

# Fear and Loathing on Air Force One. Seymour Hersh

Biden's anxieties over the Ukraine War and the election in 2024 come into view

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*Let's start with a silly fear but one that does signal the Democratic Party's growing sense of panic about the 2024 Presidential election. It was expressed to me by someone with excellent party credentials: that Trump could be the Republican nominee and will select Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as his running mate. The strange duo will then sweep to a huge victory over a stumbling Joe Biden, and also take down many of the party's House and Senate candidates.*

As for real signs of acute Democratic anxiety: Joe Biden got what he needed before the NATO summit this week by somehow turning Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan inside out and getting him to rebuff Vladimir Putin by announcing that he would support NATO membership for Sweden. The public story for Biden's face-saving coup was talk about agreeing to sell American F-16 fighter bombers to Turkey.

I have been told a different, secret story about Erdogan's turnabout: Biden promised that a much-needed \$11-13 billion line of credit would be extended to Turkey by the International Monetary Fund. "Biden had to have a victory and Turkey is in acute financial stress," an official with direct knowledge of the transaction told me. Turkey lost 100,000 people in the earthquake last February, and has four million buildings to rebuild. "What could be better than Erdogan"—under Biden's tutelage, the official asked, "finally having seen the light and realizing he is better off with NATO and Western Europe?" Reporters were told, according to the *New York Times*, that Biden called Erdogan while flying to Europe on Sunday. Biden's coup, the *Times* reported, would enable him to say that Putin got "exactly what he did not want: an expanded, more direct NATO alliance." There was no mention of bribery.

A June [analysis](#) by Brad W. Setser of the Council on Foreign Relations, "Turkey's Increasing Balance Sheet Risks," said it all in the first two sentences—Erdogan won re-election and "now has to find a way to avoid what appears to be an imminent financial crisis." The critical

fact, Setser writes, is that Turkey “is on the edge of truly running out of usable foreign exchange reserves—and facing a choice between selling its gold, an avoidable default, or swallowing the bitter pill of a complete policy reversal and possibly an IMF program.”

Another key element of the complicated economic issues facing Turkey is that Turkey’s banks have lent so much money to the nation’s central bank that “they cannot honor their domestic dollar deposits, should Turks ever ask for the funds back.” The irony for Russia, and a reason for much anger in the Kremlin, Setser notes, is the rumor that Putin has been providing Russian gas to Erdogan on credit, and not demanding that the state gas importer pay up. Putin’s largesse has been flowing as Erdogan has been selling drones to Ukraine for use in its war against Russia. Turkey has also permitted Ukraine to ship its crops through the Black Sea.

All of this European political and economic double dealing was done openly and in plain sight. Duplicity comes much differently in the United States.

Careful readers of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* can sense that the current Ukraine counter-offensive is going badly because stories about its progress, or lack thereof, have mostly disappeared from their front pages in recent weeks.

Last week Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security adviser, called in a few [journalists](#) to insist that Putin’s squabble with Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner militia, was an armed mutiny that showed weakness in the Russian’s leader command and control of his military. There’s simply no evidence for such assertions. If anything, I was later told by those with access to current intelligence, that Putin emerged stronger than ever after the Prigozhin implosion, which led to the absorption of many of his mercenaries into the Russian army.

Sullivan also took issue with the notion—he apparently did not say where it originated—that the Biden administration was paralyzed by the threat of a Russian nuclear attack and so would not fully support Ukraine. Such views were “nonsense,” he said, and cited Biden’s recent controversial decision to provide cluster bombs to the Ukraine military. He suggested that the anti-personnel weapons—each bomb can spread hundreds of bomblets—could give Ukraine an edge in the war and prompt Putin to deploy nuclear weapons. “It is a real threat,” Sullivan said, of a nuclear bomb. “And it’s one that does evolve with changing conditions on the ground.”

