



## About The Fact Checker

By **Glenn Kessler**

Jan. 1, 2017 at 5:11 p.m. EST

*“Comment is free, but facts are sacred.”*

**-- C.P. Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian, 1921**

### About The Fact Checker

In an award-winning journalism career spanning more than three decades, [Glenn Kessler](#) has covered foreign policy, economic policy, the White House, Congress, politics, airline safety and Wall Street. He was The Washington Post’s [chief State Department reporter](#) for nine years, traveling around the world with three different Secretaries of State. Before that, he covered tax and budget policy for The Washington Post and also served as the newspaper’s national business editor.

Kessler has long specialized in digging beyond the conventional wisdom, such as when he earned a “laurel” from the Columbia Journalism Review\* for obtaining Federal Aviation Administration records that showed that then President Bill Clinton had not delayed any scheduled flights when he had a controversial haircut on an airport tarmac. Kessler helped pioneer the fact-checking of candidates’ statements during the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns, when he was chief political correspondent for Newsday, and [continued to do it](#) during the last five presidential campaigns for The Post.

The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) in 2015 awarded Kessler its Media Literate Media award, presented every two years, for his work on The Fact Checker. He is a member of the advisory board of the International Fact-Checking Network and has trained reporters in Morocco and Panama on fact-checking techniques and practices.

In 2007, St. Martins Press published Kessler's widely acclaimed book on Condoleezza Rice, The Confidante. Kessler appears frequently on television and has lectured widely on U.S. foreign policy.

## **Our Goal**

This column first started on Sept. 19, 2007, as a feature during the 2008 presidential campaign. The Washington Post revived it as a permanent feature on Jan. 11, 2011, helmed by Kessler.

Other members of The Fact Checker team are Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly.

- Rizzo is a reporter for The Fact Checker. He previously covered New Jersey politics, courts, state finances and Gov. Chris Christie, with stints at the Star-Ledger, the Bergen Record and Observer.

- Kelly produces video and reports for The Fact Checker. Before joining the Post, she covered the 2016 election for NPR as a visual producer.

The Fact Checker team was awarded an honorable mention in the competition for the 2019 Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting, awarded by the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. The judges cited The Fact Checker's database of President Trump's false and misleading claims and praised fact checks that are “clear, deliberate and never hyperbolic.”

The purpose of this website, and an accompanying column in the Sunday print edition of The Washington Post, is to “truth squad” the statements of political figures regarding issues of great importance, be they national, international or local. It's a big world out there, and so we rely on readers to ask questions and point out statements that need to be checked.

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But we are not limited to political charges or countercharges. We also seek to explain difficult issues, provide missing context and provide analysis and explanation of various “code words” used by politicians, diplomats and others to obscure or shade the truth. The Fact Checker is at heart about policy -- domestic and foreign -- as we have found that politicians are apt to be more misleading about complex and difficult-to-understand topics.

The success of this project depends, to a great extent, on the involvement of you--the reader. About 50 percent of our fact checks start with an inquiry from a reader. Readers send us suggestions on topics to fact check and tips on erroneous claims by political candidates, interest groups, and the media. Once we have posted an item on a subject, we invite your comments and contributions. You can follow us on Twitter at [GlennKesslerWP](#) or friend us on [Facebook](#). We welcome comments and suggestions via tweets (Include #FactCheckThis in your tweet) or on our Facebook page.

You can also email us at [factchecker@washpost.com](mailto:factchecker@washpost.com).

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If you have facts or documents that shed more light on the subject under discussion, or if you think we have made a mistake, please let us know. We also want to make sure that the authors of questionable claims have ample opportunity to argue their case. We issue our own ruling on factual disputes (see our rules on the “Pinocchio Test” below) but it can be revised and updated if fresh evidence emerges. Our view is that a fact check is never really finished, so the rating can be revised after we obtain new information that changes the factual basis for our original ruling.

### **C-SPAN Interviews**

On January 15, 2012, C-SPAN aired [a one-hour interview with Glenn Kessler](#) about the Fact Checker column and his life and career, which has been viewed on-line more than 400,000 times. (A [transcript of the interview](#) is also available.) In 2014, C-SPAN aired a second [one-hour interview with Kessler](#).

## **A Few Basic Principles**

- This is a fact-checking operation, not an opinion-checking operation. We are interested only in verifiable facts, though on occasion we may examine the roots of political rhetoric.
- We will focus our attention and resources on the issues that are most important to voters. We cannot nitpick every detail of every speech. We especially try to examine statements that are newsworthy or concern issues of importance. We understand that everyone makes mistakes, especially when speaking extemporaneously, so we do not play "gotcha."
- We will strive to be dispassionate and non-partisan, drawing attention to inaccurate statements on both left and right. But we also fact check what matters -- and what matters are people in power. When one political party controls the White House and both houses of Congress, it is only natural that the fact checks might appear too heavily focused on one side of the political spectrum. (Divided government is much better for The Fact Checker.) We urge readers to bring to our attention possible false claims we might have missed.

