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Biden can't be FDR. He Could Still Be LBJ

The president-elect has the power to make transformational progress look like 'C'mon Man' common sense. Will he use it?

Let's never do that again.

Soon, the worst president in modern American history will resume private life. Everyone who favours the rule of law, decency and truth is exhaling a long-deferred sigh of relief. Millions are upset that the election was as close as it was. Still, however narrowly, Americans have snatched our republic from the jaws of an encroaching autocracy. We deserve the catharsis — whether dancing in the streets or joy-scrolling in quarantine.

Gone from the White House will be an administration whose gaslighting operation was matched only by its hostility and deadly incompetence. Gone will be the necessity for, and our stupid hope in, saviours: Robert Mueller, state attorneys general, Anonymous, 'concerned' Senators Susan Collins and Mitt Romney. Gone will be the Muslim bans, the human-rights violations at the southern border, the photo-op Bible shaken like a martini after federal police gassed nonviolent protesters. The parade of dishevelled presidential associates under indictment, the Jared and Ivanka leaks, MSNBC's nightly seminars on Russian oligarchs, the presidential retweets of literal white supremacists — gone.

Given the collective frenzy of these years, President-elect Joe Biden intuited that legions of Americans wanted a return to normal — a restoration, a reversion. The earnest hope in his promise 'to restore the soul of America' was that the same country that uplifted Donald Trump and let itself be consumed by internet-fuelled culture wars could heed its better angels again, as it did when it elected the nation's first Black president on a hope-and-change mandate not so long ago.

But if this election is to have lasting meaning, we cannot see a Biden campaign victory as license to cast away politics as a presence in our daily lives. We cannot succumb to the liberal temptation parodied by the

comedian Kylie Brakeman to 'vote for Biden so we can all get back to brunch.'

However effective it might have been at closing this race, this restorationist fantasy would be a terrible governing philosophy. Because the pre-Trump world — in which voting rights were being gutted and 40 per cent of Americans couldn't afford a USD 400 emergency bill — is no kind of place to go back to. Mr Biden himself seemed to concede this point by tempering his restoration message with the slogan 'Build Back Better.'

II.

On Election Day eve, I spoke with Senator Chuck Schumer of New York — the minority leader, who could, by a razor's edge, become the majority leader in 2021 if the results of two presumptive runoffs for Senate seats in Georgia go the Democrats' way. Because, like Mr Biden, Mr Schumer is an institutionalist and a moderate, I asked him about this idea of restoration versus transformation. Almost as soon as he heard me say the word 'normalcy,' he began, for lack of a better term, to filibuster: 'No, no, I don't buy that.'

'My view,' he told me, 'is if we don't do bold change, we could end up with someone worse than Donald Trump in four years.' What passed for change in the past two decades (including during the Obama years) had not, he acknowledged, been 'big enough or bold enough.' When I asked if Democrats bore some responsibility for that, he deflected: 'There's plenty of blame to go around.'

Even if, improbably, the Senate is on Mr Biden's side in 2021, he and his advisers will have to pull off a gruelling balancing act: pushing federal policy to reflect popular will so that people's lives can measurably improve, while making fundamental changes to the workings of American democracy and managing to heal rather than inflame the cultural resentments, racial hatred and party polarisation that still imperil the Republic (and that the Republican Party thrives on).

Mr Biden may take the oath of office facing a lattice of crises that make some other tough-times inaugurations look enviable: a health crisis, an economic crisis, a racial-justice crisis, a climate crisis and a crisis of representative democracy revealed and exacerbated by his predecessor. These are problems that snicker at incrementalism.

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In one favourable scenario, come January, two Democratic runoff victories in Georgia

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leave a President Biden facing a 50-50 Senate, with his vice president, Kamala Harris, possessing the crucial tiebreaking vote. Even then, the scope of available policy reforms would still be substantially limited unless Mr Biden sought to eliminate the filibuster that requires 60 Senate votes to get major legislation enacted. Doing away with this rule would, of course, immediately doom any chance of a constructive working relationship with Republicans.

But it could still be a risk worth taking. If Democrats win the two presumed Georgia runoffs, Senate Democrats will represent roughly 41 million more people than the Republican half of the chamber. If Mr Biden is to meet this moment, he can't let his cautious temperament and deep hankering for civic comity stop him from making the policy changes families need.

The most immediate problem is the plague. Mr Trump was so inept at containing it that he couldn't even keep it from infecting him. But the sanity and science-based competence that Mr Biden has promised will go only so far. Suppressing the virus and executing a vaccine rollout, while boosting an economic recovery that will have slowed over the winter, would require trillions of dollars in investment and a font of bureaucratic creativity.

For tens of millions, the economic traumas of the pandemic have come on top of decades of stagnation and precariousness. Since 1989, the wealth of the bottom 50 per cent of Americans has fallen by USD 900 billion. Before Covid-19, 44 per cent of American workers were being paid median annual wages of USD 18,000. And the evictions now surging are coming in the wake of a housing market that has long been unaffordable. Even if high unemployment were reversed, it would hardly repair our increasingly classist and Uber-ized labour market.

And if Democrats do win the Senate? Senator Schumer told me he envisions a first 100 days filled with a raft of measures on the virus and economic relief, mixed in with policies that address inequality, climate change, student debt, immigration and more. A Biden administration's early days 'ought to look like F.D.R.'s,' he said. 'We need big, bold change. America demands it, and we're going to fight for it.'

