

PERSPECTIVE | MAGAZINE

Kristi Noem's Cricket, Mitt Romney's Seamus, and the GOP dog problem

The instant comparisons were a pretty good metaphor for understanding how discourse within the Republican Party has coarsened.

By **Neil Swidey** Globe Correspondent, Updated May 6, 2024, 2:07 p.m.



PHOTOGRAPHS: DOG BY RODIMOVPAVEL/ADOBE; NOEM BY KAMIL KRZACZYNSKI/AFP; ROMNEY BY ANNA MONEYMAKER/GETTY IMAGES

As soon as the news about the South Dakota governor's dead dog broke, I felt a knot in my stomach.

That wasn't just because of Governor Kristi Noem's almost theatrical cruelty in bragging about the time she took her family's 14-month-old wirehaired pointer, Cricket, out back and shot her dead, for the sin of being insufficiently responsive to commands. Of course, I would find the story revolting—I have a functioning heart.

But what made that knot grow was that I knew it wouldn't be long before the media came after Mitt Romney, yet again, for having once put his dog on the roof of his station wagon during a family road trip. And for that, I bear more than a little responsibility.

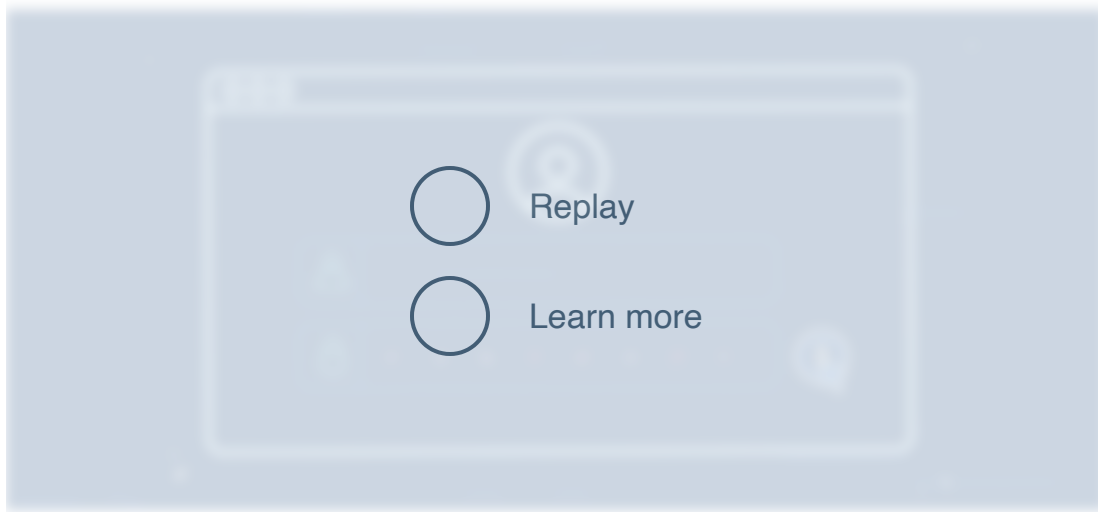
It's troubling to see people in politics and the media immediately equating Senator Romney's milder dog incident (relatively speaking!) with Noem's dog-execution-at-dawn. It's also a pretty good metaphor for understanding how discourse within the Republican Party has coarsened over the last dozen years.

A refresher: In 2007, during Romney's first presidential campaign, [I unearthed the story of Mitt and his mutt](#). I reported how, back in 1983, Romney had driven his wife and five sons in their station wagon from Massachusetts to Canada, all while their Irish setter, Seamus, rode al fresco in a carrier Romney strapped to the car roof. The story caused a stir during that 2008 campaign, but a much [bigger one](#) after Romney became the 2012 Republican nominee for president: New York Times columnist Gail Collins made good on her [promise to mention it](#) as often as she could when writing about Romney. And President Obama's [campaign](#) exploited the anecdote to claim that a President Romney would treat the American people *the same way he had treated his poor dog*.

