
Free Associations on Post-Election America

Thinking About and Laughing at Biden and Palin

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In some ways, the 2008 vice presidential candidates were fun to watch—at least if you didn't take them too seriously. I found it almost endearing that Joe Biden talked too much and sometimes forgot to connect his political brain to what was coming out of his mouth and Sarah Palin brought enormous enthusiastic energy to McCain election events as GOP cheerleader and Obama basher-in-chief. As I watched these candidates on the Jim Lehrer *News Hour*, C-SPAN, the evening news, and while debating as well as reading about them in various papers and online, I turned to the defense mechanism of humor. In my thirty-second year of doing presidential psychobiography, I was in desperate need of this coping mechanism.

It should be noted that I was not alone during the campaign in looking for laughter. The humorists had fun with questionable statements by Joe Biden, such as his anachronistically having FDR reassuring the country on TV during the Great Depression before television was invented, while finding their bread and butter in Sarah Palin. Her “you betcha,” “hockey mom,” moose-shooting, and smiling, extroverted manner as she gave “shout-outs” to her teacher-brother's third-grade students back in Alaska, were an irresistible target to these Washington, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago humorists. Many laughed with them while others identified with her and deeply resented their ridicule.

Aside from the small amount of work I did on him during his aborted 1988 presidential run, I started researching Joe Biden over two years ago as one of the group of those—senators, governors,

congressmen, ex-senators, ex-governors, ex-congressmen, and even eccentrics—whose names were being bandied about by the media because they put out presidential campaign feelers, raised funds for a possible campaign, and hired presidential “handlers” (sounds like a presidential dog show). To increase media coverage they have an unofficial, semi-official, and official start to their campaigns. Presidential Fever (PF) is a disease that strikes senators from their moment of swearing-in, even if they should flub their first speech to the C-SPAN audience watching the event. (Watchers of C-SPAN know that the Senate chamber is normally occupied by the speaker, staff, and cameramen, but not our august statesmen who are much better talkers than listeners.) In this recent run for the White House, Obama was the first-term presidential aspirant.

In certain respects the Republicans are a much more conservative group as reflected by their first-termers only dreaming about the White House. (If only the Republican leadership were truly conservative when it came to issues of spending money we don't have, declaring wars—which we pay for by borrowing money from the Chinese—against people who didn't declare war on us, and maintaining the industrial foundation of our greatness!) I challenge our readers, at least those without photographic memories, to list the names of all the people who ran in these 2008 presidential sweepstakes. Despite all my research materials I cannot possibly remember all of them without delving into my archives. Those gathering the most media attention were Sen. Joe Biden, Sen. Sam Brownback, Sen. Hillary Clinton, Sen. Chris Dodd, Gov. Jim Gilmore, Mayor Rudy Giuliani (“Mr. September 11” on the campaign trail since that was almost all he spoke about), Gov. Mike Huckabee, Rep. Duncan Hunter, Ambassador Alan Keyes, Sen. Joe Lieberman, Rep. Ron Paul, Gov. Bill Richardson, Gov. Mitt Romney, Rep. Tom Tancredo, Sen. Fred Thompson, Gov. Tommy Thompson, and Gov. Tom Vilsack. If the ambition and egos of these politicians could be converted to energy then the U.S. would be on the verge of the energy independence they pontificate upon.

Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr. was born on November 20, 1942 in Scranton, Pennsylvania as the eldest of four children of an Irish Catholic fam-

ily. When he was ten years old his struggling family moved to Delaware for better economic opportunities, though he has always maintained ties to the city and state of his birth.

Confessions of a psychobiographer: I never read Joe Biden's autobiography until he became Obama's vice presidential candidate. By 1988 I had decided it was a Sisyphean task to read the autobiographies and biographies of all the individuals who had bad cases of Presidential Fever. Consequently, Joe Biden, *Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics* (New York: Random House, 2007, 365 pages) has only been sitting on my night table since he got the magical vice presidential nod. I found it to be very much a mixed bag. There are moments when it is a marvelous sleep potion and others when I feel the man coming through the pages. What struck me more than anything else was how Biden in his twenties became the family hero, wheeler-dealer, and go-getter who was moving his parents from one house to another and mobilized his brother and sister in his endeavors. What were the family dynamics enabling this? How did he develop the irrepressible quality that enabled him to survive politically despite major instances of Political-Foot-in-Mouth Disease (abbreviated to PFMD as is proper in our acronym-crazed society), including his plagiarism in law school and infamous 1988 instance of delivering a speech plagiarized from the British politician Neil Kinnock. As a scholar, plagiarism is not a laughing matter to me, although I have had to reconcile myself to one of my heroes—Martin Luther King, Jr.—having plagiarized materials for his doctoral dissertation.

