

# [***Biden's verbal slip-ups over dead European leaders put the focus on his most potent political weakness: His age***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B90-79P1-JBSS-S02S-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Washington (CNN) &#8212; Questions about President Joe Biden's age and fitness for office are not going away, even [*as the 81-year-old president*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/20/politics/joe-biden-birthday-81/index.html) juggles multiple high-stakes international and domestic crises simultaneously and criss-crosses the country to make his case to voters for another term in the White House.

Two verbal slip-ups in the last few days are again bringing the concerns about the president's cognition to the forefront. Biden twice referred to dead European leaders - Francois Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl - when talking about recent conversations with his global counterparts, making for awkward moments that highlight the foremost concern about the president among his core supporters.

Special counsel Robert Hur's [*new report examining Biden's handling of classified documents*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/white-house-special-counsels-report-response/index.html) also mentioned apparent memory lapses. In an interview with Hur's office last year, according to the report released Thursday, Biden did not remember when his son Beau died or the years he was vice president. White House officials and Biden's personal lawyer [*forcefully rejected*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/biden-classified-documents-report-02-08-24/h_6781798a84405730423e0aac299d9bcb) what they said were inappropriate and incorrect statements about his memory, noting the interview took place in the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attack on Israel and suggesting his attention was elsewhere.

Polling has consistently shown that the issue that most vexes voters who support Biden's policies and would otherwise be happy to vote for him is his age. A [*January NBC poll*](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24408713-240037-nbc-january-2024-poll_2624-release) of 1,000 registered voters found that three quarters of all voters, including half of Democrats, had concerns about Biden's physical or mental health.

The White House did not immediately provide a response to this story.But during a briefing on Thursday, press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre sought to play down the slip-ups, citing recent examples of other public figures - including House Speaker Mike Johnson and television host Sean Hannity - mixing up names.

"As it relates to the names and what he was trying to, you know, what he was trying to say - many people, elected officials, many people, you know, they tend, they can, they can misspeak sometimes," Jean-Pierre said.

A person's numeric age is not the only measure - nor the best measure - of their mental acuity. Biden's [*advisers have said*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/16/politics/joe-biden-age-question/index.html) that with his age comes the wisdom and legislative experience garnered during more than three decades in the Senate that enable him to govern the country effectively.

The president frequently mentions his age in jokes during public remarks, making reference to his many decades in public life - "I don't look it, but I'm 180 years old. I've been around a long time," he told donors at a fundraiser last year.

But that wisdom and experience can be overshadowed when Biden misspeaks - often amplified by right-wing media.

Two examples came this week when Biden confused French President Emmanuel Macron with former French President Mitterrand - who died in 1996 - and when he referenced Kohl when discussing a meeting at the G7 during his first year in office.

Kohl, who was chancellor of Germany from 1982 to 1998, died in 2017. Angela Merkel was the chancellor who attended the summit Biden referenced. The president is set to meet the current German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Friday.

Both times, Biden was telling a story he relays frequently about his first international summit as president, when he claims fellow leaders raised concerns with him about the January 6 insurrection attempt.

"Helmut Kohl said: 'Joe, what would you think if you picked up the phone and picked up the paper tomorrow and learned in the London Times on the front page that 1,000 people stormed the Parliament, broke down the doors of the House of Commons and killed 2 bobbies in the process?" Biden asked during a fundraising event in New York.

Such slip-ups are the fuel for the campaign of Biden's lone Democratic primary challenger, Rep. Dean Phillips, who has questioned Biden's mental acumen by posting snippets of speeches on X the president gave during his 2020 campaign and more recently.

They are also seized on by Nikki Haley, the former Republican South Carolina governor and US ambassador to the United Nations who has made the age of Biden and former President Donald Trump central to her White House push.

Trump, who is 77, has also recently faced questions about his mental faculties, seeming to repeatedly confuse Haley for former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi while discussing the January 6 riot last month. Biden himself went after Trump for that gaffe, writing on social media: "I don't agree with Nikki Haley on everything, but we agree on this much: She is not Nancy Pelosi."

Haley has questioned the ability of both men to effectively lead the country at their ages.

"Do we really want two 80-year-olds to be our options when we're talking about President?" Haley said in a CNN interview last month.

Biden, for his part, has said that [*questions about his age are fair*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/11/politics/joe-biden-age-democrats/index.html), and has all but conceded that he would not be seeking a second term if Trump were not running again, and if not for his existential fears about what could happen to democracy in the United States if Trump were to obtain a second term.

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.

The campaign is also trying out humor - at times in the form of self-deprecating jokes delivered by the president himself.

Campaign officials also say that there is a clear benefit to displaying Biden as a fighter, and that opportunities to do that will become increasingly abundant as Trump emerges - in the minds of voters - as Biden's opponent heading into November.

It has been nearly one year since Biden's last physical, during which his physician deemed him "healthy," "vigorous" and "fit to successfully execute the duties of the presidency." Asked in late January about the timing of Biden's next physical, Jean-Pierre said the administration didn't have "anything to share today, but we'll keep you posted, as always."

[*During that physical exam on February 16, 2023,*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/16/politics/joe-biden-routine-physical-walter-reed/index.html) White House Physician Dr. Kevin O'Connor wrote, "The President remains fit for duty, and fully executes all of his responsibilities without any exemptions or accommodations."

The physical mentioned Biden's Covid-19 infection in July 2022, but said he "experienced only mild symptoms" and responded well to treatments. The president has not experienced any residual impacts that might be considered "long Covid," O'Connor wrote.

Biden also had a stiff gait, O'Connor wrote in the 2023 summary, but it had not worsened since the previous year.

In last year's physical, Biden's physician said an "extremely detailed" neurologic exam found no findings that would be consistent with stroke, multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease.

As with his previous physical in 2021, the White House did not say whether Biden underwent any cognitive tests, which some doctors recommend for older adults.

This story has been updated with additional reaction.

CNN's Kevin Liptak and MJ Lee contributed to this report.

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