

**York Times**

# **New York Times Admits It Seeks To Depict Trump in A Negative Way No Matter What the Story Is**

New York Times Executive Editor, Dean Baquet, held an inter-office staff meeting last week to clarify the paper's policy for reporting news relating to President Trump. This followed backlash from Democrats when the Times ran a front-page headline that read "Trump Urges Unity vs. Racism". The problem was this did not cast the President in a negative light – so the paper quickly changed the headline to read "Assailing Hate But Not Guns". During the meeting, Baquet said that the original headline was an oversight and instructed everyone to be alert to ways to shift the anti-Trump-news narrative from Russia Collusion to racism. He said, "...race in the next year is going to be a huge part of the American story." -GEG

"What I'm saying is that our readers and some of our staff cheer us when we take on Donald Trump, but they jeer at us when we take on Joe Biden," New York Times executive editor Dean Baquet told his staff in a town hall on Monday.

In the 75 minutes of the meeting—which Slate obtained a recording of, and of which a lightly condensed and edited transcript appears below—Baquet and the paper's other leadership tried to resolve a tumultuous week for the paper, one marked by a reader revolt against a front-page headline

and a separate Twitter meltdown by Jonathan Weisman, a top editor in the Washington bureau. On Tuesday, the Times announced it was demoting Weisman from deputy editor because of his “serious lapses in judgment.”

Baquet, in his remarks, seemed to fault the complaining readers, and the world, for their failure to understand the Times and its duties in the era of Trump. “They sometimes want us to pretend that he was not elected president, but he was elected president,” Baquet said. “And our job is to figure out why, and how, and to hold the administration to account. If you’re independent, that’s what you do.”

Yet the problem for the Times is not whether it can navigate social-media controversies or satisfy an appetite for #resistance-based outrage, both of which it can tell itself are not a newspaper’s job to do. It’s whether it has the tools to make sense of the world. On this point, Baquet was not reassuring or convincing.

Staffers repeatedly asked Baquet about the paper’s reluctance to use the word *racist*, in part because his explanations seemed inconsistent. Calling it a “bizarre litmus test,” Baquet argued it was “more powerful” to avoid directly using the label. “The best way to capture a remark, like the kinds of remarks the president makes, is to use them, to lay it out in perspective,” he said. “That is much more powerful than the use of a word.”

When asked a few minutes later about the paper’s historic use of *racist* to describe segregationist demonstrators in Arkansas in 1957, however, he said, “I don’t think anybody would avoid using the *racist* in a scene like that.” By the first account, *racist* wasn’t powerful enough language to describe Trump; by the second, Trump wasn’t bad enough to call *racist*.

The remarks showed Baquet and the other speakers conceding some technical and procedural failings but rejecting, or avoiding, deeper criticisms of the paper's performance. A staffer, submitting a question anonymously, suggested that the headline that had caused all the trouble—"TRUMP URGES UNITY VS. RACISM"—"amplifies without critique the desired narrative of the most powerful figure in the country."

Baquet and other editors addressed the headline as an operational problem, the result of a "system breakdown," where a front-page layout had left too little space for nuance. "We set it up for a bad headline," Baquet said, "and the people who were in a position to judge it quickly and change it, like me, did not look at it until too late."

The closest Baquet came to identifying a moment when the paper had misjudged current events was when he described it as being "a little tiny bit flat-footed" after the Mueller investigation ended. "Our readers who want Donald Trump to go away suddenly thought, 'Holy shit, Bob Mueller is not going to do it,'" Baquet said. "And Donald Trump got a little emboldened politically, I think. Because, you know, for obvious reasons. And I think that the story changed. A lot of the stuff we're talking about started to emerge like six or seven weeks ago."

By this account, the question of how to address presidential racism was a newly emerged one, something the paper would need to pivot into. "How do we cover America, that's become so divided by Donald Trump?" he said. "How do we grapple with all the stuff you all are talking about? How do we write about race in a thoughtful way, something we haven't done in a large way in a long time?"

This difficult transition from one big story to the next was not a failure, but an unfortunate turn of events, which caused readers to unfairly take out their frustration on the

messenger. The Times, like everyone, has to live through a period of heightened hostility. "There were tweets that people at the New York Times retweeted or liked last week that were really painful for this newsroom and for me personally," Baquet said.

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