

HUNT: This is Scandalized. A podcast of political impropriety. I'm Charlie Hunt.

KETTLER: And I'm Jackie Kettler. On Scandalized, we dig into the details of political scandals through our expert lens as political scientists.

HUNT: Last week, we dove into some instances of politicians violating major local food customs and paying the price politically. Honestly, most of us have probably had some embarrassing story involving food. We ordered or ate something incorrectly. We made a mess. We got sick. Jackie, I've been known to try to fit way too many tortilla chips into my mouth at once.

KETTLER: Well, luckily, Charlie, there's not much at stake when that happens. No offense. But when it involves the president of the United States, even a minor incident at a meal can become an international story. One of those infamous incidents involved President George H.W. Bush on January 8th, 1992. President Bush attended a state dinner hosted by the Japanese Prime Minister, Kiichi Miyazawa, in Tokyo with over 100 diplomats. This was part of a 12 day trip across Asia and the Pacific for trade talks. However, the dinner did not go as planned.

MEDIA REPORTS: US President George Bush has collapsed during a state dinner in Tokyo and was rushed to hospital. Abc news has obtained a videotape that shows clearly what happened when the president fell ill. The lone camera in the dining room was locked in on the head table when President Bush was overcome by nausea and fell forward. It appears he lost consciousness as he toppled over onto his host, Prime Minister Miyazawa. The new scene show First Lady Barbara Bush, acting quickly recognizing her husband, needed help bringing her napkin to his mouth, then stepping back to let the Secret Service agents take over. Moments later come the scenes, replayed so many times in the last three days, the president recovers enough to apologize and leave.

KETTLER: Thankfully, as mentioned in the news coverage, Bush quickly recovered and he was even joking to his staff quote roll me under the table until the dinner is over.

HUNT: So I have to be honest with you, Jackie. I knew that this had happened, and I remembered it as something that was kind of silly and funny. Oh, he threw up in the lap of the Prime Minister. In watching this video again, it's pretty scary. It's frightening to see, and it would have been pretty frightening, I think, for people at this dinner to see the president collapse like that especially, I forgot that he basically went unconscious for a little while. Watching this without really knowing whether he was okay, it's pretty serious.

KETTLER: Apparently, you know, we found out later that he had been sick earlier in the day, but decided to just try to power through the meal where he was scheduled to deliver some remarks. After the meal, white House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater shared that, quote, The president is human. He gets sick, which is true. Presidents get sick. And in this case, he was diagnosed as having an intestinal flu. So, Charlie, I mean, this was a major diplomatic event. Why are these important and how might something like this affect it?

HUNT: So foreign trips, especially for the president, tend to be pretty stressful and high stakes situations already, right? Being sort of the chief foreign diplomat is one of the most important parts of a president's job that really belongs to the president and not to Congress. So it matters to get these things right. And so if something happens like this, it really does tend to distract attention from the sort of diplomatic goals that the president is trying to accomplish while on these international trips. And then the news story is not about whatever accomplishments happen, but about him getting sick at a state dinner.

KETTLER: And because this was a big deal, the media was initially present at the event, which means that this whole incident, including Bush's vomiting and collapse, was captured on video. Initially, only part of the recording was shown, but eventually footage of Bush's collapse was aired. Charlie, why can something like this really capture public attention?

HUNT: Well, for one thing, you know, once this footage does come out, it's a little graphic, right? It's, you know, we see the president throw up. We see him collapse to the floor into the lap of the Prime Minister, and he's not getting up for a few seconds, so it's pretty disconcerting. But it's also potentially, and maybe unfortunately, an embarrassing incident that political opponents might use to mock the president, or maybe that folks would use to joke about the president, especially when a video exists that can really compound the situation.

KETTLER: This quickly becomes an international story, widely mocked in Japan. In the United States, it was parodied on Saturday Night Live and fodder for late night comedians including Johnny Carson.

CARSON: Try, try, try to keep it down, as George Bush's doctor said to him in Tokyo was.

KETTLER: It also received extensive coverage in the media that Bush and his team probably weren't wild about. But Charlie, how could this type of incident and coverage like this affect public perceptions of President Bush?

