

White House Correspondents Association gala

# Wealth, celebrity and decadence in Obama's Washington

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The annual gala of the White House Correspondents Association is one of the rituals of the Washington establishment, a grotesque display of wealth, celebrity and influence-peddling. Saturday's version of the event was no exception. If anything, it flaunted the ever more degraded state of American politics.

Originally established 100 years ago by the small number of full-time reporters who then covered the White House, the gala has emerged in the past two decades as a social event at which Hollywood celebrities, media moguls and Washington power brokers rub shoulders and do business.

Some 2,600 people crammed the ballroom of the Washington Hilton for the main dinner event, featuring President Obama, Vice President Biden, and actor and comedian Joel McHale, who served as emcee. The attendees then went on to dozens of after-parties sponsored by giant media corporations, Hollywood producers and Silicon Valley billionaires.

One press report asserted that cast members of every prime time program on the four major television networks were at the gala, with special attention given to the programs that depict, in one way or another, the political life of the nation's capital: *House of Cards*, on Netflix; HBO's *Veep*; and ABC's *Scandal*.

What all those in attendance Saturday night have in common is money. And so much money that the entire affair is characterized by a lack of awareness of both the conditions of life of the vast majority of people in America and the visceral hatred with which the public regards the well-heeled corporate and political elite.

Those participating in the correspondents' gala have long ago abandoned any sense that an independent press—once dubbed the “Fourth Estate” to distinguish it

from the official government structure—should maintain a certain distance from the political establishment in order to report on it objectively and critically.

This was not a once-a-year encounter between the press, the corporate oligarchy and the political rulers, but another in the daily encounters in which they work together, make money together, and, in many cases, sleep together. They share the same political assumptions and personal ambitions.

What is evident in such an event is that the people in attendance, whether in government, the media, or big business, are completely interchangeable. Jay Carney attended previous galas as the White House correspondent for *Time* magazine. He now attends as the White House press secretary. After Obama leaves office, he can return to the private sector as a media executive or lavishly paid consultant. His case is one of many.

A particularly sinister aspect of Saturday's gala was the presence of so many representatives of Silicon Valley. As the revelations of Edward Snowden about the National Security Agency have demonstrated, companies like Google, Yahoo, Facebook and Microsoft are so deeply integrated in the structure of state spying on the American population that they serve as virtual arms of the intelligence apparatus.

It was notable that none of the gala speakers made any serious reference to the exposure of rampant spying on the population of the world by the US government. Obama himself made only one cynical comment, noting that Colorado recently legalized recreational use of marijuana. “I do hope it doesn't lead to a whole lot of paranoid people who think that the federal government is out to get them and listening to their

phone calls,” he said, to laughter from the audience.

The comedy monologues and skits were on the lowest intellectual and cultural level, combining bathroom humor, sexual innuendo and a snide, even mean, sensibility.

Obama’s 19-minute performance, widely hailed in the media as a masterpiece of self-deprecating humor, was nothing of the kind. It consisted largely of predictable sallies against his political opponents within the ruling elite, within a framework that tacitly acknowledged their actual differences amount to very little.

It has been a political eon since Stephen Colbert, the emcee in 2006, lacerated George W. Bush and the Bush administration for the war in Iraq, flaying the corporate media as well for its complicity in peddling the lies used to sell the war to the public. Since then, there has been a systematic effort to prevent any repetition.

Colbert himself has in the meantime fully adapted and integrated himself into the media and political establishment.

As a consequence, a president who has asserted the right to assassinate American citizens anywhere in the world, without a judicial hearing or any other constraint, and who is provoking a confrontation with Russia over Ukraine that could spark the first-ever war between nuclear powers, faced no serious questions, let alone opposition, on his foreign or domestic policy.

What passed for self-criticism in the president’s appearance were a few references to the debacle of the healthcare.gov web site. Obama presented this, however, as a political burden for him personally, without any reference to the devastating impact of both the web site failure and Obamacare itself on access to health care for millions of working people.



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