
Left- and right-wing Biden haters demanded that the media investigate her sexual assault charge. It did—and uncovered many reasons to doubt.

There is no evidence that former vice president Joe Biden, now the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, sexually assaulted aide Tara Reade in 1993. There is no evidence that he did not. Reade claims he did—specifically, that he pushed her against a wall and digitally penetrated her against her will, when she worked in his US Senate office. Biden’s campaign firmly denies it.

The story originated on the left, just about three weeks ago, when diehard Bernie Sanders supporter Katie Halper hosted Reade on her podcast, and encouraged her to tell her story publicly for the first time in 27 years. The story took off from there, on the left and the right, with certain Sanders supporters and Donald Trump backers (whose own man is credibly accused of sexual assault or extreme harassment by more than a dozen women) accusing the mainstream media of pro-Biden bias for not investigating the charges against him.

But to those who hectored the media to investigate the allegations about Biden, believing it would validate Reade’s charges, the old adage applies: Be careful what you wish for.

In the last two days, mainstream outlets, including *The New York Times*, Associated Press, have taken deep dives into Reade’s charges, and come up with a whole lot of confusion. Even in the era of #MeToo, Reade’s story is problematic. For one thing, she’s changed it multiple times. Last year, she came forward to echo the charges of Las Vegas activist Lucy Flores (who said Biden once grabbed her shoulders and kissed the back of her head), telling the Associated Press that he “rubbed her shoulders and neck” and “played with her hair” several times when she worked for him in 1993.

That’s not good, but it’s not rape.

Reade now says she made claims of sexual harassment, but not assault, to her supervisors in Biden’s office; they vehemently deny hearing any such complaint. She says she was told to find a new job by a supervisor, but she has also changed her recollection of which supervisor it was when speaking to reporters in recent weeks (all of the people she named deny it). The AP contacted 21 former Biden staffers, none of whom remember any Reade complaint against their boss. Reade also claims she complained to the Senate personnel office; there is no record of it.

Just last Thursday, Reade filed a complaint with the Washington, DC, police department, but told the *Post* she did so, in its reporters’ words, “because she is being harassed online and wanted law enforcement to be aware of her claim.” The public record of the claim doesn’t name Biden but says Reade “disclosed that she was the victim of a sexual assault” in 1993.

She does have a friend who confirms that Reade told her about the assault at the time; the friend insists on remaining anonymous, but has spoken to multiple outlets. In corroborating sexual assault charges, that can be an important piece of evidence. Reade’s brother, in the past, has said she told him, too. But he briefly changed his story for *The Washington Post*, saying only that she’d told him about harassment by Biden, then texting a *Post* reporter to say he did remember his sister saying Biden touched her “under her clothes.” (Her brother refused to talk to the *Times*, AP, or *Salon*).

Finally, Reade seems to have, or have had, a strange obsession with Russian President Vladimir Putin. In an op-ed posted on *Medium* in 2018, she wrote, “President Putin has an alluring combination of strength with gentleness. His sensuous image projects his love for life, the embodiment of grace while facing adversity.” Since the Biden assault story broke, she has insisted she was merely writing a novel about Putin, but the *Medium* post was pretty clearly a political screed, headlined “Why A Liberal Democrat Supports Vladimir Putin.” She claimed that she quit working for Biden because she loves “Russia with all my heart” and was sickened by “the reckless imperialism of America.” As the *Times’* Michelle Goldberg points out, last December she tweeted, bizarrely, “I worked for the Senate, I know the plan to bring Russia to its knees.” She now repudiates Putin.
Respecting Putin does not discredit her; again, her changing stories here hurt her credibility.

Where does this leave us? Reade’s shifting stories are a huge problem, as they would be for anyone claiming to be the victim of a crime. And as someone who has personally criticized Biden for his persistent invasion of women’s personal space—up to and including multiple accounts of touching and kissing—I find her allegation hard to believe. Is it possible? Sure. Is it probable? No.

And here’s why, in addition to Reade’s credibility issues: In his closely documented, almost 50-year career, there have been no other similar claims against Biden. The Times interviewed the other seven women who came out last year to accuse Biden of touching them against their will; none said his behavior crossed the line to sexual assault. After many dozen interviews, with Reade and her friends, along with lawyers and two dozen Biden staffers, the writers concluded: “The Times found no pattern of sexual misconduct by Mr. Biden.” Men who do what Reade says Biden did tend to do it more than once (see Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, and Donald Trump). Also, once an allegation like Reade’s surfaces, others usually follow. They have not, at least so far.

Biden was not my primary candidate. I went so far as to say on CNN that he shouldn’t run, and here at The Nation that his behavior toward women was virtually disqualifying. (I also predicted he wouldn’t win the nomination, so what do I know. Though he was not my choice, he won it, and I’ll support him.)

Bernie Sanders wasn’t my top choice either, but I trust his integrity. I find it hard to imagine that if Sanders believed Biden was a rapist, he’d have enthusiastically endorsed him on Monday. (Elizabeth Warren followed Sanders today.)

Most troubling to me about this whole story—besides Reade’s obvious pain over whatever happened—is the way folks on the left are using it to smear feminists and Democrats who have a hard time believing her charge. “For Elite Democrats, Joe Biden’s Candidacy Means Ditching #MeToo,” Liza Featherstone wrote in Jacobin. (I guess that now includes Sanders.) When I watched a video of the Sanders endorsement on his site late Monday, dozens of rolling on-screen commenters called Biden a “rapist.” That’s repugnant. (Now that the mainstream media has investigated Reade’s claims, Jacobin, predictably, finds the coverage lacking.)

It’s true, for a time, that one of the slogans that emerged from the nascent #MeToo movement was “Believe women.” But it was never that simple; nobody ever said, or meant, “Believe every woman, no matter how incredible or undocumented her claim.” The point was to give women’s accounts of sexual assault a fair and respectful hearing: first, hopefully, by police; or, if she made her claim to the media, by reporters.

Reporters have done just that with Tara Reade. Her allegation against Biden doesn’t stand up to close scrutiny. And bullying by the left or right won’t change that.