

# When Joe Biden lost his purpose

Between his son's death and his presidential run, Biden cast about for meaning



By [Matt Viser](#)

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Joe Biden speaks to voters at the Grand River Center in Dubuque, Iowa, on April 30, 2019, days after announcing his third campaign for the presidency. (Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

Several months before [Joe Biden](#) left the vice presidency, Louis Freeh, the former FBI director, began messaging Hunter Biden in hopes of enticing his father into a business partnership. Freeh was already working with Hunter, but seemed intent on reeling in the senior Biden.

“I would be delighted to do future work with you. I also spoke to [your] Dad a few weeks ago and would like to explore with him some future work options,” Freeh, who ran an international security firm, wrote in July 2016. “I believe that working together on these (and other legal) matters would be of value, fun and rewarding.”

The message arrived as Joe Biden was contemplating a novel idea for the first time in nearly five decades: what life outside of elected office might look like. It came during a four-year period — from May 2015, when his son Beau died and Joe Biden lost his purpose, to April 2019, when he launched a presidential

campaign and in a very real way regained it — that marked one of the most trying periods in Biden’s life.

His path for once was not mapped out by a series of political campaigns. Seemingly out of politics, Biden pursued a range of private options for the first time, trying to figure out what he wanted to do and who he wanted to be, all while seeking to stabilize a family reeling from death and addiction, love affairs and divorce.

Beau Biden, beyond a beloved son, was seen as the family’s political future. His death upended his father’s life and ultimately set him on his current course, putting him back on a presidential path he had all but abandoned.

“Everything would have been 180 degrees different if Beau had lived — there’s no question,” said one close associate of the family who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private family matters. “I don’t think Hunter’s life goes off the rails. If Beau wasn’t president of the United States now, he’d be on his way to it. And Joe Biden would never have been president. He would be happily retired.”



Beau Biden, center, and President Barack Obama after Joe Biden was sworn in for a second term as vice president on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 21, 2013. (Win McNamee/Getty Images)

It is this very period in Joe Biden’s life that House Republicans are now scrutinizing in their impeachment inquiry. So far, rather than demonstrating that Biden engaged in financial wrongdoing, a review of documents, congressional testimony and emails authenticated by The Washington Post suggests he was uncharacteristically rudderless and casting about for a new role.

It would not have been illegal or even necessarily improper for him to do business with his son or with foreign entities, since he was out of politics — potentially complicating Republican efforts to build an impeachment case. Even so, he rarely took the numerous business opportunities dangled before him.

All the while, the Trump presidency was taking its brutal, chaotic path, paving the way for Biden’s decision to reenter politics and try one last time for the office he had coveted his entire life.

The White House declined to comment for this story, but Biden in the past has discussed this time period and has recounted how his son Beau had urged him to stay politically active.

“Beau should be the one running for president,” Biden said during a tearful interview with MSNBC in 2020. “Not me.”

“Every morning I get up,” he added, “I think to myself, ‘Is he proud of me?’”



Joe Biden pauses alongside his family as they prepare to enter a visitation for his son, former Delaware attorney general Beau Biden, at Legislative Hall in Dover, Del., on June 4, 2015. Standing with Biden, from left, are his son Hunter, granddaughter Natalie, daughter-in-law Hallie, grandson Hunter and wife, Jill. (Patrick Semansky/AP)

## **The calamity**

Biden's tight circle of advisers began plotting his post-political career as far back as 2010. His vice presidency would be over in 2017, and Beau Biden, at the time Delaware's attorney general, was the family's political future. It was time for the patriarch to exit political life.

He considered becoming an elder statesman, eyeing lofty foreign policy consultantships like those of former British prime minister Tony Blair or former secretary of state Madeleine Albright.

His team was approached about a "Biden Law Group" that would tackle asbestos litigation, Medicaid fraud and government consulting. Hunter and Beau Biden were both interested and proposed a further conversation with their father.

But the elder Biden seemed to have his sights elsewhere. "He's not a guy who thinks of that world. Everything is macro, political, global — he wanted to write a book and do speeches," said one person who consulted with the family. "He didn't want to do business."

In the summer of 2013 came the shock that upended the family: Beau Biden, after suffering a seizure and being rushed to the hospital, was diagnosed with brain cancer. He began treatment but attempted to keep private the severity of the prognosis as he lived his life as normally as possible, even letting it be known that he was weighing a run for Delaware governor.

