

Trump's scorched-earth nihilism will cost him the presidency

Opinion by **E.J. Dionne Jr.**

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If there is any consolation to be found in the norm-busting chaos on display in Cleveland Tuesday night, it's that President Trump's theatrical, scorched-earth nihilism pulled down the curtain on his own chances of winning.

The smoldering debris left behind by a political arsonist created one of the low moments of American electoral history and left all but the most fanatical Trump supporters more dispirited than ever about the state of our public life.

This can hardly be helpful to an incumbent president.

It was not a debate in any meaningful sense. Trump was utterly unconstrained in his interruptions, his obnoxious comments, his snide asides, his attacks on Joe Biden's family, his relentless bullying and, ultimately, his lack of humanity. Watching this spectacle, viewers had to wonder if it would become known as The Last Debate.

Chillingly, he refused to condemn white supremacists and told the far-right group Proud Boys, "Stand back and stand by!" Soon after, the violence-supporting group posted the president's words online as a new logo.

When Biden brought up the military service of his son Beau in the context of criticizing Trump's comments about the military as "suckers" and "losers," Trump could find no words of respect for Beau Biden's patriotic sacrifice or even a nod of sympathy for an opponent who had lost his son to cancer. Instead, Trump immediately shifted to a harsh attack on Biden's surviving son, Hunter. This is a man with no sense of fellow feeling.

Moment after moment, the only words that seemed appropriate were those of the celebrated rebuke that destroyed Sen. Joe McCarthy's political power: "Have you no sense of decency, sir?"

Evaluating the event in conventional political terms does not do justice to how far the evening fell beneath standards that were once widely embraced. If Trump was executing a planned strategy, its goal was to use disruption to deny Biden's chance for a lofty performance that could have put the Democratic nominee on the road to a landslide.

There were moments early on when this seemed to be working, to a degree at least, as Biden struggled to get his points through Trump's intrusions and schoolyard barbs. Biden was prepared to confront the president's arguments. He was not prepared — any more than the audience or moderator Chris Wallace — for Trump's breathtaking violation of agreed-upon rules and the norms of democratic discourse.

But Biden was not baited into any consequential mistakes or explosions that might have damaged his image of steadiness. He got stronger as the nightmare unfolded, clearly sensing that words of empathy and reason would reach viewers through the storm. At one point he did refer to Trump as a "clown," then quickly corrected to "person." By

then, “clown” seemed appropriate — almost civilized.

Biden directly responded to Trump’s calls for “law and order” by insisting that he was for “law and order with justice.” He coherently criticized Trump’s handling of the pandemic and called several times for bringing the nation together. With some assistance from Trump, Biden argued another key component of his case: that Trump would destroy the Affordable Care Act and its protections for Americans with preexisting conditions, a group that will grow because of covid-19.

But most importantly for Biden, Trump showed precisely why so many Americans are eager to throw the incumbent out.

The one thing Trump did not look like was a president. Many who watched — especially women, who are already tilting hard against Trump — were surely thinking: How soon can we end this nasty, unsettling meanness?

The debate’s moderator certainly couldn’t do it. Wallace tried but failed to get Trump under control, and the president turned on him, too. It was a sign of how successfully Trump has worked the referees for four years that Wallace tried twice to quiet the president by reassuring him that he would be “happy” with the next round of questions. Making a predator happy is not a good idea in general, and not the role of a debate moderator.

Wallace’s helplessness was symptomatic of the extraordinary and systematic damage Trump is inflicting on our institutions. The real estate speculator’s efforts at the end of the debate to discredit the electoral process itself brought home just how much of a wrecker Trump is.

Donald Trump destroys everything he touches, from the hopes of the innocent victims of his Trump University scam to his own businesses. He has left the country a shambles with his handling of the pandemic. And on Tuesday, he showed that if he cannot prevail, he is prepared to shatter our democracy.

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