

The Heart of a Leader

The '72 Biden Senate Campaign
LESSONS FROM A YOUTH-DRIVEN UPSET

a behind-the-scenes memoir by DAVID TOPEL

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*In memory of my beloved parents, Phyllis and Henry Topel,
who dared to dream with courage, roll up their sleeves to do the hard work
and instill in their children a love of community*



*And to the youngest among us, who, through these pages
might just get a glimpse of the vibrant heart of a
seasoned and exceptional public servant named Biden*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

A polarizing White House, historic racial protests and foreign policy lacking in diplomacy. Sound familiar? The year was 1972. Soon to be impeached Richard Nixon, the aftermath of the 1968 murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a senseless war in Vietnam moved Joe Biden to action, adding his voice to America's unruly discussion on war, peace, ethics and equality. His first priority? Shaking up the old political guard by insisting on the inclusion of youth at every level.

“We must identify issues of significant interest to young people - poverty, racism, the draft, pollution - and develop legislative programs. We must integrate youth into the party organization at all levels.” - Joe Biden

*To Democratic Party Elders of Delaware, May 26, 1971
Democratic Renewal Commission Report*

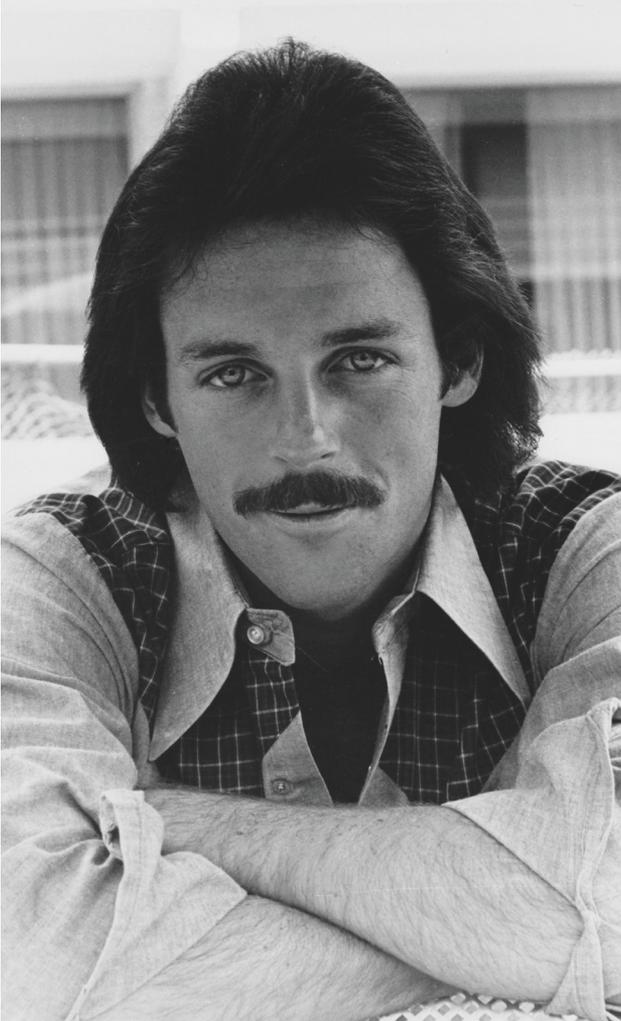
Certain to inform and inspire today's youth, **THE HEART OF A LEADER** delivers an intimate, inside view of the first youth-driven political upset following passage of the 26th Amendment giving eighteen year olds the right to vote. Uniquely told through the eyes of a teenage campaign

volunteer and son of Delaware Democratic State Chair, Henry Topel (a friend and mentor to Biden), *The Heart of a Leader* expands the first-hand campaign memoir *AN ARMY OF YOUTH* written by young Topel in 1972 detailing how Biden won the groundbreaking David and Goliath senate race of '72 defeating Delaware's venerable Republican governor by inspiring a statewide teenage population to action. A political youth empowerment handbook for its day, *The Heart of a Leader* provides a first-hand glimpse into a passionate, twenty-nine year old Biden, his position on the issues of the day and his insistence on giving a voice to youth, creating a momentum that would result in one of the most unlikely political upsets of its time.