HUNT: Yeah, so we mentioned sort of the embarrassing nature of this earlier, but it could definitely also raise serious concerns related to the president's health and capacity to hold office. It's important to remember at this time that this is in Bush's first term. This is while he is running for reelection. The election will be held later that year, and he had already been diagnosed with graves disease the previous year in 1991. And so this could increase these concerns about his capacity. And especially when running against someone like Bill Clinton, who at the time was only 46 years old and was widely viewed as a much younger candidate, and we've seen other, much more recent examples of this in the last three presidential elections. So, you know, I'm thinking of Hillary Clinton falling and sort of passing out in 2016 while attending a service at the 9/11 Memorial that got a lot of attention. Obviously, it already feels like ancient history, but Donald Trump got Covid in 2020 just a couple months before the election, and it was pretty serious case of it. And obviously, most recently the health concerns around Joe Biden in 2024, which of course, as we know, eventually led to him stepping aside. So these health concerns, especially for candidates who are a little older, can definitely make a splash in the news, in part because they can fit into these preconceived notions about these candidates.

KETTLER: And for Bush, this was just a few weeks before the New Hampshire primary, and he wasn't in a great electoral place for an incumbent. He was facing a primary challenge from Pat Buchanan, and the economy was pretty sluggish, still recovering from a recession in 1991. So I doubt Bush's campaign was thrilled with weeks of political analysis about his illness. But, you know, while it was embarrassing and distracting, Bush publicly handled it well. Here he is speaking with the press pool on Air Force One a couple days after the dinner.

BUSH: You did yesterday. I feel better. I feel it's 24 hours. Slept like a baby last night. I ate a full breakfast. Everything. Everything on it. I almost went running today. And then I thought, well, somebody would point out that was overdoing it.

HUNT: So in just listening to this clip, it sounds like a really good way to handle this. He's coming out quickly, engaging directly with the media, not through a spokesperson. They can see him. He's on camera, looks healthy, and it helps put any kind of rumors or misconceptions to rest. This is also important for things like calming global markets, like when there's a major health issue with the president, we always see market

fluctuations. So that's something he would want to do. And it's a stark difference with what we've seen in recent elections. Like we were just talking about where politicians maybe are trying to always appear really strong and as a result, maybe kind of downplay some of their illnesses. We saw that with with Trump and Covid, and we certainly saw that with, with President Biden for a while in 2024. Plus, you have this growing lack of trust between the press and the president. And so, frankly, seeing a video like this is a little refreshing in this day and age.

KETTLER: Before we leave this story, Charlie, would you expect it to have an Idaho connection?

HUNT: Not really. Idaho and Japan aren't the two places that are often talked about in the same breath, though, Idaho does seem to punch above its weight in terms of making the national news. So I guess I'm not that surprised. What is the connection here?

KETTLER: So several hours after Bush was sick at the dinner, a 71 year old man from Idaho called CNN claiming to be the president's doctor and said that President Bush died several hours after he collapsed at the Japanese state dinner. Cnn was working to verify the story and suspected it was a hoax. But as a result of how information was entered into a centralized computer, it accidentally made it to headline news anchor Don Harrison, who came within seconds of announcing it on the air.

MEDIA REPORTS: This just in to CNN Headline News and we repeat or we say right off the bat, we have not confirmed this through any other source. Stop, stop. We are now getting a correction. We will not give you that story. It was regarding some other tragic news involving President Bush, but.

HUNT: Yikes. That does not seem like a piece of fake news you would want out there. Uh, I guess CNN was just figuring out some of their reporting processes, and this can be a challenge, right, when competing with other news outlets. You know, it's hard to remember a time before cable news, but this was a time when cable was really just getting started. And I think this lays bare in some ways, maybe some of the potential dangers of having this sort of 24 hour IV drip of news.

KETTLER: There's also a lot of competition at this point. Right, Charlie? Really trying to gain viewers and kind of get people to start watching for lengthier amounts of time.

HUNT: And in general, right when news outlets are competitive with each other, they want to be the first to get to a story. And if if this man had been right and President Bush had died, being the first news outlet to report, it would have been kind of a feather in their cap. But that's obviously, like we said, a dangerous thing to have out there if it's not true.

KETTLER: Right. Because accidents have happened before in coverage. Right, Charlie.

