**Tue. Feb. 13, 2024 / Forgetful old men**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN — “MEMORY” (CATS)

NOEL KING: It’s Today, Explained and let’s start with some facts. Both men running to be president of these United States are elderly. They do elderly people things: they forget where they are, forget what they’re talking about, forget what they’ve promised claim they’ve recently talked to long-dead people.

NOEL: But it’s only really HURTING one of them.

*<SHORT BIDEN FROM POST HUR PRESSER> Reporter: Do you fear this report is going to fuel further concerns about your age? President Joe Biden: only by some of you.*

“MEMORY” POSTS

NOEL: Donald Trump, who this week cheerfully encouraged Russia to attack America’s NATO allies, is not hurting; he is leaning in, he’s playing Memory from Cats at his rallies, he’s yelling about Sleepy Joe Biden /// and it’s working. Polls show his incoherence isn’t hurting him the way it’s hurting Biden.

NOEL: Coming up:

“MEMORY” POSTS

**[THEME]**

NOEL: I’m Noel King. Special Counsel Robert Hur was tasked with answering this question: should President Biden be charged for taking classified materials from the White House? Hur’s report runs 300 pages, and his recommendation was NO. Don’t charge him. The reason, on page 6, - that’s what has caused so many problems for the Joe Biden. Christian Paz is covering the 2024 election for Vox.

SCORING IN—SKIPPING BURGLARS

**CHRISTIAN PAZ (Vox Reporter):** What we were hearing first was, this theoretical reason for why the special counsel would charge Biden with a crime, because he didn't think that he'd be able to make the case convincingly to a jury, that there was willful intent behind that, because Biden would be able to portray himself as a elderly man with a bad memory.

*<CLIP> CBC NEWS: In the report Hur, who is a Republican, makes several critical observations about Biden’s memory, saying it has significant limitations. The report includes one instance when Biden was interviewed and could not remember when he was vice president, another when he could not recall when his son Beau died…”*

**CHRISTIAN:** And then you have that come out, the White House realizes it has to respond. President Biden goes out in the evening to make a press statement, where he forcefully pushes back at the special counsel's allegations.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN: I’m well-meaning, I’m an elderly man, and I know what the hell I'm doing. I've been president of this country back on its feet. I don't need his recommendation. PETER DOUCEY, FOX NEWS: How bad is your memory? And can you continue as president? PRESIDENT BIDEN: My memory is so bad, I can let you speak.*

**CHRISTIAN:** And then trips up once he opens up the conversation for for questions from the press. He mixes up the president of Mexico with the president of Egypt.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: Initially the president of Mexico, Sisi, did not want to open up the gate to allow humanitarian material to get in. I talked to him.*

**CHRISTIAN:** And this all kind of contributes to that day's perception of a president who seemed overwhelmed, not at 100% capacity, and kind of builds on some of the stories we'd heard earlier in the week of the president speaking to donors or at private campaign events where he mentioned presidents and leaders of foreign countries who are no longer alive and talked about having had conversations with them in the past few years when they were not around.

*<CLIP> THE HILL: During a recent campaign stop, Biden referenced a meeting he had with Mitterand from Germany after being elected. One small problem, actually a couple small problems, Mitterand was a French president and he died in 1996.*

**~~CHRISTIAN:~~** ~~And all contributes to this idea that the president isn't at 100% mental capacity, mental acuity. And it feeds into this idea of age being the big reason for that.~~

SCORING OUT

**NOEL:** Hey, Christian, why do you think this special counsel report was such a moment for so many voters? I mean, these stories about Joe Biden's memory, his mental acuity. They've been around for a while now, like years. And yet this felt like something different. This felt like maybe a step too far. What what do you think happened?

**CHRISTIAN:** I think it's a combination of it being both that somebody finally said it very clearly.

**NOEL:** Huh!

**CHRISTIAN:** That this is something that was observed. Right. And then there's also the other factor that it's very reminiscent of what happened in 2016 with Hillary Clinton and her email scandal and FBI Director James Comey. And that investigation, if we remember in 2016, the email scandal had been following Hillary Clinton around for most of the campaign.

*<CLIP> TODAY SHOW, 2015: We're getting a look at the emails that reportedly triggered that FBI investigation into Hillary Clinton's personal email servers and whether there was classified information in those emails and it was mishandled during her time as secretary of state.*

**CHRISTIAN:** And it wasn't until the FBI and the Justice Department said that they weren't going to actually investigate that issue, whether there was breaking of the law in the way that Hillary Clinton had handled official government business, that the press wanted a, you know, an actual substantive reason to push the campaign more seriously on that, to ask those questions, to report on it.

