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The Celebrity Presidency Turns Out Some Good In Alice Johnson's Commutation

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Like all bad presidents, Donald Trump can look to the other guy — any other guy — and say “he started it.” Trump is America’s first president who was a celebrity first, and a politician after; his ego lacks both the suavity and the spin powers of both.

He does, however, appear to be even more interested in being liked than he is in attacking those who dislike him (Democrats, the press in general, football players who kneel). Trump’s desire to be praised feels a bit more naked than that of previous presidents. That’s frightening in certain contexts, but can also be advantageous.

Trump tweeted a photo of himself and Kim Kardashian West following a meeting in the Oval Office on May 30. “Great meeting with [@KimKardashian](#) today, talked about prison reform and sentencing,” he wrote.

Kim pushed in particular for the pardon of 63-year-old Alice Johnson, who was serving a life sentence for a nonviolent drug offense. Johnson has already served more than two decades in prison, and by all accounts has been a model inmate. The following week, the White House announced Johnson’s sentence would be commuted. Behold the power of celebrity — she appears to have succeeded.

It would be foolish, however, to assume she was the only person responsible for this human rights victory. Obviously Kim had to have learned about the case from somewhere. It seems that an October Mic article on Johnson caught her eye, and inspired her to take action.

Johnson spent 21 years in prison for drug conspiracy and money laundering — basically for helping out a cocaine dealer. She had her application for mercy denied three times under the Obama administration. Whether Trump knew that and wanted to delight in a feeling of moral superiority, or was wooed by the beautiful, famous Kardashian, or the fact that her husband Kanye West appears to support him is unclear. But the man who rode to the presidency with a Nixonian doom and gloom fear of domestic crime, international terrorism, and invading

immigrants, and who is lovingly supported by the Fraternal Order of Police was nudged into pardoning someone who by all accounts was long overdue for such a kindness.

Trump's previous kindness has been doled out to people who are his big fans, or — in the case of boxer Jack Johnson — conveniently dead. Sheriff Joe Arpaio, author Dinesh D'Souza, and Scooter Libby all made Trump's list. On the other hand, Gene Healy, vice president of the Cato Institute and author of the 2008 Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power notes that "Alice Marie Johnson's seems like the sort of case the pardon power was designed for; same with the posthumous Jack Johnson pardon."

So why are some people mad about the pardon? A sampling of Twitter shows some Trump haters to be unsatisfied by this turn of events. No one need feel particularly obsequiously grateful to Trump for this move, or even to Kardashian West. But to pretend it's not a small, lovely victory against the war on drugs' insanity and inflated prison sentences is to try to put a chunk back into the Berlin Wall simply because the whole thing hasn't been knocked down.

Despair over the scope of the problem is one thing. But a woman who hasn't done much substantial except become a baffling savvy marketer of her own life has helped save someone else. That's wonderful and should be a point of pride for her, and it should be applauded for its own sake, and in the hopes that more such pardons will follow.

Unless of course your real problem with Trump is not practical, but aesthetic. Unless, perhaps, you were one of those people's whose problem with the White House Press Correspondents Dinner was that it was undignified to invite all those celebrities, not that it was a hacky, suck-up to power event that made presidential excess a cute dinnertime skit. Somehow a celebrity supporting something is unseemly, but say, lobbyists are just how it's done.

Healy says "Sure, it's somewhat ridiculous that the recommendations came from Kim Kardashian and Sly Stallone instead of the Office of the Pardon Attorney; on the other hand, they're better pardons than most recent presidents manage most years."

In the midst of the amnesia that partisan politics brings, it might be hard for both sides to think back far enough to remember when President Obama's propensity for palling around on talk shows seemed undignified. He was too charming, too fun, too much a celebrity. And celebrities loved him back. With the former host of a reality show in the Oval Office, the right can't complain about Trump in the same way, but its opponents sure suddenly can. Kardashian West's picture with the president isn't right. She should have helped out, but without publicity. Or, so says Rep. Steve Cohen, it's basically not fair that a celebrity gave Johnson help, because some people don't have celebrities to help them.

Never mind that with 60 million Twitter followers and top tier celebrity clout, having her on the side of any issue can make it suddenly vital. On June 6, Kardashian West tweeted the Mic video that first brought Johnson to her attention again. The video mentions that 3,278 people have life in prison without the possibility of parole for nonviolent offenses. If a fraction of her earth-shattering number of followers see that and wonder about it for the first time, that could be a

good thing. If a woman they admire for whatever reason cares about this issue, maybe they should too.

Yes, they should care already. Yes, Kardashian West should somehow be anonymous, but also have the power to open all the prisons and free everyone deserving. Nothing about this is perfect. But a woman who overpaid for a crime and who had no life to look forward to will be free.

Presidents can pardon any federal criminal. This gave us the motley crew of previous choices. It also gave a woman who was left in her sentence by the Obama administration new life — one that will start any time now. Kardashian West is not the one who put Johnson in prison. She is not diminishing the dignity of the office, she's increasing it. She deserves our respect for caring, and for levying her enormous power for something good. Plus, you know, she gets it.

“If you think about a decision that you've made in your life and you get life without the possibility of parole for your first-time nonviolent offense, there's just something so wrong with that,” she told Mic. She also tweeted her support for organizations that work in criminal justice, her thanks to Trump, Ivanka Trump, and Jared Kushner, and a reaffirmation of her desire to do more on the issue. There's nothing but good news here.