

STATEMENT OF BRIAN KAREM

I write to provide you with background about myself and to tell you my side of the story regarding what happened at the Social Media Summit on July 11, 2019.

I have been a political reporter for almost 40 years. I have also covered crime and wars, and I have run community newspapers. I've been jailed, shot at, beaten, and threatened. I am currently Playboy's senior White House correspondent and a political analyst for CNN. I am president of the Maryland, Delaware, and District of Columbia Press Association. In 1990, I was jailed for contempt of court after refusing to disclose the name of confidential sources who helped me arrange a telephone interview with a jailed murder suspect, after which I was awarded the National Press Club's Freedom of the Press award. I went on to work as executive editor of The Sentinel Newspapers in Maryland and as producer and television correspondent for America's Most Wanted. I have also authored seven books.

I have covered six White Houses. While I have held my current hard pass since last year, in the past I also held hard passes. My experience in the White House is important because I can tell you, point blank, that the behavior of the press corps today is tame by comparison.

The first time I walked into the White House I was 25. It was 1986 and Ronald Reagan was president. The first person I met was Helen Thomas, who covered the White House under *ten* Presidents, and who, as it turns out, knew my great grandfather from Lebanon. She offered to take me to her house and make me an authentic Lebanese dinner.

Then she walked upstairs to Acting Press Secretary Larry Speakes' office and began banging on the door, encouraging him to come outside and talk to her. I watched, amused and in awe. President Clinton's Press Secretary, Mike McCurry, later told me that when Helen was around he would bring her coffee and a donut by seven a.m. every morning.

It was a wild time, with other reporters like ABC News Correspondent Sam Donaldson and long-time White House reporter Sarah McClendon in the briefing room.

"There's nothing wrong with the president trying to put his best foot forward," Sam told me. "But it's our job to find out what's really going on," he added.

"If you're looking for friends, then you're in the wrong business," Helen told me.

Sarah McClendon told me, "Watch and learn."

CBS White House Correspondent Bill Plante once, in a story widely told by his peers, nearly got into blows with a guest in the Rose Garden. They were a vocal bunch, those reporters of old, and pushed the envelope and pushed back—hard—against presidents and their agendas.

I have come and gone in that briefing room over the years, rarely staying long enough to be a central player in the history of the White House and the battles with the press that have been memorable and an important part of the American tapestry. I've seen administrations learn from the questions asked by reporters and adapt their policy and strategy based on what was asked of them in briefings.

The briefings have been contentious at times. Or silly. Or both. I remember a defrocked minister who always asked about UFOs or Big Foot. One day a press secretary walked in with the usual huge briefing book to refer to administration policy, facts and figures. He fielded a question from the minister who asked if we were hiding a Big Foot family or aliens.

The administration official thumbed back and forth through the huge book, settled on a page. He opened it wide, ran down the length of the page, seemed to find the appropriate information and looked up. "No." He said. Then he moved on.

I remember once tripping over myself in the White House (I am now an aging klutz) and looked up to see President Reagan smile at me as I tried to pull myself up.

I remember covering scandals, angering presidents, and laughing with them. I've often talked to sources in the White House, or invited them off the grounds for private conversations. I adopt an upbeat and jovial attitude inside the White House because there is so much of a serious nature going on that I find a little levity helps people make it through the day. I know I benefit from a sense of humor.

When Rodney Dangerfield said, "I'm telling you it's a tough room," I used that in the White House. When I didn't get answers, I have been known to say, "I'm tellin' you, no respect." Sean Connery and Curly from the Three Stooges have visited through my impersonations as well.

All I have seen and all I've been a part of in the last four decades, however, did not prepare me for the White House of President Donald Trump. Reporters covering the White House are routinely demeaned by the President and some of his allies, as "fake news," "enemies of the people," and other epithets. Reporters have been threatened—explicitly by some of the President's more fringe followers—and sometimes the President implicitly supports this rhetoric. I myself have been subjected to ugly threats, in particular in the weeks since July 11, 2019.

On July 11, 2019, we saw these forces collide. That day, I went to the White House, as I do most days when the President is in town. President Trump had scheduled that day with no open press events.

But on his schedule was a Social Media Summit, or something similarly named. I had no interest. But as the day wore on, the President announced he would allow a pool spray during the summit at 3:45 p.m. and then would have a press conference for the open press at 5 p.m. in the Rose Garden.

