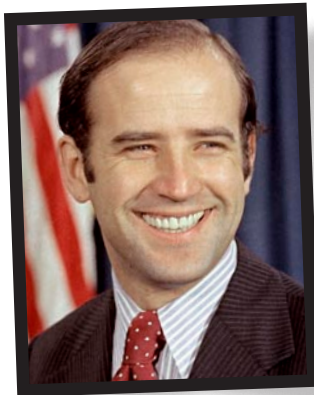


Free

He considered quitting the Senate before he was ever sworn in, after a devastating family tragedy. And then he was supposed to be finished back in 1987, done in by a scandal that would hardly merit mention today. Then he dropped out of the presidential race last year, having gone almost unnoticed by voters. And then--darndest thing--destiny finally came calling.

By JOHN H. RICHARDSON



I The new senator, December 13, 1972.



FIVE WEEKS AFTER the election, just as the press has started saying that the man who will soon ascend to the vice-presidency has been muzzled, or gone missing, Joe Biden sits behind the desk in his Senate office surrounded by framed pictures of his family. The white dome of the Capitol building shines through the window behind him.

“You can drop the vice-president-elect stuff,” he says.

“Well, I’m not going to call you Joe.”

“No, that’s all right, you can call me Joe—matter of fact, funny story...”

And he’s off. A couple of days ago, he says, he was coming down from Wilmington on the Amtrak train with a new shift of Secret Service guards in tow. He caught the 8:29, his usual morning train, and hurried up the platform to the business car. “And I get to the conductor at the front end and he goes, ‘Heeeey, Joey baby!’”

Once he got inside the car, it was more of the same. “He goes, ‘Hey, Joe-Joe, come here!’”

They fell instantly into Biden’s favorite part of any game, the huddle. He’s been taking this train for thirty-six years now, eighty minutes each way, and the longtime commuters and train employees know exactly how to treat him. “Hey, Joe, what are you going to do about this economy? We need some help!” Or “Hey, Joe, my boy’s

over in Iraq. You gotta bring the troops home.”

In Washington, the train discharged him into a long day of formality and meetings, the routine of his stunning new life. But when the day was over, he was back on the seven o’clock for the ride home—and the same thing happened. “Hey, Joey!”

When they got off at Wilmington, the lead Secret Service guy came up to Biden. “Can I ask you a question?” he asked.

“Sure, anything,” Biden answered.

“Do people talk to you that way all the time?”

➔ **THE TRUE ARTISTS** of democracy are never cynical. They are what they are, full of the moment, and when they grow full to overflowing they make us quiver with that old impossible dream—that now is the time, that revelation is finally at hand, that we are about to crash into the end zone and steal home and unfurl all our great potential like the wings of angels. That’s how it feels on the buses and planes this last headlong week before the election. And you may say that Joe Biden’s moment has passed, that he is not the one to help us unfurl our wings. But there is one thing that he knows:

He is who he is, and he likes this shirt.

It’s an unusually sporty shirt. It has vertical blue stripes on the body and horizontal stripes on the buttonhole strip and red stripes inside the collar. It’s the shirt of a yachtsman or a playboy, the shirt of a man with an ascot and a collection of pocket squares in his dresser drawer, which may seem like an odd choice given his reputation as a champion of the working class. But that’s the whole point. The shirt is a statement, and the statement is: I like this shirt.

He’s not going to wear a suit either. He’s going to wear the blue sport coat with the gold buttons, the elegant brown shoes, and the dark chocolate slacks. And he’ll skip the tie too. He’s going to wear the sporty shirt with an open collar and flash those red stripes.

When he checks himself in the mirror, he likes what he sees. He had less hair than he’s got now back when he was a kid just starting out in the Senate. And back then he’d have Nixon’s five-o’clock shadow by noon, and could look a little shady. But by now Joe Biden has grown into his features. He has a high forehead and silver hair, a strong chin and a long nose, gray eyes and blindingly white and regular teeth. If he were an actor, these would be his castable years. He could be the generic distinguished older man in a magazine ad from the ’60s for a fine liqueur, standing next to a red leather chair with a snifter in his hand. But there is also something natural and decent in his eyes. There’s something determined in the straightforward set of his mouth. You can see, just by looking at him, that he’s inclined to be gracious but also likes to come out swinging—like the time George W. Bush asked him if he’d fire Donald Rumsfeld and Biden said that he would, and then turned to Dick Cheney and said, “I’d fire you, too.” Put all that together and you have the contradiction that has followed him his whole political life, qualities that made some people dismiss him as a showboat and others trust him with their lives.

