

James Biden — presidential brother, family helper, political wild card

President Biden's brother James is known in the family as the one who's always ready to help. But he also has a history of business dealings that resulted in recriminations and lawsuits.

By Matt Viser

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Joe and James Biden at the Democratic National Convention in Denver in 2008. (Rick Friedman/Corbis/Getty Images)

James Biden took out his iPhone early one morning in September 2017 and tapped a quick message to his nephew Hunter. It was, as usual, filled with typos. It was also, as usual, filled with exclamation points meant to convey his exuberance.

“Hunter, we are cut from the same cloth,” James Biden wrote. “... You are a fine and yes, a gentle person. Believe it or not, I know you. Sounds corny, but we both deserve to enjoy the moment. Concentrate on the good in our lives and try to step out of all the bullshit you deal with on a minute to minute basis.”

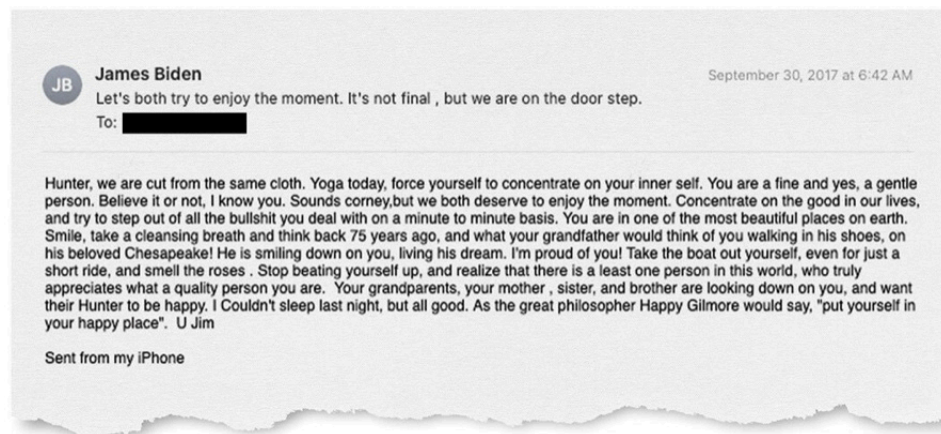
The exchange comes from a copy of a hard drive that Hunter Biden purportedly dropped off at a repair shop and never retrieved. A copy was provided to The Washington Post, and the emails cited in this article were authenticated by two forensic analysts.

James and Hunter Biden were in the midst of a lucrative deal with Chinese executives at the time, while Joe Biden was out of public service for the first time in nearly a half-century, having left the vice presidency a few months earlier. Hunter Biden was also wrestling with drug addiction, financial problems and a relationship with his late brother Beau’s widow that had become public. Amid all that, Hunter Biden turned to his uncle, at least as much as to his famous father, for emotional support.

Hunter also relied upon James Biden, who goes by Jim and is known as Jimmy within the family, on matters of dollars and cents. Within days of that exchange, Hunter received another email from his uncle urging him to take advantage of a financial opportunity related to Joe Biden. The urgency is clear, even if the precise subject is not.

“You need to call me now,” James Biden wrote on Oct. 1, 2017. “Just got off the phone with your father...We have the two biggest days of our business life in front of us!!!!!! We must be smart, or everything goes up in smoke! Please call me. You MUST remain calm. Timing could not be worse. Calm and measured!!!! Paybacks can come later.”

James Biden has in many ways always been the protector in the Biden family, the one who made sure the machinery ran while his brother soared; President Biden as recently as late last year referred to him as “my brother Jimmy, who fixes everything.” He has been there for the bad times, comforting family members in distress, visiting the bedside of loved ones, getting them into rehab when needed. He was by his brother’s side at his first wedding, was at the hospital when Beau died, found a neurosurgeon when Joe had a brain aneurysm.



(Obtained by The Washington Post)

He even helped paint Hunter’s law school apartment. When Joe Biden became president, his brother was tasked with redecorating the Oval Office.

Yet from the start of Joe Biden’s political career, James, who is seven years younger, has also walked up to ethical lines his brother has avoided, leaving a complicated trail of business dealings and angry lawsuits.

In a rare phone interview, James Biden said he tries to keep a low profile, and he used more than a few expletives to describe unwelcome attention from Republicans and the media. “I’m the guy who

assists in everything. When it comes to my family I try to be as supportive as I can,” he said. “But this notion of ‘the fixer,’ or any reference that has a negative connotation, is offensive.”

He added, “The notion I am some underworld figure and I am a fixer or the cleaner or I’m this or that — I’m a very concerned family member who tries to protect my family in every way I can, in what is a very ethical way.”

Several times during the interview, James Biden mused aloud that he should not be speaking to a reporter, then resumed talking. Eventually his wife, Sara, entered the room and advised him to cut off the conversation. “Talk to a real person who knows me,” James Biden said, then offered, “Guess what? There’s not many who do.”

James Biden has included Hunter in a number of financial deals, his expressions of undying empathy for his nephew alternating with excited business pitches. Yet a number of those deals have turned sour, as onetime business partners have alleged in court documents that James Biden has said he would bring in business using the Biden name and connections, then failed to deliver — allegations he denies.

The Post spoke to associates of James Biden at his request. They spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive legal matters and declined to provide specifics. Hunter Biden did not respond to several requests for comment sent through his attorney, and the White House declined to comment.

The intricate mesh of relationships — between the president, his son Hunter, his brother James — illustrates how the president’s relatives have struggled to make a life in his political shadow.



Hunter Biden during the White House Easter Egg Roll on the South Lawn in April. (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

The president and his family are certain to face any number of investigations if Republicans retake at least one chamber of Congress in November's midterm elections. Republicans have recently drawn more attention to James Biden, in addition to Hunter, an indication that they would put him under a spotlight.

James and Hunter Biden are far from the first presidential relatives to face scrutiny. From Billy Carter to Roger Clinton, presidential siblings have caused political problems, while former president Donald Trump's family members regularly sought business opportunities related to his presidency and even took positions in his administration.

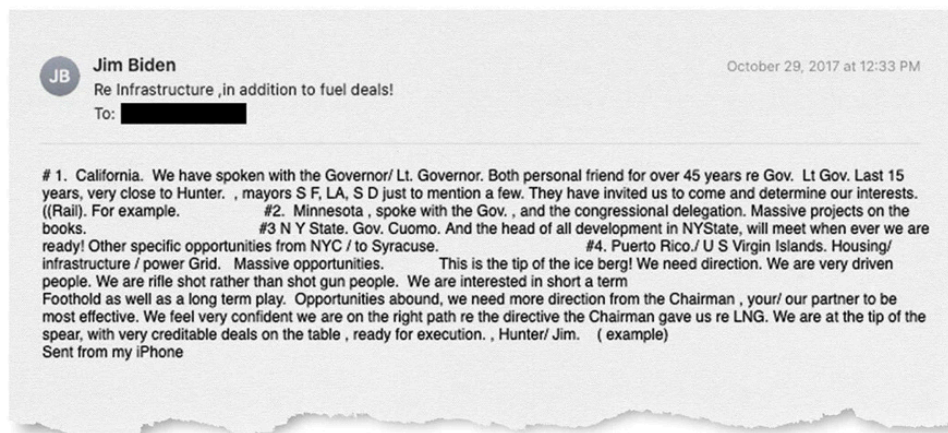
It is clear that James Biden both soothed his troubled nephew in moments of genuine despair and worked to cultivate business opportunities with him. "My Uncle Jimmy is my best friend in the world," Hunter said last year during a podcast interview.

