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After Cheney

By JAMES TRAUB

When Vice President Biden travels to Iraq, which he does every two months or so, he flies on [Air Force Two](#) to an airbase in southern England and then transfers to a cargo plane, a C-17, retrofitted for vice-presidential comfort with an Airstream trailer bolted on to tracks in the center of the hold. With its porthole and shiny rivets and gleaming chrome, this strange conveyance looks like something out of [Jules Verne](#). Captain Biden holds court in a wood-paneled galley just large enough for his half-dozen or so aides to pile into. Unlike Nemo, he is a gregarious knee-squeezer who has to be ordered by his staff to stop talking so he can get some rest.

I had the first of several long conversations with Biden in the Airstream this summer on his return from his first trip to Iraq as vice president. With violence much reduced and some signs of political reconciliation, Iraq had suddenly switched places with Afghanistan to become the war we ignore; but Obama-administration officials feared that Iraq would sink back into fratricide unless Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds made the painful compromises they had avoided so far. [President Obama](#) had committed to ending America's combat role in the country by Aug. 31, 2010; though both the American and Iraqi publics demanded the withdrawal, it endangered Iraq's very fragile security and reduced American leverage at a crucial moment of political transition. Early last June, the president asked Biden to take responsibility for Iraq.

During the course of a two-day trip to Baghdad, Biden met with [Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki](#) and other leading political figures. Officials in both the Bush and Obama administrations had come to view Maliki as a sectarian Shiite bent on marginalizing Iraq's Sunni minority. "You've never heard me prior to this trip singing the praises of Maliki," Biden said. He had changed into his Airstream mufti — short-sleeve knit shirt and natty dark slacks. He is impressively trim for a 67-year-old, especially one scarcely known for self-discipline.

Biden said he had been having second thoughts about Maliki. In March of last year, the prime minister sent troops to suppress the forces of [Moktada al-Sadr](#) and the militias that controlled the southern city of Basra — Shiites in both cases. He had alienated parts of his base and launched an appeal across sectarian lines. "He's got a real problem," Biden said, following this new train of thought, "and if he wants to stay in power" — an election is looming next year — "how does he do it?" He needed to assemble a winning coalition. Would he seek Kurdish support? Sunni support? Both? But how, given that the Kurds and Sunnis were at each other's throats? "These guys put their pants on one leg at a time," Biden said. "They're still politicians."

Here was a [Joe Biden](#) guiding principle. Unlike Obama, Biden has spent virtually his entire life in politics. It is his medium: he talks about world leaders the way a grizzled baseball coach talks about the opposing lineup. I once heard him say, "Foreign policy is like human relations, only people know less about each other." One of the chief reasons that Obama has sought Biden's advice on a range of pressing foreign-policy questions —

most notably, in recent months, on policy in Afghanistan — is that Biden has a deep knowledge of, and an intuitive feel for, people and places still new to the president. He appears to have judged right on Iraq, where the coming elections should constitute a major success both for the Iraqis and for the Obama administration. But that's only if they actually occur. Iraqi leaders may still choose sectarian over national interest no matter the consequences — and they've shown signs of doing just that. Politics are not, alas, the same all over.

AS SENATORS, [BARACK OBAMA](#) and Joe Biden were far from close. Obama served on the Foreign Relations Committee, which Biden led; and Biden, who felt that he had earned his stars the old-fashioned way, bristled at Obama's status as instant superstar. "They started out pretty far apart," a Biden aide says. They went on to run against each other for the Democratic nomination for the presidency; before Biden dropped out of the race he criticized Obama as a foreign-policy neophyte who was copying his ideas. Brian Katulis, a national-security expert at the Center for American Progress, recalls encountering Biden wandering around the executive-suite floor in the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad late one night in February 2008, looking for someone to talk to. Biden invited Katulis and a visiting former congressman down to the hotel restaurant for a milkshake, and then delivered a 90-minute monologue, the essence of which was: "I know more about foreign policy than any of the other candidates in the race, and I'm going to devote the next six months to rewriting Democratic foreign policy."

Biden said he believed — and still believes — that he would make a very good president. He was nervous about accepting Obama's offer of the vice presidency, fearing that he would suffer a loss in status, and in voice, from his role as a Senate baron. According to [John Podesta](#), a former official in the Clinton White House who ran Obama's transition, Biden "had a fairly clear sense in his own mind, which probably existed even before he was selected by Obama but definitely in the weeks in advance of and right after the election, that he didn't want to be the guy in charge of x portfolio." Instead, Biden wanted the role every vice president wants, but which perhaps only his predecessor, [Dick Cheney](#), had enjoyed: to be the last voice in the room.

The president and the vice president are very different men both temperamentally and generationally, and they move in different social circles. "Everyone wants this to be some kind of buddy movie — 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,' " as one senior White House official, who asked not to be named so he could speak freely, put it. "Presidents and vice presidents are never close friends. It's a working relationship; it's more like the C.E.O. and the chairman of the board."