But now it’s time to leave. It’s funny to think that this could be his last Holiday Inn, not that he minds a Holiday Inn. He does love living in a beautiful house and even got kind of crazy with the real estate deals in his younger years, always trading up to something bigger and grander, giving each one a name like it was some kind of nobleman’s manor. But the fact is, he’s always been one of the poorest members of a rich man’s club. Having been in the United States Senate for two thirds of his life, he somehow forgot to get rich. With an income pretty much limited to his salary and his wife’s salary as a community-college professor, his net worth is—in the odd poetic of a senator’s reporting requirements—“somewhere between \$59,000 and \$366,000.” He mortgaged his house to put his kids through college. He really does love the feeling of connecting to the average Joe. He’s like Bill Clinton that way, sucking up the energy in some primal way that goes much

deeper than politics. And you have to remember where he was a year ago, campaigning for president in a one-car caravan with a handful of loyalists and staying in the kind of traveling-salesman hotels that serve a free breakfast. At rallies, he could be found setting up the folding chairs himself. After thirty-six years of solid accomplishment in the Senate, after leading the fight to keep Robert Bork off the Supreme Court, and after the 1994 Crime Bill that put a hundred thousand cops on the street and the paradigm-changing Violence Against Women Act and the long lonely struggle to get George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton off their asses to do something to stop the Serbian genocide in the middle of Europe—which all by itself saved tens of thousands of people from torture, mass murder, systematic rape, and ethnic cleansing—he dropped out after winning less than 1 percent in the Iowa Caucus, stuck in Dennis Kucinich territory, an unmitigated failure.

You also have to remember where he started, those early years in a scrappy Irish Catholic neighborhood in Scranton, the times he had to put cardboard in his shoes to block the holes, the embarrassing stutter he had to overcome. Remember that his father raced cars and flew in private planes until his business failed, then put his fancy suits in the back of the closet and went out to clean boilers for a living.

He knows what it is to have your life turned into a story for public consumption. All those years of urgent motion, pulling himself into that fancy private school, that championship year as a football star, juggling girls and football those first two years at the University of Delaware, haunting the student lounge to watch Kennedy finesse the Cuban missile crisis on TV, panicking about whether he'd get into law school, courting Neilia, three kids and four houses before he was thirty, plus two years as a county councilman and that dazzling race for the Senate when nobody thought he could win—

All that, they put on a thumbnail. Some of them said the Christmas tree was in the back of the car when the truck hit. Some of them said Neilia was shopping for a Christmas tree. That was the sweet detail wherein God was said to dwell, the tinsel of irony on the death of his wife and baby girl. And the scene in the hospital where he was sworn in to the Senate as he stood beside the beds of his wounded sons, so dazed and naive he let the media in to watch. So he avoided personal woolgathering, even with people who were close to him. When it all flooded back, he would put Neilia's ring on his finger and worry it like his own personal rosary of grief. That's how his staff knew he was having a bad day.

After that he became Amtrak Joe, the guy who was always rushing to catch the train to Wilmington. Eccentric but admirable, doing it for the kids. They didn't know how much he just wanted to give it all up and buy a house in Vermont. Or the nights he slipped into bed next to his sons, trying to comfort himself by comforting them. To this day, he calls his grown sons what his father called him. *Hi, honey, how are you? Hey, honey.* But the truth is, he's always been hard to pigeonhole. No on busing, yes on civil rights. No on the first Gulf war, yes on the 2003 invasion of Iraq. No on partial-birth abortions, yes on stem cells. No on the surge but yes to support for Israel, yes on the 1994 Crime Bill (\$10 billion for prisons, \$13 billion for cops, sixty new death-penalty crimes), yes on a whole host of harsh drug laws—the federal asset-forfeiture law, the RAVE anti-Ecstasy act, the drug czar.

How do you summarize that?

Now, today, as the campaign nears its end, everything is different. A squad of Secret Service men flank him as he walks down the hall, another squad of sharp young aides are already waiting downstairs. When he slips out the back door and gets onto his big black bus, the convoy pulls out right on schedule. A couple of police cars take the lead, followed by another black bus for the staff and another black bus for the press and then more police cars, the whole thing moving across the flatlands of Florida like one of those articulated wooden snakes you see on Chinese New Year. The police cars race ahead and park slantways across the crossroads, drop behind and speed forward again to block the next crossroad, drop behind and speed forward again, their flashing lights festive outside the tinted windows.

As they approach the rally site, citizens wave from the side of the road. It ain't over till it's over, that's what he always says to anyone who asks, but you'd have to be dead not to feel the excitement. You can hear the music from here, sweet soul music from the 1970s pumping out its bottomless yearning and courage at nightclub volume: *I know a place (I'll take you there), ain't nobody crying (I'll take you there)*. Then the bus takes a hard right and bumps into a horse pasture and there it is, another small-town rally in a long string of small-town ral-

lies, thirty-five hundred people squeezed up against a wooden reviewing stand usually used for riding competitions, stars-and-stripes bunting hanging in half circles, a line of live oak trees forming a border beautiful enough for a postcard.

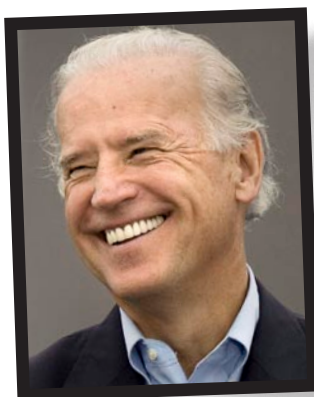
This time it's a town called Ocala in Marion County, Florida. Marion went 58.2 percent for George Bush in the last election. That's the mission Barack Obama sent him on—the blue-collar towns in the battleground states.

When he steps off the bus onto the grass, the cool air envelops him. It's a gorgeous day. The invocation and pledge and introductory speeches are already done, so it doesn't take long to catch up with the local dignitaries. Then the music stops and the loudspeakers echo with the disembodied sound campaign workers call the voice of God: "Ladies and gentlemen, the next vice-president of the United States!"