Oddly reminiscent of today's headlines, the author reflects: "The 1970's began in a mix of turmoil, promise and rage. A polarizing Nixon White House, ever present civil unrest following the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and a senseless Vietnam war, taking friends and family in its wake, had my generation in a constant state of shock and rage. Yet, on the horizon, the promise of the sixties would finally bear fruit with the passage of the 26th Amendment giving eighteen year olds the right to vote. That fateful ratification arrived July 1, 1971, two weeks after my eighteenth birthday. The first generation of eighteen year olds in history was about to vote. But where were our leaders?" Joe Biden would not only begin his run for Senate as a 29 year old, but make youth empowerment a cornerstone of his campaign. With passion and heart, he'd bring a new vitality into nearly every high school in the state, educating teens on the power of their voices in a participatory democracy and the influence within their reach should they choose to stand up for their beliefs. He'd send thousands of young people home armed with literature and information, inspired to begin discussions around the family dinner table about issues ranging from racial injustice and pollution to the need to end the war in Vietnam. And by speaking candidly and from his heart, he would inspire a new generation, moving them to action in numbers that would not only shift the local balance of power but forever alter political campaign strategies.

Biden's foresight would indeed affect the role of youth in politics well beyond Delaware's borders and move one teenage volunteer to document the behind-the-scenes unfolding of the unlikely youth-driven campaign

that launched Joe Biden into a lifetime of public service. Among his many milestones, Biden would go on to successfully sponsor forty-two bills into law, serve as Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee during some of the most volatile periods in modern times and team with President Barack Obama to become the 47th Vice President of the United States.



The author in 1972, photo credit, Jacki Hirsty

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Topel is an impassioned human rights activist, writer, filmmaker, public speaker, attorney and community builder with forty years' experience in Social Justice Advocacy. A proud youth volunteer alumnus of the '72 Biden Senate Campaign, David brings a unique perspective as the son of Joe Biden's friend and mentor, Henry Topel, former Delaware Democratic State Chairman (1970 - 1978)

A Pi Sigma Alpha National Political Science Honors student at the University of Delaware while attaining his BA degree, David studied the Civil Law Tradition at Loyola University New Orleans College of Law before earning his Juris Doctor from Delaware Law School. In addition to the practice of law, his varied experiences include: Anti-discrimination work within the EEOC, pro bono consulting for a variety of nonprofit organizations including Philadelphia's Art Sanctuary (utilizing the power of Black Art), The American Foundation for AIDS Research, Founding Board President of Philadelphia's LGBTQ Youth Center, The Attic (now in its 27th year), and former Global Community Manager to Zumba® Fitness LLC where he co-created standards for community building, communication and philanthropy throughout its 180 member countries.

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PREFACE

The 1970's began in a mix of turmoil, promise and rage. As U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war entered its sixth year, taking friends and family in its wake, the 1968 assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were fresh on our minds leaving many of us in shock and rage. Yet, on the horizon, the promise of the 60's would finally bear fruit when the passage of the 26th Amendment gave eighteen year olds the right to vote. That fateful ratification arrived July 1, 1971, two weeks after my eighteenth birthday. The first generation of eighteen year olds in American history was about to vote. But where were our leaders?

Joe Biden's first Senate Campaign was a groundbreaking David and Goliath battle, giving rise to the election of one of the youngest U.S. Senators in American History. In taking on Delaware's venerable, two term, moderate Republican governor, Biden gave us a refreshing glimpse into a passionate twenty-nine year old's convictions on race, war, prosperity and the environment. But more importantly, with heart, passion and an uncommon grasp of the issues, Joe Biden threw open the doors of the Democratic party by insisting on youth participation at every level, giving my generation a seat at the table. This historic youth-driven campaign moved one nineteen year old volunteer to document

the behind-the-scenes unfoldings in a memoir, **AN ARMY OF YOUTH, The 1972 Senate Campaign of Joseph R. Biden Jr., © David Topel, 1972.**