Yet, on foreign policy, Biden has largely realized his wish to be the president's all-purpose adviser and sage. He attends the president's daily briefing every morning with [James L. Jones](#), the national-security adviser; often Biden will stay behind for a few minutes to raise other issues. He has a weekly lunch with the president and no staff members. He sits in on most of the "principals' meetings" of top national-security officials, which occur about once a week; unlike Cheney, a silent presence at these sessions, Biden has plenty to say. Biden attends every important meeting on foreign policy the president holds. "It's me and him, and the cast of characters changes a little bit," Biden told me not long ago during a conversation in his White House office. "I have the benefit of watching him react, and him watching me react. Very seldom a week goes by that he doesn't call me down to his office, or wander in here and close the door and say, 'Wait a minute, what about this?'"

Empire-building is not encouraged in the Obama administration. Biden has five aides who focus on foreign affairs, a large number save in comparison to Cheney, who had more than a dozen. No vice president had

ever sought, or gained, the autonomy, or the supremacy over other power centers, that President Bush granted to Cheney. “He was his own separate branch of government,” as [Ron Klain](#), Biden’s chief of staff, puts it. “He took the office of the vice president out of the White House phone directory, and out of the White House budget.” Biden is seeking to “normalize” that relationship, Klain says. At the same time, people around Biden point out that he benefits from Cheney’s self-aggrandizement: Biden can reduce the scope of the office to something like its historic dimensions and still be the second-most powerful vice president in history.

And while Cheney’s staff fought for dominance with the White House, Biden’s is deeply enmeshed in the policy-making structure. His national-security adviser, Antony J. Blinken, and two other aides are also directors in the [National Security Council](#), while a number of former Biden aides occupy important posts in the N.S.C. Thomas Donilon, deputy national-security adviser and coordinator of policy across agencies, has been a close friend of Biden’s since the 1980s; Donilon’s brother, Michael, is a senior adviser to Biden, and Donilon’s wife, Catherine Russell, was Biden’s former administrative assistant and is now chief of staff to Biden’s wife, Jill. During the transition, Biden told James Jones that he didn’t want his own N.S.C. but wanted to be able to call on the N.S.C. as needed. Jones complied; on the first day in office, he told his staff, “You work for the president and the vice president.” National-security aides routinely accompany Biden on his foreign trips. As one policymaker who was not authorized to comment publicly on internal administration issues said to me: “I don’t in my head distinguish between Office of the Vice President people and N.S.C. people. We’re all the White House staff.”

One of Biden’s early assignments from Obama was to adjudicate any disputes among the so-called team of rivals. Biden, as he himself points out, knew all of them longer than they did one another (or than the president did). Biden has breakfast with [Hillary Clinton](#) every Tuesday, meets with Defense Secretary Robert Gates about once a week and speaks constantly to James Jones. He was called on to mediate a dispute over turf between Leon Panetta, the director of the [C.I.A.](#), and Dennis Blair, the director of national intelligence. Otherwise, the outward appearance of intramural harmony seems to correspond to reality. “I assure you,” Biden said to me, “among the principals there is a respect that I haven’t seen, because I think everybody, if not all on the same hymnal, they’re all on the same book. We don’t have one of those San Andreas faults” — like the Bush administration had.

The difference between Biden’s role and Cheney’s has at least as much to do with the culture of the two administrations as it does with the men themselves. Bush’s discomfort with world affairs created a vacuum that Cheney, [Donald Rumsfeld](#) and others fought to fill. Moreover, Bush’s tendency toward the snap judgment and the gut call undermined the formal policy process in favor of jockeying for position at key moments. By contrast, there is little question where foreign policy is now decided — in the Oval Office — and the absence of a San Andreas fault line has as much to do with clarity of authority as it does with personal vibes. What’s more, as the agonizingly deliberative debate over policy in Afghanistan has demonstrated, Obama wants to hear a case fully argued out before reaching a conclusion, even at some political risk. This perfectly suits Biden, a gifted expostulator and an indifferent schemer. On a wide range of issues, says [James Steinberg](#), the deputy secretary of state, Obama “knows that he can turn to Joe and say, ‘How are these people going to react, what are they going to say, how are they going to see it, what’s going to be in their mind?’ ”

THE INCOMING OBAMA national-security team believed that Iraq had constituted such an “intellectual-

capital suck,” as one official put it, that other global problems had been allowed to fester. An early review persuaded State Department officials that the Balkans, where terrible wars were fought, and uneasily settled, in the 1990s, was one such problem. “We needed someone to go over there,” says one official who was not authorized to speak on the record, “and say we care, we’re interested, at a very high level.” Steinberg, who worked extensively on the issue in the Clinton era, was an obvious candidate; but Biden enjoyed enormous credibility in Bosnia and Kosovo, where as a senator he advocated military intervention in the face of Serbian aggression. And he was the vice president. Biden traveled to the region in mid-May. Invited to address the parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the vice president warned that if growing ethnic tensions weren’t reduced, Bosnia would be kept out of the [European Union](#) and thus remain locked in poverty and might well “descend into ethnic chaos that defined your country for the better part of a decade.” (Steinberg says Biden’s rude jolt has “gotten the parties back talking to each other” but concedes that “whether we get them over the hurdles remains to be seen.”)

