

JOE BIDEN: THREE WEEKS AND FOUR MONTHS

I didn't watch the full debate, yet, though I've seen a few clips. In the clips I've seen, Biden responded to Trump's false claims by simply observing he lied, rather than explaining why and how he does.

I may not watch much more – it's clear no pundit thinks Biden did well, and his performance overshadowed Trump's own terrible performance. That may not be how all viewers see it: in the Univision focus group, for example, undecided voters said that Biden, though he spoke slowly, appeared presidential. But pundits are going to drown out what actual voters think and focus on what they think.

I don't know whether this will affect the race. I don't know whether Biden will heed calls to drop out. Biden is doing great at a rally in North Carolina, but both Hakeem Jeffries and Nancy Pelosi have made comments that make it clear serious discussions are going on. I keep coming back to this: Biden flubbed the abortion answer last night. That's the minimum necessary required for any Democrat this year, as every Democrat in the House knows well.

I wanted to lay out two thoughts that may be a useful way of discussing the issue: about three weeks and four months.

When Biden was asked whether he would drop out earlier in the year, he responded by saying he believed he had the best shot of beating Trump. He also responded that his age was not hindering his ability to do the job. Even given his low poll numbers, those claims were nevertheless true, in part because everyone's poll numbers suck and he has had surprising success, as measured against recent Presidents, in his presidency.

But at that point – in the weeks leading up to the State of the Union, for example – he was largely doing one job, that of President.

In the past three weeks, during a period that (Republicans have gloated) he was largely holed up at Camp David, Biden has been engaged with four really stressful efforts:

- At the G7 he had to play leader of the liberal world at a time when US power (and democracy generally) is waning, in large part because Americans are abandoning it, for good and ill
- He had to be President at a time when state and Congressional Republicans and SCOTUS MAGAts have pursued US failure rather than permitting any Biden success
- He did a lot more retail campaigning than he had been doing, adding not just to his physical stress, but exposing him to a far greater soup of germs than he normally is
- His kid was convicted in a trial that not only laid bare what a cost Joe's political career has been on his family, but that would, without question, never have happened if his son were not the son of President Joe

Biden

I raise this not to offer excuses. Biden had the stamina to fulfill what the Presidency required of him leading up to the SOTU. But the last three weeks have added a number of additional stresses. I would be unsurprised if, in ten days or ten years, we learned the cold offered as an excuse last night by some Biden supporters was revealed to be something more.

Still, such a haystack of stresses *is* the job of being US president. The extremism of Republicans is different, in degree, than in the past, but they've been hyper-partisan since Reagan. And only the decades-long effort to target the Clintons the campaign rivals the unrelenting campaign against his son. But it's a stressful job and the last three weeks have been particularly stressful, politically, physically, and personally.

Whether or not Biden stays in the race, he will likely to make that decision based on the same question he did earlier in the year: Does he believe he has the best shot at beating Trump? Does he have the stamina to do the job?

Maybe the last three weeks have or will change Biden's mind about those questions. Maybe they won't. The question that will determine whether he stays in the race remains the same, but the circumstances could change the answer.

Now consider that this happens more than four months before the election.

Did you know that civilized countries (and nascent fascist countries led by megalomaniacs) run entire elections in a fraction of that time?

As noted above, at least one focus group of undecided Latinos said the debate will lead them to vote Biden, not Trump. Short of catastrophic medical event, there is no chance Trump will be replaced. There is no chance that Trump will become anymore likeable, honest, or coherent. If someone besides Biden had four months to capitalize on his negatives, it might flip the

table. It would eliminate the double haters election. If someone named Biden found a way to make Trump's malice matter more than his stammer, it might well matter.

Joe Biden has a choice to make about whether he remains the best shot to beat Donald Trump. And one way or another, Republicans will be stuck with a candidate who vigorously acts unpresidential.