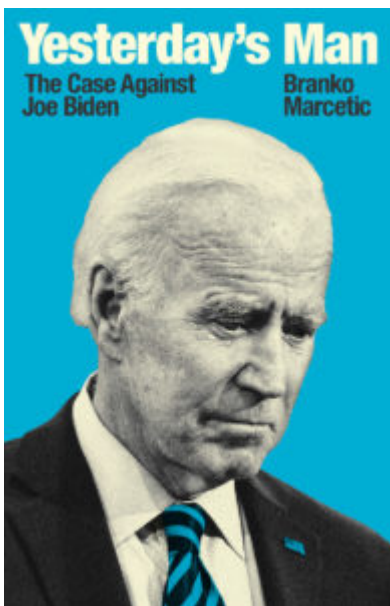
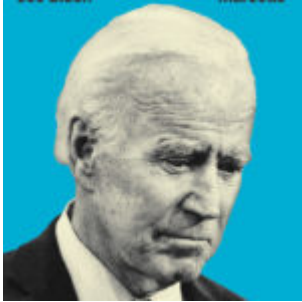


Yesterday's Man Is Today's Candidate for President

July 29, 2020



Book Review: Branko Marcetic. *Yesterday's Man: The Case Against Joe Biden*. New York: Verso, 2020.

Branko Marcetic ends his book . *Yesterday's Man: The Case Against Joe Biden* with this:

Democratic primary voters improbably hold the future of the country but potentially modern civilization in their hands. By July 2020, we'll know if they learned from history.

From the author's point of view, they didn't. Rather than choosing the progressive Bernie Sanders, the voters chose Joseph Biden, the compromiser, the advocate of bipartisanship, an erstwhile liberal whose decades-long political career led him since the late 1970s to adopt a series of fundamentally conservative budget-balancing positions, to create racist welfare and crime programs, to ravage civil liberties, and to become an advocate of U.S. military ventures around the world.

So now it's Biden who could in a few months come to hold the future in his hands. Marcetic's book could certainly discourage people from voting for him or make them wince in even greater pain if they feel they have to put a mark next to his name to rid us of President Donald Trump. Still the book is timely, since with most of our attention focused every day on Trump's latest atrocity, we have neglected to spend enough time analyzing the politics of Biden, who could soon become the national leader against whom all of our movements for social justice will have to be mobilized—for, given his past, it is clear that he will definitely not be on our side.

The thesis of *Yesterday's Man* is that Joe Biden has a flawed character; that he is one of those people who, driven by ambition, prove incapable of resisting the dominant currents of opinion in his time, who can never swim against the current, and who, therefore, ends up being carried along by the stream of history. And since through most of his life and career, history was flowing to the right, he floated right along with it. Elected to Congress as a liberal senator in 1973, by the late 1970s, he began to be caught up in the rising tide of conservatism and, fearing losing Senate seat, he went along, collaborating year after year with conservative Republicans in the writing of legislation that harmed working people and the poor.

Biden often talks about overcoming the personal tragedies in his life—the death of his first wife Neilia and daughter Naomi in an auto accident in 1972 and the death of his son Beau in 2015, and how those experiences have given the capacity for empathy and understanding. *Yesterday's Man*, focusing on Biden's politics, calls into question that characterization of the former vice-president. Marcetic's meticulously documented account follows every step of Biden's sorry career, from his first office on the New Castle County Council to his role in the vice-presidency, demonstrating how, while always claiming he was the spokesman of the middle class and covering his conservative votes with liberal rhetoric, he came to serve the banks and corporations, to align with the conservatives, to advocate for the generals, and, most important, to get himself reelected every six years as he advanced to key committee chairmanships where he could shape some of the worst legislation of the era.

From New Deal Liberal to Opponent of Busing and Warrior Against Crime

Having begun his career as Delaware senator as a New Deal Democrat, Biden's first turn to the right came on the issue of busing to achieve racial integration in the public schools, the hot button issue of the time. As the racist anti-busing movement became better organized and appeared in Wilmington, Biden voted again and again against busing and then authored legislation that prevented the Department of Health, Education and Welfare from using funds to support busing. This was not only a turning point for Biden, it also marked the beginning of a turn by his party. As Marcetic writes, "Biden's efforts were key to cracking the Democrats post-1960s commitment to civil rights.." (p. 33)

With the election of Jimmy Carter, the first of the Democratic Party neoliberal presidents and the growth of the conservative "tax-payer revolt" in the Republican Party, Biden began to move right on economic issues, beginning with his vote against Democrat Hubert Humphrey's full-employment bill in 1978. With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the pressures to cut budget and social programs became even greater. Though as Biden said, "In a strange way, the election of Ronald Reagan is more consistent with the budgetary thrust that a guy like me...has been going for the past few years." (p. 48). Biden voted for Reagan's budget cuts and for his tax cuts, and he began himself to propose to eliminate scheduled increases to Social Security and Medicare, though that failed. He backed the line-item veto that increased Reagan's power over the budget. Later he backed Reagan's tax overhaul that slashed the top tax bracket from 50 to 28 percent. He also supported the Gramm-Rudman balanced budget proposal and year after year he advocated a Constitutional balanced budget amendment. By the 1980s, Biden was no longer a liberal but rather a fiscal conservative.

