

What's Biden Doing Warning of 'Armageddon' at a Political Fundraiser?

By Rick Moran, October 07, 2022

The presidential “bully pulpit” is more than a platform to criticize political opponents. Every word a president utters is diced, sliced, and dissected for meaning. The president’s tone of voice is noted. And almost as important as what he says, it’s where he says them that amplifies his words.

Ronald Reagan could not have given his “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” speech at a Republican barbecue in Ottumwa, Iowa, and had it resonate through the ages. That’s why the speech Joe Biden gave yesterday warning that we “have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis” — perhaps the most important speech an American president will ever give — should have been given under far different circumstances than a Democratic Party fundraiser for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Biden was warning the Russian president in no uncertain terms that he understands the stakes involved.

I don’t think Vladimir Putin was very impressed.

Biden’s warning included the common sense statement, “I don’t think there is any such a thing as the ability to easily use a tactical nuclear weapon and not end up with Armageddon.” This has been accepted wisdom since the 1980s. “Limited nuclear war” using tactical nuclear weapons is a fantasy, a mirage, a political construct. War gamers will tell you that there are a lot more scenarios of a “limited nuclear war” turning into a strategic nuclear exchange than scenarios that resolve themselves without “Armageddon.”

Then the president mused out loud about how we were going to give Putin an “off-ramp” to avoid the unthinkable.

He added that he was still “trying to figure” out Putin’s “off-ramp” in Ukraine.

“Where does he find a way out?” Biden asked. “Where does he find himself in a position that he does not not only lose face but lose significant power within Russia?”

Putin has repeatedly alluded to using his country’s vast nuclear arsenal, including last month when he announced plans to conscript Russian men to serve in Ukraine.

“I want to remind you that our country also has various means of destruction ... and when the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, to protect Russia and our people, we will certainly use all the means at our disposal,” Putin said Sept. 21, adding with a lingering stare at the camera, “It’s not a bluff.”

Extraordinary statements from the president of the United States, made at a political fundraiser of all places. Why should Putin try to climb down from the ledge he's walked out on when the U.S. president has pointed out that he can't extricate himself without losing significant power?

It was not immediately clear whether Biden was referring to any new assessment of Russian intentions. As recently as this week, though, U.S. officials have said they have seen no change to Russia's nuclear forces that would require a change in the alert posture of U.S. nuclear forces.

"We have not seen any reason to adjust our own strategic nuclear posture, nor do we have indication that Russia is preparing to imminently use nuclear weapons," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Tuesday.

The White House might point out that Biden's comments came at a private fundraiser. That's even worse.

Biden's comments came during a private fundraiser for Democratic Senate candidates at the Manhattan home of James and Kathryn Murdoch. He tends to be more unguarded — often speaking with just rough notes — in such settings, which are open only to a handful of reporters without cameras or recording devices.

That may be, but reporters are there and who's going to stop a reporter from recording the speech on his phone? Biden wanted his remarks to get out. But the choice of venue leaves confusion and uncertainty where clarity was demanded.