



The first—and possibly last—debate between President Joe Biden and Donald Trump was never going to be about the existential climate crisis. But the CNN moderators did press the issue in one question. The meandering answer that followed was a microcosm of the whole excruciating affair.

I wrote [here](#) about 22 possible climate-related questions that CNN's Dana Bash and Jake Tapper could ask, as well as one question that they should avoid. Thankfully, when Bash did come to her question about climate change an hour into the 90-minute debate, it was not framed as what the candidates *believe*. Small victories.

Bash started wisely with a foundational statement, that “2023 was the hottest year in recorded history, and communities across the country are confronting the devastating effects of extreme heat, intensifying wildfires, stronger hurricanes, and rising sea levels.” She then turned to Trump, and said, “you’ve vowed to end your opponent’s climate initiatives. But will you take any action as President to slow the climate crisis?”

As one-off questions go, this was not terrible. It combined three key ideas that were included in our [22 possible questions](#): 1) How will you (both) keep Americans safe from climate disasters including extreme heat 2) How do you (Trump) defend your pledge to kill

the successful, popular climate initiatives of the Biden administration? 3) What actions would you (both) take to address climate change? And it put the onus on Trump while giving Biden a chance to use the rebuttal to call him out and then make the case for his record and his vision for the next 4 years.

Though the answer and responses lasted about 5 minutes, the two swerved from the topic of climate to HBCUs to police union endorsements to immigration and prescription drug prices, so by my count they spent 3 minutes tops talking about the climate crises. (That's if you count a false and misleading reference Trump made to "energy independence" during a different answer.)

During his dodge, Trump lied at least three times about his environmental record and the issue at large:

"I want absolutely immaculate clean water and I want absolutely clean air, and we had it."

"I had the best environmental numbers ever. And my top environmental people gave me that statistic just before I walked on the stage, actually."

"The Paris Accord was going to cost us a trillion dollars, and China nothing, and Russia nothing, and India nothing. It was a rip off of the United States."

Perhaps the only true statement he made about his environmental record was, "We had H2O." Arielle Samuelson at [Heated](#), Sammy Roth at [the Los Angeles Times](#), and Coral Davenport at the [New York Times](#) all did fact checks on the climate question and Trump's freakish answers.

Meanwhile, Biden stumbled and veered from one factual but poorly argued point to the next, butchering his impressive environmental record. He struck on four main claims about how his leadership has the U.S. "moving in directions that are going to significantly change the elements of the cause of pollution." They were all true, but they were weak-sauce versions of the [30 significant climate initiatives passed by his administration](#).

"I've passed the most extensive, it was the extensive climate change legislation in history, in history."

“He [pulled] out of the Paris Peace Accord – Climate Accord, I immediately joined it, because if we reach for 1.5 degrees Celsius at any one point, well, there is no way back. The only existential threat to humanity is climate change. And he didn’t do a damn thing about it. He wants to undo all that I’ve done.”

“We’re making significant progress. By 2035, we will have cut pollution in half. We have – we have made significant progress. And we’re continuing to make progress.”

“We set up a Climate Corps for thousands of young people will learn how to deal with climate, just like the Peace Corps.”

President Biden egregiously missed an opportunity to fully claim credit for climate and economic efforts that are working. He, along with the CNN moderators, flagrantly missed the opportunity to be the first to confront Trump with his [well-documented](#) quid pro quo offer made to oil company executives that he would roll back important regulations in exchange for big campaign donations. Jake Tapper and Dana Bash also failed spectacularly at their responsibility to ask him about Project 2025, the MAGA game plan for a second term.

If you didn’t have the stomach to watch it live last night and want to see just the climate question in the sober light of day, you can [watch the painful exchange here](#).

Democrats are openly calling the debate a disaster. Some political columnists are calling for Biden to hang up his hat and make way for another candidate to be nominated at an open convention in mid-August—columnists including [Mark Leibovich](#) and [Jerusalem Demsas](#) at the Atlantic; [Nicholas Kristof](#) and [Thomas Friedman](#) (who was weeping in a Lisbon hotel room) at the New York Times. Ezra Klein, who first flirted with this idea in February, [is talking about it again](#). I’m anxious to see where other climate policy folks land. Two ideas that have remained central to the 2024 campaign are still true this morning. When you vote for a president, you are voting for the team around them. And all evidence points to a second Trump administration being a disaster for the climate (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). So where does all this leave advocates, policymakers, and voters who care about the climate crisis?

