

Review – The Last Politician

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MICHAEL COX, DEC 14 2023

The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden's White House and the Struggle for America's Future By Franklin Foer Penguin Press, 2023

Joe Biden has set many records or near records in his long life. At 30, he was one the youngest people to enter the Senate, but at 78 became the oldest person to get the keys to the White House. He was not the longest serving Senator in history. Nevertheless, he did serve in the upper house for 36 years, beginning in 1973 when the Vietnam war was still ongoing, right through to early 2009 when another war (this time in Iraq) was just beginning to go seriously wrong as well. He was not the first Catholic to become President — that particular role was played by John F. Kennedy. But there the similarity ends. Kennedy, after all, came from American aristocracy. Biden, on the other hand, came from a lower-middle class background with few of the advantages enjoyed by JFK.

Indeed, if he was like any previous Democratic President, it was neither the dashing, sophisticated Kennedy with his summer home in Hyannis Port, or even the smooth talking, book devouring Fulbright scholar, Bill Clinton, but rather Lyndon Baines Johnson. Like Johnson, he lived in the shadow of a more sophisticated President when he was Vice President; but like the Texan, believed in getting things done by reaching across the political aisle and cutting deals. He was, in short, a politician's politician, and according to Franklin Foer at least, possibly one of the last of a generation whose reference point was the New Deal rather than the counterculture of the 1960s, and who really did think the role of the Democratic Party was to represent the American working class.

Born into what is best described as a modest home in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1942, Biden's life was marked by a series of political setbacks alongside two great family tragedies. Yet, buoyed up by his religious faith and an almost bottomless pit of raw ambition in a life lived almost entirely in the Washington Beltway, he went on to become one of the most successful politicians of his generation: first as a leading Senator, then as Vice-President under Obama, and finally, against most expectations, as the 46th President of the United States. Often looked down upon by the young Ivy League types who float around the Washington Think Tanks — many of whom seriously wish he would not run in 2024 because of his age and serial gaffes — Biden as ever remains convinced that there is only one man who can beat Donald Trump in 2024: the same man who beat him in 2020, Joe Biden.

Given how long he has been around, it is hardly surprising that Biden has generated a sizeable secondary literature. Nor, given the polarized state of America today, should we be surprised to discover that a good deal of this work is highly critical of him. A small part of this comes from the disillusioned left, as seen in Branko Marcetic's *Yesterday's Man*. On the cover, the publisher describes Marcetic as accusing Biden of 'ushering in the end of the liberal New Deal order and enabling the political takeover of the radical right'. But a much greater salvo of political rockets has been launched in his direction by his enemies on the right. Thus, in one volume, we are reminded by the author about a man with 'unfathomable levels of power and influence that have enriched his family' and 'benefitted our geopolitical adversaries' (Marlow, 2023, xvii); in another, it is implied that for years, Biden has been covering up the dubious activities of his son Hunter Biden (Devine, 2022); and in yet a third, he is taken to task (with some justification) for the disastrous manner in which he managed or failed to manage the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Dunleavy & Hasson, 2023). It is quite a roll call to which one could easily add another line of attack that Trump and his Vice-President Mike Pence together deployed back in 2020: that Biden was opening the door for a socialist takeover of

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the United States. As Pence put it before November 2020, America stood at a crossroads: one that would lead to renewal because it was based on the 'dignity of every individual', and another that would end up with 'growing control of the state... socialism and decline'.

This recent study of Biden's two years in the White House, written by the well established journalist Franklin Foer, can hardly be described as hagiography. In fact, there is much here that critics might easily pick up on. On the other hand, like the earlier volume published by Evan Osnos, Foer does a good job basing his well told story on that commodity found rather rarely in the United States today: namely, the facts. Indeed, both Osnos and Foer come to much the same conclusion about Biden: first about his political savvy in understanding that if the Democrats were to win in 2020 (and no doubt win again in 2024), they had to win over the middle ground; and then second about his desire to repair the terrible damage done to the fabric of the American polity by Trump, both at home and abroad. Biden, in Foer's telling of the tale, was and remains a healer *par excellence*.

