

The Biden Factor Is Difficult to Calculate

President Trump *should* win, but that does not now provide any certainty that he *will*.

by Conrad Black



The final stage of the election campaign and its result will depend on four factors: management of the balance between demand for police reform and concern for the maintenance of public order; whether there is a significant revival of COVID-19; the swiftness of the economic recovery; and the resolution of questions about Joe Biden's apparent capacity to serve as president.

Hovering above the campaign will be the question of indictments from U.S. Attorney John Durham's special counsel investigation. On all that has been revealed, crimes will be

charged, and Attorney General William Barr confirmed last week that those whose conduct is likely to be judged controversial will be "familiar" names. But they may not include elected officials and apparently not Biden himself. The Democratic position will be a revival of the claim that Barr is a Trump stooge (an outrageous falsehood) tempered by their revival of the concept of presumption of innocence, which they conveniently abandoned during the Russian collusion hoax.

Biden will claim complete ignorance of any improper conduct. It still does not make for a salubrious atmosphere for the Democratic orgy of claimed virtue that we may confidently expect.

Both parties will have to show great care in pleasing public opinion which registers high majorities for reform of police conduct, especially in interracial encounters, but strongly supports law enforcement as an institution. The country has greatly evolved since Chicago Mayor Richard Daley publicly ordered police to shoot to kill some categories of demonstrators in 1968.

But the abandonment of police forces by a number of prominent governors and mayors has also offended public opinion, and more importantly, in many cities the police themselves cannot be far from mass resignations or a general work stoppage. If any such thing occurred, the recent fainthearted and somewhat contemptible remarks of Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley disapproving of the use of the military to restore domestic order will be immediately rejected by a public rightly fearful of a skyrocketing crime rate.

Biden has adequately kept his distance from the police defunders. Presumably, the radical nihilists and anarchists who have been so much in evidence in the nighttime scourges of vandalism, arson, and assault, however disappointing they may find the Democrats, will vote for Biden, if they can bring

themselves to vote at all. The secret for the Republicans is not to seem unconcerned with police bigotry and brutality against minorities, and for the Democrats to be invulnerable to the charge of demotivating or undervaluing the police.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti's description of the police (who protect his family at taxpayers' expense) as "killers" could be a mortal self-inflicted wound if emulated by Biden. The president will have to be careful not to get tangled up in side-show issues like renaming Fort Bragg and other Confederate tokens. Even Robert E. Lee has probably been too much honored, but the Democrats will have to muzzle those who want to rename the Washington Monument and repurpose the Jefferson Memorial.

The profusion of cellphone and security cameras ensures that a huge number of police encounters with citizens will be recorded. There are 375 million interactions between police and members of the public every year in a country of nearly one-third of a billion people, and a reassuringly small number of them become difficult. Only nine unarmed African-Americans were slain by police last year, perhaps some of them in dubious circumstances but still, statistically it's an infinitesimal number.

As a practical matter, almost every such encounter that is controversial is apt to be massively reproduced in the media and given the left-wing slant of most television political coverage.

The Republicans will have to manage these issues carefully as they arise, in order not to be tarred with the brush of oppressive reaction. The media and demonstrative elements of the population will provide unlimited ammunition for the defunders and police abolitionists. It will require great care for both candidates and their campaigns to reconcile reform measures with assurance of public security; one false step and either campaign could blow up. Biden's indiscretions and

bobbles are more frequent than Trump's, but the media is friendlier to him; both are high-risk candidates.

Restarting the Economy in the COVID-19 Era

Everyone from the center to the far-Left seems to be clinging with a sort of crisis nostalgia to a pessimistic view of the COVID-19 crisis.

Understandably, all the Democrats who were emotionally committed to a prolonged economic shutdown that would sink the president, are darkly opining at every opportunity that the COVID crisis is not over. Never mind that no one is suggesting that it is, other than in its original sinister proportions.

The disease appears to be effectively boxed into the upper fifth of the population above the age of approximately 65. For those beneath that age, including almost the entire workforce, the risk is minimal and there is no reason to impose any restraints on them. Those who are vulnerable should know to take precautions and particular attention should be paid to those in homes for the elderly, where the incompetence of some state governments caused terrible problems in the early stages of the pandemic.

Trump should be able to open up the economy without a dangerous spike in fatalities; occurrences of the illness, since over 90 percent of people have mild or no symptoms, is not in itself worrisome.

Economic reopening should stoke up employment, income, investment, and spending, and this, linked to the heavy infusions of demand and inundation of liquidity, should generate spectacular economic growth.

Economics is half psychology and half third-grade arithmetic, and by both criteria, since the country desperately wishes and

will work for the return of prosperity, the administration should have a strong economic argument, which is traditionally the greatest single electoral issue.

Known Unknowns

The Biden factor is a difficult one to calculate. He is holding his position in the polls despite a series of gaffes and incoherence that traditionally would have scuttled any candidate.

Gerald Ford lost the 1976 election largely on his assertion that he did not consider Poland to be a Soviet-dominated country, omitting the adverb “permanently.” Any previous presidential candidate in the era of the electronic media as verbally accident-prone and lacking in fluency as Joe Biden would have vanished without a trace long ago.

It is true that some of the president’s flippant remarks are self-inflicted wounds though his ardent followers seem to be impervious to them: if the “Access Hollywood” tape didnt sink him among them, nothing will.

But it would be hazardous to assume that once the country has to make a choice between just two candidates that Biden’s shortcomings could not be decisive. The other normal issues such as the administration’s success in drastically reducing illegal immigration, revising trade agreements, cutting taxes, deregulating, and eliminating unemployment prior to the pandemic, could all move some votes, even though they seem today to have been forgotten. The policy toward Iran and North Korea, which have not produced the retaliation that the Democrats had predicted, are unlikely to be much aired unless there is an incident (which Trump would go to any lengths to win).

Much has been made of the president’s supposed precipitate descent in the polls, but it has not been steep and it is not

irreversible. He is now trailing but not by much and the result will almost certainly be determined by the issues summarized. Trump should win but that does not now provide any certainty that he will.

First published in