

Leaving Las Vegas. Inside the Last Tortured Days of the Biden Campaign. Seymour Hersh

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Global Research, July 29, 2024

[Seymour Hersh](#) 27 July 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

In late 1967, as the Vietnam War was raging and President Lyndon B. Johnson was becoming increasingly unpopular, I was recruited to handle the press and write speeches for Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, the only Democrat gutsy enough to run against the Democratic president.

Months later, working round the clock in a cluttered suite in a New Hampshire motel, I was curious about a courier from New York City who flew up most nights on the last Eastern Airlines flight. The courier would dash to the suite with a canvas bag attached to his wrist and turn it over to one of the campaign's richest and most enthusiastic benefactors. The guy was a multi-millionaire who ran a major stock market fund but was happy to sit in the suite I was then sharing with Richard Goodwin, a real political pro—unlike me and the college brats on the campaign—and just watch and do the various errands that needed doing.

One night I asked the millionaire what was in the bag. He threw it to me, with a key. I unlocked it and found myself staring at dozens of shiny packages of 100 dollar bills. I had no idea then or now whether the funds were properly reported and did not ask. So that's how it works, I thought, and I tossed the bag back. I knew then I was not long for the world of presidential politics.

It's not surprising that the long overdue unraveling of President Joe Biden's re-election campaign happened when it became impossible to keep his increasing impairment covered up. It was the big-time money backers of the Democratic Party who called off the game of see no evil, hear no evil, after Biden's shocking performance in his June debate with Donald Trump. They balked at continuing to give millions of dollars to the party now that there was evidence that the president is not always there.

You'd think it would be a vigilant press corps, led by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, who first broached the issue of Biden's impairment, but those papers missed the story. The first significant report came in early June from the *Wall Street Journal*, whose consistently brilliant news section—considered suspect by the *Times* and *Post* and many readers because of the paper's conservative editorial page and the fact that it is part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp—broke the story on the front page under the headline, "Behind Closed Doors, Biden Shows Signs of Slipping."

The White House press office quickly responded that both of those quoted in the story were Republicans who are supporters of Trump. The strategy somehow worked. Fear of Trump took priority over doing the right thing. Ditto for CNN and MSNBC, whose panels of former White House officials often can be fun to watch, especially while chewing lots of cotton

candy. Viewers of the equally biased Fox News undoubtedly had similar candy to crunch.

Who in Washington didn't know that Biden was failing? We all did, up to a point. I had learned months earlier from a federal official that those in the front rows of university events where Biden was speaking were warned not to move if the president tripped while walking to the podium. Secret Service agents were on hand to pick him up immediately. There would be no front-page photos of a college valedictorian helping the president climb to his feet.

The American public could see Biden's slow decline. The *Journal* reported that nearly three-fourths of those polled thought Biden was "too old to seek another term." Cabinet meetings in the past few years largely disappeared or turned into rote sessions, as recorded by the C-SPAN, which faithfully televises all White House events. Biden would join the seated Cabinet heads and read from a prepared text, with each page covered with a plastic sheet. It was far from vibrant television.

After the debate, there was mounting pressure on Biden to drop out. The White House and the president himself denied that he was suffering from anything more than a bad day, a cold, and jet lag. There were newspaper stories about Hunter Biden, the president's convicted son, keeping by his side and warning all White House staffers that anyone who even hinted at the truth would be fired. That message quickly was leaked to the press. Soon the White House press corps suddenly discovered that they were being misled by the president's press secretary. There were lots of tortured questions and broken hearts, but the message was the same: the president is in good health and is going to run for re-election this fall and carry on serving for four more years after he defeats Trump.

On Monday, July 15, Biden took off on Air Force One on a campaign trip to Nevada, a tossup state that Biden won in 2020 by a little more than 30,000 votes. On Tuesday he gave the keynote address to 5,000 members of the NAACP at its annual convention. The next day, the president, apparently stricken while campaigning with a yet-to-be-revealed illness, broke from his schedule and made a police escort race to Air Force One after initially telling police they were heading to the nearest emergency room.

A series of blog posts, local police reports, internet messages, and report in the *Daily Mail* disclosed further details of Biden's trip to Las Vegas and his abrupt return home to Delaware. I went over these reports this week with a senior official in Washington who helped me fashion an account of a White House in complete disarray, culminating in the president's withdrawal from the race. It's a story not unlike *Seven Days in May*, the Cold War thriller in which a colonel played by Kirk Douglas foils a coup staged by a general played by Burt Lancaster. None of what you read below comes from an official account by the White House.

At that point, according to Emily Goodin, a *Daily Mail* reporter who was in the traveling press pool, the president was "deathly pale" and Air Force One flew at maximum speed to Delaware, where the president has a weekend retreat at Rehoboth Beach. The press pool was told that Biden had COVID. Nothing more was said on Air Force One. After Biden's return to Delaware, the White House told the public that Biden had contracted a COVID infection and would be in isolation. He was said to have upper respiratory symptoms, a runny nose, a cough, and was fatigued.

That was the last straw for a core group of Congressional leaders, government officials and some senior Biden funders who were withholding huge amounts of committed contributions. “There was pressure on donors to come across on their pending commitments,” the official told me. “It was understood that Biden had a physical problem in Las Vegas and the family was saying no” to continued pressure from donors and senior Democrats in Congress to withdraw from the presidential campaign. Initially, the president could not be reached.

By Saturday, July 20, former President Barack Obama was deeply involved, and there was talk that he would place a call to Biden. It was not clear whether Biden had been examined or just what happened to him in Las Vegas. “The Big Three,” the official said, referring to former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, continued to be directly involved.

“On Sunday morning,” the official told me, with the approval of Pelosi and Schumer, “Obama called Biden after breakfast and said, ‘Here’s the deal. We have Kamala’s approval to invoke the 25th Amendment.’”

The amendment provides that when the president is determined by the vice president and others to be unfit to carry out the powers and duties of his office, the vice president shall assume those duties.

“It was clear at this point,” the official said, “that she would get the nod”—that is, the support to run for the presidency in the November election. “But Obama also made it clear,” the official said, “that he was not going to immediately endorse her. But the group had decided that her work as a prosecutor would help her deal with Trump in a debate.”

One possible drawback, I was told, was Harris’s sometime disdain for the work of the US Intelligence Community. She is known not to be especially interested in the President’s Daily Brief, a highly classified summary of current intelligence that is prepared overnight by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and delivered by hand to the most vital offices in Washington, including the vice president’s. The document, which includes signals intelligence, is to be read by the addressee in the presence of the delivering intelligence officer. I was told that Harris often showed little interest in reading the document and at some point asked the agency to stop delivering it to her. Now, as a presidential candidate, she is being kept up to date on all significant intelligence matters.

A key factor in the decision to force Biden out of office by invoking the 25th Amendment was a series of increasingly negative polls on the president’s standing against Trump that had been commissioned by the funders, the official said. “The downward slope was increasing.” Polling would also be important for the vice president, I was told, and it was agreed that if the polls did not continue to show her gaining traction, other options would be considered, including an open convention. I was unable to learn if Harris was aware of such considerations or whether she intends to abide by them.

The official, who has decades of experience in fundraising, told me that Obama emerged as the strongman throughout the negotiations. “He had an agenda and he wanted to seek it through to the end, and he wanted to have control over who would be elected.”

A few days after we talked, with Harris getting off to a solid start, Obama and his wife announced their endorsement of Harris and told her, over the phone in a staged TV event,

that they would do all they could to campaign for her and to support her.

But she had better perform.

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