

Book Review: *Lucky: How Joe Biden Barely Won the Presidency*

Why the Democratic Party can never be reformed

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The Democratic Party ranks, alongside the Tories in England, as the oldest capitalist political party in the world. This decade, it will enter into its third century of existence, carrying behind it a record of great social crimes.

In its infancy, this was the party of Andrew Jackson and Indian Removal, in its childhood it fought a war for the expansion and then defense of slavery. Its young adulthood was the violent suppression of the working class in the aftermath of the Civil War and a “humanitarian” cover for American imperialism’s bloody appearance on the world stage. Entering maturity in the 20th century, the Democratic Party took the United States into two world wars, dropped two nuclear bombs and waged neocolonial wars in Korea and Vietnam. In the 21st century, it replaced social reform with identity politics, bailed out the banks and destroyed large swaths of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

In 2021, the Democratic Socialists of America still argue that socialism can only come from within this capitalist party. They say: elect good Democrats, place good people in the cogs of this party’s machinery, and all will be well. Apply enough pressure and after 200 years, the Democrats will finally see the divine light!

Anyone who still believes this myth should read Amie Parnes and Jonathan Allen’s recent account of the 2020 election entitled *Lucky: How Joe Biden Barely Won the Presidency*. *Lucky* shows how the ruling class, through the Democratic Party, brings to bear 200+ years of experience to accomplish its chief task: crushing left-wing opposition and ensuring that the interests of working people have no impact whatsoever on state foreign or domestic policy.

The book is based on interviews with staff for the major Democratic primary campaigns, so pop a handful of anti-nausea pills and take a peek behind the curtain. What makes *Lucky* remarkable is that its revealing character is entirely unintentional. Parnes and Allen are so complacent, unoriginal and so deeply embedded in the milieu of Democratic Party politics that they fail to realize that their attempted hagiography is actually a devastating exposure.

Parnes and Allen uncritically describe a party comprised of people who treat the coronavirus pandemic and the mass suffering it has unleashed with near total indifference. The authors quote Obama-Biden confidant Anita Dunn, explaining that she “told one associate what campaign officials believed but would never say in public about the disease’s effect on Biden’s fortunes. ‘COVID is the best thing that ever happened to him.’”

Similarly, the police killing of George Floyd is significant only in terms of its immediate impact on the campaigns: “Police killings and violent protests drove a clear wedge between young Black voters and the swing-set whites,” the authors remark. These are hyper-pragmatists, uninterested in and incapable of looking past the end of the news cycle. It is taken for

granted that nobody has any political principles whatsoever, and that everyone will say anything to get elected.

The only constant is a visceral hostility to socialism or anything that resembles left-wing politics.

“This is not going to be the party of Bernie,” Bill Clinton declared in the primaries. The authors note with hands on pearls that the Democratic Party “saw the hard left as an obstacle to reclaiming power and a scary bunch who, if given enough authority, would take too much from the haves and give too much to the have-nots.” When Sanders appeared poised to win the largest states of Texas and California on Super Tuesday, the authors quote an unnamed “party heavyweight” as saying, “a panic set in.” (We will return to the South Carolina operation that crushed Sanders’ campaign momentarily).

The authors cite profound Democratic concern over polls showing a majority of Iowa primary voters supported socialist policies. This became the fixation of the party.

Contrary to the strategy of the DSA, the more pressure from below, the more resolute the party became in efforts to crush the threat of socialism. Herein lies a fundamental lesson of Democratic Party politics.

Parnes and Allen write that the Democratic Party was actively considering supporting Trump if Sanders won the nomination. Many party leaders, they write, “weren’t sure what they would do if it came down to Trump and Sanders in a general election. Founded or not, their fears of losing their party to socialism competed with their fears of Trump winning a second term.”

The ruling class had no fear of Sanders himself, or of fellow DSA members like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who, the authors note “was interested in expanding her political turf beyond the boundaries of the hard left” anyway. Democratic leadership knew these are team players with marching orders they will not disobey. They are not oppositional figures, they are part of the political establishment, and they play a critical role in its defense.