- We will stick to the facts of the issue under examination and are unmoved by ad hominem attacks. The identity or political ties of the person or organization making a charge is irrelevant: all that matters is whether their facts are accurate or inaccurate.
- We will adopt a “reasonable person” standard for reaching conclusions. We do not demand 100 percent proof. The burden for proving the accuracy of a claim rests with the speaker, however.
- Consistent with Washington Post policy, no one working on The Fact Checker may engage in partisan political activity or make contributions to candidates or advocacy organizations. Since 2013, The Washington Post has been owned by Jeff Bezos, the chief executive of Amazon, as a personal investment via Nash Holdings LLC. The Fact Checker is part of the national-news section of The Post, which is managed separately from the editorial and opinion section of The Post. In 2019, The Fact Checker received a \$250,000 grant from Google News Initiative/YouTube to expand production of video fact checks.

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- We are committed to being transparent about our sources. Whenever possible, we provide links to sources so readers have access to the information we used to reach the conclusions in our fact checks and can verify the information themselves.

- Everyone makes mistakes and we strive to correct any errors in accordance with [The Washington Post's corrections policy](#). We welcome feedback from readers who may dispute our conclusions and who want to offer additional information that might result in a change in ruling.

## **The Pinocchio Test**

Where possible, we will adopt the following standard in fact-checking the claims of a politician, political candidate, diplomat or interest group.

We do make some allowance for statements made in live interviews, as opposed to a prepared text. We will judge more harshly statements from a prepared text, on the grounds that the politician and staff had time to discuss the statistic. We also make allowances if the politician or interest group acknowledges an error was made. Finally, we also have a feature called "[Recidivism Watch](#)," which highlights claims repeated by politicians even though the claim has been previously debunked.

### **One Pinocchio**

Some shading of the facts. Selective telling of the truth. Some omissions and exaggerations, but no outright falsehoods. (You could view this as "mostly true.")

### **Two Pinocchios**

Significant omissions and/or exaggerations. Some factual error may be involved but not necessarily. A politician can create a false, misleading impression by playing with words and using legalistic language that means little to ordinary people. (Similar to "half true.")

### **Three Pinocchios**

Significant factual error and/or obvious contradictions. This gets into the realm of "mostly false." But it could include statements which are technically correct (such as based on official government data) but are so taken out of context as to be very misleading. The line between Two and Three can be bit fuzzy and we do not award half-Pinocchios. So we strive to explain the factors that tipped us toward a Three.

### **Four Pinocchios**

Whoppers.

### **The Geppetto Checkmark**

Statements and claims that contain “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” will be recognized with our prized Geppetto checkmark. We tend to reserve this for claims that are unexpectedly true, so it is not awarded very often.

### **An Upside-Down Pinocchio**

A statement that represents a clear but unacknowledged “flip-flop” from a previously-held position.

### **Verdict Pending**

There are occasions when it is impossible to render a snap judgment because the issue is very complex or there are good arguments on both sides. In this case, we will withhold our judgment until we can gather more facts. We will use this website to shed as much light as possible on factual controversies that are not easily resolved.

### **Bottomless Pinocchio**



In December, 2018, The Fact Checker introduced the Bottomless Pinocchio. The bar for the Bottomless Pinocchio is high: Claims must have received Three or Four Pinocchios from The Fact Checker, and they must have been repeated at least 20 times. Twenty is a sufficiently robust number that there can be no question the politician is aware that his or her facts are wrong. The list of Bottomless Pinocchios will be maintained on its own landing page.

(The iconic Pinocchio image used by The Fact Checker was created in 2007 by illustrator Steve McCracken.)

## **Archives**

Click on the Archives link on the top right of the Fact Checker page. The list will go back five years. For dates after Sept. 2013, adjust the year and month at the end of the url.

See 2007-2011 archives here.

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All judgments are subject to debate and criticism from our readers and interested parties, and can be revised if fresh evidence emerges. We invite you to join the discussion on these pages and contact the Fact Checker directly with tips, suggestions, and complaints. If you feel that we are being too harsh on one candidate and too soft on another, there is a simple remedy: let us know about misstatements and factual errors we may have overlooked.

## **International Fact-Checking Network fact-checkers' code of principles**

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute is committed to promoting excellence in fact-checking. Nonpartisan and transparent fact-checking can be a powerful instrument of accountability journalism. Conversely, unsourced or biased fact-checking can increase distrust in the media and experts while polluting public understanding. The following statement is the result of consultations among fact-checkers from around the world; it offers conscientious practitioners principles to aspire to in their everyday work. ***The Washington Post Fact Checker was an inaugural signatory to this code of principles, which was announced on Sept. 15, 2016.***

**(1) A COMMITMENT TO NONPARTISANSHIP AND FAIRNESS** We fact-check claims using the same standard for every fact check. We do not concentrate our fact-checking on any one side. We follow the same process for every fact check and let the evidence dictate our conclusions. We do not advocate or take policy positions on the issues we fact-check.

