

Column: Elizabeth II: A Life Well-Scripted



The news media are saturated with reports on, reviews of, videos from, and second by second analyses of one of the most expensive funerals since Pharaoh Khufu of Egypt was interred in the Great Pyramid at Giza. That funeral was held more than 4,000 years ago, and its cost was probably exorbitant. The royal family may have saved on some items. The few records available for funeral expenses during Egypt's Fourth Dynasty indicate that labor was cheap and construction materials were probably acquired by what would today be called "eminent domain." The government took what it wanted, and no citizen would dare object. A major difference between Khufu's funeral and Elizabeth's funeral is the disposition of many of the monarch's possessions. Khufu had his prized possessions and perhaps a few indispensable servants sealed up in his pyramid with him. Elizabeth will at most have a few sentimental but worthless trinkets buried with her. Her vast holdings of property, jewelry, art, etc. will pass on to her royal heirs. They are exempt from inheritance taxes.

The rich are governed by different laws in England and the United States, but in Great Britain the royal rich are governed by laws that are different from those by which even the ordinary rich need to abide. Until recently the Queen paid virtually no taxes. This apparently caused some irritation amongst the exceedingly wealthy but not royal Brits,

and their representatives in Parliament worked out a deal to collect modest taxes on the revenues generated by some of the royal family's holdings. To offset the sting of this unpleasant intrusion on the monarch's right to be obscenely wealthy, the Parliament agreed to kick back a substantial portion of the taxes paid to enable the monarch to keep the royal castles and other such properties in good shape. When Forbes magazine last made a stab at calculating the total value of Queen Elizabeth II's assets, it came up with a conservative estimate of \$28 billion. Upon the Queen's death, Charles III, the new king of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, announced that he had long dreaded this day. That his mother had had a long and largely illness-free life must have softened the blow of this inevitable event. Also, getting control over \$28 billion and guaranteed government subsidies for life may have helped him deal with his loss.

By all accounts, Elizabeth II was a wonderful person. I have seen no evidence to the contrary. Many have taken issue with the British treatment of people in its current and former colonies, but there is no reason to blame Elizabeth for 70 years of British atrocities in innumerable countries. If Elizabeth knew of these human rights violations, she never mentioned them or chided her ministers publicly for committing them. When governments aligned with Great Britain as part of the "Commonwealth" disenfranchised vast segments of their populations, as was the case in South Africa, no royal screeds went out over the airways denouncing the murder or imprisonment of political activists. As Nelson Mandela rotted in prison for decades, the Queen wished everyone a Merry Christmas.

What this queen did achieve was an aura of respectability that persisted for 96 years, an enviable achievement for a person living a very public life. The world watched as she grew up to be a pleasant young woman who married a pleasant young man. Even as a teenager she did well reading carefully-crafted statements, prepared for her by some of the best public relations professionals in the world. Over the decades that followed her ascension to the throne, she continued to read with excellent diction the reassuring statements prepared for her by these ever-optimistic professionals. The relatively few

people who were allowed to have real conversations with her described her as being affable, generous, humorous, and otherwise good-natured. Most of these people were, of course, leaders in their own countries or in the British Commonwealth and were careful to avoid being savaged by the tabloids, newspapers that were paradoxically forever on the hunt for scandal and invariably protective of their queen.

Of course, there was that messy affair with the former Princess of Wales, Diana Spencer. She spoke ill of the entire royal household, and the tabloids responded by portraying her as depraved and venal. She spoke out against international brutality when the rest of the royal family appeared to be unaware of or unconcerned with the world outside their palaces. She danced (well) with John Travolta while other members of the royal household demonstrated their equestrian skills. Unfortunately, equestrian skills are not widely appreciated in a world in which more than 99 percent of the population cannot afford to keep a horse for sporting events. Diana even had the audacity to cavort with a nonchristian. No matter how much authentic love and admiration that wonderful woman elicited from the British people, it was obvious that she simply would not read the scripts prepared for her, and she had to go.

Elizabeth read the scripts and followed the protocols and never complained. Her subjects were assured that she was a wonderful person, even though no solid evidence was presented to prove this assertion. She photographed well most of the time and seemed to be authentically fond of dogs. As the Kardashians are famous for being famous, the Queen was popular for being popular. Elizabeth was an idol to be worshipped. Whether that statue had a pulse or was simply a well-crafted puppet has yet to be revealed.

And so the crown has been placed on the sorrowful head of her son Charles. Over the years he waited for the crown, he spent much of his time expanding the royal portfolio and enriching himself. He established himself as a capable businessman with the help of special privileges and royal exemptions. His only truly exciting action was his first wedding. As it became evident that that marriage was merely another business

transaction for him, his subjects grew disinterested in him. Even the public relations army in charge of shaping his image could not depict him as charismatic. As he ascended to the throne of England, he grumbled about cluttered desks and leaky fountain pens. He established himself as England's highest ranking, grumpy old man.

As George Washington noted when one of his supporters suggested he be designated King of the United States, monarchy and the establishments it fosters are simply bad ideas. The Founding Fathers had the wisdom to work on developing something akin to democracy. Their dreams have yet to be fully realized, and we may yet lose that fragile democracy before it is shatter-proof, but we know that George was right: monarchy is stupid.

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