Friday, June 28, 2024 / Panic! At the White House

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

CHRISTIAN PAZ (senior politics reporter at Vox): Hi. I’m Christian Paz. xSenior Politics Reporter at Vox.

The *Today, Explained* team thought the best way to open today’s show would be to just have me read the tweets I sent out while watching last night’s debate between president Joe Biden and former president Donald Trump.

So here we go:

SCORING IN —PGMationsTheme

Right out the gate, I tweeted “What the f-u …“. Didn’t finish the curse, but not a great sign.

That one was shortly followed by: “What is going on”. No question mark.

Then I wrote “God I love democracy.” Just like Chancellor / Emperor Palpatine.

And then, pretty early on, I tweeted, “Alright turning the tv off.” Regrettably, I didn’t.

Later in the debate I wrote “Someone SEND HIM POPPERS”. All caps.

And finally a January 6 question. Remember January 6?

Alley Cat stock chart emoji chart emoji chart emoji chart emoji. If you know you know.

And then my penultimate reflection: Where is Commander Biden??

And my last: What an exercise in Democracy.

[THEME]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Today, explained Sean Rameswaram here with Christian Paz from Vox. He's a senior politics reporter. Christian Paz, the sitting president debated a convicted felon last night. Who won?

CHRISTIAN: I think the convicted felon might have won.

SEAN: Rough!

CHRISTIAN: Very rough.

SEAN: How did that Happen?

CHRISTIAN: I think it's a combination of people setting the expectations just so high for how important this debate would be. So immediately, the fact that this debate is happening in June kind of makes it much more important and relevant than a debate happening in October, among a few other debates that are going to happen.

SEAN: Mm

CHRISTIAN: And then the fact that the Biden campaign for a while was telephoning and telegraphing this as a kind of a make or break moment for them, where they were put to rest, ~~some of the,~~ some of the worries about Biden's age, some of the worries about whether or not he's fit to hold office for four more years. And the Trump campaign was kind of framing this as, you know, we're going to take a step back and kind of show America what the alternative is. One of the things that one of the long running jokes that the Trump campaign has been pushing around is that Biden can't string two sentences together. And unfortunately, what we ended up seeing in many, many moments last night was exactly that.  
  
SEAN: How did Joe Biden make the three year age gap between himself and the former president feel like a 30 year age gap?

CHRISTIAN: I think one big part of it was, if you listen to Biden, he just sounded so different. He sounded much more tired. He sounded a little bit like he was kind of stumbling over his own sentences, over every word.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN: “We gotta take a look at what I was left with when I was president. [cough] What Mr. Trump left me.”*

CHRISTIAN: And I think part of it was, the campaign started to tell everyone once the debate was underway, that Biden actually may have had a cold, that he might have been sick, and that was affecting the voice

SEAN: <sad> Oh.

CHRISTIAN: But I think another thing that we're kind of missing is that, Trump came to just put on a show, essentially, and Biden came to kind of discuss a lot of specifics and policy details.

SEAN: Hm.

CHRISTIAN: And it sounded a little bit like he was stumbling and confusing a lot of facts and a lot of minutia. And so when you're kind of focused on getting the specifics of how a tariff might work, or getting into the specifics about your plan to build more housing in the US to bring down housing costs, it just opens you up to more opportunities to make mistakes.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: What I am gonna do is fix the tax system. For example we have a thousand trillionaires in America, excuse me billionaires in America. And what’s happening? They are in a situation where they pay 8.2 percent in taxes. If they would just pay 24 percent, or 25 percent, either one of those numbers that’s raise 500 million dollars… Billion dollars..*

SEAN: He did have some decent moments. He mentioned that Donald Trump had sex with a porn star while his wife was pregnant.

*<CLIP> PRESIDEN BIDEN: What? What are you talking about? Yeah, you have the morals of an alley cat.*

SEAN: Which felt, like, very much like it came from the heart. But no one seems to care that he had a couple decent moments because he had so many alarmingly bad ones, right?

CHRISTIAN: That's exactly right. And I think for me, I remember watching this and four minutes, five minutes into it, I was cringing, by the ten minute mark, by the time he started to explain, all the accomplishments that the administration had made on health care costs and the price of insulin, and protecting Medicare and Medicaid, he ended up kind of wandering off a few times in some of those lines of thought. And the clearest one of those was when he kind of lost his thought around what happened with Medicare.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: Making sure that we're able to make every single solitary person, eligible for what I've been able to do with the.*

CHRISTIAN: And with the Medicare's ability to negotiate prices, for specific drugs do.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: Look…. if… we finally beat Medicare.*

SEAN: And can you remind us? Because unlike most people in this country, you actually watched the vintage Trump Biden debates this week how the president's performance last night compared to where he was at mentally, physically four years ago, debating this same dude.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, the man debating Donald Trump four years ago was much more on his game.

