

Timing Is Everything, Biden Says, and ‘Politics Is the Art of the Possible’

In his first formal news conference since taking office, President Biden offered an early glimpse of the man who inhabits the Oval Office and his approach to the presidency.



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WASHINGTON — He reflected on his reputation as a “nice guy” and a “decent man.” He talked about how his great-grandfather set sail on the Irish Sea to make the difficult journey to America. He observed that “politics is the art of the possible.”

In his first formal news conference since taking office, President Biden offered an early glimpse of the man who inhabits the Oval Office and how he is approaching the presidency so far. Unlike President Donald J. Trump’s hot-tempered blowups or President Barack Obama’s extended answers of professorial cool, Mr. Biden was the sober political veteran comfortable with thinking out loud, talking personally and conversationally, and showing occasional impatience before a roomful of reporters.

When he received a question he did not like, such as whether he expected to run in 2024 against Mr. Trump, he shrugged it off with, “I don’t know where you guys come from, man.” But Mr. Biden did say he expected to run again, with Vice President Kamala Harris at his side.

After nearly four decades in politics, including eight years as vice president, he showed himself as a student of the office. “It’s a matter of timing,” he said when asked about his legislative priorities. “As you’ve all observed, the successful presidents better than me have been successful in large part because they know how to time what they’re doing. Order it. Decide priorities. What needs to be done.” To that end, he cited his \$3 trillion infrastructure bill as “the next major initiative.”

And when asked why he did not push to abolish the Senate filibuster, which requires 60 votes to pass most legislation and which Mr. Biden called a relic of the Jim Crow era, he said simply that “successful electoral politics is the art of the possible” — and that he wanted to see whether he could change the filibuster first.

Mr. Biden also recalled the Senate of yore, as he has done multiple times as president: “It used to be you had to stand there and talk and talk and talk and talk until you collapsed. And guess what, people got tired of talking.”

But he joked about how outdated his own views could sometimes sound. “I believe we should go back to a position in the filibuster that existed just when I came to the United States Senate 120 years ago,” he said.

The president engaged on questions about his administration’s attempt to ramp up capacity to temporarily care for the thousands of migrant children who are arriving at the southwestern border without legal guardians. He also took aim at the zero-tolerance policies enacted by Mr. Trump, saying his administration is trying “to put in place what was dismantled.”

“I like to think it’s because I’m a nice guy,” Mr. Biden said. “But it’s not. It’s because of what’s happened.”

At times, he was equal parts off the cuff — “I guess I should be flattered,” he responded when pressed on his “moral” approach to detaining families at the border — and exasperated.

“That’s a serious question, right? Is it acceptable to me? Come on,” Mr. Biden said when asked if the state of Customs and Border Protection facilities in Texas, where children are being temporarily housed, was acceptable to him.

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Other times he was solicitous of reporters. “Am I giving you too long an answer?” he asked Yamiche Alcindor of PBS NewsHour. “If you don’t want the details — I don’t know how much detail you want about immigration. Maybe I’ll stop there.”

He spoke of immigration in personal terms, as the last resort of desperate people seeking a new life in the United States. When families decide to leave Mexico or Guatemala, the president said, they do not say, “I got a great idea: let’s sell everything we have, give it to a coyote, have him take our kids across the border into a desert where they don’t speak the language, won’t that be fun?”



Mr. Biden’s appearance came after weeks of requests from reporters and speculation about why the White House was delaying the decision to have him hold a news conference. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Mr. Biden added: “That’s not how it happens. People don’t want to leave. When my great-grandfather got in a coffin ship in the Irish Sea, expectation was he going to live long enough on that ship to get to the United States of America? They left because of what the Brits had been doing. They were in real, real trouble. They didn’t want to leave. But they had no choice. So, you’ve got — we can’t — I can’t guarantee we’re going to solve everything. But I can guarantee we can make everything better. We can make it better.”

The president’s appearance came after weeks of requests from reporters and speculation about why the White House was delaying the decision to have him hold a news conference. Mr. Biden’s advisers had said that the plan had been to pass the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package into law before holding one.

As he took questions for over an hour, the president also did little to fuel the narrative being crafted by conservative news media that he is lacking in his mental faculties. He appeared well prepared and sure of his facts, although he did refer to the “North China Sea,” which does not exist.

During the news conference, a limited number of journalists were allowed in the room. Those who attended wore masks and sat six feet apart to comply with social-distancing rules. Mr. Biden called on reporters by their first names, from a list drawn up beforehand by his staff.

In that sense, it was another return to normalcy, after four years of Mr. Trump’s free-for-all, fact-challenged news conferences. At one, Mr. Trump mocked a reporter for wearing what he called “the largest mask I think I’ve ever seen” and at another claimed that injecting disinfectants into the human body could help combat the coronavirus. Reporters shouted to be heard, and Mr. Trump appeared to relish the chaos.

Mr. Biden’s performance, in contrast, was relatively sedate.

“It’s a really big relief after four years, when every presidential news conference was a cataclysmic event,” said Lis Smith, a Democratic strategist. She said Mr. Biden had stayed on message and “has woven in empathy into everything he does.”

“Biden did what he needed to do,” said David Axelrod, a former top adviser to Mr. Obama. “He drove the progress on the virus at the top, parried difficult questions on the border and filibuster, and generally refrained from making unwelcome news.”

It is unclear where Mr. Biden will fall in terms of regularly addressing the news media in a formal setting. Mr. Trump gave 44 formal news conferences during his presidency, though he regularly had lengthy question-and-answer sessions with reporters during Oval Office events or before crossing the White House lawn to board Marine One. Mr. Obama held 65 news conferences, according to data compiled by The American Presidency Project, which tracks such solo appearances.

Mr. Biden also left a series of open questions about some of the most politically contentious problems facing his administration. He would not say how soon he planned to allow reporters to see the conditions at migrant detention facilities along the U.S.-Mexico border. He did not commit to a timeline for pulling American troops out of Afghanistan. And he declined multiple times to say whether he would try to change how the Senate functions.

In those moments, Mr. Biden, a politician who has only recently embraced the art of restraint, seemed aware of the perils of making promises to a room full of reporters.

“I’m not going to lay out a strategy in front of the whole world,” he said, “and you, now.”