

# Looking at Biden's Presidency from a Historical Perspective

by Luca Mezzetti

**Abstract:** Guardando alla Presidenza Biden da una prospettiva storica – Presidents eligible for reelection after completing at least one full term in office, but that chose not to run were Polk, Buchanan, Hayes, Coolidge, Truman and Johnson: the analysis of the experiences of Biden's predecessors reveals significant parallels and asymmetries, but the 1920 presidential campaign reveals more compelling, almost startling similarities between the Biden case and the Wilson case.

**Keywords:** Biden; withdrawal; American; presidents; history.

## 1. The reasons of a withdrawal

Three weeks and two days, that's how long the Democratic odyssey on Joe Biden's re-candidacy lasted. The debate on Joe Biden's fragility and suitability to run for a second term was triggered on June 27 after the disastrous televised debate with Donald Trump, but the alarms had not been lacking and the critical issues had already been previously highlighted.

Biden was 78 years old at his inauguration, making him the oldest candidate to assume the presidency. He was also older when he assumed the office than Ronald Reagan, the previous oldest, had been when leaving it. Health concerns surrounding Biden have emerged during his presidency, primarily about his age and ability to carry out a second term. In a report in the *Journal on Active Aging*, doctors noted he had an "exceptional health profile" relative to his age, and a medical assessment performed by physician Kevin O'Connor attested to his physical acuity. The *Washington Post's* Dan Zak described the U.S. government as a "gerontocracy" with Biden's inauguration. On July 28, 2022, U.S. Representative Dean Phillips became the first incumbent Democratic member of Congress to say President Biden should not run for re-election and called for "generational change," pointing to Biden's age. In July 2024, *The New York Times* reported that Kevin Cannard, a neurologist from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center specialized in movement disorders such as Parkinson's disease, visited the White House eight times within the last eight months, including a meeting with Biden's physician. The report generated controversy as O'Connor challenged it, citing Cannard's appearances during Barack Obama's administration and personnel within the White House who suffer from neurological disorders.

The beginning of the chronology of stumbles, gaffes, slips and questions that have emerged in the three years and seven months of Biden's presidency can actually be traced back to what *The New York Times* highlighted in July 2022 when - reporting the backlash of age suffered by Biden and the concerns of his staff and the Party - it was noted that the President was showing signs of age, or in November of the same year, when on the occasion of Joe Biden's eightieth birthday, the *Washington Post* wondered about the impact of age on re-election. In April 2023, in Ireland, visiting a pub in Dundalk - the hometown of some of his ancestors north of Dublin - Biden confused the All Blacks, New Zealand's legendary rugby team, with the Black and Tans, a British military unit known for having terrorized the Irish-Catholic population of Ulster during the bloody civil war of the Troubles. In June 2023, Biden concluded a speech in Connecticut by saying "God Save the Queen", the traditional motto of the British anthem which became "God Save the King" after the accession of Charles III to the throne. Less than a week later, Biden welcomed Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the White House. During the national anthems, the US president solemnly placed his right hand over his heart, realizing only later that the orchestra was playing the anthem of the host country. Biden then slowly let his hand slide into the most neutral starting position, along his legs. And again in June 2023, speaking to reporters, Biden confused Ukraine with Iraq. Asked about Vladimir Putin, the commander in chief responded: "He is clearly losing the war in Iraq. He is losing the war at home. And he has become a bit of a pariah around the world." In June 2023, *The New York Times* mentioned the complicated reality of the oldest president in history. The President's dulling lucidity, on the other hand, found unequivocal symptoms of confirmation not only in the loss of physical but also mental tone, as highlighted, just as an example, in February 2024, by Biden's confusion, at an electoral event, of Macron with Mitterand, or by the reference to a conversation he had with Helmut Kohl (instead it was Angela Merkel), by the confusion, during a press conference, speaking of the Middle East, of Egypt with Mexico. At the beginning of February 2024, all the media were once again questioning Joe Biden's physical and mental fitness to run again and, on June 23, a Gallup poll revealed that 67% of Americans thought Joe Biden was too old to be president. The dramatic turning point, however, occurred on June 27 during the presidential debate organized by CNN in Atlanta, where the age and difficulties of eighty-one-year-old Joe Biden in his confrontation with Donald Trump emerged in all their evidence and the voices of those asking him to abandon the presidential race grew.

