

Jen Psaki Transcribed Interview July 26, 2024



Background

Jen Psaki has worked in communications since 2001, working on election campaigns in Iowa before becoming Press Secretary for John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Ms. Psaki served as the Obama campaign's traveling Press Secretary. During President Obama's first term, Ms. Psaki served as Deputy Press Secretary and Deputy Communications Director. In 2013, Ms. Psaki became the State Department's Spokesperson before going back to the White House in 2015 to serve as White House Communications Director. From 2017-2020, Ms. Psaki worked at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and as a political commentator on CNN.

In November 2020, Ms. Psaki joined President Biden's transition team and would continue on to serve as the Biden White House Press Secretary – a role she occupied through the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Ms. Psaki left the Biden White House in 2022 and has hosted Inside with Jen Psaki at MSNBC since 2023.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Process

State Department Spokesperson: Establishing Foreign Policy Expertise

1. As the State Department Spokesperson, Ms. Psaki's role was to "speak on behalf of the United States Government and the work of the Secretary of State and the State Department and diplomats around the world." (Page 16, Lines 1-5)
 - a. Despite not being a policymaker, Ms. Psaki attested she had to be "informed and well-versed" in matters of foreign policy. (Page 16, Lines 6-8)
 - b. Ms. Psaki described her preparation and briefing process at the State Department, saying,
 - i. "At the State Department, I would, again, have meetings with my team in the morning to determine what new events had happened that might be on the minds of State Department reporters. And we would ask members of the team, spokespeople from the team to -- and at the State Department, it works a little differently than the White House, because it is staffed primarily by Foreign Service officers, civil servants, and others, and also, of course, diplomats around the world. So we would ask those spokespeople to work with the relevant policymakers in each of those divisions and agencies to ensure we had approved language and talking points for the briefing that day. Then the spokespeople would bring that material back to me before the briefing so I could review it in order to be prepared for the briefing." (Page 17, Lines 4-14)

White House Press Secretary: Communicating Foreign Policy for the Biden Administration

2. Ms. Psaki reported to President Biden's Chief of Staff Ron Klain in her capacity as White House Press Secretary. (Page 20, Lines 24-25)
3. Ms. Psaki understood the role of the White House Press Secretary as, "speaking on behalf of the President and the administration, answering reporter inquiries not just in the Briefing Room but

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also as they have them throughout the course of the day, which is primarily how they spend their time. They're also an advisor to the President.” (Page 21, Lines 4-8)

- a. Ms. Psaki asserted that she doesn't “think any spokesperson in the government is a pass-through vehicle.” (Page 18, Line 10)
 - b. Given Ms. Psaki's testimony that she was not a pass through vehicle, when asked to explain the input she provided as White House Press Secretary on the information conveyed to the American public, Ms. Psaki only replied, “if there is an easier and more simple way to explain things, there were times -- and often it wasn't in the national security space because of the importance of being specific with language, but there were times where I would try to simplify language to make it more accessible to the public.” (Page 31, Lines 2-5).
4. According to Ms. Psaki, “The White House Press Secretary is responsible for answering the questions of the press and reporters, and they are conduits to provide information to the American people.” (Page 22, Lines 14-16). Ms. Psaki agreed that the White House Press Secretary has a duty “to provide truthful and accurate information to the American people.” (Page 22, Lines 17-19).
- a. When Ms. Psaki was asked a question she did not know the answer to by journalists at the White House, she described her process for finding out that information by saying, “where, if we didn't have information or if I wanted to correct the record on information, we would go back later that day and follow up with the reporter. And typically it would be the spokespeople who worked with the particular policy experts who would then go back to the reporter and ensure that we followed up.” (Page 23, Lines 14-18)
 - b. Ms. Psaki claimed that when she clarified remarks she'd made previously, she did so with the purpose of ensuring accuracy and “the best truthful information at the time.” (Page 86, Lines 22-25; Page 87, Lines 1-3)
 - c. When asked how she would approach instances in which the veracity of the information she was given was in question, Ms. Psaki claimed, “Well, I think what I tried to do as the Spokesperson at the State Department is similar to what I tried to do as Press Secretary, which was, as much as I was not a policymaker, learn and understand as much about the policy as I could and be prepared to ask the right questions and ask for greater clarity to ensure that I knew and was able to explain what I was talking about.” (Page 18, Lines 21-25)
 - d. Nevertheless, Ms. Psaki claimed there was no “mechanism” nor was it “appropriate for spokespeople to challenge or question the language and the veracity of information coming from people who are front and center to the policymaking process and implementing it.” (Page 30, Lines 19-24)
 - i. Ms. Psaki claimed that communications professionals “should not be -- they don't have a means of -- nor should they -- seek alternate information to what the policymakers and experts on the ground are determining and providing.” (Page 78, Lines 4-6)