*<CLIP> REPORTER: You were the official in charge. Did you like wipe the server? HILLARY CLINTON: Like with a cloth or something? REPORTER: I don’t know You know how it works digitally. Did you try to wipe it? HILLARY CLINTON: I don't know how it works digitally at all.*

CHRISTIAN: The email issue contributed to this bigger idea that the Democratic candidate just wasn't as authentic or wasn't being as forthright as she could be, and it confirmed a lot of the suspicions that voters had. So when it was covered in the news, it just confirmed some of those underlying concerns that they had. And it mirrors a little bit of what we're seeing in 2024, which is instead of this idea of whether or not you trust Joe Biden to be authentic, it's whether you think that Joe Biden is too old. And so I draw this parallel to 2016, because it was in July of that year that James Comey and the FBI finished their investigation……

*<CLIP> JAMES COMEY: Although there is evidence of potential violations of the statutes regarding the handling of classified information, our judgment is that no reasonable prosecutor would bring such a case.*

CHRISTIAN: But then you come to October of that year, the October surprise, and it's the FBI saying that they're going to reopen this investigation.

*<CLIP> FOX NEWS: The FBI now says it will review emails that appear to be pertinent to its investigation into the Hillary Clinton email scandal. This comes just 11 days before Election Day.*

CHRISTIAN: And now the trustworthiness issue comes back. Obviously, this October surprise hasn't happened here in 2024, but it's definitely something that people are thinking about. It's definitely something that the Biden campaign is probably, drafting up some kind of plan. Should something happen? But it's not hard to imagine that a president as old as President Biden could have some kind of health issue come up between now and the election.

**NOEL:** Hmhm. Donald Trump, candidate Trump, is also an elderly man with a poor memory. He cannot seem to remember who Nancy Pelosi is.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: By the way, they never report the crowd on January 6th. You know, Nikki Haley, Nikki Haley, Nikki Haley. (fades down)*

**NOEL:** He is at times forgotten where he is. Like what city he's in, what state he's in.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: “very big hello to Sioux Falls. We love Sioux Falls. MAN: “This is Sioux city. TRUMP: oh. TRUMP TO CROWD: “Oh, Sioux City, how many people come from Sioux City, huh?”*

**NOEL:** Democrats are really bothered by Biden's memory Are Republican voters really bothered by Donald Trump's memory?

**CHRISTIAN:** They're not. And it's interesting to see how they're not really talking about him in terms of being too old. And I feel like part of it, when you look at some of the polling, it's, he's also associated with terms that have to do with strength. And a lot of that builds from the persona that he's always had. He's always been boisterous, bombastic. He's never been one to really care for minutia or details. And so it may be easier for some Republican primary voters and members of the Republican base to look past it or not even consider the age question with Donald Trump, because it's all kind of priced into his persona and into how he speaks in public and presents himself.

**NOEL:** He already I mean, people who remember him being president, he already often did not make sense some of the time. Trump it was it was like hard to follow. It's like, wait, what is he saying? So the issue that I hear you laying out here is that Democrats don't want to vote for Biden because of his poor memory. Republicans don't care. They're like, this is just who Trump is. And therefore, even though both of these men seem to be suffering from the same thing, only one of them is going to struggle among their base to convince people you can still vote for me. I'm okay.

**CHRISTIAN:** That's absolutely true. I think it's interesting to see that part of the reason for this is because the Republican coalition is not, as you know, fractured as the Democratic coalition is.

SCORING IN—NIGHTWATCH BEETLES

The big divide among the Republican Party right now is, are you with Trump or against Trump? And it's not really a 50/50 question. It's like a 80/20 question. Like the side that is anti-Trump is much smaller. On the Democratic side, there are just so many more reasons for fractures to emerge, whether it's the president not being progressive enough, not being moderate enough, whether it's the age question, whether it's pining for a different generation of leadership. And so when you break it down like that, it makes sense that the age question would be a bigger factor on the Democratic side, because there are already more reasons to be skeptical of Biden. And then there's this overarching concern that almost everyone seems to have.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL TRACK: Vox’s Christian Paz. Right after the Hur Report - that special counsel’s report - was released, ABC News and Ipsos conducted a poll. 86 percent of Americans they polled say Joe Biden is too old to be president. 59 percent say BOTH candidates are too old, but it’s clear why the Republican Party is sticking with Trump - the voters want him. If you’ve wondered why Democrats HAVE to stick with Joe Biden, well, have we got a story for you.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: Today, Explained, I’m Noel King. “Is it too late to replace Joe Biden?” ask the headlines, and everyone at my hair salon, and Uber drivers, and probably many people in your life too. And here is Vox’s Christian Paz, with answers:

**CHRISTIAN:** Essentially it is too late. And there are two big broad reasons why. The first one has to do with literal, practical reasons why it's too late. The nomination process is well under way and to win the nomination a candidate needs to win the support of a majority of delegates that are available. You need to win 1969 of the 3936 delegates that are available.

