



STYLE | SELF | CULTURE | POWER 

THE BODY POLITIC | DEC. 11, 2019

Can You Spot the Fake? Hint: Look at the pundits.

By Rebecca Traister



**One
Great
Story**

This article was featured in [One Great Story](#), New York's reading recommendation newsletter. [Sign up here](#) to get it nightly.

Photo: Getty Images

The week before the last Democratic primary debate of 2019, a panel of pundits on MSNBC's *Morning Joe* gathered to make an explicit critique of one of the candidates. Citing a “whiff of

fraudulence,” political writer John Heilemann talked with host Joe Scarborough, former Missouri senator Claire McCaskill, and former Republican strategist Steve Schmidt about the perception that there’s something dishonest and untrustworthy about Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren.

“Is this woman who she says she is?” asked Heilemann, citing controversies over her claims of Native American heritage, her consulting work on bankruptcy, and her recent assertion that her children attended public schools when in fact her younger son Alex also was enrolled in private schools, as not being about those issues, but rather reflecting the larger concern of voters: “Is she a phony? Is she a fraud?”

“I’m not saying she’s any of those things!” Heilemann made sure to say.

Then came Schmidt, who said those things. Claiming that Warren has a “tremendous talent for self-righteousness and hypocrisy,” Schmidt said that “over and over again she has misrepresented herself” and argued that he was just telling hard truths: “Why is it that Elizabeth Warren checked the box as a Native American on the Harvard Law School application? I know why she checked the box; she was trying to game the system.”

In fact, extensive reporting has shown that Warren did not identify as Native American through the hiring process at Harvard, though the law school, then under sharp criticism for not hiring women of color, later claimed her as one.

There are extremely valid criticisms to be made around Warren’s handling of her past claims of Native American ancestry; none of them are about whether she was qualified to teach at Harvard Law School on the merits. But the most compelling thing about the *Morning Joe* critique wasn’t the bevy of specific charges against Warren, some of which were false and some of which, including her answer on her son’s schooling, are rooted in real unforced errors. Warren, like scores of presidential candidates before her and alongside her, has a decent but imperfect record of accuracy when it comes to how she’s told her own story.

What’s really fascinating is whose imperfect record gets cast as fatally phony and whose does not — to whom perceptions of untrustworthiness stick and to whom they do not and to what end. Who gets called to correct the record and who permits lies to get repeated? It’s not always just the candidates.

Facing post-*Joe* criticism about the inaccuracy of his statements, Schmidt opaquely apologized on Twitter for “misspeaking,” but then doubled down on his “larger point:” that “she has not

been honest ... I believe she checked the Native American box to game the system.”

Schmidt’s refusal to submit to correction, substituting his “belief” about what a younger Warren may have done for actual reported evidence, in the midst of an exchange about accuracy and trustworthiness, was striking. So was a contrast that he had made earlier, on air. Schmidt had noted, while tearing into Warren, that her would-be opponent, Donald Trump, “is the most prolific liar we’ve ever had as president of the United States. Yet strangely, he may be the most honest president we’ve ever had. There’s no artifice. He’s exactly what he appears to be ... Do the Democrats want to nominate the second candidate in a row who’s going to lose an honesty debate to [a] prolific liar?”

Anyone listening knew exactly what Schmidt meant, and that through some twisted lens, he was correct: that Donald Trump can be an established liar, a teller of rampant, racist and self-serving untruths, yet can also be understood and appreciated as so forthright about his duplicity that he comes out clean on the other side.

But Schmidt was wrong in his implication that this extraordinary contradiction is unique to Trump. Sure, it is perhaps best embodied by him, a president who rolls around in his tens of thousands of lies like a pig luxuriating in his own excrement. But the trick of misrepresenting facts and blurring details while still enjoying a reputation for straight-talking authenticity is one practiced by plenty of lucky politicians, including some currently competing with Warren for the 2020 Democratic nomination.

Take Joe Biden, who left the 1988 Democratic primary after being charged with plagiarism both on the campaign trail and back in law school, as well as with inflating his own academic record: Biden had claimed to have graduated in the top half of his law-school class, when in fact he graduated 76th out of 85 students. In 1987, when pressed by a reporter on his academic record, Biden had angrily responded, “I think I probably have a much higher IQ than you do” (an exchange he would recall in a later memoir as “so stupid,” yet repeated just last week with a voter who asked him about his son Hunter’s work in Ukraine). Back then, Biden told the *New York Times*, “I exaggerate when I’m angry, but I’ve never gone around telling people things that aren’t true about me.” But, just as a point of fact, he *had* told people — lots of people! — things that weren’t true about himself, not just about his school years, but in borrowing details about the life of the British politician whose speeches he’d plagiarized.

Early in this campaign season, Biden’s campaign was again found to have lifted language; his climate and education plans initially included phrases taken from other publications without

attribution. He's also been caught out telling a false story about traveling to Afghanistan to award a Navy Captain a Silver Star, apparently a conflation of several different events. Back in 2007, he claimed to have been "shot at" in Iraq; this was not true. Anita Hill has recalled that back when he was in charge of Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Biden initially assured her that she would be able to testify first, but that after negotiations with Republican colleagues, Thomas had been permitted to go first. "I leave you to say whether he lied or not," Hill said to a New York *Times* reporter earlier this year.

Yet despite his career-long penchant for exaggeration and misleading recollection, Biden gets regularly presented by the mainstream political media as a man of deep integrity, a trustworthy guy; he's currently on his "no-malarkey" campaign tour.

