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FRANCE - EUROPE

THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.

U.S. Hacker Linked to Fake Macron Documents, Says Cybersecurity Firm

David Gauthier-Villars

5-6 minutes

A group of cybersecurity experts has unearthed ties between an American hacker who maintains a neo-Nazi website and an internet campaign to smear Emmanuel Macron days before he was elected president of France.

Shortly after an anonymous user of the 4chan.org discussion forum posted fake documents purporting to show Mr. Macron had set up an undisclosed shell company in the Caribbean, the user directed people to visit nouveaumartel.com for updates on the French election.

That website, according to research by web-security provider Virtualroad.org, is registered by "Weevios," a known online alias of Andrew Auernheimer, an American hacker who gained notoriety three years ago when a U.S. appeals court vacated his conviction for computer fraud. The site also is hosted by a server in Latvia that hosts the Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi news site that identifies its administrator as "Weev," another online alias of Mr. Auernheimer, Virtualroad.org says.

"We strongly believe that the fake offshore documents were created by someone with control of the Daily

Stormer server," said Tord Lundström, a computer forensics investigator at Virtualroad.org.

Through Tor Ekeland, the lawyer who represented him in the computer-fraud case in the U.S., Mr. Auernheimer said he "doesn't have anything to say."

A French security official said a probe into the fake documents was looking into the role of far-right and neo-Nazi groups but declined to comment on the alleged role of Mr. Auernheimer.

In the run-up to the French election, cybersecurity agencies warned Mr. Macron's aides that Russian hackers were targeting his presidential campaign, according to people familiar with the matter. On May 5, nine gigabytes of campaign documents and emails were dumped on the internet. The Macron campaign and French authorities have stopped short of pinning blame for the hack on the Kremlin.

Intelligence and cybersecurity investigators examining the flurry of social-media activity leading up to the hack followed a trail of computer code they say leads back to the American far-right.

Contacted by email over the weekend, the publisher of the Daily Stormer, Andrew Anglin, said he

and Mr. Auernheimer had used their news site to write about the fake documents because "We follow 4chan closely and have a more modern editorial process than most sites."

When asked if he or Mr. Auernheimer were behind the fake documents, Mr. Anglin stopped replying.

Mr. Auernheimer was sentenced to 41 months in prison by a U.S. court in late 2012 for obtaining the personal data of thousands of iPad users through an AT&T website. In April 2014, an appeals court vacated his conviction on the grounds that the venue of the trial, in New Jersey, was improper.

Asked if Mr. Auernheimer resided in Ukraine, as a January post on a personal blog indicates, his lawyer said: "I think this is about right."

The day after the data dump, French security officials summoned their U.S. counterparts stationed in Paris to formally request a probe of the role American far-right websites might have played in disseminating the stolen data, according to a Western security official. A U.S. security official had no comment.

Mounir Mahjoubi, who was in charge of computer security for Mr. Macron's campaign said far-right

groups, or "an international collective of conservatives," may have coordinated to disrupt the French election.

"We will take time to do analysis, to deconstruct who really runs these groups," Mr. Mahjoubi told French radio last week. He couldn't be reached for comment.

French prosecutors have launched formal probes into both the fake documents and the data dump.

Hiroyuki Nishimura, an administrator of 4chan.org, said the site can't control the behavior of its users. "No one can prevent such bad behaviors in internet history," said Mr. Nishimura said by email.

The phony documents intended to smear Mr. Macron were posted to 4chan.org twice by an anonymous user, first on May 3 and again on May 5 using higher-resolution files.

Soon after the second post, several 4chan.org users in the same online conversation below the post appeared to congratulate Mr. Auernheimer.

"Weev... you're doing the lord's work," wrote one of the anonymous users.

POLITICO Taylor : Get ready for the Franco-German revival

PARIS — It was a flawless debut on the European stage for French president Emmanuel Macron.

On his first working day in office, the centrist leader sent Berlin a strong signal that he is ready to give new momentum to European integration and pursue Franco-German cooperation, winning a warm vote of confidence from German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

For both Paris and Berlin, the day marked the beginning of a long-awaited rebalancing of European leadership, putting France back along with Germany in the driving seat just as Britain is on its way out and the United States, under the chaotic presidency of Donald Trump, is turning inward.

But a successful "Mercron" partnership is not a foregone conclusion.

At Monday's meeting, the two leaders pointed to short-term targets, such as making quick progress on EU trade reciprocity, a common asylum system, labor mobility rules and promoting joint investments. But the two countries have big hurdles to overcome on defense and economic governance. They will have to overcome deep-seated reflexes to make their cooperation a success.

Merkel may have left the door open to the French leader's ideas, but part of Germany's political establishment is already drawing red lines against Macron's proposals for a eurozone budget and finance

minister. And German media are anxiously asking how much Macron's victory could cost the country's taxpayers.

Basking in the enthusiasm generated by his youth and pro-European outlook, the president professed his respect for German taboos, such as the rejection of common eurobonds to redeem eurozone countries' debt stock. He maintained he was determined to carry out bold economic reforms at home to make France more credible and dynamic on the European stage.

July's joint cabinet session will be a first test of the promised Franco-German revival.

Specifically, he told reporters in Berlin, he'll focus on reforming EU rules to stop imported east European labor undercutting French workers by paying a fraction of their social contributions. He wants the EU to get tougher on anti-dumping duties and impose reciprocity on foreign strategic investment in Europe or access to public procurement tenders — wins that would reassure those in France who doubt Europe is doing anything to protect them.

With none of the previous three presidents Merkel has sat across from in the past 12 years did the cautious chancellor achieve the deep mutual understanding and political serendipity that powered European integration in the eras of

Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle, Helmut Schmidt and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, or Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand.

Macron promised to be a “frank, direct and constructive partner” for Berlin. If he can convince Merkel to revive the frequent, unscripted, plain-speaking meetings between French and German leaders of the past, it will be a crucial step toward setting a joint agenda for Europe.

Bridging differences

July's joint cabinet session — where both defense and the economy will be on the agenda — will be a first test of the promised Franco-German revival.

Macron has made it clear he intends to use France's major contribution to European defense and security as a lever to help secure progress in the eurozone. But his influence in Berlin, as he acknowledged, will depend on his ability to break the rigidities in the French labor market and put the country's young people to work.

He will need to overcome deep-seated resistance to eurozone intervention in national budget policies. The last Socialist government was as defiant as its Gaullist predecessors when the European Commission repeatedly criticized France's excessive deficits, high tax burden on business and employment, and generous welfare and pension systems. But Macron is committed to the right track. Honoring commitments to EU-supervised economic reforms are part of his vision for a more integrated eurozone, he said in Berlin.

Where Macron will be at pains to earn trust on the economy, Germany will have to show itself a reliable partner in matters of defense, a sticking point between the countries in the past.

Paris is still fuming at Berlin's refusal to let German crews fly NATO surveillance planes over the Mediterranean in the 2011 Franco-British-led air campaign in Libya, even though the operation was sanctioned by the United Nations, NATO and the European Union. The French are also furious that Sigmar Gabriel used his role as economics minister to block the export of jointly manufactured kit such as helicopters to French clients in central Asia and the Gulf on human rights grounds.

For the French, it is vital that the next German government lift restrictions on selling jointly produced arms to third countries, and promise that jointly owned or operated resources will be available when partners need them. “Until the Germans remove those two obstacles to cooperation, we can't move forward with them in confidence,” a senior French defense official said.

The Germans, for their part, expect better prior consultation before France embarks on military action that may involve its partners.

The Commission weighs in

When it comes to the eurozone, Germany will have to end its resistance to further risk-sharing to complete the EU's banking union. And here progress is likely to be difficult.

Macron will need Berlin to lift its blockade on common deposit insurance and a joint fiscal backstop for the European bank resolution fund. Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble — who has expressed support for some of Macron's ideas — will hold both steps hostage at least until after the German general election in September.

Schäuble is holding out for a very different form of eurozone governance, in which an inter-governmental (i.e. German-controlled) European Monetary Fund, built on the existing European Stability Mechanism, would impose automatic debt restructuring and an austerity program on any eurozone country that needed assistance.

Macron is a committed pro-European, willing to take risks. But he won't commit political suicide for the cause.

“Every time the Germans want to stop progress, they play one of three trump cards,” an EU official said. “Either they argue there is no legal basis, or they won't accept liability for legacy problems, or they argue that it would create a moral hazard.”

The European Commission has an early opportunity to help France and Germany overcome their differences and build a stronger framework for the eurozone.

The institution is set to release a reflection paper at the end of the month. Insiders say it will include new ideas for a “eurozone safe asset” — something they describe as less than a eurobond but more than a securitization of existing sovereign bonds.

It would also propose the creation of a “stabilization fund” equivalent to 1-2 percent of eurozone gross domestic product — no permanent budget transfers but a kind of insurance system that complements national budgets in case of asymmetric economic shocks — and call for early completion of the eurozone's banking union and an ambitious capital market union.

The timing of these first moves toward a deeper eurozone will be crucial. Macron is a committed pro-European, willing to take risks. But he won't commit political suicide for the cause.

Macron and Merkel said they were willing to seek public support for changing the EU's founding treaties if it became crucial to strengthening the eurozone. But a referendum on a new EU treaty late in Macron's five-year term would give far-right, hard-left and conservative Gaullist opponents a golden opportunity to trip him up. His more cautious advisers are urging to leave treaty change for a (hypothetical) second term.

Indeed, Macron hinted at ambitions for a second term in a throwaway line in Berlin when asked about the small but enthusiastic crowd that had cheered him outside Merkel's office.

“What I hope is that when I come back to see Madame Chancellor in five years' time, there will be the same crowd and even bigger, because we will have delivered results,” he said.



In Macron, Germany sees an opportunity to aid France – and boost the EU

The Christian Science Monitor

May 16, 2017 Berlin and Paris— There are few Europeans more hopeful over the election of Emmanuel Macron in France and its bearing on the European Union than those in the Pulse of Europe movement.

The group that has been leading weekly pro-EU rallies since last fall in a rare burst of Euro-optimism gathered, fittingly, outside the German chancellery Monday as President Macron arrived in Berlin for his first trip abroad. Many draped in EU flags, the group chanted “Jetzt auf geht's,” or “Europe, let's go!” as Macron headed to a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Mr. Macron's victory on a decisively pro-European platform has turned

him into a beacon to those wishing to move the EU beyond its Euroskeptic troubles. The 39-year-old former investment banker is seen as the best hope to strengthen France, and thus bring balance back to the Franco-German relationship that is so crucial to the project's viability.

But if Europeans like Pulse of Europe activists are looking to him, there is also a shifting inward of gazes — nowhere more so than in Germany, which, as the powerhouse of Europe, has set the tone and the rules of the European playbook over the past decade. Since confidence in the EU has plummeted, Germany and France have spent much time in familiar roles: Germany as the responsible player and France as the pesky one, resistant to any reform proposal.

Now there is an opening.

While Macron promises to tackle unpopular reform at home, many Germans say they also need to meet him in the middle on economic matters, even if that puts Germany outside its comfort zone. “Both sides need to change in order for this relationship to be much more balanced in the future, and that is a learning process on the German side because for too long we have been very arrogant vis-à-vis France,” says Thorsten Benner, director of the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin.

“Many treat France almost as if it were a basket case, where actually economically it has a lot of strengths,” from its banking industry to high productivity throughout many sectors, says Mr. Benner. “We need

to adapt and see France with different eyes, and Macron can help.”

Bridging North and South

The Franco-German motor at the heart of the EU has started to sputter due to weaknesses in the French economy — which, in turn, has sparked clashes between the nations over deeply held views of how to move forward. While Germany, valuing savings and credit worthiness, runs an enormous surplus — Benner notes in a Foreign Affairs piece that the surplus is 35 billion euros with France alone — France's economy has remained largely stagnant. That has translated into stubborn French unemployment rates of about 10 percent (up to 25 percent for youths) and greater Euroskepticism. While Germany

underwent painful labor reform in the early 2000s, France has resisted deep structural reform, striking at attempts to loosen labor laws, with a preference on public spending.

Enter Macron. The new French president noted even before he launched his campaign that a bridge needed to be built to unite the "North" and "South" of Europe, with Germany leading the former and France considered the periphery of the latter. To meet German desires, Macron has promised to lower the deficit to 3 percent of the GDP, in part by cutting public spending and by making labor laws more flexible. But he has also said he wants Germany to assume more risk within the eurozone, such as with a joint eurozone budget for infrastructure and other projects that would entail deeper economic integration.

Before any of this, major challenges stand in the way.

Macron faces legislative elections next month where he will attempt to get a majority to push through his reform agenda. Germany holds national elections in September, when Ms. Merkel will seek a fourth term. While her Christian Democrats are polling on top, particularly after a decisive victory Sunday in Germany's most populous state of North Rhine-Westphalia, no major reforms are likely until at least the late fall.

Still, the two leaders are already signaling an understanding on the need to accommodate each other.

Merkel said yesterday that Germany depends on a "strong France," while Macron attempted to ease German concerns that France will want Germany to pay more for EU troubles. Ahead of his trip Macron, who promised to draw on the strengths of the right and left, named Édouard Philippe, a conservative and German-speaker, as French prime minister.

Such signs have given new wind to pro-EU liberals like those forming Pulse of Europe, which began in November in Frankfurt after the shock of Brexit and the election of US President Donald Trump.

Soscha zu Eulenburg, a Pulse of Europe participant awaiting Macron's visit in Berlin, says she has faith in a functional Franco-German relationship moving forward – and that Germany has a role to play. "Macron must succeed with his ideas, and we must help him in any way that we can," she says.

'A game changer'

It's not as easy as that, of course. Doubts hang over Macron.

Beyond his 66 percent victory over anti-EU candidate Marine Le Pen lies the fact that more than one-third of French voters didn't vote in the runoff, or cast blank ballots. And Germans are still deeply skeptical about a French commitment to

reform: the same process they underwent, loosening worker protection but shoring up their economic strength today. The mood is best illustrated with a Bild headline the day after French elections, which asked, "How much will Macron cost the Germans?"

This reflex has deep roots, and was encouraged during the eurocrisis by politicians who perpetuated a "morality tale" of the "virtuous Germans" against the "freespending Southerners," mostly for political expedience, Benner says. The dynamics of the Greek crisis, in particular, hardened positions as Greek politicians tended to project blame squarely on Germany. This is where Macron could help shift perspectives.

"Macron can be a game changer," says Benner, because he admits to the need to reform at home, which will benefit France and then the EU. "That might actually lead to a much more constructive engagement."

He points to many hopeful signs, including recent statements by conservative Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble. A financial hardliner, Mr. Schäuble would be one of the least likely to support softening on France. But even he has shown flexibility – for example, telling Der Spiegel that Germany's trade surplus is too high.

Franziska Brantner, a federal lawmaker from the Green party, says that Macron must be given

space and patience to carry out reform that can ultimately bring Germans on board – and secure its own position. "Germany can be convinced to pay more if it sees itself as a beneficiary of reforms coming out of the national level too," she says. "Germany might need the EU to help it out one day too."

Indeed, many Germans might be convinced now simply because they find the alternatives so unpalatable. During the height of Europe's sovereign debt crisis, strains on the EU were mounting but its viability was unquestioned. That all changed in 2016.

Maxim Nitsche, a dual French-German citizen and co-founder of educational mobile app MATH 42, says France must prepare to undo some regulations in the labor market, no matter how unpopular they will initially be domestically. Yet Germany and other EU countries must strike a compromise with France, particularly by being willing to spend more on joint-EU initiatives such as infrastructure and education.

"If we don't want ... a surging far-right movement, we have to do whatever we can to communicate and find purposeful solutions where all countries and their people are beneficiaries," he says. "The rest of the world is going forward. We need to be willing to change too."



Bershidsky: Merkel and Macron Inch Toward a Common Budget

French President Emmanuel Macron's first trip to Berlin was a lovefest: If anyone thought German Chancellor Angela Merkel would push back on Macron's plans to reform the European Union, they were disappointed. It's not clear, however, if the young and impatient Macron is ready for a slow, clumsy but ultimately useful Merkel-style compromise, which appears to be in the cards.

Both leaders face elections soon: Macron hopes to muster parliamentary support for his agenda in the June legislative election, and a September vote will decide whether Merkel will get a fourth term as chancellor. A show of unity helps both.

But the substance of the future changes is more intriguing than the political messaging around them. Macron has spoken in favor of a common budget for the euro area and a finance minister to manage it. That's a potentially powerful integration tool, and there is broad

consensus among Europe's big economies that it's the way forward.

Germany's problem is that it doesn't want less fiscally disciplined nations (and there's a long list of those) to free-ride. Spain, for example, proposes issuing common euro-area bonds for the budget -- but that means German liability for debt that will mostly be used by other countries, at interest rates higher than Germany alone can command. The German government has made it clear that it hates the idea. In Berlin, Macron denied he was ever in favor of it.

Direct fiscal transfers into the euro-zone budget would be politically unpopular too, but it appears that Merkel's Christian Democratic Party is willing to shoulder that risk. In a recent interview with the Italian daily La Repubblica, Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble talked about expanding the role of the European Stability Mechanism, the bailout fund that has loaned out 264.8 billion euros (\$292.5 billion) to overcome the euro zone's economic crisis, and turning it into the

equivalent of the currency area's common budget. He even endorsed setting up a consultative euro-zone parliament, comprised of European Parliament deputies from countries that use the common currency, to oversee the reformed bailout fund (Macron himself proposed a euro-zone parliament in his election program).

That's a workable idea because it won't require changes to EU treaties -- a process that requires ratification by all bloc members, and referendums in some of them. The ESM already exists, and so does its funding mechanism: Its members have contributed 80 billion euros so far, which is used to guarantee bonds issued by the ESM at low interest. So the fiscal transfers are limited and the bonds are not the direct responsibility of euro-zone states.

Renaming the ESM "the euro-zone budget," however, doesn't amount to much of a reform. Unemployment is the No. 1 issue Europeans want the EU to take on as a group. The Spanish proposal for the euro-zone

budget includes a common unemployment insurance scheme on top of national ones. Macron's program didn't go that far; he proposed EU-wide unemployment insurance and minimum-wage standards that would take into account members states' varying economic development levels. Yet he backed a common unemployment insurance scheme while he was still French economy minister.

It's not clear when Germany might be ready for something like this and Schaeuble dodged the question in the interview. It won't be impossible for Macron, Merkel, Rajoy and other euro-zone leaders to agree on creating an anti-crisis budget based on the ESM. The bailout fund is not politically toxic: Though it hasn't achieved much in Greece, its programs for Spain, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus have been successful, and it may yet be called on to rescue Italy, where a banking crisis looms. But going much further than loaning money against binding promises of tough reform will be difficult.

Macron, like Rajoy, wants the euro zone to fund common investment projects. Germany will resist it; Schaeuble keeps pointing out that the disgraceful Berlin airport project isn't failing because of a lack of funds but because of terrible execution.

Macron and Merkel appeared to connect well on a personal level. They may make progress in other

areas of EU cooperation, such as closer military ties outside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization framework, border policy (both are in favor of strengthening the bloc's outside borders) and reciprocity in trade relations with third countries, including more forceful responses to trade restrictions in China and, potentially, the U.S. But major compromises on things like the beginnings of a common euro-zone

fiscal policy will require much more than good personal chemistry. They will have to be politically sustainable, and they will need to produce results that can be sold to voters.

That's why, as Macron pointed out in Berlin, his first priority was to develop some momentum at home, primarily in tackling unemployment. The lack of progress in that area

was what destroyed Macron's predecessor, Francois Hollande. He ended up powerless to spur change in Europe because he couldn't achieve it at home. The more successful Macron is domestically, the more trust and meaningful concessions he'll earn in Berlin.

Bloomberg

Budget Advice for the EU's Big Three

The Editors

In a fresh sign of confidence about the euro zone's recovery, the European Commission has just upgraded its growth forecasts for the bloc. This raises a question: Should governments now start tightening fiscal policy to put their public finances on a sounder footing?

It depends. Many euro-zone countries have worryingly high levels of public debt, and the best time to lower them is when economies are expanding. But they aren't all in the same position. For some, such as Italy, tighter fiscal policy is essential. For others, such as France, it's less urgent. And Germany is yet another case: Looser fiscal policy, with lower taxes and more public investment, would make most sense.

Italy's choice is straightforward. Despite a modest upswing in growth, its public debt is still rising -- and projected to top 133 percent of gross domestic product this year. The European Central Bank is expected to cut its bond-buying program next year, so financing deficits may soon be more difficult. Italy needs to show investors it's serious about budget discipline. This calls for a modest tightening of fiscal policy -- enough to put the debt on a credible downward path.

The case for fiscal expansion in Germany is less obvious. Output grew 0.6 percent in the first quarter, and the unemployment rate is just 4 percent. The budget is slightly in surplus, which has helped to bring government debt below 70 percent of GDP. What's wrong with that?

The euro zone's largest economy has a special role. Fiscal expansion in Germany would raise demand in other countries, helping their recoveries and strengthening Europe as a whole. In particular, a stronger expansion in the euro zone would let the ECB end quantitative easing sooner. Germany's leaders have never liked QE; getting rid of it faster ought to suit them. One more thing: Germany has the largest current-account surplus in the world --and this surplus, in effect, gets invested abroad. Why not channel some of it back to Germany, through higher public investment?

France is in between. The government has persistently failed to get the budget deficit below the 3 percent allowed by Europe's Stability and Growth Pact. Public debt is too high -- but bond yields have fallen since investors became

convinced that Emmanuel Macron would be elected president, suggesting that investors are willing to give him and his reform agenda a chance.

There's no imminent threat to stability, so Macron can afford to keep the fiscal stance unchanged for now. If the economy grows faster than expected, the deficit will fall faster, too, even with fiscal policy unchanged (under the influence of the automatic stabilizers).

The euro zone still needs a more integrated fiscal policy, with a common budget to help the bloc's economy cope with the business cycle. For now, that isn't happening. Until it does, the member states will have to plot their own fiscal paths through the recovery.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

U.K. Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn Unveils Left-Wing Platform Ahead of Elections

Jason Douglas

LONDON—The U.K.'s main opposition Labour Party on Tuesday pledged to nationalize parts of British industry and raise taxes on high earners if it wins a national election June 8, an avowedly left-wing platform that party leader Jeremy Corbyn hopes will narrow a gap in the polls with Prime Minister Theresa May's governing Conservatives.

Launching the party's election manifesto at an event in northern England, Mr. Corbyn said that for the past seven years the U.K. has been run "for the rich, the elite and the vested interest," vowing to fashion an economy "run for the many, not the few" if he wins power.

In a throwback to the politics of the early 1980s in Britain, the manifesto listed commitments to nationalize

railways and water companies and to increase taxes on corporations and the top 5% of earners.

The 128-page document also promised to raise the minimum wage and to create a National Investment Bank with regional branches to finance small-business lending, policies the party hopes will strike a chord with voters wearied by years of sluggish earnings growth and a long squeeze on public spending.

Mr. Corbyn's pitch highlights how far left the Labour Party has tacked since former Prime Minister Tony Blair stood down as leader in 2007 following three back-to-back election victories under the centrist "New Labour" banner.

Opinion polls suggest Mrs. May and the center-right Conservatives are heading for a big win in next month's

vote. A poll of more than 2,000 adults published Monday by ICM put support for the Conservatives at 35% against 24% for Labour, with the remainder either undecided or planning to vote for smaller parties or abstain.

Mrs. May has sought to woo working-class voters who for years made up the backbone of Labour's support. She has been aided by strong support for Brexit among many of them, a decline in Labour in Scotland, and the unpopularity of Mr. Corbyn himself.

Labour said in its manifesto that it will seek a close relationship with the European Union after Brexit that maintains many of the benefits of the EU's single market for goods and services, though it didn't elaborate on how this would be achieved. Mrs. May advocates a

clear break, and says she wants to strike a far-reaching free-trade deal with the EU instead.

In a separate document, Labour said its commitments amount to around £50 billion (\$64.5 billion) in additional public spending over the next five years, which it said would be financed entirely by new taxes. Economy spokesman John McDonnell said Labour would, though, take advantage of record-low interest rates to finance greater investment in infrastructure.

In response, Conservative David Gauke, chief secretary to the Treasury, said Labour's sums "don't add up" and taxes would have to rise more broadly to finance the extra spending.

