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Monster Makers

Unless Biden fights big money, he could pave the way for someone even worse than Trump.

It brought a tear to the eye and a hand to the heart. Joe Biden, in his acceptance speech, called for unity and healing. He would work “to win the confidence of the whole people”. I just hope he doesn’t mean it. If he does, it means that nothing has been learned since Barack Obama made roughly the same speech in 2008.

The United States of America is fundamentally divided. It is divided between exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed. There is no unity to be found with kleptocrats and oligarchs. Any attempt to pretend there is will lead to political failure. It will lead not to healing but to a deflected polarisation. If Americans are not polarised against plutocrats, they will be polarised against each other.

I understand that, in a sentimental nation, bromides like Biden’s might be considered necessary. But I fear he believes what he says. When he spoke to wealthy donors at the Carlyle hotel in Manhattan last year, he told them not only that “no one’s standard of living will change, nothing would fundamentally change”, but also that “you have to be able to reach consensus under our system”. In this context, consensus looks like appeasement.

Obama’s attempt to reconcile irreconcilable forces, to paper over the chasms, arguably gave Donald Trump his opening. Rather than confronting the banks whose reckless greed had caused the financial crisis, he allowed his Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, to “foam the runway” for them by allowing 10 million families to lose their homes. His justice department and the attorney general blocked efforts to pursue apparent wrongdoing by the financiers. He pressed for trade agreements that would erode workers’ rights and environmental standards, and presided over the widening of inequality and the concentration of wealth, casualisation of labour and record mergers and acquisitions. In other words, he failed to break the consensus that had grown around the dominant ideology of our times: neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism has been neatly described by William Davies, a professor at Goldsmiths College, as “the disenchantment of politics by economics”. It sees politics as an ineffective or illegitimate means of social improvement. Decision-making should be transferred to “the market”, a euphemism for the power of money. Through buying and selling, we establish a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. Any attempt to interfere in the discovery of this natural order – such as taxing the rich, redistributing wealth and regulating business – will inhibit social progress.

Neoliberalism disenchantments politics by sucking the power out of people’s votes. When governments abandon their ambition to change social outcomes or deliver social justice, politics become irrelevant to people’s lives. It is perceived as the chatter of a remote elite. Disenchantment becomes disempowerment.

Before neoliberalism triggered the financial crash of 2008, its doctrines were treated as orthodoxy across the political spectrum. Obama had a chance to break from this cage, to confront the powers that “*the market*” disguised and the social divisions it caused. But he chose not to take it. Grace and decency alone cannot defeat structural injustice.

Trump stormed into the political vacuum. Chaotic and unscrupulous, in some respects he offended the neoliberal consensus, ripping up trade agreements, while in others he reinforced it. But the important point is that he was a monster the consensus created. His success was a product of the fake unity and fake healing of elite political agreement. When mainstream politics offered only humiliation and frustration, people turned to a virulent, demagogic anti-politics.

Biden has turned leftwards since he was Obama’s vice-president. There are some strong policies in his platform. But there is also a determination not to break the consensus by directly confronting the donor class. His “*clean energy revolution*”, which envisages massive investments in renewables and greener infrastructure, covers half the necessary effort to prevent climate breakdown. But without an active programme to retire dirty infrastructure and leave fossil fuels in the ground – in other words, directly confronting fossil capital – it will be less effective than he imagines.

His measures to support small business are positive, but they will count for little unless he also breaks up big business, starting with big tech. He has promised to raise taxes for the rich. But the plutocrats will laugh at him until he wages war on tax havens and secrecy regimes, starting with his home state of Delaware. Unless Biden unites the people against the oligarchs who dominate the nation, the people will remain divided against each other.

Biden will be tethered by circumstance. If the Democrats fail to win both Senate seats in Georgia, he will face a hostile upper house. Trump’s appointments ensure that not only the supreme court but also many federal judges will seek to frustrate progressive measures. Much of his time will be spent firefighting the pandemic, and the economic and social crises it has caused.

It might seem strange to note that the US was lucky to get Trump, but it was, in this respect: while he is power-mad and entirely lacking in conscience and empathy, he is also impetuous and incompetent, and failed to follow a clear programme. In other words, he was a hopeless wannabe dictator. He was also unfortunate: were it not for the pandemic, he might have won again. But he has blazed a trail for someone more effective: someone with Trump’s absence of moral constraint, but with a determined programme and a cold, strategic mind. If Biden fails to break the political consensus, in 2024 he could open the door to a competent autocrat. Writing in *the Atlantic*, Zeynep Tufekci names some plausibly frightening candidates.

Before we consider solutions, I think we have to recognise the possibility that US politics might not be fixable. The system is constitutionally padlocked; beholden to the power of money, which is reinforced by the supreme court’s catastrophic *Citizens United* decision, removing the caps on political spending by lobbyists; perhaps now terminally confused, frightened and angry. But if there is a solution, it must involve the re-enchantment of politics.

What does this look like? I suspect it means a tub-thumping left populism, inveighing against billionaires, against big money in politics, against the stripping away of public protections, against white collar crime and in favour of the radical redistribution of both wealth and political power.

It would reach past an obstructive Senate and supreme court to appeal directly to the people. It would build and sustain social movements that are bigger than the Democratic party, using its activist base not just to win elections but also to drive home political change.

Though Biden is a political chameleon, and though I will never abandon hope, it is hard to see him fulfilling this role. Perhaps I'm being too pessimistic, but at this early stage his presidency looks to me like an interregnum between something terrible and something much worse.

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