Conceiving the confrontation with Donald Trump on June 27, the President had spent a whole week preparing with his staff. He knew that for him the stakes were much higher than for any other president in the past, because no one has ever presented himself for re-election with such a low level of popularity, and because he needed a solid performance to turn his electoral campaign around (this was also one of the reasons that had pushed his staff to ask for a debate already in June, much earlier than usual). The performance did not have a good result.

The version of Biden that presented itself in front of the CNN cameras was very similar to the one that the Republicans and Donald Trump have

been trying to sell to the American people for months: uncertain, weak, fragile.

There were several awkward moments for the President. As the *Washington Post* wrote, “Biden spoke at various points in a hoarse, lacking vigor. He stumbled over his words and arguments.” The worst moment, at the beginning, was when he tried to say something about health care but was unable to finish his thought before the time allotted ran out. Trump capitalized on this difficulty later, when the debate moved on to immigration. In short, Biden’s team was hoping for a debate in which Trump’s limitations would be exposed, in order to then frame what remained of the electoral campaign as a referendum on Trump. Instead, the opposite happened: the focus was mainly on Biden’s mental faculties and Trump’s limitations seemed less worrying. Biden’s performance was criticized in particular in which he had a faltering appearance and failed to recall statistics or coherently express his opinion on several occasions. Trump was declared the winner of the debate by columnists from *The Hill*, *CNN*, *Politico*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Business Insider*, and *Vox*. Columnists from *MSNBC*, *The Cook Political Report*, *The Guardian* and the *Los Angeles Times* argued that while Trump did not win the debate, Biden “clearly lost”. Polling also indicated the majority of the public believed Trump won. Following Biden’s performance at the debate, many Democrats were described as being sent “into a panic” and called for him to withdraw from the race, leading to political turmoil within the party that the media referred to as the “Biden crisis”.

On July 3, twenty Democratic governors met with Biden at the White House virtually to discuss the debate’s effect on his campaign. Following the meeting, governors Wes Moore of Maryland, Kathy Hochul of New York and Tim Walz of Minnesota spoke to the press outside of the White House, with Walz specifically admitting that “Thursday night was a bad performance” and a “bad hit”.

On July 17, *ABC News* reported that House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries and Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer had met with Biden on July 12 and 13, respectively, and had expressed concerns to Biden about Democratic losses in Congress. Biden reportedly told Schumer that he needed another week to make a decision. Jeffrey Katzenberg, a campaign co-chairman, reportedly warned Biden on July 17 that donors were withholding donations to his campaign, although Katzenberg disputed that characterization of their discussion. That evening, Biden tested positive for COVID-19. He experienced mild symptoms, including a cough, runny nose, and “general malaise”: images of him looking frail exiting from Air Force One on the way to isolation at his residence in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, fueled further speculation over his health. The *New York Times* reported that Biden was “more receptive” to withdrawing his nomination. In phone conversations, former House speaker Nancy Pelosi told Biden she was pessimistic about his candidacy. On July 18, *Axios* reported that Democrats believed Biden would exit the election, citing pressure from Jeffries and Schumer, internal polling, and criticism. The *New York Times* reported that day that Biden was considering that he may have to withdraw. *CNN* reported that on July 20 Biden met with advisors Steve Ricchetti and Mike Donilon, during which they concluded

that worsening poll numbers and a loss of party support had left the campaign without a plausible strategy to recover. That evening, Biden began planning a possible exit from the race with Ricchetti, Donilon and other close aides, and he fully committed to the decision on the morning of July 21.