The two men share the light banter of close family members, emailing on subjects like the sporting events of Hunter Biden's children. In the emails, James Biden at one point asked Hunter for advice on getting his boat painted at his marina ("They are thieves down in Fla!!!!") and at another advised him on attire for an upcoming dinner ("Jeans very casual!!").

James Biden also frequently encouraged Hunter to take time to relax, to try yoga and meditation. "It's worked for you in the past," he wrote on Oct. 4, 2017. "Force yourself. Im hitting the gym big time. Let's take some stress off, any way we can! I'm with you pal."

A few weeks after that message, James Biden was enthusiastically outlining ways for the two of them to leverage political connections in pursuit of infrastructure projects. They knew officials in California, James reminded Hunter, including Gov. Jerry Brown, so they could go after rail projects in the state. There were massive projects shaping up in Minnesota, he added, where they could tap the Democratic delegation for help. In New York, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo would meet with them whenever they were ready.

"We are very driven people," James Biden exhorted. "We are rifle shot rather than shot gun people."



(Obtained by The Washington Post)

‘You never have to ask Jimmy’

Growing up, the Bidens were a tightknit family, and James Biden’s role of sticking up for others was clear from an early age. Their mother, Joe Biden wrote in his book “Promises to Keep,” “once shipped my brother Jim off with instructions to bloody the nose of a kid who was picking on smaller kids, and she gave him a dollar when he’d done it.”

When Joe Biden ran for Senate in 1972, it was a family affair. The candidate’s sister, Valerie, was the campaign manager. His youngest brother, Frank, rallied student volunteers. And it was 23-year-old James’s job to raise money. From the beginning, James was willing to tiptoe up to ethical lines in a way that Joe Biden, by his own account, was not.

In the heat of the campaign, James reported to Joe that Bill Holayter, president of the International Association of Machinists, was willing to make a \$5,000 donation — but wanted to meet the candidate first. When they sat down, the cigar-smoking Holayter asked Joe Biden if he would support the union on an upcoming issue.

“If you’re asking me how I’m gonna vote on a particular issue, you can take that check and stick it,” Joe Biden told him, according to “Promises to Keep.” Joe Biden stormed off, so James Biden chased his brother to the elevator and asked him to reconsider. When Joe still refused to accept the check, James took it himself, according to the book.

James Biden rejects the idea that he was willing to engage in anything that his brother would not. “To get a meeting with that guy, I had to wait in his lobby for probably six months,” he recalled in the interview. “Finally he says, ‘Hey, I want to talk to your brother.’ I said fine, I brought him down.” When his brother stormed out of the room, James Biden said, he persuaded Holayter to apologize.

“The way that it was portrayed or suggested that I did something inappropriate or shady or that I crossed the line, or that I was the one that took the check and he refused?” he said. “Total, absolute bullshit.” He added, “This notion I did something that he wouldn’t do? Give me a break.”

Some of James Biden’s support for his brother was more personal — deeply so. When Biden’s first wife Neilia and their infant daughter died in a car crash, it was James who identified the bodies, who delivered the horrific news to Neilia’s parents, who broke the news to his brother that they were gone.

“Jimmy is among the most generous people in the world, and he would — the expression that we use in the family, ‘If you have to ask, it’s too late’ — and you never have to ask Jimmy,” their sister Valerie, called Val by the family, said during a recent Washington Post Live event. “He’s always a step ahead of trying to help. He’s fierce. It’s not a pushover by any means. He is genuine. You always know where you stand with Jimmy.”

Over the years and especially now, critics have often asked why the president has tolerated the dubious behavior of his family members, especially Hunter. That question may never be answered. But it’s clear that the Bidens have bonded through the kind of tragedy few other families can imagine.

After Joe’s wife and baby daughter died, James converted a garage outside Joe’s house into an apartment so he could be a constant presence as Joe tried to raise two young boys while learning the ways of the Senate. In those early days, James often tagged along on congressional trips — including a side jaunt to Europe with his brother, at the advice of Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.). “I became basically a Senate wife for the first year,” James Biden later recalled.

To Hunter and Beau, he was the fun-loving uncle. The one who brought the toys and candy, or tossed them into the air at the swimming pool. The one who dragged an artificial tree into their hospital room when they were recovering from the accident that killed their mother and sister as the family shopped for a Christmas tree.

Joe Biden has recounted moving Hunter into a New Haven apartment when his son was in law school, and realizing the entire place needed a new coat of paint. “My brother Jimmy, who fixes everything — my brother Jimmy was with us, and we went down and bought about 28 gallons of paint,” the president said last year during a talk in Connecticut. “For real. It was hot as hell.”



Joe Biden and his brother Jimmy choose their flavors at Ellen’s Homemade Ice Cream in Charleston, W.Va., during the 2008 campaign. (Christina Jamison/NBCUniversal/Getty Images)

Business pursuits and litigation

As vital as James Biden has been in his brother's personal life, he has also been a potential liability in his political one. His repeated efforts at business deals — sometimes using the family name or enlisting Hunter — have not infrequently ended in recrimination, bankruptcy or lawsuits. In several cases, as noted by ProPublica and in Ben Schreckinger's book "The Bidens," associates claimed that James promised to use his status as a Biden to drum up business but didn't, which he denies.

Shortly after Joe Biden became a senator, James Biden opened a nightclub in Wilmington, Del., with bank loans from lenders who may have been eager to please the new young senator on the Banking Committee. Joe Biden was in touch with the banks that were lending money to his brother but did not directly influence the loans, according to news accounts at the time.

On one occasion in 1975, Joe Biden called Edwards Danforth, chairman of the Farmers' Bank of Delaware, to complain about his brother's treatment. Biden's justification, the News Journal reported at the time, was that he'd only called because the bank was threatening that a default would be embarrassing for Joe. "They were trying to use me as a bludgeon," he said. Eventually, the nightclub folded.

Years later, in 2000, James took out a \$353,000 loan from Leonard Barrack, a prominent Biden donor, according to registry of deeds documents. Barrack simultaneously hired James's wife, Sara, and paid nearly \$250,000 for the couple to travel internationally to work generating business for his firm.

But the relationship fell apart and resulted in competing lawsuits between Barrack and the Bidens over Sara Biden's contract and compensation. Barrack's firm claimed that, in hiring Sara Biden,

James Biden had promised to help land clients in part “through his family name and his resemblance to his brother, United States Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware,” but they generated business for themselves rather than the firm.

Sara Biden, who was represented in part by her nephew, Beau Biden, filed a countersuit. The parties settled in 2004, and Barrack did not respond to a request for comment.

There is no record that James directly responded to the assertion in legal papers, but in the phone interview he suggested that the various lawsuits against him were meritless. “It’s not that I haven’t made mistakes in my life,” he said. “But the fact of the matter is, here I sit, anybody can sue anybody for anything. But it would never be cast in the light that ‘they can sue me just because they can sue me.’ ”

James Biden declined to respond in detail to the legal claims he’s faced over the years and referred questions to legal associates, who declined to address specifics.

A few years after the Barrack dispute, James and Hunter jointly purchased a controlling interest in a hedge fund called Paradigm Global Advisors, along with a partner named Anthony Lotito. But that relationship, too, soured, as the Bidens and Lotito sued each other for fraud, each side claiming the other had misled them. The case was ultimately settled.

In a discussion with Marc Maron on his “WTF” podcast last year, Hunter was asked about getting involved in a hedge fund with his uncle. “I tried. It didn’t work out. I was sober. I was sober then,” he said. “It just, it just didn’t work out, you know. I mean, one thing is that you think that, you know, D.C. is bad. Go to Wall Street. I mean, it’s just like, oh, my God.”

