

Tricia Johnson ([00:09](#)):

This is Aspen ideas to go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Trisha Johnson, president of like Joe Biden is taking office after a year rocked by a deadly pandemic, racial injustice, and most recently violent evidence of the country's deep political divide, New Yorker magazine staff writer, and Biden biographer. Evan Osnos says the new president needs to grapple with a whole of society problem that will take a whole of society. Solution Biden told Osnos how he was affected by the video of George Floyd staff at the hands of police and the black lives matters protests that followed.

Evan Osnos ([00:43](#)):

You said I learned in that moment that the words of a president can give hate oxygen. They've mattered. Hate will hide under a rock and it will come worrying out if a president gives it the opportunity. And the flip side of that is that a president also has the ability to set the moral temperature or how we shall live

Tricia Johnson ([01:06](#)):

Aspen ideas to go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute. Today's conversation is from the Ahmet and Joseph Gildan horn book series journalist Evan Osnos. His latest book is about Joe Biden, the life, the run, and what matters. Now he says the new president is a centrist, but as the country moves further left, the center moves with it. Osnos speaks with Margaret Brennan of face the nation on CBS news. They discuss how Biden may be well-suited for this moment in history and why his experience with loss and grief gives him the ability to connect with people in important ways, how Catholic faith is truly part of who he is and why it's valuable to make the vice presidency into a meaningful role. Osnos also speaks about his perspective being in the Capitol during the violence on January 6th, here's Brennan.

Margaret Brennan ([01:54](#)):

He put so much in our public discourse on the shoulders of the commander in chief and the president when it comes to fixing problems, even though we have all this architecture of government, we tend to talk about it, uh, based on the personality of the individual who, who steps into that role and Joe Biden, the president elect is doing that at this extraordinary moment last week. Just put an exclamation point on that sentence. I know you were on Capitol Hill, uh, on Wednesday. And I want to ask you about that moment because when I talk to people around the country, as part of, um, just the communication I do for my show, it occurred to me suddenly in conversation that a lot of people outside of Washington thought this was just a rally, turned wrong, maybe a riot, they see it and understand it differently than those of us in the nation's Capitol who have framed it as an assault on democracy. You were there. Tell me what you saw.

Evan Osnos ([02:56](#)):

Thanks Margaret. And I have to say, you know, it is, uh, it's, it's a pleasure to be here with you, thanks to Aspen for pulling us together, despite all of the obvious obstacles in our way. I think having a conversation like this as part of the process of processing it as a country, getting over it, um, but reckoning with it in a serious way, not sort of, you know, putting it in the memory hole. Look, I will tell you Margaret, when I was standing there, I'm standing at the foot of the Capitol building. It's a place that you and I know well, and I was a foreign correspondent for a long time. I'm sort of accustomed to being in outdoor environments where things are moving in strange ways, have covered riots in various countries, uh, over the years in Egypt or Iraq or China. And to see it now here, a couple of miles from where I live was disorienting.

Evan Osnos ([03:47](#)):

I mean, truly, uh, not just because it was so at odds with how we thought our country was functioning and how we think of that sacred terrain right around the Citadel of democracy of the capital, but really because of what it said to me about the future we're contending with, you know, the interesting thing was it was not the, frankly, it was not the thugs, the young guys, military age guys who were breaking windows and climbing in that, that surprised me because sure that FA that kind of group exists in every country and given an opportunity motivated, uh, in that particular diluted way. We'll do it. What surprised me and what was chilling was the conversations I had with grandmothers, people who were standing at the foot of this scene with tear gas, washing over the crowd because of this fundamental violence against democracy. And they were saying, this seems right to me, this seems okay, because as some specifically, one person said to me who was in the piece I wrote in the new Yorker, I think we're here to overturn the results of the election. And I I'm I'm frankly, I'm surprised we haven't achieved it yet, that I found really distressing Margaret, because that's a problem that's gonna take years to unwind. Uh, that's not something that is solved when one president leaves the scene at another arise,

Margaret Brennan ([05:13](#)):

This doesn't disappear on January 20th at noon when the president elect gets sworn in

Evan Osnos ([05:19](#)):

That's right. You know what though? Here's an interesting point though, that I think sometimes gets lost in this. I see this as a, we're dealing with a whole of society problem, and it's going to take a whole of society solution now in terms of sort of de poisoning, the minds of people who have been truly whipped up into, uh, uh, into the delusion that Trump won this election, but the words of a president matter, they matter extraordinary. I mean, to your point, we put this incredible load on the shoulders of the president, and sometimes we overdo it when in fact it's, it has to be distributed, but the words of the president matter, I had this really quite telling moment with, with, uh, with Joe Biden, the president elect, uh, was over the summer when he was, we were all still absorbing the impact of the black lives matter protests.

