

What really undid the Biden presidency

di Perry Bacon Jr.

Joe Biden's presidency was the culmination of a lifelong pursuit — and his conviction that he was uniquely qualified for the job he always wanted was a big part of his undoing.

Biden was elected to the U.S. Senate [when he was just 29 years old](#), an unusually rapid ascent that seems to have left him with supreme confidence in his political skills and a sense that he would at some point occupy the Oval Office. He either ran for president ([1988](#), 2008) or publicly floated himself as a potential candidate ([2004](#), [2016](#)) for more than three decades before his successful 2020 campaign. In the latter stages of Biden's career, when it seemed as if his dream might not come true, he hinted that the Democratic Party was overlooking a singular talent, a politician who would have built [stronger relationships with congressional Republicans](#) than Barack Obama had and who [connected more with working-class voters](#) than Hillary Clinton did.

The reality about Biden was less impressive. Though it was a coup to win a Senate seat at such a young age, continuing to get reelected in a small, [Democratic-leaning state](#) like Delaware didn't require political genius. He didn't push much groundbreaking legislation on Capitol Hill and occasionally supported terrible policies, most notably the Iraq War. Biden was known on Capitol Hill for his rambling speeches and odd, off-the-cuff remarks. No one was that shocked when Biden essentially [torpedoed his 2008 presidential campaign](#) at the start by declaring Obama to be the first Black presidential candidate who was “articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.”

When Democrats were looking for a running mate for Obama, Biden was the ideal choice — in ways that were not particularly flattering to Biden. The party was excited about having as its standard-bearer a young, Black candidate who wasn't part of the

political establishment but also nervous that some Americans weren't ready to move so decidedly in a new direction. Enter the old, White Biden, who had been appearing on Sunday morning political talk shows for decades. Before the rise of [Donald Trump](#), no one considered Biden the party's future.

Biden's 2020 primary campaign, his third formal presidential bid, at first [mirrored his earlier political struggles](#). He finished fourth in Iowa and fifth in New Hampshire. But then the party's establishment stepped in to endorse him en masse to prevent the victory of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont).

He seemed humbled by his good fortune. At a [March 2020 event](#) with Sen. Cory Booker (D-New Jersey), Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D) and other prominent younger figures in the party, Biden said: "I view myself as a bridge, not as anything else. There's an entire generation of leaders you saw stand behind me. They are the future of this country."

In the 2020 general election and early in his presidency, Biden at times presented himself more as a figurehead of the Democratic Party than its clear leader.

I distinctly remember the day in June 2021 when I realized that the old Biden — the one who pined for the presidency and felt unfairly overlooked before — was still there. At a news conference to announce an agreement that he had reached with 10 senators to increase infrastructure spending, the president was triumphant.

"This deal ... signals to ourselves and to the world that American democracy can deliver. And because of that, it represents an important step forward for our country," [Biden said](#). "We have reaffirmed, once again, that we are the United States of America. There's not a single thing beyond our capacity that we aren't able to do when we do it together. I know a lot of you in the press, particularly, doubt that unity is possible, that anything bipartisan is possible. It's hard, but it's necessary. And it can get done."

Just five months after Trump's presidency culminated in an attempt to overturn the 2020 election results and violence at the Capitol, Biden was declaring that American democracy was working really well ... because of an infrastructure bill. The federal government had funded highways and broadband before. The group Biden had worked with [included five Republicans](#) but zero lawmakers who were LGBTQ+ or people of

color — an obvious clue that this bill could not be a model for future legislation, since Biden’s coalition was heavily multicultural. And there were already rumors that the Republicans and centrist Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin III (West Virginia) and Kyrsten Sinema (Arizona), who had worked with Biden on the infrastructure deal, would then stall his proposal for a sweeping social policy bill.

It was Trump [who had said](#), “I alone can fix it.” But it became clear in 2021 that Biden had a similar belief. He would rebuild the Democratic Party’s relationship with rural and White working-class voters, get the two parties [working together again](#) in Washington, and reduce partisan division across the country.

I worried such overconfidence and self-regard were a recipe for disaster.

They were. Two months after the infrastructure agreement, Biden, who also was supremely assured of his foreign policy acumen, mismanaged the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Manchin and Senate Republicans [tanked the social policy bill](#), leaving Biden’s agenda languishing for months before the much more modest [Inflation Reduction Act passed](#). His poll numbers collapsed, and the Democratic candidates who won in the midterms did so by distancing themselves from the president.

But because Democrats did better in the midterms than the incumbent’s party typically does, Biden and his aides interpreted the 2022 elections as another sign that Biden was a historic president. He opted to run for reelection, despite polls showing the majority of voters felt he was too old. While Americans kept expressing deep frustration with the state of the economy, Biden bragged about the virtues of “Bidenomics” in speeches around the country.

Even after a dreadful performance in a presidential debate against Trump, Biden continued to insist he was an indispensable president and world leader, bowing out only after top leaders in the party withdrew their support, publicly and privately.

I’m usually resistant to the adage “People don’t change.” Sometimes they do. But if you had told me in 2006, when I was covering Capitol Hill as a young reporter, that Biden would become president and then insist he was doing great even as his legislative agenda stalled and he trailed in every poll, I would have been surprised only by the becoming president part. These past four years were quintessential Biden. As in his

Senate days, Biden shifted between being more moderate and more progressive, more and less conciliatory with Republicans. He gave some great speeches as well as some duds; he made [some brilliant decisions](#) and [some catastrophic ones](#).

What didn't change was that Biden always saw himself as a man called to be in the center of the action, shaping history. Biden's presidency was many things: a continuation of America's deep partisan polarization; a shift away from neoliberal economic policies; an extremely strong economic recovery from the covid-19 pandemic; and, most important, only a brief interregnum between two terms of Donald Trump. But at its core, Joe Biden's administration was about Joe Biden — the rise and fall of a man whose one central belief seemed to be that he deserved to be president.