He defended James Biden's role. "Look, my uncle is the most amazing man, one of the most amazing people I know," Hunter Biden said. "Yeah. He is literally there for everyone. He's my, he's my best friend in the world, my Uncle Jim. I mean, he's an incredible human being in his own right."

In another case, after teaming up with Americore Health, a Florida-based health-care company, James Biden was accused of stealing blueprints for a rural health-care business and failing to generate the international investments he'd promised.

In June 2019, two medical service firms who were involved in that arrangement — Azzam Medical Services and Diverse Medical Management — sued James Biden and his business partners. Among other things, they alleged James had cited his family connections and promised that Joe Biden would promote the firms' health-care model in his 2020 campaign.

They also alleged that James touted Joe Biden's connections to the labor movement and the Department of Veterans Affairs, promising the plaintiffs he'd help them win federal contracts and expand their model nationwide. James Biden's attorneys disputed many of the allegations in the lawsuit, which was settled in 2020.

And in a case that didn't end up in litigation but has drawn recent attention, James and Hunter Biden signed a lucrative deal in 2017 with officials from the Chinese energy conglomerate CEFC. As The Post previously reported, the company and its executives paid \$4.8 million to entities controlled by the two Bidens over the course of 14 months — even though the energy projects Hunter Biden discussed with CEFC never materialized.

The arrangement provided Hunter Biden with a monthly stipend of \$100,000 while his uncle received \$65,000, according to records on

the copy of Hunter Biden's hard drive, as well as bank documents obtained by Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa). James and Hunter Biden have declined to respond to questions about this arrangement.

A source close to Biden, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters, declined to comment on several specific questions about his legal issues, saying only that "Jim Biden has always maintained that he conducted himself ethically and honorably in all his business dealings."

'He sent in the cavalry: my uncle Jim'

Congressional Republicans are increasingly making it clear that James Biden as well as Hunter will be a target of their probes. "Hunter Biden wasn't the only Biden family member who had connections to the [Chinese] communist regime," Grassley said in a recent floor speech. "James Biden did as well."

But James Biden's bond with his nephew goes far beyond business deals, a fact that has played into the president's own relationship with his son. When Hunter was in the depths of a drug relapse, he often would stop answering his father's anxious calls, and Joe Biden knew the best way to reach him was to go through James.

"He sent in the cavalry: my uncle Jim," Hunter Biden wrote in his memoir. "Uncle Jimmy is my best friend in the world and Dad knew that if his younger brother asked me to do something, I'd do it. Uncle Jim has his own superpower: he gets things done."

At one point in 2018, James Biden flew out to Los Angeles, pulled Hunter out of a hotel room and checked him into rehab. Hunter wrote about the encounter in his memoir, and there is further evidence on the copy of his hard drive, which includes increasingly urgent messages from his uncle.

On Sept. 17, 2017, James wrote Hunter an email with the subject line, “Our relationship ‘Rock Solid’ ” and apologized for not providing even more comfort.

“You are a fine and (yes) noble man. I will do better from my end, and start acting like a real friend and partner,” James Biden wrote. “I am on your side/team period. Forgive me for being so insensitive to all that you are going thru. If you will permit me, I would like to start being part of the solution, rather than another problem to deal with. We will get thru this. I really believe that there are good times ahead.”

He added, “I love you pal, U Jim.”

About two weeks later, James Biden took out his phone to type the “corney” message to Hunter. He added other words of encouragement, and even indirectly suggested that he might appreciate Hunter in a way his own father did not.

“Stop beating yourself up, and realize that there is a least one person in this world, who truly appreciates what a quality person you are,” he wrote. “Your grandparents, your mother, sister, and brother are looking down on you, and want their Hunter to be happy. I Couldn’t sleep last night, but all good. As the great philosopher Happy Gilmore would say, ‘put yourself in your happy place.’ ”

Alice Crites, Tom Hamburger and Craig Timberg contributed to this report.

POLITICS

Abortion has long been complicated for Biden. Now, he leads the fight.

Biden has long described a tension between his faith and his politics. As president, the potential end of *Roe v. Wade* makes him the nation's highest-profile champion of abortion rights.

By Matt Viser

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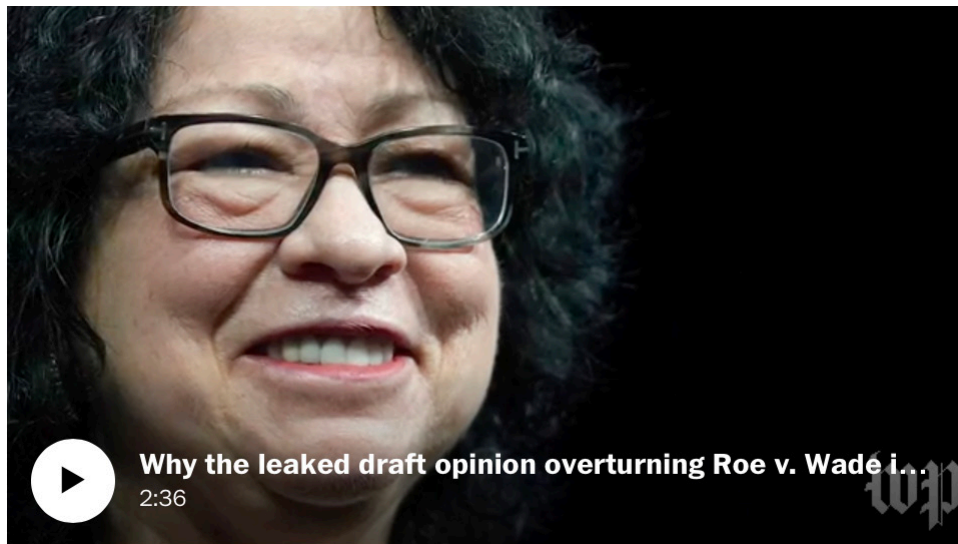
President Biden speaks about the leaked Supreme Court draft opinion on *Roe v. Wade* before leaving Washington on May 3. (Evan Vucci/AP)

Joe Biden became a senator in 1973, just 17 days before the Supreme Court decided the landmark abortion rights case *Roe v. Wade*. Soon after, the young senator, a practicing Catholic, told an interviewer that he disagreed with the decision and that he had views on such matters that made him “about as liberal as your grandmother.”

“I don’t like the Supreme Court decision on abortion. I think it went too far,” he concluded in 1974. “I don’t think that a woman has the sole right to say what should happen to her body.”

Nearly a half-century later, with Biden evolving along with his party on the issue of abortion rights, he again declared the court was moving too far — this time, he argued, in the opposite direction.

“The idea that we’re going to make a judgment that is going to say that no one can make the judgment to choose to abort a child, based on a decision by the Supreme Court, I think, goes way over-board,” Biden said on Tuesday in reaction to a leaked Supreme Court draft opinion proposing to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.



On May 2, an initial draft of a Supreme Court opinion overruling *Roe v. Wade* was leaked to Politico. The Post’s legal affairs reporter Ann Marimow explains. (Video: The Washington Post)

Throughout his career, Biden’s views on abortion — at least as a political matter — have steadily shifted in a way that has in recent years placed him in line with his party but at uncomfortable odds with his church. And now that he has become the second Catholic

president in U.S. history, he suddenly finds himself the country's highest-ranking champion of abortion rights as it faces its greatest challenge since *Roe*.

"It concerns me a great deal that we're going to, after 50 years, decide a woman does not have a right to choose," Biden told reporters as he boarded Air Force One on Tuesday.

Abortion has long been a vexing issue for some Catholic Democrats, and Biden has been openly conflicted over it. While as president he has been an ally of abortion rights groups, he has also almost never used the word "abortion," as though he finds it uncomfortable — or politically risky — to do so.

