they were Black Hebrew Israelites, a tiny sect of people who believe they are the direct descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel, and whose beliefs on a variety of social issues make Mike Pence look like Ram Dass.

The full video reveals that these kids had wandered into a Tom Wolfe novel and had no idea how to get out of it.

[Julie Irwin Zimmerman: I failed the Covington Catholic test]

It seems that the Black Hebrew Israelites had come to the Lincoln Memorial with the express intention of verbally confronting the Native Americans, some of whom had already begun to gather as the video begins, many of them in Native dress. The Black Hebrew Israelites’ leader begins shouting at them: “Before you started worshipping *totem poles*, you was worshipping the true and living God. Before you became an *idol worshipper*, you was worshipping the true and living God. This is the reason why this land was taken away from you! Because you worship everything except the most high. You worship every creation except the Creator—and that’s what we are here to tell you to do.”

A young man in Native dress approaches them and gestures toward the group gathering for its event. But the Black Hebrew Israelites mix things up by throwing some dead-white-male jargon at him—they are there because of “freedom of the speech ” and “freedom of religion” and all that. The young man backs away. “You have to come away from your religious philosophy,” one Black Hebrew Israelite yells after him.

A few more people in Native costume gather, clearly stunned by his tirade. “You’re not supposed to worship eagles, buffalos, rams, all types of animals,” he calls out to them.

A Native woman approaches the group and begins to challenge its ideology, which prompts the pastor’s coreligionists to thumb their Bibles for relevant passages from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. He asks the woman why she’s angry, and when she tells him that she’s isn’t angry, he responds, “You’re not angry? You’re not angry? I’m making you angry.” The two start yelling at each other, and the speaker calls out to his associates for Isaiah 58:1.

Another woman comes up to him yelling, “The Bible says a lot of shit. The Bible says a lot of shit. The Bible says a lot of shit.”

Black Hebrew Israelites believe, among other things, that they are indigenous people. The preacher tells a woman that “you’re not an Indian. *Indian* means ‘savage.’ ”

Men begin to gather with concerned looks on their face. “*Indian* does not mean ‘savage,’ ” one of them says reasonably. “I don’t know where you got that from.” At this point, most of the Native Americans who have surrounded—“mobbed”?—the preacher have realized what the boys will prove too young and too unsophisticated to understand: that the “four young African American men preaching about the Bible and oppression” are the kind of people you sometimes encounter in big cities, and the best thing to do is steer a wide berth. Most of them leave, exchanging amused glances at one another. But one of the women stays put, and she begins making excellent points, some of which stump the Black Hebrew Israelites.

It was heating up to be an intersectional showdown for the ages, with the Black Hebrew Israelites going head to head with the Native Americans. But when the Native woman talks about the importance of peace, the preacher finally locates a unifying theme, one more powerful than anything to be found in Proverbs, Isaiah, or Ecclesiastes.

He tells her there won’t be any food stamps coming to reservations or the projects because of the shutdown, and then gesturing to his left, he says, “It’s because of

these ... bastards over there, wearing ‘Make America Great Again’ hats.”

The camera turns to capture five white teenage boys, one of whom is wearing a MAGA hat. They are standing at a respectful distance, with their hands in their pockets, listening to this exchange with expressions of curiosity. They are there to meet their bus home.

[*Conor Friedersdorf: This is how the left destroys itself*]

“Why you not angry at them?” the Black Hebrew Israelite asks the Native American woman angrily.

“That’s right,” says one of his coreligionists, “little corny-ass Billy Bob.”

The boys don’t respond to this provocation, although one of them smiles at being called a corny-ass Billy Bob. They seem interested in what is going on, in the way that it’s interesting to listen to Hyde Park speakers.

The Native woman isn’t interested in attacking the white boys. She keeps up her argument with the Black Hebrew Israelites, and her line of reasoning is so powerful that it throws the preacher off track.

“She trying to be distracting,” one of the men says. “She trying to stop the flow.”

“You’re out of order,” the preacher tells the woman. “Where’s your husband? Let me speak to him.”

By now the gathering of Covington Catholic boys watching the scene has grown to 10 or 12, some of them in MAGA hats. They are about 15 feet away, and while the conflict is surely beyond their range of experience, it also includes biblical explication, something with which they are familiar.

“Don’t stand to the side and mock,” the speaker orders the boys, who do not appear to be mocking him. “Bring y’all cracker ass up here and make a statement.” The boys turn away and begin walking back to the larger group.

“You little dirty-ass crackers. Your day coming. Your day coming ... ’cause your little dusty asses wouldn’t walk down a street in a black neighborhood, and go walk up

on nobody playing no games like that,” he calls after them, but they take no notice. “Yeah, ’cause I will stick my foot in your little ass.”

By now the Native American ceremony has begun, and the attendees have linked arms and begun dancing. “They just don’t know who they are,” one of the Black Hebrew Israelites says remorsefully to another. Earlier he had called them “Uncle Tomahawks.”

The boys have given up on him. They have joined the larger group, and together they all begin doing some school-spirit cheers; they hum the stadium-staple opening bars of “Seven Nation Army” and jump up and down, dancing to it. Later they would say that their chaperones had allowed them to sing school-spirit songs instead of engaging with the slurs hurled by the Black Hebrew Israelites.

