

Joe Biden and COVID-19's Test of the American Experiment

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In his inaugural address, President Biden outlined an ambitious policy agenda encompassing economic recovery, climate change, racial justice, social inequality, America's position in the world and, most importantly, getting the rampaging pandemic under control. No meaningful progress can come in other policy areas until the nation suppresses COVID-19.

Fortunately, Biden is a seasoned leader who has demonstrated the capacity to learn from failure. On Biden's watch as Vice President, execution errors plagued the catastrophic rollout in October 2013 of the Affordable Care Act's HealthCare.gov website. The website's failure tarnished President Obama's signature legislative accomplishment and increased public opposition to the ACA (aka Obamacare).

AMERICAN RESILIENCE

Philosopher George Santayana famously observed that "Those who ignore history are doomed to relive it." A corollary to Santayana's famous aphorism is "Those who learn from history can improve upon it."

Successful leadership often emerges from hard-earned experience forged during periods of turmoil. With humility and grace, leaders can acknowledge failure, learn from their mistakes and become more effective decision-makers in future crises. American history provides numerous examples of presidents learning from and overcoming setbacks. Here are two.

Japan's December 7, 1941 surprise attack on Pearl Harbor decimated the Navy's Pacific Fleet, killed and wounded over 4,000 Americans and exposed the nation's military unpreparedness. The next day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared war and rallied a previously divided populace to support the long battle ahead. Within two years, the U.S. had built the greatest war machine in history. It would lead the allied forces to total victory in 1945.

In April 1961, newly elected President John F. Kennedy suffered a devastating foreign policy defeat at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. The next day, Kennedy invited his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, to Camp David to assess the situation and lend his advice. Eighteen months later, Kennedy responded deftly to a Soviet foray to place nuclear missiles in Cuba. After tense negotiations, the Soviets agreed to dismantle their offensive weapons in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to reinvade Cuba.

Under fire, Presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy responded to crises constructively. There was no finger-pointing. Each acknowledged responsibility for the setback, took time to understand its causes, and overcame it through thoughtful, deliberate, forward-looking action. Importantly, each president had the broad support of the American people.

In assembling his COVID-19 response team and plan, Biden has clearly incorporated significant lessons from the failed HealthCare.gov rollout. His full-throated commitment to managing "the hell out of the COVID-19 vaccine distribution" reflects the hard-earned wisdom of a resilient leader.

Biden assumes the presidency at a time of bitter partisanship. A significant segment of the U.S. population does not even accept his legitimacy to govern. Biden will require broad support from the American people to combat COVID-19 effectively. It's not clear that he will receive that support.

Even with great presidential leadership, there is the possibility that the nation will not rise to the challenge of defeating COVID-19. With success, there is potential to rechart the nation's course. Failure will unleash more stresses upon the land.

Foreign policy "wise man" George Kennan captured the essence of enlightened crisis leadership in a 1950 letter to Secretary of State Dean Acheson. In the following passage, Kennan advises Acheson on managing the fallout from a disastrous military campaign engineered by General Douglas MacArthur that propelled China into the Korean War conflict.

...almost everything depends from here on out on the manner in which we Americans bear what is unquestionably a major failure and disaster to our national fortunes.

If we accept it with candor, with dignity, with a resolve to absorb its lessons and make it good by redoubled and determined effort—starting all over again, if necessary, along the pattern of Pearl Harbor—we need lose neither our self-confidence nor our allies nor our power for bargaining...

But if we try to conceal from our own people or from our allies the full measure of our misfortune or permit ourselves to seek relief in any reactions of bluster or petulance or hysteria, we can easily find this crisis resolving itself into an irreparable deterioration of our world position—and of our confidence in ourselves.

Despite having only five percent of the world's population, the United States has suffered twenty percent of the world COVID-19 deaths. The nation has badly mismanaged efforts to contain the pandemic. There has been too much bluster and blaming, not enough accomplishment. In the process, America seemingly has lost confidence in its ability to tackle big challenges.

On the COVID-19 front, Americans have become increasingly frustrated with the vaccine's slow rollout.¹ Vaccine stocks are low. Distribution has been uneven. Communication has been erratic. The new Biden administration inherits the responsibility of guiding the nation to herd immunity, restoring a weakened economy and reopening American society within a dangerously polarized political environment.