But as a clear supporter of abortion rights, he has been at odds with a group of American bishops, with some refusing to offer him Communion and others saying the president — who attends Mass almost every weekend — has no right to call himself a serious Catholic.

"For Joe Biden, his gap from the institutional leadership of the church in this country and also in the Vatican is widening," said Massimo Faggioli, a Villanova University theology professor and author of "Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States." "Because politically, he has to defend *Roe v. Wade*, to legislate on it probably. That will expose him to even more accusations that he's a heretic, he's not a Catholic, and that all Catholics who voted for him are heretics."

The only other Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, confronted more open prejudice for his faith and famously gave a speech to Protestant ministers two months before the election to clear the air.

"I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president, should

he be Catholic, how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote,” Kennedy declared.

But Kennedy was elected more than a decade before *Roe v. Wade*, so he did not confront the conflict over abortion as Biden does.

“He is a Catholic president who has no real majority in Congress, but even less in his church,” Faggioli said of Biden. “This is a problem that Kennedy did not have.”

And while Biden has received support from the Vatican, with Pope Francis welcoming him and protecting him from the sometimes-vocal criticism of his American coreligionists, that relationship could now grow more complex. Biden, as the nation’s most prominent Catholic, could shift from defending an existing law — one that has been accepted precedent for nearly a half-century — to actively pressing for new legislation to codify abortion rights in law.

It could also mark a new role for Biden himself. In five decades of public life, he has sometimes signaled unease with going against church teachings, but now he has a political imperative to do just that, and in a high-profile way.

“He is the most prominent Catholic political spokesman right now, and this is a uniquely important period for him to have a strong voice on the issue,” said Mark J. Rozell, who co-edited the book “Catholics and US Politics After the 2016 Elections.”

Biden’s complex feelings on abortion — an apparent discomfort, combined with a sense that the procedure should not be banned — mirror those of many Americans, however. Because of that, Rozell suggested Biden’s message could resonate if he handles the issue forthrightly.

“If he can speak forcefully and effectively on this issue, representing the angst that not only Democrats but swing voters feel, that could be transformative in this election cycle,” said Rozell, dean of the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. “It is a compelling moment for the president.”

Biden on Tuesday nodded toward some of his own views, with a reference to St. Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century theologian.

“*Roe* says what all basic mainstream religions have historically concluded, that the existence of a human life and being is a question,” Biden said. “Is it at the moment of conception? Is it six months? Is it six weeks? Is it quickening, like Aquinas argued?”

A White House official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to be identified, said that Biden “has been very consistent over the years that he will not impose his personal faith on others” and that the president supports codifying *Roe v. Wade*.

The position Biden landed on for much of his career has been to support abortion rights but oppose federal funding for the procedure. At times, he has opposed such funding even in cases of rape and incest, a position that aligned him with Republicans but put him out of step with other prominent Catholic Democrats such as the late senator Edward M. Kennedy.

For decades, Biden also supported what’s known as “Mexico City policy,” which prohibits U.S. funding for foreign organizations that perform or actively promote abortion. And in 1982, Biden was among the few Democrats to vote for a constitutional amendment that would have let states bypass *Roe v. Wade* and restrict abortion.

At the time, Biden said it was “the single most difficult vote I’ve cast as a U.S. senator,” adding, “I’m probably a victim, or a product, however you want to phrase it, of my background.”

As he approached his 2008 presidential campaign — he dropped out and ended up becoming then-Sen. Barack Obama’s running mate — he mused about the tension between his faith and his political role. “I’m a practicing Catholic, and it is the biggest dilemma for me in terms of comporting my religious and cultural views with my political responsibility,” he said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” in April 2007.

To his hometown paper, he described himself as “middle-of-the-road” on abortion and conceded that “I may not be what the party’s looking for. ... I may not be ‘pure’ enough about abortion rights.” Biden noted that he had voted to limit so-called partial-birth abortion — but had also opposed restrictions to *Roe v. Wade*. “And so,” he said, “I’ve made everybody angry.”

As Biden entered the 2020 presidential primaries, he found himself needing to appease a Democratic Party that had shifted, becoming more emboldened and unified on abortion rights, as well as women’s rights more generally.

A key moment during his presidential campaign came when he reversed his long-held position on the Hyde Amendment, which prohibited federal funding for abortion. He was initially resistant to changing but faced an uproar within the party.

So one night in Atlanta, he read from his notes, deviating from the teleprompter to reverse the position he had held for four decades, saying the growing assault on *Roe* had persuaded him circumstances had changed. It was a sign to abortion rights groups that he was willing to shift and oppose the Hyde Amendment.

“The Biden administration is absolutely an ally in the fight for reproductive freedom and protecting abortion access,” said Sam Lau, the senior director of advocacy media at the Planned Parenthood Action Fund. “At the same time, more can and must be done to blunt the barrage of attacks.”

Biden, in fact, told Planned Parenthood Action that as president he would be an ally.

“We will protect women’s constitutional right to choose,” he said in a June 2020 video. “I am proud to stand with you in this fight.”

They didn’t know at the time how fierce the fight would ultimately become.

The Biden-Trump rematch, in many ways, has already begun

Biden and Trump appear to be nudging each other into a rare face-off between a sitting president and the predecessor he unseated

By Matt Viser

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President Biden and former president Donald Trump have faced early pushback from their respective parties and voters on potential 2024 reelection campaigns. (Video: Blair Guild/The Washington Post)

President Biden was at a Democratic reception in Maryland a few weeks ago when his rhetoric turned toward an increasingly frequent topic — “what Trump is doing and the Trumpers are doing.” An audience member called out, “Lock him up!” and Biden went on to cite “the new polls showing me beating Trump by six or eight points.”

A few days earlier, former president Donald Trump was at a rally in Pennsylvania when he, too, turned toward a frequent topic: “We’re leading Biden ... by record numbers in the polls.” He said three times, with growing enthusiasm, “So I may just have to do it again!”

The country seems to be barreling toward a rematch that few voters actually want, but that two presidents — one current, one former — cannot stop talking about. Biden and Trump both say they are planning to make their decisions in the coming months, but with a lingering codependency between them, they each appear to be nudging the other into what would be a rare faceoff between the same two candidates four years apart.

In some sense, given the growing attacks, a 2024 grudge match is already underway. But it is less a heavyweight rematch that the country is eager to see and more of a rerun that few seem to be looking forward to. Neither Biden nor Trump is enthusiastically embraced by his own party, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll released Sunday.

Some 56 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents said they want the party to nominate “someone other than Biden” in 2024, and 35 percent want him to run for a second term. Among those under age 40, a resounding 75 percent want the party to pick someone other than Biden, despite his recent action on climate change and student loan forgiveness, two issues thought to appeal to younger voters.

“I don’t think Biden has done a bad job by any means,” said Adam Kane, a 48-year-old museum director from Peacham, Vt., adding that he likes and respects Biden. “But it’s just time for some fresh leadership. He’s just too old, is what it comes down to. It’s time to pass the torch to the next generation.”

Most Democrats want their party to nominate someone other than Biden for 2024

Q: Would you like the Democratic Party to nominate Biden to run for a second term as president in 2024, or would you like the Democratic Party to nominate someone other than Biden as its candidate for president? (Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents)



Source: Sept. 18-21, 2022, Washington Post-ABC News poll of 438 Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents with an error margin of +/- 5.5 percentage points.

THE WASHINGTON POST

Biden, 79, will be celebrating his 80th birthday this November and is already the nation’s oldest president. Trump turned 76 in June.

Republicans and Republican-leaning independents are divided over Trump, with 47 percent saying the party should nominate him and 46 percent preferring someone else. It is a stronger showing than Biden’s, but it also reflects a marked drop in support from when Trump was in office; a 2019 Post-ABC poll found 67 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners wanted the party to nominate Trump for a second term.