He steps up on the stage and waits for the cheers to stop. This is the part he has always loved, when the energy of the crowd comes washing up at him like a physical sensation. In the old days, when he really got going, he would look down and see tears on their cheeks. One time, he got a standing ovation from a ballroom full of lawyers. The critics said he was infatuated with his own voice, but that was never how it felt to him. He had an ego, no doubt. But when the hope came washing up at him, he had no choice—he had to feed it.

But that isn't the task today. He's not the vessel of hope in this election, and the words don't really matter this late in the game. So he starts off low-key, straightforward, one guy to another. He's a real person, that's the important thing to convey. He's not a Machiavellian insider who wants to manipulate them into unnecessary wars. He tells them right out, it's time to choose, the choice is obvious, go out and vote. You don't need to be told. You know the reasons. Just go do it.

Now he's into the body of the speech, ten more minutes to go. It's hard not to make this part sound canned, and these short outdoor rallies aren't his best venue. He needs the intimacy of a closed room. "I'm a Senate man," he told Harry Reid not long ago. "I always will



! A career later, September 27, 2008.



! Thirtieth birthday, November 20, 1972. A month later, tragedy would strike.



! Amtrak Joe, December 1973.



! Taking the oath of office in Beau's hospital room, January 6, 1973.



! Stumping with the president, 1978.



! At the vice-president's residence, November 13, 2008.

! Announcing for president, June 1987.

be." There are moments when he disappears behind his eyes and lets Senator Biden do the talking. And when he gets to the emotional heart of the speech, the part where he slows down and his voice goes soft, where he's supposed to tug at their heartstrings with a glimpse of his personal history, he's just not feeling it.

That's when you see who Joe Biden really is—not in the things he says or doesn't say, but in a place as private as his heart and as obvious as the stripes on his shirt. That is the measure of Barack Obama's first executive decision, an arrow pointing to the future.

➔ **IN THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE** that seeks to account for the complexities of that time, Biden was holding his tongue because Barack Obama had muzzled him. He wasn't giving press conferences. This was because of his propensity for gaffes. As evidence, the same handful of lines were endlessly repeated: Hillary Clinton is as qualified or more qualified than I am to be vice-president. . . . I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. . . . You cannot go to a 7-Eleven or a Dunkin' Donuts unless you have a slight Indian accent. . . . Mark my words, it will not be six months before the world tests Barack Obama like they did John Kennedy.

But the real story is not so simple and far more interesting. It starts with the first time Barack Obama got Biden on the phone to talk about the vice-presidency. "When he called to ask me whether or not I would be willing to be vetted—and he was very specific, he

said, 'I'm not fooling around, it's down to three or fewer people, I'm not asking you to jump into a mix of ten people—would you be willing?' And I said, 'I have to think about it,'" Biden says now.

Obama told him he needed to know soon. When could he get an answer?

"If you need an answer right now, the answer's no," Biden said. "But let me think about it. I won't keep you out there hanging."

The next day, he called Obama back. "I will submit to being vetted," he said. "But I want to make it clear to you the last thing I'm worried about is the vetting. What I'm worried about is the decision if you ask me. But if, after the vetting, you believe I'm clean as a whistle and you then determine I'm the guy, we got to talk again. I'm not saying I will accept it if you offer it, I want to talk to you about it, because I want to make sure what is the expectation, what is the role, what is the deal."

During the next few weeks, Obama interviewed Indiana senator Evan Bayh, a respected centrist from the heartland, and Virginia governor Tim Kaine, whose résumé included a degree from Harvard Law and a tour as a Roman Catholic missionary in Honduras. Biden was a decade older than either of them, a walking contradiction to the theme of change, and his failure in the primaries did not suggest a useful level of popularity.

But Obama called Biden.

The president-elect's senior advisor, David Axelrod, says that contrary to most news accounts, the deciding factor was not Biden's

foreign-policy background. "I don't think Obama felt he needed to backstop himself there. He's pretty fluent in foreign policy." Rather, it was clear the election was going to center on the economic crisis, Axelrod says, so they needed someone who could "go out and hammer that middle-class message." Another factor was Biden's mastery of the Senate process and legendary ability to work with Republicans, which would come in handy when they were trying to push legislation. Finally, there was the personal equation—Obama stood across from Biden in the debates, took the measure of the man, and felt comfortable with him. "There's an affection between these people that I think is important for the long-term success of the venture," Axelrod says.

Biden flew to Minneapolis for a secret meeting with Obama. For three hours, they talked alone in Obama's hotel room. "We were very, very candid with one another," Biden says, "and the one thing I can tell you is we both said, 'This won't work unless we both agree in building a relationship that we'll be absolutely straightforward and candid.'"

At that point, Obama laughed. "I know you'll be candid," he said. "Are you prepared for me to be?"

"Absolutely," Biden answered.

Another point of agreement came when Biden told Obama he had no desire to be a "quasi-executive" like Dick Cheney. The country had had quite enough of that in the last eight years, thank you. "He made it very clear to Barack from the first time they spoke that he wasn't seeking any portfolio," Axelrod says. "All he wanted to do was be a valued counselor on the big decisions."

Biden left Minneapolis and told no one of his meeting, save his family. He went home and sat down with his wife, Jill, his two sons, and his daughter. Together they mulled over the pros and cons. He loved his job as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, loved the independence he had. Vice-president was a very different job with different requirements. He had close relationships with Walter Mondale and Al Gore, so he knew what the job was. It could give him a lot of power, but it could also be severely limiting.