Bershidsky : Brexit Can Now Be Quicker But Harder

In one of the most important rulings in its history, the European Court of Justice on Tuesday gave the European Commission broad powers to negotiate trade deals without the approval of each member state. This is likely to make Brexit negotiations much easier than expected, but the final deal -- if there is one -- worse for the U.K.

Formally, the ruling has to do with the EU's free trade agreement with Singapore, signed in 2013. The court decided that only its provisions that concern portfolio investment and arbitration between investors and states fall outside the competence of the European Commission, which negotiates trade deals on behalf of the member states. Since those provisions are there, the Singapore deal requires the ratification of member states. The Commission has the power to negotiate everything else -- the

movement of goods and services, transportation, direct investment, intellectual property, antitrust rules.

The unexpected decision -- the court went against the opinion of its advocate general, which only happens in about a third of cases -- opens up an exciting prospect for the U.K. Before the ruling, it had to assume that it would have to wait years before any Brexit agreement reached with the Commission could come into effect, and any European Union member state could derail it. All the countries have different ratification procedures, and in a number of them, a referendum may be called on a major trade deal.

In August 2014, the EU concluded talks on CETA, a comprehensive trade agreement with Canada. It's still not in effect. Last year, the regional parliament of Wallonia in Belgium nearly killed the deal because legislators claimed it would be bad for local farmers.

This is not going to happen to any Brexit deal now, if only the parties agree to keep portfolio investment and conflict resolution out of the talks. That's a small sacrifice to make for clarity on the future relationship between Europe and the United Kingdom. CETA negotiations began in 2009 and took five years until the parties were satisfied -- but the U.K. is an EU member now, and standard harmonization efforts may not be as time-consuming.

Does this, however, make a good deal more likely for the U.K.? That's doubtful. The Commission needs only a qualified majority to reach a trade deal, so it no longer needs to look quite so much over its shoulder at national governments as it negotiates Brexit. That makes life easier for Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, who have made it clear they want to serve the U.K. with a large divorce bill and harsher terms. There are

member states that would like a softer Brexit -- Ireland, Denmark, Cyprus and Poland, for example -- but they aren't particularly influential behind the scenes compared with France and Germany.

So it seems that the European Court of Justice has handed a more valuable gift to the Commission and the hard-line countries than to the U.K. Could that, perhaps, have something to do with one of the U.K.'s negotiating priorities -- getting out from under the ECJ's jurisdiction as soon as possible?

Be that as it may, once Brexit is over, with or without a deal, the EU will from now on have an easier procedure for concluding trade agreements -- something that could one day allow it to make a deal with the U.S. as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former U.S. President Barack Obama once dreamed, before political developments both in Germany and the U.S. scuppered the plan.

POLITICO Court ruling makes Brexit harder. Or easier.

Hans von der Burchard and Simon Marks

At first glance, Britain's trade deal with the EU after Brexit just got harder.

A ruling by the EU's top court on Tuesday set an important precedent that trade agreements will have to be ratified by the bloc's 38 national and regional parliaments if they include clauses about investors' rights.

That sounds like bad news for Britain. Running a gauntlet of approvals from Lisbon to Tallinn would be highly likely to stretch out the timetable of any EU-U.K. trade deal.

"The government's objective to agree [to] a comprehensive U.K.-EU trade deal within the next two years will be challenging if the deal needs to be approved by ... national and regional parliaments," said Alice Darling, a lawyer in the trade team at Clifford Chance.

Despite the perils of a what is known as a "mixed agreement," however, the outlook may not be as gloomy as it first appears for the U.K., as the Singapore ruling also offers a relatively easy way for Europe to strike trade deals more quickly and avoid getting bogged down in parliamentary debates across Europe.

To be sure, the precedent set by the European Court of Justice's ruling

on the EU-Singapore trade deal locks in the concept that EU pacts should require approval by the bloc's member countries. That revives memories of last year's diplomatic battle over a landmark EU trade deal with Canada, which almost collapsed because of objections from the Belgian regional parliament of Wallonia.

"Any meaningful EU-U.K. deal" such as the "bold and ambitious" trade agreement that British Prime Minister Theresa May has vowed to strike "will undoubtedly have to be a mixed agreement," said Marco Bronckers, a professor of trade law at Leiden University, the Netherlands. "Parliaments across the EU will want to exert their influence on Brexit," he added.

Learning from the fight over the Canada deal, Britain is aware that national parliaments can seek to exert their leverage on a range of subjects that may not be immediately related to the content of the deal. Romania, for example, threatened last year to block the accord with Ottawa over visa reciprocity.

Brexit streamlined

However, a striking feature of the ECJ ruling is that it sets out only two investment issues over which national parliaments should be granted effective veto power over trade deals. Contrary to a non-binding opinion by the court's advocate general in December,

Tuesday's decision says key areas of modern trade agreements such as transport, intellectual property rights, labor and environmental standards are exclusive EU competencies.

One European Commission source said "champagne corks were popping" that so few EU competencies had been surrendered to the national parliaments and stressed that Brussels would have control over core Brexit dossiers such as EU-U.K. aviation.

This meant the lion's share of Brexit issues could be resolved at the EU level in Brussels, without any looming fear of interference from the 36 national and regional parliaments in the remaining EU27 countries.

Even more significantly, several members of the European Parliament suggested it could become easier for the EU to strike trade deals by simply dropping contentious clauses on investment and discussing them in a different format. This would allow the EU to negotiate the most substantial aspects of trade agreements without worrying about the hazards of national ratification.

"For the limited areas of shared competence defined by the court, we should in the future envisage separate agreements, concluded jointly by the EU and member states and ratified by national parliaments. Such a separation would enhance

the ability of the EU to conclude trade deals," said Guy Verhofstadt, president of the liberal ALDE group of MEPs and Brexit coordinator in the European Parliament.

Daniel Caspary, the leading lawmaker on trade in the European People's Party, said: "We now need separate agreements."

The ECJ's decision zeroed in on two aspects of trade deals that required them to be ratified by national parliaments. The first were trade provisions relating to non-direct foreign investment. This refers to "portfolio" investments where the investor does not take a managing stake.

The ECJ's decision zeroed in on two aspects of trade deals that required them to be ratified by national parliaments.

The second — far more contentious — realm of national competence is the arbitration framework under which investors can sue governments. This proved to be the main point of discord in the Canadian agreement last year and triggered resistance from the Walloon parliament.

The key point of the Singapore ruling is that the parliaments will lose their say if the deal does not include these clauses on investment.

Allie Renison, head of EU and trade policy at Britain's Institute of Directors, took heart from the

decision. "This ruling will likely make it easier for the EU to conclude trade deals without fear of as many hold-ups from national and sub-national legislatures," she said.

The big issue, though, will be whether Britain and the EU will be able to split trade and investment.

"This may mean a separation between trade and investment in future agreements. How this affects

Brexit negotiations will depend on whether the final trade agreement includes investment provisions or not, although neither the U.K. or EU has expressed much interest in this to date," Renison said.

INTERNATIONAL

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**

Schwartz

WASHINGTON—Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan praised President Donald Trump for his November election victory and hailed his visit to Washington as the launch of a new cooperative era, but attacked America's Kurdish partners in Syria as terrorists.

With Mr. Trump standing by his side, Mr. Erdogan denounced Washington's Syrian Kurdish allies and said he would never accept them as partners in the region. Mr. Erdogan suggested that the Syrian Kurdish group is a "clear and present danger" to Turkey and said "there is no place for the terrorist organizations in the future of our region."

Mr. Erdogan's comments came days after Mr. Trump approved plans to directly arm the Kurdish force in Syria, known as the YPG, that is working with U.S. special operations forces to push Islamic State from Raqqa, the militants' biggest Syrian stronghold.

The two presidents expressed hopes of repairing the strained relationship between the U.S. and Turkey, two North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies. But the issue of arming the Kurdish fighters has cast a cloud over those efforts.

Mr. Erdogan and Turkish leaders view the YPG as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, better

Erdogan Praises Trump, Denounces U.S.'s Kurdish Allies in Syria

Dion Nissenbaum
and Felicia

known as the PKK, which has been fighting a decadeslong struggle for more rights and autonomy in Turkey, where Kurds represent about 18% of the population.

The U.S. and Turkey both classify the PKK as a terrorist organization, but disagree on the YPG. The U.S. views the YPG as a separate fighting force and doesn't classify it as a terrorist group.

In the wake of Mr. Trump's decision to arm the YPG, the U.S. plans to funnel antitank weapons, machine guns and ammunition to the YPG as they prepare to attack Islamic State in Raqqa.

Turkey has repeatedly accused the YPG of smuggling arms and fighters from neighboring Syria into Turkey. Last month, Turkey drew the ire of the U.S. by bombing YPG fighters in northern Syria, where U.S. special operations forces work side-by-side with the fighters.

After Mr. Trump approved plans to arm the YPG, Turkish officials threatened to keep striking the YPG in Syria if needed.

Some U.S. officials worry that Mr. Erdogan could complicate the fight for Raqqa by attacking the YPG. In an effort to reassure Turkey, the U.S. is preparing to step up intelligence sharing with Ankara to help it in its fight against the PKK. After meeting with Turkey's defense minister on Tuesday, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said the U.S.

plans to "increase cooperation on Turkey's counter-PKK efforts."

Turkey is a vital player in the fight against Islamic State. The country is home to Incirlik Air Base, which serves as a major launchpad for airstrikes against Islamic State.

Mr. Erdogan praised Mr. Trump's election win and said the visit could usher in a new chapter for the two countries.

"I believe my current official visit to the United States will mark an historic turn of tide," he said in Turkish through a translator. "We are laying the foundation of a new era."

In his brief comments before Mr. Erdogan spoke, Mr. Trump made no mention of the YPG decision and said it was a "great honor" to welcome the Turkish president to Washington.

Mr. Trump expressed support for Turkey's fight against the PKK and said he hoped the two countries could work more closely in confronting terrorist threats.

"Today we face a new enemy in the fight against terrorism, and again we seek to face this threat together," he said.

The YPG dispute isn't the only one straining relations between the U.S. and Turkey. Mr. Erdogan is also pressing the U.S. to extradite Fethullah Gulen, a reclusive Turkish cleric living in Pennsylvania that

Turkey has accused of orchestrating last summer's failed coup in Turkey.

Mr. Gulen has denied the allegations and the U.S. extradition process is expected to take years.

Since the July coup attempt, Mr. Erdogan has launched a sweeping crackdown on his opponents in Turkey. His government has closed scores of media outlets, detained more than 130,000 people and arrested nearly 50,000. Turkey now detains more journalists than any other country, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Last October, as part of the post-coup crackdown, Turkish officials detained an American pastor, Andrew Brunson, who has led a ministry in the country for decades. In March, Mr. Brunson publicly urged Mr. Trump not to work with Turkey until he was freed. On Tuesday, a senior administration official said, Mr. Trump raised the issue with Mr. Erdogan in their private meeting.

Mr. Erdogan has consolidated power since the failed coup. Last month, Mr. Erdogan claimed victory in a disputed referendum that gives him expansive new powers as president.

In his statement, Mr. Trump made no comments on Mr. Erdogan's crackdown in Turkey.

**The
Washington
Post**

Trump, Erdogan commit to cooperation despite tensions over Syrian militias

President Trump on Tuesday pledged continued support for Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, highlighting the importance of the U.S.-Turkish alliance despite mounting tensions over Washington's support for Kurdish rebels in Syria.

Speaking alongside Erdogan at the White House, Trump said Turkey

and the United States would act together against extremist groups including the Islamic State. "Again, we seek to face this threat together," he told reporters.

Trump welcomed Erdogan, fresh off a narrow electoral victory that granted him wide-ranging new powers, to Washington just a week after the Pentagon announced a

plan to directly arm Kurdish militiamen in Syria for the first time.

While Erdogan's government had long warned U.S. officials against expanding support for the People's Protection Units (YPG), empowering a group Turkey sees as an existential threat, the warm public remarks from both leaders reflect the NATO allies' need to hold

together a key partnership at a time of intense strain.

Aaron Stein, a Turkey scholar at the Atlantic Council, said the modest goals for Erdogan's two-day visit reflected the constraints of a relationship that has generated friction on both sides but that both nations cannot afford to jettison.

It was “mission accomplished, if your expectations are that you want people who are smiling in the photographs,” he said.

For the United States, Turkey has been a key ally in the Middle East. Most recently, the use of Turkish military facilities has been critical in the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State in Syria. For Ankara, the backing of NATO’s most powerful member has been an important boost as Turkey has asserted itself on the world stage.

In a reflection of those mixed sentiments, Erdogan heaped praise on his host — saying Trump had presided over a “legendary triumph” after last year’s elections — but reiterated his objections to the U.S. partnership with the YPG.

“We should never allow those groups to manipulate the religious structure and the ethnic structure of the region, making terrorism as a pretext or an excuse,” he said. Turkey views the YPG and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political wing of the same organization, to be an extension of

the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a Turkish group that Ankara and Washington have labeled a terrorist movement.

“Taking YPG and PYD into consideration in the region will never be accepted and it is going to be against a global agreement that we have reached,” Erdogan said.

While U.S. military officials have acknowledged Turkey’s concerns, they say they have little choice in backing the YPG, the most effective fighting force they have been able to recruit in their bid to dislodge the Islamic State from Raqqa, the Syrian city that is the militants’ de facto capital.

Erdogan also made reference to another of the issues creating friction in U.S.-Turkish ties: Fethullah Gulen, the Turkish cleric who lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, whom Erdogan has accused of plotting a coup attempt last July.

Turkish officials have repeatedly asked the United States to extradite Gulen, who oversees a vast

educational and religious network in Turkey, over his suspected involvement in that episode.

The Justice Department must decide if Turkey has a case; if it does so, a federal court would then rule on extradition. So far, despite Turkey’s submission of what it says is voluminous evidence, Justice has made no determination.

In an opinion piece published in *The Washington Post* on Tuesday, Gulen denied any involvement in the coup attempt.

Turkey has issued threats on the U.S. stance on Gulen and the YPG, saying future ties would hinge on its extradition request, and more recently saying it would take further military action against Kurdish militiamen if the United States provides new support.

The official visit was also an opportunity for the Trump administration to demonstrate its backing for Erdogan, who faces growing criticism for his government’s crackdown against an array of perceived opponents,

including the arrest of tens of thousands of people from the media, military and judiciary.

On Tuesday, dozens of people demonstrating for and against Erdogan’s visit clashed outside the Turkish ambassador’s residence in Washington. Nine people were injured and two were arrested, D.C. police said.

In the latest sign of his administration’s reluctance to publicly criticize allies on matters of human rights, Trump made no mention of those issues.

Erdogan expressed optimism that his visit would mark an improvement in U.S.-Turkey ties.

“President Trump’s recent election victory has led to the awakening of a new set of aspirations and expectations and hopes in our region,” he said. “We know that by the help of the new U.S. administration, these hopes will not be lost in vain.”



Margon : Donald Trump too cuddly with dictators like Tayyip Erdogan

On a hot summer night last July, elements of the Turkish military attempted a coup. It failed, but at least 241 people were killed and about 1,400 injured during related clashes in Ankara, the capital, and Istanbul.

A few days later, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared a state of emergency, giving him broad and sweeping powers to bypass parliament and ignore the Constitutional Court.

In the name of snuffing out the coup plotters, Erdogan’s government has shuttered news outlets, jailed journalists and opposition party members, and purged thousands upon thousands of government employees. The actions intensified a crackdown on free speech and expression that had been underway for quite some time.

In April, a landmark referendum changing the Constitution formalized Erdogan’s consolidation of power, undermining the role of courts and parliament as checks and balances on the president.

On the heels of this lurch away from democratic norms and rule of law,

after which President Trump called to offer his congratulations, Erdogan will make an official visit to the White House on Tuesday.

The principal focus of the visit is expected to be disagreement over Syria policy, which the White House perpetuated by announcing on last week that it would provide additional military aid to Syrian opposition forces dominated by a Syrian Kurdish armed group. Turkey sees this as unacceptable indirect support for the decades-long Kurdish insurgency in Turkey. Another thorny issue will certainly be the requested extradition of the U.S.-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara accuses of orchestrating the coup.

But what’s likely to be absent from the conversation is just as telling.

We should expect no substantial discussion of the 150 journalists detained in Turkey on misleading or bogus charges, or the elected politicians from peaceful pro-Kurdish parties who remain behind bars. Also unlikely to be on the agenda: The fate of the 50,000 people swept up on overly broad terrorism charges, or even the more than 100,000 civil servants

permanently dismissed with no right of appeal.

Conversations about Syria probably won’t include the 3 million Syrians hosted by Turkey — more than half of them women and children. President Trump has made clear that his primary response to their suffering is to try to ban even the most vulnerable from being resettled here and to propose major cuts to U.S.-funded programs that support their most basic needs. For its part, Turkey been harassing foreign aid groups and even forced the closure of Mercy Corps, an organization that has been supporting hundreds of thousands of civilians across the border in Syria.

President Trump’s recent meetings with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Chinese President Xi Jinping show there will be no hesitation to embrace Erdogan as a strong leader, possibly even a “fantastic guy.” The implied support for Erdogan’s autocratic approach indicates a real apathy for the deterioration of the rule of law in Turkey — and beyond.

But Erdogan shouldn’t expect a free pass in Washington. Congress does exercise vital checks and balances

on U.S. presidential power, and its members are likely to puncture the notion that America will offer only uncritical support for Erdogan’s tactics.

Indeed, on May 3 a group of 15 bipartisan senators — led by Ben Cardin, D-Md., and Marco Rubio, R-Fla. — reasserted the need to include human rights as a central component of U.S. foreign policy. And the Senate Armed Services Committee chair, John McCain, R-Ariz., noted in a May 8 *New York Times* op-ed that the U.S. is a “country with a conscience (that has) long believed moral concerns must be an essential part of our foreign policy.”

Trump and Erdogan may find common ground as leaders with little interest in oversight or checks on power. And they are likely to double down on a strengthened partnership in the name of combating terrorism even if they remain at odds on Syria. Even so, Trump should be aware that ignoring Erdogan’s erosion of rule of law — and his targeting of critics, journalists and politicians as “terrorists” — will not make Turkey a more reliable ally that can effectively address legitimate security threats.

UNE - Israel Said to Be Source of Secret Intelligence Trump Gave to Russians

Adam Goldman, Eric Schmitt and Peter Baker

Mr. Trump said on Twitter that he had an “absolute right” to share information in the interest of fighting terrorism and called his meeting with the Russians “very, very successful” in a brief appearance later at the White House.

On Capitol Hill, reaction split along party lines, but even many Republicans indicated that they wanted the White House to show more discipline.

“There’s some alignments that need to take place over there, and I think they’re fully aware of that,” said Senator Bob Corker, Republican of Tennessee and the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. “Just the decision-making processes and everybody being on the same page.”

In the meeting last week, Mr. Trump told Sergey V. Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, and Sergey I. Kislyak, the Russian ambassador, details about the Islamic State plot, including the city in Syria where the ally learned the information, the current official said. At least some of the details that the United States has about the Islamic State plot came from the Israelis, said the officials, who were not authorized to discuss the matter and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

It was not clear whether the president or the other Americans in the meeting were aware of the sensitivity of what was shared. Only afterward, when notes on the discussion were circulated among National Security Council officials, was the information flagged as too sensitive to be shared, even among many American officials, the officials said.

Intelligence officials worried that Mr. Trump provided enough details to effectively expose the source of the information and the manner in which it had been collected.

Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, the national security adviser, defended Mr. Trump’s move, saying the president made a spur-of-the-moment decision to tell the Russians what he knew and did not expose the source of the intelligence because he was not told where it came from.

Moreover, General McMaster said that by discussing the city where the information originated, the president

had not given away secrets. “It was nothing that you would not know from open-source reporting in terms of a source of concern,” he said. “And it had all to do with operations that are already ongoing, had been made public for months.”

Two senior United States military officials said that Mr. Trump’s disclosures seemed to align with an increasing concern that militants responsible for such attacks were slipping out of Raqqa, the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed capital, and taking refuge in other cities under their control, such as Deir al-Zour and Mayadeen.

These officials said they had no specific knowledge of what Mr. Trump told the two senior Russian diplomats in the Oval Office last week, or how that related to a likely decision expected soon by the Homeland Security Department to expand its ban on carrying portable electronics. But the officials said the timing of the events seemed hardly a coincidence.

American and British authorities in March barred passengers from airports in 10 predominantly Muslim countries from carrying laptop computers, iPads and other devices larger than a cellphone aboard inbound flights to the United States after intelligence analysts concluded that the Islamic State was developing a type of bomb hidden in batteries. Homeland Security officials are considering whether to broaden the ban to include airports in Europe and possibly other places, American security officials said Tuesday.

Mr. Trump’s disclosure was also likely to fuel questions about the president’s relationship with Moscow at the same time that the F.B.I. and congressional committees are investigating whether his associates cooperated with Russian meddling in last year’s election. Mr. Trump has repeatedly dismissed such suspicions as false stories spread by Democrats to explain their election defeat, but his friendly approach toward President Vladimir V. Putin in spite of Moscow’s intervention in Ukraine and other actions has stirred controversy.

The timing of the episode also threatened to overshadow Mr. Trump’s first trip abroad as president. He is scheduled to leave on Friday for Saudi Arabia, Israel, Italy and Belgium.

In Israel, he was already likely to contend with Israeli officials rattled by the administration’s refusal to say outright that the Western Wall, one of the holiest prayer sites in Judaism, lies in Israel, and is not subject to territorial claims by the Palestinians. The wall is in Jerusalem — part of what is known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary — and is considered one of the holiest sites in Islam. Both the Israelis and Palestinians claim the city as their capital.

Now, the Americans and Israelis will have to contend with the serious breach of espionage etiquette. Israel had previously urged the United States to be careful about the handling of the intelligence that Mr. Trump discussed, the officials said.

Former officials said it was not uncommon for presidents to unintentionally say too much in meetings, and they said that in administrations from both parties, staff members typically established bright lines for their bosses to avoid crossing before such meetings.

“The Russians have the widest intelligence collection mechanism in the world outside of our own,” said John Sipher, a 28-year veteran of the C.I.A. who served in Moscow in the 1990s and later ran the agency’s Russia program for three years. “They can put together a good picture with just a few details. They can marry President Trump’s comments with their own intelligence, and intelligence from their allies. They can also deploy additional resources to find out details.”

Nonetheless, General McMaster said he was not concerned that information sharing among partner countries might stop.

“What the president discussed with the foreign minister was wholly appropriate to that conversation and is consistent with the routine sharing of information between the president and any leaders with whom he’s engaged,” General McMaster said at a White House briefing, seeking to play down the sensitivity of the information that Mr. Trump disclosed.

Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, declined to tell reporters whether the White House had reached out to the ally that provided the sensitive intelligence.

But General McMaster appeared to acknowledge that Thomas P. Bossert, the assistant to the president for Homeland Security and counterterrorism, had called the C.I.A. and the National Security Agency after the meeting with the Russian officials. Other officials have said that the spy agencies were contacted to help contain the damage from the leak to the Russians.

General McMaster would not confirm that Mr. Bossert made the calls but suggested that if he did, he was acting “maybe from an overabundance of caution.”

The episode could have far-reaching consequences, Democrats warned. Any country that shares intelligence with American officials “could decide it can’t trust the United States with information, or worse, that it can’t trust the president of the United States with information,” said Representative Adam B. Schiff of California, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

“I have to hope that someone will counsel the president about just what it means to protect closely held information and why this is so dangerous, ultimately, to our national security,” Mr. Schiff said at a policy conference in Washington sponsored by the Center for American Progress, a liberal group.

Russia dismissed the reports. A spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry denied that Mr. Trump had given classified information to Russian officials, and she denigrated American news reports of the disclosure as “fake.”

Sharing the United States’ own intelligence with Russia, much less information from a foreign ally, has long been a contentious issue in American national security circles. In fact, many Republicans strenuously objected last year when the Obama administration proposed sharing limited intelligence about Syria with Russia.

One of the Republicans was Mike Pompeo, the former congressman from Kansas who now runs the C.I.A. In an appearance last year on a podcast hosted by Frank Gaffney, a former Reagan administration official now best known for his anti-Muslim views, Mr. Pompeo said sharing intelligence with the Russians was a “dumb idea.”

Did Trump Pass Israeli Intelligence to the Russians?

