

Joe Biden calls for civility uncivil times

HIGHLIGHTS

Vice president issues a plea for civility in politics

He urges Democrats not to 'act like Republicans'





Vice President Joe Biden gestures while giving the keynote address at the California Democrats State Convention on Saturday, in San Jose. **Ben Margot** - AP

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Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump reacted to a protester at one of his rallies by imagining a long-ago time when such a man would have been carried out on a stretcher.

“I’d like to punch him in the face,” Trump said as the man was escorted out of the Las Vegas hall last week.





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Struggling to catch up with Trump, Sen. Marco Rubio ridiculed the size of Trump's hands the other day and suggested that Trump might have wet his pants.

On Saturday afternoon, Vice President Joe Biden opened his speech to the California Democratic Party convention in San Jose by recounting the California politicians who had been friends of his son, Beau Biden, who died last year of brain cancer.

"I'll only say this once, but. Um." Biden didn't get the chance to finish the thought. A protester unfurled a bright yellow banner declaring that Beau got cancer by using a cellphone.

Having been assigned by President Barack Obama to the moonshot of helping scientists cure cancer, Biden had spent Saturday morning at UC San Francisco with cancer survivors, researchers and physicians. Not one cited

cellphones as a cause of cancer; there is no link.

Democrats in the crowd of 3,000-plus in San Jose hissed at the protester. Strong arms grabbed the sign and the guy. Whatever he thought of the stunningly heartless protest, Biden's response was beyond gracious. He blinked, frowned, blinked again.

“That’s all right. Let him go,” Biden said from the podium. “Let him go. It’s OK. It is all right. It’s OK. My son, Beau, would love that part. No, really, thank you. It is not a problem.

“Hey, let’s not act like Republicans. I ain’t Donald Trump.”

For the next hour, Biden delivered what almost surely will be his final speech as an elected official to a California Democratic Party convention. As he is wont to do, Biden rambled a bit, veered off script and went on a little too long.

For the most part, the party loyalist rallied the party faithful. But 45 minutes in, past time when other pols would have stopped, Biden got to his most important point – the descent of American politics.

“Our people are not the problem. Our politics is the problem,” Biden said. “It has grown so petty, so personal, so angry, so ugly.”

Science proves what our ears and eyes tell us. The Pew Research Center reported in 2014 that Republican and Democratic “partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive than at any point in the last two decades.”

Just as interracial marriages once were frowned upon, interparty marriages are becoming taboo. In the 1960s, 35 percent of couples included Democrats and Republicans, noted Shanto Iyengar of Stanford University and Sean J. Westwood of Dartmouth in their 2014 study, “Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization.” Now, about 12 percent marry across party lines.

Hostility among partisans, they write, “sends a clear signal to elected officials; representatives who appear willing to work across party lines run the risk of being perceived as ‘appeasers.’ ”

Biden attributed the decline of civility in politics to the influence of big money. Whatever its cause, the impact on civic life is pernicious.

“America can’t take this much longer,” Biden

told the Democratic faithful. “Consensus is necessary. ‘Compromise’ is not a dirty word.”

As he has done before, Biden told the story about his early days in the U.S. Senate. He was 29 and his first wife and baby daughter had been killed in a car accident a month after his election in 1972. Sens. Ted Kennedy and Robert Dole were advocating what would become the Americans with Disabilities Act. Sen. Jesse Helms, the North Carolina conservative, took to the floor to denounce it.

Then Senate Leader Mike Mansfield saw that Biden was angry and asked him why. As he retold the story, Biden ranted that Helms had no sympathy for handicapped people. Mansfield responded by telling him that before joining the Senate, Helms had read in the Raleigh newspaper about a young orphan with cerebral palsy and adopted him.

Mansfield, the elder, was trying to teach the young senator a lesson: “It is always appropriate to question another man or woman’s judgment. It’s never appropriate to judge the motive because you don’t know what it is.” That doesn’t happen now. Now, politicians question motives.

In his five decades in public life, Biden was never known for rolling over. On Saturday, the elder statesman was telling the ones coming up about the difference between sticking to principles and threatening to punch opponents in the face. Let's hope they listened.

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