

POLITICS

# We're All Hostages Of Ego

The fate of the country relies on the psychology of two elderly men

[George Dillard](#)



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**If** I were either of them, I would just golf.

Both Joe Biden and Donald Trump seem to love the sport. The most spirit-sapping part of the first debate between them this year — or at least the moment I finally felt my soul leave my body — came toward

the end, when the 78-year-old and the 81-year-old argued over which of the two was the strongest and most vigorous.

Trump bragged that he had won championships at the golf clubs that he owns (it is extremely unclear whether these victories were earned; Rick Reilly, a sportswriter who wrote a book about Trump, [says](#), “Donald Trump is the worst [golf] cheat ever and he doesn’t care who knows”). Biden replied that he used to have a good handicap.

The two men — who, remember, are auditioning to be leader of the free world — jockeyed like insecure middle schoolers over which of them could hit a little ball farther. It did not make me optimistic about the future of our republic.

But, seriously, why don’t they just retire and play golf?

For most of us, a future in which we’re still working at age 82 would be a sad scenario, one in which we’d run through our retirement funds and resorted to running the cash register at the local grocery store. Full-time employment that long after retirement age does not sound attractive, at least to me.

That’s not the case for these guys. Both are wealthy men who don’t need the salary that they’d earn as president. Both have accomplished pretty much everything you could hope for in life. Both are of advanced age. Why not pop off to the beaches of Delaware or Mar-a-Lago and enjoy retirement?

I'm sure the reasons are complicated (for Trump, it involves the enticing prospect of staying out of federal prison). But a lot of it comes down to simple ego.

Joe Biden seems, at the moment at least, to be hell-bent on taking his campaign to the finish line — even if it seems increasingly likely that the race will be full of humiliating moments, [ending with a loss](#) to a convicted felon and lifelong fraudster who tried to overthrow the government. Why not step aside and let somebody else — who would likely have a much better chance of beating Trump — run?

It seems that much of this has to do with Biden's ego. He's [long been known](#) as a person with healthy self-regard. Former Obama speechwriter Jon Lovett [writes](#):

*There have always been two Joe Bidens. The empathetic, decent, big-hearted leader, forged in loss and grief, finding the good in his friends and opponents, in love with America, arms wide and open with space for everyone. And there's the blowhard with a chip on his shoulder, stubborn, something to prove, his fellow senators rolling their eyes as the finger wags harder and the stories get longer. Statesman and politician, hero and fool...*

*But it's hard to deny that in the two weeks since the debate, it's the arrogant and small Joe Biden we've seen most — hanging on, bragging, defensive, angry, weak. Who else but him? he wonders aloud. Only God could change his mind, he tells us.*

Biden comes by his ego honestly. His whole career has been one in which he's ignored his doubters and disregarded the odds. He overcame a stutter, the tragic deaths of his wife and child, two failed campaigns for president, the death of another child, and the public struggles of his son Hunter, to become an important Senator, then Vice President, and finally President of the United States. And he didn't just win the presidency in normal times — he defeated a man who constituted one of the most unique and powerful threats to democracy in the country's history.

Now Biden wants to stay in the race and do a job that demands far more than the [six good hours](#) he can reportedly give it each day. In order to subject himself to the daily torment of this campaign and the presidency, Biden must believe some combination of the following:

- He deserves to be president more than anyone else;
- He's the only Democrat who can beat Donald Trump;
- The polls are wrong and Americans do want him to remain president; and
- He's more capable than he really is.

It must be hard to calibrate your ego when you are the president. Your whole life is stage-managed, people are constantly kissing your ass, and you really have overcome the odds to get where you are. It must be excruciating when, in the harsh light of day, your inadequacies become apparent to everyone.

It's true that Biden alone will decide whether or not he will be the nominee. Democrats will have to persuade rather than force him to step away from the campaign. So now the fate of the country likely rests on whether this particular 81-year-old man can reckon with his ego over the next few weeks.

When asked whether he thought Biden would stay in the race, Trump recently [said](#) that “he’s got an ego and he doesn’t want to quit.” Well, he would be the expert — if anybody understands ego, it’s Donald Trump.

This is, after all, the guy who made a career out of plastering his name in gaudy gold lettering on dozens of buildings. The guy who, when he felt that he wasn’t getting enough attention from the tabloids, [called reporters under a false name](#) to brag about his romantic adventures. The guy who became so addicted to his adoring crowds that he [kept holding rallies](#) after he was elected — and persisted in scheduling them during a deadly pandemic, likely [causing hundreds of deaths](#).

Trump organized [televised cabinet meetings](#) so his appointees could praise him on camera. He [undermined international agreements](#) that he didn’t initiate, convinced that he could make better deals (he couldn’t). Trump’s interactions with foreign leaders, business executives, and Republican politicians were comical at times, as everyone overpraised the narcissistic big guy the way they would a six-year-old who had just sort-of-successfully tied his shoes.

We know Trump believes that he deserves to be president more than anyone else. We also know that he routinely overestimates his own abilities. He says insanely narcissistic things like “[I alone can fix it](#)” and “[I’m a very stable genius](#)” all the time!

Trump hollowed out the Republican Party, turning it into a vehicle for his own self-aggrandizement. He did the same with the government and will go even farther the second time around, free of the “adults in the room” who were occasionally successful at constraining him in his first term.

What may be worst, Trump seems utterly incapable of understanding that his egomania is unusual or undesirable. Political philosopher David Runciman [writes](#):

*What makes Trump so unnerving, however, is his seeming lack of any self-knowledge. He is not really probing for the limits of what the presidency allows, because that would require him to accept that there are limits. He does what he does regardless. Trump is both more and less than a president should be. More, because he is behaving as though his power were truly as he believes it to be. Less, because he is also behaving as though the presidency were just another job (businessman, reality TV host). Much of the time he does not seem to appreciate where he is. Why would someone whose personality is so fixed be so unpredictable in office? Because that personality makes him incapable of seeing the presidency as its previous occupants have seen it, as an office that comes with*

*certain expectations of how to behave. Trump is, in institutional terms, unhinged.*

In other words, the most dangerous kind of egotistical man is the one that doesn't even know what a normal ego looks like.

In a democracy of more than 300 million citizens, you'd think that the voice of the people — and the people have clearly stated time and time again that [most of us don't want either of these guys](#) — would matter more than it does. But these two men and their enablers have used the machinery of power to ignore the desires of the American public and cling to their positions. The longer their self-regard matters more than the will of the people, the more cynical Americans will become about their government — and they're already plenty cynical.

Now we're in a game of chicken. One narcissist who has done a lot of good but is past his prime is staring down an electorate that doesn't think he's capable of doing the job anymore. Another far more malignant narcissist is hoping to gain another opportunity for self-enrichment and self-promotion. The rest of us have to watch the show through our fingers, hoping that the results aren't too bad for ourselves, our families, and our futures.

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty tired being held hostage by the egos of a couple of old men.