THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY: YEAR ONE

AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA

CAPITOL INSURRECTION

WRAPPING UP A WAR

THE NEXT THREE YEARS

BY ROBERT FAMILIAR
On November 7, 2020, Joseph R. Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election, defeating incumbent Donald Trump to become the 46th President of the United States.

During his campaign, Biden, a Democrat, promised an agenda of economic reform, social and racial equality, renewed global partnerships, and a once-in-a-generation investment in America’s future—on top of ending the COVID-19 pandemic. But above all, Biden promised to restore the political and cultural norms that had been abandoned during the Trump era. In his own words, he wanted to “lower the temperature” of the nation’s discourse.

Biden’s first year was a test of this ambitious agenda. He had received a record number of votes—more than 81 million—but did not have the nation’s universal support. Many Republicans were openly hostile to the new president, and even some members of his own party stood opposed to his policy goals. Making his campaign promises come true would prove to be an uphill battle in many ways.

“We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation”

—“The Hill We Climb,” by Amanda Gorman, recited at the Biden-Harris inauguration
COVID CRISIS

Upon taking office, Biden’s most pressing crisis was the coronavirus pandemic. He inherited a patchwork of state-level public health responses, with minimal unifying federal guidance. He did, however, have a large supply of two recently approved, highly effective COVID-19 vaccines at his disposal.

Biden needed to move fast. New coronavirus cases in January 2021 had reached record highs, with hundreds of thousands of Americans testing positive every day. Biden set a goal: 100 million vaccinations in 100 days. The goal was surpassed in about half that time, so Biden doubled it. It soon appeared that the country’s entire adult population was on track to be vaccinated in mere months.

Simultaneous to the vaccine effort, Biden wanted to provide more economic relief to Americans who were struggling to pay rent, keep their businesses intact, and care for their families. His administration negotiated a bill, the third pandemic-related stimulus package (Trump had approved two previous packages), with Congress.

The $1.9 trillion stimulus bill, called the American Rescue Plan, was passed in March with bipartisan support, meaning it received votes from both Democrats and Republicans. The package included $1,400 direct payments to many individuals, rental assistance, higher tax reimbursements for parents, funding for state budgets, expanded unemployment benefits, and much more.

By the end of 2021, almost 90%

RIOT AT THE CAPITOL

Unlike previous presidents, Donald Trump refused to concede defeat after numerous news organizations called the election in Biden’s favor. Instead, Trump spread unsubstantiated—and since debunked—claims of election fraud. This fueled unrest in an already frustrated Republican voter base.

On January 6, 2021, the day the election results were to be officially certified by Congress, thousands of Trump supporters protested outside the U.S. Capitol. The gathering turned violent, and a mob stormed the building. Lawmakers were evacuated to safe locations, but hundreds of people were injured and five died in the attack. Shortly afterward, Congress voted to impeach Trump for a second time. More than seven hundred people have been arrested for their participation in the riot.

Trump finally conceded defeat after the attempted insurrection, but the damage had been done. Tensions had boiled over, and the country was at its most divided point in recent memory. This was the environment Biden stepped into on day one of his presidency.

THE DEBATE: COVID CRISIS

SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT MANDATE THAT PEOPLE GET THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

YES
✓ Vaccines are proven to be effective at preventing hospitalization and death.
✓ The potential side effects from the vaccine are typically much less severe than the disease.
✓ Being vaccinated is about protecting other people’s right to a safe environment.

NO
✗ People should be able to make their own medical choices.
✗ Breakthrough cases still occur in fully vaccinated people.
✗ There are rare but serious side effects to the vaccine.
remaining in Afghanistan (down from a peak of 100,000) were set to leave by the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. U.S. leaders knew the Taliban would move to seize control of Afghanistan after the military pulled out, but they did not foresee how quickly it would happen. In a matter of weeks, the Taliban took over most of the country, and the U.S. scrambled to get its last troops and thousands of Afghan civilians who had aided them on flights out of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. On August 16, the day after the Taliban took control of Kabul, Biden admitted the takeover happened “more quickly” than anticipated.

