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Biden's tragic curtain call

di Edward Luce

If the essence of Greek tragedy is that the hero is undone by his flaws, Joe Biden gets star billing. He defeated Donald Trump, stood up to Russia, enacted more reforms than Bill Clinton and Barack Obama and bequeaths a robust economy. That made Biden a hero to America's left and beyond. Yet most of his achievements will now be erased. His legacy is Trump's return. After Biden, the deluge. He largely has himself to blame.

The Greek tragic hero's defect is hubris. Last week, Biden said he could have won the 2024 election had he stayed in the race. This was in spite of the fact that just 27 per cent of Americans last June thought he had the cognitive ability to be president again. It is likelier that Trump would have won a far bigger victory. Whatever blame Kamala Harris deserves, her vote came within 1.5 percentage points of Trump's.

Much has yet to be reported about the conspiracy of silence around Biden's waning capacities. Though he was shielded from press conferences and other unscripted events, it was an open secret in Washington that his mind was in decline. Biden's inner cabinet of family and longtime aides should take some of the blame. It was also a media failing. The rare journalist who blew the whistle risked loss of access and ostracism on liberal social media.

But the buck stops with Biden. Had he redeemed his vow to be a one-term "bridge" to the post-Trump era, the Democratic party would have had time to find a stronger candidate than Harris — someone who could have distanced themselves from what was unpopular about Biden's economy. Instead, an isolated Biden was cut off from public sentiment. To be sure, the biggest swing to Harris in November came from voters who paid most attention to the news. Trump, meanwhile, swept the low information vote by thumping margins, irrespective of race, income and gender. All right-thinking Americans are with you, a supporter told Adlai Stevenson, the twice-losing 1950s Democratic nominee. Yes, but I need a majority, he quipped.

Nobody said politics was fair. Biden helped ensure the post-Covid US rebound was stronger than in any other big economy. But a nostalgic country associated Trump with the pre-Covid era. People blamed Biden for inflation — and his stimulus did help fuel it. But voters gave him no credit for the rest. Clear majorities of Americans polled by Gallup this week said the US had lost ground in six areas during Biden's term. These were the economy, federal debt, immigration, income inequality, America's position in the world and crime.

In only one area did a majority say progress was made during Biden's presidency — “the situation for gay, lesbian and transgender people”. No data could better capture the Biden administration's weakness of narrative and leadership. Until he dropped out in July, Biden kept doubling down on the threat Trump posed to democracy, though his team had known for months that democracy did not feature in the top five voter concerns.

But it is the flawed hero's nobility that gives Biden a Greek ending. Virtue and hubris were both present in his personal tragedies. When Biden was vice-president, his net worth was estimated at around half a million dollars. After almost half a century in public life, that was barely a rounding error. No informed American thought Biden was corrupt. But he turned a blind eye to his son, Hunter, who sought to monetise the family name even as he was falling into addiction. Biden paid a big price for that indulgence. Like Othello, Biden loved not wisely but too well.

Ukrainians will remember Biden warmly. The same cannot be said for Palestinians. Amid the rubble of the worst civilian death toll in years, the Gaza Strip is littered with US munitions supplied by Biden. He believes that he was acting nobly to prevent even higher tolls and stop a Middle Eastern war. By bottling up Vladimir Putin's military resources in Ukraine, Biden may also have contributed to Bashar al-Assad's downfall in Syria. But much of the global south sees Biden as a man who failed to uphold the values that he promised. That Trump is seen as a different version of Biden in so much of the world — not as a radical departure — may be the hardest verdict of all.

Biden promised four years ago to be the “ally of light not the darkness”. He meant it. In Biden's farewell to the nation tonight, only he will know how it feels to be ceding the stage to Trump.