

# [***Biden erupts over special counsel's report as aides look to short-circuit campaign risk***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B95-18K1-DY7V-G001-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Kevin Liptak, CNN

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**Body**

Washington (CNN) &#8212; Thrust into an election year that had already been defined in part by voters' concerns over the president's age and fitness for office, [*special counsel Robert Hur's report*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/robert-hur-report-biden-classified-documents-read/index.html) amounted to a legal victory [*but a political landmine for President Joe Biden.*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/biden-classified-documents-report-02-08-24/index.html)

The president's outrage on Thursday night made that obvious.

Biden's aides know there is no topic more likely to draw their boss' fury than a slight against his family. So it was hardly a surprise to many inside the White House when an indignant Biden emerged Thursday to forcefully rebut, among other things, a claim in Hur's report that he had forgotten the date of his son's death.

"How in the hell dare he raise that?" Biden [*seethed in the Diplomatic Reception Room*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/biden-special-counsel-beau-death/index.html), where reporters had been hastily gathered for a presidential statement.

His visceral anger - among the brightest public flashes to date of what aides say is a mostly private hot temper - [*reflected a sentiment that had been boiling*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/takeaways-joe-biden-special-counsel-report/index.html) inside the White House for several days, since the president's lawyers first received a copy of the report Hur prepared following his investigation into Biden's handling of classified documents.

Behind the scenes, Biden's aides fumed at a portrait they said was wholly unfair and, more importantly, nothing close to the person they say they interact with every day.

Nearly to a person, Biden's aides use words like "sharp" and "tireless" when describing their boss, particularly when he is dealing with foreign conflicts or world leaders. They recount lengthy meetings in the middle of the night, whirlwind round-the-world foreign travel and hour-long rope-lines to illustrate a man they claim hasn't lost a beat.

Democratic Rep. Daniel Goldman of New York, who spoke by phone with Biden a day ahead of his October 8 interview with Hur, said the president was "sharper than anyone I've spoken to" about the situation in the Middle East, which at the time was unraveling.

"His mastery and command of a complicated geopolitical situation was just impeccable," Goldman said, adding he couldn't know what occurred in Biden's interview with Hur. "I don't know what happened in there."

Biden's anger bursts into public view

As details of the public report were emerging, Biden grew livid at some of the details included in the final version about his recollection of date and details. In a private meeting with Democrats in Virginia on Thursday afternoon, Biden cursed when venting his anger.

In the meeting, Biden asked how anyone could believe he would forget the day his son died, using profanity to punctuate his fury, according to people familiar with his comments. "How would I f\*\*\*\*\*\*" forget that," Biden said, according to one of the people.

People in the room interpreted the forceful response as a sign of just how upset the report had made the president.

Biden's outrage exploded into public view Thursday evening, as the president derided the allegations about his memory as "extraneous commentary" and claimed Hur and his team "don't know what they're talking about."

"It has no place in this report," Biden said before batting away questions from reporters about his fitness for office.

"My memory is fine," he insisted.

Moments later, as he was responding to a question about the crisis in Gaza, Biden mistakenly referenced Mexico when he meant Egypt - precisely the type of slip-up his rivals seize upon to question his mental acuity, and a clear indication that the concerns about Biden's fitness won't be dispelled by a single, fiery news conference.

Hur - a former Trump Justice Department official - declined to bring charges and made a point of saying Biden's handling of classified documents compared favorably to Donald Trump's. Yet the words Biden's lawyers used when describing Hur's document were scathing: "inappropriate," "inaccurate," "wrong," "extraneous," "unfounded" and "irrelevant."

The source of their ire: Multiple depictions of Biden as forgetful, unable to remember some of the most important dates of his life or the contours of a decade-old policy debate. In a phrase that appears destined to factor heavily in the coming campaign, Hur said Biden presented himself in an interview as a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory."

Biden's defenders leapt to defend him, saying the depictions were inaccurate, over the top and even ageist. And the president said Hur got at least some of that description right.

"I am well-meaning. And I'm an elderly man," he said. "And I know what the hell I'm doing. I've been president - I put this country back on its feet. I don't need his recommendation."

