

OPINION | WONDERLAND

## *Biden Bungles His Crisis*

The Manchin mess and spending spree are a White House misreading the political moment.



By

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[Joe Biden](#) was Barack Obama’s vice president-elect in 2008 when future White House colleague Rahm Emanuel posited what became a truism of Democratic politics: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that [is] it’s an opportunity to do things that you think you could not before.”

On the other hand: A crisis is a terrible thing to bungle.


With the Covid pandemic, President Biden got his crisis. It is an understatement for the ages to say he has used this crisis to do things no Democrat has attempted in more than 50 years.

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The questions are everywhere this week: Has Mr. Biden wasted his crisis? Are the Democrats on course to lose the House next year (and not beyond imagining, the Senate)? Is the Biden agenda disappearing up the flue of Joe Manchin's chimney?

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My short answers are yes, yes and yes.

Mr. Biden misread the crisis, his party will lose the House, and his and the left's ham-handed attacks on a Democratic senator from red West Virginia have put Mr. Biden's domestic policies at risk of implosion.

How could so much presidential ambition go wrong so quickly?

On May 28, Mr. Biden released his self-defining \$6 trillion budget. Two weeks later this is where we are: His negotiations with Republicans have collapsed, progressives are freaking out over Mr. Manchin's opposition to breaking the filibuster and passing the S.1 voting bill (a New Republic article argues "Yes, Take This Seriously: It's Time to Kill the Senate"), and the political calendar is ticking off the summer days before members of Congress desert Washington—and the Biden agenda—to campaign back home for Numero Uno's re-election.

The grandiose Biden policy agenda wasn't born yesterday. Clearly, progressive Democrats thought in November that Trump fatigue would produce bigger margins than a 50-50 Senate and a slim House majority. But reality checks have never stopped the American left.

After gaining so much ground inside the post-Obama Democratic Party, this has become a determined, bloody-minded faction, and it may be willing to pay a high political price, including loss of House control, to turn the Biden entitlements and taxes into federal law this year. Ideas come and go. Laws are embedded.

The most intriguing political straw of public doubt I've seen recently was inside the May 26 Fox poll: "More voters say socialism is a major threat to the stability of the U.S. today: 49% feel that way, up from 39% percent in 2019." Among independents, fear-of-socialism sentiment rose 17 points.

That's a huge move among swing voters. Look at the then-and-now dates on the poll—2019 and 2021. They bracket the coronavirus pandemic. Call this the Covid Effect—hard-to-predict shifts in public attitudes from the pre-pandemic status quo.

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The year 2020 was a maelstrom of events: Covid, omnipresent [Donald Trump](#), George Floyd, the summer protests-cum-riots, a close election, the new year starting with a Capitol riot.

Amid 2020, the original Biden campaign plan seemed sound: Go for normal and run to the center. But after winning, "normal" somehow got replaced with (in Mr. Biden's phrase) "go big."

No full explanation exists for why a safety-first political lifer jumped so far left. Sly Bernie Sanders put out the idea that Mr. Biden might equal FDR. The media was cheering. Hmmm, maybe he could join, or surpass, Barack Obama in the Democratic pantheon.

So, like LBJ's unwasted political crisis in 1964, Mr. Biden went beyond big on big government, proposing to spend trillions on new, permanent entitlements: \$200 billion for universal pre-K; \$225 billion for federal child care; \$225 billion for 12 weeks of guaranteed family leave (eventually paying \$4,000 a month); \$109 billion for free community college. Plus saving the planet, expanding unions and infrastructure to the horizon—all explicitly “paid for” with new taxes.

It looks increasingly like Mr. Biden and his allies on the left have misread the moment.

The American public has just spent a year committing unprecedented acts of self-discipline. They entered 2021 looking for post-pandemic stability. Suddenly, they get this Democratic fiscal extravaganza, including the oddity of mass-mailing \$1,400 checks even to people who held well-paying jobs. Instead of a new progressive revolution, Mr. Biden may be reviving some old saws, such as the burden this outsized debt will impose on one's children or grandchildren.

If intimidation by progressives and the media fails to force Sens. Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona to support blowing up the filibuster, the Democrats' default strategy is more coals into the inferno: a massive reconciliation bill of spending, taxes, cats and dogs.

Mr. Biden and the Democrats won't turn back now, but the political price for misreading the pandemic crisis could be high. House control is probably gone. Four Senate Democrats running for re-election won their last races by less than 3%: New Hampshire's Maggie Hassan (0.1%), Nevada's Catherine Cortez Masto (2.4%), Arizona's Mark Kelly (2.4%) and Georgia's Raphael Warnock (2%).

Joe Biden was right the first time. Voters did want normalcy. They may keep voting until they get it.

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