Evan Osnos ([06:05](#)):

And I said, what did you learn from that? From, from that experience? He said, well, one thing I've learned is that, um, watching that video, the video of George Floyd on the ground being killed by a police officer, he said, I learned in that moment that you, that the words of a president can give hate oxygen. They matter how hate will hide under a rock, and it will come roaring out if a president gives it the opportunity and out. And the flip side of that is that a president also has the ability to set the moral temperature to call it that for how we shall live. And I think that's the task that he's going to face as he steps in is beginning to say to people let's, you know, and I don't want to use this. What is now an exhausted? And I think in many ways flawed term, this is not who we are, but to say, this is not who we want to be a big idea. And it's one that I think he takes very seriously as part of the presidency.

Margaret Brennan ([07:08](#)):

You know, the theme of unity and the theme of healing is something that we heard throughout the campaign. But it seems to me after these last few days, um, and I shared this with you, that I have seen, um, a starkness of vitriol from the extremes that seems elevated. It has not dissipated as a result. In fact, I think, um, there is anger and you talk about in the book that well in advance of this, it was written on the wall that one of the things Joe Biden will have to grapple with is not just how to deal with Trumpism

and pressure from the right it's within his own party and convincing them of the best path forward. There is real anger on the left about what just happened very rightfully so there should be anger, but that idea of moving from that to January 20th, healing and unity seems even harder now than it was before. How is he going to navigate that?

Evan Osnos ([08:17](#)):

Well, it's in a way, what he has to do is figure out a way to separate the question of accountability from the S from the topic of vengeance, because they are in a sense they are separate coequal branches of our, of our political lives. You know, you have to have accountability for when people break the law, even people at the top, at the height of our political system. And one of the things we've learned over the last four years is that there's a permission structure. And if you allow somebody to get away with terrible things, they will get away with them again, and they'll try them again. He has no choice, but to say, we need to investigate this as fully as we other results on our national security and our dignity and our sense of ourselves, including nine 11. I mean, you're seeing a comparable level of the apparatus of government as, you know, kind of lurching into gear.

Evan Osnos ([09:06](#)):

Now, this is going to be a process of investigating the origins of this, uh, that is going to, I think, surprise Americans, how far it goes and how, how much it draws in the full resources of government. That's a different thing than saying that I will now render my political opponents, um, irredeemable, and that I will declare that by virtue of their stated partisan affiliation, their identity, that I will find them illegitimate, make them illegitimate for their actions, but not for their identity. And I think that's a key fact. And I think in a way, if somebody wants to make themselves, uh, inadmissible as a participant in government, by saying, I mean, even to the point of saying, look, if I refuse to wear a mask on the floor of the house of representatives, thereby endangering my fellow representatives, breaking the law, if that's the case, well, then you are essentially opting out of the privilege of being able to serve in the U S house.

Evan Osnos ([10:00](#)):

I think there's coming a point where you're going to begin to see people drawing those lines and saying, we have to treat these offenses as what they are. They are offensive, but that is completely different than saying, I don't want to see a Republican quoted in the new Yorker magazine. I don't want to be, uh, somebody who has been, um, who I disagree with. You know, I don't want to see them being questioned. I don't want to see them subjected to, um, in a way our system thrives when we subject ideas and people to scrutiny, uh, and that's different than giving them a pass and pretending that what they're doing is normal. Um, that I think from Joe Biden's perspective, the challenge is going to be separating the task of accountability, rigorous accountability from the emotional surge and temptation for vengeance.

Margaret Brennan ([10:49](#)):

So the thing that will present him most swiftly after inauguration is, well, if, if the incoming majority leader in the Senate, uh, Chuck's your word does decide to go ahead and have a Senate impeachment trial, which to date Giovan has tried not to comment on directly. Um, but he will also have to deal with how his justice department, uh, handles prosecution on all of this. Um, in the book you spoke to Pete Buddha, judge, the nominee to be transportation secretary about this idea of what happens well in advance of the violence, but you talked to him and he said, this can't be a partisan process. Victor's

justice. This has to be about national healing, values and norms. But when you were talking to Obama administration AIDS, they said, one of the things they learned in the early years is that there's nothing gained from not holding more people accountable. Um, don't have politically motivated prosecutions, but you to do something essentially, what is that something, you know, are we in this Ford pardoning Nixon moment, or is the moment calling for something different? How does Joe Biden heal while also holding people accountable,

Evan Osnos ([12:09](#)):

Fascinating area for us to explore? I think if you, interestingly, one of the things that people to judge and I talked about that day, and I think has become more urgent as an idea, is the proposal to say, let's establish committee a commission that is not, uh, you know, Backpage issue that doesn't get any attention. Remember the nine 11 commission. It was a serious piece of work that looked at the failures of our institutions, the failures to heed the warnings that prevent that would have prevented a disaster perhaps, and say, let's apply that same level of attention, not just to what happened on January 6th. We have to start with talking about what happened with COVID because that is a level of failure, an application of responsibility of failure of, of decision-making that requires that kind of thorough study. Now, look, it is possible that a commission on COVID or, and I think it's very likely we will see a commission on the events of January 6th, that that will eventually elicit and produce information that leads to referrals to prosecution.

