

# [***Biden tries to navigate the Israel-Hamas war protests roiling college campuses***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BW3-VV01-DYMD-651N-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

NEW YORK — Student [*protests over the war in Gaza*](https://apnews.com/article/columbia-yale-israel-palestinians-protests-56c3d9d0a278c15ed8e4132a75ea9599) have created a new and unpredictable challenge for President [*Joe Biden*](https://apnews.com/hub/joe-biden) as he resists calls to cut off U.S. support for Israel while trying to hold together the coalition of voters he'll need for reelection.

The protests at Columbia University in New York and other campuses have captured global media attention and resurfaced questions about [*Biden’s lagging support from young voters*](https://apnews.com/article/kamala-harris-biden-trump-2024-election-young-voters-ad7c5ab6417dd9c5a674467725113ace). His handling of the Middle East conflict is also being closely watched by both [*Jewish*](https://apnews.com/article/south-florida-jews-israel-politics-biden-israel-hamas-5dde5353f7b06659809d122b57fa0e8b) and [*Arab American*](https://apnews.com/article/michigan-primary-uncommitted-dearborn-arab-muslim-05f6a1099c00fe75823f77aaadbacf25) voters in key swing states.

At best for Biden, the protests are a passing distraction while the White House presses forward with negotiations over a [*cease-fire and the release of hostages held by Hamas*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-3591fb5f82b22cf8e5d1060fccaef115) while pushing Israel to limit casualties with [*more than 34,000 Palestinians dead*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-04-20-2024-05df312cfce4dc546837b2499fdbae02). At worst, they build momentum toward the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August, potentially triggering scenes of violence that could recall the [*unrest of protests against the Vietnam War*](https://apnews.com/article/iowa-caucuses-presidential-primary-trump-2024-f44c058659b432b6d47cf1d9d2b7f743) during the party’s convention there in 1968.

“If it ends with Columbia, that’s one thing,” said Angus Johnston, a historian focused on campus activism. “If this sends the national student movement to a new place, that’s a very different situation.”

Already, Biden's aides have had to work to minimize disruptions from antiwar protesters, holding smaller campaign events and tightly controlling access. Demonstrators forced his motorcade to change routes to the Capitol on his way to deliver the State of the Union, and they've thrown a red substance intended to symbolize blood near his home in Delaware.

The president could face more confrontations with students this spring. Morehouse College said Tuesday that Biden would [*appear at the iconic historically Black campus*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-morehouse-hbcus-2024-election-black-voters-821d03639c2d9ad7d311b3f63541e3ed) in May to deliver a commencement address that could draw protests.

**FRUSTRATION AT COLUMBIA**

More than 100 pro-Palestinian demonstrators [*camped out at Columbia*](https://apnews.com/article/gaza-war-campus-protests-47f4f7f0916a6493b79eede3e4d0a55d) were arrested Thursday, with dozens more people arrested at other campuses. Many now face charges of trespassing or disorderly conduct. The protesters have demanded that their universities condemn Israel’s assault on Gaza after [*the Oct. 7 Hamas attack*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-hamas-rockets-airstrikes-tel-aviv-11fb98655c256d54ecb5329284fc37d2) and divest from companies that do business with Israel.

Some people have reported antisemitic chants and messages at and around the Columbia campus, and similar concerns have been reported at other universities. Some Jewish students say they’ve felt unsafe on campus. The White House, in a message Sunday to mark the Passover holiday, denounced what it called an “alarming surge” of antisemitism, saying it "has absolutely no place on college campuses, or anywhere in our country."

Four Jewish Democratic members of Congress toured Columbia’s locked-down campus on Monday with members of the school’s Jewish Law Students Association. They condemned that things had escalated to where Jewish students felt unsafe and the university canceled in-person classes Monday. Columbia said it would use [*hybrid remote and in-person learning*](https://apnews.com/article/columbia-nyu-israel-gaza-protests-2c1f043478570f9206a2ea8470457cf7) through the end of the spring term.

Rep. Kathy Manning of North Carolina called on the Education Department and Justice Department to work with the White House “to ensure that all universities take steps necessary to keep Jewish students and faculty safe.”

“This discrimination is simply unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue,” she said.

Biden on Monday sought the same middle ground that he's staked out for months as he backs Israel's military operations with weapons shipments while also pushing Israel to limit civilian casualties and get more humanitarian aid into Gaza, where the United Nations has said [*there is a looming famine*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-un-humanitarian-appeal-famine-shifa-7765cef456f284f1fc4901155e1fd5f8).

