



The Unbearable Burden of being Joe Biden

America's humiliating scuttle from Afghanistan has exposed President Joe Biden as confused and clueless at best. But it's also, perhaps, shown him to be more repellent even than that: an arrogant, emotionally manipulative, and deeply cynical man. I am not thinking primarily of Biden's astonishing, uninterrupted series of false forecasts and broken promises, though there are many. Recall that a Taliban takeover was "highly unlikely," that "if there's American citizens left, we're gonna stay to get them all out," and that Afghans could be reassured because "we will stand with you just as you stood with us." Revealingly awful as these examples and many others are, they are within the range of things political leaders say that are horribly ironic in hindsight but seemed reasonable and more or less plausible when they were spoken. That is because they fit within a recognizable moral compass. They should be true, and therefore, we hope they are true.

I am thinking, instead, of comments the president made that were jarringly inappropriate even at the time he made them. Mark Schmitz, father of Jared Schmitz, a U.S. Marine murdered by an ISIS-K suicide bomber at Kabul airport on Aug. 26, revealed that when Biden talked to him at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, the president **spoke more of his own son, Beau**, than he did about the young man whose remains were even then being offloaded from a military transport plane on the tarmac.

Why did Biden do this?

The charitable explanation is that a clueless president imagined it would be empathetic to talk about Beau, a National Guard officer who served in Iraq and died of cancer in 2015. Perhaps Biden thought his words would connect one bereaved military father to another, even though Beau's death had nothing to do with his time as a soldier. But there is a much more unpleasant possibility. Namely, that the president was reflexively turning to a heart-wrenching biographical detail of his own to get him through an awkward event in which the focus should have been on others. Biden has repeatedly cited Beau in the past **not primarily to reach out to other people but, rather, to draw attention and sympathy to himself.**

There seems no end to Biden's willingness to use his dead son's memory for political advantage. As the Washington Post reported a year ago, for example, Beau's memory was placed by his father front and center at the Democratic National Convention where Biden père was due to accept the party's presidential nomination. There was a substantial tribute video to Beau; Kamala Harris also talked at length about him, and so did Pete Buttigieg (citing him as a fellow veteran). Delegates were then treated to clips from Beau's introduction of his father at the 2008 DNC in Charlotte — played from beyond the grave, as it were — to introduce his father again.

In the way of any parent, I have occasionally imagined a family calamity involving one of my children. And I have winced with shame and reproved myself when, as sometimes happens, my mind has wandered to thoughts of how I would tell people about it and what their reactions would be. How can I concern myself, I think aghast, with tangential matters of presentation, appearance, and sympathy and fail to stay focused on the substantive horror of something terrible happening to my son or one of my daughters?

Biden repeatedly emphasizes the very thing that decency insists is too profound to be used for extraneous and ephemeral purposes. He plays up his family tragedies, which are incontrovertibly real and terrible. **He does so to win affection. To emphasize his shtick as a man of the people, bearing a heavy burden of sadness. Beau's memory is cited year after year after year. It has become reflexive, and like anything reflexive, good taste and sound judgment often counsel against it.**

That would be the case in talking to recently bereaved fathers and mothers whose sons and daughters were killed in the shambolic execution of an ill-considered flight from one's responsibilities as "leader of the free world." That is a moment when, whatever the marginal cost, one should not think politically. The calamity of America's rout from Afghanistan is certainly about Joe Biden. But what happened at Dover was about the individual service of men and women who gave their lives. It was not about the man who let those lives be lost

and who could not refrain **from repeatedly looking at his watch to see how much longer he had to endure it.**