Biden, who would later make similar visits to Lebanon, Georgia and Ukraine, was becoming Obama’s fire chief and ambassador without portfolio. These trips were one-time-only events. Iraq, however, was different. In its early months, the Obama administration arguably reversed the Bush mistake and started ignoring Iraq in favor of Afghanistan. Iraq had no special envoy and, for a portion of the spring, not even an ambassador. At a national-security meeting in early June, where discussion centered on the potential dangers of the impending drawdown of troops, Obama turned to Biden and said, as Biden recalls, “Joe, you do Iraq.” Biden says he was so surprised that at first he thought the president was kidding. In fact, the White House chief of staff, [Rahm Emanuel](#), says it was his idea. “I’ve known the vice president for a long time,” Emanuel told me. “He has everything — gravitas, political smarts, the confidence of the players and knowledge of the issues. At the end of the day, this is a political process, and you need a politician to work on the process. And he has the authority of the White House.”

Emanuel also had the bright idea of sending Biden to Iraq for a July 4 photo op with the troops. The optics were everything the White House could have hoped for. Biden traveled to Al Faw Palace, a gigantesque [Saddam Hussein](#)-era structure once used for [Baath Party](#) functions, in order to administer the oath of American citizenship to 237 soldiers who had joined the military as immigrants. It was quite a sight — crisp ranks of African and Asian and Latino men and women lined up beneath a giant American flag hanging from the ceiling. Hussein was very fond of chandeliers; and from the lofty, tiled dome of Al Faw hung a mighty crystal chandelier orbited by little chandelier-moons, as perhaps lesser potentates were thought to orbit around Hussein. Except that it was all a fake: a soldier stationed at the palace told me that the chandelier was largely plastic and the gold fixtures were made of brass. The kingdom we had conquered was a stage set; now it was our stage set.

Biden loves a stage, and he loves all-American hokum. “As corny as it sounds,” he said, after [Raymond T. Odierno](#), the commanding general in Iraq, addressed the troops, “damn, I’m proud to be an American.” He told a story about being driven to Camp Bondsteel, the home of American peacekeeping troops in Kosovo, and seeing, standing together, “a female colonel, a black captain, a white sergeant and, literally, a Hispanic private.” Turning to his Kosovar driver, he said: “That’s America. And until you understand that here, you’ll never be free.” After the Al Faw speech, Biden was taken to the DFAC — dining facility — in Baghdad’s International Zone (informally known as the Green Zone), where he met with the Delaware National Guard unit with which his son Beau served. Then he entered the cafeteria for a meet and greet. He lit up like a 1,000-watt bulb. Biden shook every hand, and threw his arm around every shoulder — hundreds and

hundreds of them. “How are you, man?” he cried, with fresh joy, to each table of soldiers. “Did you get a picture of me?” A soldier said politely, “Look this way, sir,” and Biden, who has the blinding white teeth of a starlet, whirled around with a huge smile. The vice president never stopped moving, smiling or talking.

Biden’s goal for this first trip was to reassure Iraq’s leaders that Washington had not dropped their country in favor of Afghanistan, and to press them to reach agreement on a wide range of constitutional and political issues that had remained blocked for years — an agreement on oil revenues and sales, a formula for sharing power and resources between Baghdad and the provinces and the resolution of the border dispute between Arab Iraq and Kurdistan, especially involving the status of the Kirkuk region. Biden was determinedly upbeat, pointing out to the traveling press, jammed into his wood-paneled Airstream, that the phased American withdrawal was not leading to the bloodbath many predicted. “The Iraqis,” he said, “have become invested in their nationhood.” It was true that recent attacks by Sunni extremists had not provoked sectarian violence, as had been the case in 2006. But tensions between Arabs and Kurds had grown only worse. There was no sign of progress on the status of Kirkuk, which Kurds considered integral to their identity but which large populations of Arabs and Turkmen also claimed as their own. The 8.5 billion barrels of oil reserves estimated to be beneath Kirkuk made it a prize no one was willing to yield.