Over the years, I've heard from quite a few Democrats who credited the Seamus story with [helping Obama get reelected](#). Losing pet-loving swing voters sure couldn't have helped Romney. But I've also heard from Republicans who say the Seamus story helped pave the way for President Trump. If Romney had won in 2012, they contend, Trump would not have run in 2016, because he would have been facing an incumbent rather than a crowded open field.

I've never bought into these claims from either camp. The idea that something as complex as a presidential election would turn on one long-ago pet incident seems too far-fetched. But what I didn't realize back then is how much the ["Romney dog incident"](#) would preview the profound changes we would see in American politics—and American media.

ADVERTISING



[The Guardian wrote about](#) Noem's dog-slaying on April 26, quoting a passage from her forthcoming memoir. A *HuffPost* reporter later cornered Romney, and published an article under the headline, "I Didn't Shoot My Dog'; Mitt Romney Resents Being Compared to Kristi Noem."

You can certainly question Romney's judgment and sensitivity in putting his dog in a roof carrier for a 12-hour drive (even if he had nerdily [fashioned a windshield for Seamus' benefit](#)). But how could that possibly compare with Noem bragging about shooting her dog—in front of a startled construction crew, no less—after Cricket attacked some chickens and she concluded the dog was untrainable?

It's not that many pet owners couldn't relate to Noem's frustration with a dog that seems impervious to training, and perhaps even dangerous. It's that a short-list contender to be Trump's running mate could apparently think (incorrectly, it seems to be turning out)

that bragging about playing backyard assassin with her dog would boost her favorability in MAGA Nation. What does that say about how uncouth political discourse has become? And what does it say about what politicians must think of their constituents?

Compare that to the GOP discourse of 2012, when earnest, square, gee-willikers Mitt was the nominee. The biggest substantive criticism back then was that he was so desperate to become president, that he would contort any of his political stances just to close the deal. As a reporter who spent lots of time with Romney and [his family](#) back then, I came to see that shape-shifting as a function of his background in business. He had become enormously wealthy by being relentlessly logic-driven. The Seamus story highlighted his emotion-free operating system. (*Dog has diarrhea? Hose him down and return him to the roof.*)

I used to think the Seamus story got more play in 2012 than 2008 simply because Romney was the GOP nominee the second time. But I realize now that's only part of the reason.

The 2012 race was our [first fully digital election](#), dominated by smartphones and social media. Research increasingly shows how much we—and our media—have been changed over the last decade by big tech's algorithms, which reward heat over light, affirmation over information.

Imagine how Romney, as he enters his final months in the Senate, felt being forced to justify that his behavior wasn't as bad as the South Dakota governor's. Or what he thought seeing *HuffPost* publish an empty-calorie hot take with the clickbaity headline "I Didn't Shoot My Dog." Or seeing a slew of other media outlets (including the Globe) do some version of that same story and headline.

For all the legitimate criticism of Romney as a shapeshifting presidential candidate, it's worth noting how stiff his spine became in the Senate. Rather than do what so many of his colleagues did—[deriding Trump in private](#) while obsequiously refusing to hold him accountable in public—Romney put the nation over party. As the sole Republican to vote

to convict Trump at both of his impeachment trials, he's had to withstand ferocious blowback.

In the last few years, Romney grew tremendously. It would be nice if the rest of us could say the same.

Neil Swidey is the Globe Magazine editor at large. He can be reached at neil.swidey@globe.com.

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Rush Inbot

5/06/24 - 2:15PM

If this is all the Democrats have in 2024, I think they are in trouble....



Commenter001

5/06/24 - 2:24PM

<< If this is all the Democrats have in 2024, I think they are in trouble.... >>

Of course, it isn't all they have; but it's bad enough.



metintodd

5/06/24 - 2:31PM

What do Republicans have other than fake news and lies and racism and conspiracy theories and fascism and white supremacy? I mean, that's all Trump is giving us while Biden actually gets things done. Trump meanwhile goes on hate rallies and sits in a courtroom.

