

# [***Three presidents and one mission: Beat Trump***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BNB-MKW1-JBSS-S02V-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Sometimes when a president needs a hand, only another president - or another two - will do.

[*President Joe Biden's*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) bid for a second term and reelection campaign coffers will get a hefty boost on Thursday when [*he's joined in New York*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/27/politics/barack-obama-joe-biden-bill-clinton-donald-trump/index.html) by his two immediate predecessors as Democratic presidents, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

The lucrative fundraiser in New York will send a message of commitment from the 42nd and 44th presidents for the 46th's bid to prevent the 45th president, Donald Trump, from returning as the 47th.

Biden's reelection campaign announced Thursday that this evening's fundraiser has raised over $25 million - building on an already-impressive war chest as Biden heads into a general election rematch against Trump.

Obama, especially, has become increasingly involved in Biden's reelection campaign in recent weeks, motivated by alarm at the possibility that his friend and former vice president will be forced, like he was, to hand the Oval Office to Trump. CNN's MJ Lee and Jeff Zeleny [*reported*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/27/politics/barack-obama-joe-biden-bill-clinton-donald-trump/index.html) Wednesday that Obama was in the White House for a working visit just last week. Sources said Biden has also been in regular touch with Clinton, who was in the White House when the current president was a major Senate voice on foreign policy and judicial issues.

The appearance of the three men together at Radio City Music Hall will conjure a moment of symbolism that will underscore the stakes of the election. Two Democratic presidents who won second terms are uniting to try to usher a successor, who is older than both of them, into the same rarified political air.

It will also mark a rare occasion when four presidents are in one area, other than Washington, on the same day. Trump, who is permanently estranged from the ex-presidents' club because of his extreme behavior, is due on Long Island on Thursday to attend a wake for slain New York City Police Office Jonathan Diller. The other living ex-presidents are Jimmy Carter, who has been in hospice care for over a year, and George W. Bush, who is very friendly with both Obama and Clinton, but as a Republican is unlikely to campaign for Biden even given his disdain for Trump's contempt for democracy.

Biden, Clinton and Obama are in the unique group of men who have known the lonely burden of the presidency, the responsibility of sending military personnel to war abroad and the strain of trying to win a second term while doing a day job in the Oval Office.

The fundraiser is the first major joint appearance of Obama and Clinton on behalf of Biden this campaign cycle. But it will also raise questions over whether the two past presidents have quite the political heft that they once enjoyed. While both remain Democratic rock stars and possess more charisma and talent as campaign trail rhetoricians than Biden, it's been 16 years since Obama was first elected in a euphoric mood of hope and change. And Clinton has been out of the White House for nearly a quarter of a century. The two former presidents both retain strong support among African American voters who are vital to the Democratic coalition. And Obama is expected to be dispatched to college campuses in the fall to try to work some political alchemy on young voters - a tough crowd to get to the polls. But both the Clinton and Obama presidencies now appear ideologically somewhat conservative to many progressive and younger voters whom Biden has his own challenges in reaching.

Still, Leon Panetta, who served Clinton as White House chief of staff and Obama as defense secretary and CIA director, told CNN on Tuesday that Obama especially could be helpful to Biden, in particular on health care - an issue on which Biden and Obama teamed up to [*highlight on a call*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/20/politics/barack-obama-joe-biden-donald-trump-obamacare/index.html) last weekend.

"I think they have to be careful about where they use the former president," Panetta said on "CNN News Central" on Thursday. "I would probably wait until we get closer to the convention and to the election and the fall. But I think he can be a tremendous asset in terms of reaching not just the average American but obviously, the Latinos, the young people, the minorities that are going to be critical to Joe Biden if he is going to win this election."

Biden's two explainers-in-chief

Biden's supporters will be hoping that Obama and Clinton's impact on the campaign will be similar to Clinton's impact on Obama's 2012 reelection race. The then-president was having trouble convincing voters he was properly managing the economy at a time when many Americans, then as now, were not feeling the full impact of an economic recovery following a crisis. But Clinton delivered a vintage prime-time speech at the Democratic National Convention, using a folksy and persuasive turn of phrase that made a better argument for Obama's second term than the president had made for himself.

"I want to nominate a man who's cool on the outside but who burns for America on the inside," Clinton said. Obama was deeply grateful for an appearance that injected new momentum into his campaign against Republican nominee Mitt Romney and he dubbed Clinton his "explainer-in-chief."

