

The Mar-a-Lago search: Much ado about something

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Headlines concerning the search of former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence can be found here there and everywhere. It seems that not a day goes by without a media story on the subject with some discounting the serious nature of the quest to retrieve highly classified documents that involve potential crimes — including mishandling national defense information and destroying records related to an investigation of this mishandling.



The FBI seized documents of various serious security classifications in the raid of former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate earlier this month. ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO.

These stories have boosted support for the former president among Republicans, most of whom believe he has been unfairly targeted by politically motivated Democrats. But, the stories are also troubling — portraying a somewhat cavalier

attitude with regard to the lack of care and respect for security classifications covering documents containing sensitive information. More will be said about the stories after a brief digression.

Speaking as someone with some experience in these matters, I find cavalier attitudes and approaches to security classifications to be absolutely appalling. It would have been anathema to me, my colleagues, and to the government officials to whom we reported during the 1956-1964 time period when we were actively engaged in very highly classified research and development on a variety of military systems that were critical to national security.

This was also the time when America was in the midst of a Cold War with Russia and, as so-called scientific cold warriors, we felt a patriotic duty to handle work-related classified research documents with the utmost care and respect. So sensitive was the nature of the R & D that security clearances, with levels ranging up to Top Secret/ Cryptographic “Eyes only,” were necessitated with each step up on the security ladder demanding ever more arduous scrutiny of my personal, financial, academic and professional life.

How tight can security be? Consider the following: The security officer who was responsible for oversight of our Tech Center could not enter my crypto-secure office because he did not have the required “need to know,” notwithstanding the fact that he was a former FBI agent with a Top Secret clearance.

Also, my family and friends really did not know what I actually did at work for many years. A sharp contrast can be seen in today’s world where, for some, it is more important to gain and maintain political and personal power than it is to protect our national interests.

The foregoing background begs the question: What about the media stories related to the Mar-a-Lago document search that either cast doubt on the importance of the search or trivialize security classifications?

Representative of these types of stories was a column in The Wall Street Journal by Kimberly Strassel that attributed political motivation for the search on the part of Democrats and an op-ed in The Daily Herald by Michael Barone that claimed the citing of the Espionage Act of 1917 in the FBI’s search warrant will lead to an exercise in futility.

“Trump derangement syndrome has a curious way of scrambling coherent thought,” said Strassel.

Two letters in response to her column were noteworthy. The first letter used the former president's words, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and wouldn't lose any voters," to illustrate the derangement of these voters. The second letter minimized the potential national security risk related to the retrieved documents by asking: "How many of the classified items in Merrick Garland's treasure trove of seized documents are already in the public domain?"

On the other hand, Barone used a quote from the Espionage Act as a vehicle to posit this message: "and the government notoriously over classifies material, including editions of The New York Times — discounting security classifications.

Barone's message could be true with respect to the application of "Confidential" classifications, the very lowest level of security classification, but not for "Secret" and "Top Secret" levels that are used to protect highly sensitive information, the revelation of which could pose grave danger to national security.

To the best of my knowledge, neither Strassel nor Barone know exactly what was contained in the documents that were retrieved from Mar-a-Lago.

However, they both know that some of the documents were classified with Secret, Top Secret, and Top Secret/SCI (Sensitive Compartmentalized Information) designations. These designations demand extreme care regarding the handling, storage, and "need-to-know" viewing of the documents. The demand for extreme care is based on the national security implications of the material contained therein.

These stories reflect a cavalier attitude and approach to security classifications and attempts to minimize the importance of these classifications.

This cavalier attitude and approach was also reflected in the former president's claim that he issued a "standing order" stipulating that classified documents automatically became declassified when he took them from the Oval Office to his White House residence; a claim refuted by more than a dozen of his former top administration officials.

In contrast with politically motivated partisan rhetoric, patience, the capacity to accept delay in the findings of the DOJ's analysis of the retrieved documents, is essential since the retrieval was much ado about something.

As a sign of our times, no one should be surprised if supporters of the former president still vote for him no matter how fair the DOJ's analysis of the retrieved documents and how damning the evidence resulting from the search of his Mar-a-Lago estate may be.

Writ large, the American people must be better than that — more discerning if you will. Their democracy depends on it.

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