Monday, July 8, 2024 / Joe Almighty

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): President Biden worked through the holiday weekend.

On a call with Democratic governors, he apparently said his health was fine, “It’s just my brain. And at a rally he said he’d beat Donald Trump — but in the past

*<CLIP> BIDEN: I’m staying in the race. I’ll beat Donald Trump. I’ll beat him again in 2020. And by the way, we’re going to do it again in 2024!*

SEAN: Nevertheless, in an interview with George Stephanopolous he said it would take divine intervention to get him to step down.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS – BIDEN: It depends on what the Lord Almighty comes down and tells me that, I might do that.*

SEAN: He also said his terrible debate performance was his fault.

*<CLIP> ABC interview:*

*BIDEN: Nobody’s fault. Mine. Nobody’s fault but mine.*

SEAN: Everyone agrees, sir!

*<CLIP> ABC interview:*

*BIDEN: Not – my fault! No one else’s fault.*

SEAN: Joe versus himself, coming up on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram here with Vox's senior politics reporter, Christian Paz. Christian, the last time we had you on the show, it was after Joe Biden's disastrous debate performance. What has the president been up to since?

CHRISTIAN PAZ (VOX Reporter): Since the debate, we've kind of seen the president both retreat into an inner sanctum to talk to family, close advisers about the proper way to go about the campaign now, how to respond to some of those calls for him to step down, and what he has to do to convince the American people, and more specifically Democrats, that he's up for this job.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS*

*PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Every one of them, they all said I should stay in the race. Stay in the race.*

CHRISTIAN: And then at the same time, we've also seen him out in public a little bit more. We've seen him do interviews and do rallies.

*<CLIP> NORTH CAROLINA RALLY*

*BIDEN: I don’t walk as easy as I used to. I don’t speak as smoothly as I used to. I don’t debate as well as I used to. But I know what I do know. I know how to tell the truth! <applause>*

CHRISTIAN: He did have some moments of slippage when he was talking, moments when it seemed like he was confusing some thoughts and stumbling over his words a bit.

*<CLIP> WISCONSIN RALLY*

*BIDEN: I’ll beat Donald Trump. I’ll beat him again in 2020. Oh by the way we’re gonna do it again in 2024.*

CHRISTIAN: And we've kind of seen a mix of, you know, reporting and Democratic officials talking about, well, this is more frequently occurring, especially over the last few months, where it seems like the president is not necessarily, at full capacity. And then we've also seen moments of, Democratic allies coming out and saying, well, he's the nominee. He's the person who we should be rallying behind. And every time that we're talking about whether or not he should be the nominee, we're giving Donald Trump a pass, to continue kind of cruising to victory at the moment.

SEAN: Joe Biden sort of had to shift his central argument from “Donald Trump bad” to, like, “Joe Biden good.” How is he making Joe Biden good? How is he making that argument?

CHRISTIAN: It's really interesting because we see the same lines come up when he's making that argument now. It's ‘Don't compare me to the Almighty. Compare me to the alternative.’

*<CLIP> ABC interview: Biden: I've convinced myself of two things: I'm the most qualified to beat him, and I know how to get things done.*

CHRISTIAN: There's also another line about, you know, we've done good work already. Look at everything that we've accomplished over the last three and a half years. Why not continue on this path? I am promising that we will continue to do more, on a range of, you know, social and economic programs and initiatives that we have as Democrats that we kind of got started during this first term. I want to finish that. And so he's essentially making a pitch to the past, similarly to how he kind of frame things in 2020. In that case, it was about restoring decency and normalcy. And in 2024, now his argument is I beat Trump once and I can do it again. And look at all the work that we've done. Why don't you give me another chance to do some more?

SEAN: What do we know about what's going on with the president, with the White House behind the scenes? Why is he staying in this race?

CHRISTIAN: We kind of have a mixed picture here. Part of it is personal. Part of it is that Joe Biden really does see himself as the only person who can beat Donald Trump.

*<CLIP> WISCONSIN RALLY – BIDEN: I’m the nominee of this party because millions of Americans just like you just voted in primaries all across America. <cheers> You voted for me to be your nominee! No one else!*

CHRISTIAN: He's also, apparently, the picture we're getting out of the white House is a little more stubborn now, and kind of closed off a bit from criticism or from any possible kind of negative, essentially, feedback.

*<CLIP> WISCONSIN RALLY – BIDEN: And despite, despite that some folks don’t seem to care who you voted for, well guess what? They’re trying to push me out of the race. <crowd: no!> Well, let me say this as clearly as I can – I'm staying in the race! <cheers>*

CHRISTIAN: One other aspect to this is also just that we haven't heard a lot from Donald Trump at the same time.   
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
CHRISTIAN: So we're getting a lot of focus on, what is the president thinking? How are people around him, you know, feeding him information? Is he really that closed up in the White House? And it all kind of feels a bit muddy now.