Rose Garden events are mixed blessings. It can be mid-January with an ongoing blizzard, but it always seems that in the Rose Garden it is 150 degrees, sunny, with no wind. Many reporters remember the day President Trump announced we were leaving the Paris Climate Accords and took it as a warning sign that many of us were close to a heat stroke in that sun.

So, no one was looking forward to a Rose Garden press conference.

And, as it turns out, the President did not have a press conference. He was fashionably late. It was hot. We waited. He came out. He made a statement—that could've been made in the 3:45 p.m. event. Then he turned and left. As the President did so, I said words to the effect of "Mr. President, do you mind sticking around to answer a few questions?" I think one or two others may have tried to ask a question. My voice is loud. I was heard. The President left and did not respond, but some of the bloggers apparently thought the President's departure was an opportunity to try to humiliate the working press. Some of the guests had already been heckling the press corps. The heckling began anew. And I heard someone from the crowd say, "He talked to us, the real news." Someone else taunted me, "don't cry, don't be sad" that the President hadn't taken my questions, or something equally demeaning.

I'm telling you. Tough Room. I get no respect... So, in an attempt to defuse the situation, I did my Rodney Dangerfield: "Hey, looks like a group eager to be demonically possessed." I smiled. They smiled. We laughed. I thought that was that. Hey, at least I got a laugh.

Then I heard Sebastian Gorka taunt me from across the lawn about being a journalist. I don't know Gorka. I have only seen him twice in my life. I've never read anything that he's written or listened to his podcasts. I only know about him from others, figured he was a character, and relished the idea of getting to know him—not fight him. So I said "Hey, we can

talk here brother, or we can go outside and have a long conversation.” I actually had a thought I could get him on my podcast and that might be fun. He said I wanted to fight and began calling me a punk and threatening me as he made a beeline toward me from across the lawn—getting in my face as I stood behind the rope-line. As he continued to yell at me, the crowd began to join in, jeering and yelling, “Gorka! Gorka!”

I was a little discombobulated by his aggression, which I did not understand and did not feel I had provoked. I told him, “I’d be happy to talk to you,” assuring him I did not want to fight.

I mostly remained motionless. I’ve invited dozens of people outside the White House during the last 35 years to talk. The optimal word of course is “talk”—not fight. Who would invite someone to a WWF smackdown in the White House Rose Garden in front of 200 people, dozens of television cameras? Certainly not me. I’m about to be a grandfather for the first time. The only thing I’m fighting is arthritis and a bad meniscus.

A few days after I ran into Gorka I invited someone else I saw at the White House to go off campus and have a talk. It’s always better to talk where there are fewer reporters and listening devices. Privacy is hard to come by.

I saw John McCain at the White House once and asked him that very same thing. “Can we go outside and have a conversation?” I asked. I remember him saying, “Where to?” I suggested “Off the Record Lounge.” He smiled. “Too many people know me there.” I settled for a short stroll in Lafayette Park.

No one I’ve ever said this to has ever taken this to mean I wanted to fight them.

At the White House, I come in with a smile. I sing. I dance. I entertain lower press. I’ve done that off and on over the years when I come to the White House. You might as well enjoy a laugh because life is too short.

Most everyone who knows me knows that’s me. I’ve done my Rodney impression and a few other impressions (some like the Sean Connery and others like show tunes). I take my job seriously, but I do not take myself too seriously.

Gorka escalated events. He wanted the fight. I just wanted to talk. I thought he’d be a fascinating guy to talk to for my podcast and still do. I’ve interviewed Trump campaign advisor George Papadopoulos, Republican communications consultant Alice Stewart, former Trump White House Communications Director Anthony Scaramucci, comedian Carl Reiner, and reporter Sam Donaldson, so why not Gorka?

After he stormed off, we began to leave. The rope fell. I think I tripped over the rope as I was trying to leave. A Secret Service Agent said I had crossed the fallen rope. I apologized. I moved back. I never strayed too far. I certainly didn’t chase after anyone.

As we left and the hubbub had died down, I passed Gorka and approached him to see if he was just playing things for the camera and to make peace with him. I offered to shake his hand, and he wouldn’t do it. I told him I had no intention of fighting with him and said we could talk any time. He wouldn’t shake my hand. I shook my finger in disappointment at him, not aggression, while he yelled at me over and over again, “You’re done!”