David A. Graham

Under siege for President Trump's reported disclosure of classified information to two Russian officials last week, the White House has focused on the legality of any disclosure, saying the president can share what he wants.

But that narrow view overlooks the other implications of the disclosure. According to *The Washington Post* and others, the information was extremely sensitive, shared with the U.S. by an ally as part of an intelligence-sharing agreement so delicate that the details were not shared with allies, and were restricted within the U.S. government. So who was the source of the intelligence?

Some speculated the source was Jordan, especially after Trump called King Abdullah Tuesday morning. But *The New York Times* reports that the source for the intelligence was actually Israel:

Israel is one of the United States' most important allies and a major intelligence collector in the Middle East. The revelation that Mr. Trump boasted about some of Israel's most sensitive information to the Russians could damage the

relationship between the two countries. It also raises the possibility that the information could be passed to Iran, Russia's close ally and Israel's main threat in the Middle East.

NBC News is reporting the same. If true, that revelation comes at a delicate time for the two countries. Trump has positioned himself as a staunch friend of Israel and is scheduled to visit the country next week, but several tensions have emerged between the U.S. and Israel.

Interestingly, there were reports that the Israeli intelligence community was wary of Trump long before the latest Russia news. In January, the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* reported that Israeli intelligence officials were concerned that if Israel shared information with the U.S., that information could end up making its way to Russia and from there to Iran, given Trump's praise for Russia on the campaign trail. Summarizing the reporting, *Haaretz* wrote:

As Russian intelligence is associated with intelligence officials in Tehran, highly classified information, such as Israel's

clandestine methods of operation and intelligence sources, could potentially reach Iran. Such information has been shared with the United States in the past.

Yediot Ahronot also reported that officials in the Obama administration had warned the Israelis to be wary of Trump.

It now appears that the fear of Israeli information moving to Trump and then on to the Russians has become a reality. And it happens as Trump is scheduled to travel to Israel next week.

Israeli intelligence and defense leaders have not always seen eye-to-eye with the hardline government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whom Trump has hailed as a friend and promised to back to the hilt. Yet there are tensions between Netanyahu and the Trump administration as well. Unlike past U.S. presidents, Trump has refused to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and he appointed a hardliner as his ambassador to the country. Yet the administration seems to be reversing its promise to relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and this week a peculiar disagreement has

broken out over the Western Wall, a contested site in Jerusalem.

As Trump made plans to visit the sacred site, diplomats in the country reportedly told the prime minister's office he did not want Netanyahu there, and that the wall was located in the Palestinian-controlled West Bank. "Israel is convinced that this statement is contrary to the position of President Trump, as expressed in his firm opposition to the most recent U.N. Security Council Resolution," Netanyahu's office said in a statement. During a briefing on Tuesday, National-Security Adviser H.R. McMaster refused to comment on whether the administration believed the wall was in Israel or in the West Bank. In an afternoon press briefing, Press Secretary Sean Spicer said the Western Wall is "clearly in Jerusalem," but also dodged the question.

Between the Western Wall, the embassy, and the classified disclosure, Trump and Netanyahu should have plenty to talk about during next week's visit. That is, of course, if the Israelis are willing to tell him things he might repeat elsewhere.

POLITICO Trump's intelligence gaffe creates tension with Israel

By Annie Karni

Israeli leaders are unlikely to let the revelation that President Donald Trump shared classified Israeli intelligence with Russian officials derail a critical state visit next week.

But behind the scenes, U.S. officials may have some groveling to do in order to regain the trust of one of their most critical intelligence partners.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the Mossad is raging angry right now, and the Israeli defense intelligence agency is questioning how much they should be sharing with the administration," said Ilan Goldenberg, director of the Middle East security program at the Center for a New American Security, who worked under former Secretary of State John Kerry on Middle East issues. "That's a profound national security problem."

He added: "This is a disaster because we have few intelligence relationships that are more important."

Nobody expects Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to confront Trump in public. Weakened politically at home and dependent on his far-right coalition government,

the embattled Israeli politician needs to use Trump's visit to project a tight bond. He is not expected to start a public feud over the New York Times report that it was Israeli intelligence about an Islamic State threat that Trump shared with Russian officials visiting the Oval Office last week.

But the timing of the intelligence breach, just days before Trump is scheduled to depart for his first foreign trip, has also unnecessarily rattled the relationship, ahead of what was expected to be one of the most meaningful and welcoming stops on Trump's five-country tour.

"The Israeli government won't want to blow up the issue," a former senior U.S. official said in an email. "But behind the scenes I would assume that the Mossad is very upset and will want some ironclad assurances from its American counterparts about the handling of similar information before they share it again (like a promise that it won't be shared with the president!)."

Daniel Kurtzer, who served as U.S. ambassador to Israel from 1997 to 2001, said intelligence officials will be wondering, "Can we really trust you guys?"

The public smoothing of the intelligence fight began Tuesday. Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer, a close ally of Netanyahu, said in a statement to the New York Times that the country had "full confidence in our intelligence-sharing relationship with the United States" and that Israel "looks forward to deepening that relationship in the years ahead under President Trump."

On Tuesday, White House press secretary Sean Spicer would not comment on the news reports regarding Israeli intelligence but said he was "pleased to see Ambassador Dermer's comment."

"We appreciate the relationship that we have with Israel and appreciate the exchange of information we have with them," Spicer said.

Trump, who during the campaign called himself "a newcomer to politics, but not to backing the Jewish state," remains popular in Israel, where a poll during last year's Republican primaries found that one in four Israelis said they would have voted for Trump, making him the favored GOP candidate.

And Trump, who has branded himself as a master negotiator, continues to say he will deliver what

he has called "the ultimate deal," peace in the Middle East.

White House officials said Tuesday he plans to visit the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, as well as the Western Wall, a holy site in Judaism.

But the intelligence breach wasn't the only source of friction ahead of the trip.

On Monday, an Israeli news outlet reported that after Netanyahu requested to visit the wall with Trump, a U.S. official said it wasn't possible because the Western Wall was part of the West Bank and not Israel.

The comments infuriated Israelis, who consider all of Jerusalem their territory. The area around the Western Wall was captured by Israel in a 1967 war. It is longstanding U.S. policy that the status of Jerusalem will be determined in a final negotiation between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

At a briefing Tuesday, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster refused to answer questions about whether the administration considered the Western Wall to be part of Israel. "That sounds like a policy decision," McMaster told

reporters at a briefing in the White House.

"For a presidential visit, the failure to describe the Western Wall as part of Israel is a much bigger deal than the intel matter," said Jeremy Bash, who previously served as chief of staff at the Defense Department and then at the CIA. "I think they seem to be too concerned it would upset the Palestinians, and they seem very eager for a breakthrough on the Israeli-Palestinian front. It raises the question of whether the administration is as pro-Israel as it claims to be."

As the White House has been consumed by various self-created crises in the past week -- starting with the fallout of the shock firing of FBI director James Comey --

planning for the eight-day foreign trip has proceeded on a separate track, White House officials said.

Inside the White House, the daily trip planning meeting, which is chaired by son-in-law Jared Kushner, is typically attended by deputy National Security Adviser Dina Powell, McMaster and Joe Hagin, the White House chief of staff for operations, as well as National Security Council officials, an administration source said. Those meetings have continued throughout the past week.

On the trip, Trump is expected to be joined by almost all of his senior West Wing aides, who even at home often stick close to the president for fear of being out of the loop, or

diminished in power, if they stray from his side.

Kushner, daughter Ivanka Trump, chief strategist Steve Bannon, chief of staff Reince Priebus, economic adviser Gary Cohn, Powell, policy adviser Stephen Miller, and Spicer will all be along for major chunks of the trip, according to multiple White House officials. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will travel with the president through the G7 meeting in Sicily, and McMaster will accompany him for the entirety of the trip.

Also among those traveling with the president: his trusted aide Hope Hicks, deputy press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders and National Security Council spokesman Michael Anton, among others.

Counselor Kellyanne Conway, whose portfolio does not include foreign policy issues, and communications director Michael Dubke will be staying behind in Washington, White House officials told POLITICO.

Trump officials have been reaching out to Republican senators for guidance ahead of the trip. Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), who chairs the Foreign Relations Committee, last week hosted Kushner, McMaster and Powell in his office, where they "sought input from a number of senators regarding President Trump's first foreign trip," a Corker spokesman said. He would not say which senators participated in the briefing.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Assad Regime Mocks U.S. Claims Over Syria Prison Killings, Coverup

Noam Raydan

"As far as I'm concerned, it is time to eliminate Assad," Mr. Gallant, a former general in the Israeli military, told a conference near Jerusalem organized by the magazine Israel Defense.

The State Department's assertions about Saydnaya on Monday weren't unprecedented.

In a report issued in February, Amnesty International estimated 13,000 people had been hanged at the prison between 2011 and 2015.

Citing testimony from former detainees and guards, the rights group accused the government of a "policy of extermination" against suspected dissidents and said there were "clear indications" that mass hangings were continuing at the facility, located about 18 miles north of Damascus.

It said such practices amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity, and were authorized "at the highest levels of the Syrian government."

The regime later called the report's findings untrue.

Tuesday's defiant response by Damascus to the fresh allegations over Saydnaya coincided with the

start of the sixth round of United Nations-sponsored peace talks in Geneva.

The head of the Syrian government's delegation to the talks, Bashar al-Jaafari, met Staffan de Mistura, the U.N. envoy for Syria, at U.N. headquarters in the Swiss city, SANA reported.

Mr. de Mistura again said that no end of fighting was possible in Syria unless a political settlement was reached.

"Everybody's been telling us, and we agree, that any type of reduction of violence, in this case de-escalation, cannot be sustained unless there is a political horizon in one direction or the other. That is exactly what we are pushing for," he said at a news conference on Monday.

A State Department official said a team of department experts were in Geneva consulting with opposition members. As in past rounds of the talks, more senior officials could be sent to attend, the official said in Washington.

Last week, Mr. Assad criticized the Geneva talks, saying in an interview with the Belarusian TV channel ONT

that there is "nothing substantial in all the Geneva meetings."

While the Geneva talks have made little progress in achieving a political resolution of the conflict, a separate diplomatic track known as the Astana process, named after the Kazakh capital where the talks are taking place, has succeeded in forging some agreements among outside nations involved in Syria's war.

Last week, three nations involved in the Astana process—regime allies Russia and Iran and rebel supporter Turkey—signed a memorandum calling for the establishment of de-escalation areas that would provide for a reduction in violence, delivery of humanitarian aid and an atmosphere that might lead to a resumption of a political process.

Similar cease-fire agreements have unraveled. On Tuesday, the U.K.-based opposition monitoring group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights accused regime forces of violating the latest deal by continuing attacks on opposition-held areas.

The New York Times

Syria Denies Burning Bodies of Political Prisoners

Anne Barnard

attacks on civilians" had prompted the new sanctions.

The timing, intensity and public announcement of the accusations the burning of bodies suggested that the Trump administration was signaling a tougher political line on Syria, as well as seeking to embarrass Russia and Iran, all in an effort to put pressure on Damascus at the Geneva talks.

Five previous rounds of negotiations in Geneva have yielded little progress. The war is now in its seventh year, in large part because government delegations have refused to discuss the possibility of a political transition from the rule of Mr. Assad.

The Geneva Communiqué, signed by Russia and the United States in 2012, envisioned the establishment

of a transitional governing body with full executive powers.

The Syrian government has refused to negotiate about power sharing or a phased transition, an idea that the international powers have been pushing more since the adoption in 2015 of Security Council Resolution 2254 calling for "credible, inclusive and nonsectarian governance."

The United States Treasury Department announced on Tuesday that it had frozen any assets held by five Syrians and five Syrian companies in American jurisdictions and had barred Americans from doing business with them. The Treasury Department said in a statement that Syria's "relentless

The opposition has also carried some degree of responsibility for the impasse, with its delegations disunited and unwilling to reduce their demands in the face of lost leverage on the battlefield.

Before previous rounds of talks, John Kerry, as secretary of state in the Obama administration, and Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations special envoy who is acting as mediator, tended to emphasize the search for common ground at the outset, even when there was little hope for progress.

Now, with the release of intelligence photographs of the prison complex, the United States is demonstrating a new willingness to publicly challenge and pressure Russia.

Up to this point, the United States has not confronted Russia or provided the public with all the evidence it says it has on war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons, by the Syrian government.

The declassified pictures do not appear to definitively prove the existence of a crematory, and rights groups that have investigated the

conflict said they had not reached such a conclusion. But it is well established that there are many bodies to dispose of, and there is precedent for the burning of bodies by security forces.

There is ample evidence that the Syrian government has for decades run a vast network of detention and torture facilities and carried out arbitrary forced disappearances, and that such practices have expanded greatly since the uprising broke out in 2011.

In addition to thousands that have been killed outright, tens of thousands more may have died as vast numbers of detainees lived through conditions of neglect and abuse in packed, dirty cells, conditions so severe that a United Nations commission found that they amounted to the crime against humanity of "extermination."

The New York Times has confirmed that such conditions are widespread through dozens of interviews with survivors and their relatives, and with former officials.

Beginning in 2013, The Times heard multiple accounts from residents in

and around Damascus who said they detected the scent of something like burning hair. That led some to suspect that bodies were being burned in nearby security facilities like the Mezze airport, where former detainees have reported seeing bodies burned.

Other witnesses have told of government soldiers and militiamen burning the bodies of those killed in the field. Some cases, like the massacre of civilians in Baniyas and Bayda in 2013, have been documented in multiple videos.

Mr. de Mistura opened the latest round of talks in Geneva by meeting with Syria's ambassador to the United Nations, Bashar al-Jaafari, on Tuesday morning, before having lunch with Russia's deputy foreign minister, Gennady Gatilov, and heading into a series of meetings with Syrian parties, starting with the head of the Syrian opposition delegation, Nasr al-Hariri, and members of the opposition High Negotiations Committee.

To make the most of the few days set aside for this round of discussions, United Nations officials said Mr. Jaafari was likely to return

for a second session with the special envoy in the evening.

United Nations officials said on Monday that they had reason to believe the current Geneva talks would be more substantive than previous ones. Mr. de Mistura said that more countries would participate this time — he said all the signatories to the Security Council resolution would attend, which would include Iran as well as Russia — and that the intention was "to go a little bit more deeply and actually be more businesslike."

"Any type of reduction of violence, in this case de-escalation, cannot be sustained unless there is a political horizon in one direction or the other," he added. "That is exactly what we are pushing for."

Mr. de Mistura's deputy, Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy, said he recently had a two-hour meeting with the Syrian deputy foreign minister, Fayssal Mekdad, in Damascus, that led him to believe the Syrian government was prepared to engage in more substantive discussions.

the Atlantic U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Syria Amid Accusations of Mass Killings

Aria Bendix

The Trump administration has imposed a new round of sanctions on five people and five companies in Syria, the U.S. Treasury Department announced Tuesday. In a statement, the department cited Syria's "relentless attacks on civilians" as grounds for the sanctions. A day earlier, the Trump administration accused Syria's Assad regime of cremating the remains of thousands of hanged prisoners in "an effort to cover up the extent of mass murder."

According to Stuart Jones, the acting assistant secretary for Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. State Department, recently declassified reports and photos show a crematorium at the Saydnaya military prison near the Syrian capital of Damascus. While Amnesty International previously reported that between 5,000 and 13,000 people were hanged at the prison from 2011 to 2015, evidence of a crematorium is new. On Monday, the Trump administration referred to the incineration of prisoners as a "new level of depravity" for Syria.

Syria denied the accusations of mass killings on Tuesday, calling them "lies" and "fabrications." Syria's Foreign Ministry said the U.S. has a track record of falsifying claims in order to justify the country's military aggression. The latest accusations were nothing more than a "new Hollywood plot," they said. On Tuesday, Stephane Dujarric, a spokesperson for the United Nations, said the UN could not verify the United States's allegations because Damascus had "systematically rejected" their requests to visit the city's prisons and detention centers. Still, he noted that "various UN entities have regularly documented and reported on human rights violations in Syria, including torture in the context of detention."

Tuesday's sanctions signify a mounting effort on behalf of the Trump administration to crack down on Syria's human rights abuses. Among those sanctioned are two brothers, Ihab and Iyad Makhoul, both cousins of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. According to Reuters, the men have been blacklisted for helping a third brother, Rami Makhoul, evade U.S.

sanctions placed on him in 2008. At the time, Rami was accused of aiding corrupt officials in the Syrian government. Tuesday's sanctions also targeted the Makhoul family's Al-Bustan Charity, along with their cousin, Muhammad Abbas, who was accused of doing Rami Makhoul's financial bidding. The sanctions have frozen any U.S. assets the men or their businesses might have and prohibit Americans or U.S. entities from doing business with them.

Compared to last month's sanctions from the U.S., this latest round appears relatively tame. On April 24, the Treasury Department announced that the U.S. had sanctioned 271 people accused of being involved in a chemical weapons attack carried out by the Assad regime, which reportedly killed at least 80 civilians. "The United States is sending a strong message with this action that we will not tolerate the use of chemical weapons by any actor and we intend to hold the Assad regime accountable for its unacceptable behavior," U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said at the time.

Despite this forceful communication with Syria, the U.S. was willing to engage in a sixth round of peace talks with the nation in Geneva on Tuesday. While Assad said last week that "nothing substantial" would come from the talks, UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, who brokered the talks, said the nations were, to some extent, "working in tandem." This was far from the case in early April, when the U.S. launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a Syrian airbase in response to a chemical weapons attack that killed at least 70 people. The attack marked the United States's first deliberate military action against the Assad regime over the course of Syria's ongoing civil war.

In the wake of the attack, Syria and the U.S. seem to be taking small steps toward diplomacy. But, as Monday's accusations of human rights abuse and Tuesday's sanctions indicate, there are many tensions left to resolve. As de Mistura put it on Tuesday, "Any type of reduction of violence ... cannot be sustained unless there is a political horizon in one direction or the other."

POLITICO Trump drawn into Saudi Game of Thrones

Kenneth P. Vogel

President Donald Trump is boning up on policy and protocol ahead of an international trip that begins Friday in Saudi Arabia, but he's already emerged as a peripheral and perhaps unwitting player in a power struggle between two Saudi princes seeking to succeed the aging King Salman.

In March, Trump raised eyebrows among royal court watchers in Washington and Middle Eastern capitals by holding an Oval Office meeting and unexpected formal lunch with Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the chief rival to Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef for the crown.

This month, in his own move to position himself with Trump's administration, the ministry run by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef quietly signed a \$5.4-million one year contract with SPG, a boutique Washington lobbying firm with ties to Trump's team.

The hefty contract, filed with the Department of Justice and reviewed by POLITICO, calls for SPG to provide "public relations and media engagement as well as public affairs counsel" to the Saudi Ministry of the Interior. While Saudi Arabia deploys an army of well-paid lobbyists and p.r. consultants in Washington, the SPG contract appears to represent the first time in recent years that the Interior Ministry has retained a lobbying firm.

The two princes, known as MBS and MBN, respectively, have been quietly jockeying for position to succeed the 81-year-old king, who is widely believed to be in declining health.

The quiet power struggle between MBN and MBS has high-stakes in the Middle East and around the world. That's true as well in Washington, where Trump is struggling with the art of diplomacy, and where the princes' oil-rich kingdom has long been viewed as a critical but sometimes uneasy ally in the fight against extremism.

Since taking office, Trump has quieted his campaign trail criticism of the Saudis, as his administration weighs more than \$100 billion in arms sales to the country and signals continued support for its intervention in Yemen, despite humanitarian concerns.

Trump is scheduled to meet in Riyadh in the coming days with King Salman, as well as with both MBN,

who is the King's nephew and is the first in line for the crown, and MBS, who is the King's son and is the No. 2 in the order of succession.

Experts say that Trump — who is coming off a string of embarrassing diplomatic and intelligence faux pas, including last week's disclosure of classified information to Russian officials — should be careful to heed diplomatic protocol in Riyadh to avoid being seen as expressing a preference between the two princes.

"Any perceived efforts to play favorites will redound to our detriment, because the Saudis as a whole — even the ones who like us — will say, 'What the hell are you doing meddling in our process, about which you know nothing?'" said Simon Henderson, a Saudi Arabia expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

In the foreign policy community, there are already questions about whether Trump may have crossed that line by holding such a high-profile White House meeting with MBS in March, said Henderson and Joseph W. Westphal, who was U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia under former President Barack Obama until January.

"I don't think that was necessarily his intention," Westphal said of Trump. "He is new at all of this, and I think he was probably trying to signal a warm welcome, but it was unusual and it could definitely signal to people back in Saudi Arabia that there is an extra effort being made there."

Henderson said that may have been precisely the intention of MBS's allies.

"The thought was that the king was trying to have his favored son recognized as being his heir apparent, and that Trump almost confirmed his status, but Saudi succession politics are more complicated than that," Henderson said.

The White House press office did not respond to a request for comment.

To be sure, Obama also met last year in the White House with MBS, but it was a lower-profile meeting, and he had previously met with MBN.

Westphal said Obama's team was very careful "to show no bias or preference in any way" between MBS and MBN.

While both princes are seen as strong U.S. allies, they are very

different characters whose approaches and background could present their own benefits and drawbacks.

MBN, 57, in his capacity as interior minister, runs the Saudi internal security forces, and has come to be seen in Washington as a reliable partner in U.S. counter-terrorism efforts over more than a decade.

MBS, 31, as the defense minister and head of an economic development council since 2015, has quickly carved out a reputation as a bold but impulsive reformer intent on modernizing Saudi Arabia.

He has made waves in Riyadh with efforts to bring economic austerity (which recently were partly reversed), as well as maneuvers seen as trying to jump the line of succession. MBS and his allies recently have made several quiet but unmistakable moves in Riyadh and Washington.

Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef have been quietly jockeying for position to succeed 81-year-old King Salman, who is widely believed to be in declining health. | Getty

Several of MBS's allies recently were appointed to influential posts, including his younger brother Prince Khaled bin Salman, who late last month was tapped as the Saudi ambassador to Washington.

And in a high-profile interview with The Washington Post last month, MBS praised Trump as "a president who will bring America back to the right track" — a none-too-veiled shot at Obama, whose nuclear diplomacy with Iran irked the Saudis.

By contrast, MBN, who survived a 2009 assassination attempt while attempting to secure the surrender of an al Qaeda leader, mostly has kept a lower profile. That's why the lobbying contract with SPG (which stands for Sonoran Policy Group) could be a significant move.

The Saudi embassy did not respond to requests for comment about the contract.

SPG issued a statement praising MBN and his work at the Interior Ministry as "a moderating force in a region increasingly under attack from radical elements" and "a reminder of the vital importance of the United States-Saudi relationship."

SPG is among a handful of firms with ties to Trump that this year have burst onto Washington's

lucrative foreign lobbying scene, which has long been dominated by more established players who have long cultivated ties to politicians across the aisle.

SPG in recent months has hired several political and intelligence operatives, some with connections to Trump world, including Robin Townley, who briefly served as the National Security Council's Africa Director under Trump.

MBS's allies have worked with more established lobbying firms, including the Podesta Group and BGR. Those firms helped arrange a breakfast in Washington for a key Saudi general involved in the country's offensive in Yemen, which is overseen by MBS in his capacity as defense minister.

Representatives from the Podesta Group and BGR did not respond to requests for comment about their work, but according to Justice Department filings, a Saudi government entity called the Center for Studies and Media Affairs at the Saudi Royal Court is spending a total of nearly \$2.2 million per year to retain the two firms.

The center also has a \$1.2 million contract with Squire Patton Boggs, LLP.

More than a dozen Washington firms have done work for various Saudi government entities in recent months, making the kingdom among the biggest-spending foreign governments on K Street.

At one point last year, the Saudis were spending more than \$250,000 per month in an unsuccessful effort to defeat legislation allowing the families of victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks to sue the kingdom. The bill passed despite the lobbying blitz after Congress overrode Obama's veto.

Westphal, the former U.S. ambassador, said the Interior Ministry's hiring of SPG is likely an effort by MBN to ensure that his country's relationship with the U.S. remains strong in the Trump era.

"Part of it is so that they know how to approach the new administration, which is a lot different than the previous administration," Westphal said, adding "I could tell that (MBN) was a little concerned" about the turnover. "In my farewell with MBN, he said I think it's really important that we continue this relationship given everything that's going on in the Middle East, and I hope that the next administration is willing to do that."

