

## **The Biden Presidency: Four Illusions, Four Deceptions**

*di Bret Stephens*

Americans tend to have a soft spot for our former presidents. Even the bad ones.

By the time Richard Nixon died in 1994, his presidency was as likely to be lauded for the opening to China or the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency as it was to be damned for Watergate. Gerald Ford's pardon of Nixon, furiously condemned at the time as a dirty political bargain, was [later celebrated](#) as an example of selfless statesmanship. Jimmy Carter's reputational resurrection — not just for the way he conducted his post-presidency, but also for his acts in office — would have astounded the country that sent him packing in 1980 amid stagflation and a hostage crisis.

Will Joe Biden enjoy a similar place in our national memory? It's possible, and his administration had its achievements: NATO enlargement, the bipartisan infrastructure bill, defending Ukraine and Israel, strengthening alliances in the Pacific. But Biden's presidency will also be remembered for four big illusions — and four big deceptions. They will not serve his legacy well.

The illusions: first, that the 2021 surge in migration was seasonal ("[happens every single solitary year](#)," as Biden said that March); second, that the Taliban would not swiftly seize Afghanistan ("the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely," [as he said that July](#)); third, that inflation was transitory ("Our experts believe, and the data shows, that most of the price increases we've seen are expected to be temporary," [also that July](#)). The fourth, and the biggest: that he was the best Democratic candidate to defeat Donald Trump: "I beat him once, and I will beat him again," he often insisted, [even after](#) the debate debacle.

That last illusion was pure hubris. But there was an arrogance to the first three, since he was loudly alerted ([including by, well, me](#)) on each point that he was making a fundamental mistake. The White House spent months in 2021 refusing to use the term “crisis” for the border — it was, instead, [a “challenge.”](#) Pentagon leaders warned the president that the Afghan government would soon collapse if the United States withdrew. [Biden shrugged.](#) Larry Summers was [outspoken about the inflationary risks](#) of Biden’s \$1.9 trillion stimulus package. Biden ignored that, too.

Those misjudgments doomed the Biden presidency, which never had a positive [approval rating](#) after the Afghan withdrawal. Maybe senior Democrats like Nancy Pelosi could have helped their party’s chances if they had had the talk with Joe and Jill Biden about his re-election prospects in the spring of 2022 instead of the summer of 2024. It was left to [Dean Phillips](#), the former Minnesota representative, to play the part of the boy who says the emperor has no clothes. Someone ought to nominate him for a [Profile in Courage Award](#).

Behind the misjudgments were the deceptions.

Biden ran in 2020 on the implicit but clear pledge that he intended to serve a single term. (“If Biden is elected, he’s going to be 82 years old in four years,” one campaign adviser [told Politico in 2019](#), “and he won’t be running for re-election.”) He promised to be a bipartisan and moderate figure in the White House: “[Unity](#)” was the theme of his Inaugural Address. He, along with his entire administration, insisted he was mentally and physically fit to serve a second term. And he [promised](#) not to pardon his son Hunter if he were convicted of crimes.

Of these deceptions, the first was the most forgivable and the most foolish: It’s precisely because power is so alluring that the voluntary abdication would have been so admirable. His grudging decision in July not to run came too late to qualify as statesmanship.

The other deceptions: less forgivable. The centrist voters who put Biden in the White House saw him as a safe and consoling pair of hands. Instead, he sought to govern [as the second coming of Lyndon Johnson](#), with spending proposals amounting to \$7.5 trillion — nearly twice what we spent to win World War II, adjusted for inflation. And

he [took to denouncing](#) “MAGA Republicans” as a threat to “the very foundations of our Republic.”

Those MAGA Republicans responded the next year by rallying again to Donald Trump, who now owes his second term to Biden’s only term.

Worst of all were the last two deceptions. Last month, The Wall Street Journal published a [comprehensive and devastating report](#) on the president’s failing health. The paper reported that a former aide recalled a national security official saying, “He has good days and bad days, and today was a bad day so we’re going to address this tomorrow” — *in the spring of 2021*. Perhaps the president didn’t notice his own decline, so the deception might not have been his. But his entire senior staff must have noticed, and, as The Journal reported, they took advantage of it to enhance their own power. It’s a national scandal that deserves a congressional inquiry.

And Hunter? A father’s love is admirable. A president’s lie is not. In one of his last major political acts in office, Joe Biden forgot who he was. But it seems as if that already happened years ago. History won’t be kind.