SEAN: And while Americans were enjoying their 4th of July, the president went and did something he rarely does – he gave a TV interview over the weekend to George Stephanopoulos.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS*

*GEORGE: Mr. President, thank you for doing this.  
BIDEN: Thank you for having me.  
GEORGE: Let's start with the debate… <FADES OUT>*

SEAN: How'd it go?

CHRISTIAN: It was an interesting experience:

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS – George Stephanopoulous: You know, the heart of your case against Donald Trump is that he's only out for himself, putting his personal interests ahead of the national interest. How do you respond to critics who say that by staying in the race, you're doing the same thing?*

*Biden: Oh, come on. Well, I don't think those critics know what they're talking about.*

CHRISTIAN: Going into the specifics of the interview, he seemed to have a few moments of essentially having two trains of thought kind of crash into each other and kind of derail the answer that he was giving. So one of the clear examples of that in that interview was when he was essentially talking about what was happening on the debate stage. When did he realized that, that maybe he wasn't giving his best performance, since he kept saying that it was just a bad night, it was just a bad night.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS – BIDEN: I prepared what I usually would do sitting down as I did come back with foreign leaders or the National Security Council for explicit detail and I realized about partway through that you know all the I could quoted the New York Times had me down at 10 points before the debate, nine now or whatever the hell it is. The fact of the matter is that when I looked at is that he also lied 28 times. I couldn't, I mean the way the debate ran – not my fault. No one else's fault. No one else's fault*

CHRISTIAN: But then at the same time, he had other lines, other moments when he was pretty clear talking about why he's in the race, even though that also inspired some concerns and some worrying from other Democrats over the weekend when he says that, what would it take for him to drop out of the race?

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS – BIDEN: Well it depends. If the lord almighty comes down and tells me that, I might do that.*

CHRISTIAN: And, I think that was a little bit worrisome, especially as there's so much talk behind the scenes to try to figure out how you do convince a sitting president to back out at this stage in the race. And one of the things that he said toward the end of it was, you know, he gets asked what would happen if the worst comes to happen, where he loses the election, Donald Trump wins. Now, Donald Trump, if you, if you buy the arguments the Democrats are making, has all this authority and power. And as Biden has argued, would become a dictator on day one, how would you feel if you do lose and didn't drop out? And he says something along the lines of:

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS: I'll feel as long as I gave it my all and I did the good as job as I know I can do, that's what this is about.*

CHRISTIAN: And the response from Democrats around, around the country over the weekend was, well, that's not what this is about. This is about winning the election.

SEAN: In this interview, it feels like Joe Biden is making this all about Joe Biden. You know, ‘I'm going to try my hardest.’ ‘Only the Lord can stop me.’ And that feels, for this anti-Trump candidate, kind of Trumpy in a way.

CHRISTIAN: It's definitely not something I'm used to. Even as somebody who's been covering Biden for some time, I was also looking at moments over the weekend. He did some appearances in rallies in Pennsylvania and in Wisconsin Friday. And even in those speeches, it felt like there was a bit of a tonal shift in how he was talking. He would talk about, you know, his now other go to line is ‘When you get knocked down, you get back up,’ talking about himself. It's funny because nobody knocked him down. He knocked himself down.

SEAN: <chuckles>

CHRISTIAN: He was, he was on stage and did a really bad job. And even the responses that he gets from the audience now, it's so much more Joecentric in a way that maybe we expected a Democratic politician to campaign earlier on.

*<CLIP> WISCONSIN RALLY*

*BIDEN: So let me ask you, what do you think? You think I'm too old to restore Roe v. Wade to the law of the land?*

*CROWD: NO!*

*BIDEN: You think I'm too old to ban assault weapons again?*

*CROWD: No!*

*BIDEN: To protect social security and medicare?*

*CROWD: No.*

*BIDEN: To get childcare, eldercare for working families that need it in this nation?*

*CROWD: No.*

CHRISTIAN: And when you are making it all about yourself again, then there is again no one else to blame. And he admits this in the ABC news interview, too. He kind of falls back on this, on this, this defense, that it was a bad night.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS*

*BIDEN: Nobody’s fault but mine. Nobody’s fault but mine.*

CHRISTIAN: And it just seems like when he gives those answers, he's maybe not in the same ecosystem or environment that the rest of us are in where we're all looking at this. We're all watching this campaign play out and are thinking, yeah, it is about you. And maybe there is somebody else who could do a better job at this than you and that. It is one of the questions that a lot of Democrats have been asking over the last few days in public. It's about five people who've said this in public. Congressional Democrats, and private. We have a few more folks who've said maybe that it's time for him to drop out. We have one governor, Maura Healey, out of Massachusetts, who said that Biden should reconsider, whether he is the strongest candidate. And then we have a bunch of reporting about congressional, you know, both House and Senate Democrats going into this week now that they're back from their recess, having these conversations, talking about whether or not to be more forceful in public, because what we have right now is a bit of a slow boil revolt. Not necessarily like a full blown party coup.

