

Bully at the news desk

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue



In North Carolina, the Republicans have control of both houses of the legislature and the governor's office for the first time since Reconstruction. With no real opposition, they are rewriting the law books. That means regressive taxes, voter ID laws, anti-Shari'a legislation and slashed support for teachers and public universities. We're the new Wisconsin. But nastier.

The Newsroom, now in its second season on HBO, tries to get to the heart of this political moment. It features a Keith Olbermann-like bully of a news anchor named Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels, a fine actor who may finally be living down *Dumb and Dumber*), a moderate Republican who decides to return journalism to the truth-telling business.

In a critical backstory scene in the first episode, a panel in which McAvoy is participating is asked by a college student to say why America is "the greatest country in the world." A liberal panelist says, "Diversity and opportunity"; a conservative replies, "Freedom and freedom, so let's keep it that way." McAvoy spots his ex-girlfriend in the audience, a woman who had always inspired him to tell the truth, however unpopular. MacKenzie McHale (the magnificent Emily Mortimer)

holds up a sign that says simply, “It’s not.” Then another: “But it could be.”

McAvoy barks out that the United States is number one in only three categories: incarcerated citizens per capita, defense spending and the number of adults who believe that angels are real. He concludes that the student is part of the “Worst. Period. Generation. Period. Ever. Period.” (Aaron Sorkin, creator of *The Newsroom*, loves one genre above all others: the sermon.)

“We used to be great,” McAvoy goes on.

We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons, passed laws, struck down laws for moral reasons. We waged war on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors and we never beat our chests. We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, we cured diseases, explored the universe, we cultivated the world’s greatest artists and the world’s greatest economy. We aspired to intelligence, we didn’t belittle it, it didn’t make us feel inferior . . . and we didn’t scare so easy. We were able to do these things because we were informed.

After this speech, the network sees a ratings spike, and McAvoy and a rehired McHale decide to double down on truth—to inform the public rather than entertain or scare it.

It is a noble sentiment. And *The Newsroom* is a great show. It is juiced up with romantic intrigues between newsroom staffers. The actors (such as Dev Patel and Olivia Munn) and their characters are wonderful, and the soap opera asides are probably good for ratings.

Season one followed political events circa 2011–2012, so the buildup to the 2012 election provides constant fodder. For example, McAvoy wants a real debate in which candidates are held accountable for their crazy statements (“Senator Santorum, what freedoms do you lack today that you had when President Obama took office?”), but he is disappointed (“Congresswoman Bachmann: Elvis or Johnny Cash?”). The show tracks real events so carefully that a season two plotline on American use of weapons of mass destruction in Afghanistan had me Googling to see if that really happened.

But the show occasionally rings false. McAvoy is presented as a moderate Republican, but he sounds like a boilerplate anchor on MSNBC. In its ranting against

the Tea Party, the show gives the impression that America can be brought back to its lefty political senses if the good guys would just speak up a little more forcefully.

My larger complaint is with the show's handling of religion. At a staff meeting, Maggie Jordan (played by the feisty and believable Alison Pill) expresses outrage that Michele Bachmann claims to be speaking for her as a Christian. Here was an opportunity to get something right, but the show fails. Maggie has done nothing to this point to convince us she is a Christian, and she does nothing thereafter. Just like the rest of cast, she plays romantic musical chairs, is outraged by the state of the media elsewhere and tries to fight for justice while not losing ratings. All good things, but none of her concerns are marked by a particular Christian character. Her claim to religiosity rings hollow.

In another episode, McAvoy regales the viewer with a montage of monstrosities perpetrated by "Christians." These include the activities of the KKK, the Oklahoma City bombing and attacks on abortion doctors. Fair enough. But then McAvoy includes the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan and the murders of John F. Kennedy, John Lennon and Abraham Lincoln.

In one way, the point is well taken: Americans tend to assume that Muslim extremists represent Islam while excusing Christianity's violent fringes. But what operating definition of *Christian* is at work here? Does McAvoy have fresh insight into Lee Harvey Oswald's motives? Was John Wilkes Booth's *sic semper tyrannis* actually a Christian rallying cry? Maybe I'm holding the bar too high. But *The Newsroom* is so good I want it to get right the thing I care about most.

People in my part of the country often feel misunderstood and belittled by the liberal and mainstream media. They are merely pandered to by the right—but they like that better. The fact that the makers of this show would not likely see this complaint as legitimate is precisely the problem.