

A black and white photograph of Joe Biden. He is wearing a suit and tie. His hands are pressed against his face, covering his eyes and forehead, with his fingers spread. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the fabric of his clothing.

ORIGINAL SIN

PRESIDENT BIDEN'S
DECLINE, ITS COVER-UP,
AND HIS DISASTROUS
CHOICE TO RUN AGAIN

JAKE TAPPER AND
ALEX THOMPSON

ALSO BY JAKE TAPPER

All the Demons Are Here

The Devil May Dance

The Hellfire Club

The Outpost: An Untold Story of American Valor

Down and Dirty: The Plot to Steal the Presidency

Body Slam: The Jesse Ventura Story

Original Sin

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AND HIS DISASTROUS CHOICE
TO RUN AGAIN

Jake Tapper *and* Alex Thompson

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To Jennifer, Alice, and Jack
You are my everything.

—JAKE

To Mom and Dad
Thanks for putting up with me.

—ALEX

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

—*“Ulysses,” Alfred Lord Tennyson*

They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie,
I am not ague-proof.

—King Lear, *William Shakespeare*

AUTHORS' NOTE

Our only agenda is to present the disturbing reality of what happened in the White House and the Democratic presidential campaign in 2023–2024, as told to us by approximately two hundred people, including lawmakers and White House and campaign insiders, some of whom may never acknowledge speaking to us but all of whom know the truth within these pages. Most of the information laid out in this book was shared with us *after* the election of 2024, when officials and aides felt considerably freer to talk. There are very few people named herein with whom we didn't speak.

Our most important sources were Democrats inside and outside the White House who were grappling with how so many of them had been so focused on convincing voters that Donald Trump was a true existential threat to the nation that they put blinders on, participating in a charade that delivered the election directly into Trump's hands.

Some spoke to us with regret that they hadn't done more, or that they had waited so long to talk to the press about what was going on behind the scenes. Many were angry and felt deeply betrayed, not just by Biden but by his inner circle of advisers, his allies, and his family. They had seen bad moments behind the scenes but had been assured all was well. And then came the debate.

Readers who are convinced that Joe Biden was little more than a husk from the very beginning of his presidency, barely capable of stringing two sentences together, will not find support for that view here. Nor will this book satisfy those seeking comfort that he was, through to the end, unaddled and perfectly capable of being president twenty-four seven; that his rumored deterioration was all right-wing propaganda. This is also false. As Biden's presidency ended, it was difficult to find many top Democrats outside his

immediate circle of family and closest aides who thought he could ably serve a second four-year term.

This book is not an exoneration of the candidacy or presidencies of Biden's opponent, Donald Trump. Journalism about Biden does not excuse or normalize any actions and statements by anyone else, including the forty-fifth and now forty-seventh president. Indeed, for those who tried to justify the behavior described here because of the threat of a second Trump term, those fears should have shocked them into reality, not away from it.

The lessons from this book go beyond one man and one political party. They speak to more universal questions about cognitive dissonance, groupthink, courage, cowardice, and patriotism.

George Orwell once wrote that "we are all capable of believing things which we *know* to be untrue, and then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield."

He was writing about World War II, but he could have been writing about any time, any era. "The Germans and the Japanese lost the war quite largely because their rulers were unable to see facts which were plain to any dispassionate eye," Orwell went on. "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

Here is what was in front of our noses.

—Jake and Alex

“He Totally Fucked Us”

President Joe Biden got out of bed the day after the 2024 election convinced that he had been wronged.

The elites, the Democratic officials, the media, Nancy Pelosi, Barack Obama—they shouldn’t have pushed him out of the race. If he had stayed in, he would have beaten Donald Trump. That’s what the polls suggested, he would say again and again.

His pollsters told us that no such polls existed.

There was no credible data, they said, to support the notion that he would have won. All unspun information suggested it would have been a loss, likely a spectacular one, far worse than that suffered by his replacement as Democratic nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris.

The disconnect between Biden’s optimism and the unhappy reality of poll results was a constant throughout his administration. Many insiders sensed that his inner circle shielded him from bad news.

It’s also true that for Biden to absorb those poll results, he would have had to face the biggest issue driving them: The public had concluded—long before most Democratic officials, media, and other “elites” had—that he was far too old to do the job. In truth, before that consequential June 27, 2024, presidential debate, many insiders—people with a much better window into Biden’s condition than the wider public had—saw things that shocked them. Most of them said nothing.

