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Guest column / Carl Golden / Obama administration's clumsiness allowed Sestak story to fester

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As if there was a need for further testament to the power of cable television talk shows to relentlessly drive a political story, along comes the Arlen Specter-Joe Sestak-Rahm Emanuel-Bill Clinton affair revolving around allegations that the Obama administration committed a felony by enlisting the former president to dangle an appointed position in front of Sestak in return for abandoning his ultimately successful primary challenge to Specter.

A procession of academics, consultants and current and former members of Congress marched across television screens, some to proclaim impeachment awaited the president while others dismissed the episode as the political maneuvering that both parties have engaged in for years at every level of government.

With enormous chunks of air time to fill, however, the cable shows seized on every morsel of information to build the story into one of national scope and breathe life into it.

The White House deserves low marks for its handling of the story, however. Sestak himself kicked it off when, during a local interview in Philadelphia prior to the primary election, he revealed he'd been offered - and declined - a job by the White House.

The administration initially ignored the story, then stonewalled it, and finally issued word that whatever conversation took place between Sestak and the administration, there was nothing inappropriate. The delay and the fumbling around, however, fueled the controversy rather than quelling it until, finally, the president himself was forced to respond.

The situation never should have reached the point of presidential involvement. Barack Obama was ill-served by his political and media advisers who clearly failed to grasp the new media reality that nothing is too small that it can't be made larger, and responding immediately at the staff level is crucial to putting the issue to rest.

When the official response came from the White House counsel that chief of staff Emanuel had enlisted Clinton to persuade Sestak to step aside in return for an insignificant appointment to a presidential advisory board, the furor erupted anew over whether statutes were violated and

punishment should be meted out.

Suddenly, words like "special prosecutor" and "Watergate" and "coverup" were tossed about. The administration lost control of the debate and decided to let time take over while shielding itself with the White House counsel's opinion that whatever occurred was routine political activity and no illegality was involved.

The incident stands out as an object lesson in how not to deal effectively with and gain control of a political issue before it balloons into one which preoccupies people who have other, more important responsibilities.

The temptation to cavalierly brush off inquiries like the ones about the offer to Sestak is irresistible. Rather than satisfy the media, however, such casual dismissals serve only to whet its appetite for further and more aggressive inquiry.

One would have thought this lesson learned when the Nixon White House described the break-in at the Watergate office complex as "a third rate burglary."

Moreover, the considerable time that elapsed between the initial revelation of the job offer and the issuance of the White House counsel's report fed suspicions that the administration was concocting a cover story and it needed additional time to persuade everyone involved to understand it and stick to it.

While it was probably unnecessary for Emanuel to involve the White House directly in an attempt to clear the primary election field for Specter, when he realized the story had taken on a life of its own, his immediate reaction should have been to fess up to his role and describe his actions as designed solely to assure a unified Democratic Party heading into a critical election.

Reporters would have understood it, written and broadcast it, and moved on. By clumsily creating an information vacuum, Emanuel opened the way for media and political critics to fill it with overheated rhetoric and allowed it to spiral out of control.

As it turned out, the appointment offered by Clinton to Sestak was remarkably unimportant and one which Clinton, by his own admission, knew full well would be quickly rejected. It appears to have been done as a favor to Specter to allow the administration to claim it had made an attempt to clear the field for the sitting senator - fulfilling a pledge the president made when Specter switched his party affiliation in 2009.

The episode was simply an example of the transactions common in politics and the administration would have been far better served if it had been treated as such immediately.

The president is fond of describing issues or crises as presenting "a teaching moment" to the principals involved. He should hope the lessons of l'affaire Specter-Sestak-Emanuel-Clinton won't

be forgotten.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy in Galloway Township. He formerly served as press secretary to Govs. Tom Kean and Christie Whitman.

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