Republicans are split on whether to nominate Trump for 2024

Q: Would you like the Republican Party to nominate Trump to run for another term as president in 2024, or would you like the Republican Party to nominate someone other than Trump as its candidate for president? (Among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents)



Source: Sept. 18-21, 2022, Washington Post-ABC News poll of 466 Republicans and Republican-leaning independents with an error margin of +/- 5.5 percentage points.

EMILY GUSKIN / THE WASHINGTON POST

If they were to run against each other, registered voters were split almost down the middle, with 48 percent supporting Trump and 46 percent supporting Biden, the Post-ABC poll showed, within the margin of error. In 2020, Biden won the national popular vote by 4.5 percentage points.

“Trump is too much, and Biden is too little,” said Howard Walker, a 54-year-old Democrat from New York. He voted for Biden in 2020, thinks Trump has turned the Republican Party into a cult and says a Trump victory in 2024 would mean the end of democracy. But he no longer views Biden as the best candidate.

“Sometimes he’s there, sometimes he’s not,” Walker said. “Sometimes he tells long grandma stories that go nowhere, which is what old people do. And that’s okay, but that’s not what we need in a president.”

Many Republican voters, similarly, say they would support Trump if that were their only option, but they are yearning for a new leader.

“It would be best if someone else is running,” said Karin Cabell, a 58-year-old Republican from Hazelton, Pa. “It would be nice to just have fresh blood on both sides.”

Biden and Trump, though, are in a sense each other’s nemesis, and both may have trouble walking away from a rematch.

Trump views Biden as having unfairly taken the presidency from him, creating elaborate explanations for why he lost that have no basis in reality. Biden views Trump as an existential threat to the country’s founding principles, and sees himself as uniquely positioned to prevent Trump from regaining power. Unseating Trump in 2020 remains one of Biden’s proudest accomplishments.



Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the final presidential debate of 2020, on the campus of Belmont University in Nashville. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

“Why would I not run against Donald Trump if he’s the nominee?” he asked in an ABC News interview in December.

The White House has recently seen an advantage in returning to a familiar foil, particularly heading into the midterm elections, and Biden has increasingly had Trump on his mind, or at least on his lips. “The only reason I ran is because Donald Trump was running,” he said at a June 10 fundraiser in Los Angeles.

At a Maryland fundraiser in late August, Biden called Trump’s “extreme MAGA philosophy” something that is “almost like semi-fascism.” It was a line that aides said later was unplanned, but unsurprising given Biden’s views. He also said “Trump and the extreme MAGA Republicans have made their choice: to go backwards, full of anger, violence, hate, and division.”

Biden has been road-testing several phrases to brand the Republicans who follow Trump. He has called them “The Trumpies” and “ultra-MAGA” and “MAGA Republicans,” and he has declared that “this is not your father’s Republican Party.” He says there are still mainstream Republicans he can work with, but “there is no question that the Republican Party today is dominated, driven, and intimidated by Donald Trump and the MAGA Republicans, and that is a threat to this country.”

Biden has sharpened his focus on Trump and escalated his rhetorical attacks, to the point that his central political message is now the importance of keeping Trump and his followers from power.

“Folks, you can’t be pro-insurrection and pro-democracy. Not a joke. I’m being deadly earnest now. You can’t be pro-insurrection and pro-democracy,” he said in Maryland. “You can’t support law enforcement and call the mob that attacked the police on January 6th in the United States Capitol ‘patriots.’ ”

During remarks on Friday, he warned, “It’s become a litmus test in their party to pledge loyalty to Donald Trump by buying into the ‘big lie.’ ”

Similarly, Trump, in his recent rallies, can mention Biden nearly two dozen times in a single event, asserting that Biden is doing a much worse job as president than he did and boasting that he would easily win a rematch.

“A poll just came out. Did you see it?” he said at a Sept. 17 rally in Ohio. “I’m 18 points up on Biden. Who the hell wouldn’t be? Who wouldn’t be?”

He criticized Biden over gas prices — both for allowing them to rise in the first place and for using petroleum reserves to lower them.

And he insisted the reduced prices would not last: “Right after the election, it’s going to double up and go higher than anybody ever believed.”

“Trump was right on everything,” Trump continued. “And I believe I was. I was right on everything. Including Afghanistan and Ukraine. The Biden administration is outrageous.”

He also responded to Biden’s Sept. 1 speech in Philadelphia, where the president warned that Trump was seeking to tear apart the fabric of democracy, saying those remarks amounted to “the most vicious, hateful, and divisive speech ever delivered by an American president.”

He said Biden was in effect branding Trump supporters as “enemies of the state.” He added, “He’s an enemy of the state, you want to know the truth. The enemy of the state is him and the group that control him, which is circling around him: ‘Do this, do that, Joe, you’re going to do this, Joe.’ ”

One factor complicating Trump’s potential presidential run is the growing series of investigations and lawsuits against him, which appear to be picking up steam. Some analysts believe his legal troubles will make it harder for him to run, since he will need to devote time and resources to his legal defense. Others argue that Trump is even more likely to seek the White House now, as a form of protection against the legal challenges.

The United States has a rich history of presidential rematches, dating as far back as John Adams, who defeated Thomas Jefferson in 1796 only to lose to him four years later. But there are few direct parallels to what could transpire between Biden and Trump in 2024.

It is highly unusual for a sitting president to be unseated, then run against his successor. Most defeated presidents — George H.W. Bush was the last one — head into a quiet retirement from politics. In this, as in so much else, Trump is an anomaly, choosing instead to barnstorm the country to claim falsely that he was cheated.

The closest parallel to a potential Biden-Trump rerun may be the 1892 race between Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison. Cleveland served one term as president before being unseated by Harrison, then he tried to get his old job back, and ultimately succeeded.

Their second campaign focused largely on the same issues that had dominated the first, such as tariff rates, and it hardly electrified the nation. “No one showed much interest in the result,” historian Henry Adams wrote.

“The 1892 election was one of the quieter ones in American history,” said Troy Senik, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush and author of “A Man of Iron: The Turbulent Life and Improbable Presidency of Grover Cleveland.” “Because Cleveland spent much of it plagued by gout and Harrison was preoccupied with the health of his wife, who was fighting an ultimately fatal case of tuberculosis.”

Despite lively political cartoons — some referring to an out-of-wedlock child that Cleveland had allegedly fathered — the candidates lacked the mutual loathing of Biden and Trump. “Between the two candidates themselves, there didn’t appear to be animosity,” said Charles Hyde, president and CEO of the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.

In fact, when Harrison was sworn into office in 1889, photos show the recently ousted Cleveland holding an umbrella over his head as the new president took the oath of office. A few years later — after

Harrison defeated Cleveland, and Cleveland in turn defeated Harrison — some encouraged Harrison to run yet again in 1896, for a third head-to-head match.

“Harrison gave it some brief consideration, and then dispelled any notion he’d run again,” Hyde said. “After he lost the election of 1892, he said he felt like a man released from prison.”

Scott Clement and Emily Guskin contributed to this report.

WHITE HOUSE

As Biden and Xi meet, can their old connection avert a clash?

The two spent hours together before they rose to lead their nations.
But times have changed dramatically.

By Matt Viser

<https://wapo.st/3K3A444>

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Then-Vice President Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in 2012 displaying shirts from students at a California school. (Frederic J. Brown/AFP/Getty Images)

Joe Biden shook hands with Xi Jinping that day in 2011 and the two vice presidents walked up a red carpet to the strains of their countries' national anthems, until Biden paused unexpectedly before a Chinese official with a full head of hair. "If I had hair like yours, I'd be president," he cracked, breaking the atmosphere of stately diplomacy.

