



Book Review: Evan Osnos Offers a Closer Look at Joe Biden

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Cato Institute co-founder Ed Crane has long argued that it's hard to be informed about politics and economics without reading the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. Crane's viewpoint may strike some as odd given the slant of the newspapers mentioned, but it's really not. He reminds skeptics that both publications employ very talented people, and while they may not share his libertarianism, they report crucial information. All that, plus Crane's view is that reading the *Post* and *Times* is the equivalent of being allowed into "the other team's huddle."

Evan Osnos is a former reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, and since 2008 he's been a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. Osnos is one of those very talented reporters, his writing style is of the kind that other writers would logically aspire to (including this one), and while his politics don't lean Republican or libertarian, he's arguably what Crane has in mind. His columns and stories are always very interesting, and educational. His 2014 book on China, *Age of Ambition*, was unputdownable. It was a much better read of the country than can presently be found on an increasingly protectionist right wing, plus it was free of so much of the nonsensical fallacy coming from both sides about China as an "export-based economy"; the latter an explicit and mindless rejection of Say's Law.

Osnos's latest book that will be reviewed here is *Joe Biden: The Life, The Run, and What Matters Now*. The review will start with interesting anecdotes, and some will be analyzed. It will also aim to analyze what the author thought in reporting on Biden. It's said that reporters report the facts, but we all have our filters. Osnos isn't immune to this truth about human nature, and there's no expressed presumption that he thinks he is. Still, if the book had a weakness, or better yet if it at times lacked something this reader wanted, it had to do with Osnos reporting on something Biden did or said without offering his own thoughts. As an example, Osnos referenced a Biden interview with his *New Yorker* colleagues Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson in which he told them he'd acted in "fairness to [Clarence] Thomas, which he in retrospect didn't deserve." OK, but why? Over 90% of the time Supreme Court justices agree with each other on the way to unanimous votes. Had something come out about Thomas since the hearings that caused Biden to change his point of view? Or was it just politics? I wanted to know what Osnos thought.

I did, and do, because Osnos is very smart. Not a huge fan of Biden myself, I voted for his opponent in 2020 after having been a routine critic of the person I ultimately voted for going back to 2015. Not very happy with either choice, I wanted and want to know what really wise people see in the new president.

Osnos has had access to Biden going back to the Obama administration, and this slim book (167 pages) provides useful insights into #46. Readers on the right will be entertained at times, annoyed at other times, but the guess is that they'll ultimately come away from Osnos's excellent book a fair bit more comfortable about our new president. Though there are warts, and some thoroughly rebuttable assertions from the new president, he ultimately reads as fairly reasonable, and eager to achieve consensus with the other side. At times he comes off as very likable. Osnos writes of how he genuinely seems to enjoy other people, and for instance had friendly comments for all the family members of new senators that he swore in as vice president. To a senator's daughter he said, "Remember – no serious guys till you're thirty!"

As for Osnos, he's as always so much fun to read. He's got a gift for writing, so even readers who perhaps disagree with him will enjoy the reading that elicits disagreement. To offer up but one of many examples, in describing Biden's "tactile" political style, Osnos noted that while Barack Obama "projected feline indifference to the adoration he engendered," Biden "reached for every hand, shoulder and head." The two "were separated by nineteen years and a canyon in style." At one point the author described Biden's style as "mawkish." You read Osnos with a dictionary or Google at the ready. Osnos reports that Obama comically told the famously verbose Biden how they would work together: "I want your point of view, Joe. I just want it in ten-minute increments, not sixty-minute increments."

It's apparent that the reporter in Osnos has warm feelings for Biden, but at the same time the book is not all hagiography. Osnos acknowledges that Biden is "famously loose lipped," that he "has a harrowing tendency to put his foot into his mouth," and as a consequence, even Biden understood that Donald Trump to some degree saved him from himself in 2020. In Biden's words, "The more he talks, the better off I am." Looking back to the first debate between the two, Trump partisans will always wonder what the result would have been had Trump not so aggressively interrupted Biden at every turn. Might he have hung himself? It's not difficult to conclude yes, but then the question is a total waste of time. Were Trump at all capable of holding his tongue, he would have never run for president in the first place.

Biden also has trouble with the truth. Osnos notes that he "sometimes exaggerated his role" in the fight against segregation ("I marched"), plus he's got a history of taking lines from others. Most readers are already aware of how Biden plagiarized British labor leader Neil Kinnock's biography in his run for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination, but he also lied about the substance. Osnos writes that there "were no coal-mining ancestors" in Biden's family history. Readers are likely less familiar with how he was forced to repeat a class at Syracuse Law School after "he was caught lifting five pages of a law review paper without footnoting." Biden graduated 76th out of 85 in his law school class, but later "bragged that he'd received 'a full scholarship' and 'ended up in the top half of my class.'"

Biden once claimed he'd been "shot at" in Iraq, but later admitted that he was "near where a shot landed." In one speech he told attendees that he didn't own "a single stock or bond." Why such an admission would somehow elevate him in the eyes of voters is a mystery to yours truly, but the main thing is that Biden was once again fibbing. As Osnos put it, "To be precise, his family kept securities in his wife's name."

