

OPINION

TODAY'S TOPIC: THE 46TH PRESIDENT

Our View: Biden tackles two diseases — COVID and disunity

President Joe Biden's inaugural address on Wednesday was not filled with soaring rhetoric about a gloriously unified America marching toward a better future. Instead, befitting the times, this was a tough-love speech in which the new commander in chief spoke harshly of how the country is riddled with problems and in desperate need of a cure.

It was an appeal for a return to the norms trampled by his predecessor — truth, decency, respect — delivered in the most abnormal of circumstances.

The masked participants were a constant reminder of the coronavirus tragedy that has claimed more than 400,000 American lives in less than a year. The thousands of troops surrounding the U.S. Capitol were a reminder of the deadly rioting at the same site just two weeks earlier.

Donald Trump slunk from the city before the swearing-in, ditching a more than 150-year tradition of attending a successor's inauguration. And there would be no crowd-size comparisons this time: The National Mall was emptied of throngs out of concerns for both contagion and insurrection.

The beginnings of his presidency are "a crucible for the ages," said Biden, who, at 78, is the oldest person to assume the office. "Few people in our nation's history have been more challenged or found a time more challenging or difficult than the time we're in now."

Appropriately, Biden's speech was less about specific policy prescriptions than it was the clear-eyed pragmatism of a doctor diagnosing a treatable malignancy: the disease of disunity.

Failure to end the "uncivil war," he warned, would result in never-ending bitterness, outrage and the potential

for chaos. "Politics doesn't have to be a raging fire, destroying everything in its path," he said.

It stood in stark contrast to remarks Trump delivered four years earlier when he strangely spoke about "American carnage" that largely existed within his own mind. In fact, American carnage — much of it fomented by the 45th president himself — is what the 46th inherited.

And where Trump made promises he couldn't, or wouldn't, keep, Biden issued a challenge. He called on Americans to strive for the commonality required to dress the nation's wounds: "I know speaking of unity can sound like some foolish fantasy these days. I know the forces that divide us are deep and they are real."

And how to achieve unity in a riven America?

First and foremost, by delivering results that improve people's lives. As Barack Obama, whom Biden served for eight years as vice president, put it in his own first inaugural address, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works."

Biden, an old-style Democrat who first joined the Senate in 1973, and a team that includes Kamala Harris, the first female vice president, will be judged on their ability to harness the full power of the federal government to attack the pandemic and the economic pain it has created.

"My whole soul is in this," the president said Wednesday.

Biden's words might be just the balm a shaken nation needs. And the new president, who has emerged from shattering personal grief with empathy rather than bitterness, might just well be the right man for the moment.



President Joe Biden and Dr. Jill Biden review the U.S. military from the U.S. Capitol on Inauguration Day. JACK GRUBER/USA TODAY

Other Views: Prove that unity is no pie-in-the-sky dream

Brett M. Decker, USA TODAY:

"To unify a seething nation, President Joe Biden needs to chart a moderate course during his first 100 days in the White House. ... Thus far, however, Democrats sound more committed to retribution and pursuing a radically leftist agenda than bringing people together ... federal deficit spending, tax increases, immigration, the 'Green New Deal,' gun control, student-loan debt forgiveness and abortion. ... Biden needs to step back from the ledge and reach out to the middle to show that he believes unity is not a pie-in-the-sky dream, and that he really wants to represent all Americans."

Njeri Mathis Rutledge, USA TODAY:

"I watched the inauguration of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Vice President Kamala D. Harris with mixed emotions. As a Black woman, watching my sorority sister and fellow historically black college and university sister make history was a joyful moment. As an American who has family members among the 400,000 lost to COVID-19, I also felt wounded. ... The Black community worked alongside South Asians, Latinos, traditional Democrats, progressives, frustrated Republicans

and independents, and countless others to bring this day into existence. ... As I sit in my living room wearing my pink dress, chucks and pearls, and drying my tears of joy and relief, I am trusting that Harris feels the hopes of the many Americans who feel connected to her, and are applauding her. And as a Black woman, I am filled with a personal sense of pride — not only because of who Kamala Harris is, but because of who we are, collectively. We did it."

Char Adams, NBC News:

"Amanda Gorman, 22, all but stole the show on Inauguration Day as she performed her original poem, 'The Hill We Climb,' becoming the youngest inaugural poet known in the nation's history. (She) became the nation's first youth poet laureate at 19, while a sophomore at Harvard. ... Gorman's task was not an easy one: acknowledging the nation's history and present while dreaming of a better future. To that end, she opened her poem boldly. 'When day comes we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade,' she said. 'We, the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.'"



