

The Blaming of Joe Biden

di Patti Davis

We are now in the final weeks of Joe Biden's presidency, and I've been thinking about the year he had — how different it was from what he hoped last winter as he sought re-election. All presidents think about what they wanted to achieve, in the end, and how Americans will regard them. For some of us, our most vivid memory right now of Mr. Biden is from his televised debate against Donald Trump in June. I'm sure that's not the moment Mr. Biden wants to be remembered for. But I also know that presidents come to be remembered differently, over time, for better or for worse. Their highs and lows in office, once so clearly and sharply defined, can shift in our perception. I see Mr. Biden differently now from how I did last summer, and I see his last year in office as a window into the messiness of being human.

Like most people who watched the June debate, I was shocked that night at how frail and vague Mr. Biden was. He didn't seem present. The statements from his aides afterward were what you'd expect — he had a bad night, he was tired from traveling, he was sick. Shortly afterward the president gave a speech in North Carolina and was energetic and focused; “fiery” was how news outlets described him. But the condemnation was already taking shape, from both Republicans and Democrats: America has been deceived; the administration has been lying to us; it's been a shadow presidency, a cover-up. The fury only grew when Mr. Biden insisted that he was still running for president and was perfectly capable of governing for a second term.

When he finally stepped aside and handed the campaign to Kamala Harris, the anger, particularly among some Democrats, didn't cool. The accusations were like a firestorm: There was no time for a new primary. There was not enough time to campaign. When the election was lost, much of the rage turned to contempt. And now, as details come to light about advisers in the White House reportedly [knowing for years](#) that Mr. Biden was faltering with age, harsh judgments have been handed down

— we as a country have been lied to in an orchestrated plot. Even Jill Biden has come under fire for reportedly trying to shield her husband.

I understand people's anger when they feel they have been misled or even lied to. In hindsight it can seem obvious that Mr. Biden should have known that governing into his mid-80s in a second term would prove unacceptable in a re-election campaign or problematic for the country should he have won a second term. But might I suggest that there is another way to understand this, too? A more humane way? Blame is very simplistic. One person or group of people is the villain, another person or group is the victim. The lines are clear. But oftentimes blame is an easy place to hide from a more complicated and nuanced situation in which there aren't such clear lines.

That situation, as some people around the president have described, is that Mr. Biden has bad days and good days. The same is true for most of us, no matter how old or young we are. But more to the point, someone who is elderly and has had serious health issues in the past — Mr. Biden had brain surgeries for two aneurysms in 1988 — is going to find that the bad days become more frequent. And the people around that individual, who care about that person, are probably not going to readily accept that.

This is the uncomfortable truth in millions of households in which an elderly family member is becoming forgetful, unfocused or overly tired. I want to emphasize that I am in no way diagnosing President Biden, nor should any of us. But having lived through the complexities of a parent with Alzheimer's, I know well the rough terrain of watching a loved one change before your eyes, including the feeling of being unsure about what you are seeing or noticing. Whether it's from disease or the whittling away of time, there are no clear paths and no easy answers. You grab onto the good days, you memorize them, and you try to diminish the severity of the bad days. It's why it's so hard to tell parents or grandparents or even spouses that they can't go to work anymore or drive anymore. Just yesterday they were fine, you tell yourself. I not only experienced this firsthand as a daughter, but I also ran a caregiver support group for six years and have listened to hundreds of stories about the complexity of this stage of life.

On July 4, 1989, six months after he left office, my father, Ronald Reagan, fell off a horse and hit his head. He was examined and was told that he was fine. In September

it was discovered that he had bleeding on his brain from that fall, and he had brain surgery to fix it. Five years later, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Were there signs in those five years that something was changing? Perhaps. But my father had always been elusive, had always tended to retreat into his version of how he wanted things to be. He was in his 80s, so some vagueness or forgetfulness seemed par for the course. The human brain is often mysterious, and so is human nature — we rationalize things and explain away signs because we want the waters around us to be smooth. We want life to be easy for those we feel loyal to, so we focus more on the good days and try to explain away the bad days.

Even in the murky waters of Alzheimer's, there are occasionally moments when sunlight cuts through. One afternoon when I took a walk with my father, he pulled up a memory of us horseback riding together, decades ago. I had fallen off and was scared to get back on. I wasn't hurt, it wasn't a bad fall, and he told me that it's important to get back on after you fall so that fear doesn't set in and so that the horse doesn't sense that you're scared. His memory of that day was perfect — the summer heat, the dry grasses waving around us. I'm sure an hour later he had no memory of that event.

A friend's father, who is almost 90 and has not been diagnosed with any kind of dementia, recently got into a minor traffic accident that was his fault. Insurance paid, and he is still driving, but my friend and I have discussed the fact that he shouldn't be. With age, his attention wanders, and it's more than likely he will get into another accident. Maybe the next one won't be minor. Taking the car keys away from an older relative is messy, unpleasant and emotionally volatile. There is nothing simple about it, which is why so many people avoid it for as long as they can.

Of course, the situation Mr. Biden found himself in this year is among the most serious that any elderly Americans and their families have ever faced: Mr. Biden is the president, and grappling with his abilities to govern and lead is far more serious and complex than simply taking the keys away. But as I've watched the president in recent months and heard the anger and recriminations directed at him, I am mindful of those years with my caregiver support group. As we reckon with our feelings and memories of Mr. Biden and our final judgments about his advisers and family, maybe we should consider, too, that those in the White House, who saw diminishment in the president at

certain times, wanted to look instead at the times when he was fully present and on his game. They cared about him, and that's what you do when you care: You reach for what you want to be true.

Maybe we should consider that rather than orchestrating some diabolical plan to deceive America, the people surrounding the president — family and staff members — were just being achingly human.