Evan Osnos ([13:15](#)):

That's not impossible, but what you don't want to have. And this is where Joe Biden draws, I think a bright line is he says that part of what, what Donald Trump did that invited and required a response? The reason why Joe Biden ran it all was that he got personally involved in prosecution. And that, that idea of a president interfering in the decisions about how to apply the rule of law and when, and how to prioritize prosecutions, that that is not a way for a democracy to function. He says, that's why we have these institutions. That's not the job of a president. Um, and so what I think you're likely to see is this is not just Joe Biden, wanting to sort of stay out of the fray. I think that's been part of it for now, but he believes that if he becomes personally involved in either pursuing the conviction of Donald Trump or pursuing the vindication of Donald Trump, the exoneration that he's, he's degrading the institution of the presidency. And in fact of the justice system, I would not count on Joe Biden to be issuing any pardons anytime soon to Donald Trump. I think we can count on that.

Margaret Brennan ([14:20](#)):

But then, then you get into that scenario that James Comey, the former FBI director took a lot of flack for saying, but saying, look okay. So we go through with some kind of prosecution or debate about prosecution or talk about it. And you're putting more oxygen in there. You're putting a spotlight in fact, and TV cameras on the president, the then former president once again. And that becomes something that the president elect has to balance against.

Evan Osnos ([14:48](#)):

You know, what we're going through right now in the States Congress this week is essentially the form of prosecution that the founders imagined for presence. We can talk separately about whether or not once he's out of office, he's subject to civil and criminal prosecution. We are going through the process that was conceived for how you deal with somebody who has not just failed in their responsibilities, but done violence to the institution, the presence, he was just impeached the second time in Meredith first

time in American history, then anybody of course has been impeached twice. And whether or not there's a Senate trial, we'll then have a second round to consider it. But, but it's, uh, we don't have to decide today whether there are criminal charges to be brought on him for the events of January 6th, but we could just use an impeachment trial for that. What we do know is that at least two American jurisdictions Manhattan and the state of New York had active criminal and civil investigations going of this, of this president and his associates. And so he may find his day in court in various ways. And I think Joe Biden is saying it would be, it would be a mistake for me as the president to begin to wait into that issue sooner than I have to. And I, I think that's probably prudent,

Margaret Brennan ([15:58](#)):

There is going to be so much scrutiny of his justice department. Um, there already would have been before this happened, but also because of his son Hunter Biden and what we learned after the election, which was the revelation that the U S attorney in Delaware was indeed conducting an investigation, which Hunter Biden and the campaign described as tax-related. Um, how is that going to be handled? And is there a way in which that can be handled where transparency is believed?

Evan Osnos ([16:31](#)):

Hmm, well, it's going to be on the shoulders of Merrick Garland after all who comes into this job as the attorney general at a moment of extraordinary complexity. I mean, even before you get to the matter and an ongoing investigation into the president's son, uh, you know, people talk about the idea of, will there be a call for a special counsel, uh, possible. I think there is a, there's a political hesitation against it because we've seen over the last few years, how special counsel's investigations can grow, they can mutate. They can go into areas that are far beyond where they originated. Um, and also that is essentially to say, Oh, if you go adopt a special counsel, you're saying that you don't think the justice department as currently constituted can do it by itself. We don't know that at this point. Um, we know some things about Hunter Biden's business experience and his, uh, time, uh, working, particularly in Ukraine.

Evan Osnos ([17:24](#)):

There's more to learn about his time in China, but after all two Republican led committees in the Congress have looked into this, um, the results of their investigation, anything they found are, are, are, uh, have been sort of entered into the public life. So I think in as not to get too far down the road here, but I have a hunch that we may ultimately find that, uh, there's less of a story at the end of this than we might imagine. There is now that this may be more known to us already, uh, than what the ultimate results of this, of what seems to be a tax investigation will produce, but we'll see, uh, we don't know.

Margaret Brennan ([18:04](#)):

Uh, and then we have that broader challenge of believing transparency and believing, um, a common set of facts. Do you expect that we will hear frequently from the president? What president lacked on the campaign trail did not engage much with the press he rarely gave interviews. Um, that's why I found it so interesting in parts to read your book. We didn't get to know him as a candidate this time around for a variety of reasons because of the pandemic, but also because he doesn't sit down very often and talk to journalists, is that going to change?