While he did not start the war, Biden ended it, and as a result, he’s viewed as responsible for the aftermath. With Western countries limiting aid to Taliban-run Afghanistan and the Taliban inexperienced in running a country, a humanitarian crisis began unfolding. The United Nations estimated 22.8 million Afghans, more than half the population, could face life-threatening starvation. Additionally, more than 50,000 Afghan refugees were resettled across the U.S., with much of their future uncertain.

**BUILD BACK BETTER**
Beyond the COVID stimulus bill, Biden wanted to pass a bill that could be a long-term investment in America and provide opportunities for a new generation. He saw infrastructure—roads, power supplies, and the other physical systems that allow the country to function properly—as one area where he could make a major impact.
Trump had failed to pass any major infrastructure legislation before the pandemic. Now Biden was pushing the nation’s largest-ever infrastructure proposal in the middle of the crisis. However, the biggest obstacle was not the pandemic—it was the Senate.

In the evenly divided Senate, with 50 Democrats and 50 Republicans, passing such an ambitious package would be an uphill battle. In an era of extreme partisanship, it is extremely difficult for a Democratic president to get support from Republican lawmakers. This meant that Biden would need to make concessions.

After months of negotiation, a bipartisan group of Senators—50 Democrats and 19 Republicans—voted to pass a $1.2 trillion infrastructure bill. The final bill, titled the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, allocated money for transportation projects such as highways, railways, and airports; sustainable energy infrastructure like electric vehicle charging stations; broadband internet; utilities; and more.

Biden was unable to seal consensus on the other half of his proposal, a $1.9 trillion bill focused on social programs like healthcare and education. He faced opposition from not only Republicans but also a small number of Democratic lawmakers. However, the bill remained on the table at the end of 2021.

WHERE’S THE MONEY?
Every president aims to build the economy and leave the nation wealthier than when they entered office. For Biden, that meant recovering one of the most unusual and unprecedented economic situations in the country’s history.

During the pandemic, economic conditions were confusing even for the experts. If you looked just at the stock market, you might feel very optimistic. Despite a sharp dip at the start of the pandemic, it recovered all the value it lost and then some, hitting all-time record highs. But the stock market is not the only way to measure the economy’s health. Another important economic indicator, inflation, has become particularly concerning for many people.

Inflation is the rising price of goods and services. Consider your school lunch. If one week lunch is $5.00, and the next week it is $5.50, the has price inflated 10 per-}

Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia, has been one of President Biden’s biggest obstacles in getting bills through the Senate. So far, he has helped prevent the passage of Biden’s Build Back Better plan.

**THE DEBATE: BUILD BACK BETTER**

**SHOULD POLITICIANS PUT THEIR OWN GOALS OR BELIEFS ABOVE PARTY PRIORITIES?**

**YES**

✓ Politicians represent their constituents, not the party.
✓ In a republic, we elect representatives to use their own judgment.
✓ Politicians can individually be a check against bad policy.

**NO**

✗ To maintain popularity, parties must show they can get results.
✗ One politician should not block the will of the majority.
✗ As the party leader, the president’s agenda should be followed by all members.
getting per dollar spent—your purchasing power—has declined.

The inflation under Biden was mostly due to the economy “heating up” too fast after it slumped early in the pandemic. A combination of massive government spending, a surge in demand from consumers who were exiting lockdowns, and problems with the world’s supply chain (the global network of manufacturers, shippers, and retailers) created a recipe for high inflation. According to the Consumer Price Index, at the end of 2021 the U.S. had experienced the biggest one-year price increases since 1990.

Another important economic indicator is the country’s employment rate. When businesses closed because of COVID-19, unemployment rose. As the economy rebounded, businesses needed workers back to meet consumer demand. Workers recognized their value had gone up and a so-called Great Resignation took place as record numbers of people left their jobs in search for better opportunities. More power shifted to workers, and some industries, like hospitality and transportation, suffered from a labor shortage.

Presidents have less sway over these economic factors than many would think, but what they can do, and how the economy moves as a result, is weighted heavily in public opinion.

