

# [***Biden's allies are begging him to fight harder. The State of the Union is his chance to do so.***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BGW-D751-JBSS-S1H2-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Washington (CNN) &#8212; A handful of Democratic governors made their way through a gaggle of their colleagues last month to tell [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) directly what they've been stressing behind the scenes: He needs to be fighting harder.

The Democrats told Biden that [*he needed to show more of the fire*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/politics/trump-biden-general-election-analysis/index.html) that was on display in a closed-door meeting with governors when Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte handed him a letter demanding more action on the southern border. Biden flashed a smile, according to two of the governors standing there.

"State of the Union," Biden said, teasingly.

That fighting attitude is anticipated to be on display [*during Thursday's primetime speech*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/06/politics/biden-to-deliver-state-of-the-union-speech-on-march-7/index.html), in which the president is expected to go much further than he is used to in bashing corporations for gouging consumers and racking up profits. But with anger about rising prices driving so much of the bad vibes surrounding the economy - even [*the Cookie Monster X account posted about shrinkflation*](https://x.com/MeCookieMonster/status/1764692032914690276?s=20) on Monday, prompting a response from the White House - Biden is going where he long resisted, in an effort to redirect the fury that has been weighing him down in the polls.

Leading Democrats say it's far past time.

Two dozen top Democratic officials and operatives who spoke to CNN said they're tired of reading that the president is cursing about Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu behind the closed doors of the Oval Office, or hearing reports that he told donors that Vladimir Putin is "a crazy SOB" and that MAGA Republicans are worse than segregationists. They want to see that passion and fire out in public as assurances that the president's behind-the-scenes demeanor doesn't match the public perception of the 81-year-old commander-in-chief are wearing thin.

"A lot of times you need to hear it from the candidate," said Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota who's eagerly thrown himself into becoming one of the president's most active defenders. "Joe Biden's a nice guy. People get that. One of the things people wonder, 'Is he tough enough to take these things on?'"

Plus, Walz said, it would push back against the concerns that Biden is too old.

"I think it helps. He's still going to be his age, but I think it helps to make the case on this," Walz said. "Punch [Trump] a little bit. He earned it."

Multiple Democratic officials told CNN they are hesitant of how much of to say, weighing the risks of calling even more attention to what Biden isn't doing by going public.

But privately, many talk longingly about wanting to see more passion and pride - political theatrics, sure, but ones that they argue are crucial - at a moment when exhaustion with the process is pervasive and the Democratic worries over a second Trump administration are high. Biden's effort in standing up for democracy shouldn't top out with a few sly digs on Seth Meyers' late-night show, they insist. They argue he shouldn't give a forceful speech marking the anniversary of the January 6, 2021, insurrection and assume that will fill out his energetic quota for over two months.

"People do want to see that he's a fighter, which he is. Anything that presents the contrast, which I think that would help do, I'd be for," said New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a longtime friend of Biden.

Planning for traps

At a moment when polls show majorities of Democrats don't think Biden should be running for reelection, and with the biggest national audience he is likely to get outside of the summer convention, Biden and his aides are hyper aware of the importance of Thursday's speech. They know every word and stutter and shuffle will be picked over as much as any of the policy proposals, and the drafting has been going until late into the evening in the West Wing.

Top Biden advisers insist that their favorite moment from last year's speech - when he got Republicans to boo cutting Social Security and Medicare, punctuating the moment with "I enjoy conversion" - was not at all planned.

This time around, aides acknowledge that the political pressure has them workshopping options to not leave Biden's fate up to another improvisation and the hope that he will have another smooth off-the-cuff response.

Hawaii Sen. Brian Schatz isn't sure the State of the Union is the right forum for Biden to come out in full force, "but after that, I think he's going to have to be gloves off."

Biden aides love to scold and shame reporters for coverage they think is unfair or over-torqued. Schatz said the president and his aides need to move past that to get negative stories about Trump covered by getting Biden to take the swings.

"We don't have time to rewrite the rules of engagement in journalism. We just have to work with what we have," Schatz said. "He's personally going to have to make that case, and not assume that people are organically going to get it, either from surrogates or via osmosis."

