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Biden blames Putin, ‘ultra-MAGA’ for inflation, vows to give voters ‘simple’ explanations

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President Biden on Tuesday blamed Russia’s war in Ukraine, corporate greed, the pandemic and the policies of “ultra-MAGA Republicans” for causing record-high inflation.

He insisted that Democrats’ big spending didn’t spur the highest price increases in 40 years, though some economists disagree.

“It’s not because of spending,” Mr. Biden said when asked whether he is to blame for inflation. “I think our policies help, not hurt.”

In a White House speech aimed at soothing voters’ frustration in the midterm election year, Mr. Biden said he is tackling inflation on several fronts without cooperation from Republicans. He stood in front of a blue banner bearing the phrases “tackling inflation” and “lowering costs.”

“I want every American to know that I’m taking inflation very seriously, and it’s my top domestic priority,” the president said.

Economist Steve Hanke of Johns Hopkins University and the libertarian Cato Institute, noting that the administration is also blaming railroad logistics for U.S. supply problems, said the president is “grasping at straws.”

Polls show about two-thirds of voters disapprove of Mr. Biden's handling of the economy, with higher grocery bills, record gas prices and even a shortage of baby formula. The president said he needs to do a better job communicating with voters who are "not focused" on the reasons for higher prices.

"What I have to do is explain in simple, straightforward language what's going on," he said. "But right now, it's confusing. There's a war in Ukraine. ... I'm not suggesting the American people can't understand it. They're working 8 [or] 10 hours a day just to put food on the table."

Inflation hit an annual rate of 8.5% in March, and the nationwide average gas price reached a new record Tuesday of \$4.37 per gallon. The government's report on consumer prices for April will be released Wednesday, when Mr. Biden will travel to a farm in Illinois for another inflation-related event.

Many economists, including prominent Democrats such as Larry Summers, say a nearly \$2 trillion "wall of money" in COVID-19 relief approved by Mr. Biden and congressional Democrats in 2021 has led to inflation in the U.S. that is higher than in many other countries.

Global supply chain problems and increased demand while consumers emerge from the pandemic are also cited as major causes of higher prices.

The president outlined steps he is taking to lower prices, including releasing oil from the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve and speeding up the seasonal sale of E15 blended gasoline. Gas prices continued to rise after Mr. Biden took those actions, and the president on Tuesday again blamed corporate profiteering.

"The average cost per barrel of oil has been steady for weeks, so why do gas prices keep going up so high?" the president asked.

Sen. Tom Cotton, Arkansas Republican, commented on Twitter: “Biden is reading a script blaming everything for inflation except his own policies. What an embarrassment.”

Mr. Biden acknowledged that the two biggest causes of inflation, at least in his view, are the war in Ukraine and the pandemic, which are “global in nature” and out of his control. The president also indirectly acknowledged that inflation will remain a problem in the U.S. indefinitely. Last summer, he assured Americans that a high inflation rate was temporary.

“This will not be my only speech on inflation, I’m sure,” Mr. Biden said Tuesday. “The vast majority of economists think that this is going to be a real tough problem to solve.”

The president launched into a sustained attack on “ultra-MAGA Republicans,” the wing of the party loyal to former President Donald Trump, for resisting his efforts to reduce prices through various legislation.

“The MAGA Republicans are counting on you to be frustrated by the pace of progress, which today they’ve done everything they can to slow down, that you’re going to hand power over to them so they can enact their extreme agenda,” the president said.

If Mr. Biden faulted himself at all, he said he underestimated the political strength of the opposition party, which he claims is blocking him from lowering inflation in an election year. “I never expected the ultra-MAGA Republicans who seem to control the Republican Party now to have been able to control the Republican Party. I never anticipated that happening,” the president said.

Mr. Biden repeatedly criticized a sidelined proposal by Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, chair of the Senate Republicans’ campaign arm, that would require all Americans to pay at least some

income tax, including about half of all lower earners who currently don't pay any federal income tax.

"Their plan is to raise taxes on 75 million American families," Mr. Biden said.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, said in March that the proposal isn't part of the Republican agenda.

Mr. Scott said Tuesday that the only way for the administration to solve the inflation problem is for Mr. Biden to resign because he is "unwell."

"He's unfit for office," Mr. Scott tweeted. "He's incoherent, incapacitated & confused. If Biden wants to actually fix the inflation crisis he created, he should resign."

Told of the lawmaker's comments, the president said, "I think the man has a problem."

During his speech, Mr. Biden erroneously said Mr. Scott represents Wisconsin, instead of Florida.

Mr. Scott tweeted of the president after the speech: "He just hides in the White House, blames others & lies. If Biden has a real plan, he'll accept my invite to a debate in Florida — if he can find it."

The president said price pressures would ease if Congress approves legislation, for example, aimed at lowering prescription drug costs and boosting U.S. production of semiconductor chips. The semiconductor proposal would take years to show an impact, according to most estimates. "Some parts of my plan I've been able to get done on my own," Mr. Biden said. "Some parts have been held up by Congress. What's the congressional Republican plan? They don't want to solve inflation by lowering your costs. They want to solve that by raising your taxes and lowering your income."

Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo responded on Twitter: “I hate to break it to President Biden, but our 40-year-high inflation is not caused by the Russian oil supply or the last administration. He and his policies are the cause.”

Mr. McConnell said Democrats’ policies “have unleashed the worst inflation in more than 40 years.”

“Gas prices are now the highest they have ever been in American history,” Mr. McConnell said. “Americans are now paying roughly \$4.40 per gallon. That’s up about two whole dollars from when President Biden put his hand on the Bible.”