Some of the answers to the question of Joe Biden's resiliency can be found in his having had to overcome great personal difficulties such as a stutter that lasted into his early twenties and personal tragedy. Shortly after he was elected to the U.S. Senate when still aged twenty-nine, his beloved wife Neilia and one-year-old daughter died in an auto accident and his two young sons were severely injured. Joe didn't have much time to feel sorry for himself, grieve, or even to do the mourning he so needed to help with the healing process after such a colossal loss; he had a young son hovering between life and death in the hospital and another injured, motherless boy at home desper-

ately needing his father. The enormous support of his family, some of whom moved into his home to help, was one key to his surviving this tragedy and agreeing to serve in the Senate despite this being a very low priority at the time. After all he has been through, relapses of Political-Foot-in-Mouth Disease, often as a result of making an honest, but politically dangerous, statement are manageable problems for Joe Biden.

Between laughs it is good to keep in mind that another way of looking at PFMD is as Freudian slips. They are our mirror into the unconscious, which I greatly value since it is hard to get presidential aspirants to provide honest statements of their fantasies and night- and daydreams. These parapraxes appear to be the senatorial version of the stutter Biden left behind in his early twenties. This grist for our psychohistorical mill is easier to work with than probing the difference between the conscious attention of politicians and their actual behavior since it is hard to know when they are simply saying things to get elected (that is, lying). Frankly, I worry more when they are lying to themselves than when they are lying to the public. Whoops, I am slipping back into my characterological trait of seriousness. Clearly, this is a totally unacceptable trait for this essay, so I must remind myself that I am part of the public craving laugh lines as part of our collective defense mechanism.

Her life on the 2008 presidential campaign stage is as close as we have to an autobiography of Sarah Louise Heath Palin. She bopped around the stage serving as chief cheerleader for John McCain, rather like the friendly, loud, smiling soccer or hockey mom at one of our kids' games who can be heard above the applause of all the others. To many, there is a warm, human quality to her public persona, especially when placed within the picture of her handsome husband and smiling children. (After the first photos, her son Track deployed to Iraq.) Trig, her six-month-old Down Syndrome baby, may not be smiling but he is a sensation among parents of special needs children who flock to Palin events with their children. Governor Palin, who has trouble separating personal and professional boundaries, proudly parades her family and personality in the public arena. Bristol, her seventeen-year-old daughter, held Trig in front

of her in the initial McCain/Palin family photos, thus covering her pregnancy. After John McCain shook hands with the unborn child's father, millions wondered if this teenager (Levi Johnston) would actually marry Bristol in the name of "family values."

Sarah Palin's zestful personality fits the expansive landscape of the most frontier-like of America's fifty states. Frontiersmen and -women care as little for boundaries as Sarah, her husband Todd (known in Alaska as the "First Dude"), and her staff, in working to fire her ex-brother-in-law state trooper. In fact, they had to settle for firing the head of the Alaska state troopers who would not stoop to this level of political involvement. One Alaskan ethics committee established that the firing endeavors were an abuse of office though another found that it was not illegal. Some other instances of her questionable crossing of boundaries were Palin's attempts to fire a librarian for not removing allegedly immoral books from the local library and her pushing through the building of a skating rink partly on property the town did not yet own—causing major legal problems and considerable unforeseen expenses.

When my local library finally came up with a copy of the one pre-VP-nomination biography of Governor Palin, I did not have high expectations. In fact, I anticipated Kaylene Johnson's *Sarah: How a Hockey Mom Turned the Political Establishment Upside Down* (Epicenter Press, 2008, 159 pages) to be an almost worthless political lives-of-the-saints-type hagiography. After all, this volume begins by suggesting three plots to the Palin story: "a Cinderella tale," a "version of David and Goliath," and "a refreshingly modern can-do story about a down-to-earth woman with energy and idealism—a homemaker and mother of five—who is determined to make a difference. And she does." Though the uncritical quality of this biography befits an author whose previous works were *Alaskan Wilderness Discovery Guide* and *Trails across Time*, its contents on childhood, personality, and style of leadership serves our purposes. Below I will start with basics.