Eli Lake : Trump Has to Decide: 50,000 Troops to Afghanistan?

A new Afghanistan war strategy approved last month by President Donald Trump's top military and national security advisers would require at least 50,000 U.S. forces to stop the advance of the Taliban and save the government in Kabul, according to a classified U.S. intelligence community assessment.

U.S. intelligence and national security officials familiar with the assessment tell me that it was drafted in April, and that it provided estimates of necessary troop strengths for various strategic options. But it found that if an ambitious war plan approved by the National Security Council's principals committee got a green light from the president -- a big if -- more than 50,000 U.S. troops would be needed.

That proposed strategy, which I wrote about earlier this month, would place the U.S. on a new war footing and in a deeper partnership with the Afghan government in its current campaign against the Taliban. It would also remove arbitrary timelines for withdrawal set by President Barack Obama.

The new estimate from the intelligence community envisions significantly more U.S. forces in Afghanistan than the current levels of around 8,400 U.S. troops currently fighting there. It is also more than the modest troop increase for Afghanistan of around 5,000 that was reported last week.

One reason the new war strategy would require more troops is that it

envisions using U.S. forces in a support role that until now has relied on outside contractors. Using contractors for functions like vehicle maintenance and other logistical aid have meant that U.S. forces deployed to Syria and Iraq have largely focused on war fighting and training locals. This has kept the total number of U.S. troops artificially low, while increasing the overall cost of the U.S. presence.

Spokesmen for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the National Security Council declined to comment for this column. But other U.S. officials familiar with the internal deliberations tell me Trump has signaled he is in no mood to escalate America's longest war. Indeed, he has complained to close aides in the last month about how great powers throughout history -- from Alexander's Macedonians to the British Empire -- have failed to pacify the country.

Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster takes a very different view. For the last five weeks he has lobbied the national security cabinet and the president with a slide presentation on Afghanistan that features photos from Kabul in the 1970s when it resembled a modern capital. That was before the Soviet coup of 1979, before the rise of the Mujahideen in the 1980s that drove the Soviets out, and before the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s and early 2000s that provided a safe haven to al Qaeda before the Sept. 11 attacks.

According to U.S. officials familiar with McMaster's presentation, the message was simple: Afghanistan is not necessarily destined to be a safe haven for terrorists or a wasteland run by warlords. What's more, McMaster has argued strongly that the counter-terrorism mission against the Taliban and other Islamic insurgents is contingent on the government of President Ashraf Ghani surviving.

On this last point, there are no guarantees. While the Taliban has not been able to control territory in major population centers, it has expanded its reach and influence since the end of U.S. combat operations in the country in 2015. One national security official described the current strategy inherited from Obama as "losing slowly." This official said the Taliban will overrun the government eventually if more outside resources are not deployed.

Last week, Lieutenant General Vincent Stewart, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said the current war between Ghani's government and the Taliban was a "stalemate." He added: "That stalemate will deteriorate in the favor of the belligerents. So we have to do something very different than what we've been doing in the past."

Jack Keane, a retired four-star Army general who is an ally of McMaster's, told me that a strategy to support Ghani's government is not only the best plan, but it also has a good chance of succeeding. "In survey after survey, for every year we have been doing this, the polling

reflects overwhelmingly that 70 to 80 percent of the Afghan people reject the Taliban," he said. "Supporting a government that is attempting to meet the needs of its people, despite their inefficiencies and despite the level of corruption that is there, still makes the most sense."

In the abstract, Keane is right. And yet Trump has avoided making a commitment to heavy military involvement recommended by the NSC principals committee. Initially, McMaster had hoped to brief the president on a final strategy and get a decision in the first week of May. The hope was that the president would be able to present the plan at the NATO summit in Brussels on May 25, so the allies would be asked to contribute to a cohesive strategy. White House officials now tell me they don't expect there will be time on the president's schedule this week for Afghanistan.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Obviously Trump is a busy man. Between the president's first foreign trip, the latest allegations that he inappropriately shared classified intelligence with Russia's foreign minister and the aftermath of his chaotic firing of FBI director James Comey, the White House has to attend to many urgent matters. But with the spring fighting season getting into full swing in Afghanistan, the government in Kabul does not have the luxury of time.



O'Hanlon : To win in Afghanistan, we need more troops

As the Trump administration considers sending several thousand more American troops to Afghanistan as part of a broader NATO buildup, to join the 8,400 U.S. troops and several thousand more from allied countries there today, many Americans will wonder why. Already America's longest war, a place where more than 2,000 Americans have died to produce at best fragile and highly imperfect results, many will want to pose General David Petraeus's famous question first voiced about Iraq in 2003: "Tell me how this ends." The short answer is that maybe it doesn't, anytime soon -- but maybe that's ok, given how relatively modest in scale and risk the mission has become, and how modest it will remain even if President Trump

adds several thousand more troops to the mix.

In the first phase of this long mission, in the fall of 2001, CIA advisory teams, a couple thousand troops on the ground, and stand-off U.S. airpower helped Afghanistan's "Northern Alliance" overthrow the Taliban. The hope was that this brilliant military success would be somehow self-sustaining -- a kind of hope later repeated, and tragically also revealed to be wrong, in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011.

In what might be called phase two, from roughly 2002 through 2008, we squandered what in retrospect was Afghanistan's golden window -- a period when the Taliban was on life support, in the country's hinterlands and over the border in Pakistan. Rather than work hard to

build up solid Afghan institutions, including a strong army and police force that could resist any future insurgent resurgence, the United States and its NATO allies built only skeletal, flimsy Afghan institutions while conducting occasional counterterrorism strikes. Typical combined western troop totals ranged from 10,000 to 20,000 in the country. Many blame this weak effort on the Bush administration's distraction with the Iraq war, but it is worth noting that European countries did no better, even though very few had taken on significant responsibilities in Iraq. President Bush did begin to increase U.S. troop totals the last year of his presidency.

Phase three covered the first two and a half to three years of the Obama presidency. Under the

leadership of General Stanley McChrystal and General David Petraeus in particular, American troop totals increased towards 100,000, with NATO and other outside forces providing almost 40,000 more by 2011. This amount in effect to a "skinny surge," following many of the same concepts that had just proven successful in Iraq. Not as many forces were available for the east as commanders had wanted, so in regions such as Khost and Jalalabad, the pace of operations was constrained. Meanwhile, in this same period of time, the development of Afghan forces was raised to a top priority. The combined strength of the Afghan army and police grew towards 300,000; standards for training and equipping these forces were significantly improved.

Phase four lasted from mid-2011 through the completion of the International Security Force Assistance mission at the end of 2014. Most of this time U.S. and NATO forces were under the command of General John Allen and General Joseph Dunford. NATO gradually handed off main combat responsibilities to Afghan forces; U.S. troop strength was reduced by more than two-thirds. NATO advisers had to pull back from most of the engaged Afghan units in the field they had been mentoring and supporting.

Phase five, over the past two years, has been called Operation Resolute Support. But the White House was not so resolute during this time; President Obama toyed with the idea of zeroing out the U.S.

presence at the start of this period, and again flirted with the idea in 2015. Meanwhile, troop totals were cut well below what had been recommended for this phase of the mission. Instead of the 13,500 tally that commanders favored, Obama took the U.S. number down to 8,400 last year. The consequence of losing those 5,000 troops was that it was no longer possible to partner with or mentor virtually any deployed units in the field; even a larger formation, the 215th Afghan Army Corps in Helmand province, was left without NATO advisers. The results were predictable, as much of Helmand fell to the Taliban, and Kunduz city in the north did so temporarily as well.

Fast forward to today. The question now is this: Should we, having

underinvested badly in Afghanistan in the Bush years, skimmed somewhat on the initial buildup in the Obama years, and then accelerated the drawdown there two or three times relative to what planners believed wise, revert to a phase of the mission that we had unwisely skipped? Adding several thousand troops would allow, in addition to our presence at main bases and central training facilities, more advising capability for fielded Afghan units that really need the help — at the brigade and kandak level. (Afghan army corps have about 25,000 troops each; brigades have some 3,000, and kandaks some 800.) Since those units have typically suffered substantial battlefield casualties (Afghan forces have been taking 5,000 or more fatalities a year in recent years, akin

to U.S. losses in Vietnam), as well as turbulence in their leadership, they are not as far advanced as we would have liked. We have remedial work to do.

Of course, the military side of our mission does not occur in a vacuum. Among other things, we need to keep the pressure on the Afghan government in its fight against corruption and its efforts at political reform, and ratchet up the pressure against Pakistan in its support for the Taliban. But to the extent we want a robust eastern pillar in our broader counterterrorism network to take on foes ranging from the Taliban to al Qaeda to ISIS, an increase of several thousand U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan has a sound logic behind it.

**The
New York
Times**

UNE - A New Goal for President Trump's First Foreign Trip: Damage Control

"It's a huge burden on the American psyche to have a president go abroad when a sword of Damocles is hanging over them at home," said Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history at Rice University and an expert on the presidency. "It turns our president, instead of representing the best of America on the road, into a traveling can of worms."

Mr. Brinkley likened the timing of Mr. Trump's trip to a visit Mr. Nixon made to the Middle East in 1974 as the Watergate scandal was closing in on him, and Mr. Clinton's trip to Russia, Britain and Northern Ireland in 1998 during the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

For his part, Mr. Trump, a confirmed homebody, has expressed dread about the trip, asking aides whether it can be shortened to five days from nine. His advisers concede that the intense schedule — dozens of interactions with leaders from the Middle East and Europe, over a range of delicate issues — could produce unscripted, diplomatically perilous moments.

Even beyond the tempests surrounding the president, Israeli officials expressed alarm about the unwillingness of Mr. Trump's national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, to publicly affirm that the Western Wall, one of the holiest prayer sites in the Jewish faith, was part of Israel.

General McMaster's statement came during a White House briefing about the trip that was largely overtaken by the furor over the intelligence disclosure. After going through the details of Mr. Trump's travel — coffee with King Salman of

Saudi Arabia, a wreath-laying in Israel — General McMaster was bombarded with questions like whether allies could trust the United States enough to share sensitive intelligence with it.

"I'm not concerned at all," he said, asserting that Mr. Trump's disclosures to Mr. Lavrov and the Russian ambassador, Sergey I. Kislyak, were "wholly appropriate."

But General McMaster dodged when asked whether Mr. Trump believed the Western Wall was in Israel. The question arose after a report on Israeli television that an American official involved in planning the visit had rebuffed a request by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to join Mr. Trump on a visit to the wall because, the official said, it was not in Israel.

The White House disavowed that statement on Monday, saying it did not reflect the president's thinking. But General McMaster confirmed that no Israeli leaders would join Mr. Trump in his visit to the wall — in line with longstanding American practice — and he declined to say whether Mr. Trump viewed the Western Wall as being part of Israel.

"That sounds like a policy decision," he said.

Current American policy is to treat East Jerusalem, where the wall is, as Israeli-occupied territory. Israeli troops seized the area around the wall in 1967 during the Six-Day War, and it has become a highly visible symbol of the disputed nature of Jerusalem, which Palestinians also claim as their capital.

Mr. Trump's new ambassador to Israel, David M. Friedman, visited the wall as one of his first acts after arriving in the country. And Mr. Trump promised repeatedly during the 2016 campaign that he would move the American Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv.

"He's in real danger of blowing up Jerusalem as an issue that divides rather than unites two of the Abrahamic religions," said Martin S. Indyk, an American ambassador to Israel under Mr. Clinton. "That part of the visit needs to be handled with extreme care."

Mr. Trump's disclosure of Israeli intelligence raises a separate set of issues. Mr. Netanyahu, who is determined to have a successful visit, is not likely to make an issue of this with the president, analysts said. But he will face intense pressure from his own intelligence services.

"For them, it is a question of how they acquire information and how they perceive threats against Israel," said Dennis B. Ross, who has advised several presidents on Middle East issues. "This will inevitably produce a discussion about the ground rules."

Aaron David Miller, another longtime Middle East diplomat, said, "This will likely break crockery, jeopardizing sources and additional information on ISIS operations." But he added that Mr. Netanyahu "will see no reason to exacerbate the incident, and may well see some political advantage in giving Trump some cover and the benefit of the doubt."

In Israel, some analysts speculated that Mr. Trump's disclosure of Israeli

intelligence might force his hand on the embassy, since he would need to make a good-will gesture to the Israelis.

"It would show that the president of the United States and his administration understand where lies the truth," Avi Dichter, a former head of the Shin Bet and current Likud member of Parliament, said in an interview. "And that is what Jerusalem is for the state of Israel. It's not just a symbolic step. It's more profound than that."

In Israel, government officials refused to comment on the report that Mr. Trump's disclosure of intelligence was supplied by Israel. Some former officials familiar with Israel's strategic and security relations with the United States said they did not have enough detailed information about the incident to assess what damage was done — or the possible fallout.

"The entire thing hinges on the specifics," said Eran Lerman, a former deputy director of Israel's National Security Council, who handled Israel's strategic dialogue with the United States. "Yes, you try to protect your sources as best you can. But on the other hand, if you have actionable intelligence, you want to talk to people who can take action."

Mr. Lerman, who teaches at Shalem College in Jerusalem and is a senior researcher at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University, pointed to what he called Mr. Trump's "lack of serious grounding in intelligence craft." But he added, "I cannot judge if the president made the right call or the wrong call."

Israel and the United States have no choice but to share intelligence, he said, though some rewriting of the

ground rules might now be necessary. "At the end of the day, the community of like-minded

nations cannot afford to tear the fabric of cooperation apart," he said, "but there may be a need to sew it

with more sturdy threads here and there."



Haass : Donald Trump's first foreign trip is a test of nerves. Ours.

A trip to Saudi Arabia, Israel, the Vatican and a NATO conference would present challenges for even the most disciplined and diplomatic president, words not normally associated with Donald Trump. Is there reason for concern? The short answer is "yes" — unless the president stops his freelancing and sticks to a script.

Trump either had no script or went way off it in his meeting last week with the Russian foreign minister and ambassador in the Oval Office. There he revealed details of a terrorism-related threat uncovered by an extraordinarily sensitive intelligence operation. The disclosure could jeopardize American security by tipping off enemies and leaving American allies less willing to share sensitive material. And, according to National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, "He made the decision in the context of the conversation."

A recent story on the front page of *The New York Times* described aides to Trump as stunned and "slack-jawed" upon learning he had not just telephoned Rodrigo Duterte, the highly controversial president of the Philippines, but invited him to the White House. This announcement triggered considerable criticism given Duterte's record of human rights

abuses and anti-American statements.

What had transpired was plain and simple: the president was, once again, freelancing. He simply decided to issue an invite to his Philippines counterpart. Defenders of freelancing will say there is nothing wrong with it, that anyone elected president by definition has good political instincts. And presidents obviously have the authority to freelance. But there are risks associated with any president going off on his own without the involvement of his advisers. This is especially true in the case of someone such as Trump, who entered the Oval Office with no government experience and little familiarity with the issues.

In the Philippines case, the invitation was premature at best. A chance to come to the White House and meet with the American president is a big deal. A meeting with the likes of Duterte could lead to changes in his policy, but such a meeting should only be offered when such changes are all but guaranteed. Here the offer of a meeting signaled something very different: That you can criticize the United States and move closer to China and not only pay no price, you can reap a benefit.

Social media pose an additional problem. As Trump recently said, "Social media is the way to go. I have got over 100 million people

watching." Clearly, Twitter allows this president to reach people in the United States and around the world without the often critical filter of the mainstream media. But the "send" button can be all too easy to press; Trump is paying a price for his tweets, including a series undercutting his advisers' assertions that he hadn't disclosed sensitive intelligence to the Russians.

By definition freelancing avoids formal procedures for making policy. But process has its purposes. Meetings and memoranda can make sure relevant history and analysis are brought to bear, trade-offs identified and weighed, and the consequences for resources (from dollars to hours) considered. Such deliberation decreases chances that actions or statements will be ill-advised or lead to unwelcome results. Indeed, this was a principal reason the National Security Council process was established in 1947.

Most meetings are known and planned for well in advance. One hopes that will be the case on the president's upcoming overseas trip, his first since moving into the Oval Office. It is one filled with pitfalls.

Trump is giving a major speech on Islam in Saudi Arabia, whose leaders are looking for American backing against arch-enemy Iran. The president needs to reassure them without either getting the U.S.

more involved in a potential quagmire in Yemen or walking away from a controversial agreement that for now constrains Iran's nuclear program.

Israel, too, is looking for reassurance. Israeli leaders will pressure the president to make good on his promise to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem — although doing so could trigger violence and set back what little chance exists for Israel-Palestinian reconciliation.

Avoiding a clash with a pope who is revered but with whom this president often disagrees will not be easy. Even more difficult could be talks with NATO allies on edge about a president who has questioned the value of NATO and revealed secrets to a Russian government that has used armed force to alter the map of Europe. There is already talk of reducing information sharing.

Sometimes what is done spontaneously and regretted can be walked back, and Trump has had considerable experience with that. But often there is a price to be paid for freelancing. Security once compromised cannot be fully restored. The same holds for a reputation, be it of an individual or a country. The temptation to freelance, like most temptations, ought to be resisted.

ETATS-UNIS



Boot : Donald Trump's Russia blunder is horrifying

On Monday night, the question of the hour was did he do it? Did President Trump reveal codeword secrets (some of the most sensitive information that the U.S. government possesses) to the Russian foreign minister and ambassador?

In truth there was never much doubt that *The Washington Post* exposé was accurate, given its depth of detail. If *The Post* got it wrong, why would security officials ask reporters to withhold details about the intelligence in question? But the White House felt compelled to send out national security adviser

H.R. McMaster and his deputy, Dina Powell, to issue a non-denial denial, labeling the story false but disputing only assertions that *ThePost* didn't make — for example insisting that Trump hadn't blown any ongoing military operations. Intelligence operations, well that's different. Only Fox News was convinced.

Then on Tuesday, having put his aides out on a limb, Trump sawed it off. In a series of tweets, he admitted that yes he had shared the information with the Russians but claimed it was proper to do so.

In a legal sense he's right: The president can declassify anything he wants. But in a larger moral and

strategic sense, Trump committed a horrifying blunder that puts at risk at least one vital U.S. intelligence-sharing relationship (and likely more than one), threatens the life of a human asset, and ultimately endangers U.S. security by potentially cutting off valuable streams of intelligence about terrorist planning by the Islamic State of Iraq an Syria terrorist group.

Now the question is, why did he do it? I think there are three answers: Trump is boastful, ignorant, and inclined to see the Russians as friends rather than enemies. Let's unpack those.

If *ThePost* account is accurate, Trump's disclosure to the Russians came in the context of a boast about how great his intelligence is. Good thing he didn't feel compelled to brag about how quickly he can launch nuclear missiles!

This is of course a pattern with Trump, a man-child who is in desperate, endless need of approbation. He turned this neediness into a successful business strategy because his brand of braggadocio served him well in real estate and reality TV. It is, however, anathema for his current job, in which he must deal with the nation's most sensitive secrets and measure his words

carefully so as not to create diplomatic incidents or even a war by accident. His over-the-top talk has already ramped up tensions, not only with adversaries such as North Korea but also with allies such as Mexico, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, among others.

This brings us to the second reason for Trump's blunder: He has no idea how government works. He is the first president never to have worked in either the civilian or military branches of the government. And amazingly enough he made no attempt to educate himself about policy before he ran for president, probably because he never expected that he would win.

Los Angeles Times

McManus : Trump's downward spiral

When Donald Trump was elected president six months ago, his supporters thought he'd soon grow into the job. He'd surround himself with smart people, listen carefully to their advice, and run his administration with the efficiency of a successful businessman. That seems a long time ago. Trump hasn't grown, and now we're seeing the consequences.

In domestic affairs, the president assembled a staff of family members, ideologues and hangers-on, some competent, others not, that quickly divided into warring factions jostling for a snippet of his short attention span.

In foreign policy, he appointed some of the nation's best and brightest, such as national security advisor H.R. McMaster, but it's not clear how much of their advice he actually absorbs.

The result is an administration that has lurched from one crisis to another.

Take the controversy over the intelligence Trump divulged to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov when they met in the Oval Office last week.

According to the Washington Post, the president recounted intelligence reports that the Islamic State has devised a "thin bomb" hidden inside a laptop computer. (That wasn't a secret.)

"I get great intel," Trump bragged to Lavrov, according to the Post. In the newspaper's account, he went on to tell the visiting Russians just enough — including the city where

Now he is president and he desperately needs to educate himself about the most powerful job in the world. For a start he needs to learn the very stringent rules for the handling of codeword secrets, which are so sensitive they may be known to only a dozen people in the entire government. But he has a short attention span and an inability to read long documents, combined with a boundless faith in his own ability to improvise and come up with the right answer on the spur of the moment. Hence his latest blunder — and many others.

The final explanation lies in Trump's benign view of Russia as a potential partner rather than a dangerous adversary. He is willing to share

the information originated — to enable a smart spy service to deduce the source.

That's a problem — compounded by the fact that the intelligence came from a friendly foreign intelligence government (later identified by the New York Times as Israel), and wasn't Trump's to give away. The White House even had to warn the CIA that Trump might have blown a foreign government's secret.

There's far more at stake here than the etiquette of information-sharing among friends. The United States depends heavily on foreign governments for on-the-ground espionage against terrorists in the Middle East.

"The cost for us, just on the intelligence level, is the likelihood that we won't get similar information again — at least for a little while," former CIA officer Paul Pillar told Vox. "Foreign partners will say, my goodness, even if we're given assurances of how carefully our information will be used, as long as we've got this guy at the top who does this sort of thing, those U.S. assurances don't mean very much."

The larger issue is that Trump's unintended intelligence leak fits into a broader pattern of general incompetence, compounded by hubris.

"He is very inexperienced; this is an absolutely new world to him," former CIA Director Michael Hayden said on CNN. "If I fault him for anything, it's not that he's inexperienced. He doesn't have humility in the face of his inexperience."

more intelligence with the Kremlin than we share with South Korea, France, or Germany. But then, he has had more critical comments about those countries than he has ever had about Russia. Indeed he consistently praises Vladimir Putin as a strong leader and even defends him from well-founded charges that he murders critics.

What accounts for Trump's Russophilia? That is, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. Could it be that Trump simply likes strongmen like Putin? Is he financially dependent on Russian oligarchs? Does Putin have some kind of compromising information that can be used to blackmail him?

"Here is a president who does not seem to prepare in detail, is a bit disdainful, even contemptuous of the normal processes of government," Hayden said. "[He] seems to go into these encounters with, frankly, an unjustified self-confidence in the ability of his person to make these things come out right."

Thus does each of Trump's missteps — his bungled ban on immigration from Muslim countries, his confused proposals on healthcare and tax policy, plus the controversies surrounding the firings of Michael Flynn and James B. Comey — contribute to a growing crisis. The latest wrinkle, on Tuesday, was the news that Trump asked Comey to end the FBI investigation of Flynn, according to notes Comey made in February. (By the time you read this, a new revelation may have succeeded that one.)

In private, Republicans in Congress have grumbled for weeks about a White House that doesn't know what it's doing. Now they're beginning to do the grumbling in public.

Incompetence erodes support for a president in his own party, even among people who generally agree with his policy views. (See: George W. Bush after Hurricane Katrina.)

"They are in a downward spiral right now," said Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee, who was one of the people Trump considered as a potential vice president and who, until now, had been the gentlest of critics. "The chaos that is being created by the lack of discipline is

Is he grateful that Russia helped to elect him? Those are the questions the FBI is probing, and Trump fired FBI Director James Comey to, by his own admission, try to bring that investigation to a close. Perhaps Trump's relationship with Russia is entirely innocent, but he is certainly acting like he's guilty of something.

However, for purposes of explaining the disclosure, we don't have to posit that Trump is a Russian agent. More likely, if hardly reassuring, is that he is simply an ignorant braggart who is unprepared for the presidency.

creating ... a worrisome environment," Corker said.

Republican chieftains who would normally be duty-bound to defend their president were mostly silent this time — or, in the case of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, acerbic.

"I think we could do with a little less drama from the White House," McConnell said.

Trump has created his own troubles, and they are far from over. Republicans are joining Democrats in asking for tape recordings of White House meetings (whose existence the president hinted at in a tweet) and, now, a transcript of what he told the Russians. He's renewed his war with U.S. intelligence agencies, accusing them of leaking secrets to undermine him — a gambit that rarely ends well.