It took time for Joe Biden to fully face the implications.

"Joe Biden is a famously eternally hopeful person," said one person who was close to the family during that period. "I think up until Beau went back to the hospital and then to Walter Reed — probably March or April of 2015 — I think everybody was holding onto hope he would be one of the small number of glioblastoma cases that has survival for many years."

Beau died in May 2015, leaving the family utterly without direction. Hunter and Ashley, Biden's surviving children, spiraled into personal crisis, and Hunter's addiction problems became acute.





A girl holds a commemorative program for Beau Biden as the hearse and Biden family arrive for his funeral service in Wilmington, Del., on June 6, 2015. (Mark Makela/Getty Images)



The Biden family leave the funeral Mass for Beau Biden at St. Anthony of Padua Church in Wilmington. (Doug Mills/AP)



Hunter Biden wipes his eyes as his sister Ashley delivers a eulogy for their brother Beau. (Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP)

For longer than has been previously reported, many of those close to Biden clung to the idea that, with President Barack Obama leaving office, Biden could still enter the 2016 Democratic primary against Hillary Clinton, according to emails sent at the time.

Many in the family, led by Hunter, had disdain for Clinton (“F her,” he wrote in February 2016 after a perceived slight of his father); disliked her husband, Bill (“What an asshole. And God he looks like shit,” Hunter wrote in April 2016 after Clinton blamed Biden for the 1994 crime bill); and derided consultant David Axelrod (“What a complete and total asshole,” he opined in October 2015 when Axelrod criticized a “Draft Biden” ad).

The Biden circle was particularly aghast at Hillary Clinton’s struggle to handle a controversy over her private email server, according to emails on a laptop that Hunter Biden apparently dropped off at a repair shop and never retrieved.

Biden confidant Ted Kaufman passed along an article about the Clinton emails on Oct. 13, 2015, with the subject line, “Cancer.” Nearly a year later, he sent around a story about the number of people Hillary met with who had donated to the Clinton Foundation, writing, “These people are ethically challenged.” The Clintons declined to comment. All this was not enough to persuade the outgoing vice president, overwhelmed by grief, to jump into the race.

“It was really a man who for the first time in his life was not going to be in public office and was perfectly comfortable with that fact,” said one of the people advising him around that time, adding, “It was very much, ‘I’m going to be a private citizen the rest of my life, and how can I be productive as a private citizen?’”



Joe and Jill Biden walk off the stage following Obama's farewell speech to the nation in Chicago on Jan. 10, 2017. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

## A state of bewilderment

The Biden brain trust drew up papers for a Biden Foundation, seeking \$500,000 contributions from longtime friends and supporters. His son and brother avidly pursued foreign business deals, but Biden was more interested in universities and nonprofits, according to emails and people who consulted with him.

In May 2016, Bob Bauer, Biden's private lawyer, approved talking points that said, among other things, "The VP plans to dedicate the rest of his life to this new stage of his public service" and "You can see from our proposed website that the VP is planning for a very energetic post VP life."

At the center of that new life would be the foundation, which would "continue his life's work in foreign policy, cancer research, equal treatment before the law, preventing violence against women and children, support of community colleges, and American veterans."

Biden also met with several universities and planned an academic center on the vice presidency. Amid all this activity, he did not hide his bewilderment at the new phase that opened before him.

"I've never been gainfully employed in my life. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do," he told an audience a few months before the 2016 election. "You know, I mean, I've never cashed a paycheck in my entire life. You think I'm joking — I'm not."



Biden waits to be introduced at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in November 2017, one of dozens of speeches he gave as a private citizen after serving as vice president. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)



Biden signs his book for a supporter at a community event in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in January 2020. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

One of the most lucrative temptations was hitting the paid speech circuit, but Biden's circle knew that would risk a hit to his reputation, given the controversy that had erupted over speeches Hillary Clinton gave to Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street groups.

The Post in 2019 found at least 65 instances when Biden gave a speech or appeared at a book event. But he avoided the backlash that engulfed Clinton, in part because many of his appearances were at university campuses, book events or health-care conventions.

