

COMMENTARY

East of Hawaii and west of Maine



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When I am finally summoned to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen (no doubt the invitation is imminent), first I'll embark on a torturous philosophic rumination about my behavior on the international stage.

But even before that, I have to consider this: Should I spell the word behavior by plugging a u into the end, the way the British do?

Behaviour. Already this is torturous, for you and me both.

Anyway, when I get to London and finally approach Her Majesty, I'll do what any American born and bred in the heart of the Western Wilderness (as the Wizard of Oz once said) would do: I'll play it by ear.

Should I curtsy, like Nancy Reagan did once, or not, like Michelle Obama last week? Should I wink, like George W. Bush, or step up and hug that ferocious-looking alabaster prune dressed in a pink dress and hat?

An Australian prime minister tried that approach. He hugged her. The next day, the poor dude was excoriated by the SSSS, the Shirt-Stuffing-Snuff-Sniffers of the British press (say that three times fast). They described him as "The Lizard of Oz."

Shall I do handsprings across the room and break into a rousing rendition of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary?"

No, definitely not. I should probably consider something more recent, like, "I Can't Get No (Satisfaction)," or "It's Only Rock 'n' Roll." Those songs were created with all the blunt gravity of 10-pound hammers by the Queen's very own subjects.

But I am not one of the Queen's very own subjects. In fact, I consider myself subject to very little but the desire to please my wife and raise my children well.

So what is an American to do in front of the Queen?

The British, unlike the French, often manage to make people jittery and uncertain about their behavior in the presence of royalty. (The French make people feel bad even without royalty.)

Here's my answer: Americans should never bow or curtsy to anyone who claims a privilege either from God or birth. Royalty — apparently a starchy clothing line said to be bestowed by God or birth or both — insists per se that some people are better than other people.

Sure they are. Somewhere else.

But not east of Hawaii and west of Maine. For us, royalty ain't nothin' but a hound dog.

Meanwhile, Americans are frequently hobbled by this famous advice: When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Should you follow it?

I would — if you're alone and trying to blend in. And yes, if your hosts have no interest in making you subservient. Then you should behave as custom dictates.

For example, if they sit down over a bowl of fried monkey brains and honor you with the first serving, you should

accept the gift and grin, like chef Anthony Bourdain. And no vomiting like George H.W. Bush, who upchucked all over the sushi one time, in Japan.

But what if they offer you their oldest daughter for a night of revelry? In that event maybe call a cab, or call in an air strike, or feign a sudden debilitating illness (but don't blame it on the monkey brains). Or, you know, go with it.

In the case of royalty, however, the idea of going with it is pretty weak. These people historically like to murder each other, start bloody wars over church affiliations, conduct adulterous liaisons, practice genocide in Ireland, kill those with contrary opinions, and cozy up to tyrants.

Admittedly, that's only on their bad days. Still, bowing or curtsying to that behavior is not the way to go.

Which means Nancy Reagan screwed up.

But Michelle Obama did it right. She didn't curtsy. And AFTER the queen touched Mrs. Obama, the First Lady responded by gently touching the Queen.

Nevertheless, here's how *The SSSS* reported it the next day in *The Times of London*: "Protocol is abandoned as Michelle Obama cozies up to queen."

They were wrong, of course. The First Lady gives comfort, perhaps, but she doesn't cozy up to squat (a term that aptly describes Her Majesty).

Protocol, our protocol, was perfectly observed by Mrs. Obama, who brought it off with grace and dignity, and did not offend the Queen, apparently, in the process.

I will do it differently, of course, and slam-dunk the protocol. Now that I've considered all this (tortuously), I think I'll take along my social and spiritual advisor, Mr. Burdie Baker. I'll follow his example.

Mr. Baker, who will turn 70 in June, continues to ramble the countryside between Copeland in eastern Collier County and Charleston Park in eastern Lee County doing good deeds for those with needs — he brings people food or hauls them to doctors' offices or teaches them to fish. And always, he displays a peerless social style I consider perfect for Buckingham Palace.

First, he arrives in a pick-up truck that says, "Now Run, Tell That," which basically means, "If you don't like my manners, too damn bad. Go tell somebody else about it."

Then he jumps out of that truck like a beanpole kid at a barbecue. He smacks down his black boots under his black jeans under his black tank top under his hat de jour, and stands up straight and tall.

Finally, he bellows his royal salutation — an affectionate, good-natured greeting. He forged it himself in an American etiquette shop, probably with a 10-pound hammer: "The Black Redneck, reporting for duty!"

It's a stereotype-buster for sure. Michelle Obama herself couldn't do it as well, although she didn't grow up in rough poverty as the son of an abusive Georgia sharecropper, so we shouldn't judge her too harshly.

Come to think of it, maybe I'll just give my invitation from the Queen to Mr. Baker, and ask him to meet that Defender of the Faith for me, in honor of all of us — since he, like the rest of us, is her equal.

That is, as soon as her invitation arrives. ■

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