

Joe Biden's Last Campaign

Trailing Trump in polls and facing doubts about his age, the President voices defiant confidence in his prospects for reelection.

By **Evan Osnos**

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“I’ll show you where Trump sat and watched the revolution,” Joe Biden said, stepping out from behind his desk in the Oval Office. It was noon on a Wednesday, in the doldrums of January. The Middle East was aflame, and Biden’s approval rating was among the lowest of any President in history, but, for the moment, he was preoccupied with Donald Trump. As he led the way through a door toward his private chambers, he startled two Secret Service agents in the corridor. They had expected him to remain at his desk for a while; agents, referring to him by his handle, had passed word: “Celtic is in the Oval.” Walking by, he said, in a whispery deadpan, “Hey, guys—it’s a *raid*,” and then moved on.

Biden, always a little taller than you expect, wore a navy suit and a bright-blue tie. He passed a study off the Oval, where he keeps a rack of extra shirts, an array of notes sent in by the public, and a portrait of John F. Kennedy in a contemplative pose. (It's one of his favorites, even though Bobby Kennedy thought that it evoked his brother during the Bay of Pigs debacle.) He continued to the Oval Office dining room, a small, elegant space where, in Biden's eight years as Vice-President, he often visited Barack Obama for lunch. One wall is graced by "The Peacemakers," a famous painting of Lincoln and his military commanders, on the cusp of winning the Civil War. Another is dominated by a large television set, installed by Donald Trump.

It was in front of that TV that Trump spent the afternoon of January 6, 2021, after exhorting his supporters to march on the Capitol and stop Congress from certifying Biden's election. With the television remote and a Diet Coke close at hand, he watched the events live on Fox News, rewinding at times for a second look. It is a period in Presidential history that the House select committee on January 6th later called "187 Minutes of Dereliction."

"This is where he sat," Biden said, and I braced for a bit of speechifying on democracy or character or the defiling of the Presidency. (As early as 1970, a colleague of Biden's on a Delaware county council observed that

he could make a “fifteen-minute speech on the underside of a blade of grass.”) But, in the dining room, he let the moment pass. At the age of eighty-one, in his fourth year as President, he displays less of the reflex to fill every silence. Gesturing around the room, he said, “I don’t do interviews here, because it’s not so commodious.” He gave a rueful laugh and headed back to his office.

Not long ago, most Americans found it inconceivable that they might once again face the choice between Trump and Biden. In the years since Trump lost the 2020 election and refused to concede, he has been found liable for sexual assault and financial fraud, and indicted for attempting to overturn the election and refusing to return classified documents; as his legal challenges mounted, he embarked on a campaign focussed on “retribution” against his enemies. Yet Republicans have become steadily less likely to hold Trump responsible for the violence on January 6th—and less likely to believe that Biden actually won the White House.

Back in the Oval Office, where winter sun shone through glass doors, I asked Biden if it was possible for him to reach voters who had those beliefs. He treated the question as a provocation: “Well, first of all, remember, in 2020, you guys told me how I wasn’t going to win? And then you told me in 2022 how it was going to be this red wave?” He flashed a tense smile. “And I told you there wasn’t going to be any red

wave. And in 2023 you told me we're going to get our ass kicked again? And we won every contested race out there." He let that sink in for an instant and said, "In 2024, I think you're going to see the same thing."

For decades, there was a lightness about Joe Biden—a springy, mischievous energy that was hard not to like, even if it allowed some people to classify him as a lightweight. For better and worse, he is a more solemn figure now. His voice is thin and clotted, and his gestures have slowed, but, in our conversation, his mind seemed unchanged. He never bungled a name or a date. At one point, he pulled out a white notecard inscribed with some of Trump's most alarming comments: his threat to terminate the Constitution, his casual talk of being a dictator on "Day One," his description of immigrants as "poisoning the blood of our country." Biden tossed the list on his desk and gave a look of disbelief. "What the *hell!*" he said. "If you and I had sat down ten years ago and I said a President is going to say those things, you would have looked at me like, 'Biden, you've lost your senses.'"

I last interviewed Biden in 2020, when he billed himself as a "transition candidate" and praised "an incredible group of talented, newer, younger people." But, in office, he has presided over the passage of ambitious legislation, the end of the COVID pandemic, and an economic revival beyond anyone's expectation—and declared his intention to run for a

second term. I asked Biden if there was ever a time when he doubted that he would run again. “No,” he said. “But, look, if I didn’t think that the policies I put in place were best for the country, I don’t think I’d be doing it again. I’m running again because I think two things: No. 1, I’m really proud of my record, and I want to keep it going. I’m optimistic about the future.” He continued, “And, secondly, I look out there, and I say, ‘O.K., we’re just—most of what I’ve done is just kicking in now.’ ”

If you spend time with Biden these days, the biggest surprise is that he betrays no doubts. The world is riven by the question of whether he is up to a second term, but he projects a defiant belief in himself and his ability to persuade Americans to join him. For as long as Biden has been in politics, he has thrived on a mercurial mix of confidence and insecurity. Now, having reached the apex of power, he gives off a conviction that borders on serenity—a bit too much serenity for Democrats who wonder if he can still beat the man with whom his legacy will be forever entwined. Given the doubts, I asked, wasn’t it a risk to say, “I’m the one to do it”? He shook his head and said, “No. I’m the only one who has ever beat him. And I’ll beat him again.” For Biden, the offense of the contested election was clearly personal. Trump had not just tried to steal the Presidency—he had tried to steal it *from him*. “I’d ask a rhetorical question,” Biden said. “If you thought you were best

positioned to beat someone who, if they won, would change the nature of America, what would you do?”

By the usual measures, Biden should be cruising to reelection. Violent crime has dropped to nearly a fifty-year low, unemployment is below four per cent, and in January the S. & P. 500 and the Dow hit record highs. More Americans than ever have health insurance, and the country is producing more energy than at any previous moment in its history. His opponent, who is facing ninety-one criminal counts, has suggested that if he is elected he will fire as many as fifty thousand civil servants and replace them with loyalists, deputize the National Guard as a mass-deportation force, and root out what he calls “the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country.”

But the usual measures do not apply these days. Rarely in American history have two major parties had such wildly different intentions—and such similar levels of support. In 2020, seven states hinged on a difference of less than three percentage points. “The electorate is frozen,” Dmitri Mehlhorn, an adviser to Democratic donors, told me. “There will be important movements on the margin—but they are only important because this thing is fucking tied.”

For a long time, Biden had a modest but steady advantage in the polls, ahead by three or four or five points. By this February, though, Trump had taken the lead, forty-seven to forty-two per cent, according to an NBC poll. (In 2020, by contrast, Biden never trailed Trump in any major poll.) Some Democrats were already complaining publicly that Biden's campaign was complacent and behind schedule in hiring staff for battleground states. On Bill Maher's podcast, the political consultant James Carville said, "Somebody better wake the fuck up." Maher wondered if Biden was in danger of staying so long in his job that he would be blamed for handing it to the opposition—becoming the "Ruth Bader Ginsburg of the Presidency." At a dinner attended by major donors in Chicago, Senator Chris Coons, a co-chair of the Biden campaign, struck a reassuring note. "I'm given to worry on occasion," he told the audience. "I've been known to wring my hands." But in the 2022 midterms, he reminded them, "the American people showed up," giving the Democrats unexpectedly strong results. "Folks, trust our voters," he said. "They will show up again."

As the election year arrived, Biden's aides argued that the polls were too early to be useful; they reasoned that sitting Presidents are often a target for free-form resentment—and that, in any case, only a quarter of Americans were engaged enough to even realize that it would be a

choice between Trump and Biden. His advisers present his confidence as a virtue. One told me, “He is not diverted by politics or by bad polling or by some crazy-ass shit that Donald Trump has done.” Bruce Reed, one of his closest aides, said, “We live in abnormal political times, but the American people are still normal people. Given a choice between normal and crazy, they’re going to choose normal.”

When I visited Biden in January, two days had passed since the Republican caucuses in Iowa. Trump had won all but one of the state’s ninety-nine counties; the voting was so lopsided that news organizations called the race with many votes still to be cast. For all the speculation that Ron DeSantis might secure evangelical voters, Trump took even more of them than he had eight years before. In the Oval Office, I brought up the Iowa results and asked Biden to explain why Trump was still popular with a substantial portion of Americans. He disputed my framing. “Substantial portion of the Republican *MAGA party*,” he said. “That’s who it is.”

