

# *Inside the Complicated Reality of Being America's Oldest President*

President Biden is asking voters to keep him in the White House until age 86, renewing attention to an issue that polls show troubles most Americans.

Peter Baker, Michael D. Shear, Katie Rogers and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, *The New York Times* Online Edition, June 4, 2023/

The reporters cover the White House for The Times.

There was the time last winter when President Biden was awakened at 3 a.m. while on a trip to Asia and told that a missile had struck Poland, touching off a panic that Russia might have expanded the war in Ukraine to a NATO ally. Within hours in the middle of the night, Mr. Biden consulted his top advisers, called the president of Poland and the NATO secretary general, and gathered fellow world leaders to deal with the crisis.

And then there was the time a few weeks ago when the president was hosting children for Take Your Child to Work Day and became mixed up as he tried to list his grandchildren. “So, let me see. I got one in New York, two in Philadelphia — or is it three? No, three, because I got one granddaughter who is — I don’t know. You’re confusing me.” He also drew a blank when asked the last country he had visited and the name of a favorite movie.

The two Joe Bidens coexist in the same octogenarian president: Sharp and wise at critical moments, the product of decades of seasoning, able to rise to the occasion even in the dead of night to confront a dangerous world. Yet a little slower, a little softer, a little harder of hearing, a little more tentative in his walk, a little more prone to occasional lapses of memory in ways that feel familiar to anyone who has reached their ninth decade or has a parent who has.

The complicated reality of [America's oldest president](#) was encapsulated on Thursday as Congress approved a bipartisan deal he brokered to avoid a national default. Even Speaker Kevin McCarthy testified that Mr. Biden had been “very professional, very smart, very tough” during their talks. Yet just before the voting got underway, Mr. Biden [tripped over a sandbag](#) at the Air Force Academy commencement, plunging to the ground. The video went viral, his supporters cringed and his critics pounced. Anyone can trip at any age, but for an 80-year-old president, it inevitably raises unwelcome questions. If it were anyone else, the signs of age might not be notable. But Mr. Biden is the chief executive of the world’s most powerful nation and has just embarked on a campaign asking voters to keep him in the White House until age 86, drawing more attention to an issue that polls show troubles most Americans and is the source of enormous anxiety among party leaders.

Image



“You say I’m ancient?” Mr. Biden said at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner in April. “I say I’m wise.” Credit...Yuri Gripas for The New York Times

The portrait that emerges from months of interviews with dozens of current and former officials and others who have spent time with him lies somewhere between the partisan cartoon of an addled and easily manipulated foggy promoted by Republicans and the image spread by his staff of a president in aviator shades commanding the world stage and governing with vigor.

It is one of a man who has slowed with age in ways that are more pronounced than just the graying hair common to most recent presidents during their time in office. Mr. Biden sometimes mangles his words and looks older than he used to because of his stiff gait and thinning voice.

Yet people who deal with him regularly, including some of his adversaries, say he remains sharp and commanding in private meetings. Diplomats share stories of trips to places like Ukraine, Japan, Egypt, Cambodia and Indonesia in which he often outlasts younger colleagues. Democratic lawmakers point to a long list of accomplishments as proof that he still gets the job done.

His verbal miscues are nothing new, friends note; he has struggled throughout his life with a stutter and was a “gaffe machine,” to use his own term, long before he entered Social Security years. Advisers said his judgment is as good as ever. So many of them use the phrase “sharp as a tack” to describe him that it has become something of a mantra.

Mr. Biden says age is a legitimate issue but maintains that his longevity is an asset, not a liability. “You say I’m ancient?” he said at the [White House Correspondents’ Association dinner](#) in April. “I say I’m wise.”

Still, few people fail to notice the changes in one of the nation's most public people. As vice president a dozen years ago, Mr. Biden engaged in energetic squirt gun battles each summer with the children of aides and reporters. More than a decade later, he shuffled stiffly across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., to mark the anniversary of Bloody Sunday.

Polls indicate the president's age is a top concern of Americans, including Democrats. During a recent [New York Times focus group](#), several voters who supported Mr. Biden in 2020 expressed worry, with one saying: "I've just seen the blank stare at times, when he's either giving a speech or addressing a crowd. It seems like he loses his train of thought."

