

Top aides shielded Biden from staff, but couldn't hide the debate

[Alex Thompson](#)



President Biden at Thursday's debate in Atlanta. Photo: Kyle Mazza/Anadolu via Getty Images

[Joe Biden](#)'s close aides have carefully shielded him from people inside and outside the White House since the beginning of his presidency.

Why it matters: The intermittent access has resulted in many current and former White House aides being shocked at the 81-year-old president's limitations at the [debate Thursday night](#).

Driving the news: Current and former White House aides are feeling whiplash — and now questioning whether Biden could fulfill a second term.

- "It's time for Joe to go." That's what Chandler West, the White House's deputy director of photography from January 2021 to May

2022, wrote in an Instagram story after the debate.

- "I know many of these people and how the White House operates. They will say he has a 'cold' or just experienced a 'bad night,' but for weeks and months, in private, they have all said what we saw last night — Joe is not as strong as he was just a couple of years ago," West wrote, according to screenshots obtained by Axios.
- Reached by phone, West said he wrote the post because "the debate was not the first bad day, and it's not gonna be the last." He declined to comment further.
- The president and his team have acknowledged Biden had a bad night but said he had a cold.

Zoom in: Biden's behavior stunned many in the White House in part because Biden's closest aides — often led by Jill Biden's top aide, Anthony Bernal, and deputy chief of staff Annie Tomasini — took steps early in his term to essentially rope off the president.

- Even the White House's residence staff, which serves the first family in the mansion's living quarters, has been kept at arm's length.
- A former residence official told Axios that Jill Biden was "so protective of the president, and then Anthony just protects her, and they often wouldn't let us do anything for them."
- "The separation between the family and the residence staff was so big, so divided," the former official said. "It's not supposed to be and usually isn't, even in the Trump White House."
- A White House official said the president "is deeply appreciative of the residence staff's work, but is unused to being waited on regularly or having butlers, so some staff are often allowed to go home early."

Bernal, Tomasini and other close aides had easy access to the residence area of the White House (marked RES on passes).

- Some residence staff found it unusual — political staffers typically don't have such access — and another example of the tight circle

around the president.

- **The White House official said:** "Annie and Anthony never requested to have 'Res' on their badges and there are other political staff who have that designation, too."

The intrigue: The former residence official recounted an early incident that set a tone for many residence staffers.

- On July 4, 2021, Biden hosted a party on the South Lawn in which he declared "independence" from the coronavirus pandemic.
- It was a hot day and after hours outside, Biden went back into the White House through the Diplomatic Room, and then into the nearby Map Room.
- Biden sat down and the door was abruptly shut as Biden's aides blocked the White House butlers and residence staff from aiding the president.

They suggested to the staffers that the president was just a little overheated. But the episode left residence staff feeling like his close aides were creating a barrier around anything possibly related to the president's health, the former official said.

- Asked about the incident, the White House official told Axios: "There are many reasons for presidents to need some staff to leave the room at any time, because they often deal with sensitive information."

Between the lines: Shielding Biden was a safe and obvious move during COVID. But some within the White House have felt that some of those habits have lingered long afterward.

- White House spokesperson Andrew Bates told Axios: "In every administration, there are individuals who would prefer to spend more time with the President and senior officials. President Biden fights

hard for families every day, working with a wide range of team members at what he is proud is the most diverse White House ever - and achieving historic results for the American people because of his determination, values, and experience."