

The Hunter Biden Case

An example of America's dueling realities.

By David Leonhardt

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You're reading The Morning newsletter. Make sense of the day's news and ideas. David Leonhardt and Times journalists guide you through what's happening — and why it matters.

The Hunter Biden case has become the latest example of America's dueling realities.

If you're a Republican, there is a good chance you believe that Democrats and the mainstream media are deliberately minimizing a scandal that calls into question President Biden's honesty and threatens his presidency. I know some conservative readers of The Morning feel this way because they've written to me to say so.

If you're a Democrat, you likely believe that this so-called scandal is a transparent attempt to distract from Donald Trump's far worse behavior. You may see the Hunter Biden obsession as the latest in a line of conservative conspiracy theories, joining Barack Obama's birthplace, John Kerry's Vietnam War record and the suicide of Vince Foster.

Today's newsletter is for both those readers who believe the case deserves more attention and those whose instinct is to skip any article about Hunter Biden. I hope to avoid committing the journalistic sin of false balance while explaining why the story deserves some attention from everybody.

Cashing in

When top Democrats are asked about Hunter Biden, they tend to dismiss his problems as a private issue. "Hunter Biden is a private citizen, and this was a personal matter," Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, said last month when asked about federal tax and gun charges against him. "The president, the first lady, they love their son, and they support him as he continues to rebuild his life."

This explanation is partially fair. Hunter Biden has struggled with drug addiction. His failure to pay taxes seems connected to the chaos of his life while he was using crack cocaine, and the gun charge stems from his claiming to be sober when he bought a handgun in 2018.

But it's a stretch for anyone to suggest that Hunter Biden is merely a private citizen. When his father was vice president from 2009 to 2017, Hunter tried to create the impression that he could leverage his family connections to help his clients, as a former business partner has testified to Congress.

Some clients believed it. Burisma, a Ukrainian energy company, put Hunter on its board, in an attempt to signal that it was pro-Western. A Chinese tycoon also signed a partnership with him. All told, Hunter made more than \$800,000 in 2013 and more than \$1.2 million in 2014.

My colleague Luke Broadwater, who covers Congress, told me that he initially found the public discussion of Hunter Biden to be uninteresting — typical partisan noise. But Luke came to believe the story was more important. "Many rich and famous people try to cash in on their family name, including relatives of the politicians," Luke said. "It's certainly worth newspaper coverage."

Luke notes that Joe Biden made a false statement during a 2020 campaign debate when he claimed, "My son has not made money" in China. "The only guy who made money from China is this guy," Biden continued, referring to Donald Trump. (Amazingly, Biden was correct about the Trump part: The Trumps received money from the same Chinese company.)

These details are not pretty. The current president's son made substantial sums of money from the perception of his proximity to top government officials, and the president has claimed otherwise. That story is notably different from past Republican lies about Obama's birthplace or Kerry's war record.

Unsupported claims

The problem for Biden’s Republican critics is that they are making their own untruthful statements — or at least statements lacking any support. House Republicans have claimed that the elder Biden himself received money as part of Hunter’s business dealings; they have produced no evidence to support the claim, Luke notes. There is also no evidence that Joe Biden altered policy to benefit Hunter’s clients.

Sometimes, the Republican claims have turned farcical. House Republicans portrayed Gal Luft, a dual U.S.-Israeli citizen, as a truth teller who would expose the Bidens. Luft has not done so. Instead, a grand jury indicted him last month for acting as an unregistered agent of the Chinese government and helping Iran evade sanctions. Luft denies any wrongdoing.

For anybody who wants to dig deeper into the Hunter Biden saga, I recommend this detailed article by my colleagues Adam Entous, Michael Schmidt and Katie Benner. Here’s the key sentence: “The real Hunter Biden story is complex and very different in important ways from the narrative promoted by Republicans — but troubling in its own way.” As Michael said to me: “Should the vice president’s son be selling the perception of access to his father even if that son isn’t delivering anything for that money?”

Jonathan Chait of New York magazine has compared Hunter Biden to the Supreme Court justices who have accepted large gifts from private citizens. “In American politics, the worst abuses by powerful people usually involve clever ways to exploit the law without committing crimes,” Chait wrote.

Yes, Trump and his family have profited much more from their government service than Hunter Biden has. But that isn’t a fully satisfying explanation to many Americans. Perhaps, Chait argues, it’s time for stricter ethics rules for the highest officials and their close relatives:

“It’s unsavory, but it’s not a crime” is a good argument for a defense lawyer. It’s not a great argument for people who are in a position to write new laws and whose survival depends on refuting the cynicism of a pseudo-populist whose appeal is rooted in the corrosive assumption that every politician is on the take.