His objection was not just rhetorical. “Look, a hundred thousand people voted,” he said. “He got fifty per cent of a hundred thousand votes.” To be precise, it was closer to a hundred and ten thousand votes, but the point remained: Trump had generated the lowest turnout in a contested G.O.P. race in a quarter century, a drop of forty per cent from the

Republican primary of 2016. It didn't help that temperatures were below zero that night, but the fact was that nearly half the Republicans who voted chose someone other than Trump. Some forty per cent of Nikki Haley supporters in Iowa told pollsters that if she fell short they would vote for Biden. "Now, they're going to argue the weather was the reason," Biden told me. "But what about this enthusiasm—this hard-baked enthusiasm?"

Trump is too familiar and too disliked to attract many new supporters. And when voters are asked in polls how they will react if he is actually convicted of a felony, Biden pulls ahead again. But the schedule of Trump's trials is in flux, and, even if he is convicted, it is difficult to predict how that unprecedented spectacle will reverberate.

By the end of January, the race was nearing the point at which history shows a correlation between approval ratings and electoral results: incumbents who trail their opponent nine months from Election Day rarely go on to win. When pollsters asked who would do better in specific areas, the gaps were stark. On immigration and border security, Trump led Biden fifty-seven to twenty-two; on the economy, fifty-five to thirty-three. On the "required mental and physical stamina for the presidency," Trump was lapping Biden, forty-six to twenty-three per cent. Even seasoned analysts who tend to discount small fluctuations in

polls took note. “Let’s say it’s a fifty-per-cent chance that Trump could be President again,” a prominent Biden donor told me. “That’s like a fifty-per-cent chance that the doctor is going to tell you that you have pancreatic cancer.”

David Axelrod, who was Obama’s chief campaign strategist, told me that age was the crucial issue for Biden. “I don’t question his competence as President,” he said. “You give me Biden’s record and take fifteen years off of him, and this wouldn’t be a competitive race. This is the barrier he has to overcome, and it’s a hard one, because the march of time is immutable.”

The kind of people who believe that they should be President of the United States do not generally go graciously into retirement. Alexander Hamilton, who knew his share of ex-politicians, described them as “discontented ghosts.” When Richard Nixon was between stints in office, he fretted, “I’m going to be mentally dead in two years and physically dead in four.” Calvin Coolidge, the only twentieth-century President who voluntarily passed up a reasonable chance at reelection, said that he hoped to avoid “grasping for office.” (Coolidge noted that Presidents “live in an artificial atmosphere of adulation and exaltation which sooner or later impairs their judgment.”) In Biden’s case, he has

been in politics so long that one of his aides told me a decade ago that he seemed “afraid if he stops working he might just fall over.”

Early in Biden’s Presidency, his age was a fixation mostly on the right. Conservative media circulated video anytime he fell—while dismounting from his bike, or tripping over a sandbag onstage. Kevin McCarthy, the Speaker of the House, joked about bringing “soft food” to a meeting with Biden, even though McCarthy was, according to Politico, “privately telling allies that he found the president sharp and substantive.” Biden’s doctors reported no significant trouble. (His latest medical report, released last week, lists sleep apnea; atrial fibrillation; a “stiff” gait, owing to arthritis and the aftermath of a fractured foot; and gastroesophageal reflux, which causes him to cough and clear his throat. Like most of his predecessors, Biden didn’t undergo a cognitive test, but the report notes that an “extremely detailed neurologic exam was again reassuring.”)

For a time, Democrats who worried that Biden’s age would prevent his reelection hesitated to speak out. “A lot of people thought, O.K., we’ll get our ass kicked in the midterms, and then we’ll have this big conversation about whether Joe should run again,” a former Democratic official told me. “Then the midterms are this big surprise.” For Biden, questions about his age were inextricable from feelings of being

underestimated by the establishment. In 2015, during his second term as Vice-President, when he was reeling from the death of his son Beau, Obama enveloped him in personal support but was, in Biden's words, "not encouraging" of his running for President—a fact that some intimates recall with bitterness. (One told me that Biden was treated in a spirit of "See you later. Emeritus. God bless. Nice guy.") An effort to discourage him from running for reelection in 2024 could well have had the opposite effect. Besides, Trump—just four years younger than Biden—was already so prone to signs of age that the DeSantis campaign set up a social-media account called the Trump Accident Tracker. He had confused Jeb Bush with George W. Bush, talked about Obama when he meant Biden or Hillary Clinton, and called the Hungarian Prime Minister "the leader of Turkey."

The former Hollywood executive Jeffrey Katzenberg, a co-chair of Biden's campaign, urged him to embrace his age with swagger, like his fellow-octogenarians Mick Jagger and Harrison Ford. Biden tried out some jokes. Just as Ronald Reagan, in a 1984 debate, had vowed not to "exploit the youth and inexperience of my opponent," Biden told an audience he had "never been more optimistic about our country's future in the eight hundred years I've served." In the meme wars on social

media, the campaign promoted illustrations of Biden as a political mastermind, firing lasers from his eyes.

Still, Axelrod and others eventually started voicing their worries. “I felt like Biden had the ability to say, ‘I’ve run my race, and I’ve faithfully fulfilled my duties to the nation,’ ” he told me. “He’s really done a hell of a job, but he is not a particularly competent performer in front of cameras now. That’s mostly how people interact with the President. Bill Clinton said, ‘Strong and wrong generally beats weak and right.’ ”

(When Axelrod expressed criticisms, Biden reportedly dismissed him as a “prick,” after which one of Axelrod’s friends printed campaign buttons that read “Pricks for Biden.”)

The concerns about Biden’s age exploded on February 8th, with the release of a report by the special counsel Robert Hur on the handling of classified documents, which Biden’s lawyers had reported after discovering them in his offices and garage. Hur, who had worked for the Justice Department under Trump, concluded that he lacked evidence to bring charges, but also described Biden, indelibly, as “a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory.” Hur wrote that Biden “did not remember, even within several years, when his son Beau died.”

The Administration could have chosen to emphasize the fact that Biden, unlike Trump, had been exonerated, but Biden wanted to dispute Hur's comments. At a hastily called press conference, he said, "I'm well meaning and I'm an elderly man and I know what the hell I'm doing." He seethed at the assertion that he did not remember the date of his son's death, saying, "I don't need anyone to remind me when he passed away." In his final answer of the night, after being asked about hostage negotiations, he slipped up, referring to the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, as the President of Mexico. Stories about Biden's age and memory dominated the news for days. After the *Times* carried several articles on the topic on a single Sunday, Margaret Sullivan, the newspaper's former public editor, criticized the response as disproportionate—calling it the "2024 version of the media's obsession with Hillary's emails"—and faulted the press for not focussing as much on Trump's recent threat to let Russia "do whatever the hell they want" against NATO allies that do not spend enough on their militaries.

Hur's comments and Biden's press conference spread panic among Democrats. "If we don't get an emergency transplant, we're going to die," one donor told me. Ezra Klein, of the *Times*, argued that Biden was governing well but was no longer capable of sustaining the "performance" that a campaign requires: "Whether it is true that Biden

has it all under control, it is not true that he seems like he does.” Klein proposed that Democrats hold an open convention this summer and let a “murderers’ row of political talent” compete for the nomination.

Proponents often mention Gretchen Whitmer, Raphael Warnock, and Gavin Newsom, among others. But, at the moment, none of these people poll better against Trump than Biden does, or have enough money on hand to mount a serious campaign. And holding an open convention risks fracturing the Party, as a relatively small group of insiders scramble to pick a candidate. The last time Democrats held an open convention, in 1968, a Party divided by war fought openly; the losers stayed home on Election Day, and Richard Nixon won by one per cent.

Unless Biden decides to step aside, it is overwhelmingly likely that he will be the nominee in November. “There is no group of wise men or women who compose the Party anymore, who have the assumed gravitas,” Michael Kazin, the author of “What It Took to Win,” a history of the Democratic Party, told me. “The President now runs the Party.”

Like many Democrats, Axelrod has turned his critiques to the opposition. “Now I think the question is: how do you make the best argument for Biden in a race against Donald Trump?” he told me. “Both these guys are old. The difference between them is one of them is actually working on the project of building a better future—not for

himself, but for the country and for our kids and grandkids. And then you have on the other side a guy who's not looking to the future but is consumed by his own past."

