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Trump secretly sent covid tests to Putin during 2020 shortage, new book says

"War," by Bob Woodward, traces how Trump and Biden responded to international crisis and concludes that Trump is worse than Nixon, the president exiled by the Watergate scandal.

12 min

President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin before the start of their meeting in 2018 in Helsinki. (Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP)

By [Isaac Stanley-Becker](#)

October 8, 2024 at 8:56 a.m. EDT

As the coronavirus tore through the world in 2020, and the United States and other countries confronted a shortage of tests designed to detect the illness, President Donald Trump secretly sent coveted tests to Russian President Vladimir Putin for his personal use.

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Putin, petrified of the virus, accepted the supplies but took pains to prevent political fallout — not for him, but for his American counterpart. He cautioned Trump not to reveal that he had dispatched the scarce medical equipment to Moscow, according to a new book by Washington Post associate editor Bob Woodward.

Putin, according to the book, told Trump, “I don’t want you to tell anybody because people will get mad at you, not me.”

Four years later, the personal relationship between the two men appears to have persisted, Woodward reports, as Trump campaigns to return to the White House and Putin orchestrates his bloody assault on Ukraine. In early 2024, the former president ordered an aide away from his office at Mar-a-Lago, his private club and residence in Florida, so he could conduct a private phone call with the Russian leader, according to Woodward’s account.

The book does not describe what the two men purportedly discussed, and it quotes a Trump campaign official casting doubt on the supposed contact. But the unnamed Trump aide cited in the book indicated that the GOP standard-bearer may have spoken to Putin as many as seven times since Trump left the White House in 2021.

These interactions between Trump and the authoritarian leader of a country at war with an American ally form the basis of Woodward’s conclusion that Trump is worse than Richard M. Nixon, whose presidency was undone by the Watergate scandal exposed a half-century ago by Woodward and his Washington Post colleague Carl Bernstein.

“Trump was the most reckless and impulsive president in American history and is demonstrating the very same character as a presidential candidate in 2024,” Woodward writes in the book, “War,” which is set to be released Oct. 15.

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said, “None of these made-up stories by Bob Woodward are true,” issuing a string of personal attacks on the author and saying Trump didn’t give him an interview for the book. Cheung argued

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that the book “either belongs in the bargain bin of the fiction section of a discount bookstore or used as toilet tissue.”

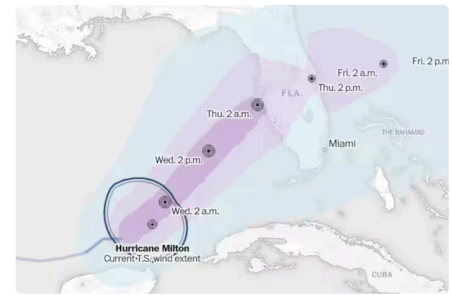
With publication on the eve of the presidential election, Woodward, who has chronicled the successes and failures of U.S. presidents for 50 years, concludes that Trump is unfit for office while President Joe Biden and his team, mistakes notwithstanding, exhibited “steady and purposeful leadership.” Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential nominee, makes several appearances in the narrative, with Woodward presenting her as a shrewd and loyal No. 2 to Biden but not an influential voice in his administration’s foreign policy.

The book is Woodward’s fourth since Trump’s upset victory in 2016. It focuses principally on the twin wars consuming Biden’s national security team — Russia’s all-out war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, and Israel’s campaign against Hamas and other Iranian-backed proxies since the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7, 2023.

The book also examines the long shadow cast by Trump over the foreign conflicts of the past four years and over the bitter U.S. political environment in which they have unfolded. And it includes candid assessments by Biden of his own missteps, including his decision to make Merrick Garland attorney general. Reacting to the prosecution of his son Hunter — by a special prosecutor named by Garland amid partisan recriminations over the Justice Department’s prosecution of Trump — the president told an associate, “Should never have picked Garland.”

Woodward reveals how Biden weighed his fate before exiting the presidential race in July, including over lunch earlier that month with Antony Blinken, his secretary of state. Blinken, reports Woodward, warned Biden in the private dining room off the Oval Office that everyone’s legacy is reduced to a single sentence — and that, if he continued to campaign and lost to Trump, that would be his legacy.

