



The Treadmill Gaffe

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The job of White House Press Secretary is notoriously difficult. Besides supplying facts to the fact-hungry press and steering them away from fake news, it often entails explaining the inexplicable and defending the indefensible, on policies the secretary doesn't necessarily agree with. And it includes correcting administration gaffes — at the very least not making them.

Thus, Press Secretary Jen Psaki was pillaged this week after making light of the supply chain crisis, or at least one aspect of it.

After prefacing the briefing with a cheery rundown of “some good news on the supply chain front,” which noted progress at the ports where the time for cargo sitting on the docks has been cut in half, she invited questions.

Psaki rejected the charge that the administration has been late in responding to the crisis, noting that “we’ve been working on this since February,” reviewing the matter, and in June “the President formed a task force ...”

Indeed, the task force made a number of serious-sounding recommendations, like “bring[ing] the full capacity of the federal government to address near-term supply/demand mismatches.” But it’s not clear what, if any, impact they’ve had.

She also sought to focus on the bright side of the breakdown, saying that “one of the reasons that there has been so much traffic in a lot of these ports is because there are more goods that are being ordered by people across the country — people who have more money, expendable resources. Their wages are up. More people are working than they were a year ago...some of those ports have 20%, 30% increased volume as a result of that.” Such is the price of prosperity: less to buy.

Then a reporter mentioned that due to disruptions in the supply chain, “people couldn’t get dishwashers and furniture and treadmills delivered on time, not to mention all sorts of other things. ...”

Psaki caught the incongruity of treadmill in the list and interjected, laughingly, “The tragedy of the treadmill that’s delayed.”

When the reporter resumed, asking her to be “serious,” she went back to reciting from a list of administration achievements on the issue. (The White House press secretary has all the information at her fingertips — literally, in a thick briefing book on the podium.)

But the damage was done. Media pundits and others — lambasted the spokeswoman for a cavalier attitude to the hardship of millions of Americans.

“Stores are running out of food, medical supplies, supply driving inflation but Psaki reduces real world problems down to the example of a treadmill for a chuckle. Hoo boy,” conservative talk show host Dana Loesch was quoted as saying in the *Washington Times*.

They immediately recalled White House chief of staff Ronald Klain’s retweet of a post from a Harvard professor that summed up such things as “high class problems,” suffered by people with jobs and too much money.

And they invoked a really annoying rant from Micheline Maynard in a *Washington Post* op-ed, who scolded “whining customers”:

“Across the country, Americans’ expectations of speedy service and easy access to consumer products have been crushed like a Styrofoam container in a trash compactor. Time for some new, more realistic expectations. ... Rather than living constantly on the verge of throwing a fit ... we’d do ourselves a favor by consciously lowering expectations,” she advised.

There have been times when Psaki has been deservedly criticized for egregious spin, as in the case of claiming that the Afghanistan withdrawal was “an astonishing success” and that the \$4 trillion Biden spending package will cost “zero.” In this case, though, it was more grin than spin.

As for the supply chain crisis itself, it is not of the administration’s making, and it is far from being entirely in its control to fix it. The issues, as Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said on CNN, are multiple and will take a long time to sort out. They include not only “off the charts” consumer demand, but an acute shortage of truck drivers, amid disruptions to supply abroad.

Buttigieg presumably thought that by now he’d be in the driver’s seat of a sweeping infrastructure revival, not in the middle of a maddening bottleneck that stretches from the Los Angeles ports to Shanghai.

Far from a cavalier attitude, the official search for solutions has been so earnest as to entertain the impractical.

For example, the idea of deploying National Guard troops to the California ports. Scott Lincicome, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Cato Institute, dismissed it “as entirely fanciful unless the National Guardsmen have experience in any of the aspects of ports and logistics work that would be needed,” he said.

Buttigieg more gently deflated the notion by saying, “Right now, we’re focused on some other steps that we think are making a difference,” such as making it easier for commercial drivers to receive licenses. Less dramatic, but more realistic. A man with his eyes on the road.

For now, though, there appears to be little choice but to be patient and make do with what is available and not to be horribly shocked by either rising prices or a minor chuckle at the daily press briefing.