

ELECTIONS

'We have to do better': Biden courts Hispanic voters, veterans in first Florida visit as nominee

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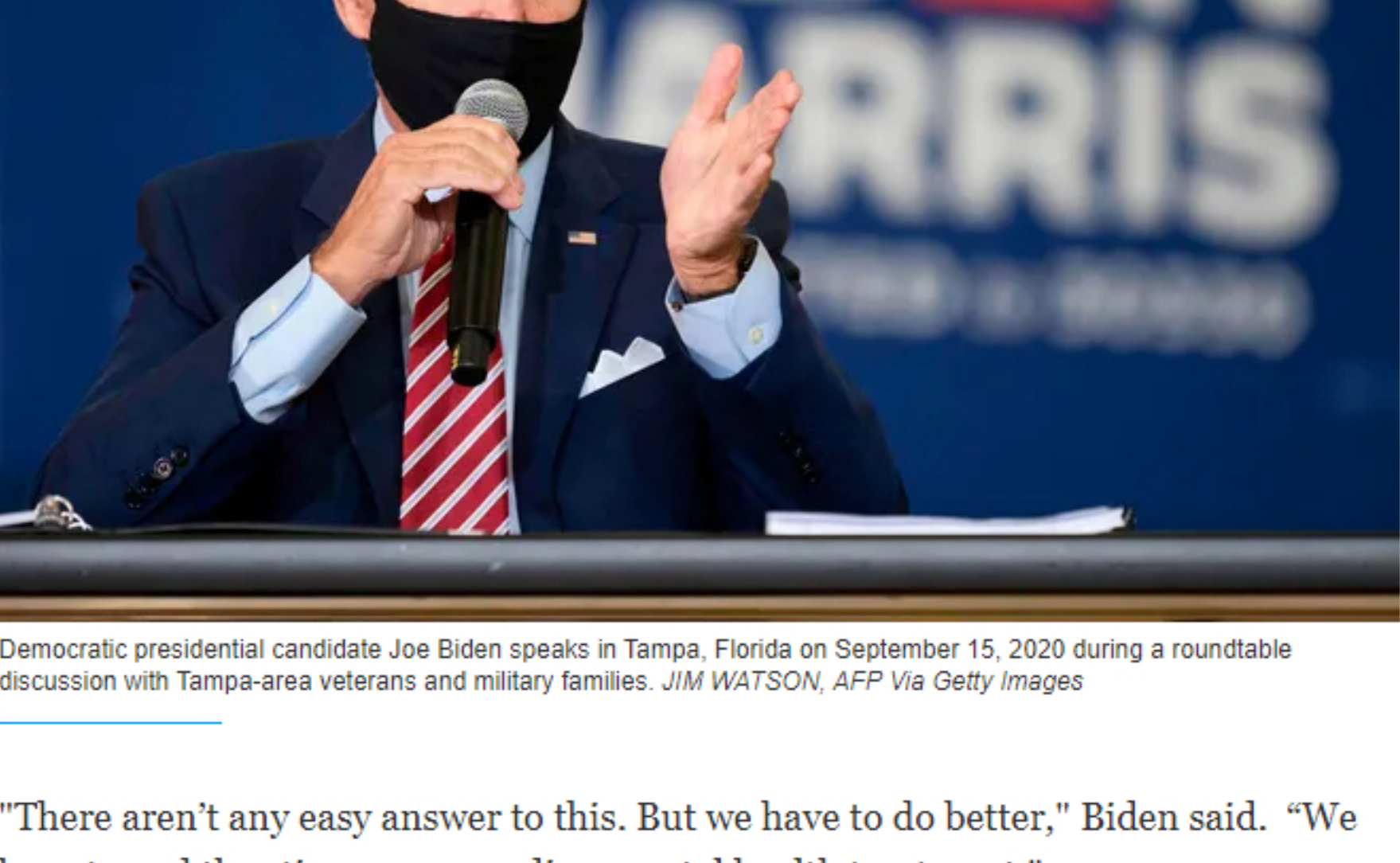
Biden slams Trump over remarks about veterans
Joe Biden tore into President Donald Trump for his reported remarks referring to fallen soldiers as “suckers” during a Tuesday campaign visit to the key battleground state of Florida. (Sept. 15) AP

TAMPA – Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden told Florida veterans Tuesday that supporting the military and providing for veterans after their service are sacred obligations for the country must improve.

