



## ASSOCIATED PRESS

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To the judges:

Five days before the presidential election, a U.S. government official asked AP White House reporter Aamer Madhani if they could meet after work. Madhani was in Las Vegas covering Vice President Kamala Harris' campaign, so the two connected by phone.

The source revealed that the White House press office had altered the official transcript of comments by President Joe Biden in which the president had appeared to suggest that Trump's "supporters" were "garbage." Biden later insisted that he had said "supporter's" (with an apostrophe), indicating that he meant the word "garbage" to apply only to the individual who had made a noxious statement about Puerto Rico at a Trump rally -- not to all Trump supporters. The change in punctuation fundamentally shifted the meaning of the president's remark to align with what Biden said he meant.

The day before, Madhani has pushed White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre to explain what Biden had meant by the "garbage comment," and the source knew he would understand the importance of the alteration.

The White House was trying to alter the official account of history, and Madhani quickly recognized the significance. The source supplied details about the dispute between press aides and the director of the White House stenographers' unit. It was a solid start, but Madhani needed more. White House Correspondent Zeke Miller joined the hunt and soon came up with a second source.

Then Madhani went back to his original source to firm up a detail and the source shared an email from the director of the stenographers to top White House press officials that laid out all the details in print.

That email locked down the scoop and the story hit the wire at 9:30 pm on the Thursday before Election Day.

The story was one of AP's top performers for the entire week and virtually every major news organization scrambled to match or pick up the late-breaking news, all of them prominently crediting the AP. It was a rare instance of scoring a scoop stemming from a briefing attended by dozens in the White House press corps.



The next day, Jean-Pierre and other White House officials were pressed by multiple news organizations to explain the alteration. The story also prompted the Republican-controlled House Oversight Committee to send a letter to the White House seeking information about the transcript dispute, citing the AP report.

For dogged reporting and a fast and sharp turnaround on a breaking story, I am pleased to nominate Aamer Madhani and Zeke Miller for the White House Correspondents' Association's Award for Excellence in Presidential News Coverage Under Deadline Pressure.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anna Johnson".

Anna Johnson  
Chief of Bureau  
Washington

November 1, 2024

## AP sources: White House altered record of Biden's 'garbage' remarks despite stenographer concerns

BY [AAMER MADHANI](#) AND [ZEKE MILLER](#)

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House press officials altered the official transcript of a call in which [President Joe Biden](#) appeared to take a swipe at supporters of [Donald Trump](#), drawing objections from the federal workers who document such remarks for posterity, according to two U.S. government officials and an internal email obtained Thursday by The Associated Press.

[Biden created an uproar](#) earlier this week with his remarks to Latino activists responding to [racist comments at a Trump rally](#) made by the comedian [Tony Hinchcliffe](#), who referred to the U.S. island territory of Puerto Rico as a “floating island of garbage.”

Biden, according to a transcript prepared by the official White House stenographers, told the Latino group on a Tuesday evening video call, “The only garbage I see floating out there is his supporters — his — his demonization of Latinos is unconscionable, and it’s un-American.”

The transcript released by the White House press office, however, rendered the quote with an apostrophe, reading “supporter’s” rather than “supporters,” which aides said pointed to Biden criticizing Hinchcliffe, not the millions of Americans who are supporting Trump for president.

The change was made after the press office “conferred with the president,” according to an internal email from the head of the stenographers’ office that was obtained by The AP. The authenticity of the email was confirmed by two government officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal matters.

The supervisor, in the email, called the press office’s handling of the matter “a breach of protocol and spoliation of transcript integrity between the Stenography and Press Offices.”

“If there is a difference in interpretation, the Press Office may choose to withhold the transcript but cannot edit it independently,” the supervisor wrote, adding, “Our Stenography Office transcript — released to our distro, which includes the National Archives — is now different than the version edited and released to the public by Press Office staff.”



President Joe Biden speaks during an event about his Investing in America agenda, Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2024, at the Dundalk Marine Terminal in Baltimore. (AP Photo/Daniel Kucin Jr.)

The edit of the transcript came as the White House scrambled to respond to a wave of queries from reporters about Biden's comments. The president's remarks clashed with Vice President [Kamala Harris'](#) near-simultaneous [speech outside the White House](#) in which she called for treating Americans of differing ideologies with respect.

The Trump campaign quickly moved to fundraise off the quote, and the next day, Trump himself held a photo op [inside a garbage truck](#) to try to capitalize on Biden's criticism.

Harris on Wednesday distanced herself from Biden's comments — making the clearest break from the president since she took over for him at the top of the Democratic ticket just over three months ago. "Let me be clear," she told reporters, "I strongly disagree with any criticism of people based on who they vote for."

According to the email, the press office had asked the stenographers to quickly produce a transcript of the call amid the firestorm. Biden himself took to social media to say that he he was not calling all Trump supporters garbage and that he was referring specifically to the "hateful rhetoric about Puerto Rico spewed by Trump's supporter at his Madison Square Garden rally."

The stenographers office is charged with preparing accurate transcripts of public and private remarks of the president for preservation by the National Archives and distribution to the public.

The two-person stenography team on duty that evening — a "typer" and "proofreader" — said any edit to the transcript would have to be approved by their supervisor, the head of stenographers' office.

The supervisor was not immediately available to review the audio, but the press office went ahead and published the altered transcript on the White House website and distributed it to press and on social media in an effort to tamp down the story.

White House senior deputy press secretary Andrew Bates that evening also posted on X the edited version of the quote and wrote that Biden was referring "to the hateful rhetoric at the Madison Square Garden rally as 'garbage.'"

The supervisor, a career employee of the White House, raised the concerns about the press office action — but did not weigh in on the accuracy of the edit — in an email to White House communications director Ben LaBolt, press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and other press and communications officials.

"Regardless of urgency, it is essential to our transcripts' authenticity and legitimacy that we adhere to consistent protocol for requesting edits, approval, and release," the supervisor wrote.

The supervisor declined to comment to The AP and referred questions about the matter to the White House press office.

Asked to comment, Bates did not address the alteration of the transcript and said: "The President confirmed in his tweet on Tuesday evening that he was addressing the hateful rhetoric from the comedian at Trump's Madison Square Garden rally. That was reflected in the transcript."

Karoline Leavitt, a Trump campaign spokeswoman, said the White House "unethically altered an official White House transcript in a failed attempt to edit the truth."

“Joe Biden called more than half the country ‘garbage’ and the Harris-Biden Administration cannot be trusted,” she added. “President Trump will fix it.”

House Republicans, meanwhile, were debating launching an investigation into the matter. House Republican Conference Chairwoman Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., and House Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer, R-Ky., on Wednesday accused White House staff of “releasing a false transcript” of Biden’s remarks.

In a letter to White House counsel Ed Siskel on Wednesday, they [called on the administration to retain documents](#) and internal communications related to Biden’s remarks and the release of the transcript.

“White House staff cannot rewrite the words of the President of the United States to be more politically on message,” the lawmakers wrote to Siskel.

Stefanik and Comer said the action could be in violation of the Presidential Records Act of 1978.

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Madhani reported from Las Vegas.

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<https://apnews.com/article/biden-garbage-transcript-puerto-rico-trump-326e2f516a94a470a423011a946b6252>