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These qualities endeared me to Joe Biden in 1987 — and I still support him today | Opinion

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Watching the president on the world stage in recent weeks has made me think a lot about the man and his place in history.

I first met Joe Biden in 1987. I was a 21-year-old student, responsible for bringing political speakers to the George Washington University campus. The occasion was a speech by then-Sen. Joe Biden about the upcoming Summit meeting between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Unknown to me when I organized the event was that it would be one of Biden's first major public appearances since dropping out of the 1988 presidential race.

That day, the calls started coming in. Students and professors were very interested. News organizations were very interested. C-SPAN wanted to cover it. All of a sudden, our otherwise small policy discussion with a United States senator turned into a national event, which had to be relocated into a campus auditorium.

After stumbling through my introduction, I welcomed Biden to the stage to deliver his remarks. Measured. Engaging. Insightful. Thoughtful. The then-former presidential candidate and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee commanded the large audience, including me, for more than 2 hours.

Years later, during my stint with the U.S. Department of State, I had the opportunity to meet Biden a couple of more times. Always brief, but always memorable, the encounters left me even more grateful for and more impressed with his leadership. In fact, due to my work related to the so-called "Helms Biden" law — which obligated the U.S. to pay its back dues to the United Nations in return for reforms of the world body — I was present at multiple meetings Biden

helped lead, including unprecedented discussions with U.N. officials and ambassadors in 2000.

Over the next two decades, I — like many Americans — watched from afar as the world changed and as Biden changed alongside it, playing an increasingly important role in the life of our country. First as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during and following the 9/11 attacks. Then as vice president to our first African American president. And for the past two years, as our commander-in-chief during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history.

For me, it has been exciting to watch the trajectory of Biden's career — in part because I have long been a supporter, in part because I had the opportunity to meet him at key moments in my own career. Who knew that one of the speakers brought to my campus would end up president? Who knew that the U.S. senator so many of us would pass on Amtrak commuter trains would end up leader of the free world?

And now, due to circumstance as well as character, Biden — who was first elected to the United States Senate 50 years ago this November — has the potential to be one of the most consequential figures in American history.

Granted, I realize the president has had his detractors. There are those on the political left and right, whose views on policy are not aligned with the president's — reasonable, thoughtful people who just do not share his perspective. And, of course, there are also those on the political extremes, whose stridency blinds them to anything that varies with their own world view.

But I also realize that it is important sometimes to look beyond a president's position on issues and to focus instead on their temperament, their approach and their place in history. Yes, policies matter, but sometimes a president's disposition and timing matter as much, if not more. This is why many people look back at Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan as being the "right person at the right time." This is why many people still have so much appreciation for Barack Obama.

In this context, Biden is proving to be the president we need most right now. His sense of moderation. His wealth of experience. His respect for the office and genuine love for our country. Taken together, I cannot think of a better person to help us meet this very challenging moment.

Indeed, when he stepped back onto the national stage in 2020, Biden did so as a national healer at a time we desperately needed national healing. And he brought with him a long

strong history of leadership on a full range of policy issues — invaluable experience that has been making it possible for him to address a precarious mix of domestic and international threats. As a result, even during this most polarizing time, President Biden has already been able to achieve bipartisan agreement on several difficult issues at home and abroad.

To me, none of this is surprising.

The Biden of today seems a lot like the Biden I met 35 years ago. Measured. Engaging. Insightful. Thoughtful. Back then, addressing the overflow crowd of students and professors — many of whom did not agree with him politically — Biden spoke with respect and candor, underscoring the fundamental point that that which unites us is far greater and far more important than that which divides us. On Sept. 21, addressing the United Nations General Assembly, Biden took a similar approach and delivered a similar message — strong yet deferential, solemn yet hopeful.

It was the type of leadership our campus audience appreciated in 1987. It is the type of leadership our country and world needs now in 2022.

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