

Can Basement-bound Biden Ride His Trump-Fueled Sugar High?

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With consistent and increasing leads in poll after poll, the temptation to keep Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden safely tucked away in the comfort and security of his basement may become too powerful to resist.

Like the rest of the nation, Biden and his campaign advisers watch as President Trump continues to blunder, bluster and lurch from one public relations disaster to another.

From hinting the presidential election should be postponed to arguing daily with the nation's top infectious disease expert over the response to COVID-19, Trump has reinforced the perception that he's untethered from reality and rational thought.

The Biden family basement must be the scene of joyful whoops and jubilant high fiving as they watch Trump toss himself off a higher cliff each week.

Biden commands a double-digit lead in some polls, a narrower margin in several others and the smart money is flowing in his direction.

Whether he can ride this political sugar high for the next three months is not at all clear. Trump has shown no indication he'll abandon his wildly undisciplined approach to governing or campaigning, but will his unruly, erratic behavior continue to benefit Biden if the former vice president remains sequestered in his basement while his staff periodically cranks out statements and position papers, an inadequate substitute for enthusiasm-building stump speeches to a raucous rally of supporters.

Ceding the playing field to Trump in the expectation he'll continue to fumble the ball and heave interceptions is a risky strategy reminiscent of the Hillary Clinton campaign four years ago.

The coronavirus pandemic has not only dramatically altered virtually every facet of American life but has provided cover for Biden to stay close to home, straying out occasionally for carefully orchestrated appearances and minimal media contact.

Some Democratic Party leaders have expressed concerns over a strategy they fear is not sustainable, that voters will grow weary of a candidate for president who has refused to mingle to the extent it is safe with the public.

Moreover, the media which has been generally sympathetic to Biden — largely out of animosity to Trump — will grow restive over the lack of access to him and it's likely demands will increase and grow louder for news conferences and sit down contemporaneous interviews.

The three presidential debates — Sept. 29 and Oct. 15 and 22 — will change the dynamic.

Biden and Trump will stand side by side (presumably at least six feet apart), take questions from moderators and participants and pressed to respond directly to all manner of criticisms and allegations as well as offer a visionary path forward for the country.

While candidates enter debates well-prepped and supplied with months' worth of talking points, the confrontations are also a test of their ability to think quickly on their feet, ad lib, deliver stinging one liners, and provide cogent, incisive rationales for becoming the leader of the Free World.

Biden's history suggests he has yet to master that environment. His debate performances in the string of party primaries was uneven, marked by faltering and often disconnected responses.

He will attract outsized and perhaps unfair scrutiny from the media, eager to seize on any misstep, non-sequitur and rhetorical rambling as evidence that his campaign has as a matter of deliberate strategy kept him shielded from public view.

There is trepidation and foreboding among some party leaders who recall Biden's often wobbly journey through a verbal minefield and are mindful that in the relentless glare of a presidential debate each slip up will be magnified and resonate endlessly through the media echo chamber.

At the same time, however, it is an opportunity to put to rest the 77-year-old-man-in-decline perception and demonstrate to the country that he's prepared physically and mentally to shoulder the burdens of the office and face up to its challenges.

Trump on the other hand will bring his A game; that is, he'll be the bull charging through the china shop, tossing off unsubstantiated allegations, promoting bizarre conspiracy theories, re-writing his and the nation's history, attacking the media and dabbling in outright falsehoods.

In other words, for Trump the debates will be just another day at the office.

Biden hasn't been helped by his relative silence on protests that turn violent, the soaring murder rate in many American cities or the video coverage of demonstrators tossing Bibles into a bonfire in Portland, Ore.

The incessant coverage of his being tugged further to the left toward policies opposed by a majority of Americans has portrayed a party unable to mend its ideological fractures.

If the party's left wing faction decides to make a stand by fighting to include its demands in the platform, the Biden team will need all its negotiating skills to head off days of media coverage speculating if the internal divisions will lead to disgruntled progressives taking a powder on election day.

For the President, his handling of the worst public health crisis in a century has dragged his approval ratings into dangerous territory and is clearly a factor in Biden's surge, particularly in the swing states Trump needs to win.

His attempts to explain away that the increase in virus infections is the result of greater testing — fewer tests will lead to fewer infections — is an absurd argument. It's like pointing out that if only people would stop dying, the death rate would decline.

He will continue to portray himself as the law and order President, cracking down on looting, arson, destruction of public buildings and monuments and attacks on law enforcement which, he argues, is an existential threat to the safety and security of all Americans.

He will continue to claim that Biden has been captured by the radical left and is willing to tolerate lawlessness.

The pandemic, though, will continue to be the dominant issue in the country outweighing all others and Trump's leadership or lack of it will most certainly be a major topic in the debates.

A cynic once observed that the media covers presidential debates in the same manner it covers the Indianapolis 500 — not to see who wins, but to see who crashes into the wall.

There is truth to that as either Biden or Trump will soon discover.

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