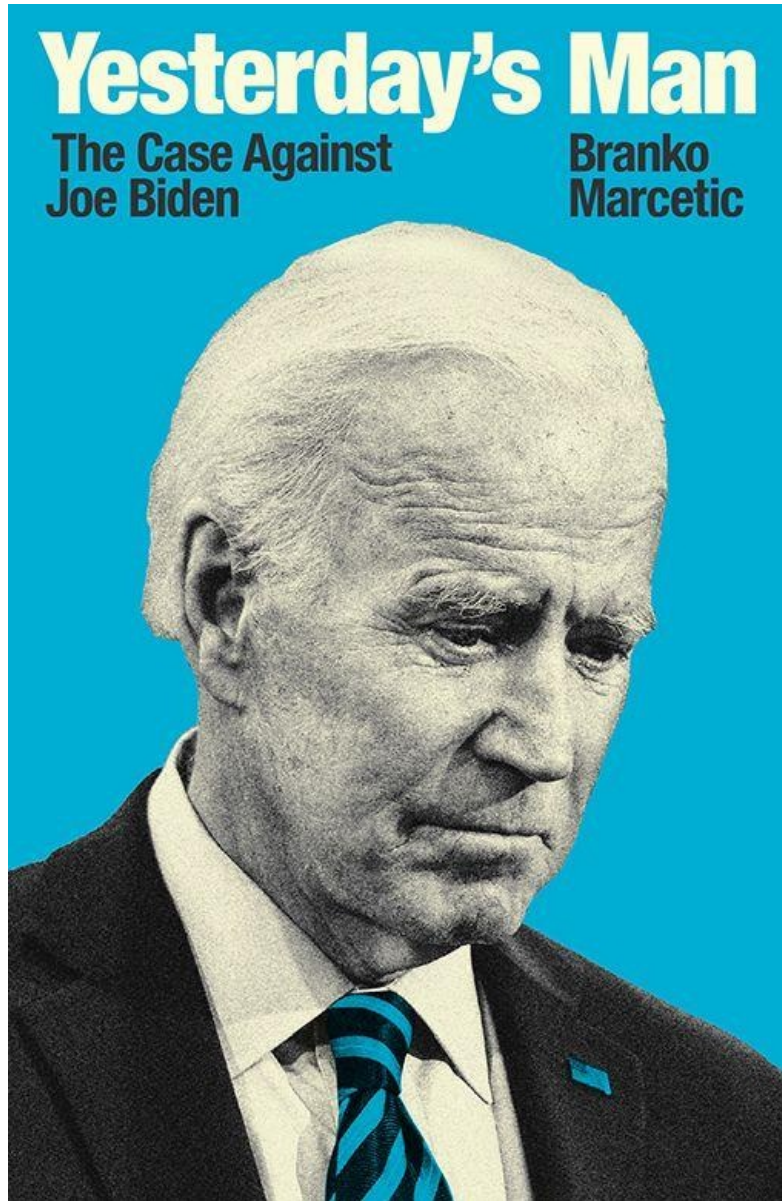


Yesterday's Man

The Case Against Joe Biden

Branko Marcetic



This eBook is licensed to Aleksandra Holubowicz, aleksandra.holubowicz@gmail.com on 03/19/2020

First published by Verso and Jacobin Foundation Ltd. 2020
© Branko Marcetic 2020

All rights reserved

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG

US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201

www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

Jacobin Foundation Ltd.

388 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn NY 11217

www.jacobinmag.com

ISBN-13: 9781839760280

eISBN-13: 9781839760303

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Printed in the United States by Maple Press

This eBook is licensed to Aleksandra Holubowicz, aleksandra.holubowicz@gmail.com on 03/19/2020

Contents

Introduction

1. The Making of a Neoliberal
2. Victory in Defeat
3. Racing in the Street
4. It's the Middle Class, Stupid
5. No Daylight
6. The Great Compromiser

Epilogue

Notes

This eBook is licensed to Aleksandra Holubowicz, aleksandra.holubowicz@gmail.com on 03/19/2020

Introduction

Ask any liberal-minded person, and they can probably tell you where they were and what they were doing when they learned Donald Trump won the White House. Three years and five stages of grief later, they'll probably tell you they're now wondering which of the many, many candidates gunning for the Democratic presidential nomination will just end the nightmare and bring things back to normal. As of the time of writing, that may well be former vice president Joe Biden, who has continued to lead the polls since entering the race in April 2019.

