

Fairness Dictates Cutting Biden Administration Some Slack – on a Few Trivial Points, at Least



US President Joe Biden reviews royal guards along with Britain's King Charles III during a welcoming ceremony at Windsor Castle in Windsor, England, Monday, July 10, 2023. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

There is no need or justification to go to extraordinary lengths to find fault with a presidency that is stumbling in

much more important matters.

by Conrad Black

It is unlikely that anyone will accuse me of being overly complimentary to the Biden administration, and I do not unsay any of my sometimes vociferous criticisms of it. Yet political commentators have some obligation to try to be fair even towards regimes that they lament were ever elected, and I think a number of the administration's critics and even some friends have been unreasonably severe in the last week on several subjects.

Even though the legal treatment of Hunter Biden has been a mockery of soft and favored treatment, there was no reason for the president not to invite him to a state dinner for the prime minister of India, at which the attorney general of the United States was also present. It's the president's party, and he can invite whom he wants; it would have been a gratuitous affront to public opinion to seat the president's son and Attorney General Garland at the same table, but that apparently did not happen.

In general, members of the president's cabinet and his family are frequently invited to state dinners at the White House, and there was no reason to restrict that practice, even though I am one of those who believes that Mr. Garland should be impeached and that Hunter Biden should face more serious charges and more onerous penalties. That does not disqualify either of them from a dinner invitation to the same location, where the boss of one and father of the other is the host.

The criticism of the Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen, for bowing to a minister of the Chinese government three times is gratuitous carping. I have no standing to impute motives to the secretary, but I assume she was just trying to be courteous in what she took to be the oriental manner. She is not the chief of protocol or an influencer of international

diplomatic etiquette. Prime ministers of Canada and Australia bow to the British monarch, who is also the sovereign of their countries. There is nothing unseemly about this, nor does it even imply that the individuals are not themselves republicans; it is just normal courtesy.

Leaders of traditionally Roman Catholic countries generally venerate the ring of the Pope. President de Gaulle, the long-serving Irish prime minister and president, Eamon De Valera; successive kings and queens of Spain; Princess Grace (Kelly); Mrs. John F. Kennedy, and the former speaker, Nancy Pelosi, all followed that practice, and it did not imply that this connoted any transmission of what is customarily rendered to Caesar to the account of the alleged Vicar of Christ as a result.

It was, in each case and in many similar ones, the result of a combination of the customary relationship of the country the individual represented with the Holy See and the individual's private religious practices. There is nothing risible or contemptible about one office-holder attempting to begin what promised to be a somewhat contentious meeting with an analogous office-holder in a rival state with a cordial and courteous gesture.

Too much is being made of the discovery of some cocaine in the White House. It is true that given the apparent profusion of security cameras in the White House, it should be possible to figure out who was responsible. Yet the speed with which some anti-Biden commentators have implied that this is more evidence of the debauchery of the president's son or indicative of a disregard by the first family or the administration as a whole of criminal statutes governing hard drugs is unwarranted.

The Biden family as a whole cannot be held responsible for or assumed to be the authors of every act bringing an illegal substance into one of the most famous buildings in the world,

which is visited by a large number of people every week. And it is unjust at this point to conclude that the first family is unenthusiastic about finding out who did bring the cocaine into the White House. The administration disclosed this information and has pledged to try to find out what happened, and it deserves a reasonable time to do that.

Though it is a more complicated issue, it is also saddening to see some of the president's habitual supporters turn on him over the question of sending cluster bombs to Ukraine. The very respectable moderate leftist, Fareed Zakaria, has attacked the president, whom he has usually supported, for sending these weapons, as they have been described as morally inexcusable when used by the Russians. Yet this is precisely the point: it is not the wish or policy of the administration to pour assistance into the Ukrainians' gallant defense of their country against what most of the world recognizes to be an aggressive war by Russia by asking it to fight with armaments inferior to those in the hands of its enemy.

If this were the West's policy, we would have been better off making a deal with Russia at the start that we wouldn't give Ukraine anything in exchange for Russia doing some favors for us. Ukraine would have been reabsorbed into Russia long ago with a huge flood of refugees, and it would be widely believed that liberty was in retreat and that the Western Alliance was a league of cowards, which would, in those circumstances, have been reasonable conclusions. The Western victory in the Cold War would have been substantially undone, and Russia would be emboldened to a great deal more mischief-making than it is already conducting.

While I have disagreed on occasion with the timetable the administration and other NATO countries have followed in sending more sophisticated armaments to Ukraine, and the administration was in unjustifiably defeatist mode at the outset of this war, it correctly saw that such aggression had to be countered and resisted and that the Ukrainian

determination to achieve their independence deserved generous assistance.

After some initial nonsense about seeking regime change in the Kremlin and requiring that President Putin be handed over for trial as an international war criminal, there seem to be glimmerings of recognition that apart from assuring the secure independence of Ukraine from Russian aggression, the West's chief objective is to prevent Russia from becoming a virtual satellite of the People's Republic of China.

These equally important but not confluent objectives require a careful calibration of escalated assistance to Ukraine without acts of unnecessary brinkmanship opposite Russia. President Biden's critics on this issue should keep in mind that Ukraine is entitled to its independence but possibly within adjusted borders, and no acceptable goal would be served by asking Ukrainians to fight for their homeland and dislodge Russia from places where they have no right to be with one hand tied behind their backs.

This was the nature of the Democrats' conduct of the Vietnam War – enough assistance to keep the war going but not to win it, until the helicopters lifted off from the roof of the American Embassy compound at Saigon, and 750,000 South Vietnamese fled for their lives. Afghanistan does not bear thinking about.

Those minded to criticize the Biden administration will find it a target-rich environment. There is no need or justification to go to extraordinary lengths to find fault in trivial matters with an administration that has been comprehensively incompetent in almost all important policy areas.

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