

Investigate Tara Reade's Allegations

Americans deserve to know more about a sexual assault accusation against the likely Democratic Party nominee.

By The Editorial Board

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Former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democrats' presumptive nominee for president, has forcefully denied allegations of sexual harassment and assault made against him by Tara Reade, a former staff assistant in his Senate office.

"They aren't true," Mr. Biden said in a statement on Friday. "This never happened."

Ms. Reade's accusations, which have been percolating for several weeks, are grave and graphic. She charges that, in the spring of 1993, Mr. Biden cornered her in a deserted hallway of the Capitol complex, pinned her against a wall, reached under her skirt and penetrated her with his fingers.

Ms. Reade's brother and multiple friends have said that she told them of the incident around the time it occurred. Some bits of evidence lend credence to her claim, even as others prompt skepticism. When Ms. Reade's brother, Collin Moulton, first spoke to The Washington Post about his sister's accusations, for instance, he mentioned only that she talked about Mr. Biden touching her neck and shoulders; several days later, Mr. Moulton texted The Post to say that he also recalled her sharing that Mr. Biden had put his hand "under her clothes."

As is so often the case in such situations, it is all but impossible to be certain of the truth. But the stakes are too high to let the matter fester — or leave it to be investigated by and adjudicated in the media. Mr. Biden is seeking the nation's highest office.

In 2018, this board advocated strongly for a vigorous inquiry into accusations of sexual misconduct raised against Brett Kavanaugh when he was nominated to a seat on the Supreme Court. Mr. Biden's pursuit of the presidency requires no less. His campaign, and his party, have a duty to assure the public that the accusations are being taken seriously. The Democratic National Committee should move to investigate the matter swiftly and thoroughly, with the full cooperation of the Biden campaign.

Ms. Reade's account has some apparent inconsistencies. Last year, she was one of several women who came forward with complaints of Mr. Biden hugging or touching them in ways that made them uncomfortable, but she did not raise the assault accusation until this March. She says she tried to share her story with the media earlier, only to get "shut down."

Members of Mr. Biden's staff from that period have denied that Ms. Reade expressed any complaints about Mr. Biden, and they reject the idea that the office tolerated any harassment.

Ms. Reade says that she filed a formal harassment complaint with a congressional personnel office in 1993. (She says the report did not mention the assault.) Although she kept some of her employment records from that time, she says she does not have a copy of that complaint. In his statement, Mr. Biden said that if such a document existed, there would be a copy of it in the National Archives, which retains records from what was then the Office of Fair Employment Practices. He called on the archives "to identify any record of the complaint she alleges she filed

and make available to the press any such document.” Later on Friday, after the National Archives said it did not have personnel documents, Mr. Biden asked the secretary of the Senate to direct a more extensive search, also asking for “any and all other documents in the records that relate to the allegation.”

This is a start, but it does not go far enough. Any serious inquiry must include the trove of records from Mr. Biden’s Senate career that he donated to the University of Delaware in 2012. Currently, those files are set to remain sealed until after Mr. Biden retires from public life — a common arrangement. There are growing calls for Mr. Biden to make those records available to see if they contain any mention of Ms. Reade or perhaps others who raised similar complaints about his behavior.

In a Friday interview on MSNBC, Mr. Biden resisted these calls, insisting that his Senate papers do not contain any personnel files and so could not possibly shed light on Ms. Reade’s allegations. He added that they do, however, contain sensitive information about his past work that could be unfairly exploited in a presidential campaign.

While understandable, this concern is not prohibitive — and Mr. Biden’s word is insufficient to dispel the cloud. Any inventory should be strictly limited to information about Ms. Reade and conducted by an unbiased, apolitical panel, put together by the D.N.C. and chosen to foster as much trust in its findings as possible. Admittedly, this would be a major undertaking. Mr. Biden served 36 years in the Senate. He turned over nearly 2,000 boxes and more than 400 gigabytes of data to the University of Delaware; most of it has not been cataloged. But the question at hand is no less than Mr. Biden’s fitness for the presidency. No relevant memo should be left unexamined.

It has been noted that President Trump has been accused of sexual harassment or assault by more than a dozen women. Those claims also should be investigated, and the Republicans concerned about Mr. Biden’s behavior now should be at least equally focused on the questions about Mr. Trump’s. For his part, Mr. Trump does not seriously address the claims against him; he simply denies them and attacks his accusers.

Mr. Biden has set higher standards for himself. That has been central to his appeal. His campaign is founded on the promise of restoring sanity, civility and decency to the presidency. Even if certainty isn’t possible in this matter, the American people deserve at least the confidence that he, and the Democratic Party, have made every effort to bring the truth to light.

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