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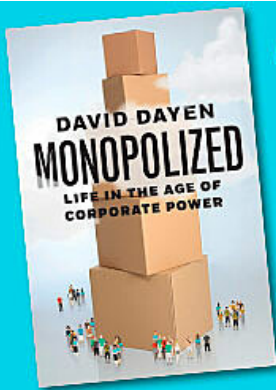
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The Trouble With Biden's Big Tent

It papers over some irreconcilable differences of policy and principle. Sooner or later, Biden will have to choose which side he's on.

BY ROBERT KUTTNER AUGUST 4, 2020



ANDREW HARNIK/AP PHOTO

The dozens of policy task forces are the Biden campaign's way of making lots of different people feel part of the campaign.



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The delay in Joe Biden's selection of a running mate is emblematic of a deeper concern. Biden is trying to be all things to all people.

Given the need to assemble the broadest possible electoral coalition to oust Trump, one can understand the impulse. But at some point, you need to decide what you are for.

Only one person, after all, can be Biden's veep—and that running mate will not satisfy everybody. The prolonged delay and repeated stripteases about who has the edge is causing candidates and their proxies to snipe at each other, which produces the opposite of

the unity Biden seeks and needs.

More from Robert Kuttner

There is also the case of Biden's very progressive policy proposals and his not so progressive senior campaign team. As I've previously written regarding his highly detailed releases on industrial policy, infrastructure and jobs, they are terrific—far more progressive than anything we've seen from a Democratic nominee in my lifetime.

Since I wrote that, he's released several other detailed blueprints, including a \$2 trillion plan climate and the environment; on safely opening schools; and on the caregiving economy. All are exceptionally good, and remarkably progressive.

Meanwhile, however, his closest-in advisers are mostly centrist Democratic operatives closely associated with all that was wrong with the Obama and Clinton years. Steve Ricchetti, a top campaign aide and former Biden chief of staff, is a Wall Street guy and a lobbyist. Anita Dunn, the campaign's chief strategist, is also a longtime corporate lobbyist. As Jonathan Guyer reported in an investigative piece for the *Prospect*, recently lifted without credit by The New York Times (shame!), Biden's foreign-policy team is both orthodox and riddled with conflicts of interest.

In one true progressive in Biden's inner circle is his longtime Senate chief of staff, Ted Kaufman, who was appointed to fill out the last two years of Biden's Senate term when Biden became vice president in 2009. Kauffman turned out to be a superb Banking

Committee ally of the likes of Elizabeth Warren and Sherrod Brown.

But it's not clear how much influence Kaufman has today in Biden's inner, inner circle.

As an example of the big tent gone berserk, consider Biden's two task forces on trade, one of the issues where his policy paper signaled a break with the corporate hyper-globalism of the past. One of the task forces, as I reported several weeks ago, is headed by exactly the sort of corporate globalists who you would not want in a Biden administration—Jennifer Hillman and Miriam Sapiro.

But it turns out there is another task force on trade, with mostly progressives on it. Even more weirdly, the two task forces don't talk to one another. Apparently, the more conservative one is part of the Biden foreign-policy operation and the more progressive one is part of the economics group.

This is one way of making everybody feel welcome. But it's pretty weird.

When I first reported the story of the more conservative trade-policy working group, I spoke to a senior member of Biden's policy team, who asked not to be identified by name. He flatly insisted that the working group did not exist, "and I would know if it did." I have since confirmed that it very much exists, so I was flat out lied to.

The undertow on trade policy is also reflected in Congress. The same Jennifer Hillman was invited to be

the lead Democratic (!) witness at last week's hearing on the future of the WTO, by ranking Senate Democrat Ron Wyden, who is a liberal on some issues, but a traditionalist on trade.

When asked by Sen. Sherrod Brown about the impact of past trade deals on workers, Hillman spoke about the need for job retraining, totally missing the point that broader impact of these deals has been to undermine wages and worker bargaining power.

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At some point, just as Biden has to select one person as his running mate, Biden will have to signal what he really stands for when he names his transition team and his cabinet officials.

Trade is one of those issues where Biden either breaks with the orthodoxy or he doesn't. Trump has blown up a lot of traditional assumptions about trade, without putting anything useful in their place. Biden will either try to put Humpty Dumpty together again, or forge a new path that makes room for industrial policy, rebuilding domestic supply chains, and rejecting the entire logic and architecture of trade deals sponsored by Wall Street and undermining U.S. workers.

At some point, just as Biden has to select one person as

his running mate, Biden will have to signal what he really stands for when he names his transition team and his cabinet officials. At that point, if he appoints the kind of orthodox economic officials who were the senior people around Obama and both Clintons, none of the progressive policy papers will matter.

The risk is that Biden tries to buy off progressives with good appointments to such cabinet posts as labor, education, housing, and HHS, but that the Wall Street people get the real power posts of Treasury, OMB, and USTR. He probably can't get away with appointing a Wall Street person as treasury secretary, but the pressure from financial players and donors will be immense to appoint a deficit hawk to OMB, a traditional hyper-globalist to USTR, and a treasury secretary who is at least "safe," meaning not a threat to the toxic Wall Street business model.

The dozens of policy task forces are the Biden campaign's way of making lots of different people feel part of the campaign; the policy papers are meant to reassure progressives. But they will have little if any connection to the actual policy of an actual administration. Progressives would be better advised to keep their eyes on that other p-word—personnel.

ROBERT KUTTNER

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