



[Ben W. Heineman Jr.](#) - Ben Heineman Jr. has held top positions in government, law and business. He is the author of *High Performance with High Integrity* (Harvard Business Press, 2008).

## Replace Joe Biden

By Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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*The vice president overstepped the boundaries of his office by putting President Obama in a politically sensitive situation.*



I believe Joe Biden should go. He should not be on the Democratic ticket in the fall.

Let me be clear that this is not about his position on gay marriage. I support gay marriage. I think President Obama should support gay marriage.

But, from the perspective of how the presidency should work, a vice president should never force the hand of a president on a sensitive, first-order issue by getting out ahead publicly. This is true whether the issue is foreign policy, defense policy, economic policy, or social policy.

Biden committed a governmental sin of the first order. In any organization where the leader can fire the second in command--whether a university, an NGO, a corporation--Biden would have been asked to leave, if not immediately then before too long. Taking a controversial position (however "inadvertent") outside the government, not inside, is a good reason not to renew Biden's lease at the VP's house at the Naval Observatory in Washington.

Having refused to defend the Defense of Marriage Act and having done an excellent job of bringing "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" to an end, the president, in a politically fraught year, had the right to decide when and how to announce his support for gay marriage--and not be forced to act by his vice president, looking weak and disorganized in the process. (The reporting thus far does not suggest a Machiavellian two-step, with Biden testing the waters having gained Obama's approval in advance.)

This latest, egregious Biden incident only points up the need discussed by many political commentators ([see](#) Bill Keller of the *Times*, early in the year) to make Hillary Clinton the vice presidential nominee.

The vice presidential nominee has three core roles. First, to help the president get re-elected. I think there is a consensus among political observers that Clinton, by energizing key constituencies, would be a much more powerful vote-getter in key states than Biden. In an election that is going to be extremely close, she clearly could make the difference between victory and defeat for Obama--one of the rare times that the vice presidential candidate could help swing an election. Biden was the nominee in 2008 because his foreign policy experience (as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) complemented Obama's fresh look. That is not true today, and he has no political base. The rare importance of the VP nominee in helping win a toss-up election has been illustrated recently by Robert Caro's detailed description of John Kennedy's selection of Lyndon Johnson as his Vice Presidential nominee (*The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power*)

Second, the vice president must be fully capable of being president in the event of death or disability. Without arguing the point, let me just say that Clinton would meet this test easily--and be better than Biden--with her long experience in the White House, on the Hill and now running a major department.

Third, since Jimmy Carter used Walter Mondale as a senior counselor, without any other significant portfolio, the role of vice president has evolved into a position where the person is often last in the room and gives the president unvarnished political and policy advice. Clinton would be at least the equal to Biden on this dimension as well.

Despite the stories that Clinton wants to leave government, I certainly think it likely that, if asked by the president and if her presence on the ticket would make a real difference--especially with the possibility that the Republicans will control both houses of Congress--she would accept. The departure of Biden (to the State Department or some other position or home) could also be orchestrated gracefully. After the last week, there

can be little doubt that this is a subject now being discussed with much intensity in some quarters of the White House.

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