

TUESDAY OPINION

DANA MILBANK
WASHINGTON SKETCH

Trump voters should be loving Biden

If Trump voters cared a whit about substance, they would be swooning for Joe Biden right now.

In ways both enthusiastic and reluctant, President Biden has pursued a surprisingly Trumpy agenda:

He has implemented the rapid and complete withdrawal from Afghanistan that former president Donald Trump negotiated with the Taliban.

He has maintained Trump's tariffs against China and on metal imports.

He has continued a Trump policy that allows for the rapid deportation of asylum seekers.

He achieved the longtime Trump goal of a massive infrastructure spending deal — and continued Trump's practice of heavy deficit spending.

He has furthered Trump's coddling of the Saudi regime (by letting it off the hook for murdering journalist Jamal Khashoggi) and Russia (by greenlighting a gas pipeline to Germany that circumvents Ukraine).

He has left in place Trump's hard-line Cuba policy and has so far failed to reinstate the nuclear deal with Iran.

So where's the love from the MAGA crowd?

Ninety-four percent of Trump voters disapprove of Biden, according to a CBS News poll this month, including 46 percent who strongly disapprove. Trump voters disapprove of the (Trump-negotiated) pullout from Afghanistan, 61 to 39 percent.

The likely reason for this is obvious, and depressing. Trump voters weren't attracted to him because of his policies but because of tribal partisanship and because they liked Trump's style: his attacks on institutions, government-by-tweet, the violent talk and, yes, the white nationalism. Conversely, Democratic voters support Biden despite many policy disappointments because he has brought calm and stability and isn't slashing away daily at the fabric of democracy.

Certainly, Biden offers a sharp repudiation of Trump in areas such as climate change, civil rights and covid response. It's also true that some of the populist Trump policies Biden has continued — protectionism, big spending, bringing the troops — all appealed to the left long before Trump's rise.

The Afghanistan pullout, which Republicans now blame on Biden, is the closest case of continuity. Trump had agreed with the Taliban on a May 1 withdrawal, and Biden's only change was to add four months for the evacuation — not enough to turn out, but it was enough to get the process. All the troops are coming back home; Trump boasted at a rally two months ago. The Biden administration "couldn't stop the process. They wanted to, but it was very tough." Trump had previously suggested sticking "as close to" his May 1 pullout date "as possible."

On immigration, Biden has, notably, halted Trump's border wall. But Biden kept in place Trump's use of a health code, Title 42, so that, under the guise of preventing the spread of covid-19, U.S. officials can rapidly remove migrants without allowing them to seek asylum. Biden had originally planned to maintain Trump's absurdly low annual cap on refugees at 15,000, only raising that to 62,500 after an outcry on the left.

As Politico's Anita Kumar reported this month, the Biden administration has supported the expiration of some visas, endorsed tougher green-card requirements, backed denying of permanent residency to thousands of legal immigrants, and defended a number of Trump immigration positions in court. The Biden administration has been accused of violating required protections of migrant children in government custody, as the Trump administration notoriously did. In one prominent case where Biden did reverse a Trump policy, the Supreme Court's conservative majority last week required the administration to revive Trump's "remain in Mexico" initiative for asylum seekers.

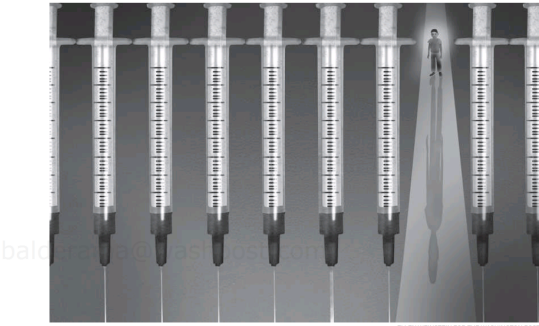
Biden rejoined the World Health Organization, but he was slow to share the U.S. vaccine surplus and raw materials with the rest of the world, and he has ignored the WHO plea that booster shots wait until more of the world gets vaccinated.

The administration has been in no hurry, despite corporate pressure, to end Trump's punitive tariffs on Chinese goods. Biden has only strengthened "buy American" requirements for the federal government from where they were under Trump.

