

Hypocritical Commemorations: World Press Freedom Day

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Global Research, May 07, 2023

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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Selected days for commemoration serve one fundamental purpose. Centrally, they acknowledge the forgotten or neglected, while proposing to do nothing about it. It's the priest's confession, the chance for absolution before the next round of soiling.

These occasions are often money-making exercises for canny businesses: the days put aside to remember mothers and fathers, for instance. But there is no money to be made in saving writers, publishers, whistleblowers, and journalists from the avenging police state.

World Press Freedom Day, having limped on for three decades, is particularly fraught in this regard. It remains particularly loathsome, not least for giving politicians an opportunity to leave flimsy offerings at its shrine. These often come from the powerful, the very same figures responsible for demeaning and attacking those brave scribblers who do, every so often, show how the game is played.

Every year, we see reactions often uneven, and almost always hypocritical. The treatment of US journalist Evan Gershkovich is the stellar example for 2023. Here was the caged victim-hero scribbler, held in the remorseless clutches of the Russian Bear.

It gave US Secretary of State Antony Blinken an opportunity to do the usual cartwheel. "Far too many governments use repression to silence free expression, including through reprisals against journalists for simply doing their jobs," goes his May 3 [press statement](#). "We again call on Russian authorities to immediately release *Wall Street* reporter Gershkovich and all other journalists held for exercising freedom of expression." What, then, of the Australian publisher and founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange?

With unintended, bleak irony, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) also thought it fitting to rope in the Secretary at a World Press Freedom Day [event organised](#) in conjunction with the *Washington Post*. Talking to his interlocutor, the *Post*'s David Ignatius, Blinken spoke of

efforts to “fight back and push back around the world to help journalists, who – in one way or another, are facing intimidation, coercion, persecution, prosecution, surveillance.” This seemed grimly comical, given that the United States, through its agencies, has engaged in intimidation, coercion, persecution, prosecution and surveillance against Assange, whose scalp they continue to seek with salivating expectation.

In the course of the event, Ignatius and Blinken encountered Code Pink activists Medea Benjamin and Tinghe Barry. Both were keen to test the Secretary’s lofty assessments about Washington’s stance on free expression and journalistic practice. “Excuse me, we can’t use this day without calling for the freedom of Julian Assange,” exclaimed Benjamin, storming the stage where the two men were engaged in bland conversation. A bemused Ignatius duly [approved](#) of Benjamin’s eviction by three burly minders, seeing it all as part of “free expression”.

Barry’s [own assessment](#) of the whole show summed matters up. “Two hours and not one word about journalist Shireen Abu-Akleh, who was murdered by Israeli occupation forces in Palestine, not one word about Julian Assange.”

Others from the US State Department were also found wanting. A department [press briefing](#) from Vedant Patel, principal deputy spokesperson, opened with comments about World Press Freedom Day. He echoed the belief in “the importance of a free press. It’s a – we believe a bedrock of democracy.”

Then came a question from Matt Lee of Associated Press: Did the State Department regard Assange “as a journalist who is – who should be covered by the ideas embodied in World Press Freedom Day?”

Patel’s response did not deviate from the views of his superiors. “The State Department thinks that Mr Assange has been charged with serious criminal conduct in the United States, in connection with his alleged role in one of the largest compromises of classified information in our nation’s history.”

With dutiful adherence to a narrative worn and extensively disproved in Assange’s extradition trial proceedings, Patel spoke of actions that “risked serious harm to US national security to the benefit of our adversaries” (there was none) and subjected “human sources to grave and imminent risk of serious physical harm and arbitrary detention” (no evidence has ever been adduced by the Department of Justice on this point).

When confronted with Gershkovich’s detention as a precedent the US was potentially emulating regarding the publisher, Patel insisted the cases were “very, very different.” The US did not “go around arbitrarily detaining people, and the judicial oversight and checks and balances that we have in our system versus the Russian system are a little bit different.”

Patel has obviously not familiarised himself with those totemic, lugubrious reminders of the US justice system: Alexandra Detention Center (ADC) and the ADX Florence Supermax prison. Or, for that matter, discussions within the US intelligence services on how to abduct or assassinate Assange, where checks and levers are conspicuously absent.

Then came a [White House briefing](#) that same day, where the issue of Assange’s treatment, inconveniently for the Biden administration, reared its head. But not before the utterance of slushy remarks from White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. “It is not an

exaggeration to say that the free press is essential to our democracy and democracies everywhere.” With the opening platitude came concern for Gershkovich and Austin Tice, whose “wrongful detentions we see around the world that we must stand up and call out.”

Enter Steven Portnoy of CBS News, who addressed Jean-Pierre on precisely that point. “Advocates on Twitter today have been talking a great deal about how the United States has engaged in hypocrisy by talking about how Evan Gershkovich is held in Russia on espionage charges but the United States has Espionage Act charges pending against Julian Assange.”

In being asked to respond to the criticism, Jean-Pierre, without batting an eyelid, asked what that criticism was. “Well, the criticism is that – the argument is that Julian Assange is a journalist who engaged in the publication of government documents,” came Portnoy’s response. By accusing Assange of crimes under the Espionage Act of 1917, the US was “losing the moral high ground when it comes to the question of whether a reporter engages in espionage as a function of his work.”

Jean-Pierre, evidently not well-briefed on the pitfalls and vicissitudes of World Press Freedom Day, merely stated that she would not “speak to Julian Assange and that case from here.”

After three decades, it may be time to forget the importance of this curious bauble of communications, not because of the sincerity of some of its advocates who genuinely seek to protect the lot of journalists, but because of the propagandists who willingly prosecute a case against Fourth Estate when it comes to national security and crude self-interest.

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