HUNT: Yeah, exactly. I'm reminded more recently in 2011, of the time when NPR National Public Radio mistakenly reported that Congresswoman Gabby Giffords had been killed in the shooting that occurred at one of her events. It was obviously a really tragic situation. But this was a report from a couple of different sources who didn't have firsthand knowledge of it, and a number of other outlets like CNN and Fox. And The New York Times attributed reported this as well, and attributed NPR as their source. And so this was something that NPR had to walk back, completely retract, really apologize, because, like we said, that's a bad thing to get wrong.

KETTLER: So they did take quick responsibility for the situation.

HUNT: Exactly. And I think it's important to remember that that's especially in this day and age, how fundamentally different that is from when, for example, random people share rumors, you know, wild rumors on social media. Get it wrong and then never retract them. And I think, you know, in today, when the idea of fake news has kind of lost all meaning, it's really important to use some of these scarier mistakes or potential mistakes made by news organizations as a reminder for how hard they really do work to fix things when they get something wrong. So, so far, Jackie, we've been pretty heavy on the food. How about a light beverage story for the road?

KETTLER: Let's hear it.

HUNT: So this one's truly one of my absolute favorites from back in 2013. Our subject is Marco Rubio, who at the time we're recording this is President Trump's secretary of state. But who at the time was the junior senator from the state of Florida. And thankfully, unlike the somewhat scarier embarrassment that President Bush faced, the only real victim in this story is Marco Rubio's dignity. Barack Obama is president at the time, and he's just recently been elected to a second term. And it's January, which means that Obama is scheduled to give his state of the Union address before Congress.

OBAMA: Mr. speaker, Mr. Vice president, members of Congress, fellow Americans 51 years ago.

HUNT: This is actually required by the Constitution that presidents give their assessments to Congress about how the country is doing and then offer a kind of roadmap for the issues and policies they hope Congress will focus on in the coming year. It's a political speech, of course, but it is constitutionally required. What is not constitutionally required is the official response that's become customary after the state of the Union address given by a member of the opposition party. And in 2013, the Republicans chose Marco Rubio to do this, basically to directly rebut many of the things that Obama said during his address and to outline the Republicans Republican's views on the issues as an alternative to the president's vision. Jacki, in thinking about this time and where Marco Rubio is at in his career, why might he have been a natural choice to deliver a message like this?

KETTLER: Well, when Rubio first took office in 2011, he was widely considered a rising star in the Republican Party. He was young, only 39 years old when he took office, which for the US Senate is basically like a toddler. And as a Cuban American, he was a high profile Latino Republican, which was and is an important demographic in American elections. And he was from Florida, a swing state, a then swing state that Barack Obama won in 2008 and would win again in 2012.

HUNT: And, jacki, coming out of that 2012 election, which didn't go so well for the Republicans, they were trying to kind of rebrand their image. Right?

KETTLER: That's right. The Republican Party was trying to, you know, recruit both candidates that were young, more diverse, as well as appeal to a broader, broader swath of voters. And so this really was an opportunity for Rubio to position himself as a future leader in the party and help shape the future of the party.

HUNT: Yeah, exactly. And, you know, this kind of response doesn't typically get as much attention as the president's address. And there's also not a ton of evidence that these responses have a big impact on policy. But it's still broadcast on national television in prime time immediately following the president's address. So it's sort of a rare moment where a member of Congress has a kind of bully pulpit that's close to on par with the president. In other words, the stakes here are really pretty high for Marco Rubio and for the Republican Party in particular, which made what happened smack in the middle of Rubio's address All the more embarrassing.

RUBIO: Good evening, I'm Marco Rubio. I'm blessed to represent Florida in the United States Senate. Let me begin by congratulating President Obama.

HUNT: So the speech begins innocently enough, with a lot of the sorts of points you'd expect to see from a response like this. Critiques of President Obama and the Democrats approach to governing. Some promotion of the Republican's plans for the economy as an alternative to Obama's. And even a bit of Rubio's personal bio, which really is a fascinating and very quintessentially American story.

RUBIO: My parents immigrated here in pursuit of the opportunity to improve their life and to give their children the chance at an even better one. They made it to the middle class, my dad working as a bartender and my mother as a cashier.