In the field of human rights, Biden violated a campaign promise and continued Trump's failure to hold Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accountable for the murder of Khashoggi, even though the CIA concluded that the prince approved the killing. Though Biden said he would end U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition war in Yemen, he also cleared a Trump arms deal that sent \$2.6 billion in advanced weaponry to the United Arab Emirates, which is involved in the conflict.

To his credit, Biden has imposed sanctions on Russia for its cyberattacks on U.S. interests. But his administration in May waived sanctions on the company building Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which Biden claimed to oppose, as Trump did. On Friday, Ukrainian members of parliament wrote that Biden's decision "rewards" Russian President Vladimir Putin and forces him to pursue "large-scale offensive operations against Ukraine."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy finally gets the White House visit he has wanted that Trump infamously conditioned on political favors. But Zelenskyy must be wondering whether betrayal of Ukraine has become a bipartisan pursuit.



My brother's death was used to sell the 'war on drugs'

BY TONY VAN DER MEER

On Jan. 12, 1970, the New York Times printed an obituary of my 12-year-old brother on its front page, identifying him as the youngest person to die of a heroin overdose in New York City. The article's headline reduced him to a "heroic user." His name is Walter Dean Meier.

It has been more than half a century since Walter died tragically on Dec. 14, 1969. His frail body was found slumped over in a dingy Harlem boardinghouse bathroom two weeks after his birthday. Newspapers circled a photograph of him in this state, turning unspeakable loss into public spectacle.

This image of my brother, vulnerable and abandoned, has haunted me ever since. It crystallizes the abject failure of this society to have ever made Black lives matter, or to take seriously the economic and social deficits that leave people vulnerable to drug addiction and overdose.

President Richard M. Nixon appropriated his death (and others') to provoke the hysteria necessary to declare drug abuse America's "public enemy number one." Under the guise of a "war on drugs," a new form of structural racism emerged, what Michelle Alexander calls the "New Jim Crow."

Fifty years on, the war's devastation is clear. Last year alone, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported a grim milestone of 93,000 overdose deaths — 93,000 brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children, friends lost. If racism had not been deployed to dehumanize Walter — had his overdose been framed a "death of despair," the term applied more recently to White people who have succumbed to overdose — perhaps the current crisis could have been averted.

Despite what outsiders saw and wrongly assumed, my family and neighbors forged a community of love and dignity. Most, like mine, were refugees fleeing the aftermath of centuries of

enslavement and racial terror in the South. In the North, our mothers and fathers worked grueling jobs with long hours, but they were present in our lives. Structural racism, however, all but assured the deterioration of many families.

Things began to unravel for mine when my Surinamese father was deported. Our family needed a just and equitable society. Instead, we got segregated, under-resourced schools; dangerous, underpaid jobs; dilapidated housing; and grossly negligent child welfare and mental health systems.

Rather than providing support to keep our family together, the state of New York took Walter and me into custody. Walter struggled, as many children in his situation would. In custody, he was isolated and overmedicated with Thorazine. Once he was introduced to heroin, after years of failed state interventions, it became a form of self-medication.

Community activists have long argued that if the nation had responded to the heroin epidemic of the 1970s — the crack-cocaine epidemic of the 1980s — as a public health emergency instead of a matter of crime, it might now have an effective treatment system to mobilize. Alas, a profound lesson of Walter's death is that it reveals how structural racism is wounding us all.

Consider methadone — a highly effective medication for treating opioid addiction — authorized in the 1970s with low-income communities of color in mind. Rather than being deployed as compassionate care, it has been federally regulated for optimal social control, long disparaged as "liquor handkerchiefs." People who attend methadone programs must conform to harsh rules and surveillance or face debilitating opioid withdrawal. Such restrictive policies have proved largely counterproductive — and, of course, harm White people, too.

None of this would enter Kabul only a historic opportunity to end the "war on drugs." Its Statement of Drug Policy Priorities embraces a public health

framing of the drug crisis, centers racial equity and underscores the importance of harm-reduction programs.

But more must be done. President Biden should create a pathway for opening overdose prevention centers, where people can consume pre-purchased drugs more safely, with sterile equipment, in a medically supervised environment. Such facilities help prevent overdose deaths, decrease risk of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, and benefit communities by decreasing both public injecting and discarded syringes.