One thing for sure, it was a hell of a time to enter the White House. With the financial crash and two wars, the country was experiencing its biggest crisis since the 1930s.

"This is the worst of times to come into office," he would tell me later. "The responsibilities, the burdens, the crises exceed anything—and I said it during the campaign and I believe it even more now—that any president has faced since Franklin Roosevelt. In many ways it's more complicated than Roosevelt because of the foreign-policy piece of it. But the flip side of that is, if you're ever going to do this job, this is the time to do it. If you're a surgeon, do you want to do a tonsillectomy or a heart transplant?"

But the real question was, which job would give him more influence?

A few days later, Obama called for his answer.

"What do you think, Joe?" he asked.

"Yes," Biden said.

"Are you sure?"

They joked about it. Was the job too small? Was he too big?

Biden's response was unequivocal. "No. I know the role of a vice-president."

When they hung up, Obama called Axelrod. "He said, 'I'm going to go with Joe. They're all good, they all have virtues, but he's the best mix

for me right now. And he'll be a good guy to have around in the next four or eight years.'"

Once the decision was made, they got their first glimpse of how it would work in practice. "I was in the SWAT team that went to Wilmington back in the days when we could actually keep secrets," Axelrod says. "We gave him basic information about how it was going to move forward and helped him work on his speech for the day—and he was very eager to get on the same page and make sure we were fully coordinating."

The supposed gaffe issue mattered not one bit, before or after the election. "Everybody's strength is their weakness. Joe Biden's strength is he speaks his mind, and every once in a while it may not come out the right way—a speed bump. But those things were minor, and frankly did not hurt us. When you take the few times when he may have said something that would make you kind of scratch your head and weigh it against the good he did us, it isn't even a close contest."

Of course, this could all be spin—there's no doubt the Obama people are spectacular control freaks. And none of it answers the difficult questions about what to do in Iraq or how to solve the economic crisis, where reasonable people can disagree and both Biden's and Obama's positions tend to range from center to left. But the best proof is in those intense final weeks, when history was in the balance and the pressure never stopped.

➔ **HE WAS SUPPOSED** to be dead. They killed him twenty-one years ago, which is why it's so ironic that he's going to be the vice-president right here at the dawn of a new era of Democratic government—because way back in 1987, he was supposed to be the dawn of a new era of Democratic government. After eight years of Ronald Reagan imploded in the Iran-Contra scandal, the country was ready for a change. All the polling showed it. Gary Hart had just crashed in the flaming wreckage of his personal life, victim of his insane challenge to the media: "Follow me around. I don't care. I'm serious. If anybody wants to put a tail on me, go ahead." That was the start of the world as we know it today, the beginning of the politics of personal destruction, and Biden was about to jump right into its ravenous maw.

He announced his candidacy on June 9, five weeks after Hart flamed out. He'd already raised more money than any of the other candidates, and he sure as hell had more charisma and purpose than Michael Dukakis. Ever since his first campaign, people had been telling him he was going to be president. And he had a secret weapon in

"This is the worst of times to come into office. But if you're ever going to do this job, this is the time to do it. If you're a surgeon, do you want to do a tonsillectomy or a heart transplant?"


WHAT NOW?

KEVIN REILLY
 PRESIDENT,
 ENTERTAINMENT, FOX
 BROADCASTING
 COMPANY

WHAT'S THE FIRST THING YOU'D LIKE TO SEE PRESIDENT OBAMA DO IN OFFICE?
 Dispel the concept of the first 100 days. Redefine it as the first 250-plus days. We have complex, long-term challenges ahead. He should follow the philosophy of the great John Wooden: "Be quick. But don't hurry."

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN AMERICA?
 A sleeping giant has arisen, because we have a newly empowered chunk of America that now feels connected to the ideals of what the country is supposed to stand for.

THE ONLY THING WE HAVE TO FEAR IS...
 Unrealistic expectations.

WHAT'S YOUR STATE OF MIND?
 Hopeful. So long as I don't check my portfolio.

Delaware, which was part of the liberal East up near Wilmington and more like Alabama in the south. From his very first campaign, he showed a remarkable ability to span the divide—“like Houdini,” in the words of his old friend and longtime staffer Ted Kaufman. The Delaware Democrats were split on Vietnam and he managed to finesse that. He was fighting for the environment and civil liberties and unions—he often says that unions created the American middle class—but also won over the folks down south as a man of faith and a champion of fiscal responsibility. And that was in 1972, twenty years before Clinton led the Democrats to the center.

Now he was forty-four, a senator for nearly fifteen years. He joined the Foreign Relations Committee when he was thirty-two, negotiated the fine points of an arms-control pact with Alexei Kosygin when he was thirty-six, formed personal relationships with foreign leaders like Helmut Schmidt and Golda Meir—even Josip Tito, the strongman of Yugoslavia. He had a reputation as a truly decent person, popular with Republicans as well as Democrats. (When Strom Thurmond was called to his final reward, Biden was the only Democrat invited to give a eulogy.)

