

"The Questions of Age and Leadership"

How Old Is Too Old to Be President? An Uncomfortable Question Arises Again.

Either of the leading 2024 candidates would be the oldest occupant of the Oval Office ever by the end of his term, and neither seems eager to discuss the ramifications.



By Peter Baker

Reporting from Washington

Feb. 10, 2024, 5:03 a.m. ET

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When Dwight D. Eisenhower weighed the pros and cons of running for a second term, one factor that concerned him was his age.

Arguing against a re-election campaign in his mind, he wrote in his diary in November 1954, was the need for “younger men in positions of the highest responsibility” at a time of “growing severity and complexity of problems that rest upon the president.”

He was 64 at the time.

Today the two leading candidates for his old job clock in at 77 and 81. Barring an unforeseen political earthquake, America seems destined to have a commander in chief well past typical retirement age for years to come no matter who wins in November. Donald J. Trump would be 82 at the end of the next term, and Joseph R. Biden Jr. would be 86.

Aging today, of course, is different than it was in the 1950s, and Eisenhower did decide to run again, serving out a second term leading an administration that historians credit as formidable. But he experienced multiple serious health scares in office that tested his Cold War presidency, and it seems reasonable to assume that the country could be confronted with similar issues between now and January 2029, when the next term will expire.

The issue of age was thrust back onto the front burner with the special counsel report on Mr. Biden’s handling of classified information that described the president as a “well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory” who had “diminished faculties in advancing age.” The report came the same week that Mr. Biden on two occasions referred to European leaders who are, in fact, dead as if they were still around and mistakenly called the president of Egypt the president of Mexico.

Mr. Trump quickly sought to capitalize on the special counsel report, issuing a statement through an aide calling Mr. Biden “too senile to be president.” But Mr. Trump has suffered his own bouts of public perplexity lately, confusing the leaders of Hungary and Turkey, warning that the country is on the verge of World War II, saying that he defeated Barack Obama instead of Hillary Clinton and referring to his Republican primary challenger, Nikki Haley, as if she were Nancy Pelosi, the former House speaker.

As a matter of politics, age has been a bigger liability for Mr. Biden than for Mr. Trump, according to polls, perhaps because of the president’s physical presentation, particularly the shuffle when he walks. Mr. Biden, who unlike Mr. Trump exercises regularly, has agreed that age is a legitimate issue to consider but grew incensed over the report by the special counsel, Robert K. Hur, and made a last-minute decision to summon cameras to the White House for a feisty nighttime pushback.

“Biden clearly finds the conversation about his health and age exasperating,” said Jonathan Darman, author of “Becoming FDR,” about the health challenges of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. “This is understandable, particularly given Trump’s own advanced age, his apparent confusion and his frequent lapses of memory. But even if, as Biden and his aides insist, he is

in excellent physical and mental health, he owes it to the country to have a frank and robust conversation about the topic.”

Neither candidate seems eager for that. Both have issued reports from doctors stating that they are in good shape, but neither has answered questions about their health at length. While the White House physician has been made available to reporters by previous presidents, Mr. Biden has not seen fit to order his doctor to respond to detailed queries.



Former President Donald J. Trump has issued reports from doctors saying he is in good health, as has Mr. Biden, but neither has answered questions about their health at length. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Even assuming both are fit for the presidency at this point, the harder question for voters to evaluate is whether they will be in five years. And the dilemma for the country would be what to do if a president slips mentally or physically in a way that affects his ability to do the job but will not admit it or voluntarily step aside.

History suggests that presidents do not willingly give up power no matter how impaired they may be, and the constitutional mechanism for removing them enshrined in the 25th Amendment is politically problematic. Among other things, it requires a vice president and majority of the cabinet to declare that a president is “unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office,” which loyal appointees may be reluctant to do if the president does not agree. Even if they did, a defiant president could appeal to Congress, requiring a two-thirds vote by both houses to sustain his removal.

Some of Mr. Trump’s own cabinet members when he was president contemplated invoking the 25th Amendment to unseat him, but his vice president, Mike Pence, refused to go along. The 25th Amendment provides an alternative: A panel created by Congress could declare a president unable to serve, but lawmakers have never formed such a body. When Representative Jamie Raskin, Democrat of Maryland, tried to create a bipartisan panel of outside experts during Mr. Trump’s presidency, the initiative went nowhere.