SCORING IN <A Peaceful Plummet BMC>

CHRISTIAN: And as long as he can get closer and closer to the nomination itself, to the convention, you kind of are running out the clock on alternatives, being able to step up or to push him out.

SEAN: Christian Paz. Vox dot com.

The coup is coming when we return on *Today, Explained.*

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

AMY WALTER (Publisher/Editor, Cook Political Report): My name is Amy Walter, and I am the publisher and editor of the Cook Political Report.

SEAN: And, I imagine you spent your holiday weekend thinking a lot about what's going on in the Democratic Party right now.

AMY: I did spend a lot of my time thinking about that …  
  
SEAN: <chuckles>  
  
AMY: … and talking to folks and reading stuff and looking at polls, and thankfully it was so super hot here in DC. It was okay being stuck inside.

SEAN: From all of your thinking and talking and avoiding the heat. What have you gleaned? Where do we stand?/

AMY: Yeah.

SEAN: What is the, what is the status of this race right now, at least on the Democratic side?

AMY: You have polling that's come out that has shown, you know, it's a slight drop for Biden. I mean, in some places, you know, I looked at all the different polls and the change that they've had since their last poll.

SCORING IN <Data\_Files\_APM>

AMY: So, you know, CNN, Biden's down by six, but he was down by six before debate. Wall Street Journal Biden's also down by six. But again, they hadn't polled since February. So we don't have like an apples to apples. Like what did he look like the week before? What does he look like now? *The New York Times*, he dropped about a couple of points since their earlier June primary [poll]. So I think it's fair to say he's lost some ground. Maybe the best way to think about this is he went into that debate trailing. He's come out of the debate still trailing with a harder path now to get ahead.

SEAN: This election, of course, isn't just about President Biden and former President Trump. What do we know about how this limbo situation on the Democratic ticket is affecting down ballot races or, or even the perception of down ballot races?

AMY: And I think that is something that does need a little bit of time to shake out. But if you're a down ballot Democrat in a swing state or a swing district, what you know is what's happening at the top of the ticket has a tremendous impact on you. If Democratic Voters are less enthusiastic about showing up to vote because they feel pretty down in the dumps about Biden, then they're probably not going to show up for you either.

*<CLIP> SEN. CHRIS MURPHY: Voters do have questions, and personally, I love Joe Biden. I don't know that the interview on Friday night did enough to answer those questions.*

SCORING OUT

AMY: You know, one way to think about it is you've got a bunch of members who sit in districts that Biden carried, but by a narrow margin in 2020, if that margin is erased, that puts them in a really precarious position. I think this week is going to be really critically important because members have been out on 4th of July recess. They've been texting and calling each other, of course, but it's really different when you're sitting in the room with everybody. You know, the reality is, unless Joe Biden decides that he's dropping out of this race, I don't know how individual members of Congress are not going to be enough. Right?

SEAN Yeah.

AMY: A member of Congress saying, I want you to drop out. There's no way there's no legal or political reason why he has to do that. The question going forward is, you know, how much weight does he put on the fact that some of the most vulnerable members of his party are asking him to step aside, if that is weighing on him at all?

SEAN: We've discussed on the show several times now that the only path here, if there is to be some replacement candidate, is for Joe Biden to step aside.

AMY: Right

SEAN: But we haven't actually gone much further than that in the thought experiment. So what would happen, let's say, if, if that were to happen, I don't know, before the convention?   
  
AMY: Right.   
  
SEAN: What happens to all the delegates who have pledged their support to Joe Biden already?

AMY: So if this were to work out in the ideal fashion for, for Democrats, Biden would say, ‘Hey, delegates who are pledged to me? It's all cool. You don't have to, you don't have to stick with me anymore. You can vote for whomever you'd like.’ Or he says ‘It's all cool. You don't need. You don't. I'm releasing you. I also want to let you know I'm endorsing my vice president.’ Those are the options. We don't really know how delegates are feeling, right?  
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
AMY: You know, no one has gone out and actually polled all of those many, many, many delegates about what they would like to see and how, how concerned they are about this, and, and how they think it would work. We really are in uncharted territory. And the, you know, the all the sort of Aaron Sorkin-esque, theories of how this would work …

*<CLIP> THE WEST WING – Bartlet: Well, that's it that we've saved people the trouble of voting. What's next?*

AMY: Again, they sound great if you're making this a screenplay, but doing it in real life with, things like the internet, which wasn't really as much of a factor even in the, in the West Wing times. But, and it certainly wasn't a factor back in the days when conventions really were conventions, right, where people actually came in, uncommitted, and you spent hours and hours and hours, sometimes days, until you got to consensus on a nominee. This is brand new for all of us.