On the downside, he had a reputation for talking too much and for promoting himself a little too shamelessly. His official bio read like a piece of cheesy advertising copy, and he seemed to have an endless hunger for approval, a need to be liked that came close to compulsion. Not to mention his long-standing desire to be president, so intense it was almost comical—in *What It Takes*, Richard Ben Cramer suggests he bought one of his homes because it resembled the White House. And when he was just a junior in college and his future mother-in-law asked what he wanted to be, Biden said:

“President.”

She just looked at him, not sure how to take it.

“Of the United States,” he added helpfully.

The first sign of trouble came just a few weeks after the campaign started, when Lewis Powell retired from the Supreme Court and Reagan nominated Robert Bork to replace him. The stakes couldn’t have been higher. Powell was the swing vote on the court and Bork was a hard-right conservative who took extreme stands against the right to privacy and even civil rights. As the new chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Biden would be responsible for leading the fight to keep him off the bench. If he succeeded, he’d become a liberal hero and probably win the presidency. If he failed, his campaign was over.

Biden threw himself into work, poring over Bork’s judicial decisions and prepping day after day with constitutional scholars from Harvard and the University of Chicago. As the fight

grew more and more vicious—liberals called Bork a racist, conservatives dismissed Biden as a hack and a loudmouth—he began cutting campaign appearances to prepare for the hearings. He also began suffering from the blinding headaches that would erupt just six months later in an aneurysm so serious, surgeons had to open his skull and lift his brain to save his life. All that led to the fatal mistake that has plagued him ever since.

Biden saw the speech on videotape. It was by Neil Kinnock, head of the British Labour party. “Why am I the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to be able to go to a public university?” Kinnock asked. “Why is Glenys the first woman in her family in a thousand generations to be able to get to a university? Was it because all our predecessors were thick?”

No, it was because of public education, state colleges like the ones Biden attended.

It was the perfect response to the minging Reaganites who kept saying government was the root of all evil. So Biden started quoting the speech, always giving Kinnock credit—

until the Sunday late in August when he was scheduled to appear at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines but spent all day Saturday prepping for Bork. He sketched out his speech on the plane and got into a van with his Iowa campaign manager, David Wilhelm, who suggested that Biden close with the Kinnock story.

“I was thinking as I was coming over here, why is it that Joe Biden is the first in his family ever to go to a university? Why is it that my wife who is sitting out there in the audience is the first in her family ever to go to college? Is it because our fathers and mothers were not bright?”

This time, Biden neglected to give Kinnock credit. The local reporters didn’t think much about it because they’d heard him credit Kinnock before, and Biden came out of Iowa with spectacular numbers—without a single TV or radio ad, he shot from 1 percent to 15 percent in the polls, tied for the lead. Then, two days before the Bork hearings were to begin, Maureen Dowd broke the story in *The New York Times*. Where Kinnock spoke of ancestors who “could sing and play and write poetry,” Biden cited ancestors who “read poetry and wrote poetry and taught me how to sing.” Where Kinnock said they worked eight hours underground and came up to play football, Biden said his ancestors worked twelve hours in the coal mines and came up to play football. But there weren’t any poets or coal miners in Biden’s family. He lifted the speech complete with “phrases, gestures, and lyrical Welsh syntax intact.”

The next day, NBC ran the two speeches on a split screen. Dowd was right. Biden even shook his fist at the exact moment Kinnock shook his fist.

The story exploded, another Gary Hart feeding frenzy. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* called to question his line about marching for civil rights. Did he ever really march? *Legal Times* dug out his law-school records and found out that he’d been forced to take a class over because he quoted a legal journal without a citation. *The Wall Street Journal* wanted to know if he was really a teetotaler or maybe did he sneak a drink once. And didn’t he use a Bobby Kennedy quote without attribution? And what about that line from Hubert Humphrey? And what about the time he ripped into that snotty guy who questioned his academic credentials? Now that was a suicidal rant:

I think I probably have a much higher IQ than you do, I suspect. I

“What do you think, Joe?” Obama asked. “Yes,” Biden answered. “Are you sure?” They joked about it. Was the job too small? Was he too big? Biden was unequivocal. “No,” he said. “I know the role of a vice-president.”

WHAT NOW?

JOHN RIDLEY

WRITER, CABLE-NEWS COMMENTATOR, AND FOUNDED EDITOR OF THATMINORITYTHING.COM

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING AMERICA?

The imploded economy. The money party's over, the pretty girls are gone, and all of us are rolling around in the financial vomit spewed on the national frat-house floor we were all acting a fool in. Call me biased, but only an ascended black man—a guy who by the typical metrics of race had to work twice as long and twice as hard to get half as much, though he's earned so much more—can get us sober again.

THE ONLY THING WE HAVE TO FEAR IS...

Palin 2012.



! Jupiter, Florida, October 29, 2008.

went to law school on a full academic scholarship, the only one in my class to have a full academic scholarship. In the first year in the law, I decided I didn't want to be in law school and ended up in the bottom two thirds of my class and then decided I wanted to stay, went back to law school, and, in fact, ended up in the top half of my class. I won the international moot-court competition. I was the outstanding student in the political-science department at the end of my year. I graduated with three degrees from undergraduate school and 165 credits—only needed 123 credits. And I would be delighted to sit down and compare my IQ to yours.