But simply removing Donald Trump from power won't do what many liberals hope it will. Trump and Far-Right populists like him are just one by-product of the same "normal" that the many now pine for, a normalcy that, I hope this book makes clear, often felt like anything but for a growing number of people.

To return the United States to any version of normality that won't just lead the country straight back to another Trump, the eventual Democratic nominee will have to do two things: they'll have to beat Donald Trump at the ballot box, thus removing him from the White House; and they'll need to midwife a fundamental break from the political status quo, removing or mending the conditions that led to his rise in the first place. This book makes the case that Joe Biden, beloved elder statesman and current frontrunner, will not do the second and may well fail at the first.

Joe Biden is not a bad or evil man. But he is someone who, by virtue of the political, social, and historical forces that shaped his life, made choices and drew political lessons that not only make him ill-suited to combat Trumpism but led him to help engineer the very conditions that handed Trump victory in the first place. In this, Biden is not much worse than many other prominent Democrats; indeed, part of the problem is that the Democratic Party, right now the only viable electoral vehicle against Trump and the Republicans, is loaded with politicians who share these same inadequacies.

Biden's career has straddled the United States' uneasy transition from the politics of the New Deal to its takeover by the radical Right. Starting in the 1930s, after decades marked by class conflict, stark inequality, and alarming concentrations of wealth and power, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's four terms helped transform the United States from a country whose business was business, as one Republican predecessor had famously put it, to one focused on securing hard-fought social, economic, and political rights for its working people, however imperfectly and even unjustly it carried out that task.

In the process, Roosevelt forged an unstable but powerful voter coalition that helped turn all politics into New Deal politics for the next several decades. Even when Republicans took power, they largely went along with the political order Roosevelt had laid down, recognizing that to do otherwise would be political suicide. And though the United States never got as far as, say, some of its European counterparts in securing economic and political rights for its people, for a good few decades, it secured a viable, if flawed, welfare state.

The first major cracks in this unspoken consensus came in the 1960s, when the Vietnam War and the victories of the civil rights movement began to unravel the New Deal order in different ways: Vietnam by fomenting mass unrest and disillusionment with both the Democratic Party and the US government more generally, and the civil rights movement by prompting a mass exodus of racists from the Democrats and into the arms of the GOP. These fissures widened in the 1970s, with the continuation of Vietnam and its accompanying unrest, rolling economic crises, and the rise of a more conservative, suburban-dwelling, white middle class that rebelled against the same New Deal order that created it. Meanwhile, the radical Right, which had, with generous corporate backing, been building a grassroots movement against the New Deal for decades, fell in line behind the GOP, which in turn recognized the power of leveraging racist resentment to win power, winning victories on the back of suburban support across the country.

It was at this point that the supposed "liberal consensus" set up in the 1930s was gradually replaced. Just as Roosevelt's election had heralded a sharp break from what came before, Ronald Reagan's in 1980 did the same, only in the opposite direction. While Roosevelt's New Deal order had used state power to improve people's lives, Reagan's presidency helped usher in a *neoliberal* order that claimed to pursue the same goal with the opposite platform: lower taxes, less government "interference" in the market and people's lives, and overall pro-business policies that, the claim went, would create prosperity that filtered down to everyone else.

Though Reagan and those who followed him didn't always live up to their slogans—mostly due to the need to maintain a powerful military to police a US-dominated global order that kept markets open for these same business interests—these beliefs broadly came to undergird virtually the entire mainstream political spectrum, helped along by the influence of money that seeped more and more into every facet of the US political system. Just as even anti-New Dealers had gone along with the prevailing Rooseveltian mood for the sake of political survival, liberal politicians found it easier to swim with the tide Reagan had set in motion, adjusting their politics and narrowing their imaginations to suit this new consensus.

But this could only last for so long. By giving businesses and the super-rich more and more power over

people's lives and dismantling or weakening the government programs that helped guarantee prosperity, or simply survival, for working people, neoliberalism made the overwhelming majority of Americans' lives worse. The pool of political leaders willing to fundamentally challenge this order and the powers that be behind it shrank and became marginalized.