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Day-to-Day Process

5. Ms. Psaki received most of her information from an interagency process and the NSC press team. The NSC press team did not report directly to Ms. Psaki, but they worked in close coordination. According to Ms. Psaki, the NSC press team are “responsible for coordinating and preparing press materials, materials for the briefing. And they are the ones who are the primary points of contact with the other agencies to prepare those materials.” (Page 21, Lines 20-25)
6. Ms. Psaki described her day-to-day work as White House Press Secretary saying, “Typically how we would work is, in the morning, we would determine, either because there was news stories overnight that had developed, something maybe had happened on Capitol Hill, maybe there was a development around the world, and we would discuss where we might need new information and guidance from the policy experts in order to make sure we had up to date information for that briefing. And it didn't mean that I always determined or even my press team even determined what those topics were. Often, there were people who were closer to all of the questions that might come up, like, say, the NSC press team, that would come to us with, "I think these are topics, because we've been getting a lot of inquiries, that might come up." So we would discuss that in the morning. Everybody would go back, all of the spokespeople, and work with the policy experts to develop language, to get approval for that, so that we would then have that information available for the briefing.” (Page 24, Lines 6-19)
7. Regarding the topics that came up in the White House briefing room, Ms. Psaki said, “The conversation -- or I should say the questions that were being answered in the briefing were based on what reporters topically wanted to discuss.” (Page 72, Lines 11-13).

Engagement with the NSC

8. As White House Press Secretary, Ms. Psaki attested that the information she prepared to brief both the press, and the President all had to get approved by the NSC. (Page 26, Lines 12-15)
 - a. Ms. Psaki typically received press guidance from the NSC press team and working level team. (Page 28, Lines 7-8).
9. At the NSC, Ms. Psaki primarily engaged with NSC spokesperson Emily Horne. (Page 27, Lines 9-10). Ms. Psaki would also, at times, ask National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan for further clarification on fluid situations. (Page 27, Lines 15-17).
 - a. The NSC press team’s process would oversee clearance of messaging outputs from “relevant policy agencies and entities in the Federal Government.” (Page 83, Lines 1-8)
 - b. Ms. Psaki described the NSC press team as follows:
 - i. “There was also an NSC press team that worked directly as a part of the NSC press apparatus and was primarily responsible for being the point of contact in the interagency national security process for preparing public messaging talking points and answers to questions. They had their own process that we worked with them in close coordination. They did not report directly to me or any press secretary typically.” (Page 73, Lines 23-25; Page 74, Lines 1-2)

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- c. “The NSC press team was primarily responsible for developing the baseline of press responses and language and answers that could be provided publicly.” (Page 82, Lines 14-15)
 - d. Ms. Psaki did not ever have any concerns about the process to develop and finalize messaging outputs and considered the process to develop and finalize messaging outputs to be sound and effective. (Page 84, Lines 18-23)
 - i. Ms. Psaki described an “effective process” as one where “communicators are relying on policy experts and implementers to ensure that information is up to date.” She did not say it’s one where the information being conveyed is accurate. (Page 84, Line 25; Page 85, Lines 1-2)
 - ii. Despite this purported “effective process,” Ms. Psaki never received Secretary Blinken’s and Secretary Austin’s assessments for a slow withdrawal. (Page 170, Lines 6-8). Ms. Psaki was also only made aware of the Dissent Channel Cable only after it was made public. (Page 49, Lines 10-11)
 - iii. When presented with such evidence of senior military and diplomatic officials’ dissent with the Biden Administration’s position on the Afghanistan withdrawal, Ms. Psaki claimed she “did not have independent knowledge” of these conflicting assessments (Page 204). When asked if she had “concerns that the NSC was deliberating withholding information from [her] purview,” Ms. Psaki responded that her “job as the spokesperson was not to discuss everybody’s viewpoint from within the government.” (Page 205, Lines 10-15)
 - 1. When asked about what she did to later mitigate public reporting of Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin’s recommendation against the President’s chosen course of action, Ms. Psaki stated, “Well, most of the management of these -- this story or these stories would have been through the NSC press team, who we’ve spoken about previously.” (Page 173, Lines 22-23).
10. Despite describing her role as that of an “advisor” and not a “pass through vehicle,” Ms. Psaki claimed, Ms. Psaki claimed she did not provide inputs on policy at discussions with principals at the NSC. (Page 28, Lines 17-18)