On July 21, in a letter published on X, Joe Biden announced that he would not seek re-election as president: “while it has been my intention to seek reelection, I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down and to focus solely on fulfilling my duties as President for the remainder of my term”.

On July 24, the President of the United States, from behind the Resolute Desk of the Oval Office, spoke to the Nation at 8 pm local time, explaining the reasons that led him to withdraw, after weeks of pressures, pointing out that “America is at an inflection point, one of those rare moments in history when the decisions we make now will determine our fate of our nation and the world for decades to come” and that “is going to have to choose between moving forward or backward, between hope and hate, between unity and division”. Believing in honesty, decency, and respect; freedom, justice, the cause of American democracy itself must unite to protect it”. Affirming that in recent weeks, it became clear to him that he needed to unite his party in this critical endeavor, he “decided the best way forward is to pass the torch to a new generation. That’s the best way to unite our nation”. According to Biden, a time and place for new voices, fresh and younger voices, had arrived.

## 2. Biden compared: lessons from the past

Historically, most U.S. presidents who completed one full term chose to run for a second. Presidents eligible for reelection after completing at least one full term in office, but that chose not to run were James K. Polk (in office 1845–1849); James Buchanan (in office 1857–1861); Rutherford B. Hayes (in office 1877–1881); Calvin Coolidge (in office 1923–1929); Harry S. Truman (in office 1945–1953); Lyndon B. Johnson (in office 1963–1969).<sup>1</sup>

James Knox Polk was the 11th President of the United States, serving from 1845 to 1849.<sup>2</sup> He also served as the 13th speaker of the House of Representatives from 1835 to 1839 and the ninth governor of Tennessee from 1839 to 1841. A protégé of Andrew Jackson, he was a member of the Democratic Party and an advocate of Jacksonian democracy. Polk is known for extending the territory of the United States through the Mexican–American War during his presidency, annexing Texas, the Oregon Territory, and the Mexican Cession after winning the Mexican–American War. After building a successful law practice in Tennessee, Polk was elected to its State legislature in 1823 and then to the United States

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<sup>1</sup> B. O’Reilly, M. Dugard, *Confronting the Presidents. No Spin Assessments from Washington to Biden*, New York, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> R.W. Merry, *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent*, New York, 2010; W.R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America*, New York, 2009; J. Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, New York, 2004.

House of Representatives in 1825, becoming a strong supporter of Jackson. After serving as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, he became Speaker of the House in 1835, the only person to serve both as Speaker and U.S. president. Polk left Congress to run for governor of Tennessee, winning in 1839 but losing in 1841 and 1843. He was a dark-horse candidate in the 1844 presidential election as the Democratic Party nominee; he entered his party's convention as a potential nominee for vice president but emerged as a compromise to head the ticket when no presidential candidate could gain the necessary two-thirds majority. In the general election, Polk defeated Henry Clay of the Whig Party. True to his campaign pledge to serve only one term, Polk left office in 1849 and returned to Tennessee, where he died of cholera soon afterward. Honoring his pledge to serve only one term, Polk declined to seek re-election. At the 1848 Democratic National Convention, Lewis Cass was nominated. The 1848 Whig National Convention nominated Zachary Taylor for president and former congressman Millard Fillmore of New York for vice president. Martin Van Buren led a breakaway Free Soil group from the Democrats. Taylor won the presidential election with a plurality of the popular vote and a majority of the electoral vote.

The presidency of James Buchanan began on March 4, 1857, when he was inaugurated as 15th President of the United States, and ended on March 4, 1861.<sup>3</sup> Buchanan, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, took office after defeating John C. Frémont of the Republican Party and former President Millard Fillmore of the American Party in the 1856 presidential election. He declined to seek re-election and was succeeded by the Republican Abraham Lincoln.

