

# [***Opinion: Biden gave the speech of his life***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BH3-NHC1-JBSS-S1VX-00000-00&context=1516831)

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(CNN) &#8212; CNN Opinion asked political and policy contributors to weigh in on President Joe Biden's State of the Union address. The views expressed in these commentaries are their own.

David Gergen: Biden just rewrote the presidential race

President Joe Biden not only delivered perhaps the best speech of his life last night; he may have also changed the race itself.

Coming into the State of the Union, Biden was limping along the campaign trail. Democrats - some on his own staff - worried that his age and listless demeanor were dragging him down. Many, myself included, wondered if he could still throw a punch.

The Biden who showed up at ringside Thursday night was a completely different kind of animal. Passionate, feisty, focused - he came eager to put the gloves on. There were moments when he went over the top, promising more than he could possibly deliver, but Democrats felt energy coursing through their veins again.

The more salient question is how much Biden may have changed the odds in the overall race. Political veterans tend to think that a strong performance at a State of the Union is worth only three or four days of good press before it fades. Perhaps that will be the case here.

But watching as the cheers grew deafening in the hall, one had to wonder: Was it different this time? Can Democrats actually turn this race upside down? Stay tuned ... We won't know for a while, but it is already clear that with Biden's stewardship, they sense there is fresh hope in the air.

David Gergen is a professor emeritus on public leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School and previously served as a White House adviser to presidents of both parties.

Carrie Sheffield: Biden gave a cynical, partisan campaign stump speech

Immediately out of the gate, President Joe Biden's State of the Union address was a cynical, partisan campaign stump speech rather than an uplifting, substantive, unifying message.

In the first few minutes, Biden hit all the main fear-mongering campaign themes that Democrats plan to run on this fall. The president focused on wedge issues from abortion to the January 6, 2021, riots - even though they're issues [*that Gallup shows*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx) fall very low on the priority list of what Americans say are the most pressing.

Biden also frequently distorted his predecessor's record, for example, failing to mention that former President Donald Trump's critique of NATO countries centered on [*allies' failures to pay*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/12/nato-countries-defense-spending-gdp-trump/) their committed 2% share of gross domestic product on defense spending. Biden fixated on wealthy US families paying "their fair share" in taxes without holding foreign NATO countries accountable for their fair defense share. This is typical, tone-deaf, America-last rhetoric.

Biden boasted of unprecedented "job creation" under his administration, failing to note many of those jobs were [*simply restored*](https://budget.house.gov/press-release/fact-check-biden-misleads-on-job-creation-statistics) after Covid. He cynically pandered on student loans, touting his reduction in loans for Americans despite the [*judicial rebuke*](https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/student-loan-forgiveness-amount-biden-ab289d75) over his effort. Ironically, by doing so, Biden continues his [*push to subsidize*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/student-loan-forgiveness-is-regressive-whether-measured-by-income-education-or-wealth/) wealthier, educated people at the expense of poorer, less-credentialed ones. He also failed to take responsibility for the immigration crisis that's straining even [*Democratic-led major cities.*](https://www.newsweek.com/democrat-cities-are-struggling-cope-1856203#:~:text=The%20Democratic%20mayors%20of%20New,arrivals%20out%20of%20his%20state.)

Biden's speech should have been statesmanlike, transcending ideological lines. Instead, his unprecedented rhetoric sounded like a party boss clinging to power [*amid dismal approval ratings.*](https://www.cnn.com/polling/approval-rating-polls) Biden chose to swipe both at congressional Republicans in the room and at an invisible political rival, Trump. Americans deserve a president who offers us an agenda of hope, not political bickering.

Carrie Sheffield is a senior policy analyst at [*Independent Women's Voice.*](https://www.iwv.org/people/carrie-sheffield/)

Sophia A. Nelson: It's clear that Biden has in spades what Trump lacks

I met then-Sen. Joe Biden when I was a junior in college interning at the United States Senate in the summer of 1989. If you had told me back then that Biden would be president of the United States of America in 2024, I would have laughed at you.