Evan Osnos ([18:42](#)):

You know, Margaret, what's interesting about Biden as an interviewee. I mean, this gets to the very origins of why I remember it took this project. How did I get interested in Joe Biden? It was partly because I'd been a foreign first mind and I come back to the U S I moved to Washington and I was interested in foreign affairs. And Joe Biden was interested in foreign affairs. And this will not be a shock to you as you well know, the vice presidency is not the most beloved glamorized office in Washington and Biden was not very much in demand as an interviewee. So I, you know, I called his office, I'd said, I'd like to set up an interview and talk about foreign affairs. And that was, that was doable. I mean, honestly it felt like in a way as after I started talking to him, this was in 2014, it felt to me like an under utilized resource from a reporting perspective, because here he was doing a lot, he was involved in a lot of issues, very obviously, uh, last one in the room with the president.

Evan Osnos ([19:39](#)):

And yet he wasn't where a lot of the reporting energy was directed. Understandably. Um, but it felt to me like there was more there fast-forward to 2020 and or 2019, really. And in the early stages of this presidential race, when, when he was not rated very highly, and that was fair. I mean, there was a period in this race when he was very close to the end to talk about if we want to. Um, but when it finally happened that he was then clearly on the path to the nomination, that's when it became time to really sit down and stare at it. I need to talk to him again in detail, partly so I can benchmark it and say, how does he sound to me today? Versus when I first started talking to him six years ago, how's his mind working. Um, but I, you know, I think from a, from a sort of transparency and availability perspective, you're likely to see what is a normal presidency, which is to say, he's not going to give into it. Yeah, exactly. Give in to every invitation on his way to, uh, to Marine one over to the microphone. And, you know, we're coming off a period in which this is a president who cannot resist opportunity to microphone. Joe Biden takes the longer view and says, I'll pick my shots. I'm going to pick my moments when I talk, but I think you're right. There's going to be a pressure on him to do a lot more than he has done.

Margaret Brennan ([20:57](#)):

Um, I am interested in following up on what you just talked about, about a moment where he was at a weak point on the campaign trail. I remember sitting down with him in February. I think it was February 19th or so it was, um, right before South Carolina and, uh, he was tense. It was not, it did not go well for him in Nevada. Um, and it really wasn't clear what the path forward was. And then boom, South Carolina delivered him the shot in the arm he needed, and everyone took a step back and gave him center stage. How close was he to actually bowing out?

Evan Osnos ([21:35](#)):

I mean, that is that period when you were there with him is a crucial piece of that history because there was a moment right around Nevada. I mean, you remember he came in and New Hampshire so poorly that they, they actually left New Hampshire before the results were announced so that they wouldn't be on the ground when the numbers came in and he would have to be photographed kind of in a dreary condition. They said, we're going to South Carolina. We want to point to the future. I didn't put this in the book, but it was actually quite an interesting moment that happened when, um, Anita Dunn, uh, who was after all, very senior in the campaign effectively running the campaign in many respects. She had the unwelcome job of calling Joe Biden to say, look, uh, this thing may be over in a week. And if it's over in a week, um, you're going to need to keep enough cash on hand to, you know, wind down the operation, pay people and make sure that they get severance.

Evan Osnos ([22:30](#)):

And so on. She called him on a day. He happened to be on the Amtrak as he often is. He was on his way, I think either to, or from New York, uh, for an appearance. And I said, how did he respond to that? You know, the news essentially that his campaign is on life support. Did he rage against the heavens? I mean, there's a lot of ways a person in that moment could respond. And she said, no, actually he was, he was calm. And he said a version of what he has said to me in the past about presidential races, which is I've lost a lot more than this in my life. And if I lose this, I'll be able to deal with it. And I think there's a deep lesson in there about how he confronts issues of political loss and gain, uh, how we, how we, how we understand it in the context of his biography.

Margaret Brennan ([23:17](#)):

You spend some time on his biography, clearly in this book in terms of what the public knows. Well, the awful loss he has had throughout his life, the health struggles he's also had himself. But one of the things that I think is interesting and will be interesting to watch is the degree to which, and you kind of gestured to it there at least it was suggested to me in his language, you described of faith and religion and what that's going to be like. I mean, Joe Biden will only be the second Catholic elected president in this country. It was controversial when it was Kennedy. Um, and for Joe Biden, he is a church going liberal who puts his faith out front in a way that as we heard on the campaign trail poop, Pete Buddha judge said liberals were making a mistake by not embracing faith in their language and by not embracing other Americans of faith within to the party. And I, I'm going to be interested to see how Joe Biden weaves that in to his presidency, certainly in policymaking. Um, but what are we actually going to see? I mean, every Sunday he's going to leave the white house and we're going to go to church with them on camera. How is that going to work?