The only good news about such primitive and circular thinking, I have been told, is the impossibility at this point of any significant Ukraine success. “Biden’s principal issue in the war is that he’s screwed,” the informed official told me. “We didn’t give Ukraine cluster bombs earlier in the war, but we’re giving them cluster bombs now because that’s all we got left in the cupboard. Aren’t these the bombs that are banned all over the world because they kill kids? But the Ukrainians tell us they are not planning to drop them on civilians. And then the administration claims that the Russians have used them first in the war, which is just a lie.

“In any case,” the official said, “cluster bombs have zero chance of changing the course of the war.” He said the real worry will come later this summer, perhaps as early as August, when the Russians, having easily weathered the Ukraine assault, will counter-strike with a major offensive. “What happens then? The US has painted itself in a corner by calling for

NATO to do something. “Will NATO respond by sending the brigades now training in Poland and Romania on an airborne assault?” We knew more about the German army in Normandy in World War II than we know about the Russian army in Ukraine.”

I have been told of other signs of internal stress inside the Biden administration. Undersecretary of State for Policy Victoria Nuland has been “blocked” —a word used by one Democratic Party insider—from being promoted to replace the much respected Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman. Nuland’s anti-Russian politics and rhetoric matches the tone and point of view of Biden and Secretary of State Tony Blinken. And a newcomer to the upper reaches of the American intelligence community—CIA director Bill Burns—trumpeted his love for Biden and his intense dislike of all things Russian, including Putin, in a speech on July 1 in England.

Burns, a long-time diplomat who served as ambassador to Russia under George W. Bush as well as deputy secretary of state under Obama, had won the respect of a hard core of CIA officers and agents for his discrete handling of the nine-month planning and execution of the covert operation, approved by Biden, to destroy the [Nord Stream I and II pipelines](#) running from Russia to Germany. He was the liaison between the intelligence team operating out of Norway and the Oval Office. When he asked how much he needed to know, he accepted the CIA’s answer of “very little” with aplomb.

Burns was also known for his warning, published in a memoir after his retirement as ambassador, that continued expansion of NATO to the east—NATO now is now on the verge of totally covering Russia’s western border—would inevitably lead to conflict.

It was this nuance—the notion that Putin could be pushed only so far—that Burns recounted in the UK. “One thing I have learned,” he said, “is that it is always a mistake to underestimate Putin’s fixation on controlling Ukraine and its choices, without which he believes it is impossible for Russia to be a major power or him to be a great Russian leader. ... Putin’s war already has been a strategic failure for Russia—its military weaknesses laid bare; its economy badly damaged for years to come; its future as a junior partner and economic colony of China being shaped by Putin’s mistakes; its revanchist ambitions blunted by a NATO which has only grown bigger and stronger.”

Biden, who is not revered throughout the CIA, as many presidents have not been, was cited repeatedly during his speech. The highly respected intelligence official explained Burns’s glowing words by telling me, cryptically, that all was in flux throughout the Biden national security bureaucracy. “Yes. Yes,” he said in a message. “Big shuffle. Big power struggle. Biden oblivious. All the ants fighting for the crumbs of a dying administration. Advised all the professionals inside to shelter in place. Wait and see the color of the smoke from the Vatican Chancellery. Explain Burns’ Kool-Aid remarks in the UK.”

I was told that Burns’s speech was essentially a job application in a future government, or perhaps in the one at hand, for secretary of state. “He was showing his competence and his experience,” the official said, “He realized that he was going down the drain, professionally, while at the Agency. He was awful”—that is, inexperienced—“but he realized it was not going down well with the boys, and then he did right.” The key issue for Burns, I was told, as some in the CIA saw it, was ambition. “Once you are a secretary of state, the world is your oyster.”

The official remarked that “running the CIA is not that much.” He cited the example of

Stansfield Turner, a retired Navy admiral who was appointed CIA director in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter. Turner and Carter had been midshipmen together at the US Naval Academy. After his retirement Turner ended up giving speeches on ocean cruises.

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