After all, Biden had to drop out of the 1988 presidential race due to allegations of plagiarism before he suffered two life-threatening brain aneurysms. Thankfully he recovered.

Fast forward to today, Biden just gave a powerfully optimistic and honest assessment of where this nation stands, and I am inspired by him today the same way I was back then.

My big takeaway from the State of the Union: I too reject this era of "resentment, revenge, and retribution." I am interested in Biden's pragmatic policies. The truth is, I was one of millions who had long-standing student debt cancelled. The stock market is soaring, my retirement portfolio is sound. I am also interested in the man whose best attributes include his commitment to democracy, along with his love of kindness and human connection. That is the character America deserves from the president.

Listening to the State of the Union, I looked for cues of some loss of vitality or sharpness, as I suspect we all did. The President's age - he is 81 - has become a huge issue in this campaign. But in my opinion, his age is an asset. We need calm - not chaos. We need the wise. Not the wild. We need the older statesman to calm the waters and build the bridges our tumultuous times demand.

Biden has in spades what former President Donald Trump lacks: the steadiness of having lived a life of service amid great success and great loss.

Listening to Biden's address tonight, I believe the state of our union is strong, and will only get stronger in a second Biden-Harris term.

Sophia A. Nelson is a former House GOP Congressional Investigative Committee Counsel, DEI and corporate wellness trainer and author of four best-selling nonfiction books.

Daniel McCarthy: Biden's class-warfare shouts will give old-guard Republicans reasons to back Trump

President Joe Biden made a populist pitch during his State of the Union address - and he made it loud. Raising his voice to a sustained shout is Biden's way of strengthening his stage presence. Do voters find it firm and forceful, or do they feel like they're being yelled at by an old curmudgeon?

Biden lacks the easy-going charisma of a Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton, and this State of the Union, despite being full of the usual boasts and reassurances, wasn't an address to set Americans at ease. It was a call to class war, among other things.

The president reached back 40 years to the rusty old rhetorical weapon of Reagan's critics, "trickle-down economics." Democrats applied that term to Reagan's tax cuts, and Biden branded today's Republicans with it. But he's been around long enough that he should remember how the 1984 election turned out. Reaganomics routed its detractors at the ballot box.

Former President Donald Trump's Republicans haven't abandoned tax cuts, but they also court working-class voters with populist themes. Biden is acutely aware of the danger Democrats face if they forfeit voters without college degrees to the GOP. And with many progressives incensed at Biden over his policies toward Gaza, he needs to shore up his support on the left however he can. (Democratic Reps. Cori Bush and Rashida Tlaib held up signs that said, "Lasting ceasefire now" and, "Stop sending bombs" during Biden's address.)

So Biden not only emphasized jobs for voters without college degrees, he channeled the class-conflict spirit of Sen. Bernie Sanders, particularly with a proposal for a massive new 25% minimum tax on billionaires. But in doing this, he gave old-guard Republicans and the kind of high-income, college-educated voters who favored former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley in the GOP primaries an incentive to vote Republican in November. Trump couldn't have asked for a message better tailored to remind Reagan Republicans of why they aren't Democrats, and why, on their own terms, they can't vote for Biden on November 5.

Daniel McCarthy is the editor of Modern Age: A Conservative Review and a columnist for The Spectator World and Creators Syndicate.

Roxanne Jones: Biden finally sounds like he's ready to fight

President Joe Biden finally has my attention.

Thursday night, Biden sounded like he's ready to go toe to toe with former President Donald Trump and win in November.

Challenging, taunting and even mocking Trump at times without mentioning his name, Biden called out Republicans for way too much talk and very little action on key issues such as immigration reform and stronger border policies.

But it was his focus on pocketbook issues where Biden was most effective. The president spoke authentically to Americans about his solutions for the real problems we face closer to home - greedy landlords who charge exorbitant rents, the attacks on women's reproductive rights and Big Pharma's price gouging, to name a few.