Evan Osnos ([24:27](#)):

You know, what's amazing. He is. I think Margaret, you know, he is, uh, he's a devout man. It is a real part of his life. I mean, it is a very personal matter for him. And I mean, to the point that people, I don't think fully appreciate it. There were three times in his young life, when he thought about becoming a priest, he started talking about it in middle school. He talked about it again later. In fact, then after the death of his wife and his daughter, he's on his way to the U S Senate. And he actually went to go see the Bishop in Wilmington, Delaware and said, I think I want to become a priest. And the Bishop said to him actually, uh, I don't think that's a good idea. And there was that there was a, there was a provision that he wanted to use.

Evan Osnos ([25:09](#)):

He'd already thought about it enough. He'd done his research that he said, you can grant me a waiver, even though I've been married, you can allow me to become a priest. The priest said, look, the Bishop said, I don't think this is a good idea. I want you to take a year and think about it. And then come back to me. If you still want to do it, I don't think this is your calling and Biden went off. Of course became a Senate, but Senator and the rest is history. Um, but what's different about his faith is that it is a way it's more of a private, personal matter than it is a public feature of his, of his political identity. It's an interesting comparison to say somebody like Mike Pence or others who have been very forward in their faith in politics, Biden has a testy relationship with the church, but he doesn't have a testy relationship with Catholicism.

Evan Osnos ([25:54](#)):

And that's an interesting distinction. He is at home in his belief. It's a big part of his life. One thing I mentioned in the book, which for me was one of the most interesting moments in the process of this research. I spoke to Stephen Colbert. You know, Cole bear is a, is a Catholic. He is somebody who also has this strange point of shared experience with Biden. Uh, Cole bear. When he was young, his father was killed in a car accident. His brothers died in a plane crash, I should say, and his brothers. And there was a day when Biden was going to see Cole bear. Um, this is shortly after the death of Beau Biden in 2015. And they had never met before. And, and Cole bear got a message and said, Biden wants to talk to you backstage before you guys talk in public.

Evan Osnos ([26:39](#)):

It was one of the first times Biden was coming out to speak. And the two of them met just privately. And I asked Colbert, I said, what did you talk about? And he said, frankly, we talked about our mothers, the rosary. We talked about Catholicism. We talked about loss and tragedy and grief. And he said to me personally, it was one of the most effecting conversations I've ever had in my life. And he explained it. He said, look, Biden has this ability to talk about grief in a way that makes other grieving people feel, uh, that he understands them. He sees them to use the language of now. And what Kobe said to me really, really stayed with me. He said, when you're in, when you're grieving that way, when you're mourning, very often, people treat you like you're radioactive. There's something about it that feels almost contagious.

Evan Osnos ([27:31](#)):

People don't want to go near it. They don't want to talk about it. And Biden doesn't allow that he puts it in front of you. When he says, I have grieved, I have recovered and you will too. And I think the lesson right now is we are a country that is mourning. We are mourning literally for our families in the COVID epidemic. And we are mourning a sense of ourselves as a political culture and how we got into this moment of such complete abject failure. And that ability to talk about grief in unadorned ways, neither making more of it than it should and not minimizing it is his asset that he comes to office with. And it's unbelievably rare in Washington for somebody to be as acquainted with grieving as he is. And I think we'll find, we'll find that that proves to be a more valuable entity than we may assume at the outset.

Margaret Brennan ([28:18](#)):

One of the moments you recount in the book is, um, a conversation during the Obama administration in which Joe Biden, then vice-president his insight was kind of dismissed, um, by Obama advisors, specifically, as I recall on the issue of, um, mandating the provision of birth control under, uh, the affordable care act and how that would be received by religious institutions or people of faith. And Joe Biden said, wait a second, I see problems here. And the Obama folks were like, God, that's like old thinking. And they really kind of laughed him out of the room. And then fast forward a few years as you recounted the book that was so resonant, particularly with conservatives and so resonant with the Mike Pence of the world and in that way of thinking. Um, and I just wonder if there is something that he can tap into through faith that allows for that unity, or at least for that understanding that may be, um, maybe has felt belittled in, in the past, by the democratic party,

Evan Osnos ([29:27](#)):

He talks the talk and walks the walk. This is baked into how he sees himself as a citizen as a, as a practitioner of government. And certainly as a person to say, look, he sees family and religion essentially is the basic building blocks on which his vision of America depends. Now that is a big idea actually,

because that's always been one of the things that puts in that slightly out of, at odds with other democratic party leaders, you know, he has never been in every respect, a member of the in crowd. He didn't go to the schools. He didn't have the same measures of credentialed achievement that they did, and that's a bit of a chip on his shoulder. Um, you know, he, he is very conscious of slights, both real and imagined. But what it also means is that he really does have a more attuned understanding of what it means to feel marginalized, to feel as if a feature of your culture that you think is important is being dishonored.