I still wouldn’t mind having him on my podcast.

I left.

I never heard one word from the White House about this matter. Not once. White House logs should show that I was at the White House at least a dozen times from July 22 until my suspension on August 5. I interacted with the White House staff two or three times a day during those visits, including with Hogan Gidley and Stephanie Grisham, at least briefly. Not once did

this episode ever get mentioned by them, nor did they say they wanted to schedule time to talk to me about it.

I had been trying to schedule an interview with the new press secretary Stephanie Grisham for some time. I had scheduled an interview prior to the Social Media Summit and she canceled it. After the event I tried to reschedule my meeting, hoping to discuss this issue with her—specifically I wanted to ask her if she could make sure White House guests could refrain from heckling and insulting working members of the press.

She never rescheduled that meeting, though I asked her, and her secretary Annie LeHardy, in person at least once and via email twice, as late as July 17. On that day, I believe I was told she would be available that week. We are submitting some related emails. Later I was told Grisham would not be available until this week for a meeting—apparently after the preliminary decision to yank my press pass.

Meanwhile, I've seen Gorka celebrating this confrontation with the “fake news industrial complex” and encouraging others to do as he did. He apparently used this episode for several days on his radio show, I'm told, to further drive home his desire to confront reporters.

In the several weeks following the Summit, the President took several questions from me in appearances on the South Lawn. It was, frankly, business as usual.

On July 17, I asked him if he'd ever been to a social function with Jeff Epstein and underage girls. He didn't answer. On July 18, I asked him if he disavowed racism, and he told me he did. On July 24, he called me and others “Fake News” gratuitously and pointed his finger right at me. Then he singled me out again, saying I had been nice to him and could ask him a question—which I did and he answered. The day before I received the suspension letter, I asked the President to respond to Bernie Sanders's statement that the President was a pathological liar, and the President didn't answer.

Then, on Friday, August 2, 2019, on the South Lawn he took two questions from me in a rather cordial exchange. At 4:55 p.m. in the afternoon, I received an email from Ms. Grisham attaching her letter informing me that my hard pass had been suspended for 30 days, and I could respond within one business day, by 5 p.m. Monday, August 5, 2019. Given that the letter came weeks after the Social Media Summit, I thought it had more to do with the question I had asked the day before about Sanders' statement that the President was a pathological liar.

I understand that Ms. Grisham says she has taken this action against my hard pass because I insulted White House guests and escalated the situation. The escalation ran the other direction, as did the insults. The crowd was heckling the journalists, and singled me out because of my parting question to President Trump. Then Gorka singled me out, and interpreted my friendly attempt to defuse the situation as a threat. At no point in time was I ever of the mindset I was going to fight anyone. As I said, I'm 58 years old, about to be a grandfather for the first time and I've got bad knees. I ain't fighting anybody. Seriously. There would have been NO confrontation if Gorka hadn't come after me. I wasn't looking for him. I don't cover Gorka. I cover the president.

Of course, I ask questions and write things that the White House may not like. But reporters aren't scribes and contention is normal. What is not normal is retaliation. Since the Social Media Summit, I've received a great deal of hate mail, a few death threats, threats against my children, and one anonymous caller who said, “I will stake you to a tree and make you watch while I rape your wife.” And now, of course, I face the prospect of having my hard pass suspended. At the same time, apparently no action has been taken against Mr. Gorka or other attendees of the Summit who escalated the situation.

All of this is perhaps not surprising when the President himself repeatedly insults journalists, smears the mainstream media, and threatened a Time magazine reporter who tried to take a picture of a letter from Kim Jong Un with prison time.

As a journalist, it's my responsibility to ask tough questions of President Trump and this administration. I was just doing my job on July 11, as I have done in previous administrations. Just today, I asked the President two questions regarding assault weapons bans and the NRA. After the news conference, as he walked by me and headed to Marine One, I asked if we could do this indoors sometime—he stopped, laughed, and waved.

It's essential that I hold on to my hard pass so that I can continue to carry out my responsibility. After all, that's what the First Amendment is all about.

And I still look forward to a one-on-one sit down with the President at his earliest convenience. I believe it would be informative and fun.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'BK', with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

Brian Karem
August 9, 2019