

Fire and ice

This week America's oldest magazine offered its first-ever presidential **endorsement**. "We do not do this lightly," said Scientific American, in explaining its decision to come out for Joe Biden. But what choice did it have? The country is **gripped** by two science-related catastrophes, a global pandemic and global warming. Donald Trump **downplays** the first on a good day (as America's deathcount **approaches** 200,000, he predicts it will soon "go away") and **denies** that humans are causing the second. During a visit to Sacramento this week, to **acknowledge** the wildfires that have so far **incinerated** over 5m acres of forest and thousands of homes and killed at least 35 people, he assured a **roomful** of silent, serious Californians that global warming was about to go into **reverse**.

In a speech delivered in Delaware the same day, Mr Biden meanwhile underlined his **determination** to introduce at a national level the policies to **combat** climate change that America, almost uniquely among Western democracies, still lacks. Where Barack Obama made the issue secondary to health-care coverage, and Hillary Clinton put it behind immigration and other promised **reforms**, Mr Biden promises to make **tackling** climate change his priority. His proposals, with an important **caveat**, reflect that degree of urgency. There is no **starker** contrast between the Republican president and his Democratic challenger than on this issue.

The climate plan Mr Biden **released** in July includes faster, deeper cuts to America's carbon emissions than either of his Democratic **predecessors** envisaged. Mr Biden promises a commitment to decarbonising the electricity grid by 2035. To that end, he **pledges** among other things to invest \$2trn in renewable energy and other technologies over four years. He would also commit America to cutting its emissions to net zero by 2050. Mr Obama's failure to **enshrine** a much more modest commitment—an 80% emissions reduction by 2050—indicates how **bold** that would be. Yet, if backed by a Democratic-controlled Congress, Mr Biden would probably have a much better chance of making progress on the issue than Mr Obama had.

That is **chiefly** because his party is **desperate** for him to do so. Before covid-19 hit, the combination of Mr Trump's denials with ever-worsening wildfires, hurricanes and floods had made Democratic voters increasingly likely to **cite** climate change as their main concern. And Mr Biden, a master at **hewing** to his party's shifting currents, has further **hardened** this environmental **consensus** by using it to bridge the **rifts** exposed by his nomination.

His appointment of John Kerry and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez— emblems of the centre-left and activist left—to co-chair his climate-policy shop was evidence of that. So is the **heterodox** nature of his proposals. For example, though he **dispensed** with the socialism-by-stealth of the left's Green New Deal—which included

guaranteed jobs and Medicare-for-All—he has **mollified** Ms Ocasio-Cortez’s faction by emphasising environmental justice, as well as with the scale of his ambition. Labour unions are reassured by his stress on job creation in low-carbon industries. Centrists are **thrilled** that he has **bucked** the left by remaining open to nuclear power and to the possibility of making fossil fuels safe by capturing the gases they emit when burned.

In a sign of how the climate-policy debate often **scrambles** ideological positions, moderate Democrats are also largely responsible for limiting the **scope** of market mechanisms—either a cap-and-trade scheme or a carbon tax—in Mr Biden’s plan. Democratic leaders in Congress consider them desirable but unsellable. Hence the more regulatory approach laid out in a 547-page climate plan released by House Democrats in June. While allowing for the possibility of a nationwide carbon tax—as Mr Biden’s plan does—it lays more emphasis on the sector-by-sector low-carbon standards adopted in California—including zero-emissions from cars, as well as power stations, by 2035. Mr Biden’s plan follows suit.

Implicit in the way it is designed to have maximum Democratic appeal is an assumption that a Biden administration could count on no Republican support. That is a reasonable **precaution**. While Democrats and independents have become more concerned about climate change, opinion on the right has hardly moved. Like Mr Trump, half of **moderate** and 75% of conservative Republicans deny the link between human activity and global warming. At the same time, any Republican tempted to break with his or her party should not find Mr Biden’s proposals off-putting. His emphases on growth and technology are hard to argue with. The recent rise of renewables industries—which employ a lot of people in Republican states—has also made them less **divisive**. And the fact that Mr Biden would probably **jam** much of his promised \$2trn **splurge** into a broad, post-virus stimulus package would provide moderate Republicans with additional cover on their right **flanks**.