"With a law I proposed and signed and not one Republican voted for we finally beat Big Pharma," Biden said. "Instead of paying $400 a month for insulin, seniors with diabetes only have to pay $35 a month. And now I want to cap the cost of insulin at $35 a month for every American who needs it."

The president got so deep into our daily lives that he vowed to crack down on deceptive pricing for one of my favorite snacks: potato chips. "Companies think you won't notice when they charge you just as much for the same size bag with fewer chips in it," he quipped.

The one area where Biden continues to struggle among many Democrats is when it comes to justifying to potential voters his administration's handling of the Israel-Hamas war, a conflict that has left more than 30,000 Palestinians dead after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel that killed at least 1,200.

But Thursday night, Biden talked about the need for a ceasefire and insisted that a two-state solution is the only way forward to achieve peace in the region. He also announced that the US military would establish a temporary pier on the Gaza coast in order to ship in humanitarian aid, food, medicine and shelters.

Smart move. And it may go a long way to alleviate the hesitation many voters feel about supporting Biden in November.

Roxanne Jones is CEO of the Push Marketing Group and talks ***politics***, sports and culture weekly on Philadelphia's WURD radio.

Jill Filipovic: The most telling part of Biden's speech

Joe Biden's third State of the Union speech was a banger and surely much will be written about how the president defied expectations, broke the stereotype of a worn-out older gentleman and spoke to the American people with vigor, determination and barbed humor.

But perhaps the most telling aspect of Biden's speech didn't come from Biden himself, but from the Republicans in the chamber: The same party that has been on a tear banning abortion and refusing to [*protect access to IVF*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/28/us/politics/senate-republicans-ivf-bill.html) and [*contraception*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/26/us/politics/republicans-birth-control-ivf.html) nationwide, all while touting the label of being "pro-life," could overwhelmingly not even bring themselves to clap for, let alone support, the many Biden policies and proposals that would offer basics like providing clean drinking water and teaching kids to read.

Many of the pro-child policies Biden touted should have seen bipartisan support. He mentioned the infrastructure bill, a bipartisan achievement that, he said, would remove "poisonous lead pipes so every child can drink clean water without risk of getting brain damage." He proposed expanding pre-K, because, he said, "Studies show that children who go to pre-school are nearly 50% more likely to finish high school and go on to earn a 2- or 4-year degree no matter their background." He said he wants every American child to learn to read by the third grade. He mentioned restoring the expanded child tax credit, which significantly reduced child poverty as part of the American Rescue Plan - a bill every Republican in Congress voted against.

[*Republicans*](https://washingtonpost.com/business/2021/11/30/biden-universal-prek-gop/) have [*opposed*](https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/dec/04/chris-larson/yes-gop-did-oppose-40-million-lead-pipe-replacemen/)[*many*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/11/18/what-house-republicans-want-do-public-education-funding/) of these efforts. When Biden raised them during the State of the Union, most of the GOP members in the chamber stayed seated, refusing to applaud. They were perhaps taking a cue from Speaker Mike Johnson, who seemed to shrink lower and lower into his seat as the speech went on, rolling his eyes like a rude, petulant child at regular intervals.

There is so much on which Republicans and Democrats have deep, genuine philosophical and political disagreements. But lead-free pipes and kids who can read should not be among them. Children should not be the victims of hyper-partisanship. Far too many self-identified "pro-life" Republicans, though, have proven themselves willing to sacrifice children's health, education and wellbeing in the service of opposing Biden's agenda - a cynical and rotten strategy if there ever was one.

Jill Filipovic is a journalist based in New York and author of the book "OK Boomer, Let's Talk: How My Generation Got Left Behind." Follow her on Twitter.