Engagement with Other Administration Principals

11. Ms. Psaki did not regularly meet with State officials as White House Press Secretary. (Page 34, Lines 5-9)
- a. As White House Press Secretary, Ms. Psaki engaged with State Department Spokesperson Ned Price in a “limited capacity.” (Page 34, Lines 11-15)
 - b. As White House Press Secretary, Ms. Psaki engaged with Defense Department Spokesperson John Kirby “sporadically when appropriate or when needed for clarification of any information.” (Page 34, Lines 19-24)

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12. As White House Press Secretary, Ms. Psaki, “relied on the information by policymakers and experts who were either implementers of a policy or policymakers who were in charge of any given policy in the U.S. Government, whether it was COVID or approach to Ukraine during the Russian invasion or, of course, during the Afghanistan withdrawal.” (Page 29, Lines 17-21)

The Interagency Process

1. Ms. Psaki claimed she requested to attend policy meetings when she knew that the subject would be a dominant issue in the Briefing Room, yet she recalls only beginning to attend interagency meetings on Afghanistan, as an observer, during the summer of 2021. (Page 33, Lines 8-10; Page 85, Lines 21-25)
 - a. Reporters were asking Ms. Psaki about Afghanistan as early as [January 25, 2021](#).
 - b. Ms. Psaki was not present at any meetings with State and Defense Department principals regarding Afghanistan prior to the President’s Go to Zero order. (Page 35, Lines 13-17).
2. Ms. Psaki did not receive briefings or updates on the interagency deliberations leading up to President Biden’s April 14th announcement of an unconditional withdrawal. (Page 114, Lines 17-19; Page 115, Lines 2-3).
 - a. Ms. Psaki attested that as State Department spokesperson, she was “briefed on information needed in order to do my [her] job as the spokesperson for the U.S. Government.” (Page 16, lines 17-18).
 - b. As White House Press Secretary, Ms. Psaki was not briefed on, and never asked any senior officials for greater clarification on the interagency process because “it was an ongoing process which we would not be speaking about publicly.” (Page 116, Lines 3-7).
 - i. Ms. Psaki claimed she worked “through the NSC press team to determine what we would say publicly, which was quite limited at the time, given it was an ongoing internal deliberation,” regarding the administration’s Afghanistan policy prior to President Biden’s Go to Zero order. (Page 34, Lines 1-4)
 - ii. Ms. Psaki claimed, “there wasn't a lot of internal discussion between spokespeople around this topic [Afghanistan]” prior to the April 14th Go to Zero announcements because “it was internal deliberations we weren't going to be speaking about publicly.” (Page 36, Lines 24-25; Page 37, Line 1)
3. Despite describing her role as that of an “advisor” and not a “pass through vehicle,” Ms. Psaki claimed she never offered any direct policy recommendations for Afghanistan policy during her time at the White House in 2021. (Page 76, Lines 17-19)
4. When asked why she responded to a journalists’ question regarding President Biden’s decision to withdraw from Afghanistan with “his commitment remains,” Ms. Psaki first claimed that her response was based on publicly available information on the President’s views on Afghanistan, and later claimed, “I’m not going to parse language in a press briefing from three and a half years ago. I don’t have anything to add to what I said in the briefing,” giving the Committee no further clarification on what information informed her characterization of the President’s views. (Page 45, Lines 2-9; Page 46, Lines 1-12)

