

White House correspondents dinner: A degrading spectacle of conformism

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Saturday night was the eighth appearance by President Barack Obama at the annual White House correspondents dinner, which has become a staple of social life in the US capital. Politicians rub shoulders with figures from Hollywood and the news media at an event featuring two supposedly comic monologues: the first by the president, the second by a television comedian, in this case, Larry Wilmore of Comedy Central.

As the *Washington Post* described it: “The event once again was a mashup of Hollywood’s beautiful people, famous-for-Washington types, business executives, sports stars, military representatives and many well-connected nobodies. There were even a few actual White House correspondents.”

Perhaps just as important to the life of the political and media establishment as the dinner itself are the pre-parties and after-parties, lavish displays by media conglomerates, lobbyists and similar well-heeled sponsors. At these events, well-lubricated Democrats and Republicans drop the pretense of implacable hostility and schmooze with media celebrities in a general celebration of wealth and self-satisfaction.

The *Post* account continued: “The unusual diversity of the crowd led to some one-of-a-kind encounters. Secretary of State John F. Kerry, Michelle Dockery of ‘Downton Abbey,’ ‘Spotlight’ actress Rachel McAdams and MSNBC’s Lawrence O’Donnell all gathered at one pre-dinner reception. Vice President Biden sat during the dinner with Kerry and actress Helen Mirren ...”

“The unusual diversity of the crowd”—an astonishingly obtuse and revealing phrase. It never occurred to the reporter that all those named have one great thing in common: they’re all rich, privileged, separated from the mass of American working people

by an unbridgeable social gulf. Everyone at the dinner was drawn from the rarefied world of the top one-tenth of one percent, or an even smaller fraction of the corporate, political and media elite.

There were a few actual billionaires, like Michael Bloomberg, proprietor of Bloomberg News and former mayor of New York, and some children of billionaires, including Donald Trump Jr. and his brother Eric. Ordinary millionaires and those who can reasonably aspire to reach that status shortly made up the rest of the 2,600 in attendance.

As at previous such events, the atmosphere was one of terrible social conformism. No one ventures to refuse an invitation to spend an evening saluting the president of the United States, a man steeped to his elbows in blood, responsible for death and destruction on a colossal scale in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond.

It is not just lack of courage: the politicians who attend are Obama’s accomplices and enablers. The same could be said of the media propagandists from CNN, Fox, MSNBC, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and other networks and publications.

As for the actors and entertainers who came by the hundreds—among them Morgan Freeman, Helen Mirren, Emma Watson, Carrie Fisher, Bryan Cranston and Will Smith—they evince a combination of lamentable ignorance and willful indifference over the actual nature of the commander-in-chief whose praises they came to sing.

None of these figures dared to protest an event sponsored by the news media where the guest of honor is responsible for more prosecutions of leakers and whistleblowers than all previous presidents combined. Obama ended his comedy routine with a tribute to the media, expressing his supposed devotion to freedom of

the press. He told his audience, “We’ve always shared the same goal to root our public discourse in the truth. To open the doors of this democracy. To do whatever we can to make our country and our world more free and more just.”

What a colossal lie! The Obama administration has sent Chelsea Manning to prison for 35 years, forced Edward Snowden into exile in Russia, and worked with the British government to keep Julian Assange penned up in a London embassy for more than five years.

Comedian Larry Wilmore made one semi-serious thrust at Obama early in his monologue, noting that he had recently welcomed National Basketball Association star Steph Curry at the White House. “You know it kinda makes sense, too,” he continued, “because both of you like raining down bombs on people from long distances, right?”

The audience, perhaps concerned that Wilmore might go in the direction of Stephen Colbert’s 2006 monologue denouncing the media’s collaboration with George W. Bush over the war in Iraq, booed loudly. The comedian stopped, asked, “What? Am I wrong?” Then he abandoned the topic, filling out the rest of his monologue with a mind-numbing series of racial jokes mixed with insults against various media figures in the audience.

One episode during Obama’s carefully scripted monologue is worth recording. He made several friendly references to Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the principal challenger to Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton. Sanders was present, clearly enjoying himself. He took a bow and was given a warm round of applause, after which Obama concluded by referring to himself as “your comrade.”

Under the protocol of the event, all non-journalists must come as guests of one or another media organization. Sanders came as the guest of CBS News, and he also made an extended appearance at the party put on the network, where he was reportedly mobbed by media and entertainment figures seeking “selfies.”

Sanders came to the dinner and received a pat on the back for his services to the ruling elite. Far from genuinely opposing the domination of American politics by the “millionaires and billionaires,” Sanders has worked to keep the seething social opposition to the Wall Street criminals trapped within the straitjacket of the Democratic Party. And he has refrained throughout

his campaign from any serious criticism of the promotion of war, militarism and police-state surveillance by the Obama administration.



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