HUNT: But as the speech goes on, it's becoming really clear that Rubio's mouth is very, very dry. I will spare you the compilation of his mouth sounds that social media made after the speech. But basically, Rubio is licking his lips before every sentence, and it's really, really distracting from the actual words that are coming out of his mouth.

RUBIO: America continues to be indispensable to the global of global liberty, property and safety.

HUNT: And eventually this goes from being a kind of subtle distraction to something that completely derails Rubio's address.

RUBIO: The one the president laid out tonight. The choice isn't just between big government or big business. What we need is an accountable.

HUNT: In that silent moment you just heard Rubio lunges. There's really no other word for it. To his left and grabs a small plastic bottle of water that is way out of the camera shot. He takes a quick swig from it, then lunges back and places it out of the shot. He then continues with his speech as if nothing happened. I realize this is a podcast and you can't see the visual, so I would really encourage our listeners to go and watch the actual clip. But Jackie, I'm guessing you have seen this clip many times, can you help get across to our listeners just what it is that made this moment so strange?

KETTLER: This is also one of my favorite like funny little like what is happening here. So why is the water so far away? Did they not have it at first? Did someone have to go and get it and bring it once they realize Rubio was struggling?

HUNT: This is a good question. I mean, yeah, how did they not think to put it closer, like right in front of him I think is a big one. Another big one to me is the super weird way in which Rubio maintains eye contact with the camera almost the entire time. And then combined with this lengthy, awkward silence, he just seems to have chosen the absolute most awkward way imaginable to casually go and get a drink of water.

KETTLER: It's like he panicked and he doesn't want us to go away or even realize that anything's happening, which makes it all the more obvious. It's a weird moment.

HUNT: Yeah. Maybe he just wants us to, like, really stay engaged.

KETTLER: Another thing. Charlie, what is up with the size of this water bottle?

HUNT: It's literally the smallest water bottle I've ever seen.

KETTLER: So small. It did result in one of my favorite headlines from Vanity Fair, tiny Watergate. Marco Rubio comically overreaches for refreshment.

HUNT: Yeah. I mean, all these features of the clip are sort of tailor made for this era of internet ridicule. The incident happens right in this first decade, where going viral is a really a big part of the culture. And so the major awkwardness of this clip, I think, makes the endless mockery of Rubio not all that surprising. Uh, once again, Saturday Night Live predictably, had its fun with Rubio in a pretty entertaining Weekend Update segment.

SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE: I'm sorry, are you sure you don't just want a little. I'm fine, I'm fine. Seth. For much of human history, people were trapped in society. Why do I have all that cinnamon? Yeah. Why did you eat cinnamon? Cinnamon challenge. Oh. Give me the water. Where's the water? It's right. Here. Where's the water? Can you not see further? It's never that far away. It's right in front of you. It's right here.

KETTLER: Clearly, others were making fun of Rubio, and many of us did. Yes. But was he able to also make fun of himself?

HUNT: Well, sort of. A few years later, in 2016, when Rubio was running for president, he tried to do kind of the same thing while he was introducing himself in a Republican primary debate that was being held in California at the Reagan Presidential Library. It did not exactly go according to plan.



RUBIO: My name is Marco Rubio. I'm from Florida. I'm honored to be here at the Reagan Library. And I'm also aware of that. California has a drought. And so that's why I made sure I brought my own water.

KETTLER: Oof, that somehow might even be worse than the original clip.

HUNT: Yeah, he doesn't exactly nail that joke, does he? I mean, I think particularly compared to the clip we heard earlier of Bush, where it's off the cuff. You know, he's kind of making jokes about himself compared to Rubio, who just really crashes and burns with this very obviously pre-rehearsed line. But look, we've had a lot of fun with Rubio here. But Jackie, come on, is this really that big of a deal? The guy was just thirsty.

KETTLER: Yeah. There's no doubt that this is a pretty superficial concern. I think we can say this doesn't really implicate his performance as a senator or what type of president he'd be.

HUNT: It's also a pretty easily fixed problem, right? Just keep the guy hydrated. Maybe a maybe a slightly bigger bottle of water.

KETTLER: Or maybe a glass. Maybe we don't even need a bottle.

HUNT: That's right. And keep it on screen if we can.