The issue has arisen in different forms at various points in American history. President James A. Garfield was shot by a would-be assassin in 1881 and lingered for 80 days before dying, during which time he was hardly in shape to be running the country. Likewise, President Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981 and hospitalized for nearly two weeks, although his staff labored to create the perception that he was able to govern from bed.

After Eisenhower’s rumination on age in his diary, chronicled by biographers like Jeffrey Frank, the general-turned-president suffered a heart attack in 1955 and underwent surgery in 1956 for an obstruction caused by Crohn’s disease before nonetheless winning re-election. In 1957, he had a small stroke but completed his term in 1961. Like other presidents, he convinced himself he was uniquely suited to the White House and ran again.

Eisenhower overruled aides who wanted to hide his condition from reporters, instructing his staff to “tell them everything.” The health issues “kept no one from voting him a second term,” noted Richard Norton Smith, a former director of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Center in Abilene, Kan. “Indeed, that wound up educating people about the modern treatment of heart and other diseases once presumed debilitating — even if Ike found distasteful public depictions of his internal organs.”



President Dwight D. Eisenhower in a wheelchair at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital after suffering from a heart attack in 1955. Bettmann, via Getty Images

Roosevelt was always struggling with the politics of health, forced to convince the country that he was up to the presidency when he first ran in 1932 despite having lost the use of his legs because of polio. Roosevelt clearly proved capable despite the disease, and Mr. Darman argues in his book that it made F.D.R. a better, more empathetic and determined leader.

By the time he ran for a fourth term in 1944, however, Roosevelt was so drained and diminished that his own doctor did not believe he would survive the term, which proved prescient. “Knowing what we know now,” said Mr. Darman, “his decision to run that year is hard to defend. Roosevelt’s aides told the country his health was good, but anyone who was in close contact with him at that point in his presidency could see that his physical stamina was dramatically reduced.”

The most famous and serious presidential disability crisis came when Woodrow Wilson collapsed during a cross-country train trip promoting his League of Nations in 1919. Later felled by a stroke, he was hardly in shape to govern, leaving his wife Edith Wilson and a handful of aides to shield him from public view and effectively manage his presidency for nearly a year and a half.

“He really should have stepped down, at least temporarily,” said Rebecca Boggs Roberts, author of “Untold Power,” a biography of Edith Wilson. “He hated the idea, and his wife, Edith, chose to protect his feelings over the needs of the nation, and basically did his job for him while lying to everyone about how sick he was. That is not how democracy is supposed to work — no one elected Edith to anything.”

Such extensive subterfuge seems impossible in today's hyper-accelerated political and media world. But White House aides still do what they can to cover for ailing presidents. In Reagan's later years in office, some were so worried about his mental state that they thought they might have to orchestrate the invocation of the 25th Amendment, as revealed in "Landslide," by Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus.

After closely studying him, the aides decided he was still capable of handling the job. But nearly six years after leaving office, Reagan disclosed that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and many have debated since whether the effects of that may have been taking hold while he was in the White House.

Reagan defused concerns about his age during his 1984 re-election campaign with humor. After a halting performance at a debate against his Democratic challenger, Walter F. Mondale, left many voters with questions, Reagan, then 73, joked at his next debate: "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." Even Mr. Mondale laughed and said later that he knew at that moment he had lost.

Until recently, Reagan was the oldest president in American history, leaving office just a couple of weeks before his 78th birthday. Mr. Biden was older on his first day in office than Reagan was on his last, taking over the title of oldest president. If Mr. Trump wins in November and finishes his second term, he will overtake Mr. Biden for that distinction.

Mr. Darman said the lesson he learned from history was that Roosevelt dispelled worries about his health with a vigorous campaign schedule. "Americans today have doubts about Biden's ability to handle the demands of the presidency," he said. "The only way for him to address those doubts is to do what Roosevelt did — get out in public and show the country that he is up for four more years."

Mr. Trump, too, will have to quell concerns about his cognitive health, something that was a serious enough worry while he was in office that many of his aides privately believed he was not fit. His own second White House chief of staff bought a book by a series of mental health experts to try to understand Mr. Trump. But Mr. Trump has many other issues that may overshadow his health, most obviously the 91 felony criminal counts against him.