MIKE THOMPSON/USA TODAY NETWORK

Trump pardons take corruption to new high

A personal tool to reward cronies and roil waters

Paul Rosenzweig

It could've been worse. Former President Donald Trump's last-minute flood of pardons could have included many more controversial grants of clemency. That he did not pardon himself, his children or Rudy Giuliani is a pleasant surprise. Nor were controversial possibilities like Julian Assange or Edward Snowden on the pardon list.

What we got from Trump is something more akin to the traditional way in which presidents have used and misused their pardon power on the way out the door — but as with so much about Trump, he sank past practice to a new level of corruption and connection. The pardons of Steve Bannon and Albert Pirro Jr., in particular, both echo historical practices and fracture them.

To be sure, past presidents have misused their pardon powers in their final days. In one recent example, Bill Clinton pardoned Susan McDougal, who had kept silent rather than testify against him in the Whitewater cases. Clinton also infamously granted a pardon to financier Marc Rich, who was a fugitive from justice abroad and whose family made significant political contributions to the Democratic Party.

Those pardons, like many of Trump's, had the whiff of inappropriateness and corruption about them. But none broke the norms of presidential behavior as severely as Trump's.

Pardons were conceived by the framers of our Constitution as a way to guard against overreaching by the legislative and judicial branches. They allowed the president to do justice in cases where the law was overly harsh or the judicial system had failed to render an equitable judgment.

Some of Trump's pardons this week have that character. His sentence commutation for Jawad Musa (serving life in prison for a nonviolent drug offense), seems to have arisen at least partially out of a genuine concern for the harshness of the criminal justice system.

Stoking division

The framers also saw the pardon as a way to smooth political waters and end contentious social disputes. Jimmy Carter's pardon of those who resisted the Vietnam draft was an effort to move past the war. Most famously, Gerald Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon was a well-intentioned attempt to end the trauma of Watergate. None of Trump's pardons this week seem intended to heal the political turmoil in the country — indeed, they will only exacerbate it.

And so, most of Trump's final pardons do not reflect either of the framers' stated goals for the pardon power. Rather, coming on top of his other post-election pardons of cronies like Roger Stone and Michael Flynn, they largely reflect the worst instincts of earlier pardon abuses. Collectively, they embody an affinity for corruption and a willing-

ness to use the pardon power as a personal tool to benefit or punish people.

In this last round, corrupt political operatives like Paul Erickson (a GOP adviser who defrauded investors in an oil company) and Ken Kurson (a friend of Jared Kushner, charged with cyberstalking his ex-wife) got clemency. So did Sholam Weiss, who was serving an 800+ year sentence for a massive insurance fraud, and Elliott Brody, a Trump donor who pleaded guilty to acting as an unregistered lobbyist for foreign interests.

Less than an hour before Joe Biden took the oath of office, Trump gave a reward to Fox News host Jeanine Pirro for her sycophantic support: a pardon for her tax-evader ex-husband. But even that couldn't top Trump's pardon of Bannon, his former political adviser, as the most perfect example of Trump's affinity for power and corruption.

Rubes lose again

Bannon was awaiting trial on charges that he defrauded Trump supporters by soliciting more than \$25 million in donations for a fundraising campaign called "We Build the Wall." Instead of funding construction of Trump's border wall, some of that money went to fundraising executives — including \$1 million to Bannon.

Though Bannon was, in times past, critical of Trump, he has returned to the Trump fold. Indeed, one reason for the pardon is that he could be particularly useful if Trump follows through on his reported decision to form a new party. On the other hand, Bannon could still face fraud charges in various state courts, so his pardon might be uniquely Trumpian in nature — political dynamite yet only partially effective.

More to the point, it is perfectly "on brand" and emblematically "peak Trump" for him to reward a vital elite political supporter like Bannon even though Bannon defrauded Trump's own base. In the con man's last con, the rubes lost again.

The broad nature of presidential pardon power was an intentional choice made by the Founders. They hoped and expected presidents would use it judiciously. Trump's exploitation of it calls into question the assumption of reasonableness in its exercise.

The Trump pardon extravaganza was (thankfully) different more in degree than in kind from those that came before. Perhaps we have dodged a bullet, and should be grateful. Even so, that the nation has had to even contemplate the possibility of a corrupt self-pardon — or preemptive pardons for family members — shows the potential for abuse. We must consider whether we need a constitutional correction to the framers' vision of this power.

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