David A. Andelman: Biden's foreign policy points were just what the world needed to hear

President Joe Biden said out loud what is on the minds of much of the world - that America will stand up to threats to democracy. Launching from the top into just how he would deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Biden began by warning, "If anybody in this room thinks Putin will stop at Ukraine, I assure you, he will not." And unlike his predecessor, he would "not bow down."

All it will take is funding - which is currently being held up by congressional Republicans, which few European leaders can understand. What they can understand and will certainly applaud, though, is Biden's unrestrained commitment to NATO - "the strongest military alliance the world has ever known."

On Gaza, it was critical to see how far Biden is prepared to go in terms of a break with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the country's goals to pursue Hamas at any cost. Biden reiterated the administration's demands "to establish an immediate ceasefire," which he said would get the hostages home. And he announced a plan to establish an American offshore pier to deliver food and humanitarian assistance to Gaza - a stopgap that will help stave off famine and an example of how America can use its military power for humanitarian purposes.

In the end, there were pledges to stand up to China - economically and militarily, and Iran as well. Biden demonstrated a powerful determination to maintain America's role as a guarantor of democracy.

David A. Andelman is a former New York Times and CBS News correspondent in Europe and Asia, who writes SubStack's Andelman Unleashed. His latest book is "A Red Line in the Sand."

Paul Sracic: It's unlikely Biden will win back White working-class voters

President Joe Biden could easily reuse tonight's State of the Union address and change very little when he accepts his party's nomination in Chicago this August, where the chant "four more years" would feel less out of place.

It's appropriate, therefore, to look at tonight's address as a campaign speech. So, did it accomplish what campaign speeches are supposed to accomplish? Will it help Biden win re-election in November? Perhaps, but what was more interesting to me was how the speech symbolized the changing nature of the Democratic Party.

The Democratic establishment rallied around Biden in 2020 in part because they hoped that his roots in Scranton, Pennsylvania, would allow him to bring White, working-class voters back into the Democratic coalition. Yet, according to CNN exit polling in 2020, [*Biden lost White voters*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results) without college degrees to former President Donald Trump by 35 points. This was only slightly better than the jaw-dropping 37-point deficit [*Hillary Clinton suffered*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls) among those same voters four years earlier.

There were sections of tonight's speech that were clearly aimed at trying to reclaim this vote. Biden mentioned, for example, how he worked with the United Auto Workers to save an auto plant and add an EV battery plant in Belvidere, Illinois. And he stressed the "buy America" requirements in his signature infrastructure bill.

Missing, however, was any acknowledgement of why these voters might have turned against Democrats in the first place. For example, Biden might have empathized with workers whose jobs are under threat due to the transition away from fossil fuel, or admitted that gas prices and high interest rates are still making life difficult for many Americans. While the aggressive attacks on "his predecessor" and a focus on issues such as climate change were red meat for the more progressive base of Biden's Democratic party, it's hard to see how it will win back the support of those who voted for Trump four years ago.

At the end of his speech, Biden reminded voters that he "grew up among working people" in Scranton. Curiously enough, he also mentioned his childhood in Claymont, Delaware. In context, he meant "working people" in both states, but earlier in the speech, when he ad-libbed a reference to Delaware, he did so to reassure America that he was not against business.

Insofar as the Democratic Party has managed to balance a loss of White, working-class voters with growing support among more educated, wealthier voters, perhaps one takeaway from this speech was that the 2024 campaign was going to feature more of "Joe from Delaware," and less "Joe from Scranton."

Paul Sracic is a professor of ***politics*** and international relations at Youngstown State University in Ohio. He is also an adjunct fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC.

Raul A. Reyes: A misstep on 'illegals,' but not a fatal one

In a State of the Union address that was strong on both substance and style, President Joe Biden forcefully presented his administration's accomplishments while rolling out his vision for the future. Biden was fired up, optimistic and at times mocking in his assessment of a man he referred to only as "my predecessor."

