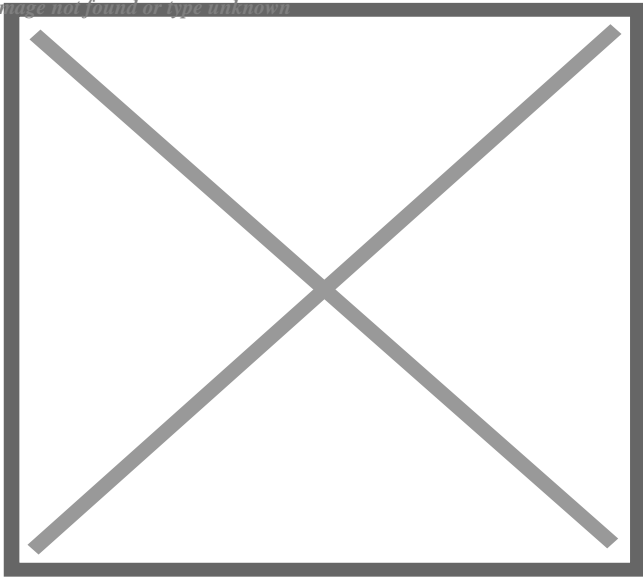


White House bats down reports Biden assessing exit from presidential race

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Washington, July 4 (RHC)-- U.S. President Joe Biden has pledged to stay in the presidential race, despite media reports he was assessing an exit following a dismal debate showing against his Republican challenger, former President Donald Trump, last week.

Biden was resolute when he joined a call with campaign staff on Wednesday, despite growing concern about the 81-year-old's viability in the race in November against Trump, including from members of his own party.

"I am running," Biden said during the call, two sources told the Reuters news agency. He added he would not be pushed out as the Democratic Party's nominee. White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre later echoed the sentiment in comments to reporters, saying that Biden was "absolutely not" considering stepping down.

Jean-Pierre was responding to a slate of reports in US media that Biden had told confidants that he was aware his candidacy had suffered in the wake of his performance in his first live face-off with Trump of the election cycle.

The New York Times and ABC News both reported that Biden had told allies that the next few days will be significant in recovering his standing, although sources speaking to both outlets stressed that he wanted to continue.

At 78, Biden was the oldest person ever sworn into the U.S. presidency following his victory in the 2020 election over Trump. A second victory would see him leave office at the age of 86. If Trump were to win in November, he would also be 78 when he enters office for his second term.

Concerns about Biden's age have stoked disquiet among some members of the Democratic Party for months in advance of the primary elections, but questions were often met with a shrug from Biden and his team.

The concerns came to a head during the June 27th debate, particularly within the first 10 minutes when a gruff-voiced, slow-moving Biden gave several answers that meandered into incoherence. In contrast, the typically bombastic Trump remained relatively controlled during the debate.

The White House has since said Biden was suffering from a cold that hurt his performance. The president said he was not at his physical best during the debate, reportedly telling donors on Tuesday his demanding schedule of time-zone hopping travel was partially to blame and that he nearly "fell asleep on the stage."

On Tuesday, Representative Lloyd Doggett of Texas became the first federally elected Democrat to publicly call on Biden to drop out of the race. Democrat Raul Grijalva followed suit on Wednesday, saying that Biden has a responsibility to "get out of this race".

Other prominent Democrats – including former President Barack Obama and former Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi – have defended Biden, while acknowledging his dismal debate showing.

Despite her support, Pelosi said in an interview with MSNBC that it was a "legitimate question to say is this an episode or is this a condition?"

A White House official said Biden had spoken to top congressional Democrat Hakeem Jeffries, the minority leader in the House of Representatives, on Tuesday, and Senator Chuck Schumer, the majority leader in the Senate, on Wednesday, to allay concerns about his candidacy. Biden was also set to meet Democratic governors on Wednesday.

If Biden were to step aside it would cast the race into uncharted territory. The U.S. presidential primary season, when party members typically vote on who they want to be their candidate, has already ended, although the party's candidate will not be finalised until the Democratic National Convention next month.

Jim Clyburn, an influential Democratic congressman and close Biden ally, suggested during an interview with CNN on Wednesday that the party should hold a "mini-primary" if Biden steps aside. The comment made him the first senior party member to talk publicly about how a potential replacement would work.

Vice President Kamala Harris, who has rallied behind her boss, is considered the most likely successor if Biden were to step aside. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, California Governor Gavin Newsom, Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro and Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear have also been floated.

The extent of the political fallout from the debate has been unclear, with some early polls showing little change among support for either Trump or Biden in the polarised atmosphere. A Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Tuesday found one in three Democrats believed Biden should exit the race in light of his debate performance, but showed no other potential Democratic candidate faring better than Biden.

However, a Times/Siena Poll released on Wednesday spelled bigger trouble for Biden. It showed a three-point overall increase in Trump's lead over Biden from the week earlier, prior to the debate. Meanwhile, 74 percent of voters viewed Biden as too old for the presidency, up five percentage points since the debate.

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