

Multiple US Officials Confronted About US Assange Hypocrisy on World Press Freedom Day

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Wednesday was [World Press Freedom Day](#), and it saw US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, and Deputy State Department Spokesman Vedant Patel confronted about the glaring hypocrisy of the Biden administration's persecution of Julian Assange for the crime of good journalism.

During [an appearance](#) at a World Press Freedom event hosted by The Washington Post's David Ignatius on Wednesday morning, Blinken was confronted by [Code Pink activists](#) Medea Benjamin and Tighe Barry demanding justice for Assange before being swiftly dragged off stage.

"Excuse us, we can't use this day without calling for the freedom of Julian Assange," said Benjamin, holding a sign saying "FREE JULIAN ASSANGE".

The two were immediately rushed by many security staffers, and the audio from the stage was temporarily cut.

"Stop the extradition request of Julian Assange," Benjamin can be heard saying.

"Two hours and not one word about journalist Shireen Abu-Akleh, who was murdered by the Israeli occupation forces in Palestine, not one word about Julian Assange," said Barry.

"We're here to celebrate freedom of expression, and we just experienced it," said Ignatius without a trace of irony once the dissent had been silenced. He then returned to the subject of how bad and awful the Russian government is for imprisoning American journalist Evan Gershkovich.

Then during a [White House press briefing](#) on Wednesday afternoon, Karine Jean-Pierre was [asked a question](#) by CBS News' Steven Portnoy that was so inconvenient the press secretary flat-out said she wouldn't answer it.

"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. Can you respond to that criticism?" asked Portnoy.

"What is the criticism?" asked Jean-Pierre.

"Well, the criticism is that — the argument is that Julian Assange is a journalist who engaged in the publication of government documents," Portnoy replied. "The United States is accusing him of a crime under the Espionage Act, and that, therefore, the United States is losing the moral high ground when it comes to the question of whether a reporter engages in espionage as a function of his work. So can you respond to that?"

"Look, I'm not going to speak to Julian Assange and that case from here," said Jean-Pierre.

And then she didn't. She just dismissed Portnoy's question without explanation, then babbled for a while about things Biden has said that are supportive of press freedoms, then again said "I'm not going to weigh in on comments about Julian Assange."

This type of "I'm not answering that, screw you" dodge is a rare move for a White House press secretary. They don't normally just come right out and say they refuse to answer the highly relevant and easily answerable question a reporter just asked; typically when the question is too inconvenient they'll either word-salad a bewildering non-response, say the answer is the jurisdiction of another department, or say they'll get back to them when they have more information. It's not the norm for them to just wave away the question without even pretending to provide a reason for doing so.

But really, what choice did she have? As Wall Street Journal White House correspondent Sabrina Siddiqi recently [acknowledged on MSNBC](#), the job of the White House press secretary is not to tell the truth, but to "stay on message and control the narrative." There is nothing about the Assange case that is on-message with the White House narrative; just the other day Biden [said](#) at the White House Correspondents' Dinner that "journalism is not a crime," yet his persecution of Assange is deliberately [designed to criminalize journalism](#).

There's simply no way to reconcile the US government's story about itself with its [efforts to normalize the extradition and persecution of journalists](#) around the world under the Espionage Act. If your job is to make the White House look good, the only way to respond to questions of US hypocrisy regarding the Assange case is not to respond at all.

Later in the press conference, Jean-Pierre responded to another reporter's questions about press freedoms in China with an assurance that the Biden administration will "hold accountable the autocrats and their enablers who continue to repress a free, independent media."

Also on Wednesday afternoon, AP's Matt Lee cited the aforementioned Code Pink protest

earlier that day to [question Deputy State Department Spokesman Vedant Patel](#) about Assange, and was met with a similar amount of evasiveness.

“So then can I ask you, as was raised perhaps a bit abruptly at the very beginning of his comments this morning, whether or not the State Department regards Julian Assange as a journalist who would be covered by the ideas embodied in World Press Freedom Day?” asked Lee.

“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,” Patel replied. “His actions risked serious harm to US national security to the benefit of our adversaries. It put named human sources to grave and imminent risk and risk of serious physical harm and arbitrary detention. So, it does not matter how we categorize any person, but this is – we view this as a – as something he’s been charged with serious criminal conduct.”

“Well, but it does matter actually, and that’s my question. Do you believe that he is a journalist or not?” asked Lee.

“Our view on Mr. Assange is that he’s been charged with serious criminal conduct in the United States,” said Patel.

“Yeah, but anyone can be charged with anything,” Lee replied. “Evan Gershkovich has been charged with a serious criminal offense in Russia, and you say that he is a journalist, and he is obviously. And I just want to know whether or not you, the State Department – regardless of any charges that he faces – believe that he is a journalist, or he is something else.”

“The United States doesn’t 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,” said Patel, before again repeating his line that Assange has been charged with a very serious crime.

“Okay. So, basically, the bottom line is that you don’t have an answer. You won’t say whether you think he is a journalist or not,” Lee replied.

Again, Patel was left with no safe answers to Lee’s questions, because of course Assange is indisputably a journalist. Publishing information and reporting that is in the public interest is precisely the thing that journalism is; that’s why Assange has [won so many awards for journalism](#). Trying to contend that Assange is not a journalist is an unwinnable argument.

Later in that same press conference Patel [was challenged](#) on his claim that Assange damaged US national security by journalist Sam Hussein.

“You refer to WikiLeaks allegedly damaging US national security,” said Hussein. “People might remember that WikiLeaks came to prominence because they released the Collateral Murder video. And what that showed was US military mowing down Reuters reporters – workers in Iraq. Reuters repeatedly asked the US Government to disclose such information about those killings, and the US government repeatedly refused to do so. Only then did we know what happened, that the US helicopter gunship mowed down these Reuters workers, through the Collateral Murder video? Are you saying that disclosure of such criminality by the US government impinges US national security?”

"I'm not going to parse or get into specifics," Patel said, before again repeating his line that Assange stands accused of serious crimes in a way that harmed US national security.

Journalist Max Blumenthal [tweeted](#) about Patel's remarks, "According to this State Dept flack, Julian Assange's jailing is justified because he 'harmed US national security.' But Assange is not an American citizen. By this logic, the US can kidnap and indefinitely detain any foreign journalist who offends the US national security state."

It is good that activists and journalists have been doing so much to highlight the US empire's hypocrisy as it crows self-righteously about its love of press freedoms while persecuting the world's most famous journalist for doing great journalism. Highlighting this hypocrisy shows that the US empire does not in fact care about press freedoms at all, save only to the extent that it can pretend to care about them to wag its finger at governments it doesn't like.

Assange exposed many things about our rulers during his work with WikiLeaks, but none of those revelations have been as significant as what he's forced them to reveal about themselves in the lengths that they will go to to silence a journalist who tells inconvenient truths.

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