

Biden's legacy: A bridge to nowhere

di Matt Bai

This week, Post columnists share their closing thoughts on Joe Biden's presidency.

In the long run, we tend to remember one-term presidents more for their principled stands than for their ultimate failures. [Gerald Ford's pardon](#) of Richard M. Nixon has become, over the years, a story of self-sacrifice. [Jimmy Carter](#) has been lauded by a bevy of recent historians for having challenged Americans to better themselves. George H.W. Bush is fondly recalled (by Democrats, at least) for raising taxes, consequences be damned.

That won't be Joe Biden's legacy. After a lifetime of noble service, he will be chiefly remembered — like so many in his generation — as a man who didn't know when to leave.

It's not that Biden didn't achieve anything grand or lasting. He had, arguably, the [most successful two-year legislative cycle](#) of any president in memory, investing trillions of dollars in clean energy and high-tech industries. He led a rejuvenated NATO and managed to navigate the narrow gantlet between turning back Russian aggression, on one hand, and blundering into a nuclear war on the other. He deserves his due.

But none of that gets to the principal reason that most Americans took a chance on Biden in 2020, when he was making his third run at the presidency in his 78th year. Voters didn't think they were buying into some New Deal sequel (no matter what the left might have read into the election results). They certainly didn't elect Biden to guide the country through a second Cold War.

What the voters thought they were getting, amid a paralyzing pandemic and a teetering economy, is exactly what Biden held himself out to be: a transitional leader who would restore a sense of calm and normalcy. Biden never actually promised to serve a single term, but the implication was clear, even to some of his closest aides.

His job, as [he himself put it](#), was to act as a “bridge” — from the political ruins of his generation to whatever the next one might erect in its place.

Why did Biden’s bridge collapse so spectacularly? There’s no single answer. After a half-century of ascending unsteadily to the apex of power, Biden seemed reluctant to yield it so easily. Jetting around the world, juggling mental and physical demands that would have crushed a lot of us who were substantially younger, he must have felt that the transition could wait a few more years.

Then there was the awkward problem of who, exactly, would succeed him. Having rallied around Vice President [Kamala Harris](#) in the tumultuous, racially charged summer of 2020, despite her rather abysmal showing as a short-lived presidential candidate, Democratic leaders and Biden’s own aides worried that she couldn’t win. (A competitive primary could have answered that question, of course, but modern Democrats are terrified of any process they can’t orchestrate.)

Improbably, despite flagging approval ratings throughout his presidency, Biden became convinced not only that he was the best candidate to run against [Donald Trump](#) but also that he was the only candidate who could defeat him. Those of us who even gently questioned that premise were dismissed as ageist and impractical.

By the time Biden took the stage for his debate with Trump in June, it was clear that history had been hijacked by a dangerous delusion — one shared and fostered by his senior aides and even the reporters who covered him most closely. It was one thing for the octogenarian president to read his State of the Union address off a teleprompter with a few ad-libs thrown in, the [elated reaction to which](#) would have made you think he had just articulated a new string theory for the universe while doing backflips. It was quite another to see him shuffle onstage and choke on his syntax while Trump grinned like Nurse Ratched.

Even now, during the waning hours of Biden’s term, it’s impossible to look at him and think: *here’s a guy who should have been running for president again*. Twenty years on, it will rank among the most self-evidently foolish acts of denial in which any incumbent party has ever engaged.

None of that should wipe away Biden's very real achievements, which are probably more significant than those of any other one-term president in our lifetimes. If, in the coming years, Americans charge their electric cars at brand-new stations and power their computers on American chips, they will have Biden largely to thank. So might Europe have much to thank Biden for, if Vladimir Putin's ambitions to re-create the Soviet empire are stymied.

But memory is brutally reductive, and that's not what most people will associate with Biden's legacy. While [Ford](#) and [Bush](#) were each awarded the Profile in Courage Award given by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Carter won the Nobel Prize, Biden, I fear, will have to satisfy himself with a train station in Wilmington, Delaware, and a rest stop on Interstate 95.

The enduring image of his presidency, however unfairly, will always be the bridge that didn't hold.