

OPINION

Dear Joe Biden: Don't attend the next debate

If millions of Americans can do their jobs via Zoom, the two candidates can debate that way as well.

By [Michael A. Cohen](#) Contributor, Updated October 7, 2020, 5:11 p.m.



The James Brady Press Briefing Room sits empty a day after White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany tested positive for the coronavirus, Oct. 6. More than 20 people who worked at or visited the White House, including senior administration officials and President Donald Trump, have tested positive for COVID-19. CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY

Since the coronavirus pandemic arrived on America's shores, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has done what President Trump is seemingly incapable of doing: He's consistently demonstrated how Americans should protect themselves and others from COVID-19. He regularly wears a mask, he socially distances, and he has eschewed in-person rallies. For this, he deserves enormous credit.

But he must do more — he should refuse to attend the Oct. 15 presidential debate with President Trump, who has been diagnosed with COVID-19.

Already Biden has called for the event to be [canceled](#) if Trump continues to test positive. But with the debate only a week away — and the White House's disturbing lack of transparency about the president's medical condition, it is simply unsafe for Biden to share a stage with him.

Besides the obvious — that Biden, 77, needs to protect himself from becoming ill with a disease that's already [killed more than 211,000 people in the United States](#) — he has a responsibility to the American people to model the kind of behavior that Trump will not.

Unfortunately, that kind of behavior will not be on display Wednesday night for the vice presidential debate between Vice President Pence and Senator Kamala Harris.

Last week, a maskless Pence attended the Rose Garden announcement of the nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court as well as other events at the White House, where [more than 20 people](#) have since tested positive for COVID-19. Eight days ago, he told supporters at a debate watch party in Pennsylvania that he had been with the president that day in the Oval Office. Yet, the CDC [issued a statement saying it was safe for Pence to participate](#) in an in-person debate even though it blatantly contradicts [the agency's own guidance](#): Anyone who has been in contact with a person who tested positive for the coronavirus should quarantine for 14 days. Pence should be in quarantine for at least another six days.

Yet tonight he will share a stage with Harris, separated by a [Plexiglass shield, which the Pence team fought against](#). In fact, Pence's aide Katie Miller derided Harris's team for wanting "to use a fortress around herself." In related news, Miller's husband, [Stephen Miller, tested positive for COVID-19 on Tuesday](#). Thankfully, Pence has so far [not tested positive for COVID-19](#), but that doesn't mean he hasn't been exposed to the virus.

The Biden campaign should not only have declined to have Harris participate in Wednesday's debate, they should also refuse to agree to have Biden be on stage with Trump next week. According to [CDC guidelines](#), "people who are severely ill with COVID-19 might need to stay home longer than 10 days and up to 20 days after symptoms first appeared." We don't know precisely how ill the president is, but considering that he went to the hospital, required the use of supplemental oxygen, and received experimental medication, [he may have a significant case](#).

If the president no longer has symptoms it might, according to CDC rules, be safe for Trump to appear alongside Biden. But since we've already seen the president's doctor, Sean Conley, publicly admit that he misled the American people about Trump's medical condition — and the White House still won't say when Trump last had a negative coronavirus test — how would anyone know for sure?

Even ill, Trump still refuses to fully abide by appropriate social distancing measures and mask-wearing. Why would anyone expect him to act responsibly on a debate stage? And considering that he has continually put others in harm's way since testing positive, how many more people will needlessly be put in danger to transport the president to Miami?

It's obvious that Trump wants to playdown his illness and project an image of strength. There is every reason to believe that those around the president may lie about his condition so he can make a triumphant return to the campaign trail.

There is no reason for Biden to go along with the charade. The former vice president doesn't need to pull out of the debate altogether, but he should make clear that he will

only appear next to the president virtually. If millions of Americans can do their jobs via Zoom, the two candidates can debate that way as well.

The president and his allies will probably accuse Biden of ducking the debate and various other sins of weakness. So what?

The only way that America gets past this deadly pandemic is if everyone follows CDC guidelines and takes every precaution to stop the spread of COVID-19. It's more obvious than ever that Trump is not going to abide by these rules. By refusing to appear on stage with Trump, Biden would make clear the important message that he has been sending for the past seven months — that public health must take precedence over politics.

Michael A. Cohen's column appears regularly in the Globe. Follow him on Twitter [@speechboy71](#).

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