The result was the dramatic collapse of the neoliberal center embodied by 2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Weaned on decades of elections where her party's traditional base of multiracial working-class voters had no option but to vote for the Democrat, Clinton explicitly pitched her campaign at the more affluent, suburban voters who for decades had formed the Republican base. At the same time, she found herself hampered by a set of flaws she shared with most of the political elite: an approach that prioritized business interests over those of workers, a racial justice record that victimized nonwhite Americans, an aggressive foreign policy that sunk lives and money into wars, a lack of consistent political principles, and a history of corruption that mingled her political work with her family's enrichment.

Clinton's approach could only work, as it had for her husband and his Democratic successor, as long as the party's voters stayed motivated enough to turn out on Election Day and as long as her opponent was firmly to her right. But Donald Trump made for a very different Republican candidate than those who came before: he criticized the political corruption endemic to the system, rejected foreign wars, attacked the free trade deals that put corporate interests over those of workers, acknowledged working-class suffering, and pledged to take aggressive action as president to alleviate it. The fact that he was disingenuous about all this and would largely betray these promises once in office made little difference. Trump held onto the affluent Republican base and peeled away just enough working-class voters from Clinton, while many traditional Democratic voters, seeing nothing for themselves in either option, didn't bother voting at all.

Joe Biden, who is cast by much of the media, as Clinton was, as the safest, most logical choice to defeat Trump, has all of these weaknesses and more. While Clinton was hammered for her husband's criminal justice policies that overwhelmingly hurt black communities, Biden was one of the chief architects of a racist system of mass incarceration and showed a career-long willingness to sacrifice African American communities for political survival. While Clinton's neoliberal politics alienated many voters, Biden was one of the earliest adopters of neoliberalism, successfully pushing the party to become more like him. The hawkishness that turned a war-weary public off Clinton has been a cornerstone of Biden's foreign policy views for decades. Trying to be all things to all people, Biden has stuck to a Clinton-like strategy of telling different audiences whatever they want to hear. And while not matching the scale of corruption Clinton and Trump have engaged in, Biden has tended to follow the instructions of his wealthy and corporate backers while letting his family profit off his political connections.

Even if Biden manages to beat Trump, there is every chance that his presidency will produce the rise of someone much worse. Rather than appealing to the material, class-based interests that unite voters across racial, gender, religious, or other lines, Biden has instead sought to find a nonexistent middle ground between working-class Americans and the rich and powerful, often leaning toward the latter. Rather than offering a bold alternative, Biden has spent his career reflexively adopting his right-wing opponents' positions as his own. Genuinely believing in consensus and bipartisanship for their own sake, he has repeatedly worked with Republicans to advance the lion's share of their political goals, dismantling the legacy of the New Deal in the process. At the same time, whether it has been crime, drugs, terrorism, or something else, Biden has tended to get swept up in every right-wing panic of the last few decades, often going even further than Republicans in his response. All of this has supposedly been on behalf of the "middle class," a group Biden defines as white, suburban, and largely conservative voters, whose interests alone he sees as essential to political success.

This would all be concerning no matter what. But in a time of rising white supremacy and with a Republican Party more ruthless and ideologically extreme than any major "center-right" party in the Western world, a Biden presidency could well end up taking the United States further down a Far-Right path than even Trump, whether by attempting to appease his opposition by pursuing some of their political goals—a hallmark of both his politics and of the administration he served in for eight years—or by creating the kind of economic conditions tailor-made for a Far-Right populist, which, in a sense, Biden has done his entire career.

Many interpreted Clinton's 2016 defeat as the neoliberal center's death knell. But Biden's ongoing popularity—based mostly in his overwhelming support among older voters who long ago internalized the myth, disproven in election after election, that unambitious corporate centrism is the only answer to an increasingly radical right wing—suggests its obituary has been written too soon. Whether Democratic voters ultimately decide to go with Biden or not, pre-Trump "normalcy" has collapsed and isn't coming back, particularly with an intensifying ecological emergency that much of the media and political establishment are trying their hardest to block out.

With a temporarily ascendant Far Right and a growing popular rejection of forty years of neoliberalism feeding the sudden return of the kinds of ideas that led Roosevelt's Democratic Party to dominate politics for decades, the world and the United States in 2020 are standing on the precipice of *something*. The question is: will Democratic voters rise to the occasion?