All on videotape! Full of lies! He finished seventy-six out of eighty-five in law school! He only got one degree! He wasn't the outstanding student in his political-science class! And he didn't stop there! *It seems to me if you can speak, you're a liability in the Democratic party, it seems to me you've all become heartless technocrats, it seems to me—*

Later, nuances emerged. He did cite that paper in law school, just not in the right place. He'd gone to a sit-in but not a march. He did win the moot-court competition. A staffer slipped in the Kennedy quote without telling him. But the headlines were coming too fast—the “death by a thousand cuts,” as Kaufman remembers it. The second day of the Bork hearings, his staff had to pull him into the hall to get a response for *The New York Times*. A crowd of reporters packed the hall, firing questions.

Biden was trapped. His transgressions were trivial, especially when weighed against his accomplishments, but the stream of stories was threatening Bork and if he failed at that, his campaign was over anyway. So he called a press conference right outside the Judiciary hearing and faced down a swarm of reporters. “I’m angry with myself for having been put in the position—for having put myself in the position—of having to make this choice.” With those words, Biden stepped aside, all but guaranteeing the election of George H. W. Bush, and ushering in the beginning of the Bush era.

Then he went straight back into the hearing room, hungry for redemption.

➔ **ON THE DAY** he was elected vice-president of the United States, the whole family came along. Valerie and Jim, Gerry and Ashley, John, Hallie, Natalie, Hunter, Kathleen, Naomi, Finnegan, Maisy, Jim, Sarah, Jamie, Caroline, Nick, Jack, Missy, Casey, Jan, Nealie, Chad, Bonny, Paul, Paul Jr., Jennifer, Kim, Zachary, Jacob, Rachel, Kelly, and Tim all pile onto the plane to Chicago. And his mother, Catherine Eugenia “Jean” Finnegan Biden, ninety-one years old and still marching along on her own two feet. And his wife, Jill, looking beautiful in a sharp red jacket and high spike heels, plus a few old friends like Ted Kaufman, who keeps talking about how surreal this whole thing is—after all those years and all that struggle and loss, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, without even trying. From a kid who used to buy penny candy at Simmey’s, who used to pay twelve cents for a double feature at the Rosie Theatre and play on the toxic banks of the Lackawanna River. When people ask Kaufman who the unluckiest person in the world is, he says Joe Biden. And when they ask him who the luckiest person in the world is, he says Joe Biden.

Truly, it’s a happy day. Just look at Finnegan, his granddaughter. She’s the one who pushed hardest to get him to accept the vice-presidential nomination.

WHAT NOW?

JIM WEBB
SENIOR SENATOR
FROM VIRGINIA

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY FOR POSITIVE CHANGE IN AMERICA RIGHT NOW?
To unite the American people by reminding them how good they are and turn their energies toward solving our problems. This was Ronald Reagan’s great gift.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO IN THE NEXT DECADE?
A comprehensive national energy policy.

THE ONLY THING WE HAVE TO FEAR IS...
Losing our courage.

WHAT'S YOUR STATE OF MIND RIGHT NOW?
Undaunted.



Obama introducing his running mate to the world, Springfield, Illinois, August 23, 2008.

whole time, he strokes her hair and cups her chin, caresses her cheek and cups her chin again, not even aware of what he's doing. He's a person who loves with his hands, who gives affection without reserve. And Finnegan loves him back the same way, leaning against him with absolute trust and pride. Then little Natalie toddles up and wraps her arms around his leg.

➔ **THE NEXT MORNING**, sixty-nine million Americans have decided to give him a new job, and there's no time to rest. He wakes up early next to Jill in his suite at the Fairmont Hotel, cozy under the thick white duvet, and slips on a pair of jeans as a small gesture of freedom after all the months of ceremony and scrutiny. But now just getting out of the hotel is a major operation requiring an advance team of Secret Service agents to map the route and another team to flank him every step of the way. The scale of everything has increased. His personal security detail has gone from fewer than ten to as many as thirty. The city of Chicago is assigning sixty officers just to guard the transition headquarters over at the Kluczynski Federal Building. He always liked to just hop into the pickup for a run to the dump or the hardware store. Those days are over. Now wherever he goes, bomb-sniffing dogs precede him. This is going to take some getting used to.

At today's meeting, it's just the core transition group—Obama, Rahm Emanuel, John Podesta, Valerie Jarrett, and a few others. "It started with Barack saying to me, 'Joe, can you submit to me names of the people you think we should be putting in this Cabinet?'" Biden says.

For the next month, this takes up 75 percent of their time. Biden's short list included many of the names that end up being chosen, among them Robert Gates, Hillary Clinton, and General James L. Jones. He likes Gates for the many improvements he's made in Iraq, for his early call to close Guantánamo, for being a straight shooter. And continuity seems essential in the middle of two wars. He's known Jones since the early 1980s, when he was the Marine Corps liaison to the Senate. In the nineties, Jones helped Biden goose Clinton and the Joint Chiefs into the Balkans. As for Hillary Clinton, he agrees with her on almost every issue.

Barack Obama needs you, she said. Standing there with the expression of an impish angel, twirling an orange ribbon in her fingers. She's in the fourth grade, her favorite subject is social studies, and, um... What do you want to be when you grow up?

She grins. "I want to be president!"

Biden strolls up behind her. "Did you say anything nice?"

She gives him a mischievous smile.

"I have absolute confidence in my granddaughter," he says, endorsing her for president at some point on down the road.