As the general election contest takes shape, the emerging choice between octogenarian and septuagenarian may be unique in American history. But it may not be the last. Given longer life spans and advances in medical science, Mr. Smith said, "we had better get accustomed to older presidents."

Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent for The Times. He has covered the last five presidents and sometimes writes analytical pieces that place presidents and their administrations in a larger context and historical framework. More about Peter Baker

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The Challenges of an Aging President

Feb. 9, 2024

By The Editorial Board

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Because of his age and his determination to run for a second term, President Biden is taking the American public into uncharted waters. He is the oldest person ever to serve as president, is the oldest ever to run for re-election and, if he is successful, would be 86 at the end of his tenure. Ronald Reagan, by comparison, was an unprecedented 77 when he ended his second term in 1989.

A remarkably broad swath of the American public — both Mr. Biden's supporters and his detractors — have expressed increasing doubts about his ability to serve for another five years because of his age. As Nate Cohn, The Times's chief political analyst, noted, "In Times/Siena polling last fall, more than 70 percent of battleground state voters agreed with the statement that Mr. Biden's 'just too old to be an effective president.'" But the release of the special counsel Robert K. Hur's report on Thursday — and Mr. Hur's assessment that the president presents himself as a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory" — will invariably test the trust that the American people have in their president.

Mr. Biden's performance at his news conference on Thursday night was intended to assure the public that his memory is fine and argue that Mr. Hur was out of line; instead, the president raised more questions about his cognitive sharpness and temperament, as he delivered emotional and snappish retorts in a moment when people were looking for steady, even and capable responses to fair questions about his fitness.

His assurances, in other words, didn't work. He must do better — the stakes in this presidential election are too high for Mr. Biden to hope that he can skate through a campaign with the help of teleprompters and aides and somehow defeat as manifestly unfit an opponent as Donald Trump, who has a very real chance of retaking the White House.

Mr. Biden's allies are already going to the usual Washington playbook of dismissing the special counsel's report as partisan. Regardless of Mr. Hur's motivation, the details that he presented spoke to worries voters already had. The president has to reassure and build confidence with the public by doing things that he has so far been unwilling to do convincingly. He needs to be out campaigning with voters far more in unrehearsed interactions. He could undertake more town hall meetings in communities and on national television. He should hold regular news conferences to demonstrate his command of and direction for leading the country.

As it stands, he has had less substantive, unscripted interaction with the public and the press than any other president in recent memory. As Michael Shear of The Times reported last year, "In the 100 years since Calvin Coolidge took office, only Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan held as few news conferences each year as the current occupant of the Oval Office." As of late January, he had also given fewer interviews than the last six presidents: only 86. Mr. Trump gave 300, and Barack

Obama gave 422. For the second year in a row, Mr. Biden has even refused to do an interview before the Super Bowl, a practice that allowed presidents to speak to Americans informally before the country's largest sporting event of the year, unpersuasively citing a desire to give the public a break from politics.

This is part of a concerted, modern White House strategy to reach Americans through online influencers or tightly produced videos, rather than public encounters that might challenge him. But the combination of Mr. Biden's age and his absence from the public stage has eroded the public's confidence. He looks as if he is hiding, or worse, being hidden. The details in Mr. Hur's report will only heighten those concerns, which Mr. Trump's campaign is already exploiting.

This is a dark moment for Mr. Biden's presidency, when many voters are relying on him to provide the country with a compelling alternative to the unique danger of Mr. Trump. On the most important questions — of integrity, record of accomplishment and the character required to be fit for the presidency — there is no comparison between them. In the most challenging moments of his presidency, in supporting our allies when they are threatened and in steering the U.S. economy away from recession, Mr. Biden has been a wise and steady presence. He needs to do more to show the public that he is fully capable of holding office until age 86.

