

Joe Biden: A familiar face, a deeply reactionary record

By Patrick Martin
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Former Vice President Joe Biden has been a leading figure in American capitalist politics for nearly 50 years. He was first elected to the US Senate in 1972 from the state of Delaware and spent 36 years in office before his eight years as vice president in the Obama administration.

While Biden today seeks to emphasize his association with Obama to give a liberal gloss to his political career and curry favor with black voters, the truth is that Obama selected Biden as his running mate in order to demonstrate to the US ruling class, by picking the veteran servant of big business, that if elected he would carry out a pro-corporate domestic policy and a foreign policy that staunchly upheld the global interests of US imperialism.

Obama mouthed rhetoric about “hope and change” to appeal to the millions who hated President George W. Bush and the Republicans, but he selected as his running mate the most right-wing figure among those who sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. This set the tone for an administration that bailed out Wall Street at the expense of the working class, added wars in Libya and Syria to those it inherited and continued in Iraq and Afghanistan, and enacted domestic policies such as Obamacare, whose goal was to strengthen corporate America, not improve conditions of life for working people.

In the lead-up to announcing his 2020 presidential campaign, Biden created controversy with his gratuitous praise for ultra-reactionary segregationist Democrats in the Senate like James Eastland and Herman Talmadge, citing their willingness to work with him in a collegial fashion despite supposed political differences. This was not simply a “gaffe,” as the media claimed, but revealed something of Biden’s long-term political role, both in the Senate and in the Obama administration.

He has always been a Democratic wheeler-dealer, able and willing to work with the most reactionary forces in both capitalist parties when it served the interests of corporate America. Biden was never afraid to get his hands dirty, and in the process covered himself with the muck and filth of American capitalist politics.

This is why the current effort to package and sell Biden as the embodiment of up-from-hardship, struggling Americans, as “middle class Joe,” rings so hollow. He first came to the Senate in 1973 at age 29 and spent a political lifetime in the circles of power and influence in Washington.

It should be noted—particularly for readers outside the United States—that Biden’s home state of Delaware has an infamous reputation as the headquarters location of choice for giant corporations seeking to evade taxes, regulations and scrutiny of all kinds.

The tiny state has only 975,000 people, ranking 44th of the 50 states. However, “More than 1,000,000 business entities have made Delaware their legal home,” according to the state’s Division of Corporations website. “More than 50 percent of all publicly-traded companies in the US including 64 percent of the Fortune 500 have chosen Delaware as their legal home.”

Delaware is the Cayman Islands or Singapore of America, sheltering

corporate tax evasion and criminality of every kind, and every capitalist politician from that state, Democrat and Republican alike, upholds that distinction. It was this particularly noxious milieu that produced the young Senator Joe Biden.

It took several years of cajoling, but in 1977 Biden finally obtained a coveted seat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, then under the chairmanship of James Eastland. In 1981, when the Republicans gained a majority in the Senate, the chairmanship passed to Republican Strom Thurmond, the antediluvian reactionary from South Carolina who had run for president in 1948 as the candidate of the States’ Rights Democratic Party, the ultra-right segregationist wing of the Democrats, and who crossed over to the Republicans in 1964 in opposition to Lyndon Johnson’s concessions to the civil rights movement.

From 1981 through 1997, a period of nearly two decades, Biden was either the ranking Democrat under Thurmond or chairman himself after the Democrats regained control in 1987-1995. Thurmond and Biden collaborated closely in approving such Supreme Court nominees as Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy and Clarence Thomas, and in passing numerous pieces of law-and-order legislation that resulted in longer jail terms for millions of people.

Biden likes to dismiss this legislation as ancient history, seeking to avoid any close scrutiny of what he actually did. But the record demonstrates his role as the principal advocate within the Democratic Party of the most brutal forms of state repression, including, among other things, capital punishment. The laws included:

* The Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, which established mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses, increased the penalties for marijuana cultivation and use, and re-established the federal death penalty.

* The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which contained the notorious 100-1 provision penalizing possession of crack cocaine over powder cocaine by that ratio (a minimum five-year sentence for 5 grams of crack or 500 grams of powder).

* The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, which further stiffened penalties for drug abuse, provided \$6.5 billion for the “war on drugs” and strengthened the federal death penalty.

* The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which created 60 new federal death penalty offenses, stripped federal inmates of the right to obtain educational Pell grants, set aside money for 100,000 new police officers and further entrenched a “three-strikes” rule in sentencing.

The combined impact of this legislation was barbaric and racially discriminatory. A report from the US Sentencing Commission found that in 1992, 91.4 percent of federal crack cocaine offenders were black, even though the majority of cocaine users were white. And Biden was a fervent defender of these laws, boasting in one Senate speech, “We do everything but hang people for jaywalking in this bill.”

Biden was not an outlier with regard to Democratic Party support for

these punitive measures. Nearly every one of these laws had overwhelming bipartisan support. The 1986 bill, for example, passed the House by 392-16 and the Senate by 97-2. Majorities of the Congressional Black Caucus and, later, the Congressional Progressive Caucus supported these laws.

In 1993, Biden boasted in a speech on the Senate floor, “Every major crime bill since 1976 that’s come out of this Congress, every minor crime bill, has had the name of the Democratic senator from the State of Delaware: Joe Biden.” In 1994, when President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act into law on the White House lawn, Biden sat directly behind him, sharing the spotlight.

This period included Biden’s first run for the presidency, in 1987-88, which collapsed early after charges of plagiarism emerged based on his lifting whole passages of speeches by British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock for his own campaign.

After 1997, Biden’s focus shifted from throwing poor people into prison to bombing and otherwise annihilating people in countries targeted by US imperialism. He had long been a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, an even more influential position than Judiciary, and when the opportunity arose to become the panel’s ranking Democrat, with the retirement of Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, he took it.

