[*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) can ill afford a long, hot summer of protest that comes to a boil in time for the Democratic National Convention in August and then bleeds into the final weeks of an already venomous clash with [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45).

After days of [*college campus demonstrations*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-pro-palestinian-israel-05-02-24/index.html) - triggered by outrage at the civilian carnage from Israel's war in Gaza - the president's reticence to throw himself into the ***politics*** of a perilous situation finally became unsustainable, resulting in [*his first on-camera comments*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/02/politics/biden-says-his-support-for-israel-remains-unwavering-amid-college-protests/index.html) on Thursday.

The nationwide campus protests are not as pervasive as mass civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests that raged in the 1960s and 1970s. And this year's fervor may cool when finals are over and students head home. But in stepping to the White House podium, Biden assumed a role adopted by many of his predecessors at moments of high tension. He tried to remind the nation of its core principles and the citizenry of their duty to uphold them to ensure that both the right to free expression and the rule of law prevail. He argued that just as people have the right to protest government policies, others have the right to get a degree on campus in safety and not to be racially slandered.

"I understand people have strong feelings and deep convictions," Biden said. "In America, we respect the right and protect the right for them to express that. But it doesn't mean anything goes. It needs to be done without violence, without destruction, without hate, and within the law."

Biden's political isolation

In a political sense, Biden's speech was an act of fence sitting. He needs to avoid further alienating young, progressive voters who are furious about his handling of the Gaza war and could doom his reelection hopes if they don't show up in November. But he must also ensure that more middle-of-the-road voters aren't convinced by Trump's claims the country is on fire and spinning out of control. Any time a sitting president looks like he's observing rather than controlling inflammatory events, he's taking a huge political risk. This is especially the case when a political opponent, in this case Trump, is lambasting him as weak and not up to the job.

James Traub, a columnist for Foreign Policy and the author of a new book about Hubert Humphrey, said Biden faced a similar dilemma as the former vice president who was the Democratic nominee in 1968 amid the domestic angst caused by the Vietnam War. Biden "has such a narrow path to tread that I think he said the right thing and did as well as he could do," Traub told Isa Soares on CNN International on Thursday. Traub argued that Biden could lose "whatever connection he has to the energy and idealism of young people" if he criticizes the protesters but could alienate more moderate voters if he validates them.

Biden's optics problem may be exacerbated by his own lack of engagement in the Vietnam-era activist movement. He told reporters in 1987 that "by the time the war movement was at its peak, I was married, I was in law school, I wore sports coats." It's hard to believe now, but America's oldest president was once of the youngest senators in US history. But he was not a natural protester. His way was always to seek change through establishment ***politics*** and legislating. He's got more kinship with the labor movement than the protest movement. According to the late columnist Mary McGrory, who was at the 1987 news conference, Biden said: "You're looking at a middle class guy, I am who I am. I'm not big on flak jackets and tie-dye shirts - you know, that's not me."

That same conventionality was evident in Biden's remarks decades later in Thursday.

Biden tries to reconnect with another, more moderate audience

Biden was also reaching out to a silent majority of Americans not represented in the pictures of late-night unrest on campus or among the right-wing Republicans demanding a military-style crackdown. He was speaking to the values of the moderate, middle America that craves stability and that helped him win the Democratic nomination in 2020 afer he promised to restore pre-pandemic stability. In a sense, he was betting that he knows America better than Trump, than the activists who seized university buildings after pro-Palestinian protests spun out of control and than the antisemitic and Islamophobic extremists emboldened by the Gaza war.

But in invoking a quieter more conventional age, before Trump's incessant cacophony, social media fury, and growing extremism on the left, Biden often seems to be trying to lead a country that no longer exists.

The Gaza protests have further exposed a deep vulnerability in a reelection race in which the president is neck and neck with his twice-impeached predecessor and is facing an uphill task in assembling a path to 270 Electoral Votes. Biden was already having trouble engaging younger voters, who typically vote disproportionately for Democrats. And now Israel's war in Gaza, in which more than 34,000 civilians have been killed, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, has caused a shift in American ***politics***. A younger generation has empathized with Palestinians, breaking with their more traditionally pro-Israel elders. This has been especially testing for Biden - a staunch supporter of Israel dating back to 1970s Prime Minister Golda Meir. Asked on Thursday whether he'd reconsidered his policies towards the region, despite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's frequent rebuffs of his calls for a tempering of the intensity of the Gaza offensive, Biden replied simply, "No."

Biden's position represents his best estimation of US national interests. But it's a risky one domestically with many Democratic base voters deeply committed to what they see as the moral cause of opposing Israel's right-wing government.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, whom Biden beat in the Democratic presidential primary four years ago, warned Thursday that the president was in danger of suffering the same fate as President Lyndon Johnson, who saw his Democratic support base fracture in 1968 over the Vietnam War and widespread student protests. LBJ was forced to abandon his reelection bid and fold his primary campaign.

"In terms of his campaign, you know, I am thinking back and other people are making this reference that this may be Biden's Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson, in many respects, was a very, very good president. ... He chose not to run in '68 because of opposition to his views on Vietnam," the Vermont independent told CNN's Christiane Amanpour.

"I worry very much that President Biden is putting himself in a position where he has alienated not just young people but a lot of the Democratic base in terms of his views on Israel and this war," Sanders added. South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn, a Biden political ally who is set to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom later Friday, agreed with Sanders' assessment in an interview on CNN, calling it a "good argument."

To the senator's point, 81% of voters under 35 said in a recent CNN poll that they disapproved of the president's handling of the Israel-Hamas war. Biden's position could worsen even more if his administration can't convince Netanyahu to shelve a plan for a surge in to the Gazan city of Rafah that could cause heavy civilian casualties.

But Sanders' analogy is not an exact one. More than 3 million Americans served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Nearly 60,000 were killed and a generation of young men was subject to the draft in a conflict that ripped deep societal tears that didn't mend for decades afterwards.

There are no American troops on the ground in Gaza and there have been no mass casualty events involving Americans that could have a deep societal impact, even if there are significant numbers of US service personnel in the wider Middle East. This may be one reason why recent polls show that the Israel-Hamas war is well down the list of issues that most concern young Americans. This may also help explain why Biden had not addressed the campus protests in detail before Thursday.

While Biden said at the beginning of his White House remarks that "this isn't a moment for ***politics***," he took one clear shot at his 2024 election foe, who has been demanding the deployment of the National Guard to crush protests. "We are not an authoritarian nation where we silence people or squash dissent," Biden said.

"The American people are heard," he added.

But the president's reelection hopes may depend on whether his fractious political base begins hearing him.