



Biden as Backup

The cliché might be that U.S. Senator Joe Biden “needs no introduction” to the American voting public, since he has run for president twice. But many Americans may have only the sketchiest knowledge of the Delaware senator’s checkered career and why he has been widely hailed as both a wise and “safe” choice as a running mate for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, yet may prove to be controversial on many fronts.



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Loose Tongue

For one thing, Biden has demonstrated throughout his career a notoriously loose and careless tongue. His biggest blunder known to the public was his appropriating as his own the biography of British Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock during a speech in Biden’s abortive campaign for the 1988 presidential nomination. It was a peculiar kind of theft, commonly referred to as plagiarism, since Biden used without attribution a large portion of a Kinnock speech in which the British politician recounted life in the coal mines and other aspects of his own biography that had nothing to do with Biden. Once a videotape of Biden’s speech was widely circulated and the source of the plagiarism documented, Biden withdrew his candidacy and waited for another opportunity to seek the nation’s highest executive office.

Twenty years later, Biden was running again and his loose talk was getting him in trouble again. As the Obama phenomenon came to dominate the Democratic primary campaigns, Biden told an interviewer that “for the first time” the nation had a “mainstream” African-American candidate who “is clean, articulate” and appealing to a wide range of American voters. That created a furor nationally, particularly among Democrats and especially among African-Americans, many of whom had voted for and otherwise supported candidates like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, both of whom were considered “clean and articulate,” and perhaps even (in the eyes of many Jackson or Sharpton supporters) “mainstream.”

Biden stepped into further controversy along racial lines when he responded to a question about his viability in conservative Southern states by mentioning that his home state, Delaware, “was a slave state” in the early days of the republic. He was also overheard and recorded when he offered the observation that in Delaware, one can’t go into a Dunkin’ Donuts or 7-11 without an Indian accent.

Balancing the Ticket?

Biden never did get any traction in his presidential campaign and dropped out before the first primary. But his experience and alleged expertise in foreign policy apparently appealed to the Obama campaign, which was dealing with the suspicion that the presidential candidate, in only his fourth year in national politics, lacked the maturity and experience to be a serious candidate for president. Adding Biden, it was thought, would lend added stature to the top of the ticket to offset the perception that Obama was getting by on oratorical skills and his personal charisma.



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But critics contended that by putting Biden on the ticket, the Democrats were undercutting the appeal of Obama as the outsider, even as John McCain's later choice of first-term Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, at 44 three years younger than Obama, undermined the Republican's argument that the GOP ticket offered an experienced and seasoned alternative to the Democrats' "Boy Wonder." Biden, after all, has been in the Senate for 36 years, starting at the beginning of Richard Nixon's second term as president. He has served as chairman of the Judiciary as well as the Foreign Relations Committee. On the Judiciary, he spearheaded the successful opposition to the nomination of Judge Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1987, the same year Biden's first presidential campaign collapsed under the burden of plagiarism. He also permitted the pillorying of Supreme Court nominee Judge Clarence Thomas, leading to an historically close vote confirming Thomas in 1991. While Biden has been perhaps more confrontational than Obama seems to be, his bent on judicial nominations appears to be more or less in harmony with the presidential hopeful, whose public statements on judicial philosophy have indicated a desire for judges who see their role as agents of social "progress" rather than impartial referees.

But on foreign policy, there appears to be a slight disconnect between the top of the ticket and the running mate. Obama is no pacifist, despite Republican-inspired fears that he is not tough enough to defend the country. He wants to increase our war efforts in Afghanistan, though he appears to have no more of an "exit plan" for the war there than either Bush or McCain has for the Iraq War. But for non-interventionists, he has said some hopeful rhetoric, expressing a desire not only to end the Iraq War, but "to end the mindset that gets us into wars."

The mindset expressed by Obama is very different from the mindset of the senior senator from Delaware, since Biden, in his 36 years in the U.S. Senate, has seldom seen a war he did not support from the first saber rattling of an American president, be he Republican or Democrat. He was against the first Gulf War under the first President Bush, a war ostensibly to turn back aggression and liberate Kuwait from Iraqi conquest, but which has had the effect of leaving the United States more deeply and permanently immersed militarily in the international, ethnic, and sectarian warfare of the Middle East. But he supported the Clinton administration and NATO's war in Serbia over Kosovo. And he supported the current Bush administration in the run-up to the war with Iraq, in marked contrast to Obama, who spoke out against the "dumb war" while still a state senator in Illinois. Moreover, Biden has supported the expansion of NATO right up to the Russian border, advocating the inclusion of Georgia, which would have required the United States and other allies to come to the aid militarily of that former Soviet state when it was invaded earlier this year after Georgia invaded the breakaway state of South Ossetia.

It seems, in some ways, a strange balance, but only if Obama's anti-war rhetoric is viewed as genuine. Obama, recall, in a New Hampshire debate during the primary season refused to commit to withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of his first term as president. (Hillary Clinton also refused to make that commitment when asked the same question.) He also, like Biden, is supportive of including Georgia in NATO.

Biden and Obama complement each other in some respects. The presidential candidate is, at 47, relatively young and inexperienced. Biden is 20 years older and a Senate veteran, possessing a wealth of knowledge and experience that he is happy to talk about, often to the exhaustion of his audience if not himself. Obama is a black Protestant from a Midwest state rich in electoral votes. Biden is white and Catholic and hails from a small Mid-Atlantic state. Obama, though not born to wealth, is Harvard educated and well connected, aristocratic in bearing, refined in taste, and widely perceived as



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something of an elitist. Biden has, even without Neil Kinnock's coal mines, cultivated a working man's image, reinforced by his practice of taking the Amtrak from his home in Delaware to his job in the nation's capital.

But on what conservatives like to call the "social issues," the two appear cut from the same liberal, even pagan, cloth. Both support the party platform's call for reproductive freedom "regardless of ability to pay." In other words, abortion "on demand" and taxpayer-funded for poor women. Obama would not even support legislation to protect the life of babies born alive in an abortion. In effect, the Democrats have balanced the ticket by pairing a pro-abortion "moderate" with a pro-infanticide liberal.

One joker in the deck could be the Catholic Church, whose membership makes up 24 percent of the U.S. population. Catholics have historically supported the Democrats. If the Catholic Church rebukes Biden — one of its own — for his pro-abortion position and comes out strongly against Obama's pro-infanticide standing, McCain would get a strong boost.

As measured by the "Freedom Index," this magazine's congressional scorecard based on the Constitution, Biden has earned a score of 19 percent in the current Congress (to date), not much better than Obama's score of 13 percent.

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