

The Calm Man in the Capital: Biden Lets Others Spike the Ball but Notches a Win

President Biden brokered a debt limit deal by following instincts developed through long, hard and sometimes painful experience in Washington.



President Biden's strategy seemed to pay off with a strong bipartisan vote by the House on Wednesday night passing the deal. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

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Peter Baker, who has covered the last five presidents and countless Washington showdowns over spending and debt, reported from Washington.

In the days since he [struck a deal to avoid a national default](#), President Biden has steadfastly refused to boast about what he got as part of the agreement.

“Why would Biden say what a good deal it is before the vote?” [he asked reporters at one point](#), referring to himself in the third person. “You think that’s going to help me get it passed? No. That’s why you guys don’t bargain very well.”

The president calculated that the more he bragged that the deal was a good one for his side, the more he would inflame Republicans on the other side, jeopardizing the chances of pushing the agreement through the narrowly divided House. His reticence stood in striking contrast to his negotiating partner, [Speaker Kevin McCarthy](#), who has been

running all over the Capitol in recent days asserting that the deal was a “historic” victory for fiscal conservatives.

While Mr. Biden knew that would aggravate progressives in his own party, he gambled that he could keep enough of them in line without public chest-beating and figured that it was more important to let Mr. McCarthy claim the win to minimize a revolt on the hard right that could put his speakership in danger. Indeed, in private briefing calls following the agreement, White House officials told Democratic allies that they believed they got a good deal, but urged their surrogates not to say that publicly lest it upset the delicate balance.

The strategy paid off with a strong bipartisan vote by the House on Wednesday night passing the deal, which will suspend the debt ceiling while imposing spending restraints for the next two years. The Senate followed with [passage of the bill](#) late Thursday, with similarly bipartisan support.

The president’s approach to the negotiations — and especially their aftermath — reflects a half-century of bargaining in Washington. When someone has been around the track as long as Mr. Biden has, resisting the temptation to spike the ball and claim victory can be critical to actually securing the victory in the first place. From the start of the clash with Mr. McCarthy’s Republicans, Mr. Biden has followed the instincts he has developed through long, hard and sometimes painful experience.

Understand the Debt Limit Deal

Some of his fellow Democrats complained that Mr. Biden’s measured messaging — “it’s a bipartisan deal,” he would say when asked who got the better of the compromise — left Republicans to dominate the conversation. In their view, Mr. Biden was too eager to get an accord even at the expense of policy concessions they found anathema and too passive in making the case for the pact once he signed off on it.

“We don’t negotiate with terrorists globally — why are we going to negotiate with the economic terrorists here that are the Republican Party?” Representative [Jamaal Bowman](#), Democrat of New York, told reporters.

The who-won debate now raging in Washington could shape the narrative for both parties as they navigate this new era of divided government. Republicans want to take credit for putting an expanding federal government on a diet while Democrats want to tell their supporters they protected key progressive priorities.

The agreement crafted by Mr. Biden and Mr. McCarthy in the end was [a whittled-down version of the original proposals](#) on the table. Mr. Biden won no Democratic initiatives as part of the bargain — no new taxes on the wealthy or prescription drug discounts, for instance — but he succeeded in reining in the sweeping ambitions of conservatives who wanted to slash spending for the next decade and gut some of the president’s most important achievements of his first two years in office.

The spending restraints will apply only for the next two years instead of the 10 years sought by Republicans and result in less than half of the cuts they wanted. The work requirements ultimately added to social safety-net programs were more modest than



Speaker Kevin McCarthy has asserted that the deal was a “historic” victory for fiscal conservatives. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

originally envisioned and not applied at all to Medicaid, as Republicans insisted. While some food aid recipients aged 50 to 54 will now face work requirements, many others who are veterans or homeless will be excluded for the first time in what the Congressional Budget Office estimated would be a net wash when it comes to the total.