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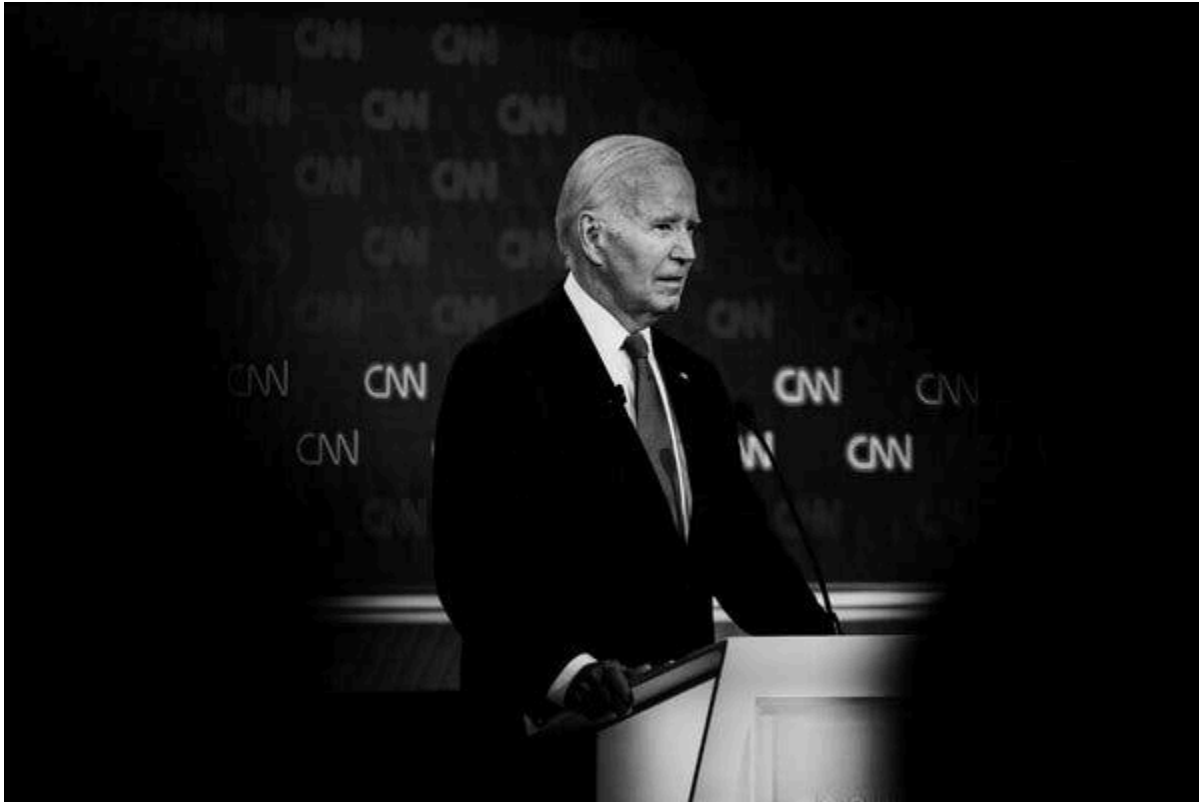
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OPINION

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

To Serve His Country, President Biden Should Leave the Race



Credit...Damon Winter/The New York Times

The Editorial Board, *The New York Times* Online Edition, June 29, 2024.

President Biden has repeatedly and rightfully described the stakes in this November's presidential election as nothing less than the future of American democracy.

Donald Trump has proved himself to be a significant jeopardy to that democracy — an erratic and self-interested figure unworthy of the public trust. He systematically attempted to undermine the integrity of elections. His supporters have described, publicly, a 2025 agenda that would give him the power to carry out the most extreme of his promises and threats. If he is returned to office, he has vowed to be a different kind of president, unrestrained by the checks on power built into the American political system.

Mr. Biden has said that he is the candidate with the best chance of taking on this threat of tyranny and defeating it. His argument rests largely on the fact that he beat Mr. Trump in 2020. That is no longer a sufficient rationale for why Mr. Biden should be the Democratic nominee this year.

At Thursday's debate, the president needed to convince the American public that he was equal to the formidable demands of the office he is seeking to hold for another term. Voters, however, cannot be expected to ignore what was instead plain to see: Mr. Biden is not the man he was four years ago.

The president [appeared on Thursday night](#) as the shadow of a great public servant. He struggled to explain what he would accomplish in a second term. He struggled to respond to Mr. Trump's provocations. He struggled to hold Mr. Trump accountable for his lies, his failures and his chilling plans. More than once, he struggled to make it to the end of a sentence.

