

Oh, Joe: VP's off-base flu advice needs do-over

April 30 2009, By NANCY BENAC , Associated Press Writer



President Barack Obama, with Vice President Joe Biden, right, addresses the rising concern of Swine Flu at the White House in Washington, Wednesday, April 29, 2009. "This is obviously a serious situation" and "we are closely and continuously monitoring" it, Obama said. He added that schools with confirmed cases of swine flu should consider closing. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

(AP) -- Vice President Joe Biden - with a well-deserved reputation as someone who shoots from the lip - made it through the first 100 days of the Obama administration without any major gaffes. But on Day 101 the vice president, well, took a nose dive when it came to the government's talking points on air travel during the swine flu outbreak.

At 7:05 a.m. Thursday, Biden was asked on NBC's "Today" show what

advice he would give to a family member who was considering flying to Mexico.

"I would tell members of my family - and I have - I wouldn't go anywhere in confined places now," Biden said. "It's not that it's going to Mexico. It's you're in a confined aircraft. When one person sneezes, it goes all the way through the aircraft." Biden went on to say he wouldn't suggest that they ride the subway either.

Avoid all airline travel? Don't ride the subway?

Cue the backpedaling.

At 8:47 a.m., Biden's office put out a statement gamely trying to rewrite the vice president's words:

"The advice he is giving family members is the same advice the administration is giving to all Americans: that they should avoid unnecessary air travel to and from Mexico," said Biden spokeswoman Elizabeth Alexander. "If they are sick, they should avoid airplanes and other confined public spaces, such as subways."

By 10 a.m., Homeland Security chief Janet Napolitano had supplied her own do-over for the VP:

"If he could say that over again, he would say if they're feeling sick they should stay off of public transit or confined spaces because that is indeed the advice that we're giving," Napolitano said on MSNBC.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who takes the subway to work every day, also tried to channel the [vice president](#).

"I think what [Joe Biden](#) was talking about was, it is true if you have all

these symptoms, we recommend you stay home," Bloomberg said.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs also tried to close the gap that Biden left between "what he said and what he meant to say."

"If anybody was unduly alarmed for whatever reason, we would apologize for that," Gibbs added.

The people who provide and promote travel on planes and trains were not amused.

There was "extreme disappointment." There was talk of "fear-mongering." There was gentle scolding. There was clarification.

For the record, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site says this: "CDC has NOT recommended that people avoid travel at this time."

It does recommend that people avoid nonessential travel to Mexico, the flu's epicenter, and that those who are sick stay home.

With Biden's track record of impolitic remarks, it was only a matter of time before he found himself trying to eat his words as vice president.

President Barack Obama knew that going in. He praised his running mate's candor and made light of Biden's penchant for "rhetorical flourishes."

When they were still presidential rivals, Biden apologized for describing Obama as "articulate" and "clean," remarks that some thought had racial overtones.

Biden also had to defend his remark that "you cannot go to a 7-Eleven or

a Dunkin' Donuts unless you have a slight Indian accent."

He has been surprisingly disciplined since the inauguration - although when he joked about Chief Justice John Roberts flubbing Obama's oath of office, Obama didn't crack a smile.

That's just Joe.

"Sometimes maybe I shouldn't be as straightforward as I am," Biden said Sunday on CBS' "60 Minutes."

"I am who I am."

AP reporters Matt Small and Joan Lowy in Washington, and Sara Kugler in New York contributed to this report.

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