



THE POWER TRIP | JULY 4, 2024

The Conspiracy of Silence to Protect Joe Biden

The president's mental decline was like a dark family secret for many elite supporters.



By Olivia Nuzzi, New York's Washington correspondent

Photo: Elizabeth Frantz/REUTERS

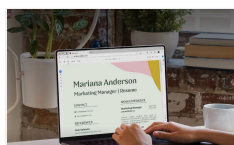
President Joe Biden walked before a row of flags and took his place at a lectern stamped with the presidential seal. A few feet in front of him, thin panes of teleprompter glass, stare as he spoke into House press

ncer ~~secretly~~ looked on. So did several senior White House officials. Anxiety clung to the humid summer air. What the president was about to say might determine the future of his presidency and perhaps the Republic itself.

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Yet this was not to be some grand pronouncement about war or peace or a shift in domestic policy. He was not delivering an official address or even a rally speech. He was not onstage in a stadium or auditorium or perched on a platform in a gilded government or hotel ballroom. He was not speaking to a crowd of thousands or even hundreds. There would be no video of his statement carried live to the world. There would be no photos. And there would be no published audio.

In a tent on the backyard patio of a private home in suburban New Jersey, the president was eye to eye with a small group of powerful Democrats and rich campaign donors, trying to reassure them that he was not about to drop dead or drop out of the presidential race.



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The content of his speech would matter less than his perceived capacity to speak coherently at all, though much of what he would say would not be entirely decipherable. His words as always had a habit of sliding into a rhetorical pileup, an affliction that had worsened in the four years since he began running for president for the third time in 2020. He might begin a sentence loud

and clear and then, midway through, sound as if he was trying to recite two or three lines all at once, his individual words and syllables dissolving into an incoherent gurgle.

Still, he was fine, he told the donors. Old, sure. But fine. He was here, wasn't he? Things were actually going well by the numbers. The polls looked good. The money looked good. They were looking right at him. He looked pretty good for 81, no? *Really, folks!* And what choice did they have? As he liked to say, "As my father liked to say: Joey, don't compare me to the almighty; compare me to the alternative." In total, his remarks would last for exactly ten minutes — long enough to inspire confidence in his abilities, advisers hoped, but not so long that he was at increased risk of calling those abilities further into question.

As always with this president, the production surrounding any public appearance — even if it was semi-private — came down to timing and control. He could not spend too much time out in the wild, and the circumstances in which he could exist in such an environment with so many wobbly variables would need to be managed aggressively. According to rules set by the White House, the traveling protective pool — the rotating group of reporters, run by the White House Correspondents' Association, that trails a sitting president to provide constant coverage of his movements for the press corps — would be permitted limited access to observe his remarks before being whisked away from the reception, or "wrangled," in communications parlance, and held elsewhere on the property (in a guest house, where somebody tuned an old television set to *Real Time With Bill Maher*).

Obsessive efforts to control Biden were not a new phenomenon. But whereas in the last campaign, the incredible stagecraft surrounding even the smallest Biden event — speaking to a few people at a union hall in rural Iowa, say, or in a barn in New Hampshire — seemed to be about avoiding the so-called gaffes that had become for him inevitable, the stagecraft of the 2024 campaign seems now to be about something else. The worry is not that Biden will say something overly candid, or say something he didn't mean to say, but that he will communicate through his appearance that he is not really there.

The display early Saturday evening was the last of seven campaign events held across four states in the 48 hours that followed the first presidential debate. The events were designed to serve as both proof of life for concerned wealthy patrons of the Biden reelection effort and proof of the wisdom of their choices: Other concerned wealthy people were still buying. They didn't need to panic.

The sprawling Red Bank estate on a hill overlooking the Navesink River belonged to Goldman Sachs executive turned governor Phil Murphy. The local press had reported that hundreds were

expected to attend the event. Though the \$10 million property could have easily accommodated such a crowd, it was more like 50. Fewer if you subtract official staff or members of the Biden family, including the First Lady and several grandchildren. But big money comes in small packs, and Tammy Murphy, the governor's wife, began her remarks with an unusual announcement: The couple had raised \$3.7 million with their fundraiser, a number that had exceeded their goal. "This is personal for us," the governor said. "We're all with you 1,000 percent." He called Biden "America's comeback kid." The callback to Bill Clinton articulated the nervous, defensive energy that animated the evening. But Biden had not face planted in a pit of bad press because of a mistake in his personal life. His problems would be much trickier to solve. A sex scandal might help him right now, in fact.