Biden said doctors at the Department of Veterans Affairs should be paid more competitive salaries and a pipeline of training must be established to staff doctors in rural areas. He also advocated for easier access to healthcare for military-related problems such as traumatic brain injury or from burn pits.

“I will never treat you with anything other than the honor and respect and dignity you deserve,” the former vice president said during a roundtable at Hillsborough Community College in Tampa. “I will always have your back, like you’ve had our back and our country’s back.”

Biden also said more efforts must be made to prevent veteran suicides, which he called an epidemic. DeSheun Hines, a Marine veteran who advises students at the college, described at the roundtable how he knew a Marine who committed suicide after being turned away from treatment at a veterans hospital.



Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks in Tampa, Florida on September 15, 2020 during a roundtable discussion with Tampa-area veterans and military families. JIM WATSON, AFP Via Getty Images

“There aren’t any easy answer to this. But we have to do better,” Biden said. “We have to end the stigma surrounding mental health treatment.”

The Rev. Dr. Glenn Dames Jr., senior pastor at Allen Temple A.M.E. Church and an Army veteran, described working with a veteran of the Vietnam War who has been retired for 40 years and who suffered ailments from Agent Orange and is still fighting for benefits.

“I think that’s abhorrent,” Dames said, urging Biden to expedite benefits for veterans.

As a senator, Biden sponsored the initial legislation to provide benefits for troops harmed by Agent Orange. Biden said the legislation shifted the burden so that troops could receive benefits if exposed to the defoliant rather than proving the chemicals caused the harm. He said similar healthcare access must be provided for traumatic brain injury or from burn pits.

“We can’t let this be delayed again, denying access because a vet couldn’t prove a direct connection,” Biden said.

Biden’s visit comes as Trump’s support for the military and veterans are under fire. Trump criticized his former defense secretary, retired Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, as “highly overrated” on Fox and Friends on Tuesday. Mattis blasted Trump in June as a threat to democracy for militarizing the federal response to racial-justice protests.

“I didn’t like him. I fired him,” Trump said. “To me, he was a terrible general. He was a bad leader.”

Controversy over allegations in The Atlantic

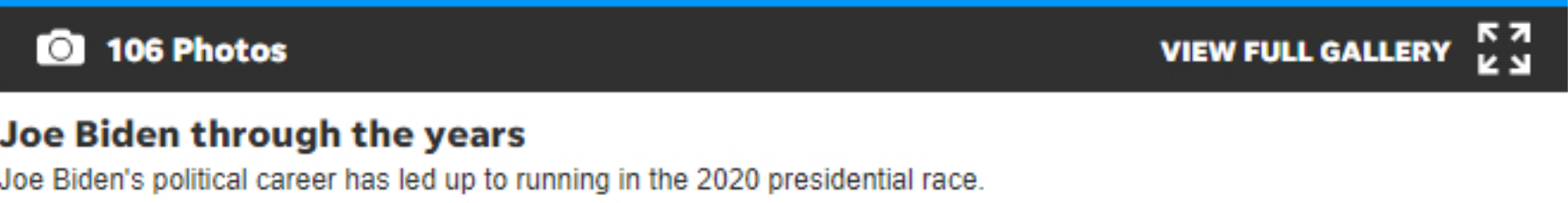
Trump adamantly denied a Sept. 3 article in The Atlantic magazine, about his decision in 2018 to cancel a planned visit to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery near Paris to honor America’s dead from World War I. Trump was quoted by unnamed sources in the magazine as saying the cemetery was “filled with losers,” and that more than 1,800 Marines who died at Belleau Wood were “suckers.”