Biden knows a lot about Iraq, but his judgment has scarcely been perfect in the past. He opposed the first gulf war, voted to authorize the 2003 invasion and opposed the surge. “When was the last time Biden was right about anything?” the military writer Thomas E. Ricks asked in his blog earlier this fall, apropos of Biden’s current views on Afghanistan. Like many senior Democrats, Biden was an uneasy and equivocal supporter of the 2003 war. He now says that, at the time, he didn’t think the war was really “worth the candle.” In 2002 he convened hearings that focused attention on the enormous challenges that would come after a military victory — challenges the Bush administration went on to treat with stunning nonchalance. He and Senator Richard Lugar submitted a measure that would have required the Bush administration to either get explicit authorization for war from the [U.N. Security Council](#) or to stipulate to Congress that Iraq posed an “imminent threat” to U.S. security. When this effort collapsed, Biden voted to give Bush the authority to go to war without such restrictions. When I asked Biden if he felt, in retrospect, that he had made a mistake, he said: “To the extent that I made a mistake about the war it was, I trusted what I was being told by Bush personally. And I trusted that he in fact was not buying into the neocon argument.” The president had acted circumspectly in Afghanistan. Biden says he believed Bush when he said he wanted to return weapons inspectors to Iraq. It may also be that, like other liberal Democrats — especially those who voted against the first gulf war in 1991 — Biden did not feel that he could afford to fly with the doves.

AS A SENATOR, Biden did not give countries the once-over lightly, as most legislators do; he typically traveled with a colleague — usually [Chuck Hagel](#), in the case of Iraq — and stayed for four or five days. Very few legislators, if any, could match his knowledge of people and places. On Iraq, Biden argued from the outset that the U.S. needed more troops, more civilians, more focus on politics and the long term. He did not, of course, make much headway.

But as growing sectarian violence reduced the Bush administration’s dream of a democratic Iraq to ashes, Biden began to have second, or third, thoughts. In May 2006, he and Leslie H. Gelb, an old friend who is a former president of the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), co-wrote an Op-Ed in this newspaper arguing that conflict among the major groups would inevitably frustrate designs for a centralized Iraqi state, and suggesting instead a Bosnia-type solution with three “largely autonomous” regions and a central government

with functions limited to “border defense, foreign affairs and oil revenues.” Rather than staying forever or withdrawing precipitately, U.S. forces would leave Iraq by 2008.

The idea was unfamiliar and had no constituency. “I don’t know anyone else in politics who would do that,” Gelb told me. The proposal was flatly rejected by the dominant Shiites, who had no wish to dilute their power; the 2006 Iraq Study Group suggested that the plan could starve the Sunnis of economic resources. Scholars and policymakers asserted that the war in Bosnia, unlike the war in Iraq, ended with the three groups largely sorted into their own regions. The plan got little traction. Some who thought the proposal was flawed nevertheless admired Biden for making it. Michael O’Hanlon, a foreign-policy analyst at the [Brookings Institution](#) who has been more hawkish on the war than Biden, says, “When much of the rest of the country was taking sides — ‘Are you for it or against it?’ — Biden said, ‘Neither — the current strategy isn’t working, and here’s my alternative.’” O’Hanlon adds that Biden “was remarkably and admirably nonpartisan through ’04, ’05, ’06, as we were trying to sort out if we had any hope in Iraq.”

By 2007, however, Biden was running for president, and he sounded more like a highly partisan candidate than a dispassionate statesman. He asserted that Gen. [David Petraeus](#), the author of the surge in Iraq, was “dead, flat wrong,” and that only a political solution based on his federalism plan could allow us to leave behind a stable Iraq. (Though Biden won’t quite admit it, the success of the surge has made a radical devolution of power unnecessary.) He argued that the greatest danger to America came from Pakistan rather than Iraq. He advocated strong action to prevent further atrocities in Sudan, including the imposition of a no-fly zone. And he argued, in general, that he understood the world better than any of his opponents did. Voters were not sufficiently impressed: Biden ended his campaign after the Iowa caucuses.

While Biden was in Baghdad, Prime Minister Maliki’s spokesman, Ali al-Dabbagh, pointedly noted that the constitutional concerns Biden hoped to advance are “internal issues that Iraqis will handle.” Maliki himself had been similarly standoffish, at least in public. But Iraqi officials were eager to use Biden as a go-between and advocate. Maliki gave his blessing to a proposal that Biden press [Massoud Barzani](#), the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, to postpone plans to hold a referendum on the Kurdish Constitution, which would have unilaterally absorbed Kirkuk. But a sandstorm, freakish even by Iraqi standards, prevented Biden from traveling to Kurdistan’s capital city, Erbil.

As soon as he returned to Washington, though, Biden hit the phones. He spoke regularly to [Christopher Hill](#), the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, and to General Odierno, the commander of American-led forces, as well as to Maliki, Barzani and other leadership figures. Biden pressed Maliki to carry through on plans to visit Kurdistan, and he pressed Barzani to postpone the referendum. He asked each man to stop describing the other as an enemy of peace. And those things did happen. A senior White House official says that Biden’s influence was crucial both in persuading Maliki to make the trip and in postponing the referendum. The Iraqis, on the other hand, take a more skeptical view of the American role. Sadiq al-Rikabi, Maliki’s political adviser, told me that the prime minister was simply responding to an invitation from Iraq’s president, while Barzani’s chief of staff, Fuad Hussein, ascribed the voting delay to “technical” issues. But Qubad Talabani, the representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government to the U.S., says Biden told Barzani it would be “unhelpful” if the Kurds held their referendum — “and we knew what that meant.” It meant that Arab outrage at the Kurdish annexation of Kirkuk could increase ethnic violence. Talabani gives Biden significant credit for helping to move the process forward. Biden, says Talabani, “is keeping us all honest and actually delivering results.”