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5. Ms. Psaki claimed she was not involved in the discussions where the decision was made to keep U.S. Embassy Kabul open, nor does she know who was involved. (Page 201, Lines 13-19)
6. Ms. Psaki claimed she was only aware of senior-level military official's disagreements with the President's policies when they became publicly reported. (Page 207, Lines 1-21)

On President Biden's Views on U.S. Obligations to the Afghan People

7. Ms. Psaki repeatedly refused to provide further clarification outside of publicly available press transcripts on what information informed her characterizations of President Biden's position on Afghanistan.
 - a. When asked about President Biden's position on the U.S.'s obligations to the Afghan people, Ms. Psaki stated, "I'm not going to parse the President's words. I would point you to the many speeches and public interviews he gave on his own behalf and did not answer the question. (Page 109, Lines 20-25).
 - b. Ms. Psaki claimed she didn't have "anything" to add to parse what she had already said publicly on President Biden's mindset on the U.S.'s obligation to the Afghan people. (Page 112, Lines 1-3)
 - c. Ms. Psaki was presented with a transcript of her own press briefing where she was asked about a conversation between Richard Holbrooke and President Biden and President Biden's reported assertion that the U.S. had no responsibility to the Afghan people. When asked if she ever tried to confirm or learn more about this conversation, Ms. Psaki claimed, "I did not seek further clarification about the President's conversations with a former ambassador who had been dead for more than 10 years, no." (Page 146, Lines 18-25).

On the Presence of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2021

8. When asked about an April 14th, 2021 statement she made where she said, "And even if you look at al Qaeda, it is not-- it is not being harbored in a safe haven in Afghanistan how it was 20 years ago," Ms. Psaki claimed that "Any statement I would have made on this would have been based on information that came... in that moment of time through the NSC." (Page 123, Lines 16-23)
 - a. Generals Milley, McKenzie, and Miller testified to the Committee that al-Qaeda was present and being harbored in Afghanistan at that time.
 - b. Ms. Psaki agreed that she understood that the issue of degrading and destroying al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was a longstanding objective of U.S. foreign policy. (Page 137, Lines 5-8)
 - a. Ms. Psaki reiterated, "any questions I would have answered related to intelligence would have been based on public -- approved press guidance developed by the team through coordination in the interagency process that included members of the intelligence team." (Page 161, Lines 11-13).

On Taliban Adherence to the Doha Agreement

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9. When asked if the Taliban's actions in 2021 reflected their commitment to the Doha Agreement, Ms. Psaki claimed, "I'm not a policymaker, nor do I have independent assessments of the Taliban's actions." (Page 155, Lines 2-30). When asked again if the Taliban's repeated actions belied their commitments on the Doha agreement, Ms. Psaki did not answer and instead pointed to her public comments at the time. (Page 155, Lines 8-11).

On 9/11 Decision Date

10. At a press briefing on April 14th, the day President Biden announced his decision to unconditionally withdraw from Afghanistan, Ms. Psaki was asked why the administration chose the date of 9/11 as the withdrawal deadline, wherein she responded with, "I think it was the President wanting to send a clear message that this is not going to be an open ended timeline to withdrawing troops. We have had that policy for some time in the past, and he disagree with it. Says he was giving a timeline on when operationally we could move troops out."
 - a. Despite being the Biden Administration's "chief communicator," when asked what information Ms. Psaki received to inform her answer to that question, Ms. Psaki claimed, "because I was not involved in the discussion nor was I asked for my input on that date, I don't have any further information." (Page 22, Lines 10-11; Page 176, Lines 19-20)
 - b. When asked what information then informed her assessment that the timeline of 9/11 was by when the military could operationally move troops out, Ms. Psaki claimed, "this is a briefing from more than 3 years ago" and did not answer the question. (Page 177, Lines 1-25; Page 178, Lines 1-2)
 - i. Later, Ms. Psaki claimed, "the information I was sharing publicly about a timeline being operationally feasible would, of course, have been confirmed through the interagency NSC press process." (Page 187, Line 25; Page 188, Lines 1-2)
11. Ms. Psaki claimed she was not part of the conversations on changing the date from 9/11 to August 31st. She was simply told that the date would change and does not recall who told her. (Page 192, Lines 1-11)
 - c. Ms. Psaki previously attested that she was not a "pass through vehicle" and that she was an "advisor" to the President, and yet when asked why she communicated certain information to the American public regarding the 9/11 deadline, the circumstances around how that date was chosen and why, Ms. Psaki could not answer.

