



## Two days with Joe Biden: Cassandra joins charisma

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Spending two days in Venice next to U.S. Senator Joe Biden two months ago, I could not help thinking two things: He is as clairvoyant as Cassandra and he is nobody's "Yes-Man."

Cassandra, if you remember, was that Greek Goddess who foresaw and predicted that the city of Troy (yes, the one in Turkey) would be destroyed.

Cassandra lived on quite unhappily but her name became the equivalent of "I told you so."

As far back as a few years ago, Biden was saying to his American grassroots audiences what the priorities were: "Pakistan, teetering, Russia, moving in an authoritarian direction, Iran, malleable but dangerous."

He was prescient on the Balkans calling Milosevic a few choice words before anyone else during the Clinton administration and many of his foreign policy choices pushed the Bush administration to change its lines just as Biden became disenchanted with the Bush policy on Iraq -- despite having voted for the attack in 2002.

He is fond of saying about his former Democratic rivals -- and still does and still will -- "I have more experience than all of them including the candidate who says she has the most experience (Hillary Clinton) and I have changed more things than the guy who is talking about change (Barack Obama)."

The Council for U.S. and Italy, a think tank and a forum which brings together the best of U.S. and Italian business with significant world leaders once a year in Venice, invited Biden as a keynote speaker in June and I spent two days next to him and his wife Dr. Jill Jacobs.

Before and during his trip, it was always clear he was going to do everything his own way. He was fastidious on his U.S. foreign policy speech text beforehand and clipped and fast on his replies afterwards.

After all, Biden has been acting as a "shadow foreign minister" for nearly a decade, meeting all the foreign leaders as Chairman of the prestigious U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

### **Private family man without any escort**

And the day after his Venice keynote speech, when the Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, and business leaders like Marco Tronchetti Provera and Sergio Marchionne of Fiat were waiting at lunch for Biden, he decided that it was more important to skip the chit chat and join the group later for desert after sleeping off his jetlag.

His plans for Sunday private Catholic mass in Venice were equally important.

This is a man who was elected to the U.S. Senate at age 29 when Richard Nixon was in the White House and

Obama was 11. A few days after Biden's surprise victory in Delaware for the Senate, he lost his first wife and infant daughter in a car accident. His son was saved and he is now attorney general in Delaware schedule for Iraq duty as a National Guard reserve in October 2008.

When he was widowed, Biden travelled 90 minutes each way from Delaware to Washington on the train every day to be near his family. He still does that every weekend--- but on the train not in a big limousine.

In Venice, it was the same. Private time and a private family man without any escort.

Here were some of his messages that he delivered in Venice.

--Priority number 1 is to re-establish credibility of the United States.

--Iraq is an obstacle.

--The U.S. spends 3 billion Dollars a week in Iraq. It needs to be solved fast but not with a unilateral exit.

--The United States should be able to have a dialogue with Iran and as John F. Kennedy said " we should never fear to negotiate."

Biden also described the political scene in the United States back in June while the primaries were still underway as "an incredible moment since I came out of college in 1960s" because a woman and an Afro-American were competing for the presidency. Obama has "the more energy and the strength" to prevail, he said as it was not yet clear who would be the final winner and his prediction came true.

Biden also thwarted off fears that his party would be divided at the Denver Convention later this week. "You will see total unity," he said.

## **Foreign policy positions**

Having described the man: Loquacious, sometimes prone to gaffes and sometimes harshly cutting in his dialogue with the public, what about his other foreign policy positions?

First of all, he has his priorities right: This is what he said after spending 24 hours in Georgia at mid-August and speaking with President Mikael Sakashvili:

"I left the country convinced that Russia's invasion of Georgia may be the one of the most significant event to occur in Europe since the end of communism. The claims of Georgian atrocities that provided the pretext for Russia's invasion are rapidly being disproved by international observers, and the continuing presence of Russian forces in the country has severe implications for the broader region. The war that began in Georgia is no longer about that country alone. It has become a question of whether and how the West will stand up for the rights of free people throughout the region. The outcome there will determine whether we realize the grand ambition of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace."

He was there. He knew where the fire was and provided analysis.

Biden will surely bring up the Georgia case during the next few months and the rival presidential ticket will have to explain:

For example, a U.S. lobbyist for Georgia, Randy Scheunemann, worked for Sakashvili, to urge the United States, if necessary, to intervene militarily. He also worked at the same time for Republican presidential candidate Senator McCain between January 2007 and March 2008, receiving money from both sides. This is a time bomb waiting to explode.

Iraq is another issue. Biden, in 2006, urged a tripartite federal system for the war torn country in a much discussed plan.

### **Staunch supporter of "secular Turkey"**

Biden is not a well liked figure in Turkey. His past position on Cyprus seeking withdrawal of the Turkish troops and his support of the "Armenian Genocide bill" stand as worrisome factors for the Turks.

But Biden does know Turkey well. He was in Turkey in February with some other senators. He is also a staunch supporter of "secular Turkey." "Real Politik" may force him to come to terms since he keeps talking about a regional solution for Iraq if the presidential ticket is successful.

It is too early to predict whether "Mr. Cassandra" will shore up "Mr. Charisma" Barack Obama.

The real election campaign is still to start but you can be sure that foreign policy and security will also take place center stage now that Joe Biden is there--- besides the central issue of the economy.

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