

Voters Wonder
What’s Too Old
For a President

Age Issue Hurts Biden,
but How Much?

By NATE COHN
When a reporter asked President Biden on Thursday night about concerns about his age, his first instinct was to reject the premise. He replied in part: “That is your judgment. That is not the judgment of the press.”

The question was about the public’s concern, not the press, but either way the concerns over his age were not just those of one reporter.

A clear majority of Americans harbor serious doubts about it, polls show. To take just one example: In Times/Siena polling last fall, more than 70 percent of battleground state voters agreed with the statement that Mr. Biden’s “just too old to be an effective president.” More than 60 percent said they didn’t think Mr. Biden had “the mental sharpness to be an effective president.” And fair or not, fewer than half of voters express similar doubts about Donald J. Trump’s age or mental acuity.

Of all the reasons Mr. Biden has narrowly trailed Mr. Trump in the polls for five straight months, this is arguably the single most straightforward explanation. It’s what voters are telling pollsters, whether in open-ended questioning about Mr. Biden or when specifically asked about his age, and they say it in overwhelming numbers. In Times/Siena polling, even a majority of Mr. Biden’s own supporters say he’s too old to be an effective president. His political problems might just be that simple.

Now, just because it’s easy to blame Mr. Biden’s age for his political woes doesn’t make it so. There’s no doubt that voters have concerns, but it’s very hard to figure out how much support it’s costing Mr. Biden in the polls. We can’t know, for instance, what his approval rating would be if he were 10 or 20 years younger. Maybe it would be nearly as low, because of the border, the Middle East, earlier inflation, lingering resentments and anxieties after the pandemic — alongside the corroding effects of partisan polarization.

Why can’t we know? The age issue is not like the economy, in
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RESPONSE The White House and some Democrats questioned the special counsel’s report. PAGE A12



SIMBARASHE CHA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Making Strides

Models wearing outfits from Helmut Lang during Fashion Week in New York City on Friday.

Allegations of Volatile History Pile Up for Majors

By MELENA RYZIK

Since the actor Jonathan Majors was found guilty in December of assaulting and harassing a girlfriend, he has maintained his innocence and his hope of reviving a once-skyrocketing career that disintegrated in the wake of his conviction. In a televised interview last month, he said that he had “never struck a woman.”

But in pretrial statements to the prosecution in that assault case and, separately, in interviews with The New York Times, another former girlfriend, Emma Duncan, accused him of emotionally and physically abusing her — choking her, throwing her around and bruising her. A third, Maura Hooper, also said that he had emo-

Former Girlfriends and
Colleagues Say Actor
Has Been Abusive

tionally abused her.

Speaking publicly for the first time, Ms. Duncan and Ms. Hooper, actresses who dated Mr. Majors before he shot to fame as the supervillain Kang in Marvel projects, described him as a controlling, threatening figure who isolated them from friends and career pursuits. “You lose your sense of worth,” Ms. Duncan said.

And in interviews with former colleagues, The Times found that Mr. Majors had a history of volat-

ity on the set of the HBO series “Lovecraft Country” that included confrontations with female co-workers that led them to complain to the network.

On Thursday afternoon, a lawyer for Mr. Majors, Priya Chaudhry, said that Mr. Majors had not physically abused Ms. Duncan. She described the relationships with both women as “toxic” and said that Mr. Majors was taking responsibility for his role in them. She added that “countless” women in the entertainment industry “can attest to his professionalism.”

This article is based on interviews with 20 people, including some who requested anonymity for fear of career repercussions,
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U.S. Faltered
With Israelis,
An Aide Says

‘Inadequate’ Emphasis
on Palestinian Lives

By REID J. EPSTEIN
and ERICA L. GREEN

WASHINGTON — In a closed-door meeting with Arab American leaders in Michigan this week, one of President Biden’s top foreign policy aides acknowledged mistakes in the administration’s response to the war in Gaza, saying he did not have “any confidence” that Israel’s government was willing to take “meaningful steps” toward Palestinian statehood.

The remarks came after months of public and private admonitions from the Biden administration for Israel to take a more surgical approach in a conflict that has killed more than 27,000 Palestinians, according to health authorities in Gaza. On Thursday, Mr. Biden himself declared that Israel had gone “over the top” in its response to the Hamas attack on Oct. 7.

The Biden aide, Jon Finer, a deputy national security adviser, offered some of the administration’s clearest expressions of regret for what he called “missteps” it had made from the beginning of the violence, and he pledged that it would do better.

During the meeting Thursday in Dearborn, Mich., Mr. Finer said, “We are very well aware that we have missteps in the course of responding to this crisis since Oct. 7,” according to a recording of the gathering obtained by The New York Times. A National Security Council official confirmed the recording was authentic.

Mr. Finer added: “We have left a very damaging impression based on what has been a wholly inadequate public accounting for how much the president, the administration and the country values the lives of Palestinians. And that began, frankly, pretty early in the conflict.”

The war in Gaza has become part of a cascade of political problems for Mr. Biden, who has remained publicly supportive of Israel and resisted demands within the Democratic Party to call for a cease-fire. His position since Hamas killed about 1,200 people in Israel on Oct. 7, along with his remarks casting doubt on the death toll from Israeli airstrikes and calling the loss of life “a price of waging war,” has angered young people, Black voters and progressives who are more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

Mr. Biden himself has acknowl-
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NETANYAHU TELLS
MILITARY TO PLAN
CLEARING OF CITY

OVER A MILLION GAZANS

Order Comes as Biden
Sharpens Criticism of
Israeli Tactics

This article is by Aaron Boxerman, Iyad Abuheweila, Hiba Yazbek and Michael Levenson.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered the Israeli military to draw up plans to evacuate Rafah, a Gazan city packed with more than a million people, in advance of an expected ground offensive that has set off international alarm.

