As [*protests and attempts to quell them spread*](https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/university-protests-gaza-05-01-24/index.html) from New York to Los Angeles and many states in between, [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) finds himself caught in a series of political and diplomatic crosscurrents without an easy solution.

He is opposed to lawlessness and the takeover of campus buildings and has strongly condemned dark instances of antisemitism. But he is also mindful of students' right to protest, even when the anger is directed at his own policies toward Israel.

At the same time, he is navigating a highly sensitive moment in the [*Gaza war*](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel), as officials pursue a fresh proposal to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas. The plan, if agreed to, would result in a temporary pause in the fighting - an outcome some Biden advisers hope could lower the temperature at home.

For the president, the dueling domestic and foreign policy challenges have imposed a unique burden six months before the election. It's a rare moment that puts the demand for strong presidential leadership at odds with empathy, a trademark of his public persona.

The Biden campaign is closely watching the protests unfold, particularly those in battleground states, and advisers are keenly aware of the domestic political consequences of the administration's policy toward Israel but remain hopeful the crisis in the region eases by the fall.

"If ***politics*** was driving this, the president obviously would have changed course months ago," a senior Democratic adviser told CNN, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic inside the campaign. "But there is not a simple political solution to this. It's driven by complex policy decisions without easy answers."

One of the biggest worries, the president has told allies, is the impact of images of disorder on campuses and cities across America.

So far, Biden himself has said little about the unrest that has gripped certain college campuses. He told reporters at an Earth Day event on April 22 that he condemned antisemitism, but also "those who don't understand what's going on with the Palestinians."

The comment, which drew accusations of "both-sides-ism" from some Republicans, was his last public remark on the matter. Since then, Biden has avoided questions about the protests. The administration position on the unrest has been conveyed through spokespeople and in written statements instead, and Republicans, including House Speaker Mike Johnson, have tried calling the president out on the issue, even saying this week Biden should visit a college campus.

The White House on Wednesday sought to answer questions about Biden's relative silence by pointing to his condemnation of antisemitism.

"No president, no president has spoken more forcefully about combating antisemitism than this president," press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters when asked why the country hadn't heard directly from Biden about the protests.

"It is important that students and communities feel safe here and at the same time, we are going to be really forceful here and continue to underscore how antisemitism is hateful speech," she added later.

Biden to speak on antisemitism next week

Jean-Pierre said Biden would deliver the keynote address next week at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's annual days of remembrance ceremony on May 7, describing his speech as intended to "discuss our moral duty to combat the rising scourge of antisemitism."

Still, she did not preview any remarks specifically meant to address the situation on college campuses.

On Tuesday, White House officials sharply condemned the takeover of a building at Columbia University, voicing a rebuke of tactics they said went too far. And in a proclamation noting Jewish American Heritage Month, Biden decried "the ferocious surge of antisemitism" on campuses and elsewhere.

"These acts are despicable and echo the worst chapters of human history," Biden wrote in the proclamation. "They remind us that hate never goes away - it only hides until it is given oxygen."

Yet already, Biden's political rivals have seized upon the images of violence - and Biden's relative public silence - to claim the president is absent.

"Biden is supposed to be the voice of our country and it's certainly not much of a voice. It's a voice that nobody's heard," his Republican rival in November's election, former President Donald Trump, said in a phone interview on Fox News on Tuesday evening.

A Biden campaign spokeswoman, Lauren Hitt, said in response to Trump's comments that it was the former president who had a record of fanning violence.

"While Donald Trump stood proudly with white supremacists and encouraged violent crack downs on peaceful demonstrators, Joe Biden defends our First Amendment and strengthened protections against antisemitism and Islamophobia," she said.

Biden administration officials say they are watching with concern as the campus protests spread across the country, though haven't detected signs of "bad actors" among the demonstrators.

And they have left all policing decisions to individual universities and local officials. When asked about the prospect of sending in the National Guard to quell protests - a scenario that would immediately draw comparisons to the deadly shooting of four students by guardsmen at Kent State University in 1970 - the White House has said that decision is left to governors.

Challenge to turning out young voters

If protests are still raging by the fall, Biden could well become the first Democratic president since the Vietnam era not welcome to visit college campuses, which have long been a critical piece of turnout efforts for younger voters.

Biden plans to deliver two commencement addresses later this month, at the US Military Academy at West Point and at Morehouse College in Atlanta. His planned speech at Morehouse has already drawn some consternation on campus, though there are no plans for it to be canceled. Some Biden allies expect there to be protests during the event.

For the president, allegiance with campus protests is not necessarily ingrained. He has written that he felt little affinity for antiwar protesters who demonstrated on college campuses in the 1960s, including at Syracuse University, where he studied law.

"They were taking over the building," he recalled in a memoir. "And we looked up and said, 'Look at those assholes.' That's how far apart from the antiwar movement I was."

Perhaps at no point in American history has a foreign policy challenge had the potential to weigh so heavily on domestic ***politics*** - particularly with American boots not on the ground. And now, the protesters are coming from within Biden's own coalition.

Karim Safieddine, a doctoral sociology student at the University of Pittsburgh, stood outside the United Steel headquarters last month with a group of demonstrators taking a stand against Biden as he visited Pittsburgh.

"Our tax money is going into policies that Joe Biden is engaging in and we have a responsibility to stop it," Safieddine said. "If there is indeed a will to stop this conflict, it can be stopped."

Asked whether he could vote for Biden again, as he did in 2020, he said: "I do not believe so and I do believe that many people will not be voting for Joe Biden."

Heading into the summer campaign season, with both parties bracing for demonstrations at their respective political conventions in Milwaukee and Chicago, the president's political advisers concede the televised images of protests are not helpful for his re-election bid. But several aides point to concerns about the appearances of a breakdown in law and order more than a worry that young voters will support Trump.

Biden's team also believes that other issues - namely the economy and abortion - will be more decisive factors in November, including for young Americans.

Dahlia Saba, an electrical engineering graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, helped organize a protest vote in the state's primary earlier this month. She bristled at the question of whether her opposition to Biden could help Trump.

"We reject the idea that the Democratic Party feels like they have to coerce people into voting for them by leveraging the threat of another candidate that is worse," Saba said. "We want to see a democratic system where our politicians reflect our values, rather than threatening us with someone who is the worse of two evils."

Barry Burden, who leads the Elections Research Center at the University of Wisconsin, said he believes Biden is on the cusp of facing a modern-day version of the fraught tensions of the Vietnam era.

"He does have this problem of a kind of nagging protest vote on the Democratic side because of his handling of things in Gaza," Burden said. "We don't know if that will still be a prime issue come November, but at the moment it's something that's dogging him and probably would give him some pause about visiting a college campus."