Later in the whirlwind trip, Biden made a more serious point: “President Obama and I want to see a rising China. We don’t fear a rising China.”

More than a decade later, the two men are slated to meet again after Biden arrives Sunday night in Bali, their first face-to-face meeting since Biden became president and Xi consolidated his position as the strongest Chinese leader in recent memory.

Biden certainly has not acquired the thick mane of the Chinese diplomat. His administration now very much does fear a rising China. And U.S. officials are hoping that — somehow — the personal connection the two men forged more than a decade ago can soften the often hostile, sometimes volatile and potentially dangerous standoff between two global behemoths.

The Biden-Xi meeting is perhaps the most consequential encounter of a six-day foreign trip that will circumnavigate the globe, and it comes at the fulcrum of Biden’s presidency. He departs just after voters delivered a verdict on the first two years of his tenure, giving him better-than-expected results but possibly costing Democrats control of at least one chamber of Congress.

It also comes as the Pentagon issues fresh warnings that China poses the “most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security.” With colliding positions on trade, Ukraine and especially Taiwan — and even fears of a global U.S.-China cold war — the pressure on Biden could hardly be greater.

The question, diplomats say, is whether their old connection can be enough to mitigate the bitterness of the rivalry between the two superpowers.



Biden and Xi walk across the Dujiangyan irrigation system in the province of Sichuan in 2011. (Peter Parks/AFP/Getty Images)

“We’re in an awful dynamic, and what is being put to the test is whether there is enough of a relationship, enough respect and ability to listen,” said Daniel Russel, a U.S. diplomat who helped plan Biden’s trip to meet with Xi in 2011. “There’s something there. These guys really do know each other. And they have a legacy, a relationship.”

He added, “It’s the one thing we have to work with — that is kind of the only thing we’ve got going for us in slowing the death spiral of the U.S.-China relationship.”

While Biden arrives at the Group of 20 summit in Bali with new political challenges after democratic elections put Republicans on the verge of a House majority, Xi comes strengthened, just weeks after steamrolling any opposition to extend his autocratic reign by at least another five years.

“Xi Jinping is feeling all-powerful in his internal politics,” said John Delury, a professor of Chinese studies at Seoul’s Yonsei University. “China is rising and feeling stronger and stronger in the relationship, and Xi is going to bring that into his meeting with Biden.”

The tension between the two leaders’ identities lent drama to their 2011 encounter and may do so again this week. One is a devoutly Catholic Irish American who prides himself on a middle-class upbringing and a jovial persona. The other is a faithful Communist Party member who has cultivated an image as a pragmatic man of the people.

Both are deep institutionalists who have come up in diametrically opposed political systems and are now locked in a battle that Biden has cast as an existential test of democracy versus autocracy.

At one time, they referred to each other in glowing terms, but no more. Biden has called his onetime friend “a thug.” Xi recently called Biden “my old friend,” but his government’s statements of hostility toward the United States are unmistakable.



Biden and Xi in the White House Roosevelt Room in 2012. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

Planting the seeds of a relationship

The hope of a detente, however frail, comes from a moment shortly after Barack Obama took office when the White House was eager to get a sense of Xi, who was a rising figure and presumptive leader of China but also an enigma.

“Xi was a bit of an unknown commodity — he had not served in the type of post that led to a lot of interaction with Americans,” said Ben Rhodes, who was Obama’s deputy national security adviser. “There was a real benefit in having somebody spend a lot of time with the guy to take his measure, get to know him and set up Obama’s capacity to hit the ground running with Xi when he became president.”

Biden had traveled to China only twice before, but he plunged into the task. He and Xi sat for tea and held several dinners, formal and informal. They held lengthy meetings in Beijing and traveled to Sichuan province to tour a centuries-old irrigation project. They visited a school, where Xi signed basketballs and Biden shot hoops (successfully scoring after a half-dozen tries).

Biden made news in Beijing when he slipped away for a lunch of pork buns, noodles and cucumbers at a small, family-run restaurant (it was known for its pig intestines, which Biden apparently skipped), joined by his granddaughter Naomi, who had studied Mandarin.

While Chinese leaders were criticized for being wealthy and distant, Biden dug into a meal that cost the equivalent of \$12. The action won popular coverage on Chinese social media, though it may have discomfited his hosts with their more aloof style of leadership.

But Xi himself quickly showed signs of being a new, less formal kind of Chinese leader, if not quite an American-style politician.

“It was clear to me that Xi Jinping was trying to learn more from Biden as a peer, about how you do it, what is it like,” Russel said. “He was about to embark on this incredible project leading China. We had no idea at the time all of the plots and ambitions he had in the back of his mind, but he wanted to know more. This is not a person who had much experience dealing with the world.”

When Xi made a reciprocal visit to the United States six months later, Biden toasted him at a State Department luncheon and hosted him for dinner at the Naval Observatory, the vice president’s official residence. Later in the trip, Biden met Xi in Los Angeles, where they toured a school.

“What Biden’s trip helped reaffirm for us was that [Xi] is ambitious, he’s a larger personality, and we’re going to have to deal with a different type of Chinese leader,” Rhodes said. “The way Xi behaved on those trips, you could tell he was more of a politician than an apparatchik.”

Once Xi became president, Biden’s interactions were more limited as Obama took the primary role. He did travel to China in 2013 — accompanied by his son Hunter, who met with a Chinese business partner during the trip — and spent more than five hours with Xi.

Xi continued to confirm early impressions of his bolder, more personal style: Meeting with Obama in 2013 in Rancho Mirage, Calif., he broke out a bottle of hard liquor during a working dinner to toast his fellow president.

Exaggerated interactions

Like any number of stories Biden tells, those involving him and Xi have grown more elaborate over time. While they unquestionably spent large amounts of time together, Biden has dramatically overstated their engagements.



Biden meets with Xi inside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 2013. (Lintao Zhang/Pool/AP/Getty Images)

He has repeatedly claimed, for example, that they traveled 17,000 miles together in China and the United States. A White House official said Biden was referring to the total distance he traveled to attend the meetings — not necessarily their actual time together — but even that does not fully add up, according to The Washington Post’s Fact Checker.

Biden has also pegged the time they spent together when he was vice president at 24 or 25 hours, and as president, Biden has spent perhaps 10 more hours on the phone with Xi. Yet his estimates of their interactions have ranged far beyond that.

In March, he said the two had had “over 36 hours of private meetings.” A month later, he referred to it as “90-some hours of talking or meeting.” About four hours later, he remarked, “I think it’s now up to 70-some hours with Xi Jinping.”

Since then, he has cited their meetings on 12 occasions, often alternating between “76 hours” and “78 hours,” although he recently shaved off 10 hours and said they’d spent 68 hours together.

Biden also often says he has spent more time with Xi than any other leader has, something that is also probably a stretch. Obama spent significant time with Xi after Biden’s initial visits, and foreign policy analysts say that Russian President Vladimir Putin almost certainly has been with Xi more than any American president.

Xi is a primary character in one of the most frequent stories Biden tells. He has recounted it at a General Motors plant in Detroit; an infrastructure event in Rosemount, Minn.; a White House Hanukkah menorah-lighting ceremony; an Equal Pay Day event; a gathering of U.S. troops in Poland; and a Hispanic Heritage Month reception.

In the anecdote, Biden recalls being with Xi on the Tibetan Plateau when Xi asked him, “Can you define America for me?” Biden says he responded, “I can, in one word: possibilities.” Telling the story in July 2021, Biden elaborated, “Possibilities — it’s what America is built on. It’s one of the reasons why we’re viewed sometimes as being somewhat egotistical. We believe anything is possible in America.”