Unease about Mr. Biden's age suffuses Democratic circles. One prominent Wall Street Democrat, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid offending the White House, noted that among party donors it was all anyone was talking about. At a small dinner earlier this year of former Democratic senators and governors, all of them in Mr. Biden's generation, everyone at the table agreed he was too old to run again. Local leaders often call the White House to inquire about his health.

In private, officials acknowledge that they make what they consider reasonable accommodations not to physically tax an aging president. His staff schedules most of his public appearances between noon and 4 p.m. and leave him alone on weekends as much as possible.

A study of Mr. Biden's schedule based on data compiled by Axios and expanded by The New York Times found that Mr. Biden has a similar morning cadence as the president he served, Barack Obama. Neither had many public events before 10 a.m., just 4 percent in Mr. Obama's last year in office and 5 percent in Mr. Biden's first two and a half years. But the real difference came in the evening. Mr. Obama was twice as likely to do public events after 6 p.m. compared with Mr. Biden, 17 percent to 9 percent.

Aides limit exposing the president to news media interviews when he could make a politically damaging mistake. He has [given just a fourth of the interviews](#) Donald J. Trump did in the same time period and a fifth of Mr. Obama's interviews — and none at all to reporters from a major newspaper. Mr. Biden has not given an interview to the news department of The Times, unlike every president since at least Franklin D. Roosevelt other than Dwight D. Eisenhower. And in the past 100 years, only Ronald Reagan and Richard M. Nixon have subjected themselves to as few news conferences.

White House officials have not made Mr. Biden's doctor available for questioning, as previous presidents have. In February, Kevin C. O'Connor, the White House physician, issued [a five-page letter](#) stating that Mr. Biden is "fit for duty, and fully executes all of his responsibilities without any exemptions or accommodations."

But he also wrote that the president's tendency to walk stiffly is "in fact a result of degenerative ('wear and tear') changes in his spine, and partly the result of 'tighter hamstrings and calves.'" The letter said there were "no findings which would be consistent with" a neurological disorder like stroke, multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease. He takes medicine for atrial fibrillation, cholesterol, heartburn, asthma and allergies.

Like many his age, Mr. Biden repeats phrases and retells the same hoary, often [fact-challenged stories](#) again and again. He can be quirky; when children visit, he may randomly pull a book of William Butler Yeats off his desk and start reading Irish poetry to them.

At the same time, he is trim and fit, exercises five days a week and does not drink. He has at times exhibited striking stamina, such as when he flew to Poland then boarded a nine-hour train ride to [make a secret visit to Kyiv](#), spent hours on the ground, then endured another nine-hour train ride and a flight to Warsaw. A study of his schedule by Mr. Biden's aides shows that he has traveled slightly more in the first few months of his third year in office than Mr. Obama did in his.

Image



Mr. Biden's trip to Kyiv, in which he met with President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine, required a nonstop schedule. Credit...Daniel Berehulak/The New York Times

“Does he ramble? Yes, he does,” said Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey, a Democrat who categorically rejects the idea that Mr. Biden is too old to be president. “Has he always rambled? Yes, he has. Public and private. He’s the same guy. He’s literally — I’m not saying this lightly. I don’t know anyone else in my life who is so much the same guy privately as he is publicly.”

Some friends bristle at the attention to his age. “I think the reason this is an issue is primarily because of the media talking about it constantly,” said former Senator Ted Kaufman, a longtime adviser to Mr. Biden from Delaware. “I do not see anything in my dealings with him that age is a problem. He’s done more than any president has been able to do in my lifetime.”

Andrew Bates, a White House spokesman, noted that Republican hard-liners were grouching that Mr. Biden had gotten the better of Mr. McCarthy in the fiscal deal. “It’s telling that the same extreme MAGA members of Congress who’ve been talking about



his age complained this week that he outsmarted them on the budget agreement,” Mr. Bates said.

The question of Mr. Biden’s age does not come in isolation, of course. Mr. Trump, his likeliest Republican challenger, is just four years younger and was the oldest president in history until Mr. Biden succeeded him. If Mr. Trump were to win next year, he would be 82 at the end of his term, older than Mr. Biden will be at the end of this one.

While in office, Mr. Trump generated concerns about his mental acuity and physical condition. He did not exercise, his diet leaned heavily on cheeseburgers and steak and he officially tipped the scales at 244 pounds, a weight formally deemed obese for his height.

