Monday, July 22, 2024 / You did it, Joe

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (HOST): *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram, standing outside of *the* White House to ask Americans how they feel about a historic moment – their president dropping out of the presidential race.

SCORING IN – ENDLESS MAZE (BMC)

NICE LADY: Mixed feelings. I think it’s sad, but overall I think he might be making the right decision.

NICE LADY’s HUSBAND: I’m sad to see him dropped out, but I think it needed to be done.   
  
YOUNG SF RESIDENT: So I think, like, hopefully it brings out more young voters.   
  
ANTICHRIST GUY: Joe Biden is considered as the antichrist.

TRUMP VOTER: I wanted him to stay in. This way I know Trump would have wow. Now it’s up in the air.

TRUMP VOTER’S WIFE: Yeah, that’s another way to look at it!

KAMALA SUPPORTER: But I just feel like is America ready for a woman and also a Black woman? So that’s what scares me.   
  
BAY AREA GUY 2: I just don’t really see CAMala or really anyone else being a viable threat to Trump.

SEAN: KAHmala! KAHmala!

FUN GUY: We need the facts, man. I don’t know. You feel me? I think there’s something else going on, but don’t quote me. Yeah. Yeah.

SEAN: I’m gonna quote you.  
  
FUN GUY: Yeah. <laughs> Yo!  
  
SEAN: We’re gonna ask Vox’s Andrew Prokop and David Axelrod how they feel on *Today, Explained*.   
  
EVEN MORE FUN GUY: Amen. Sheeeeee-he-he!

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* here with Vox's Senior Political Correspondent,Andrew Prokop. Andrew, how was your weekend? Did anything interesting happen?

ANDREW: It was pretty quiet, not much going on. As a political journalist, I got to just relax and spend a lot of time with my family.

SEAN: Oh, so you didn't hear that, that the President dropped out of the race?

ANDREW: Wait, Is that what this show is about?

SEAN: [laughs] What do you think, Andrew? What does this mean?

ANDREW: I mean, obviously this is a historic, momentous, stunning turn of events. Uh, I view it In the context of all that came before it …

*<CLIP> KAMALA HARRIS: You think you just fell out of a coconut tree? [laughter]*  
  
SCORING IN — Circus Bent (Breakmaster Cylinder)

ANDREW: … which was a campaign that has been pretty sleepy up to this point, very low public interest, very little apparent happening in both the primaries and the general election until that debate happened at an unprecedented early date

*<CLIP>: CNN JOHN KING: it started minutes into the debate, and it continues right now.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CouurnDJPdk)*> FACE THE NATION: Well, Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff has joined the calls for President Biden to drop out of the 2024 presidential race. Schiff is the highest ranking Democrat.*

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lNkcSM1msvY)> MARI HARF, FORMER OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: *On the heels of Schumer and Pelosi and Hakeem Jeffries, it feels to me like we are very close to knowing that Joe Biden will no longer be the nominee.*

ANDREW: And then it's just been remarkably chaotic rollercoaster ride from there.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3-l5WyUvLo)*> FOX 11 NEWS LOS ANGELES: President Joe Biden has withdrawn from the 2024 race*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3-l5WyUvLo)*> TIKTOK MADI\_HART SOCCER: Guys today is so crazy. Like literally Joe Biden dropped out of the election. Like everything's insane, which means like, you can do whatever you want today…*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.nbcnews.com/video/biden-drops-out-of-presidential-race-and-backs-harris-215364677904)*>NBS NEWS: The president writing. I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down and to focus solely on fulfilling my duties as president for the remainder of my term.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Has anything like this ever happened before, Andrew?

ANDREW: You know, in one sense, this is unprecedented. Um, In the modern era, certainly no presidential party has changed its apparent nominee so late in the process. People point to Lyndon Johnson choosing to step aside in March, 1968 as one precedent.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hu2Y_6I2zic&t=11s)*> LYNDON B. JOHNSON: I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your president.*