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, of Rhode Island, voiced a position that I encountered among many high-ranking Democrats. "He's not the only option that we *had*," he told me. "But, once he'd made the decision to go, he became the only option that we *have*." In the months that remain, Whitehouse said, the best way to beat Trump is a strategy that he called "Biden plus offense." When people are "frightened or angry, you need to convince them that you, too, are equally concerned and you're willing to throw punches and pick fights," he said. "If you've got your sleeves rolled up and you're waist-deep fighting alligators in the swamp, then nobody's really thinking about your age."

Last March, Trump held the first rally of his 2024 Presidential campaign in Waco, Texas—a choice with unsubtle significance. Thirty years before, federal agents in Waco confronted a cult called the Branch Davidians, whose members were stockpiling weapons and explosives in their compound. After a siege, the building caught fire, and more than seventy people died. The incident became a rallying cry for right-wing activists and militiamen, who see themselves as locked in conflict with a

tyrannical regime. Trump's event embraced the full aesthetic of anti-government resistance. He stood onstage with his hand over his heart, while loudspeakers blared "Justice for All"—a recording in which inmates serving time for their role on January 6th sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," as Trump recites the Pledge of Allegiance. ("Justice for All" later reached the top of a *Billboard* chart.) While the song played, a huge screen showed scenes of the riot at the Capitol. Trump told the crowd, "For seven years, you and I have been taking on the corrupt, rotten, and sinister forces trying to destroy America." He declared, "2024 is the final battle."

The violence of January 6th has become a touchstone for Biden, too, but with a different valence. He staged his first rally of 2024 on the eve of the riot's third anniversary, near a site chosen to dramatize the stakes: Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where George Washington hunkered down in 1777 and turned a group of militias into a cohesive force for democracy.

The encampment sprawled across a grassy plateau, where Washington arrived at the head of a contingent of weary and ill-equipped soldiers. Biden arrived in Marine One, accompanied by dusty green military helicopters loaded with advisers, security staff, and the press pool. The Presidential arrival is a hoary ritual of the media, but these days it carries

the added risk that any stumble will become fodder for critics. Biden descended the steps from the helicopter and turned back to extend a hand to Jill Biden, his wife. They gazed at the weathered remnants of the revolutionary camp, then ducked into a waiting limousine. After a couple of stops—laying a wreath at a memorial, visiting a stone house that Washington used as his headquarters—the motorcade headed to a community college in the nearby suburb of Blue Bell, where Biden would give a speech.

Biden stepped onstage to the audience’s chant of “Four more years!” But little of what followed bore much resemblance to a typical campaign speech. There was no ingratiation, no name-check for the local pols. He barely bothered with the requisite list of first-term achievements. “The topic of my speech today is deadly serious,” he began, “and I think it needs to be made at the outset of this campaign.” He talked of the sacrifices memorialized at Valley Forge. “America made a vow—never again would we bow down to a king,” he said. “Whether democracy is still America’s sacred cause is the most urgent question of our time.” He turned to the memory of January 6th and ticked through the horrors of that day—the wooden gallows, the chants of “Where’s Nancy?” Over and over, he named Trump—more than forty times in all. “Trump lost sixty court cases—*sixty*,” Biden said. “The legal path just took him back

to the truth: that I won the election, and he was a *loser*.” The crowd erupted in chuckling applause.

Four years ago, Biden tried to position himself as a unifier in an age of conflict and name-calling. But there is less of a market for that this time, and in any case he finds it hard to hide his contempt. He conjured the image of Trump joking about the attack on Nancy Pelosi’s husband, Paul, who was struck with a hammer, fracturing his skull: “He laughed about it. What a sick—” Biden held up his hands, as if to stop himself from going further, and clenched his fists as the crowd applauded. (In private, Biden is less decorous; among other things, he has been heard to call Trump a “sick fuck.”) He cited Trump’s threat to give the death penalty to Mark Milley, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his reported mockery of dead soldiers as “suckers” and “losers.” (Trump has denied this.) “How dare he?” Biden asked. “Who in God’s name does he think he is?” He was rolling now, calm and clear. Preserving America’s democracy, he told the crowd, is “the central cause of my Presidency.”

For nearly half a century in Washington, Biden worked on many things—foreign policy, crime, domestic violence. It’s only now, in the era of Trump, that he has arrived at a defining mission. In the final moments of the speech, he posed a question that will almost certainly

feature in his rhetoric in the months ahead, a question that could be posed to Biden as much as to the audience. “We all know who Donald Trump is,” he said. “The question we have to answer is: who are we?”

Among the staff members backstage at the rally, none had spent more time formulating that day’s message than Mike Donilon, an unassuming man in a roomy gray suit. Donilon is, as Sheldon Whitehouse puts it, the “high priest of Bidenism.” At sixty-five, he has short white hair, long white eyebrows, and a quiet voice, often used to deliver gnomic pronouncements. He does not tweet or go on television, and even after decades in politics he slips into restaurants in D.C. without attracting notice. He started out as a pollster before making ads and running strategy for campaigns, and has worked with Biden off and on since 1981, longer than nearly any other member of his inner circle. In the 2020 election, it was Donilon who spurred Biden on, helping to shape the campaign around the concept of a “battle for the soul of a nation.” He followed Biden into the White House as a senior adviser.

Donilon’s mild demeanor can be misleading. Like Biden, he has firm beliefs—about politics, the public, the press—and a contrarian side. In 2020, he and his campaign team had to decide whether to emphasize the economy or the more abstract idea that Trump imperilled the essence of

America. “We bet on the latter,” Donilon said, even though “our own pollsters told us that talking about ‘the soul of the nation’ was nutty.” That experience fortified his belief that this year’s campaign should center on what he calls “the freedom agenda.” By November, he predicted, “the focus will become overwhelming on democracy. I think the biggest images in people’s minds are going to be of January 6th.”

He sees a parallel to the race between George W. Bush and John Kerry, in 2004. At the time, Donilon was working on television ads for Kerry. “The Democratic Party didn’t want to believe it was a 9/11 election,” he said. Instead, the Party tried to focus on an array of issues—the war in Iraq, the economy, hostility to Bush. But, shortly before the election, a new video of Osama bin Laden was released that dredged up memories of 9/11. Bush won, and Donilon vowed not to repeat the error: “I decided, after the election, I would never be part of a Presidential campaign that didn’t figure out—with clarity—what it wanted to say and stick to it.”

It’s easy to miss how unusual a “freedom agenda” is for a Democratic Presidential campaign. Since the nineteen-sixties, Republicans have held fast to the language of freedom—from the backlash against civil rights to the Tea Party to the Freedom Caucus. But Democrats have been trying to convince the public that the Republican Party under Trump has

transformed into the “MAGA movement,” an authoritarian crusade bent on dominion. Donilon said, “At its heart, it doesn’t believe in the Constitution, doesn’t believe in law, embraces violence.” He sees an opportunity for Democrats to be “in a place where they usually aren’t.” They can lay claim to the freedom to “choose your own health-care decisions, the freedom to vote, the freedom for your kids to be free of gun violence in school, the freedom for seniors to live in dignity.”

The idea of wrapping the 2024 campaign around this kind of high concept is divisive in Democratic circles. “I’m pretty certain in Scranton they’re not sitting around their dinner table talking about democracy every night,” David Axelrod told me. “The Republican message is: The world’s out of control and Biden’s not in command. That’s the entire message—Trump, the strongman, is the solution. I think you have to be thinking about how you counter that, and how you deal with fears about Biden’s condition.” Axelrod argues that in 2020, even as the Democrats summoned concerns about the soul of a nation, they never lost sight of more concrete issues: “Biden as a guy who really understood and fought for the middle class, Biden as a person of faith, and Biden as someone who had a deep connection to the military. It was basically ‘Biden is one of us.’ ”

Donilon is undeterred. He shares Biden's pride in defying predictions that Democrats would take heavy losses in the 2022 midterms, because of inflation and poor views of the economy; instead, they expanded their Senate majority and picked up two governors' seats, the best performance in decades by a party in the White House. The freedom campaign, Donilon said, is a story in three acts: "The first act was 2020. Trump represented a threat, and Biden won. 2022 was a second round. You had these election deniers, and all these folks around the country, and they were beaten back." He added, "Round three is 2024. The thing is, you got to win all the rounds."