On immigration, the president was smart to highlight the fact that his opponent was largely responsible for the failure of [*a bipartisan*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/politics/biden-border-bill/index.html) Senate border plan. He pointed out that even the Border Patrol union endorsed this bill.

As he noted, this proposal would have included many provisions that Republicans have said they want, including a mechanism that [*would have given*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/politics/border-security-bill-senate-explained-cec/index.html) Biden temporary authority to close the border. "If my predecessor is watching," Biden declared, "instead of playing ***politics*** and pressuring members of Congress to block this bill, join me in telling Congress to pass it."

Biden stumbled in response to Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene's [*heckling about Laken Riley*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/01/us/laken-riley-funeral-cec/index.html), the nursing student in Georgia allegedly killed by an undocumented migrant, referring to the suspect as an "illegal." Progressives and Latinos watching no doubt winced at the term, which is pejorative no matter who is using it. Only an immigration judge has the right to decide whether a person is in the country legally, and many Latinos object to this term because it strips people of their humanity, instead reducing them to assumptions about their immigration status. But Biden said it off the cuff and it doesn't bespeak any broader hostility to immigrants.

Consider that [*Trump has said*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/12/18/lead-trump-immigration-language.cnn) that immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our country." Biden called him out specifically for these words, stating, "I will not demonize immigrants saying they 'poison the blood of our country.'" The president seemed eager to engage on immigration, likely his greatest political liability. "We can fight about the border," he said, "or we can fix it. I'm ready to fix it."

The president needs more of such proactive messaging on immigration, especially since Americans now rank it [*as their top issue*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/611135/immigration-surges-top-important-problem-list.aspx#:~:text=The%2028%25%20currently%20naming%20immigration,on%20an%20immigration%20reform%20proposal.). The public cannot hear enough that Biden made a good-faith effort to address a serious problem only to have Republicans tank it anyway.

It might surprise people to know that, [*according to the Pew Research Center,*](https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2024/03/04/latinos-views-on-the-migrant-situation-at-the-us-mexico-border/) Latinos do not rank immigration as their top issue. Like other Americans, Latinos care about the economy, education and jobs. On these and a host of other issues on Thursday night, the president delivered, coming across as comfortable, at ease and raring to fight for a second shot at the White House.

Raul A. Reyes is an attorney and a member of the USA Today board of contributors.

Mark Zandi: On the economy, Biden got (almost) everything right

When it comes to the economy, President Joe Biden in his State of the Union address got it right (mostly). The president was correct when he said the economy is strong. The nation's [*unemployment rate*](https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/UNRATE) has been below 4% for two years and counting, something that hasn't happened in over half a century.

Not only did the economy avoid a recession that was feared by many, it is posting [*gross domestic product*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/26/economy/us-gdp-other-countries/index.html) gains that are bigger than most other developed economies.

Biden got it right when he said that not all Americans are enjoying the strong economy equally. [*Higher food prices*](https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CPIUFDNS) and [*housing rents*](https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CUUR0000SAS2RS/) have been especially hard on lower-income households. And higher [*mortgage rates*](https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MORTGAGE30US) combined with surging [*home prices*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/27/economy/us-home-prices-december/index.html#:~:text=US%20home%20prices%20hit%20an,consecutive%20record%20highs%20in%202023.) have made it all but impossible for younger households to afford a mortgage payment and become a homeowner.

To address this, Biden was right to focus on ensuring businesses are transparent in their pricing and the fees they charge, markets are competitive and builders have tax incentives to build and renovate more homes.

The president is also correct that the nation must face up to the federal government's large [*budget deficits*](https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/FYFSD) and mounting debt load. If we don't, we will soon be paying more on the interest on the debt than on the nation's [*defense*](https://finance.yahoo.com/news/u-set-pay-more-interest-204019352.html), and ultimately our economy will be diminished.

Getting the deficit under control will require both more taxes and government spending restraint. The most efficient way to raise tax revenue is to partially roll back the tax cuts large corporations and wealthy households received a few years ago.

