OUR VIEW: JD Vance's behavior is unbecoming of his office

Ideas & Voices

By the editorial board of this newspaper

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"If a leader does what it takes to win power and keep it, his methods will always be reckoned honourable and widely praised. The crowd is won over by appearances and final results." - Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince

"If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do," Vice Presidential candidate and U.S. Senator JD Vance said in an interview this weekend.

This is an incredible admission from anyone, let alone our sitting U.S. Senator.

When pressed by CNN host Dana Bash, he clarified that his amplification of the debunked pet-eating rumor on social media last week "created the actual focus that allowed the media to talk about this story and the suffering caused by policies."

The clarification is as alarming as the initial admission: The ends justify the means in how he communicates with the public.

History, of course, offers no shortage of atrocities committed when the truth is viewed as an inconvenient obstacle in your way.

Indeed, the approach is antithetical to everything we value as journalists.

"Seek truth and report it" is the first principle of the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics.

While JD Vance is not a journalist, he is a U.S. Senator and vice presidential candidate with a powerful platform that reaches millions of Americans.

In his interview, Senator Vance repeatedly said he was responding to "first-hand accounts" from constituents who made various claims about Haitian immigrants in Springfield.

When asked if he would provide names of those constituents to verify the claims, he demurred.

Worse, he has also doubled-down on the falsehood by spreading more sensational claims about immigrants in Dayton. Both Dayton Police and Dayton's mayor adamantly denied the allegations in statements Saturday.

On Wednesday, the Wall Street Journal reported that the Vance campaign provided them with a police report in which Springfield resident Anna Kilgore claimed her pet had been taken by Haitian immigrants. When a reporter visited Kilgore's house on Tuesday, she said her cat, "Miss Sassy," had actually returned a few days later and was safe at home.

The Wall Street Journal story also revealed that the Vance campaign knew that these rumors had been directly denied by Springfield officials as early as last Tuesday, Sept. 10, ahead of the presidential debate where Trump then repeated the false claim.

The initial social media claim came from a woman who now acknowledges she merely passed along a story she heard, with no first- or even second-hand knowledge.

This desperate grasping at straws from Sen. Vance has become an embarrassment not only to himself, but to Ohio.

When journalists encounter extraordinary claims, we do our due diligence to find extraordinary evidence to substantiate them prior to publishing that information. If a mistake was made, particularly on a sensitive subject that might affect public safety, it is incumbent upon us to immediately publish a correction. It would be reckless – and dangerous – to do otherwise.

Since these claims began circulating, there have been dozens of separate threats to schools, government offices, officials and hospitals that have disrupted daily life. The city's annual celebration of diversity, arts and culture, CultureFest, was recently canceled. On Wednesday, three grocery stores were evacuated due to threats and the Springfield election debate was canceled.

Beyond terrifying the innocent population of Springfield, this deliberate spread of misinformation will require resources — taxpayer funds that are desperately needed elsewhere — to address the fallout. The Ohio State Highway Patrol has sent 36 members of its field force to sweep Springfield City Schools each morning before classes and to stay around during school. The Ohio Department of Public Safety has provided the use of its bomb detection dogs and several 30-foot high patrol towers equipped with cameras.

Politicians lie. If newspapers were to write an editorial every time a political figure was found lying, we would have long ago exhausted ink and newsprint.

Sen. Vance's lie is remarkable for a politician in that he not only outright admits to the falsehood, but that he is willing to do it again if it leads to the result he's looking for.

We believe his conduct over the past week is unbecoming of a U.S. Senator and violates the public's trust in the esteemed office. His reckless disregard for truth has endangered

members of our community and further undercuts Americans' faith in government at a time when that faith is already perilously close to depletion.

We insist that Sen. Vance immediately stop spreading unsubstantiated, inflammatory rumors about our communities – his constituents. Amplifying hateful rhetoric is not the proper way to draw attention to or address important issues we have been reporting on for years.

Senator, Ohioans need your help, not your hate. Listen to local leaders about the needs in their communities and focus on identifying ways to solve problems instead of creating new ones.