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Biden's classified document debacle fuels Trump's flailing return | Opinion

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Carl Golden Special to the USA TODAY Network

Published 12:44 p.m. ET Jan. 17, 2023 | Updated 12:44 p.m. ET Jan. 17, 2023

For those who inhabit the political universe, one of life's constants is the quest to occupy the moral high ground, that space that sets apart those with noble intentions and pure motives from those driven by craven desires in pursuit of personal gains.

The peril, of course, in reaching the rarefied air floating above the moral high ground is that for anyone whose act cuts that ground from beneath their feet, the fall is steep and the landing bone-jarring.

Such is the fate that has befallen the Biden Administration knocked off balance by the discovery of classified government documents stored at his former office in a Washington, D. C., think tank and his private home in Delaware.

The president's staff and supporters, aghast at the devastating political implications posed by the documents' discovery, sprang into damage control mode, arguing there is no comparison between Biden's possession of classified material and former President Trump who came under repeated attacks by Democrats — including Biden — and demands that he be prosecuted for leaving the White House with cartons of classified documents and moving them at his Mar-A-Lago resort in Florida.

The president's legal advisers insisted that storing the material in the president's former office and home was an "inadvertent" act, although refusing to offer further explanation only deepened the skepticism.

Attempts to change the narrative failed and the controversy exploded across the political environment amid accusations of hypocrisy and a double standard in the administration of justice.

Press briefings were public relations disasters. A flustered Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre appeared out of her depth yet again thrown on the defensive as she struggled through increasingly contentious exchanges with reporters by claiming the Administration acted properly upon discovering the documents. Unable to provide substantive answers, she simply refused to respond and referred all inquiries to the Department of Justice.

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The most damaging blow to its credibility and much touted self-declared commitment to transparency, however, came with the revelation the classified material was found on Nov. 2 but not acknowledged publicly until earlier this month after a media leak, a time line immediately attacked by critics as an attempt to keep the discovery secret to avoid it becoming a perilous issue in the week leading up to the competitive midterm Congressional election.

There are differences, to be sure, between the manner in which the document possession has been handled by Biden and Trump, notably the amount of material each held (Trump reportedly kept a far greater volume) and the current president's quickly notifying the National Archives and Justice Department while Trump — in a serious blunder started a fight he was destined to lose — dug in his heels, resisted and insisted the documents belonged to him until an FBI search of his home last August retrieved them.

These distinctions, though, are matters of degree rather than matters of fact and as is the case in political disputes and controversies, subtlety, nuance, context and policy-driven explanations lack impact.

In this instance — like similar others — the media and political shorthand drive the narrative, particularly in an environment dominated by social media which has become the principal source of information and a major factor in shaping public opinion.

The vast majority of Americans who consume news in appetizer nibbles rather than entrée bites view the issue starkly: “Biden did the same thing as Trump.”

Even some Democrats in Congress fretted publicly that the Administration's response has been inadequate and ineffective, that the president has suffered a major political blow which may even impact his decision whether to seek a second term in 2024.

The good will directed toward the Administration as a result of its legislative accomplishments and the slight uptick in the president's approval rating that resulted have been driven off the

front pages and replaced on television talkfests by the torrent of news and speculation about the classified documents uproar.

As he did with Trump, Attorney General Merrick Garland has selected a special counsel to investigate the circumstances of the document discovery involving the Biden Administration, establishing him as an historically unique individual overseeing investigations of a sitting president and his immediate predecessor for the same alleged violations.

Legal scholars have already weighed in speculating that the Biden document discovery creates a serious roadblock to a potential indictment of Trump.

It may be too late to recoup; initial impressions are lasting ones and the Administration has come up short, victimized by the political truism “When you’re explaining, you’re losing.”

Trump could not have scripted it any better. The Administration handed him a massive political gift, one he can and will use to re-weaponize his allegations of a partisan witch hunt by the Department of Justice and an incumbent Administration guilty of boundless hypocrisy.

His floundering, flailing 2024 presidential campaign has been given an adrenaline boost and his dedicated band of followers will be in full cry, crowing they were right all along and their leader is an innocent victim hounded relentlessly by a vengeful and vindictive political/media cabal.

His rallies will be carnivals of accusations, conspiracy theories and impeachment demands in an atmosphere which Trump loves.

The moral high ground has vanished and the political damage has been done — Biden suffers and Trump celebrates.

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