iden's role as vice president is not, of course, limited to foreign policy. Though his chief persona in global affairs is He Who Knows All World Leaders, in domestic affairs and the economy — subjects that never much interested him — he is regular Joe from working-class Delaware (and Pennsylvania, initially). The campaign often exploited his lunch-bucket cred to balance Obama's lofty Harvard Yard aura on pocketbook issues. One of his jobs as vice president has been to make the public argument for Obama's economic stimulus efforts. Biden is also the administration's senior ambassador to the Senate. He regularly works out at the Senate gym, where he gets in as much schmoozing as exercise. His closest friends include current and former senators like Chuck Hagel and [Christopher Dodd](#). He ended one of our conversations in order to make calls to the Senate on [health care reform](#). [Lindsey Graham](#), the South Carolina Republican, told me Biden lobbied him and other members of the [G.O.P.](#) on the Kerry-Lugar bill mandating aid to Pakistan.

Biden's former colleagues speak fondly of him, though they acknowledge his reputation as a windbag. "You can't help but like Joe," as Graham puts it. Biden's vanity and his regard for his own gifts seem considerable even by the rarefied standards of the [U.S. Senate](#): in his telling, the room is always falling silent as he confronts his listeners with the killer insight. Unlike his boss, Biden is not a particularly self-conscious person. I once heard him tell a very long anecdote — a very good anecdote, to be sure — in exactly the same words as he had told it to exactly the same audience about 36 hours earlier. His audience — reporters and aides on the C-17 — struggled to keep an expression of rapt attention on their faces, and to laugh at the places they had laughed the day before. Biden noticed nothing. You have the feeling that he has been spared the normal human allotment of reproach. But neither does he reproach others: Biden is the kind of fundamentally happy person who can be as generous toward others as he is to himself. One of his former aides — Washington is rife with them — told me that she had learned an important life lesson from her boss: "Question people's judgment, not their motives."

Biden has, it is true, occasionally provoked the famously disciplined president with his unscheduled rhetorical flights. After Biden ventured that administration policies had a "30 percent" chance of failure, Obama said at a press conference, "You know, I don't remember what Joe was referring to, not surprisingly." The White House was even more taken aback when, on his way home from Ukraine and Georgia, Biden told a reporter that Russia, facing historic decline, was "clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable." Obama called Biden and said, "What was that about?" Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had to walk that one back on "Meet the Press." Nonetheless, you can see Biden making the very visible effort to bite his tongue in public. And in White House deliberations he is said to have curbed his epic prolixity. "He's much more disciplined now," John Podesta says. "He speaks less; he waits until the end."

The president and vice president tend to reach the same conclusions, if by different paths. In Biden's worldview, which seems to be composed equally of temperament, experience and books, principles are very important as beacons, but they are dangerous, and often delusory, as direct guides to action. He shares with Obama a deep skepticism about wished-for outcomes, which makes him wary about conventional liberalism. He ran for the Senate in 1972 as an opponent of the war in Vietnam, but he says, "I wasn't against the war for moral reasons; I just thought it was a stupid policy."

Biden consumes policy books and loves nothing more than policy debate, but he is no more a theoretician or an ideologue than most politicians. On domestic policy, Biden has been a moderate liberal, favoring gun control and abortion rights, though also the [Patriot Act](#) and a balanced-budget amendment to the Constitution. On global affairs, Les Gelb calls him "a classic moderate American pragmatist," applying broad

principle but looking at each situation on its merits. Biden was an outspoken advocate of bombing Serbia to stop ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, but he was at least as concerned about instability spreading toward Central Europe as he was about ending atrocities. And it was doable: “It was within our wheelhouse,” as Biden puts it. Ending atrocities in, say, Somalia, was not. Nor was democratizing the Arab world by invading Iraq and replacing Saddam Hussein with a leader of our choosing. Biden’s constant criticism of the Bush administration’s policies in Iraq was not that they were immoral but that they, like Nixon’s in Vietnam, were unrealistic. “‘The road to peace in the Middle East is through Baghdad’ — we never bought any of that,” he told me.

Biden says he used to meet regularly — “because we disagreed so much” — with [Robert Kagan](#), the neoconservative champion of democracy promotion. Biden mocks the idea that “you can actually impose democracy” because “the yearning masses, yearning to be free and democratic” will “just embrace it.” Experience, he says, argues otherwise. At the same time, Biden refuses to accept the supposed choice between moralism and realism that, he says, dictates that in the face of authoritarian states like Russia or China, “you either decry the behavior and cut off relations, or you ignore the behavior and enhance your relations.” The Obama administration, especially in regard to Russia, Biden says, has chosen a third option: “You make it clear to the country in question, We don’t approve of the behavior in question. We can’t do anything about it, but don’t expect us” to acquiesce “if the only way you’ll trade with us is if we say it’s O.K. you’re beating the hell out of those folks in Tiananmen Square.”