After complaining that he was overscheduled with morning meetings, Mr. Trump stopped showing up at the Oval Office until 11 or 11:30 a.m. each day, staying in the residence to watch television, make phone calls or send out incendiary tweets. During an appearance at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he had [trouble lifting a glass of water](#) and seemed to have trouble making his way down a modest ramp. Most striking was Mr. Trump’s cognitive performance. He was erratic and tended to ramble; [experts found that he had grown less articulate](#) and that his vocabulary had shrunk since his younger days. Aides said privately that Mr. Trump had trouble processing information and distinguishing fact from fiction. His second chief of staff, John F. Kelly, bought a book analyzing Mr. Trump’s psychological health to understand him better, and several cabinet secretaries concerned that he might be mentally unfit discussed invoking the 25th Amendment to remove him.

Image



Former President Donald J. Trump’s cognitive issues are not as often associated with age in the public mind as are Mr. Biden’s, perhaps because Mr. Trump’s bombastic volume conveys energy. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

But perhaps because his bombastic volume conveys energy, Mr. Trump’s issues are not associated with age in the public mind as much as Mr. Biden’s are. In [a recent](#)

[Reuters/Ipsos poll](#), 73 percent said Mr. Biden is too old to be in office, compared with 51 percent who said the same of Mr. Trump.

Mr. Biden manages his day with more discipline than his predecessor. Jill Biden, who teaches at Northern Virginia Community College, gets up around 6 a.m. while the president wakes an hour later, according to accounts he has given. Mr. Biden has told aides that their cat sometimes wakes him in the middle of the night by walking across his face.

By 7:20 a.m., the first lady leaves for work. Mr. Biden works out at 8 a.m.; he has a Peloton bicycle in the residence and is known to watch shows like “Morning Joe” on MSNBC. He arrives at the Oval Office by 9 a.m. for a morning usually filled with meetings. For lunch, there is a rotation of salad, soup and sandwiches.

Image



Mr. Biden exercises five days a week and does not drink. Credit...Al Drago for The New York Times

Following afternoon events, the president returns to the residence around 6:45 p.m. For dinner, pasta is a favorite. In fact, one former official said, whenever he travels, aides make sure there is always red sauce on hand for pasta to finish his day — even as he balks at the salmon that his wife urges on him.

From 8 p.m., the Bidens often read their briefing books together in the living room of the residence. The first lady typically turns in at 10:30 p.m. and the president follows a half-hour later.

Aides say it is clear he actually reads the briefing books because of the questions that follow. “There’s no one who is better at asking questions to get to the bottom of an issue, calling your bluff, asking the tough questions,” said Stefanie Feldman, the White House staff secretary. “He asks just as tough questions today as he did 10 years ago.”

Some who accompany him overseas express astonishment at his ability to keep up. When Italy's new leader pushed for a meeting while the president was in Poland, he readily agreed to add it to the already packed schedule. During a trip to Ireland, people with him said he was energized and wanted to talk at length on Air Force One rather than rest.

Still, after fatiguing days on the road, he skipped dinner with world leaders in Indonesia last year and again in Japan in May. Others who have known him for years said privately that they have noticed small changes. When he sits down, one former official said, he usually places a hand on his desk to hold his weight and rarely springs back up with his old energy.

Image



Mr. Biden's staff schedules most of his public appearances between noon and 4 p.m. and leaves him alone on weekends as much as possible. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

He speaks so softly that he can be hard to hear. For speeches, aides give him a hand-held microphone to hold close to his mouth to amplify his voice even when standing at a lectern with mounted microphones.

White House officials voice aggravation that concern about age is inflated by pictures on the internet that are sometimes faked or highly distorted. Every week, strategists conduct a word cloud analysis with a panel of voters asking what they had heard about the president, good or bad. After Mr. Biden's [foot got caught in the toe cage of his bicycle and he tumbled over](#) last year, the two words in the bad-word cloud for weeks were "bike fell" — all the more frustrating for aides who noted that Mr. Trump hardly seemed capable of even riding a bike.





