

“Journalism is not a crime,” says Biden—except for Julian Assange

Patrick Martin
30 April 2023

The annual dinner of the White House Correspondents Association is an occasion for the media elite and top politicians in Washington to schmooze and declare their mutual solidarity. This is usually couched in the language of defense of the First Amendment, although that constitutional provision has been systematically trampled on by administration after administration in the interests of American imperialism.

Illegal government spying, police violence and the violation of such basic democratic precepts as the separation of church and state are everyday practices in America, and the corporate media generally passes over them in silence as long as its own financial interests are not harmed.

There was more than the usual measure of such hypocrisy at Saturday night’s annual dinner of the White House Correspondents Association, as President Joe Biden and the assembled members of the political and media elite pretended to defend freedom of the press, but only when it serves the foreign policy interests of American imperialism.

Most presidential appearances at the dinner—attended by every president in recent years except Donald Trump—have been characterized by scripted remarks making fun of the audience, the president’s political opponents and critics, and the president himself.

But Biden devoted the bulk of his remarks to a lengthy declaration of his opposition to the repressive measures taken against journalists in Russia, China, Iran, Syria and Venezuela, and pledges to devote US diplomatic efforts to winning the release of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, recently arrested on bogus spying charges in Russia, and other American prisoners of the Putin regime.

The coincidence between the list of countries guilty of violating press freedom and the list of countries

targeted by American imperialism for subversion and overthrow was obvious. Biden made no reference, for example, to the murder of *Washington Post* commentator Jamal Khashoggi, killed and dismembered inside the consulate of Saudi Arabia in the Turkish city of Istanbul.

Khashoggi, an adviser turned critic of the Saudi monarchy, was targeted by the de facto Saudi ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose security chief sent the hit squad and directed its actions. Biden claimed during the 2020 election campaign that he would turn the Saudi leader into a “pariah.” Instead, in pursuit of greater Saudi oil production, he went cap in hand to Riyadh for talks with the prince/assassin.

But the most obvious case of a double standard was one that involves the Biden administration directly: the persecution of Julian Assange. The WikiLeaks founder and publisher was trapped in the Ecuadorian embassy in London for nearly seven years after he sought political asylum there against a US campaign to seize him and bring him to the United States for prosecution on espionage charges for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the Guantanamo Bay torture prison.

Since Assange was seized by British police who raided the embassy four years ago, he has been held in solitary confinement in Belmarsh, a high-security prison for terrorists and violent criminals in London, awaiting extradition to the United States, where he would face 175 years in prison if convicted under the Espionage Act. He would be the first journalist prosecuted under the century-old law, passed amid the anti-communist hysteria whipped up as part of US entry into World War I.

Three minutes into his remarks to the Saturday night festivities, Biden declared, “Journalism is not a crime.”

The formulation seemed a perverse restatement of a declaration issued by a half dozen major world newspapers, including the *New York Times*, last December, when they called on the Biden administration to drop charges against Assange because “publishing is not a crime.”

It is noteworthy that in their coverage of the correspondents’ dinner, neither the *Times* nor the *Washington Post* or any other “mainstream” publication made any mention of Assange or the contradiction between Biden’s declaration of fidelity to the First Amendment and the continued drive of his administration to extradite and jail Assange. Nor did any media correspondents or management—the bulk of the audience at the dinner—seek to raise the issue there.

Seven Democratic members of Congress, including all five members of the Democratic Socialists of America, recently sent a letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland, urging him to drop prosecution of Assange. None of these representatives sought to raise the issue at the correspondents’ dinner, which took place only four days before World Press Freedom Day (as designated by the United Nations).

Later in his remarks, Biden flattered the press, declaring, “You make it possible for ordinary citizens to question authority.” Actually, the American corporate media has abandoned even a token commitment to such an oppositional stance toward the US government.

The *Times*, which sets the agenda for the daily coverage in the American media, is little more than an adjunct to the CIA and Pentagon on national-security issues, particularly the war in Ukraine. When National Guard airman and IT specialist Jack Teixeira released top secret Pentagon documents on the internet, the *Times* tracked him down and published his name, enabling the FBI to swoop in and arrest the 21-year-old soldier only hours later.

Biden’s paean to the American media and his declaration of devotion to the First Amendment were followed by a series of obvious and banal jokes, largely at the expense of Fox News, as well as a few references to his advanced age, as though that was the only issue standing in the way of his reelection campaign.

He made no mention of the war in Ukraine, which every day threatens to escalate into a nuclear exchange between the US and Russia, or of the COVID

pandemic, which remains a deadly threat to the world’s population.

It was notable that those who attended the correspondents’ dinner, like other large public functions in Washington and throughout the country, were entirely unmasked. There was no effort to shield anyone, including the 80-year-old Biden, from the danger of an infection that could have lethal consequences.



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