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## Joe Biden embraced segregation in 1975, claiming it was a matter of 'black pride'

by Alana Goodman, Investigative Political Reporter | January 31, 2019 11:46 PM

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Joe Biden, weighing a 2020 White House bid, once advocated continued school segregation in the United States, arguing that it benefited minorities and that integration would prevent black people from embracing “their own identity.”

Biden was speaking in 1975, when he opposed the federally mandated busing policy designed to end segregation in schools. In the past few decades, he has claimed he wanted desegregation but believed the policy of busing would not achieve it. Last year, he stated he had voted heroically to protect busing.

An audio player interface for a SoundCloud track. At the top left is a red play button icon. To its right, the text "Washington Examiner" is displayed in a blue, underlined font. Further right is the SoundCloud logo, consisting of a cloud icon and the word "SOUNDCLOUD" in all caps. Below this, the track title "NPR 1975 interview wi..." is shown. The main area of the player is a large, dark, rectangular waveform representing the audio signal. At the bottom left of the waveform, there is a small icon for a cookie policy. At the bottom right of the waveform, a black box displays the time "17:35".

Washington Examiner

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NPR 1975 interview wi...

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In 2008, after being chosen as Barack

Obama's vice-presidential running mate [he said](#): "The struggle for civil rights was the animating political element of my life." He appears poised to make his civil rights record a centerpiece of any campaign, telling an audience in Fort Lauderdale this week that "I came out of the civil rights movement. He added that he first became aware of what an "awful thing" segregation was as a third grader, when he asked his mother why a bus was taking black children to a school away from where they lived.

But 44 years ago, facing a backlash against busing from white voters, the future vice president voiced concerns not just about the policy of busing, which he had supported when first seeking election in 1972, but about the impact of desegregation on American society. He argued that segregation was good for blacks and was what they wanted.

"I think the concept of busing ... that we are going to integrate people so that they all have the same access and they learn to grow up with one another and all the rest, is a rejection of the whole movement of black pride," said Biden. Desegregation, he argued, was "a rejection of the entire black awareness concept, where black is beautiful, black culture should be studied; and the cultural awareness of the importance of their own identity, their own individuality."

Questioning whether he might be a racist, Biden said he had asked "the blacks on my staff" whether he harbored something "in me that's deep-seated that I don't know."

**[Read: [The transcript of NPR's October 1975](#)**

[interview with then-Sens. Joe Biden, D-Del., and Edward Brooke, R-Mass.\]](#)

Biden's comments were made in an NPR interview discovered in congressional archives by the *Washington Examiner*. They underline the perils of Biden, 76, mounting a 2020 campaign after a career spanning 36 years in the Senate and eight years as vice president, during which he gained a reputation for being rambling and verbose.

He mounted unsuccessful presidential bids in 1988 and 2008, never threatening to break away from the ranks of the also-rans, but if he runs this time, he will start as one of the favorites to win the Democratic nomination and face fierce scrutiny.

A spokesperson for Biden did not respond to requests for comment. This story will be updated if a response is received.

*President Barack Obama with Vice President Joe Biden walk to speak to members of the media on Thursday, June 16, 2016, in Orlando, Fla.*  
(AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

Ronnie Dunn, an urban studies professor at Cleveland State University and author of the book on northern segregation *Boycotts, Busing, & Beyond*, said Biden was making a case in favor of maintaining segregation. "That's how I interpret that argument," Dunn told the *Washington Examiner*. "That was an argument against desegregation."

Dunn said opposition to busing was largely motivated by racism and that without the court-ordered policy "we likely would not have had a black president." Had Biden's arguments prevailed, he might well not have become vice president in 2009. "What

I find ironic is that [Biden] was the vice president under a president who, if it hadn't been for the social interaction that occurred during the era of busing, I argue we likely would not have seen the election of Barack Obama," said Dunn.

He said Biden must address the issue if he runs for president. "People have to be held accountable," said Dunn. "We all evolve in our thinking and grow, but that doesn't mean we aren't going to have to answer for our positions we held."

