



Joe Biden:

46TH US PRESIDENT

Stephen Currie



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CHAPTER ONE

Early Years

The presidents of the United States have come from all walks of life, but many of them share a few characteristics. Several presidents, for example, came from highly political families. George W. Bush and John Quincy Adams were the sons of presidents, and Benjamin Harrison was the grandson of one. Being born into a wealthy family is also a common trait of many presidents. Donald Trump's father was a billionaire who made most of his money in the New York City real estate market. John Kennedy's father built a large family fortune as an investor and entrepreneur. Franklin Roosevelt was born into one of New York's oldest and wealthiest families.

In addition, many presidents have distinguished themselves as soldiers or scholars. George Washington, of course, was a general in the Revolutionary War. Ulysses S. Grant, Dwight Eisenhower, and Andrew Jackson likewise served as military commanders and were then elected to the presidency. As for academics, many presidents have attended highly selective and prestigious schools. Eight, including Barack Obama, Teddy Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt, obtained degrees from Harvard University, and five graduated from Yale University. Others, including Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson, were known for their intellect—Wilson remains the only president to have earned a doctorate.

Though most presidents fit into at least one of these categories, Joe Biden, the forty-sixth president, does not. None of Biden's parents or grandparents held elective office

or were especially involved in politics. Neither did Biden come from wealth. His father worked a sequence of sales and blue-collar jobs, and the family was often short of money. Biden has written about times when he was forced to “put cardboard in an old shoe till Dad’s next payday”⁵ instead of buying a new pair. Biden never served in the armed forces, let alone in a position of military leadership, and he was by his own admission an indifferent student whose academic career was undistinguished. He had little in common, then, with Kennedy, the Bushes, the Roosevelts, or indeed most other presidents of the past, and there were few indications that someday his name would be known across the world.

Yet Biden’s experiences in his early years did serve as an excellent foundation for a career in government. Perhaps most critically, he learned the importance of determination—a value exemplified and encouraged by both his parents. “The world dropped you on your head?” Biden remembered years later. “My dad would say, *Get up!* You’re lying in bed feeling sorry for yourself? *Get up!*”⁶ As a young man, Biden also showed flashes of leadership, especially in sports. He struck many people as kind, compassionate, and honest. And even though he did not always apply himself academically, Biden often impressed friends and teachers with his intelligence. Biden did not grow up in a well-off political family, nor did he make his mark as a commander or a scholar. But his early years nonetheless helped prepare him for one of the most difficult jobs on earth.

Scranton to Wilmington

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. was born on November 20, 1942, in the industrial city of Scranton in northeastern Pennsylvania. He was the oldest of four children born to Joe Sr. and Jean Finnegan Biden; the other three were Valerie, Jimmy, and Frankie. For the first decade of his life, Joe Jr. lived mainly in Scranton, a period that he remembers with great fondness. His mother was a Scranton native, and young Joe spent much of his time with her



Biden is joined onstage by his mother, Jean, after his speech at the Democratic National Convention in August 2008.

extended family. When Joe was ten, the family left Scranton to move about 140 miles (225 km) south to the outskirts of Wilmington, Delaware, where jobs were said to be more plentiful. Indeed, Joe's father soon found work managing a car dealership. For many years the Bidens returned to Scranton whenever they could to spend weekends with their Finnegan relatives.

But Joe's nuclear family was even more important in his growth and development. He was very close to his sister and brothers. While they still lived in Scranton, Joe would put Valerie on the handlebars of his bicycle to give her a ride to a nearby playground. If one sibling was threatened or teased by neighborhood children, the other siblings typically came to his or her defense. Joe also admired both his parents, whom he credits with instilling a strong sense of right and wrong in their children. He also saw them as kind and loving people who wanted their children to succeed. That included giving them pep talks when the children were

discouraged. “Remember, Joey, you’re a Biden,” he recalls his mother telling him. “Nobody is better than you. You’re not better than anybody else, but *nobody* is better than you.”⁷

