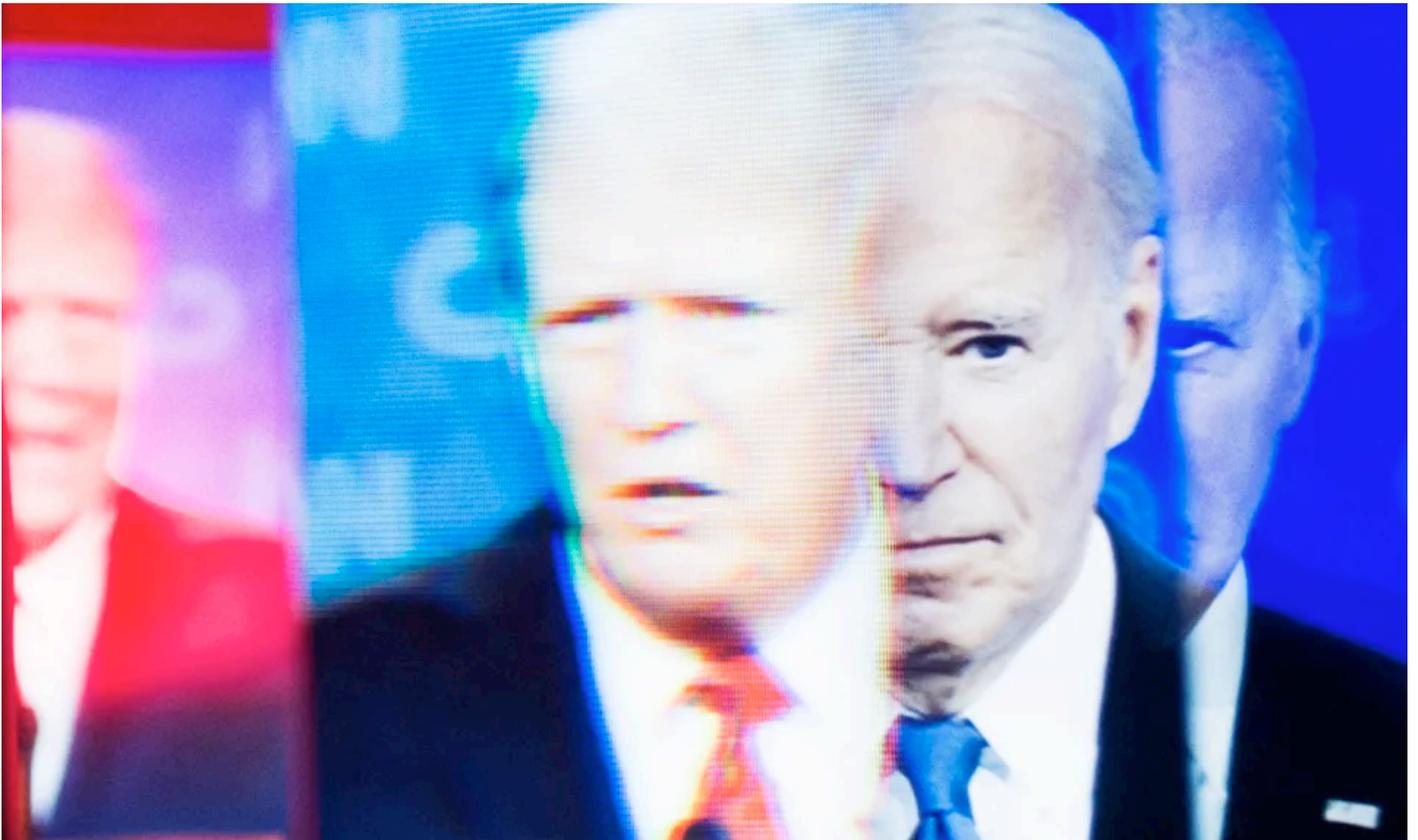


WAS THE DEBATE THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF JOE BIDEN'S PRESIDENCY?

Notes on a disastrous night for the Democrats.

By Susan B. Glasser

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Photograph by loulex



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It didn't take long. From the very start of Thursday's CNN debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the question was not so much whether Biden was losing but exactly how much damage it would do to the President's reelection campaign. His first shaky answers, it turned out, were no outlier: Biden, his voice raspy and often unclear, struggled for the entirety of the debate, an agonizing hour and a half that, amazingly enough, Biden's own campaign had sought out in an effort to make up ground against Trump, the defeated, criminally convicted ex-President who was nonetheless leading in the polls.