The White House insisted that the cemetery visit was canceled because heavy fog made it unsafe for Marine One to make the flight. The administration also released a list of two dozen officials who deny that Trump made the disparaging remarks.

“I would be willing to swear on anything that I never said that about our fallen heroes,” Trump has said. “There is nobody that respects them more.”

Biden took a swipe at Trump by recalling that the most meaningful moments of his service as vice president visiting wounded veterans at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and having them volunteer to return to their units, even if they had suffered an amputation.

“Does that sound like the heart and grit and patriotism of a sucker or a loser?” Biden said. “Sounds like heroism to me. Sounds like what patriotism is all about.”



Joe Biden through the years
Joe Biden’s political career has led up to running in the 2020 presidential race.

Biden courting crucial Latino voters in swing state

Later Tuesday, Biden attended a Hispanic Heritage Month event in Kissimmee at Osceola Heritage Park as part of his first visit to the Sunshine State as the nominee.

Biden, whose support has lagged among Hispanics in the key battleground state, told reporters Tuesday that he will have to make the case that Hispanics will be much better off without Trump as president.

“That case is an easy one. Education, health care, immigration, the whole notion of dealing with COVID in a way that doesn’t so damage the Hispanic community which is hurt very badly, much worse than the Caucasian community,” Biden said. “It’s about talking about jobs, it’s about to be willing to step up and provide opportunities for people.”

Biden was introduced by musicians Ricky Martin and Luis Fonsi, and actress Eva Longoria.

“The Hispanic vote is critical,” said Rep. Darren Soto, D-Fla. “We must elect Joe Biden to president of the United States, to solve the pandemic, to restore the economy and to build back better.”

Florida is one of a half-dozen battleground states where Trump and Biden will compete for the White House. Trump narrowly won his adopted state in 2016 by fewer than 113,000 votes out of 9.5 million cast, and Republicans control the governor’s mansion and both chambers of the legislature.

Trump traveled to Jupiter, Florida, on Sept. 8 to sign an extension of the moratorium on coastal drilling around the state.

At the Biden roundtable, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard “Beef” Haddad urged Biden to extend the moratorium on drilling by legislation rather than an executive order that could be reversed. Haddad said 20 military bases in Florida rely on test firing ranges in the Gulf of Mexico, which could he hindered through drilling, and that an oil spill could damage the state’s coastline.

“Failing to extend the eastern Gulf moratorium will impact military readiness, preparedness and will ultimately threaten our national defense,” Haddad said.

Biden said he would extend the moratorium permanently.

“I can guarantee you, if I am president there will be no offshore drilling and I extend the moratorium,” Biden said.

At the Hispanic heritage event, Biden said everyone other than Native Americans or people forced here by slavery came by choice, looking for opportunity. Biden’s ancestors fled the Irish famine of the 1840s.

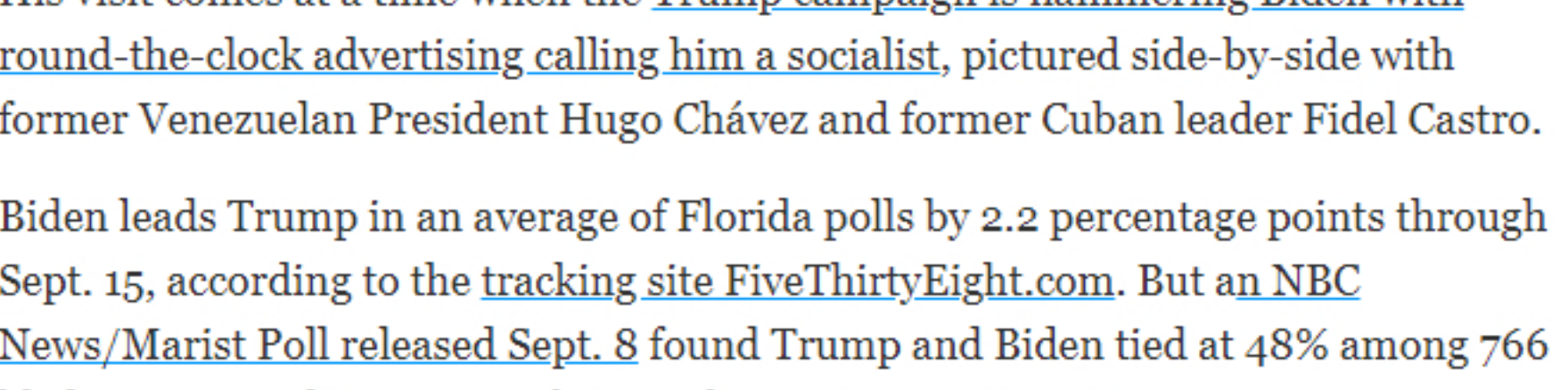
“The only thing they had in their pocket was hope,” Biden said.