ANDREW: But I also think of the way this played out as quite similar to something that actually happens pretty frequently, which is a scandal plagued politician begins hurting the party and then faces a tragedy. Pressure campaign that could be quick. That could take longer, but designed to force them to step aside. And you know, that's something we just saw it in New York with Governor Andrew Cuomo in 2021. It also happened with New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and Governor Elliott Spitzer. New York Democrats do this a lot. But The idea is that, you know, the primary voters had their say, such as it was with the limited options they were presented with, in part because of the party elites falling behind Joe Biden. But there is a conceptual problem of what happens when the primary voters make their choice, but new information emerges after the primary. I think everyone knows that if a time traveler sent back a recording of how Donald Trump and Joe Biden's first debate of 2024 went, uh, back into 2023. I don't think he would have, uh, waltzed to the nomination with only token opposition. Uh, it was simply not well understood or accepted, uh, that he would perform so badly and he tried to, um, prevent that from being known by limiting his availability for high profile, high stakes interviews; for avoiding any debates in the primaries. And, uh, because of that, the primary voters lacked some information that now the general electorate has. It's also worth mentioning that back during the primaries, many polls showed that a large majority of Democratic voters did not think Biden should run for a second term and they would prefer someone else. But nobody else who was significant and credible ended up running.

SEAN: Biden submits a resignation letter to the American people yesterday. In it, he does not lay out a path for his successor. Although he does then issue, I believe, a tweet in which he endorses his vice president, Kamala Harris. Why didn't he endorse her in the resignation letter? Do we know why there's two statements, essentially?

ANDREW: I have no idea. It's, uh, It's an interesting question.There was some uncertainty before this about whether there would be this rapid consolidation of Democratic support around Harris. Uh, this could have been, you know, Biden's endorsement was a big part of this, but, you know, it wasn't. The deciding factor necessarily, uh, it's more indicative, all the endorsements we've seen rolling in, are more indicative of the mood in the party that they're kind of desperate for unity.

After the past few weeks of chaos, they don't want a big open process, uh, and the potentially other credible contenders who would, one might think, get involved in this process have mostly already endorsed Harris and said they're not interested in going for it this time. Now, this does pose the risk that Democrats are kind of repeating the same mistakes they made with Joe Biden's run in the first place in clearing the field and consolidating around someone whose strengths and weaknesses really have not been tested yet.

SEAN: If the candidate ends up being Kamala Harris, do we have any idea who her, her Veep will be? Can she pick Joe?

ANDREW: Theoretically, she could. I don't see why she would, but, um, I think probably the platonic ideal is like white men in a swing state. This is what Democrats are thinking, not myself, but like they, they view this as, like, a good balance to Harris at the top of the ticket, and like they want someone who swing voters will perceive as, as non threatening and normal. Like, this is kind of said in a joking way, but also not necessarily so joking. But people point to Governor Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania, Senator Mark Kelly of Arizona. Both of those are important swing states. Uh, also in the mix, Governor Andy Beshear of Kentucky.

SEAN: What's Vice President Harris saying to potentially allay concerns in her party?

ANDREW: She said she's running. She says she's running to win and that she would like to earn the nomination. And, you know, it's, it's a little vague about how these next steps will actually play out. We all know that the nominee will be put forward and confirmed at the Democratic Convention the week of August 19th and be, uh, technically chosen by the, uh, A couple thousand delegates who are attending that convention, but whether they will have a actual choice between multiple competing options, uh, who are are realistic, who have an actual shot, the reality is that it is entirely possible Harris will lock up the vast majority of party support well in advance so that there is effectively no real alternative and no realistic alternative wants to even, uh, try.

SEAN: Do we have any idea how those potential tickets stack up against the former president and Republican candidate, Donald Trump?

ANDREW: I don't think the polling right now is worth very much, uh, particularly I don't think the Veep typically doesn't make much of a difference.

But we do have a fair amount of Harris vs. Trump polling, and that polling is not fantastic for Harris. It generally shows her losing. Just like Biden.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py8oXjmGwMs)*>  FOX 5 WASHINGTON:  Now the Trump Harris poll is interesting. They have Trump at 51% and Harris at at 48%.*

ANDREW: So again, Democrats are tremendously excited right now. They're jubilant uniting around Harris. The Democratic fundraising platform Act Blue had a record day raising an enormous amount of money yesterday.

SCORING IN <Hot Plate\_BMC>

ANDREW: Clearly, the base is very excited about this historic pick and, and about Harris as a candidate. But if we look at the polling right now. She starts as the underdog. Their argument, she can turn it around, and, uh, sure, she can turn it around, it's certainly possible she could win, but I would caution, you know, people not to get too carried away in, you know, assuming that she is a surefire winner when, when that is very far from the case based on the polling we've seen.  
  
 SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Andrew Prokop Vox dot com. And when we're back on *Today, Explained*, Barack Obama's David Axelrod.

[BREAK]

*AOC: All you folks that are coconut pilled in the comments, as you are identifying, buckle up! <laughs>*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with David Axelrod, who some people know as ‘Axe.’ And people know you from CNN, from your podcast, *The Axe Files*, from you, from your other podcast *Hacks on Tap*, from your years working with President Obama. But they also might know you as one of the many Democratic strategists who was calling for President Biden to step aside. Can I ask how long you have thought that would be the best idea for this ticket?

DAVID: Well, I was pretty lonely, I thought. I think it was about a year, more than a year ago that I said that I thought that it would be hard to explain to the American people why anyone should be president until they're closer to 90 than 80. You know, last fall, after the first wave of very bad battleground states polls came out and the age issue really popped. I said, you know, this is the last chance for the president to to think about whether this is best for him in the country. I will tell you, though, Sean, that I … when I got the news yesterday, I was very, very sad. I mean, I worked with the president when he was vice president; I was involved in the process of choosing him for vice president; I thought he was a tremendous asset in the white House. Always enjoyed being with him, always appreciated the points that he was making. I think history will be a lot kinder to him than voters are right now, for the things that he's accomplished. And, you know, it was a poignant ending. I think it was also, you know, an act of love and patriotism for this country that he decided maybe the best thing for me to do is step aside.

SEAN: I mean, you were part of this mounting call for him to step aside. Did you the whole time think that was actually in the cards? Did you think the party was capable of what it's going through right now?

DAVID: I thought it was almost inevitable after the debate. You know, the debate kind of crystallized what had been a big and growing problem, which was, you know, doubts about his fitness to serve another four years. And, those were just, not just magnified, but but calcified by the debate. And then you had the bookend of Trump and the assassination attempt. And, you know, the his preternatural marketing instincts to find the precise spot to take the hero pose.   
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
DAVID: And you know, the two things read weakness and strength, which was the, the essence of the Trump message that the world was out of control. Biden is not in command. He's weak. Trump is strong. Vote for Trump. That was their whole campaign. Now they have a complication because they don't have Biden. So, it does change the nature of the race.

SEAN: A lot of the people who were calling for Biden to step aside are now jubilant, if not endorsing Vice President Harris. Your friend and former colleague, former President Barack Obama, has not yet done that. What do you think is going on there?

DAVID: I don't think he wanted to prescribe for the party what the party should do, but rather be available to be, a force for pulling the party together once the party made its choice. I think what's very clear as we sit here this morning, the day after the president made his announcement, is that Kamala Harris is going to be the nominee of the Democratic Party. I don't think there's any real debate about that. She very quickly consolidated support in a way that should actually inspire some confidence, because that's a political task to move quickly and consolidate your support. She did it. She did it very well. And, you know, I think the last of the prospective opponents will endorse her today. You know, she'll move on to the business of choosing a vice presidential candidate.

SEAN: So you don't think she's going to do what the Republicans did and wait until the DNC to announce who's going to be on the ticket with her?

DAVID: I don't think she can, because they are committed to an early vote of the delegates to nominate the candidates in order to accommodate all the states filing deadlines for the fall ballot. So they're scheduled to meet next week to codify the ticket. I don't think that they really can put this off until the convention. So I anticipate that, you know, we'll know relatively quickly who the vice presidential nominee is going to be.

SEAN: You host a podcast with a Republican strategist named Mike Murphy, who's, who's anti-Trump, but he's one of the few voices out there right now saying that Democrats should slow their roll – that, that it's happening too fast with Harris. Do you understand his perspective on that?

