

## **When asked about the legacy of slavery, Joe Biden lectured black people on their parenting abilities.**

By Ryan Grim, author of the new book *We've Got People: From Jesse Jackson to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the End of Big Money and the Rise of a Movement*

For the Washington Post, former Vice President Joe Biden delivered “the kind of performance his supporters have been waiting for — combative when needed and in the thick of the action throughout” during Thursday’s presidential debate. Cable news commenters largely agreed. The New York Times was slightly less kind, subtitled its analysis “Strong start, but a stumble over race.”

That stumble happened when Biden was asked about the legacy of slavery and gave a meandering answer that, in part, lectured black people on their parenting abilities. The Times delved into Biden’s controversial answer in a separate article, headlined “Biden Was Asked About Segregation. His Answer Included a Record Player,” but the blatant racism in Biden’s answer has not received the scrutiny it deserves. Meanwhile, former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julián Castro has borne the brunt of Washington’s rage for breaking rules of “civil” discourse by questioning Biden’s ongoing mental acumen.

In the second hour of the debate, ABC correspondent Linsey Davis asked Biden to reflect on a remark he made in the 1970s: "I don't feel responsible for the sins of my father and grandfather. I feel responsible for what the situation is today, for the sins of my own generation, and I'll be damned if I feel responsible to pay for what happened 300 years ago."

Davis said to Biden, "You said that some 40 years ago, but as you stand here tonight, what responsibility do you think that Americans need to take to repair the legacy of slavery in our country?"

Biden's answer was staggeringly incoherent, obscuring, to his own benefit, what was, underneath, a horrifyingly racist answer. Here's his whole response:

Well, they have to deal with the — look, there's institutional segregation in this country. And from the time I got involved, I started dealing with that. Redlining, banks, making sure we are in a position where — look, you talk about education. I propose that what we take the very poor schools, the Title I schools, triple the amount of money we spend from \$15 to \$45 billion a year. Give every single teacher a raise to the \$60,000 level.

Number two, make sure that we bring in to help the teachers deal with the problems that come from home. The problems that come from home. We have one school psychologist for every 1,500 kids in America today. It's crazy. The teachers are — I'm married to a teacher, my deceased wife is a teacher. They have every problem coming to them. Make sure that every single child does, does in fact, have 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds go to school. Not day care, school.

We bring social workers into homes of parents to help them deal with how to raise their children. It's not that they don't want to help, they don't want — they don't know quite what to do. Play the radio, make sure the television — excuse me, make sure you have the record player on at night, the phone — make sure that kids hear words. A kid coming from a very poor school — a very poor background — will hear 4 million words fewer spoken by the time they get there.

The thoroughly racist paternalism came at the end of Biden's answer, at which point many viewers had likely zoned out. It was not adequately highlighted in post-debate coverage, so it's worth taking a closer look at.

In response to a question on the legacy of slavery, Biden said: “We bring social workers into homes of parents to help them deal with how to raise their children. It’s not that they don’t want to help, they don’t want — they don’t know quite what to do.”

Author Anand Giridharadas flagged the moment. “Is this not one of the most explicitly racist moments of all time in a Democratic primary debate?” he wondered. “Asked about his past comments denying responsibility, as a white man, for America’s sins, he gives an answer insinuating that black parents don’t know how to raise kids.”

Joe Biden's answer on how to address the legacy of slavery was appalling -- and disqualifying.

It ended in a sermon implying that black parents don't know how to raise their own children.

This cannot go on. #DemDebate  
[pic.twitter.com/WuI4b8n5Yz](https://pic.twitter.com/WuI4b8n5Yz)

— Anand Giridharadas (@AnandWrites) September 13, 2019

The answer appears to reflect not a campaign talking point, but Biden's genuine thoughts on the question of race relations in the U.S. He has been criticized for his leading role in developing the policy infrastructure of mass incarceration, while couching it in dehumanizing and paternalistic language that was popular — and popularized by politicians like Biden — in the 1980s. The biases from which those ideas and that rhetoric sprang are still alive, if not necessarily well, in Biden's mind 40 years later.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, a journalist leading the New York Times Magazine's "1619 Project" on the legacy of 400 years of slavery and its aftermath in America, said that Biden's remark was revealing. "He talked about poverty, social workers needing to help families raise their kids and debunked science on vocab deficits," she said. "He assumed we'd all understand he meant black folks even without saying — as if black is synonymous with poverty/dysfunction."

Biden maintains his fragile lead over the Democratic primary field largely thanks to his overwhelming support from black voters.

The latest CNN poll, for instance, has him at 24 percent among all voters, with Elizabeth Warren at 18 percent and Bernie Sanders at 17 percent. But among Hispanic voters, Sanders is beating Biden 24 to 18 percent. And among white voters, Warren is beating Biden 23 to 21 percent.

Only among black voters is Biden comfortably — or, at least, widely — ahead, pulling 42 percent of the vote to Sanders's 12 percent and Warren's 10 percent.

Biden's political approach to race has long been geared toward assuaging the racial anxieties of white voters. Biden has even deployed his — at best — racial insensitivity toward Barack Obama himself. "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy," Biden declared in 2007. It's an irony that he was added to Obama's ticket not in spite of his racial politics, but because of them.

"Obama," the Times reported recently, was "deeply worried about a backlash against a black man at the top of the ticket, and believed that an older white running mate would ease fears in battleground states like Pennsylvania, Michigan and Indiana that he had lost in the primaries."

He told his adviser, David Axelrod: "Barack Hussein Obama is change enough for most people." Biden's politics have now been laundered by his eight years serving the country's first black president, but that doesn't mean he's clean.