

The End Of The Biden Era

Joe Biden Didn't Just Have A Bad Night. American Democracy Is Now In More Danger Than Ever.

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About Last Night

I Have Been Harshly Critical Of Calls For President Joe Biden To Step Down. I Have Argued With People Across The Political Spectrum About This, Including Friends And Colleagues. I Think Biden Has Had A Successful First Term And That His Age Has Been No Barrier To His Effectiveness As A Leader. I Still Believe That. [Ed. Note: Quite So.] And If The Choice This Fall Is Between Biden And A Man Who I Believe Is A Mentally Unstable Menace To American Democracy, I Won't Think Twice About My Vote.

But Donald Trump Must Be Defeated, And After Last Night's Debate, I Am No Longer Sure That Biden Is Electable. Politics Can Be A Miserable Business That Too Often Turns On Perceptions, And For The President, The Debate Was A Full-Blown, Hindenburg-Level Disaster. Biden's Performance Was Unnervingly Bad, And It Has Led To A Chorus Of Calls, Including In This Magazine, For Biden To Step Down.

I Have Promised To Always Be Honest With The Daily's Readers, And Although Part Of Me

Stubbornly Wants To Argue That Democrats And The Prodemocracy Coalition They Lead Should Stay The Course With Biden — A Good Man And A Good President — The Political Realist In Me Recognizes The Danger Of Such Obstinacy.

I Know That, For Biden Loyalists, The Gathering Consensus Around Last Night's Debate Must Feel Like A Betrayal: Friends And Coalition Partners Now Seem To Be Lining Up With Knives Behind The Back Of The Man Who Saved America From **Trump** In 2020. Political Loyalty, Although Useful And Sometimes Admirable, Should Not Override Practicality. Blind Support Of One Man, After All, Is The Hallmark Of **Trump's** Cult; The Prodemocracy Coalition Is Larger, And Should Be More Resilient, Than Any Single Person In It.

Before We Think About Next Steps, It's Important Not To Wave Away What Happened Last Night, And It's Especially Important Not To Engage In Random Blame-Storming. Biden Had **One Job — Don't Look Old And Befuddled — And He Failed.** Biden Supporters Are Raging Away On Social Media About How The CNN Moderators Should Have Intervened With More Fact-Checking (Read: Debating **Trump** Themselves And Saving Biden), But Jake Tapper And Dana Bash Did A Reasonable Job Of Keeping The Debate Moving And Giving Biden Multiple Chances To Unload Any Number Of Haymakers On **Trump** Had He Wanted To Do So.

Biden, However, Was Simply Not Present. Opportunity After Opportunity To Call Out **Trump** Passed Him By As He Garbled A Basket Of Statistics And Talking Points. The President's Staff Clearly Overprepared Their Candidate, Stuffing His Head With Factoids About Pell Grants And Climate Targets And Tax Rates And Other Things That Are Completely Irrelevant In A Debate With A Deranged Bully. If This Was The Work Of The White House Prep Team, Then

They Are Guilty Of Egregious Political Malpractice — But In The End, The Candidate Is Always Responsible For What Happens In The Campaign.

I Now Accept That The Biden We Saw Last Night Is As Good As We'll Get In The Election, And That Americans — Unfortunately — Are Likely To Decide That An Entertaining Autocrat Is Less Of a Risk Than A Decent Old Man. If Biden Should Step Down, How Does That Happen, And Who Replaces Him?

This Is Where I Freeze. Every Option, Whether Biden Stays Or Goes, Seems To Lead To Electoral Disaster And A Trump Victory. But It's Time To Think About The Unthinkable.

Replacing Biden Is Going To Be Almost Literally Impossible Unless He *Willingly* Steps Down. Biden Controls Nearly All Of The Pledged Democratic Delegates; To Reopen The Nomination Process, He Would Have To End His Candidacy And Then Release Them. But Release Them To *Whom*? And Here, We Run Into The Kamala Harris Problem.

Harris Has Been An Unexceptional Vice President, But I Do Not Intend To Debate Her Record, Because In The General Election Her Record Wouldn't Matter. She, Even More Than Biden, Has Serious Electability Problems. Her Approval Numbers Are Lower Than Biden's And Among The Lowest Of Recent Vice Presidents'. You Can Cavil That This Is All The Product Of Bias And Racism And Misogyny, But None Of That Matters On Election Day: *If She Can't Win, She Can't Win*. Worse, Biden Abdicating In Favor Of Harris Would Convince Many People — Not All Of Them Trump Supporters — That This Was The Plan All Along, A Way Of Giving The Democratic Nomination, And Perhaps The White House, To A Woman (Seen By Some As

Radical Leftist) Who Ran A Poor Campaign In 2020 And Could Never Have Been Nominated In Her Own Right.