Up until now, there's been about 91 delegates that have been assigned based off of how folks have voted in South Carolina and in Nevada.

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Biden Wins SC Primary> ANCHOR: And President Biden is one step closer to securing his party's nomination after winning the South Carolina primary on Saturday.*

**CHRISTIAN:** and in Nevada,

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Biden Wins Nevada Primary> ANCHOR: He will claim the state's 36 pledges to delegates*

**CHRISTIAN:** Both places where Joe Biden won about 90% or more of the vote.And so that's why I say that it's a little too late in the practical sense, because up until now, there isn't anyone who's registered on the ballot in those primary states other than Joe Biden, and in some places in Dean Phillips and in some places, Marianne Williamson. But it seems like Joe Biden is on track to win more than the majority.Right. And going through to March past Super Tuesday and a bunch of the other big states that are having their primaries in March, it doesn't look like there's anyone other than Joe Biden who is a serious candidate on those ballots. And so it's too late to register to get on the ballot in those states. And if you look, I think specifically there are 44 states where the deadline has already passed to have that registration happen. So there isn't anyone who can jump in at this point, get on the ballot and compete with Joe Biden for that traditional nominating process.

SCORING - <Sunken Cruiseship Lobby Song>

**NOEL:**  Why didn't any brave Democrats, who were aware a year ago that Joe Biden had problems with his memory? Why didn't any of them say, I want a primary, put me on the ballot, I want a shot here.

**CHRISTIAN:** That speaks a little bit to some of the political reasons why it's too late. Also, it's because it's already historically difficult to challenge an incumbent for the nomination of their party. Every time that's happened in recent memory, it's gone poorly for that party by the end of the election.

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Kennedy v Carter> Carter and Kennedy shook hands but Carter's team never forgave Kennedy for weakening their candidate in the battle against Ronald Reagan. After the loss to Reagan, the Democratic Party vowed never to self destruct like that again.*

**CHRISTIAN:** But the other reason for it being difficult is because the president is the incumbent, and that gives him the advantage of having selected the folks who run the Democratic Party.

And so it would mean that you would have to go against not just the president and the party apparatus that's there to support the president. It would also mean that you'd need to rally your own base of support. You'd need to raise so much money. And then you'd need to actually build a campaign operation out there. And that's not easy to do without the support of a party, without the support of big party donors. And even when you look at the Republican side, we had a contested election there also, right, with Ron DeSantis, Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, etc. and they all slowly fell out of the race.

**NOEL:** But they tried,

**CHRISTIAN:** they tried

**NOEL:** they tried. It's like the Democrats have learned nothing about unprecedented times, which everyone says we're living in unprecedented times. We've always done it this way, so we're always going to do it this way, I don't know.

SCORING OUT

**CHRISTIAN:** It is. It does make you wonder, right? I think another big reason is maybe there's just some political instinct that's different here, where the folks that you would look at to be those challengers, governors like Gavin Newsom of California

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWSOM Dem States Rule> NEWSOM: But it’s an interesting fact that GDP growth in California last year outpaced all red states in America.*

**CHRISTIAN:** Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan,

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Whitmer Praises Biden> WHITMER: This president has delivered and that's why you see so many of my colleagues and me getting ready to to help him win re election*

**CHRISTIAN:** Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Shapiro Praises Biden> SHAPIRO: he's a native of Pennsylvania. For a long time, he was our third senator. And as president, he's really deliberate for the commonwealth*

**CHRISTIAN:** they're all loyal. Biden Democrats is the other thing here. There is no incentive for them to go against Joe Biden and for them to, you know, just incur a bunch of scorn from the party and from the base. It's also interesting to see that in you when you hold the Democratic Party, when you pull Democratic voters, Biden is still the top option, even if people are dissatisfied with him. And if they don't want him to be the nominee and they're asked, who would you rather have? People don't know who they would want. So even if you were to go with theoretically one of these other governors or senators, none of them have independently enough support to actually build an operation from. And then on top of that, there is all the theoretical polling that's being done. Also to see, hypothetically, if Gretchen Whitmer or Gavin Newsom were to run against Donald Trump. How would things go? It turns out that Joe Biden still does the best.

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Biden Beats Trump Hypothetical Poll> ANCHOR: A new national poll shows Joe Biden beating Donald Trump in a hypothetical general election match up// Biden leading Trump by 6 points 50 percent to 44 percent among registered voters*

**NOEL:** The New York Times columnist Ross Douthat wrote over the weekend, and others. Others have said the same, that Joe Biden should stay in the race until the convention, he kinda has to the way you’ve laid it out and then Joe Biden should bow out of the race. And the idea is that would allow someone else to step in and be like, okay, I'm the person now who's going to run the Democrats to the end zone. Could that work?