Biden also signed a deal shortly after leaving office that paid him a reported \$8 million for three books, to be written by him and his wife, Jill. All told, in the two years after he left the vice presidency, he and his wife reported earning \$15.6 million, according to tax returns he later made public.

That was more money than Biden had ever made in his life, and he began spending it, renting a large home in McLean, Va., and purchasing a \$2.7 million, 4,800-square-foot vacation house in Rehoboth Beach, Del. The beach house was one of the few material items he openly desired, according to one person close to the family, and he wanted each of his children and grandchildren to have a key.

He also created organizations to try to maintain a role in shaping public policy: the Biden Foundation, the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, the Biden Institute at the University of Delaware, the Biden Cancer Initiative.

The efforts show clearly how Biden saw himself — seasoned diplomat, scholar of government, global statesman. It's an image that has been hard to sustain in the bruising world of the presidency.



Former FBI director Louis Freeh in 2012. (Brynn Anderson/AP)



## **Freeh makes his pitch**

Hunter Biden connected with Freeh in June 2016 to enlist his help on the case of Gabriel Popoviciu, a Romanian real estate tycoon who was convicted in his country of corruption (an appeals court last year suspended his seven-year sentence).

Freeh quickly agreed, and he turned toward the personal. “Your Dad told me you have been an incredible father figure and strength for Beau’s family, and what a precious gift to be able to bestow,” Freeh wrote.

Freeh at the time was working for clients facing serious charges abroad, and he also mentioned to Hunter the idea of partnering with his father.

“No doubt both he and you have many options and probably some which are more attractive than my small shop,” Freeh wrote on Aug. 24, 2016 — though he noted that his firm did have offices in Washington, Delaware and New York and was representing the Malaysian prime minister. “I’m very flexible and we could set it up as an equity-share or whatever works best. It would certainly be an honor to work with you both.”

About six months later, with Joe Biden now out of office, Freeh wrote to Hunter Biden again, saying that he had seen his father at Catholic Mass. “If you have his cell and a personal email, I’d like to have his contacts (will protect),” Freeh wrote on March 17, 2017. “I would still like to persuade him to associate with me and FSS — as we have some very good and profitable matters which he could enhance with minimal time.”

Freeh was referring to Freeh, Sporkin & Sullivan, the firm he co-founded with former judges Stanley Sporkin and Eugene Sullivan.

In an email to The Post, Freeh said that, like Biden, he attends St. Joseph on the Brandywine in Wilmington, Del. He has long been friends with the Bidens, he said, and he sits on the board of the Beau Biden Foundation.

He said that in late 2016 and early 2017, he had several conversations with Biden about joining his firm. “He considered it but decided to pursue other goals,” Freeh said.



Biden prepares to speak to House Democrats during a retreat on Capitol Hill in February 2018. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

## Using Joe Biden as bait

If Joe Biden shied away from potentially lucrative opportunities, other members of his family did not.

Hunter Biden and his uncle James, Joe's brother, pursued a high-stakes deal around this time with a group of Chinese energy executives. With Joe Biden seemingly out of public life, they had little reason to keep their distance from firms based in China or other potentially controversial partners.

Hunter and James Biden teamed up with several associates who would later resurface in House Republicans' investigation of President Biden, including Rob Walker, James Gilliar and Tony Bobulinski. On several occasions, this group tried to use the outgoing vice president's cachet to attract potential partners.

Walker, in an interview with FBI and IRS agents, recounted a lunch with the Chinese executives at Washington's Four Seasons Hotel when Joe Biden stopped by for a brief visit. Walker said he thought Hunter had arranged for his father to drop by to bolster the chances of a deal.

But within weeks, the would-be partners began to worry that their opportunity was slipping away, and Gilliar embraced a way to make their bid more enticing: enlist the former vice president. "Man U are right let's get the company set up, then tell H and family the high stakes and get Joe involved," Gilliar wrote to Bobulinski on May 11, 2017, in a text message reported by Fox News in December 2020.

Two days later, Gilliar sent an email titled “Expectations,” outlining a possible equity distribution from the deal. It included “10 held by H for the big guy,” suggesting 10 percent that Joe Biden would receive. Republicans have highlighted this email, saying it shows Biden benefited from his son’s foreign business career despite denials from both Bidens.