The politics and economics of climate change may thus, for once, be coming into **alignment**. The issue has already gone some way to making sense of Mr Biden’s unexciting **candidacy**. One of its overarching promises is to **salvage** Mr Obama’s legacy, then improve upon it; the former president’s climate record is in **dire** need of both services. Another is to rebuild America’s economy at home and reputation abroad; Mr Biden’s climate plan could help do both.

The **lurking** caveat to this upbeat prospect is that the regulatory approach he is pushing will almost certainly deliver much slower, more partial and more inefficient progress than he predicts. America is not California. A Biden administration’s sector-by-sector carbon standards would draw a storm of legal challenges, **stalling** them and making them vulnerable to partisan judges and hostile successors. That is not to knock Mr Biden’s plans **unduly**; they may well be as bold

as is politically **feasible**. But what is feasible in America's **dysfunctional** politics is likely to be much less than the country—and in this instance the world—requires.

New words

Endorsement(n)- public statement or action showing that you support somebody/something

Grip(v)- to interest or have a strong effect on somebody; to hold somebody's attention

Downplay(v)- to try to make something seem less important than it really is

Approach(v)- to come close to something in amount, level or quality

Deny(v)- to refuse to admit or accept something

Acknowledge(v)- to accept that something is true

Incinerate(v)- to burn something, especially waste material, until it is completely destroyed

Roomful(n)- a large number of people or things that are in a room

Reverse(n)- the opposite of what has just been mentioned

Determination(n)- the quality that makes you continue trying to do something even when this is difficult

Combat(v)- to stop something unpleasant or harmful from happening or from getting worse

Reform(n)- change that is made to a social system, an organization, etc. in order to improve or correct it

Tackle(v)- to make a determined effort to deal with a difficult problem or situation

Caveat(n)- a warning that particular things need to be considered before something can be done

Stark(adj)- unpleasant; real, and impossible to avoid

Release(v)- to make information available to the public

Predecessor(n)- a person who did a job before somebody else

Pledge(v)- to formally promise to give or do something

Enshrine(v)- to make a law, right, etc. respected or official, especially by stating it in an important written document

Bold(adj)- brave and confident; not afraid to say what you feel or to take risks

Chiefly(adv)- not completely, but as a most important part

Desperate(adj)- needing or wanting something very much

Cite(v)- to mention something as a reason or an example, or in order to support what you are saying

Hew(v)- to make or shape something large by cutting

Harden(v)- to become or make something become solid or stiff

Consensus(n)- an opinion that all members of a group agree with

Rift(n)- a serious break in the relationship between people or organizations

Heterodox(adj)- not following the usual or accepted beliefs and opinions

Dispense(v)- to provide something, especially a service, for people

Mollify(v)- to make somebody feel less angry or upset

Thrilled(adj)- very excited and pleased

Buck(v)- buck something (informal) to resist or oppose something

Scramble(v)- to move quickly, especially with difficulty, using your hands to help you

Scope(n)- the opportunity or ability to do or achieve something

Implicit(adj)- suggested without being directly expressed

Precaution(n)- something that is done in advance in order to prevent problems or to avoid danger

Moderate(adj)- having or showing opinions, especially about politics, that are not extreme

Divisive(adj)- causing people to be split into groups that disagree with or oppose each other

Jam(v)- to push something somewhere with a lot of force

Splurge(n)- an act of spending a lot of money on something that you do not really need

Flank(n)- the left or right side of an army during a battle, or a sports team during a game

Alignment(n)- arrangement in a straight line

Candidacy(n)- the fact of being a candidate in an election

Salvage(v)- to manage to rescue something from a difficult situation; to stop a bad situation from being a complete failure

Dire(adj)- very serious

Lurk(v)- to wait somewhere secretly, especially because you are going to do something bad or illegal

Stall(v)- to make somebody wait so that you have more time to do something

Unduly(adv)- more than you think is reasonable or necessary

Feasible(adj)- that is possible and likely to be achieved

Dysfunctional(adj)- not working normally or properly

Source: The Economist, September 19th 2020

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