In a community with a large Puerto Rican population, Biden released a plan for helping the U.S. territory recover from Hurricane Maria. Biden proposed to invest in economic development initiatives, provide debt relief and expand access to education for the island’s 3 million residents. He contrasted his proposals with Trump tossing paper towels at a relief station after the storm.

“It was mortifying,” Biden said.

Biden said he would work with the territory’s leaders to determine their status. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has warned against elected Biden because Democrats would seek statehood for Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

“I happen to believe statehood,” Biden said. “The people of Puerto Rico must decide.”



Trump expands ban on new offshore drilling sites
President Donald Trump signs executive order to expand a ban on offshore drilling while visiting the battleground state of Florida. (Sept. 8) AP

Biden’s running mate, Sen. Kamala Harris of California, campaigned Thursday in Florida with her husband, Doug Emhoff. Harris met in Miami Gardens with Black community leaders to hear about their concerns with the coronavirus pandemic and the economy. Emhoff met with rabbis in Aventura to hear about Jewish issues.

Biden said Monday after a climate-change speech in Wilmington, Delaware, that his message for Florida is that is “going to work like the devil” to make sure he turns out every Latino vote.

His visit comes at a time when the Trump campaign is hammering Biden with round-the-clock advertising calling him a socialist, pictured side-by-side with former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and former Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

Biden leads Trump in an average of Florida polls by 2.2 percentage points through Sept. 15, according to the tracking site FiveThirtyEight.com. But an NBC News/Marist Poll released Sept. 8 found Trump and Biden tied at 48% among 766 likely voters, with a margin of error of 4.5 percentage points.

Biden led by three percentage points in a Florida Atlantic University poll released Tuesday, within the poll’s margin of error. Biden had been up by six points in an FAU poll in May.

“Florida continues to be too close to call, but the enthusiasm still favors President Trump, and that could be the difference,” said Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at FAU.

Latinos who are key to the Florida vote remain a contested demographic, according to the Marist poll. Trump is doing well against Biden among Florida’s Latinos – 50% to 46% – after trailing Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton in 2016 exit polls by 62% to 35%, according to the poll.

Many Hispanic voters in Florida are of Cuban descent, and some may be wary of the push by Biden and former President Barack Obama to normalize diplomatic and trade relations with Cuba, something Trump reversed. The president has targeted Cuban voters and those from other oppressive socialist regimes, such as Venezuela.

Trump’s campaign held a Latinos for Trump “MAGA meet-up” in Kissimmee on Tuesday to counter Biden’s message.

“While President Trump fights for all Americans, Biden’s trip to Florida today is a stunning reminder that Biden is not only failing to resonate with Hispanic voters but he is hemorrhaging support in the Latino community because of his far-left agenda,” Trump’s campaign said in a press release.

Biden is getting help in his Hispanic outreach effort from billionaire Michael Bloomberg, the former New York mayor, who announced recently that he will spend up to \$100 million in Florida to support the former vice president. Part of that effort will target Hispanic voters.

