

Taking a Break From the Circus



by Conrad Black

Three weeks in Europe seeing almost no American news made my return to this continent and to the routine presentation of the almost unbelievable antics of the Biden administration a startling experience.

Having closely followed the news from Washington since the middle of the Eisenhower years, other than when I was abroad, like most America-watchers, I naturally became accustomed to a reasonable level of official competence and Washington press corps professionalism. This return to the daily news about the Biden administration has been a shocking reminder of how peculiar, unbelievable, and other-worldly the whole process has become.

President Dwight Eisenhower was a universally respected

victorious theater commander and a well-liked president (“I like Ike”). He appeared a bit of a fuddy-duddy when he assumed that the pilot of the U-2 reconnaissance plane shot down over Russia in 1960 was dead and claimed to the world that it was a weather research plane. Soviet leader Khrushchev jubilantly revealed that the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was alive and well and chirping enthusiastically about his aerial reconnaissance mission. Apart from that and the Sputnik surprise, Ike was always a credible and reassuring figure.

We now know that John F. Kennedy’s health was a good deal less robust than he appeared, but apart from the Bay of Pigs fiasco, which was redeemed in the Cuban Missile Crisis, he invariably seemed highly articulate, very well informed, and fully in charge. There was a good deal of snobbery about Lyndon Johnson’s Texas accident, and a credibility gap emerged over Vietnam, but not once in five years did he ever seem unequal to the task of being president.

The same can be said of Richard Nixon: Even in the worst days of Watergate he was always able to manage the barrages of hostile and insulting questions that he received, and his knowledge of foreign affairs and domestic politics was legendarily encyclopedic. Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter were not fast on their feet, but they both earned respect as honest, diligent, and sensible presidents.

Ronald Reagan was a hypnotic public speaker and frequently revealed an extraordinarily detailed familiarity with particular elements of policy that interested him. He often seemed awkward in press conferences. But apart from the early and inexplicable days of the rather trivial Iran-Contra affair, he always got through his press conferences fairly well and his addresses to the nation were more effective than those of anyone except the founder of the genre, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Bushes were not very articulate, but they were

knowledgeable, and George H.W. Bush's tangled syntax could never be mistaken for ignorance of important subjects. While George W. Bush's malapropisms were embarrassing and he sometimes seemed more of a yokel than is appropriate for a U.S. president, he always seemed to know what he was doing. Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were always extremely fluent and alert, although almost nothing of what they said is easily remembered today.

It was much more complicated with Donald Trump, given the pathological hostility to him of 95 percent of the national political media. But he was never afraid of reporters' questions, and if cant and emotionalism and snobbery could be set aside, even his media enemies acknowledge that he was formidable, a powerful man of cyclonic energy who forced through his foreign and domestic programs in the teeth of an unprecedented fraudulent allegation of collusion with a foreign power, and a completely fatuous impeachment charge.

In Joe Biden's 44 years as a senator and vice president, he was never impressive nor original, but it was reasonable to assume that he knew the ropes. He fell in behind Edward Kennedy in a scurrilous assault upon Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork in 1987. As he was endlessly reelected in the pocket borough of Delaware, and the Democrats generally controlled the Senate, he eventually became the chairman of both the judiciary and foreign relations committees, but never demonstrated much knowledge of either field. He notoriously cribbed a platitudinous comment from the unsuccessful British opposition leader Neil Kinnock, never rose above 2 percent support in his early attempts at the Democratic presidential nomination, and was caught claiming to hold academic qualifications that were fictitious, and claiming to attempt to gain access to Nelson Mandela at Robben Island where he was imprisoned, although he was in fact 800 miles away. His remarks often strained credulity and even his supporters referred to him as a "human gaffe machine," with a jocular

that implied that this quality made him likable. It didn't.

He didn't win the vice presidential debate with the much-mocked Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska in 2008, and it has never been clear what possessed Barack Obama to take him as his running mate. Unlike Nixon, Rockefeller, Bush, Cheney, and Michael Pence, he did nothing noteworthy as vice president, apart from enabling the egregious conduct of his son.

Returning last week from Europe it was a tremendous shock to be reminded of the complete failure in every field of the Biden administration, of the inability of any authorized spokesperson for that administration to explain or justify any element of official policy, and particularly to see, all of a sudden and not after a gradual buildup through the infelicities and press baiting sessions of the Trump administration, Biden's ill-tempered and completely inadequate explanations to the generally fawning press of his conduct.

The spectacle of the president of the United States, having taken drastic measures to reduce American oil production, explaining why he was going to Saudi Arabia to beg a regime that he promised to make a moral outcast of mankind to raise its oil sales to the United States challenged belief as painfully as did the Afghanistan debacle. The complacent torpor of the press as television routinely recorded mass illegal entries into the United States amid official assurances that "the border is closed," though familiar, was hard to assimilate.

The whole country seems to be tiptoeing through a make-believe world. Of course, Donald Trump will win almost all of the Republican primaries if he runs for renomination, and of course, he will be elected easily over any candidate manifesting any level of continuity with the shambles of the current Democratic administration. The only possible escape from this fate is for rabid Democratic prosecutors to indict Trump over Jan. 6. Even in the District of Columbia, where

being a Republican is effectively a criminal offense, it will be impossible to convict the former president of a felony—he's the most maliciously investigated person in American history and nothing has been discovered.

The guardrails of the American political arena appear to be that the Supreme Court will not entertain overturning the results of a presidential election, though it probably had grounds to do so over improper changes in 2020 to vote-counting rules in several states; and on the other side, even the most rabid Democratic prosecutors seem to be reluctant to launch a spurious indictment of Donald Trump.

If the Democrats do indict Trump, they will lose the election to Ron DeSantis, and the failure of the attack on Trump will disqualify the Democrats from national office for 20 years. Trump is almost the presumptive president, and that's clearer after taking a break from the circus for a few weeks.

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