President Biden awoke the morning after the election sure that he was not to blame.

Two and a half miles away, north on Connecticut Avenue Northwest, then west on Massachusetts, Harris walked solemnly into the dining room of the vice president's residence at the US Naval Observatory.

She was joined that morning by her husband, Doug Emhoff; her sister, Maya; and her brother-in-law Tony West. They were incredulous. It was real. It wasn't a nightmare. It had really happened.

They knew that they'd been running from behind, that their challenge had been considerable: They'd had only 107 days to convince America that the vice president to a historically unpopular president would be a change agent. They had hoped that the margin of error in the polls they saw would break their way. The enthusiasm they felt on the trail was tangible. They were hopeful.

But overnight, the TV networks had called the race for Trump.

Sitting at the breakfast table, Harris knew she would have to call the president-elect and concede. And then she would have to finish the speech she never wanted to give.

Victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan, so goes an old saying President John F. Kennedy invoked after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Few Democrats were running around claiming paternity of the political wipeout that was the 2024 campaign.

No one thought that the Harris campaign had been without error. But for the most knowledgeable Democratic officials and donors, and for top members of the Harris campaign, there was no question about the father of this election calamity: It was Joe Biden.

Harris, loyal to Biden to a fault, might never say such a thing. But plenty of people around her would.

"We got so screwed by Biden as a party," David Plouffe, who helped run the Harris campaign, told us.

Plouffe had served as Senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign manager in 2008 and as a senior adviser to President Obama before largely

retiring from politics in 2013. After Biden dropped out of the race on July 21, 2024, Plouffe was drafted to help Harris in what he saw as a “rescue mission.” Harris, he said, was a “great soldier,” but the compressed 107-day race was “a fucking nightmare.”

“And it’s all Biden,” Plouffe said. Referring to Biden’s decision to run for reelection, then wait more than three weeks to bow out, Plouffe added: “He totally fucked us.”

This isn’t the typical finger-pointing of a losing campaign.

Before the 2020 primaries, in December 2019, four Biden advisers—in what *Politico* reporter Ryan Lizza read as a strategic leak to get the idea out into the open—told Lizza that it would be “virtually inconceivable that he will run for reelection in 2024, when he would be the first octogenarian president.”

“Look, I view myself as a bridge, not as anything else,” Biden reiterated in March 2020 as he was on the verge of capturing the Democratic nomination.

Instead, supported by his senior advisers and his wife and family, the oldest president in American history announced in April 2023 that he would run again. This meant potentially being president until he was eighty-six.

The real issue wasn’t his age per se. It was the clear limitations of his abilities, which got worse throughout his presidency. What the public saw of the realities of his functioning was concerning. What was going on in private was worse.

While Biden on a day-in, day-out basis could certainly make decisions and assert wisdom and act as president, there were several significant issues that complicated his presidency: a limit to the hours in which he could reliably function and an increasing number of moments where he seemed to freeze up, lose his train of thought, forget the names of top aides, or momentarily not remember friends he’d known for decades. Not to mention impairments to his ability to communicate—ones unrelated to his lifelong stutter.

It wasn’t a straight line of decline; he had good days and bad. But until the last day of his presidency, Joe Biden and those in his innermost circle refused to admit the reality that his energy, cognitive skills, and

communication capacity had faltered significantly. Even worse, through various means, they tried to hide it.

The original sin of Election 2024 was Biden's decision to run for reelection—followed by aggressive efforts to hide his cognitive diminishment.

And then came the June 27 debate against Trump, when Biden's decline was laid bare before the world.

It was not just one bad night, as Biden and his team claimed in the aftermath. Millions were shocked by Biden's unintelligible, slack-jawed performance at the debate, but some Democrats weren't surprised at all. Though they had seen him like this behind closed doors, they didn't say anything. For a variety of reasons, they rationalized their silence.

As a result, Democrats stumbled into the fall of 2024 with an untested nominee and growing public mistrust of a White House that had been gaslighting the American people. With only three and a half months to run a campaign against a candidate and machine that had been going pretty much full speed since 2015, Harris was fearful of distancing herself from her boss and publicly unable to acknowledge what the world continued to witness of his decline.

Harris made plenty of mistakes, both before Biden became a candidate and afterward, but no decision that she and her campaign made was anywhere near as consequential as his decision to run for reelection and pretend he wasn't mentally melting before our eyes.