Evan Osnos ([30:30](#)):

And he takes that quite seriously. Now, look, I I'll be clear though, Margaret, I think there is a level of kind of a barrier that has been erected in front of him that is going to prevent a lot of conservatives from seeing him and hearing him for what he's actually saying. That the level of our polarization makes it almost impossible to really say, okay, I'm listening to him. And what he says is, is something that means something to me, part of the task is for him to lower the temperature. I'm going to mangle the metaphors here, but begin that lowering that barrier so that he can be, be seen for what he's really saying. Um, and in a way, you know, one of the most perceptive comments I heard along the way, Margaret, from somebody who worked very closely with Biden and with Obama in the white house was I think we're ready for a boring president again for an insult that's actually. And I think probably a lot of us would agree.

Margaret Brennan ([31:27](#)):

Journalists might have great. Uh, ironically, how much has Biden been moved left by his party? Is there any change in his approach to governing compared to four years ago?

Evan Osnos ([31:38](#)):

Yeah, really interesting question. The answer is yes, he has moved left, but probably not as far left as some people might think. Um, he is to use, uh, I think a perceptive description that somebody else told me, who'd worked very closely with him in the white house. And they said, Joe Biden is a perfect weather vane for the center of the democratic party. And that is true. And th th the, the point about that is that as the party has moved left, he has moved left, but by being a weathering for the center, he is never going to be the guy who was farthest forward at the frontier of progressive issues. And he also doesn't want to be the one who is trailing behind being sort of abandoned by history. He wants to find that place. It's one of the reasons why he got to, uh, support of same-sex marriage, even before president Obama did.

Evan Osnos ([32:28](#)):

It was his sense of where the party was going. And, um, now the reason why I say that he has moved there is, you know, one of the things that he said to Bernie and a private phone call when he was coming to Bernie, after Bernie had dropped out of the race. And he said to him, according to an aide who was in the room, a Sanders aid, um, I want to be the most progressive president since FDR and Bernie later said, I take him, I take him at his word and I believe him actually. And the interesting thing is there's a huge amount. They disagree on Biden is by nature, a centrist that is his core identity, and it's his perception. It's his real theory of politics. But what that also means is that he has to be responsive to when the circumstances are pulling the country to the left, the country is in fact, the party is certainly moving to the left and he wants to be a part of that.

Evan Osnos ([33:22](#)):

So I'll give you just one, one practical example. When it came time for him to create these task forces, um, before the, uh, election day, when he was trying to build his platform, and he knew he had to reflect the views of the left side of his party, as much as the middle, he called on AOC. And he asked her to be the co-chair of his environmental, uh, taskforce. And so there she was with John Kerry, the two of them as co-chairs. And I spoke to progressive activists, environmental activists from the sunrise movement who were part of that. And they said, we were surprised at how responsive he was to us, but we also didn't think we were going to walk out of there with him endorsing the green new deal. And sure enough, of course he didn't. So you have to understand that he is true to his basic view of government, which is that we should probably linger somewhere around the middle, but the middle moves and he wants to move with it.

Margaret Brennan ([34:17](#)):

Will he proceed with Democrat only solutions? Now that Democrats have the white house, the Senate and house majorities, or do you expect he will address major issues in an attempt to get bipartisan solutions?

Evan Osnos ([34:31](#)):

I have no doubt. I think he's going to try to get bipartisan solutions and that will irritate a lot of Democrats. There are people who are going to say, you're wasting time, you're playing into a trap. You're going to lose this key period. You've got maybe two years before you lose one of the houses of Congress. Um, but Biden is not casually committed to the idea of bipartisanship. He thinks things work better. If you can get Republican support. What that means is trying to galvanize some of the energy, which we've seen just in the last few days, you know, we just had the most bi-partisan impeachment process in American history, 10 Republicans, um, backed away from this president and the house of representatives in order to back impeachment. That is also, uh, the beginning of something. There are young Republican members of Congress who are coming in, who say, this is crazy.

Evan Osnos ([35:17](#)):

I don't want to be a part of that old paralysis. I want to do something I'm here to work. And what Biden is going to try to do is peel off people around the edges. Maybe not formally peel them off, get them to change parties. So that's not impossible. Um, you know, I, I sometimes I'm reminded of the fact Margaret that in 19, in 2009, when he came in as part of the, uh, Obama administration, he was tasked with trying to lure Arlen specter over from the Republican party, the Democrats, and he succeeded that was a Biden project. So he has an ability to tell people, I understand your interests. I see you. I don't pretend that this isn't real, that you have real attachments to the Republican party. Um, but meet me on common ground. Let's see if we can get something done. And I think there may be more people that are willing to do that than we assume today. This is so completely influx.

