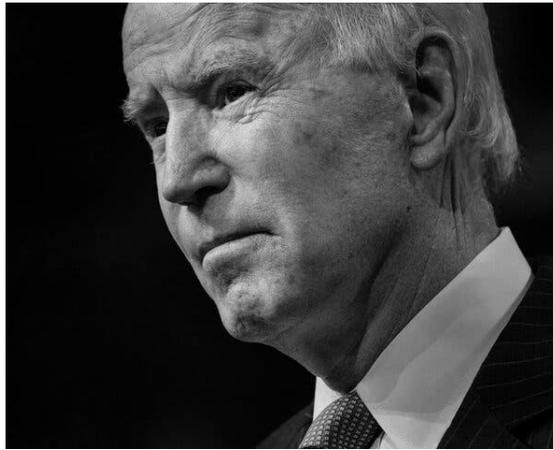


Opinion

Biden Made Sure ‘Trump Is Not Going to Be President for Four More Years’

By Thomas L. Friedman



President-elect Joe Biden was in a good mood as we talked on the phone Tuesday evening for an hour — he in Delaware and I in Bethesda, Md. He apologized, though, for being late. He had been following the breaking news that Attorney General William Barr had announced that the Justice Department had not uncovered any significant fraud that could have affected the results of the presidential election. It’s all over.

Biden joked that Barr had just called him, “asking if I can get him in the witness protection program for endorsing me.”

Considering the Trump team’s hurricane of dishonest claims about the election, the president-elect was entitled to a little laugh at its expense. Otherwise, he was all business.

Biden had a lot to say about how he intends to approach the current Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, and his Republican colleagues in order to get his cabinet nominees — and as much of his agenda as possible — through the Senate; how he intends to reshape U.S.-China strategy; and why he is ready to return to the Iran nuclear deal, if Iran does, and end President Trump’s sanctions on Iran.

Biden also spoke in depth about his strategy to connect with rural Americans, who have become estranged from the Democratic Party.

I did ask one personal question: What has it been like to win the presidency under such weird circumstances — with a deadly pandemic and an infodemic of Trump propaganda falsely claiming that the election was rigged?

“I feel like I’ve done something good for the country by making sure that Donald Trump is not going to be president for four more years,” Biden said. “But there’s been no moment of elation. It kind of reminds me of what’s going on with all my grandkids. You know, here I got a granddaughter who graduates with honors from Columbia. There’s no commencement. I’m the commencement speaker. It’s virtual. These kids are graduating with no parties. It’s just one of those moments. There’s a lot of work to do. I’m just focused on getting some things done as quickly as I can.”

Exactly how much he will get done will depend to a large degree on two things, Biden noted. One is how Republicans in the Senate and the House behave once Trump is truly gone from power. And the other is how McConnell behaves if he continues to control the Senate.

Biden’s top priority, he said, is getting a generous stimulus package through Congress, even before he takes office.

We are courting serious long-term economic harm if we don’t deal with the fact that “you have over 10 million people out there who are worried [how] they can pay their next mortgage payment,” and “you have a significantly higher number of people who have no ability to pay their rent.”

When people “are out of the work force too long, you know, that makes it a hell of a lot harder for them to get back in the work force,” Biden said. “Many of them are losing years and years of opportunity.”

The same is true when kids miss significant time in school. “They don’t just lose that semester,” he said. “They end up sometimes two and three years behind.”

A generous stimulus will actually generate economic growth without long-term fiscal harm if in the future “everybody pays their fair share, for God’s sake,” he insisted. “And by that fair share, I mean there’s no reason why the top tax rate shouldn’t be 39.6 percent, which it was in the beginning of the Bush administration. There’s no reason why 91 Fortune 500 companies should be paying zero in taxes.”

But the big question is whether he can get it past McConnell today or tomorrow if the Republicans continue to hold the Senate. A significant number of Republican senators could decide that they want to become deficit hawks again under a President Biden, after four years of uncontrolled spending under Trump that has brought the national debt to record highs.