To quote Elizabeth Kolbert, “Despair is unproductive. It is also a sin.”

Here is the full [transcript](#) of the climate question:

BASH: Another persistent challenge is the climate crisis. 2023 was the hottest year in recorded history, and communities across the country are confronting the devastating effects of extreme heat, intensifying wildfires, stronger hurricanes, and rising sea levels.

Former President Trump, you've vowed to end your opponent's climate initiatives. But, will you take any action as President to slow the climate crisis?

TRUMP: Well, let me just go back to what he said about the police, how close the police are to him. Almost every police group in the nation from every state is supporting Donald J. Trump, almost every police group. And what he has done to the black population is horrible, including the fact that for 10 years he called them super predators. We can't, in the 1990s (ph), we can't forget that. Super predators was his name. And he called it to them for 10, and they've taken great offense at it, and now they see it happening.

But, when they see what I did for criminal justice reform and for the historically black colleges and universities, where I funded them and got them all funded, and the opportunity zones with Tim. As you know, Tim Scott was - incredibly did a great job, a great Senator from South Carolina. He came to me with the idea and it was a great idea. It's one of the most successful economic development acts ever in the country, opportunity zones. And the biggest beneficiary are blacks. And that's why we have the best numbers with them. And maybe ever, if they're saying ever, I read this morning, wherever, the best numbers, he has lost much of the black population because he has done a horrible job for black people. He has also done a horrible job for Hispanics.

But, why do you see these millions of people pouring into our country and they're going to take the jobs? And it's already started. And you haven't seen anything yet. It's a disaster.

BASH: 38 seconds left, President Trump. Will you take any action as President to slow the climate crisis?

TRUMP: So, I want absolutely immaculate clean water and I want absolutely clean air, and we had it. We had H₂O. We had the best numbers ever. And we did - we were using all forms of energy, all forms, everything. And yet, during my four years, I had the best environmental numbers ever. And my top environmental people gave me that statistic just before I walked on the stage, actually.

BIDEN: I don't know where the hell he has been. The idea that, Dana, he said is true. I've

passed the most extensive, it was the extensive climate change legislation in history, in history. We find ourselves – and by the way, black colleges, I came up with \$50 billion for HBCUs, historic black universities and colleges, because they don't have the kind of contributors that they have to build these laboratories and the like. Any black student is capable in college in doing any white student can do. They just have the money. But now, they'll be able to get those jobs in high tech.

We're in a situation where the idea that he kind of is claiming to have done something that had the cleanest water, the cleanest water? He had not done a damn thing with the environment. He – out of the Paris Peace Accord – Climate Accord, I immediately joined it, because if we reach for 1.5 degrees Celsius at any one point, well, there is no way back. The only existential threat to humanity is climate change. And he didn't do a damn thing about it. He wants to undo all that I've done.

TRUMP: The Paris Accord was going to cost us a trillion dollars, and China nothing, and Russia nothing, and India nothing. It was a rip off of the United States. And I ended it because I didn't want to waste that money because they treat us horribly. We were the only ones who was costing us money. Nobody else was paying into it. And it was a disaster.

But, everything that he said just now, I'll give you an example. I heard him say before insulin, I'm the one that got the insulin down for the seniors. I took care of the seniors. What he is doing is destroying all of our medical programs because the migrants coming in. They want everybody. And look, I have the biggest heart on the stage. I guarantee you that. And I want to take care of people. But, we're destroying our country. They're taking over our schools, our hospitals, and they're going to be taking over Social Security. He is destroying Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

BIDEN: Where does that come from? The idea is that we, in fact – we were the only ones of consequence or not. We're not members of the Paris Accord. How can we do anything we're not able to, the United States can't get this under control? One of the largest polluters in the world. Number one, we're making significant progress. By 2035, we will have cut pollution in half.

We have – we have made significant progress. And we're continuing to make progress.

We set up a Climate Corps for thousands of young people will learn how to deal with climate, just like the Peace Corps. And we're going to – we're moving in directions that are going to significantly change the elements of the cause of pollution.

But the idea that he claims that he has the biggest heart up here and he's really concerned about – about pollution and about climate, I've not seen any indication of that.

And, by the way, with regard to prescription drugs, one company agreed that they would reduce the price to \$35, which I was calling for – one, voluntarily. I made sure every company in the world, every pharmaceutical company, cannot have to pay.

BASH: Thank you.

BIDEN: And, by the way...