The Drug Policy Reform Act, recently introduced by Reps. Cori Bush (D-Mo.) and Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-N.J.), calls for federal drug decriminalization and would help overhaul U.S. drug policy. It should be wholeheartedly supported by the administration and passed by Congress.

States are also beginning to act, but the ongoing paradigm remains. In Philadelphia this year, attempts to open the nation's first overdose prevention center were thwarted when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 3rd Circuit ruled that the "crack house" statute of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 would make such centers illegal. (This is the very legislation that instituted 100-to-1 disparities in sentencing for crack as opposed to powder cocaine.)

My brother's death was society's loss, the loss of a brilliant child. His story can remain just one tragic instance in a vast archive of suffering. Or this nation — its leaders, policymakers and public officials — can finally listen to his 12-year-old cries for help: for healing, love and decency.

The writer is a senior lecturer in Africana studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Material for this article was contributed by Jennifer Brody, director of HIV Services for Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program and an instructor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, and by Keith Jones, a visiting assistant professor of Africana studies at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

MARC A. THIESSEN

Greenlighting the Taliban's takeover

Americans have been told that the fall of Kabul took the Biden administration by surprise, creating a situation — completely beyond our control — in which the United States had to depend on the Taliban for security in the Afghan capital as the U.S. military conducted the evacuation.

That tale turns out to be untrue. The Post reports that the Taliban offered to allow the U.S. military to take responsibility for security in Kabul — but we declined. In other words, our dependence on the Taliban for security in Kabul was not a fait accompli, but a choice — an American choice.

That's not all the horrors the world witnessed over the past two weeks — desperate Afghans chasing and falling from U.S. military aircraft; American soldiers being blocked and beaten at Taliban checkpoints; Afghan interpreters hiding from door-to-door searches by Taliban thugs; American veterans organizing private rescue missions for them because the commander in chief would not; and flag-draped coffins arriving at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to be received by grieving families — might have been prevented.

According to The Post, the Taliban hadn't intended to take Kabul on Aug. 15. But when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled and the Afghan security forces melted away, the Taliban was quick to announce in Doha, Qatar, between Gen. Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, and Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar.

"We have a problem," Baradar reportedly told McKenzie. "We have two options to deal with it: You — the U.S. military — 'take responsibility for securing Kabul or you have to allow us to do it.'"

That's right: The Taliban leader offered to let the U.S. military take control of the city.

If his side would enter Kabul only if the U.S. forces would "allow" them to do so. But according to The Post, "Throughout the day, [President] Biden had remained resolute in his decision to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan. The collapse of the Afghan government hadn't changed his mind."

So McKenzie — "aware of those orders" — turned down the Taliban leader's offer to let the U.S. military secure the entire city, which was not needed control of only the airport, so we could evacuate our citizens and Afghan allies. "On the spot, an understanding was reached, according to other U.S. officials: The United States could have the airport until Aug. 31. But the Taliban would control the city," The Post reports. I asked McKenzie for comment, but he declined to respond.

One former senior general officer of the U.S. military who has recently secured the capital. We would likely have secured the Green Zone where Western embassies are located directly to the east of the city, which was not secured anyway under Afghan forces) and the access to the airport, he says. We could have set up our own perimeter and established a secure corridor

from Kabul that would have allowed us to get all our citizens and Afghan allies out safely. But we chose not to do the. Instead, we greenlighted the Taliban to take control of Kabul, which made the United States dependent on the Haqqani network — whose leader is an al-Qaeda-linked U.S.-designated terrorist with a reward of up to \$5 million on his head for the capture of any of our men and women in uniform.

The negligence and incompetence of this decision is simply stunning. The American people need answers to pressing questions. The Post reports Biden remained determined throughout the day to withdraw all U.S. troops — and that McKenzie was "aware" of Biden's orders when he turned down the opportunity the Taliban presented. Did McKenzie relay the Taliban's offer to the president? Did he ask for additional troops to secure the capital? Did Biden decline to provide them?

It's much more certain: The Biden administration had the chance to control Kabul while we evacuated, but chose to cede it to the Taliban. That is a dereliction of duty unlike any we have seen in modern times. Our leaders made a conscious choice to put the safety of our military, civilian, service members and Afghan allies in the hands of terrorists rather than the U.S. armed forces — a decision that led directly to the deaths of 13 Americans in an Islamic State attack on the Kabul airport last Thursday at the hands of a suicide bomber. It is a national disgrace.