Rutherford Birchard Hayes was the 19th President of the United States, serving from 1877 to 1881.<sup>4</sup> He won the Republican nomination for president in the 1876 United States presidential election. In the disputed general election, he faced Democratic nominee Samuel J. Tilden. Hayes lost the popular vote to Tilden; neither candidate secured enough electoral votes to win the election. Hayes secured a victory when a Congressional Commission awarded him 20 contested electoral votes in the Compromise of 1877. The electoral dispute was resolved with a backroom deal whereby both Southern Democrats and Whiggish Republican businessmen acquiesced to Hayes's election on the condition that he end both federal support for Reconstruction and the military occupation of the former Confederate States. Hayes declined to seek reelection in 1880, keeping his pledge not to run for a second term.

Theodore Roosevelt Jr. was the 26th President of the United States, serving from 1901 to 1909.<sup>5</sup> He was the Vice President under President William McKinley for six months in 1901, assuming the

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<sup>3</sup> G. Boulard, *The Worst President. The Story of James Buchanan*, Bloomington, 2015; J. Quist – M.J. Birkner (Eds), *James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War*, Gainesville, 2014; J. H. Baker, *James Buchanan*, New York, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> H. Trefousse, *Rutherford B. Hayes*, New York, 2002; A. Hoogenboom, *Rutherford B. Hayes. Warrior and President*, Lawrence, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> D. McCollough, *Mornings on Horseback. The Story of an Extraordinary Family, a Vanished Way of Life and the Unique Child Who Became Theodore Roosevelt*, New York, 1982.

presidency after McKinley's assassination. The 1908 United States presidential election was the 31st quadrennial presidential election, held on Tuesday, November 3, 1908. Republican Party nominee William Howard Taft defeated three-time Democratic nominee William Jennings Bryan.

Incumbent President Theodore Roosevelt honored his promise not to seek a third term (for him, a second full term), and persuaded his close friend, Taft, to become his successor. With Roosevelt's support, Taft won the presidential nomination at the 1908 Republican National Convention on the first ballot and at the 1908 presidential election he easily defeated Democratic nominee William Jennings Bryan.

During Taft's administration, a rift emerged between Roosevelt and Taft, and they became the leaders of the Republican Party's two wings: progressives led by Roosevelt and conservatives led by Taft. Taft's conservatism angered Roosevelt, so he challenged Taft for the party nomination at the 1912 Republican National Convention. When Taft and his conservative allies narrowly prevailed, Roosevelt rallied his progressive supporters and launched a third-party bid. At the Democratic Convention, Wilson won the presidential nomination on the 46th ballot, defeating the Speaker of the House Champ Clark and several other candidates with the support of William Jennings Bryan and other progressive Democrats. The Socialist Party renominated its perennial standard-bearer, Eugene V. Debs. On November 5, 1912, Wilson won the presidency by carrying a record 40 states.

Calvin Coolidge was the 30th president of the United States, serving from 1923 to 1929.<sup>6</sup> A Republican lawyer from Massachusetts, he previously served as the 29th vice president from 1921 to 1923. Elected vice president in 1920, he succeeded to the presidency upon the sudden death of President Warren G. Harding in August 1923. Elected in his own right in 1924, Coolidge chose not to run again in 1928: in the summer of 1927, Coolidge vacationed in the Black Hills of South Dakota. While on vacation, Coolidge surprisingly issued a terse statement that he would not seek a second full term as president. After allowing the reporters to take that in, Coolidge elaborated. "If I take another term, I will be in the White House till 1933 ... Ten years in Washington is longer than any other man has had it – too long!". In his memoirs, Coolidge explained his decision not to run: "The Presidential office takes a heavy toll of those who occupy it and those who are dear to them. While we should not refuse to spend and be spent in the service of our country, it is hazardous to attempt what we feel is beyond our strength to accomplish".