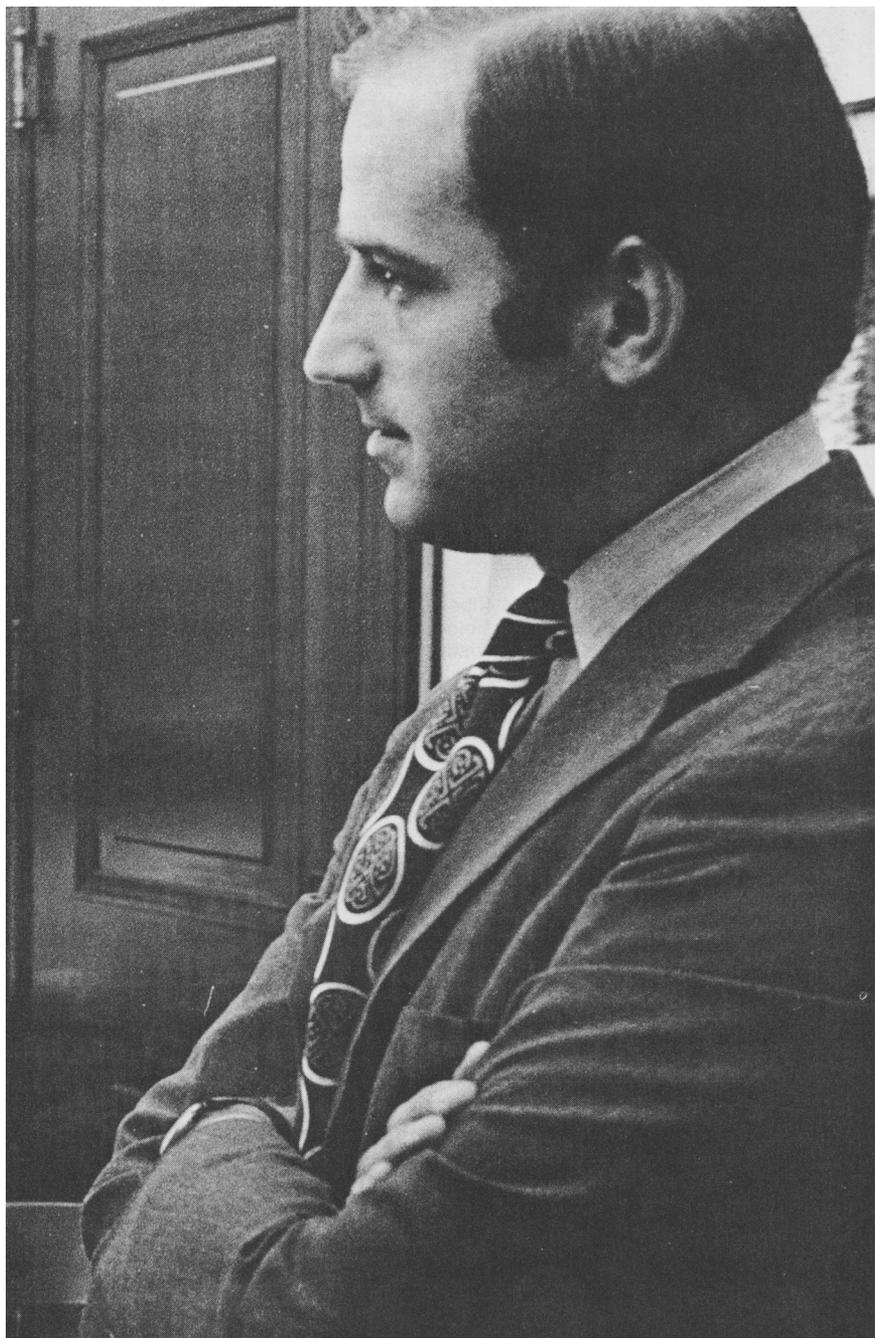
I finished writing my '72 Biden campaign memoir, *An Army of Youth*, three weeks after the unlikely victory that launched Joe Biden's meteoric rise into American politics. Two weeks later, on December 18, 1972, Joe experienced devastation beyond measure as his beloved wife Neilia and thirteen month old daughter Naomi were killed in a horrific automobile accident that also left both sons hospitalized with serious injuries.

In the depth of his depression and despair, Joe Biden had an immediate decision to make - either withdraw before being sworn in as the Senate's youngest member or put one foot in front of the other and proceed with the dream he and Neilia had envisioned, to take his place in the U.S. Senate.

On January 5, 1973, in the presence of a small group of family members and friends, Joe Biden took the oath of office for the U.S. Senate in the chapel of the Wilmington Memorial Hospital where son Beau was still in traction. In his brief remarks, Joe promised that if he found there was a conflict between being a good father or a good senator, fatherhood would prevail, concluding, "...we can always get another senator, but they can't get another father." Thus would begin Joe Biden's widely known daily train commute to and from Washington D.C. to serve his country in the Senate while raising his boys in Wilmington, Delaware.

That a man could regain his faith and footing through such unimaginable grief and move on to a life of service to country and devoted fatherhood is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit but more specifically, to the character and personal fortitude of Joe Biden.

I tucked my campaign memoir away in 1972, never expecting to read it again. Thirty-seven years later I read it to prepare for an interview by renowned author, Jules Witcover for his Vice Presidential biography, *Joe Biden, A Life of Trial and Redemption* (William Morrow & Co, 2010). I'm glad I did. As the presidential race of 2020 began to heat up, I felt the need to share the words written by my nineteen year old self, reflecting the integrity, insight, strategy, heart and sheer guts that defined the Biden



campaign of 1972. The Heart of a Leader is part historic documentation, part thank you letter to Joe Biden for inspiring a new generation to action and part love letter from one family of good conscience and civic engagement to another for a lifetime of mutual respect, support and service to country.