Biden aides acknowledge he'd look stronger if he fought more

For months, Biden campaign aides have been talking about the need to step up, and the obvious benefit they see in him doing it. People look strong when they're picking fights, is how one senior Biden campaign official summarized the thinking to CNN all the way back in January - and they know the president needs to look stronger than he does.

They have found this easier said than done, and not just because Biden is trying to maintain the chances of getting a few outstanding bills through Congress, including avoiding a shutdown and sending more aid to Israel and Ukraine.

"The real Joe Biden is: 'We're red states, we're bluestates, but we're the United States of America,'" said Gov. John Carney, who's known Biden for decades and attributes that sensibility to their shared Delaware roots. "But he also is feisty."

And [*while Biden has enjoyed needling Trump while knowing he'll probably get a response*](https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2024/01/26/politics/biden-taunts-trump-2024/index.html), his inclination is to present a calm demeanor for the sake of trying to insert more civility into ***politics*** - like the laudatory statement about Sen. Mitch McConnell he pushed to release last week after the Kentucky Republican announced he would be stepping down as minority leader. Biden did rile up many core Democrats by putting out any statement praising McConnell and by not mentioning things like his role in overturning Roe v. Wade by ensuring that Antonin Scalia's and Ruth Bader Ginsburg's Supreme Court seats went to conservatives.

"A statement like that, you have to wonder if Joe Biden gets it," one enraged high-level Democratic operative complained to CNN.

Most of the fiercest statements to come out of Biden's campaign so far have been attributed to staff members or written largely by others in his name. Aides say realistic management of the president's time is a basic consideration: busy running the country, he cannot be constantly running to microphones to blast Trump.

"President Biden is on offense, demonstrating whose side he's on and calling Republican officials out for choosing rich special interests over middle class families, choosing extreme attacks on basic reproductive health care over Americans' freedoms, and choosing fentanyl traffickers over the Border Patrol by opposing the toughest bipartisan border security legislation in modern history," said White House spokesman Andrew Bates.

Biden campaign spokeswoman Lauren Hitt followed up with a statement noting similar points and that "the president and vice president will absolutely continue holding Donald Trump accountable and communicating directly to voters how much is at stake in this election."

Tactically skipping some fights

But on several issues with huge potential for wavering voters, Biden can't say much at all.

Trump's kaleidoscope of indictments and court cases is one of the former president's greatest political liabilities and a popular line of attack from Nikki Haley. But Biden is committed to making clear the independence of the Justice Department and courts.

He has more to say about Netanyahu and the situation in Gaza that American voters might be interested in, but White House aides are wary of how scrupulously every word attributed to the president is being read both by the Israeli government and Arab leaders in the region.

Biden's habit of pulling back the curtain on these thoughts and others at fundraisers isn't just because he gets comfortable in front of a friendly crowd. It's an occasionally tactical decision to try to get his comments into the media bloodstream while preserving a sliver of plausible distance.

Just because going harder lights up Democrats already obsessing about the race and plays well online doesn't mean it's the best strategy for winning over the moderates and Republicans turned off by Trump that Biden is hoping to be a palatable enough alternative for, especially over a long campaign that can already feel like a slog with still eight months to go.

For now, the campaign has been leaning on a format for videos for its new TikTok and other social media accounts: Hand Biden an iPad and record him watching and reacting to a video of the latest Trump comment that the campaign wants to highlight. It's what one campaign aide called "the real digital equivalent of 'Let Biden be Biden.'" Biden's mostly exasperated reactions from watching the videos tend to be fresh, but the comments he makes after to sum them up are scripted and modulated.

And for all the people complaining that Biden can seem like an elderly man sleepwalking on the job, aides feel like they have plenty of time to ratchet up the outrage.

That only goes so far.

"You can't be at an 11 out of 10 in terms of being alarmed for eight months in a row - so I understand the need for him to peak at the right time, and to make those arguments when the maximum number of voters are paying attention." Schatz said. "But a lot of times politicians are advised not to be too rough, because it can harm, it can backfire, because it can backfire. In this case, people really know what they think of Joe Biden as a human. So, he's got a lot of runway here to be as tough as necessary."

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