

# [***Biden's allies can't agree on how to combat questions about his age and memory***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B96-5CG1-DY7V-G009-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Leesburg, Virginia (CNN) &#8212; Minutes after [*the special counsel report*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/biden-classified-documents-report-02-08-24/index.html) landed on Thursday afternoon, House Democrats stood and cheered for [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) as he used their annual retreat as the latest chance to make a forceful case for four more years on the job.

By the time they took their seats as the president returned to the stage minutes later, [*murmurs were rippling around the room*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/biden-age-concerns-analysis/index.html), according to several who spoke afterward to CNN.

How damaging are all the renewed questions [*about age and mental acuity*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/joe-biden-age/index.html) going to be? Does anyone have a plan to make more Americans see the behind-the-scenes sharpness and lucidity that they know is far from the public image? And why was the leader of the free world sitting in front of one of the friendliest audiences he could find, long after the press had been escorted out, answering scripted questions off prepared notecards - even if he did end up quickly moving past them to riffs of his own?

Whether brutally honest or - as Biden aides charge - [*a partisan hatchet job by a Donald Trump appointee*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/09/politics/biden-fury-special-counsels-report/index.html) out to damage a president he couldn't find cause to prosecute, the special counsel's report aimed straight at what every Biden adviser has known would be the president's consistent liability from the moment he started talking about running for reelection: At 81, he's clearly aged, and to many that looks like he's not up to the job.

One Democratic member of the House responded to being told of the questions about age and memory raised in the report with a morbid laugh and sullen shake of the head. Another started anxiously asking for a sense of how others were responding, palpably feeling at wit's end. Even members who feel like ageism, double standards for Trump and overblown concerns about Biden are all at play say they are getting worried that the questions about age - which have been showing up in many Democratic focus groups for over two years - keep getting louder.

And they're loud enough to leave leading Democrats worrying undecided voters might believe that four more years of the far right, anti-democratic agenda Trump is promising would be better than four more years of Biden if he seems on the decline.

[*Inside the White House and among Biden's reelection campaign staff*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/takeaways-joe-biden-special-counsel-report/index.html), the tension is constant. Top aides have set the strategy that the president need not play the Washington news cycle game of constant appearances that risk embarrassing flubs, while others complain that this unfortunately reinforces the image put forward by his political opponents that he is barely bumbling through his days.

Biden is constantly caught coming off "stilted," and looking "like a caricature," complained one sympathetic former West Wing aide, who asked not to be named to speak bluntly about the situation.

"Some of the folks around him create this weird bubble because they're trying to be protective, but they've got him so anxious he makes mistakes," the former aide said.

Democratic Rep. Annie Kuster, who was initially skeptical of Biden running for reelection instead of making way for a younger candidate but has since come around, said that she and three other members of the New Hampshire congressional delegation left an Oval Office meeting last week all chattering with each other about Biden's impressive command of the issues.

"It's like, 'No, he's fine,'" Kuster said. "Most people don't get an hour with him. He's sharp. He's doing fine."

This isn't just allies covering for a president at a tough moment. Dozens of officials, aides and others who have spent time with Biden in private have told CNN over the last three years that they find him to be completely on top of things. And White House aides liked to point out, for example, that former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy - who would often publicly question Biden's mental fitness - also told reporters after meetings that the president was on top of all they discussed.

More informal moments planned

The internal debates go beyond staging speeches or agreeing to interviews. Current and former aides tell CNN that decisions about opening White House events to the press, how long they are scheduled for and other logistics are obviously clouded by considerations about the president's age and how it will come across.

How much sleep the president is getting and how he looks have been topics of conversation among advisers, with several pointing to the speeches he delivered at the beginning of January at Valley Forge and the Mother Emanuel church in Charleston as examples of finally getting him to come across with the strength and vigor they wanted.

Biden aides also feel themselves that this hasn't been enough. In internal meetings over the last few weeks, they have focused on plans to have the president do more informal campaign stops, like his swing by a boba tea store in Las Vegas on Monday, where he chatted with the cashier as he was shown how to put the straw through cup's plastic cover. These play up Biden's famous retail ***politics*** virtuosity, and they also feed content that the campaign is trying to disperse online as they try to break through in a fractured media environment.

Most importantly, they reflect what Biden aides have learned from experience: Nothing combats questions about the president's competence as much as people seeing him in action.

"I want to see the president do what he does best: Be with people in their homes, see him on an individual level, so that he's connecting not just on the policy successes but that he's connecting to the people," said Rep. Gabe Amo, a newly elected Democratic congressman from Rhode Island who until last summer worked for Biden in the White House. "I think less about the details that the president remembers, and more about the values he's portraying. And that's what you get when you put the president with the people."

