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The Washington Post's essential guide to power and influence in D.C.

Leigh Ann Caldwell and
[Theodoric Meyer](#)>

By [Leigh Ann Caldwell](#) and [Theodoric Meyer](#)
with research by [Alec Dent](#)

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Good morning, Early Birds. It's officially summer. We didn't need a calendar to tell us. Send tips to earlytips@washpost.com. Thanks for waking up with us.

In today's edition ... Trump raised massive sum after his conviction ... Biden's 2024 message: Trump is worse than ever ... but first ...

Trump will be a 'cattle prod' for Biden during debate, says former Clinton aide

Washington Post illustration; Philippe Reines (Lucy Naland/TWP)

Six questions for ... Philippe Reines: A longtime aid to **Hillary Clinton**, Reines is one of the few people who have been intimately involved in presidential debate prep. During Clinton's 2016 campaign, he played **Donald Trump** in her mock-debate sessions.

With the first debate between **President Biden** and Trump less than a week away, we spoke with Reines about how he would advise Biden. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

This debate is earlier than any general-election debate. What should the goals be? Should Biden appeal to persuadable voters or engage his base?

You can't think in those terms. You're just onstage with a malfunctioning appliance. I mean, you can't. You can't assume that you're going to get done what you want to get done unless you do it in the context of using the malfunctioning appliance to make your point.

The debates are a moment where everyone tunes in more, but they're not distinctly that

different from the rest of the campaign. The debate is an opportunity to do a few things. One is to talk to a much larger audience than you will at any other point. It is the most acute opportunity to provide an actual visual contrast to your opponent.

This idea that every time he's convicted of a felony or his house is raided by the FBI, or he loses an election somehow, is in his favor is silly. So to apply that to the debates. The idea that Donald Trump doesn't make mistakes or things don't hurt him [politically]? It's pretty silly concerning the fact that he's lost an election in large part because of many mistakes he made.

How high are the stakes for Biden?

This is not doing my duty as a Democrat, but there is an unfortunate pattern of sitting presidents not doing well in the first debate. It's legit. They just don't like prepping. It is an unpleasant process. You're the president of the United States of America. You are, without exaggeration, the most powerful person in the world, and then suddenly you've got a roomful of people telling you everything you're doing, everything you're saying, every way you're saying it is either wrong or needs to be better.

Plus, you've got some idiot pretending to be an even bigger idiot who's barking at you. I mean, this is not why you became president. So it's a tedious process. I think a couple times people have had to be scared straight. I remember vividly the Kerry-Bush first debate. I don't think the Democrats were ever more down the morning of that debate. They were one step away from just forfeiting — and then the next morning you would think that it was like Kennedy-Nixon.

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How much should we expect Trump to highlight Biden's age?

I get pretty worked up when people talk about Biden's disposition and his appearance. I will say this video stuff gets my blood pressure even higher.

I think [Biden] is at his best when he talks about this general point: rule of law. In his announcement speech in 2019, he said four years [of Trump] is one thing, eight years would be like, existential. I think he believes that now as much as then. And it really animates him, and I think the trial is under that umbrella. It is wanton disrespect for the law. It is just steamrolling anything close to playing by the rules. It's also an excuse to talk about all four trials.

The word "strategy" is not operable with Trump. The question is, what's on his mind. And I think it's pretty clear what's on his mind. By and large he's pretty mad. And he's got his list of grievances. And what I think that's going to do is have the opposite effect of what he wants to do. Like, if I were him and I wanted to show that my opponent was cognitively impaired, I would get up there and I would whisper. I would read a lullaby. He's going to get up there and he's going to lose the s--- because that's what he does. It might take six minutes or 16 minutes, but he's going to basically be shock paddles for Biden.

Trump is going to be motivation for Biden?

He's going to be a cattle prod for Biden. The Biden that they make fun of all the time wandering around Normandy, that's not with someone yelling at him. If they want to re-create that for 90 million people, then don't put Donald Trump in there yelling at him. That's not how it's going to work.

Trump is likely to bring up Biden's son Hunter. How should Biden address it?

I'm not sure. I think it'd be a mistake to go after the president's child. The president's son being found guilty is helpful politically in that it undercuts a lot of arguments about politicizing the justice system, but I don't even know what [Trump's] argument would be unless it is: "If it was my son ... I'd pardon them. And I think you should. If you don't do it after you lose, then I'll do it on my first day."

What advice would you give to Biden?

Donald Trump has had a horrible four years. There's no reason to believe he's gotten better. The real problem for Joe Biden is that there is no expectation of Donald Trump. He is not expected to do well. He is not expected to abide by anything.

How do you lose? In these situations, two ways: One, the other person does so well that they flat-out beat you. And the second way you win is that he just absolutely beats himself, which is what [Trump] did in the first debate in 2020.

What we're watching

In the courts

The Supreme Court is expected to hand down more rulings today at 10 a.m. Some of the court's biggest cases this term are still awaiting decisions. Among them: Trump's claim of "absolute immunity" from criminal prosecution for acts committed during his presidency, and a case that will determine whether doctors can perform abortions in an emergency in states where the procedure has been restricted.

You can see the full list of cases from this term at [The Post's Supreme Court tracker](#).