Biden's Senate career began in 1973 when he was 30, the youngest age allowed by the Constitution. It was a different era. All 100 senators were men and the sole black senator, Edward Brooke, was a Republican. If Biden opts to run, he will face an African-American woman, Sen. Kamala Harris of California, and a Samoan-American woman, Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, as well as perhaps two black men, Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey and former Attorney General Eric Holder, and three white women, Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota.

The NPR interview provides new insight into a little-explored chapter of Biden's political career: His curious role as a leading opponent of a liberal cause celebre: federal school integration efforts in the decades following the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

Biden said in the interview, during which he was speaking with Brooke, the African-American Republican senator, that "busing doesn't work," but he went on to say he had

a philosophical as well as a practical objection to it: Busing would lead to "a totally homogeneous society" that would be to the detriment of black people.

"There are those of we social planners who think somehow that if we just subrogate [sic] man's individual characteristics and traits by making sure that a presently heterogeneous society becomes a totally homogeneous society, that somehow we're going to solve our social ills," he said. "And quite to the contrary."

*Then-Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., on Aug. 12, 1974.  
(Photo by CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images)*

Biden's conclusion on busing, according to his own account, was not arrived at lightly. He claimed he spent "close to 300 hours" studying the issue before staking out a position against it.

He said he met with black members of his staff and asked if they thought he harbored hidden racial prejudices. "I give you my word as a Biden, I put in over 100 hours, by far — I would say close to 300 hours — on just torturing this [anti-busing concept]. Calling my staff together, and the blacks on my staff together, saying 'Look, this is what I think. Do you think I am [racist]? Is there something in me that's deep-seated that I don't know?'"

The future vice president also claimed he had been an attorney for a member of the Black Panther Party. "It really is a hard, hard thing," Biden said. "In law school I was considered a raging liberal. As a lawyer, I'm considered, gee, I must be wacky — who'd represent a member of the Black

Panthers?" The *Washington Examiner* was unable to confirm whether Biden ever served as a lawyer for a member of the Black Panthers, a claim he has not made in recent decades.

Balick & Balick, a Wilmington, Del., law firm where Biden worked before joining the Senate, said it doesn't have "any way to confirm this" because none of the current attorneys at the firm worked there during that era and it has not kept records from that time. Biden also served briefly as a public defender before entering politics.

Brooke was bemused by Biden's stance, saying, "I don't think it's a new liberalism to say that, you know, you can't support busing." He added: "Actually, more than 40 percent ride buses to school every day. If it is used, he's not against it for consolidation of schools, obviously he's against it for the desegregation of schools."

When Biden ran for the Senate in 1972, he supported busing. But once elected, by a margin of just 1.4 percent, busing became a major political controversy as northern cities were forced to grapple with attempts to end segregation. In 1974 and 1975 there were riots in Boston and Louisville, Ky.

In 1974, a court-ordered integration plan thrust Wilmington into the maelstrom. Biden's white constituents formed an angry anti-busing lobby. White parents shouted Biden down during a July 1974 meeting of the anti-busing New Castle County Neighborhood School Association, demanding to know what the senator was going to do to prevent their children from being reassigned to schools that had been

majority black.

African-Americans comprised 14.3 percent of the population of Delaware in 1970, [according to U.S. Census Bureau data](#) — less than two-thirds what it is today. White voters in the state, on whom Biden's re-election in 1978 depended, overwhelmingly opposed busing.

Biden shifted his position to oppose busing while insisting he was in favor of desegregation.

"It enabled Biden to choose votes over principles, while acting as if he was not doing so," [wrote University of New Hampshire professor Jacob Sokol](#). This sleight of hand paid dividends for Biden. He was re-elected by a whopping 16 percent of the vote in 1978. That same year, Brooke, who had never bowed to the anti-busing clamor from white voters in Massachusetts, lost the seat he had held since 1967.

*Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., is shown in Washington, Feb. 24, 1975.*

*(AP Photo/Henry Griffin)*

In September 1975, Biden supported an anti-busing amendment to a federal bill. It was proposed by Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina, a segregationist until at least the 1960s and regarded by most to be a racist. Delighted by Biden's shift, Helms welcomed him "to the ranks of the enlightened."

That same month, Biden trumpeted his credentials with the African-American community in his state. "I still walk down the street in the black side of town," he [told the Washington Post](#). "Mousey and Chops and all the boys at 13th, and — I can walk in

those pool halls, and quite frankly don't know another white man involved in Delaware politics who can do that kind of thing."

