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The Parasitic Relationship Between Power and the American Media



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It's always good to have our profession honoured, albeit that the living martyrs of journalism should be accompanied by the ghost of another. But the moment I learned of Time magazine's person of the year front cover – the award going to Jamal Khashoggi and the other “guardians” who have “taken great risks in pursuit of greater truths” – I remembered Spielberg's movie *Bridge of Spies*.

When captured Soviet agent Rudolf Abel's defence lawyer (Tom Hanks) asks Abel (Mark Rylance) if he is worried, he replies: “Would it help?”

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The right question. Would it make any difference? Is Time's choice of its 2018 front page going to change anything? Or was it chiefly aimed at Trump? The raving lunatic in the White House was its "person of the year" in 2016, just before he took office. He said he expected the accolade again this year, and indeed he's the 2018 runner-up. If he had known this, Khashoggi himself would surely turn in his grave – wherever the Saudis eventually reveal it to be.

But fair enough. Trump is fighting a war against truth, and it's a noble gesture to whack a crackpot president by honouring those who oppose his kind of mendacity, even unto death. Many believe – as I suspect – that the five staff at the Annapolis newspaper would be alive today if Trump had not already accused us all of being "enemies of the people". The "enemies" and journalists like Khashoggi, Maria Ressa, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, are – or should be regarded as – "friends of the people". But they are clearly regarded as enemies by Trumpites and supporters of dictator Duterte and the military masters of Myanmar.

Of course, I did look at Time's list of names to see if Yasser Murtaja, the brave Palestinian cameraman shot dead by an Israeli sniper in April, made it to their hall of honour. He was hailed by The Nation magazine. Like Khashoggi, he gave his life for telling – or in his case, filming – the truth, the Palestinian protests at the Gaza border. But maybe he wasn't filming a truth which Americans or Time magazine are ready to accept, or to talk too much about without becoming "controversial": the oppression of the people of Gaza. And maybe Murtaja was shot by the wrong people, if you see what I mean.

After all, if you drag Khashoggi's corpse up onto the throne of martyrs, you know that it's going to annoy Mohammed bin Salman – accused by the CIA and numerous senators of arranging Jamal's demise – and you know that he remains a chum of Trump and that all this will upset him. Maybe. It won't upset the Israelis, of course, although they themselves are rather keen on being chums with MbS.

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While it's good to see that the enemies of dictators are acknowledged for their courage, it does raise a few questions about Time itself. For far too long, it supported some pretty gruesome wars around the globe. Vietnam comes to mind, in the conflict's early years. And some pretty awful US presidents and politicians. But then we have to remember that Hitler made it to Time's man of the year in 1938 – and Stalin made it twice, in 1939 and 1942 – and Time editors have never pretended that their yearly personalities must be evil or angelic to qualify.

Now, I suppose, they do. This year, those Time editors have clearly chosen their “persons” because they regard them as brave, good and representative of a craft which should be a profession; journalists who – alive or dead – believe (or believed) that comment is free but facts are sacred, and who are (or were) damned for believing this. Not bad. Journalists should be holding power to account, and if Time has often failed to do this, that’s no reason to get sniffy about their award for 2018.

But will it help? I don’t think so. The osmotic-parasitic relationship which still exists between power and the American media, between the US military and the defence correspondents, between the corporate world and American business editors is as powerful as ever, merely more discreet under the Trump regime.

Bring back a Democrat – Bernie – or a sane Republican, and I fear Time’s new-found courage will wither away. If Obama was still in power, and the Saudis were still America’s friends, and if they had knocked off their usual enemies rather than a guy who wrote for the Washington Post, we’d ask the same question: Jamal who?