MATT BAI

Afghanistan is a mess, but it's not the end for Biden

The rushed retreat from Afghanistan is an ongoing human tragedy, the collision of historical realities with exceptionally poor decisions.

But is this really going to derail President Biden's entire agenda? Probably not.

Democrats and all the leftist Cassandra on cable TV really need to calm down, because history and common sense suggest that Afghanistan isn't going to define the Biden presidency — and probably not even the next election.

Democratic Washington is in the grip of panic. The general feeling is that Biden was seen as competent and steady until his Afghanistan withdrawal blew up, with 13 service members now dead and more violence likely to come. (This on top of a resurgence of covid-19, mostly in states where vaccination rates are lagging.)

As Biden's once-soaring approval ratings plummet, Democrats fear massive losses in next year's midterm elections and a hobbled presidency. Some are urging that Biden start firing senior members of his Cabinet.

Maybe everybody should just take a deep breath and read a little history.

All presidents get pounded by unforeseen crises — especially overseas, and especially early in their terms when they're dealing with policies inherited from their predecessors.

This kind of crisis may hasten the end of a presidential "honeymoon," which has always been ephemeral and these days is pretty much nonexistent. But you'd be hard pressed to name an instance when it marked the turning point in a president's tenure.

John F. Kennedy rued his embarrassing failure in the Bay of Pigs. Ronald Reagan reeled from the deaths of more than 200 Marines in Beirut in 1983. (Unlike Biden, Reagan bore responsibility for deploying those troops.)

Bill Clinton saw his presidency rocked in its first year, when 18 U.S. service members were killed in Somalia, having been sent there in the last weeks of George H.W. Bush's term.

We remember all these disasters, which dominated politics at the time, but none of them can be said to have defined a presidency or even come close.

In terms of foreign policy, Kennedy is chiefly remembered for the Cuban missile crisis, Reagan for the end of the Cold War, Clinton for his foray into Kosovo. Kennedy is remembered as a great president; the latter two men remain controversial.

Moreover, Democrats should recognize that they were always going to lose the country in the summer of 2021, whether or not they were poised to buck the trend before Afghanistan went south. Maybe the Nationals were coming back from 10 games out to win the World Series before they sold off their team.

But the fact is that the president's party almost never gains seats in a midterm cycle. The two presidential terms before Biden came into office with majorities and promptly lost them, largely because independent voters grew disenchanted with the party.

So it's practically a given, with the narrowness of their margins and the added challenge of redistricting, that Democrats were going to suffer serious losses next year with or without Afghanistan.

Midterm elections are pretty much never driven by foreign policy, anyway. Will voters a year from now focus on the economy? Yes. The state of the pandemic? Sure. Government spending? Entirely possible.

Bungling the end of a 20-year war in Afghanistan — a withdrawal that most people supported? Very, very unlikely.

Finally, there's this: Whatever else may be coming unglued right now, the presidency, seven months after Donald Trump's departure, is no longer a carnival. Which, after all, is the main reason Biden was elected in the first place.

Americans didn't give Biden the most votes of any president in history — and the largest margin of victory since 1964 — because they thought he'd never make a mistake, or that he'd seamlessly carry out his predecessor's policy of ending overseas wars.

They voted for Biden because he promised a return to reliable and accountable leadership, a dignified presidency that would be the background of American life, rather than dominating the culture with toxic lies and misdirection. We'd all had enough of the unscripted spectacle.

To be honest, it is, at the nadir of his young presidency, speaking solemnly to the public, mostly accepting responsibility for what's gone wrong, leveling with voters about the peril that still exists and the limits on what he can promise.

It's possible that in the end, even in crisis, Biden will end up reinforcing for voters the very qualities that made him seem like a desirable alternative in the first place. At a minimum, he will have closed the door on a protracted war that has cost Americans — Democrat, Republican and independent — had long ago lost faith.

Will that be enough to save Biden's party from inevitable setbacks in the years ahead? No, another term, should he want it? Of course not.

But it doesn't spell the end of his presidency, either.