



The first few days of the IRS scandal that would consume Washington for weeks went like this: Conservatives were indignant, the media was outraged, the president had to respond, his allies turned on him ... and only then, the Treasury Department's inspector general released the actual report that had sparked the whole controversy — in that order.

It's a fitting microcosm of the entire saga, which has gone from legacy-tarnishing catastrophe to historical footnote in the intervening six weeks, and a textbook example of how the scandal narrative can dominate Washington and cable news even when there is no actual scandal.

While the initial reports about the IRS targeting looked pretty bad, suggesting that agents singled out tax-exempt applications for Tea Party and conservative groups for extra scrutiny, the media badly bungled the controversy when supposedly sober journalists like Bob Woodward and Chuck Todd jumped to conclusions and assumed the worst from day one.

Instead of doing more reporting to discover the true nature and context of the IRS targeting, or at least waiting for their colleagues to do some, the supposedly liberal mainstream press let their eagerness to show they could be just as tough on a Democratic White House as a Republican one get ahead of the facts. We expect politicians to stretch reality to fit a narrative, but the press should be better.

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