In that capacity, Biden was one of the principal proponents of US intervention in the former Yugoslavia, a role he describes in his 2007 campaign autobiography as his proudest achievement in foreign policy. He advocated a direct US attack on Serbia during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, joining with a like-minded Republican senator to introduce the McCain-Biden Kosovo Resolution authorizing Clinton to use “all necessary force” against Serbia.

Biden was chairman of the committee from 2001 to 2003, and then from 2007 until his entry into the Obama administration. As committee chairman, he played a critical role in authorizing both the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. The Senate panel approved an Authorization for Use of Military Force in 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, which became the basis for the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the entire subsequent “war on terror.” In 2002, the same body approved another Authorization for Use of Military Force against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. Biden voted for both and helped shepherd them through Congress.

As a candidate for president in 2008, Biden was undone in large measure because of his pro-war record, as young people in particular flocked to the candidacy of Barack Obama, who postured as a longtime opponent of the Iraq War. While today Biden claims to have been opposed to the war, that is not what the record shows. In July 2003, well after the invasion and occupation of Iraq and President Bush’s declaration of “mission accomplished,” Biden gave a speech in which he declared he “would vote that way again” on the war resolution.

He bemoaned the Bush administration’s failure to sell the war effectively to the American people. In a speech to the Brookings Institution in June 2005, he declared, “I want to see the president of the United States succeed in Iraq... His success is America’s success, and his failure is America’s failure.”

Biden later became associated with proposals to break up Iraq into three separate states based on religion and ethnicity: a Kurdish north, a Shi’ite south and a Sunni center. Such an arrangement would have involved forced population transfers in the millions, an effort at “ethnic cleansing” dwarfing Yugoslavia and rivaling the 1947 partition of India.

One other aspect of Biden’s long and reactionary record has been raised in the 2020 campaign. He was one of the most fervent Democratic supporters of the reactionary 2005 legislation overhauling the consumer bankruptcy laws, making it much more difficult for working class and middle-class families to escape debt burdens exacerbated by the corrupt and misleading marketing tactics employed by companies like MBNA,

the largest US issuer of credit cards. MBNA was then headquartered in Delaware and employed the senator’s son Hunter as an executive vice president. (MBNA has since been acquired by Bank of America.)

One of Biden’s main rivals, Senator Elizabeth Warren, has repeatedly criticized him for this legislation, which she opposed at the time as an expert on federal bankruptcy law, arguing that it unduly favored credit card issuers and other creditors at the expense of borrowers.

It is a remarkable fact, given this right-wing record, that Biden has chosen to wrap himself in the mantle of the Obama administration—the most right-wing in US history up to that time—in order to draw attention away from his earlier career. As he said in a recent debate in Houston, “I stand with Barack Obama all eight years, good, bad and indifferent.”

This is not the place to review in detail the record of the Obama years, 2009-2017, for which Biden bears shared responsibility. There is no record of any opposition on his part to the bailout of Wall Street, the forced wage-cutting for autoworkers, the austerity policies pursued jointly with Republicans in Congress (with Biden as chief interlocutor), or the foreign policy of drone assassinations and militarism.

One incident is characteristic of Biden’s role as a representative of the Washington foreign policy consensus. During the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, he came out strongly in defense of the longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak, declaring, “Mubarak has been an ally of ours in a number of things. And he’s been very responsible on, relative to geopolitical interests in the region, the Middle East peace efforts; the actions Egypt has taken relative to normalizing the relationship with Israel... I would not refer to him as a dictator.”

In the years since he left office, Biden has cashed in with some gusto, becoming a multi-millionaire in the process. After 36 years as one of the poorest members of the US Senate, Biden raked in more than \$15 million in only two years, including six-figure speaking engagements a la Hillary Clinton, book-publishing fees, and six-figure gigs as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

He has the closest ties to big business and has raised far more money from financial interests than any other candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. At one fundraising soirée in Manhattan, he noted that since the 1980s the value of tax exemptions for the wealthy had increased from \$800 billion under Republican Ronald Reagan to \$1.6 trillion, effectively doubling.

“I could take about \$400 [billion] away and it wouldn’t change your standard of living one tiny little bit—not even an iota,” he told donors. “I mean, we may not want to demonize anybody who has made money,” he continued. “We can disagree in the margins, but the truth of the matter is it’s all within our wheelhouse and nobody has to be punished. No one’s standard of living will change, nothing would fundamentally change.”

Biden was telling his wealthy backers that such a sacrifice would be politically useful. “When we have income inequality as large as we have in the United States today, it brews and ferments political discord and basic revolution,” he warned.

Later, at an appearance in Nevada, Biden scoffed at the prospect that younger voters were looking for “radical, revolutionary change.” He responded to that suggestion by declaring, “They’re looking for somebody who, in fact, can articulate what they believe and who is in the mainstream,” he said. “They’re not all—and this is not a hit on Bernie, my word—but this is not a generation of socialists.”

After the collapse of his 2008 campaign, Biden was tapped by Obama as his running mate. At the time, this writer described the choice of Biden in the following terms:

The selection of Senator Joseph Biden as the vice-presidential candidate of the Democratic Party underscores the fraudulent character of the Democratic primary campaign and the undemocratic

character of the entire two-party electoral system.

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, the supposed protagonist of “change,” has picked as his running mate a fixture of the Washington establishment, a six-term US senator who is a proven defender of American imperialism and the interests of big business...

Obama has selected Biden to provide reassurance that, whatever populist rhetoric may be employed for electoral purposes in the fall campaign, the wealth and privileges of the ruling elite and the geo-strategic aims of US imperialism will be the single-minded concerns of a Democratic administration.

Eleven years later, there is absolutely no reason to alter that assessment.

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