

LETTER FROM BIDEN'S WASHINGTON

# IS 2024 DOOMED TO REPEAT 1968 OR 2020 —OR BOTH?

*Donald Trump has now made clear that he won't concede if he loses the election. Believe him.*

**By Susan B. Glasser**

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Photograph by Paul Sancya / AP



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Here we go again. On Wednesday, Donald Trump, while spending a day off from his criminal trial in Manhattan on the road in the swing states of Wisconsin and Michigan, gave an interview to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. He was asked a question that, until Trump entered politics, never really needed to be asked in American public life: Win or lose, will you commit to accept the results of the 2024 election? “If everything’s honest, I’ll gladly accept the results,” Trump told the newspaper. “If it’s not, you have to fight for the right of the country.” In other words: no.

Given that Trump has done this before in calling forth a violent movement to block the last election, you’d think his warning of another “fight” would be major national news. You would be wrong. By Thursday morning, the *Times* had published a brief story about his refusal to unconditionally accept this year’s election results, but there were no breaking-news alerts that I saw or big headlines on the front page. Politico’s dispatch from the battleground tour with Trump, meanwhile, was headlined “Trump, Free from Court, Finds ‘a Little Fun on the Campaign Trail.’ ” (The *Washington Post* and Politico each eventually posted stories on the interview on Thursday.) I get that it can be hard to figure out which threats to focus on from Trump, whose brand of entertainment-cum-demagoguery demands that he produce ever-more-alarming rhetoric in order to stay relevant nearly nine years into the show. But, seriously, did 2020 teach us nothing?

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Trump's announcement that he has no intention of peacefully accepting another defeat this fall, by the way, was only one of many extreme statements he made on his campaign swing. A day after being found in contempt of court for defying a gag order that prohibited the former President from posting social-media attacks on witnesses and the judge in his New York case, Trump disparaged the charges against him as "bullshit" and mocked the "kangaroo court" where he is being tried on allegations that he sought to tilt the 2016 election by paying the former adult-film star Stormy Daniels a hundred and thirty thousand dollars to buy her silence before the voting. Amid familiar complaints about electric cars and his favorite false claim that, when he was President, the U.S. had the greatest economy in the history of the world, there was a palpable threat of violence in his rhetoric. At one point, Trump announced, theatrically, "If we don't win this election, I don't think our country is going to survive. I've never said that publicly, I don't think, but I've felt it for a long time. I actually think our country's not going to survive."

This statement—the menace of which was hard to miss, even if the threat itself was somewhat opaque—came in the midst of an extended rant about Joe Biden's alleged plan to bring "massive numbers of Gazans from the Middle East . . . to your towns and villages." As the riled-up crowd in Waukesha, Wisconsin, booed and hissed, Trump turned the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas into one of his signature anti-immigration talking points, warning that Biden, in considering allowing into the U.S. an undisclosed number of Gazan refugees with relatives already living in the country, was "determined to create the conditions for an October 7-style attack right here in America." It was scary stuff, an inflammatory new addition to the ex-President's racist road show. The crowd loved it. "We do

not need a jihad in the United States of America,” Trump said, to cheers and shouts of “No!” “We do not need our once-great cities to become hotbeds of terrorism.”

This week, the news seemed not so much focussed on the spectre of 2020 as that of a more distant election year: 1968. That was the immediate thought, at least, that sprang to mind while I watched the coverage of a large phalanx of armored N.Y.P.D. cops clear antiwar protesters from Hamilton Hall, the central administration building of Columbia University, which had been occupied overnight. History was overtly rhyming: the police action took place on the fifty-sixth anniversary to the day of the massive arrests that ended a student takeover of Hamilton Hall in the Vietnam era—one of the iconic scenes of that iconic year.

For decades now, 1968 has been seen as the ultimate annus horribilis in American politics: the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy; the race riots; the young antiwar leftists whose self-styled revolution triggered police violence at the Democratic Convention in Chicago and an allergic reaction in Middle America. After President Lyndon Johnson stepped aside, his Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey, inherited the chaos of a country and a Democratic Party torn asunder by Vietnam. The beneficiary of all this was Richard Nixon, who, promising a return of “law and order,” emerged the winner in November.

This is history as a cautionary tale. The Biden-Humphrey, Gaza-Vietnam, Trump-Nixon parallels may be inexact, but remind me, again, just why the Democrats decided to pick Chicago for this year’s convention? Already, activist groups are promising major protests over Biden’s support for Israel during the August gathering, all but guaranteeing bad split-screen visuals emphasizing young progressives’ disillusion with a President who urgently needs a strong youth turnout to beat Trump. “It looks like a repeat in the making,” the Democratic consultant Don Rose, who, in 1968, served as a spokesman for one of the main antiwar groups, told Chicago’s CBS News affiliate this week. “At this moment,

there's a perfect parallel." With confrontations between campus protesters and police spreading nationwide in the wake of Columbia's crackdown, Meghan McCain, somewhat more crudely, summed up the emerging conventional wisdom about 2024 in a tweet on Thursday: "The DNC convention this summer is going to be a fucking shit show."

Trump, for his part, has long been obsessed with Nixon's 1968 "law and order" strategy; both his 2016 and 2020 races deployed the same playbook, years before the war in Gaza was dividing Democrats. Of course, he will do so again, especially now that the political conditions appear to resemble that year even more than before. This, it seems to me, is both Biden's peril and opportunity. For Trump, it's less than ideal to be running as a "law and order" candidate while simultaneously facing nearly ninety felony charges in four separate criminal proceedings. And yet it speaks to the bizarreness of the present moment that Trump has bashed the pro-Palestinian student protesters while also suggesting that they may receive more lenient treatment than the January 6th rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on his behalf. There is also the matter of picking one's enemy. How odd was it, a couple of weeks back, to see Trump, he of the "Muslim ban" and the unqualified support for Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Israeli government, chuckling as his rally-goers picked up the far left's "Genocide Joe" chant? "They're not wrong," Trump said.

For now, Biden appears to have taken the advice that James Traub, the author of a timely new biography of Humphrey, offered in the *Wall Street Journal* this week. "The lesson of 1968," Traub wrote, "is that while the fireworks are on the left, the votes are on the right." Which is as good an explanation as any for why Biden, when he spoke to reporters on Thursday, in his most extensive comments to date on the escalating protests, sternly lectured that there was "not a right to cause chaos" along with the right to protest, rejected any suggestion that he change course in his Middle East policies, and dismissed Republican calls to bring in the

National Guard to calm the campuses. The message was clear: this “moderate liberal in an age of extremism,” as Traub called him, is staying the course.

The truth is that it’s far too early to know whether the historical dread that many Democrats feel about a 1968 redux is warranted. Maybe, by the fall, the war in Gaza will no longer be front and center. Perhaps, by then, the students will be more focussed on Trump’s threats to their reproductive freedom, their democracy, or consumed by some other Trumpian outrage that has yet to occur. What’s already both knowable and known, however, is that if Trump is once more defeated, he’s planning on pulling a 2020 all over again. On this, at least, take him at his word. ♦

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