Dunn, the urban studies professor, said: "I was really taken aback to find that he had actually introduced legislation with Jesse Helms. I was really struck by that. So he's going to have to answer for his position on this matter on the campaign trail if he does in fact seek the presidency."

Biden also supported an anti-busing amendment by Sen. Robert Byrd, a senator from West Virginia and a Democrat who had renounced his racist past, which included being a recruiter for the Ku Klux Klan and rising to the title of klingle and exalted cyclops of his local chapter.

Tom Atkins, a Boston NAACP leader, [said in March 1975](#) that opposing busing was racist: "An anti-busing amendment is an anti-desegregation amendment, and an anti-desegregation amendment is an anti-black amendment."

Gary Orfield, a University of California, Los Angeles, political scientist and author of the 1978 book *Must We Bus: Segregated Schools and National Policy*, told the *Washington Examiner* that Biden's comments about "black pride" and African-Americans wanting their "own identity" were common arguments against desegregation at the time. "This is one of the traditional conservative ways to oppose integration," said Orfield. "All of the surveys of African-Americans show virtually no preference for segregation. ... They favor integration," he said.



Biden had emerged as the first of a small group of liberal Democratic senators to support anti-busing laws in the 1970s and 1980s. He sponsored legislation on the issue, promised to fight for a constitutional amendment against the policy, and was profiled in the Washington Post as the “liberal who fights busing.”

Orfield, a Brookings Institute researcher in the 1970s and a prominent figure in the busing debate, argued that busing was the only realistic option to integrate schools and recalled trying to talk to Biden about the issue at the time. “[Biden] started talking about how this is like Vietnam, or something like that. Some dramatic statement,” said Orfield. “It’s sad, I think [Biden] has a real failure on this,” he added. “His was a sad loss of courage that many of the other liberals in the Senate did not experience.”

*Former Vice President Joe Biden pauses as he speaks at the University of Utah Thursday Dec. 13, 2018, in Salt Lake City.*

*(AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)*

Jeffrey Raffel, a Delaware desegregation activist who ran the Delaware Committee on the School Decision in the 1970s, recalled that Biden was under tremendous political pressure to oppose busing, which had been court-ordered in Wilmington and New Castle County and was extremely unpopular with white suburban voters. Raffel said his group’s own polling showed overwhelming opposition to busing in the state.

“We did polls at the time and surveys, and 90 percent or so of suburban parents strongly opposed to sending kids over city-

county lines in so-called “busing,”” said Raffel. “There was a tremendous amount of upset and negativity and opposition to it. ... The threat was always there that anybody, including Biden, could be defeated by that opposition.”

In his 2007 biography, Biden wrote that busing was a “liberal train wreck” that “was tearing people apart” in the 1970s. “The quality of the schools in and around Wilmington was already suffering, and they would never be the same,” he wrote. “White parents were terrified that their children would be shipped to the toughest neighborhoods in Wilmington; black parents were terrified that their children would be targets of violence in suburban schools.”

But Biden recently seems to have grasped the potential political problems of his busing position and gave a very different recollection of his role in the debate on the [Pod Save America podcast last March](#).

“I have never, ever, ever voted for anything I thought was wrong,” said Biden, unprompted, to three former senior aides in the Obama White House. “In the middle of the single most extensive busing order in all the United States history, in my state, I voted against an amendment, cast the deciding vote, to allow courts to keep busing as a remedy. Because there are some things that are worth losing over.”

By picking out a single pro-busing vote from an anti-busing record lasting years, Biden seemed to hope he would be viewed as an advocate for busing after all.

Larry Sabato, founder of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, said the busing comments could be a major problem for Biden in 2020. Biden would be "running against 15, 20, 25 other Democrats who are much younger and who grew up in a more politically correct time, when you didn't say x or y or z," he said. "He's going to have to explain [his position on busing] ... and a lot of other things, really, because he served for so long."

*CORRECTION: In a previous version of this story, the Washington Examiner erroneously reported Ronnie Dunn is a professor at the University of Cleveland. Dunn is a professor at Cleveland State University. The Washington Examiner regrets the error.*