

Biden has lost the battle for the soul of the nation

Far from restoring decency to the White House, the Biden administration has found itself mired in scandal

Fred Bauer 18 December 2023

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Joe Biden's culture war has come back to bite Credit: Kevin Dietsch/Getty

A video purportedly showing a [congressional staffer having sex](#) in a Senate hearing room has rocked Washington. An element of cruelty permeates these media feeding-frenzies, in which an inopportune moment from a person's life suddenly rockets through global headlines. The staffer allegedly shown in the video has now left the Senate and is now a character in the Beltway drama factory infamous for cycling through the young and ambitious.

For many observers, this latest controversy only underlines how politics has not yet returned to *normal* under Joe Biden. "Decency is on the ballot," Jill Biden proclaimed during the 2020 election. Biden ran under the banner of a "return to normal," and Biden and his allies have trumpeted that they are engaged in a "battle for the soul of the nation."

Yet this high-toned rhetoric has collided with the realities of the Biden administration. The legal challenges of Hunter Biden, the president's son, provide fodder for news coverage. House Republicans have now opened up an impeachment inquiry related to the president's potential involvement in Hunter Biden's business dealings.

Far from tempering cultural battles, the Biden White House has often exacerbated them. One of the major set-pieces of Biden's 2022 midterm campaign was a Philadelphia stemwinder denouncing "MAGA Republicans" as a threat to democracy – even as Democratic interest groups had strategically boosted Trump allies in key GOP primaries.

In the first two years of his presidency, Biden dumped political capital in a failed effort to [eliminate the Senate filibuster](#), one of the major checks on centralised controls in that body and something Biden once called essential for preserving American democracy. The unprecedented prosecution of Donald Trump, Biden's predecessor and leading political challenger, has only added to the sense of existential political conflict during the Biden years.

The White House has adopted maximalist positions on abortion, gender, and sexuality. Biden's immigration policies have helped precipitate a historic crisis at the Southern border. The shockwaves of these policy choices echo throughout the Americas. An Associated Press report recently highlighted the Darien Gap, which bridges Colombia and Panama. Prior to 2022, the record for migrant crossings in that area was 30,000 people. This year, it has been over 500,000.

The aftermath of Hamas's terrorist onslaught on Israel has heightened the sense of American instability. Antisemitic demonstrations have erupted in major American cities and college campuses – a sign, for many, of the fraying civic fabric. The White House has offered some support to Israel in its anti-Hamas military operations, but the national Democratic Party's divisions have spilled into public view.

While some elected officials like Pennsylvania senator John Fetterman have unapologetically defended Israel, Democratic White House and congressional staffers have initiated a campaign of open letters and demonstrations in order to undercut Biden's Israel policy. The strident activism that has transformed so many elite college campuses risks destabilising the Democratic Party, which has increasingly become the party of the meritocratic elect.

This constellation of controversies may pose some peril to Biden reelection's prospects. Perhaps the inflection point for Biden's approval rating was the [bloody and tumultuous withdrawal from Afghanistan](#); he has not had a positive net approval rating in polling aggregators since then. Further chaos – along with the economic pain caused by inflation – has dragged down his numbers even more since then.

Indicating the depth of the public's frustration, a recent Pew poll found that only 42 per cent of *Democrats* have at least some confidence that Biden could "bring the country closer together." Thus, only a minority of Biden's own party has faith in his ability to deliver on perhaps his central promise from the 2020 campaign.

Biden may yet be able to overcome those weaknesses. Democrats overperformed Biden's approval rating in the 2022 midterms, and Donald Trump (currently the Republican frontrunner) remains deeply unpopular. But a number of polls also show Trump with a lead in the general election. A lot can happen in a year, but these polling numbers suggest Biden's vulnerability.

While the bitter conflict that has defined the Biden years may at first seem at odds with his 2020 campaign message, a "battle for the soul of the nation" can actually be a way of rationalising the most vicious political warfare. If "the soul of the nation" really is at stake, any excess can be justified and any scandal (for the "right side of history," of course) can be excused. The theme of urgency helped propel Biden to the presidency, but that inner logic of conflict may endanger his bid to remain in the Oval Office.