BIDEN'S OBAMACARE BRUSH WITH FIRE

Like FDR and JFK, Biden worked through a debilitating governmental setback. As Vice President, Biden experienced firsthand the botched rollout in October 2013 of the Affordable Care Act. With the federal government shut down as Republicans exhibited their intense opposition to the ACA, an eager and curious nation awaited the opportunity to explore and purchase affordable health insurance on the HealthCare.gov website.

The day before HealthCare.gov's October 1, 2013, launch date, President Obama's Chief of Staff Denis McDonough exclaimed to friends, "we're going to knock your socks off." Unfortunately, this made-for-TV moment became a farce. As chronicled in a 2014 *Time Magazine* cover story titled "Code Red," hundreds of thousands of potential enrollees overwhelmed the site. Traffic slowed to a crawl. Only 30% of users gained access, and the site kicked most of them off.

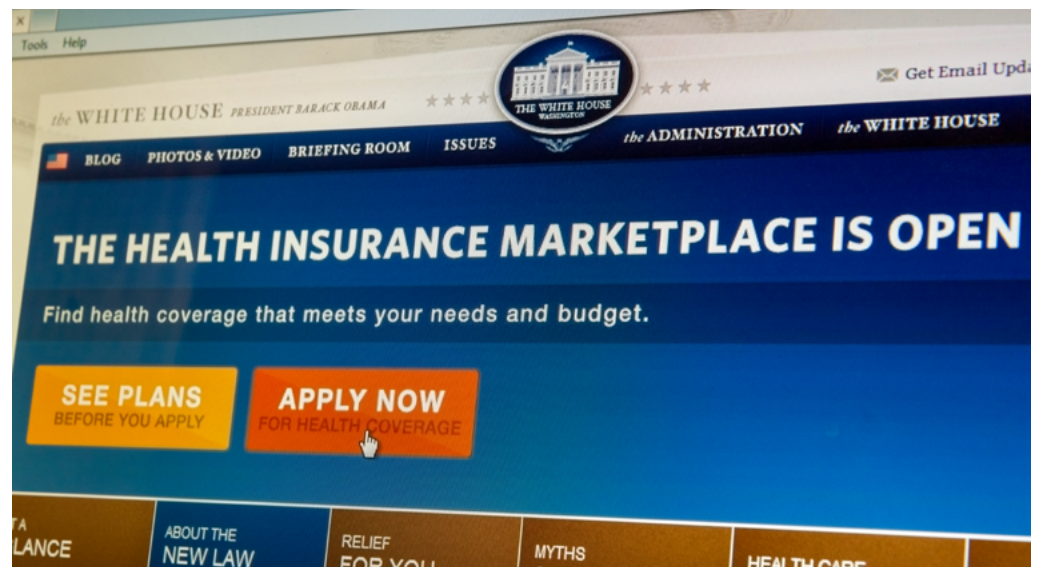
Biden was instrumental in gaining Senate passage in 2010 for the controversial ACA. He persuaded Senator Arlen Specter to switch parties and become the crucial 60th vote to overcome a Republican filibuster.

After the website crash, Biden participated in the disaster recovery planning. On October 17th, Obama considered scrapping the website altogether and starting fresh. To help with that decision, the White House recruited former OMB executive Jeff Zients to assess whether HealthCare.gov was salvageable.

Zients has a passion for execution. In a 2018 commencement address at American University, he made the following categorical assertion regarding organizational success:

Big ideas do change the world, but not on their own. None of it matters unless you execute well, and executing well is really hard.

After a short but intense program review, Zients determined that HealthCare.gov was fixable. He recruited a small team of



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technology wizards to redesign the site. He also chose QSSI to serve as the project's general contractor. Andy Slavitt from United HealthGroup (QSSI's owner) arrived from Minneapolis to lead the QSSI team.

In a remarkable feat of human endurance, stand-up meetings and coding mastery, Zients, Slavitt and their HealthCare.gov "trauma" team got the HealthCare.gov website up and running smoothly in six weeks. It handled the intense crush of late December enrollees without a hitch. HealthCare.gov lived to fight another day.

