



BY JASON SHAN // IN MY OPINION

## “What else do you have left?”

It was a question that my parents had asked and one I had asked myself countless times during the summer before high school. I had quit nearly all my extracurricular activities, so as I entered high school, where there was an unrelenting pressure to overachieve, I felt lost.

My life in middle school was a comfortable pattern that had been drilled into me for years: school, homework, then the day’s extracurricular activity. As a result, my schedule was superficially filled: I never felt a true passion to dribble a basketball down the court or read the music of some long-deceased classical pianist, but it gave me a sense that I was doing something. For years I repeated the tooth-pulling process of begrudgingly dragging my feet from home to sports practice.

I fell prey to the sunk-cost fallacy, reasoning that the hardships I labored through were the stepping stones to a “good” college and a better future. This reap-what-you-sow mentality, coupled with my comfort in the established norm and my parents’ expectations, resulted in my aversion to change. Quitting was never an option.

One day, as I was preparing for basketball practice, in a spur-of-the-moment decision, I told my mom that I wanted to quit. I had the simple epiphany that I shouldn’t be dedicating so much of my life to an activity that I didn’t want to do. I realized that I had agency over my own life, and as a maturing teenager, I no longer needed to live by the path my parents decided. Talking to my parents helped me see that they trusted my decisions and, as platitudinal as it sounds, wanted what was best for me.

The second turning point was when I quit piano. I had played piano for years, yet after a few lessons with a substitute teacher, the new environment gave me a fresh perspective, opening my eyes to the fact that I never liked playing the piano. This time, quitting was a more thought-out process, and after discussing with my parents and the academy director, I concluded that it would be best if I moved on.

In retrospect, my impulsive decisions bespoke my immature age. If I were to redo it, I would have talked more with my family and friends to better balance my parents’ wishes with my newfound independence.

Quitting ended up being the right choice for me. My schedule opened up for me to pursue things I was genuinely interested in. In eighth grade, I joined the Cupertino Education Endowment Foundation, one of the first organizations I ever joined of my own volition, catalyzing a future filled with more independent endeavors. In freshman year, I was part of a youth group that would later work with a local media channel to host a community-wide video competition, and in early 2021, I helped organize a youth-led AAPI march and rally after the rise of anti-AAPI sentiments. I joined these organizations because of my own interest in making meaningful change. I was also able to dedicate time to computer science through various projects that touched on concepts like website development, machine learning, app development and blockchains. I thought that quitting would reduce my opportunities, but it instead opened me to countless possibilities I never knew existed.

# BBB: Biden Be Better



GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION BY CATHERINE ZHOU

BY MEERA NAMBIAR

During the 2020 election, Biden campaigned on the slogan “Better Days Lie Ahead.” But almost a year later, is the country truly better off? Many Americans disagree, with Biden’s approval rating dropping to 42% as of Dec. 2. A loss in Virginia and a close win in New Jersey in the Nov. 2 gubernatorial elections further evinced Biden and Democrats’ decreasing popularity even in states that Biden easily won in the 2020 presidential election. Though Biden’s presidency started wrong with a COVID-19 stimulus bill, problems ranging from alarming inflation to party infighting show that Biden has not been the president he promised to be.

Biden started his presidency by upending many Trump-era policies. The U.S. rejoined the Paris Climate Accords and the World Health Organization, turning back from Trump’s isolationist sentiments. He reversed many of Trump’s most controversial policies by halting construction on the U.S.-Mexico border wall and removing the Muslim ban.

Biden also improved upon COVID-19 policies from the Trump era, implementing a science-based policy with mask mandates on federal land and vaccine requirements for federal workers. Vaccination rates also substantially increased, with Biden succeeding in his promise to administer 100 million vaccinations in 100 days.

“Biden’s COVID-19 plan has been pretty well-executed,” sophomore and Lynbrook Politics member Ryan Zhou said. “He has been trying to increase the administration of vaccines to the public with incentive programs.”

Under the Biden administration, there has been a nationwide decrease in COVID-19 mortality and hospitalization rates, especially for the vaccinated. One of Biden’s greatest pandemic accomplishments is the American Rescue Act, passed in March 2021. The \$1.9 trillion bill gave stimulus checks to millions of Americans and helped small businesses struggling with pandemic losses.

However, one of Biden’s biggest failures so far was the Afghanistan withdrawal and the subsequent reemergence of the Taliban. Once in office, Biden promised to withdraw the troops and end America’s longest war. However, weeks before the withdrawal was set to finish, the Taliban took over the Afghan government, causing chaos as people tried to flee the country. Afghanistan is now in the same place as it was twenty years ago: Freedom of press and women’s rights are heavily restricted, as women are banned from school and jobs and unable to move freely in public. Now, the Afghan economy is on the brink of collapse without foreign aid, and millions of children could face malnutrition.