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**pgerlings**

5/06/24 - 2:21PM

“I’m suspicious of people who don’t like dogs, but I trust a dog when it doesn’t like a person.”

~ Bill Murray

**clave**

5/06/24 - 2:58PM

Swidey's regrets, apologies for Romney, and claim that Romney has "grown" show how easy it is to fool media oligopoly journalists. They want to be fooled! They will seize on any lame rationale to proclaim that the Business Party and its pols (GOP and Dem wings thereof) aren't so bad.

**nahantjim**

5/06/24 - 5:25PM

It underlines the fact that writers, candidates and parties are not abstract objects...humanity suffuses all.

Thanks Mr. Swidey...and Bill Murray.

This comment has been blocked.



Batman80

5/06/24 - 2:38PM

Quote from his "Dreams from My Father" book, "I was introduced to dog meat (tough)."



Harry Trueman

5/06/24 - 3:07PM

Yes, I had forgotten Barry ate dogs.

~

[Show all 4 replies](#)

**TherealDeadmanwalking**

5/06/24 - 2:34PM

Its funny because Trump wont win his bid to return and then all we will hear is how it was stolen from him. The guy is the biggest sore loser... In any event putting your dog on the roof of a car and driving not a smart idea. Shooting your dog at 14 months because of whatever reason she has is just sad, just sad.

**Moxie58**

5/06/24 - 2:46PM

"just sad" -- how about horrific?

**Call the mover, Joe**

5/06/24 - 3:40PM

Right now he's in the lead
Let's see if Uncle Brosie's nephew has the stones to debate

[Show all 3 replies](#)**Wp01852**

5/06/24 - 2:46PM

In 1983, dogs were pets in families, and pets were at the bottom of the family hierarchy. In 2008, 2012, through to today, pet care, cat and dog care is a billion dollar industry in the US and the family dog is now sits atop the family hierarchy.

Had Romney run for national office in 1984, this Seamus story would have been a non-story. Add 25 years and a generation to the equation and the story had legs that ran Romney out of the White House.

In 2012, Romney was hated by the Democrats first and foremost for being a successful businessman, the Seamus story was the icing on the "Let's get Mitt" cake.

To compare Romney to Noem is ludicrous and just another way for the right and left to denigrate a good man.



painter

5/06/24 - 2:54PM

How to be wrong on every thought...



Swan Man

5/06/24 - 3:53PM

to say, "Romney put the nation over party" is like saying I was willing to call the lifeguard when someone was drowning. What he did was the bare minimum. And that's what he continues to do. And what he did as governor here. As for the rest of them, history will call them traitors and criminals. Bye Mitt.

[Show all 3 replies](#)



gangtey

5/06/24 - 2:57PM

I still think Romney made up the story about the dog on the roof. I think Romney, a peculiar man seemingly unacquainted with the everyday lives of Earthlings, concocted the story to make himself seem hapless and folksy like the Earthlings whose votes he was seeking. Problem is, a pooping dog on the car roof is strictly something from a cartoon, not real life. And poor Mitt is stuck with that stupid story hanging around his neck for the rest of his life.

At least Romney didn't make up a story like Noem's, that the family dog ("Cricket," mind you) had it coming because she was actually a wolf-like killing machine that would have devoured the children if kept inside the car.

Mitt's world class liar, but he's got nothing on Kristi Noem.



nahantjim

My opinion is that she intentionally related that story as an offset to her being a "lady."

She wanted it known that she was tough as nails, willing to kill dog or man, on 5th Avenue or not.

She thought it would enhance her among Trump's supporters. Do we know that it didn't?



nahantjim

5/06/24 - 5:36PM

Look at MTG! Swaggering around, gun on hip, bringing a weapon onto the floor of the House!

Presenting as serious and thoughtful does not help one's status in the Trump party. Not by a long shot...