As a past supporter of movements for democracy and self-determination in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Georgia and Kurdistan, Biden does not have to defend his antiauthoritarian credentials; but the Obama administration itself, despite the president’s occasional soaring rhetoric, has come in for some heavy weather from liberals for its reluctance to criticize autocratic allies like Egypt, or to condition aid on democratic reform, as the Bush administration did (albeit with little success). One consequence of Biden’s view may be that authoritarian states have to endure some fairly gentle admonitions while having their way on major issues.

There is a view that Obama’s team is divided between what Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation and The Washington Note, a leading foreign-policy blog, calls “progressive realists” like James Steinberg and “Democratic neocons” — that is, moralists — like [Susan E. Rice](#), the ambassador to the [U.N.](#) The hard-headed Biden, Clemons says, “can play in both those games.” But this classification scheme explains only so much. It may be more useful to say that this president is pulled both toward the grand project — as in the campaign to eliminate nuclear weapons — and toward the chastened recalibration, as evident in the reined-in language on democracy promotion. The tension falls between the extreme ambitiousness of the goals and the caution required to achieve them — a sense of prudence born in no small part of the failure of [George W. Bush’s](#) transformative schemes.

IT IS PRECISELY this tension that has made the debate over Afghanistan so prolonged and difficult. The president called Afghanistan “a war of necessity” as recently as August. Iraq was George W. Bush’s war of necessity; and for Bush that meant authorizing the war and worrying about the consequences later — or perhaps closing his eyes to the consequences. But Obama and his circle of advisers have been bedeviled by doubts about whether the ambitious nationwide counterinsurgency program proposed by Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and David Petraeus, head of Central Command, can actually work. And here Biden’s hard-earned skepticism, his knowledge of the region, his zest for verbal

combat and the trust that Obama now reposes in him have allowed him to play a major role in recasting the terms of debate.

Biden was an original believer in the epic project of nation-building in Afghanistan. “Whatever it takes, we should do it,” he said soon after the [Taliban](#) government in Kabul was toppled in 2001. He subsequently accused the Bush administration of ignoring Afghanistan, the source of the Qaeda threat, in favor of Iraq. He opposed the surge in Iraq in part because he favored one in Afghanistan. But Biden began to have second thoughts about Afghanistan, as he had about Iraq. As Taliban victories grew, heroin production increased and reports of high-level corruption grew ever more baroque, Biden began to lose faith in [Hamid Karzai](#), the Afghan president, and in the nation-building project itself. A trip to Afghanistan in the weeks before the new administration took office persuaded Biden that the U.S. military had no clear plan for victory. In the ensuing internal debate over so-called AfPak policy, Biden argued for a narrow definition of success — suppressing [Al Qaeda](#) — and no new troops. He lost. Obama added 21,000 new troops; and though he adopted the narrowed goal Biden favored, the new policy asserted that a broad nation-building enterprise would be needed even for this more modest goal.

I asked Biden about Afghanistan when we were in his White House office, with its Colonial blue walls and paintings of Jefferson and Adams and its rather truncated view of the Executive Office Building. (His Senate office, he says, was much nicer.) We were seated in armchairs at oblique angles to each other. Biden is a warm man — an ardent man — who is always trying to dispose of the space between himself and his audience. He cannot talk without making contact; I noticed once or twice that he made a swoop in the direction of my shoe before making do with my knee.

Afghanistan required maximal contact, and the vice president, in an athletic gesture, bent all the way over to tap my toe before wheeling around to face me directly. “When you’re talking about a country which has an 85 percent rate of illiteracy, which has virtually no history of modern governance, you should go in with an overwhelming dose of humility,” he told me. “And you’d better damn well have as precise a notion as you can of what your objective is.”

From the outset of his tenure as vice president, Biden had come to view himself as the one who asked the unpleasant and searching question — who “upset the apple cart,” as he put it. In the debate over Afghanistan, he initially faced a near-consensus in favor of the view advanced by the generals. McChrystal offered three options, which boiled down to way more troops than he could get (80,000), enough troops (40,000), and failure (10,000 trainers but no new combat troops). Obama encouraged Biden to push the advocates to defend their arguments and justify their assumptions. Biden proceeded to do just that, especially with the brass; he proposed an alternative plan that focused less on defeating the Taliban and more on eliminating Al Qaeda. Obama reacted to this very different view by asking James Jones to present four options with different strategies, and troop levels appropriate to those strategies. When I asked Rahm Emanuel about Biden’s role in the discussions, he said: “People were thinking about certain things, but hadn’t expressed them. The vice president was expressing them.”