Mr. Biden has been an admirable president. Under his leadership, [the nation has prospered](#) and begun to address a range of long-term challenges, and the wounds ripped open by Mr. Trump have begun to heal. But the greatest public service Mr. Biden can now perform is to announce that he will not continue to run for re-election.

As it stands, the president is engaged in a reckless gamble. There are Democratic leaders better equipped to present clear, compelling and energetic alternatives to a second Trump presidency. There is no reason for the party to risk the stability and security of the country by forcing voters to choose between Mr. Trump's deficiencies and those of Mr. Biden. It's too big a bet to simply hope Americans will overlook or discount Mr. Biden's age and infirmity that they see with their own eyes.

If the race comes down to a choice between Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden, the sitting president would be this board's unequivocal pick. That is how much of a danger Mr. Trump poses. But given that very danger, the stakes for the country and the uneven abilities of Mr. Biden, the United States needs a stronger opponent to the presumptive Republican nominee. To make a call for a new Democratic nominee this late in a campaign is a decision not taken lightly, but it reflects the scale and seriousness of Mr. Trump's challenge to the values and institutions of this country and the inadequacy of Mr. Biden to confront him.

Ending his candidacy would be against all of Mr. Biden's personal and political instincts. He has picked himself up from tragedies and setbacks in the past and clearly believes he can do so again. Supporters of the president are already explaining away Thursday's debate as one data point compared with three years of accomplishments. But the president's performance cannot be written off as a bad night or blamed on a supposed cold, because it affirmed concerns that have been mounting for months or even years. Even when Mr. Biden tried to lay out his policy proposals, he stumbled. It cannot be outweighed by other public appearances because he has limited and carefully controlled his public appearances.

It should be remembered that Mr. Biden challenged Mr. Trump to this verbal duel. He set the rules, and he insisted on a date months earlier than any previous general election debate. He understood that he needed to address longstanding public concerns about his mental acuity and that he needed to do so as soon as possible.

The truth Mr. Biden needs to confront now is that he failed his own test.

In polls and interviews, voters say they are seeking fresh voices to take on Mr. Trump. And the consolation for Mr. Biden and his supporters is that there is still time to rally behind a different candidate. While Americans are conditioned to the long slog of

multiyear presidential elections, in many democracies, campaigns are staged in the space of a few months.

It is a tragedy that Republicans themselves are not engaged in deeper soul-searching after Thursday's debate. Mr. Trump's own performance ought to be regarded as disqualifying. He [lied brazenly and repeatedly](#) about his own actions, his record as president and his opponent. He described plans that would harm the American economy, undermine civil liberties and fray America's relationships with other nations. He [refused to promise](#) that he would accept defeat, returning instead to the kind of rhetoric that incited the Jan. 6 attack on Congress.

The Republican Party, however, has been [co-opted by Mr. Trump's ambitions](#). The burden rests on the Democratic Party to put the interests of the nation above the ambitions of a single man.

Democrats who have deferred to Mr. Biden must now find the courage to speak plain truths to the party's leader. The confidants and aides who have encouraged the president's candidacy and who sheltered him from unscripted appearances in public should recognize the damage to Mr. Biden's standing and the unlikelihood that he can repair it.

Mr. Biden answered an urgent question on Thursday night. It was not the answer that he and his supporters were hoping for. But if the risk of a second Trump term is as great as he says it is — and we agree with him that the danger is enormous — then his dedication to this country leaves him and his party only one choice.

The clearest path for Democrats to defeat a candidate defined by his lies is to deal truthfully with the American public: acknowledge that Mr. Biden can't continue his race, and create a process to select someone more capable to stand in his place to defeat Mr. Trump in November.

It is the best chance to protect the soul of the nation — the cause that drew Mr. Biden to run for the presidency in 2019 — from the malign warping of Mr. Trump. And it is the best service that Mr. Biden can provide to a country that he has nobly served for so long.

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A version of this article appears in print on June 30, 2024, Section SR, Page 11 of the New York edition with the headline: To Serve His Country, President Biden Should Leave the Race.

NEWS ANALYSIS

As Debate Looms, Trump Is Now the One Facing Questions About Age and Capacity

With President Biden no longer in the race, former President Donald J. Trump would be the oldest person ever to serve in the Oval Office. But his rambling, sometimes incoherent public statements have stirred concern among voters.