Sarah Louise Heath was born on February 11, 1964 in Sand Point, Idaho as the third of four children of Sally and Chuck Heath, two months before her father took a grade school teaching job

in Alaska, where the family embraced the Alaskan wilderness as they crabbed, explored, fished, hiked, hunted, and trapped. Little Sarah—who loved to read—according to her father revealed "an unbending, unapologetic streak of stubbornness." Chuck, Jr., her brother, remembers that "she never lost an argument and would never, no matter what, back down when she knew she was right. Not just with me or with other kids, but with Mom and Dad too" (Johnson, p. 2). Chuck, Sr. was bemused when acquaintances asked him to influence his daughter the governor, because he felt he had lost that ability when she became two (p. 3)! This early determination reminds me of her running-mate John McCain, who at that early age held his breath until he "blacked out," if he was not getting his way. The doctors prescribed tossing him in a bathtub of "cold water whenever...[he] commenced a tantrum," which worked (John McCain, *Faith of My Fathers: A Family Memoir*, p. 99). Palin was chosen as his Veep candidate, partly because he saw in the Alaskan governor many of his own traits, especially her inclination to be a maverick against the Republican establishment. However, his campaign staff were bedeviled by the reality of Governor Palin's sharing his need to be the center of the limelight, stubbornness, and inclination to go his own individualistic way, thus subverting any structure, including that which was designed to elect him President. In short, Palin is too much like McCain.

The Heaths were a Catholic family, which shortly after Sarah's birth converted to Protestantism, becoming Pentecostal Christians. She takes her religion seriously, as does Biden. In high school she headed the Fellowship of Christian Athletes as well as captaining the basketball team. The first Republican woman vice presidential nominee was, like Joe Biden, John McCain, and Barack Obama (nicknamed "Barry O'Bomber" on the basketball court), a good high school athlete. The success of "Sarah Barracuda" was more noticeable than theirs was, as her basketball team won the small-school state championship with her making a crucial basket (Barack's team won the state championship in Hawaii, but he was only a second-string player.) She attended Hawaii Pacific College ("too hot" to stay at for more than one semester), North Idaho Community College, the University of Idaho (twice), and Mananaska-Susitna

Community College in Alaska. That graduation with a B.S in communications-journalism from the University of Idaho in Moscow took five years was not surprising given the varying requirements of the colleges and her extracurricular activities which included competing to become Miss Wasilla and placing third in the Miss Alaska contest of 1984. Her college hopping reflected her restlessness, just as her graduation revealed her determination. Sarah spent some time as a sports reporter, then married and worked in her husband's commercial fishing business. After a stint on the Wasilla (estimated population of 5,469 in 2000 in and 9,780 in 2007) city council, she became mayor in 2000 prior to unseating a former Republican governor in the 2006 primary. Her biographer declares that on the campaign trail Mrs. Palin "didn't make promises she couldn't keep" (Johnson, p. 95).

Sarah Palin's success after winning the Republican primary in running for governor against a former Democratic governor and a third-party candidate previews her strategy in campaigning for vice president. The strategy of her opponents was to reveal her ignorance by pinning her down on particular issues of public policy. She didn't cooperate. In the words of her biographer, "In her typical style, Sarah refused to play their game. Rather than sell her positions on particular issues, she sold herself as a new voice for Alaskans" (Johnson, p. 103). In listening to the re-airing of one of these debates on C-SPAN after she was tapped by McCain, I was struck by how little she had to say beyond her one issue of renegotiating the pipeline deal of her Republican predecessor. Nevertheless, her strategy won her election to the statehouse. One of the Alaskan psychohistorians I know reported having a favorable opinion of her as governor, although he also wrote me that he does not think she is ready for prime-time in the Lower Forty-Eight.

Alaska is a beautiful state that I have read and dreamed about since I was a boy. In many respects, it is America's last frontier which my wife and I thoroughly enjoyed visiting for twelve days as tourists last year after I decided we had to get there before all the glaciers melted. It is a state of extremes, which attracts individualists and where almost half the electorate just voted for the reelection of their Senator after he was convicted of a

felony, even though he was not likely to be able to be seated in the Senate which accepts habitual liars on the campaign trail but not "convicted" felons. It is a state where the people take pride in their independence from Washington while they hire lobbyists, as did Sarah Palin, to get a disproportionately large percentage of U.S. taxpayers' dollars from the District of Columbia. For their part, they are paid rather than pay state income or sales taxes since the oil companies pay so much to the state government as the price of doing business that last year about a thousand dollars per resident was distributed.