Biden was careful about how he talked about McConnell, who has been careful not to call Biden “president-elect.” Biden obviously wants to keep the prospects of cooperation open —

but also make clear that he may have more leverage with the American people than the G.O.P. realizes if Senate Republicans opt for full-on obstruction.

“Let me put it this way,” he said. “There are a number of things that when McConnell controlled the Senate that people said couldn’t get done, and I was able to get them done with [him]. I was able to get them to, you know, raise taxes on the wealthy.”

“I think there are trade-offs, that not all compromise is walking away from principle,” Biden added. “He knows me. I know him. I don’t ask him to embarrass himself to make a deal.”

At the same time, if Republicans clearly “let all this go down the drain” just so a Biden administration will not get a win, that “may have an impact on the prospect of Republicans running for re-election in 2022.”

“When you have cops and firefighters and first responders across the board being laid off, when you’re not getting the kind of distribution of vaccines out to rural America,” he said, “it has to have some consequences.”

Having been through a lot of political seasons, Biden added, the world could change a lot for Republican lawmakers once Trump is gone, although he certainly will not be forgotten.

“My favorable rating is now 55 percent,” he said. “Trump is down to 42 percent.” A significant number of independents and some Republicans could start to look at the world very differently in the next few weeks, he said.

“I’m not sure [they] can sustain the position that we’re not going to do anything to help the circumstances of keeping businesses open, making sure we could open our schools safely. It is kind of hard to go home” if you are a Republican senator who says “let the states go bankrupt.” Republicans live in those states, too.

On foreign policy, Biden made two significant points. First, I asked him whether he stood by his views on the Iran nuclear deal that he articulated in a [Sept. 13 essay](#) on CNN.com. He answered, “It’s going to be hard, but yeah.”

He had written that **“if Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal, the United States would rejoin the agreement as a starting point for follow-on negotiations,” and lift the sanctions on Iran that Trump imposed.**

The Iranians are clearly hoping for that. The Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif, said on Nov. 17 that a return to full implementation by the United States and Iran can be “done automatically” and “needs no negotiations.”

The nuclear deal was signed in 2015. Trump unilaterally withdrew from it in May 2018, reimposing crippling oil sanctions on Iran, claiming that it was a bad deal to begin with and that Iran was cheating — which was not the view of our European allies or international inspectors.

The view of Biden and his national security team has been that once the deal is restored by both sides, there will have to be, in very short order, a round of negotiations to seek to lengthen the duration of the restrictions on Iran's production of fissile material that could be used to make a bomb — originally 15 years — as well as to address Iran's malign regional activities, through its proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Ideally, the Biden team would like to see that **follow-on negotiation** include not only the original signatories to the deal — Iran, the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany and the European Union — but also Iran's Arab neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Earlier this week, I wrote a column arguing that it would be unwise for the United States to give up the leverage of the Trump-imposed oil sanctions just to resume the nuclear deal where it left off. We should use that leverage to also get Iran to curb its exports of precision-guided missiles to its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq, where they threaten Israel and several Arab states. I still believe that.

Biden and his advisers are aware of that argument, and do not think it is crazy — but for now they insist that **America's overwhelming national interest is to get Iran's nuclear program back under control and fully inspected**. In their view, Iran's development of a nuclear weapon poses a direct national security threat to the United States and to the global nuclear weapons control regime, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

“Look, there's a lot of talk about precision missiles and all range of other things that are destabilizing the region,” Biden said. But the fact is, “the best way to achieve getting some stability in the region” is to deal “with the nuclear program.”

If Iran gets a nuclear bomb, he added, it puts enormous pressure on the Saudis, Turkey, Egypt and others to get nuclear weapons themselves. “And the last goddamn thing we need in that part of the world is a buildup of nuclear capability.”

Then, Biden said, “in consultation with our allies and partners, we're going to engage in negotiations and follow-on agreements to tighten and lengthen Iran's nuclear constraints, as well as address the missile program.” The U.S. always has the option to snap back sanctions if need be, and Iran knows that, he added.

There is going to be a lot of debate about this in the coming months.

