

Interview transcript shows more nuance on Biden's memory than special counsel report

[Tamara Keith](#) March 12, 2024 8:00 AM ET

President Biden speaks to reporters about the special counsel report on his handling of classified documents in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House on Feb. 8.

Evan Vucci/AP

During more than five hours of interviews over two days last October, President Biden cracked jokes, went into great detail about the design of his Wilmington home and spoke with confidence about world events from more than a decade ago. At times, he was defiant.

He also said some combination of "I don't know," "I don't recall," "I don't specifically remember," "I have no goddamn idea" and similar phrases more than 100 times during the deposition for a special counsel review of his handling of classified documents after he left office in 2017, according to an NPR review of the transcript.

The 258-page transcript of the interviews conducted by special counsel Robert Hur on Oct. 8 and 9 paints a more nuanced portrait of the president than was described [in Hur's report](#) last month. Hur is set to testify before Congress on Tuesday about that investigation.

The transcript shows moments where Biden felt around trying to remember the year of certain events, like Donald Trump winning the election in 2016 and the death of his son Beau. Biden recalled the day, May 30, but not the year.

Hur concluded that [criminal charges were not warranted](#) because the evidence did not establish Biden's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. He

said that Biden would come across to jurors as a "sympathetic, well-meaning elderly man with a poor memory," had trouble remembering timelines and details, and said it would have been "difficult to convince a jury that they should convict him ... of a serious felony that requires a mental state of willfulness" in his retention of some of the classified documents.

Biden and the White House [pushed back angrily](#) against the characterization. Voters have [questioned](#) whether Biden, 81, is too old for a second term in office. Since the Hur report landed, Biden has made a public push to show otherwise, including in a vigorous [State of the Union address](#) last week.

Robert Hur is slated to testify on Tuesday about his probe of President Biden's handling of classified documents. In this file photo, he arrives at U.S. District Court in Baltimore on Nov. 21, 2019.

Steve Ruark/AP

During the interviews, the timelines bounced around

The first interview began at the White House at 12:15 p.m. on Oct. 8, the day after the deadly Hamas attacks in Israel. Hur thanked Biden for making time for it. "I just got off the phone with Bibi Netanyahu," Biden said.

Throughout the interview, Hur and his deputy Marc Krickbaum asked detailed questions about how documents were handled when Biden was vice president and once he had left office — including about specific rooms he was working in at various times, and even specific pieces of furniture. The timelines bounced around.

About halfway through the first day, Hur asked Biden how he stored documents related to his work after he no longer was vice president. "Where did you keep papers that related to those things that you were

actively working on?"

Biden said he wasn't sure. "This is what, 2017, 2018, that area?" he asked. "Yes, sir," Hur responded.

The most confusing part of the interview concerned the timeline surrounding his son's death

They discussed the nature of his work after he left office, work that included Biden's "[cancer moonshot](#)" push to find cures and treatments for the disease — and writing a book.

But Biden went further back in time and began talking about the death of his son Beau, from cancer, just as Biden was trying to decide whether to run for president. "Remember in this timeframe, my son is — either been deployed or is dying, and so it was — and by the way, there were still a lot of people at the time when I got out of the Senate that were encouraging me to run in this period, except the president," said Biden.

"He (former President Barack Obama) just thought she had a better chance," Biden said, referring to Hillary Clinton, who ended up being the Democratic nominee in 2016. He briefly talked about how, by 2017-18, he hadn't ruled out trying to run for president again — then returned to talking about his son.

"And so what was happening, though — what month did Beau die? Oh God, May 30," Biden said, according to the transcript. An attorney from the White House counsel's office interjected to say "2015," a year then echoed by a second unidentified speaker.

"Was it 2015, he had died?" Biden said. Moments later, the president — still seemingly looking for his bearings in time — asked: "and what's happened in the meantime is that Trump gets elected in November of 2017?"

Two people corrected him, saying, "2016."

"2016. All right, so — why do I have 2017 here?" Biden asked. "That's when you left office, January of 2017," another of Biden's lawyers said.