But Biden also brought something else to the table that previous Democrats like the cerebral Obama and the crowd-pleasing Clinton did not: a belief that the Democrats had to do more than just manage globalization, or, in Obama's case, talk in somewhat abstract terms about a post-American foreign policy. Rather, they had to be bold enough to stand up for ordinary working people by using the power of government to rebuild the American economy from the ground up. In this regard, Biden turned out to be a genuine economic radical who was prepared, in an almost New Deal fashion, to invest massive amounts of the tax payer's money into making the American economy — especially its manufacturing sector — so competitive that China would be left in the dust and US allies across the Atlantic would wonder how they would be able to keep up.

The other big story told here inevitably deals with Biden's biggest foreign policy challenge, which was not just China in the long term, but rather Russia in the here and now. This is a tale that has been told before in various academic articles, but Foer tells it very much like he was that proverbial fly on the wall listening in to all the more important conversations. After the fiasco that was Afghanistan, Biden just could not fail. And according to Foer, he didn't. Indeed, having concluded by October 2021 that Russia was planning an invasion, the Biden team acted in a most decisive fashion by letting Putin know that Washington knew precisely what Moscow was up to. Thereafter, his team did everything it could to warn Putin of the possible consequences of an invasion, while at the same time making sure it did not hand the Russian leader a pretext for attacking Ukraine. The trick was to do this while at the same time doing everything it could (within reason) to back up Ukraine and President Zelensky.

As Foer shows in some of the more revealing sections of the book, relations with Zelensky were never that easy. Biden and his team could not even persuade the Ukrainian President that Moscow was actually going to invade. Nor did Zelensky ever seem that convinced that Washington always had his back. In fact, according to Foer, he was always complaining that the United States was never doing enough to support Ukraine, by neither allowing it into NATO — something the US and its allies strongly resisted — nor by supplying it with all the most up-to-date military equipment. As more recent events have shown, this is an argument that looks set to run well into the distant future, as the war grinds on into its second year.

Foer's volume only covers the first two years of the Biden presidency, and leaves the story hanging on a somewhat optimistic note in late 2022. Whether he would be so optimistic a year on, given Biden's still very low ratings, is not so clear. Nor is it at all clear how he would write about the impact the deepening crisis in Israel and the impact its war against Hamas might have on the presidential race. Yet, as he shows in a telling phrase, Biden during his first two years was determined to hug Israel and 'Bibi tight', in spite of the fact that Netanyahu helped undermine Obama's nuclear arms treaty with Iran and then proceeded to openly root for Donald Trump (p. 105). But if Biden was bothered, according to Foer, he didn't let it show. Perhaps he should have done. Indeed, with many in the US (including its over 1 million Muslim voters) asking whether they are any longer willing to vote for a party whose leader has thus far been reluctant to call for a ceasefire, Biden may come to rue the day that he got quite so close to 'Bibi'. In what promises to be a very close race for the White House in 2024, the Democrats will need every vote they can muster. It would be ironic indeed if a war the US did not anticipate, in a region it felt was beginning to settle down, turned out to be decisive and delivered victory to its opponents.

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About the author:

Professor Michael Cox taught at The Queen's University of Belfast and the Department of International Politics in Aberystwyth before being appointed to a Chair in International Relations at the LSE in 2002. One of the founding directors of LSE IDEAS in 2008, he is currently Emeritus Professor in the Department of International Relations at the LSE, holds a visiting professorship at the Catholic University of Milan, and is an Associate Fellow on the US and Americas programme at Chatham House in London. He is the author, editor and co-editor of several volumes including works on the Cold War, US foreign policy, Northern Ireland, E.H. Carr and John Maynard Keynes. His most recent books include *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden* (Bristol University Press, 2022), *Agonie dell'impero: il potere americano da Clinton a Biden* (Vita E Pensiero Press, 2022), *Afghanistan: Long War – Forgotten Peace* (LSE Press, 2022) and with the same press, *Ukraine: Russia's War and the Future of the Global Order*, which will be published in December 2023. He is also now working on a study of the China-Russia relationship entitled *Comrades* to be published by Polity Press in 2024. His most recent contribution to E-International Relations was an interview published on 4 October 2023.