Biden was not willing to discuss on the record the advice he gave the president while the decision remained outstanding, but the outlines of his views may be gleaned from news reports and White House interviews. Biden and those around him do not seem to believe that McChrystal’s strategy can work — not because they question the abilities of the military, but because they think the generals are far too optimistic about the

civilian elements upon which the overall plan depends. They are deeply skeptical that the government of President Hamid Karzai can somehow gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people; that the U.S. can quickly develop the enormous civilian capacity that would accompany a military surge, or can train as many as 400,000 Afghan soldiers, especially with attrition rates now running around 25 percent; that Pakistan will accept a policy designed to bolster Afghanistan's Pashtun-led government; that [NATO](#) allies will overcome public resistance to offer major help; or that the U.S. can afford to spend something like \$250 billion on Afghanistan at a time when deficits are already running very high.

Biden does not view the Taliban as synonymous with Al Qaeda and does not appear to believe that it would be a calamity if the Taliban increased its presence in the Afghan countryside (though he is not prepared to see Kabul or other major urban centers fall). If Al Qaeda can be bottled up on the border with Pakistan through counterterrorism measures involving troops as well as [drone attacks](#), and with the help of an expanded Afghan army, then it is unnecessary to build a secure Afghanistan that can defeat the Taliban. And then you could focus instead on the greater danger — Pakistan. "I'm going to ask you a question," Biden said. "If I said to you right now, We can send \$30 billion a year to Pakistan, or \$30 billion to Afghanistan, which would you pick? Every goddamn person says, 'Pakistan.' So I say, 'O.K., guys, we should be talking about a PakAf policy, not an AfPak policy.'"

This is a thoroughly plausible proposition — if, and only if, ceding much of Afghanistan to the Taliban would not be a calamity. Among those who believe that it would be are Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, most Republican senators and experts like Bruce Riedel, who has said that it is "a fairy tale" to think that Al Qaeda will not return to Afghanistan along with a resurgent Taliban. Those who favor a larger military presence in Afghanistan accept the validity of Biden's concerns but do not view them as insurmountable. Biden is very likely to once again lose the debate on troop strength, though he may win on narrowing the objectives. The real test of his success will be whether the new policy tilts toward Pakistan.

BY THE TIME Biden returned to Iraq, in mid-September, some of the seeds he planted earlier had begun to sprout. Maliki had made his good-will trip to Kurdistan; Barzani was not describing Maliki as the reincarnation of Saddam Hussein quite as regularly as before. With the election approaching, Maliki and other leaders were crossing sectarian lines to assemble winning coalitions. All talk of constitutional reform was delayed until after the election. Biden, recognizing this, backed off on these issues, focusing instead on the need to agree on an election law as soon as possible in order to ensure that the election could take place on time. In his public remarks, he asserted that the country's leaders understood that "the election coming off on Jan. 16 is critical to Iraq's future." But despite all the fine rhetoric, top Iraqi officials could not agree on an election law, just as they could not agree on almost any other difficult question.

This time Biden was able to fly from Baghdad to Erbil. Baghdad, even now, is an extremely tense place. As soon as we landed in Erbil, however, an official from the Department of Foreign Relations chattered away about the luxury villas at the "Dream City" complex, the new cafes and restaurants, a racetrack and go-kart center. Christians were fleeing Arab Iraq for ecumenical Kurdistan.

The Kurds are very hard to refuse. Kurdistan is a free-market democracy in a part of the world that has very little of either marketplace or democracy. The Kurds suffered terribly at the hands of Saddam Hussein — as they are quick to remind the visitor. Biden told me that the Kurds were not yet prepared to make the concessions over Kirkuk that they would have to make, but that he understood why. "The first thing I

remember is when we drove into Erbil to meet with the Kurds,” he said, referring to a 2002 trip. “ ‘Senator, you understand what every Kurdish child learns is: The mountains are our only friend.’ This sense of victimization has a historical basis. This is the Poland of the Middle East.”

And yet Biden understood very well that the Kurds had to be moved off their maximalist position. When Iraqis passed a constitution in 2005, they sidestepped the intractable problem of drawing borders between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq, and of the status of Kirkuk, by including Article 140, which called for a national census whose chief goal would be to determine the proportion of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen in the region. The census would be followed by a referendum on Kirkuk, to be held no later than the end of 2007. But because the Kurds would plainly win the referendum — especially after bringing hundreds of thousands of their countrymen back to the region, in effect reversing Hussein’s own demographic engineering — it had proved impossible to hold the census. Kurdish representatives in Iraq’s Parliament, frustrated by the delay, exacted their revenge by holding up virtually every piece of crucial national legislation. And then the Kurdish regional government passed its own constitution laying claim to all of Kirkuk.

