

White House shake-up as attacks mount on Biden over handling of classified documents

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Press reports on the weekend, not denied by the White House, indicated that President Joe Biden's chief of staff, Ron Klain, would step down within a few weeks, to be replaced by Jeff Zients, the multi-millionaire who was formerly Biden's coronavirus coordinator. The transition will reportedly take place soon after Biden's State of the Union address, set for February 7.

While Klain had told some insiders, as well as author Chris Whipple, that he expected to leave the White House at some point after last November's midterm elections, the timing of his departure is remarkable. He leaves in the midst of the most serious domestic political crisis of the Biden administration, with the finding of classified documents in at least five separate locations, including Biden's home in Wilmington, Delaware.

On Saturday, FBI agents visited the home and conducted a nine-hour search operation, which uncovered some additional classified documents, of unknown sensitivity, including some dating back as far as Biden's tenure in the US Senate (1973–2008), before he left to become Barack Obama's vice president.

The search was at the invitation of Biden and his lawyers, both personal and at the White House. These attorneys attended the search and monitored the actions of the agents, while Biden, speaking to the press in Washington, declared that there was “no there there” in the purported scandal, and that he had no regrets about his own conduct.

As the WSWWS pointed out last week, the real scandal is not the handling of the classified documents, but their very existence. The purpose of classification is to conceal the crimes of American imperialism, in which Biden has been up to his neck for half a century, from

the American people.

For Biden's right-hand man to leave at this point is certain to undermine the White House response to mounting attacks in the media and from congressional Republicans and even some Democrats. The classified documents crisis comes together with the prospect of multiple hostile investigations by House Republicans, now that they have taken control of the chamber, as well as the prospect of a full-blown financial crisis triggered by Republican refusal to raise by the federal debt ceiling.

The position of White House chief of staff does not require confirmation by the Senate. Both Klain and any successor are appointed by the president at his sole discretion, and will occupy a position of enormous power without any democratic process. The chief of staff will play a particularly critical role given Biden's age, 80 years, which obviously limits his ability to oversee the vast apparatus of the American capitalist state.

The replacement of Klain by Zients would represent a further shift to the right by the Biden administration. Klain, while a long-time right-wing capitalist political operative, maintained certain pretenses of liberalism and was the White House official in closest touch with the House Progressive Caucus and “left” liberals like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other members of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Zients, by contrast, worked first in the Obama administration and then in the Biden White House, always as an administrative czar who could “make the trains run on time,” while riding roughshod over the concerns and needs of workers. During his time as deputy chief of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) under Obama, he was the point man for implementing a wage freeze for federal government

workers in 2010.

He would be the wealthiest man ever to hold the position of White House chief of staff. Zients has a fortune estimated at between \$400 million and \$700 million. This was derived at least in part from consulting for health care companies seeking to drive up efficiency and productivity (i.e., to increase the exploitation of their work force).

He got his start in high-level financial manipulations working at Bain Consulting, the Boston-based firm that spun off its investment business as the hedge fund Bain Capital, whose first CEO was Mitt Romney, Obama's Republican challenger in 2012. Zients later established several consulting businesses of his own, selling them for huge profits.

His meteoric rise earned him a place in 2002 on *Fortune* magazine's list of the 40 richest Americans under 40, two places below Elon Musk. In 2005, he joined former Secretary of State Colin Powell in an unsuccessful bid to buy the Washington Nationals baseball franchise.

Obama first appointed him to the newly created position of chief performance officer, to promote "efficiency" throughout the federal government. He moved to the position of deputy director of OMB, the White House agency that oversees the budget for every federal department and agency. He also served as acting director. After the disastrous rollout of the Obamacare website in the fall of 2014, Zients was brought in to run the effort to fix it.

He finished his time with Obama as director of the National Economic Council, a special assistant to the president, and, as the *Wall Street Journal* described it, "a kind of ambassador to the business community." Now this representative of finance capital will occupy the position generally described as de facto prime minister of the Biden administration.

Zients returned to the financial markets after Obama left office, setting up a private equity firm, Cranemere, and spending two years on the board of directors of Facebook. He stepped down from his business positions when he joined Biden's election campaign as a fundraiser.

The ruthlessness that characterizes Zients was shown most clearly in his earlier role in the Biden administration, when he served as Biden's first coronavirus chief, although he had no medical

background, except for his work as an efficiency consultant for the health care industry. He drove the initial campaign in 2021 to distribute the vaccines for COVID-19 produced by Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson and promote mass vaccination.

When the Biden policy shifted to spreading complacency about the dangers of COVID-19 and declaring the pandemic over, Zients followed suit, finally departing the administration in April 2022, replaced by the unctuous Dr. Ashish Jha. That was part of the shift from mitigation, where Zients' administrative skills were needed, to "let it rip," where a smooth television presence was more important.



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