The Obama administration ultimately won the technology battle but lost the public relations war. Despite the investment of enormous political capital and massive expenditure to launch the ACA, a failed website diminished President Obama's signature legislative accomplishment. Obama could not convince a majority of Americans to support his healthcare reform program. It would take years for Obamacare to recover its popularity.

HealthCare.gov's launch failure demonstrates the importance of public opinion in achieving policy goals. As Abraham Lincoln noted in an 1854 debate with Stephen Douglas, "... public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."²

The importance of program execution in winning public support is paramount as President Biden's new administration tackles the pandemic. He's picked an accomplished COVID-19 team and designed an ambitious COVID-19 plan to win hearts and minds by getting results.



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TEAM COVID

As important as it was, the Obamacare launch pales in significance to the COVID challenge that Biden now confronts. As he took the Presidential Oath on January 20th, the number of American COVID deaths had surpassed 400,000 and total cases approached 25 million.

COVID-19 is now the nation's leading cause of death.³ Hospitals and healthcare workers are stretched to and beyond capacity. Vaccine distribution has woefully underperformed. Mutating, faster-spreading coronavirus strains are now infecting Americans.

During his inaugural address, Biden chronicled COVID-19's deadly human and economic toll:

Few people in our nation's history have been more challenged or found a time more challenging or difficult than the time we're in right now. Once-in-a-century virus that silently stalks the country. It's taken as many lives in one year as America lost in all of WW II. Millions of jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed.

Later in his speech, Biden asked for a silent prayer to honor COVID-19's victims, the "four hundred thousand fellow Americans, moms, dads, husbands, wives, sons, daughters,

friends, neighbors and co-workers." While honoring the dead, Biden also warned of tougher times to come:

... we're going to need each other. We need all our strength to persevere through this dark winter. We're entering what may be the toughest and deadliest period of the virus.

The stakes are high, and the challenge is hard. To meet that challenge, Biden has assembled an expert, battle-tested dream team to lead his administration's efforts at slowing disease spread and vaccinating hundreds of millions of Americans. Their logistical challenge is immense - the equivalent of D-Day, the Space Station and Hands Across America rolled into one.

Not surprisingly, Biden has selected "Mr. Fix-It" Jeff Zients to be his administration's "COVID Czar." Zients has recruited Andy Slavitt, his HealthCare.gov partner, to serve in a senior advisory role. The rest of Biden's COVID team is equally impressive.

The omnipresent Dr. Anthony Fauci will be the President's chief medical advisor. Former FDA Commissioner Dr. David Kessler will oversee vaccine manufacturing and distribution. Mass General Hospital's Chief of Infectious Disease, Dr. Rochelle Wilensky, will head the Centers for Disease Control. Dr. Vivek Murthy will again serve as the U.S. Surgeon General.

RHETORIC AND RESULTS

Documentary film maker Ken Burns describes the COVID-19 pandemic as the 4th and perhaps worst great crisis in American history — after the Civil War, the Great Depression and World War II.⁴ Public distrust bred through misinformation and fragmented news sources makes unifying the country to fight COVID-19 exponentially more difficult. Winning Americans' hearts and minds will not be easy.

Biden understands that strong public support is central to the nation's ability to defeat COVID-19. Given this reality, Biden has assigned himself to be the Administration's communicator-in-chief for framing the COVID-19 conversation with the American people. He transparently acknowledges the realities of "the dark winter" America confronts, but remains hopeful.

This passage from Biden's inaugural address captures his emphasis that only unity can lead America to a brighter future:

To overcome these challenges, to restore the soul and secure the future of America requires so much more than words. It requires the most elusive of all things in a democracy: unity, unity...

...History, faith and reason show the way, the way of unity. We can see each other not as adversaries, but as neighbors. We can treat each other with dignity and respect. We can join forces, stop the shouting and lower the temperature. For without unity, there is no peace, only bitterness and fury. No progress, only exhausting outrage. No nation, only a state of chaos.

...We must set aside politics and finally face this pandemic as One Nation. One nation.