*<CLIP> BIDEN, 2020: You folks at home, how many of you got up this morning and had an empty chair at the kitchen table because someone died of Covid?*

CHRISTIAN: He knew kind of how to play off of Trump. And how to poke fun at Trump and get Trump flustered. The format of the debate itself four years ago lent itself to making that visible, that contrast pretty obvious. Because Trump just spent that whole time talking over Biden, stumbling over himself, muttering, mumbling, kind of reacting.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP, 2020:: Okay, we have major stages of that.   
MODERATOR: Sir.   
TRUMP: All run by Democrats.  
MODERATOR: Two minutes is two minutes.*

CHRISTIAN: And Biden, which is kind of stand back and let Trump speak. The reverse kind of happened this time around. And you got to see a little bit of kind of the wear of the presidency, on Biden himself, where Trump would just let Biden kind of mumble and talk and, you know, there weren't opportunities for interruptions because microphones were kept silent. Unless it was your turn to speak. And there were actually a. Few moments where Trump was like President Trump.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: I really don't know what he said at the end of that sentence. I don't think he knows what he said, either.”*

CHRISTIAN: Look. And that kind of heightened that contrast.

SEAN: How did Trump do otherwise? If I'm recalling correctly, he kind of lied a lot.

CHRISTIAN: He lied a lot. Yeah.And there was an extensive, you know, exchange where Trump got to these questions about whether you're going to accept the results of the 2024 election. And again, he didn't he didn't commit to accepting the results. And, he was like, you know, let's go back to 2020. Let's relitigate January 6th. This election was stolen. This, this was, you know, massive fraud.

*<CLIP> JAKE TAPPER: My question was: what do you say to those voters who believe you violated your constitutional oath on January 6 2021, and worry you will do that again? TRUMP: Well I didn’t say that to anyone, I said peacefully and patriotically.*

CHRISTIAN: Obviously that's not true, but he kind of got away with a lot of very blatant lies.

SEAN: And essentially, they didn't matter because he didn't get called out in the moment. And his base doesn't mind.

CHRISTIAN: That's exactly right. And the other side there is that Trump just got to say very crazy things.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: We had H2O. We had the best numbers ever.*

CHRISTIAN: It didn't matter because as he was saying these things, at least he was saying it with a vigor and with, a little bit of assertiveness. Right. And the contrast was then a president who would get another question, you know, teed up perfectly to talk about abortion rights or talk about Roe v Wade. And it would just kind of stumble on.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: I support Roe V Wade, which had three trimesters. First time is between women and the doctor. Second time is between doctor and an extreme situation Third time is between doctor…I meant between women and the state”*

SEAN: By the second half of this thing, it just felt like two very old men trying to figure out which one of them was the worst president in American history, and all of us were just watching and wishing that there were two other people on stage. Did substantive discussion of policy ever happen last night?

CHRISTIAN: There were moments, and I think this is why when I went back to relisten, I didn't watch. The second time I listened to what they were saying. And at least in the start, President Biden makes a very good point about affordability, about prices. He talks about, you know, his plan to bring down prices. He talks about inflation, talks about inheriting an economy that was in freefall and was just beginning to recover from the Covid recession.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: Unemployment rate rose to 15 percent. It was terrible. So what we had to do was put things back together again. And that’s exactly what we began to do.*

CHRISTIAN: And that starts off all right. There are other moments where he talks abouf investments in climate change, and green technology, where he tries to talk about, his accomplishments in foreign policy and what they're doing on that front in terms of, you know, Israel, Palestine, Ukraine, Russia. But the problem is that, you know, you just can't get over the visuals of it. If you were watching it that first time around, where it seems like he's struggling to to make those points. And then by at least 30 minutes in, Trump has kind of scrambled the whole discussion. And it's no longer about policy. It's about whether or not one of them is better at golf.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: I was an eight handicap…..  
TRUMP: I’ve seen your swing. I know your swing.*

CHRISTIAN: Who should be convicted of crimes? Who is a convicted felon, whose family member is a convicted felon. And it just kind of spins out from there.

SEAN: Jill Biden spoke after the debate and she said, ‘Joe did a great job. He answered all the questions.’

CHRISTIAN: He sounded a lot more coherent and a lot more straightforward in that moment when he was talking to supporters, when he was feeding off of an audience.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: : Well, look, we're going to beat this guy. We need to beat this guy. And I need you in order to beat him. You're the people I've run. [applause]*

SEAN: Yeah. What the heck was that? Where was that guy? At the debate?

CHRISTIAN: A lot of us are asking this question. A lot of us, many people are asking.

