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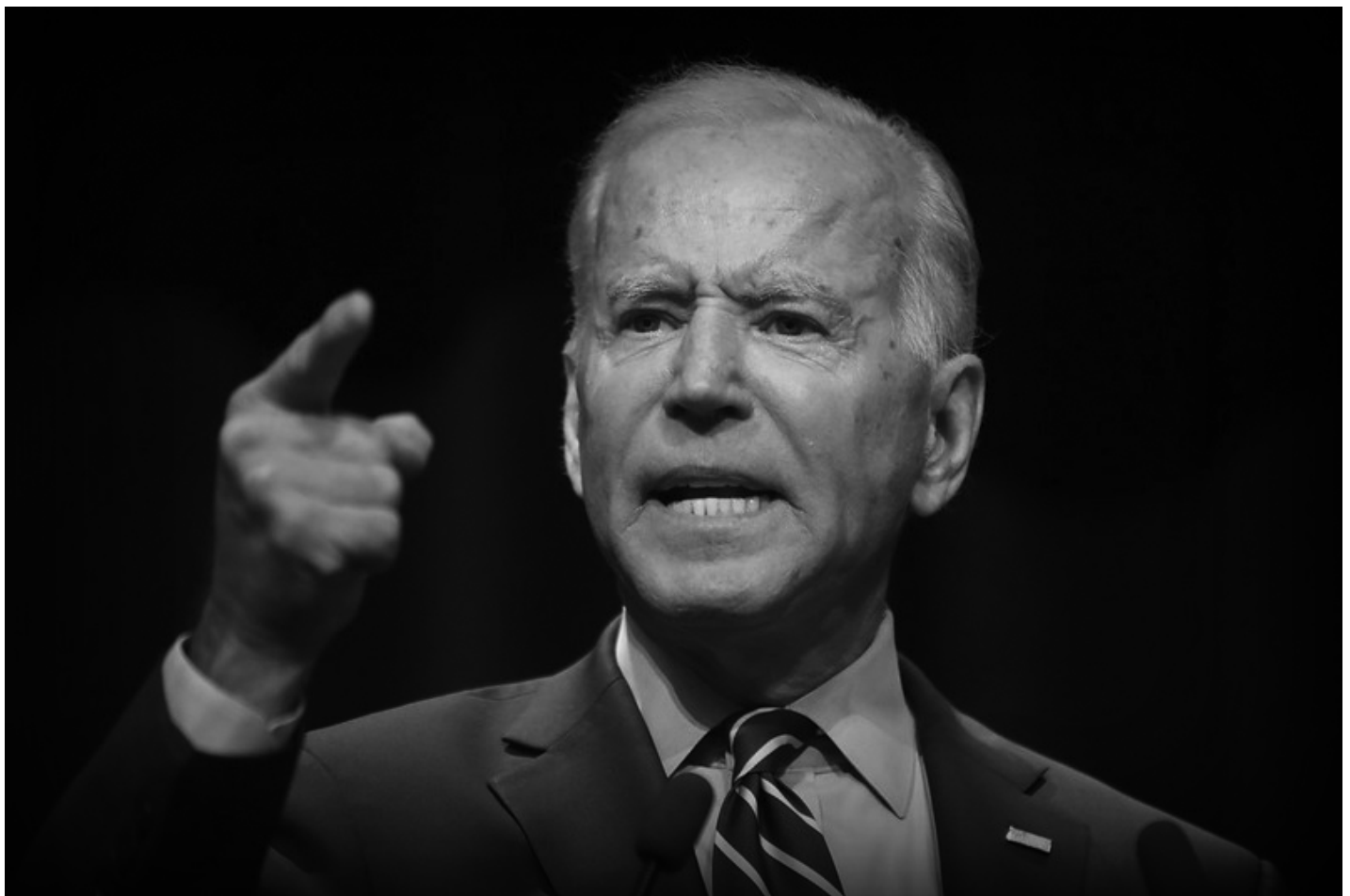
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NEWS

The Trial Balloon Probably Lose, so I won't Participate

By Carl Gordon | August 17, 2020, 12:50 pm | in News (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/news/>)



If the trial balloon floated by the Biden campaign gains altitude and the Democratic nominee withdraws from participation in the three scheduled presidential debates, it will surely go down as one of the most egregious blunders in presidential election history.

For someone who for months has fought off rumors and speculation about his declining mental nimbleness, Biden's withdrawal from the debates would confirm for many the validity of the rumors and accuracy of the speculation.