In a statement announcing the orders on Friday, Mr. Netanyahu’s office did not give any details of when the evacuations might be carried out, when the Israeli military might enter the city or where people might go. Many civilians in Rafah are sheltering in rickety tents made of plastic and wood and say there is nowhere left in Gaza to avoid Israeli shelling.

Mr. Netanyahu’s office said it would be impossible to realize Israel’s goal of smashing Hamas’s rule in Gaza without destroying what it said were the group’s four battalions in Rafah, on Egypt’s border. The military’s “combined plan” would have to both “evacuate the civilian population and topple the battalions,” the statement said.

“Any forceful action in Rafah would require the evacuation of the civilian population from combat zones,” it said.

Mr. Netanyahu’s office announced the orders less than a day after President Biden issued some of his sharpest criticism of Israel’s conduct in the war, calling it “over the top” and saying the starvation, suffering and killing of civilians had “got to stop.” His criticism, which dominated Israeli news headlines, revealed growing frustration with Mr. Netanyahu as the death toll in Gaza has risen above 27,000, according to the territory’s health officials.

After Mr. Netanyahu said this week that he had ordered troops to prepare to enter Rafah, aid agencies, the United Nations and U.S. officials said the prospect of an incursion there was particularly alarming.

About 1.4 million Palestinians are sheltering in Rafah after the Israeli military invaded Gaza and ordered people to evacuate north-
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SEIJI OZAWA, 1935-2024
A Captivating Conductor Who Helped Transform Classical Music

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

Seiji Ozawa, the high-spirited Japanese conductor who took the Western classical music world by storm in the 1960s and ’70s and then led the Boston Symphony Orchestra for almost 30 years, died on Tuesday at his home in Tokyo. He was 88.

The cause was heart failure, according to an announcement released on Friday by Veroza, his management office.

Mr. Ozawa had experienced years of health problems beginning in early 2010, when he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He never fully rebounded from cancer surgery or from back problems that were made worse during his recovery, and he was hospitalized with heart valve disease later in life.

Mr. Ozawa was the most prominent harbinger of a movement that has transformed the classical music world over the last half-century: a tremendous influx of East



CHANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Seiji Ozawa conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1997.

Asian musicians into the West, which has in turn helped spread the gospel of Western classical music to Korea, Japan and China.

For much of that time, a widespread prejudice even among knowledgeable critics held that although highly trained Asian musicians could develop consummate technical facility in Western music, they could never achieve a real understanding of its interpretive needs or a deep feeling for its emotional content. The irrepressible Mr. Ozawa surmounted this by dint of his outsize personality, thoroughgoing musicianship and sheer hard work.

With his mop of black hair, his boyish demeanor and his seemingly boundless energy, he captured the popular imagination early on.

He found himself near the top of the American orchestral world in 1973, when he was named music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He scored many successes over the years, proving es-

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Billions in Claims for Catheters
Suggest Medicare Billing Scam

By SARAH KLIFF
and KATIE THOMAS

Linda Hennis was checking her Medicare statement in January when she noticed something strange: It said a company she had never heard of had been paid about \$12,000 for sending her 2,000 urinary catheters.

But she had never needed, or received, any catheters.

Ms. Hennis, a retired nurse who lives in a suburb of Chicago, noticed that the company selling the plastic tubes was called Pretty in Pink Boutique, and it was based in Texas. “There’s a mistake here,” Ms. Hennis recalled thinking.

She is among more than 450,000 Medicare beneficiaries whose accounts were billed for urinary catheters in 2023, up from about 50,000 in previous years, according to a new report produced by the National Association of Accountable Care Organizations, an advocacy group that represents hundreds of health care systems across the country. The report



JAMIE KELTER DAVIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
Linda Hennis was billed for catheters she didn’t receive.

used a federal database of Medicare claims that is available to researchers.

The massive uptick in billing for catheters included \$2 billion charged by seven high-volume suppliers, according to that analysis, potentially accounting for nearly one-fifth of all Medicare spending on medical supplies in 2023. Doctors, state insurance de-
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New Commander in Ukraine

As Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky begins, he must weigh defending ground with inflicting pain on the enemy. PAGE A8

The Friar Who Deals With A.I.

Paolo Benanti advises the church and the Italian government on the moral issues. The Saturday Profile. PAGE A5



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Uneven Pandemic Recovery

New research shows that many students have made a “surprising” academic rebound after school closures, but those in poorer districts continue to lag. PAGE A14

Prosecutors Cite Intimidation

A move to shield the identities of several witnesses in the Trump classified documents case suggests mounting frustration with the presiding judge. PAGE A16

G.O.P. Flirts With Vote System

Most on the right have opposed ranked-choice voting, which could be on the ballot in four states. But some say the party is starting to embrace it. PAGE A11

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India’s Push to Make iPhones

The companies that make smartphones are bringing their factories to one corner of the country, to graft them onto a network of manufacturers. PAGE B1

Carlson Regains the Bullhorn

The ex-Fox News host’s interview with Vladimir V. Putin put him back on center stage in American politics. PAGE B1

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Bartenders in Singapore are making cocktails with unexpected, and ecologically conscious, ingredients. PAGE C7

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New York and New Jersey won a bid for the 2026 World Cup soccer final. Now comes the hard part. PAGE B10

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Kansas City quarterback Patrick Mahomes can’t escape comparisons to Tom Brady, who won seven titles. PAGE B7



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How Apple’s “1984” spot helped make the Super Bowl TV’s biggest showcase for commercials. PAGE C4

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Peter Coy

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