

This Is What Fake News Looks Like

By Stephen Varela

“Feds Investigating Board of Education Member . . .”, an online *Denver Post* headline screamed last Thursday. It was clickbait, for sure. (Note: shortly after publishing the article, the Post modified the headline to qualify its allegation with the words “sources say”.)

The story was fake news. That’s perhaps an overused allegation against the media. But in this case, it’s true. The story was chalk full of falsehoods and exaggerations. As the target of the story, I appreciate the opportunity to explain why.

During and after my time in the U.S. Army, I developed a special passion for veterans. I went to work for the Veterans Administration. I became the head of the local union.

The previous head of the union had been charged with -- and pled guilty to -- various acts of malfeasance. We obviously needed to clean things up. And that’s what we did. I would have been crazy to push the bounds of ethical propriety. The feds were watching. My fellow officers and I put processes in place to ensure all purchases were properly documented and approved.

When I left my position as President of the Local 2430 after about three years, all audits of the union were clean.

About the time I announced my bid for Congress, I started getting calls from the Post about an “investigation” of me involving my years-ago service with the union. Timing sound suspicious? I have never been contacted by anyone at the Department of Labor about any investigation of me. And the Post even noted that the department refused to confirm anything. But that did not stop them from writing and publishing their fake news. The Post spoke with several of my political adversaries (there are plenty – I’m a convert to the Republican Party in a Democrat town) – to “document” its story.

Missing were interviews with fellow union officials who stand by me. Curious.

The story makes several allegations, most of which fall into four categories.

1. My use of a debit card to pay for items. The allegation? That I uniquely obtained and used a debit card in some sort of self-serving scheme to circumvent expenditure limits and requirements. The reality? All officers of the union had access to a debit card. All expenditures were documented and followed the union’s internal procurement rules. All expenditures were audited yearly. All audits during my presidency were clean. The Department of Labor was looking over our shoulder and gave our local union a clean bill of health at the time I departed in 2020.
2. My travel. The allegation? That I traveled excessively. The reality? When President Trump took office, his Department of Labor heightened scrutiny of unions with new regulations.

Those rules took effect at the very time I took over as President. Those regulations stipulated attendance at mandatory trainings and meetings. I complied. When I did travel, I kept expenses as modest as possible. Sometimes that meant renting a car to get around; sometimes that meant using taxis or Ubers.

3. My purchases. The allegation? That I somehow unilaterally purchased items, such as “beer-making equipment.” The reality? Every purchase followed protocol. The so-called “beer-making equipment” purchase, for example, was approved by a membership vote and used for union business.
4. My party registration changes. The allegation? That I changed my party 18 times, even changing my party three times in 48 hours! The Post is not the first outlet to lob this one out there. The reality? I was a Democrat, and I did change my party registration a few times before becoming a Republican for good when Joe Biden took office. But I did not change my party registration 18 times or multiple times in one day. My 2022 Democrat opponent was accused of multiple party registration changes of which he had no awareness either. There is clearly some type of clerical error within the election administration system. I have reached out to the county clerk and the Secretary of State to ask for an explanation.

I conclude by quoting Jason Tubbs, Vice President of the union at the time I was President, who posted the following on my Facebook page after the Post story was published: “Stephen Varela, unlike his predecessor, served as president honorably and ethically and always in good faith. . . . This [*Denver Post*] article is clearly politically driven and a misrepresentation of the facts.”

The Denver Post interviewed my political adversaries to generate a one-sided narrative. They got exactly what they wanted. The outcome was predictable because the Post is more interested in tearing down Republicans than reporting the facts. I hope you are never in the Fake News crosshairs of *The Denver Post*. Luckily, Republican voters know better than to trust *The Denver Post*.

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