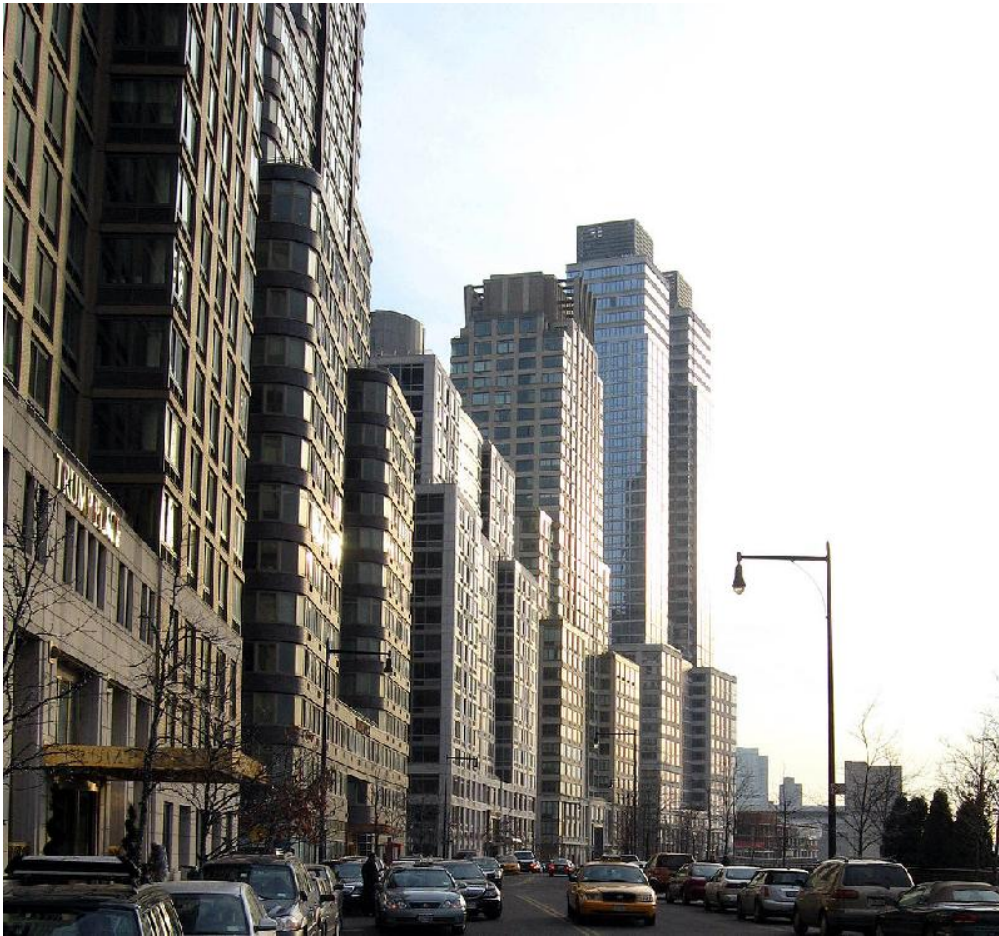


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Virtue signaling as political thought

by James Bowman



A building bearing Donald Trump's name, Riverside Boulevard, New York

Guess what? Keith Olbermann is moving. Yes, I thought you would be excited to hear about it. But wait until you hear why. I'll give you a hint. The building where he lives bears, like so many others, the name "Trump." OK, that makes it obvious. But let's let Keith tell it in the op-ed he wrote on the subject and that *The Washington Post*, in keeping with its usual high standards, has published:

I'm getting out because of the degree to which the very name "Trump" has degraded the public discourse and the nation itself. I can't hear, or see, or say that name any longer without spitting. Frankly,

I'm running out of Trump spit. And, yes, I'm fully aware that I'm blaming a guy with the historically unique fashion combination of a cheap baseball cap and Oompa Loompa makeup for coarsening politics even though, out of the two of us, I'm the one who has promulgated a "Worst Persons in the World" list for most of the past decade. That's how vulgar this has all become. It's worse even than Worst Persons.

As his essay in self-congratulation goes on, Mr. Olbermann takes the opportunity to get another grievance against Mr. Trump off his chest. Apparently it took some time, a while back, for the bloviating billionaire to get around to repairing the elevators in the building where he, Mr. Olbermann, lives—and this even *after* Mr. Trump had personally (though with obvious insincerity!) asked him to call if anything went wrong. Talk about the Worst Persons in the World!

Of course it comes as no surprise that Keith Olbermann, for all his claim to be "fully aware" of it, is as lacking in a sense of irony as he is in the sense of bathos. It's somewhat (though not a lot) more surprising that the *Post* is apparently similarly deficient. But this lack is just one more example of how the universe of discourse now being so shockingly (to the media) dominated by Donald Trump could only have come into existence with the enthusiastic participation of the media themselves.

As it happens, in the same day's *Post*, Dana Milbank wrote indignantly to deny that the media are to blame for the Trump phenomenon. Oh no, insisted Dana. Why, he himself has been calling Mr. Trump rude names for months and months! If only that gentleman's Republican competitors for the nomination had started do so earlier, he wouldn't now be on the verge of clinching the party's nomination.

See what I mean? How can a man celebrated—at least among his fellow progressives—for wit, or at least for snark, be so utterly devoid of a sense of irony about himself? How can he see no connection at all between his own rudeness and crudeness and Donald Trump's? I think the answer must be that over the years we have all grown so used to the rhetorical environment in which we have long been living that, like the frog in the boiling pan, we didn't know how dangerous it was to our politics until it killed them.

For some time now, opinion journalism has been dominated by what, as I pointed out a few months ago, the Brits have taken to calling "virtue signaling." It's what Keith Olbermann and Dana Milbank are doing here. Both, that is, have really nothing to say apart from letting the reader know that they are the kind of superior people who would, unlike so many of their benighted fellow citizens, *never* be taken in by the demagoguery of a Trump. No, sir! Not them! They belong to the faction of the good people, the smart people, the decent people who loathe Trump and everything he stands for. And you can be sure of it because they loathe Trump and everything he stands for! Just in case you didn't know about it.

It's self-righteousness elevated to the status of a political philosophy and may have been given its current impetus by the "Not in My Name" peace demonstrators of the Iraq War era. Seriously, what did those guys and gals think the victims of that war cared for their assertions of a superior

virtue to that of the war-makers? What good could they even pretend it did them? All it did, all it could do, was contribute still further to their own already Himalayan sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Look at me! Aren't I (politically) virtuous! As if the ugliness of war were no more than an excuse to make themselves look good for hating it.

In the same way, what does Keith Olbermann suppose anyone else cares about whose building he lives in? Or what, if anything, is its connection to the political questions being raised by the campaign? Ah, there, I think, we might have an answer. For Donald Trump (I hear) has been going around saying that he is smarter and better and greater than anyone else because he built that building and a few others like it. And Keith can't resist replying, with a genuine sense of injury, "No, you're not!" Because it is *he*, Keith Olbermann, who is smarter and better and greater—certainly than his nemesis, the builder of many buildings—because *he's* moving out of one! Now tell me again, *who* is it who has degraded the public discourse?

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