Now a major figure in the Judiciary Committee in the Senate, Biden turned his attention to making war on crime and drugs. He pushed for mandatory minimum sentences, supporting and working with the segregationist Strom Thurmond, and the two of them wrote and pushed through the Congress the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 (CCCA) creating guidelines for maximum and minimum sentences. The results were immediate: "...the already overcrowded federal prison population exploded, growing 32 percent after its first year and pushing some jails 0 more than 100 percent of their capacity." (p. 79) Driven by the hysteria surround the growth of crack cocaine used

by mostly Black Americans, Biden helped to author a new drug law, signed by Reagan in 1986, with a \$2 billion budget, including his favorite idea of a Drug Czar to lead a centralized national campaign, and imposing harsh sentences. “Marcetic notes that, Thirty-five years out from 1980, the prison population had ballooned by 734 percent, with half of those prisoners serving time for drug offenses.” (p. 83)

As head of the Senate Judiciary Committee during the Reagan period and into administration of H.W. Bush, Biden failed to use his role to mount a strong fight against rightwing nominees to the Supreme Court bench Marcetic argues. As a result of his weak leadership, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy, and Clarence Thomas all ascended to the nation’s highest court. The last case is best known because of Biden’s mishandling of the accusations and the testimony of Anita Hill who alleged that Thomas had sexually harassed her while he was her supervisor at the Department of Education and then at the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. Biden showed little understanding or sympathy of her situation, failing to call corroborating witnesses and offering every opportunity for Republicans to berate her and for Thomas to deny her allegations. The feminist movement detested Biden for his behavior. So with those appointments the court was change completely, as Marcetic writes, “The result was that the Supreme Court, dominated by liberals since 1953, swung way to the right under Biden’s chairmanship, with 1960s-era civil rights protections perhaps the greatest casualty.” (p. 85)

Partner of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama

The Democratic Leadership Council, the neoliberal caucus found in 1985 and at one time chaired by Bill Clinton, became the vehicle for pushing policies that Biden had already been advocating. As Marcetic writes, “Biden was a natural fit with the group.” (p. 59) With the party now moving to the right, Biden decided to run for president, competing in the primaries with Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, Senator Al Gore, and civil right leader Jesse Jackson. Biden was the only one who went directly after Jackson, telling him he shouldn’t “pit the Rainbow Coalition—Blacks, Hispanics, poor whites, and gays—against the middle class.” (p. 63) Biden promised to balance the budget without tax hikes and “reminded the voters about his conservative positions on busing and abortion.” (p. 65) He had in 1977 supported the Hyde Amendment that denied and government funding of abortions to for women on welfare and government employees. He also had a reputation as a leader in the war on drugs and he stood as a friend of Israel. At the same time—always maintaining the façade of liberalism—he was for free health care for poor kids and a \$1.00 increase in the minimum wage. When it was learned that Biden had plagiarized several of his speeches, lied about being a civil rights activist and an opponent of the Vietnam War, as well as lying about his standing in his law school class, his campaign collapsed.

The election of Bill Clinton to the presidency in 1993 provided Biden with an executive partner with a shared political outlook. He worked with Clinton to pass the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that led to the loss of well-paying union jobs, he supported the personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA), which put time limits on receiving welfare benefits, stricter conditions for food stamps, more stringent requirements for immigrants, and established a welfare-to-work program. Biden’s personal agenda involved support for a tougher bankruptcy act helped banks and hurt middle class and working class creditors. Worse yet, he supported the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (GLBA) that was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on November 12, 1999, repealing the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, leading to fewer restrictions on financial institutions and the growth of banks, and which was an important factor in the economic Great Recession of 2008. Biden, of course, remained a crime fighter and worked to pass the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which added the death penalty to 60 crimes, built new prisons, and was a central feature of the new carceral state in which the United States accounts for more than 25 percent of the world’s prison population.

Finally, we have Biden's role as a militarist and imperialist. President George W. Bush's response to the September 11 terrorist attacks coincided with Biden chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of which he had been a member since 1975. Biden was considered the Democrats' leading expert on foreign policy. During the 1980s Biden had fought against Reagan's wars against progressive revolutionary movements in Central America, but, as the author writes, times and Biden had changed. He praised war-criminal Henry Kissinger as the country's greatest Secretary of State, he supported Margaret Thatcher's war with Argentina over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, he supported Reagan's bombing of Libya, backed George H.W. Bush's war on Panama, supported the U.S. training of Latin American soldiers, some of whom ended up as the organizers of death squads, and advocated sending U.S. troops to Serbia and the bombing of the Serbian "illiterates and degenerates." So it is not surprising that he allied with Bush on the question of the war in Iraq and also backed the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act with its attacks on civil liberties. Marcetic argues that Biden's later proposal for an exit strategy from Iraq-based on dividing the country into three separate regions—came from the conclusions he had adopted about American society: Some groups just could not live together.