SEAN: You know, you brought up Aaron Sorkin. I saw Benji Saarland from Semafor, writing that …   
  
AMY: <chuckles> Yes!  
  
SEAN: … there's a plan circulating among Democratic donors for something called a blitz primary that would involve weekly forums with each candidate moderated by cultural icons like Michelle Obama, Oprah and Taylor Swift. Maybe. Who knows?

AMY: Yeah, I mean, Taylor Swift. You know, I'd go to that. I would totally go.

SEAN: And someone wrote not even Aaron Sorkin could have dreamed this up.  
  
AMY: <chuckles>  
  
SEAN: Is this stuff all just theory? Is there any sense of what a Biden replacement primary could actually look like at this point in the race at this point?

AMY: At this point! I mean, Sean, that's the key. There was an opportunity to have a blitz primary. It was called the primary, right? It was called January, February, March of 2024.   
  
SEAN: <chortles> Right. Yeah.  
  
AMY: That was an actual primary on the books where those very people who are being mentioned as potential candidates could have actually come out and said, ‘Hey, my name is governor, fill in the blank, and I would like to run for president.’ Okay, great.  
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
AMY: But nobody did that.

SEAN: Everyone fell in line in this party.

AMY: Everybody fell in line. You don't see Gretchen Whitmer saying, ‘Yeah, I'm thinking about it.’  
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
AMY: You saw the governor of Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro, campaigning with Biden in Pennsylvania. So the very people who are mentioned as the most likely replacement to him are also the people who are least likely to run. So it seems to me Democrats have a choice. You stick with Biden or you go with the vice president.   
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
AMY: There are risks in both.

SEAN: I've read many times now it feels like that, you know, Democratic operatives think that a Kamala Harris ticket is doomed. There's no way, it's an impossibility. Joe Biden's the only person who can beat Donald Trump. I'm just confused, Amy. Why do people think they know what will happen in November if there's someone else running against Donald Trump?

AMY: <laughs> Exactly.

SEAN: I think, you know, for a lot of people, this is just about, you know, who's the best candidate, who's going to beat X, can X beat Y? But, but a lot of the behind the scenes talk seems to be about fundraising. Does a Kamala Harris ticket help with the fundraising question?

AMY: I'm of the belief that, you know, money and politics is very, very important.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQL6zfPGv10&t=222s)*> ARI EMANUAL: The lifeblood to a campaign in politics. The lifeblood is money. I talked to a bunch of big donors, and they're moving all their money to Congress and the Senate. I mean, I cannot believe we're in this situation.*

AMY: But I do think that, donors, as you said, are … just want to win. The just, the folks who want to be Donald Trump just want to be Donald Trump. And whatever money, wherever they have to give their money, they will give their money. So I don't know that money is going to be the bigger problem.

SCORING IN <New Tension 08 Infinite Whack-a-Mole\_BMC>

AMY: To me, the bigger challenge is, you know, if you're, if you are not the vice president. Where does your campaign staff come from? I mean, I guess you assume that all those Biden staffers are like, ‘Okay, cool. Sure, I'll come work for you.’ Also, what's your campaign message? What's your plan? A presidential campaign is is like putting together a fortune 500 company. You have thousands of employees. You literally have, you know, $1 billion or more. You have, so many moving parts, and it takes a while to build that up. And you can't just do it overnight. Now, again, theoretically, if I'm working for the Biden campaign, I'm working for the Biden campaign because I want to beat Donald Trump, and whether that's Joe Biden or whether that is somebody else, I'm on board. But that's also, you know, you may decide, ‘Well, wait a minute. I didn't sign up for this person. I didn't sign up for this to be the focus of the campaign. I don't want this person to be the face of the Democratic Party.’ So, you know, that is a little complicated.

SCORING BUMP

AMY: What makes this different to me from previous politicians is that they had a political problem they had to fix. This is a physical problem and that cannot be fixed, which is you can fix your political challenges, you can't get younger.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Amy Walter is the publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Cook Political Repor*t. Cook Political dot com.

This one was produced by Hady Mawajdeh and Denise Guerra. We were edited by Matthew Collette. Fact checked by Laura Bullard, with help from Amanda Lewellyn. And mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

It’s *Today, Explained.*

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]