Political rallies often take on the character of the candidates. Republican audiences were extremely enthusiastic as they cheered on the McCain team—Governor Palin brought incredible youthful energy and enthusiasm to the Republican cause while reassuring the religious conservatives in the party whom McCain in 2000 had called "agents of intolerance." This enthusiasm and support saved her from the recall movement among some Eastern conservative Republicans who for several weeks were attempting to launch a movement to replace her since they felt she was an embarrassment.

Though rallies for Barack Obama took on the quality of rock concerts, his more intellectual approach to the political issues has meliorated this tendency. When the media focused on Joe Biden's gaffes, partly to balance their criticism of Palin, he was exiled to less visible locations to campaign. With some success, he sought to rally the audiences in the populist tradition. There was a different quality to the Republican rallies than of their Democratic rivals. In terms of garnering public and media attention, Palin and, for the latter part of the campaign, even "Joe the Plumber" usually eclipsed Biden.

Sarah Louise Palin may have won a "Miss Congeniality Award" in her college beauty pageant period, but the McCain campaign staff viewed her as a "diva" and "a loose cannon" during the campaign more interested in her own career advancement than helping John McCain be elected. Some campaign staffers anonymously reported that they told the Walmart-clothed "hockey mom" to buy six suits at an expected cost to the Republican Party of twenty to twenty-five thousand, and she billed them for \$150,000 from Nieman Marcus and Saks

Fifth Avenue. (After the election was over the Republicans reported another \$165,000 spent on traveling stylists to keep Sarah looking her best, much like a Hollywood star seeking media attention for a grand opening.) The McCain staffers did not laugh at what this did to the ordinary housewife and mother image they were cultivating. According to Elisabeth Bumiller in the *New York Times* (November 6, 2008), before the campaign was over some of them viewed her as a “whack job.” (“Jerks,” is what she called these critics after the election.) At the height of the campaign, like McCain, she laughed away some of the criticism by going on the *Saturday Night Live* comedy TV show to join in the laughter after she was repeatedly mocked in skits by Tina Fey.

A major question remains: “Who will get the last laugh?” Joe Biden will be doing the vice-presidential chores of presiding over the Senate and going to funerals of heads of state of the less important countries, while trying to keep his irrepressible loquaciousness from embarrassing himself and the administration. There are not many laughs in these activities. Should Biden still have Presidential Fever upon the completion of a two-term Obama presidency, he will be aged seventy-three in 2016. He could then emulate John McCain’s response to the age issue for the last decade, which is to declare, “I am older than dirt!” Sarah Palin, on the other hand, in eight years will be only fifty-two. When she was told on the telephone by a Canadian comedian posing as President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, that she would make a good president, Palin laughingly replied, “Maybe in eight years.” Should this come to pass, it remains to be seen who will be laughing and who will be crying.

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[Editor’s Note: See the Letter to the Editor on Alaska on page 176]

Beisel on Fiscal Crisis

(Continued from p. 105)

ical weaknesses built into American culture.

As we know, one goal of the 9/11 attackers was to weaken and destroy America’s financial strength and dominance. The World Trade Center was specifically targeted not only as a symbol of US financial might but also because it served as workplace for thousands of global financial experts whose years of expertise, should they be eliminated at one blow, could not easily be replaced.

Reactive societies such as our own move slowly and only after they’ve been severely hurt. It’s hard catching the horse after it’s out of the barn, while our after-the-fact responses becoming enormously difficult or completely ineffectual in any case. This repeated behavior is clearly irrational since we already know we do things this way and continue to ignore the many warnings we’ve given ourselves beforehand.

Part of the reason we’ve reached this pass, as many social critics, sociologists and contemporary historians have observed, is that we’ve become an overindulgent society that embraces myriad self-defeating fantasies. They include the fantasies that: there are no limits; there are no consequences; mistakes won’t hurt us; and there’s always another chance.

Only part of this behavior is rooted in childhood. The rest results from a series of complex cultural interactions which include the influence of the institutions we’ve created to embody, reflect, and control our wishes, fears, and impulses that also confirm and justify our beliefs and behaviors, as well as the contemporary re-staging of particular past traumas we’ve brought upon ourselves.

Sixty percent of teenage youth in our inner cities try to gain a measure of self-importance by thinking they’ll make it into the National Basketball Association (NBA), while polls show that the main goal of sixty percent of American high-school students is to become a “celebrity.”

In addition, many veterans are troubled by what they find when they return to the States. Intellectually, of course, we “know” we’re at war;