Then they talk about the pool at the vice-president's mansion and the possibility of a puppy—the important things, as he puts it. The

Obama makes it very clear that he wants these personnel deliberations kept very private. There's also a consensus that Biden should keep a low profile for a while. The way Axelrod puts it, every time you stick your head up, people want answers you don't know yet. Better just to stay low-key.

Biden takes this to heart. He even shuts out longtime staffers like Tony Blinken, who flew by his side on eight trips to Iraq and is likely to sign on as his new foreign-policy advisor. They would fish for information, but Biden would just smile and say, "I'm not talking about it." Same with his plans to banish the Cheney era by installing new procedures and guidelines for accountability—for now, the

➔ It's the "Portage Fees" That'll Get You...

IT'S NEVER BEEN cheap for reporters to cover a presidential campaign, but by all accounts the charges levied on them by the campaigns in 2008 set records. Just to get on campaign buses and planes, journalists had to offer an open-ended, no-limit credit card. They would then be charged a prorated share of travel and related expenses—as determined by the campaigns. And no press corps paid more for the privilege of covering the same stump speech day after day than Biden's. Fewer in number than Obama's, McCain's, or Palin's followers, each had to eat a bigger slice of the pie. Esquire's John Richardson was billed more than \$1,000 a day for the six days he spent with the veep-elect during the last week of the race. Among the charges:

push for transparency is going to have to be conducted in secret. He's so eager to play by Obama's rules, his wife teases him about it. "He's the president, man," he says in answer.

"What even my staff didn't quite understand is, I really thought this through," he tells me later. "I've been here for eight, nine vice-presidents. I've been intimately involved with at least four of those presidents and vice-presidents. I mean, I know how this job works. There's going to be really good days and lousy days but the truth of the matter is, I crossed that Rubicon, I made that judgment. And it's not been hard."

Two days later, still in Chicago, at the transition team's first economic conference, he's sitting in the chair next to Obama with some of the most consequential economic thinkers in the world arrayed around him—Larry Summers right across the table, Paul Volcker two seats to his left, Robert Rubin to his right, Warren Buffett on the speakerphone. After Robert Reich presents the morning's dismal jobs report, Biden speaks up. It's a mistake to focus on bailing out one side or the other, he says. America's economic policy can't turn into a competition between Wall Street and the workers. He's been thinking about this for a long time and he has lots of detailed ideas—infrastructure development, for example, which would lay the foundations for business success in the twenty-first century and generate tens of thousands of construction jobs.

"Here's the point I was making," he says. "If the middle class doesn't grow, America fails, and I just wanted to remind some of the intellectual powerhouses in that meeting.

"It wasn't so much that people weren't consciously aware of the perspective I articulated, but nobody specifically articulated it. I just wanted to make sure, 'We're all on the same page, right guys? This has to be done.' So I kept coming back to that—I don't think Wall Street can survive without Main Street doing well. Look, 70 percent of this economy is consumer driven. How can you not look at Main Street?"

Everyone at that meeting was sworn to secrecy, so none of this hits the press. Instead, the Obama team keeps the focus on the banal surface: Biden and wife get a tour of the vice-president's mansion from Lynne and Dick Cheney, Biden goes to Nantucket for his thirty-third annual Thanksgiving retreat, on his sixty-sixth birthday Obama presents him with cupcakes. The press starts referring to him as the "incredible shrinking vice-president." Politico.com says that he "generates less buzz than the nonexistent first puppy." Even Biden jokes about it, "Ever since the election, nobody pays any attention to me at all."

Behind the scenes, he goes about his business. He calls the president of Georgia, the president of Colombia, the three leading candidates for prime minister of Israel. He meets with Al Gore and Walter Mondale, quizzing them on their approach to the vice-presidency. He joins Obama for their daily CIA briefing. Deep into the practical issues of reorganizing the government, a key task that includes streamlining the bureaucracy and creating new offices to fight cyber attacks and weapons proliferation, he spends three days a week in Chicago with Obama.

"I've been impressed with this guy," he says. "I was impressed

with him already or I wouldn't have joined the ticket, but watching him unravel a knot is an interesting phenomenon—the guy is really disciplined. He listens and then he asks the right question. And he goes, 'I don't need that, I need this,' and you can see these guys in the first couple of meetings—people who don't know him that well—going, 'Whoa.'"

As soon as the major positions are filled and the organizational issues are moving, the core team then prioritizes the top fifteen or twenty policy issues that they'll have to tackle on January 20, starting to review and refine the options.

And that's when things really start to heat up. December is no rest for anybody. By 7:00 A.M. every day, he's on the phone with Ron Klain, his new chief of staff, with a list too long for one day. He'll meet with Secretary Gates, spend two hours with Hillary Clinton, interview a few candidates for his own office, spend some time with John Podesta reviewing the latest on where they are with Cabinet selections, meet with a potential Cabinet candidate that the president-elect wants him to interview, and report to him on that. Then he'll make some calls to the Hill to suss out the confirmability of one of the potential nominees. Then he'll be on the seven o'clock back to Wilmington, and after he gets home and has a bite to eat, he'll be back on the phone with Klain at 11:00 P.M.