Which brings us to Biden's endless claims over the years about being "Middle Class Joe." On its own, it's once again hard to figure why this makes him better or worse, but American politicians have a thing about wrapping themselves in humble beginnings. With Biden, it seems he's

overstated things a tad. Who knows, but Delaware's Archmere Academy (where he worked on a grounds crew to help with tuition) is hardly indicative of a family that was struggling (Osnos writes that there was a stretch when Joe Sr. was actually quite well to do, and in the polo-playing sense), plus he met his first wife (Neilia) while on a trip to the Bahamas during his junior year of college. Understand that in the early 1960s the percentage of Americans who'd flown on an airplane was something south of 10 percent.

This all rates discussion given Osnos's assertion that Biden, "who relied on his government salary, was among the least prosperous members of the United States Senate." But was he really? It brings to mind Marco Rubio's emotive commentary during the 2016 GOP presidential primary debates about how he used to have major student loan debt. The point here is that by 2016, and even though he too was earning a senator's salary, the debt had seemingly disappeared. If you're in politics, money finds you. *Always*. Maybe not directly, maybe the handsome pay reaches your wife, or brothers and sisters, sometimes offspring, but find you it does. Though Biden earned a senator's salary for a long time, Osnos reports that he lived on several acres in the "Chateau" area of Wilmington. Somehow he did all right, plus imagine the bonanza if he'd ever left the Senate for the private sector. It turns out he didn't need to on account of Obama tapping him for Vice President, but he did ultimately cash in. Osnos reports that he's "earned more than \$15 million, from speeches, teaching, and book deals" since 2017. Politics is lucrative for those on top, at which point it's not unreasonable to speculate that Biden's pay was to a high degree a proverbial Wall Street "call" on him eventually reaching the White House.

What about Hunter Biden? This is a short book, but Osnos acknowledges the various problems he's had over the years. Where it gets interesting is when Osnos refers to speculation that "Biden had used the vice presidency to help his son Hunter make money in Ukraine" as a "canard." OK, but even if we assume it was not Biden's intent to enrich his errant son, "canard" seems a reach. This was an example of reader yearning for more analysis from the author. Does Osnos really think Burisma added Hunter Biden to its board based on expertise, or because they felt his father could be useful? Question asked, question answered. Right? Bringing it back to Biden having been one of the "least prosperous" senators, it seems the description was overdone in the way that Hillary Clinton overdid it in saying she and Bill Clinton were "broke" upon leaving the White House in 2001. No, they weren't. Their future earning power was endless. So was Biden's while he was in the U.S. Senate. The bet here is that family members and former staffers got pretty good jobs based on Biden's perch. Politics is once again lucrative for those up top.

On the subject of race in the 2020 campaign, Osnos noted that the happenings of 2020 "afforded Trump abundant opportunities to look racist and inept." This read as too much. It particularly did in consideration of Biden's past on the matter. It raises a basic question: why are those partial to Democrats always so eager to excuse the lapses of their own on the subject of race? From *Joe Biden* we learn that he offended Jewish people with his 2014 comment about debt collectors as "Shylocks who took advantage of these women and men." On page 54, Osnos brings readers back to Biden's second failed attempt to win the Democratic presidential nomination in 2007 when, upon being asked about Obama, he described him as "articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy." From Mark Leibovich's 2018 book about the NFL (*Big Game*), we know that Biden approached Perry Bacon, a reporter for the *Washington Post* who is black, and commented "You look like you played some football, man." Actually, Bacon never played football.

Osnos excuses Biden's "twilight war with his mouth" at seemingly every turn, but Trump just has to be racist. It doesn't matter that he opened up the private club at Mar-a-Lago to all races and religions in an exclusive U.S. locale that was notorious for excluding certain races and religions, that he's dated black women, and that he signed the First Step Act with an eye on reducing the incarceration of so many minor drug offenders who are predominantly black, to his detractors Trump is racist. The reporting on race in *Joe Biden* was a disappointment. So was the reporting on the coronavirus.

It's apparent Osnos believes that Trump was at fault for the virus death count and "cases" related to the virus. The basis for the previous assertion comes from a passage early in the book in which he pointed to 110,000 virus-related deaths in a four month stretch as a way of ridiculing Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner going on *Fox* to declare the administration's efforts "a great success story." Toward book's end, Osnos concluded that by the fall of 2020, the U.S. "remained the world's worst performer" on the matter of the coronavirus, "with more than six million cases." This was hard to swallow.

About what's about to be said, it will be stated up front that all statistical references you're about to read come from the *New York Times*. The newspaper is mentioned so that no one reading this review will presume what's being said emanates from some kind of fringe source. In the writing of all my columns on the virus, along with my upcoming book, *When Politicians Panicked*, I made sure to use the *Times* as a reference point to check my view from day one that the lockdowns amounted to the biggest global human rights tragedy of the 21st century, and the biggest trampling on personal freedom stateside since Japanese interment during WWII.