The president had approached the lectern with his stiff gait, which his official medical report, written by Dr. Kevin O'Connor, who has led his care since he was vice-president, attributes to a foot injury and an arthritic spine.

"I'd like to make three quick points," Biden said. "Today we announced, since the debate, which wasn't my best debate ever, as Barack points out, we raised \$27 million." It has long been a feature of Biden speeches to refer to the former president in this familiar way. "Barack and me" is a frequent refrain, a reminder of his service to the nation's first Black president and a promise, too, of a return to normalcy after the aberrant rise of Donald Trump.

Although large speakers lined the patio, and although Governor and Mrs. Murphy were perfectly audible in their remarks, understanding Biden's speech required intense focus. "POTUS was difficult to hear at times," Tyler Pager of the *Washington Post*, assigned to circulate his statements in real time as the print pooler, wrote. "So please check the transcript." The pool reporters often struggle with the challenge of how hard it is to hear or make sense of the president. Radio reporters do not always obtain usable audio of his remarks. Print reporters squint and strain and crane their necks, trying to find the best position by which their ears may absorb the vibration of his voice in the air. Reporters scrutinize their audio recordings and read quotes to one another after the fact. *Is that what he said? You heard it? In that order? You sure?*

Biden continued on: "Secondly, I understand the concern after the debate. I get it. We didn't have a great night, but we're working hard and we're going to be working to get it done ... Since the debate, the polls show a little movement and have me up a couple points."

The donors broke into thunderous applause when the president said this about the polls. But what he said was false. Early public surveys immediately following the debate indicated that Biden was down overall a point or two, and surveys that asked respondents to rate the debate

itself had him losing by mid-double digits. As a means of damage control, the campaign leaked some of its own internal polling — which had been until recently regarded as a state secret — to argue that the debate had not moved the needle: The president was losing by a slim margin before Thursday night, and he was still losing by that slim margin after Thursday night. In the days that followed, the polls would only grow grimmer.

“In fact,” Biden went on, “the big takeaway are Trump’s lies ... The point is, I didn’t have a great night and neither did he.”

He returned to the central message of his campaign: “The fact is that Donald Trump is a genuine threat to democracy, and that’s not hyperbole. He’s a genuine threat. He’s a threat to our freedom, he’s a threat to our democracy, he’s literally a threat to America and what we stand for ... Ask yourself the question: If not for America, who would lead the world?”

The question was posed as a reminder of the stakes of the November election. During his term in office, Trump had sought to retreat from America’s global commitments, abiding by a madman semi-isolationist theory of foreign policy that in Biden’s view and the view of many Establishment actors across the ideological divide had caused damage to the country’s reputation that will take a generation of stable leadership to undo.

Yet Biden’s comment also served as an unintentional reminder of the concerns about his own leadership. Just the day before, the *Wall Street Journal* had published a report that described how the president’s “frail” appearance and inconsistent “focus and performance” presented challenges on the world stage. At the G7 summit in Italy in June, Biden had the distinction of being the only world leader who did not attend a private dinner party where candid diplomatic talks would happen off-camera. At a European Union summit in Washington in October, Biden “struggled to follow the discussions” and “stumbled over his talking points” to such a degree that he required the intervention of Secretary of State Antony Blinken. (The White House denied the *Journal’s* reporting.)

Under vines of white moonflowers on the governor’s patio, I watched as the president neared the end of his ten-minute speech. If a gaffe is when a politician accidentally tells the truth, he was still making them. The truth he told now was this: “I’ve got a helluva lot of plans for the next four years — God willing, as my father used to say.”

In January, I began hearing similar stories from Democratic officials, activists, and donors. All people who supported the president and were working to help reelect him to a second term in

I office. Following encounters with the president, they had arrived at the same concern: Could he really do this for another four years? Could he even make it to Election Day?

Uniformly, these people were of a similar social strata. They lived and socialized in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles. They did not wish to come forward with their stories. They did not want to blow a whistle. They wished that they could whistle past what they knew and emerge in November victorious and relieved, having helped avoid another four years of Trump. What would happen after that? They couldn't think that far ahead. Their worries were more immediate.