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By Peter Baker

Reporting from Washington

Sept. 9, 2024

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The last time the nation held a debate with the presidency on the line, a candidate with about eight decades of life behind him faced the challenge of proving that he was still up to the job of running the country. He failed.

Two and a half months later, the cast of characters has shifted and another candidate heading toward the octogenarian club confronts his own test to demonstrate that he has not diminished with age. Whether he passes that test may influence who will be the next occupant of the Oval Office.

At 78, former President Donald J. Trump exhibits more energy and speaks with more volume than President Biden does at 81, but he, too, has mixed up names, confused facts and stumbled over his points. Mr. Trump's rambling speeches,

sometimes incoherent statements and extreme outbursts have raised questions about his own cognitive health and, according to polls, stimulated doubts among a majority of voters.

With Mr. Biden now out of the race, the politics of age have been turned on their head. Mr. Trump is now the oldest person ever to run for president on a major party ticket and, if he wins, would become the oldest president in history by the end of his term, when he would be 82. While he managed to sidestep questions about his own capacity while Mr. Biden was his opponent, the rival he will square off against at Tuesday's prime-time debate in Philadelphia will be Vice President Kamala Harris, who at 59 is nearly two decades younger.

The issue has been propelled back into the campaign by some of Mr. Trump's recent public performances, most notably a meandering, hard-to-follow answer to a question on child care at the Economic Club of New York last week. Asked how he would help American working families stressed by the cost of taking care of children, Mr. Trump wandered through a thicket of unfinished sentences, non sequitur clauses and confusing logic that tied the answer to tariffs on imports.

A clip of the exchange went viral and prompted headlines with words like "incomprehensible," "incoherence" and "gibberish." The White House and Ms. Harris's allies pounced, mocking the "word salad," as multiple Democrats put it. "He couldn't string together a coherent sentence," Representative Katherine M. Clark of Massachusetts, the No. 2 House Democrat, wrote on social media.

As a result, analysts said, Mr. Trump will face renewed scrutiny at the debate. "Because the Harris campaign and press drew attention to the incoherence of Trump's answer to the question about child care, he is now subject to the same 'coherence' test as was Biden," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a scholar of presidential communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.

Mr. Trump has long engaged in discursive, roundabout, off-script speaking that would not pass muster with an English teacher. Diagraming his sentences with a noun, verb and object can be daunting. He floats from one subject to another

seemingly at random, often baffling listeners looking for a main point, a pattern that experts call tangentiality that increases with age. And he throws out wild assertions with no basis in fact.

He has mixed up Nikki Haley and Nancy Pelosi, declared more than once that he beat Barack Obama instead of Hillary Clinton and while arguing that he is mentally fit gave the wrong name for his former doctor. During a June rally in Nevada, he wandered into a bizarre rhetorical cul-de-sac speculating about being on a sinking boat and whether it would be better to be electrocuted in the water or attacked by a shark. "I'll take electrocution every single time," he volunteered. "I'm not getting near the shark. So we could end that. We're going to end that for boats."

Sometimes he makes false claims that are so far-fetched, they make him appear detached from reality. At the end of last month, he suggested that schools were sponsoring transgender transition surgery. "Your kid goes to school and comes home a few days later with an operation," he said. "The school decides what's going to happen with your child."

He seems bent on self-destructive behavior that causes even allies to roll their eyes. Last Friday, without being asked, he raised allegations that he once molested a woman on an airplane in the 1970s. "I know you're going to say it's a terrible thing to say," he said, "but it couldn't have happened, it didn't happen, and she would not have been the chosen one."

Stephanie Grisham, who served as Mr. Trump's White House press secretary but broke with him after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol and spoke at last month's Democratic National Convention, said that Mr. Trump "can be disciplined when he wants to be" and that she expects him to get through Tuesday's debate without looking diminished, given the rules and time limits.

"But I think his ramblings are certainly getting worse," she added. "I don't know if it's his age or some kind of mental decline. I think the media, general public and certainly his supporters have grown desensitized to a man who lies and rambles all the time, and that's unfortunate."