In 2008 Biden decided to take another run at the presidency but quickly fell behind Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, and others in fundraising and polling. It was during that campaign that he described Obama as "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean." (p. 170). Why then did Obama choose Biden to be his vice-president? As a very young, Black candidate, Obama wanted a white, mature, running mate, and Biden was clearly a genuine mover and shaker in the Congress. The two seemed to have a chemistry based on their shared politics and values.

President Obama had inherited a disaster: the Iraq War and the economic crisis of 2008. Marcetic reminds the reader that while Biden would contribute to the Obama administration's failures, it was the president who was primarily responsible:

It was Obama's presidency, and it was he who demobilized his volunteer army, who failed to prosecute Wall Street and capitalize on the public anger at its greed, who went back on his pledge to end the wars and took Bush's "war on terror" to new extremes, who declined to apply pressure to Democrats holding up his agenda, and who shied away from taking more radical steps to deal with an epochal crisis for fear of being labeled a "socialist," something he had already been called incessantly long before winning the election.

All of that was on Obama—but Biden, as his sage advisor, was prepared to go with him every step of the way. As his chief counselor he approved the appointment of neoliberal economists and bankers like Larry Summers for Director of the National Economic Council and Timothy Geithner for Secretary of the Treasury and of the conservative Rahm Emanuel as Obama's chief-of-staff. Biden supported Obama's entirely inadequate stimulus program of \$800 billion and Biden was then put in charge of its distribution, which failed to help the middle class and working class as it might have. Biden supported Obama when he reinstated the Bush tax cuts that took trillions of dollars from the federal government. Biden would have liked to cut Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps, but the crisis had made that impossible. On another issue, Biden backed Obama's immigration policy based on border militarization, and deportations, accompanied by a Central America foreign policy founded on privatization, free trade zones, regulatory carve-outs, logistic corridors, and new pipelines.

Biden or Trump?

Biden won the Democratic Party nomination largely because the American capitalist class opposed his progressive opponents Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren whose policies threatened finance and business political control and their profit. The corporate news media argued that only a moderate like Biden could defeat Trump, while a New Deal liberal like Sanders would go down to defeat. Sanders' failures—to convince Americans of his policies, to win the black vote, to mobilize young voters, and to increase his vote in the primaries—also contributed to Biden's victory. And as we all know the South Carolina vote, where Black voters overwhelmingly rallied to Biden, sealed Sanders' fate. Other Democratic candidate then resigned in favor of Biden and Sanders capitulated, endorsed him and began to work for him.

Today, with Trump having failed to deal successfully with either the coronavirus pandemic or the national economic crisis, Biden, the presumptive nominee, is rising in the polls, now ten points ahead of the incumbent. Democrats, including former Sanders supporters, will turn out to vote overwhelmingly for Biden. Trump could still win the electoral college vote and a very messy election conducted during a plague and using many more mail-in ballot could delay results. Trump has said that he expected mail-in ballots—perhaps printed and distributed by foreign countries—could rig the election and that therefore he would “have to see” if he would turn over the office his rival if he won. But, assuming Biden does win and assume office, what can we expect?

Throughout his entire political career, Biden had cultivated and depended upon financial and corporate donors, raising money from Wall Street, big tech, and fossil fuels. Those interests established the parameters of his politics. And it's the same this year. For example, his insurance, corporate health, private hospital, and pharmaceutical donors stand against policies such as single-payer public health for all. Biden has been the loyal servant of financial and corporate interests throughout his career and the personal tragedies that he suggests give him his vaunted empathy and compassion have not mitigated his pro-business stances that harm the working class and the poor.

Some argue that the depth of the current crisis and the growth of the left wing of the Democratic Party will force Biden to move to the left and to enact progressive programs inspired by his former opponent Bernie Sanders and young representatives like Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and “the squad” of other progressives. Perhaps. But—as this book makes clear—for Biden to move left he would have to overcome decades of equivocation and an atrocious record on many issues, such as his by votes for the Hyde Amendment and against so-called “partial birth abortions,” his support for policies leading to the mass deportation immigrants, his votes for welfare and criminal justice programs that harmed Black and Latino communities as well as poor whites, and his votes for foreign wars.

Many will feel understandably that they have to vote for Biden to stop Trump. Marcetic's book suggests that will not be enough, that those of us on the left and on the side of working people will have to mobilize massively to force a Biden administration to do the right thing. If Biden is to be moved to the left, it will take massive labor and social movements such as those that in the 1930s pushed President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats to establish public works programs, to create the National Labor Relations Act and to pass Social Security. So the future really lies with us.