**WHAT’S NEXT**
The successes and failures of a presidency can be measured in many ways. By how the majority of Americans feel about President Biden, he has not had a great first year. In fact, he has one of the worst approval rating trends among modern U.S. presidents, second only to Donald Trump. However, public opinion only tells us the perception of what was done, not necessarily what actually happened.

Instead, we can look to tangible economic growth, social progress, or diplomatic achievements as the measure of a presidency. In reality, it is the sum of those things and many more. Here are some of the things that will define Biden’s presidency in 2022 and the rest of his term:

**THE DEBATE: WHAT’S NEXT**

**IS BIDEN FULFILLING HIS PROMISES?**

**YES**

✓ The majority of Americans are vaccinated.
✓ A new law put more than a trillion dollars into infrastructure.
✓ The war in Afghanistan was ended.

**NO**

✗ The pandemic is ongoing.
✗ Significant social spending has failed to pass.
✗ U.S. politics remains highly partisan.
• **2022 midterm elections.**
  With some high-profile state elections such as the Virginia governor’s race going to Republicans in 2021, Democrats could be poised to lose their Congressional majority in 2022.

• **Immigration.**
  Southern border crossings spiked in 2021, and Biden is facing criticism from his party for continuing some restrictive immigration policies enacted under Trump, including one that forces asylum-seeking migrants to live in poor conditions for months at a time.

• **U.S.-China relations.**
  China’s encroachment on Hong Kong and Taiwan have been denounced by the West. At the same time, the U.S. economy is heavily dependent on China. In December 2021, the Biden administration announced that U.S. officials would boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

• **Russia and Ukraine.**
  Russia moved troops to the Ukrainian border, and Biden has warned Russia against invasion.

• **Climate progress.**
  Biden recommitted the U.S. to global climate agreements. Meanwhile, extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and more destructive.

• **COVID-19.**
  Despite vaccination progress, the pandemic still impacts Americans’ everyday life. If that continues, Biden will have a hard time enacting his agenda and winning reelection in 2024.

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**CABINET TRAILBLAZERS**

The Cabinet consists of the vice president and 24 heads of executive branch departments. When choosing his Cabinet, President Biden wanted not only the best and the brightest the country had to offer, but also people with new perspectives that have not been represented before at such high levels of the government.

**Kamala Harris, Vice President**
- Harris, a former U.S. senator from California, is the first African American, first Asian American, and first woman ever elected vice president.
- During Biden’s first year, Harris was tasked with addressing the overwhelming migration across the southern border. As vice president, she has cast 13 tie-breaking votes in the U.S. Senate, the most in any vice president’s first year.

**Pete Buttigieg, Secretary of Transportation**
- The secretary of transportation advises the president on issues relating to the country’s transportation systems, from highways to air travel.
- Buttigieg is the first-ever openly gay Senate-confirmed Cabinet secretary, as well as the youngest member of Biden’s Cabinet.
- A former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Buttigieg ran as a Democratic presidential candidate in 2020. He eventually dropped out of the race and endorsed Biden.

**Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Interior**
- The Secretary of the Interior is the head of the U.S. Department of the Interior, which oversees management of national parks and other natural resources.
- Haaland is the first Native American to serve as a Cabinet secretary.
- In her first year, Haaland created a new initiative in the Bureau of Indian Affairs to help tribal communities investigate missing and murdered Native Americans. She also approved a new constitution from the Cherokee Nation affirming citizenship for all Cherokee Nation members.
A DIVIDED NATION

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? Do you agree with the message? Why or why not?
2. How much of the blame falls on the president’s shoulders if Democrats and Republicans can’t work together in Congress?
3. What, if anything, could President Biden be doing differently to find common ground between the parties?

NOW IT’S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Do you think any of the other Democratic presidential candidates in 2020 would have done a better job than Biden? Which ones, and why?
2. How do you think things might be different today if Trump had been reelected in 2020?
3. YOUR STORY: Which of Biden’s actions as president have had the biggest impact on your life?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

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