The lessons Joe learned at home were reinforced at school and at church. The Bidens were Roman Catholic, and as a boy Joe attended services regularly. He was enrolled in parochial school, first in Pennsylvania and then in Delaware. His instructors “taught reading and writing and math and geography and history,” Biden remembers, “but embedded in the curriculum also were the concepts of decency, fair play, and virtue.”⁸ Upon completing eighth grade, Joe hoped to attend Archmere Academy, a Catholic high school. The tuition was more than his parents could afford, but the school offered Joe the chance to work around the campus during the summer and apply his earnings toward the cost of the program. He entered Archmere in the fall of 1957.

Initially, Joe had difficulty at Archmere. The main reason was a speech impediment: Joe had stuttered since early childhood. In fact, due to the stutter, Archmere released him during his freshman year from the standard requirement of giving a speech to the assembled students. Joe had al-

ways been teased about the stutter, but his Archmere classmates mocked him mercilessly. Among other names, they called him “Joe Impedimenta.”⁹ The teasing pushed Joe to overcome the problem. He memorized passages from literature and practiced saying them fluently in front of a mirror. “If I saw my jaw start to clench,” he remembered years later, “I’d pause, try to go slack, smile, then pick it up again.”¹⁰ Over time Joe’s stutter became less noticeable. As a sophomore, he delivered an assigned speech without a hitch.

Joe was not a strong student at Archmere; by his own admission, he was mostly a B-average student. He did enjoy himself, though, making plenty of friends and becoming one of Arch-

“Remember, Joey, you’re a Biden. Nobody is better than you. You’re not better than anybody else, but *nobody* is better than you.”⁷

—Jean Finnegan Biden, mother to Joe Biden

Biden and Scranton

Though Joe Biden has been a Delaware resident for most of his life, his presidential campaigns have also stressed his connection to Scranton, Pennsylvania, the city of his birth. On Election Day 2020, for example, he visited Scranton to remind local voters that he was one of them. “He’s from Scranton, North Washington Avenue,” said Janet Evans, a retired teacher, “and we the people love him and trust him.” The trek to Scranton did not hurt; Biden won Scranton’s Lackawanna County by almost ten thousand votes, helping him capture Pennsylvania.

The city has fallen on hard times, though, since Biden was a boy. In the early 1900s Lackawanna County was a center of the coal mining industry, a railroad hub, and a manufacturing area known for producing phonograph records. By 1942, when Biden was born, the city’s population exceeded 140,000. But after 1945 Americans increasingly relied on oil and natural gas to heat their homes rather than coal, leading to economic stress in Scranton as the mines closed one by one. At the same time manufacturers shut down or moved elsewhere, and rail traffic diminished as well. Today Scranton’s population is only 75,000.

Quoted in Nina Lakhani, “Joe Biden Returns to Childhood Home in Scranton: From This House to the White House,” *The Guardian* (Manchester, UK), November 3, 2020. www.theguardian.com.

mere’s most popular students. “He was an outgoing person, very sociable,” one friend remembers, adding that Joe was the kind of person who “would talk with anybody.”¹¹ Joe served as class president both his junior and senior years. He was also a talented football player, leading the team in scoring during his senior season. His coach once described him as “one of the best pass receivers I had in 16 years as a coach.”¹² In 1961 Joe Biden graduated from Archmere and went off to the University of Delaware in nearby Newark.

“He was an outgoing person,
very sociable.”¹¹

—A Biden childhood friend

College

Biden had not distinguished himself academically in high school, and at first his college work was equally unimpressive. Rather than putting his energies into studying, he focused much more on dating, friends, and sports. “I probably started my first year of

college a little too interested in football and meeting new girls,” Biden admitted later, adding drily that “there were a lot of new girls to meet.”¹³ Biden’s first-semester grades were poor enough that his parents told him he had to quit the freshman football team until he showed significant academic improvement. Embarrassed, Biden worked a little harder during the next few semesters, but his grades did not improve by much.

