

OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Biden Team Strikes Back

Its strategists promote an identity politics campaign against an op-ed on Jill Biden's use of 'Dr.'

By Paul A. Gigot

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Vice President Joe Biden and his wife Jill leave the stage at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, N.C., Sept. 6, 2012.

PHOTO: THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES



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Joe Biden says it is “time to heal” America’s divisions after the Trump presidency, and The Wall Street Journal has praised him for saying so. Presumably he intends less rancor with the press as part of this mandate, but on that score my run-in with the Biden team this weekend was very Trumpian.

The catalyst was our [Saturday op-ed](#) by Joseph Epstein, “Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not if You Need an M.D.” Mr. Epstein, a longtime contributor, criticized the habit of people with Ph.D.s or other doctorates calling themselves “Dr.” as highfalutin, using Jill Biden as Exhibit A. Mr. Epstein can be acerbic, and his piece began: “Madame First Lady—Mrs. Biden—Jill—kiddo: a bit of advice on what may seem like a small but I think is a not unimportant matter. Any chance you might drop the ‘Dr.’ before your name?”

This has triggered a flood of media and [Twitter](#) criticism, including demands that I retract the piece, apologize personally to Mrs. Biden, ban Mr. Epstein for all time, and resign and think upon my sins. The complaints began as a trickle but became a torrent after the Biden media team elevated Mr. Epstein’s work in what was clearly a political strategy.

Mrs. Biden’s press spokesperson, Michael LaRosa, issued a tweet in early afternoon: “@jamestaranto, you and the @WSJ should be embarrassed to print the disgusting and sexist attack on @DrBiden running on the @WSJopinion page. If you had any respect for women at all you would remove this repugnant display of chauvinism from your paper and apologize to her.” James Taranto is the Journal’s op-ed editor, but I am responsible for the opinion pages.

WELCOME BACK

Elizabeth Alexander, the soon-to-be first lady’s

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communications director, also chimed in:
“Sexist and shameful. Be better @wsj.” Ms.
Alexander called me after her tweet to register
her disapproval personally, which is fine. Her
job is to flack for her boss, and part of my job is
to listen to complaints. We had a frank
exchange of views, as the diplomats say, and I

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invited her to send in a letter for publication.

Meanwhile, Team Biden continued to push the sexist theme. Doug Emhoff, husband of Kamala Harris, tweeted: “Dr. Biden earned her degrees through hard work and pure grit. She is an inspiration to me, to her students, and to Americans across this country. This story would never have been written about a man.”

Pete Buttigieg’s husband, Chasten Buttigieg, tweeted: “The author could’ve used fewer words to just say ‘ya know in my day we didn’t have to respect women.’ ”

Why go to such lengths to highlight a single op-ed on a relatively minor issue? My guess is that the Biden team concluded it was a chance to use the big gun of identity politics to send a message to critics as it prepares to take power. There’s nothing like playing the race or gender card to stifle criticism. It’s the left’s version of Donald Trump’s “enemy of the people” tweets.

The difference is that when Mr. Trump rants against the press, the press mobilizes in opposition. In this case the Biden team was able to mobilize almost all of the press to join in denouncing Mr. Epstein and the Journal. Nearly every publication wrote about the Biden response, reinforcing the Biden-New York Times line: “An Opinion Writer Argued Jill Biden Should Drop the ‘Dr.’ (Few Were Swayed.)”

This strategy worked to protect Joe and Hunter Biden during the campaign, so it’s no surprise that they’re keeping it up as they head to the White House. Northwestern University, where Mr. Epstein taught for many years, did its part by denouncing him in a statement and appearing to purge his emeritus listing from its website. This is how cancel culture works.

The outrage is overwrought because, whether you agree or disagree, Mr. Epstein’s piece was fair comment. The issue of Jill Biden’s educational honorific isn’t new. As long ago as 2009, the Los Angeles Times devoted a story to the subject. From the piece by Robin Abcarian: “Joe Biden, on the campaign trail, explained that his wife’s desire for the highest degree was in response to what she perceived as her second-class status on their mail. ‘She said, “I was so sick of the mail coming to Sen. and Mrs. Biden. I wanted to get mail addressed to Dr. and Sen. Biden.” That’s the real reason she got her doctorate,’ he said.”

Many readers said Mr. Epstein’s use of “kiddo” is demeaning, but then Joe Biden is also fond of that locution. In his 2012 Democratic convention speech he even used it to refer to his wife in the context of his many proposals of marriage: “I don’t know what I would have

done, kiddo, had you on that fifth time said no.” You can buy a T-shirt on the internet with Mr. Biden’s image pointing a finger saying “That’s where you’re wrong, kiddo!”

Mr. Epstein also infuriated dozens of educators defending their doctorates. (See the nearby [letters](#).) But that status isn’t sacrosanct or out-of-bounds for debate. Mr. Epstein’s point applies to men and women and his piece also mocked men for their honorary degrees. Mrs. Biden is now America’s most prominent doctorate holder and is taking a leading role in education policy. She can’t be off-limits for commentary.

By the way, the Journal editorial page’s longtime style is to use “Dr.” only when referring to medical doctors. Henry Kissinger gets a “Mr.” Lynne Cheney, wife of Dick Cheney, is Mrs. Cheney despite her Ph.D.

If you disagree with Mr. Epstein, fair enough. Write a letter or shout your objections on Twitter. But these pages aren’t going to stop publishing provocative essays merely because they offend the new administration or the political censors in the media and academe. And since it’s a time to heal, we’ll give the Biden crowd a mulligan for their attacks on us.

Mr. Gigot is the Journal’s editorial page editor.

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