When they discussed what they knew, what they had seen, what they had heard, they literally whispered. They were scared and horrified. But they were also burdened. They needed to talk about it (though not on the record). They needed to know that they were not alone and not crazy. Things were bad, and they knew things were bad, and they knew others must also know things were bad, and yet they would need to pretend, outwardly, that things were fine. The president was fine. The election would be fine. They would be fine. To admit otherwise would mean jeopardizing the future of the country and, well, nobody wanted to be responsible personally or socially for that. Their disclosures often followed innocent questions: *Have you seen the president lately? How does he seem?* Often, they would answer with only silence, their eyes widening cartoonishly, their heads shaking back and forth. Or with disapproving sounds. "Phhhhwwaahhh." "Uggghhhhhhhhh." "Bbbwwhhheeuw." Or with a simple, "Not good! Not good!" Or with an accusatory question of their own: "Have *you* seen him?!"

Those who encountered the president in social settings sometimes left their interactions disturbed. Longtime friends of the Biden family, who spoke to me on the condition of anonymity, were shocked to find that the president did not remember their names. At a White House event last year, a guest recalled, with horror, realizing that the president would not be able to stay for the reception because, it was clear, he would not be able to make it through the reception. The guest wasn't sure they could vote for Biden, since the guest was now open to an idea that they had previously dismissed as right-wing propaganda: The president may not really be the acting president after all.

Others told me the president was becoming increasingly hard to get ahold of, even as it related to official government business, the type of things any U.S. president would communicate about on a regular basis with high-level officials across the world. Biden instead was cocooned within mounting layers of bureaucracy, spoken for more than he was speaking or spoken to.

Saying hello to one Democratic megadonor and family friend at the White House recently, the president stared blankly and nodded his head. The First Lady intervened to whisper in her husband's ear, telling him to say "hello" to the donor by name and to thank them for their recent generosity. The president repeated the words his wife had fed him. "It hasn't been good for a long time but it's gotten so, so much worse," a witness to the exchange told me. "*So much worse!*"

Who was actually in charge? Nobody knew. But surely someone was in charge? And surely there must be a plan, since surely this situation could not endure? I heard these questions posed at cocktail parties on the coasts but also at MAGA rallies in Middle America. There emerged a comical overlap between the beliefs of the nation's most elite liberal Biden supporters and the beliefs of the most rabid and conspiratorial supporters of former President Trump. Resistance or QAnon, they shared a grand theory of America in 2024: *There has to be a secret group of high-level government leaders who control Biden and who will soon set into motion their plan to replace Biden as the Democratic presidential nominee.* Nothing else made sense. They were in full agreement.

What I saw for myself confirmed something was amiss. I spent much of the spring, summer, and fall of 2020 on the primary campaign trail with Biden. In the period before he was granted Secret Service protection, his events, which were usually of modest size, were more freewheeling affairs, and reporters inched up to the candidate as he interacted with voters at the rope line. He rarely took questions. A teetotaler, he was not the kind of candidate who hung out at the hotel bar after the campaigning day was through (on occasion, Jill Biden would enjoy a glass of Pinot Noir in a Marriott lobby with her aides), but he was visible and closely observable.

A campaign trail is a grueling exercise for anybody of any age, from the youngest network embeds to the oldest would-be presidents, and back then, there were days when Biden appeared sharper than on others. I knew it was a good day when he saw me and winked. On such occasions, he joked and prayed and cried with voters. He stayed to take a photo with every supporter. He might even entertain a question or two from the press. He had color in his face. There was no question he was alive and present. On bad days, which were unpredictable but reliably occurred during a challenging news cycle, he was less animated. He stared off. He did not make eye contact. He would trip over his words, even if they were programmed in a teleprompter. On such occasions, he was hurried out of the venue quickly and ushered into a waiting SUV.

This April, at a reception before the White House Correspondents' Dinner, I joined a sea of people waiting for a photo with the president and First Lady in the basement of the Washington Hilton. A photo line is a trauma. The main attraction must stand there, reduced to a human

prop, with person after person, group after group, nodding and saying “hello” and flashing the same smile a zillion times so that guests leave the event with their little token commemorating their split second in proximity to history. People of all ages suffer in a photo line. It is tiring and unnatural, an icky transaction that requires robotic discipline on the part of its star and reveals primal horrors on the part of its participants. In Washington, even the most allegedly serious people can behave like pushy fangirls. So I grade photo-line behavior and performance on a curve. Who can be their best selves wedged into such a nightmarish dynamic? And in the basement of a Hilton, no less.