Margaret Brennan ([36:08](#)):

I'm not sure, uh, what insight you have into the relationship with his vice president. But, uh, this question is about what you've observed regarding their dynamics and what he may envision her role to be and how it could change now that she is the tie-breaking vote in the Senate.

Evan Osnos ([36:27](#)):

Well, interestingly, uh, Biden comes to this in a slightly unusual position because he was a vice president. So he cares about the office. Um, he was very suspicious of the office when it was first offered to him. He didn't want to be vice-president. He said, can anybody? And this is what he said to his staff. He said, can anybody here even name who Lincoln's vice-president was he then had a profound transformation of his views, because what he decided was that the vice presidency is only as powerful as the president makes it it's only as meaningful as it is. And he takes pride in the fact that he thinks he was an important piece of Obama's, uh, record. He helped Obama on things that Obama needed on foreign affairs, on relationships to Capitol Hill. Um, he needs a slightly different set of contributions in a sense from, from, uh, from the vice president elect, he doesn't need foreign affairs help.

Evan Osnos ([37:17](#)):

He knows how to do that. He doesn't need relations with the Hill. That's his area, what he desperately needs. However, is a connection to this much broader country, a more diverse country than he represents in his own person. Um, he's he is, uh, I'm going to break news here, Margaret. He is a white male in his eighth decade, and the reality is he knows it and he knows that he has to figure out ways of making sure that he understands what people care about and that he has a real ear to it. And Kamala Harris is a crucial piece of helping him succeed. Um, but it's early days of what we haven't heard. This is one last point on that. It says, um, interestingly, you know, Biden's view of the vice presidency is that it should be a general advisor to the president. This is a, this is language that came to him from, uh, Walter Mondale.

Evan Osnos ([38:05](#)):

And I spoke to Mondale about it that, you know, in a sense they were a similar positions. They had an outsider coming into the presidency. Barack Obama been in Washington just a few years. Um, how do you help them succeed? And the way you do it is by being a general advisor, don't get tasked with some narrow gig because that's going to marginalize you. And that's what he aimed to do. We got some portfolios when he was vice-president, but I think you're likely to want, you're likely to see him wanting Kamala Harris to be a general advisor, keep him plugged in, keep them getting things right. Um, and then she'll take on some specific portfolio elements.

Margaret Brennan ([38:41](#)):

Uh, I mean, it is somewhat predictable just given the kind of spending that has been required to get us out of this crisis. We're still in. And you just look at the past few years, uh, policymaking and the prediction of taxes going up seems just inevitable. Um, what will his policies be in light of the ballooning debt?

Evan Osnos ([39:02](#)):

Well, I think, you know, for one thing, uh, we need to be vigilant here that the debt has ballooned under a Republican president with a Republican Senate. So it's going to be a point of political accountability, not to allow folks to turn around tomorrow and say, all right, now I'm desperately concerned about the debt because they weren't all that concerned about it for the last four years. And I think that's something that Democrats are worried about. Then all of a sudden the deficit Hawks come out of hibernation and begin to say, we can't spend on things that Democrats want. Um, but the debt is clearly an issue. It's something that he takes seriously. But, uh, yeah, I think his immediate view would be before we can begin to deal with the debt. Uh, we have to deal with the crisis before us and the crisis before us is, is COVID COVID and COVID, I mean, that is the ball game, from his perspective, everything

else flows from that. You can't even explain January 6th without understanding the failure to get the epidemic under control. So, uh, they're going to spend the money. They need to, to get this pandemic, um, to break its back. And, uh, that's not going to come cheap, but that's not priority. Number one right now is saving money. It's just a reality.

Margaret Brennan ([40:16](#)):

But to do all of those things, it's also going to require a certain, um, friendliness with wall street and friendliness with people who hire and create jobs and to do all of that, how much of that necessity is going to, um, complicate policymaking, uh, that progresses would like to see,

Evan Osnos ([40:36](#)):

Well, there, you know, he is a veteran of the 2009 experience. And, you know, there are progressives who feel that the Obama administration of course, was too quick to, uh, forgive and forget, and to allow the relationship with wall street to benefit, uh, to benefit the big banks again, as they would put it. And I think the reality is that, you know, Biden takes some of that lesson. Um, part of the reason he talks about accountability is because he knows that there were a lot of Americans who felt scorched by the failure to prosecute people at the tops of institutions that were ultimately responsible for America's financial distress. But he also believes that this is, has to be done in some level of partnership. This cannot be done at a moment in which we are, uh, flat on our backs. We have a lot of shared incentive incentives and interests.

Evan Osnos ([41:30](#)):

I mean, that word interests is the single most important thing to remember about Joe Biden. If you come away from today's conversation with one lesson it's that Joe Biden sees everything in terms of understanding the other person's interests. And when it comes to dealing with wall street, he will say it is in wall Street's interest. And it is in the country's interest for the United States economy to thrive again. Uh, but obviously we don't want to do it in a way that promotes abuses, but there is no world in which he can get this done by also turning his back, ultimately on a financial power in this country,

Margaret Brennan ([42:02](#)):

Who does he listen to?

