

POLITICS

Biden Trip to Florida Raises Speculation About Presidential Run

By **GARDINER HARRIS** SEPT. 2, 2015

MIAMI — Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. flew into this sweltering city on Wednesday and directly into a hotbed of speculation about his political future.

The speech he came to deliver — about the need to invest in an educated work force, provide two years of free college education and align college offerings with employer needs — was boilerplate stuff. He said much the same at colleges in Denver in July and Des Moines in February.

But none of those addresses received anywhere near the attention of his appearance at Miami Dade College.

The back of the auditorium at the college's science center was bristling with more than 20 television cameras. Most of the nation's major news media organizations covered the event. The British Embassy in Washington even sent an observer.

“Look at all the press here,” Mr. Biden said, gesturing toward the cameras. “It’s amazing their interest in community colleges, and I hope that’s what they’re going to write about.”

At least two reporters shouted questions at him about his plans for the 2016 campaign. He ignored them, providing no clues as to whether he will

decide to become a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. Instead, he took off his coat — the large crowd and camera equipment had overwhelmed the room's air conditioning — and dug into his education speech.

“People who aren't willing to risk failure never succeed,” Mr. Biden said, a frequent exhortation to students that seemed to have new resonance.

Besides the speech, Mr. Biden also attended a \$10,000-a-couple fund-raising dinner to benefit the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. On Thursday, he will focus on selling the nuclear deal with Iran, first at a Jewish community center here and then in a speech at a synagogue in Atlanta.

His advisers have been silent about whether the trip to South Florida, one of the richest grounds in the country for raising campaign cash, is intended to pave the way for a presidential run.

The fund-raiser was held at the home of Stephen H. Bittel, a prominent commercial real estate developer who raised more than \$200,000 for President Obama's re-election.

Aides to the vice president said that Mr. Biden did not discuss his presidential plans at the dinner. He spoke to the crowd for about 10 minutes, saying that Senator Bernie Sanders was doing a great job exciting crowds, but that “I'm not a populist like Bernie.” Mr. Biden did not mention Hillary Rodham Clinton.

He then took one question, which was about the Iran deal.

James Carville, a longtime Democratic political consultant, said that while he did not know if Mr. Biden was going to run, “I wouldn't read a lot into the tea leaves from him going to South Florida — that's a regular stop on the itinerary of any senior Democratic politician.”

Still, while Mr. Biden has traveled to South Florida more than 30 times

since taking office in 2009, an aide said, this trip was different given the focus on his future.

On Tuesday, Senator Chris Coons, Democrat of Delaware, held a news conference to announce his support for the Iran nuclear deal — a crucial endorsement for the White House. But Mr. Coons then said that he would support Mr. Biden for president, a statement that received almost as much attention as his backing of the Iran deal.

In early August, Mr. Biden's confidants said that the vice president intended to decide by early September whether to run. In more recent conversations, advisers have let the deadline slip, with some saying that the first week in October is more likely and others saying that he could wait until early next year.

The longer he waits, the more difficulties Mr. Biden would face in putting together a successful campaign. The first Democratic presidential debate is scheduled for Oct. 13, and some states require that candidates qualify by early November to be placed on primary ballots. The Iowa caucuses will be held in February.

Joe Trippi, a longtime Democratic operative, said Mr. Biden would undoubtedly ask a few of the wealthy donors he was meeting with on Wednesday about his chances. "I think every time he goes out and does any kind of engagements now, he's gauging the reaction and seeing how people respond to him," Mr. Trippi said.

"I still don't see a pathway that makes it likely that he wins the nomination, though," he added.

A "Draft Biden" movement is underway, and some of the vice president's advisers have been exploring how to put together enough money for a campaign.

But Mr. Biden is still reeling from the death of his son Beau three months ago, and he said on a conference call last week that he was uncertain if his family had the “emotional fuel” for another presidential campaign.

One of Beau Biden’s dying requests was that his father become a candidate, but if Mr. Biden follows his son’s wish, many of his longtime friends and supporters worry that such a quixotic effort could bruise his legacy.

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