

White House skirts truth again in Porter fiasco: Golden

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(Photo: Evan Vucci, AP)

Of all the head shaking, eye-rolling moments produced over the past year by President Trump's White House, none has been more revealing of the dysfunctional, cutthroat atmosphere prevailing in the West Wing than the events surrounding the resignation of Rob Porter as staff secretary.

Porter resigned Feb. 7 after public disclosure of accusations that he had physically, verbally and emotionally abused two of his former wives on several occasions. The news accounts were accompanied by a photograph of one of his ex-wives sporting a shiner of a sort usually seen at the conclusion of a UFC championship fight. He had punched her while they were vacationing abroad, she said.

The domestic abuse incidents showed up during an FBI background investigation to determine whether Porter should be granted top level security clearance. The shifting accounts offered by the White House of who was aware of the accusations and when and why Porter was allowed to remain in his position have portrayed a staff in disarray, failing to communicate clearly and possibly deliberately misleading one another.

Initially, there was greater concern expressed for Porter, his career and his reputation than for his two ex-wives. The President fretted on Twitter that individuals like Porter faced ruin as the result of "mere allegations" while Chief of Staff Gen. John Kelly described Porter as a man of honor and integrity.

For an administration whose standing among women voters barely registers, their remarks were appallingly tone deaf. (In the most recent Washington Post/ABC News poll, only 20 percent of women "strongly approved" of Trump's job performance).

Scrambling to contain the damage, the White House insisted that high-level staff was unaware of the allegations against Porter, as well as the damaging photo, until they appeared in public print.

That explanation collapsed when FBI director Christopher Wray testified before Congress that reports were submitted last March, July and November, outlining the accusations and raising questions about granting security clearance to Porter. The FBI gave its final report to the White House in January of this year. Press Secretary Sarah Sanders stuck to the initial timeline even though it was at odds with the FBI chronology.

As the controversy dragged on for more than a week, Sanders changed her story, claiming that the investigation of Porter wasn't complete because the White House Office of Security Personnel hadn't issued its final recommendation. When Kelly learned of the extent of the accusations and saw the photo, Sanders said he asked for Porter's resignation.

In the face of withering questioning from the White House media, Sanders stood her ground even as the ground was crumbling beneath her. She struggled to reconcile versions which were in fact unreconcilable.

Anonymous sources poured out of the woodwork, suggesting Kelly was in deep trouble and would soon be replaced. The president was furious over Kelly's bungling of the affair, the sources insisted, and said it was symptomatic of larger and more widespread dissatisfaction with Kelly's management style.

The White House reputation for chaos, power struggles and cutthroat internal competition seemed well deserved, indeed.

In covering the controversy, the media has regained its footing and is doing what it does best — relentlessly pursuing answers and pushing the administration to respond fully and truthfully. It has reported the discrepancies in the administration accounts and has, for the most part, dealt in facts rather than conjecture and speculation. It has fulfilled the traditional and professional role expected of it, avoiding a reliance on self-serving sources with a personal agenda.

The White House handling of the incident has arguably been a failure on all levels — a textbook example of how to permit a containable situation to turn into a howling uproar and damage the credibility of everyone involved.

It is tempting to suggest that the incident is the price to pay when loyalty is placed ahead of competence when selecting high level staff. Their immediate reaction when confronted with a situation similar to Porter's is to concoct a plausible cover story to protect themselves and their superiors rather than make the difficult but necessary decisions.

It's been demonstrated time and again that truth — told quickly, unambiguously and fully — is the most effective response. Hampered by infighting, distrust and personal animosities, it was inevitable that the administration would fail that test.

Whether Kelly survives remains to be seen. He seems to be secure at the moment, but with a personality as mercurial as Trump, the future is always in doubt.

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