Of course, each unscripted moment is a chance Biden will make a slip, like last weekend's mixing up French President Emmanuel Macron for long-dead French President Francois Mitterrand. Or when he came back to the microphone on Thursday night after forceful remarks about the special counsel report to have his carefully weighed comments about negotiations over the Israel-Hamas war distracted by his referring to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as the president of Mexico, rather than Egypt.

Those remarks were quickly added to his schedule, reflecting an internal acknowledgement that seeing the president in action was the best way to combat the special counsel's allegations.

"Anybody can have a slip of the tongue and say 'Mitterrand,' but look at all the things that Donald Trump has said," said Rep. Dina Titus, a Nevada Democrat who joined Biden for the boba tea and other stops last week. "Joe Biden is very sharp, very well-respected, holds his own with international leaders, negotiating with the Senate on this whole foreign policy package. If I felt somebody wasn't competent, I wouldn't want them with their finger on the button. And I certainly don't think that about Joe Biden."

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin said Trump's flubs are much worse, from saying Biden would start "World War II" if he gets a second term to appearing in a video deposition to mistake a photo of E. Jean Carroll for one of his second wife.

"Joe Biden is not walking around pretending that he's 30 years old anymore. He's running based on his wisdom and his experience and his fantastic accomplishments in office," said Raskin, who said that his own takeaway from the Thursday session with House Democrats in Virginia was of a president who is "completely lucid and recalling stories from many years ago" in stark contrast to what is in the report.

"They're down to the point where all they've got against him now is he's old. Give me a break."

The Biden campaign seized Friday night on Trump's event with the National Rifle Association in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to portray the GOP front-runner as "confused" and "deranged."

"Every single time Donald Trump opens his mouth, he's confused, deranged, lying, or worse," said spokesperson TJ Ducklo. "Tonight, he lied more than two dozen times, slurred his words, confused basic facts, and placated the gun lobby weeks after telling parents to 'get over it' after their kids were gunned down at school."

Biden aides dismiss outside advice on age

Democratic operatives and consultants have chipped in with advice: Spend a whole lot more time working on his makeup and lighting, they tell Biden aides, or finally accept that the arthritis explanations aren't working and start having him do more events where he starts out seated instead of being photographed shuffling to a podium.

Other Democrats are blunter, reacting with rage when talking about the president still going on bike rides after his 2022 tumble on camera (which he got right up from) or going shirtless on the beach last summer. At this existential moment for American democracy, they say, a faltering president is too often too close to a costly embarrassing moment.

Little delights Biden's inner circle more than sneering at outsiders who didn't think he would win the 2020 primaries or the general election. To them, those same outsiders are now lobbing suggestions at them about what he should do differently. Pundits who declare new revelations will completely reshape the election, at least until the next one comes along, also grate on those same top advisers. That also didn't change with the special counsel report or its aftermath.

A campaign aide told CNN that many in the Wilmington, Delaware, campaign headquarters feel Republican attacks on the president and his age are nothing new from those that have been lobbed at him since he started running for president in 2019.

For all the attention to Biden's gaffes in the last campaign, "voters didn't care," said Kate Berner, a deputy communications director for that run and later in the White House who is now an outside adviser to the reelection effort.

"At the end of the day, if you're concerned about a national abortion ban or Social Security existing or the cost of your prescription drugs or your kids' safety at school because of gun violence, Biden's age might be something you think about, but Trump is on the wrong ... side of all those issues."

White House deputy press secretary Andrew Bates added that any concerns about Biden's age are undercut by what aides feel is another week of more relevant news, this time in standing against Republicans who backed away from their own demands for a bipartisan border and immigration bill.

"Biden demonstrated the same experienced leadership and maneuvering that has made him the most effective president in modern history, achieving a major, bipartisan border security deal endorsed by the Border Patrol Union," Bates said.

Counting this as another win for Biden even as his political opponents question his competency, Republicans, Bates jabbed, "Must have forgotten that they've seen this movie before."

At least one clear impact of the report: a president who has always hated being called old snapped back at the report saying a jury would find him to be "a well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory."

"I'm well-meaning and I'm an elderly man and I know what the hell I'm doing. I'm the president. I put this country back on its feet," and adding mockingly that he defied conventional wisdom to get as much accomplished because "I guess I just forgot what was going on."

Backstage before going out to see House Democrats, Biden was more angry than sarcastic about the accusations. The suggestion he didn't know what year Beau Biden had died clearly cut deepest for a father who has been defined by that grief ever since the moment the glioblastoma took his son nearly nine years ago.

"How would I f\*\*\*\*\*\*" forget that? Biden said, according to one of the people who heard him.

CNN's Arlette Saenz, Haley Talbot and Kevin Liptak contributed to this report.

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