**CHRISTIAN:** I guess, but that kind of has to happen in a fantasy world that we are not in right now where. I think we're forgetting that Joe Biden has said he wants to run for a second term. He hasn't given any indication that he's dropping out or that he wants to drop out.He has the entire Democratic Party apparatus working toward that. And in the primaries you've had so far, it looks like voters are willing to support him. And so it doesn't seem like that's actually something that might play out.

**NOEL:** can you talk us through when Democrats meet and they do a little fantasizing of their own about, you know, Joe Biden says, the time has come for me to step aside. And the Democrats, the Democrats have to go looking for someone else. Can you talk to me about who some of these folks might be?

**CHRISTIAN:** The names that have been coming up have either been folks who've shown that they're very progressive and consistently progressive. So in my mind, that is the lane occupied by Gavin Newsom in California. As governor, he's been the leader of the biggest Democratic state. He's handily beat back recall efforts and won reelection.

**A**nd he spent a lot of the last year essentially campaigning for Biden, being a surrogate that's willing to go up against Ron DeSantis. Go on Fox News.

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Newsom Defends Biden> NEWSOM: I will take Joe Biden at 100 versus Ron DeSantis any day of the week*

**CHRISTIAN:** Go to the Republican debate and be in the spin room to defend Biden's record. And it's no secret that he kind of aspires to the presidency at some point. But for now, I think he's made the calculation that it makes more sense to play the role of loyal foot soldier and loyal, you know, front line defender of Biden than to challenge Biden. Then you have the. Kind of candidate that's cooked up in a lab, which is popular, governor of a important swing state who has won many close or won a few close elections, and has been able to govern popularly. And that is the lane that's occupied by the governors of Michigan and Pennsylvania, Gretchen Whitmer and Josh Shapiro. And they're both really popular in their states. They've won really tight races. Gretchen Whitmer led the Democratic Party in Michigan to not only win and hold the governor's mansion, but also to win a bunch of other statewide races and flipped control of the legislature. Which is a pretty big accomplishment.

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Michigan Flips Dem> ANCHOR: A momentous night for Michigan Democrats. Democrats secured control of the House and Senate for the first time in nearly four decades*

**CHRISTIAN:** And then you have kind of a realm of candidates who have either run before or who could be future options because they've done a good job at their assignments right now. And that is the Pete Buttigieg category of folks who maybe they're not as ideological, but they understand how government works  **and then there's Gina Raimondo, the current US Secretary of Commerce and the former governor of Rhode Island.**

*<CLIP BIDEN ARC NEWS Raimondo Future US Econ> RAIMONDO: I think our economic priorities are clear. Ensuring that the United States builds the talent, technologies, and manufacturing capabilities necessary to lead the global economy in the 21st century.*

**CHRISTIAN:**. And then you have the other other realm of like, Joe Manchin, senator from West Virginia, who's not running for reelection, who's floated the idea of maybe running as a third party.

**NOEL:** Let's speculate about a really bad situation that I want to be clear. We're not wishing on anyone. Let's say Joe Biden really is incapacitated by a stroke, for example, or a bad fall, which at his age are not unheard of. Is there anything in the convention rules that could require a new candidate, or allow a new candidate if there was a very serious Biden health event?

**CHRISTIAN:** There are contingencies. There's… it's never it's never happened before. Right. In the modern era for us to have to go through this. But the default would be that the party would end up supporting Kamala Harris.

*<CLIP> Kamala Harris: You think you just fell out of a coconut tree? Laughs. You exist in the context of all that came before you.*

**NOEL:** The funny thing about Kamala Harris is that, she is also frequently incoherent, like, and it's I'm saying that in a fun way because she's, you know, she's young. What do we know about Kamala Harris's numbers? If she's put in hypothetical polling against Trump, you're saying none of these other Democratic names would have a shot at beating him? Does polling suggests that Harris is somehow different?

**CHRISTIAN:** The polling actually does show that Harris does the least worse.

SCORING IN - <Sleepwalking\_Ghost\_APM>

One of my sources has done a lot of analysis of head to head polls of these different candidate options versus Trump. And it turns out that, yes, Kamala Harris does underperform Joe Biden a bit, but she does better than Gavin Newsom, for example, would do~~.~~ And so we're doing all this thinking about, yeah, there's this generic Democratic candidate who everyone wants, who what people would be more enthusiastic about than Joe Biden. But when you actually look through to see who that would be, who the options that we have are, if you're a Democrat, it's not that much better than going with Kamala Harris.

NOEL: Christian Paz, covering election 2024 for Vox. Today’s episode was produced by Miles Bryan and Jesse Alejandro Cottrell. It was edited by Matthew Collette, fact-checked by Laura Bullard and Avishay Artsy, engineered by Patrick Boyd. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**