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OPINION | DECLARATIONS

A Dog's Breakfast of a Dinner

The Correspondents' Association fête isn't just bad, it's bad for America. Let this one be the last.



Broadcast of the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, Washington, D.C., April 28.

PHOTO: C-SPAN



By

Peggy Noonan

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It's over, the conversation has turned and won't bubble up again till early next year but a final thing should be said about the White House Correspondents' Association dinner. It's been persuasively argued that the dinner hurt journalism (true) and politics in general (yes). But I think it hurt America.

Here, with apologies but to make a point (the TV clips don't capture it) is a sample of the comic stylings of Michelle Wolf, in the centerpiece speech of the evening. To put things in historical context, the tampon joke is very much like what Walter Lippmann said of Mamie Eisenhower. Oh wait, that's wrong. But the banging bimbos reference is reminiscent of what Bobby Kennedy said about Scotty Reston. Oh dear, that's wrong too. Anyway here's what Michelle Wolf said.

On Mike Pence : "He thinks abortion is murder, which, first of all, don't knock it till you try it. And when you do try it, really knock it—you know, you've got to get that baby out of there." Paul Ryan has been circumcised. "Unfortunately, while they were down there they also took his balls." Ivanka Trump is "about as helpful to women as an empty box of tampons." "She's the Diaper Genie of the administration: on the outside, she looks sleek, but the inside, it's full of sh—." "Like a porn star when she's about to have sex with Donald Trump, 'Let's get this over with.'" "Oh, you don't think he's

good in bed.” Of Sarah Sanders: “Like, what’s Uncle Tom but for white women who disappoint other white women? Oh I know, Aunt Coulter. ” Also, she’d like to make fun of Democrats but they’re “harder to make fun of because you guys don’t do anything.” Lucky them.

The above is an abridged version of Ms. Wolf’s quotes, because most of them didn’t make it past my editors. These are the tamer ones.

What’s wrong with those remarks? You’re thinking of words like vulgar, grubby and immature, and you’re right, and you’re detecting an embarrassing fixation on sexual organs and bodily functions, and you’re right there too.

But you also think—you want to think: This is below us. It used to be. Can’t it be below us again?

The dinner is decadent. It is the Capitol elite in “The Hunger Games.” It takes place in the great political capital of the world, with its most powerful figures in journalism and politics, and they giggle at dirty jokes.

It is weird. They are, almost all of them, better than that. But they invited the comedian and acted out mirth. Everyone who laughed was lowered.

Each year the WHCA dinner gets grubbier and more partisan. Each year there is a heavier insistence on hitting the audience’s sweet spot, center-left sanctimony. Instead of admitting and correcting all this, participants take refuge in their own form of disapproval porn: You raise one eyebrow, briefly give one shake of the head, stare at the cutlery and then, when you think the camera is off you in the reaction shot, deftly lean in and say something encouraging to the victim of a joke. In this way you think you’re preserving your dignity. You are not.

Comedians have defended the routine: “Michelle Wolf killed.” Fine, it’s their job to hate censorship and burst boundaries. They feel tribal loyalty. It’s not their job to have good judgment and uphold what remains of public dignity. It’s not their job *not* to embarrass the nation. That’s more the responsibility of the journalists and politicians, who failed.

The dinner hurts America in two ways. The first and more obvious is that it is, functionally, elite journalists telling half of America: We hate you. It’s as if they break out of their “This just in” face and say, “You know how you think we don’t share your values and respect your views? You know how you think we’re biased, self-infatuated twerps who think we’re better than you? It’s true! We do! Ha ha!” Mainstream media’s disdain for half the country is not news to them—they know exactly what their betters think. But how does it make our country better to grind your heel into the wound? How does that enhance the position of the press?

Second, the world is watching. It is odd journalists forget this, but they do. Every foreign capital gets the full, instantaneous report; every ambassador shares his observations in his lame weekly letter home. This week they

reported on the American leadership class—its great journalists and CEOs and politicians—chortling over jokes that were primitive, squalid and deeply stupid. This just might lead the absorbers of this information to conclude the American leadership class itself is those things.

“It is,” you say.

But America in its ego often puts itself forward as a moral exemplar, the greatest nation. Maybe our friends in foreign capitals look and think, again: “They’re not just slobs, they’re liars. They’re hollow.”

When you see a hollow tree you just want to push it over.

People attend the dinner for the reasons of vanity we all share—wanting to be on the inside, wanting a public affirmation of your importance. For Republicans and conservatives there’s an additional reason: to show what good sports they are. But they should never go again. There is no need for them to cooperate in their humiliation, and no gain in it. The people back home are not impressed. The people in the room are not touched. You look like a fool.

No great newspaper, no serious organ of journalism, should ever attend again. Why hurt your profession by showing so much of your ugly side?

The dinner is an anachronism representing a world of Washington journalism that began disappearing, culturally and technologically, two generations ago. Times pass, things change. What was once an event of stature—a sign to journalists that they’d arrived or were arriving, a way for money men to get a personal bounce out of ad money spent, a way to make a good impression on a potential source, and for everyone to feel part of something meaningful and important, American journalism—is over.

It is a lost world. When you’ve got a lost world start a new one. Make it better.

The dinner’s organizers can’t reform themselves. If they could they’d already have done it. No one wants to be the censor, no one wants to be the joke Nazi, no one wants their first dinner to be called staid.

Scrap it and start again. The reason for the dinner is to give scholarships and recognition to aspiring journalists, and reward some current ones. So throw a banquet to honor the winners. The scholarship winners will be delighted to meet those they think real stars—reporters, anchors, editors. Offer witty, heartening, inspiring speeches. Impart a sense of how to be in the world, how to act, which doesn’t involve roaring over tampon jokes and the inherent comedy of abortion.

The White House Correspondents’ Association dinner is a blind, sick, stumbling horse desperate to be put down. Put it out of its misery.

“Michelle Wolf killed.” Let’s hope so.

