

# 'The words of a president matter' — especially when he goes off script



Associated Press/Patrick Semansky

*President Biden speaks about his proposed budget for fiscal 2023 in the State Dining Room of the White House, on Monday, March 28, 2022, in Washington.*

It's one thing when your 79-year-old uncle says things that make you roll your eyes and wonder if the old guy even knows what he's talking about. But when your 79-year-old uncle is president of the United States, what he says matters. His rhetorical blunders aren't something that makes the kids giggle at the family reunion. When the president goes off script it can set nerves on edge in capitals all around the world. And worse.

The Russians have a well-deserved reputation for saying things they don't really mean. Who knew that good ol' Uncle [Joe Biden](#) would give the Russians a run for their money?

Let's start with what he said at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) headquarters in Brussels last Thursday, when he was asked what the United States would do if Russian [President Vladimir Putin](#) used chemical weapons in Ukraine. That, the president said, would "[trigger a response in kind.](#)"

Does that mean if they use chemical weapons we would respond "in kind" by using chemical weapons of our own? Apparently not, because [Jake Sullivan](#), the president's national security adviser, [explained](#) that what the president really meant was that while Russia would pay a heavy price if it used chemical weapons, the U.S. had "no intention of using chemical weapons, period, under any circumstances."

One day later in Poland, the president [spoke to troops](#) from the 82nd Airborne Division and casually said, "You're going to see when you're there [in Ukraine] — some of you have been there — you're going to see women, young people, standing in the middle, in front of a damn tank, saying, 'I'm not leaving.'"

This was [the headline](#) in the Daily Mail after [Biden's](#) comment: "White House is forced to make correction after Biden suggested U.S. troops WOULD be sent into Ukraine and had already been there in speech slip-up to paratroopers in Poland."

And then just one day after that, in Warsaw, things got really serious with the ad lib heard 'round the world. The president was delivering an [impassioned speech](#) denouncing [Putin's](#) crimes in Ukraine and about how what we are witnessing is a battle between democracy and tyranny when he went off script and fired his now-famous shot across the bow of the Russian leader: "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in office."

We all know what he meant. Is there anyone besides [Putin](#) and his most loyal cronies who actually believes he should remain in office? Still, in no time at

all, a White House official was busy [explaining](#) what the president really meant — that the leader of the free world was not articulating U.S. policy that advocated for regime change in Moscow.

“The president’s point was that [Putin](#) cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors or the region. He was not discussing [Putin](#)’s power in Russia, or regime change,” the unnamed White House official said. And the next day in Jerusalem, to make sure everybody got the message, Secretary of State [Antony Blinken said](#), “We don’t have a strategy of regime change in Russia, or anywhere else for that matter.”

A few days ago in Washington, [Biden](#) stuck by what he said about how “this man cannot remain in office,” but even Biden must know that it’s not a good idea to make it sound like you’re calling for the ouster of an autocratic leader who just happens to possess a whole bunch of nuclear weapons.

And the president’s gaffes might make you wonder if it was something he said that led Putin to believe he could invade Ukraine in the first place and get away with it. Back in January, before Russian tanks rolled across the border into Ukraine, [Biden told journalists](#) at a White House news conference that Putin has “never seen sanctions like the ones I promised will be imposed if he moves.”

But then he inexplicably added that sanctions might not be so severe if [Putin](#) doesn’t launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. “It’s one thing if it’s a minor incursion,” [Biden said](#), “and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do.”

That led to more cleanup on aisle 1600 — or as one news report put it, the White House “went into frantic cleanup mode, with Press Secretary [Jen Psaki](#) forced to issue a statement about what the president meant to say.”

Psaki explained, "President [Biden](#) has been clear with the Russian president: If any Russian military forces move across the Ukrainian border, that's a renewed invasion and it will be met with a swift, severe and united response from the United States and our allies."

And when a reporter asked him about sanctions last week, [Biden](#) got testy and said, "I did not say that in fact the sanctions would deter him [[Putin](#)]. Sanctions never deter." Apparently, the president wasn't paying attention when his own people, one after another, had said the opposite of what he told that reporter.

As Politico [pointed out](#), Blinken, for example, had said that "The purpose of those sanctions is to deter Russian aggression." Sullivan said: "The president believes that sanctions are intended to deter." Vice President [Kamala Harris](#) said: "The purpose of the sanctions has always been and continues to be deterrence." And Psaki said: "If there's a 95 percent chance of Russia invading without the threat of sanctions ... and a 65 percent chance that they will with them, you're obviously going to go with the threat of sanctions because you want to reduce the threat of an invasion. So, there is a deterrent."

This raises a few questions: Does the president really know why sanctions were imposed on Russia? And who's calling the shots in the White House? Is [Biden](#) setting the agenda or is he only carrying out orders for whomever is pulling the strings behind the curtain?

In August 2019, while he was campaigning for president in Iowa, Biden took a shot at his rival, [Donald Trump](#), saying that "the words of a president matter." He's right, of course, and someone needs to remind him of what he said back then — because when you're president, saying things that require "clarifications" can make our allies and our adversaries wonder what the

heck is going on. Uncertainty about what the president really means, and whether his words indicate a shift in official U.S. policy, can jeopardize his credibility. It can lead to questions about trust and about competence and about who's really in charge at the White House.

That's not something our friends want or expect from an American president. When you're dealing with a bellicose tyrant like Vladimir Putin, a man who may be paranoid about whether [Biden](#) is somehow planning to oust him, you just don't know what that might lead to.

Uncle Joe's gaffes may have been funny once, but not anymore.

*[Bernard Goldberg](#) is an Emmy and an Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University award-winning writer and journalist. He was a correspondent with HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel" for 22 years and previously worked as a reporter for CBS News and as an analyst for Fox News. He is the author of five books and publishes exclusive weekly columns, audio commentaries and Q&As on his [Patreon page](#). Follow him on Twitter [@BernardGoldberg](#).*

The Hill has removed its comment section, as there are many other forums for readers to participate in the conversation. We invite you to join the discussion on Facebook and Twitter.