Harry Trueman

5/06/24 - 2:57PM

Meanwhile, Corrupt Joe Biden gets a pass for sniffing the hair of little girls during photo ops.

~

This comment has been blocked.

This comment has been blocked.

[Show all 4 replies](#)

This comment has been blocked.



DoverConservative

5/06/24 - 3:04PM

Pause



MWK

5/06/24 - 3:02PM

I saw Kristi Noem on CBS mornings this morning. She is one scary piece of work. Her face doesn't move. She has these dead eyes. Some of these hard core republican women are much more scary than the men.



IronMask

5/06/24 - 3:10PM

That's today's GOP. Botox and cruelty. Who can be the meanest, most fake caricature of a real person?



Maximiis Cadius

5/06/24 - 3:28PM

ANd she's cheating on her husband with that disgusting Corey Lewandowski!

Show all 4 replies



Boston Water

5/06/24 - 3:14PM

Presidents, presidential candidates and all political wannabees should steer clear of dogs (and leave them to dog lovers like me). Even the beloved Fala got FDR in trouble once or twice; yes, Nixon used - exploited? - Checkers to his advantage but that may be the exception. Dogs running amuck in the White House biting Secret Service, soiling the Romney wagon, decimating South Dakota fowl...please, leave the dogs to those of us who know how to love and care for them. And forget cats for politicians, there's always the rodent lobby to worry about, fish or parakeets might be best, but for God's sake be careful transporting them to Canada (Canada?) for the family vacation.



nahantjim

5/06/24 - 5:42PM

Fala has been immortalized in bronze, sitting with FDR who sits in his wheelchair at the FDR memorial in Washington DC



EliotNessMobTrollHunter

5/06/24 - 3:19PM

Noem wasted a costly (horrible) MAGA/Fox makeover. Whoever thinks a Ivanka/Kimberly Guifoile mashup is hot or somehow emblematic of the best of American womanhood is nuts.

This comment has been blocked.



Maximiis Cadius

5/06/24 - 3:33PM

Very scary.

[Show all 3 replies](#)

**Watrat**

5/06/24 - 3:31PM

What is it about Republicans and dogs?! And, don't forget that Nixon as VP admitted to accepting a bribe from a businessman of a dog named Checkers, while admitting that he was too cheap to pay for a decent housecoat for his wife.

**In Memory Of Uncle Bosie**

5/06/24 - 5:47PM

Google "Joe Biden kicks dog" and you will see links to a video of Joe Biden viciously kicking his dog in the head and then punching the dog.

With a nasty owner like Joe Biden, no wonder his dogs bit everyone at the White House and had to be removed.

**ceb86**

5/06/24 - 6:07PM

Yeah, there is no such video or the lying troll would have posted a link.

[Show all 3 replies](#)

**Batman80**

5/06/24 - 3:33PM

My comment that Obama ate dogs based on a quote from his "Dreams from My Father" book, "I was introduced to dog meat (tough).", was blocked. Hey BG, why is a factual comment that is merely a quote from a presidential autobiography subject to being blocked. Biased much?

**Batman80**

5/06/24 - 3:34PM

And yes, he was 10 years old and living in a different country, but is the dog less dead? He certainly showed no remorse about it upon reflection

as an adult who owns dogs. Just as callous as the GOP.



Maximiis
Cadius

Maximiis Cadius

5/06/24 - 3:40PM

Tissue, snowflake?

Show all 8 replies



PolarBear2

5/06/24 - 3:38PM

Rolling Stone had an article on Mitt in 2012, ruining takeover companies in Bain Capital.

Greed and Debt: The True Story of Mitt Romney and Bain Capital

A good read.

As for Noem, she is scary. If you cannot train your dog, get a professional trainer involved or give the puppy to someone who can give it a better home. Rarely is it necessary to kill the dog, and even then, it can be done by injection.



JXVI

5/07/24 - 7:26AM

Do you remember the 30-minute 'When Mitt Romney Came To Town' video, also from 2012, attacking his record at Bain Capital that came from the Newt Gingrich campaign (of all places)?