“This was a lose-lose situation,” said Economics and AP Government teacher Jeffery Bale. “[When] you look back at the

presidents [who] have been involved in the Afghan war, nobody wanted to be the president that removed the troops. So it fell into Biden’s lap. Although there could have been improvements, it was gonna be a disaster for whoever was in office at the time.”

There were no good options for Biden when it came to dealing with Afghanistan: If troops remained, the endless war would have continued, and if troops withdrew, Afghans would have had to fend for themselves. However, the U.S. had an obligation to the people of Afghanistan to prevent cruel punishment from the Taliban and ensure that all women had the right to education and freedom. Biden’s failed withdrawal leaves Afghanistan with an uncertain future of violence and oppression.

One issue that Biden has not addressed enough is one of the most controversial topics in the U.S.: immigration. Biden tried to reinstate the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, and the Build Back Better Plan includes some provisions about immigration, but immigration remains one of the lowest priorities on Biden’s agenda. The Southern border saw a marked increase in the inflow of illegal immigrants as well as the volume of Haitian refugees at the border waiting for asylum. Biden’s immigration policy has left almost everyone unhappy, with liberals believing he is being too strict and conservatives believing his policies are leaving the borders open.

“Immigration hasn’t been the best issue,” Zhou said. “There has been a surge of immigrants, and the government has not been treating those immigrants very well.”

After months of negotiation, Congress finally passed Biden’s bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act on Nov. 6. The law aims to fix America’s aging infrastructure, with solutions ranging from building roads and bridges to repairing broadband lines. The law, which had support from Democrats and some Republicans, proved that bipartisanship and compromise was still possible, even in today’s divided political climate. The bill’s passage is a big step toward improving the lives of Americans and demonstrates Biden’s ability to fulfill his promise of reducing gridlock in Congress and being a man of compromise. However,

because it took months after Senate approval to be passed by the House, the law was passed too late to help the Democrats in the Nov. 2 elections.

“The infrastructure bill was one of Biden’s weak areas because it only recently passed,” freshman and Lynbrook Politics member Sanaa Lokray said. “He could have probably worked harder on pushing it. I feel like he just let the bill get stuck in Congress for a while.”

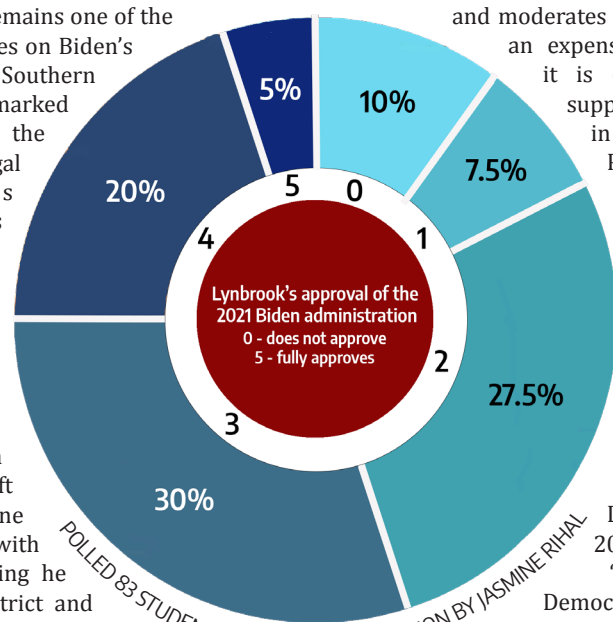
Similar to the infrastructure bill, Biden’s key social spending bill, the Build Back Better Plan, is still being debated in Congress and has not been passed by the Senate. If approved, the bill will supply Americans with provisions and paid family leave to switch to renewable energy. But due to infighting between liberals and moderates in the Democratic Party, the bill remains stalled. Biden’s entire agenda rests on this bill, and failure to pass it indicates failure from the Democrats in improving the country’s broken social programs system.

The Democratic Party is split between liberals who advocate for mass reform and moderates who do not want an expensive bill. Though it is difficult to gain support of everyone in the Democratic Party, passing a compromised bill is better than not passing one at all. If Biden cannot unite the party and pass the Build Back Better Plan, it could cost the Democrats the 2022 midterms.

“I think the Democratic Party needs to get in order and get their priorities in line because the more dysfunctional the Democrats are, the less likely they’re going to stay a major player in national politics,” Lokray said.

Overall, Biden’s first year of presidency has flashed both positive and negative aspects. His COVID-19 response was well executed and has led to widespread vaccinations, and the passage of his infrastructure bill will improve America’s physical infrastructure. Despite these successes, Biden has faced problems with withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, preventing an immigrant crisis at the border and passing his social spending bill.

“If I had to give him a grade, I’d give him a C plus,” Bale said. “I think he’s shown real competency in some areas, and I think that there has been a real lack of awareness in others. So I would say that it has been a moderate first year.”



POLLED 83 STUDENTS - GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION BY JASMINE RIHAL