The president's supporters, echoing Hayden, say he doesn't mean any harm. Some of his actions have appeared careless, they acknowledge. He's still learning the job, they say. And he is, in truth, surrounded by adversaries.

But as examples of carelessness multiply, the ranks of Trump's critics will swell. And they'll begin, soon, to point out that carelessness isn't much of an excuse. Not for a man whose job description, right there in the Constitution, says his first duty is to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed."

UNE - Trump Asked Comey to Drop Flynn Investigation, According to Memo Written by Former FBI Director

President Donald Trump asked then-FBI Director James Comey to back off the investigation of former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn shortly after Mr. Flynn had resigned, according to two people close to Mr. Comey.

The people said they had seen a memo written by Mr. Comey that documented a meeting with the president during which Mr. Trump told the director that he hoped he could find a way to drop the Federal Bureau of Investigation's probe of Mr. Flynn.

"I hope you can let this go," Mr. Trump told the former FBI director, according to the memo, which was described in detail by a person close to Mr. Comey. A second associate confirmed having seen the memo and the thrust of its contents. Both requested anonymity to describe the law enforcement record.

The memo isn't the only one that documents Mr. Comey's encounters with the president, according to one of the people. There are "a number of encounters with the president that concerned him, and he wrote very detailed memos about those instances," the person said.

The person said Mr. Comey may have written a similar memo documenting his dinner with Mr. Trump on Jan. 27, when the president reportedly asked the director for his loyalty. Mr. Comey demurred, according to a third associate who spoke to Mr. Comey about the dinner.

Mr. Comey, who was abruptly fired May 9 by Mr. Trump, couldn't be reached for comment. An FBI spokesman, Michael Kortan, declined to discuss the matter, as did spokespeople for the Justice Department. The existence of the

memo was first reported by the New York Times.

In a statement issued Tuesday evening, the White House denied the account as described by those close to Mr. Comey.

"While the president has repeatedly expressed his view that Gen. Flynn is a decent man who served and protected our country, the president has never asked Mr. Comey or anyone else to end any investigation, including any investigation involving Gen. Flynn," the statement said.

"The president has the utmost respect for our law enforcement agencies, and all investigations," the statement said. "This is not a truthful or accurate portrayal of the conversation between the president and Mr. Comey."

The latest disclosure further roiled the waters after a turbulent stretch for the White House starting with the president's unexpected firing of Mr. Comey a week ago. Because Mr. Comey was overseeing an FBI investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, including any possible coordination between the Trump campaign and Russian officials, the dismissal attracted criticism and questions from lawmakers of both parties.

Both Russia and the Trump administration have denied any wrongdoing during the election.

On Monday night, the administration confronted reports that Mr. Trump had disclosed sensitive intelligence information to Russian officials during a meeting at the White House last week.

The disclosure of the Comey memo quickly prompted demands from Congress for more information, as lawmakers from both parties appeared taken aback by the reports.

"I'm floored by that," said Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, adding that she was hearing of it for the first time and wanted to reserve judgment until she learned more. "There's so much floating around—some of it's true, some of it isn't," Ms. Collins said.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) said such a memo, if it existed, would be troubling. "I'd have concerns about it, but I don't know anything about it," he said.

Mr. Grassley and other Republicans said they thought the memo would conflict with statements last week by Acting FBI Director Andrew McCabe, who said in testimony before Congress that the White House hadn't interfered with any investigation.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D., Calif.), the top Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, expressed "stark surprise and deep concern," saying she believed the committee should "hold full hearings on this immediately."

The meeting in question took place in the Oval Office after a regularly scheduled briefing on an unrelated matter and occurred a day or two after Mr. Flynn resigned on Feb. 13. The former national security adviser had been under pressure for having misled Vice President Mike Pence and other officials about the nature of his conversations with Sergei Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to the U.S.

Mr. Flynn had assured Mr. Pence and other White House officials he hadn't discussed sanctions with Mr. Kislyak. In fact, they had talked about the sanctions in a phone conversation the very day the Obama administration levied penalties against the Kremlin for its

alleged interference in the 2016 campaign. U.S. intelligence officers learned about the discussions after reading intercepts of Mr. Kislyak's phone calls, officials have said.

The FBI is reportedly investigating Mr. Flynn for the conversations he had with the Russian diplomat and his financial dealings with Russia and Turkey. It isn't clear if Mr. Trump was aware of the exact nature of the investigation into Mr. Flynn.

In their private meeting, Mr. Trump asked Mr. Comey if he might "see your way clear to letting this go," adding that he thought Mr. Flynn was "a good guy," according to the person who read the memo.

Mr. Comey declined to talk about the Flynn investigation but agreed that Mr. Flynn was a good person, according to the associate.

Ronald Hosko, a former senior FBI official, said Mr. Trump's comments, if accurately recounted in the Comey memo, were "extraordinary, entirely out of bounds," and that agents would be "shocked and dismayed" by the president's actions.

Richard Painter, a chief ethics lawyer in the George W. Bush White House, said it would be obstruction of justice for the president to explicitly or implicitly threaten to fire the FBI director if he didn't drop the investigation of Mr. Flynn.

However, "if all he does is express his view that it's an investigation he hopes will end, that in and of itself would not be obstruction of justice," Mr. Painter said. He said the sequence of events appeared to show an implicit threat, given that Mr. Trump acknowledged he was thinking about the Russia investigation when he fired Mr. Comey.

UNE - Comey Memo Says Trump Asked Him to End Flynn Investigation

Michael S. Schmidt

Mr. Comey shared the existence of the memo with senior F.B.I. officials and close associates. The New York Times has not viewed a copy of the memo, which is unclassified, but one of Mr. Comey's associates read parts of it to a Times reporter.

"I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go,"

Mr. Trump told Mr. Comey, according to the memo. "He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go."

Mr. Trump told Mr. Comey that Mr. Flynn had done nothing wrong, according to the memo.

Mr. Comey did not say anything to Mr. Trump about curtailing the investigation, replying only: "I agree he is a good guy."

In a statement, the White House denied the version of events in the memo.

"While the president has repeatedly expressed his view that General Flynn is a decent man who served and protected our country, the president has never asked Mr. Comey or anyone else to end any investigation, including any investigation involving General Flynn," the statement said. "The president has the utmost respect for

our law enforcement agencies, and all investigations. This is not a truthful or accurate portrayal of the conversation between the president and Mr. Comey."

Mr. Chaffetz's letter, sent to the acting F.B.I. director, Andrew G. McCabe, set a May 24 deadline for the internal documents to be delivered to the House committee. The congressman, a Republican, was criticized in recent months for showing little of the appetite he

demonstrated in pursuing Hillary Clinton to pursue investigations into Mr. Trump's associates.

But since announcing in April that he will not seek re-election in 2018, Mr. Chaffetz has shown more interest in the Russia investigation, and held out the potential for a subpoena on Tuesday, a notably aggressive move as most Republicans have tried to stay out of the fray.

In testimony to the Senate last week, Mr. McCabe said, "There has been no effort to impede our investigation to date." Mr. McCabe was referring to the broad investigation into possible collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign. The investigation into Mr. Flynn is separate.

A spokesman for the F.B.I. declined to comment.

Mr. Comey created similar memos — including some that are classified — about every phone call and meeting he had with the president, the two people said. It is unclear whether Mr. Comey told the Justice Department about the conversation or his memos.

Mr. Trump fired Mr. Comey last week. Trump administration officials have provided multiple, conflicting accounts of the reasoning behind Mr. Comey's dismissal. Mr. Trump said in a television interview that one of the reasons was because he believed "this Russia thing" was a "made-up story."

The Feb. 14 meeting took place just a day after Mr. Flynn was forced out of his job after it was revealed he had lied to Vice President Mike Pence about the nature of phone conversations he had had with the Russian ambassador to the United States.

Despite the conversation between Mr. Trump and Mr. Comey, the investigation of Mr. Flynn has proceeded. In Virginia, a federal grand jury has issued subpoenas in recent weeks for records related to Mr. Flynn. Part of the Flynn investigation is centered on his financial links to Russia and Turkey.

Mr. Comey had been in the Oval Office that day with other senior national security officials for a terrorism threat briefing. When the meeting ended, Mr. Trump told those present — including Mr. Pence and Attorney General Jeff Sessions — to leave the room except for Mr. Comey.

Alone in the Oval Office, Mr. Trump began the discussion by condemning leaks to the news media, saying that Mr. Comey should consider putting reporters in prison for publishing classified information, according to one of Mr. Comey's associates.

Mr. Trump then turned the discussion to Mr. Flynn.

After writing up a memo that outlined the meeting, Mr. Comey shared it with senior F.B.I. officials. Mr. Comey and his aides perceived

Mr. Trump's comments as an effort to influence the investigation, but they decided that they would try to keep the conversation secret — even from the F.B.I. agents working on the Russia investigation — so the details of the conversation would not affect the investigation.

Mr. Comey was known among his closest advisers to document conversations that he believed would later be called into question, according to two former confidants, who said Mr. Comey was uncomfortable at times with his relationship with Mr. Trump.

Mr. Comey's recollection has been bolstered in the past by F.B.I. notes. In 2007, he told Congress about a now-famous showdown with senior White House officials over the Bush administration's warrantless wiretapping program. The White House disputed Mr. Comey's account, but the F.B.I. director at the time, Robert S. Mueller III, kept notes that backed up Mr. Comey's story.

The White House has repeatedly crossed lines that other administrations have been reluctant to cross when discussing politically charged criminal investigations. Mr. Trump has disparaged the continuing F.B.I. investigation as a hoax and called for an inquiry into his political rivals. His representatives have taken the unusual step of declaring no need for a special prosecutor to investigate the president's associates.

The Oval Office meeting occurred a little over two weeks after Mr. Trump summoned Mr. Comey to the White House for a lengthy, one-on-one dinner at the residence. At that dinner, on Jan. 27, Mr. Trump asked Mr. Comey at least two times for a pledge of loyalty — which Mr. Comey declined, according to one of Mr. Comey's associates.

In a Twitter post on Friday, Mr. Trump said that "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!"

After the meeting, Mr. Comey's associates did not believe there was any way to corroborate Mr. Trump's statements. But Mr. Trump's suggestion last week that he was keeping tapes has made them wonder whether there are tapes that back up Mr. Comey's account.

The Jan. 27 dinner came a day after White House officials learned that Mr. Flynn had been interviewed by F.B.I. agents about his phone calls with the Russian ambassador, Sergey I. Kislyak. On Jan. 26, the acting attorney general, Sally Q. Yates, told the White House counsel about the interview, and said Mr. Flynn could be subject to blackmail by the Russians because they knew he had lied about the content of the calls.

**The
Washington
Post**

UNE - Notes made by former FBI director Comey say Trump pressured him to end Flynn probe

President Trump asked the FBI to drop its probe into former national security adviser Michael Flynn and urged former FBI director James B. Comey instead to pursue reporters in leak cases, according to associates of Comey who have seen private notes he wrote recounting the conversation.

According to the notes written by Comey following a February meeting with the president, Trump brought up the counterintelligence investigation into Flynn and urged Comey to drop the probe in the wake of the national security adviser's resignation.

The conversation between Trump and Comey took place after a national security meeting. The president asked to speak privately to the FBI director, and the others left the room, according to the Comey associates, who, like other officials, spoke on the condition of

anonymity because they were not authorized to reveal internal discussions.

"I hope you can let this go," Trump said, according to the Comey notes, which were described by the associates. Comey's written account of the meeting is two pages long and highly detailed, the associates said.

The conversation described in the notes raises new questions about whether Trump may have crossed any legal lines into criminal behavior by pressuring the FBI to end an investigation.

"There's definitely a case to be made for obstruction," said Barak Cohen, a former federal prosecutor who now does white-collar-defense work at the Perkins Coie law firm in the District. "But, on the other hand, you have to realize that — as with any other sort of criminal law — intent is key, and intent here can be difficult to prove."

The revelation also marks the second major challenge for the White House this week, coming just a day after a report in The Washington Post that the president disclosed highly classified information to Russian diplomats during a private meeting last week at the White House. And it comes at a particularly precarious time for the Trump administration as it searches for someone to nominate to succeed Comey as the next leader of the FBI — the official who will take over investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 election and any coordination between Trump associates and Russian officials.

Comey's account of the February talk made it clear that his understanding of the conversation was that the president was seeking to impede the investigation, according to people who have read the account or had it read to them. Comey's notes also made it clear

he felt that the conversation with the president was improper and decided to withhold details of it from the case agents working on the Russia probe, according to the associates.

The details of Comey's meeting notes were first reported by the New York Times.

According to the director's notes, Comey did not respond directly to the president's entreaties, only agreeing with Trump's assertion that Flynn "is a good guy." The notes also described how the president said that he wanted to see reporters in jail for leaks and expressed his dissatisfaction with what he viewed as the FBI's inaction in pursuing whoever leaked his conversations with foreign leaders, according to Comey associates.

Current and former officials have described ongoing tensions between the Trump administration

and the FBI over the issue of the Russia probe and leaks. The president and others have repeatedly pressed the FBI to focus more of its energy on pursuing leakers than on the Russia investigation, these officials said. While the FBI is investigating disclosures of classified information, other issues that Trump and the administration wanted to be investigated did not involve classified information, and FBI officials have resisted demands that they pursue such issues.

Details of Comey's notes have been shared with a very small circle of people at the FBI and Justice Department, these people said.

A Justice Department spokeswoman and an FBI spokesman declined to comment.

A White House statement denied the version of the conversation described by those who had seen Comey's notes, saying "the president has never asked Mr. Comey or anyone else to end an investigation, including any investigation involving General Flynn. . . . This is not a truthful or accurate portrayal of the conversation between the president and Mr. Comey."

Democrats reacted sharply to the news, calling for Comey to testify about what he knows.

"If true, this is yet another disturbing allegation that the president may have engaged in some interference or obstruction of the investigation," said Rep. Adam B. Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee. He said Comey "should come back to the Congress and share with us what he knows in terms of the president's conversations with him on any of the Russian investigations."

Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah), chairman of the House Oversight Committee, said he was prepared to use a subpoena if necessary to get a copy of the Comey memo that has been described.

"I need to see it sooner rather than later. I have my subpoena pen ready," he tweeted.

At the time of the Trump-Comey conversation in February, Flynn had just been forced to resign after it was revealed public statements made by Vice President Pence and others on his behalf were not true. In those statements, White House officials had denied that Flynn had discussed easing U.S. sanctions against Russia when he spoke to

Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak in late December. U.S. intelligence intercepts showed that they had discussed the topic, according to people familiar with the matter.

Flynn has been under investigation for a variety of issues, including his payments from foreign entities; whether he violated laws requiring registering as an agent of a foreign government; and his communications with Russian officials. The FBI has also probed other Trump associates for possible connections to Russian officials.

Throughout his long career in law enforcement, Comey has been known to write down what transpired in important meetings and conversations, particularly ones in which he felt there were potentially tricky legal or ethical issues.

The notes taken by Comey appear to contradict testimony offered last week by his temporary successor, acting FBI director Andrew McCabe.

"There has been no effort to impede our investigation to date," McCabe said last week in response to a question posed by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.). "Simply put, sir, you cannot stop the men and women of the FBI from doing the right thing,

protecting the American people and upholding the Constitution."

From the question and answer, it is unclear if McCabe was speaking only about Comey's firing not interfering with the Russia investigations, or whether he was saying that there was no effort to impede in any Trump-related matter.

Law enforcement officials declined to explain the apparent contradiction between Comey's notes and McCabe's testimony.

Last week, as he sought to explain his rationale for firing Comey, the president also sparked another controversy by contradicting his own aides' claims that Comey had been fired over his handling of the investigation into former secretary of state Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server.

Instead, the president said, he was thinking of the Russia probe when he decided to fire the FBI director. He also suggested that there might be recordings of his conversations with Comey. Since then, White House officials have steadfastly refused to say whether the president's conversations have been recorded.



Editorial Board : The country needs to hear from James Comey

PRESIDENT TRUMP on Feb. 14 asked then-FBI Director James B. Comey to drop the investigation into former national security adviser Michael Flynn's connections to Russia, according to a memorandum Mr. Comey wrote at the time. The White House says the conversation didn't happen as described. If it did, it would represent an extraordinarily improper effort by the president to influence an FBI investigation. The report certainly bolsters the case, already persuasive, for independent inquiries into Russia's meddling in the U.S. election, any possible collusion by the Trump campaign —

and any post-inauguration effort by the administration to disrupt investigation into any such collusion.

The New York Times, which reported the existence of the Comey memo on Tuesday, notes, "An F.B.I. agent's contemporaneous notes are widely held up in court as credible evidence of conversations." Mr. Trump had already admitted that he had the Russia investigation on his mind when he fired Mr. Comey last week. At the time, the investigations into Russia's meddling and Mr. Flynn's Russian connections were ramping up. If Mr. Trump had tried and failed to persuade Mr. Comey to discontinue the Flynn inquiry, the firing becomes all the more suspicious.

More than a generation has passed since the country so badly required an aggressive independent investigation into White House behavior. Tuesday's news only raises more questions. How many memos did Mr. Comey write? What else may the president have improperly asked of federal law enforcement officers? The country needs to hear from Mr. Comey, see his memos and hear White House tapes of the conversations, if they exist.

The Justice Department must appoint a special prosecutor charged with determining whether any laws were broken. But that would not be sufficient. Some of the things Mr. Trump has done, such as terminating Mr. Comey, may have

been legal but inappropriate. Other elements of the Russia story, such as the election hacking, may not lend themselves to criminal prosecution, as many or all of the perpetrators are outside the country. In order to provide the public a full picture of what happened inside and outside the country, Congress must empanel an independent commission. House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) can no longer duck these issues in an effort to focus on the GOP agenda. The Russia-Comey fiasco is now the country's agenda. Mr. Trump, if his denials are true, should welcome an independent inquiry.



Trump Officials on Comey Memo: 'Don't See How Trump Isn't Completely F*cked'

The president reportedly asked the FBI director to stop investigating Trump's top national-security aide—a bombshell that has an already-beleaguered White House begging for mercy.

If you come at James Comey, you best not miss.

The former FBI director—who President Donald Trump fired and then later threatened on Twitter last week—reportedly kept notes of their conversations, and some of those details are now making their way into public view. According to one of those memos, first reported by *The New York Times* on Tuesday, the

president urged Comey to drop the FBI's investigation into Trump's former national security adviser.

The White House, through an anonymous press statement, flatly denied the *Times'* reporting, which has since been confirmed by several other media organizations.

(The Daily Beast could not immediately do so independently.) But the reported details already have some—including attorneys, members of Congress, and law enforcement officials—suggesting criminal wrongdoing.

"The obstruction of justice articles of impeachment counts are stacking up, it seems," an active duty FBI agent told *The Daily Beast* on Tuesday. Firing Comey, the agent added, was a "big gamble. You've got to kill him, metaphorically. You can't just wound him."

For this story, *The Daily Beast* spoke with nine current and former administration and law enforcement officials, most on the condition of anonymity so they could speak freely.

Trump administration officials described the current state of affairs in the West Wing as expectedly chaotic and anxious—but having an almost "numbing effect," as one described it—as White House staff and senior Trump aides frantically jumped from one crisis and negative news cycle to the next.

"I feel like running down the hallway with a fire extinguisher," one senior Trump administration official told *The Daily Beast*, in response to an inquiry regarding Tuesday's developments.

On the heels of yet another round of bad press that started on Monday—reports that the president shared classified national security information with top Russian diplomats in an Oval Office meeting last week—Tuesday's reports on Comey's memo sent another wave of frustration through a White House already reeling from a week of intense media scrutiny.

"Every time I feel like we're getting a handle on the last Russia fiasco, a new one pops," a White House staffer told *The Daily Beast* on Monday evening. On Tuesday, after reports of the Comey memo began to circulate, the staffer revised that assessment: "I guess I was wrong about the timing," the staffer said. "We can't even wrap up one Russia

fiasco before we're on to the next one."

A senior official in the Trump administration, who previously worked on the president's campaign, offered a candid and brief assessment of the fallout from that string of bad press: "I don't see how Trump isn't completely fucked."

The meeting in question between Trump and Comey came a day after the resignation of Mike Flynn, the most briefly tenured national security adviser in White House history, who stepped down after it was revealed that he had failed to disclose details of a December conversation with Russia's ambassador to Washington regarding U.S. sanctions against the country. Flynn and a number of associates have since been subpoenaed by congressional investigators as part of their probe into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

Robert Kelner, Flynn's attorney, declined to comment on reports that Trump asked Comey to drop the FBI's investigation.

According to Comey's account, Trump told him, "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go," the *Times* reported. "He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go."

That plea, if relayed accurately, could veer dangerously close to criminal activity, according to national security attorney Brad Moss.

"Even if there is some legal nuance that the President could rely upon to save himself here from an obstruction charge, the allegation (if true) is politically devastating," Moss told *The Daily Beast* in an email. "The President didn't just walk up to the line, he stepped over it without a

moment's hesitation and threw aside decades of institutional precedent separating the FBI from the White House."

"This is now a consistent pattern of obstruction [of justice] by the President," said Clint Watts, a former FBI special agent and *Daily Beast* contributor. "The loyalty oath dinner, the request to squash the Flynn investigation and Comey's firing over Russia all point to a President Trump who has no respect for the rule of law, and doesn't realize that he should not run the country the way he ran his businesses."

One official in the Justice Department wasn't quite so sure. "In legal terms, this doesn't look like further evidence of obstruction of justice," the official told *The Daily Beast*, adding: "It does look like further evidence of consciousness of guilt."

The release of language in Comey's memo comes amid a torrent of bad press for the White House over its firing of the FBI director last week. The president admitted in an interview shortly after that firing that Comey's refusal to wind down the FBI's probe into his campaign's contacts with Russian officials influenced his decision to let Comey go. Days later, reports surfaced that Trump had asked Comey at a private dinner to pledge his loyalty to the president.

Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, one of the panels probing Russian election meddling and Flynn's role in it, said he hoped to bring Comey back before his committee to testify. He also suggested that he might seek to compel the release of the former FBI director's memos on his conversations with the president.

"I also think that we ought to ask for the notes that were taken, contemporaneously or shortly after those meetings, and of course if there are any tapes as the president alleged... if necessary we should subpoena them," Schiff told reporters on Capitol Hill.

Rep. Jason Chaffetz, the Republican chairman of the House Oversight Committee, suggested that he might subpoena those documents as well. His committee "is going to get the Comey memo, if it exists. I need to see it sooner rather than later," Chaffetz wrote on Twitter. "I have my subpoena pen ready."

Those full memos could also shed light on the Trump administration's proposed legal actions against journalists who report on sensitive or classified information, Tuesday's media reports indicate.

Trump's private conversations with Comey weren't just about the Flynn investigation, apparently. According to the *Times*, a Comey associate said that Trump had told Comey in the Oval Office that the now ex-FBI director should consider throwing reporters in prison for publishing classified information.

Members of the White House communications shop did not immediately respond to emails from *The Daily Beast* seeking comment on Trump's reported pitch to Comey about jailing journalists. However, such a suggestion would not be uncharacteristic for this president. On the campaign trail, Trump publicly and loudly declared that as president he would expand libel laws to make it easier for him to sue news outlets that cover him in ways he finds unacceptable or too mean.



Feldman : Trump Should Worry: Comey Memo Describes a High Crime

If President Donald Trump asked FBI Director James Comey to stop investigating National Security Adviser Mike Flynn and his ties to Russia, that's obstruction of justice. But let's be clear: It's the impeachable offense of obstruction. It's probably not the criminal version of that act. With the evidence now available, it's extremely unlikely that an ordinary prosecutor could convict Trump.

This is an outstanding example of a crucial distinction that Americans badly need to keep in mind. High crimes and misdemeanors, to use the Constitution's phrase, aren't the same as ordinary crimes. What makes them "high" is their political

character. High crimes and misdemeanors are corruption, abuse of power, and undermining the rule of law and democracy. They don't have to satisfy all the technical aspects of an ordinary crime. And this act of Trump's, as described in a memo written by Comey first reported Tuesday by the *New York Times*, probably doesn't.

Start with the federal obstruction statute, 18 U.S.C. Section 1503. The first part of the law has to do with trying to influence jurors in the course of a trial; we can ignore it for our purposes.