Remaining sequestered in his basement is central to his campaign strategy, a belief that he benefits greatly from President Trump's erratic and undisciplined behavior while remaining out of the media spotlight and studiously avoiding interviews and public appearances.

His campaign team lies awake at night beset by worry and trepidation over the danger posed by a face-to-face freewheeling debate with Trump.

Biden's uneven debate history is well known. He is prone to misstatements, rambling responses which often lead up a rhetorical blind alley and embellishing his personal role in a variety of incidents. At times, he appears befuddled and incapable of maintaining a cogent train of thought.

His ability to ad lib — a debate essential — is non-existent and when attacked as he was during the Democratic Party primary season, his responses often verge on the unintelligible.

In his most recent interview, he grew agitated over a question and angrily implied that the questioner was addicted to cocaine.

His staff has repeatedly been forced to scramble to clarify, explain and walk back his comments. For them, damage control has become a fact of life.

Using friendly media to raise the possibility of ditching the debates was a calculated move by the campaign to assess the public reaction and, if necessary, develop a plausible cover story to rationalize a withdrawal.

One CNN columnist argued that since Biden had nothing to gain and everything to lose in a debate with Trump, there was no legitimate reason to engage the President.

Translation: I'll probably lose, so I won't participate.

The New York Times took up the cause as well. One columnist characterized presidential debates as having outlived their usefulness and were no longer relevant while still another offered the astoundingly absurd suggestion that Biden refuse to debate unless Trump released his income tax returns.

In a whistling past the graveyard response, Biden's campaign quickly reiterated their candidate's eagerness to debate.

The obvious cover story for skipping the debates would be concern for personal safety in the face of an unprecedented public health crisis — the same rationale Biden is currently utilizing to remain in his basement.

However, with major league baseball, professional basketball and hockey having resumed their seasons — albeit abbreviated ones — voters would react skeptically to an argument that Trump and Biden standing more than six feet apart for 90 minutes in an empty auditorium poses a threat to either one.

Presidential debates have become a vital element of quadrennial campaigning. For the overwhelming number of voters, taking the measure of presidential candidates responding to media questions and making their case for leading the country is as close as they'll ever come to personal contact.

Refusing to participate because of a deep fear of embarrassing oneself or appearing unprepared to take on the burdens of the presidency is not an acceptable explanation.

Despite his seclusion, Biden has built and maintained a lead in numerous national and swing state polling. However, believing that public distaste for Trump is so deep it will negate significant adverse reaction to rejecting 60 years of presidential debate tradition is foolishly short-sighted.

To be sure, Trump is in his element in a one on one debate setting. He enjoys nothing more than standing in the center of the ring throwing haymaker after haymaker hoping one will land with devastating consequences.

He is the verbal equivalent of a Gatling gun, indiscriminately spraying accusations, bizarre conspiracy theories, fanciful predictions with no factual basis, self-aggrandizing commentary, and revisionist historical references.

Unconcerned with the veracity of his assertions, Trump is the embodiment of the ancient Greek prophecy: "In war, truth is the first casualty." For Trump, the debate is war.

Biden, though, must demonstrate that he too is willing to mix it up, to stand tall, challenge Trump and demolish once and for all the man-in-decline narrative.

As in any debate, the candidates are well-prepped, armed with carefully researched talking points and a script of hopefully memorable one-liner retorts to capture the ensuing media/political establishment analyses.

There is a risk of over-preparing, stuffing a candidates' head so full of data, facts and figures that replies turn into a hodgepodge of disconnected and confusing thoughts.

Biden must be ready to rebut the onslaught of Trumpian assaults, of accusations that he's been dragged to the left fringe of his party and out of the mainstream and that by failing to speak out forcefully to condemn violent street protests and soaring homicide and crime rates in many large cities, he's thrown in with the defund the police movement.

Biden has in his grasp an opportunity to show the nation that he possesses the strength in mind and body to lead the country out of the economic trough into which it has been driven and to restore social harmony to a country in turmoil. A strong performance will go far, indeed, to erase the image of a man comfortably cloistered in his basement removed from the demands and burdens of seeking the nation's highest office.

He'll have the chance to do so on Sept. 29 and Oct. 15 and 22.

No matter his staff's misgivings or their nervousness about the potential for a major misstep that will live forever in a political blooper highlight reel, Biden's participation in the debates is an imperative.

Failure to do so will add a third question to the nation's political lore:

*Should Nixon have burned the Watergate tapes?

*Did Bill Clinton have sex with a White House intern?

*Should Biden debate Trump?

Yes, yes and yes.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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