About virus "cases," it's notable that Indonesia, with a population of 270 million (U.S.: 330 million) had, as of the fall, "only" 10,000 virus-related deaths. Oh well, the answer for why was kind of simple. Virus testing per 1,000 people in Indonesia was 8. In Mexico it was 13. In the Philippines it was 33. In the U.S. there have been well north of 200 million virus tests. Is it any wonder the high case count? Furthermore, since the virus is so mild for the vast majority of those who contract it, Osnos's U.S. case count of 6 million was clearly *way too low*. Still, seek and you shall find. A virus that spreads faster than the flu is logically going to be rampant in the richest, most advanced country in the world where tests are so easy to come by.

After which it's useful to point out that the *Times* reported for months that nearly half of all U.S. virus related deaths were related to nursing homes. Really, what was the Trump administration to do? Ban old age? How rampant was virus death if old people with other life-threatening maladies were removed from the death count? Notable here is that last week, in an article about Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser, the *Times* reported that blacks in D.C. had endured more deaths related to the virus than whites in the city had. True enough, but that same *Times* report indicated that the higher number was a direct consequence of there being many more elderly black D.C. residents who could also claim other major maladies.

But the main thing is that Osnos, though not a lawyer, knows his way around the Constitution. He'd written early in Trump's presidency about the 25th Amendment, and whether it could be used to remove Trump from office. This rates stress as a reminder that Osnos is highly sophisticated, and because he is, he knows that states' rights trump the federal government on these matters. That's why New York and California locked down early, Florida and Georgia locked down late and ended what was tragic early, while South Dakota didn't lock down at all. Trump very incorrectly said his power over states was "absolute," only to have Georgia Gov.

Brian Kemp correct him by re-opening against his expressed wishes, but so have his critics been just as incorrect in presuming that he had the power to lead a national fight against the virus. He didn't, after which his critics can't have it both ways. If he's as doltish as they claim, who among them would have followed his orders as is? Thankfully presidents aren't this powerful. If readers aren't as thankful as I am, they might look up Biden chief of staff Ron Klain's commentary on how the Obama administration handled H1N1. Presidents are quite simply unfit to lead virus campaigns. What would they know? Osnos knows this, which is why his reporting on the coronavirus was the most disappointing aspect of a very good and useful book.

What about Biden as president? Biden correctly mocks the popular Republican assertion that "The Democrats are socialists," that "They're here to take away everything you have." Some of the most enterprising people in the U.S. are Democrats. Big time. To pretend, as some members of the right do, that the Democrats are broadly socialist isn't serious. Watch what they do, not what they say. They work and prosper like capitalists. Good!

Has Biden been slippery? Yes. Osnos reports Biden telling supporters in rich New York that he wouldn't "demonize" the rich and that "nothing would fundamentally change." At other times, however, he said "I want to be the most progressive president since FDR."

In one interview Osnos conducted with Biden, the future president went on a silly rant about how "We're not talking enough about income inequality. We're not talking enough about how in God's name could you talk about a \$5.7 trillion additional tax cut, for Christ's sake. How can we continue to say a 20 percent tax on carried interest is fair? Why the hell aren't we talking about earned income versus unearned income?" Politicians can be so dim. Answering Biden, income and wealth "inequality" signal progress as technology enables the talented to reach more and more people with their unique genius. In other words, Jeff Bezos would have surely been rich 50 years ago if that's when he'd been in his commercial prime, but not nearly as rich as today. To all of our detriment. If Biden really wanted to reduce inequality, he'd abolish the internet, along with its eventual replacement. Tax cuts? The rich have all the unspent wealth. That's why they're rich. The less they're taxed, the more investment there is. This doesn't mean there won't be prosperity under Democrats, but why limit it with penalties imposed on those with the most unspent wealth to invest? The tax on carried interest should be zero, as should all taxes on investment income. Carried interest is not a sure thing anyway, which is why it's most certainly not income; rather it's capital gains on successful investments that are by no means sure things. If Biden loves job creation, he should be all about reducing taxes on savings and investment. And then there's no such thing as "unearned income." All investment is a consequence of past work. Why anyone, Republican or Democrat, would want to tax the savings without which there's no economic progress is one of life's mysteries.

So Biden has weaknesses, which is the bad news. The good news concerns whether he'll act on them. For one, Congress and Senate are divided. For two, Biden seems to enjoy being liked. Brawler he is not. For three, there's a centrist behind all the rhetoric. Osnos writes that Biden "voted for the deregulation of Wall Street, the Defense of Marriage Act, the North American Free Trade Agreement, [and] the war in Iraq." In that case he got two of the votes (NAFTA, and Glass-Steagall repeal) right. By politician standards that's commendable. Biden will never be everyone's cup of tea, but Osnos's excellent book indicates that he won't make any grand lurches either way. That's good, and probably the best we can hope for in these times. There are few libertarians in politics, and even fewer libertarian outcomes.