Still, if Hur's claims about Biden's memory had occurred in a vacuum, separated from what Americans were already seeing and hearing, they would perhaps have appeared less credible. But because they arrived at a moment when American voters were already reckoning with the president's age and mental fitness - and, in polls, expressing deep concerns about both - the words only buttressed what will be Biden's biggest political challenge over the coming nine months.

On Thursday, however, Biden summarily dismissed concerns about his age - even those shown in public polling - ascribing instead the worries to the media.

"That is your judgment. That is your judgment," he told CNN's MJ Lee, raising his voice.

A persistent annoyance for Bidenworld

In public, however, Biden can at moments appear forgetful, as he did this week when he verbally transposed the names of former (and deceased) foreign leaders with present-day ones. In those episodes, Biden was describing an international summit in 2021 when he recalled speaking with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who died in 2017, and French President Francois Mitterrand, who died in 1996.

There are other signs of his age as well. He has slowed noticeably, with a stiff gait his doctor has ascribed to previous injuries. And he clears his throat so often - a symptom of reflux, according to the physician - that he sometimes has to explain himself, as he did at a fundraiser this week when he said he had swallowed a cough drop.

Only about 45 minutes before Hur's report was released publicly, the White House was working to downplay the verbal slip-ups, saying it's common for people to misspeak.

"Many people, elected officials ... they can misspeak sometimes," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, citing recent examples from House Speaker Mike Johnson and TV host Sean Hannity. She said in meetings she's attended with Biden, she had never witnessed him confuse people's names.

There is little that irritates Biden or White House officials more than public questioning of the president's age and acuity, making Thursday's report a wellspring for frustrations and forceful pushback.

One official told CNN that they viewed some of the criticism outlined in the lengthy report as "way out of line" and "just wrong." White House officials were particularly aggrieved by allegations in the report about Biden having memory and recall problems during his multi-hour sit-down with Hur in October, including about Beau Biden's death.

This official said that as the multi-hour interview got underway in the fall, Hurt acknowledged to the president that he would be asking about some things from a long time ago and prompted Biden to recall things to the best of his ability - and thanked Biden for doing the interview in the middle of a serious international crisis.

"Of course, he was understandably distracted and managing a crisis in Israel and the Middle East," the official said. "To now retrospectively go back and suggest it is indicative of some bigger issue with memory is wrong. It's just wrong."

Perhaps the biggest objection among White House officials was a reference in the report that says Biden "did not remember, even within several years, when his son Beau died."

"He remembers the day Beau died every day of his life," this official said. "To suggest otherwise is insulting."

A strategy unfolds

As the Biden campaign pivots to general election mode, senior campaign officials insist that the best remedy for concerns related to the president's age is for voters to see him - out and about and campaigning - as much as possible. There has already been a notable uptick in traditional retail ***politics*** stops for Biden in the new year - drop-bys at diners and small businesses where he is meeting voters and working the room.

Ahead of the report's release, the biggest concern among Biden's aides was that Republicans would seize on its findings about documents found in the president's home and conflate them with the far more significant legal risks facing Trump for his own handling of classified material. As it turned out, the report delineated clearly between the two cases, pointing to "several material distinctions between Mr. Trump's case and Mr. Biden's."

Instead, it was the questions of mental acuity that were immediately glaring to Biden aides and lawyers who viewed the report ahead of its public release.

A strategy of embracing the legal findings while forcefully challenging the "irrelevant critical commentary" had been taking shape in private for several days. The White House and Biden's outside lawyers had been engaging with the special counsel's office on the report since at least Monday, when they strongly rebutted the claims about Biden's memory as "gratuitous" and "not supported by the facts" in a letter.

The report was released anyway, with the objections of Biden's lawyers included - but only toward the end of the nearly 400-page report.

Biden's team pointed to the timing of his interview - in the two days following the October 7 terror attacks in Israel - to demonstrate a leader preoccupied with world events rather than instant historical recall.

"I was in the middle of handling an international crisis," Biden said Thursday about an hour after the report was released.

CNN's MJ Lee contributed to this report.

By Kevin Liptak, CNN

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