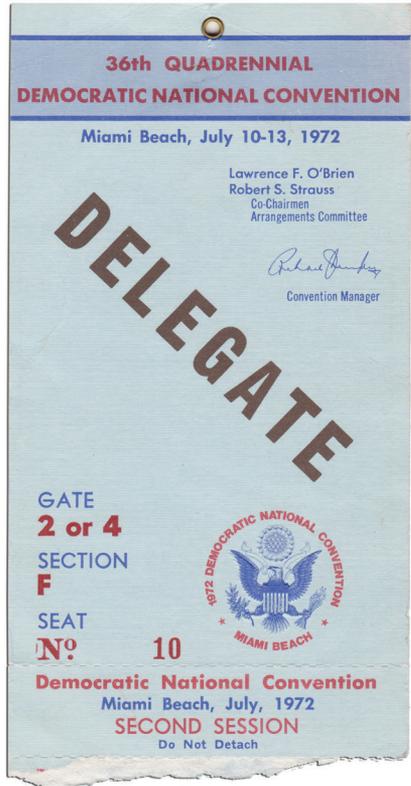
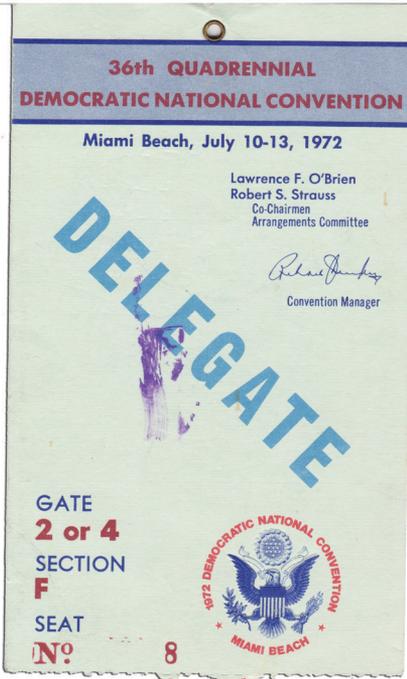
INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a house where politics was discussed in honorable terms. To participate at any level was a respected civic duty. I witnessed and believed in the values of authentic, selfless leadership, the potential for fairness in a flawed yet functional participatory democracy and the artful nobility of those I viewed as the architects of compromise - elected officials who, with passion and conviction, were able to compromise for the greater good, while respecting the right of others to differing views. Compromise. I miss it.

Those were the 1960's and 70's. What made our system work was the existence of significant numbers of conservative southern Democrats and moderate, somewhat liberal, mostly northern Republicans. Unlike the politics of today, this philosophical overlap allowed for earnest and productive debate on issues, less posturing and fewer opportunities for big corporate dollars to own issues. I was inspired by our shiny, somewhat accessible system of democracy and at the age of fourteen, was determined to visit our nation's capital to observe our legislators in action. Ironically, though from a family active in Delaware's Democratic party leadership, the civility of the day allowed for Republican Senator Caleb Boggs to arrange for my visit to the Senate. To this day, my February 29, 1968 visitor's pass to the U.S. Senate gallery remains a cherished keepsake and reminds me of the rights and responsibilities of "We the People."



Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, Chair of the Vice Presidential Selection Commission with commission researcher David Topel. Precipitated by the resignation of Vice Presidential candidate, Senator Thomas F. Eagleton, after his psychiatric treatment and electric shock therapy became public, a commission was created in 1972 to improve the process of selecting vice presidential nominees.



Delegate Credentials for the author's parents, Henry and Phyllis Topel, to attend the 1972 Democratic National Convention where Senator Thomas F. Eagleton would accept the Vice Presidential nomination, only to resign nineteen days later, pointing to the need for the Vice Presidential Selection Commission chaired by Humphrey.



U.S. Senate Gallery Pass issued by Republican Senator J. Caleb Boggs, February 29, 1968 to fourteen year old David Topel, who was determined to view the 90th Congress in session.