Mr. Biden and Jill Biden, his wife, often follow a similar schedule. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

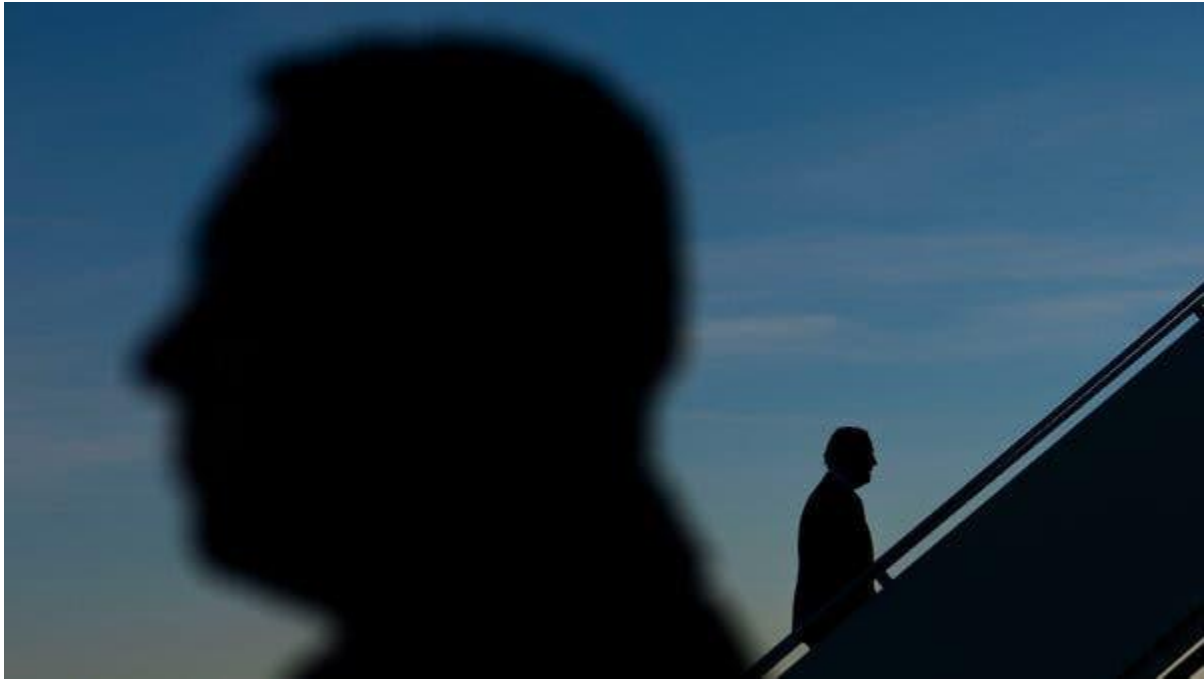
Yet aides said that while he can momentarily forget a name or fact, he retains a formidable memory for detail. Preparing to travel to Shanksville, Pa., on the 20th anniversary of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he became frustrated that officials had given him the wrong plan for his movements. He had been to the memorial before and knew the plan made no sense because he remembered the layout of the grounds.

Mr. Biden lately has turned to self-deprecating humor to defuse the issue, taking a cue from Mr. Reagan, who won re-election in 1984 at age 73 in part with a well-timed debate quip about not exploiting [“my opponent’s youth and inexperience.”](#)

At the correspondents’ dinner, Mr. Biden assured the audience that he supported the First Amendment, and “not just because my good friend Jimmy Madison wrote it.” During the Take Your Child to Work Day event, he looked back on “when I was younger, 120 years ago.”

And at the Air Force Academy a few days ago, Mr. Biden joked that “when I was graduating from high school 300 years ago, I applied to the Naval Academy.” After tripping on the sandbag, he sought to laugh that off too. “I got sandbagged,” he said.





Some who accompany Mr. Biden overseas express astonishment at his ability to keep up. Still, after fatiguing days on the road, he skipped dinner with world leaders in Indonesia last year and again in Japan in May. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

**Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent and has covered the last five presidents for The Times and The Washington Post. He is the author of seven books, most recently “The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021,” with Susan Glasser. [@peterbakernyt](#) • [Facebook](#)**

**Michael D. Shear is a veteran White House correspondent and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who was a member of team that won the Public Service Medal for Covid coverage in 2020. He is the co-author of “Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration.” [@shearm](#)**

**Katie Rogers is a White House correspondent, covering life in the Biden administration, Washington culture and domestic policy. She joined The Times in 2014. [@katierogers](#)**

**Zolan Kanno-Youngs is a White House correspondent covering a range of domestic and international issues in the Biden White House, including homeland security and extremism. He joined The Times in 2019 as the homeland security correspondent. [@KannoYoungs](#)**

**A version of this article appears in print on June 4, 2023, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Spry Diplomat With a Stiff Gait: Aging Leader’s Complex Reality.**

# 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

**Sign up for the On Politics newsletter.** Your guide to the 2024 elections.  
[Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

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**

The editorial board is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

**Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter** Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

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.