Let's stipulate to this: Trump was no champion, either. For much of the debate, he reiterated familiar lines, often out of context or wildly untrue, from his rallies and social-media feed. CNN's moderators, having announced in advance that they would not be doing any fact checking, stuck to their plan, and the Trumpian B.S. flowed freely: The Greatest Economy Ever! Biden's Is the Worst Administration Ever! Russia, Russia, Russia! Some of Trump's lies were flagrant and damaging; others were merely bizarre.

But did anyone care? The news of the debate was not Trump saying crazy, untrue things, though he did so in abundance. It was Biden. The President of the United States, eighty-one years old and asking to be returned to office until age eighty-six, looked and sounded old. *Too* old. His voice was muffled. He lost his train of thought. He raced through answers. When Trump talked, the split screen showed Biden staring, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, in a way that made him look even older.

Biden struggled so much that even several scathing pre-planned lines failed to land with any force, as when he brought up Trump's hush-money conviction and said, "You have the morals of an alley cat," or when he fumbled over himself saying that Trump was the first President since Herbert Hoover to lose as many American jobs. Sure, Trump was also rambling and incoherent, but at a much louder decibel level. He looked and sounded healthier; Biden was literally painful to watch.

Within minutes, Democrats were panicking; would they seek to replace Biden at the top of the ticket? And how would that work anyway? Even before the first commercial break, Biden's fortunes tanked in the online prediction markets. On social media, jubilant Republicans were convinced that the election was all but won. Finally, Americans of different political persuasions found something they could agree on. The White House spent the last two years denying that Biden's age was a legitimate subject in this campaign. What will they say after this? Late in the evening, Vice-President Kamala Harris appeared on CNN, where she conceded that Biden had a "slow start," but insisted that she was there to talk about the last three years, not the previous ninety minutes. Oof. She then went on to warn about Trump as a would-be dictator "on Day One" of his Presidency and the continuing threat to women's reproductive freedom. She was a million times more coherent making the argument for Biden than Biden was himself.

Four years ago, in Cleveland, Ohio, Trump and Biden had a shouting match that made a strong case for the worst Presidential debate ever. On Thursday night in Atlanta, their rematch easily stole that title. Between Trump's lies and Biden's weak performance, it was not even close.

The pre-game theatrics from Trump and his team had relied heavily on the usual cocktail of pre-made excuses and preemptive attacks: the CNN moderators were biased against him; Biden was going to be pumped full of performance-enhancing drugs; and what about that suspicious tape-to-air delay? In the hours leading up to the debate, Trump complained on social media about Fox News putting a Biden spokesperson on air. As for Biden, well, he "IS A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY, AND TO THE SURVIVAL AND EXISTENCE OF OUR COUNTRY ITSELF!!!" Such a windup suggested that a rerun of their infamous 2020 debate was coming, with Trump casting himself in the role, once again, of rogue gasbag.

The difference this time was not, then, because of any suspense surrounding the two well-known principals but in the surround-sound of palpable dread

with which the event was suffused. Two angry old men shouting at each other was bad enough four years ago; would this rerun serve merely to underscore the unappealing choice America has in 2024?

In that 2020 debate, Trump had interrupted Biden and the debate's beleaguered moderator, Chris Wallace, constantly—a hundred and forty-five times, according to one count. This time, the rules agreed to by both campaigns in advance did not permit it, and CNN installed a kill switch on their microphones. But in the end, Trump did not need to interrupt Biden much; the President was doing all the damage to himself. The only time the two really rode roughshod over the mikes was in an extended dispute toward the end of the debate over their golf handicaps. The wrangling went on so long—with gripes about whether Trump could carry his own golf bag or just how far Biden could hit a drive—that even Trump got tired of it. “Let’s not act like children,” he said to Biden.

At the end of a grim night, this might have been the comic relief we all needed. But it did not seem funny so much as very, very sad. Is this how democracy dies, in a shouting match between two seniors about their golf game?

There will be much shouting (and not about golf) over the next few days and weeks, as Democrats attempt to sort through the wreckage from this ill-advised debate. History suggests that the winner of a Presidential debate can expect a bounce—a slight one, averaging seven-tenths of a point—in the two weeks afterward. Perhaps that’s why both Biden and Trump readily agreed to have one so early in the election cycle, before either man has even been formally nominated by his party: plenty of time to clean up the mess.

But if that assumption was what drove the decision to debate, it looks potentially catastrophic for Biden. The question now is not so much about what kind of bounce Trump might get from Thursday’s debate but an even bigger one that we can’t quite answer yet: Was this the beginning of the end of the Biden Presidency? ♦