

## Will a Biden trip to Saudi Arabia be his “Walk to Canossa”?

June 20, 2022



President of the United States Joe Biden (Photo: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

By Raphael Benaroya

In 1076, in a contest of the Holy Roman Empire’s secular power and the Catholic Church’s ecclesiastical power, Pope Gregory VII excommunicated the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV. The following year, Henry was forced to travel through a blizzard to Canossa Castle, in Italy, to beg the pope to revoke the excommunication. Henry IV supplicated himself on his knees at the castle entrance for three days and nights before the pope granted him an audience.

This humiliating trip was called the “Walk to Canossa,” and Canossa has come to mean a place or occasion of submission, humiliation, or penance. To use Merriam-Webster’s example, “He went to Canossa when he reversed his policy.”

As President Biden seeks a personal visit to Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the de facto ruler of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, history may be repeating itself in a modern-day Walk to Canossa.

Here are two leaders, each proud of their values and cultures, each committed to promoting their country’s interests, and each seeking the respect and support of their constituents. And despite the disparity in their nations’ size and power, both leaders have significant economic and security interests in common.

Should these leaders be careful in calculating the actions and words they direct at each other? You would think!

Well, candidate Biden declared that Saudi Arabia should be treated like a “pariah” over its human rights record. And President Biden postponed a scheduled arms delivery to the Saudis, publicly wagging his finger at them and saying, “It’s all about human rights.”

Noble, perhaps, but national leaders do not take kindly to public scolding, especially over centuries-old cultural practices, many of which are rooted in religion.

Biden then reversed the Trump administration’s decision to designate Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi rebels as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). The Houthis have repeatedly launched missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia—and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as well.

The magnitude of these miscalculations was exposed when Biden realized that the U.S.’s pragmatic global interests must sometimes trump its idealistic values.

The Biden administration’s policies have diminished the U.S.’s self-reliance on fossil fuels and triggered rampant inflation. As a result, the U.S. is now pleading with Saudi Arabia to pump more oil to reduce fuel prices, fight inflation, and apply pressure on Russia in their war on Ukraine.

But MBS, in an unprecedented act, refused to take Biden’s personal phone call. This cold shoulder was clearly a response to Biden’s policies and previous scolding. And now the President of the United States finds himself compelled to change his words, his tone, and his actions to appease the Saudi leader.

U.S. presumptuousness has also affected its relationships in Latin America. When Biden called for a “Summit of the Americas” in Los Angeles, some South American presidents refused the invitation and called on other nations to avoid the meeting. Perhaps, like MBS, they did not care to be lectured to.

There is no doubt that America should carry the torch of democracy, freedom, and human rights for the world. But we must balance idealism with pragmatism. Especially with allies, we must sometimes assert our moral agenda through collaboration and quiet, firm diplomacy—not righteous, unilateral, public proclamations.

The U.S. tends to apply its own values and culture when addressing foreign challenges, at times to the detriment of its national interests. The U.S. has repeatedly made this error in the Middle East, where American-style democracy does not come easily to the intricate mix of cultures and values. This is a

systemic, costly misunderstanding (even failure) across U.S. political, diplomatic, security, and, at times, military institutions.

In my early days as a CEO, I quickly learned that many of the resources I needed—banks and suppliers, for example—did not report to me. I understood that carefully maintaining a positive, productive relationship with these parties, even in tough negotiations, was vital for the business. Similarly, in our interconnected world, no country is entirely independent of other nations.

Even if the U.S. occupies the moral high ground, it cannot always force good will and cooperation from other nations as and when it chooses. And the U.S. cannot only do business with morally virtuous nations. In fact, the U.S. frequently does not. The tension between national values and national interests will always require skillful navigation.

If the current U.S. administration had taken a more diplomatically sensitive approach to working with Saudi Arabia, perhaps President Biden's phone call to MBS would have been sufficient to gain Saudi support. And perhaps Biden could have avoided a visit to Saudi Arabia—his own Walk to Canossa.

*Mr. Benaroya is an American businessman, philanthropist, and Vice Chairman of the NGO Business Executives for National Security (BENS). He has been engaged in national security and foreign policy matters for over 30 years.*