But It Is Also Impossible To Imagine Biden Quitting Without Anointing Harris With His Endorsement, Unless He — Supported By The Party's Elders — Declares That The Democrats Are Truly The Party Of Democracy, And That The Convention In Chicago Should Be Open To All Comers. Harris, For Her Part, Would Have To Welcome Such A Challenge And Vow To Support The Nominee No Matter Who Takes The Prize In August. Party Elders, Led By Barack Obama And Assisted By Others Such As Nancy Pelosi And Jim Clyburn, Could Then Convene A War Council And Talk To Almost Every Interested Candidate. (Almost. Maybe, For Once, Bernie Sanders — Who Is *Older* Than Biden — Could Sit This One Out.) The Democrats Are Not Known To Be Cigar Lovers, But This Time, They Need A Smoke-Filled Room.

I Am Deep Into Wishcasting Here, A Coping Mechanism That I Have Warned About Repeatedly, And I Continue To Doubt Democrats' Ability to Replace Biden With *Any Kind Of Orderly Or Sensible Process; They're Not That Kind Of Party*. As My Colleague Ronald Brownstein Wrote Today:

Most Democrats Who Want To Replace Biden Also Remain Extremely Dubious That His Incumbent Running Mate, Kamala Harris, Could Beat **Trump** — But If She Sought The Nomination, Then Denying That Prize To The First Woman Of Color Who Has Served As Vice President Could Tear Apart The Party. The Fear That Such A Fight Could Practically Ensure Defeat In November Is One Reason Democrats Who Are Uneasy About Renominating Biden Have Held Their Tongue For So Long.

That's A Hell Of A Dilemma. Nevertheless, I Agree With Ron That "The Prospect Of The Party Simply Marching Forward With Biden As If Nothing Happened Last Night Seems Difficult To Imagine."

Shaken As I Am By Biden's Debate Performance, I Have Few Doubts That He Can Still Handle The Presidency; No Commander In Chief Does The Job Alone. But Even Biden's Supporters Are Botching The Very Simple Argument That Biden Would Continue To Be A Competent President. Congressman Ro Khanna, A Biden Campaign Surrogate, Said Today: "We Have A Great Team Of People That Will Help Govern. That Is What I'm Going To Continue To Make The Case For."

That Is *Not* A Great Case. In Fact, It's Trump's 2016 Argument About How He'd Be Inexperienced But Bring "The Best People" With Him. And After The President's Stumbles And Lapses Last Night, Such Arguments Are Like Running On A *Weekend At Bernie's* Platform, As One Of My Friends Puts It, In Which Voters Should Somehow Be Reassured By The Presence Of Good Staff And The Ultimate Backstop Of The Twenty-Fifth Amendment.

Today, In North Carolina, Biden Was Full Of Energy, Self-Deprecating Humor, And Fury. I Suspect That This Is Biden In A Kind Of Late-Ronald Reagan Phase, In Which He Is Able To Give A Barn Burner Of A Speech But Not Capable Of Heavier Lifting; Even During The North Carolina Event, He Looked Vacant And Slack-Jawed While He Watched Others Speak. He Was Animated At The Podium — But That's Likely Not Going To Be Enough To Win An Election In Which So Many Undecided Voters Think Biden Is Too Old To Be President.

Time Is Running Out. The Operatives Out There Trying To Soothe Nerves By Invoking Reagan's First Disastrous Debate In 1984 Forget That Reagan Was Ahead In The Polls At The Time, With Plenty Of Electoral Cushion Under Him. Biden Has No Such Margin. My Friend Greg Sargent At *The New Republic* Has Argued That Joe And Jill Biden Need To Assure America That Last Night Was The Exception, Not The Rule. *But I Suspect That Biden Has, At Most, About A Week To Either Make Up His Mind Not To Run Or Reassure America That He Can Take On Donald Trump And Win.* AT THIS POINT, IT'S VERY HARD TO IMAGINE THAT SUCH REASSURANCE IS POSSIBLE.

I Hope That I Am Wrong, But A Rose Garden Strategy Of Running Out The Clock To August And Then Sprinting To November No Longer Seems Like A Realistic Option.

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