Biden then launched into recounting how Beau implored him not to shrink from public life, which led to his book title, [*Promise Me, Dad*](#).

Biden went into great detail about his Wilmington home

Early on, Hur thanked Biden for cooperating with the searches of his homes. "The FBI knows my house better than I do," Biden quipped, to laughter.

Hur asked Biden to try his hardest to recall details. "I acknowledge that some of the questions we are asking relate to events that happened years ago," Hur said. Biden replied: "I'm a young man, so it's not a problem."

At another point in the interview, Biden went into great detail about his home in Wilmington — so much detail that there were numerous redactions in the transcript by the U.S. Secret Service. Biden described himself as a "frustrated architect" as he went through minutiae about the home he helped design and decorate.

"This room cost one-third of the entirety of my entire home," Biden said. "Swear to God."

"It's very impressive," Hur replied.

Hur complimented Biden on his memory. "That was very helpful. We have some photographs to show you, but you have — appear to have a photographic understanding and recall of the house," Hur said.

He was less clear about the state of his garage

Biden had a less photographic memory when trying to explain when and how certain boxes appeared in his very cluttered garage, photographs of which appeared in Hur's report.

"I just came home and all of it was on the garage floor," Biden said.

He noted at one point that investigators who had searched his Wilmington home had "left everything in place," even some personal items.

"I just hope you didn't find any risqué pictures of my wife in a bathing suit. Which you probably did. She's beautiful," Biden said.

Asked at another point whether Jill Biden ever stored her files with his, the president was adamant in his reply. "She wanted nothing to do with my filing system," he said.

President Biden leaves the podium on Feb. 8 after speaking about the special counsel report on his handling of classified documents.

Evan Vucci/AP

Biden was defiant about notebooks he kept from his time as vice president

Krickbaum attempted to ask Biden about whether he was authorized to have notebooks he kept full of handwritten notes about events and items he was briefed on. "You view those as yours —" Krickbaum began to ask.

"They are mine," Biden interrupted, in one of the more defiant moments of the interview.

"Every president before me has done the same exact thing," Biden said. Earlier in the conversation, Biden had described how former President Ronald Reagan had held onto his personal notes and diaries. It was a precedent Biden and his legal team have leaned on to explain why he kept

notebooks that could have contained summaries of classified briefing materials.

"I'm not arguing with you about that right now, Mr. President," Krickbaum said. "I just want to make sure we are on the same page," Biden replied, before they moved on.

Then-Vice President Biden tries out archery on a tour in Mongolia on Aug. 22, 2011.

Andy Wong/AP

Biden told a lot of his favorite stories during the two days of interviews

The interviewers spent a lot of time walking Biden through photos of home and office spaces, asking him to recall details. In one instance, Biden told Hur he remembered buying a conference table "in Wilmington at Berger Brothers, I believe." Hur then asked about another piece of furniture.

"So, you just told us where you bought the conference table. Do you remember where the file cabinet came from?" Hur asked.

"I don't know," Biden replied. It was one of the many times Biden told Hur he didn't know — about things mundane (why he wasn't using the hanging folders in his file cabinet in Wilmington) to procedural (what his staff did with highly classified materials when he was done with them).

The interview also included Biden going on at length about the decision-making process around the [troop surge in Afghanistan](#) in 2009, his decision in the early 1970s to become a public defender, his decision to run for office the first time, his family meeting where the [grandkids](#) convinced him to run for president in 2019 — and this one time he used a bow and arrow to hit a target during a trip to [Mongolia](#).

At one point, Biden became aware that he was going on too long with one of his favorite stories, saying, "to make a long story not quite so long..." and then he kept on going.

"My generic point was: There was a lot of material that I had amassed that I wanted to save," Biden explained.

At the end of the second day, Biden ended the interview with one last quip.

"I know it's a lot of work for you — putting a lot together. I may now write a book, you have all this," Biden said, before adding: "That was a joke."