Walker has testified, however, that the idea of including Joe Biden was “wishful thinking.” Gilliar, who did not respond to messages seeking comment, told the Wall Street Journal in October 2020 that, “I am unaware of any involvement at anytime of the former Vice President.”



Joe Biden, left, and his brother James Biden during the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver.  
(Rick Friedman/Corbis/Getty Images)

## **Lending a hand**

After Hunter and James Biden signed a deal with the Chinese executives, money began flowing. During a 14-month period starting in August 2017, CEFC China Energy and its executives paid \$4.8 million to entities controlled by the two, according to financial records reviewed by The Post.

But apparently it was not enough, as both Hunter and James still turned to Joe Biden for financial help. On Jan. 12, 2018, according to bank records, Joe Biden lent \$200,000 to James. About seven weeks later, on March 1, 2018, the loan was repaid.

James Biden’s attorney, Paul J. Fishman, said that “at no time did Jim involve his brother in any of his business relationships.” He declined to respond to questions about why James Biden had needed the large sum.

Later that year, after the CEFC deal collapsed, Hunter Biden wrote to ask his father for a short-term loan so he could pay alimony bills, his kids' tuition and the fees for a rehab program.

He promised to repay Joe Biden within 10 days. "I'm really embarrassed to ask and I know it's unfair of me to put you in that position right now," Hunter wrote.

"It's not a problem but call me," his father replied. "Hunt tell me what you need. No problem." He offered to pay tuition and housing bills for Hunter's daughters and to provide the rest directly to Hunter, saying \$75,000 would be sent that day.

It does not appear that the money helped much in the long term. Later that month, Hunter, in a message to his uncle, said that even if he worked every day for three months he would not be able to dig out of his financial hole. "I can't pay alimony w/o Dad or tuitions or for food and gas," he wrote on Dec. 29, 2018. "Really it's all gone."

Hunter's credit scores were so low that he had trouble buying a car. Instead, Joe Biden signed for a 2018 Ford Raptor truck, and Hunter repaid his father with several monthly payments of \$1,380. After about a year, he returned the truck to the dealer.

Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.), who is leading the GOP investigation of the Bidens, has held up the loan repayments from James and Hunter Biden as evidence that the former vice president was getting "laundered China money." But both seem to be instances of family members reimbursing Joe Biden for money he had lent out to them. James and Hunter Biden are both scheduled to testify this month before Comer's committee.



Biden looks as he is introduced during a campaign stop at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa, in January 2020. (Justin Botsford/The Washington Post)



## Back into the fray

Joe Biden's life outside politics, of course, did not last long.

For two years, he spent much of his time in the refined world of foundations and academic centers. His speaking contracts required that he be supplied with a pre-speech meal of angel hair pomodoro, a caprese salad and raspberry sorbet with biscotti.

But by this time, Hillary Clinton had lost in a devastating upset, and Trump's presidency was unfolding as an affront to everything Biden stood for.

Before he died, Beau had made his father promise that he would stay engaged in public life. With no obvious Democrat to pull the party together, Biden, by his own account, concluded that the way to live up to that promise was to run for a nomination he had twice failed to win.

By early 2019, Biden's aides began planning another presidential campaign. They met at his McLean house, a dwelling that looked much like a brick version of the White House a few miles away.



Biden, projected as a shadow, takes the stage in his first swing through Iowa as a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate, at the Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids on April 30, 2019. (Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

At one point, Naomi Biden, Hunter's daughter and Biden's oldest granddaughter, called a family meeting. Joe Biden's grandchildren told him that they knew a presidential campaign would provoke scrutiny and stress, but they were ready for it.

Biden's advisers saw Hunter Biden, with his history of drug addiction, as a liability — and, unbeknownst to them, the FBI in 2018 had opened an investigation of Hunter for potential tax crimes and, according to court filings that until recently remained sealed, would soon obtain warrants to review Hunter Biden's emails and iCloud data. Campaign aides identified James Biden, who had a long history of troubled business deals and legal problems, as another vulnerability.

That had not been much of a concern as long as the former vice president was not seeking public office. But suddenly it mattered a lot.

Biden formally announced his third campaign for the presidency at a rally in Philadelphia, declaring that he was running “to restore the soul of the nation.” His grandchildren, along with his daughter Ashley, joined him onstage. The seat for Hunter was empty.



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