

# [***Biden projects a vision of strength that's been missing from his presidency but will be needed in 2024 campaign***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BH3-T001-DY7V-G2SS-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; This version of [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) could beat [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45).

At [*the State of the Union address*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2024/03/annotated-fact-checked-president-biden-sotu/) on Thursday night, the 81-year-old president set out to defuse his biggest liability: deep-seated fears among millions of Americans that he's too old to serve a second term.

There is nothing worse for a president than looking weak. So every word, gesture, joke and admonition of Biden's appearance was geared toward the goal of making him look strong.

And in the most important moment of the 2024 election campaign so far, Biden appeared to succeed. He projected vigor and forcefulness. His voice, which has seemed reedy at times, was sonorant. He was quick off the mark as he goaded heckling Republicans, who again walked into his trap by showcasing their extremism to millions of viewers. Biden was a trenchant master of the chamber of the House of Representatives, effectively wielding the theatrics of the presidency and commanding an hour of unfiltered primetime television.

At times, Biden reanimated the scrappy, twinkle-eyed, blue-collar street politician that has characterized his public image for decades - for instance, when he used the word "illegal" instead of the more politically correct term "undocumented migrant."

Taking aim at another of his own weaknesses - over the border crisis - Biden attacked the GOP for sabotaging a bipartisan border bill that contained many of the policies that Republicans had been advocating for years, apparently because Trump wanted to deprive him of an election year win. The president pointed out that many Republicans had originally supported the measure, and he mockingly reacted to their boos by saying: "You don't think so - you don't like that bill, huh?"

Not for the first time in the speech, Biden appeared to be speaking directly to Trump, potentially watching at home in Florida, while trying to get under his skin. "If my predecessor is watching, instead of playing ***politics*** to pressure members of Congress to block the bill, join me in telling the Congress to pass it. We can do it together."

And Biden slammed Republicans for forgetting the trauma of the January 6, 2021, mob attack on the US Capitol by the former president's supporters. "My predecessor and some of you here seek to bury the truth of January 6. I will not do that," Biden said. "Remember your oath of office - to defend against all threats foreign and domestic." The president's intention appeared to be to remind voters of the extremes of the Trump years at a time when polls suggest growing nostalgia for his presidency among some voters.

Such an energetic performance from Biden has been in far less evidence as he's perceptibly aged and been weighed down by the burdens of office. If he is to overcome the kind of low approval ratings that typically doom first-term presidents, he will have to emulate this performance over and over in the coming months.

Biden's answer to Trump

It is unusual for a president to spend so much time calling out his electoral opponent in an annual address. Biden repeatedly took shots at Trump - whom he referred to only as "my predecessor." In that sense, this year's State of the Union represented one of the most overt examples of a president delivering a campaign-style speech from the podium in the House, as Democrats chanted "four more years."

Trump has for years lampooned Biden as old, tired, doddering and weak, often with cruel impersonations at his campaign rallies. Any misstep or senior moment from the president on Thursday night would have immediately gone viral and had the damaging effect of confirming what majorities in polls think - that Biden is too old to be running for reelection.

Alabama Sen. Katie Britt may have hoped for a less robust performance by the president since her Republican response to his speech included the pre-written line, "Right now, our commander in chief is not in command. The free world deserves better than a dithering and diminished leader."

House Speaker Mike Johnson took a similar approach as he accused Biden of behaving in a hyperpartisan manner.

"President Biden is clearly not on his A-game and I think that's a charitable way to describe it. I thought tonight he was overly emotional. I thought he shouted at the audience. I thought so much of that was unnecessary," Johnson said.

Of course, Republicans would have faulted any version of Biden that showed up on Thursday. Had he lacked energy, they'd have said he was too old. Since he put on a strong performance, they accused him of shouting.

Not only did the president seek to project strength, he also sought to redefine the concept of strong leadership in his favor. He suggested that while Trump projects a strongman's persona, he's really most interested in genuflecting to dictators and autocrats.

Biden started his speech with a strident demand for the House to lift its hold on his $60 billion arms package for Ukraine, which Trump opposes, portraying it as vital to continued American strength in the world.

He contrasted Trump with former Republican President Ronald Reagan's thundering call on Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down" the Berlin Wall. "My predecessor, a former Republican president, tells Putin, quote, 'Do whatever the Hell you want,'" Biden said, drawing boos from Democrats on the House floor. "That's a quote. A former president actually said that bowing down to a Russian leader. I think it's outrageous, it's dangerous and it's unacceptable."

"We will not bow down. I will not bow down," Biden said. "History is watching." Biden also accused Trump of going soft on President Xi Jinping's China, saying he had taken steps to bolster regional alliances to meet its threat and to protect US technology from being used in the country. "For all his tough talk on China, it never occurred to my predecessor to do any of that."

While Biden was hale and lively in delivering his speech, it's tough to know in the moment how it will affect voters agonizing over their vote and even wavering Democrats whom the president badly needs to show up in large numbers in November. And his political position is so perilous that no one speech can guarantee his reelection. The months to come will have multiple unpredictable events that could sway the result.

Republicans complain Biden politicized a great state event

Some Republicans faulted the president's delivery and said he mistook loudness for strength. Former President George W. Bush's ex-spokesman Ari Fleischer mused on X, for instance, that someone had told Biden to show energy but that he instead came across as "weirdly amped up" and was "bizarrely fast" in his delivery.

Other Republicans complained that Biden had polarized a great state occasion. "Maybe that was supposed to be the Democratic Convention speech," Rep. Dan Crenshaw of Texas told CNN. "It was divisive. It was an attack ad against Republicans."

The president's use of the annual speech to the nation to repeatedly attack his 2024 opponent, if not by name, was indeed a political risk in that it could have offended some swing voters. But it also made the most of what may be Biden's most potent political platform of the year.

And it's rich for Republicans to complain about politicizing the State of the Union. Trump presented the Medal of Freedom to late conservative radio icon Rush Limbaugh one year. And he used the White House, which belongs to all Americans regardless of political party, as the backdrop for his Republican National Convention speech in the pandemic year of 2020.

The profound national crossroads that the 2024 election represents - between Biden's traditional, American global leadership and Trump's populist "America First" nationalism - has rarely come across as stark as Biden laid it out during his opening remarks on Ukraine. On Friday, Trump is set to welcome a European autocrat, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, to his resort at Mar-a-Lago. Orban's suppression of democracy, opposition figures, the legal system and the press looks a lot like the second term of "retribution" that Trump is promising. Like Trump, Orban cozies up to Putin and backs the ex-president's plan to end the war in Ukraine within 24 hours - a process that could only happen on the Russian leader's terms and reward his illegal invasion of a democracy. Orban is the kind of idealized strongman that Trump would like to become and frequently cites at his rallies.

The White House did not extend an invitation for Orban to meet with Biden, CNN's Betsy Klein reports. And in his speech on Thursday, Biden was advocating a different kind of strength - one rooted in democracy rather than in trying to destroy it.

In summing up his remarks, Biden sought to make his age a virtue rather than a liability, arguing that Trump is a creature of a dangerous past, while he has a positive vision of the future.

"I know I may not look like it, but I've been around a while," the president quipped. "When you get to be my age, certain things become clearer than ever. I know the American story. Again and again. I've seen the contest between competing forces in the battle for the soul of our nation."

"Let's build a future together and let's remember who we are," Biden said.

That debate about two vastly different visions of the meaning and the soul of the country will decide the fates of both Biden and Trump come November.

Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

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