

Biden needs to do all he can to find Austin Tice

BY TONY HUNTER

In the 12 years since Austin Tice was abducted in Syria, his family and his coworkers at McClatchy have grieved at his absence, despaired at silence from the Syrian government and prayed that promises from three U.S. presidents would turn into actions that brought Austin home.

Now, more than any moment since he was taken from us, we have a reason to believe that Austin may return. The government of Bashar al-Assad has fallen in Sy-



Austin Tice

ria. Rebels and others are opening the gates of Assad's many prisons, and the world is watching as captives walk from their cells to freedom. We hope the next one will be our colleague, Austin.

That hope was boosted with the news that Roger D. Carstens, the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, had arrived in the capital city of Damascus along with two other top U.S. diplomats. The update, coming al-

most two weeks after al-Assad fled the country, was welcome.

Journalists and non-governmental organizations have been on the ground in Syria, traveling from prison to prison, searching for clues to Austin's whereabouts. The U.S. military, the FBI and the CIA are standing by should information surface.

Until Dec. 20, representatives from our State Department had not joined them.

State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters at a briefing earlier that week that security was a concern but

that U.S. officials had been "in communications with groups on the ground in Syria."

The engagement of U.S. envoys is a hopeful sign amid a troubling question: Is a president who said it's a top priority to return American hostages taking full advantage of this critical moment? The rebels who toppled Assad have said they would work directly with the U.S. government to help find Austin, and some reports indicate he has been moved regularly while in captivity, including perhaps being placed more recently in the basement of the Syrian

Air Force intelligence building.

Austin's mother, Debra Tice, says the family has "credible information" that Austin may be held in a prison outside Damascus and that a new source told them that Austin is alive and healthy. In a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Debra asked that Israel pause military strikes in that area so that rescuers could search for Austin. Israeli officials have said publicly that they have done so.

"In the absence of the bombing, they'll be able to make a more thorough search" for hidden cells in tunnels near the presidential palace there, Debra said.

We are hopeful senior U.S. representatives have arrived in time and will engage with rebels to unearth clues about Austin's

movement and whereabouts. We believe they should pull out the stops to bring this to closure.

The incoming Trump administration appears to care passionately about Austin's case, but we understand that the staffing and logistical demands a new administration faces could mean weeks or months might pass before a robust search for Austin can be launched. The Biden administration already has that personnel and structure in place.

We at McClatchy join Austin's family in imploring President Biden to remember that Austin is not just a Syrian captive and American hostage but a colleague, a brother and a son. Please, bring him home.

Tony Hunter is chairman and CEO of the McClatchy Media Company.

Eventually, history will be kinder to Joe Biden than the pollsters

BY MATTHEW A. WINKLER
Bloomberg Opinion

Now that pollsters are declaring President Joe Biden a "failure," historians will reckon with too many economic signals rendering the prevailing narrative little more than media noise.

From the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 that ushered in the longest period of unemployment below 4% since the 1960s to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 that paved the way for road and bridge building, and from the Chips and Science Act of 2022 that sparked the biggest manufacturing construction boom the country has ever seen to 2022's Inflation Reduction Act that has led to many tens of billions of investment in new technologies that are already leading to new sources of climate-friendly energy, history will show that the 46th president laid the groundwork for U.S. exceptionalism lasting many years, perhaps even decades, after his administration has long ended.

This is why the U.S.



SAUL LOEB/AFP via Getty Images/TNS, file

U.S. President Joe Biden speaks about his proposed federal budget for the fiscal year 2024 at the Finishing Trades Institute in Philadelphia, Pa., on March 9, 2023.

economy is growing faster than any developed country as measured by the International Monetary Fund. It's why America has been able to avoid a recession that so many pundits said would be inevitable by now. It's why the U.S. stock market is the envy of the world, soaring 58% percent under Biden's watch, compared with just 2.5% for

everyone else as measured by the MSCI indexes.

No U.S. president in the last half century comes close to replicating Biden's superior score among most of the 15 measures of relative prosperity weighted equally, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. The 2.9% annual increase in non-farm payrolls, 7.9% nominal rate of annualized

GDP growth, 14.1% increase in homeowners equity, 5.1% surge in average hourly earnings and the dollar's 19% appreciation against a basket of major currencies are just some of the metrics that make Biden the uncontested economic leader.

What makes this performance all the more remarkable is that Biden

inherited the once-in-a-century COVID-19 pandemic that led to a catastrophic 1.12 million deaths in the U.S. alone. Remember that at the time of the 2020 election, a recovery from both the pandemic and the worst recession since the Great Depression presided over by Donald Trump was still in doubt. Biden then delivered what had been largely missing for the previous two decades: fiscal stimulus.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Biden economy benefitted a wider swath of Americans. The poverty rate fell to 11.1%, the second lowest in data going back to 1973, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Also, the Gini Index of Income Inequality declined for two straight years, the first time that has happened since the early 1970s. Under Biden, household net worth has surged by an unprecedented \$32.1 trillion through mid-2024. Americans are spending less than 10% of their incomes servicing debt, a record low in data going back to 1980 and excluding the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 when many payments were put on hold.

The problem for Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris was that all of these accomplishments were overshadowed by the sudden scourge of inflation due mostly, according to

researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and elsewhere, to the pandemic-era disruption to the global supply chain under Trump, and a housing market that effectively "trapped" millions of Americans in place.