KETTLER: Ideally. Still, I think we can see why this went viral and really kind of shaped his image for a while. Rubio's whole reputation was based on being a rising star in the future of the party, and this episode kind of implied that he wasn't ready or was maybe too nervous for prime time. But at the same time, like you said, it's a national address, and for the first time that millions of Americans are getting to know you. I'd be nervous, too.

HUNT: Yeah, and you know what would make me even more nervous? If my job was to follow not just the president of the United States, but a president like Barack Obama, who is pretty widely considered one of the most skilled orators ever to hold the office.

KETTLER: Yeah. You know, on the whole, the state of the Union response is generally a thankless job. It's often reserved for some of the rising stars in the opposition party to shine, but there's only so much shining you can really do when you're out of power and following the leader of the free world.

HUNT: So typically we like to do a segment at the end of the show called Party Favors. Just some short little tidbits of info to share on our way out the door that maybe didn't fit much place else in the show. This week, we have each brought to the scandalized dinner table a couple of favorite culinary hot takes from the world of politics. Jackie, you want to kick us off?

KETTLER: So back in 2018, Mitt Romney is now running for the US Senate. He's still perhaps doing some work to, you know, appeal to a broad population. And at a campaign event, it was reported by the Washington Examiner that Romney shared one of his own food preferences. Quote, my favorite meat is hot dog, by the way. That is my favorite meat. My second favorite meat is hamburger. And everyone says, oh, don't you prefer steak? It's like, no, steaks are great, but I like Hot dog best and I like hamburger next best.

HUNT: Honestly, it sounds kind of like a Doctor Seuss book. My favorite meat is Hot Dog. That is my favorite meat. My second favorite meat is hamburger.

KETTLER: It does sound like a book like my toddler would be reading right now.

HUNT: Yes. So, okay, so like, I'm, as you know, Jackie, I'm a vegetarian, so, uh, my favorite meat is not top of my mind. But my favorite thing about this is Romney isn't even asked the question. What is your favorite meat like? I read the article in context. He just sort of shares it unprompted. Also, what type of meat is hot dog meat like? Aren't there different kinds of hot dogs?

KETTLER: I really hope he's referring to 100% beef hot dogs, and not the conglomeration of meats that are used to make some hot dogs.

HUNT: My sense is that this is an attempt by Romney to again try to connect with the general public, maybe seem like a regular person who whose favorite meat is not some fancy meat, it's hot dog singular. Um, and this is notable with Romney because he struggled traditionally with perceptions of himself as a sort of a wealthy elite. He's a very wealthy individual. And so this comment and a number of other comments during the campaign did not exactly help him give off that vibe, that he's a regular person. And so maybe again, this is a kind of, uh, to use another meat pun, a ham handed attempt to do that.

KETTLER: You know, I love hot dogs. Shout out to the double R ranch. Broncho dogs served at Boise State games. They're delicious. So I can understand why Romney might

appreciate hot dog. Um. However, the phrasing is just so odd and somehow really just does not make it relatable. But credit to him, he has had a good attitude about the whole thing and continues to sometimes make fun of himself for it.

ROMNEY: Well, as you all know, today is National Hot Dog Day, and perhaps you also know that Hot Dog is my favorite meat. I love hot dogs. Uh, I love them in buns. I love them outside of buns. I love them with baked beans. I just like hot dogs. It's the best meat there is, without question. So to all of you who, like me, are celebrating National Hot Dog Day, congratulations to you and may there be many, many more hot dogs served in our wonderful land.

HUNT: So I think a lot of us can get behind hot dogs and hamburgers. But what I can't get behind, Jackie, is this one final culinary hot take from Senator Mark Warner of Virginia. So this is in April of 2020. So we're just getting into the depth of staying at home during the coronavirus outbreak. It was a dark time, but Senator Warner was about to make it inexplicably darker. Other members of Congress at this time have been recording videos of themselves doing everyday things at home. You know, Senator Tim Kaine played the harmonica, for example, and others recorded videos of them making their favorite recipes. And Warner was apparently very ready to do so. He decided to take this approach by preparing and making on camera what he says is his all time favorite food the tuna melt.

WARNER: Hi. Virginia Senator Mark Warner here.

HUNT: In the video, Warner is in a very sparse and sort of dingy kitchen. It's probably his apartment in D.C., which many members of Congress have and just records himself describing and making this sandwich. He starts out with two slices of Wonder Bread, which is a big mistake in and of itself. At least get some decent bread. But he really gets our attention when he just totally lathers on to both slices of bread. Truly the most obscene amount of mayonnaise I have ever seen.