As the crowd dispersed in Pennsylvania, I scanned the social-media reaction to Biden's speech. His supporters had thrilled to the flashes of anger: "Biden almost slips up and calls Trump a sick fuck"; "pissed off Biden is my favorite Biden." His opponents were posting, too, of course, but they didn't bother with the content of his remarks. The Republican National Committee put up a clip of Biden walking stiffly beside the First Lady. Soon, it had been reposted hundreds of times, while the posts in Biden's favor had not spread as widely.

That was no accident, according to Sarah Longwell, a former Republican strategist and a founder of the Bulwark news site.

“Democrats do not build their own echo chambers the way Republicans do,” she said. “It’s a strange communications differential. It’s not rocket science: you create a narrative, you are relentless about promoting it, you have a million people all working from the same sheet of paper.” She continued, “I know that this is a thing with Democrats—it’s like herding cats—but if Biden is not the strongest communicator, why aren’t there hundreds of surrogates for him? Having spent a long time on the Republican side, I am constantly flabbergasted by the inability of Democrats to prosecute a case against Republicans relentlessly, with a knife in their teeth.”

In Chester County, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, I stopped for dinner with three local Democratic volunteers. “The three of us live in the swing district of the swing county of the swing state,” Caroline Bradley, a marketing director for a fitness company, told me. “Registration for our district is pretty much fifty-fifty, Democrats and Republicans.” Her friend Vanessa Babinecz chimed in, “Purple, purple, purple!” Babinecz, who is thirty-eight years old and of mixed race, works as an administrator at a private school, and had watched the Valley Forge speech at home, with her toddler on her lap. “I was riveted,” she said—and that surprised her. “He can still connect with people.”

Babinecz confessed a lack of enthusiasm for Biden. “I wish there was someone younger, but I don’t know anyone who’s younger who’s qualified, who could do it,” she said. “I thought Kamala would’ve been great, but for whatever reason she just can’t make a compelling speech.” Babinecz is confident, though, that women will be motivated to vote by Republican efforts to eliminate access to abortion. She said, “Every single woman I’ve ever talked to about it either has had an abortion or knows someone who’s had an abortion.” She offered the President some advice: “He needs to have a few viral TikToks and a few viral Instagrams. We need to see pictures of him in his slippers interacting with his grandkids. A more approachable side, not just him on a stage.”

Social media could be vital. With older Americans already entrenched in partisan identity, strategists are focussed on mobilizing young urbanites. Dmitri Mehlhorn, the donor adviser, said that the numbers are potentially significant: “How many Millennials and Gen Z-ers are in dense cities in one of the seven swing states? About five million.”

Bradley, who described herself as a “HinJew” (“My father’s Hindu, my mother’s Jewish”), keeps a close eye on persuadable voters, monitoring the number of people who contact the local Democratic Party to switch their registration. Through her outreach, she’s heard that “people are sick of Biden now. I don’t know if fear of Trump is enough this year.” When

major candidates are unpopular, third-party options prosper. Though polls show modest support for Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Cornel West, and Jill Stein, protest votes can tip the results of a tight race—and they become more likely when people think that their vote won't determine the outcome.

As we talked, the volunteers returned often to the challenge of getting Biden's message to break through to an overloaded, disengaged public. Bradley looked back fondly at the simplicity of an earlier slogan: "You want to know why Barack Obama was awesome? Hope, change. Hope, change." She went on, "Biden hasn't figured out how to be clickbait. I work full time. I have two kids. How much time do people really have? Biden does all of these things and nobody knows what he's done." Biden has passed up major opportunities to advertise his record, including televised interviews before the Super Bowl. His advisers have embraced less conventional venues—he has appeared on podcasts with comedians and with a life-style guru.

There is no guarantee that the more people see Biden, the more they'll like him. But as Longwell, the former Republican strategist, who has spent hundreds of hours with focus groups, told me, "Trump was in people's faces so insanely all the time for so long that actually voters got quite used to the rhythms of a President who was just front and center

constantly. Let's get Biden on shop floors, in swing states, putting his arms around people. People think he is invisible.”

When you go to work for Biden, you'll likely hear his version of Tip O'Neill's classic political adage. In his view, all politics is not local; it's *personal*. Even more than most politicians, Biden refracts the world through the lens of the individual—through an accounting of people's idiosyncrasies and biographies, their talents, flaws, and blind spots.

Before meeting foreign leaders for the first time, he will grill his briefer for insights into their areas of pride and vulnerability. When he talks about economics, he refers to data less often than to “dignity,” and he routinely conjures up the image of a laid-off father or mother, on the humiliating trip home to face their kids. Senator Whitehouse told me, “The world is personal to him in a way that it is not to everyone.”

Biden takes the same approach to his own life, which he tends to frame in terms of obstacles overcome and respect earned—or, when necessary, seized. In his first memoir, “Promises to Keep” (2008), he devoted the opening chapter to his stutter, which a nun mocked by calling him “bu-bu-bu-bu-Biden,” and to his efforts to defeat it by practicing Irish poetry in front of the mirror. He also recalled his mother's high-minded pugilism: “She once shipped my brother Jim off with instructions to

bloody the nose of a kid who was picking on smaller kids, and she gave him a dollar when he'd done it.”

Biden's self-mythology took shape around the figure of the underdog. “I was young for my grade and always little for my age, but I made up for it by demonstrating I had guts,” he wrote of his early years, in Scranton. He described exploring the region's culm dumps, heaps of coal slag with fires smoldering below the crust: “On a dare, I'd climb to the top of a burning culm dump, swing out over a construction site, race under a moving dump truck. If I could visualize myself doing it, I knew I could do it.”

That effortful confidence carried over into politics. After scraping through the University of Delaware, he graduated from law school at Syracuse University, despite rarely attending class. In 1972, as a council member in New Castle County, with governing experience mostly related to stoplights and sewers, he decided to run for the United States Senate. His opponent, Senator Caleb Boggs, had won seven straight elections, but Biden saw a path for himself—playing up his youth, showing off his handsome family, flattering Boggs with patronizing grace. In June, while polling at three per cent, Biden rented the biggest ballroom in Delaware for what he was already calling his “victory

celebration.” When he won—by just three thousand votes—it was one of the biggest upsets in Senate history.

In 1987, as Richard Ben Cramer started writing “What It Takes,” his study of the psychology of Presidential aspirants, he gravitated to Biden, then a third-term senator competing in the Democratic primary. Biden had survived a personal agony almost beyond reckoning: in 1972, a car accident had killed his wife, Neilia, and daughter, Naomi, and left his young sons, Beau and Hunter, hospitalized. But Biden had found a calling in the Senate, where he came to believe ever more deeply in his capacity to envision a way through obstacles. “Joe called that process ‘gaming it out,’ ” Cramer wrote, “and it went on continuously in his head.”

Biden, the persuasive son of a car salesman, was always gaming out ideas that others thought half crazy—like the time he bought a dilapidated mansion, full of squirrels and asbestos, for two hundred thousand dollars that he didn’t have, or the time he fell in love with a crop of enormous hemlock bushes at a nursery in Pennsylvania and borrowed a truck to haul them home. “Joe drove the thing,” Cramer wrote, “overloaded, rocking and pitching, with trees hanging off the tail, down the back roads, an hour and a half, back to Wilmington.”

Sometimes Biden’s ambition nearly derailed his career; in 1987, his first

run for President ended abruptly after he was found to have embellished his biography and used other politicians' lines in his speeches. Biden returned to the Senate, and in 2008, after another unsuccessful campaign for the Presidency, Obama asked him to join his ticket. The idea was that he would bring some foreign-policy experience, a connection to working-class white voters, and not much else. Biden was sixty-five years old; the job would be, as Obama's strategist David Plouffe later put it, "a capstone to his storied career."

In the Vice-Presidency, Biden took bristly pride in defying the political wisdom of younger advisers. In 2012, he publicly embraced gay marriage while Obama was still weighing the political implications. The same year, though, he sided against progressives in a debate over requiring health-care plans to provide free contraception. When Biden argued that it risked alienating religious voters, a White House aide is said to have dismissed his concern as an artifact of the "electoral map of 1992," when "the Catholic, white, Reagan Democrat vote was decisive."

Some of those same voters would prove decisive again, when they sided with Trump in the 2016 election. But Biden was not in that race, of course. As he entered the last year of his Vice-Presidency, his son Beau was stricken with brain cancer—the second great agony of Biden's life. He coped by returning to his "purpose" as a public servant—asking his

chief of staff to overload the schedule with work, and telling him, about his family's car accident, "The only way I survived, the only way I got through it, was by staying busy and keeping my mind, when it can be, focused on my job."

When Biden left office, he was still in mourning, and for the first time in decades he was unsure what to do next. He started public-policy organizations, signed a reported eight-million-dollar contract for three books, advocated for veterans' issues and cancer research. Meanwhile, his son Hunter was coming apart; he had leveraged the family name into a much criticized business venture, joining the board of Burisma, an energy company in Ukraine, while his father was still overseeing relations with the country. While Hunter descended into addiction, he made a multimillion-dollar deal with a Chinese energy company that also benefitted his uncle James. (Hunter is awaiting a possible trial in California on federal tax charges.) Those ventures have become a focus of Republican-led investigations, but they have produced no evidence that Joe Biden was financially involved.

In 2017, Biden published his second book, "Promise Me, Dad," framed around a moment near the end of Beau's life when he implored his father to stay engaged in public life after he was gone. In April, 2019, Biden entered the Presidential primary, but found himself beset by concerns

that he was too old, too out of touch. After he lost in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada, advisers told him that he was so low on cash he might be finished within weeks.

In a turnaround that Biden and his aides still often cite, he won the South Carolina primary, thanks in part to a long-standing bond with Representative James Clyburn, who delivered an endorsement that carried singular weight with Black voters: “We know Joe. But, most importantly, Joe knows us.” Democrats, fearing a divisive primary, rapidly coalesced around Biden, and he went on to beat Trump by more than seven million votes. It was a smaller margin than polls had predicted—but it also represented the highest turnout in a Presidential election in decades.

Winning the Presidency after Trump was a mixed blessing. During the usual redecoration of the Oval Office, Biden was surprised by a proposal to put Franklin Roosevelt’s portrait over the fireplace. “I said, ‘I admire Roosevelt, but why Roosevelt?’ ” he told me. Citing the threat to democracy, the Presidential historian Jon Meacham told him, “Not since Roosevelt has anyone ever inherited a circumstance of more difficulty.”

The economy was in ruins. On Inauguration Day, unemployment was 6.3 per cent, and food banks were sustaining millions of people who had

been laid off. Thousands of Americans were still dying of COVID every day. Arriving at the White House, Jeff Zients, who was assigned to take over the pandemic response, could not bear to dwell on images of hospitals. “I remember watching CNN out of the corner of my eye, and finally turning it off,” he said.

On both COVID and the economy, Biden had a core belief: better to respond too heavily than too lightly. “I want to overwhelm the problem,” he told aides. The risk of a stimulus is inflation, but Biden recalled a bitter lesson from the financial collapse during the Obama Administration, when a stimulus proved insufficient and Republicans, who took control of the House in the next year’s midterms, refused to agree to more. Biden told aides working on the stimulus proposal, “We’re not going to be able to do this again.” In March, 2021, after intense debate among members of the Administration and Congress, Biden signed a \$1.9-trillion package. In July, as inflation was registering worldwide, Biden’s approval rating fell substantially for the first time.

That drop in popularity was compounded in August, when Biden fulfilled a years-long desire to pull American troops from Afghanistan—despite warnings that he should disregard the timetable set by Trump. The withdrawal was ugly. The Taliban took over almost instantly, and the Administration was desperately unprepared; it airlifted

out some hundred and twenty thousand people, but tens of thousands more who had worked for the U.S. government were still clamoring for evacuation. In “The Last Politician,” a book about Biden’s first two years in the Presidency, Franklin Foer wrote that criticism of his policy “caused him to stubbornly defend his own logic.” According to Foer, Biden saw the scathing coverage and told an aide, “Either the press is losing its mind, or I am.” As people scrambled to flee, a bombing at the gates of the Kabul airport killed thirteen American troops and nearly two hundred Afghans.

Biden’s popularity might have recovered as the economy steadied. The stimulus was likely contributing modestly to rising prices, but it had also kept many out of poverty. Then, in February, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Biden was lauded for his response; European leaders had wrongly predicted that Vladimir Putin was bluffing, but the Administration had released accurate intelligence in advance, which fortified Biden’s bid to rally NATO allies. Nevertheless, the costs of energy and shipping spiked, and, by that June, prices in America had soared more than nine per cent in one year—the steepest rise in four decades.

The feeling of a world out of control—inflation, Afghanistan, Ukraine—contributed to a sense that Biden was floundering. Larry

Summers, the former Treasury Secretary, said that a recession was “almost inevitable.” Biden repeatedly disputed the idea, even as a consensus formed: in December, a *Financial Times* survey of economists found that eighty-five per cent predicted a recession within a year. Bloomberg Economics calculated the odds at a hundred per cent.

Those predictions proved resoundingly wrong. By 2024, the country had gained more than three million jobs, unemployment was at historic lows, consumer confidence was steadily rising, and the United States was in stronger shape than all other advanced economies. (Germany, by contrast, declared a recession in early 2023.) The economist Tyler Cowen concluded, in a postmortem on the forecasts, “The problem is that the real world is not as consistent as model builders might like.”

Biden takes evident pride in having been right. He asked me, “How many times did you and your colleagues write, ‘The recession is coming next month’?” In pursuing a larger stimulus, Biden was challenging what he often calls “the orthodoxy of trickle-down economics.” That view, he said, held that “the only way we’re going to get inflation down is to get unemployment up to ten per cent. Come on. That’s how it worked in the past, because we’d want to make sure the wealthy don’t get hurt. But who pays for that?” The goal was rebuilding the economy

from “the middle out and the bottom up,” he said. “When that happens, everybody does well, including—*including*—the wealthy.”

In January, when the S. & P. 500 and the Dow hit their highest points in history, Biden posted a video from 2020 of Trump predicting that a Biden win would lead to “a stock market collapse the likes of which you’ve never had.” More recently, Trump had said that he was hoping for a crash. “He’d like to see a recession or a depression,” Biden said, aghast. “He doesn’t want to be the next Herbert Hoover? He’s *already* Herbert Hoover. He’s the only President that ever lost jobs in a four-year period—other than Hoover.”

Roger Altman, a Deputy Secretary of the Treasury in the Clinton Administration, told me, “The data is so good you have to rub your eyes.” But feelings about the economy have become, in part, a proxy for partisan identity. In December, more than three-quarters of respondents in a poll for Axios acknowledged reports of the recovery but said they were “not feeling it where I live.” Those most likely to report financial distress were Republicans and rural Americans. Biden, Altman said, needs to hammer home the idea: “ ‘We’re getting key prices back down for you.’ Talk about it every half hour, because this grocery-price anger is a real problem.”

Three days after the Valley Forge speech, Biden was back on the road—this time to Charleston, South Carolina, where he could counter talk that he was losing ground with an important demographic. Four years earlier, Black voters had resuscitated his campaign. Now, according to an NBC News survey, their approval of Biden had dropped nearly twenty points in a year.

The Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church occupies a creaky nineteenth-century sanctuary—and a singular position in the history of the Black freedom struggle. Founded near what was once one of the country’s busiest slave ports, it became known as Mother Emanuel, because it spawned so many churches across the Lowcountry of South Carolina. In 2015, it gained international notice, in horrific fashion, when a white supremacist, welcomed at a Bible study, pulled out a gun and murdered the pastor and eight parishioners.

The horror at Mother Emanuel would come to be understood as an opening shot in an age of far-right violence, and of radicalization in the Republican Party. Joseph Darby, a reverend and an influential political voice in Charleston, told me, “It was a dog whistle in the Nixon days. It’s a bullhorn now. You’ve got Nikki Haley running around with amnesia about slavery. You’ve got DeSantis trying to ban books and

saying that slaves might've learned to make a buck while they were being beaten, raped, and maimed.”

On the dais at Mother Emanuel, backed by a towering stained-glass mosaic, Biden faced an audience of about seven hundred parishioners and guests. He was introduced by Clyburn, the dean of South Carolina's congressional delegation, who ticked through the Administration's programs and repeated his crucial imprimatur: “As I told you four years ago, we know Joe. But, more importantly, Joe knows us.”

