

Biden's "gaffe" and the black vote

Patrick Martin
25 May 2020

Vice President Joe Biden was interviewed for the Friday morning broadcast of "The Breakfast Club," a drive-time program popular with a younger black and Latino audience. In the course of the interview, he bristled when challenged about his record of support for law-and-order legislation that put hundreds of thousands of African American men in prison.

He defended his support for the 1994 crime bill, the 1986 crime bill and other repressive laws he helped draft and push through Congress in his capacity as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee (a position he owed at least in part to his long collaboration with Southern racists, both Democratic and Republican, from James Eastland to Strom Thurmond).

When a Biden scheduler intervened to cut off the interview, host Charlamagne Tha God protested, "You can't do that to black media." Then he urged Biden to come back on the show before the November 3 election because there were more questions about his record to be answered.

"You got more questions," Biden retorted. "But I'll tell you, if you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, then you ain't black."

This arrogant comeback became a 24-hour sensation in the American media. Suddenly nothing was as important, particularly the ever-mounting death toll from coronavirus which reached 100,000 on the same weekend, as the furor over the Biden "gaffe."

The Trump reelection campaign branded Biden's remark "racist" and "dehumanizing," apparently not seeing the irony of such words coming from advocates of the most openly racist occupant of the White House in modern history and one who delights in dehumanizing every political opponent.

Biden's use of faux dialect—his "ain't" was only the last of a series of such efforts to fake "street talk" in the course of the 15-minute interview—came in for denunciations from the usual guardians of racial

identity politics, who rapped the knuckles of the former vice president because he, as a white man, presumed to expound on who should be considered legitimately "black."

Biden himself issued an apology within hours, going out of his way to address the US National Black Chamber of Commerce, an organization of African-American businessmen, rather than delegating the appearance to a surrogate as had been planned. He should not have been such a "wise guy," Biden said, calling his remark "cavalier" and denying that he would ever take for granted black support in the election.

"I don't take it for granted at all," he said, "and no one should have to vote for any party based on their race, religion or background. There are African Americans who think Trump is worth voting for. I don't think so, and I'm prepared to put my record against his, that was the bottom line, and it was really unfortunate, I shouldn't have been so cavalier."

In both his retort and his apology, Biden was seeking to reduce the political choice in the 2020 election to himself and Trump, the Democrats vs. the Republicans, upholding the two-party monopoly whose destruction is the urgent political task of the working class. And he was seeking use the totally unscientific and reactionary category of race to help him reinforce this monopoly.

This is the hallmark of the Democratic Party, which has long ago abandoned reformist appeals to the working class, the staple of its politics in the New Deal period, in favor of appealing to sections of the upper middle class on the basis of identity politics, the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation, not class.

Biden conceded, in his remarks to the black businessmen, that some might be Republicans. And indeed, there is a layer of wealthy blacks, personified by the new billionaire, Kanye West, who openly

support Trump. But he made no reference to the substance of the questions raised on “The Breakfast Club” about his own right-wing law-and-order record, which might suggest a left-wing rather than right-wing critique of the Democratic Party.

Charlamagne Tha God (born Lenard Larry McKelvey) is no political innocent, having built a lucrative career as a radio and TV talk show host and advocate of black enrichment. His 2017 book, *Black Privilege: Opportunity Comes to Those Who Create It*, which he called “a self-help guide for the hood,” was published by a major New York publisher, Simon & Schuster, and favorably reviewed in the *New York Times*, a sure sign that the author was not viewed as an opponent by the financial aristocracy.

He first pressed Biden on the question of selecting a black female running mate, citing multimillionaire Sean (P. Diddy) Combs on the Democratic Party practice of taking black voters for granted, suggesting that Biden should use the vice presidential pick to offset his own record on issues of concern to African Americans.

Despite being framed in racial terms, the questions that followed on Biden’s law-and-order record were nonetheless both legitimate and more persistent than those Biden had been accustomed to encounter from the servile pro-Democratic Party corporate media, and the candidate’s answers became increasingly defensive and irate. Biden openly lied about the impact of the crime bill and other legislation, and was forced to fall back on the argument—revealing in its own right—that all of these bills had the overwhelming support of the Congressional Black Caucus and the black mayors of major cities.

Biden owes his likely presidential nomination to these same figures in the black Democratic Party establishment, notably Representative Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, the number three Democrat in the House, who intervened at the critical point, pushing Biden to victory in the South Carolina Democratic primary after he had begun the presidential contest with three humiliating defeats in a row, trailing Senator Bernie Sanders in the national poll.

The media furor which followed had its serious side as well. It became the occasion for stepping up the pressure on Biden to select a running mate who would be acceptable to the Democratic Party establishment, a right-wing black female like Senator Kamala Harris,

defeated Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, or Florida Representative Val Demings, one of the House managers for the impeachment of Trump, as opposed to making any gestures towards the Sanders wing of the party, where there is support for Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren.

And given Biden’s age, 77, and his history of ill health, including narrowly surviving a burst aneurysm, the selection of a vice president could well amount to selecting his successor, not merely in 2024 or 2028, but far earlier. This with American capitalism plunging into a crisis of unparalleled dimensions, under the impact of the global coronavirus pandemic, can have explosive implications, not merely before the November 3 election, but before the Democratic National Convention in August.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact