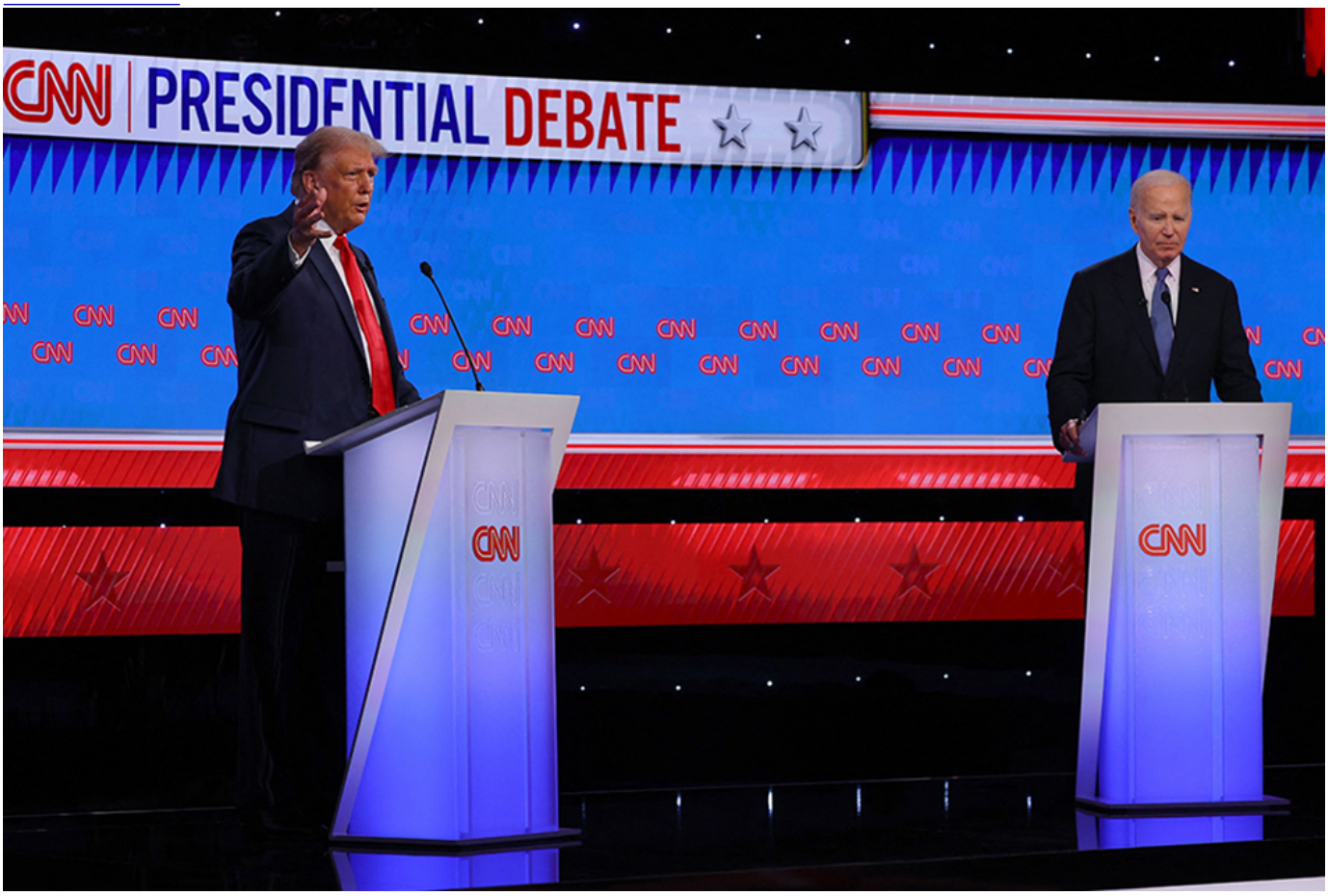
Opinion

NCR Voices



Former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden participate in their first U.S. presidential campaign debate in Atlanta June 27, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



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President Joe Biden lost the debate last night, and he lost badly. He spoke the truth, but his voice was raspy. At times he was clear and focused as when he discussed complicated issues like immigration and Israel. But at 12 minutes into the debate, he lost his train of thought and couldn't finish his answer, switching from COVID-19 to Medicare without explanation.

Throughout the 90-minute debate, he sometimes looked vacant. Very few of his answers were crisp and many sounded over-rehearsed.

Former president Donald Trump repeatedly said things that were not true. He often deflected questions, including those pertaining to the assault on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. He kept returning to issues like the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan that matter to his base but not to undecided voters.

None of that mattered. He was vigorous. He performed. He spoke without pausing; also, without a factual basis for his claims. But what mattered is that he projected energy and strength.

A meme has emerged in this election: the "double haters," people who hate both of their choices in the presidential contest. It is difficult for those of us on the left to see how anyone could fail to see that Trump is an unprecedented danger to democracy. Unfortunately, the discussion of threats to democracy did not begin until 39 minutes into the debate. He did not engage in a rant about election fraud until the last minutes of the debate.

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Biden's strengths — his decency, the sense that he truly cares about average people — these did not translate well on the debate stage. He had no stories that conveyed his natural empathy. His hurling insults at Trump had the effect of lowering him to

Trump's level. In fact, Biden's attacks robbed him of his greatest strength vis-à-vis Trump: Trump constantly trashes the country, and he did so again last night, whereas Biden still believes in the American Dream. Biden rightly, and strongly, criticized Trump for trashing America, but it was too late. Besides, a minute later, they got into a debate about golf handicaps and Biden took the bait. Ugh.

Trump's weaknesses — his narcissism, his dystopian vision, his contempt for the rule of law — none of these figured prominently in the debate, which is one reason the CNN hosts should be faulted. Trump parried the questions for which he had no answers. He benefitted from a format that involved no fact-checking. He did nothing to endear himself to undecided voters. If Biden had not bombed, Trump's performance would have been viewed negatively. But Biden did bomb.

Debates are rarely decisive; they tend to clarify perceptions that are already prevalent. And the perceptions that matter have next to nothing to do with issues or policy. People do not vote for a slate of policies. Party platforms were once meaningful documents, but that has not been the case for decades. Instead, debates clarify perceptions of the person.

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In 1980, Jimmy Carter came across as someone who was overwhelmed by events, and Ronald Reagan looked like someone who could master them, even if such mastery required gross simplifications of complex problems. In 1976, Gerald Ford's unfortunate comment about Poland being free from Soviet domination reinforced the image of him as a klutz, someone who tripped on policy as well as stairs. In 1992, when George H.W. Bush looked at his watch, the image reified the idea that he thought he was born to governance and the hard work of asking for votes was a waste of his precious time. In 2012, Mitt Romney couldn't shake his image as an uptight oligarch.

Four years ago, Trump reinforced the perception that he was a petulant bully with his near-constant interruptions. When Biden had finally had enough and said, "Man, will you shut up," people did not detect disrespect for the office of the presidency on

Biden's part. They saw Trump's behavior as beneath the dignity of the office. Preconceived perceptions were solidified.

Last night, concerns about Biden's age were not just reinforced. They were verified. It was a disaster for the sitting president.

By noon on Friday, we will know which clips are going viral. It is one of the saddest things about our democracy that the election will be decided by low-information voters who probably did not watch the entire debate last night. They will learn about the debate from Tik-tok. The clip that is most likely to go viral was that moment 12 minutes in when Biden lost his train of thought. It was painful to watch but it will be watched. Again and again.

Former president Trump took a giant step towards winning the November election last night. The texts I received during the debate were uniformly characterized by gallows humor. The problem is that it isn't actually funny.

It is frightening.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.