Biden rose from his seat, embraced Clyburn, and stepped forward. Before he spoke much of politics, he spoke of loss. After the massacre, Biden and Hunter had visited the church. The trip was meant “to show our solidarity,” Biden recalled, but Beau had died only three weeks earlier, and “my family also needed to be healed.” Now, he said, seeing family members of some of those killed “reminds me that, through our pain, each of us—each of us—must find purpose.”

Biden didn't restrain himself from politics for long. In the minutes that followed, he drew his opponent into a blistering analogy to the aftermath of the Civil War, when, he said, “defeated Confederates couldn't accept the verdict of the war.” They took refuge in “a self-serving lie that the Civil War was not about slavery but about states' rights.” That lie, in

turn, gave rise to Jim Crow. “Once again, there are some in this country trying to turn a loss into a lie,” Biden said. “This time, the lie is about the 2020 election, the election in which you made your voices heard and your power known.” He never mentioned Trump’s name, but the point was clear. “In our time, there’s still the old ghost in new garments,” he told the crowd. “And we all need to rise to meet the moment.”

Seated in the second row was Deon Tedder, the son of a custodian and a secretary, who was elected last year to the state senate. He knows that some young voters are unimpressed with Biden. “They’re saying, ‘Well, what has he done? We don’t see anything,’ ” Tedder told me. Trump put his name on people’s stimulus checks—and they still talk about them. But the effects of Biden’s policy agenda will take years to manifest. Tedder went on, “Democrats, even here, we are horrible with messaging. Talk about student-loan forgiveness. Talk about the push to decriminalize nonviolent offenses. You have to break it down so that people can connect.”

After leaving the church, Biden stopped at Hannibal’s, a venerable soul-food spot that draws Democrats on the stump. A President’s entourage is the size of a small army, but as Biden moved from booth to booth he seemed relaxed for the first time all day. A half century of glad-handing shone through. Approaching the owner, who was standing

with his daughters, he asked, with mock concern, “Do you know these women?” The man beamed and said, “They’re the next generation. I’m the old patriarch—like you.”

Biden’s victory in the South Carolina primary, on February 3rd, was never in question, but the returns would be studied for indications of his campaign’s momentum. The results were encouraging for Democrats. Turnout in Orangeburg County, home to two historically Black universities, was the second-highest in the state—and it was higher still in the county’s predominantly African American precincts.

Reverend Darby told me that he has always thought Biden’s standing among Black voters was better than press accounts suggested. “Donald Trump is not exactly the picture of health, but if Joe Biden wears sneakers there’s a great national concern. There’s something wrong with that balance,” he said. He believes that as the year moves on voters will recognize practical improvements from some Biden-era policies. He said, “My late wife was diabetic. The first time I found out how much insulin costs, I asked, ‘How much is it with insurance?’ And the pharmacist said, ‘That is with insurance.’ ” (Under the Inflation Reduction Act, a month of insulin, which used to cost Darby about two hundred dollars, is now capped for Medicare recipients at thirty-five dollars.) He continued, “I have two sons. Neither of them are

exceptionally enthused. But both of them say, ‘I will be at the polls. Can’t have Trump.’ ”

The Trump White House confronted Americans with a parade of emergencies, pratfalls, and defenestrations. The Biden Administration, by contrast, has a culture of almost ostentatious calm. Biden’s public statements are “actively sedative,” as one commentator put it, and Cabinet members seem to go out of their way to avoid generating excitement. In a list of their personal New Year’s resolutions published by Politico, Gina Raimondo, the Secretary of Commerce, declared, “I’m hoping to drink less diet soda.”

Turnover has been rare in the top ranks of the Administration. Biden has long retained a core group of advisers, and, unlike in the previous Administration, top aides don’t regularly disparage each other to reporters. Anita Dunn, a senior adviser who specializes in communications, considers that a by-product of age. “You don’t have a lot of the jockeying around being close to him, or ‘Who is he listening to?’ ” she said. “We’re closer to the end of our careers than the middles or the beginnings.”

But the culture of calm also relies on a capacity for setting aside concerns. A series of senior aides told me that they doubt Biden is

trailing Trump as much as some polls have suggested. “Polling is broken,” one of them said. “You can’t figure out how to get someone on the phone.” Pollsters partly concede the point; few people these days are willing to be candid with a stranger about politics, and fewer still have landlines. “I think the only person who calls me on my landline is Joe Biden,” the aide added. Campaigns that are trailing in the polls often impugn them, of course, but Biden aides cite reasons for their skepticism. When I raised the issue with Jennifer O’Malley Dillon, a top adviser who recently moved from the White House to the campaign, she made a distinction between “favorability” (a line of inquiry in opinion polls) and “vote choice” (the outcome of recent elections, notably the recent ones in which Democrats did well). “Historically, favorability and vote choice have been correlated,” she said. “I actually think that that’s no longer the case.”

Outside the White House, though, concerned Democrats note that Biden was not on the ballot in 2022 or 2023, so voters did not have a chance to signal their feelings about him. They worry that aides are relying too much on Biden’s self-image as the underdog who disproves the doubters. In any Administration, there is a tendency to amplify the good news and obscure the bad. “Every White House does it to some degree,” the former Democratic official told me. He said he believes that Biden’s

polls show “flashing red warning signs,” but that the President “can just choose to hear the positive reinforcement.”

Unsurprisingly, Biden’s aides reject the idea that the White House is insular or dismissive of reality. Zients, who succeeded Ron Klain as chief of staff last year, pointed to Biden’s reputation for soliciting opinions from critics. “Just the other day, he picked up the phone and called Larry Summers,” Zients said. As outreach goes, it was relatively safe; Summers, despite his critical comments, is a longtime adviser to Presidents. Biden’s other occasional calls range from the columnist Thomas Friedman to the Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. “That’s how you pressure-test decisions,” Zients said.

At bottom, Biden has oriented his Presidency around an unfashionable faith in compromise, experience, and relationships. As Dunn put it, “The biggest bet of all is that good governing actually can get you reelected in 2024, when all of the forces seem to be arrayed against it.” But there is little agreement—even among Biden’s supporters—on what good governing looks like. Perhaps the greatest test of Biden’s belief in the old ways of Washington came from abroad, and outraged some of the voters he needs most.

At 12:06 A.M. on October 7th, the Situation Room at the White House sent an urgent message to national-security officials: “Heavy rocket barrage launched from Gaza.” By 12:48, new details had confirmed that something far more devastating was afoot: “ Hamas militants have infiltrated Israel from Gaza via land, air, and sea.” Michael Herzog, Israel’s Ambassador to Washington, had sent the message, “This is war.”

Like many Presidents before, Biden had come to office hoping to avoid engulfing dramas in the Middle East. “No new projects,” as one aide put it. But, after Hamas slaughtered some twelve hundred Israelis, Biden expanded arms shipments to Israel, dispatched ships, and spoke furiously about the rampage of killings, rapes, and kidnappings—what he called “an act of sheer evil.”

In Biden’s view, the attack was part of a challenge that defines his Presidency: the assault on free societies. “ Hamas and Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common—they both want to completely annihilate a neighboring democracy,” he said, in an Oval Office address last October. Although Biden has a half century of sometimes tense dealings with Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s right-wing Prime Minister, he feels a deep kinship with the country, which he first visited in 1973, just before it fought off a surprise attack from its neighbors. “In his gut, he sees Israel as besieged by enemies,” Senator

Coons told me. “The tension is that my kids’ college-ish generation doesn’t see Israel as surrounded by enemies, at risk of not surviving.”

As Israel’s retaliation generated horrific images of Palestinians suffering in Gaza, Biden’s tone slowly shifted. He publicly warned Israel against “indiscriminate” attacks and privately intervened to avoid counterstrikes based on bad information; by mid-January, the number of Gazans killed each day had fallen by nearly half, according to a tally by the *Times*. But Biden continued to resist calls for an immediate ceasefire or a reduction in military aid. When I visited the White House, protesters near an entrance used by visitors and staff were dousing the pavement with blood-red liquid and lying across the walkway. The potential political impact was obvious: In 2020, Biden won resoundingly among Arab and Muslim voters—an especially consequential bloc in Michigan, where he won by just a hundred and fifty-four thousand votes. Now some of the same voters in Michigan were promoting a campaign called Abandon Biden, and a national poll showed that his support among Arab and Muslim Americans had dropped by forty per cent.