"It was an abomination," one prominent Democratic strategist—who publicly defended Biden—told us. "He stole an election from the Democratic Party; he stole it from the American people."

Biden had framed his entire presidency as a pitched battle to prevent Trump from returning to the Oval Office. By not relinquishing power and being honest with himself and the country about his decline, he guaranteed it.

ANOTHER TOP DEMOCRAT, one who spent much of 2023 and early 2024 publicly and privately defending the president and his acuity, spoke with White House and campaign officials regularly and received constant reassurance. “He’s fine, he’s fine, he’s fine,” they all said.

This was the experience of dozens of officials, from politicians to donors to left-leaning pundits.

In the spring of 2024, this Democrat called top White House officials. “Every day I’m defending this guy,” the top Democrat told them. “Someone tell me he’s okay. Like, it doesn’t look great. The press conferences don’t look great.” He was reassured every time, the top Democrat told us. “Anita [Dunn] told me he was fine; [Jeff] Zients told me he was fine. [Mike] Donilon goes, ‘I promise he’s okay.’ ”

In 2024, after Biden withdrew from the race, this Democrat privately met with the First Couple and saw the reality with their own eyes.

“He was not fine. She [the First Lady] had to complete some of his thoughts. It was not fine. I got emotional leaving the White House because he was clearly not fucking fine.”

The Democrat says they want to believe that Biden’s top aides “weren’t intentionally deceitful. I think sometimes people think the best. I think the theory was always ‘He’s a gamer; he’s going to deliver.’ And I think they believed that. But when you’re with him every day, they had to have moments like I had with him, where you were like, ‘Whoa, this is not okay.’ And at some point, you shut the door and say, ‘Hey, you’re not up to this.’ ”

Trump ended up winning the Electoral College by 312 to 226 electoral votes, and he secured the popular vote by more than 2.2 million. But the race was closer than those numbers suggest. Harris lost the three key “Blue Wall” states by a total of roughly 230,000 votes. If she had beat the margins of 1.44 percent in Michigan, 1.73 percent in Pennsylvania, and 0.87 percent in Wisconsin, she would be president today.

Ponder the question that Democrats such as Harris and others who might have run in 2024—Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, Governor Gavin Newsom of California, Governor JB Pritzker of Illinois, Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan—replay in their minds: If Biden had not run for reelection, or if he had acknowledged his decay and changed his mind about it in 2023, what would have happened?

If history is any guide, a competitive primary and caucus process would have produced a stronger Democratic nominee, one who had more experience with debates and taking questions from reporters, one with a more cogent and precise answer as to why they were running, one with time to introduce themselves to the American people. Past flip-flops on issues would have been addressed, policy proposals would have been fleshed out, winning messages would have been formed. The nominee would have figured out a way to respectfully but forcefully distance themselves from the unpopular incumbent president and forge a new path, representing change.

Would that candidate have been able to do 1.5 percentage points better in Michigan, 1.8 points better in Pennsylvania, and 0.9 points better in Wisconsin?

To the Plouffes of the world, it's hard to argue no.

“If Biden had decided in 2023 to drop out, we would have had a robust primary,” Plouffe said. “Whitmer, Pritzker, Newsom, Buttigieg, Harris, and Klobuchar would have run. Warnock and Shapiro would have kicked the tires of it. Maybe Mark Cuban or a businessperson of some sort. Twenty percent of governors and thirty percent of senators would have thought about it. We would have been eminently stronger.”

Once it became clear to the world that Biden needed to drop out, Obama, former House Speaker Pelosi, and others pushed for some sort of open process in July and August. Biden's refusal to budge until July 21 and then his immediate endorsement of Harris meant that this, too, fell by the wayside.

THIS ISN'T HINDSIGHT. Everyone saw it happening.

Throughout 2023 and into 2024, Biden's gait grew stiffer, his voice softer. People would call Plouffe—the president looked frail and sounded weak. He would often do small fundraising events with the aid of a teleprompter and leave early. People ponying up big bucks would call Plouffe to ask if everything was okay. This wasn't normal.

Plouffe asked folks at the White House and in the party if they were sure he could win. Yes, they said, noting that Biden had beaten Trump in 2020, that the election cycle of 2022 wasn't as bad as it could have been for Democrats, and that he was achieving FDR-level accomplishments. The Biden team also argued that if he didn't run, Vice President Harris would likely be the nominee, and they had little confidence in her abilities.