Thursday night's event will mark the latest twist in fascinating relationships among three men who reached the pinnacle of ***politics***. People who become president, by definition, nurse substantial egos. Clinton, Obama and Biden, though they are now working toward the same goal, have sometimes also gotten in each other's way - and at times there have been tensions between them.

And the thwarted hopes of another historic figure, former first lady and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who twice lost White House bids - to Obama and Trump - deepens the intrigue in the interactions of the three presidents.

It's a mark of his extraordinary longevity as a politician that Biden actually ran for president before any of them. He was seen as a great future hope of the Democratic Party, but his 1988 run for the nomination - four years before Bill Clinton ran - ended in the embarrassment of a plagiarism scandal.

When Obama, seeking some foreign policy ballast, chose Biden as his vice presidential nominee in 2008 - after another failed presidential bid by the then-Delaware senator - many of his own staff were skeptical of Biden, whom they viewed as a gaffe machine. The Democratic nominee had also reportedly despaired at the old Senate bull's meandering speeches and hyperbole. Journalist Gabriel Debenedetti relayed an anecdote in his book "The Long Alliance" about the Biden and Obama relationship: When Biden launched a stemwinder during a congressional hearing, the then-Illinois senator passed a note to an aide that read, "Shoot. Me. Now."

But in the White House, the two men gradually became close. Biden played a valuable role as devil's advocate and last sounding board in foreign policy debates. And his deep loyalty to the president and role in implementing Recovery Act spending plans earned him new respect. On one occasion, however, the vice president irked Obama's team when he got out ahead of the president on endorsing same-sex marriage at a time when the issue was hugely controversial.

Biden leaned increasingly on Obama as his beloved son, Beau, was dying of cancer. And Obama delivered a moving eulogy which was as much a tribute to his vice president as to his deceased son, ending his remarks by embracing Biden and placing a kiss on his cheek.

In the final days of his presidency, Obama surprised a tearful Biden by awarding him the presidential medal of freedom. He quoted an unnamed Republican who said of Biden, "If you can't admire Joe Biden as a person, you got a problem. He's as good a man as God ever created."

Biden and Obama have appeared several times together during the current administration. And in the Covid-19 campaign in 2020, the former president delivered a powerful primetime speech on behalf of the Democratic nominee in which he warned that Trump posed an unacceptable threat to democracy.

But one thing continues to sit poorly with Biden - his belief that Obama thought Hillary Clinton, and not him, represented the best bet for Democrats to keep the White House. Biden was still thinking about this as recently as last year, when he sat for an interview with special counsel Robert Hur, who was investigating his handling of classified documents. "I'm not - and not a mean thing to say. He just thought that she had a better shot of winning the presidency than I did," Biden said. Some former Obama aides have denied that their old boss did anything to prevent Biden running in 2016.

Clinton and Biden go back even further than Obama and Biden

As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1993, Biden helped usher Clinton's pick, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, onto the Supreme Court in one of the then-president's most enduring legacy achievements. During the war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Biden sometimes irked the White House as one of the most hawkish voices on Capitol Hill arguing in favor of US intervention about which Clinton long procrastinated. He eventually launched a peace initiative that ended the most damaging post-World War II war on the European landmass until Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years ago.

But Biden was also a valuable ally for Clinton after the president's impeachment over an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. And after he became vice president, Biden developed a friendly and cordial relationship with Hillary Clinton, maintained by regular breakfasts at the vice president's official residence in Washington.

Obama and Bill Clinton also had a tumultuous relationship before the former president came to Obama's aid in 2012. Clinton was one of the first political heavyweights to understand the threat that the charismatic Obama posed to his wife's 2008 campaign. Relations between the Clinton and Obama campaigns were, at times, deeply antagonistic as the young senator challenged and then beat the Clintons, breaking their hold on a party they dominated for nearly two decades. Bill Clinton, who had prided himself on his relationship with Black voters, became especially exercised as the African American Democratic establishment split from his wife and gathered around Obama.

At one point, Clinton described Obama's opposition to the Iraq War - the key to his appeal among many Democrats - as a "fairy tale," which fed complaints from some Obama supporters that he was using a racist trope. Clinton's fury burst out into the open in South Carolina, where Obama beat the former first lady in the Democratic primary in a victory that put him on the road to the White House.

But the three presidents have long since buried their various hatchets, mostly, and will Thursday unite to counter a threat that they all believe poses a near existential risk to US democracy - a second Trump term.

CNN's Donald Judd and MJ Lee contributed to this report.

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