

Biden under fire over comments about working with segregationist senators

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Former Vice President Joe Biden came under increasing fire Wednesday and Thursday from his rivals for the Democratic presidential nomination, after he reiterated his comments about how he had valued working in the Senate with ultra-right segregationists like James Eastland of Mississippi and Herman Talmadge of Georgia, diehard defenders of Jim Crow.

Biden's first remarks came at a fundraiser Tuesday night in Manhattan with Wall Street multi-millionaires, when he contrasted the dysfunction in the Senate in the current era with the supposedly more cordial and collegial atmosphere that prevailed when Biden first became a senator in 1972.

"I was in a caucus with James O. Eastland. He never called me 'boy,' he always called me 'son,'" Biden said, dropping his voice into a Southern drawl. He described Talmadge as a mean and implacable defender of segregated schools, but then said, "You go down the list of all these guys. Well guess what? At least there was some civility. But today, you look at the other side and you're the enemy. Not the opposition, the enemy. We don't talk to each other anymore."

Two African-American senators who are running for the Democratic nomination, Cory Booker of New Jersey and Kamala Harris of California, attacked Biden for his comments, although they were careful to combine their criticism with praise for Biden's record overall—conscious of the fact that if he becomes the nominee, he is highly likely to seek a running mate who is female or African-American.

Harris told reporters in the Capitol that Biden "doesn't understand the history of our country and the dark history of our country," adding, "If those men had their way, I wouldn't be in the United States Senate and on this elevator right now." She hastened to say that she had "a great deal of respect" for Biden, and

that "He has served our country in a very noble way."

Booker declared, "Biden's relationships with proud segregationists are not the model for how we make America a safer and more inclusive place for black people, and for everyone," and called for Biden to issue "an immediate apology."

"You don't joke about calling black men 'boys.' Men like James O. Eastland used words like that, and the racist policies that accompanied them, to perpetuate white supremacy and strip black Americans of our very humanity," Booker added.

Biden did not respond as expected by the media and his critics in the Democratic establishment, with a verbal retreat or acknowledgment that he had made a mistake. Instead, he haughtily declared that he had nothing to apologize for, and that Booker should apologize to him. "Apologize for what?" he asked. "Cory should apologize. He knows better. There's not a racist bone in my body; I've been involved in civil rights my whole career. Period. Period. Period."

Actually, the controversy has thrown the spotlight on a particularly sordid and reactionary episode in Biden's early career in the Senate. In 1975, three years after his first election, he sponsored legislation to block cross-district busing of schoolchildren for the purposes of racial integration. Biden formed a political alliance with Eastland, a diehard, last-ditch defender of white supremacy, to support his legislation.

One question raised in some quarters, and not answered by the Biden campaign, was what exactly were the things that he and Eastland "got done" in the Senate that supposedly justified his fond recollections of working together with the white supremacist senator.

Biden recalled in his 2007 campaign biography, during his second run for the presidency, that Eastland, who had far more seniority and influence within the

Senate Democratic leadership, had helped him gain a seat on the powerful Judiciary Committee. He rose to become its chairman, presiding over, among other things, the confirmation of Anthony Kennedy in 1998 and Clarence Thomas in 1991.

Biden's remarks have given new prominence to the rotten history of the Democratic Party throughout the civil rights era. The most intransigent defenders of racial oppression and police and Klan violence were Democrats like Eastland, Talmadge, George Wallace, Lester Maddox, and Strom Thurmond.

It was Thurmond who began the wholesale conversion of southern Democrat segregationists into Republicans when he announced in 1964 that he was quitting the Democratic Party to support Republican Barry Goldwater for the presidency. But Eastland remained a member in good standing of the Democratic caucus until 1978, Talmadge until 1981.

The *New York Times* noted: "Mr. Biden had a similarly mixed relationship with Strom Thurmond, a South Carolina Republican with a history of racist views who was a key figure on the Senate Judiciary Committee in the 1980s and 1990s. Though Mr. Biden and Mr. Thurmond had several disagreements over civil rights, they worked closely on crime legislation in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1997, Mr. Biden effusively praised him, including glowing words for Thurmond's life before public office."

The media furor over Biden's seemingly gratuitous embrace of Eastland and Talmadge has shifted the spotlight from his remarkable comments about the danger of income inequality leading to revolution in America. On Tuesday, during one of three fundraisers he held in Manhattan that day, before Wall Street audiences, he said, "You know what I've found is rich people are just as patriotic as poor people."

He continued, "Not a joke. I mean, we may not want to demonize anybody who has made money." He went on to warn, however, "when we have income inequality as large as we have in the United States today, it brews and ferments political discord and basic revolution."

Biden made it clear to his wealthy audience that whatever the Democrats promised to working people, it would not threaten their interests.

"We can disagree in the margins," he said. "But the truth of the matter is, it's all within our wheelhouse and nobody has to be punished. No one's standard of living

would change. Nothing would fundamentally change."

The last phrase could serve as the epitaph, not merely of the Biden campaign, but of the entire fraudulent effort by all the Democratic politicians, from the 23 presidential candidates to the hundreds who will run for Senate and congressional seats, to suggest that this right-wing corporate-controlled party represents any genuine alternative to Trump and the Republicans.



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