The second part of the law punishes anyone who "corruptly or by threats

or force, or by any threatening letter or communication, influences, obstructs, or impedes, or endeavors to influence, obstruct, or impede, the due administration of justice."

On a close reading, this isn't a great fit with the president asking the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation if he can let a probe go because the target is "a good guy." Remember, as a constitutional matter, the director of the FBI, like the attorney general and the rest of the machine of federal law enforcement, works for the president.

Although there has been a strong tradition of separating investigation and prosecution from the president -

- a tradition grossly violated by Trump's request -- it's still just a tradition, not a legal requirement.

Thus, as a constitutional matter, Trump has the authority to propose ending an investigation. If he wanted to, Trump could just order the investigation to be brought to an end. He wouldn't even have to exercise his pardon power, another way to put a preemptive stop to investigations. He could just direct his subordinates to cease.

To be sure, Comey probably would have resigned had this order been given. The point is that Trump could have given it, legally speaking.

Given Trump's inherent constitutional authority to end the

Flynn investigation himself, it's pretty hard to say that he was "corruptly" obstructing or impeding "the due administration of justice." It's within prosecutorial discretion to decide not to go after someone because he's a good guy. The target's character and career of public service are legitimate factors to consider in the course of the investigation and decision of whether to bring charges.

It's not that the president can never be guilty of the crime of obstruction. He can. It would be a federal obstruction crime for the president to lie to or to mislead investigators. It would be an obstruction crime for the president to hide evidence of a crime. But those examples are fairly different from the president exercising authority over investigations.

The one credible legal argument that could be made by a prosecutor seeking to charge Trump would be that he was indeed acting "corruptly" if his true intent was to protect himself and his administration, not just give Flynn a break.

Suppose a president owed a favor to an organized crime leader and asked the FBI director to drop the investigation. That would presumably count as a corrupt act, and would count as obstruction.

It's not at all clear how you could prove Trump's intent here, except maybe by taped conversations where he says he wants to protect Flynn to protect himself. Nor is it at all clear that acting "corruptly" under the statute would include saving himself from embarrassment. The upshot is that I don't think Trump could be prosecuted for a crime on

the basis of this report, and I am not at all sure that he actually committed a federal crime, legally speaking.

Impeachment is another matter. Using the presidential office to try to shut down the investigation of a senior executive official who was also a major player in the president's campaign is an obvious and egregious abuse of power. It's also a gross example of undermining the rule of law.

This act is exactly the kind that the Founding Fathers would have considered a "high crime."

And it's a high crime the president could perform only by virtue of holding his office.

Practically, it still seems unlikely that a Republican House would impeach the president, much less

that two-thirds of the Senate would vote to convict and remove him from office.

But a Democratic House would have more than enough material now to start the impeachment process -- including the revelation of the request to Comey. And the House could choose to impeach even if it calculated that the Senate probably wouldn't convict.

The act of impeachment would have tremendous symbolic ramifications. And it would include the detailed investigative oversight that so far has been lacking in Washington.

Trump's firing of Comey now looks pretty different in the light of this news. Right around now, the president is probably asking himself whether firing the FBI director was the right decision. And if he isn't, he should be.

the Atlantic Ford : Did President Trump Obstruct Justice?

Tuesday's bombshell report that President Trump asked former FBI Director James Comey to drop the federal investigation into former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn will almost certainly strengthen a growing consensus among legal scholars that the president may have committed obstruction of justice, an impeachable offense.

The New York Times reported Tuesday afternoon that Comey kept memos of conversations he had with Trump, including one of a conversation in which the president allegedly urged the then-director of the FBI to drop the ongoing federal probe into Flynn. Multiple media outlets have reported the investigation is examining Flynn's conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak as well as the retired general's foreign sources of income prior to joining the Trump administration.

"[Flynn] is a good guy," Trump reportedly told Comey in February in the Oval Office after a routine national-security briefing. "I hope you can let this go." (The White House, for its part, told the *Times* that description was "not a truthful or accurate portrayal of the conversation between the president and Mr. Comey.")

Comey's memos could bolster calls for an obstruction-of-justice investigation into Trump himself, either by the Justice Department or by Congress. "It helps meet the burden that has to be shown that the president engaged in some kind of misconduct," said Michael Gerhardt, a University of North Carolina law professor who testified during the Clinton impeachment

hearings. "At this point, the burden is shifting over to the president to explain how this might've been done in good faith or how this is not misconduct."

John Q. Barrett, a St. Johns University law professor who worked as an associate counsel for the independent counsel's office during the Iran-Contra affair, said he wouldn't flatly declare that what the *Times* reported was a crime. But he also emphasized the potential implications of Trump's alleged comments.

"Much will depend on how Comey, and any other witnesses, understood the statement as they heard it," Barrett said. "But this, as reported, is a piece of serious evidence of possible criminality. It is plainly a basis for criminal investigation and evaluation."

The current firestorm erupted after Trump suddenly dismissed Comey last week, three months after the February memo would have been drafted. The White House's initial explanation centered around a different memo drafted by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein that castigated Comey for his behavior during the 2016 presidential election, which some observers believe cost Hillary Clinton the presidency. But Trump himself began to undercut the administration's public stance almost immediately.

"[Rosenstein] made a recommendation, but regardless of the recommendation, I was going to fire Comey knowing there was no good time to do it," Trump said in an interview with NBC's Lester Holt two days after Comey's sudden ouster.

"And in fact when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, you know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made up story, it's an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won."

Trump's statement that he had been considering the Russia investigation when making the decision to fire Comey immediately drew criticism. Laurence Tribe, a prominent Harvard Law professor, published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* in which he declared the "time has come for Congress to launch an impeachment investigation of President Trump for obstruction of justice."

But other legal scholars were more circumspect about the implications of Holt's interview. "I think we need to know more about Trump's reasons for firing Comey, but if one puts the worst face on it, yes, it would be obstruction of justice," said Peter Schuck, a Yale Law School professor. "That is to say, if he was attempting to intimidate Comey or exact loyalty from him in connection with the investigation, that would be obstruction of justice."

Gerhardt said there was a "good chance" Trump's comments in the interview could be considered obstruction of justice. But Gerhardt also noted the interview could be interpreted multiple ways. "It seems to sort of suggest he was obviously thinking about it, but it still requires some further elaboration," he noted. "Was he trying to stop it? Did this have the effect of trying to stop it? What does it reveal about his mindset?"

Those caveats would make it challenging for federal prosecutors

to use the Holt interview as conclusive proof against him in a federal case. Obtaining an obstruction-of-justice conviction requires evidence the official in question acted with a "corrupt" purpose. Because Trump could lawfully fire Comey as the president, federal prosecutors would have to prove he acted "with an improper purpose" when removing the FBI director from office. Those thresholds amount to a "high burden of proof," Gerhardt said.

Bruce Green, a law professor at Fordham and former federal prosecutor who worked as an associate counsel for the prosecutor's office in the Iran-Contra affair, said that as far as Trump's exchange with Comey goes, "if it emerges that he was trying to shut down the investigation to stop Flynn from implicating him in criminal conduct, that would be a different story."

Green noted that "corrupt intent" can only be proven circumstantially. "That President Trump asked others to leave the room is some evidence from which, together with other evidence (if it exists), one might infer that he had a corrupt intent rather than an innocent one," Green said. "But really - what rational person tries to obstruct a federal criminal investigation in front of the FBI director?"

Congressional efforts to remove Trump from power, on the other hand, would have far fewer restrictions. The Constitution allows legislators to remove federal officials from office for "high crimes and misdemeanors," but leaves it to Congress to decide what exactly falls under that category. "In

impeachment, there's no standard of proof," Schuck said. "You simply have to get a majority of the House and two-thirds of the Senate. Each of those individuals can apply whatever standards of proof he or she thinks is appropriate."

Three presidents in American history have either faced impeachment or the imminent threat of it. Two of them faced obstruction-of-justice charges: Richard Nixon resigned in 1974 before the House could consider four articles of

impeachment related to Watergate; Bill Clinton came within 17 votes in the Senate of being removed from office on obstruction of justice during the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1999. (The third, Andrew Johnson, came within a single vote in the Senate of removal from office after Radical Republicans in Congress grew disenchanted with his policies during Reconstruction.)

Direct presidential interventions into ongoing criminal investigations are also highly irregular. Justice

Department policies generally bar federal prosecutors from communicating with White House political officials, and the FBI follows similar practices. "I've never heard of anything like this," said Ali Soufan, a former FBI agent who investigated the U.S.S. Cole bombing. "It's very inappropriate for the president of the United States, who is the boss of the head of the FBI, to ask him to stop an investigation."

What Comey's memo and the Holt interview ultimately indicate is the need for further investigation, multiple experts concluded. "At this point, people on both sides of the aisle have every reason to be disturbed by this kind of conduct and are entitled to an explanation," Gerhardt said. "Perhaps leaders of Congress need to think about what mechanisms they have to get to the heart of this."

**The
New York
Times**

Editorial Board : Did Mr. Trump Obstruct Justice?

"I hope you can let this go."

communications with the Russian ambassador.

Those are President Trump's words, according to the former F.B.I. director, James Comey, and they should resound as an alarm to Congress and anyone concerned about protecting the Constitution. The president of the United States may have a lot of power, as Mr. Trump likes to remind us, but that power does not extend to obstructing a federal investigation.

The White House — whose credibility at this point is, like the president's, in tatters — denied the allegations in Mr. Comey's memo. But the memo's existence, which was first reported Tuesday by The New York Times, is very bad news for an administration already suffocating itself in scandal.

That is precisely what Mr. Trump was trying to do, Mr. Comey feared. As was Mr. Comey's standard practice, he recounted the remarks in a memo he wrote shortly after a private Oval Office meeting with Mr. Trump in February. He believed that the president was attempting to stifle the bureau's investigation into Michael Flynn, the former national security adviser, who had resigned the day before amid public reports that he had lied to Vice President Mike Pence about his

Representative Jason Chaffetz, chairman of the House oversight committee, was right Tuesday night to immediately demand all documents related to conversations between Mr. Comey and the president, including any recordings Mr. Trump may have secretly made. But other Republicans were once again struggling to look the other way. Richard Burr, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the burden was on The Times to produce the memo. Perhaps he forgot his own committee's authority to subpoena Mr. Comey's memo, and his testimony.

Mr. Comey certainly has the free time to testify. Mr. Trump fired him last week, just as the bureau's investigation into ties between Russia and the Trump campaign and efforts by Russian officials to influence the presidential election was heating up. After the White House tried to produce a coherent rationale for the president's action that would distance it from the Russia investigation, the president himself made the connection explicit. In a television interview days later, Mr. Trump said his decision was based at least in part on his belief that "this Russia thing" was a "made-up story."

Taken together with the news of Mr. Comey's memo and reports that Mr. Trump had tried to extract a loyalty pledge from him after learning about the Flynn investigation, it is hard not to see the outlines of an attempt by Mr. Trump to quash a criminal investigation that could reach into the highest levels of his campaign and administration.

This growing crisis now raises urgent questions of abuse of executive power and demands an immediate and thorough response. The White House cannot police itself, of course, and Americans can't have an ounce of faith in the Justice Department, which is run by an attorney general, Jeff Sessions, who was Mr. Trump's top cheerleader in the Senate. Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who alone has the power to appoint a special counsel, has not given any indication that he plans to do so.

When will Republicans in Congress decide that enough is enough? Do they need Mr. Trump's approval ratings to dip below 30 percent? Do they need first to ram through their deeply unpopular agenda? Or is it possible they might at last consult their consciences, and recall that they took an oath to uphold the Constitution?



Zelizer : Republicans' patience with Trump may be running out

(CNN)The news that former FBI director James Comey wrote in a memo that President Donald Trump asked him, in February, to stop investigating national security adviser Mike Flynn has sent shockwaves through Washington.

It comes amid Trump's worst week in politics, and that's saying a lot. After many months of shocking and aweing the nation, the President is finally doing something that seemed impossible -- he is threatening to crack the Republican firewall on Capitol Hill that has done more than anything else to protect him.

In general, House and Senate Republicans have stood firm as Trump has issued controversial statements and provoked international tensions. They have given him the benefit of the doubt, hoping that even though the

President's first 100 days lacked any significant legislative accomplishments, the second hundred might allow the GOP to finally make progress on their agenda after eight long years in the wilderness.

Despite concerns that the health care legislation that passed the House would prove to be damaging to Senate Republicans, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he still had confidence he could put the pieces back together into a successful initiative.

But in the span of just seven days, everything has changed. President Trump stunned the nation when he fired FBI Director James Comey in the middle of the agency's investigation into his campaign, then admitted in a TV interview that he did it because of the "Russia thing."

Presidential advisors were left tripping all over themselves trying to justify what happened, each seeming to contradict the other. They had no time to catch their breath before The Washington Post published a bombshell story Monday night alleging that Trump had extemporaneously shared highly classified information about ISIS with visiting Russian officials. While it is legal for the president to do this, providing this kind of sensitive information to a non-ally is highly unusual and, most experts agree, dangerous.

Sounding exasperated, McConnell told reporters, "we could do with a little less drama from the White House on a lot of things so that we can focus on our agenda, which is deregulations, tax reform and repealing and replacing Obamacare."

Then came the Comey bombshell.

The triple whammy of Comey's firing, the intelligence sharing with Russia and now the Comey memo has shaken the GOP, generating immense, open questions about whether the President is able to handle two core presidential functions that Republicans have always prioritized -- law and order and national security.

Now, more Republicans like Tennessee Senator Bob Corker, who warned of a "downward spiral," are speaking up. Others are not springing to Trump's defense and remain conspicuously silent. None of them know exactly what to do.

With an eye on the 2018 elections, they realize how politically damaging Trump could be to their prospects, particularly as his approval ratings are now hovering at about 38%.

The controversies of the past week have also taken place at a critical moment for Republicans. Members of Congress have been eager to move forward on some kind of legislative agenda. They wanted to make progress on some kind of health care bill and they were particularly eager to move forward on Trump's proposal for supply-side tax cuts.

They were hoping that this would finally be the moment when Trump made a "legislative pivot" and actually took the job of pushing bills through Congress as seriously as he did his tweets.

Some have even hoped that, just maybe, despite all the odds, the President would be able to produce some kind of dramatic diplomatic breakthrough during his visit to the Middle East.

None of this looks like it is going to happen. The momentum has moved

in the exact opposite direction. The President is now politically paralyzed and will be on the defense as the White House tries to manage fallout. With the pressure over ongoing Russia investigations and talk of mental competence and impeachment moving to the front pages, the President's men and women will be devoting much of their time to damage control.

A day before the headlines about Trump's Oval Office meeting with Russian leaders emerged, The New York Times had already reported that Senate Republicans were planning to go it alone to move bills.

"It does seem like we have an upheaval, a crisis almost every day in Washington that changes the subject," complained Maine Senator Susan Collins.

At bottom, wrote the conservative Times columnist David Brooks after the Washington Post story broke,

"Trump is an infantalist." Senator Lindsey Graham said "If it's accurate, it'd be troubling." Senator John McCain tweeted:

"If true, deeply disturbing."

House Speaker Paul Ryan said through a spokesman: "We have no way to know what was said, but protecting our nation's secrets is paramount. The Speaker hopes for a full explanation of the facts from the administration."

For all the talk about populism and his maverick appeal, the heart and soul of Trump's survival has been the power of partisanship. During his election campaign, he depended on most Republicans to support his version of the party line regardless of what they thought of him. And Republicans came through.

Since taking the oath of office Trump has counted on congressional Republicans to protect him from investigation or

political backlash based on their desire to make the most of what is possible with united government.

To be sure, it is not clear yet if Republicans will actually break ranks. So far its been mostly talk and tweets. But the pressure is clearly building, and the voices of conservative protest are growing louder.

If the outrageous actions of the past seven days break this partisan unity, then President Trump will be truly exposed. If legislators feel that their majority is at stake and their party's long-term standing is in jeopardy -- particularly because of a President many of them did not like to begin with -- then anything becomes possible.

And at that point, this President may learn just how imperial the legislative branch can be when it puts its mind to taking on the White House.

NATIONAL
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Trump Tipping Point: Conservatives Will Reach the Hell-With-It Stage

the wave election Democrats are currently dreaming about.

The reason the conservative base is sticking with Trump even as his White House mismanages a series of debilitating controversies isn't hard to figure out. No matter what Trump does, says, or tweets, two factors always serve to mitigate any damage it might do him with his voters.

The first is that in our bifurcated society, in which the nation is roughly divided between those who read, listen to, and watch one set of media and those who watch another, nothing that is reported by the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, NPR, CNN, or MSNBC is likely to influence conservatives. Most on the right assume, not without cause, that the liberal mainstream media is out to paint Trump in the worst possible light, even if what the president has done on any particular day isn't all that terrible. They also understand that leaks from inside the government may be politically motivated.

Just as crucial is that whenever the usual cast of media characters start arguing that the latest outrage is the worst thing Trump has ever done, and that this will finally be the straw that breaks the camel's back, most conservatives smile. Even if what we're learning about Trump's disclosure of Israeli intelligence is deeply troubling, it's clear that such issues aren't viewed in isolation. We are now at the point where anything — even news stories involving national security that would in other circumstances upset conservatives

— that outrages liberals is seen by many on the right as somehow a good thing. The Right may have spent all of 2015 and 2016 demanding that Hillary Clinton be held accountable for her refusal to treat classified information seriously, but it's likely that many Republicans may be ready to treat the story about Trump's indiscretion as either fake news or not such a big deal. If that makes them hypocrites, they will simply answer that Clinton's Democratic and liberal media apologists are in no position to talk about Trump.

That is why Trump's support among his voters has — despite an all-out media assault since he was elected in November — stayed strong.

As Democrats showed us in the last election cycle, rationalizing and defending the prevarications of your party's leader isn't all that hard. You just put your head down and refuse to accept the premise of the other side's questions, no matter how reasonable they might be. At this point, there just isn't any place in our political culture where sensible people can find common ground. In this case, even those on the right who know that Trump's behavior and comments — and the circus that is his White House — are bad for the country also understand that the alternative is a liberal "resistance." Surrendering to the other side could mean not just Trump's undoing but the unraveling of the entire conservative project, much of which the president has supported in his first months in office.

As Democrats showed us in the last election cycle, rationalizing and defending the prevarications of your party's leader isn't all that hard.

But the assumption that Republicans can go on like this indefinitely is equally unfounded. Conservative voters, even the most loyal members of the Trump base, may not be willing to join forces with his critics, but they are being exhausted by the effort required to stick with such an undisciplined and constantly off-message president.

That doesn't just apply to pro-Trump talking heads, whose numbers have dwindled in recent days because anything you might say in defense of the president's position on any issue is likely to be undermined by the next morning's tweets from @realDonaldTrump. While Trump's fans love it when he's outrageous, they can't derive the same enjoyment from his contortions as he balances the need to appear presidential on national-security issues with his compulsion to vent his spleen at his critics or boast in private meetings.

The sheer effort of having to discount the endless stream of controversies is taking a toll on conservative energy and activism. Where are the legions of tea partiers who turned out to hound Democrats at town halls a few years ago, or to cheer at Trump rallies in 2016? They may still be out there waiting to be mobilized, but having to defend an incumbent who seems unable to stick to a position or put

forth an easily understood narrative about his actions is not a factor that helps sustain a party or a movement. Trump voters may think that the Russia-collusion story is a crock, that Comey deserved to be fired, and that disclosing Israeli intelligence to Moscow isn't treason, but neither are there any signs that they're all that excited about what this administration is doing.

The enthusiasm gap between Trump supporters and those of

Clinton last year played no small role in determining the outcome. Can anyone on the right pretend that this factor isn't now working in the Democrats' favor, and that the reason is Trump's often indefensible behavior? This will act as a drag on congressional Republicans as they labor to turn the country's attention back to the issues they want to work on in the year and a half they have left before the next election. It will also hamper their ability to compete effectively in the midterms. While

we're a long way from the Democrats' being able to credibly claim that they will do a 2010-in-reverse next year, each Trump controversy gives them more confidence and further depresses GOP morale.

There may be no such thing as a Trumpian act that will constitute a tipping point in the sense of making Republicans openly abandon him. The real tipping point for Trump may be the moment when he will

have so depressed his base that it will no longer constitute an effective counterbalance to the Democrats' resistance media machine. When that point is reached, GOP majorities and any hope that Trump can successfully govern may be gone. If that isn't something that will scare the Trump White House into a genuine if probably futile attempt to keep the president's loose lips in check, nothing is.

POLITICO Republicans may be reaching their breaking point with Trump

John Bresnahan

For Republicans on Capitol Hill, Donald Trump may finally have gone too far.

Tuesday's report that Trump asked former FBI Director James Comey to end the criminal investigation into ex-national security adviser Michael Flynn was more than just another embarrassing revelation for a president used to a near-daily barrage of scandal and staff intrigue.

Republicans are privately beginning to worry that they may one day have to sit in judgment of Trump, or that more damaging information from Comey could force the president to step down. Within hours of Tuesday's report by The New York Times, there was a distinct shift among congressional Republicans, who until now have mostly resisted criticizing Trump, let alone demanding the president be held to account for all he says or does.

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) immediately said he's prepared to subpoena the memos that Comey reportedly wrote contemporaneously to document his interactions with Trump. Chaffetz sent a letter to the FBI on Tuesday night asking for any notes, documents or records of Trump and Comey's conversations to be turned over to his panel by May 24.

His request was echoed by AshLee Strong, spokeswoman for House Speaker Paul Ryan: "We need to have all the facts, and it is appropriate for the House Oversight Committee to request this memo."

Comey has also been invited by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) to testify publicly at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing to "tell his side

of the story" about his dealings with Trump, Graham said Tuesday, even before this latest story broke.

More Republicans have openly discussed the possibility of a select committee or the appointment of a special prosecutor to look into the Trump-Russia connection. It's still a minority of GOP lawmakers, but Republican leaders are watching closely.

The White House vehemently denied the New York Times report, and Trump has defended his firing of Comey and reported disclosure of classified information to Russian officials.

Not since October's "Access Hollywood" moment — when many Republicans believed Trump would have to drop out of the race over his hugely offensive comments about women — has the president faced such a serious political threat. Even conservatives from districts that Trump won overwhelmingly in November want to find out what occurred between the president and Comey, no matter how damaging it may be to Trump. This is a dramatic turn for the party that's been whiplashed by Trump's drama since his first day as a candidate in June 2015 yet has still stuck with him.

"It is important to get to the bottom of it," said Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), chairman of the Freedom Caucus. Meadows was last seen celebrating passage of the House GOP health care bill in the Rose Garden with Trump and dozens of his Republican colleagues. "We've got one standard, and we need to make sure that applies to everybody."

Top Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway met with the Freedom Caucus on Tuesday night and would not say afterward what they discussed. Meadows insisted the

Comey matter did not come up, but he told reporters that he intends, through his role on the Oversight Committee, to help get to the bottom of what happened. And he expects cooperation from the White House.

"If this is legitimately something that there was some kind of influence or pressure from Comey doing his work, I'm going to be very disappointed," added Rep. Mark Walker (R-N.C.), chairman of the conservative Republican Study Committee.

In private, top Republicans fear that this latest Trump controversy — coming just a week after he fired Comey, and only one day after it was revealed that the president revealed highly classified intelligence information during a meeting with Russian officials — will overwhelm everything they are trying to do legislatively. Health care, tax reform, building up the Pentagon — all of it is potentially threatened by the latest furor.

And if Republicans are paralyzed and can't pass anything despite control of the White House and Congress, how can they justify their majorities when they go before voters next year?

Sen. Lindsay Graham listens as Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse holds up a copy of "The Kremlin Playbook" at a hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism on Capitol Hill on May 8. | Getty

"I don't think we can just shrug our shoulders and walk away from this one," said a top House Republican, who asked not to be named. "I don't know where this goes."

What is most worrying for congressional Republicans is how easy this latest episode is to explain to the public — Trump reportedly

tried to interfere with a criminal investigation by the FBI but was rebuffed, then fired Comey — and thus fodder for endless cable TV coverage. That could spur moderate Republicans in swing districts, already nervous about 2018, to openly break with Trump.

"If these allegations are true, it's deeply troubling and it certainly opens up a new chapter that all of us have to consider very carefully," said Rep. Carlos Curbelo (R-Fla.) outside the House chamber Tuesday night. "We need to get to the truth as soon as possible. This weekly scandal, this weekly controversy is unhealthy for the country. It's a major distraction for the country and it's just bad for the psyche of every American."