Harry S. Truman was the 33rd president of the United States, serving from 1945 to 1953.<sup>7</sup> He was elected vice president in the 1944 presidential election and became president upon Roosevelt's death in April 1945 till 1949. Investigations revealed corruption in parts of the Truman administration, and this became a major campaign issue in the 1952 presidential election, although they did not implicate Truman himself. He was eligible for reelection in 1952 but, with poor polling, he chose not to

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<sup>6</sup> C. Coolidge, *Autobiography*, Washington D.C., 2021; A. Shlaes, *Coolidge*, New York, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> D. McCullough, *Truman*, New York, 1993.

run. In 1951, the United States ratified the 22nd Amendment, making a president ineligible for election to a third term or for election to a second full term after serving more than two remaining years of a term of a previously elected president. The latter clause did not apply to Truman's situation in 1952 because of a grandfather clause exempting the incumbent president. Therefore, he seriously considered running for another term in 1952 and left his name on the ballot in the New Hampshire primary. However, all his close advisors, pointing to his age, his failing abilities, and his poor showing in the polls, talked him out of it. At the time of the 1952 New Hampshire primary (March 11, 1952), no candidate had won Truman's backing. His first choice, Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson, had declined to run. Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson had also turned Truman down, Vice President Barkley was considered too old, and Truman distrusted and disliked senator Kefauver, who had made a name for himself by his investigations of the Truman administration scandals. Truman let his name be entered in the New Hampshire primary by supporters. The highly unpopular Truman was handily defeated by Kefauver; 18 days later the President formally announced he would not seek a second full term. Truman was eventually able to persuade Stevenson to run, and the Governor gained the nomination at the 1952 Democratic National Convention. Eisenhower gained the Republican nomination, with Senator Nixon as his running mate, and defeated Stevenson decisively in the general election, ending 20 years of Democratic presidents.

Lyndon Baines Johnson served as the 36th president of the United States from 1963 to 1969.<sup>8</sup> He became president after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, under whom he had served as the 37th vice president from 1961 to 1963. Johnson began his presidency with near-universal support, but his approval declined throughout his presidency as the public became frustrated with both the Vietnam War and domestic unrest, including race riots in major cities and increasing crime. Johnson initially sought to run for re-election; however, following disappointing results in the New Hampshire primary, he withdrew his candidacy. As the 1968 election approached, Johnson began to lose control of the Democratic Party, which was splitting into four factions. The first group consisted of Johnson and Humphrey, labor unions, and local party bosses (led by Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley): this group had traditionally controlled the Democratic Party since the days of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and they feared loss of their control over the party. After Johnson's withdrawal this group rallied to support Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's Vice President; it was also believed that President Johnson himself was covertly supporting Humphrey, despite his public claims of neutrality. The second group consisted of antiwar students and intellectuals who coalesced behind senator Eugene McCarthy in an effort to "dump Johnson." The third group included Catholics, Hispanics and African Americans, who rallied behind senator Robert F. Kennedy. The fourth group consisted of traditionally segregationist white Southerners like Governor George Wallace. Johnson's approval ratings had declined significantly by 1968, at the time of his withdrawal being 36 percent. Despite Johnson's growing unpopularity,

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<sup>8</sup> R.A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, 4 volumes, New York, 2013.

conventional wisdom held that it would be impossible to deny re-nomination to a sitting president. Johnson won a narrow victory in the New Hampshire presidential primary on March 12 against McCarthy 49–42%, but this close second-place result dramatically boosted McCarthy's standing in the race. Kennedy announced his candidacy on March 16. But on March 31, 1968, then-incumbent US President Lyndon B. Johnson made a surprise announcement during a televised address to the nation that began around 9 p.m., declaring that he would not seek re-election for another term and was withdrawing from the 1968 United States presidential election. Johnson stated: "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President". Historians have debated why Johnson quit a few days after his weak showing in New Hampshire. Jeff Shesol says Johnson wanted out of the White House, but also wanted vindication; when the indicators turned negative, he decided to leave. Lewis L. Gould says that Johnson had neglected the Democratic party, was hurting it by his Vietnam policies, and under-estimated McCarthy's strength until the last minute, when it was too late for Johnson to recover. Randall Bennett Woods said Johnson realized he needed to leave, for the nation to heal. Robert Dallek wrote that Johnson had no further domestic goals, and realized that his personality had eroded his popularity. His health was poor, and he was preoccupied with the Kennedy campaign; his wife was pressing for his retirement and his base of support continued to shrink. Leaving the race would allow him to pose as a peace-maker. Anthony J. Bennett, however, said Johnson had been forced out of a re-election race in 1968 by outrage over his policy in Southeast Asia.

