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The Question Is Not if Biden Should Step Aside. It's How.

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Joe Biden should not be running for re-election. That much was obvious well before the special prosecutor's comments on the president's memory lapses inspired a burst of age-related angst. And Democrats who are furious at the prosecutor have to sense that it will become only more obvious as we move deeper into an actual campaign.

What is less obvious is how Biden should get out of it.

Note that I did not say that Biden should not *be* the president. You can make a case that as obvious as his decline has been, whatever equilibrium his White House has worked out has thus far delivered results largely indistinguishable from (and sometimes better than) what one would expect from a replacement-level Democratic president.

If there has been a really big age effect in his presidency so far, I suspect it lies in the emboldenment of America's rivals, a sense that a decrepit American chief executive is less to be feared than a more vigorous one. But suspicion isn't proof, and when I look at how the Biden administration has actually handled its various foreign crises, I can imagine more disastrous outcomes from a more swaggering sort of president.

Saying that things have worked out OK throughout this stage of Biden's decline, though, is very different from betting that they can continue working out OK for almost five long further years. And saying that Biden is capable of occupying the presidency for the next 11 months is quite different from saying that he's capable of spending those months effectively campaigning for the right to occupy it again.

The impression the president gives in public is not senility so much as extreme frailty, like a lightbulb that still burns so long as you keep it on a dimmer. But to strain the simile a bit, the entire issue in a re-election campaign is not whether your filaments shed light; it's whether voters should take this one opportunity to change out the bulb. Every flicker is evidence that a change is necessary, and if you force Biden into a normal campaign-season role, frequent flickering (if not a burning out) is what you're going to get.

Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, and assume that Biden senses this, that he isn't just entombed in egomania, but he feels trapped by his own terrible vice-presidential choice. If he drops out and anoints Kamala Harris, she's even more likely to lose to Donald Trump. But if he drops out and doesn't endorse his own number two, he'd be opening himself to a narrative of identitarian betrayal — aging white president knifes first woman-of-color veep — and setting his party up for months of bloodletting and betrayal, a constant churn of personal and ideological drama.

There is no easy escape from these dilemmas. But the best approach available to Biden is a distinctively old-fashioned one. He should accept the necessity of drama and bloodletting but also condense it all into the format that was originally designed for handling intraparty competition: the Democratic National Convention.

That would mean not dropping out today or tomorrow or any day when party primaries are still proceeding. Instead Biden would continue accumulating pledged delegates, continue touting the improving economic numbers, continue attacking

Donald Trump — until August and the convention, when he would shock the world by announcing his withdrawal from the race, decline to issue any endorsement, and invite the convention delegates to choose his replacement.

Pain would follow. But so would excitement and spectacle, the things that Biden himself seems too old to deliver. Meanwhile, any agony would be much briefer than in a long primary battle between Harris and Gavin Newsom or Gretchen Whitmer. The proximity of the general election would create stronger incentives for Harris or any other disappointed losers to accept a behind-the-scenes proffer and fall in line if the convention battle doesn't go their way. And the format would encourage the party as institution, not the party as mass electorate, to do a party's traditional job and choose the ticket with the most national appeal.

Would Trump and Republicans have a field day attacking Democratic insiders for pulling a fast one on the public? Sure, but if the chosen ticket was more popular and competent seeming, less shadowed by obvious old age, the number of relieved voters would surely outstrip the number of resentful ones.

This plan also has the advantage of being discardable if I'm completely wrong, Biden is actually vigorous on the campaign trail, and he's ahead of Trump by five points by the time August rolls around. Like my past suggestion that Joe Manchin should run as a third-party candidate provisionally (also still a good idea!) to see how the Trump-Biden race shapes up, contemplating a convention bow-out gives Biden a way to be responsive to events — sticking it out if he really sees no other options, but keeping a path open for his country to escape a choice that right now seems like divine chastisement.

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