In the swirl of activity and adjustment, he forgets to tell the Obama team that he's going to attend the ceremony for his son Beau's deployment to Iraq. Doesn't even occur to him that everything he does is now public and political. He doesn't realize that the new president could get questions like, you know, "By the way, what's your view about his son being deployed?" And there's that meeting that Biden's guys should have been invited to but aren't. Nothing intentional, but oh, Jesus. From now on, they have to clue each other in on every little thing.

"But there's been nothing so far, knock on wood here, but there's nothing that leads me to believe this won't be—as I said during the campaign and I meant it—I think we fit, I think our personalities complement one another."

Here, the personal and the political overlap. "The more I am with him as these decisions are made, the more I [continued on page 119]



WHAT NOW?

JOHN WEAVER FORMER CHIEF STRATEGIST FOR JOHN MCCAIN

WHAT'S THE FIRST THING YOU'D LIKE TO SEE PRES- IDENT OBAMA DO IN OFFICE?

He should strengthen America's security by closing Guantánamo and by ending torture. He should begin the responsible withdrawal from Iraq, refocus on bin Laden and Al Qaeda wherever they may be. And he should begin the process of uniting the civilized world against a nuclear-armed Iran.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO IN THE NEXT DECADE?

The regeneration of the Republican party into an attractive, center-right movement. The base by itself is not enough. We're losing voters, and it's because we can't articulate what we stand for, and because our tone is too angry.

THE ONLY THING WE HAVE TO FEAR IS... Hopelessness.

WHAT'S YOUR STATE OF MIND RIGHT NOW?

Hopeful. Obviously I wanted John McCain to become our next president, but it speaks well of Americans that Obama will become president. It speaks to the hopefulness of the American people.

Workspace (not used), 10/28:
\$51.34

Internet access (not used), 10/28:
\$69.65

Internet-setup fee, 10/28: \$73.34

Share of Internet-setup guy's
hotel room, 10/28: \$11.77

Share of bus driver's hotel room,
10/28: \$14.64

Portage charge, 10/29: \$19.06

Supplies (not used), 11/3: \$52.53

Internet-setup fee (not used),
11/4: \$57.89

Workspace (not used), 11/4:
\$1,028.50

Joe Biden

[continued from page 87] realize how philosophically in sync we are. It's not like what I've seen in other presidents and vice-presidents. We're in sync on almost every major issue. I mean, how we view everything in a personal sense, from how well and real the relationship is between Jill and Michelle and how we view family. For example, there was something coming up, I forget what the hell it was, some meeting he wanted me to be at, an important meeting, and I said, 'Well, look, Jill is having this procedure done'—she had been in an accident, she was getting this series of shots in the back of her neck to ease the—she's not big on needles. To other presidents, I'd have to say, 'Well, look guy...' It wasn't even a question. 'Of course, you gotta go with your wife.' I didn't have to call and say 'Can I?' It was just, 'I'm not coming.' And his response was, 'You shouldn't come.' It goes all the way from that level to choosing the Cabinet members. When I submitted my list, he didn't choose off my list. It turns out that his list was almost identical to mine."

But still, the truth is, standing there silently while another guy does all the talking doesn't come naturally to him. He looks like a man not entirely sure where he is as he accompanies the president-elect to announce the new government, as he stands meekly off Obama's right shoulder. It's like putting a boxer in the ring and telling him not to fight. He is not a

man like Dick Cheney, who was determined to remain elusive and mysterious. Rather, Joe Biden likes to change the world and then brag about it. He has done so many times. And that was why he wouldn't give Obama a ready answer when they first began talking in earnest about the possibility of his joining the ticket in the middle of last summer. He already had an important job. What he didn't need was to be retired into a lesser job with a fancy title. Or some make-work assignment in the margins, like reinventing government. God, what a sentence that would be. No, Biden required and received Obama's assurances that he would be a partner in every major decision that issued forth from the White House—that would be his portfolio. He would not be shunted to the kiddie table, only to be propped up next to the Speaker once a year at the State of the Union.

He would not be John Nance Garner—a pillar of Congress just like Biden, the Speaker of the House become FDR's first vice-president, now remembered to history for describing the office as "not worth a bucket of warm piss." Or poor, emasculated Lyndon, another person uniquely unsuited to the role of attendant. After Gore, and especially Cheney, the vice-president has escaped that sorry fate, and he's likely never going back. But still, the sense of dislocation after thirty-six years of being his own man in the United States Senate was palpable. So when he finally broke his silence at the ceremony to introduce the

new national-security team in early December, Biden couldn't resist a little bit of semaphore. After praising the new president for his appointments, he began to speak in the first person, in public, for the first time in weeks, and the color returned to his animated face as if he were breathing pure oxygen. "I have worked with and admired each of the members of this team...."

Biden gave his remarks a workmanlike brevity. Obama nodded his assent. Then the two men who will lead the country waved and walked from the stage. And so it was that Joe Biden, a man who had been given all the gifts except good timing, who had assumed that his moment would never come, took his place as the second most powerful man in the world.

"Here's the thing," Biden told me. "This is an historic moment. I started my career fighting for civil rights, and to be a part of what is both a moment in American history where the best people, the best ideas, the—how can I say it?—the single best reflection of the American people can be called upon—to be at that moment, with a guy who has such incredible talent and who is also a breakthrough figure in multiple ways—I genuinely find that exciting. It's a new America. It's the reflection of a new America."

Biden goes quiet for a moment. "And I think we got it right," he says. "We got it right, the president and vice-president. It's the right order." ■