I asked Biden if he intended to apply more pressure on Israel’s leaders, and, for the first time that day, he did not jab back at the question. “I understand the anger and the rage” sparked by October 7th, he said. “But you can’t let the rage consume you to the point where you lose the moral

high ground.” Biden didn’t hide his frustration with Netanyahu’s government. He told me that, when he preached caution to members of Israel’s war cabinet, they replied that America had carpet-bombed Germany in the Second World War. Biden said that he responded, “That’s why we ended up with the United Nations and all these rules about not doing that again.”

Biden holds out hope for the most elusive of grand bargains: getting Israelis to accept the creation of a Palestinian state, in exchange for normalized relations with Saudi Arabia—which many Israelis see as a vital step toward long-term security. He described it as a way for Israel to fight off its attackers without causing undue suffering: “We could put in place a circumstance that ends up where they continue to move—as we did with bin Laden—against the leaders of Hamas, but not assume that every Palestinian is a supporter of Hamas.” He added, “I’ve been pushing very hard for the Israeli government to come down hard on these out-of-control settlers.” (In February, Biden imposed financial penalties and visa bans on four Israeli settlers in the West Bank who were accused of attacking Palestinians and Israeli peace activists.)

I brought up the disdain that Biden’s handling of the war has engendered among Arab Americans and young Democrats. “I don’t want to see any Palestinians killed—I think that it’s contrary to what we believe as

Americans,” he said. But he urged his critics to wait. “I think they have to give this just a little bit of time, understanding what would happen if they came into their state or their neighborhood and saw what happened with Hamas,” he said. “The pressure on the leadership to move with every ounce of capacity against Hamas is real. But it doesn’t mean it should be continued. It doesn’t mean it’s right. And so, I think you’re going to see—I’m praying you’re going to see—a significant downturn in the use of force.”

That posture was echt Biden: asking for patience to continue private negotiations, criticizing Netanyahu’s government without renouncing him. It would satisfy almost nobody in the short term. (The day after we spoke, Netanyahu dismissed Biden’s idea of a Palestinian state as an “attempt to impose a reality that would harm Israel’s security.”) As with many issues, Biden is both weighed down and blessed by his experience. He is not counting on an epiphany from Netanyahu. Without saying so explicitly, he is betting that an offer of Saudi normalization would be so popular with Israeli leaders that Netanyahu would have no choice but to engage it. Since the war began, Israel has rejected many American requests—to allow humanitarian assistance, to let out the severely wounded and foreign-passport holders, to pause the fighting while hostages are released—before ultimately agreeing. The Administration

treats each no from Israel as an “initial answer,” a national-security official told me, adding, “Other people would like us to take an approach that is much more publicly confrontational. But would it actually lead to better outcomes in the war?”

Not long after I visited Biden, I called Mohammad Qazzaz, a Palestinian American who lives in Dearborn, Michigan, and owns a coffee business. We met in 2020, when he was a strong Biden supporter. Now he was furious. “There are people who bleed Democratic here, but they will never vote for Biden again,” he said. “Some of them are actually saying they will vote for Trump because they just want to screw up the whole system. Screw this country if it thinks we’re dogs.”

Qazzaz can’t bring himself to vote for Trump, but he plans to write in “Free Palestine” on the ballot this November. It’s not yet clear how much this kind of sentiment will hurt Biden. During the Michigan primary, a hundred thousand people—about thirteen per cent of the total—wrote in “uncommitted,” as a protest vote. When I asked one of Biden’s political advisers how much disillusionment over the war will matter, he said, “The single biggest thing is whether it’s a three- or four-month thing—or does it go on longer?”

On a crisp afternoon in late January, Biden and the First Lady boarded Marine One from the South Lawn of the White House, for a short hop to Manassas, Virginia, where George Mason University has a campus. There, they would meet up with Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, to mark the fifty-first anniversary of Roe v. Wade—which the Supreme Court overturned in 2022, starting a national furor. Onstage for Biden’s speech, a backdrop of white letters spelled out “Restore Roe.”

For decades, the politics of abortion were notoriously awkward for Biden. As a devoted Catholic and a liberal Democrat, he was torn between two creeds. Even after he became a vocal supporter of same-sex marriage and transgender protections, he remained, as he put it, “not big” on abortion. “It’s always been a hard issue for him,” an aide told me. “But it became a very easy issue for him because of the Supreme Court.” O’Malley Dillon recalled that when the decision came, in a case called Dobbs v. Jackson, Biden’s immediate response was “How is it that we are rolling back fifty years of rights?”

I asked Biden what he would do in a second term to protect abortion access at the federal level. “Pass Roe v. Wade as the law of the land,” he said. Democrats would need to win control of the House of Representatives and gain seats in the Senate, but Biden expressed confidence. “A few more elections like we’ve seen taking place in the

states” would suffice, he said. “You’re seeing the country changing.” Then, reiterating his position on Roe, he said, “I’ve never been supportive of, you know, ‘It’s my body, I can do what I want with it.’ But I have been supportive of the notion that this is probably the most rational allocation of responsibility that all the major religions have signed on and debated over the last thousand years.”

It’s a framing that irritates advocates. (In February, after he told attendees at a New York fund-raiser, “I don’t want abortion on demand, but I thought Roe v. Wade was right,” Slate ran a story titled “Biden’s Latest Abortion Fumble Is Particularly Distressing.”) But, so far, they have chosen to avoid a fight with a Democratic President whose opponent crowed that he was able to “terminate” Roe. After the midterms in 2022, researchers found that abortion restrictions had disproportionately motivated first-time and younger voters, and women under fifty.

Since Dobbs, twenty-one states have tightened restrictions on abortion. The prospect of a further rollback looms. In a concurring opinion on Dobbs, Justice Clarence Thomas argued that the legal rationale for overturning Roe could be applied to “correct the error” in cases on same-sex marriage, the decriminalization of homosexuality, and access to contraception. I asked Biden if he thought that the Justices would

undo those protections. “I don’t think there’s a majority to go there,” he said, but added, “I think that a couple on the Court would go considerably further”—specifically “the guy who likes to spend a lot of time on yachts.”

“Thomas?” I asked.

Biden grinned.

At the event in Manassas, it became clear that two of the most important issues for young people are colliding. As Biden began cranking up his speech, a man in the auditorium yelled, “Genocide Joe, how many kids have you killed in Gaza?” The audience drowned him out with chants of “Four more years,” and Biden returned to his lines, but moments later another call came from across the room: “Israel kills two mothers every hour!”

While the protesters were removed, Biden looked out calmly, knitting his fingers on the lectern. He seemed determined to project the mien of a parish priest, saying of the protesters, “They feel deeply.” But he barely made it through the next sentence of his speech before there was another shout. “This is going to go on for a while,” he told the crowd.

Eventually, he gave up bothering to pause with each interruption—his supporters shouted, “Keep going!”—and by the end there had been at

least a dozen removals. Biden wound up the speech to thundering applause. Still, it was hard to see how the impassioned young people who had been ejected, or who had stayed away that day, would change their minds between now and November.

A few hours after I met Biden in the Oval Office, he was due to sit down with members of Congress to discuss an ungainly jumble of issues, including military aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, as well as the humanitarian crisis at America's border with Mexico. They had been conjoined in a single bill after Republicans vowed to block funding for Ukraine unless Biden did something about immigration.

At the West Wing, more than a dozen Republicans and Democrats filed into the Cabinet Room, where the fireplace was roaring. The Republicans were led by the unlikely Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, a previously obscure lawmaker from Louisiana: a staunchly religious lawyer, with a rigid shell of salt-and-pepper hair and round schoolboy glasses, who had been installed only after a chaotic internal revolt pushed out his predecessor.

Biden's aides worried that the meeting would devolve into grandstanding. In December, House Republicans had approved an impeachment inquiry into Biden, in the hope of finding evidence of

corruption by him and his family. And immigration was a growing political nightmare for Democrats. For nearly three years, the Administration, beset by internal tensions, had tacked between looser and stricter policies. By the end of 2023, the number of migrants coming to the border had risen tenfold in five years, driven by calamities in Central America, the Middle East, and beyond. Some in the White House spoke glumly of the border with the mantra “All options are bad.”