District Judge Aileen M. Cannon is holding a pretrial hearing in Trump's classified documents case today, with Trump's lawyers expected to argue that the prosecutor was improperly appointed. Their movement to dismiss will be based on the premise that the Senate should have approved the prosecutor, a move our colleague **Perry Stein** [reports](#) is a "long-shot argument." Similar challenges in other cases have been unsuccessful.

This hearing is the first of five that will take place over the next few days. More sessions will follow Monday and Tuesday.

The campaign

Trump raised huge sum after his conviction

Trump's "campaign, the **Republican National Committee** and an allied super PAC raised more than \$170 million in May, including tens of millions that came in after Trump's May 30 conviction on [34 felony counts of falsifying business records](#)," our colleagues **Maeve Reston** and **Clara Ence Morse** [report](#). The surge of donations has helped to erode Biden's cash advantage.

- * “**MAGA Inc.**, the main super PAC supporting Trump, raised \$69 million in May — its best fundraising month of the cycle — and reported \$94 million in cash on hand.”
- * “Its largest donation was \$50 million from transportation executive **Timothy Mellon** on the day after Trump was convicted in New York. Mellon had previously given \$25 million to the group and \$25 million to a super PAC supporting **Robert F. Kennedy Jr.**, who is running as an independent.”

Biden’s “campaign said it had raised \$85 million in May in coordination with the four committees that it jointly raises money with,” Maeve and Ence write. “Overall, the Biden team said it had \$212 million in cash on hand as of May 31.”

Biden is also pulling in huge contributions.

Former New York mayor **Mike Bloomberg** gave nearly \$20 million last month to help Biden’s reelection effort, our colleagues **Michael Scherer** and **Tyler Pager** [report](#).

Biden’s 2024 message: Trump is worse than ever

President Joe Biden delivers remarks during an event for the 12th anniversary of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals in the East Room of The White House on June 18, 2024 in Washington, DC. (Michael A. McCoy for The Washington Post)

Biden has settled on his message for the 2024 campaign: Trump has snapped and is now even worse than before.

- * “The notion that the former president changed — becoming more self-obsessed, more dangerous and more extreme — has since been seeded throughout Biden’s campaign, the result of months of polling, focus groups and ad testing, his advisers say,” [reports](#) our colleague **Michael Scherer**. “Independent Democratic

groups that plan to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to help reelect Biden have come to similar conclusions in their own research, according to people familiar with that work, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the strategy.”

Biden gave a taste of this messaging at a Washington fundraiser in May, where he told attendees: “Let’s get to the message of the campaign. ... When [Trump] lost in 2020, something snapped in him.”

Geoff Garin, a pollster for Biden, said the strategy is built around convincing voters “that Trump was a bad president” and has only gotten worse.

That means rhetoric and ads focused on, among other things, Trump’s felony convictions, the sexual assault allegations and civil conviction against him, the Jan. 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol and Trump’s talk of “retribution” against those he believes have wronged him if he wins a second term.

Chris LaCivita, a Trump adviser, called the Biden campaign’s strategy “desperate.”

“The American people aren’t buying what the White House is selling,” said LaCivita.

The Biden campaign has spent \$65 million on television and radio advertising so far, with ad buys from other groups that support Biden adding another \$51 million. That spending has increased as of late, with an increase in attack ads.

White House Notebook

Biden gives hints of his debate arguments

*White House reporter **Cleve R. Wootson Jr.** files this week’s notebook:*

In less than a week, Biden will step on a stage in Atlanta to try to draw as stark a contrast with Trump as he can.

Biden is spending much of a long weekend at the presidential retreat at Camp David, doing debate preparation. Although he’s sharpening his arguments, they won’t necessarily be new.

Biden and other politicians often workshop such arguments in the weeks before debates, dissecting public appearances, exchanges with the press and remarks at fundraisers to find attacks and applause lines that resonate.

“I think he snapped when he lost in 2020,” Biden said of Trump at a fundraiser in McLean, Va., on Tuesday night that featured Bill and Hillary Clinton. “He can’t accept he lost. [It’s] literally driving him crazy. ... Now he’s running again. He’s not only obsessed with losing in 2020, he’s clearly a little bit unhinged right now.”

That’s the latest version of an argument Biden and his campaign have been making in recent weeks: that Trump is an unhinged candidate bent on political revenge — and possibly using the presidential race to skirt punishment for his crimes.

But Biden will also need to prepare defensive arguments on topics on which voters perceive

him as weak — such as immigration, which his campaign has long worried is an Achilles' heel. Biden may have given a preview of how he will address the issue in a Monday announcement where he cleared the way for hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants married to U.S. citizens to apply for legal residency. During that speech, Biden spent a large amount of time talking about what he has done to secure the border, including an executive order that shut off access to the U.S. asylum system when illegal border crossing exceed a daily threshold.

"Two weeks ago, I did what Republicans in Congress refused to do: I took action to secure our border. That included restricting unlawful crossings at our southern border, making decisions on asylum more quickly, and so much more. And so far, it's working," he said, adding that encounters have dropped 25 percent at the border.

You can follow all of Cleve's work [here](#) and follow him on X [here](#).

The Media

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Viral

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