Aides who were with Biden say that they do not recall that precise exchange but that it would have been in keeping with the leaders’ open-ended conversations meant to probe each other’s world views. “They were unburdening themselves and trying to explain and convey what kind of a country are we, what do we believe?” Russel said.

Biden worked to draw out Xi, quoting William Butler Yeats or offering an aphorism he said came from his father: “The only thing worse than war is unintended war.”



Biden speaks virtually with Xi in November 2021. (Demetrius Freeman/
The Washington Post)

‘We’re not old friends’

But any bond has frayed over the years as China has taken on a new ambition and aggressiveness under Xi. Biden during his presidential campaign called him a “thug,” albeit “a smart guy.” He has said his counterpart does not have a democratic “bone in his body.”

And perhaps mindful of previous presidents who believed they had a rapport with Putin, Biden has dismissed the idea that he and Xi are buddies. “Let’s get something straight — we know each other well, we’re not old friends,” he said in June 2021. “It’s just pure business.”

But he has also referred, almost wistfully, to a time when the two engaged in a seemingly genuine effort to understand each other.

“We’ve spent an awful lot of time talking to one another, and I hope we can have a candid conversation tonight as well,” Biden

said before a virtual meeting in 2021. “Maybe I should start more formally, although you and I have never been that formal with one another.”

“I’m very happy to see my old friend,” Xi responded.

The politics in both countries have changed radically since 2011, and the two superpowers are far more openly antagonistic.

“I think Xi Jinping believes his advantage on any American president is they’ll be gone before he is. He sits atop a system he has total control over,” Rhodes said. “He looks at a Joe Biden and knows, ‘I will be president of China after you are president of the United States.’ ”

Xi himself has changed, Rhodes added, which will force a recalibration from Biden.

“The Xi Jinping of 2022 is not the Xi Jinping of 2011,” Rhodes said. “That was a guy who was probably trying to ingratiate himself because he was a newcomer. Now he is a guy who thinks he’s the most powerful man in the world, even more powerful than the president of the United States. It’s the difference between the new kid on the block and the bully on the block.”

A senior administration official said White House aides expect the meeting to be a “substantive and in-depth conversation” between the two leaders but did not anticipate substantive progress on major issues.

Instead, the official said, White House officials view the meeting as an effort for Biden and Xi to understand each other’s priorities and establish a “floor” for the relationship to ensure lines of communication remain open at times of tension.

“I’m not willing to make any fundamental concessions,” Biden said during a news conference on Wednesday. “I’ve told him: I’m looking for competition — not conflict,” he added.

Leon Panetta, the former defense secretary who knows both men, compared their current interaction to “two boxers circling, really trying to weigh just exactly what the strengths and weaknesses are of the other side.”

He added, “I think deep down, both understand that in many ways, there has to be a better way for both countries to deal with one another rather than constantly threatening to destroy one another. In the personality for both of these leaders, there is a greater strain of wanting to see if there’s a way to accommodate the other. But who the hell knows — sometimes events can destroy the best of intentions.”

WHITE HOUSE DEBRIEF

Brandon returns, darkly: Democrats turn an insult into a pro-Biden meme

With “Let’s go, Brandon,” Biden’s critics found a way to curse him. His supporters are seizing on the “Dark Brandon” meme to vaunt his superpowers.

Analysis by Matt Viser

<https://wapo.st/3YpLPWY>

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President Biden on Aug. 7. In memes, his supporters are depicting him with laser eyes and lightning powers. (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

It’s not President Biden as many have come to know him. He’s not the aviator-wearing average Joe with familiar family folkisms, the grandpa who plays with his dogs, the ice cream aficionado.

In one image, he is in a lifeguard chair, lightning bolts coming out of his hands as he declares, “Let there be jobs!” In another, he’s sit-

ting in a chair that evokes Game of Thrones. In yet more, his eyes are glowing with lasers, or he is bearded and wearing an eye patch. At times there is rubble in his wake.

Meet Dark Brandon.

Over the past few weeks, Democrats have attempted to co-opt one of the most searing catchphrases that Republicans have pinned on Biden, turning the “Let’s go, Brandon” meme around and reclaiming it as their own version of Biden fan fiction.

The new liberal-driven meme is meant to depict Biden as having superpowers, able to smite an al-Qaeda leader and pass legislation through Congress with ease.

Rather than an ineffective president inspiring Republican vitriol and earning historically low approval ratings, he is a superhero familiar with the dark arts and able to change the course of history.

The tone reflects the shift in outlook at the White House, from a struggle to accomplish items on Biden’s agenda to a mood of more swaggering confidence. The imagery, which has roots among anti-Biden users on social media, has quickly gone from some of the far corners of the internet into more mainstream use by administration officials, liberal commentators and U.S. senators.

“Dark Brandon is crushing it,” tweeted deputy White House press secretary Andrew Bates, with an image of Biden with pupil-less red eyes and text that reads, “Your malarkey has been going on for long enough, kiddo.”

Rob Flaherty, the White House’s director of digital strategy, also tweeted an image of Biden smiling with red eyes, his hair haloed against a dark background. He did it on his official White House account, he wrote, to ensure that it goes into the historical archives.

Some have added Biden-isms to the memes (“Dark Brandon said ‘here’s the deal’ and then there was a deal,” wrote Megan Apper, a senior adviser in the Bureau of Global Public Affairs at the State Department). Others in the White House have openly ruminated about changing their Twitter biographies to state that they work for “Dark Brandon” rather than the 46th president of the United States.

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) posted an image of Dark Brandon after the Senate approved the sweeping Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which includes a number of key Biden priorities.



Imagery around Biden has taken different forms in recent years. During his time as vice president, the satirical Onion portrayed him as a sort of goofy uncle who washed his car shirtless in the White House driveway, while “Saturday Night Live” imitations played up his toothy smile.

To his supporters, he has often been a cool yet folksy guy wearing aviator sunglasses and driving a Corvette. To his critics, he is the bumbling, gaffe-prone elderly president who recently fell off his bike.

Early in his presidency, the “Let’s go, Brandon” tag tapped into the invective that many Republicans were aiming at Biden.

The phrase originated with a vulgar chant that broke out in October 2021 at Alabama’s Talladega Superspeedway. The crowd was screaming “F--- Joe Biden!” but an NBC Sports reporter — interviewing NASCAR driver Brandon Brown on air — quipped, “You can hear the chants from the crowd, ‘Let’s go, Brandon!’”

Supporters of Donald Trump claimed that the media was censoring anti-Biden content, the exchange went viral, and a shorthand for vulgarity directed at the president was born.

Yard signs with the phrase were put up. Trump supporters lined streets along Biden’s motorcade holding signs or chanting it. Rep. Bill Posey (R-Fla.) wrapped up a speech on the House floor by saying, “Let’s go, Brandon,” and it has been the focus of several songs, including one from Kid Rock. Even in Rehoboth Beach, Del., not far from Biden’s vacation home, stores sell T-shirts with the phrase.

Biden himself did not seem aware of the coded phrase. When he and first lady Jill Biden were taking calls on Christmas Eve for the NORAD Santa tracker, one man ended his call by saying, “Merry Christmas, and let’s go, Brandon.”

“Let’s go, Brandon, I agree,” the president responded.

Several months later, during the White House correspondents’ dinner, Biden joked about the phrase. “Republicans seem to support



Pro-Trump and anti-Biden merchandise was for sale at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas on Aug. 4. (Brandon Bell/Getty Images)

one fella, some guy named Brandon,” he said. “He’s having a really good year, and I’m kind of happy for him.”