SEAN: Ja Rule is asking this, he said. This can't be our only choice of candidates. Facepalm emoji WTF on Twitter last night. Is there another option, Christian?

CHRISTIAN: It didn't take long for me to start to get texts, to start to see tweets, to get direct messages from people wondering ‘What is going on?!’

SCORING IN — Subtle Edged Sword (BMC)  
  
CHRISTIAN: Like, is this really the candidate that we are supposed to, you know, be deciding between, him and Trump? A lot of questions about, okay, have we all just been seeing a completely different person on the campaign trail for the last few months? What are the options ahead? You know, can they replace him? Can the DNC come together and select somebody else who is vice president Harris waiting in the wings for this moment specifically? And I think there was just a building, especially by the time we get to the first commercial break where it's like, what just happened? And where do we go from here? And that's been the big question over the last few hours. Right. It's not that long ago. There's still people who are waking up who didn't tune into the debate. And their first reaction, probably from catching up on the news, is, ‘Wait, really? It went that badly?!’  
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
CHRISTIAN: And so, I don't know, this is one of those things that I was like, let me go back to the rulebook. Let me look at what the process is. Let me understand. Right. Is there an alternative?

SEAN: We're going to go to the rule book when we're back on *Today. Explained*.

[BREAK]

<CLIP> TRUMP: We shouldn’t be having a debate about it. There’s nothing to debate.

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with the Christian Paz. Christian, you went and looked at the rules. What did they say?

CHRISTIAN: It's pretty straightforward. There is a process in place. That process has all but wrapped up. All 50 states have voted.~~.~~ He's amassed way more than the simple majority of delegates that he needs to win the nomination. In the August convention, during that first vote, that they have to choose the nominee. And as far as the, you know, DNC rules state all those delegates who have been kind of some of them have been chosen by the campaign, are bound to support Biden during that first round of, voting And so when we get to August, it's kind of inevitable that they'll vote. Biden will win a majority even if some of those folks slip away or, you know, turn around, and vote for somebody else, Biden will end up becoming the nominee unless he makes a decision between now and the convention to drop out.

SEAN: There's never been more people clamoring for Joe Biden to step down than there is right now, even though he's been 81 for a minute now. So let's just humor the possibility for the sake of the exercise here. What do we think that would look like? And obviously the best time for him to do that would be like, I don't know, two days ago.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, absolutely.

SCORING IN — Basic Barbara

CHRISTIAN: Important thing to clarify here. It's like the DNC itself isn't some, you know, machine that gets to operate independent of Biden. Everybody there has essentially been chosen by him and by his allies. So what they'll do is what essentially the Biden campaign and Biden himself wants. And then what Biden will decide depends on what his closest advisers, Inner sanctum is telling him. So that's his sister Valerie, who has run campaigns for him before. That's the first lady, Jill Biden, who was crucial in giving essentially the green light to him to run for reelection this time around. It's his closest, strategist in advisors, Ted Kaufman, Steve Ricchetti, some important and influential folks within the Democratic Party. So your President Obama, you are Nancy Pelosi. But at the moment, this clamor that we're talking about is from unnamed, anonymous, Democratic people, right? It's, it's, it's former strategists or former campaign managers for other campaigns, right? Not anybody who's working in, in, in the campaign world right now. It's, you know, former, Democratic officials, like Claire McCaskill, the former senator from Missouri, was on cable news last night talking about how Biden did not meet the moment and that this was the one thing he had to do was dispel these concerns that have now just crescendoing, to what we have today.

*<CLIP> CLAIRE MCCASKILL: Joe Biden had one thing he had to do tonight, and he didn't do it. He had one thing he had to accomplish, and that was reassure America that he was up to the job at his age, and he failed at that tonight.*

CHRISTIAN: So what we'll have for the next few days is a lot more talk about this, and anticipation to see just how much of the public was watching what the polls say, and whether or not this goes beyond kind of Democratic elites.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: One thing I think all the names you just dropped have in common is that none of them are viable presidential candidates at this point. But there was someone I couldn't help but notice who was on TV last night spinning the hardest for Joe Biden.

*<CLIP> GAVIN NEWSOM: We have the opportunity to universally have the back of this president who's had our back, you know, turn your back.*

SEAN: I think he's maybe the governor of California who, like, you know, seems like he was built in a, like, cryogenic chamber for manufacturing presidents.

*<CLIP> GAVIN NEWSOM: You go home with the one that brought you to the dance.*

SEAN: Can we talk about the people who maybe have a shot at this for a second here?

SEAN: Gavin Newsom seems like he's in the conversation.