Republicans’ efforts to cancel clean-energy investments and block student loan forgiveness were stripped out of the final agreement, and they had to settle for trimming \$20 billion from Mr. Biden’s \$80 billion plan to bolster Internal Revenue Service efforts to target wealthy tax cheats rather than cancel it altogether.

“As a purely political calculation, the #DebtCeilingAgreement could have been worse,” Representative Ro Khanna, a prominent progressive Democrat from California, [wrote on Twitter before voting against the deal](#). “But this is not about politics, it’s about people.”

Mr. Biden’s approach was decidedly old-school in a new-school era. No matter how much Mr. McCarthy assailed him for waiting 97 days to talk about the dispute, the president believed there was no point in rushing into extended talks, given that no important agreements in Washington are made until a deadline is looming with catastrophic consequences if the two sides do not come together.

The Rush to Avoid a Default on the U.S. Debt

President Biden signed the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 into law, ending for now the threat of economic calamity from a default on the nation’s debt.

- **Biden's Strategy:** The president's team aimed to work out a deal that [would appease Republicans with big spending cuts](#), but would offer wins on substance through the details of the text and many side deals.
- **Enforcing the Deal:** The law includes a provision that carries [the threat of automatic cuts if Congress fails to pass additional spending bills](#) needed to follow through on their deal.
- **The Calm Man in the Capital:** Biden brokered the deal by following instincts he developed through [long, hard and sometimes painful experience in Washington](#).
- **National Debt:** The legislation features modest cuts to a relatively small corner of the federal budget. As a curb on the growth of the nation's \$31.4 trillion debt load, [it is a minor breakthrough, at best](#).

While he initially insisted that the debt ceiling was “not negotiable,” Mr. Biden eventually abandoned that point of principle to do exactly what he said he would not. He barely maintained the fiction that negotiating about spending cuts was not the same thing as negotiating over the debt ceiling, a distinction few if any saw. When that was pointed out to him at one point this week, he finally shrugged and said, [“Well, can you think of an alternative?”](#)

Some in his party could — they wanted him to claim the power to ignore the debt ceiling, citing the 14th Amendment, which stipulates that the “validity of the public debt” of the federal government “shall not be questioned.” But Mr. Biden is an institutionalist, and while he said he agreed with the interpretation that the amendment gave him such untested authority, he balked at asserting it at this point, reasoning that it would be challenged in court and still possibly result in a default during prolonged litigation.



The agreement crafted by Mr. Biden and Mr. McCarthy in the end was a whittled-down version of the original proposals on the table. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

Many others in both parties have run to the television cameras in recent days to make comments about the meaning of the agreement and the effects it would have on politics or policy, but Mr. Biden positioned himself as the calm man in the capital, the mature leader he hopes voters will prefer during next year's election. The president did engage in occasional Republican-bashing when it seemed strategically useful, but he felt little need to jump into the public positioning fray just for the sake of it, either before or after the deal was cut.

Even as his allies and even his own White House issued incendiary statements, Mr. Biden acted like the person who has been there before. Because of course he has. Many times. At one point, during the final phase of the talks, as both sides were lobbing public grenades at each other while quietly narrowing their differences, Mr. Biden counseled reporters not to pay that much attention. It was all part of the process, he said.

“This goes in stages,” [he said](#). “I’ve been in these negotiations before.” He explained the back and forth, involving negotiators meeting and then reporting back to their leaders. “What happens is the first meetings weren’t all that progressive. The second ones were. The third one was. And then, what happens is they — the carriers go back to the principals and say, ‘This is what we’re thinking about.’ And then, people put down new claims.”

It would all work out in the end, he assured Americans. And as far as he is concerned, it did. No matter what anyone else may say.

Peter Baker is the chief White House correspondent and has covered the last five presidents for The Times and The Washington Post. He is the author of seven books, most recently “The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021,” with Susan Glasser. [@peterbakernyt](#) • [Facebook](#)

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