Much, however, could still get in the way. First, Mr Biden's own instinct toward caution — which can easily end up enabling paralysis at a time

when Democrats' window for proving the promise of an active government could be closing. Any measure of success is likely to be determined by how seriously a Biden administration takes the inevitable calls for fiscal conservatism and austerity (despite historically low interest rates).

And there are early warning signs: Ted Kaufman, who is leading the Biden transition team, recently told The Wall Street Journal that because of Trump-era deficit spending, 'when we get in, the pantry is going to be bare.'

A Biden administration could also perceive itself as owing a political debt to the most influential and visible centre-right elements of his sweeping, unwieldy alliance of supporters. Young leftists of colour from cities in major swing states are arguably more responsible for his win than Republican defectors like former Senator Jeff Flake and the former Republican operatives turned media darlings of the Lincoln Project. But who will have more of a voice in Washington?

On various matters of policy, Mr Biden could find himself in an awkward fox trot with wealthy donors in liberal power centres like Silicon Valley and Wall Street — the kind of people who may love hanging 'Black Lives Matter' signs in their yards more than they love Biden proposals like a Section 8 expansion that would allow more working-class Black families to live in their midst.

III.

And this, mind you, is the congenial scenario. It is a bit more plausible that Mr Biden will face a Republican-controlled Senate, in which the majority leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, reprises his record-breaking Obama-era obstructionism to thwart Mr Biden's agenda and his re-election chances.

In this case, Mr Biden could bypass Congress to make forceful changes in people's lives — changes that would in their own way help address one root cause of the very gridlock those actions would be working around: lack of faith in government.

The growing sense, among both the party's technocrats and its populists, is that their midterm fate lies in whether voters give Democrats credit for improving their lives — not on the processes used or norms violated to do so.

‘A public health and economic crisis is not the time for incremental steps, small ideas or meekness,’ Representative Pramila Jayapal of Washington, a leading Democrat in the House Progressive Caucus, told me. ‘Joe Biden can deliver on this from Day 1 with executive orders and administrative actions that cancel student debt, lower drug prices, strengthen workers’ rights and cut emissions.’ The American Prospect recently published ‘277 Policies for Which Biden Need Not Ask Permission,’ based on the results of the Biden-Sanders unity task force.

Mr Biden has an opportunity to seize on policies that, thanks to the heterodoxy of Trumpism, now have surprising resonance in both parties — but not for the traditional reasons of being milquetoast or appealing to corporatist moderates. A wealth tax polls surprisingly well among Republican voters. Using the Department of Justice to crack down on monopolies and threats from China has some bipartisan support. As does actual infrastructure investment and, to a limited extent, raising the minimum wage.

The example of Lyndon Johnson — a long-time senator and a vice president less charismatic than the president he served and succeeded who, nevertheless, became more consequential — provides a possible historical analogue.

Mr Biden also does not need Mr McConnell’s permission to build a down-ballot pipeline. One of the failures of the Obama years was the attrition of the Democratic Party beneath the president: By 2017, its Senate seats had dwindled to 48 from 59, and it lost 62 House seats, 12 governorships and a whopping 948 seats in state legislatures.

Amanda Litman, the executive director of Run for Something, a progressive group that grooms candidates for office at all levels, proposes this corrective: ‘Bring back the 50-state strategy. Invest in all state parties to build grass-roots infrastructure,’ she told me. ‘Set the direction and tone: No office is too small, no community too unimportant. Then raise money for all of it.’

To the extent that, for the next two years, divided government severely limits the sort of public action that progressives dreamed about in their 2020 primaries, Mr Biden could use his office to create task forces that normalize and build a public consensus for more significant small-d democratic changes to American politics achievable only down the road.

IV.

Despite our divisions, Mr Biden could use the bully pulpit to bring the country together. He could promote local projects of dialogue and reconciliation, and continue to hold genuinely bipartisan town halls throughout his term.

Joe Biden — simply by being himself and not Donald Trump — can make a monumental difference. His evident basic goodness and empathy being of real use. And yet the Biden way — the smiles, the giving out of his phone number, the backslapping of political foes — tends to elevate personal kindness over systemic justice.

In the end, a basic choice may stalk Mr Biden: What matters more, the radiation of personal decency or the pursuit of structural fairness?

There are some reasons to hope that he could be a bolder president than anticipated. He is that rare candidate who tacked toward the party base rather than the centre in the general election. In certain areas, such as climate change and student debt, he has shown a willingness to have his initial policy view revised by others. He is less motivated by ideology than by the path of least resistance. Whether that path aligns with donors, the Beltway consensus or organised popular movements, he takes it.

The example of Lyndon Johnson — a long-time senator and a vice president less charismatic than the president he served and succeeded who, nevertheless, became more consequential — provides a possible historical analogue. Mr Biden could turn out to be an improbably deft salesman for progressive priorities, using his disarming, folksy, median-voter-friendly patois, that 'C'mon, man' Americana vibe, to make major changes seem like common sense.

'Joe Biden's magic is that everything he does becomes the new reasonable,' Andrew Yang, once Mr Biden's rival for the Democratic nomination, told me. 'He has shown the ability to move the mainstream of the Democratic Party on issues before. As president, whatever he does, he will bring the whole center with him.'

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