CHRISTIAN: And he's always loved to be in the conversation. As a Californian, we are familiar with his craft. And it is really interesting. He's been one of Biden's most effective surrogates this whole year, and it's just incredible how well he's able to spin, you know, the accomplishments that the administration has done and made, he's willing to go on Fox News. He's willing to debate Ron DeSantis. He's willing to do sit down with Sean Hannity, and go into the belly of the beast

SEAN: And do well in those performances.

CHRISTIAN: And do well and make a name for himself and fundraise. And he's not the only one.

SEAN: Let's talk about the other ones. Yeah. Gretchen Whitmer.

CHRISTIAN: Gretchen Whitmer out of Michigan, Josh Shapiro out of Pennsylvania, more recently, Wes Moore in Maryland. And you do wonder, right, are they actually viable candidates? What would it take for them to become the Biden replacement right now? And that's where it gets a little complicated.

SEAN: And maybe we're saving the best for last here because we haven't talked about someone who, you know, exists in the context of all in which she lives and what came before her, of course, the vice president of the United States, Kamala Harris.

SCORING IN — Neutral Richard

CHRISTIAN: And the vice president of the United States was out on TV last night. She was really kind of showing what she can bring to this campaign, what she can bring to the ticket, which is defending Biden, spinning answers. Presenting a stronger case.

*<CLIP> KAMALA HARRIS: It was a slow start. That's obvious to everyone. I'm not going to debate that point. I'm talking about the choice in November. I'm talking about one of the most important elections in our collective lifetime.*

CHRISTIAN: You know, literally looking at her. She is very youthful. She is very clever in how she engages with debate and with, interview questions. And she was kind of suddenly the person that everyone was talking about, I was seeing all these tweets that were like, all right, K hive rising, it's time to bring out the coconut trees. It's time to put the vice president, you know, center stage, because she needs to kind of save this ticket right now.

SEAN: And I think a lot of people, when they voted for Joe Biden in 2020, thought they were setting up a vote for Kamala Harris in 2024. I know it's early yet, but with all this discourse about who will replace him, how can we make this happen if he steps down? Who is waiting in the wings to step in? Is is Kamala Harris the number one choice? We think. Are there any indications?

CHRISTIAN: By all the measures that I've taken a look at. Yes, because she's already on the ticket. So when folks have voted in their primaries, right, they are essentially endorsing the party process. And the party rules essentially state, right, that the president gets that decision. What is the most logical thing for the president to do if he was to step aside? Tap a successor, somebody who can keep the party united, somebody who has already been campaigning with him. And there would be massive party infighting if you were to pass up the vice president, somebody who is significant because of her historic role as the first woman of color to hold the office, somebody who has been campaigning with him, she's been loyal, and she represents something important to the country, to the Democratic Party, to the Democratic Party's base of Black voters, especially. And that was one of those essentially, you know, unspoken, commitments that Biden made when he was running in 2020 was he would be trying to set up, a path for future Democratic leadership. And that person, best suited for that back then, the decision was it was Kamala Harris. So how are you going to go back on that commitment and that pledge that you essentially already made, and passed by somebody who, honestly, despite some of the polling showing that she's not necessarily the best, match up against Trump. You know, I think Biden still performance best when you compare those head to head polls. She does better than many of the other alternatives still. And she does have better name recognition than some of these other Democratic options.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: What has Joe Biden said, if anything, about his performance last night?

CHRISTIAN: I think he kind of recognizes that maybe it wasn't the best.His campaign is kind of working overtime with the surrogates, with appearances on TV and more recently, just kind of coming out and saying, he's not dropping out. So I imagine, we'll try to see some more efforts to tamp down on that discussion in the next few days.

SCORING IN — These Boops Remain Neutral (BMC)

CHRISTIAN: But I, I, I think it's important to give a little bit of space to, to see how the surveys, you know, what the surveys tell us to see how the polls react. Um, because It's hard right now. We don't have full data on how much, you know, how much of the American public tuned into this debate.There is a little more time right for these discussions to happen to see what the practical options are, um, for both parties, um, and now the stakes are also higher for the next debate, which is supposed to be happening at some point in September, I believe, um, and big questions about whether or not Donald Trump would even show up, um, If I were, you know, Donald Trump, I probably wouldn't. If I were Joe Biden, I would be asking to, to have that debate.

SEAN: Well, if the Republic makes it to September, we'll have you back to talk about it, Christian

CHRISTIAN: I do love the Republic, I love democracy. And there are shining moments like last night where that gets tested. But but it's all right. That's what Twitter's for.

SEAN: Christian Paz, read him at Vox.com.

Our episode today was produced by Miles Bryan and Denise Guerra. We were edited by Matthew Collette, fact-checked by Laura Bullard and Victoria Chamberlin, and mixed by Rob Byers and Patrick Boyd And Andrea Kristinsdotter. It's Today, Explained. TGIF.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]