Although Biden remained a mediocre student, his friends recognized his intellectual capacity. “Joe was the kind of guy who could read someone else’s notes and do better on the exam than the guy who made the notes,”¹⁴ remembers his roommate, Donald Brunner. That innate academic ability served Biden well around the middle of his college years, when he decided that he wanted to go to law school after his graduation from the University of Delaware. Law schools are selective and use applicants’ grades as an important part of admissions decisions. It was clear to Biden that his grades to that point would not qualify him for most law schools. He consequently began studying as hard as possible. In

Biden stands at the podium with his sister, Valerie Biden Owens, in 2010. As a child, Joe was close to his sister and his brothers.



the end he raised his grade point average considerably and was accepted by the law school at Syracuse University in New York.

Syracuse was not a top-ranked law school, but Biden's choice to go there was based not on reputation but on love. During a college spring break, he had met a Syracuse student named Neilia Hunter. The couple quickly began a long-distance relationship. Biden frequently made the trip to Syracuse during his final semesters of college to visit his girlfriend, and he chose to attend law school there largely to be closer to her. There were a few difficulties at first. Biden was somewhat intimidated by Hunter's family, which was much wealthier than his own. Moreover, the Hunters were Protestant, and Neilia's father was initially reluctant to allow his daughter to date a Roman Catholic. Nonetheless, these issues were eventually resolved. Joe and Neilia married in 1966, following Biden's first year of law school.

“Joe was the kind of guy who could read someone else’s notes and do better on the exam than the guy who made the notes.”¹⁴

—Donald Brunner, Joe Biden's college roommate

Law School and Beyond

Biden had not been a rousing academic success in either high school or college, and the same pattern held for law school. He frequently cut classes and failed to study as hard as he needed to. The work did not appeal to him—law school was “the biggest bore in the world,”¹⁵ he said once—and his grades showed his overall lack of engagement. Typically, Biden did little work until near the end of the semester, when he pushed himself to learn all the material in just a few days—often with Neilia's help. It was not the most successful of strategies. At one point Biden improperly cited sources in an assignment, was accused of plagiarism, and was required to repeat the course. He did graduate in 1968, but his grades ranked him just seventy-sixth in a class of eighty-five. It was not a distinguished beginning to a legal career.

Joe and Neilia returned to Delaware in 1968. In 1969 their son Joseph III was born; they called him Beau. The following year saw the arrival of Beau's brother, Hunter. Joe and Neilia kept themselves busy with the children. They also had part-time work managing a swimming pool at a country club, along with owning a few rental properties. Biden's law degree initially got him a job working for a corporate law firm, but he soon decided that this was not the kind of work he wanted to do. The firm primarily represented wealthy and powerful clients in business and industry, and Biden realized that his heart was on the side of poorer people who had fewer resources and desperately needed the help of a skilled lawyer.

Biden stands next to his first wife, Neilia, with their two young sons, Beau and Hunter, in the summer of 1972.



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5. Joe Biden, *Promises to Keep*. New York: Random House, 2007, p. 11.
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13. Quoted in Wilser, *The Book of Joe*, p. 18.
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IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF JOE BIDEN

1942

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. is born on November 20 in Pennsylvania.

1953

The Biden family moves to Delaware.

1961

Biden graduates from Archmere Academy and begins attending the University of Delaware.

1966

Joe Biden and Neilia Hunter marry.

1968

Biden graduates from Syracuse University College of Law.

1972

Biden's wife, Neilia, and their daughter, Naomi, are killed in a car accident; their two sons, Beau and Hunter, are badly injured but survive.

1973

Biden is sworn in as a US senator from Delaware.

1977

Joe Biden and Jill Jacobs marry.

1979

Biden helps negotiate an arms control treaty with the Soviet Union.

1987

Biden enters and then drops out of his first presidential race.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

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Ballotpedia (https://ballotpedia.org/Joe_Biden). This website includes information and links to articles about Joe Biden's personal and professional life, including past elections and legislative actions throughout his career.

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