The Ukraine problem was no less of an emergency, and no simpler to solve. Military analysts estimated that, without more American arms and ammunition, Ukraine would start to succumb to Russia’s attacks by the summer. The Republican Party once defined itself by its opposition to Russian aggression, but the current House of Representatives is often sympathetic to Putin—and nearly always unsympathetic to Biden’s requests for funding. Still, Biden liked his chances. “Bring them here,” he told aides. “I want to meet with them.”

Biden’s seemingly inexhaustible appetite for negotiating with Congress can make him seem like a political misfit, a conciliator in an age of absolutes. But, in one of the more perceptive observations I’ve heard about Biden, his longtime aide Bruce Reed told me that he “proceeds as if things are on the level and tries to force them to be so.” He still believes in the old legislative-favor trade. In 2021, even though Mitch

McConnell directed his members not to vote for the stimulus package, Biden made a point of approving a measure that the Alaska Republican Lisa Murkowski requested, providing relief for the cruise-ship industry. Biden told aides, “She can’t vote with me now, but that doesn’t mean she won’t later, and she’ll remember this.”

At times, Biden’s deference to lawmakers has infuriated progressive members of his own party. In 2021, some pushed him to publicly criticize Joe Manchin, the conservative Democrat who had scuttled the centerpiece of the Administration’s agenda, a bill known as Build Back Better. But Biden refused to “kick the shit” out of Manchin, an aide said. Instead, Steve Ricchetti, Biden’s counsellor, who oversees legislative affairs, privately stayed in touch. They were an easy mix: two genial Italian American pols from industrial flyover states—Manchin from West Virginia, Ricchetti from Ohio. Manchin is a Democrat in a deep-red state, and Biden, betting that he might coöperate after the initial pressure passed, encouraged a strategy to “keep the door open.” Manchin ended up siding with the Administration on a series of pivotal votes. Ricchetti told me, “Had we listened to that advice”—to name and shame Manchin—“we don’t get the Inflation Reduction Act, we probably don’t get the CHIPS Act, and we don’t get the veterans’-health bill, or Ketanji Brown Jackson on the Supreme Court.”

Last fall, once Republicans made it clear that they would not agree to aid for Ukraine without an immigration deal, a group of senators started meeting to negotiate across the aisle. By January, they were nearing a compromise that no one in Congress would have predicted a decade ago. To the chagrin of immigration advocates, Democrats were prepared to drop the requirement for a pathway to legalization for undocumented immigrants already in the country, and to accept Republican demands for expanded detention capacity and higher standards for asylum. During the meeting at the White House, Biden told the assembled group, “I will do a big deal on the border.” Speaker Johnson said on television that night that the meeting was productive.

None of that sat well with Trump, who had built his campaign on the politics of a permanent border crisis; if conditions improved, he would have nothing to blame on Biden. On January 25th, even before the text of the bill was available, Trump posted on social media, “A Border Deal now would be another Gift to the Radical Left Democrats.” Republicans rapidly fell in line, without bothering to conceal the rationale.

Representative Troy Nehls, a Texas Republican, asked a reporter, “Why would I help Joe Biden?” On February 4th, just hours after the bill was released, Johnson pronounced it “dead on arrival.”

Trump had thwarted a bipartisan effort to address two of Washington's most urgent problems. Yet this act of cynicism was also, perhaps, a political gift to Biden. For the next nine months, he could blame Republicans for being feckless and destructive. In an apparent preview of how he will talk about the topic during the campaign, Biden told me, "I'm watching television this morning while I'm shaving." A Republican was trashing him onscreen, he recalled, saying, "Well, Biden won't support more funding for the border!" Biden laughed. "I mean, what the hell?" he said. "I've been pushing *so damn hard* for reform of the border."

Biden's opportunity is akin to the one that Harry Truman had in his 1948 campaign for reelection. Trailing in the polls, Truman railed against what he called a "Do Nothing Congress," which had failed to stop spiking prices and ameliorate a housing crisis. Much as Biden talks about the threat to freedoms worldwide, Truman spoke of a gathering Cold War, a grand mission that served to unify a fractious Democratic Party. He ultimately prevailed.

"It was a matter of pulling together a coalition that was in even worse fragmentation," Sean Wilentz, a Princeton historian, told me. "Truman did it by going to the American people, running against Congress, standing up on both the Cold War and civil rights. It's possible that '48

will prove a precursor to what we have now—if the Democrats take heed.” Sarah Longwell said, drawing on her experience in focus groups, “Nothing papers over the fractures in the Democratic coalition like Donald Trump. He is a walking turnout mechanism. I’ve just spent so much time listening to how much voters viscerally dislike him.” She added, “You’re not building a pro-Joe Biden coalition—you’re building an anti-Donald Trump coalition.”

Near the end of my conversation with Biden, he said, “There’s only one reason, I think, to be involved in elective office, and that’s to be able to do what you think is the right thing.” The sentiment is noble but incomplete. In this election, the right thing is to win. If Biden succeeds, his critics will say that their alarms nudged him to victory. If he loses, they will say that he was captive to hubris. History will be harsh.

Biden believes that he is doing the most essential work of his life. To some, this is a dangerous rationalization. He is at peace with that. In the election, he is betting that Americans will reward him for his achievements: ejecting Trump from the White House, getting the nation out of the pandemic, rescuing the economy, reviving NATO—not to mention passing significant legislation on climate change, gun control, drug prices, manufacturing, and infrastructure. But achievement is not

the same as inspiration, and Americans are not in a mood of gratitude toward our leaders.

Having entered the Senate at the age of thirty, one of the youngest members in its history, Biden formed an idea of himself as a wunderkind, and he has never quite shed it. He often says, “I feel so much younger than my age.” In the early years of his Presidency, when people asked him about his age, his stock response was “Watch me.” He doesn’t say that as much anymore. Grudgingly, painfully, he may be coming to terms with the reality that people don’t see him the way he hopes they will.

In 1960, when John F. Kennedy ran for President, discrimination against Catholics was widespread, and he faced the persistent slur that he would be controlled by the Vatican. In a speech that fall, Kennedy told an audience of Protestant ministers, “The real issues in this campaign have been obscured—perhaps deliberately.” Without posturing, he asked Americans to join him in rejecting “disdain and division” by promoting “instead the American ideal of brotherhood.” The speech was a success, and the fixation on Kennedy’s faith receded.

Biden has not addressed the matter of age as forthrightly, even though it is a topic that might resonate with Americans, especially those who have

suffered the condescension and dismissal that rankle him. Yes, he might stumble at the microphone, but he might also convince skeptics of the power in his patience, institutional memory, and experience. His campaign, at least, has evidently decided that the issue can't be avoided entirely. Last week, Biden made an appearance on "Late Night with Seth Meyers," and the first question was about his age. Biden replied, as he often does, with a joke: "You got to take a look at the other guy. He's about as old as I am, but he can't remember his wife's name."

Biden likes to say, "Don't compare me to the Almighty. Compare me to the alternative." But, unlike his opponent, he is in office, and liable to be judged for the condition of the country. It is a measure of the interlocking crises in the world today that the course of the next eight months depends on circumstances that are unfathomable in advance. Could Houthi militants, firing rockets over the Red Sea, disrupt enough shipping to revive inflation? Could Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., ride a wave of nostalgia onto the ballot in Arizona or Michigan? Could a last-minute deepfake deter a decisive few thousand voters in a swing state? The real world of politics, like economics, is not as consistent as model builders might like.

One of the few points of certainty is a chilling one. Half the respondents to a CBS poll in January said they believed that the losing side of the

coming election will resort to violence. Biden has an uneasy relationship to such knowledge. He is convinced that Americans will reject the Trumpist view of politics. “How can we, as a democracy, elect anyone President who says violence is appropriate?” he asked me. And he thinks that the press has failed to take full stock of Trump’s menace. “It’s like you’ve all become numbed by it.”

But he must also prepare for the prospect that this race will get very ugly. When I asked whether he thinks that Trump will concede if he loses in 2024, Biden said no. “Losers who are losers are never graceful,” he said. “I just think that he’ll do anything to try to win. If—and *when*—I win, I think he’ll contest it. No matter what the result is.” ♦

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