A similar advantage seems to have been accrued by Mayor Pete Buttigieg, who has been pushing the view of Elizabeth Warren as deceptive — the same view expressed vocally by the *Morning Joe* panel on Tuesday — for months. In October, Buttigieg said that his opponent has been more "forthcoming about the number of selfies she's taken" than about how she planned to pay for Medicare for All (Warren has since released her detailed plan on how to pay for Medicare for All), and his campaign has recently hit her hard with the suggestion that she's hiding something regarding the bankruptcy expert's past work as a "corporate lawyer." But Buttigieg has significantly changed his positions, including on Medicare for All, during his time on the campaign trail, and until pressed by the Warren campaign, had not permitted press into his fundraisers, released his list of donors, or the list of clients he'd worked for as a McKinsey consultant, a lot of which he did this week. Buttigieg also recently rolled out a list of black supporters in South Carolina, some of whom had never in fact endorsed him, and felt they had been misled by his campaign.

None of these omissions or instances of low-grade deceit are unusual in politics, nor are they necessarily disqualifying or personally defining any more than Joe Biden's history of plagiarism and self-inflation or Warren's misleading imprecision about her son's schooling should be disqualifying or defining. But it matters that some of the candidates get tagged on *Morning Joe* as inauthentic phonies, while some are regarded by broad swaths of America as familiar, direct, rock-solid truth-tellers and safer bets for the American presidency.

As Schmidt pointed out on Tuesday, we have seen this before. Hillary Clinton — regularly evaluated as a comparatively forthright candidate by fact-checking trackers, and once described by former New York *Times* editor Jill Abramson, who'd spent years investigating

Clinton “scandals,” as “fundamentally honest and trustworthy” — nonetheless managed to earn a reputation for deceit and deception that she could not shake.

Back in 2016, the writer and professor Salamishah Tillet suggested to me that the way that Clinton could be “so seamlessly rendered synonymous with all things untrue” went back to the kinds of “religious narratives [that] tell us that women are inherently untrustworthy ... The idea of woman as a liar ... goes back to the Bible.” That ancient framing of female fraudulence, engraved on our shared consciousness, would go a long way toward explaining how a candidate like Warren, who, despite her run-of-the-mill record of misstatements and fudged details, has run a comparatively transparent campaign, and who, unlike Clinton, speaks frequently to the press, can still be painted as more unknowable and slippery than her male peers.

No, it’s not just women who’ve been framed as dishonest in presidential races. In 2004, a group of right-wing veterans planted the false idea that John Kerry had lied about his experience as commander of a Swift boat in Vietnam, successfully undermining his narrative of wartime heroism and of later righteous objection to the war.

But crucially, the so-called Swift-boating of John Kerry was a means to unman him, sap him of some of the valorous masculinity that had helped to afford him political authority. Along with intimations about his New England wealth, his thrall to his smart wife and his plastic surgery, the tactical goal with Kerry was to delegitimize a war hero by rendering him effete; the view of him as inauthentic was part of that project.

When we talk about how gender shapes electoral politics and media coverage, we’re not *just* talking about rudimentary questions of “do people like or dislike a candidate because she’s a woman” or even whether men and women are attacked for similar things: they often are! But questions of gender are also about how broader perceptions of authority and authenticity are transmitted, and by whom, and what all of this tells us about who we are meant to trust and who we instinctively don’t, often without regard to actual records of truthfulness.

These dynamics don’t just accrue to candidates but also to those who shape opinions about them. Sometimes the people who assure us that *they’re* not saying that certain candidates are inherently deceptive are, literally, saying that those people are deceptive, thus sending a message that is ... inherently deceptive. Sometimes political interlocutors pass off inaccurate versions of candidates’ histories as examples of those candidates’ pattern of inaccuracy; often

they are hypocritical in their charges of hypocrisy. Sometimes metrics of trust and relatability are built out of the slippery muck of gendered perception, on imprecise and fantasized ideas about what constitutes transparency; and those metrics are presented to us by people whose views we're encouraged to trust.

Is the political media filled with phonies and frauds?

I'm certainly not saying that's the case.

TAGS: THE BODY POLITIC POWER POLITICS MEDIA MORE

■ 33 COMMENTS

THE LATEST

22 MINS AGO

10:35 A.M.

9:59 A.M.

9:50 A.M.

9:50 A.M.

HOW I GET IT DONE | 8:00 A.M.

Sara Nelson is the woman credited with helping to end last year's government shutdown.

By Bridget Read

YESTERDAY AT 11:06 P.M.

YESTERDAY AT 10:58 P.M.

YESTERDAY AT 10:58 P.M.

YESTERDAY AT 10:34 P.M.

RED CARPET | YESTERDAY AT 9:56 P.M.

Billie Eilish.

By Emilia Petrarca

From Billy Porter to

OSCARS 2020 | YESTERDAY AT 9:12 P.M.

van Gogh nails.

By Erica Smith

Hair scarves, pearl parts, and

YESTERDAY AT 8:55 P.M.

ASTROLOGY | YESTERDAY AT 8:30 P.M.

with a powerful full moon in Leo.

By Claire Comstock-Gay

This week starts off

YESTERDAY AT 8:00 P.M.

YESTERDAY AT 7:48 P.M.

YESTERDAY AT 7:48 P.M.

RED CARPET DERBY | YESTERDAY AT 6:00 P.M.

Updated live, right here. 

By Lee Musho

NYFW FALL 2020 | YESTERDAY AT 2:24 P.M.

R13 and Christopher John Rogers are doing it right.

By Cathy Horyn

YESTERDAY AT 1:39 P.M.

MORE STORIES 

THE CUT

STYLE | SELF | CULTURE | POWER

NEWSLETTERS ABOUT US

CONTACT HELP

WE'RE HIRING PRESS

TRADEMARK PRIVACY

TERMS AD CHOICES

THE CUT IS A VOX MEDIA NETWORK.
© 2020 VOX MEDIA, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.