

(<https://prekourway.org/>)



COLUMNIST

The Zen of Jen

By Carl Golden | April 1, 2021, 12:58 pm | in **Columnist** (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/columnist/>)



As the surge of immigrants at the southern border threatened to spiral out of control, the Biden Administration turned to the politics of Zen: There is no solution; therefore, there is no problem.

Each day, press secretary Jen Psaki embarrassed herself in the White House briefings, promoting a narrative everyone in the room knew was patently absurd:

- *The border is closed.
- *It is not a crisis; it's a challenge, a problem, a situation.
- *It's all cyclical; it happens every year.
- *The Trump Administration is to blame.

It must have taken every ounce of self-control Psaki possesses to maintain a straight face while delivering the Administration message so clearly at odds with reality.

Weeks of stonewalling and an across the board denial of media access to migrant holding facilities at the border was the kind of amateurish blunder that shredded Administration credibility even further.

When the Administration finally relented and permitted a small group of reporters in, it did so not from a suddenly discovered reverence for transparency but acted after its hand was forced by a member of Congress who photographed the facilities and distributed them to the media.

Each day, Psaki was forced to defend the indefensible. Her linguistic contortions to avoid the use of the word "crisis" were painful to watch. Her repeated promises to open the border area to media coverage at some undefined point in the future fed the perception that the Administration feared revealing the true extent of a situation that was growing more intense daily.

The entire Administration response was a textbook example of short-sighted decision-making, taking the easy way out convinced they could control the narrative, bend public perception to their will and a compliant media would buy it.

It's been tried before and it's failed before because it's delusional.

Clinging to a false narrative even as it crumbles under the weight of reality is infinitely more damaging than facing up to hard decisions, dealing in truth and moving aggressively to overcome the crisis.

When Biden assumed office, he was committed to reversing or repealing his predecessor's immigration regulations and moved with alacrity to do so.

If concerns were raised over the potential for an overwhelming wave of migrants at the border as a result of the change in policy, they were either dismissed or minimized.

The goal of the new Administration was to break with the old and reap the political benefit. If warnings were sounded or misgivings expressed, they were ignored in favor of the anticipated good will that would flow their way.

When the realization hit and migrant crossings soared to levels not experienced in 10 years, the Administration was caught flat-footed and forced into flimsy and easily refuted explanations.

Psaki, echoing the border is closed and the crisis doesn't exist narrative, edged close to a "who are you going to believe; me or your lyin' eyes?" challenge to the media.

In all fairness, Psaki — like press secretaries before her— is committed to carrying out the policies and decisions reached by the president's top level staff.

Presumably, her input was sought beforehand and if she believed the approach was flawed and a skeptical media would refuse to accept it, she was obliged to express her thoughts. If she was overruled, well, that's what press secretaries are for.

Even when Biden acted to inject a more serious note into the debate by announcing he'd given Vice President Kamala Harris responsibility for dealing with the crisis, his move collapsed in a pool of contradictory explanations concerning her role.

He indicated, for instance, she would visit the border, only to have her staff announce she would not. Her responsibilities did not include overseeing border activities but would be restricted to dealing diplomatically with the Central American nations from which the migrants fled.

As the Administration scurried to define her responsibilities more clearly, she stepped on the story by publicly whining that the official Vice President's residence was not in move-in condition when she arrived.

That Biden is an individual of great empathy and compassion, genuinely and deeply moved by the plight of tens of thousands of children in particular fleeing poverty, danger and disease in their native lands is not in dispute. His desire to help is shared by most Americans.

Unfortunately, his compassion and desire to help has been overshadowed by the Administration's initial refusal to acknowledge the extent of the crisis and to struggle to keep it hidden.

The Administration handed a potent political issue to Republican critics who charged Biden was more concerned with satisfying the vocal left wing of his party by rejecting the policies of his predecessor than in dealing with a humanitarian crisis of his own making.

It is an issue which will gain resonance and threaten to overshadow the Administration's ambitious legislative agenda. And it was all so needless.

As for Psaki, she'll be relegated to mop up duties, dealing with a restive and inherently cynical press corps.

Every one of the 1,461 days of the Trump presidency was all out war with the media, often over inconsequential and trivial matters.

Psaki can change the tenor and tone of that of her predecessors, but when she feels it critical, she must be more forceful in making her case with the president's top staff as policies are developed and decisions reached.

Truth and candor, even when it defies Zen philosophy, are her most formidable weapons. Use them, Jen.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.