Still, Blinken believed at the end of the meal that the president was leaning toward staying in the race,



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underscoring how unpredictable Biden's decision-making remained until the final moment.

"War" illuminates the frantic, and often failed, effort by Biden's team to prevent escalation of fighting in the Middle East — fighting that the president came to see as inseparable from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political fortunes, and from political dynamics in the United States, too.

According to Woodward, one of Trump's national security advisers, Keith Kellogg, secretly met with Netanyahu during a trip to Israel earlier this year. Upon his return, Kellogg publicly circulated a memo effectively blaming Biden for the Hamas-led attack on Israel, writing, "This visit reinforced that the Biden Administration's erosion of U.S. deterrence globally and its failed policies vis-à-vis Iran have opened America up to a regional war in the Middle East with devastating consequences for our ally Israel."

At the time, Biden advisers were pushing Israel's leaders to agree to a cease-fire deal as part of an effort to head off an invasion of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. Their entreaties were futile; the Rafah offensive began in May. No one felt the limits of the administration's ability to restrain Israel more acutely than Blinken. "It was obvious Blinken had no influence," Woodward writes.

On Ukraine, too, Trump's influence was pronounced, even from his home at Mar-a-Lago. The former president's resistance to funding Kyiv's war effort created a blockade on GOP support in the House. This past spring, House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) was able to persuade Trump to soften his stance, according to Woodward, not by showing him that Ukraine's cause was just, but by convincing him that the aid package would help the Republican conference's electoral chances and thus benefit him personally in the run-up to the November election.

"War" offers several snapshots of Harris, always in a supporting role to Biden and hardly determining foreign policy herself.

The book recounts how Harris sought to spur French President Emmanuel Macron into action in the fall of 2021, in preparation for what the U.S. intelligence community indicated would be a significant Russian military action against Ukraine. So, too, the vice president made her case to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the Munich Security Conference in February 2022, going so far as to press him to develop a succession plan ensuring stability “if you’re captured or killed,” as she put it.

And the book reveals how her forceful public tone following a meeting in July with Netanyahu — pledging that she would “not be silent” about Palestinian suffering — contrasted with her more amicable approach in private. The difference, according to Woodward, infuriated Netanyahu, who was taken aback by her public remarks.

From the Israeli viewpoint, however, Harris had little responsibility for the administration’s approach to the conflict.

“Until now, I didn’t feel that Vice President Harris had any impact on our issues,” Michael Herzog, the Israeli ambassador in Washington, is quoted as saying about the period before Harris replaced Biden on the ticket. “She was in the room, but she never had an impact.”

As for Trump’s own decision-making process on foreign affairs when he was commander in chief, the book shows how he took in a wide range of viewpoints, including from people without relevant expertise. During a high-level meeting about Afghanistan held at one point in the Situation Room, Trump went around the table to ask everyone’s opinion.

“Mr. President, I’m the notetaker,” one person deflected.

“Oh, no,” Trump replied, “if you’re in this room, you’re talking.” The notetaker briefly shared her views.

“War” presents the withdrawal from Afghanistan, in the summer of 2021, as a wound for the Biden administration that would shape its response to other international flash points. The debacle, in which U.S. intelligence failed to

foresee how quickly the Taliban would seize power, elicited sympathy from the architect of the initial 2001 invasion, George W. Bush, who told Biden, according to the book: “Oh boy, I can understand what you’re going through. I got [expletive] by my intel people, too.”

Woodward contrasts the intelligence failure in Afghanistan to the remarkable insight gained by American spies into Russian plans ahead of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. U.S. capabilities, Woodward reports, included a human source inside the Kremlin.

The book shows how Biden’s early decisions, which were sometimes in conflict with the judgments of his closest advisers, shaped the course of the war. Foremost was his public vow that Washington would not commit troops to the conflict, which took a key bargaining chip off the table but laid down a marker for the American public wary of new foreign entanglements. Biden, according to Woodward, felt past Russian aggression had been badly mismanaged by his predecessors, including the one he had served, Barack Obama.