And then you hear the sound of drumming, and Phillips appears with several other drummers, all of them headed to the large group of boys. “Here come Gad!” says the Black Hebrew Israelite excitedly. His religion teaches that Native Americans are one of the 12 tribes of Israel, Gad. Apparently he thinks that his relentless attack on the Native Americans has led some of them to confront the white people. “Here come Gad!” he says again, but he is soon disappointed. “Gad not playing! He came to the rescue!” he says in disgust.

The drummers head to the boys, and keep playing. The boys, who had been jumping to “Seven Nation Army,” start jumping in time to the drumming. Phillips takes a step toward the group, and then—as it parts to admit him—he walks into it. Here the Black Hebrew Israelites’ footage is of no help, as Phillips has moved into the crowd.

Now we may look at the viral video—or, as a CNN chyron called it, the “heartbreaking viral video”—as well as the many others that have since emerged, none of which has so far revealed the boys to be chanting anything about a wall or about making America great again. Phillips keeps walking into the group, they make room for him, and then—the smiling boy. One of the videos shows him doing something unusual. At one point he turns away from Phillips, stops smiling, and locks eyes with another kid, shaking his head, seeming to say the word *no*. This is consistent with the long, harrowing statement that the smiling boy would release at

the end of the weekend, in which he offered an explanation for his actions that is consistent with the video footage that has so far emerged, and revealed what happened to him in the 48 hours after Americans set to work doxing him and threatening his family with violence. As of this writing, it seems that the smiling boy, Nick Sandmann, is the one person who tried to be respectful of Phillips and who encouraged the other boys to do the same. And for this, he has been by far the most harshly treated of any of the people involved in the afternoon's mess at the Lincoln Memorial.

I recommend that you watch the whole of the Black Hebrew Israelites' video, which includes a long, interesting passage, in which the Covington Catholic boys engage in a mostly thoughtful conversation with the Black Hebrew Israelite preacher. Throughout the conversation, they disrespect him only once—to boo him when he says something vile about gays and lesbians. (Also interesting is the section at the very end of the video, in which—after the boys have left—the Black Hebrew Israelites are approached by some police officers. The preacher had previously spent time castigating police and “the penal code,” so I thought this would be a lively exchange, but the Israelites treat the cops with tremendous courtesy and gratitude, and when they leave the pastor describes them as “angels.” So let that be a lesson about the inadvisability of thinking you can predict how an exchange with a Black Hebrew Israelite will end up.)

I have watched every bit of video I can find of the event, although more keep appearing. I have found several things that various of the boys did and said that are ugly, or rude, or racist. Some boys did a tomahawk chop when Phillips walked into their group. There is a short video of a group that seems to be from the high school verbally harassing two young women as the women walk past it. In terms of the school itself, Covington Catholic High School apparently has a game-day tradition of students painting their skin black for “black-out days,” but any attempt by the school to cast this as innocent fun is undercut by a photograph of a white kid in black body paint leering at a black player on an opposing team.

I would not be surprised if more videos of this kind turn up, or if more troubling information about the school emerges, but it will by then be irrelevant, as the elite media have botched the story so completely that they have lost the authority to

report on it. By Tuesday, *The New York Times* was busy absorbing the fact that Phillips was not, apparently, a Vietnam veteran, as it had originally reported, and it issued a correction saying that it had contacted the Pentagon for his military record, suggesting that it no longer trusts him as a source of reliable information.

How could the elite media—*The New York Times*, let's say—have protected themselves from this event, which has served to reinforce millions of Americans' belief that traditional journalistic outlets are purveyors of “fake news”? They might have hewed to a concept that once went by the quaint term “journalistic ethics.” Among other things, journalistic ethics held that if you didn't have the reporting to support a story, and if that story had the potential to hurt its subjects, and if those subjects were private citizens, and if they were moreover minors, you didn't run the story. You kept reporting it; you let yourself get scooped; and you accepted that speed is not the highest value. Otherwise, you were the trash press.

At 8:30 yesterday morning, as I was typing this essay, *The New York Times* emailed me. The subject line was “Ethics Reminders for Freelance Journalists.” (I have occasionally published essays and reviews in the *Times*). It informed me, inter alia, that the *Times* expected all of its journalists, both freelance and staff, “to protect the integrity and credibility of *Times* journalism.” This meant, in part, safeguarding the *Times*' “reputation for fairness and impartiality.”

I am prompted to issue my own ethics reminders for *The New York Times*. Here they are: You were partly responsible for the election of Trump because you are the most influential newspaper in the country, and you are not fair or impartial. Millions of Americans believe you hate them and that you will casually harm them. Two years ago, they fought back against you, and they won. If Trump wins again, you will once again have played a small but important role in that victory.

** This article originally misstated the publication date of The New York Times' first story on the incident.*

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write

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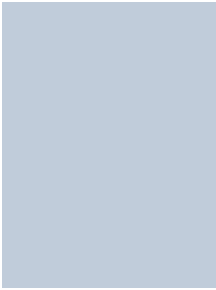
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