

DAILY COMMENT

THE RECKONING OF JOE BIDEN

For The President To Insist On Remaining The Democratic Candidate Would Be An Act Not Only Of Self-Delusion But Of National Endangerment.

By David Remnick, Editor
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There Is An Immense Bounty Of Bunk About The Wisdom Of Age Available To All Of Us Who Require It From Time To Time, But, As The Pitiless Mark Twain Put It In His Autobiography, “It Is Sad To Go To Pieces Like This, But We All Have To Do It.”

On Thursday Night, It Was Joe Biden’s Turn. But, Unlike The Rest Of Us, He Went To Pieces On CNN, In Front Of Tens Of Millions Of His Compatriots. At Some Level, Biden’s Supporters Were Hoping That He Would Defy The Realities Of Time, The Better To Puncture The Vanities And Malevolence Of His Felonious Opponent. And So There Was A Distinct Cruelty To It All, The Spectacle Of A Man Eighty-One, Struggling Terribly With Memory, Syntax, Nerves, And Fragility, His Visage Slack With The Dawning Sense That His Mind Was Letting Him Down And That, As A Result, He Was Letting The Country Down. It Must Be Said, With Fellow-Feeling, But It Must Be Said: This Was An Event, If Unremedied, Could

The Country Closer To Another Trump Presidency And With It A Diminishment Of Liberal Democracy.

The Question Is: What Will Joe Biden Do About It?

We Have Long Known That Biden, No Matter What Issue You Might Take With One Policy Or Another, Is No Fluid Or Effective Communicator Of Those Policies. Asked About His Decline, The Biden Communications Team And His Understandably Protective Surrogates And Advisers Would Deliver Responses To Journalists That Sounded An Awful Lot Like What We All, Sooner Or Later Tell Acquaintances When Asked About Aging Parents: They Have Good Days And Bad Days. Accurate, Perhaps, But Discreet And Stinting In The Details. In Biden's Case, There Were Certainly Times Where He Could Pull Off A Decent Interview Or An Even Better State Of The Union. If He Worked A Shorter Day, Well, That Was Forgivable; If He Stumbled Up The Stairs Or Shuffled From The Limo To The Plane, A Little Neuropathy In The Feet Was Nothing Compared To FDR In A Wheelchair. The Prospect Of Donald Trump's Return Permitted, Or Demanded, A Measure Of Cognitive Dissonance. And It Wasn't Trump's Own Rhetorical Insanity Even Worse? To Say Nothing Of Thirty-Four Felony Convictions, A Set Of Dangerous Policy Goals, And An Undeniable Authoritarian Personality?

But Watching Thursday's Debate, Observing Biden Wander Into Senselessness Onstage, Was An Agonizing Experience, And It Bound To Obliterate Forever All The Vague And Qualified Descriptions From White House Insiders About Good Days And Bad Days. You Watched It, And, *On The Most Basic Human Level, You Could Only Feel Pity For The Man And, More,*

Fear For The Country.

In The Aftermath, Jill Biden, Who Led Her Husband Off The Stage, Dismissed The Night As An Aberration, As Did Barack Obama, And A Cluster Of Loyalists. He'd Had A "Bad Debate."

He Was Sure To Get Better, Grow More Agile. Such Loyalty Can Be Excused, At Least Momentarily. They Did What They Felt They Had To Do To Fend Off An Immediate Implosion Of Biden's Campaign, A *Potentially Irreversible Cratering Of His Poll Numbers*, An Evaporating Of His Fund-Raising, And The Looming Threat Of Trump Redux.

But Meanwhile The Tide Is Roaring At Biden's Feet. He Is Increasingly Unsteady. It Is Not Just The Political Class Or The Commentariat Who Were Unnerved By The Debate. Most People With Eyes To See Were Unnerved. At This Point, For The Bidens To Insist On Defying Biology, To Think That A Decent Performance At One Rally Or Speech Can Offset The Indelible Images Of Thursday Night, Is Folly.

Biden Has Rightly Asserted That The Voters Regard This Election Not Only As A Debate About Global Affairs, The Environment, Civil Rights, Women's Rights, And Other Matters Of Policy But As A Referendum On Democracy Itself. For Him To Remain The Democratic Candidate, The Central Actor In That Referendum, Would Be An Act Not Only Of Self-Delusion But Of National Endangerment. It Is Entirely Possible That The Debate Will Not Much Change The Polls; It Is Entirely Possible That Biden Could Have A Much Stronger In September; It Is Not Impossible To Imagine That Trump Will Find A Way To Lose. But, At This Point, Should Biden Engage The Country In That Level Of Jeopardy? To Step Aside And Unleash The Admittedly Complicated Process Of Locating And Nominating A More Robust

And Promising Ticket Seems The More Rational Course And Would Be An Act Of Patriotism. To Refuse To Do So, To Go On Contending That His Good Days Are More Plentiful Than The Bad, To Ignore The Inevitably Of Time And Aging, Doesn't Merely Risk His Legacy — It Risks The Election And, Most Important, Puts In Peril The Very Issues And Principles That Biden Has Framed As Central To His Presidency And Essential To The Future.

Trump Went Into The Debate With One Distinct Advantage. No Matter How Cynical And Deceitful He Might Be, No One Expected Anything Else. His Qualities Are Well Known. In Contrast, Biden's Voters And Potential Voters Might Disagree With Him On Particular Issues — On Immigration, On The Middle East, You Name It — But They Are, At Minimum, Adamant That He Not Be A Figure Of Concealment Or Cynicism. *To Stay In The Race Would Be Pure Vanity*, Uncharacteristic Of Someone Whom Most Have Come To View As Decent And Devoted To Public Service. To Stay In The Race, At This Post-Debate Point, Would Also Suggest That It Is Impossible To Imagine A More Vital Ticket. In Fact, Gretchen Whitmer, Raphael Warnock, Josh Shapiro, And Wes Moore Are Just A Few Of The Office-Holders In The Party Who Could Energize Democrats And Independents, Inspire More Young Voters, And Beat Trump.

So Much — Perhaps Too Much — Now Depends On One Man, His Family, And His *Very Small Inner Circle* Coming To A Painful And Selfless Conclusion. And Yet Joe Biden Always Wanted To Be Thought Of As Human, Vulnerable, Someone Like You And Me. All Of Us Are Like Him In At Least One Way. It Is Sad To Go To Pieces Like This, But We All Have To Do It.

There Is No Shame In Growing Old. There Is Honor In Recognizing The Hard Demands Of
The Moment.

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