“I condemn the antisemitic protests," the president said at an Earth Day event. He then added, "I also condemn those who don’t understand what’s going on with the Palestinians.”

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, a high-profile progressive who represents parts of the Bronx and Queens, spoke before Biden at the same event. She said it was “important that we remember the power of young people shaping this country” and praised “the leadership of those peaceful student-led protests.”

**HOW MUCH IS BIDEN TO BLAME?**

Former President Donald Trump, Biden's presumptive Republican opponent in November, pointed to the headlines and images coming out of Columbia to redirect focus from [*his criminal hush money trial*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-hush-money-national-enquirer-d44d4a7ce66cc08edb5981b3afb882ba) in New York, telling reporters in the courthouse Tuesday that Biden bears the blame for the unrest.

“If this were me, you’d be after me. You’d be after me so much,” he said. “But they’re trying to give him a pass. But what’s going on is a disgrace to our country, and it’s all Biden’s fault and everybody knows it.”

In a sign of the political potency of the situation at Columbia, Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana planned to visit the school Wednesday and meet with Jewish students.

Joel Rubin, a former State Department official and Democratic strategist who has worked in Jewish ***politics*** for years, rejected critics blaming Biden “for everything that's gone wrong” but said the president would have to "make the argument for why the policy is the right one and let the chips fall where they may.”

“If it were purely ***politics*** and polling, it would be a very hard one,” Rubin said. “But I think Biden is making these decisions based on national security.”

Biden graduated from Syracuse’s law school in 1968, bypassing the campus convulsions over the Vietnam War. He distanced himself from that protest movement two decades later during his first run for president.

“I was married, I was in law school, I wore sports coats,” Biden said in 1987. “You’re looking at a middle-class guy. I am who I am. I’m not big on flak jackets and tie-dyed shirts. You know, that’s not me.\u2033

Biden has been endorsed this year by [*many leading youth activist organizations*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-youth-activists-joint-endorsement-reelection-age-15ea5b67e05f2dc6c41ba7f48cfccdcd) and built his campaign around key social issues — such as [*defending abortion rights*](https://apnews.com/article/president-joe-biden-florida-donald-trump-abortion-6b069fd8c14c4c65236d708b347697f0), [*combating climate change*](https://apnews.com/article/clean-energy-fossil-fuels-politics-wind-solar-oil-coal-natural-gas-c33f8a2c68786b32d9b78e5b4f098462) and canceling [*student debt for millions*](https://apnews.com/article/student-loan-cancellation-debt-forgiveness-college-fb020cb7f66d99db6c393c2be696bcf0#:~:text=Biden%20administration%20announces%20another%20round%20of%20loan%20cancellation%20under%20new%20repayment%20plan&text=WASHINGTON%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94%20The%20Biden,a%20faster%20route%20to%20forgiveness.) — that they believe can energize voters under 30 who are more likely to be concerned about his approach to Gaza.

[*He was in Florida*](https://apnews.com/article/president-joe-biden-florida-donald-trump-abortion-6b069fd8c14c4c65236d708b347697f0) on Tuesday to capitalize on the momentum against nationwide abortion restrictions and criticize a state law soon to go into effect that will ban abortions after six weeks, before many women know they're pregnant. A day earlier, Vice President Kamala Harris held an event promoting abortion rights in swing state Wisconsin.

Safia Southey, a 25-year-old law student at Columbia who is Jewish, has been participating in the protest and sleeping at the encampment on the university’s quad since Thursday. She believes outrage over the war will deflate Biden’s chances against Trump because staunch supporters of Israel are more likely to support the presumptive Republican nominee.

"I think Biden has tried to be very strategic and it’s backfired in a lot of ways,” she said.

However, Southey said she’ll vote for Biden “pretty much no matter what” in a matchup with Trump.

“The students who are upset, especially at these kind of universities, are smart enough to not stay home,” she said. “I think that they’re going to go out and vote, and they’re going to go for the most strategic option, even if they’re not happy for Biden. I think that they would do anything to make sure that Trump’s not in office.”

Democratic pollster Cornell Belcher was skeptical that campus demonstrations over Gaza would prove to be politically influential.

“What percentage of Americans are really in those narrow spaces, and how representative are they of a broader American audience, or even a broader youth audience?” he asked.

Johnston, the historian on student activism, said the current protests don’t approach the size or intensity of demonstrations in the 1960s, when school officials were held hostage and campuses were vandalized.

But over the years, he said, “there’s a lot of times where student protests have shaped the national debate.”

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Weissert and Megerian reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Jill Colvin in New York contributed to this report.

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