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Bittersweet Biden passes the torch to Harris as giddy Democrats bask in optimism

Opening evening of Democratic convention marked a clear generational shift



An emotional Joe Biden described the US presidency as the "honour of a lifetime" as he addressed the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Video: Reuters



Keith Duggan in Chicago

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THE IRISH TIMES

Hi Ceril

across [Joe Biden](#)'s ancestral homeland in Ireland by the time he'd finished what was a rapturous goodbye in Chicago. The opening evening of the Democratic convention marked a clear generational shift. And it was, too, a parade of presidents – the presidential candidate, the exiting president, the ghosts of what-if shimmering around an almost-president and intimations of future presidential potential stars as the party set about building on its stunning August revival.

Wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, Biden gave a tearful introduction from his podium at 10:00 p.m. on Monday night. He gave a ten-minute and lengthy defence of his presidency at the White House and a subtle acknowledgment of his age. Biden's end. Twice and then three times the Democratic delegates on the floor and those in the bleachers in the big arena interrupted Biden's speech to chant "Thank You Joe".

Biden spoke well here. His voice sounded stronger than it had all summer as his [election campaign](#) lost its wattage and momentum. At one stage, he belted out the rehearsed line – "we finally beat big pharma" – which he had so painfully mangled in his debate against [Donald Trump](#) in June. Here, two months on and his ambitions for a second term over, Biden seemed at peace. "Bittersweet" was the buzzword in advance of this speech, but it could be that witnessing the sudden infusion of joy and optimism coursing through the Democratic campaign this past month has convinced Biden that the hardest decision was the right decision. If he is still smarting, he disguised it brilliantly.

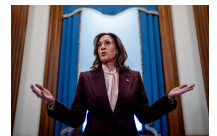
"I've got five months left in my presidency. I've got a lot to do. I intend to get it done. It's been the honour of a lifetime to serve as your president. I love the job. But I love my country more. I love my country more. And we need to preserve our democracy."

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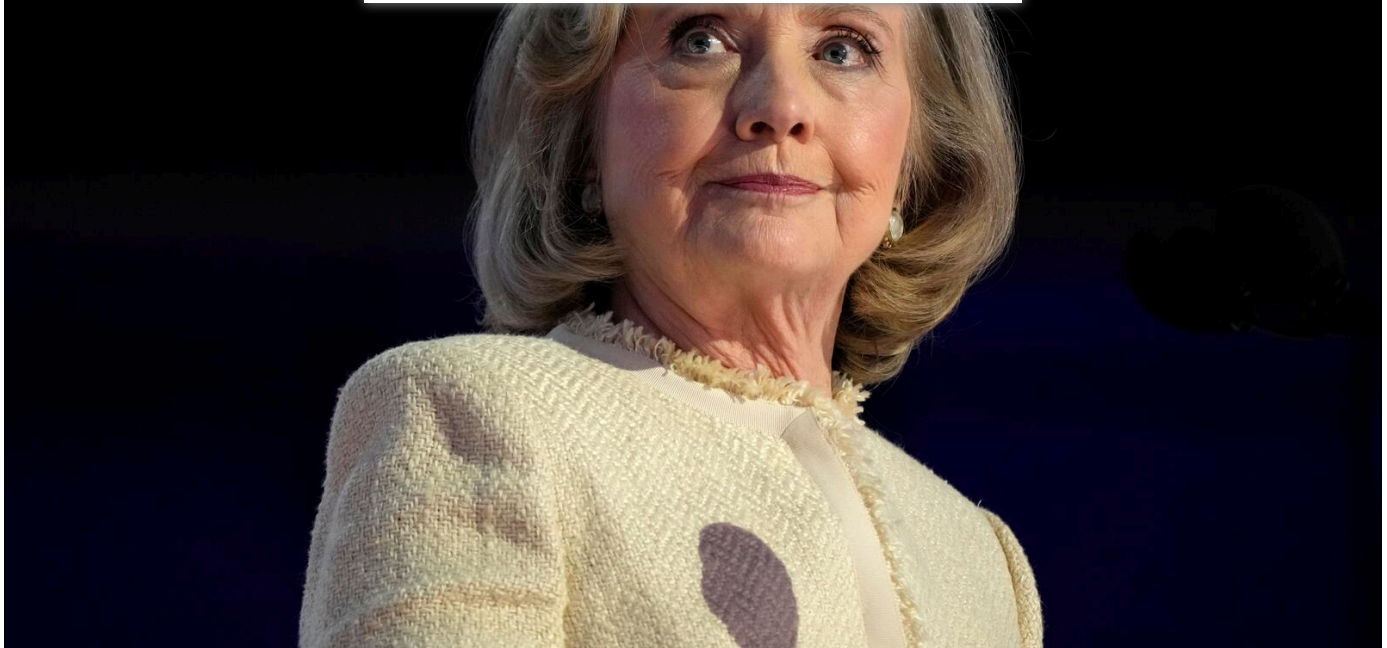