There is light at the end of the housing tunnel. With inflation subsiding, the Fed has started to lower its target for the federal funds rate, and the cost of financing a home is starting to drop as well.

Unfortunately for Biden and Harris, little of this context was shared with readers, listeners or viewers by corporate or social media. On the contrary, many disingenuous media overwhelmed the favorable outlook with misinformation that continues unabated from domestic and foreign perpetrators. Incumbents around the world are being ousted in elections by voters still scarred by the pandemic and looking to assign blame.

Like Biden, Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson were former vice presidents who also shared much greater disapproval than approval from voters during their waning days in the White House. Only much later did Truman and Johnson garner a much greater appreciation for their handling of the economy. It's likely to be the same with Biden.

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wonder. It mainly gives him a gnawing hunger to know more, to feel that transcendent joy again, to sate himself with the presence of an unseen but very real God.

"Faith" is the wrong

word for faith as I experience it," he says. "The word 'faith' implies possession of something, whereas I experience faith as a yearning for something beautiful that I can sense but not fully grasp.

For me faith is more about longing and thirsting than knowing and possessing.

... Desire pushes me onward. The path is confusing and sometimes discouraging, but mostly the longing for the holy is a nice kind of longing to have."

Yes, that's it exactly.

Later, he aptly describes faith as "more like falling

in love that it is like finding the answer to a complicated question."

He's not sure whether he's still primarily Jewish in his spiritual leanings or whether, as some of his Jewish friends have suggested, he's "crossed over to Team Christian" because he buys into both the Old and New Testaments.

There's much more to this honest, humble, soul-touching essay. His practice of journalism has been affected by a biblical moral logic that says "the meek shall be exalted, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst, where there is humility there is majesty, where there is weakness there is

might."

Do yourself a kindness as this year ends and a new, uncertain one looms: find Brooks' essay. Read it all. Then read it again.

Paul Prather is pastor of Bethesda Church near Mount Sterling. You can email him at praptd@yahoo.com.

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BLACKFORD

weigh in. School choice and supporting public schools are not diametrically opposed — both are pro-student. At the end of the day, we want every student to be successful, contributing members of our commonwealth. But we have to do more than just increase funding. We've seen record increases in public school funding, which I support, but that doesn't automatically translate to outcomes. We need to study the role of technology in our schools and consider if other state's examples of banning phones have improved student outcomes. We need to look at making sure schools are accountable for the funding they receive.

LB: I want to push back a little on the funding piece. While the GA has increased school funding,

and importantly, shored up the pension system, school funding is still trailing from where it should be, which has caused historic inequities between districts based on property tax to reemerge. There's a lot of worry that this will be exacerbated by the further reduction in income tax. Why should we not worry about this?

AMB: No question there has been a quick and steep rise in property taxes over the last few years, which significantly benefits urban centers who have seen a more significant increase in property values. This is something we will need to address. The proposed 2025 income tax is an easy target, but there is bipartisan agreement that it is in the interest of the commonwealth to continue these cuts. I always look at the

budget in terms of buckets and priorities. Funding our schools is and will continue to be a priority, no matter the size of the bucket. I believe educating the future of Kentucky is the most important investment we can make. I do think you bring up a good point, which is that the long-term funding mechanism for education should be examined. It's been over 30 years since the General Assembly tried to equalize per student funding and increase school performance. I think we can agree that the goal may be the same, but it's getting challenging to meet. I would also point out that our current commitments are exceeding inflation when you look at both our SEEK commitment and the additional fringe benefits we pay directly to the entities covering health and pension benefits. These are benefits every business has to consider when they budget their operational

expenses and should be included in our budget discussions.

I also want to push back just a little on funding. It's too easy for conversations around public education to shift to funding conversations — more or less dollars. Yes, funding matters. However, at the end of the day we have to be sure we are seeing student success. Can they read? Are they comprehending what they read? Can they write? Do they know math facts? Are we identifying struggling students before they fall through the gaps? We have to be sure that any funding we give is tied to these outcomes for students.

LB: Well, the history of education in Kentucky since 1990 is one long discussion about this kind of accountability: No one in the General Assembly has ever been able to agree on what it should look like. In addition, I'd argue that schools are being blamed for every societal ill we face, name-

ly poverty, without the tools to fix them. But that is a much longer conversation.

So, let me move on to this: While Trump's election may solidify feelings in the legislature that Kentucky does not need any exceptions to its abortion laws, I think the 2022 failure of Amendment 2, and reporting from local outlets and ProPublica about these laws hurting women who need miscarriage and other types of care, show the need for additional language. How do you feel and is there any impetus to add exceptions for rape and incest and more clear definitions for doctors in helping women whose pregnancies or failed pregnancies put their lives in danger?

AMB: Yes, we have seen significant changes in the abortion landscape over the last two years. And just to be honest with you — a conversation in our caucus would not be productive at this time

until a pending class-action lawsuit in Louisville is resolved. It's a moral issue for our members because we are talking about a baby at its most vulnerable stage. One in five women endure a miscarriage. I am one of the women who has witnessed both the happiness of childbirth and the loss of miscarriage, so I know the joy and the pain. And I know the importance of receiving medical attention when you need it. I am committed to the on-going conversation so that no woman who ends up in a situation like mine a few years ago doesn't get the care she needs.

While I know you and I won't agree on the issue of abortion, I think we can both agree it is a deeply held personal conviction. I hope we can all find a way to take on a more respectful and understanding approach to this issue.

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