DAVID: I do, I mean, look, I think that she would. Be the nominee. If there were a process or if there were not a process. For a variety of reasons. One, that, she has more of a relationship with the delegates to the convention there. Biden-Harris delegates, they were chosen by the Biden campaign. And so, you know, they're naturally going to gravitate towards her. The composition of those delegates favors her. I think she might have benefited from a more of a competition just to, show that she could win that competition. But I get Mike’s point of view. One of the reasons why I spoke out as early as I did about my concerns about the president moving forward, was that had he made this decision last year, we would have had a Democratic primary. In the Democratic primary is how you pressured, primaries, how, campaign is how you pressure test these candidates. Remember, Ron DeSantis was viewed as a behemoth in the fall of 2022, and then he had to go through the battle of the nominating battle, and he ended up not faring as well. You do find out about people through that process. That said, she's you know, she's been vetted quite a bit. She ran for president. She's been vice president for three and a half years. And, Sean, the thing that I would say about her is, you know, having been involved in presidential politics for a really, really long time, not just with Barack Obama but others, and not just as a strategist, but as a reporter. I can tell you it is a beastly hard process. It is really, really hard. And no matter what level of politics you're at, there's no level like that. There's no training for it. There's no like simulator you can pop into to find out what the pressures of a presidential campaign are like. In many ways, the campaign simulates the sort of relentless pressure that presidents themselves will feel. She's experienced that she has been swimming in the deep end of the pool, and that, to me is a big thing. The other thing is she has, in fact, apprenticed. She has been in those rooms. She has been in those meetings. She knows a lot about what the presidency entails. That, too, is something that's very hard to learn, on the fly. So I think she's got a lot of arguments on her side for this.

SEAN: I watched the RNC last week. I'm sure you caught some of it, too.

DAVID: I was there.

SEAN: You were there! Even better.

DAVID: So you didn't see me in my Uncle Sam suit.

SEAN: I was watching on C-Span. I'm sorry I betrayed you. <laughs>

DAVID: Oh, I see.

SEAN: It seems like the Republicans really want to come after Biden. And now Harris probably on immigration, on inflation. Does, does Harris have the same weaknesses as Biden there, if not even more so?

DAVID: Well, they will try to certainly depict her as the immigration czar. And I'm sure they've got about 100 ads in the can on this. But the truth is, she's not Joe Biden. She can chart her own course now. I'm old enough to remember the 68 campaign when Lyndon Johnson quit. Ultimately, his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, became the presidential candidate, and the heavy, heavy burden of Vietnam hung over him. He ends up losing by a point, but he also was like 20 points behind when he got nominated. And if that race had gone another month, another week, I should say he would have won. So, you know, she needs to chart her own course. Talk about what she would do. I think there are also points on this immigration issue that are a vulnerabilities for Trump.

SEAN: Are you looking forward to that debate?

DAVID: Oh, yes. I think so. You know, what's interesting is that the addled old man on the platform is not going to be Joe Biden this time.

SEAN: [laughs] That's right. Kamala Harris is a historic vice president. She'll be an even more historic president, obviously. Do you think she leans into that, or do you think she leans into the issues? She leans ito Donald Trump's various criminal battles, what have you.

DAVID: Listen, when Barack Obama was running for president, we never talked about the historic nature of his candidacy because we thought that was obvious. And anybody who could see understood that, and others might be talking about it, but, he he always said, I am proudly of the black community, but I'm not limited to it, and I'm not running to be the first black president or the black president. I'm running to be president of the United States. The people who step forward and say, you can't bypass her because she's the first black woman vice president. They were diminishing her. They were diminishing her. The case they should have been making and should be making today is why she's the best candidate, why she has the best chance to win, what she brings to this race. And, you know, I know, like, there's a lot of enthusiasm among. some folks about the historic nature of the race.But, you know, there are a lot of voters for whom other things are more important. And they want to know, are they are we going to have someone who understands our lives and is fighting for us? And, that's the case that she has to make? I think she can make it. And the more she focuses on that, I think the greater her chances of success.

SEAN: You started saying that the news yesterday made you sad, but you obviously helped turn hope into a political strategy in 2008. Do you feel hopeful right now?

DAVID: I do, because I think that what was not a race yesterday is a race today. And, you know, I see the enthusiasm that, the vice president has generated in the first 24 hours. I mean, she raised $46 million in a matter of hours, online and small donations. That's a record. It's a gauge of enthusiasm which has been absent. So, you know, I, I am encouraged by what I see. You know, it's better to have hope than despair. Just as a general rule, you might want to write that down for your own life. But, it's certainly true in politics. And this morning, a lot of Democrats have hoped that they didn't have yesterday morning.

SCORING IN — Breather (minimal, contracting, expanding)

SEAN: David Axelrod. CNN. *Axe Files*. *Hacks on Tap*. Barack Obama.

Our show today was produced by Denise Guerra and Miles Bryan. They had help from Matthew Collette, Amina Al-Sadi, Hady Mawajdeh, Andrea Kristinsdottir, and Patrick Boyd.

This is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]