During the NEO

1. Ms. Psaki's role during the NEO "was actually to rely on the guidance from the national security team and the implementers on the ground, which included people who were in Kabul who were projecting their information through the NSC process." (Page 52, Lines 5-7)
2. When asked why she put forward inaccurate information regarding Americans in Afghanistan during the NEO, Ms. Psaki claimed, "The information I projected publicly was what I had available to me at the time." (Page 53, Lines 6-7). Ms. Psaki testified that "if I heard something that was conflicting to what was on a talking point, I would not have said it." (Page 157, Lines 12-13).

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- a. Yet, Ms. Psaki admitted that despite claiming, “it's irresponsible to say Americans are stranded. They are not. We are committed to bringing Americans who want to come home, home,” by the end of the NEO, there were still Americans who wanted to get out who were stuck in Afghanistan. (Page 229, Lines 11-13; Page 229, Lines 21-25)
 - b. Ms. Psaki clarified that her statement on August 23, 2021, where she said “we have been very clear that we're not leaving Americans who want to return home. We are going to bring them home, and I think that's important for the American public to hear and understand,” was meant to “convey what our goal and objective was as the U.S. Government.” (Page 231, Lines 21-22).
3. At a press briefing on August 31, 2021, regarding the collapse of the Afghan forces and military, Ms. Psaki stated, ““I don't think anyone assessed that they would collapse as quickly as they did. Anyone. Anyone in this room. Anyone in the region. Anyone anywhere in the world. If you have anyone who did, I'd be surprised.” Ms. Psaki was then presented with conflicting assessments from Generals Milley and Miller, as well as the Dissent Channel Cable from U.S. Embassy Kabul. (Pages 209-214)
- a. When asked if she thought she fairly communicated to the American people based on the warnings issued within the U.S. Government how quickly Afghanistan would fall, Ms. Psaki responded, “I answered the question based on the information I had available at the time, which is what we are all basing information on in these briefings.” (Page 216, Lines 8-11).
 - b. Given Ms. Psaki’s testimony that her information came from the NSC press team, the talking points and the messaging she received from them must not have included the conflicting assessments from Generals Milley and Miller, as well as the Dissent Channel Cable from U.S. Embassy Kabul.

The Dover Ceremony

1. Ms. Psaki claimed she included her recounting of the Dover Ceremony for the 13 U.S. servicemembers who died in the Abbey Gate Attack to illustrate an instance where she was giving “tough feedback to President Biden.” (Page 100, Lines 14-21)
 - a. “And so the story was about me conveying to the President that his story about his own son was not received in the way he had intended and that they have every right to feel how they feel...as any family member grieving the loss of a loved one, especially Gold Star families.” (Page 101, Lines 1-6)
 - b. Ms. Psaki’s objective in conveying this story was “validating their [the Gold Star families] feelings and understanding that, even when someone has the best of intentions, as the President did in that moment, someone who has lost his own son, that it is certainly their not just their right but, of course, of any family, to feel however they want to feel, that the service of their sons and daughters is tremendous.” (Page 101, Lines 21-25)

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Inability to Answer Questions

1. Despite multiple rounds of correspondence requesting her appearance before the Committee and outlining the reasons for such a request, Ms. Psaki claimed she did not know why her testimony was sought for this congressional investigation. (Page 76, Lines 20-22)
2. Ms. Psaki repeatedly did not answer questions regarding the Biden Administration's assessment at the time regarding the Taliban's compliance with the Doha agreement (Page 155), the presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (137), and the plight of women and girls in Afghanistan (Page 167).on the premise that, "because I answered all of these questions 3 and a half years ago, what I stated publicly about the position at the time is the best record of the position at the time of the U.S. Government on Afghanistan and any of these issues." (Page 1168, Lines 9-12).
3. When asked what recourse was available to those who don't like the policies of a particular government, Ms. Psaki stated, "You can quit. You can express a different point of view in a meeting. You can use a dissent channel. You can use a -- do a range of things in the U.S. Government and also outside of the U.S. Government." (Page 221, Lines 20-25)