"I hope Director Comey testifies before Congress as soon as possible," said Rep. Leonard Lance (R-N.J.), who earlier broke with Trump and his own leadership over health care reform legislation.

"Congress needs to see the Comey memo," Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) tweeted late Tuesday night.

Rep. Pat Meehan (R-Pa.), a former federal prosecutor, suggested Trump's interactions with Comey threatened the public perception of the Justice Department as an autonomous entity.

"This whole process is very difficult because we are seeing the central institution — the Justice Department, and the independence of the Justice Department — stretched. And people want to have confidence in the independence of [DOJ's] activities," Meehan said. "I'm hoping that throughout this long process, it can get back into a place where there could be confidence in the ability of the institutions to do their work."



Boot : Republicans Need to Abandon the Trump Ship ASAP

The problem with writing about Donald Trump is that the outrages come so fast and furious that it's hard to keep up. The political world is now buzzing over the *Washington Post's* blockbuster report on Monday night that Trump divulged code-word secrets — in other words, some of the most highly classified information that the U.S. government possesses — to the Russian foreign minister and ambassador during an Oval Office meeting. Yes, that's important. But don't lose sight of the firing of James Comey, which is, on balance, an even bigger scandal.

Two days after dismissing Comey, after all, Trump went on NBC and destroyed his own administration's cover story that the firing was based on the FBI director's out-of-school public statements about the Hillary Clinton email investigation. "In fact, when I decided to just do it," the president told Lester Holt, "I said to myself, I said, 'You know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story. It's an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won.'"

In that same interview, Trump confirmed that he had asked Comey on at least three separate occasions whether he was a target of the investigation into Russian tampering with the U.S. election. It subsequently emerged that in January, Trump had dinner with Comey and demanded his loyalty, holding out the implicit threat that if he didn't deliver he wouldn't be able to stay on the job. Trump denied to Fox News that he had asked for personal loyalty from the head of the Russia investigation but then undercut his protestations by saying that it would not be "inappropriate" to do so.

As if that weren't enough, Trump threatened the former FBI director in the manner of a mob boss warning an underling who is thinking of going into the witness protection program. "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!" Trump tweeted on May 12.

Donald Trump is not the first U.S. president to obstruct justice. But he is the first to boast about it in public.

It no longer matters whether it can be shown that Trump illicitly colluded with the Kremlin to affect the course of the election — something that would be difficult to prove and even more difficult to prosecute, as David Frum notes in the *Atlantic*. Trump has now committed obstruction of justice and witness intimidation in plain sight — and as Laurence Tribe, one of the nation's foremost constitutional law scholars, argues, that should now lead to impeachment proceedings. "To say that this does not in itself rise to the level of 'obstruction of justice,'" he writes, "is to empty that concept of all meaning."

One could imagine another charge being added to the bill of impeachment if Trump did indeed disclose code-word secrets to Russia's representatives. Such an action is criminal if anyone other than the president does it; in the president's case it is potentially impeachable.

Yet there is no chance of an impeachment inquiry being launched for the simple reason that few if any members of the ruling political party in Washington agree with Tribe's analysis. In the week that has elapsed after the most serious abuse of presidential authority since Watergate, not a single member of the Trump administration has resigned in protest. Far from it: U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley took to ABC News to falsely claim: "The president is the CEO of the country. He can hire and fire whomever he wants." Haley might want to reread the Constitution, which does not mention anything about a CEO but does charge the president to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed."

Even Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who was duped into serving as a cover for Comey's firing, neither resigned nor appointed a special counsel. He apparently doesn't much mind having his professional reputation shredded by the conniving commander in chief.

On Capitol Hill, roughly 40 Republicans out of 290 have raised

questions about the Comey firing, but only six have called for an independent investigation and only one for a special counsel.

Far from criticizing Trump, many Republicans are high-fiving him.

Far from criticizing Trump, many Republicans are high-fiving him. Rep. Liz Cheney, for example, posted Trump's disingenuous and shameful letter firing Comey with this gleeful Twitter comment: "Best. Termination. Letter. Ever."

Even outside government, it is hard to point to a single prominent Trump defender who has now switched to criticizing Trump. Bizarrely enough, the libertarian law professor Richard Epstein, who in February was suggesting that Trump should resign, is now defending his termination of Comey. So is William Barr, the attorney general under President George H.W. Bush. Also Kenneth Starr, the former Whitewater independent counsel. He tried to get Bill Clinton impeached for lying about a sexual affair but now claims that there is no cause to appoint a special counsel to look into whether Trump tried to stop the FBI from probing suspected collusion with a hostile foreign power to influence a presidential election.

One thing unites all of these pro-Trump arguments: They are based entirely on a fiction. To wit, the claim that Comey was fired for being mean to "Crooked Hillary." This is the cover story advanced by the White House in the 24 hours after Comey's firing and then just as swiftly discarded. But apparently Trump's defenders haven't gotten the message: They are acting as if Comey really was let go for the acts that Trump praised him for last year.

To the extent that any of them acknowledge reality — that Trump canned Comey to bring the Russia investigation "to its conclusion," as White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders acknowledged — these Republican enablers claim it's no big deal, because Trump may not get his desire. They act confident that the Russia probe will continue full speed ahead, even though it's just as likely that Comey's successor, hand-picked by Trump, will allow the investigation to languish and eventually to die.

Certainly anyone in the Justice Department or FBI intent on pursuing the investigation wherever it may lead will now know that he or she is in danger of dismissal — and that Attorney General Jeff Sessions will not hesitate to drop the axe in spite of his transparently false pledge to have recused himself from the Kremlingate probe.

But even if Trump's defenders are right, and his firing of Comey does not impede the investigation as intended, how is that a defense? It's like saying Richard Nixon's dismissal of Archibald Cox was no big deal because it didn't stop the Watergate investigation.

Is the standard now that obstruction of justice has to be successful in order to be a crime?

Is the standard now that obstruction of justice has to be successful in order to be a crime? Simply trying and failing is just fine?

Independent, nonpartisan observers like former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper can see what's happening. On CNN, he said Sunday that "our institutions are under assault internally" from President Trump. But Republicans are acting deaf, dumb, and blind — or, even worse, acting as cheerleaders — while this slow-motion assault on the rule of law unfolds. As Fareed Zakaria said in a trenchant commentary, "[I]t appears that the Republican Party is losing any resemblance to a traditional Western political party, instead simply turning into something more commonly found in the developing world: a platform to support the ego, appetites and interests of one man and his family."

Given the unwillingness of Republicans to act as a check on Trump's abuse of power, the only remedy that I can see lies in the 2018 midterm elections. It pains me to say this as someone who spent 30 years as a loyal Republican — I re-registered as an independent on Nov. 9 — but I agree with Mark Salter, Sen. John McCain's former chief of staff, who tweeted: "Words I thought I'd never say: the security of the United States might now depend on electing a Democratic Congress in 2018."



Psaki: Trump is destroying the trust of our allies

As news broke on Monday evening that Donald Trump had, according to reports from the *Washington Post* and later the *New York Times*,

shared code word (highly classified) intelligence with the Russian Foreign Minister during his visit to the Oval Office last week, the shock wave was felt far beyond the beltway.

When Washington wakes up on Tuesday, leaders in Middle Eastern and European capitals -- and elsewhere around the world -- could be hours into re-evaluating their

intelligence sharing relationship with the United States.

And can you blame them?

Two former officials knowledgeable of the situation confirmed to CNN

that the main points of the Post story are accurate, and if that is true, Donald Trump didn't just violate intelligence protocols -- he likely put the lives of members of the intelligence community serving an allied country at risk. People put their lives on the line to acquire the type of information President Trump reportedly shared.

It is pretty shocking. The man sitting in the Oval Office, with access to unfettered information not only from the United States, but also our "five eyes" partners -- the intelligence alliance we are part of with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom -- apparently cannot be trusted to keep it to himself.

For close watchers of President Trump's relationship with the intelligence community in the United States, his disregard for the contributions of our partners, the years of work developing sources and the time spent building trust among allies may not be surprising.

Even before Monday's breaking news, anxiety abroad was palpable. Foreign officials expressed concern

even during the transition about the potential for President Trump to share information with adversaries like Russia and Iran. Unease about the coziness of President Trump's relationship with the Russians has only grown as the investigations into allegations of collusion between them have proceeded.

At best, if he shared sensitive information, Donald Trump was channeling his inner high school outcast, trying to gain approval and score cool points from the more charming bully, Sergey Lavrov (and by extension his boss, Vladimir Putin). At worst, he knowingly provided information to the foreign minister of a country that may have helped rig the election in the United States on his behalf. So far, the reporting has suggested the former -- but there is more to unravel about this story, to say the least.

If our partners and allies pull back on intelligence sharing, we won't have access to the information we rely on to keep the United States and American citizens living

overseas safe. And it could take years to rebuild the kind of trust in these relationships that has allowed the United States to have productive intelligence sharing partnerships around the world in the past, under the leadership of both Democratic and Republican Presidents.

The potentially devastating impact of these revelations makes the dust-up over the Russian state-run media being allowed into the meeting between President Trump and Foreign Minister Lavrov while the American press was excluded seem, well, quaint.



What Trump's intelligence-sharing with Russia may have cost the US

The Christian Science Monitor

President Trump's disclosure to Russian officials of sensitive intelligence provided by a US partner in the fight against the Islamic State threatens to put a chill on one of Mr. Trump's priorities -- the global effort to defeat Islamist terrorism.

That's because counterterrorism work depends on a high level of trust among partner nations, international security experts say. The partners rely on each other to use the highly sensitive information, which sources may have risked their lives to gather, judiciously and to mutual benefit.

Violate that trust by loosely sharing intelligence from at-risk sources, the experts add, and information critical to stopping one attack -- or prevent a new means of carrying out deadly attacks -- can dry up.

"This whole episode is terrible for trust -- and trust is what makes intelligence sharing work," says Joshua Rovner, an expert in relations between leaders and intelligence officials at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

"Sharing intelligence is very risky for the side that's giving the information up, and especially if what's involved is a human source inside ISIS," he adds. "Sharing that kind of information with a third party is not something you do lightly."

Trump shared ISIS-related information the US obtained from another country with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, as well as with Russia's ambassador to Washington, when the two visited the Oval Office May 10.

At a White House press conference May 16, national security adviser H.R. McMaster deemed the information Trump shared as "wholly appropriate" and further stated that the president wasn't even aware of the country that provided the information. The New York Times reported that the source was Israel.

What worries intelligence officials is that the information shared -- which US officials say concerned ISIS methods of placing explosives inside electronic devices like laptops -- could be "reverse-engineered" to pinpoint the source or sources of the information.

The Russia factor

Adding a kind of "on-top-of-everything-else" aura to the revelations is the fact that Trump chose to share the information with Russia -- a fact that may not sit well with many Americans or with America's counterterrorism partners in Europe.

"The information sharing is not really the problem. I must tell you that in foreign policy this kind of thing goes on all the time," says Jeffrey White, a specialist in Middle East military and security affairs at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP). "What makes this very bad all around is that this was with Russia, and only underscores [Trump's] unwillingness to accept that Russia is an enemy state that is not looking out for our interests."

At one level, thwarting attacks planned by ISIS, Al Qaeda, or other terrorist groups intent on attacking the West depends on a global web of intelligence sources -- some of whom provide crucial information at extreme personal peril.

The prospect of having highly classified information about those sources banded about -- even if by the president of the United States to another global power pledging to crush Islamist terrorism -- can't help but cause nervous sources to clam up, and the relaying of valuable information to go cold.

More broadly, destroying the scourge of international terrorism depends on a high degree of trust in international relationships -- including sometimes between partners who have access to vital information but who prefer to keep their level of cooperation with the United States under wraps. If partners decide they can no longer rely on the US to safeguard the intelligence they provide on terrorists and their organizations, they may think twice about sharing information that could prevent attacks.

Trump's information-sharing with Russia may not perturb some US allies that are more focused on garnering US support for other priorities. For example, Saudi officials, preparing for what they are calling a "pivotal" summit with Trump in Riyadh this weekend that is to feature more than 50 Muslim nations, are pushing aside fears over intelligence leaks while praising "closer cooperation" with the Trump administration on top-tier concerns like Iran.

"There is full security, intelligence, and political cooperation with the new administration that will only continue," says an official Saudi source, who was not authorized to speak to the press and thus insisted on anonymity.

"The new US administration sees the region and the threats that face it like Saudi Arabia [does], and its

policies are much more in line with Saudi policies than the previous administration," says Jasser al-Jasser, an analyst and columnist at the semi-official Saudi daily Al Jazirah. "An incident or leak would not derail this important partnership."

Keeping information from Trump

But reactions from European partners are likely to be much more critical of the president, experts there say.

"Donald Trump was a businessman who speculated in real estate using other peoples' money. Now as president he is taking risks with other peoples' intelligence (assets)," says Irwin Collier, director of North American Studies at Free University of Berlin.

"Clearly people stop lending to speculators who fail to pay back when they fail," he says, "and [now] intelligence agencies have witnessed their worst fears, [that] the president of the United States risks their people and methods to satisfy his own ego."

One mitigating factor, Mr. Collier says, is that German intelligence agencies are dependent on the US sharing intelligence with them. As a result, he says, he doubts it will come down to a widespread refusal to share from the German side.

"But they will definitely work out procedures to double-insulate their sources and methods before sharing," he adds. "They will seek assurances that their US colleagues figure out ways of keeping particular information very far from the current occupant of the White House."

Some even see the spectacle of the American president casually sharing hard-won intelligence with the

Russians as pushing European officials back to a mistrust among powers that some thought had ameliorated in recent decades.

"We are almost going back to this cold war type of environment where information obtained by the other side, it could be misused and lives potentially could then be in danger," says Sajjan Gohel, a terrorism expert at the London-based Asia-Pacific Foundation. "One has to be very careful. Especially more-so when you are discussing things with Russia."

Ties to intelligence community at risk

WINEP's Mr. White says that as worrying as the impact on US relations with its intelligence partners may be, he is much more concerned about what this latest crisis in the Trump White House says about White House-intelligence community relations.

Calling it "very clear to me" that the information about the intelligence sharing, first reported in *The Washington Post*, was leaked by someone in intelligence, White

says, "This indicates to me that the Intel Community is out to get Trump, and that's not a healthy thing."

SMU's Dr. Rovner concurs that damage has been done to "intelligence policy relations," right when, he says, signs were mounting of steady mending in White House-intelligence community relations.

But he is less optimistic about repairing the breach he anticipates is widening with international counterterrorism partners as a

result of the Oval Office ISIS information sharing.

"I really think the difficulty so many countries are now going to have sharing information with the US will be a factor as long as Trump is in office," Rovner says. "Intelligence people around the world are seeing a US president that is unreliable, unpredictable – and not the kind of leader you'd entrust with your most sensitive information."



Editorial Board : Pretend Clinton did what Trump has done

Imagine what would have happened had a President Hillary Clinton abruptly fired the man overseeing an investigation of her campaign's ties to a hostile foreign government.

Imagine if the firing came, according to *The New York Times*, weeks after Clinton had asked the man to drop a probe of a close associate who had lied about conversations with that nation's ambassador.

Imagine, further, what would have happened had she invited the ambassador and foreign minister of that hostile government to the Oval Office at the request of their autocratic leader, closed the meeting to U.S. journalists, and claimed to have been tricked when the foreign adversary's media arm released chummy photos from the meeting.

And then imagine that she had used the meeting to share classified intelligence with the envoys.

Republicans in Congress and conservative news outlets would undoubtedly be clamoring for investigations, if not impeachment. After all, Clinton's critics spent years

trying to make a capital case out of the Benghazi tragedy, then pounded her careless handling of sensitive information through her use of a private server for State Department emails.

Now, many of those formerly apoleptic Republicans are shrugging off Trump's behavior — his campaign's suspicious ties to the Russian government, his dismissal of FBI Director James Comey and his sharing of classified information with two high-level Russian officials — with only a modest sense of annoyance.

Sen. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., allowed that it would be nice to have "a little less drama" from the White House. Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Neb., compared the Trump White House to "kiddie soccer" (an insult to youth soccer leagues). "It is what it is," added Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla.

What is it? How about a breathtaking degree of ignorance, incompetence, immaturity and impulsiveness? Trump's disclosure of classified intelligence would put anyone but a president in legal jeopardy. He has harmed national security by raising questions among

allies about whether they should cooperate with the United States and trust America to keep secrets. And he has used the powers of the presidency to attempt to impede a credible investigation into how he came to be president.

Rather than trying to make excuses for the president, Republicans should be providing leadership, staying true to their oaths of office, and serving as credible checks on Trump's excesses. Even before getting briefed on the latest outrages, they should demand that the next FBI director be a non-partisan career professional, not a politician who could be co-opted by the administration.

They should also get serious about their own fact-finding investigations. Even before Trump's disclosure of sensitive information and Tuesday's report in *The Times* that the president asked Comey to close down an investigation of former national security adviser Michael Flynn, their intelligence committees already had at least three angles to pursue: the degree to which Russia interfered with last year's election, its coordination (if any) with the Trump campaign, and the

circumstances surrounding Comey's ouster.

The work of the House Intelligence Committee has been farcical. The Senate Intelligence Committee has shown more promise, but it might need to be replaced with a select committee with more resources and a higher profile.

The most credible criminal investigation would come from a Justice Department special counsel. The decision on whether to appoint such a person is up to Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, but congressional Republicans should make clear that they would have no objection.

Had Clinton been elected and done a 10th of the things Trump has done, the calls from the right for her removal would be deafening, louder even than the "lock her up" shouts during the presidential campaign.

It's time for GOP lawmakers to demand more accountability and more competence from their president, whose suitability for office grows ever more tenuous.

POLITICO White House on edge: 'We are kind of helpless'

Josh Dawsey

It was, in the words of one senior White House official, the worst day of Trump's presidency.

White House officials spent early Tuesday wondering who was leaking details of President Donald Trump's classified conversations with Russian officials about intelligence shared by the Israelis, and moving to contain the fallout ahead of Trump's planned trip to Jerusalem next week. They spent the evening facing a report that before he fired FBI director James Comey, Trump directly asked him to stop investigating the Trump campaign's Russia ties—and

worrying what else might yet be revealed.

"Nobody knows where this really goes from here," the White House official said. "Everyone is walking around saying, 'What is next?'"

In interviews, multiple White House officials indicated they feel under siege — unsure who in the intelligence community was leaking, how much damaging information was out there, when the next proverbial shoe would drop and what Trump might say.

Staffers shuttled back and forth among West Wing offices debating what to say without divulging

confidential material or getting anything wrong. A deflated and exhausted Sean Spicer, who continues to read reports that his job is in jeopardy but is working 12 hours every day in his office, huddled in his office with Chief of Staff Reince Priebus.

There was a pervasive sense, another official said, that "we are kind of helpless."

Republicans outside the administration didn't mince words. "We've seen this movie before," Sen. John McCain said at a dinner for the International Republican Institute. "I think it appears at a

point where it's of Watergate size and scale."

Top White House officials learned of the looming New York Times story about a memo Comey wrote memorializing Trump's request two hours before it went online. Aides rushed to ask Trump what he had actually told Comey. But the White House had no memos or tapes of the meeting to rebut the claims, several officials said. Trump didn't even give an entire readout of his conversation, leaving staffers "actually unaware of what happened," one official said.

"It's not like we were in on the meeting," this person said. "We had

no idea. We still don't really know what was said."

Another official laughed when asked if Trump had really "taped" the meeting, as he's suggested on Twitter: "If so, none of us have heard the tape."

Trump was furious about the story, one of the officials said, but retreated to the White House residence within 75 minutes of it going online – leaving aides to "figure out how bad the fallout was."

The White House put out a statement denying the accuracy of Comey's memo. "This is not a truthful or accurate portrayal of the conversation between the President and Mr. Comey," said the White House statement.

A senior administration official questioned the veracity of the Comey memo, asking why he didn't express his concerns earlier and why acting FBI director Andrew McCabe said there was no interference during recent Capitol Hill testimony.

But inside the White House, there was a struggle to get any surrogates on TV because no one knew what to say or how to defend the story, one White House adviser said. At one point in the evening, Fox News host Bret Baier told

viewers that "there are not Republicans willing to go on camera tonight as of yet."

"There is this misunderstanding all these people want to go out there and defend us," said one of the senior administration officials. "Who are they? Do you want to call them? Do you know how to get them on TV?"

Earlier in the day, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster was given talking points to "try and turn the temperature down a little," one person familiar with the comments said, "without causing more of a firestorm or making news or actually denying the story."

But White House officials, one person said, are becoming increasingly leery of putting their names on statements in the immediate aftermath of stories – because Trump often contradicts them publicly or on Twitter.

And staffers have grown tired and upset about stories of a staff shake-up. Two officials said they had no idea if their jobs were in jeopardy – but that Trump has given people private assurances they are safe. That includes Spicer, according to one ally of his—though this person also said the communications staff is given very little say in decisions and then is left to clean them up.

Priebus is sitting in every meeting. Bannon has been given "some authority" to help clean this up, one outside adviser said. Other senior officials believe Trump trusts them.

"What he says on the phone to his friends, we don't know," one of the White House officials said. "We don't even know if the people in the press who say they talk to Trump actually talk to him."

There was a growing realization that Trump had made a number of missteps that hurt him with the intelligence community – and likely with Comey.

Two people familiar with White House discussions said Trump was determined to write a line in the letter firing Comey saying that the FBI director had given him three assurances he wasn't under investigation. The words, said one White House adviser, "probably will cause him more heartbreak than anything else." The line, this person said, had worried White House officials after it was printed – but few people saw the letter before it went out.

Internally, one senior administration official said, there was a realization he made the decision over the weekend in New Jersey, where "none of us were."

Another person said White House aides learned about Trump's comments criticizing Comey as a "showboat" as he said them on the air with Lester Holt of NBC – and showed up last Friday morning to the office to see his tweet about "tapes" of Comey's meetings.

Aides were in meetings in the West Wing while the tweets reverberated, and then Trump walked into the Oval Office.

"They're in a bad situation," said one adviser who has known Trump for years. "If people wanted the Comey situation to go away, he did nothing to help that happen."

Inside the White House Tuesday night, there was a decision to not put anyone on TV and to not put a statement out with someone's name on it. Officials huddled to discuss the upcoming foreign trip, with specifics still not set, and concerns that the adventure will be overshadowed by news in Washington.

White House officials said there would be no more comments Tuesday evening.

"And we are hoping the president doesn't tweet," one said. "Fingers crossed."



Koncewicz : It took heroes inside the administration to bring down Nixon. We should be so lucky in 2017

"Well, he better start fighting for me or he's gonna be out! I want him to do right, but he must not cut the president!"

That was Richard Nixon, caught on tape shouting about his attorney general, Elliot Richardson, who had just insisted on his independence during the Watergate investigation. Nixon's ire was prescient — Richardson would, indeed, go on to "cut the president." On Oct. 20, 1973, the attorney general very publicly resigned rather than carry out a White House order to fire Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox.

Within hours, Richardson's deputy, William Ruckelshaus, would likewise refuse to follow Nixon's command. Cox was finally ousted (then-Solicitor Gen. Robert Bork did the deed), but not before the "Saturday Night Massacre" reassured some in the nation that not all the president's men were deep in his pocket. We should be so lucky in 2017.

As the Nixon scandal unfolded, a few prominent Republicans stepped

forward to take on the president. Sen. Howard Baker, the minority chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities (better known as the Watergate committee), and Sen. Barry Goldwater famously spoke up in the latter stages of the saga. What is little known is that they were preceded by Republican civil servants inside the administration who stood in the way of some of the White House's most nefarious plans. Without those less-publicized efforts, the nation could have succumbed to an even more serious constitutional crisis.

In the summer of 1971, the Nixon White House began compiling an enemies list that ultimately included hundreds of Democrats, antiwar activists, reporters and administration critics. The goal, in the words of a memo by White House Counsel John Dean, was "to use the available federal machinery to screw" Nixon's political opponents.

The worst of what Dean and others contemplated, however, didn't come to pass. Johnnie Walters, a Republican from South Carolina,

was commissioner of the IRS. He consistently fought against the White House's attempts to politicize his agency. When Walters was given the enemies list, he locked it inside a personal safe because he believed the "Enemies Project" was a serious threat to the nation's tax system. With the support of Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz, Walters told the White House that he would not move forward with its request to audit those on the list. "It was an improper use of the IRS, and I wouldn't do it," recalled Shultz, in an oral history taped in 2007 for the Richard Nixon Presidential Library.