In 2020, Sanders and the DSA members of Congress were not victims of some scheme to sideline them, they were active, knowing participants in a plan to suppress the real “scary bunch”—their own supporters—who mistakenly supported them believing they were genuine opponents of social inequality and war.

The authors gratefully note Sanders’ pliancy after the 2016 primary, when he campaigned avidly for Hillary Clinton. This time, Sanders caused even less trouble before the convention and practically disappeared from the post-Super Tuesday storyline like a soap opera actor in a contract dispute. He spent the second half of 2020 quietly risking his own life in the midst of the pandemic (he had suffered a heart attack in 2019) and traveling the country whipping his own reluctant supporters behind Biden, who later snubbed him from the cabinet. There is no reference to any

concessions Sanders was able to gain from Biden after winning 10 million votes in the primaries.

Identity politics was the torpedo that sank Bernie Sanders' campaign. Parnes and Allen comment that "Unlike Trump, who used race to define his political tribe, Biden had used it as a fulcrum."

There is some truth behind this thoughtless comment—identity politics was a fulcrum used by Biden to pose as left while advancing ever more right-wing policies. Parnes and Allen write, "To get through the primary without being pulled too far to the left, [Biden] wanted to find ways to signal to progressives that he shared values with them." His aides were concerned that by raising money from Wall Street, he would alienate left-wing voters. In order to "buckrake from big-time donors," he had to "bring in more diverse staff at senior levels."

One top Biden adviser told him: "Have a woman of color who is your traveling aide." Parnes and Allen add, "He meant that it should be visually clear to voters that representation mattered." In other words, trick voters by taking pictures near black people. This is the level at which these people think.

Race is a sort of professional currency used by the Democratic Party courtiers to promote their own careers and destroy their rivals. Everything is a racial issue in the dirty scrum to the top of the Democratic garbage pile.

Proponents of the use of Zoom were racist because "Black people don't get on Zoom," Biden adviser and former Bernie Sanders aide Simone Sanders declared. Those operatives who argued it was unsafe for the campaigns to knock on doors in the general election due to the pandemic were also racist: "An undercurrent of racial tension within the party jostled the dynamics of the door-knocking controversy," Parnes and Allen write, because white people apparently do not like people knocking on their doors.

At one point, advisers apparently fought about the darkness of the skin color of various potential nominees for vice president. Parnes and Allen quote one adviser as saying, "The other thing that plays out is Stacey is a dark Black woman and Kamala is lighter skinned."

The comical absurdity of Democratic Party identity politics was on display in Biden's effort to solicit support from Al Sharpton to shore up his bona fides among black voters. "Reverend Al's ring needed to be kissed," Parnes and Allen explain, adding (strangely) that Biden wanted Sharpton to be his "half Sherpa and half flack jacket" among black voters.

Here is the description Parnes and Allen give of the man the Democratic Party presents as a representative of all black people:

Once a chubby, tracksuit-wearing acolyte of Jesse Jackson who was dismissed by much of white America as a loud-mouthed agitator, the slimmed-down sixty-four-year-old Sharpton now ate dry toast, sipped tea, and puffed cigars at Manhattan's Grand Havana Room alongside onetime targets of his protests, like former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Tens of millions of struggling black workers can be forgiven if they don't think smoking cigars with fascists is the promised land Dr. King spoke of in Memphis the day before he was assassinated. Sharpton and leading black Democrats like South Carolina's James Clyburn do not represent "black people" any more than Trump represents "white people." They are corrupt self-promoters and opponents of workers of all races. They used racial nationalism to force through the nomination of Biden, who championed anti-crime bills leading to the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of impoverished black youth.

Nowhere was this more clearly on display than in South Carolina.

By February 29, 2020, the date of that state's primary, Bernie Sanders

had won the Iowa caucus, the New Hampshire primary and the Nevada caucus. He was climbing nationally in the polls and primary voters overwhelmingly supported his proposals for universal health care and taxes on the wealthy.

The authors acknowledge that early that spring, the Democratic Party had mobilized the trade union bureaucracies in an effort to sink Sanders' campaign on an anti-communist basis. The DSA also argues these pro-management organizations defend the interests of workers.

