

# [***Biden has shelved the age issue - for now***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJ5-2RD1-DY7V-G011-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Not even presidents can reverse time, so there's only so much [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) can do to defuse one of his top general election liabilities - his advanced age.

But Biden, 81, appears to be in far better shape on this question than he was a week ago - and not just because he charged past the magic number of convention delegates needed to [*clinch the 2024 Democratic nomination*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/12/politics/biden-trump-presidential-nominees/index.html) on Tuesday evening.

The president's [*vigorous State of the Union address*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/08/politics/biden-state-of-union-analysis/index.html) has partly reset the political narrative and is still delivering dividends. The prime-time look at Biden in his element, dominating the stage, offered a robust counter-image to the one Americans have sometimes seen - of a bewildered statesman who cited phone chats with dead European leaders and confused Mexico and Egypt in a news conference meant to fix the age issue.

That debacle was prompted by special counsel [*Robert Hur's report*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/robert-hur-report-biden-classified-documents-read/index.html), which lifted the threat of Biden facing criminal charges for retaining classified documents after his vice presidency but described him as a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory." That characterization incited a furor and reignited debate over whether the president should step aside so a younger Democrat could carry the fight to presumptive GOP nominee [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45).

At one point in that angry appearance, Biden raged, "How in the hell dare he raise that?" referring to Hur's depiction of his struggle to remember exactly when his son Beau died.

The reality of the interview now appears somewhat different than portrayed either by Hur or Biden or spun by Republican and Democratic operatives and reflected in media coverage.

The 258-page [*transcript*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/12/politics/read-transcript-biden-interview-special-counsel/index.html) released Tuesday shows Biden occasionally flustered and searching for dates. But the totality of the encounter doesn't support Republican claims of advanced cognitive decline. The transcript, however, also undercuts claims by Democrats that Hur, a Trump-appointed former US attorney in Maryland, was a raging partisan out to trip up the president.

A treasure trove for Biden watchers and historians

In the interview, Biden speaks at length and fluently, easily recalling in-depth details about his vice presidency, family life and lore. He digresses into discussing his power as a eulogist, waxes lyrical about his beloved Delaware and even seems to be trying to sell Hur on the merits of his administration's foreign policy.

While it may be a disappointment for Republicans looking for a smoking gun, the transcript will be a goldmine for future historians.

As Hur probes for details about document storage, the president comes across as helpful and sometimes like the windy old politician who knows how to filibuster like only a long-time senator can. He's fiercely proud of his family, his home, and is in love with his wife, first lady Jill Biden, and hopes Hur didn't find "risque" photos of her. He unleashes long perorations on his cabinets and officer furniture and says he's something of an amateur architect. The exchanges about the death of Beau from brain cancer are hard to read. But there's also pure comedy - like when Biden boasts about his prowess with a bow and arrow during a trip to Mongolia and said of the country's prime minister: "The poor son of a b\*tch couldn't pull it back."

Maybe Hur wasn't trying to be funny when he told Biden at the start that he wanted some background but that "we will not be asking you to take us back to Scranton." Yet anyone familiar with Biden's veneration of his life story as a scrappy kid in the blue collar Pennsylvania city would have struggled to stifle a chuckle.

For all the diversions, there's little evidence in the interview transcript that Biden isn't fit or capable of serving in the Oval Office - a key charge at the center of Trump's searing general election campaign.

Republicans fail to draw out Hur on age issue

Hur defended his finding in a highly politicized House hearing on Tuesday, where he also declined to give credence to Republican claims that Biden's mental faculties are diminished. Wisconsin Rep. Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, asked him: "Mr. Hur, based on your report, did you find that the president was senile?" Hur answered: "I did not. That conclusion does not appear in my report."

The fact that his GOP interrogators chose to focus more on Biden's and Trump's differing consequences for holding classified documents - Biden was not charged and Trump was - may suggest they understand that, for now, at least, taking pot shots at Biden's age has lost some potency. (Trump has pleaded not guilty to federal charges, brought by a different special counsel, related to his hoarding of documents at Mar-a-Lago.)

Similar GOP messaging confusion was evident after Thursday's State of the Union address. Republicans went into the event slamming Biden as doddering and aged. They came out of complaining that he was too amped up and too loud.

Had the annual televised address been a total disaster, with Biden providing more highlight reels of what Alabama Sen. Katie Britt called a "dithering and diminished" figure in her lampooned GOP response, this week could have been a rough one for Biden. He would, for instance, have added fuel to GOP attacks in Tuesday's hearing and offered evidence for Hur's assessment of his memory. Instead, his performance last week, which has been followed this week by several upbeat campaign events in swing states, has countered the narrative of decline that conservative media has spent months building with its Biden blooper tapes.

One good week does not make a campaign

One person not ready to let the age issue go is Trump, who himself is 77. He put out a video of Biden stumbling on the steps of Air Force One and falling off his bike, seeking to revive his long-term narrative about his rival. The former president's focus on Biden's age reflects the fact that one good week will not change a harsh reality of the coming eight months. Any sign of fragility on the campaign trail will revive doubts over Biden's ability not just to serve but to beat Trump when he's underwater in multiple swing states and on key electoral issues.

Biden has implicitly acknowledged this will continue to be a vulnerability. In an ad released over the weekend, he said, "I'm not a young guy, that's no secret. But here's the deal, I understand how to get things done for the American people." Biden's supporters often complain that there is a double standard on age since Trump is not far behind Biden in years. But the ex-president's bombast and bluster tends to undercut that criticism - something the Biden camp acknowledges by sometimes implicitly arguing that while the president is old, he's not a wild threat to the rule of law and the Constitution like his predecessor.

Outside Washington and the self-contained world of ***politics*** and campaigns, concerns about Biden's age will be hard to shift. Multiple polls show that most Americans believe Biden is too old to run. [*A New York Times/Siena College survey*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/03/us/politics/biden-age-trump-poll.html) before the State of the Union found that even a majority of those who voted for Biden in 2020 think he's too old to be effective. The age issue was rumbling long before it became a major campaign issue. White House claims that the media has exaggerated the anxiety underplay the genuine feeling among many voters as they mull their choice in November.

Still, Biden's age is only one issue of an election that the president wants to turn from being a referendum on his performance to a public repudiation of Trump's effort to claim a second term devoted to retribution and revenge. A slight uptick in inflation in new government data Tuesday, meanwhile, underscored the president's vulnerability in the face of economic factors outside his control. And the more a restive world plays into Trump's caricature of a planet careening toward World War III, the harder the campaign may become for Biden.

However, after a successful State of the Union address and after escaping Hur's inquiry in better shape than had seemed possible a few weeks ago, the Biden campaign registered a milestone on the night that the president officially claimed the nomination, albeit without serious challenge.

"It's a 'turn the page' moment," a campaign official told CNN's MJ Lee. "The transcript is out. The hearing is done. Trump is going to continue to be dogged by indictments on the documents, but for us - it's effectively done."

But after showing he's in command, Biden must keep it up for eight more months on a grueling campaign trial, against an unchained opponent who's still a couple years short of 80.

Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

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