

History Matters: Biden Steps Down

On July 21, 2024, sitting President Joe Biden made the decision to exit the 2024 Presidential race, making the election one of most historically interesting contests in American history. By choosing to withdraw and endorse his Vice President Kamala Harris, Biden has made the rare choice to step away from a powerful position. Biden's decision, which came after winning a number of primary contests, makes him one of a small group of leaders throughout history who have willingly given up power.

In 1786, when President George Washington declined a second term as president, he astounded leaders around the world, including King George III of England, who expressed his amazement at Washington's choice. Washington had been offered the presidency for life, but he would not betray the ideals of the American Revolution.

Without Washington, America would never have won its war of independence; he was the catalyst of the American Revolution, surrounded by peers who understood that fact. Washington arguably went farthest among the Founding Fathers to secure the Revolution. The choice to cede power proved that republican government was not only possible but could represent a better model of leadership. Defeated and exiled, Napoleon lamented the significance of it all: "They wanted me to be another Washington."

Washington's decision was based on a desire to build a new form of government, one with foundations in the ideals of the Enlightenment. While other presidents have stepped away from the presidency—most notably Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson in the 20th century—they did so before securing their parties' nominations and with clear awareness of their sharply declining popularity. Biden, on the other hand, had secured his party's nomination by wide margins, making his decision to step aside due to concerns about his age less straightforward than those of Truman and Johnson. Despite this, mounting pressure led him to make a nearly unprecedented choice. His decision reflects a sense of selflessness that is rare in modern politics.