

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Donald Trump is poised to get new classified national security briefings. Is that a good idea?

By **Brett Wagner**
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Gift Article







Boxes of classified records are stored in a bathroom and shower in the Lake Room at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla.

Department of Justice

A ruling Monday by U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon dismissing Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago classified documents criminal case should serve as a powerful reminder that sometimes the wheels of justice can turn very slowly. Fortunately, unlike the more complex federal election interference case in U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan's courtroom, hamstrung by the recent Supreme Court ruling regarding presidential immunity, the documents case is quite simple, and everything the public needs to know about it is already in the public square.

By now, we've all seen the photos: dozens of cheap cardboard boxes stuffed with top secret documents, stacked beside the toilet in a tacky bathroom at Mar-a-Lago and dozens more stored in plain sight in a kitschy ballroom where public events are regularly staged and even more squirreled away in storage rooms, their contents spilling out onto the floor.

Boxes seized by the FBI agents in their search two years ago, containing some of our nation's most highly coveted nuclear

secrets — in a threat environment known to be populated with Chinese spies.

It's also probably safe to say that most have heard the stories where the former president (while in office and after) can't seem to keep his mouth shut when it comes to nuclear secrets. Everything from boasting to the Philippine president the top secret locations of our nuclear-armed submarines off the North Korean coast to blabbing to an Australian billionaire about the exact number of warheads our nuclear subs carry to leaking just how close our subs can get to a Russian submarine without being detected.

But what we have not seen or heard — not yet, anyway — is any sort of rational explanation for why President Joe Biden appears poised to allow U.S. intelligence agencies to move forward later this week with their widely reported plan to, once again, begin providing intelligence briefings to someone who doesn't seem to be able to keep secrets any better than Chelsea Manning or Edward Snowden.

It's not like President Biden hasn't been down this road before. In the earliest days of his presidency, he determined that Trump could not be trusted with classified information. Citing the outgoing president's "erratic behavior," Biden took the unprecedented step of barring his predecessor from receiving intelligence briefings traditionally given to former presidents.

To reverse course now and permit the intelligence community to resume sharing our nation's most highly guarded secrets with a man who has demonstrated repeatedly that he can't be trusted would be a gross dereliction of duty and raise serious doubt about whether Biden (already widely called out by his detractors regarding his mental acuity) continues to demonstrate the good judgment that he, himself, can be trusted with these sorts of decisions or these sorts of secrets.

Beyond the direct threat this potential strategic blunder would pose to America's top secrets, of course, lies the even bigger threat posed to our closest allies regarding shared intelligence. And to the shared trust it's taken our countries so many years to develop. We are, after all, the superpower upon which their national securities rely.

As someone who worked alongside intelligence officials throughout much of my career, I've seen firsthand the damage done when our allies learned, in real-time, how the incoming Trump administration had wasted no time divulging their most closely guarded secrets with our shared adversary, Russia. All of our allies took notice, for example, how he outed the identity of one of Israel's most valued double agents — something Israel had specifically forbidden us from sharing with even our closest NATO allies.

How awkward it must have been, therefore, nearly two years

after the former president had been voted out of office, for U.S. intelligence officials to have to come clean once again with their counterparts from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom that the U.S. was once again responsible for leaked intelligence.

This time it was regarding shared secret intelligence discovered lying on the floor at Mar-a-Lago — intel clearly labeled, for anyone to see, “SECRET//REL TO USA, FVEY” — a top-secret classification that would have been spotted almost immediately in a highly fluid threat environment known to be populated with Chinese spies. This is intelligence that any intel officers worth their salt would have to assume was discovered by the adversary, photographed and returned to its place on the floor. Intelligence that our allies should have been able to reasonably expect would have been retrieved almost immediately by federal law enforcement or counterintelligence, rather than waiting months — asking politely for the materials to be returned while being lied to at every turn — and then waiting additional months for courts to approve search warrants. The Biden White House might think that’s normal, but I promise you: Our allies don’t.

Whatever happens next in the documents case is now the least of our worries. What we need now is for Biden to act and to act fast. It’s time to throw on the brakes. Reverse course. The intelligence community’s plan, already in place, to lift the

moratorium on Trump receiving briefings, must never be allowed to happen.

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