

White House correspondents' dinner celebrates "free press" amid propaganda in support of war, genocide and repression

Patrick Martin
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The White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA) dinner Saturday night was a disgusting display of subservience by the corporate media to the administration of President Joe Biden. It sought to cover up the blood-drenched role of this government, which is a full partner in the Israeli genocide in Gaza and is spearheading the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, bringing the world ever closer to a nuclear Third World War.

Some 2,600 people, including print and broadcast journalists, their corporate bosses and their invited guests from Washington and Hollywood rubbed shoulders at the affair, where the head table included President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and their spouses. The event was the centerpiece of several days of festivities, including parties and receptions thrown by corporate trade groups and lobbyists, embassies and other well-heeled participants in influence-peddling in the US capital.

The WHCA banquet is an annual event at which the corporate media throws an expensive bash in honor of itself, celebrating its close ties to the administration in power and to the political establishment as a whole, while mouthing occasional hosannas to press freedom—although always in a way that aligns with US foreign policy.

Thus there was much concern expressed for *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, held for more than a year in a Russian prison, and for war correspondent Austin Tice, detained in Syria more than 12 years ago. But no one mentioned the name of the most celebrated journalist currently held in prison, Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks.

This is all the more significant since the dinner's main honoree, President Biden, is personally responsible for Assange's imprisonment. Assange has been held in Britain's maximum security Belmarsh prison for more than four years in response to a US government demand to extradite him for trial in the United States on charges under the Espionage Act, which could bring a sentence of up to

175 years in prison.

While the dinner's emcee, WHCA president and NBC correspondent Kelly O'Donnell, did refer to the journalists killed in Gaza—she gave the number as nearly 100, although the actual figure is at least 175—she did not name the government and military responsible for those deaths, namely, the Netanyahu regime in Israel and the Israel Defense Forces. Nor did she indicate that the man who supplied the weapons used to kill those journalists was sitting only a few feet to her right on the platform.

This was no oversight. The genocide in Gaza, which has taken the lives of some 40,000 Palestinians, including targeted killings of doctors, university professors, teachers, poets, journalists and others who play an indispensable role in modern culture, overshadowed the proceedings.

As the participants alighted from their limousines and taxis and entered the Washington Hilton, they had to pass through hundreds of anti-genocide protesters, who denounced the US media for its cover-up of the crimes of Israel and shouted "Shame on you!" At one point, the crowd chanted, "Western media, we see you and all the horrors that you hide."

But there was no reference during the proceedings to the protesters outside, or to the wider protests in dozens of US cities and on scores of college campuses, as demonstrators, mainly students and other young people, defy mass arrests and expulsions to denounce the genocide in Gaza and demand an end to official support for the fascist Israeli regime.

National Public Radio reported a letter sent by "more than two dozen journalists in Gaza" calling for a boycott of the WHCA dinner. The letter read:

The toll exacted on us for merely fulfilling our journalistic duties is staggering. We are subjected to detentions, interrogations, and torture by the Israeli military, all for the "crime" of journalistic integrity.

The letter was ignored by the journalists who flocked to the Washington Hilton.

While the Palestinians of Gaza, including journalists, face mass starvation, the WHCA attendees enjoyed appetizers such as “Jicama, Mango, Pepitas & Baby Oak Salad,” with a “bread presentation” of four kinds of rolls plus flatbread.

This was followed by entrées: “Smoked Paprika Rubbed Filet, Foraged Wild Mushroom Ragout, Pancetta & Gala Apple Demi, Seared Alaskan Halibut, Mascarpone Cheese Stone Grits, Jumbo Peeled Asparagus & Roasted Baby Bell Pepper,” according to one account. That and “assorted desserts” were washed down with Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon wines from West Coast vineyards.

The dinner gave way to the presentation of a series of awards. Honors for reporting under deadline pressure, for both print and broadcast media, went to reporters who covered Biden’s trip to Israel after the October 7 Hamas attack. There was no mention of the actual circumstances of that visit. Biden rushed to Jerusalem to give the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his fellow fascists a blank check for the war they had launched against the population of Gaza, which had already killed many thousands.

When Biden finally took the podium, his remarks were predictable. He devoted a few minutes to scripted jokes about his age and Trump’s legal woes, followed by a ten-minute paean to the “free press” as his ally in the defense of democracy against the danger of Donald Trump.

He paid tribute to the “patriotism and heroism” of the media, “when you report truth over lies. That’s why I want to close the night with my genuine thanks for the free press.”

This was said to an audience that has changed its narrative of the campus demonstrations against genocide in Gaza, now invariably describing them as “antisemitic,” a slur promoted by the Biden administration and congressional reactionaries in both parties.

“You literally risk your lives doing your job,” he continued. “Some of your colleagues have given their lives. Many have suffered grievous injuries. Other reporters have lost their freedom. Journalism’s clearly not a crime, not here, not there, not anywhere in the world.”

But for Julian Assange and other whistleblowers against the crimes of the CIA and American imperialism, and for the courageous reporters documenting the crimes of the state of Israel in Gaza and on the West Bank, this assurance does not hold. What they have done and are doing is a crime, according to imperialist warmongers like Biden and Netanyahu. Moreover, it is one punishable by death.

Biden was followed by an interminable stretch of flat jokes and limp insults from Colin Jost of Saturday Night Live, the designated “entertainment” for the event. Jost assiduously

avoided the US/Israeli mass murder in Gaza, the government/media slander of anti-genocide protesters as “antisemites,” and the police crackdown on college campuses in violation of freedom of speech and political expression.

He closed with a fervent tribute to Biden, declaring that his grandfather, a longtime firefighter who recently died, had voted for Biden in 2020 “because you’re a decent man.” With a straight face, Jost continued:

He voted for decency. And decency is why we’re all here tonight. Decency is how we’re all able to be here tonight. Decency is how we can make jokes about each other, and none of us goes to prison afterwards.

It is difficult to determine the exact combination of willful ignorance and abject prostration before the capitalist state that produces such statements. But all the participants in this degrading affair are forever besmirched by it. In the face of a world-historic crime, they praise and fawn over its enabler and co-conspirator.

In covering up the genocide in Gaza, and the US role in it, the corporate media acts as an accomplice. It plays the role not of an independent “Fourth Estate,” speaking “truth to power,” as self-satisfied pundits like to claim. Rather, it acts as a courtier, flattering the White House criminals as they prepare even bloodier crimes, including the final assault on Rafah and the introduction of US and NATO combat troops to fight Russia in Ukraine.

This reality underscores the necessity to develop and support the socialist alternative to the corporate media, the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The WSWS tells the truth to the working class and to the world’s population as a whole: That the only progressive road forward is the revolutionary one. The working class must take power, put an end to capitalist barbarism and war, and establish a socialist society on a world scale, based on peace, democracy and social equality.



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