Evan Osnos ([42:05](#)):

He listens to foremost, um, people that have been with him through thick and thin. You know, this is a guy who, after all has been in politics for 48 years. And some of the people who were the ones who got him over the finish line to the presidency are people who've been with him a long time. And they're not always the names at the top of everybody's list. Somebody like Mike Donalyn is a name that I make, you know, you and I who follow this stuff closely track the importance of somebody, but Mike Donald was chief strategist in the campaign. And Mike Donald was one of the people who was telling him along the way you need to be, uh, you need to screen out all of this talk that you're done for that you're finished, stay to stay true to the plan, you know, hold true to what you think this campaign is about.

Evan Osnos ([42:55](#)):

Mike Donaldson came up with the language about the soul of the nation and restoring the soul, a nation. That was a slogan that a lot of us in the political press thought, well, that sounds a little sweet

and antique it really the soul of the nation. He was right on some level people wanted to restore the soul of this country. So, um, it varies from somebody like Mike Donaldson. Who's been with Joe Biden since I think shortly after the cooling of the crust of the earth all the way. And I would say that if my dollar was sitting here with me all the way up to some of his newer, the newer voices in the room, um, people who may not agree with him on a lot. Um, but, uh, you know, he, if you look at his appointments, what you see is that there I'll be blunt here. You see a lot more, um, racial and ethnic diversity than you see ideological diversity. And I think that's something he's gonna have to figure out how to navigate. There are going to be Progressive's who feel that they're not getting a seat at the table.

Margaret Brennan ([43:51](#)):

And, and lastly, I want to ask you, um, a foreign policy related question. Um, there has been a lot of scrutiny of his decision to choose general Lloyd Austin, to run the Pentagon who will of course require a waiver since he was so recently head of CENTCOM, um, and thus muddies that what is supposed to be a clear divide between, uh, the military and civilian structure, but, you know, Bob Gates, the former defense secretary famously said, Joe, Biden's been wrong. And every 40 foreign policy decisions for the past 40 years. And as you count for it in the book, he was wrong on Iraq. He was, he overestimated that the government there would allow for us troops remain, which of course became a huge vacuum into which ISIS was allowed to take advantage and flourish on Afghanistan. He doesn't want us troops there either not a huge difference from president Trump. Um, what are some of his instincts, particularly in the middle East and where does that policy had?

Evan Osnos ([44:54](#)):

Well, interestingly, Margaret, I think you look not only at the mistake and it was a tragic mistake to support the war in Iraq, but you also look at the lesson that he put from that, how he reckoned with how he talks about how candid, how Frank is he about the failure of that decision. And I think you see that he is kind of willing to reflect on that. Um, and it shaped the decisions he made afterwards. I mean, it's, it's quite distinct the pattern. If you look at it, he was then much more conservative about the application of American Powell overseas about getting involved in things we couldn't control the intervention in Libya. He was opposed to it. He was even wary of acting on the intelligence, uh, to go after Osama bin Ladin on the day that we did. And he felt we wanted to see more intelligence.

Evan Osnos ([45:42](#)):

Um, now he was sort of more concerned about the political risk, if it failed and said to Obama, you're going to be a one-term president. Um, but he's become more restrained. And I think that that is a part of the process that he brings to this, uh, every president for the last, as long as you and I have been doing this kind of work has said, I want to do less in the middle East. Uh, and, and they have all found themselves remaining there, but it is a moment of extraordinary flux. And I think, you know, um, it, we have to acknowledge the fact that the Trump administration, one thing it will leave behind is a slightly rejiggered Matt, more than slightly. I mean, the deal of the, the so-called Abraham Accords, which are changing some of the byways of power and hostility are something that the incoming administration is going to contend with. I can tell you one thing in faculty, this administration, like many before, it would hope to draw down its level of engagement in the middle East and focus more on Asia. Uh, and the question will be whether they can pull that off

Tricia Johnson ([46:46](#)):

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The new Yorker magazine staff writer, Evan Ochs. His latest book is about Joe Biden, the life, the run, and what matters. Now, his previous book won a national book award and he shared a Pulitzer prize for investigative reporting at the Chicago Tribune, Margaret Brennan moderates face the nation on CBS news, which was the most watch Sunday morning public affairs program last year. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen ideas to go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow us on social media at Aspen ideas. Listen on our website, [Aspen ideas.org](http://Aspenideas.org) today's show was produced by Shawna Lewis. It was presented by the Alma and Joseph Gildan horn book series. Our theme music is by Wanderly I'm Trisha Johnson. Thanks for listening.