

# [***Opinion: Against Trump, Biden will have to be his own best argument***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BNM-Y3Y1-JBSS-S007-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama joined President Joe Biden in New York City's Radio City Music Hall on Thursday, along with television host and comedian Stephen Colbert, to [*raise campaign funds*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/28/politics/biden-obama-clinton-nyc-fundraiser/index.html) and bolster Biden's support. The star-studded event, featuring celebrities including Queen Latifah and Lizzo, was another reminder of [*the massive financial gap*](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-cant-match-bidens-2024-fundraising-republicans-campaign-says-2024-03-28/) thus far between what the president and his opponent, former President Donald Trump, have been able to raise.

During the glitzy evening, the former presidents stepped in to make a strong case for supporting and being enthusiastic about their colleague. Moving away from the intense focus on Trump that has stolen much of the attention of the 2024 campaign, Obama said that "it's not just the negative case against the presumptive nominee on the other side, it's the positive case for somebody who's done an outstanding job as president." Moving back to Trump, Clinton argued, "What President Biden inherited was a very vibrant, diverse society and economy, and you know, President Trump, let's be honest, had a pretty good couple of years, because he stole them from Barack Obama."

Rising to the occasion, Biden also took some shots at his predecessor and his party: "We're at a real inflection point in history. This guy denies global warming. This guy wants to get rid of not only Roe v. Wade which he brags about having done, he wants to get rid of the ability of anyone in America to have the right to choose."

While the speeches were important, so too was the final tally: [*$25 million raised*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/28/politics/biden-obama-clinton-nyc-fundraiser/index.html) ahead of the evening. The money continues to flow into Biden's reelection coffers. But Biden needs to be careful. Even at a celebratory gala such as this, it was possible to see warning signs about paths that his reelection campaign must avoid.

Most importantly, Biden, whose strength has always relied on his ability to connect with average, working Americans because of his own modest roots, doesn't want to fall into the predictable trap of letting Republicans paint him as an out-of-touch coastal elitist who likes to hang out with Hollywood stars (or worse, intellectuals). This type of argument has been one of the most effective points [*Republicans have made against Democrats*](https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/4397634-our-new-political-reality-democratic-elitists-versus-republican-populists/) since President Dwight Eisenhower's running mate, Richard Nixon, railed against [*"egghead" Democrat Adlai Stevenson in 1952.*](http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1956/quail-hunting)

Despite the fact that Democratic economic policies have tended to be much more supportive of working and middle class American families, the argument that the party is beholden to elites [*has gained traction over the decades*](https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374200237/whatittooktowin). Alongside the culture wars, it has been a way for Republicans to peel away voters whose economic self-interest would naturally move them toward the Democrats.

For some voters, Thursday could seem to be an example of this gambit. Always aware of the how things look, Trump, who was also in New York City, drew a contrast by [*attending the wake*](https://www.politico.com/newsletters/new-york-playbook/2024/03/29/new-yorks-presidents-club-00149705) of Jonathan Diller, a New York police officer who was killed while conducting a traffic stop.

There have been numerous books, such as David Leonhardt's "Ours Was the Shining Future," documenting how Democrats have lost their hold on working class Americans. The optics on display Thursday evening can easily fuel those trends.

Nor should Biden allow his fundraising advantage to become his defining strength. Many Americans don't like the way private money dominates American ***politics***. Concerns about the corrosive effects of private finance have long been talking point in the body ***politic***. While having more funds that your opponent is helpful to mounting a successful presidential campaign, money isn't everything, as [*Hillary Clinton learned in 2016.*](https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-clinton-campaign-fundraising-totals-232400)

Moreover, the money advantage can't become more defining than the candidate's character, values, ideas and vision. This is especially true for Biden, who has invested so much of his career in being the individual who has sought and held office because of who he is - not what he can raise. At a certain point, too many headlines about fundraising hauls can easily turn off voters.

Although Trump is just as eager to raise funds, [*though struggling to do so as effectively*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/31/politics/trump-fundraising/index.html), it is notable how his supporters devote much less airtime to that metric compared to extolling his anti-establishment, faux victimhood narrative.

While having Obama, Clinton and other prominent Democrats play a strong role in the campaign is valuable, they can't become the focus of the campaign. Biden's greatest asset is to have public attention turn toward the dangers that Trump poses to the nation. When that is not the subject of conversation, the discussion needs to center on what Biden does well for America. Shifting to past presidents, which will include memories of the Clinton scandals and stir the backlash sentiment against Obama, has its costs.

And none of the Democrats in Radio City Music Hall could ignore the [*massive protests that were unfolding outside*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/28/politics/biden-obama-clinton-nyc-fundraiser/index.html), primarily from activists condemning Biden's support of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Biden, Clinton and Obama all tried to address the issue when Colbert brought up the subject in his question: "What do you believe the United States' role should be going forward to ensure the most peaceful and prosperous future for the people of Israel and for Gaza?"

Biden tried to make clear that he is deeply concerned about all "innocent victims, Israeli and Palestinian." Obama made the point that the world is filled with "tragedy and cruelty" and that these are "hard problems" that don't offer "neat, easy answers." Clinton reiterated that Biden "cares about giving the Palestinians a decent state, self-governance and the support they need for self-determination."

But these arguments won't allay the deep and intense divisions that have opened up within the Democratic Party about the Middle East. [*Public opinion*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/27/world/middleeast/military-action-americans-gaza.html) broadly has [*turned against the war*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/642695/majority-disapprove-israeli-action-gaza.aspx) in dramatic fashion. Gaining a hold on this issue through effective policy responses in the months to come will be essential if Biden is to avoid depressing the vote or preventing a move toward a third party in crucial parts of the electorate.

For all the positive steps that Biden has enjoyed since his State of the Union, pushing back against many of the problematic signs that his campaign has faced, this campaign is going to be a tough slog that comes down to the wire. Trump, who keeps managing to delay any sort of legal reckoning and might just have managed to revitalize his own coffers as a result of his [*Truth Social deal*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/25/investing/trump-media-stock-trading/index.html), is in a much better position than any expert would have imagined given the immense baggage that he brings to the table.

In the end, Biden will have to be his own best argument. He is the only person who can answer his critics and heal some of the internal divisions within this coalition. Too much attention to the glamorous stuff and the money could easily turn Biden into the kind of politician he has never been and is unlikely to come out on top in November.

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