Since the Vietnam War had become the major issue that was dividing the Democratic Party, and Johnson had come to symbolize the war for many liberal Democrats, the President believed that he could not win the nomination without a major struggle, and that he would probably lose the election in November to the Republicans. However, by withdrawing from the race, he could avoid the stigma of defeat, and he could keep control of the party machinery by giving the nomination to Humphrey, who had been a loyal vice president.

At first Johnson's only significant challenger in the 1968 Democratic Party presidential primaries was Eugene McCarthy, an anti-war senator from Minnesota. Johnson's announcement to drop out of the race came after McCarthy nearly won the New Hampshire primary and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, another critic of the war and the brother of the late President John F. Kennedy, entered the race.

Johnson's decision opened the door for Vice President Hubert Humphrey to become the Democratic Party's nominee. The 1968 Democratic National Convention, held in Chicago, was marked by significant protests and clashes between demonstrators and police, reflecting the deep divisions within the nation.

The 1968 election saw Republican Party candidate Richard Nixon emerge victorious, defeating Humphrey and third-party candidate George Wallace.

### 3. The Johnson's and Wilson's antecedents

The analysis of the experiences of Biden's predecessors conducted above reveals significant parallels and asymmetries with the current situation.

Supposedly, the easiest comparison to President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw from the 2024 U.S. presidential race is to focus to incumbent Democratic President Lyndon Baines Johnson's decision not to seek the presidential nomination of his party in the 1968 campaign. Nevertheless, while that comparison would be reasonably accurate, it would not reflect the rather stunning differences between the decisions made by the two presidents.

Mired in the national division over the conduct of the Vietnam War and under political attack from both the Republican Party and his fellow Democrats, Johnson was 59 years old when he withdrew from the 1968 campaign. Biden is 81. While burdened with poor physical health and what biographers and wife Lady Bird Johnson would confirm was a pervasive battle with anxiety and depression (mostly about his physical health and fear of his health leading to incapacitation), Johnson's cognitive abilities and mental acuity were not in question. Johnson withdrew months before the 1968 Democratic Convention. The 1968 election was rocked by the assassinations of Martin Luther King in Memphis and later of Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles. Biden withdrew less than a month before the 2024 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Biden's decision came just days after a failed assassination attempt on the life of Republican nominee former President Donald Trump.

In Johnson's case, the principal source of weakness in March 1968 was related to policies and their consequences. Going all in for victory in Vietnam had backfired when victory proved elusive. Efforts at racial justice had proved frustrating and produced backlash. The rioting from the summer of 1967 hit many of the nation's cities.

Biden has struggled with events as well. Federal largesse during and after the pandemic contributed to a spike in inflation that has taken time to come to earth. While the numbers have gotten better, consumers still see high prices and wonder. Immigration on the Southern border has also spiked, and while here, too, the numbers have come down, the perception of "open borders" persists. On foreign policy, Biden has suffered from a disastrous exit from Afghanistan and the consequences of sustained support for Israel. The current government there has angered much of the world with its ongoing retaliation against Gaza and Southern Lebanon for a terrorist attack by Hamas and Hezbollah fighters based there. Many in the U.S. have grown weary of helping Ukraine battle Russian invaders.