WARNER: Open up the mayonnaise. Make sure you get plenty on both sides.

HUNT: Next, he cracks open a can of chicken of the sea and starts layering on this tuna without draining it. So the disgusting tuna juice is mixing in with probably the half a cup of mayo. He's just put on this bread. He then puts on two slices of plastic wrapped yellow cheddar cheese in the middle. Smashes the two pieces of bread together. And then Jackie comes the most egregious moment of this scandal, which is that he warms up his tuna melt in the microwave.

WARNER: You need heating of ice. I'm going with the MVP five and my one of my old favorites, usually about 30 seconds.

HUNT: Honestly, this is the kind of video that makes me want to vomit directly into the lap of the Prime Minister of Japan.

KETTLER: I mean, there's so many things going on in this video which I had not watched for a few years and oh my gosh, it still delivers. Everyone should go watch it. Um, and you know, maybe he was a little ahead of his time. Tin fish is really having a moment right now. It's quite popular.

HUNT: It's true, it's true.

KETTLER: But putting tuna in the microwave is absolutely awful. We can debate the ingredients, and it is an absurd amount of mayo, but I suspect Microwaving it was part of what really sent people over the edge.

HUNT: Yeah, Jackie, that was the moment where I started to actually question whether or not he was being serious. Like, is it possible this was a parody that just didn't, like, go the whole nine yards? What do we think happened here?

KETTLER: I mean, it's possible. I mean, I do think he really does like, tuna melts. Like his passion for them actually seems legit.

HUNT: And he does eat it at the end of the video. Like he doesn't just prepare it and then not eat it. He takes a giant bite out of it.

KETTLER: There's also the part in the middle where he washes his hands for a while, and to help remind us of the correct procedure for washing our hands.

HUNT: Yeah, although he washes it after he prepares the sandwich.

KETTLER: So I had a few questions. About what? Why, what was happening there. But, you know, I think he probably had some different goals with the video and was maybe, maybe in on the joke. But I do think he truly likes tuna melts.

HUNT: Yeah. I mean, thankfully though, he did not get away with this, this kind of crime. Like many of our subjects today, he was mercilessly mocked, rightly, I would argue. And

a couple of weeks later, none other than Kamala Harris, who at the time was Warner's colleague in the Senate. This was before she was vice president, set Warner straight in an Instagram Live video calling out some of these ridiculous cooking choices.

HARRIS: So take the tuna, then get it out of the can. Drain the water. Drain the water out of it. Either you can toast the bread. That's a toaster.

WARNER: You lose that microwave salty softness if.

HARRIS: You do it. Soggy bread thing. This is called a skillet.

KETTLER: So, you know, I mean these videos, maybe some weird some weirdness happening, but there is some humanization, right? You get to see a different side of Romney and Warner than what we might have seen on the floor of the Senate, for example. So it's perhaps a good reminder that our elected officials are in many ways regular people as well.

HUNT: That's true. Congressmen are people, too. And like some of the other folks we've talked about, it's at least an indicator that when they do something ridiculous, they can at least laugh at themselves after the fact.

KETTLER: Which we know is not always the case with all our politicians.

HUNT: So true.

KETTLER: This episode was written by me, Jackie Kettler, and my co-host Charlie Hunt. It was produced and edited by Charlie. Our theme music is by Dear Room with incidental sound from Shutterstock music. For more sources and info on all our episodes, head over to [WWW.Scandalizedpod.com](http://WWW.Scandalizedpod.com). Next time on Scandalized, we check in with a couple of our old favorites from season one, including Governor Rod Blagojevich.

UNKNOWN: We have a full and unconditional pardon for former Governor Rod Blagojevich of the state of Illinois.

TRUMP: It's my honor to do it. I've watched him. He was set up by a lot of bad people, some of the same people that I had to deal with.

KETTLER: And a former staffer spills the tea with us on Mark Sanford's international love affair.

UNKNOWN: And I don't know what Sanford said that triggered me. To this day. I don't remember it. But he made a joke and I. I snapped and I went at him, like, physically went at him. And Tom had to, like, restrain me.