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Former President Trump Faces Major Charges and Potential Prison Time as 49-Page Indictment is Unsealed

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Former President Donald Trump.

Federal prosecutors on Friday unsealed a comprehensive 49-page indictment against former President Donald Trump. The indictment alleges that Trump retained access to sensitive military secrets that he knew he should not have, shared these secrets with others, and even directed his staff to help him evade attempts by the authorities to reclaim the information.

The charges leveled against Trump total 37 in number, ranging from willful retention of national defense information and withholding records, to conspiracy, making false statements, and obstruction. Additionally, on five of these counts, Trump was charged in tandem with his military

valet, Walt Nauta, who had previously worked in the White House and subsequently at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort. Nauta also faces an individual charge of making false statements.

The classified documents that Trump kept in his possession allegedly included sensitive information about U.S. and foreign defense capabilities, nuclear programs, and potential vulnerabilities of the U.S. and its allies to military attack, among other things. The indictment highlighted two instances where Trump allegedly shared classified information with unauthorized individuals. In one instance, he is alleged to have discussed a secret attack plan with a writer, a publisher, and two staff members at his golf club in New Jersey. In another, he reportedly showed an associate a classified map related to a military operation and revealed it despite knowing he should not have.

The case against Trump and Nauta has been initially assigned to U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon, who was appointed by Trump in 2020. Judge Cannon had previously approved a request from the Trump team to appoint a special master for the review of documents the FBI seized from Mar-a-Lago, a decision that was later overturned by a three-judge appeals court panel, citing it as a drastic shift from past criminal cases.

In response to these charges, Trump announced that he has named former prosecutor Todd Blanche to lead his defense, parting ways with two previous lawyers, Jim Trusty and John Rowley. Blanche was originally hired in April to defend Trump in a separate criminal case, but his role has recently expanded to include representation in the special counsel investigation. The Trump team is reportedly looking to expand its legal representation in Florida, where the case is being brought, according to sources familiar with the matter.

While charges are usually only unsealed after a defendant makes an initial court appearance, Trump isn't scheduled to appear in court until Tuesday, and there was some debate among Justice Department officials about whether to make the case public sooner. Law enforcement officials are also preparing for potential civil unrest following the indictment. There was a notable increase in threats following the August search of Mar-a-Lago, including an armed attack on the FBI's Cincinnati field office and a man from western Pennsylvania charged with threatening to kill FBI agents.

The indictment is the result of months of investigation by prosecutors, who built a case alleging that Trump deliberately withheld sensitive documents related to U.S. intelligence and defense plans, even after they demanded the return of all such documents last year. Nauta has been a key focus of this investigation, after surveillance footage showed him moving boxes from a storage room both before and after investigators issued a subpoena in May seeking the return of all government documents in Trump's possession.

This indictment represents the largest legal threat Trump has faced so far, following his survival of a special counsel investigation, two impeachment trials, and multiple criminal investigations. The charges and the preceding investigation suggest that Trump may face prison time if convicted.

This case dates back to the chaotic final days of Trump's presidency, when he was preoccupied with contesting his election loss and staffers were in a rush to pack up, leading to a large number of boxes filled with documents being sent to Mar-a-Lago.

Trump's legal battles have been ongoing for the better part of six years, with federal prosecutors examining a wide range of his activities.

In terms of strategy, some former prosecutors have posited that Trump may find it easier to defend himself in Miami rather than Washington, D.C., due to the political leanings of potential jurors. Southern Florida, in contrast to Washington, D.C., is a politically mixed district with pockets of staunch Trump supporters and immigrants from Cuba and Venezuela who may hold negative views about the federal government based on experiences in their native countries.

Michael Sherwin, a former prosecutor in both Miami and Washington who led the January 6 inquiry as the Trump-appointed acting U.S. attorney in Washington, noted that "the jury pool is more dynamic politically and in terms of diversity" in Southern Florida, according to the Wall Street Journal.

While Trump already faces state criminal charges related to hush-money payments on the eve of the 2016 election, legal experts suggest he is unlikely to face jail time for these charges if convicted. However, the latest charges, including violations of the Espionage Act, obstruction, and making false statements, point to the severity of the situation and the potential consequences if found guilty.

All eyes are now on the court as it prepares to hear the case, marking another dramatic chapter in the post-presidential life of Donald Trump.