



White House under pressure to explain why it didn't reveal documents discovery earlier

Description

The White House is under mounting pressure to explain why the discovery of classified Biden documents was not immediately revealed to the public, with critics openly questioning if there was an intentional effort to keep the first find quiet in the lead up to the midterm elections.

The first batch of documents were first discovered on Nov. 2, which was just six days away from the election. But the White House did not disclose the findings until after they were reported by CBS News earlier this week.

"That's your version of the case," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said when asked on Friday if not revealing the discovery when it happened was to protect the president from political damage.

"I've been very clear here and I've answered that question multiple times, in different versions, in the last couple of days. Look, I want to be very clear: There's a process here, we are going to respect that process," she added, responding "no" when asked if staff were involved in crafting a strategy as to when the disclosure should be made.

A second batch of classified documents was found in a storage space in the garage of Biden's Wilmington, Del., residence on Dec. 20, and another one-page document was discovered among stored materials in an adjacent room this week. The search of Biden's residence was completed on Wednesday.

Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed Robert Hur as special counsel to investigate the discovery of classified documents on Thursday, following the announcement of additional documents found at Biden's Wilmington residence. He also said he was notified in real time when the White House found the documents.

"The timing of the revelation of the document discovery is indeed curious," said former Rep. Chris Carney (D-Pa.), a longtime Biden ally and former intelligence officer. "President Biden must be

accountable and accept responsibility for this awkward episode. The most important thing here is not preventing political embarrassment, it's protecting our nation's security."

Reporters pointed out on Friday that while Jean-Pierre says she answered questions throughout the week on the documents, she's only faced questions at all because CBS broke the news. She argued that's because it's an ongoing process.

"There is a process here, the Department of Justice is independent. We respect that process," she said.

Congressional Republicans are also raising questions over the timing of the disclosure, and the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability launched an investigation into the documents this week.

"Look, this happened Nov. 2nd. Joe Biden said he would be the most transparent president in American history. Why are we just now learning this? CBS did a great job uncovering this or we would never know, " Oversight Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.) said on CBS this week.

The news that classified documents were discovered in November and December, without the White House disclosing it, has cast a shadow on any other political developments this week, such as the federal report that inflation slowed in December.

Doug Heye, a Republican strategist, argued the same would have happened if the discovery was revealed in November. And, he said, Democrats wouldn't have wanted that to distract from their messaging in the last week of the election.

"That's one of the first questions that very reasonably comes up, about the timing. Would this have had a major impact on the races in 2022? It's not clear, but you can't go back and disprove the negative," he said.

"Clearly, it's not what Democrats would have liked their closing message to be, especially given that so much of what they were talking about was 'Look at these insane people running who are Trump acolytes,'" Heye added.

Stephen Saltzburg, a law professor at George Washington University and former Department of Justice official, noted that the way former FBI Director James Comey announced details about the investigation into then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton just before the 2016 election left a "bad taste" in many people's mouths.

"Having said that, I don't know why once the election was over, they didn't affirmatively disclose it. When it was discovered, the press was all over it, and that put them on the defensive," Saltzburg said.

The White House referred The Hill to previous statements when asked if there was an intentional effort to keep the discoveries quiet, especially ahead of the election. Those statements reiterate that the Department of Justice review is an ongoing process, so the White House is limited on what they can say.

There were reportedly 10 documents with classified markings found at Biden's Washington office, which he used between his time as vice president and his 2020 presidential run, mixed in with other personal material. Those documents reportedly contained briefing material about Ukraine, the United Kingdom and Iran.

"While it's common to finger-point in Washington, we cannot forget the potential damage uncontrolled intelligence documents can do to this nation's security. No matter if it's Biden, Trump, or anyone else who loses control of the documents, potentially grave national damage can result," said Carney, now a senior policy adviser at Nossaman.

He added that, as someone who has handled classified documents, he is "infuriated that national leaders can be so cavalier with intelligence reports."

Biden's team alerted the National Archives and the Department of Justice about the discovery shortly after the documents were found, the White House has said.

That sets a clear distinction from former President Trump's handling of government documents. Officials had requested documents from Trump multiple times before an FBI search was conducted last summer.

Biden, during a press conference in Mexico this week, commented that he had been surprised to learn that documents were found at his old Washington office. He added that he is unaware of what the documents were.

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But the White House failing to disclose the findings at the time raises more questions than just what is in the documents, including if they wanted this discovery to remain a private matter to protect the president.

"Between the Biden press conference and then Karine's briefing, I was reminded, there's an old line in politics: If you're explaining, you're losing," Heye said. "Yesterday, which should have been a day of good economic news, was a day of explaining."

Brett Samuels contributed.

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