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Hillary Clinton preached perseverance during the first day of the Democratic National Convention. Photograph: Jacquelyn Martin/AP

It was as close as he came to directly reflecting on his historic decision to walk away. But those in the audience could be left in no doubt that they were witnessing the beginning, at least, of that slow walk. If he marvelled at his own journey – “nowhere else could a kid with a stutter go from a modest home in Delaware to sitting behind a desk in the Oval office” – it was framed in a genuine gratitude at the opportunity to serve as president, one that arrived after his best chance seemed to have passed. It was, he reminded them, a sense of duty and the disturbing white supremacy scenes he witnessed in Charlottesville in 2017 that convinced him to make a stand and run against Donald Trump.

“Hate was on the march in America. Old ghosts in new garments. I had no intention of running again. I had just lost part of my soul,” he said, referring to the death two years earlier of his son Beau.

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But although the occasion belonged to Joe Biden, the spirit of the night belonged to the women who took to the stage. There were typically excellent, snappy turns

from rising Democrat Jasmine Crockett, who spoke against Trump, winning over the resumes of the respected career prosecutor. He



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The most powerful moment of the night belonged to Hadley Duvall, a Kentucky woman who stood alone on stage and told the audience of her story of pregnancy through rape at the age of 12, by her stepfather, calling out Trump's role in the abortion bans.

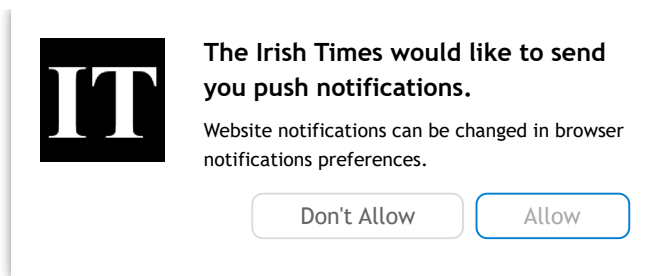
"He calls it a beautiful thing. What is so beautiful about a child having to carry her parents' child?"

And then there was Hillary. It is hard not to believe that some essential part of Hillary Clinton was vanquished by the traumatic experience of losing a presidential election that had seemed like her manifest destiny in 2016. It was her sliding doors moment and the thousands of analyses – that her campaign team were fatally complacent about their stronghold in the Rust Belt states; that the public could not warm to her; that the US was simply not ready to elect a woman; all were quickly just water under the bridge as Trump took the White House and unleashed his American Carnage inauguration speech. In a peculiar way, Clinton's grand disappointment brought about this emotional goodbye to Joe Biden.

And here was Clinton now, in her pale suit and, under the bright lights, very much the same person who won the popular vote eight years ago and still lost out on the greatest political prize. Her public appearances have become less frequent in the years since. But when she took the stage, she felt the hot breath of warmth and gratitude for her from the delegates and responded with a speech that arguably eclipsed anything she could muster during that traumatic campaign, when she had strained and guessed to gauge how she should best project herself in order to appear presidential.

Clinton spoke of shattered glass ceilings and as Kamala Harris now enjoys a startling surge in Democratic enthusiasm and an eye-catching jump in the polls, it was acknowledged, implicitly, in the sustained and unstoppable applause, that Clinton's failed tilt at the presidency eight years ago had delivered the hammer blow that cracked that same glass.

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She came first. She didn't need to pretend to be anyone other than herself here, telling the crowd that her mother, Dorothy, was Chicago-born, in those years before women could vote – a status, she said, that “changed 104 years ago yesterday”.

Referencing her response to that election failure, Clinton preached perseverance. “And afterwards we refused to give up on America. Millions marched; many ran for office. We kept our eyes on the future. Well, my friends, the future is here. I wish my mother and Kamala’s mother could see us. They would say: keep going. And women fighting for reproductive healthcare are saying keep going. People struggling for healthcare, for rent are all saying to us, keep going.”

The arena was filled with variations on that theme: that the Democrats are the party of compassion, of equity, of optimism and opportunity. The mood was one of uncomplicated happiness. They haven't felt this good about themselves for years. Little wonder, then, that Joe Biden was beaming at the end of it all, when Jill Biden and then Kamala Harris arrived to greet and embrace him on the stage. The people rained love and chanted his name.

In the decades ahead his salute will be distilled to the moment when he quoted a line from the Gene Scheer ballad American Anthem that sounded to all the world like his epitaph.

“America, America,” Joe Biden said. “I gave my best to you.”

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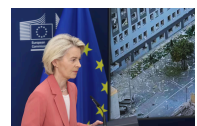


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