

**Remarks at the Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting Ceremony**  
*March 28, 2016*

Well, good evening, everybody. And thank you, Chancellor Syverud, for those wonderful remarks and reminding me of how badly my bracket is doing. [*Laughter*] Congratulations, Syracuse. You guys are doing great. I want to thank Robin's wonderful husband Peter and their incredible kids Jake and Nora for organizing this annual tribute to her memory. And I want to thank all of you for having me here this evening.

A Washington press dinner usually means ill-fitting tuxes, celebrity sightings, and bad jokes. So this is refreshing. And it is a great honor to be here to celebrate the 2015 Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting. Now, in this political season, it is worth reflecting on the kind of journalism Robin practiced and the kind of journalism this prize rewards.

A reporter's reporter, that was Robin. From her first job at the Charleston Daily Mail to her tenure as the New York Times national political correspondent—the first woman to hold that position—she always saw herself as being a servant for the American public. She had a sense of mission and purpose in her work. For Robin, politics was not a horserace or a circus or a tally of who scored more political points than whom, but rather was fundamentally about issues and how they affected the lives of real people.

She treated the public with respect, didn't just skim the surface. Few reporters understood the intricacies of health care policy better. Few could cut to the heart of a tax reform plan more deeply and analyze how it would affect everybody, from a struggling worker to a hedge fund manager. Few could explain complicated, esoteric political issues in a way that Americans could digest and use to make informed choices at the ballot box.

Robin's work was meticulous. No detail was too small to confirm, and no task too minor to complete. And that, too, she saw as her responsibility, the responsibility of journalism. She famously developed her own fact-checking system, cleaning up every name and date and figure in her piece, something most reporters relied on others to do. And it's no wonder then that of her almost 2,000 articles, only 6 required published corrections. And knowing Robin, that was probably 6 too many for her tastes.

And this speaks to more than just her thoroughness or some obsessive compulsiveness when it came to typos. It was about Robin's commitment to seeking out and telling the truth. She would not stand for any stray mark that might mar an otherwise flawless piece, because she knew the public relied on her to give them the truth as best as she could find it.

Of course, these were qualities were harder to appreciate when her lens was focused on you. She held politicians' feet to the fire, including occasionally my own. And in her quiet, dogged way, she demanded that we be accountable to the public for the things that we said and for the promises that we made. We should be held accountable.

That's the kind of journalism that Robin practiced. That's the kind of journalism this prize honors. It's the kind of journalism that's never been more important. It's the kind of journalism that recognizes its fundamental role in promoting citizenship and hence undergirds our democracy.

As I've said in recent weeks, I know I'm not the only one who may be more than a little dismayed about what's happening on the campaign trail right now. The divisive and often vulgar rhetoric that's aimed at everybody, but often is focused on the vulnerable or women or minorities. The sometimes well-intentioned, but, I think, misguided attempts to shut down that speech. The violent reaction that we see, as well as the deafening silence from too many of our leaders in the coarsening of the debate. This sense that facts don't matter, that they're not relevant; that what matters is how much attention you can generate. A sense that this is a game, as opposed to the most precious gift our Founders gave us: this collective enterprise of self-government.

And so it's worth asking ourselves what each of us—as politicians or journalists, but most of all, as citizens—may have done to contribute to this atmosphere in our politics. I was going to call it "carnival atmosphere," but that implies fun. [*Laughter*] And I think it's the kind of question Robin would have asked all of us. As I said a few weeks ago, some may be more to blame than others for the current climate, but all of us are responsible for reversing it.

And I say this not because of some vague notion of political correctness, which seems to be increasingly an excuse to just say offensive things or lie out loud. I say this not out of nostalgia, because politics in America has always been tough. Anybody who doubts that should take a look at what Adams and Jefferson and some of our other Founders said about each other. I say this because what we're seeing right now does corrode our democracy and our society. And I'm not one who's faint of heart. I come from Chicago. [*Laughter*] Harold Washington once explained that "politics ain't beanbag." It's always been rough and tumble.