The Kurds had to be persuaded to accept half a loaf: shared jurisdiction over Kirkuk, the loss of some rural areas now claimed as Kurdish. But the Kurds would have none of it. When I said to Fuad Hussein, President Barzani’s chief of staff, that the dispute over Article 140 seemed to have paralyzed Iraq, he shot back, “It is exactly on the contrary: Iraq is paralyzed because there isn’t the will to implement the constitution.” Biden, it was true, had a lot of credit with the Kurds. In late 2002, as war fever was building in Washington, he and Chuck Hagel were driven through the night from Turkey to the Kurdish capital, Erbil. Biden addressed the Kurdish Parliament and made the Kurds’ cause his own. When I asked Barham Salih, the Kurdish prime minister, about Biden, he said, “We trust him as a friend, and as someone who has been aware of the Kurdish predicament for some time.” But, he added, “Biden is not going to convince the Kurds to abandon what are fundamental interests.”

The Kurds were deeply dug in. “Barzani is mercurial,” said a foreign diplomat who was not authorized to speak on the record. “Nobody looks him in the eye and says, ‘You guys are heading for disaster.’ We need the Americans to tell the Kurds that some of their goals are so maximalist that even their iteration is a problem for us.” Specifically, Biden needed to persuade the Kurds that a political agreement acceptable to Arabs as well as Kurds had to come first, and only then could a referendum be held. And with violence growing along the “trigger line” separating Kurdish and Arab territory, it wasn’t clear how long the issue could wait. When I asked the diplomat if the current situation was likely to degenerate into large-scale violence, he said: “On balance, no. But I wouldn’t bet the farm on it.”

How far would the Kurds go? The United States would not support Barzani if he insisted on a referendum either on Article 140 or on the Kurdish Constitution. And Barzani’s leverage may never be greater than it is now, when American troops continue to help police the trigger line, and when Sunni and Shiite political leaders must court the Kurds to achieve an electoral majority. Biden is almost certain to be making these arguments to Barzani. If he has, however, the Kurdish leaders I spoke to seem not to have heard the news. Middle East experts maintain that the problems of borders, and of Kirkuk, constitute the single gravest threat to Iraq’s future.

ONCE AGAIN, MUCH of the key action took place after Biden returned home. The Iraqis remained deadlocked over the electoral law for weeks, with the election itself hanging in the balance. The stumbling

block was Kirkuk: Barzani wanted to use the 2009 electoral rolls, reflecting the influx of Kurds. Arab leaders wanted to use data from 2004. The issue finally came to a head earlier this month. Biden was going back and forth on the phone between Maliki and Barzani, conducting what he calls his “condensed, truncated version of shuttle diplomacy.” Antony Blinken says Biden and his team “were in contact in real time.” Over the course of a very long weekend, Blinken told me wonderingly, “different groups were caucusing, making quorums, going out of the room, coming up with new positions. It was democracy in action.” And by Sunday evening, the Arabs and Kurds had reached a compromise.

And then, two weeks later, the compact was upended when Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, surprised Americans and Iraqis alike by vetoing the electoral law over a provision that he felt would suppress Sunni representation in Iraq’s Parliament. This was the same Vice President al-Hashemi who told me, during a conversation in his Baghdad office in September, that the Iraqi people were fed up with the politics of sectarian rivalry, and then declared that the coalition he was forming would advance “a national agenda which is nonsectarian and nonethnic.” It’s not easy to leave behind deeply ingrained habits.

Iraq is a long way from being a functioning democracy; it’s a long way from being a functioning state. The danger of Kurdistan still looms. The country may well vindicate Biden’s skepticism about America’s ability to shape outcomes abroad. But some Iraqis give him credit for avoiding the mistakes of the past. “This is exactly what the U.S. needs to be doing today — helping us reach compromise, not dictating what the compromise should be,” says Qubad Talabani, the Kurdish regional government’s representative. “It’s a model for American engagement in Iraq today.” Our experience in both Iraq and Afghanistan has offered painful proof that we cannot simply bring refractory states to heel, no matter how much force we bring to bear. We cannot dictate outcomes. We will have to be more patient, more humble and perhaps smarter than we have been.

Patient and humble are not words that come to mind when you think of Joe Biden; yet even his limitations may suit him for this new world. Biden is the one who knows many little things but no big thing. As gifted as he is at retail politics, he has none of Barack Obama’s talent for the sweeping formulation or inspirational language, which perhaps explains why he has fared so poorly in presidential campaigns. Biden does not project even slightly in the realm of myth. But for this very reason, he is allergic to magical, wish-fulfillment thinking. “Guys,” he’ll say — this is how he describes addressing the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#) — “what if it doesn’t work?” An administration full of youthful true believers, enraptured with their heroic leader, needs a skeptic and a scold. Obama may need one himself. And yet Biden is also, like Obama, an optimist. As vice presidents go, he has more in common with Hubert Humphrey, the happy warrior, than with dark Dick Cheney. He may well, as Tom Lehrer once sang of Humphrey, dream of staging a coup; but he is likely to remain happy as long as he has apple carts to overturn.

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