

Opinion

Democrats' unity might hinge on vice-presidential pick | CARL GOLDEN

By Carl Golden

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While Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden remains semi-cloistered in the bunker/basement/television studio of his Wilmington, Del., home, the vice presidential selection process plods on.

Biden's campaign is facing increasing pressure from the party's progressive wing to choose a running mate who supports massive reductions in spending on police departments and major revisions in law enforcement powers. By pledging to select a woman as his running mate, Biden availed himself of several highly qualified women capable of fulfilling his principal condition – ready to step in as president should it become necessary.

Biden's campaign quickly recognized the perils of the "Defund the Police" movement and distanced the former vice president with a declaration of opposition. But President Trump's campaign, sensing a potentially powerful wedge issue which could be exploited, piled on. It moved quickly to hang the movement around Biden's neck as evidence the Democratic Party had ceded control to its radical elements who supported abolishing police departments.

A recent Harris/HillX poll bore out the Trump view – 52 percent of Democrats supported defunding while 78 percent of Republicans and 70 percent of independents opposed it.

Trump ratcheted up the attack with his usual volatile and incendiary rhetoric. He proclaimed himself the "president of law and order," threatened to turn dogs loose on protesters, shoot looters and mused aloud about mobilizing the U.S. military to quell demonstrations.

The lawbreaking chaos – attacks on police, burning businesses, looting in a party atmosphere – demanded a law enforcement response and, in most cases, received one. Scores of arrests were made and curfews enforced. The demonstrations that followed, while raucous and noisy, were generally peaceful.

Meaningful reforms in policing procedures and practices – a position Biden has embraced – enjoys healthy majority support, but withdrawing traditional law enforcement functions does not.

Proponents of the “Defund the Police” movement struggled to explain their goal is re-allocating funds spent on policing to social service programs to help individuals whose behavior is better served by professionals in the field of mental health, for instance, than by encounters with police officers not trained to deal with such confrontations.

They’ve been victimized by their sloganeering, as critics quickly framed the debate over police or no police. Nor has their cause been helped by inflammatory anti-police remarks against a background of violent street clashes, arson, looting, and destruction of property.

Many progressives are already suspicious of Biden and, as he deals with the increase in support for an African-American vice presidential selection, he’s treading on tricky terrain.

Two potential running mates under serious consideration – California Sen. Kamala Harris and Florida Congresswoman Val Demings – drew opposition from some outspoken Black leaders because, they contended, their earlier careers in law enforcement (Harris as a prosecutor and Demings as a chief of police) disqualified them. Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar took herself out of the running, realizing her service as a county prosecutor worked against her.

If Biden passes on Harris or Demings, he’ll be accused of caving in to the militant progressives. Should he choose either one, he’ll encounter significant backlash, continued criticism and possible loss of support from that wing.

It’s another straw on the camel’s back as the party struggles to construct a united front for the four-month run to the election.

Party establishment figures are unhappy and concerned over what they perceive is a shortage of enthusiasm on the part of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, among others.

Biden has surged to a double-digit lead in several polls but concerns persist it is a lead on paper only, that Trump – buoyed by an enthusiastic rock solid base – is capable of making up ground in significant chunks while Democrats squabble among themselves and worry about whether large disgruntled segments of their party will desert it.

His choice of a running mate may hold the answer.

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