But when our elected officials and our political campaigns become entirely untethered to reason and facts and analysis, when it doesn't matter what's true and what's not, that makes it all but impossible for us to make good decisions on behalf of future generations. It threatens the values of respect and tolerance that we teach our children and that are the source of America's strength. It frays the habits of the heart that underpin any civilized society, because how we operate is not just based on laws, it's based on habits and customs and restraint and respect. It creates this vacuum where baseless assertions go unchallenged and evidence is optional. And as we're seeing, it allows hostility in one corner of our politics to infect our broader society. And that, in turn, tarnishes the American brand.

The number-one question I am getting as I travel around the world or talk to world leaders right now is, what is happening in America? About our politics. And it's not because around the world people have not seen crazy politics; it is that they understand America is the place where you can't afford completely crazy politics. For some countries where this kind of rhetoric may not have the same ramifications, people expect, they understand, they care about America, the most powerful nation on Earth, functioning effectively and its Government being able to make sound decisions.

So we are all invested in making this system work. We are all responsible for its success. And it's not just for the United States that this matters. It matters for the planet.

Whether it was exposing the horrors of lynching, to busting the oil trusts, to uncovering Watergate, your work has always been essential to that endeavor, and that work has never been easy. And let's face it, in today's unprecedented change in your industry, the job has gotten tougher. Even as the appetite for information and data flowing through the Internet is voracious, we've seen newsrooms closed. The bottom line has shrunk. The news cycle has as well. And all too often, there is enormous pressure on journalists to fill the void and feed the beast with instant commentary and Twitter rumors and celebrity gossip and softer stories. And

then, we fail to understand our world or understand one another as well as we should. That has consequences for our lives and for the life of our country.

Part of the independence of the Fourth Estate is that it is not government-controlled, and media companies thereby have an obligation to pursue profits on behalf of their shareholders, their owners, and also has an obligation to invest a good chunk of that profit back into news and back into public affairs and to maintain certain standards and to not dumb down the news and to have higher aspirations for what effective news can do. Because a well-informed electorate depends on you. And our democracy depends on a well-informed electorate.

So the choice between what cuts into your bottom lines and what harms us as a society is an important one. We have to choose which price is higher to pay, which cost is harder to bear. Good reporters like the ones in this room all too frequently find yourselves caught between competing forces. I'm aware of that. You believe in the importance of a well-informed electorate. You've staked your careers on it. And our democracy needs you more than ever. You're under significant financial pressures as well.

So I believe the electorate would be better served if your networks and your producers would give you the room, the capacity to follow your best instincts and dig deeper into the things that might not always be flashy, but need attention.

And Robin proves that just because something is substantive doesn't mean it's not interesting. I think the electorate would be better served if we spent less time focused on the he-said-she-said, back-and-forth of our politics. Because while fairness is the hallmark of good journalism, false equivalency all too often these days can be a fatal flaw. If I say that the world is round and someone else says it's flat, that's worth reporting, but you might also want to report on a bunch of scientific evidence that seems to support the notion that the world is round. *[Laughter]* And that shouldn't be buried in paragraph five or six of the article.

A job well done is about more than just handing someone a microphone. It is to probe and to question and to dig deeper and to demand more. The electorate would be better served if that happened. It would be better served if billions of dollars in free media came with serious accountability, especially when politicians issue unworkable plans or make promises they can't keep. And there are reporters here who know they can't keep them. I know that's a shocking concept that politicians would do that. But without a press that asks tough questions, voters take them at their word. When people put their faith in someone who can't possibly deliver on his or her promises, that only breeds more cynicism.

It's interesting—this is a little going off script. But we still have our house in Chicago, and because Michelle and me and the kids had to leave so quickly, it's a little bit like a time capsule, especially my desk, which wasn't always very neat. So I've got old phone bills that I think I paid—*[laughter]*—but they're still sitting there. And for a long time, I had my old laptop with the AOL connection. *[Laughter]* But there's also these big stacks of newspapers from right before the election. And every time I go back, I have occasion to look back and read what I said at the time. And Lord knows, I have made mistakes in this job, and there are areas where I've fallen short, but something I'm really proud of is the fact that, if you go back and see what I said in 2007 and you see what I did, they match up.

