

OPINION | COMMENTARY

Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not if You Need an M.D.

Jill Biden should think about dropping the honorific, which feels fraudulent, even comic.

By Joseph Epstein

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Jill Biden speaks to reporters at a campaign stop in St. Petersburg, Fla., Nov. 3.

PHOTO: MARTHA ASENCIO RHINE/ZUMA PRESS



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


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? “Dr. Jill Biden ” sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic. Your degree is, I believe, an Ed.D., a doctor of education, earned at the University of Delaware through a dissertation with the unpromising title “Student Retention at the Community College Level: Meeting Students’ Needs.” A wise man once said that no one should call himself “Dr.” unless he has delivered a child. Think about it, Dr. Jill, and forthwith drop the doc.


I taught at Northwestern University for 30 years without a doctorate or any advanced degree. I have only a B.A. in absentia from the University of Chicago—in absentia because I took my final examination on a pool table at Headquarters Company, Fort Hood, Texas, while serving in the peacetime Army in the late 1950s. I do have an honorary doctorate, though I have to report that the president of the school that awarded it was fired the year after I received it, not, I hope, for allowing my honorary doctorate. During my years as a university teacher I was sometimes addressed, usually on the phone, as “Dr. Epstein.” On such occasions it was all I could do not to reply, “Read two chapters of Henry James and get into bed. I’ll be right over.”

I was also often addressed as Dr. during the years I was editor of the *American Scholar*, the quarterly magazine of Phi Beta Kappa. Let me quickly insert that I am also not a member of Phi Beta Kappa, except by marriage. Many of those who so addressed me, I noted, were scientists. I also received a fair amount of correspondence from people who appended the initials Ph.D. to their names atop their letterheads, and have twice seen PHD on vanity license plates, which struck me as pathetic. In contemporary universities, in the social sciences and humanities, calling oneself Dr. is thought bush league.

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The Ph.D. may once have held prestige, but that has been diminished by the erosion of seriousness and the relaxation of standards in university education generally, at any rate outside the sciences. Getting a doctorate was then an arduous proceeding: One had to pass examinations in two foreign languages, one of them Greek or Latin, defend one's thesis, and take an oral examination on general knowledge in one's field. At Columbia University of an earlier day, a secretary sat outside the room where these examinations were administered, a pitcher of water and a glass on her desk. The water and glass were there for the candidates who fainted. A far cry, this, from the few doctoral examinations I sat in on during my teaching days, where candidates and teachers addressed one another by first names and the general atmosphere more resembled a kaffeeklatsch. Dr. Jill, I note you acquired your Ed.D. as recently as 15 years ago at age 55, or long after the terror had departed.

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The prestige of honorary doctorates has declined even further. Such degrees were once given exclusively to scholars, statesmen, artists and scientists. Then rich men entered the lists, usually in the hope that they would donate money to the schools that had granted them their honorary degrees. (My late friend Sol Linowitz, then chairman of Xerox, told me that he had 63 honorary doctorates.) Famous

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television journalists, who passed themselves off as intelligent, followed. Entertainers, who didn't bother feigning intelligence, were next.

At Northwestern, recent honorary-degree recipients and commencement speakers have included Stephen Colbert and Seth Meyers. I sent a complaining email to the school's president about the low quality of such men as academic honorands, with the result that the following year the commencement speaker and honorand was Billie Jean King —who, with the graduating members of the school's women's tennis team, hit tennis balls out to the audience of graduating students and the parents who had paid \$70,000 a year for their university education, or perhaps I should say for their "credential."

Political correctness has put paid to any true honor an honorary doctorate may once have possessed. If you are ever looking for a simile to denote rarity, try "rarer than a

contemporary university honorary-degree list not containing an African-American woman.” Then there are all those honorary degrees bestowed on Bill Cosby, Charlie Rose and others who, owing to their proven or alleged sexual predations, have had to be rescinded. Between the honorary degrees given to billionaires, the falsely intelligent, entertainers and the politically correct, just about all honor has been drained from honorary doctorates.

As for your Ed.D., Madame First Lady, hard-earned though it may have been, please consider stowing it, at least in public, at least for now. Forget the small thrill of being Dr. Jill, and settle for the larger thrill of living for the next four years in the best public housing in the world as First Lady Jill Biden.

Mr. Epstein is author, most recently, of “Gallimaufry: A Collection of Essays, Reviews, Bits.”

Correction

Seth Meyers received an honorary doctorate from Northwestern. An earlier version misidentified him.

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