Plouffe found that theory bizarre. No one had any idea who might win a contested round of Democratic primaries and caucuses. If—*if*—Harris emerged victorious, that would be because of those political abilities they were doubting. The most enraging part of their anti-Harris argument? Biden was the one who had picked her to be his vice president.

It was 2023. Plouffe had retired from politics and his former boss, Barack Obama, was staying out of it. Biden was still pissed at Obama for not backing his possible presidential run in 2016, implicitly backing former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Obama had never directly told Biden not to run, but he had encouraged his VP—still deeply grieving the loss of his son Beau—to focus on himself as a person. Plouffe had cautioned against a run—Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders were way too popular—and Obama political director David Simas had presented Biden with polling that showed the improbability of a victory.

“The president was not encouraging” is how Biden had put it.

Folks in the Obama camp felt that they had spared Biden from a third presidential primary disaster following his 1988 and 2008 failures.

Then they rallied the party around him in 2020 because he had the best chance of beating Trump. He did, and many felt his was a presidency of accomplishment. Reviving the economy after COVID, getting vaccines into arms. A historic infrastructure bill. Boosting semiconductor manufacturing in the US. A bipartisan gun safety package.

In June 2023, Obama popped in on Biden for a visit. He wanted to kick the tires, make sure the old guy was still up to it. Biden seemed fine—old, still Biden, but fine. Obama cautioned that Trump would be a formidable foe because of the increasingly polarized nation, Trump’s entrenched base, and the fractured media landscape.

“Just make sure you can win the race” is all Obama told Biden this time, notwithstanding any doubts.

What could Obama do? This was Biden’s decision.

He was, after all, the president.



THESE ARE THE POLITICS, the what-ifs, of the original sin.

More concrete are the facts we uncovered about Biden’s health and abilities; the silence of witnesses; the complicity of enablers; and the scheming of those who endeavored to hide it from others and from the public.

As of early 2025, Biden can still, of course, engage in a coherent conversation if he is prepared and rested. Former top aides insist his decision-making is sound.

But the hours during which he can perform are limited. Since at least 2022, he has had moments where he cannot recall the names of top aides whom he sees every day. He can sometimes seem incoherent. He is increasingly prone to losing his train of thought, occasionally speaking so softly that he cannot be understood, even if he’s talking directly into a microphone.

The presidency requires someone who can perform at 2:00 a.m. during an emergency. Cabinet secretaries in his own administration told us that by

2024, he could not be relied upon for this.

What the world saw at his one and only 2024 debate was not an anomaly. It was not a cold; it was not someone who was underprepared or overprepared. It was not someone who was just a little tired. It was the natural result of an eighty-one-year-old man whose capabilities had been diminishing for years. Biden, his family, and his team let their self-interest and fear of another Trump term justify an attempt to put an at times addled old man in the Oval Office for four more years.

What was the extent of it? Who knew about it? Was it a conspiracy?

We will let the facts speak for themselves.

TWO

“Get Up!”

To grasp how Joe Biden could have decided to run for reelection at his historically advanced age, one must understand Biden’s own mythology. Even before one gets to his belief that he, and only he, was capable of defeating Donald Trump, consider the legend of Joe Biden and its grounding in exceeding expectations, defying odds, and surviving.

“Get up!” he wrote in his first memoir, *Promises to Keep*. “To me this is the first principle of life, the foundational principle, and a lesson you can’t learn at the feet of any wise man: Get up! The art of living is simply getting up after you’ve been knocked down.”

A lesson from his father, Joseph Robinette Biden Sr., who’d been knocked down hard but had “no time for self-pity.” His dad struggled. Biden Sr.’s crop-dusting business on Long Island went bust, and he moved the family back to Scranton to live with his wife’s parents. Destitute, Biden Sr. couldn’t find work, so he started commuting to Delaware where he cleaned boilers and sold trinkets at the farmers’ market, eventually moving the rest of the family to join him.

“Champ, it’s not how many times you get knocked down,” Biden Sr. would tell his son. “It’s how quickly you get up.”

“Get up!” Biden wrote, “has echoed throughout my life.”

Get up!

The other kids in Scranton mocked Biden’s stutter. In high school, they dubbed him Joe Impedimenta or Dash—not because of his speed on the