Biden's rhetoric is compassionate, forward looking and action oriented. He's encouraging all Americans to think about the individual choices we can make to shape the nation's shared future. This is the essence of persuasion. By refusing to assign blame for COVID-19's spread and describing a brighter post-COVID future, Biden invites Americans to come together as one people to suppress the pandemic and revitalize our communities.

Consistent with his positive rhetoric, Biden's COVID-19 Plan intends to achieve demonstrable results in his administration's first one hundred days. The plan has the following notable features that increase its likelihood of success.

- **Lots of Shots:** in a preinaugural briefing for reporters, COVID Czar Zients identified these four components of the Biden plan to dramatically accelerate the pace of vaccinations throughout the country: loosen restrictions on who receives vaccines and when they receive them; expand the number of vaccinating sites; expand the number of medical personnel administering vaccines; and use the full power of the federal government to address supply-chain shortages.



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All four components must work in unison to vaccinate 30-40 million people per month. The plan is logical. Executing at scale is the challenge. Once the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson receive FDA Emergency Use Approval and come into the marketplace, vaccine supply will shift from a scarce to an abundant resource. That is why expanding vaccinating sites and vaccinating personnel is so critical to achieving herd-level immunity.

- **Measurable Goals:** Biden has set several ambitious goals to get the nation on war footing against COVID-19: 100 million vaccinations administered in his administration's first 100 days; mask mandates in federal buildings and on airplanes, trains and buses for the first 100 days; majority of K-8 schools opened in the first 100 days; and 4. 100,000 new public health workers to administer vaccines and conduct contact tracing.

These initiatives create a more expansive public health infrastructure to prevent disease transmission as well as accelerate vaccine administration. Both are necessary for eliminating the COVID-19 threat from American shores.

- **Delineated Federal and State Responsibilities:** In America's federal system, states bear the final responsibility for administering vaccines and establishing public health protocols. Biden will use the full power of the federal government to assist the states in this national priority. On day two in office, Biden signed 10 executive orders and released a 200-page "National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness" to "guide America out of the worst public health crisis in a century."

These initiatives provide the roadmap and support to assist states in administering vaccines at scale. By taking more federal responsibility for the logistics, Biden expects a smoother and more uniform vaccine rollout across states. The National Strategy also will deploy the national guard and employ the Defense Production Act when and where necessary to support states in administering vaccines.

- **Ample Funding:** Biden has proposed a massive \$1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package. It includes \$20 billion to support vaccinations, \$50 billion to create a national testing and tracing infrastructure and \$130 billion to retrofit schools for safe operations even as the virus continues to spread. There's additional funding for developing community health centers and to support congregate centers (e.g. nursing homes, prisons) experiencing disease outbreaks.

AMERICA'S FINEST HOUR?

Politicizing COVID-19 and related public health measures has created an epic national crisis. To overcome counterproductive behaviors, Biden is calling for Americans of all stripes to unify against a common viral enemy.

Biden takes the Presidential mantle at a time of national peril. His firsthand experience in the Obamacare wars has prepared him for this moment. He's using every resource (money, expertise, federal mobilization, the bully pulpit and his own credibility) available to thwart COVID-19.

There's almost a Churchillian "we're-all-in-this together" rhythm to Biden's anywhere-and-everywhere vaccination plan: we will vaccinate in the stadiums; we will vaccinate in mobile clinics; we will vaccinate in the schools; we will vaccinate in the churches...

At issue is whether the country can rise to the challenge. As he closed his inaugural address, Biden laid down the gauntlet:

...we're going to be tested. Are we going to step up? All of us? It's time for boldness, for there is so much to do...Will we rise to the occasion, is the question. Will we master this rare and difficult hour? Will we meet our obligations and pass along a new and better world to our children?



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The next six months will shape the national destiny for the foreseeable future. Beating COVID-19 has the potential to reboot the nation's dysfunctional politics, reestablish fact-based political discourse and create a more conducive environment for fixing America's broken healthcare system. Failure to control the virus will lead to greater political and economic dislocation.

President Biden is an experienced leader with a coherent and well-funded plan to defeat COVID-19 and reopen American society. The ultimate outcome of the COVID-19 crisis, however, is in the hands of the American people. This could be our finest hour or become another stage in the unraveling of the American experiment. The choice is ours.

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