Asked to comment on Monday, Steven Cheung, a spokesman for the campaign, rejected criticism of the former president's capacity. "The truth is that President Trump has more energy and more stamina than anyone in politics," he said in an email. "People know President Trump is the strongest candidate. He has outworked and outpaced Kamala Harris who continues to duck the press. The Democrats and Kamala are the ones who are diminished because of all the hurt they have caused this country."

Mr. Trump lately has come to explain his speaking style as "the weave," suggesting that he is masterfully bringing together multiple seemingly unrelated topics into genius oratory. "I'll talk about like nine different things, and they all come back brilliantly together," he said last month.

Other than his rally-going fans, who mainly appear entertained and often understand the cryptic, unexplained shorthand references he makes, most voters have not been exposed to Mr. Trump's stream-of-consciousness style at much length lately. But tens of millions will be watching on ABC on Tuesday, likely the largest audience before the election.

Mr. Trump's challenge is different than Mr. Biden's was. At the June 27 debate, which led to the end of his campaign, Mr. Biden appeared frail and pale, struggled to convey his message with lucidity or authority and even seemed to go blank. Mr. Trump, by contrast, appeared physically more vigorous and commanding, even though much of what he said proved false or unclear.

"It's not a question of age, because Trump remains energetic," said Ron Bonjean, a longtime congressional Republican strategist. "It's a matter of focus and message discipline, because he has to convince the few remaining undecided voters that Harris is not only too liberal, but that he also has a real grasp on tackling problems that families are having today."

Still, some Republicans think that age is a factor in a country where more than half the population is under age 40 as polls show increasing excitement for Ms. Harris among younger voters. Even aside from questions of capacity, Mr. Trump's

references are often rooted in decades-old touchstones, as in his repeated and mystifying allusions lately to the 1991 film “The Silence of the Lambs.”

“Many others have outlived their most productive years; Joe Biden and Donald Trump reached that inconvenient reality,” said Al Cardenas, a former Florida Republican Party chairman. “Biden made the right decision, perhaps helped to do so by his party’s leadership. It’s stunning to watch the lack of internal fortitude from the G.O.P.’s hierarchy to have the same conversation with their presidential candidate.”

Voters have long harbored concerns about Mr. Trump’s age, but more of them were worried about Mr. Biden’s, according to polls. Without the president to focus on, more Americans have expressed doubts about Mr. Trump’s capacity. Fifty-one percent of registered voters in a survey released last month by Morning Consult said that Mr. Trump is too old to run for president, up from 44 percent when he was running against Mr. Biden. Fifty-seven percent had that view in a poll by Marquette Law School.

Moreover, fewer voters now consider Mr. Trump mentally fit for the presidency. Just 48 percent in the Morning Consult poll said the former president was capable of handling the office, down from 53 percent. Nearly four in five said they were not sure he could serve another full four-year term, and roughly the same proportion were concerned about his ability to make decisions.

Mr. Trump’s response to the child care question in New York on Thursday underscored the concerns. Often his mangled statements are summarized in news accounts in ways that do not give the full picture of how baffling they can be. Quoting them at length, though, can provide additional context. Here is a more extended account of his reply on affordable child care:

“It’s a very important issue. But I think when you talk about the kind of numbers that I’m talking about that — because the child care is, child care, it’s, couldn’t, you know, there’s something, you have to have it. In this country, you have to have it. But when you talk about those numbers compared to the kind of numbers that I’m talking about, by taxing foreign nations at levels that they’re not used to, but they’ll

get used to it very quickly — and it's not going to stop them from doing business with us, but they'll have a very substantial tax when they send product into our country. Those numbers are so much bigger than any numbers that we're talking about, including child care, that it's going to take care.”

What he seemed to be saying was that he would raise so much money by imposing tariffs on imported goods that the country could use the proceeds to pay for child care. In itself, that would be a disputable policy assumption.

But the failure to articulate the point, or any point, in a clear way left many in the room scratching their heads, including the questioner, and the response was eventually seen by millions on social media. It was, fair to say, an answer that did not age well.

Chevez Clarke contributed video production.

Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent for The Times. He has covered the last five presidents and sometimes writes analytical pieces that place presidents and their administrations in a larger context and historical framework. [More about Peter Baker](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Too Old? The Focus Is Now on Trump.

