

Why Joe Biden can do no wrong

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One columnist declared that former Vice President Joe Biden could boil babies and she would still vote for him. Feminist leaders have said they believe Biden raped a Senate staffer but they still endorse him. Good government advocates have opposed any investigation into prior sexual harassment or corruption claims against Biden. It seems politicians and pundits alike have discovered the glory of the “presidential bull.” In this instance, Biden is akin to a papal indulgence that allows writers, members of Congress and journalists to forgive any sin in a holy crusade to retake Washington.

In the 11th century, Pope Urban II formalized the use of indulgences, which could be purchased to forgive sins. A papal bull of the Crusade accompanied those who fought in the Holy Land and committed atrocities in the name of a higher order. The practice was defended as essentially drawing from the “treasury of merit” created by Jesus Christ, the saints and the faithful.

Now the 2020 election has become the ultimate crusade, and President Trump’s critics seem to be enjoying indulgences in tossing aside moral and ethical considerations. The freedom that is Biden is nowhere more evident than in a recent column by The Nation’s Katha Pollitt, who wrote about the allegations of sexual assault made by former Biden staffer Tara Reade. Pollitt dispensed with any struggle over feminist or moral qualms, declaring, “I would vote for Joe Biden if he boiled babies and ate them.”

As Pollitt explained, “We do not have the luxury of sitting out the election to feel morally pure or send a message about sexual assault and #BelieveWomen.” Otherwise, Pollitt would have to deal with her column during the confirmation hearing for Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, in which she denounced “some of his defenders [who] seem to be saying that even if the allegations are true, it shouldn’t really matter.”

For years, critics have expressed disgust at Trump’s statement that “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and wouldn’t lose any voters.” Yet they now afford Biden the same immunity even if he turns into the ancient god Cronus and starts snacking on boiled babies. The same indulgence has been claimed by politicians and commentators in dealing with other Biden allegations of sexual assault. Many of them demanded during the Kavanaugh controversy that all women must simply be believed when alleging sexual harassment. Those who questioned the allegations of Christine Blasey Ford were denounced for insensitivity, if not complicity, in the abuse of women.

Today, some of us have said that Biden has the stronger case thus far, but we still support an investigation. Yet many Kavanaugh critics quickly declared Biden to be innocent and opposed any search of his records — including those under lock and key at the University of Delaware — for any allegations of sexual abuse.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) simply cut off questions by testily declaring, “I don’t

need a lecture” when confronted with her prior statements. Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D) declared she sees no need for an investigation because she knows Biden and believes him, adding that she resented being asked about it as a victim of sexual assault. She cut off questions from CNN’s Jake Tapper by saying, “And you know what? That’s all I’m going to say about it.”

Others have struggled with an answer until they discovered the presidential bull. Women’s rights attorney Lisa Bloom said she believes Biden did rape a female staffer and has lied about it publicly but she still will endorse him for president. She tweeted, “I believe you, Tara Reade ... sorry.” To use Pollitt’s language, defending a rape victim is now a “luxury.” Likewise, Linda Hirshman wrote an opinion piece in The New York Times titled “I Believe Tara Reade. I’m Voting for Joe Biden Anyway.” She explained, “Democratic primary voters knew all about Mr. Biden’s membership in that boys’ club when there was still time to pick someone else. Alas ... I’ll take one for the team. I believe Ms. Reade, and I’ll vote for Mr. Biden this fall.”

Then there is commentator Karine Jean Pierre, who declared three years ago that sexual misconduct allegations alone should disqualify candidates from running for office. In December 2017, she told CNN’s Tapper, “I think we’re at a point in time in this country where the ‘Me Too’ movement has really gotten some traction. We’re finally listening to victims ... and I think if you’re running for office, you can’t have been accused of sexual harassment or assault.” She just joined Biden’s campaign as a senior adviser this week. The fact is that, without political indulgences, Washington’s thick, sulfuric hypocrisy would choke the life out of the city.

After his work on the atomic bomb, scientist Robert Oppenheimer observed that “the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.” If commentators have known sin (whether mortal or venial), it is in the abandonment of facts for a true faith. For legal analysts, the cardinal sin is the distortion of the law to fit a cause rather than a case — and many are still twisting the criminal code to come up with new crimes against Trump, regardless of future implications.

Some have said that Trump’s recent tweet about withholding funds from states over the use of mail-in voting is a crime in the making. Former prosecutor Richard Signorelli described the tweet as “the crime of extortion in plain sight” and the basis for a “new impeachment” — no matter that such an extortion charge would be utterly absurd and directly contradict controlling case law.

In the age of echo chamber journalism, legal experts are now selected according to their willingness to consistently declare that Trump or his associates are committing criminal or impeachable offenses. Any such theory, no matter how unhinged or unsupported, finds easy access to the pages of The Washington Post or segments on CNN or MSNBC. Most recently, allegations of prosecutorial abuse or judicial overreach in the Michael Flynn case have been ridiculed.

Some legal analysts have even encouraged the judge in that case, Emmet Sullivan, to take his own liberties with the law and use his courtroom to deliver a blow against Trump. The Los Angeles Times ran a recent column by former United States Attorney Harry Litman advising Sullivan how to “make trouble” for the administration. Litman admitted there is “very little leeway to reject the government’s decisions to dismiss charges” but encouraged Sullivan to “accomplish what Congress, multiple inspectors general, and a majority of the electorate have not been able to do — hold the president and his allies accountable for their contemptuous disregard for the rule of law.”

The liberating element of a presidential bull is that it relieves the bearer from justifying the means to the ends of a crusade. All sins are forgiven for that higher purpose. The defeat of Trump is that higher purpose: You can expressly support someone you believe to be a rapist. You can distort the criminal code or encourage raw forms of judicial activism. With the presidential bull, Biden will simply declare, “Ego te absolvo” — “I absolve you” — on Jan. 20, 2021, and all will be forgiven and forgotten.

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