What sets the Biden case apart now is the paramount issue of his physical and mental fitness at age 81. A look at the 1920 presidential campaign reveals more compelling, almost startling similarities. President Woodrow Wilson, a liberal Democrat known for leading the nation through World War I, for the formation of the League of Nations and having changed the nation's economy with the establishment of the Federal Reserve

and the imposition of the modern income tax, served as president from 1913 until 1921.<sup>9</sup>

On October 2, 1919, Wilson suffered a serious stroke, leaving him paralyzed on his left side, and with only partial vision in the right eye. He was confined to bed for weeks and sequestered from everyone except his wife and his physician, Cary Grayson. Bert E. Park, a neurosurgeon who examined Wilson's medical records after his death, wrote that Wilson's illness affected his personality in various ways, making him prone to "disorders of emotion, impaired impulse control, and defective judgment." Anxious to help the President recover, Tumulty (his secretary), Grayson and the First Lady determined what documents the President read and who was allowed to communicate with him. By November 1919, Wilson's recovery was only partial. His mind remained relatively clear, but he was physically enfeebled and the disease had wrecked his emotional constitution and aggravated all his more unfortunate personal traits. Throughout late 1919, Wilson's inner circle concealed the severity of his health issues. By February 1920, the President's true condition was publicly known. Many expressed qualms about Wilson's fitness for the presidency at a time when the League of Nations fight was reaching a climax, and domestic issues such as strikes, unemployment, inflation and the threat of Communism were ablaze. In mid-March 1920, Lodge and the Republicans formed a coalition with the pro-treaty Democrats to pass it with reservations, but Wilson rejected this compromise, and enough Democrats followed his lead to defeat ratification. No one close to Wilson was willing to certify, as required by the Constitution, his "inability to discharge the powers and duties of the said office." Though some members of Congress encouraged Vice President Marshall to assert his claim to the presidency, Marshall never attempted to replace Wilson. Wilson's lengthy period of incapacity while serving as President was nearly unprecedented; of the previous presidents, only James Garfield had been in a similar situation: on July 2, 1881, Charles J. Guiteau, a disappointed and delusional office seeker, shot Garfield at the Baltimore and Potomac railroad station in Washington; the wound was not immediately fatal: Garfield retained greater control of his mental faculties and faced relatively few pressing issues, but an infection caused by his doctors' unsanitary methods in treating the wound killed him on September 19.

Despite a desire to run for a third term, Wilson stood down and stepped aside in 1920. The Democrats nominated then Ohio governor James Middleton Cox and the New York Navy Department administrator, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Republicans nominated Ohio senator Warren Harding and Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge. With the Cox-Roosevelt ticket stuck with defending Wilson's unpopular policies after a war, a pandemic, and dire economic troubles, the Harding-Coolidge tickets won in a landslide despite the famously un-effervescent "Silent Cal."

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<sup>9</sup> C. Cox, *Woodrow Wilson. The Light Withdrawn*, New York, 2024; J. Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson. A Biography*, New York, 2011; H.W. Brands, *Woodrow Wilson*, New York, 2003.

#### 4. Conclusions

Biden's gaffes, lapses in memory, and lack of lucidity, which have prompted so many merciless comments about his mental balance, do not seem sufficient in themselves to justify the request for a step back in the race for the presidential elections, advanced by a plurality of voices within his own party: it is the correlation of such critical issues with the challenges that the most powerful man in the world is called upon to face that has plausibly encouraged and made his withdrawal highly recommendable. Consider his support for Ukraine and, in a not unrealistic perspective, the management of a possible military and, perhaps, nuclear crisis with Russia; the management of the Middle Eastern crisis and the possible extension of the conflict as a result of Iran's involvement; the management of diplomatic and economic relations with China and, equally in a not-so-distant perspective, the management of a military crisis caused by Chinese threats to Taiwan's sovereignty; the impact of migratory flows and the pressure they exert on US borders. From these perspectives, Biden's choice cannot fail to be appreciated as inspired by a profound sense of responsibility.

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