

'Put y'all back in chains'? More Biden being Biden

By Jules Witcover, syndicated columnist and former long-time writer for The Baltimore Sun. His latest book is "Joe Biden: A Life of Trial and Redemption" (William Morrow).

To no one's surprise, Vice President Joe Biden said what was on his mind the other day down in Danville, Va. To no one's surprise either, the Mitt Romney campaign pounced on this notoriously free-speaking politician like a feline on catnip.

It all started when Mr. Biden, addressing a predominantly African American crowd, quoted Mr. Romney as saying in his first 100 days as president that "he's going to let the big banks once again write their own rules -- unchain Wall Street." Then the vice president added with a grin: "They're going to put y'all back in chains!"

Shades of the pre-Civil War slave trade! A Romney aide indignantly declared that the Obama campaign "has reached a new low" and "will say and do anything to win this campaign." To which Mr. Obama replied, in effect: The same back to you, and double it. And so it goes in what is being widely called the most negative campaign yet, which of course is what they always say.

When it comes to Joe Biden, however, his alleged allusion to slavery was only another example of his talent -- or unwitting spontaneity -- to connect with a crowd with which he feels a comfort level, and letting it all hang out. If it's pandering, as some have suggested, to playfully remind black Americans of the bad old days of servitude, that would be a most uncommon way to pander.

In any event, the Biden who let loose in Danville was on display once again as the occasional loose cannon who may give Obama

campaign strategists an uneasy moment. However, they knew what they were getting in his selection and were willing to accept it. As Mr. Obama's 2008 campaign manager, David Plouffe, wrote later, "It was in his DNA and we couldn't expect him to change." So, too, Mr. Biden's longstanding link to blue-collar workers.

In a comparison of the two 2012 running mates, Mr. Romney may well have shored up his campaign's credentials in budgetary wonkery with his selection of Paul Ryan, a recognized top numbers-cruncher in the deficit-and-entitlement reduction game. But what his team still lacks is connectibility on a personal level with the hoi polloi.

In that department, beyond Barack Obama's own appeal, no one in American politics today has the old Hubert Humphrey happy warrior manner and approachability that Mr. Biden does. Whether on the stump or just in pop-ins at small-town diners and coffee shops, the optimistic man from Delaware is an irrepressible presence, usually well received by all he engages in folksy chatter.

Much of his fitting in no doubt comes from his personal story as a street kid in Scranton, Pa., who climbed dangerous mountains of coal debris and hitched rides on streetcars as the son of a car dealer, and later beat the odds by getting elected to the U.S. Senate at age 29. His family tragedy of having lost his first wife and an infant daughter in a highway crash tempered him into a humility that is shielded by his open, often wise-cracking style.

As his resume revealed in his first failed bid for the Democratic presidential nomination 25 years ago, Mr. Biden's ebullience and lack of self-discipline can get him in hot water at times. They

make him vulnerable to political attack by opponents who at first see him as easy pickings, but often come away chagrined at his Houdini-like escapes.

But the bottom line is that Mr. Biden, up to now at least, has bought himself a pass from fellow Democrats and, in his home state, voters of all stripes with his welcoming demeanor and candor. And the betting in the Obama camp is that on balance he will continue to be a plus for the campaign.

Back in Delaware, when locals are asked about this or that "Biden gaffe," their response often, with a shrug, is: "That's Joe." In other words, they know their favorite son has his faults and shortcomings, but on balance they're happy with the package. That seems still to be the attitude of Mr. Obama and his strategists as the 2012 campaign heads into the party conventions, the running mate debates and the fall election to follow.