**(2) A COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY OF SOURCES** We want our readers to be able to verify our findings themselves. We provide all sources in enough detail that readers can replicate our work, except in cases where a source's personal security could be compromised. In such cases, we provide as much detail as possible.

**(3) A COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY OF FUNDING & ORGANIZATION** We are transparent about our funding sources. If we accept funding from other organizations, we ensure that funders have no influence over the conclusions we reach in our reports. We detail the professional background of all key figures in our organization and explain our organizational structure and legal status. We clearly indicate a way for readers to communicate with us.

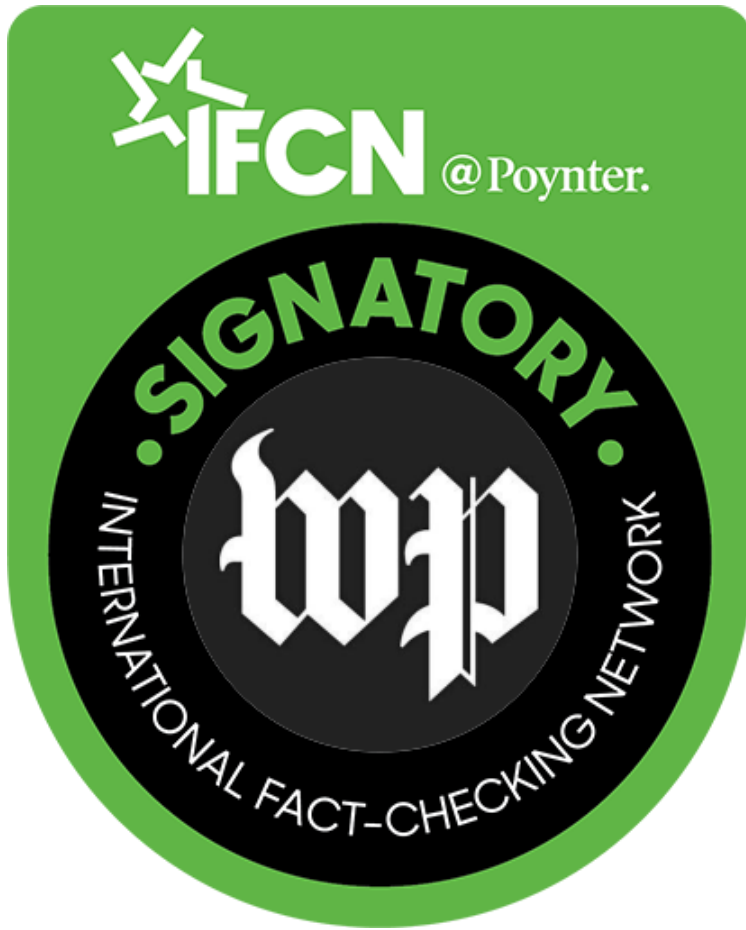
**(4) A COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY OF METHODOLOGY** We explain the methodology we use to select, research, write, edit, publish and correct our fact checks. We encourage readers to send us claims to fact-check and are transparent on why and how we fact-check.

**(5) A COMMITMENT TO OPEN AND HONEST CORRECTIONS** We publish our corrections policy and follow it scrupulously. We correct clearly and transparently in line with our corrections policy, seeking so far as possible to ensure that readers see the corrected version.

*By signing up to this code of principles, the fact-checking initiatives agree to produce a public report indicating how they have lived up to each of the five principles within a year from their signature, and once a year thereafter. The report will allow readers and others to judge to what extent the fact-checker is respecting the code of principles and will be linked to from this page.*

*Being a signatory to this code of principles and publishing a report in no way implies an endorsement from Poynter's IFCN or any of its members.*

*A formal process for adding signatories began in 2017. The Washington Post Fact Checker was evaluated by an independent assessor and officially accepted by the IFCN board on March 8, 2017, permitting the display of the badge below. The Fact Checker was reevaluated and accepted again in 2018 and 2019.*



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**Columbia Journalism Review, May 1993:**

\* “LAUREL to New York Newsday, and to staff writer Glenn Kessler, for a record-breaking solo flight. With most of the nation’s news media zooming in on the president’s \$ 200 haircut on the Los Angeles Airport runway and roaring about the disruptions his hirsutic hubris caused, Kessler took off in a different direction -- and landed on some hard, concrete facts. His analysis of Federal Aviation Administration records, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, revealed that, contrary to stories of circling planes, jammed-up runways, and inconvenienced passengers (and contrary, too, to the apology the White House felt pressured to make), only one (unscheduled) air taxi reported an actual (two-minute) delay. Unfortunately, most of the nation’s news media, in usual near-perfect formation, found neither time nor space to correct a story that had been wildly off course.”