The first person I saw upon entering the subterranean space was the First Lady. I maintain personal fondness for Dr. Biden, whose controversial preferred honorific I am using out of respect. The day that my mother died, I happened to be traveling with her in Virginia, and when she learned about it, she was incredibly decent. She called to talk with me about grief, and she sent me a lovely note. The Bidens are famous for their willingness and ability to mourn with others, so I was not surprised exactly, but I was impressed, since among White House officials, members of the Biden family, and supporters of the president, I had always been treated with suspicion or outright contempt after my critical coverage of him during the 2020 campaign. I had written that there were “[c]oncerns, implicit or explicit, about his ability to stay agile and alive for the next four years,” and that “[f]or political reporters, marveling every day at just how well this isn’t going, watching Biden can feel like being at the rodeo. You’re there because on some level you know you might see someone get killed.” Biden-world insiders did not appreciate that very much, and they never forgot or fully forgave it. I was particularly touched then by the First Lady’s kindness, and I always think of that when I see her.

In the basement, I smiled and said hello. She looked back at me with a confused, panicked expression. It was as if she had just received horrible news and was about to run out of the room and into some kind of a family emergency. “Uh, hi,” she said. Then she glanced over to her right. *Oh ...*

I had not seen the president up close in some time. I had skipped this season’s holiday parties, and, preoccupied with covering Trump’s legal and political dramas, I hadn’t been showing up at his White House. Unlike Trump, he wasn’t very accessible to the press, anyway. Why bother? Biden had done few interviews. He wasn’t prone to interrupting his schedule with a surprise media circus in the Oval Office. He kept a tight circle of the same close advisers who had been advising him for more than 30 years, so unlike with his predecessor, you didn’t need to hang around in West Wing hallways to figure out who was speaking to him. It was all pretty locked down and predictable in terms of the reality you could access as a member of the press with a White House hard pass.

I followed the First Lady's gaze and found the president. Now I understood her panicked expression.

Up close, the president does not look quite plausible. It's not that he's old. We all know what old looks like. Bernie Sanders is old. Mitch McConnell is old. Most of the ruling class is old. The president was something stranger, something not of this earth.

This was true even in 2020. His face had then an uncanny valley quality that injectable aficionados call "low trust" — if only by millimeters, his cosmetically altered proportions knocked his overall facial harmony into the realm of the improbable. His thin skin, long a figurative problem and now a literal one, was pulled tightly over cheeks that seemed to vary month to month in volume. Under artificial light and in the sunshine, he took on an unnatural gleam. He looked, well, inflated. His eyes were half-shut or open very wide. They appeared darker than they once had, his pupils dilated. He did not blink at regular intervals. The White House often did not engage when questioned about the president's stare, which sometimes raised alarm on social media when documented in official videos produced by the White House. The administration was above conspiratorial chitchat that entertained seriously scenarios in which the president was suffering from a shocking decline most Americans were not seeing. If the president was being portrayed that way, it was by his political enemies on the right, who promoted through what the press office termed "cheap fakes" a caricature of an addled creature unfit to serve. They would not dignify those people, or people doing the bidding of those people, with a response.

For many inclined to support the president, this was good enough. They did not need to monitor the president's public appearances, because under his leadership the country had returned to the kind of normal state in which members of a First World democratic society had the privilege to forget about the president for hours or days or even weeks at a time. Trump required constant observation. *What did he just do? What would he do next? Oh God, what was he doing right at that moment?* Biden could be trusted to perform the duties of his office out of sight. Many people were content to look away.

My heart stopped as I extended my hand to greet the president. I tried to make eye contact, but it was like his eyes, though open, were not *on*. His face had a waxy quality. He smiled. It was a sweet smile. It made me sad in a way I can't fully convey. I always thought — and I wrote — that he was a decent man. If ambition was his only sin, and it seemed to be, he had committed no sin at all by the standards of most politicians I had covered. He took my hand in his, and I was startled by how it felt. Not cold but cool. The basement was so warm that people were sweating and complaining that they were sweating. This was a silly black-tie affair. I said "hello." His

sweet smile stayed frozen. He spoke very slowly and in a very soft voice. “And what’s your name?” he asked.

Exiting the room after the photo, the group of reporters — not instigated by me, I should note — made guesses about how dead he appeared to be, percentage wise. “Forty percent?” one of them asked.

“It was a bad night.” That’s the spin from the White House and its allies about Thursday’s debate. But when I watched the president amble stiffly across the stage, my first thought was: *He doesn’t look so bad*. For months, everything I had heard, plus some of what I had seen, led me to brace for something much more dire.

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