What did the president get wrong? Getting any of what he wants done will require Republican support, and judging from the mood in the Capitol Thursday evening, that feels a long way off.

Mark Zandi is chief economist of Moody's Analytics.

Ana Marie Cox: Biden's full-throated defense of abortion rights is an important reminder for voters

Reproductive rights are so central to President Joe Biden's re-election campaign that he quickly turned to them during his State of the Union address Thursday night. A full-throated defense of reproductive freedom allowed Biden to remind viewers that it's Democrats who champion this access and that it is his opponent in November who set the stage for abortion rights to be sieged.

Reproductive care access is so [*broadly popular*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx) that Biden could even troll Republicans, inviting them to vote to protect IVF access nationwide. While some GOP politicians [*have made noises*](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/house-gop-navigates-ivf-backlash-offering-symbolic-measures-rcna141423) about signing onto such legislation, any serious attempt to protect IVF would have to be squared with the conservative proposition that life begins with conception.

Biden's exhortations around abortion access wound around one idea: Republicans, including those on the Supreme Court, have overstepped. To the justices seated before him, he cited the Dobbs v. Jackson majority decision's statement that "women are not without electoral and political power," and Biden told them, "...and you're about to realize how much they have." He then followed by saying, "No kidding," and warned that Republicans "have no clue about the power of women."

The warning isn't wrong, but it betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the connection between reproductive care and political power. Opponents of abortion access know exactly how much power women have - which is why they want to take abortion access away.

The end of Roe v. Wade and the Alabama decision shutting down IVF have created situations of unimaginable emotional anguish and, especially in the case of those who cannot access abortion, real physical harm. Now, Biden's political life depends on his ability to channel the outrage that so many of us feel about this grim state of affairs - maybe next time he can summon a rhetorical framing that acknowledges Republicans did not overstep their bounds; they made a targeted attack.

Ana Marie Cox is a political journalist and writer in Austin.

Peter Bergen: Biden passed the commander in chief test

Not since President George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union months after the 9/11 attacks has the commander in chief had so much at stake about national security issues while delivering the Super Bowl of political speeches.

The Russians are waging the largest land war in Europe since World War II, yet the US Congress' support for the Ukrainians seems to be wavering; the war in Gaza rages on with little immediate prospect of a ceasefire in sight, and the conflict is destabilizing the Middle East more than any event since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Israel's conduct of the Gaza war is also alienating a swath of President Joe Biden's base. Meanwhile, at the border, a record number of immigrants are arriving, which is now the [*top issue for voters*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/611135/immigration-surges-top-important-problem-list.aspx#:~:text=The%20latest%20results%20are%20based,crossings%20by%20Central%20American%20migrants) in the 2024 presidential election, according to Gallup.

In his State of the Union speech, Biden had to answer the mail on all of these. So, how'd he do?

Biden gave a very clear defense of his Ukraine policy, that the US should provide the aid and weapons to the Ukrainians to counter Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion and he called out former President Donald Trump - without mentioning him by name - who has opposed sending tens of billions of dollars of additional aid to Ukraine.

Biden also weighed in on the crisis at the southern border noting that there was a bipartisan deal on the table in recent weeks in the US Senate that would have sped up rulings on asylum claims, beefed up law enforcement resources at the border and would have discouraged some migrants from coming to the country. Biden swiped at Trump for dissuading members of Congress from passing the deal to keep the political issue alive for him to use in the 2024 campaign.

And Biden made his clearest public stance so far on [*behalf of Gazans*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/03/07/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-prepared-for-delivery-2/), saying "More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed. Most of who are not Hamas. Thousands and thousands are innocent women and children."

All in all, Biden gave a strong performative speech, and on the crucial national security issues he needed to address - Ukraine, Gaza and the border - he did a more than creditable job.

Peter Bergen is CNN's national security analyst, a vice president at New America and a professor of practice at Arizona State University.

Opinion by CNN contributors

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