

Presidential scandals in italy and united states

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Wiretapping, Monica Lewinsky and “ Grab Her by the Pussy”: The Evolution of Reporting the Presidential Scandal

Historically in the United States, presidents have been brought down by good journalism. Although only Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton were ever successfully impeached, the work of the free press has also been used to bring down leaders such as Richard Nixon. What I want to know is how the press might function in 2017 to topple a corrupt leader, namely Donald Trump. Due to his connections with Russia, actions against Syria, and failure to follow procedure in congress, action can be taken against Trump. Of course, it is impossible to discuss impeachment and not discuss Nixon. Although never impeached, Nixon faced impeachment due to a severe breach of office. If Trump is found guilty of colluding with the Kremlin, he could face the same fate. However, technology and, by association, the press, have changed significantly since the 1970's. Would the press of today be able to take down a president? And would the American people care, or has the public grown too used to corruption? Silvio Berlusconi has had a political career surrounded in scandals, the most significant of which was the wiretapping conviction. Based on Silvio Berlusconi's history of surviving scandals, I would argue that Trump's criticism in the media will not be his administration's downfall, however, Johnson and Clinton, along with Nixon, set promising precedents for the power of the press to take down corruption.

A Precedent of Impeachment

Johnson's impeachment was mainly unremarkable, even tame by today's standards: he attempted to defy an act which prevented the president from firing senators without prior approval from the Senate. On the other hand,

Clinton's impeachment was several years in the making, with a general suspicion regarding his character, suspicions which were confirmed by the Lewinsky debacle.

The internet has played a huge role in presidential controversies. The first victim of this phenomenon was Monica Lewinsky. In "Unchained Reaction: The collapse of media gatekeeping and the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal", Bruce Williams and Michael Carpini highlight the problem of the internet as it turns anyone with an internet connection into a reporter and commentator on the news. During the Watergate scandal, the Washington Journal and other large, reputable news organizations were the sole investigators and critics on the presidential scandal. With the advent of the internet, the public gained access to this method of interacting with the spectacle of a president on the verge of impeachment.

Although Nixon faced impeachment, he resigned office before he could be forcibly removed. This is significant for Trump in particular. If he is found guilty of tampering with election results, or is taken to trial for sexual assault, he would potentially need to decide whether to be impeached or resign. However, Nixon's resignation was not enough to save his reputation, and he is still considered a disgraced and nearly-impeached president.

The Free Press in The United States

The press in 2017 faces even greater obstacles. The proliferation of social media and greater access to the internet among average people means that even more people are participating in public discourse on scandals; as Williams and Carpini explain, "expansion of cable and satellite television,

the growth of the internet and world wide web” (65) makes news more readily available with much less curation. The internet allows both journalists and non-journalists alike to spread footage and audio much more easily than the Washington Journal could distribute their findings and evidence during Watergate. As Elizabeth Drew details in her book on the subject, *Washington Journal: Reporting Watergate and Richard Nixon’s Downfall*, the immediacy of news in the Nixon era “ may seem to reduce their [historical events] magnitude” (3), because television and newspapers so deeply saturate the culture. This is exasperated in the current age, as 24-hour news stations are in high demand and social media has become a common source of news – we are more connected than ever before. However, this becomes problematic for the dissemination of information; as Williams and Carpini explain, all hierarchies of the media that were established in response to the “ social, political, and economic changes in the postwar era” (63) have now collapsed, as opinion, entertainment and news have merged, and the average citizen is now considered an expert and reporter, destroying any possibility of professionalism in media. This is problematic in the Trump administration particularly because of Trump’s particular disdain for traditional news media: well-respected networks like CNN, and established newspapers like the New York Times have been barred from the White House. Trump consistently derides the media writ large in his public appearances and press conferences, popularizing the term “ fake news”.

Italy has a more tenuous relationship with the media, given Berlusconi’s empire was built on media, and his MediaSet mass media company serves to prop him up and portray him in a positive light. This presents a problem for

the people of Italy in finding unbiased news sources regarding Berlusconi's scandals. While Trump can bar certain news organizations, the reporting on Trump's administration has been dedicated to finding truth and dissecting his actions. Both leaders, however, represent the problem highlighted earlier of combining the news media with entertainment media. Berlusconi did this with his ' tits-and-ass' television; Trump did this in his transition from The Apprentice to the White House. By entering into public office from the entertainment industry, Berlusconi and Trump present a problem to the press: how do you present on a leader who is better known as a media personality?

Social Media

Social media is widely regarded as having helped Donald Trump win the election (The Hill, The Guardian, NPR). Despite Trump's constant derision of the " fake news", the fake news spread on social media benefited him in the election. Due to a lack of fact checking and proper vetting on social media, it is impossible for journalists to gatekeep or control information anymore. Although newspapers and magazines occasionally publish and broadcast incorrect information or even get entire stories wrong, there is recourse and responsibility that social media lacks.

Trump's Twitter has become as much a part of the entertainment media as it is part of the news media. His oft parodied tweets, so often punctuated with " SAD!", using small, digestible words makes Trump a target for left-wing satirists. The president's social media presence has assisted in making him as much an entertainment icon as a political one. The timestamps on his

tweets are usually later than 11 p. m. and contain spelling and grammatical errors.

Berlusconi's social media strategy has not been nearly as effective. In a desperate attempt to reach younger voters, Berlusconi opened an Instagram account, posting 60 images in the first day alone, according to NPR. Social media has not played as large a role in Italy as in the USA.

Wiretapping Italy

Silvio Berlusconi has a wiretap scandal of his own, of which he was convicted in 2013. Much like Richard Nixon, Berlusconi was found guilty of wiretapping a political opponent. On the other hand, Trump has accused Obama of wiretapping Trump towers, although this has never been substantiated.

Berlusconi's scandals were enough to press charges and even go to trial, but it did not prevent him from being a popular leader in Italy for two decades.

Even with evidence against him, the post-political world does not take as much offense to presidents being bad. As we see with Trump, allegations that he colluded with Russia to win the election and multiple accusations of sexual assault will not detract voters nor supporters. According to The Telegraph, Berlusconi's approval rating hit 33% in 2011, in particular due to his number of sex scandals. The wiretapping charges are generally less of a motivator in reducing his approval rating among Italians.

Conclusion

In both Italy and the United States, the collapse of entertainment, opinion and news into one conglomerated genre of fake news. The scandals reported in the mass media and on social media from the times of Watergate and the

Clinton-Lewinsky scandal have desensitized the public to presidential scandals. Social media allows everyone to spread information or misinformation through wider streams of communication. In both the United States and Italy, sex scandals have been enough to plummet approval ratings and destroy careers - wiretapping is more complicated and morally grey in the eyes of Italy's Catholic and America's Protestant majorities.