“Barack never took Putin seriously,” Biden told a close friend.

Biden’s own blunders were costly, the book reveals. In January 2022, he seemed to undercut American resolve by raising the possibility that Russia might seek only a “minor incursion.” His national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, had to do damage control with counterparts in nine NATO countries, in addition to Japan, Woodward reveals.

Woodward writes that Biden’s most delicate diplomacy, however, involved seeking to foreclose Russia’s nuclear option. In the fall of 2022, that option seemed like a live one, as U.S. intelligence agencies reported that Putin was seriously weighing use of a tactical nuclear weapon — at one point assessing the likelihood at 50 percent. An especially frantic quest to bring Moscow back from the brink came in October of that year, when Russia appeared to be laying the groundwork for escalation by accusing Ukraine of preparing to detonate a dirty bomb.

Biden's team confronted similar hair-raising moments with the Israelis, Woodward reports, foreshadowing Netanyahu's recent campaign against Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based militant group and Iranian proxy, in an explicit rejection of U.S. calls for a cease-fire. In a parallel of unsubstantiated Russian claims of Ukraine's intention to use a dirty bomb, the Israelis seemed poised, in the days after Oct. 7, 2023, to launch a preemptive strike against Hezbollah based on what American experts deemed "phantom" warnings of Hezbollah mobilization along Israel's northern border.

"The Israelis always do this," was the reaction of Brett McGurk, Biden's Middle East coordinator, according to the book. "They claim 'We got the intel! You'll see it. You'll see it.' But like 50 percent of the time the so-called intel doesn't actually show up." Apparent drones reported by the Israelis turned out to be birds.

Yet the book also shows how the Biden administration did little to alter its policy toward Israel even as senior U.S. officials abandoned their belief that the government in Jerusalem was operating in good faith. Already in the days after Oct. 7, Blinken's impression of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's approach was: "It doesn't matter how many people die. I have a mission to eradicate Hamas and it doesn't matter how many Palestinians die. It doesn't matter how many Israelis die."

Biden, according to Woodward, was cautious about setting limits on Israel's conduct lest Netanyahu blow past them. In a one-on-one call in April, Netanyahu promised Biden that the Rafah offensive would take only three weeks, a vow the American president never took seriously. "It'll take months," Biden replied.

To associates, Biden complained that Netanyahu was a liar only interested in his political survival. And he concluded the same of the prime minister's associates, saying that 18 out of 19 people who work for Netanyahu are "liars."

At the same time, support for the Biden administration's Middle East policy came from unexpected places, the book reveals. Before the Oct. 7 attacks, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-

S.C.), a loyal Trump lieutenant and shape-shifter who went from an outspoken critic of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to a trusted interlocutor, had relayed information to Biden about prospects for the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Graham believed normalization was best completed under Biden, arguing that congressional Democrats would be reluctant to lend support to a Trump-sponsored initiative. Graham promised he could deliver the Republican votes.

After Oct. 7, Graham continued to engage with the crown prince. During a March visit by the senator to Riyadh, which is recounted by Woodward, Graham proposed a phone call with Trump, so the crown prince pulled out a burner phone labeled "TRUMP 45." In earlier meetings, the crown prince had brandished other such devices, including one labeled "JAKE SULLIVAN" for Biden's national security adviser.

During the March call with Trump, conducted by the crown prince over speakerphone while Graham was present, the former president teased the senator for once calling for the Saudi royal's ouster over the assassination of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, which the CIA concluded Mohammed had ordered. Graham brushed it off, professing to have been wrong about the autocrat.

The royal court in Riyadh, however, is not the comparison Graham uses when describing visits to Trump's residence at Mar-a-Lago. According to Woodward, the senator invokes an even more brutal form of authoritarianism.

"Going to Mar-a-Lago is a little bit like going to North Korea," the book quotes Graham as saying. "Everybody stands up and claps every time Trump comes in."

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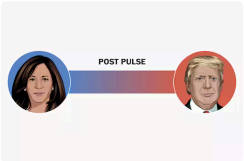
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