On China, he said he would not act immediately to remove the 25 percent tariffs that Trump imposed on about half of China's exports to the United States — or the Phase 1 agreement Trump inked with China that requires Beijing to purchase some \$200 billion in additional U.S. goods and services during the period 2020 and 2021 — which China has fallen significantly behind on.

“I'm not going to make any immediate moves, and the same applies to the tariffs,” he said. “I'm not going to prejudice my options.”

He first wants to conduct a **full review of the existing agreement with China and consult with our traditional allies in Asia and Europe**, he said, “so we can develop a coherent strategy.”

“The best China strategy, I think, is one which gets every one of our — or at least what used to be our — allies on the same page. It’s going to be a major priority for me in the opening weeks of my presidency to try to get us back on the same page with our allies.”

China’s leaders had their issues with Trump, but they knew that as long as he was president, the United States could never galvanize a global coalition against them. Biden’s strategy, if he can pull it off, will not be welcome news for China.

While Trump was focused on the trade deficit with China, with little success, despite his trade war, Biden said his “goal would be to pursue trade policies that actually produce progress on China’s abusive practices — that’s stealing intellectual property, dumping products, illegal subsidies to corporations” and forcing “tech transfers” from American companies to their Chinese counterparts.

When dealing with China, Biden concluded, it is all about “leverage,” and “in my view, we don’t have it yet.” Part of generating more leverage, though, is developing a bipartisan consensus at home for some good old American industrial policy — massive, government-led investments in American research and development, infrastructure and education to better compete with China — and not just complain about it. Both Democratic and Republican senators have draft bills calling for such a strategy. The U.S. semiconductor industry in particular has been lobbying for such an approach.

“I want to make sure we’re going to fight like hell by **investing in America first**,” said Biden. He ticked off energy, biotech, advanced materials and artificial intelligence as areas ripe for large-scale government investment in research. **“I’m not going to enter any new trade agreement with anybody until we have made major investments here at home and in our workers” and in education, he said.**

And this time, he insisted, **rural America will not be left behind.** There is no way Democrats can go another four years and lose almost every rural county in America. For their sake and the country’s, Democrats have to figure out what is going on there and speak to rural voters more effectively.

“You know, it really does go to the issue of dignity, how you treat people,” Biden said. “I think they just feel forgotten. I think we forgot them.”

“I respect them,” Biden added, and he plans to prove it by “tackling the virus” in “red and blue areas alike.”

We have “got to end the rural health care crisis right now by building on Obamacare, assuming it survives at all, with a public option [and] automatically enroll people eligible for Medicaid. There’s strong support for that — and particularly [from] people in rural states,

like Texas and North Carolina, that reject expansion. We can boost funding. I visited 15 rural hospitals. And the biggest problem is there's not enough reimbursement for them to be able to keep open." And they are often the biggest employer in that town or city.

A lot of these rural hospitals and clinics could benefit from telemedicine, but they don't have the broadband connectivity. "We should be spending \$20 billion to put broadband across the board," Biden said. "We have got to rebuild the middle class," but "especially in rural America."

Before we signed off, I asked the president-elect just how he reacted to Republican senators threatening not to confirm Neera Tanden as director of the Office of Management and Budget, because of her trail of nasty tweets about Republicans. Should nasty tweets be disqualifying in this day and age?

"That disqualifies almost every Republican senator and 90 percent of the administration," Biden chuckled. "But by the way, she's smart as hell. Yeah, I think they're going to pick a couple of people just to fight [over] no matter what."

Biden closed by reflecting on the ugliness of the last four years — first seeing the glass half empty but then deciding in the end, who knows, maybe it's half full.

"Seventy-two million people is a lot of people to vote for" Trump, he said. But maybe, just maybe when Trump is gone from the immediate scene, "I'm not so sure that ugliness stays. There may be 20 percent of it. Twenty five percent of it, I don't know."

But some portion has to come back to a place where we can collaborate.

"We got to figure out how to work together," he said. Otherwise, "we're in real trouble."