

The Biden bubble: How first lady Jill and staff ‘protect’ Joe from White House press

By

Social Links for Josh Christenson and

Social Links for Steven Nelson

Published Feb. 9, 2024, 12:17 p.m. ET

Three years into Joe Biden’s presidency, reporters who cover the administration know what to expect when [first lady Jill Biden appears: nothing](#).

The president, 81, has held the fewest press conferences or formal interviews of any modern commander-in-chief — leaving Biden’s jaunts across the White House South Lawn to and from his Marine One helicopter as the best chance for the press corps to get some face time.

When Biden is alone, he is far easier to bait with shouted questions, sometimes shuffling over around midnight for a give-and-take — despite the unflattering overhead TV lights forcing him to hold up his hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

However, the presence of Jill, 72, on such trips is a dead giveaway that there will be no questions, with the first lady making sure to hold her husband’s hand the entire way across the lawn.

Jill Biden’s role in shielding her husband from members of the media has come under new scrutiny after [special counsel Robert Hur described the president in a report released Thursday](#) as an “elderly man with a poor memory.”



First lady Jill Biden has long shielded her husband from members of the media at the White House — and even berated aides for not cutting off press conferences filled with the president’s blunders. Bastiaan Slabbers/NurPhoto/Shutterstock

Biden has only held three solo White House press conferences since taking office in January 2021. At [the most recent](#), in November 2022, Jill arrived at the last minute and was seated at the very front of the State Dining Room by a beefy aide — who positioned her so that journalists could not see whether the first lady was urging her husband at any point to make a hasty retreat.

Joe Biden's classified documents probe report

- Special counsel Robert Hur determined that President Biden “willfully retained and disclosed classified materials” after leaving office as vice president in 2016.
- The records kept by Biden included documents on military and foreign policy in Afghanistan as well as other national security and foreign policy issues.
- Biden kept the classified documents in part to assist with the writing of his memoirs. According to the report, Biden told a ghostwriter in a 2017 conversation that he had “just found all the classified stuff downstairs.”
- Despite the findings, Hur’s 388-page report recommended that the president not face charges.
- The special counsel noted that Biden would likely present himself to a jury as a “sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory” if he were to face trial.



When Biden is alone, leaving the White House South Lawn to and from his Marine One helicopter, he is far easier to bait with shouted questions. Getty Images

Such precautions may have been needed after Biden’s second White House presser in [January 2022](#), [a marathon affair](#) in which the president droned on for nearly two hours and made several factual errors and noteworthy gaffes.

At that presser, Biden suggested a “minor incursion” by Russia into Ukraine would prompt a minimal US response, leaving officials in Kyiv aghast and suggesting the president had given [Vladimir Putin a “green light” to invade](#) — which he did weeks later.

“Why didn’t anyone stop that?” Jill Biden fumed to aides, demanding an explanation for her husband being left to wilt before the world, according to excerpts from a forthcoming book by New York Times correspondent Katie Rogers, [reported Friday by Axios](#).

“Everyone stayed silent, looking at one another, and then at her, and back to one another,” Rogers writes. “That included the most powerful man in the world.”

The 81-year-old Biden has only had three solo White House press conferences, and when accompanied by his wife will rarely take questions from the press as he strolls hand in hand with her across the South Lawn for helicopter departures and arrivals. Shutterstock

“Her husband essentially played along, not offering an answer, even though aides had slipped him a card suggesting he end the press conference,” the book adds.



A scathing report from special counsel Robert Hur on Thursday noted a jury would likely let Biden off on any charges of allegedly retaining classified material, since he would be viewed as an “elderly man with a poor memory.” AP

The first lady has also taken on the role of stage manager for her husband, [leading Joe offstage by the hand](#) at an event last month to commemorate the anniversary of the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot after repeated instances of the president hesitating or wandering in the wrong direction after making remarks.

Jill isn’t alone: White House staff have also gone to extensive lengths to prevent the president from potentially embarrassing interactions.

At that same January 2022 press conference that caused the first lady so much anguish, then-press secretary Jen Psaki — clad in a distinctive pink blazer — stood up after roughly an hour in an apparent attempt to bring the proceedings to a close.



“Why didn’t anyone stop that?” Jill Biden fumed to aides after a January 2022 press conference, according to excerpts reported Friday by Axios from a book out Feb. 27 by the New York Times’ White House correspondent Katie Rogers. Getty Images

Psaki sat back down as Biden continued to take questions, only to stand up again about 20 minutes later and walk to a door about 50 feet away from the press seating area in another apparent attempt to end the questioning, which continued for approximately 40 more minutes.

But the most notorious staff intervention took place at the White House Easter Egg Roll in April 2022, when then-director of message planning [Meghan Hays](#), [dressed in an Easter bunny](#) costume, barged in to block Biden from answering an Afghan journalist’s question and guided him away from the rope line.

The White House press office has also played its part, introducing a Byzantine prescreening process to select which reporters are allowed to attend large indoor events that were open to all under past administrations — leading to muttering that those most aligned with the administration were most likely to be extended invitations.



Jill Biden has been seen leading Joe by the hand offstage immediately after events, as the president has sometimes hesitated or wandered in the wrong direction when exiting after making remarks. AP

Prescreening was eased following a protest by members of the [press corps in the summer of 2022](#), but returned ahead of Biden's [last-minute response to Hur's report](#) Thursday night. Digital RSVP forms only went out a few minutes before the hastily scheduled event in the White House Diplomatic Reception Room and some reporters on the executive mansion's campus were denied access to the relatively small venue.

Despite all the precautions, Biden's penchant for saying the wrong thing has never been hidden for long.

At that November 2022 White House press conference, for example, Biden said he would take 10 reporters' questions from a list of pre-approved names, but left after only calling on nine — following [a brutal gaffe](#) in which he said Russian troops were preparing to pull out of the Iraqi city of Fallujah when he meant to say the Ukrainian city of Kherson.



Biden can still be baited into back-and-forths with White House reporters when he appears solo on the South Lawn, occasionally shuffling back to the executive mansion around midnight.
REUTERS

Those slips have increased in recent weeks, with Biden [mixing up the names of current foreign leaders with their deceased predecessors](#). On Sunday, he told a Las Vegas audience that he had recently spoken with the late French President Francois Mitterrand, who died in 1996. In Manhattan on Wednesday, Biden recalled to donors that he discussed the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who last held office in 1998 and died in 2017.

On Thursday night, moments after insisting “I know what the hell I’m doing” in response to the Hur report, Biden [misidentified Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi](#) as the “president of Mexico.”

The president has held no press conferences of any size [since the APEC summit in November](#), where he appeared confused while standing side by side with other world leaders and mispronounced the name of the venue.

That same month, his re-election campaign launched operation “[Bubble Wrap](#),” which insiders told the New York Times was aimed at protecting the president from his unflattering trips and stumbles — whether [on stage](#) or while [boarding Air Force One](#).