A political science major at the University of Delaware at age nineteen, I was given an opportunity to work as an aid and researcher to former Vice President Hubert Humphrey in his capacity as Chairman of the Vice Presidential Selection Commission, an initiative to help the Democratic party improve its process of selecting Vice Presidential candidates. At the same time, I was also eager to volunteer as a youth organizer for the U.S. Senate campaign of a bright and outspoken twenty-nine year old from my hometown, a man with solid convictions on matters ranging from racial equality and ending the war in Vietnam to youth empowerment. Fortunately, a progressive political science faculty allowed me to divide my time among my studies, my charge as researcher to the Vice Presidential Selection Commission and my role as a youth volunteer coordinator for the Biden campaign. Little did I know that Joe Biden was not only destined to become one of the youngest and most respected U.S. Senators in our nation's history, but like Humphrey, he would ascend to the Vice Presidency. Dreams were real. Passion, the nobility of service to one's country and the spirit of compromise and respect made them so.

Since the 1970's, polarization within the House and Senate has grown steadily. Big money has long been commonplace in politics and even decent public servants have rationalized it as a necessary evil to successful reelection efforts. Philosophical overlap between Democrats and Republicans is a thing of the past. Collaboration in the House and Senate is nearly impossible. What happens when compromise is discarded as readily as obsolete technology? Just one option remains - to outnumber and overpower one's opposition. Sound familiar? It should. It's the definition of war. We've become a nation at war, with itself. Even worse, recently it has become routine, almost fashionable to declare one's political allegiance and use everything in one's arsenal to destroy the opposition. Friends and family are often among the casualties.

Joe Biden's got about ten years on me. There are pros and cons to this fact. What brings me hope is just this. First, like me, his roots are grounded in a time where the nobility of compromise and respect made our system work. He doesn't just know of a time where we served in government as brothers and sisters devoted to the greater good, he lived it and continues to do so. The legislation he co-sponsored with Republicans exemplifies his gift for reaching across the aisle. His Bipartisan Ranking Index

(BRI) during his years in the Senate (the nonpartisan measure of a U.S. Senator's or Representative's inclination and ability to work with the opposite party) kept him in the top 20% of all elected officials. Through his final days in the Senate he was known for seeking out Republican co-sponsorship for legislation. Secondly, and perhaps the motivation behind this book, since his first campaign, Joe Biden has routinely recognized the youngest among us, that next and upcoming generation of young adults, as the most vital cog in the political machine and the key to real progress. It is my hope that today's youth get a glimpse of and support this lifelong core belief.

Like Joe Biden or not, doubt his legislative voting record or support it, point to his failings, justify them or both, it is his process, his belief in reaching across the aisle in the spirit of compromise and respect combined with his insistence on youth empowerment and participation, that just may ignite the spark that restores our system and ends a civil war that is tearing our nation, our friends and our families apart.

So why look back to his first campaign? Why now? Our nation is in crisis. To the rest of the world we grow increasingly unrecognizable each day. The slide into totalitarianism comes in small increments. It requires the dismantling of one of the most important fundamentals upon which our Constitution is built and the reason our country can withstand and absorb differing opinions. That fundamental is checks and balances. The genius of checks and balances is that each of our three branches of government can limit the power of the others. Our Constitution assures that power is shared among our Legislative (Congress), Executive (The President) and Judicial (Supreme Court) branches of government.

The confluence of a Supreme Court appointed through radical partisanship and a Senate Majority in blind lockstep with its president has the potential to create the perfect storm to debilitate our system of checks and balances. This is how authoritarianism is born. A recent example includes the dismantling of independent editorial autonomy within our nation's global voice, Voice of America and its many affiliates. For those unfamiliar with its beginnings, in an effort to counter Nazi propaganda, in 1942 our nation created a centralized media voice, Voice of America, based on the principle of reporting unbiased, independent, nonpartisan truth in more than forty languages to the world. Voice

of America has been a beacon of hope for seventy-eight years to two hundred million weekly listeners, many living under tyrannical rule. The current administration recently fired many senior executives at Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and other affiliates, to be replaced by political loyalists. Like other actions of the current administration, this is an alarming move in the direction of authoritarianism. The politics of hate and obstruction have become the norm as longstanding safeguards slip away one by one. Without intervention by men and women like Joe Biden, people who reflect the more enlightened values to which this country so painstakingly evolved, even greater polarization leading to unimagined consequences is America's likely destiny. The 2020 presidential election will determine more than a simple balance of power. It may well be a last opportunity to move in the direction of the kind of civility that allows for compromise and inclusion exemplified by Joe Biden since his humble beginnings in public office. Why now? What better time to look back to that first campaign, to appreciate one of the earliest models of youth empowerment in politics and to reflect on the core beliefs, strategies, values and yes, on the heart of the man once known as the young and unlikely candidate who swung open the doors to youth in American politics.