Related: Wealthy executives have treated Justice Clarence Thomas to at least 38 vacations, including yacht trips and private jet flights, ProPublica reported.

(Finally, a request for readers: My colleagues and I would appreciate your feedback about The Morning. What do you like? What can we do differently? Here’s a survey for anyone who has a few minutes.)

THE LATEST NEWS

Hawaii Wildfires

- Maui is in crisis after fires killed at least 55 people. The wind that spread the flames is easing, but none of the fires are fully contained.
- The death toll was expected to rise: Emergency workers have been searching burned-out properties for victims.
- Some survivors from the fire in Lahaina, Hawaii's former royal capital, say the flames reached them before evacuation orders. People escaped on foot, some holding children.
- In Lahaina, the fires destroyed streets and leveled hundreds of structures, satellite photos show.
- "Climate change is here and it's affecting the islands," Gov. Josh Green of Hawaii said. Read more in [The Washington Post](#).

International

- Iran agreed to free five imprisoned Americans. In exchange, the U.S. will release some Iranian prisoners, and allow Tehran to buy food and medicine with previously frozen funds.
- Ecuadorean officials arrested six suspects in the killing of the presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio. All six are Colombian.
- West African leaders said they were activating a "standby force" ready to intervene against a coup in Niger.
- Russia launched a rocket intended to land a robotic craft on the moon. It's Moscow's first lunar mission since the 1970s.

Politics

- The Supreme Court temporarily blocked a deal shielding the Sackler family from lawsuits related to the opioid epidemic. The court will hear a challenge to the plan.
- The Biden administration will spend \$1.2 billion on projects to vacuum carbon out of the atmosphere, an ambitious but unproven tactic against climate change.
- Republican presidential hopefuls arrived at the Iowa State Fair, a political rite of passage filled with fried food and photo ops.
- Trump said he would not promise to support whoever wins the Republican presidential nomination, a requirement for the first debate.
- Senator Joe Manchin told a West Virginia news station that he was thinking "very seriously" about leaving the Democratic Party.

Trump Indictments

- The special counsel asked a judge to set a January start date for Trump's election interference trial.
- In the other federal trial, over his handling of secret documents, Trump and his aide Walt Nauta pleaded not guilty to the new charges that prosecutors added last month.
- Trump's legal bills are straining his campaign funds.

Other Big Stories

- Consumer prices rose slightly last month, new figures show. Economists said the numbers suggest inflation is continuing to cool.
- After the suicide of a participant, regulators halted human research trials at a Columbia-affiliated psychiatric center.

Opinions

Teenagers deserve the space and privacy to be teenagers and make mistakes — including online, **Lux Alptraum** argues.

Here is a column by **Pamela Paul** on shoplifting.

MORNING READS

Chimp Haven in Keithville, La. Emil T. Lippe for The New York Times

Extreme weather: When a storm is coming, who warns the chimps?

Muons: This tiny particle might unlock the universe's secrets.

Modern Love: Never give your child five names.

Lives Lived: In the mid-1960s, when Pop Art and minimalist sculpture were in the ascendancy, Brice Marden's intricately textured paintings made a powerful counterstatement. They propelled him to art-world stardom while he was still in his 20s. He died at 84.

WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Spain is through: A late goal in extra time propelled the Spanish women's national team into the World Cup semifinals, eliminating the Netherlands.

Japan is out: Sweden won their quarterfinal, 2-1. No former champion remains in the tournament.

OTHER SPORTS NEWS

Big bets: Phil Mickelson's former gambling partner said the golfer had placed more than \$1 billion in wagers.

A new high: Liverpool has agreed to a record \$140 million transfer fee in order to acquire midfielder Moises Caicedo.

Raphaelle Macaron

Literary landscape: Appalachia crosses half a dozen states, but its residents share a mind set — small town folk who rely on one another, who measure the time by planting seasons, who make things like quilts, music and stories. “It adds up to a literature as bracing and complex as a tumbling mountain creek,” writes the novelist Barbara Kingsolver, who was raised in rural Kentucky. Kingsolver has written a guide to reading across Appalachia.

More on culture

- Tapestry, which owns Coach and Kate Spade, agreed to buy Capri, which owns Versace and Michael Kors.
- Years after he was turned away from a swanky hotel bar, a Manhattan teenager returned with protest signs. Their feud is now the subject of a lawsuit.