

## Biden's last-ditch effort

By: [David Paul Kuhn](#)

September 5, 2007 07:17 AM EST

DES MOINES, Iowa — Each Iowa State Fairgoer is invited to take one kernel of corn and drop it into a candidate's glass jar. Each jar is adorned with wallet-size portraits of the contenders.

Hillary Clinton has four full jars. Barack Obama has three. Even Bill Richardson is on his second jar.

Joe Biden's jar is nearly empty.

While two wars rage overseas, the candidate who arguably has the most foreign policy experience in the 2008 presidential race can hardly get a hundred folks to drop a kernel of corn into a container. He's polling at the back of the pack.

As Biden spoke last month at the fair soapbox, only about two dozen Iowans even bothered to listen.

That presidential candidates with impeccable qualifications fail to catch fire is far from a new phenomenon (note the already ended GOP bid of former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson). But the listless state of Biden's candidacy offers particular irony — or poignancy.

In an election waged under the looming shadow of the war in Iraq, the senator from Delaware — and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee — has been one of his party's most eloquent and consistent spokesmen on the conflict.

Yet he seems to be the one of the last people Democratic voters want to lead them out of it.

The reasons, like Biden himself, are complicated. At 64, he is an anachronism, a Lyndon Johnson Democrat in a YouTube era. He's yet another white male in the year of the first viable female, black and Hispanic candidates.

He's campaigning as the pragmatic choice in a year Democrats are emboldened and less inclined toward pragmatism. He seemed woefully ill-prepared for the fundraising rigors of this race.

Perhaps more telling, in Washington political and media circles, Biden has long been viewed as possessing a fatal flaw that would always deny him the White House: a penchant for verbosity that helped scuttle his 1988 presidential run with a plagiarism scandal and has made him the subject of Capitol Hill ridicule ever since.

"We would always try to show him the exit signs," a former senior Biden aide said of

Biden's tendency to turn 20-minute speeches into epic orations of an hour or more. "But once he started talking, the car would just keep heading on down the highway."

But what the voters at the state fair here also don't know about Joe Biden is that privately, in Washington, many of his peers acknowledge that if he could somehow manage to get elected president, he'd probably do, in Biden-speak, "a helluva job."

That he weathered the death of his wife and infant daughter in an automobile accident in 1972 with legendary grace. That he somehow, after six terms and more than 30 years in the Senate, retains the gleaming eye of a blue-collar Catholic kid whose dad was a car salesman.

"You talk to Biden about anything, ... somehow it gets back to home," Richard Ben Cramer wrote in his classic account of the 1988 race, "What It Takes."

Ever hopeful and ever confident, Biden soldiers on. After his speech at the fair, he found an Iowan wearing an Obama button.

Biden quickly introduced himself, tapped the metal button with his index finger, and asserted: "The air is going to come out of this balloon and then you are going to want a man who can be president."

Biden still thinks Iowa Democrats are now playing the field. But when it comes to settling down, they'll marry good old Joey Biden.

### **Pitching experience**

Biden believes if you have only one pitch to throw, you "throw your best pitch." So he was in Iowa hawking his plan to partition Iraq, standing above Iowans sitting on hay bales and sipping lemonade while he talked of Sunnis and Shia. Biden plans to travel to Iraq this week.

The narrative for Biden's candidacy is built on his years of experience in foreign affairs — accumulated wisdom he likes to contrast with the relative inexperience of his Democratic opponents.

He is trying to cast himself as the teller of hard truths, a Scoop Jackson hawk who is wary of a precipitous exit from Iraq despite his harsh criticism of the war (after he voted to authorize it).

When we discussed Obama's recent comment that "if we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets [in Pakistan] and President Musharraf won't act, we will," Biden scoffed. He was similarly dismissive of Clinton's criticism of the statement as "naive."

"None of them knew what they were talking about. Hillary didn't know what she was talking about," he said. "It's been U.S. policy that if we had actionable intelligence, we would go in."

In May, Biden was the one Democratic candidate to vote to fund the war in Iraq. His son Beau, Delaware's attorney general, is scheduled to go to the war zone in 2008.

At the fair soapbox, he upbraided Obama and Clinton for their votes against funding. “There is no political point worth my son’s life!” he thundered.