Now, part of the reason they match up is because in 2008, during the campaign, people asked me really tough questions about whether they'd match up. And we had to spend a lot of time worrying about whether what I said I could deliver on and whether we believed it was true. And there was a price if you said one thing and then did something completely different.

And the question is, in the current media environment, is that still true? Does that still hold? I think Robin understood this, because she asked those questions. She asked me some of those questions.

One of the reasons I ran for this office was to try and change the tone of our politics in Washington. And I remember back in early 2008, 8 years ago this month, Robin wrote a story wondering whether I could, whether it was even possible. At the time, I probably thought the piece was fairly cynical. And while I still believe Americans are hungry for a better politics, as I've said several times now, one of my great regrets is that the tone of our politics has gotten worse. And I won't take all the responsibility for it, but I'll take some. We all own some of it. I'll take my share. But Robin asked that question. She cast a critical eye from the very beginning. And that was useful. Still is.

As I believe that that for all the sideshows of the political season, Americans are still hungry for truth, it's just hard to find. It's hard to wade through. The curating function has diminished in this smartphone age. But people still want to know what's true.

Think about it. Hollywood released films about getting stuck on Mars and demolition derbies in a postapocalyptic wasteland, and you even had Leo DiCaprio battling a grizzly bear. [Laughter] And yet it was a movie about journalists spending months meticulously calling sources from landlines and poring over documents with highlighters and microfiche, chasing the truth even when it was hard, even when it was dangerous, and that was the movie that captured the Oscar for Best Picture. Now, I'm not suggesting all of you are going to win Oscars. [Laughter] But I am saying it's worth striving to win a Toner.

So look, I—ultimately, I recognize that the news industry is an industry, it's a business. There's no escaping the pressures of the industry and all its attendant constraints. But I also know that journalism at its best is indispensable, not in some abstract sense of nobility, but in the very concrete sense that real people depend on you to uncover the truth. Real people depend on getting information they can trust because they are giving over decisionmaking that has a profound effect on their lives to a bunch of people who are pretty remote, and very rarely will they ever have the chance to ask that person a direct question or be able to sort through the intricacies of the policies that will determine their wages or their ability to retire or their ability to send their kid to college or the possibility that their child will be sent to war.

These are folks who trust you when you tell them that there's a problem in their schools or that their water has been poisoned or that their political candidates are promoting plans that don't add up. That's why the deep reporting, the informed questioning, the in-depth stories—the kind of journalism that we honor today—matters more than ever and, by the way, lasts longer than some slapdash tweet that slips off our screens in the blink of an eye, that may get more hits today, but won't stand up to the test of time. That's the only way that our democracy can work.

I mean, as I go into my last year, I spend a lot of time reflecting on how this system, how this crazy notion of self-government, works; how can we make it work. And this is as important to making it work as anything: people getting information that they can trust and that has substance and evidence and facts and truth behind it. In an era in which attention spans are short, it is going to be hard because you're going to have to figure out ways to make it more entertaining, and you're going to have to be more creative, not less. Because if you just do great reporting and nobody reads it, that doesn't do anybody any good, either.

But 10, 20, 50 years from now, no one seeking to understand our age is going to be searching the tweets that got the most retweets or the post that got the most likes. They'll look for the kind of reporting, the smartest investigative journalism that told our story and lifted up the contradictions in our societies and asked the hard questions and forced people to see the truth even when it was uncomfortable.

Many of you are already doing that, doing incredible work. And in some ways, the new technologies are helping you do that work. Journalists are using new data techniques to analyze economics and the environment and to analyze candidates' proposals. Anchors are asking candidates exactly how they're going to accomplish their promises, pressing them so they don't evade the question. Some reporters recently watched almost 5 hours of a certain candidate's remarks to count the number of times he said something that wasn't true. It turned out to be quite a large number. So talk about taking one for the team; that was a significant sacrifice they made.

This is journalism worth honoring and worth emulating. And to the young aspiring journalists that I had a chance to meet before I came on stage, those are the models you want to follow.