The operation to use the trade unions to crush Sanders was in full force in Nevada, where UNITE HERE told Sanders, "Medicare for All was a bridge too far." Likewise, the "Culinary Workers Union advised its members that it opposed Medicare for All." Threats from bureaucrats were aimed at intimidating workers voting in in-person caucuses.

Parnes and Allen explain that "the decision to caucus for Sanders meant bucking the same shop stewards who negotiated contracts with management and influenced promotions, pay, and benefits for workers. The union's message was clear: anybody but Bernie. And, in a caucus, there was no secret ballot."

Nevertheless, workers in Las Vegas and Reno repudiated the bureaucracies and Sanders won the state caucus by an overwhelming margin. He was poised to win the most populous states on Super Tuesday. This filled the Democratic Party with even greater fear.

Four days before the South Carolina vote, during a debate in Charleston co-hosted by the Congressional Black Caucus, Biden made a litany of racial appeals and concluded by pledging to appoint a black woman to the first open Supreme Court seat. The next morning, Congressman James Clyburn announced his endorsement of Biden in an open racial appeal: "We know Joe, but most importantly, he knows us."

After Biden won the South Carolina primary, the Democratic machine swung into action, presenting the vote in this small Republican safe state as definitive proof that black voters want Biden and that the primary must therefore come to an end. Biden campaign headquarters had prepared a list of "Democratic elites who liked Biden but were supporting other candidates. These were the people who could be leaned on to lobby their own favorites to get out of the race at a crucial moment."

Barack Obama "made a round of calls to Biden's rivals after South Carolina," Parnes and Allen write, as the state and party decided the primary was over.

Perhaps from the veranda of his newly-purchased \$12 million mansion on Martha's Vineyard, Obama placed calls to Amy Klobuchar, who "was smart enough to know he wasn't calling to encourage her to fight for every last vote." He called Pete Buttigieg and told him, "Pete, you will never have more clout than you do right now."

Even the nonagenarian Jimmy Carter was called in to put the kibosh on Buttigieg's campaign, inviting him to a homely Georgia tavern and ordering him to end his run. Klobuchar and Buttigieg promptly dropped out and endorsed Biden, while Elizabeth Warren remained in the race to siphon progressive votes from Sanders. As a result, Sanders was crushed on Super Tuesday.

Sanders accepted his pathetic fate without so much as a whimper. In a one-on-one debate with Biden later that spring, Parnes and Allen describe how the self-proclaimed socialist acted like a loyal wingman for the Delaware Senator from Citibank: "Sanders made his points but hardly threw haymakers at Biden. It was damn near impossible for a trailing candidate to make up ground without hitting the front-runner, but Sanders knew that no one in the party was in the mood for blood sport in the midst of a scary public health and economic crisis."

The book provides other interesting tidbits. We learn of Biden's Irish temper and the fact that he gets sleepy quite early in the night, such that aides attempted to avoid late starts to televised debates. We are told *Jacobin's* David Sirota was paid a \$150,000 salary on Sanders' staff, where his responsibilities largely entailed boosting Sanders on Twitter—no

wonder the DSA is comfortable within the Democratic Party! The ever-lurking Hillary Clinton also repeatedly floated entering the primary as a unity candidate, as did John Kerry. Parnes and Allen describe how Kerry decided he would *not* be reporting for duty this time around:

“Maybe I’m f*cking deluding myself here,” Kerry said, as he began to play out the practical considerations of making a late bid for the presidency. “I’d have to give up Bank of America,” where he sat on the board. “I’d have to give up my speaking.” He’d just finished making payments on his house, he said, and would have “enough to live on”—a couple million bucks in the bank—to “be in a position to see if I’m working” on the trail.

Profound statesmanlike meditations.

This is what the Democratic Party looks like on the inside. There is no division between “establishment” and “non-establishment” Democrats. The Democratic Party *is* the establishment, it is the state, it is the CIA and the military and the FBI. It is an institution through which the capitalist class maintains its rule, suppresses social opposition and plunders the world on behalf of the corporations. Genuine socialists have nothing but contempt for those who tell workers and young people that the path to socialism passes through this stinking cesspool of political reaction.



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