

Postcards From the Edge of Cannibalism

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President Joe Biden speaks during a campaign event at Martin Luther King Recreation Center in Philadelphia, Pa., on April 18, 2024. (Drew Hallowell/Getty Images)



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4/23/2024

Updated: 4/23/2024

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Commentary

SCRANTON, Pennsylvania—Several years ago the Smithsonian magazine ran an elegant story about the use of postcards in American culture as a way both to communicate to loved ones far away and to illustrate what the traveler wants you to see about where they have been.

The key phrase is “wants you to see.”

Smithsonian used as an example the work of Curt Teich, a German immigrant who in 1931 used his small printing company to introduce idyllic, brightly colored postcards that always included the familiar “Greetings from,” then inserted the name of a town or state the family member or friend was visiting.

The postcards “depicted an optimistic view of America,” and it is fair to say there were some rose-colored glasses in the effort, as postcards rarely depicted decay.

Well, President Joe Biden used a similar style this week when he bounced around Pennsylvania and used postcard-like images to sell himself as a man rooted to the state (Scranton), who has steelworkers’ backs (Pittsburgh), and who has united his party by using the Kennedy family as a backdrop (Philadelphia).

Granted, Biden’s first speech, at the Scranton Cultural Center at the Masonic Temple, was an angry, populist one meant to illustrate that he was one of them, just Joey from North Washington Avenue, whose values are much different from his opponent’s in Mar-a-Lago in Florida. The crowd was by invitation and small, about 200.

Biden’s second speech was with campaign volunteers at the Carpenters and Joiners Local 445. That event was much smaller still and not the pitchfork-and-brimstone speech he gave earlier in the day.

While the imagery was meant to convey a man going after the rich to help the middle class, that is really not the issue for voters right now. After all, it is not the rich causing food prices to be out of reach, or car and homeowners insurance costs to soar 25 percentage points, nor are the rich keeping our border open for smugglers carrying fentanyl up to Akron, Ohio, and making its way across Pennsylvania to Scranton, leading to addiction or overdoses.

This is a man who sent a postcard of himself to voters that the national press conveyed for him on a very superficial level. Yet there are problems with his message, because Biden's connection to people's problems is virtually nonexistent.

His trip to Pittsburgh was meant to be a postcard of him standing shoulder to shoulder with the steelworkers, taking on China by calling for higher U.S. tariffs on their metal products. If you were only looking at the glossy postcard, you'd think, "Good on him."

However, there is a lot more unpacking to do with this imagery, beginning with the other 900 unemployed steelworkers not invited to the event who just lost their jobs at the steelmaking tinplate mill 30 miles up the river. These jobs were lost thanks, at least arguably, to a decision from the U.S. International Trade Commission not to tax tin from several countries, including China. So at the same time President Biden was bragging about taxing China's steel, 900 men and women who loved their jobs, loved working locally, and loved making a decent wage were at a job fair at the local community center.

Seeing people meander around the job fair was definitely not the postcard image the Biden campaign or the press was going to send out to voters.

As it was put by one steelworker who was not inside the room with President Biden and the handpicked group of elected officials and union leadership, "Who leadership supports is very different from who the rank and file support, and I'll just leave it at that." He was echoing a refrain I've reported for years all across the industrial Great Lakes and Midwest.

The other two postcards you are not going to see from Pittsburgh were, first, the massive crowd of protesters along Stanwix Street—one set chanting, "Hey hey, ho ho, Bidenomics has got to go," the other chanting, "Hey hey, ho ho, Genocide Joe has got to go."

Then there was the already viral moment with the steelworkers when President Biden claimed that after the aircraft of his uncle, 2nd Lt. Ambrose J. Finnegan Jr., had gone down in the Pacific during World War II, the likely reason Finnegan was never found was that "cannibals" were in the area.

His uncle Boise, as President Biden referred to him, “flew those single-engine planes as reconnaissance over war zones. And he got shot down in New Guinea, and they never found the body because there used to be, there are a lot of cannibals, for real, in that part of New Guinea.”

Might be hard to illustrate that in a postcard.

However, the press somewhat covered for the president, with anodyne headlines such as NBC’s “President Biden mischaracterizes the circumstances of his uncle’s death” and the Associated Press’s “Biden is off on the details of his uncle’s death.”

Just in case you are wondering, the website for the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency says Finnegan and the other two men were not shot down but fell prey to engine trouble, and not over land with cannibals but instead over the ocean, where they never emerged from the crash.

The final trip to Philadelphia was meant to illustrate a united Democratic Party—hugging and so forth—when he stood with the Kennedy family, obviously without Robert Kennedy Jr., who is running for president as an independent.

Now, had that photo been with the far-left members of his party in the House or the 100-plus students at Columbia University who were just suspended for occupying the school’s South Lawn, or perhaps the 28 Google employees who just lost their jobs for sit-in protests at their offices in New York and Sunnyvale, that would probably illustrate a united Democratic Party.

President Biden and his team chose to place him in three very Democratic cities where he is all but guaranteed to win in November. The Pennsylvania presidential contest, however, will not be decided primarily in those three cities, but rather in the rural/post-industrial counties such as Erie, Northampton, Luzerne, Bucks, and Beaver.

President Biden has forgotten how not to play it safe. He has forgotten the world outside of his bubble of Washington elites, his wife, and his brothers and sister, whose own lives are cloistered from the outside world of average people. His only impulse that remains from his time

as a U.S. senator is a tendency to go off script, a lot, and talk about things either too far in the past for people to connect with or that have nothing to do with their daily concerns.

While it is important to show up in the most important electoral state in the country—President Biden needs Pennsylvania more than former President Donald Trump does—where you show up matters. What also matters is your message. Taxing the rich isn't on everyone's mind. The cost of groceries is. And telling people inflation is going down is also a bad message, because the prices themselves have never come down.

Perhaps if the president had to go shopping and put an item back on the shelves because it was too expensive, he'd have a better idea. Or perhaps if he had gone downriver to where the 900 steelworkers were at a job fair, he would have changed more minds.

And changing minds is what winning is all about in a state that is all about the margins.

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Salena Zito has held a long, successful career as a national political reporter. Since 1992, she has interviewed every U.S. president and vice president, as well as top leaders in Washington, including secretaries of state, speakers of the House and U.S. Central Command generals. Her passion, though, is interviewing thousands of people across the country. She reaches the Everyman and Everywoman through the lost art of shoe-leather journalism, having traveled along the back roads of 49 states.

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