The phrase “Let’s go, Brandon” has waxed and waned in popularity among right-wing online influencers since it started in October 2021, according to a Washington Post analysis of political text content on both sides of the political spectrum. Lately, though, it has ticked up again after Trump was greeted with chants of the phrase at a golf tournament, and it’s more frequently used than at the beginning of the year — a trend that perhaps inspired the left to pay attention to the meme again.

The Dark Brandon imagery began to gain traction in March and April, but often in ways that were not complimentary of Biden. That changed over the past week or so, particularly after the killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Biden supporters en masse began referring to him as Dark Brandon, with imagery of the president as the shadowy dark lord who authorized a drone strike. Some noted that he was sick with the coronavirus while doing so.

“Dark Brandon strikes again,” wrote one user, with an image of Biden wearing aviators and eating ice cream as a bomb explodes in the background.



They are using a similar aesthetic to Dark MAGA, an online movement that uses imagery of Trump and calls on him to seek political vengeance.

Critics on Monday pointed to what they alleged was Nazi imagery in the background of some of the images. Bates had tweeted a meme that placed Biden — with facial hair and an eye patch — on the movie poster for “The Dark Knight.”

“The Malarkey Will End,” it read. “The Dark Brandon Rises.”

Conservative commentators pointed to the background of the poster, saying it included an image of an eagle that was used as a Nazi symbol.

“So Biden’s Deputy White House Press Secretary, @Andrewjbates46, is posting literal Nazi memes on Twitter and our corrupt media is completely silent about it,” wrote Donald Trump Jr. “I’m sure that if this was a Trump WH staffer, the media would treat it the exact same way and totally ignore it.”

But Tobin Stone, who says he created the meme, said the image was in no way meant to evoke any Nazi elements.

“The eagle is not, and was never intended to be the Reichsadler,” he said in a direct message on Twitter, referring to the “Imperial Eagle” used by, among others, Nazi Germany. “It was just intended to be a representation of America’s national bird, the bald eagle, and any reasonable person should be able to interpret it as such. It was just an eagle, and nothing more.”

Stone said he is a graduate of Albright College in Reading, Pa., in political science and public policy and administration, but he makes posters and does graphic design in his free time. He has created several recent Dark Brandon memes.

“I’m a Democrat — and if we are being honest — the past year since the withdrawal from Afghanistan has been pretty disheartening for Democrats,” he wrote. “Up until this past month, where we’ve been seeing win after win, from the gun bill, to declining gas prices, and now the Inflation Reduction Act finally passing. It’s been great to see so many wins, and celebrating them with these memes that portray Biden as this powerful figure that made it all happen is just good fun.”

White House officials said they wanted to tap into the zeitgeist and saw an opportunity to draw attention to the successes they had last week.

Their base is less active on Twitter — and it was a point of pride during Biden’s campaign that they avoided the policies and conversations that may have been trending on social media — so White House aides have been more selective about when to engage.

But they have also sought to turn perceived negatives around. When Trump attempted to pressure Ukraine to investigate Biden ahead of the 2020 presidential election, they made the case to Democratic primary voters that Trump was most afraid of facing Biden.

It is unclear, however, whether Biden knows about the new direction the memes about him have taken.

Jeremy Merrill contributed to this report.

WHITE HOUSE

Biden is actually Greek. And Jewish. And raised by Puerto Ricans.

The president often uses identity to connect with crowds, most recently in Puerto Rico. Sometimes it may be a stretch.

By Matt Viser

<https://wapo.st/40Qx8hc>

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President Biden on Monday in Ponce, Puerto Rico, at a community center aiding those battered by Hurricane Fiona. (Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images)

President Biden, to hear him tell it, is as Greek as Poseidon. He was brought up by both the Puerto Rican community and the Black community. And he's more Jewish than the Jews.

"I probably went to shul more than many of you did. You all think I'm kidding," Biden said to laughter last week during a ceremony

celebrating Rosh Hashanah, pointing at a rabbi from Wilmington, Del. “He can tell you I’m not. I’m not.”

“I’m a practicing Catholic, but I’d go to services on Saturday and on Sunday,” he added. Amid the laughter, he again affirmed: “You all think I’m kidding. I’m not.”

And this week, speaking to a group of Puerto Ricans in the aftermath of Hurricane Fiona, Biden found kinship with a different culture.

“I was sort of raised in the Puerto Rican community at home, politically,” he said.

Put Biden in front of a crowd, and he’ll try to connect with it — even if, at times, the connection seems to stretch the available facts. When delivering the commencement address for the U.S. Naval Academy, he claimed to have almost attended the school. When he spoke to a group of athletes in Israel, he suggested he came close to trying out as a walk-on in the NFL.

The president tries to relate to local officials with remarks about his brief tenure as a county commissioner — 50 years ago — sometimes with a tale about removing a dead animal from a constituent’s lawn. (In one version, he carts it away in a pickup truck; in another, irritated at her tone, he places it on her doorstep.)

Biden’s search for a connection also shows his approach to ethnic politics, a skill that he needed for much of his career as he sought to cater to small slices of an electorate in a small state. And it reflects his role, once he graduated to the national stage, as a glad-handing pol who has visited Little Italy in Cleveland, Chinatown in Los Angeles and Little Havana in Miami.

“I’m an honorary Greek — not only today but every day!” Biden said in 2009 before quoting Aesop, the Greek fabulist and storyteller, at a celebration of Greek Independence Day.

“We haven’t had a Greek in the White House, but now we have Joe Bidenopoulos,” the then-vice president said on another occasion. (As an April Fool’s joke last year, the Greek Reporter news site wrote a story suggesting that researchers had traced Biden’s ancestors to a Greek man named Markos Bidenopoulos who fought in the Greek War of Independence.)

While most of the mentions are innocuous, Biden has gotten in trouble before for appropriating a British politician’s family story as his own. During his 1988 presidential campaign, he slightly altered lines Neil Kinnock delivered about his Welsh coal-mining ancestors who would spend hours underground before coming up and playing football.

Biden, who delivered those lines during a debate at the Iowa State Fair, later said that he meant to credit Kinnock — but the episode helped drive him out of the race.

During his latest presidential run, his ability to relate to voters — particularly those grieving or suffering from tragedy — was central to his political strength, with voters often saying that amid ephemeral politics driven by tweets and memes, Biden’s humanizing connections drew them to overlook some of his gaffes or the attacks of his rivals.

And there were plenty of those, particularly as he sought to connect with Black voters, who made up a crucial portion of his coalition.

“I come out of a Black community, in terms of my support,” Biden said in a November 2019 primary debate. “If you notice, I have more

people supporting me in the Black community that have announced for me because they know me, they know who I am.”

Responding to criticism of that comment, he said a few months later: “I’m not saying, ‘I am Black.’ But I want to tell you something — I have spent my whole career with the Black community.”

Biden also often notes that he is a son of Pennsylvania (where he was born) and also Delaware (where he moved at age 10).

“I grew up in a heavily Irish Catholic community in Scranton, Pennsylvania,” he said in 2020, “and a heavily Italian Polish community in Claymont, Delaware.”

His favorite food is Italian pasta, and Jill Biden has deep Italian roots as the country’s first Italian American first lady.

But he is few things more than Irish — an Irish Catholic with an Irish temper, by his own account, who occasionally gets his Irish up and ends up in a “black Irish” mood.

“We Irish are the only people who are nostalgic for the future,” he is fond of saying.

But he also uses his Irishness to find a connection, and not only with other Irish Americans.

“Whether it was my ancestors who boarded coffin ships in the Irish sea in the famine in the 1840s or families who fled oppressive regimes and natural disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean,” he said in 2020 in Florida, “all of our ancestors, yours and mine, they came equipped with only one thing — the only thing they had in their pocket was hope.”