

Biden's Battered Legacy

di Daniel Henninger

Jimmy Carter spent nearly 45 years building a solid legacy following four years of an OK one-term presidency. [Joe Biden](#) is trying to cram his legacy redo into 45 days.

While it's not quite true that Mr. Biden has thrown everything but the kitchen sink at shaping his legacy in the 11th hour, he has scheduled a ban on most gas-fired heaters that send hot water to the kitchen sink. He also waved forth a ban on oil and gas leasing in about 625 million acres of offshore waters surrounding the U.S.

Against the recommendation of his national-security team, he stopped [Nippon Steel](#)'s proposed merger with [U.S. Steel](#) to preserve his legacy as the most "pro-union" president ever, notwithstanding that many steel workers in Pennsylvania wanted the Nippon bailout. He commuted the sentences of prisoners on federal death row.

In addition to George Soros and Anna Wintour, Mr. Biden last week gave the Medal of Freedom to Robert F. Kennedy, who died in 1968, and Lionel Messi, an Argentine citizen who has played soccer in the U.S. for a little over a year. To his credit, Mr. Messi declined to show up for the absurdity. Just wait, there's sure to be more.

Every presidency is a combination of tough calls, good outcomes and defeats. A legacy, though, is how history chooses to remember a president, or, more cynically, it is what's going to be in the first paragraph of your obituary.

Every Biden first paragraph will include his abrupt decision not to run for re-election. Then the heartless legacy writers will note the messy details of Mr. Biden's final year in office, culminating in his catastrophic debate with [Donald Trump](#).

They will catalog the increasing concerns of Democratic Party professionals about Mr. Biden's mental state, his withdrawal and the party's defaulted nomination of Vice President [Kamala Harris](#), whose tossed-together campaign of joy ended in ignominy

for Democrats. Mr. Trump won every battleground state and increased his vote margins among the Democrats' base constituencies.

No matter how many executive orders Mr. Biden throws against the wall before Jan. 20, his legacy won't be pleasant reading. But let us agree: The Biden legacy didn't have to end with the 2024 debacle.

Mr. Biden is in this circumstance of his own choice. There was an alternative to this unhappy fate, one he suggested. Several times during the 2020 campaign, he [described himself](#) as a "transitional candidate" or a "[bridge](#)," citing "an entire generation of leaders" behind him.

Had Mr. Biden kept to this initial inclination and opened the party to a competitive primary, liberal historians would have treated his presidency very well. His embarrassing personal frailties would have become a footnote. The open-border migrant flow would be explained away as political gridlock. They would credit him with restoring economic growth.

Ultimately, they would have ranked Mr. Biden highly among Democratic presidents because his domestic-policy set aligned perfectly with the progressive holy grails of our era. With congressional Democrats, he produced trillions of spending to drive hundreds of climate projects and industrial policy deep into the U.S. economy.

Democratic memorialists would have sainted him for that spending alone. Instead history will mark him down for exposing his party to a humiliating defeat that put Mr. Trump back in the White House. Add to this Mr. Biden's lame-duck decision to issue an overly expansive pardon for his son Hunter after many false promises not to.

Mr. Biden's decision to stay past his time, explainable in part by a lifetime of blind ambition, was surely abetted by Jill Biden and his inner circle of aides. Despite routine displays of Mr. Biden's infirmities over four years, his staff insists he was an active participant in his presidency. Still, a defining metaphor from the past year is Mr. Biden's being [led offstage](#) by Barack Obama at a West Coast fundraiser in June.

In late August, reports emerged that Mr. Biden was [angry](#) at Mr. Obama, [Nancy Pelosi](#) and Chuck Schumer for forcing him to withdraw. After Christmas, a lengthy Washington Post article described Mr. Biden regrets at agreeing to bow out and his belief that he could have beaten Mr. Trump.

This delusional attempt to rewrite the past year's politics is rich, considering the realities of Mr. Biden's ascent to the presidency. It was the Democratic establishment that selected the Beltway lifer during the party's 2020 presidential primaries and ran him as a "moderate" promising to restore normalcy.

In office, Mr. Biden has essentially held open the door to let the party's left-wing activists and lawyers push through a wish list of policies and rulemaking. Their idea of a normalized America included the unprecedented initiation of lawfare against former President Trump. That politicized litigation contributed to a second Trump term and will remain part of the Biden legacy.

Mr. Biden arrived in the Senate in 1973. It may have been unrealistic to expect that after more than 50 years, the 46th president would willingly slide back down the greasy pole to make way for the next generation of his party's climbers. But the spectacle of him trying to hold on will be unforgettable.