*The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).*

*Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X and Threads.*

The editorial board is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

SUBSCRIBER-ONLY NEWSLETTER

Frank Bruni

**OPINION**

# **The Overlooked Truths About Biden's Age**





Credit...Ben Wiseman

Frank Bruni, ~~The New York Times~~ Online Edition, March 28, 2024.

*[Mr. Bruni is a contributing Opinion writer who was on the staff of The Times for more than 25 years.]*

In terms of optics and in terms of energy, I wish President Biden were younger. There's no point in pretending otherwise. And from the casual conversations all around me and the formal polling of voters, I know I'm in robust company. A great many Americans consider his age unideal, and that belief is why there's no wishing away the focus on it. The swell of attention to it over the past few months is more beginning than end. There are tsunamis yet to come.

Even so, aspects of the subject actually get too *little* consideration, starting with this crushingly obvious and yet frequently overlooked fact: The presidency isn't a solo mission. Not even close. It's a team effort, and the administration that a president puts together matters much, much more than his brawn or his brio.

To listen to the fretting over how many hours a day Biden can vigorously work, how many speeches he can authoritatively deliver and how many miles he can comfortably travel is to get the sense that he's independently on the hook for the nation's welfare. That he's more action figure than decision maker. That, um, he alone can fix it. That he shoulders all the responsibility.

But he's not Atlas; he's POTUS. And the president of the United States is only as good as the advisers around him, whose selection reflects presidential judgment, not stamina.

We acknowledge as much when we discuss how a president might fill or has filled his cabinet. We recognize that many vital decisions are made — and that most important policies are realized — outside of the Oval Office.

But that recognition weirdly dissipates when we start tallying Biden's birthdays. We attach as much weight to digits as to discernment, or we imply that the former wipes out the latter. Yes, age can erode judgment — if a person's cognitive health is in marked and clear decline. But Biden's situation is more cloudy than clear, and nothing about it suggests to me that he'd treat governing as cavalierly as Donald Trump would (and did) or assemble a team as ragtag as Trump's — or, for that matter, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s.

He wouldn't elevate a conspiracy theorist like the quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who was on [a short list of potential running mates](#) for Kennedy before, on Tuesday, [Kennedy chose Nicole Shanahan](#), a philanthropist (and vaccine skeptic) with zero experience in public office. He wouldn't invite anyone as unhinged and reprehensible as Rudy Giuliani, who led Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election, into his inner circle.

Yes, Trump is about three and a half years younger and often peppier than Biden. Biden is about 300 times saner and always more principled than Trump. That's the infinitely

more important contrast between the two men, and we should never, not for a nanosecond, sweep it aside.

We should also call nonsense on many of the people who signal or say that Biden's age is propelling them toward Trump. Obviously, that's a dynamic for some of them, but it can't be all that common because it defies common sense. Voters who'd be content to back a version of Biden with more spring in his step and less stammer in his voice have values, priorities and policy leanings that would probably render Trump an unconscionable choice. They're not going to throw in with Trump because he throws himself around more forcefully.

Really, how many people say to themselves: Heck, Biden may be the guy with a proper respect for democracy, won't blow air kisses at murderous tyrants and doesn't sound like a fascist, but that Trump sure can shout louder, talk faster and clomp around more thuddingly! He'll bring the vim to trashing democracy that Biden can't muster for preserving it. I guess I'll go with Trump!

No, many of these Trump supporters like what he's selling — maybe the lower taxes for corporations and wealthy Americans, maybe the promised crackdown on immigration, maybe the nihilism, maybe just the vitriol — and have found a way to defend a vote for him (Biden's decrepit!) without fully owning up to it.

In an age of rampant falsity, let's be honest about that.

#####