In the car, Biden was calmer. He said the Iraq vote “hurt the Democratic Party.” I ask him whether Clinton and Obama also made a strategic mistake, like John Kerry’s vote against funding in 2004.

“You got it, baby,” he laughed ruefully. “Can you see the 30-second ad” if either Obama or Clinton is the nominee, Biden asks.

Biden’s bona fides on national security are central to his contention that he is the best suited of the Democratic field to appeal to the political center.

“I’m the only one you can nominate that is going to be able to win red states,” he told union members. “If we don’t nominate someone ... who the American public knows has unimpeachable credentials on national security and terror, we’re not going to win.”

He was the sole Democratic candidate not to attend the YearlyKos convention, a gathering of activist bloggers. Biden says it was a scheduling conflict. But liberal bloggers are Biden’s bête noire: “They say it’s their party. Like hell it’s their party! They are part of the party, like labor.”

For a candidate most known for standing behind a podium, it’s mingling with voters where Biden seems most himself — less the austere senator than the old-school pol.

“Hey, man” was the way he would greet lowans as he wandered the fairgrounds, as casual as a presidential candidate can be. When one man asked him if he was Christian, Biden placed his palms on the man’s shoulders and attested to his faith.

When he flipped pig patties at the fair’s pork industry booth, one cook asked, “You don’t eat chicken, do you?”

“If I don’t eat chicken, I don’t get elected,” Biden replied, with a nod to his home state’s poultry industry.

Biden seemed to realize lowans are used to being appeased. Therefore, he wouldn’t. One woman asked him, “How are you enjoying the state fair?”

“It’s not as good as the Delaware State Fair,” Biden replied, “but I like it.” The candor seems to endear him to many lowans — it’s like the pretty girl who is charmed by the one guy who doesn’t say she’s pretty.

### **Waiting for the wind at his back**

August was supposed to be Biden’s month. His book, “Promises to Keep,” was published. He crisscrossed Iowa for a third of the month and went up with his first round of television ads.

Yet there is no getting around the fact that Biden has little corn in the jar. In the back of a country music bar, as Biden sat with me, fellow senator — and long-shot candidate — Chris Dodd walked in. “Hey,” Biden bellowed. “Tell him why I’m such a good guy.”

The Connecticut Democrat smiled.

“I was just telling him why I think I’m going to win,” Biden said with a half-smirk.

“If you just look at qualifications, we ought to be in the top tier,” Dodd added, sounding Biden’s argument. “If you have 100 percent name recognition and 82 percent of the people are still looking ... ”

“Now, it doesn’t mean either one of us will step up,” Biden interjected. “They may say, ‘I don’t like that son of a bitch, either.’”

This is, in every way, a different campaign for Biden than last time around.

Biden was once the Democratic wunderkind. Elected to the Senate at the age of 29, he was the Obama of the 1988 race. But after a speech was shown to have been copied from a British MP, the mistake was compounded with past accusations of plagiarism. Biden’s campaign soon imploded.

Biden has been fighting for his reputation ever since. He rose in the Senate as an expert of foreign affairs. He became known for his blunt opinions. But he also became known for too many opinions.

The day Biden announced his candidacy, he referred to Obama as “clean” and “articulate.” Biden apologized for any racial inferences.

To the chattering class, however, the incident substantiated the senator’s typecast — an irony, given he had a childhood stutter that he overcame by spending countless hours practicing his speech. Like Forrest Gump after the leg braces came off, Biden’s mouth has been running ever since.

But in recent months, Biden has been anything but loquacious. During one debate, a moderator mentioned his inclination to leave no thought unspoken. “Can you reassure voters in this country that you have the discipline you would need on the world stage?”

Biden replied, deadpan: “Yes.”

For all his retail talents and newfound discipline, however, Biden lacks money. With less than \$3 million in cash on hand, he has no personal financial reserves to rely upon. His net worth is roughly \$150,000; in 2006, Opensecrets.org ranked Biden’s wealth 99th among the 100 senators.

Biden acknowledges the difficult slog ahead. “It’s awful hard,” he said, standing alone on the tarmac of a small airport in northeast Iowa. He throws out his arms. “It’s just hard.”

“Does that mean in the next five months I can’t get it down? No,” Biden added. “I’ll die a happy man not having heard ‘Hail to the Chief.’ But I’ll not die a happy man not having tried.”