It's got that emotionally oversaturated tone of a political ad, but the business moves they're criticizing did happen.



peristroika

Kristi figured that since Trumpicans wouldn't care if Trump shot and killed someone on 5th Ave. in NY in broad daylight, she could also get a pass from the Trumpicans if she "only" shot a puppy in the backyard, and then bragged about it!



fudbuster

5/06/24 - 3:52PM

Ironically, the same dog-loving MAGA-cultists that have distanced themselves from Noem would excuse and probably even praise Trump (a notorious dog hater) if he shot a dog on Fifth Avenue. Heck, they'd probably even offer up their own pets to him as a sacrifice!



DoverConservative

5/06/24 - 3:55PM

Comrade speaks

[Show all 3 replies](#)



Call the mover, Joe

5/06/24 - 3:42PM

Hey max, Joe was jumping ugly with Dr Jill when she was still married



Maximiis Cadius

5/06/24 - 3:51PM

False.

Try again.

I thought you clowns were going to impeach Joe Biden? Whatever happened with that? Did you guys forget?

Show all 4 replies



curly_q_link

5/06/24 - 4:50PM

She writes in her book about killing the family dog and lies about meeting the Little Rocket Man. Then complains when the media reports it. What a clown. And it looks like she uses the same make up consultant as MTG.



GoodBob

5/06/24 - 5:02PM

Noem is just despicable ... shooting a defenseless puppy because it hadn't been trained well by its psychopathic owner is horrific and then bragging about it as a 'demonstration of strength' is ludicrous.



StopTWNJfascism

5/06/24 - 5:34PM

“harry the low integrity liar”

Defends nixon

Which tells everyone all they need to know

As far as the new fascist wing of the republican party is concerned it's fine to be an authoritarian criminal strong man who tries to undermine democracy for their own desires to hold onto power



StopTWNJfascism

5/06/24 - 5:34PM

“harry the low integrity liar” likes to LOL in articles about human suffering
They particularly likes it when US Service members are killed



StopTWNJfascism

5/06/24 - 5:34PM

“harry the hate-filled liar” also likes to LOL in articles about mass shooters terrorizing a community

“harry the low integrity and hate-filled liar” also likes to LOL in articles about children being denied care or services



CertainDeath

5/06/24 - 5:36PM

She shot her goat because it smelled. How's she plan to deal with being Trump's VP?



EliotNessMobTrollHunter

5/06/24 - 9:12PM

Good one.

This comment has been blocked.

This comment has been blocked.



loginbroken

5/06/24 - 8:41PM

I am often reminded how the human brain tries to make sense of the world by finding patterns that aren't really there in random data. These dog stories are not random data per se but I don't think they are in any way actually related or in any way that is meaningful or useful.



josh_or_joshua

5/06/24 - 8:55PM

of all the countless awful things about TFG, the worst is refusing to concede the election; the harm to the country is immeasurable



JXVI

5/07/24 - 7:11AM

Mitt hasn't grown at all. Remember that hostage-photo dinner with Trump about being Secretary of State?

He only found his spine after Donald yanked it out and showed it to him. I could see the possibility if he'd gone straight from the campaign to leading the opposition, but he didn't - he tried join them anyway. That noble opposition or whatever only came after being completely rejected by the ruling faction of the GOP - their choice, not his.



nahantjim

5/07/24 - 9:20AM

I'm not a fan of Mitt but I do like his father who I had the pleasure of meeting when Mitt was running against Senator Kennedy.

Mitt thought that he could be a moderating influence in the Trump administration. A lot Republicans thought they could shape that crazy man only to discover that, no matter how hard they tried, Trump would always be Trump...a reckless and dangerous egomaniac.

It has been so sad to watch so many Republicans retreat, hide, give up the ship...

The Lincoln Project continues its work. Good for them.

But the danger has only grown.

[1](#) [2](#) [next](#) [last](#)

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