As all of you know, I just came back from Cuba, where I held a press conference with President Castro that was broadcast all over the country. So in a country without a free press, this was big news. And it was a remarkable thing that the Cuban people were able to watch two leaders—their own and the leader of a country that they'd grown up understanding as their archenemy—answer tough questions and be held accountable. And I don't know exactly what it will mean for Cuba's future. I think it made a big difference to the Cuban people. And I can't think of a better example of why a free press is so vital to freedom.

In any country, including our own, there will be an inherent tension between the President and the press. It's supposed to be that way. I may not always agree with everything you report or write. In fact, it's fair to say I do not. [*Laughter*] But if I did, that would be an indication that you weren't doing your job.

I'll tell you, this is—I probably maybe shouldn't do this, but what the heck, I'm in my last year. [*Laughter*] I had an in-depth conversation with President Putin a while back about Syria and Ukraine. And he had read an article on—in the Atlantic that Jeff Goldberg had done about my foreign policy doctrine. And he said, "Well, I disagree with some of the things that you said in there." And Jeff is a remarkable journalist who I admire greatly, and all the quotes that were directly attributed to me in there I completely agreed with. [*Laughter*] I said, well, but there—some of the things that were shaped may not fully reflect all the nuance of my thoughts on the particular topic that President Putin was mentioning. But I pointed out to him, of course, that unlike you, Vladimir, I don't get to edit the piece before it's published. [*Laughter*]

So you are supposed to push those in power for more evidence and more access. You're supposed to challenge our assumptions. Sometimes, I will find this frustrating. Sometimes, I may not be able to share with you all of the context of decisions that I make. But I never doubt how much—how critical it is to our democracy for you to do that; how much I value great journalism. And you should not underestimate the number of times that I have read something that you did, and I have called somebody up and said, what's going on here? Because as Bob Gates told me when I first came in—I think it was my first or second week—I said, well, what advice do you have, Bob? You've been around seven Presidents. You've served in Washington, in the administration. He said, Mr. President, the only thing I can tell you for sure is that

you've got about 2 million employees, and at any given moment in any given day, somebody, somewhere, is screwing up. [*Laughter*]

So you help me do my job better, and I'm grateful for that. Because the point of politics, as Robin understood it—certainly as I've tried to understand it throughout my tenure in this job—the point of politics is not simply the amassing of power. It's about what you do with that power that has been lent to you through a compact with a citizenry, who give you their proxy and say, "I'm counting on you to not just make my life better, but more importantly, to make my kids' lives better and my grandkids' lives better." Who will we help? How will we help them? What kind of country do we leave to the next generation?

And my hope is, is that you continue to ask us questions that keep us honest and elevate our democracy. I ask that you continue to understand your role as a partner in this process. I say this often when I speak to Democratic partisan crowds: I never said, "Yes, I can," I said, "Yes, we can." And that means all of us. If we can keep supporting the kind of work that Robin championed, if we cultivate the next generation of smart, tough, fairminded journalists, if we can all, every single one of us, carry on her legacy of public service and her faith in citizenry—because you have to have a certain faith to be a really good journalist; you have to believe that me getting it right matters, that it's not just sending something into the void, but that there's somebody on the other end who's receiving it and that matters—if you continue to believe that, if you have faith, I have no doubt that America's best days are ahead.

So thank you to Robin's family. Congratulations to this year's winner. And thank all of you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:49 p.m. in the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium. In his remarks, he referred to Kent Syverud, chancellor, Syracuse University, whose S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications awards the Toner Prize annually; Peter Gosselin, husband of the late New York Times national political correspondent Robin Toner, and their children Jacob and Nora Gosselin; actor Leonardo DiCaprio; Isaac Arnsdorf, Daniel Lippman, and Darren Samuelsohn, Politico reporters who fact-checked the public statements of Republican Presidential candidate Donald J. Trump, chairman and chief executive officer, Trump Organization; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates; and Alec MacGillis, reporter, ProPublica, recipient of the 2015 Toner Prize for his collection of stories "The Breakdown."

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