Well before the enemies list was drawn up, Nixon had campus activists in his sights. He told his advisors he wanted to find a way to cut off federal funding to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other elite universities as punishment for rampant student antiwar protests. In 1972, as a massive U.S. bombing campaign in North Vietnam reignited protests, Nixon put more pressure on his administration to find a way to punish the schools. "I want those funds cut off, for that

MIT," the president told H.R. "Bob" Haldeman, his chief of staff.

The order was eventually relayed to three assistant directors at the Office of Management and Budget — Kenneth Dam, William Morrill and Paul O'Neill. Two of the three were registered Republicans (Dam and O'Neill), but all three were united in their opposition to the order and threatened to resign in protest. "There's no basis in law to carry out this order," O'Neill remembered when he was interviewed by the Nixon library. Once again, Shultz stepped in, and with his help, the men at OMB successfully blocked the order and kept their jobs.

Republicans like these who said no to Nixon are evidence that the president's downfall was not the product of a single misstep or tantrum, but rather a sustained effort to institutionalize abuses of power. Nixon began his second term, telling Haldeman and White House special assistant Fred Malek on tape, that "there must be absolute loyalty" among his staff and inner circle. We can be thankful he didn't achieve it.

"I think the trouble is that we've got too many nice guys around who just want to do the right thing," an exasperated Nixon told his closest advisors in the Oval Office when discussing Shultz's refusal to help politicize the IRS.

One after another, the revelations of the last week have revealed President Trump leaning on his appointees, trying to close out the FBI's investigation into "this Russia thing," tweeting to deny any missteps on his part and to deflect criticism. When he fired FBI Director James B. Comey he was within his

rights, but it was uncomfortably similar to the Saturday Night Massacre. And this time, the attorney general and his deputy not only acquiesced, they participated.

Trump's obsession with personal loyalty among his staff and party is well documented. The danger now,

as in the Watergate era, is that such obedience will threaten the separation of powers, the Constitution and democracy itself. The U.S. survived Nixon because enough good men said no. We can only watch and wait to see whether such heroics will be matched in this administration.

**The
Washington
Post**

Editorial Board : Trump can't be trusted with sensitive information — and now the world knows

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S disclosure of highly classified information to senior Russian officials was the most disturbing demonstration yet that he is dangerously unprepared to handle sensitive national security matters. On Tuesday, Mr. Trump essentially confirmed a Post report that he provided details of the Islamic State's plotting of airline attacks to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak in an Oval Office meeting last week. The Post reported that the information could allow Moscow to identify the source of the intelligence, which came through a foreign government with which U.S. spy agencies have a special relationship.

The consequences of the president's lapse could be far-reaching. In addition to disrupting a vital flow of intelligence and possibly endangering agents on the ground, Mr. Trump has let the world know that he and his administration cannot be trusted with sensitive information. Governments that share their secrets with the CIA, from Britain to Israel — which was reported to be the source of the information — may feel compelled

to recalibrate their cooperation. Those that don't have a cooperative relationship, such as Russia and China, will try to use their access to Mr. Trump to extract more indiscretions.

The administration's attempts to defend the leak only underlined the continuing chaos in the White House. When the Post article first appeared Monday, senior administration officials issued denials: National security adviser H.R. McMaster and deputy adviser Dina Powell both called it "false." Mr. Trump then undercut them by confirming on Twitter that he provided the Russians with "facts pertaining ... to terrorism and airline flight safety," which, he said, "I have the absolute right to do." By midday Tuesday, Mr. McMaster found himself simultaneously arguing that he was right to call the article false and spinning the president's leak as "appropriate."

In fact, everything about Mr. Trump's engagement with the Russian officials reflected the gross inadequacy of his knowledge of foreign affairs as well as the weakness of the staff and processes he has put in place to aid

him. His decision to meet with the chronically dishonest Mr. Lavrov and with Mr. Kislyak, who already had several questionable contacts with senior administration officials, itself reflected poor judgement; the Obama administration had refused to give Mr. Lavrov an Oval Office meeting since 2013. As the meeting began, U.S. journalists were banned from the room, while a Russian news-agency photographer was invited in, producing embarrassing photos and raising the possibility of a security breach.

Mr. Trump's subsequent disclosures appeared to flow from two of his deepest flaws, vanity and an obtuseness about the regime of Vladimir Putin. As The Post reported it, he appeared childishly boastful about his "great intel." And as the president subsequently described it, he was hoping the Russians would respond to the leak with greater cooperation with U.S. operations against the Islamic State, as opposed to using it to undermine them.

That was a naive and dangerous conclusion, as any CIA briefer would have told the president. Unfortunately, Mr. Trump doesn't

pay much heed to intelligence professionals, even as he misuses their materials, endangers their operations and impugns their professionalism. The processes in place to ready the president for interactions with foreign leaders are shockingly attenuated: A lot of the spade work is done by his inexperienced son-in-law, Jared Kushner, while key positions at the National Security Council and State Department remain unfilled. As the president prepares for his first trip abroad later this week, including meetings with key Middle Eastern and European allies, the potential for further gaffes — and damage to key U.S. alliances — is alarmingly high.

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) aptly described Mr. Trump's presidency on Monday as "in a downward spiral." Arresting the fall would require a thorough revamping of White House staffing and function, one that replaces disorder and ignorance with discipline and competence. That, in turn, would require corrective action by Mr. Trump — for which the nation can only hope.

**The
New York
Times**

Editorial board : Can Donald Trump Be Trusted With State Secrets?

On Monday, Americans learned that President Trump shared with the Russians highly classified intelligence about the United States fight against the Islamic State. Mr. Trump jocularly passed secrets obtained by Israel to Kremlin representatives in a White House meeting last week, blithely endangering America's relationship with a vital counterterrorism ally and its national security.

Republicans called Mr. Trump's act "deeply disturbing," "troubling" and "very serious." It is worse than that. It is further proof of the menace posed by an erratic president who, we now learn, may also have interfered with the F.B.I.'s investigation of his former national security adviser, Michael Flynn. Mr.

Trump defended himself (on Twitter, as usual) by asserting that sharing highly classified intelligence with a foreign adversary is something "I have the absolute right to do." What's terrifying is that he's right. But what he fails to grasp is that he was elected to protect American interests, not his own.

How then can Congress's Republican leaders seem so diffident? Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, said, "It would be helpful if the president spent more time on things we're trying to accomplish." Paul Ryan, the speaker of the House, said through a spokesman that he "hopes for a full explanation of the facts from the administration." But so far the best he's gotten is another Trumpian Twitter blast in which the president vowed to

avenge caps-lock "LEAKERS" among the American intelligence professionals whose years of work he may have unraveled with his ad-hoc bumbling.

There's a danger to overthinking this man. We needn't apply, as the Times columnist David Brooks put it, the "vast analytic powers of the entire world ... trying to understand a guy whose thoughts are often just six fireflies beeping randomly in a jar."

Mr. Trump created this latest crisis during an immature boast about himself. "I get great intel. I have people brief me on great intel every day," he is reported to have said, before telling Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, and Sergey Kislyak, the Russian

ambassador to the United States, about his knowledge of an ISIS plot.

After his Russian guests left the Oval Office, White House officials struggled to limit the damage by contacting the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency and trying to scrub transcripts from the meeting. The news media has withheld the most sensitive details of what Mr. Trump told the Russians. Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, the national security adviser, mounted an odd and hairsplitting defense, saying that Mr. Trump's disclosure was "wholly appropriate" while acknowledging that Mr. Trump didn't know the source of the information and had blurted it out at the spur of the moment.

It is bad enough that the intelligence community is now likely to do what it can to wall off sensitive information, sources and methods from this irresponsible leader. But the president of the United States has unlimited access to the nation's secrets, and virtually unfettered authority to act unilaterally on matters of national security. That is enshrined in our Constitution — but

so are means for curtailing the danger posed by a leader who misuses that power.

So far, Republicans in Congress repeat the mantra we heard during Mr. Trump's campaign: that he is coachable and will mature in office. Or, maybe his White House will, as Senator Bob Corker put it on Monday night, "bring itself under

control and in order. ... Obviously they're in a downward spiral right now and they've got to figure out a way to come to grips."

That's not going to happen. We are seeing the real Mr. Trump. This same inattention and ignorance, vanity and foolish impulsivity nearly sank his business — until his

leaders stepped in before he took them down with him.

So what will Republicans do, as he threatens to do the same to all of us? They might start devising a plan. The downward spiral is accelerating.



Will U.S. Intelligence Partners Trust Trump Anymore?

Jenna McLaughlin,
Robbie Gramer

The real danger behind President Donald Trump's decision to share classified information with Russian officials isn't that he did something illegal but that foreign partners will now be reluctant to share sensitive information, endangering the U.S. government's ability to track security threats, former administration and intelligence officials told Foreign Policy.

Trump on May 10 reportedly went "off script" to disclose to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russia's ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, highly sensitive "code-word information" provided by a U.S. ally concerning an aviation threat from the Islamic State, the *Washington Post* reported Monday evening. That threat, related to explosives in laptops, is slated for discussion at a meeting with officials from the European Union on Wednesday.

The president can declassify what he wants, when he wants, but these disclosures could lead to a "ripple effect," one former senior administration official told FP during a phone interview. There's a danger that foreign partners, beyond the government that shared the sensitive source, will "turn inward and reduce or limit sharing even on issues outside the counterterrorism realm," the former official said.

Trump undercut his own staff Tuesday with a pair of tweets confirming he revealed intelligence to the Russians — the morning after his top White House lieutenants vehemently denied the report, first published in the *Post*.

National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster told reporters Monday night that no "sources and methods" were revealed during the conversation. On Tuesday, he repeatedly told reporters Trump's conversation was "wholly

appropriate," going so far as to say that what Trump told the Russians wasn't anything more than you could get from open-source intelligence, on the internet and through press reports. "I was in the room ... and none of us felt in any way that conversation was inappropriate," he said.

However, the *Post* article did claim that President Trump revealed the name of the city where the partner nation got the information about the aviation threat. The United States and the EU will be discussing plans to implement a "laptop ban" on transatlantic flights, a response to threat information derived from intelligence overseas.

The bombshell revelations could damage key U.S. intelligence relationships with allies around the world. Foreign partners are watching the wheels fall off the cart, thinking "too many things are out of control, so I might hold back," a former senior intelligence official told FP.

One senior European intelligence official told The Associated Press his country may curb its intelligence sharing with Washington for fear of what Trump could reveal to Russian officials. Trump "could be a risk for our sources," the official said, speaking anonymously and on condition his country would not be identified.

While White House officials have emphasized that Trump did not disclose sources and methods and only described the intelligence he had received, the former intelligence official said that may be a distinction without a difference. Some intelligence is so sensitive that it will be obvious to intelligence professionals how it was obtained, the former official said.

The intelligence Trump shared came from a Middle Eastern ally, the *New York Times* reported. Separately, the White House announced that Trump had a phone

call with King Abdullah of Jordan Tuesday morning after the news broke, fueling speculation that Trump's disclosures came from Jordan, which has a robust intelligence footprint in Syria.

Several former administration and intelligence officials interviewed by FP, though without direct knowledge of the information Trump shared, speculated that the foreign partner is likely a Middle Eastern ally — potentially Jordan or Israel. One former official who worked for several intelligence agencies told FP that the source of the information may be concerned about "exposure of sources and methods ultimately to Iran," because of Tehran's relationship with Moscow.

Though officials think it's unlikely the information came from one of the so-called "Five Eyes" nations — the intelligence alliance made up of the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada — officials from those countries are likely to be concerned about the president's decision to share the information with Russian officials.

Trump's disclosures are "certainly" a risk to U.S.-U.K. intelligence sharing, one of the closest bonds in espionage, said Matt Tait, a former analyst at GCHQ, Britain's equivalent of the U.S. National Security Agency. "Lots of information is shared on the understanding that the U.S. will be able to keep it safe," Tait said. "To have a president show that he does not care about that arrangement makes countries think twice before sharing it."

GCHQ declined a request for comment.

While Democrats fumed at the revelations, exasperated Republicans in Congress worried that Trump's repeated scandals and gaffes could scupper their legislative agenda.

"They [the White House] are in a downward spiral right now and have got to figure out a way to come to grips with all that's happening," said Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "The chaos that is being created by the lack of discipline is creating an environment that I think ... creates a worrisome environment."

"Can we have a crisis-free day?" said Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine). "That's all I'm asking."

Key lawmakers were, yet again, in the dark before the bombshell. An aide for the Senate Intelligence Committee told FP that no one briefed the committee about Trump's conversations. They learned about it from the *Post*.

This isn't the first time disclosures of classified information have gotten U.S. officials into trouble. For example, Reuters reported that John Brennan, then the top White House advisor for homeland security, may have accidentally disclosed sensitive information about the "underwear bomber" to TV counterterrorism pundits during a teleconference in 2012. President George W. Bush authorized leaks of classified information to a *Times* reporter to bolster his decision to go to war in Iraq, court documents later revealed.

The White House had to confront the fallout from major European partners including the U.K. and Germany, after former NSA contractor Edward Snowden disclosed a large cache of classified documents to journalists in 2013.

The former senior administration official recalled several instances when U.S. officials shared more information than might have been prudent, often a result of poor staffing.

"It's unfortunate," the former official said, "but we've seen this movie before."

Ignatius : Trump's presidency is beginning to unravel

Think of the intelligence community and its fragile array of secret relationships as a china shop. Think of President Trump as a bull, restless and undisciplined. For months, we've been watching the disastrous collision of the two.

Trump's latest self-inflicted spy scandal was the disclosure this week that he had boastfully revealed to Russian visitors his knowledge of highly classified reports about threats by the Islamic State to attack planes with undetectable bombs hidden in laptop computers. This is the kind of secret intelligence that saves lives; bragging about it to foreign visitors was unwise, perhaps even reckless.

Then came the stunning reports Tuesday evening that in February, Trump had asked FBI Director James B. Comey to drop his investigation into the Russia connections of Michael Flynn, whom Trump had just fired as national security adviser for lying about those same contacts. Trump's alleged request may become a signature phrase: "I hope you can let this go."

Observing this White House in action is sometimes like watching a horror movie. The "good guys" (and yes, there are a few) keep falling through trap doors. National security adviser H.R. McMaster, whose credibility is precious, struggled Tuesday to defend

Trump's actions in disclosing terrorism information as "wholly appropriate." He said the president hadn't even been aware of what country had provided the terrorism information. Israel, reportedly the source country, issued a statement endorsing its "intelligence-sharing relationship" with Trump.

If there's no problem here, why did Tom Bossert, assistant to the president for homeland security, call the directors of the CIA and NSA to warn them about what the president had told Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak? The White House line is that Bossert was "freelancing." Maybe so, but that's not a bad word for Trump's own behavior.

Trump is a daily reminder of why presidents need protocols and talking points. When someone as inexperienced and impulsive as Trump tries to wing it, the result is chaos or worse. The Lawfare blog, one of the most fair-minded chroniclers of national security issues, reviewed the string of Trump's recent actions involving intelligence and asked whether he was violating his oath to "faithfully execute the Office of President." That's a polite way of asking whether he should be impeached.

The threat to Trump's presidency is deepening. His credibility is unraveling, with prominent Republicans now voicing concern about his erratic, impulsive

decisions. Each new revelation builds the narrative of a man who has been trying to bully or cajole intelligence and law enforcement officials since his election. As one GOP veteran told me: "There are no guardrails for this president."

Intelligence issues have been at the center of Trump's troubles since before the election, animated by a strange mix of anxiety, insecurity and vanity. Last fall, he began calling reports of Russian election meddling a hoax; he later likened intelligence officers to Nazis; after his inauguration, he delivered a smug, self-congratulatory speech at the CIA's hall of heroes; he reportedly pressed the FBI director, who was leading the Russia investigation, for a declaration of loyalty and then fired him after he didn't deliver — and allowed the White House to issue a misleading explanation.

And then Tuesday's night's allegation that Trump wanted the FBI to halt the investigation of Flynn, and concentrate instead on leaks.

Against this litany, Trump's garrulous discussion of terrorism with the Russians strikes me as a secondary issue. Presidents get to decide what they want to tell foreign officials. But this incident is another warning light.

Every president encounters damaging leaks and other intelligence issues. During the Carter administration, The Post

revealed that Jordan's King Hussein was on the CIA payroll. The station chief in Amman can't have enjoyed that revelation, but the relationship continued.

The George W. Bush administration suffered catastrophic intelligence failures in the 9/11 attacks and in assessing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, yet its intelligence relationships abroad were, if anything, deepened. The Obama administration inadvertently bolstered an Associated Press story revealing a British/Saudi penetration of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula — a breach that infuriated foreign partners but didn't end cooperation.

The difference in Trump's case is that he doesn't seem sure whether the intelligence community is his friend or enemy. He attacks the CIA and FBI directors when he thinks they're challenging his legitimacy. Then he boasts to Lavrov and Kislyak about what great intelligence he gets.

This presidential love-hate relationship with intelligence needs to change. It demeans the government and, just as important, it's self-destructive. Intelligence relationships are built on trust. So are successful presidencies. The bull needs to get out of the china shop.

NATIONAL
REVIEW
ONLINE

Trump Discloses Classified Intelligence: Troubling, Even after His Defense

Let's begin with this proposition — there is a proper and defensible mechanism for disclosing classified information, even to a geopolitical rival. If the president determines that such disclosure advances the national interests of the United States, and if the president solicits the advice and counsel of the intelligence community and his national-security advisers to minimize the possibility of revealing sources and methods, betraying the trust of allies, or causing any other damage to national security, then it can even be prudent and proper to disclose secret information. In other words, disclosure should be the result of a deliberative process, not a momentary impulse.

Now, let's contrast this appropriate process with the charges against

President Trump and, crucially, with his defense.

The charge is serious. The *Washington Post* and numerous other media outlets reported that Trump impulsively shared highly classified information with visiting Russian officials — information that "jeopardized a critical source of intelligence on the Islamic State." According to the *Post*, the information "had been provided by a U.S. partner through an intelligence-sharing arrangement considered so sensitive that details have been withheld from allies and tightly restricted even within the U.S. government." The *New York Times* has identified the partner in question as Israel.

Trump's disclosure was allegedly dangerous enough to trigger a scramble within the government to "contain the damage" by, among

other measures, "placing calls to the CIA and National Security Agency." Officials asked the *Post* not to publish the full details of the leak. Earlier today, *The Resurgent's* Erick Erickson wrote that he knows one of the sources for the media's stories and that the reality is even worse than the reports:

I am told that what the President did is actually far worse than what is being reported. The President does not seem to realize or appreciate that his bragging can undermine relationships with our allies and with human intelligence sources. He also does not seem to appreciate that his loose lips can get valuable assets in the field killed.

It doesn't take a 3,000-word explainer to describe how this allegation is alarming. But let's note this — Hillary Clinton lost the presidency in part because her own

mishandling of classified information meant that Russia *could* have had access to American secrets. According to this report, Trump gave Russia dangerous secrets, impulsively, perhaps as part of an effort to impress his guests.

And what is Trump's defense? Yesterday one of the most respected members of his administration, national-security adviser H. R. McMaster, issued a terse statement claiming that the *Washington Post* story, "as reported," was false. After denying that "sources and methods" were compromised, he said, "I was in the room. It didn't happen."

The statement was carefully crafted to create the *impression* of a blanket denial while still giving the administration some wiggle room on the details. Then, this morning, Trump not only refused to deny

giving Russia classified information but, in two tweets, said this:

As President I wanted to share with Russia (at an openly scheduled W.H. meeting) which I have the absolute right to do, facts pertaining [. . .] to terrorism and airline flight safety. Humanitarian reasons, plus I want Russia to greatly step up their fight against ISIS & terrorism.

In other words, he undercut the blanket denial. Today, McMaster took questions and clarified his earlier statement. Here are his key assertions:

1. He stood by his statement yesterday but said the "premise" of the *Post* article was false.

2. It wasn't inappropriate for Trump to disclose the information, and his doing so did not undermine national security.

3. The disclosure was "consistent with the routine sharing of information" between the president and foreign leaders.

4. Trump "wasn't even aware of where this information came from."

5. The disclosure occurred in the "context of the conversation" and apparently not as a result of a deliberative process.

There is no such thing as 'no harm, no foul' in this context.

In other words, congratulations America, you got lucky. Despite not knowing the source of the information and apparently making a spur-of-the-moment decision, Trump (allegedly) didn't hurt our national security.

McMaster is perhaps Trump's best spokesperson, presenting Trump's

best case, and it's still unsatisfactory. There is no such thing as "no harm, no foul" in this context. This is not the way we want presidents handling classified information — especially during conversations with a hostile foreign power. While I can imagine a context in which an experienced and knowledgeable president could make a disclosure decision on the fly, the key here is "knowledgeable." Disclosing information without knowing the source is a throw of the dice.

And remember, this is the administration's *defense*. The original allegations are still hanging out there, and the reporters are standing by their stories. Defenses and denials are not the same thing as refutations. If the initial charge is true, then the president's behavior is inexcusable and potentially

deeply damaging. If his defense is true, his behavior is still irresponsible.

Finally, there is a truth of the matter. The allegations are too serious to be left to the realm of charges and countercharges. The White House should share available records of the conversation with the relevant congressional oversight committees, and those committees should do their job, examine the evidence, and issue a public report of their findings. The American people should be troubled by what we know. But until we know all the facts, we don't yet know how troubled we should be.



Lake : Trump's Best Defense on Russia Is Incompetence

One way you know the president is in trouble is that, accused of collusion, his best defense is incompetence. Such is the case with Donald Trump's firing of James Comey. And such is the case with the latest scandal to hit this White House, that Trump disclosed highly classified information in his meeting last week with Russia's foreign minister.

It looks terrible. Trump fires the FBI director investigating Russia's influence of the election, and the very next day has the Russian foreign minister in the Oval Office. He proceeds to divulge to his guests sensitive details about an allied intelligence operation that detected an Islamic State plot against airlines. U.S. officials told the *Post* that this disclosure was "reckless" and violated the trust of an allied spy service. The implications could be grave. Intelligence cooperation could be chilled. A human source could be in danger. Our efforts to disrupt the Islamic State could be hobbled.

That said, this doesn't look like collusion with the Russians. "Collusion" implies the information should not be shared. The U.S. actually should inform Russia about terrorist threats against airlines, so long as this sharing is done with care. Both of Trump's predecessors pursued sensitive counterterrorism partnerships with President Vladimir

Putin. Also, Russia lost an airliner in 2015 over the Sinai to an Islamic State bomb. Putin claims to be fighting the Islamic State in Syria (which his air force has repeatedly failed to distinguish from Syrian civilians).

This leaves us with the president's incompetence. On this score, the *Washington Post* story is damning. It says that current and former U.S. intelligence officials fear that Russia could reverse-engineer the sources and methods of the intelligence Trump shared because he revealed the city from which the Islamic State was plotting laptop bombings against airliners. The error was serious enough that the *Post* reported the White House briefed the intelligence community and intelligence oversight committees on the breach. Senior Trump administration officials did not dispute those facts in on-the-record statements Monday evening.

In addition to being incompetent in a national security sense, the flub is also politically embarrassing for the president. Remember that Trump campaigned on the idea that Hillary Clinton was unfit to be president because her use of a private email server was evidence of mishandling classified information. Clinton must find in this story a delicious schadenfreude.

But in light of that, it's also important to get some perspective. Let me make a prediction here. Whichever

allied intelligence service had its sources and methods endangered will not end intelligence sharing with the U.S. I base this on the fact that in the last seven years, the U.S. has endured worse. American allies were also exposed by the State Department cables shared with the world by WikiLeaks and the NSA documents provided to journalists by Edward Snowden. The Obama White House blamed a 2012 Associated Press story on another threat to airlines for disclosing a source from an allied intelligence service within al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Today we remember this incident primarily for the extraordinary steps the Justice Department took to monitor the phone records of AP reporters in its subsequent leak investigation.

None of those stories are comparable to the prospect of a sitting president sharing too many details about intelligence with a major adversary like Russia. But it's a reminder that the U.S. intelligence community has suffered greater breaches, and its relationships have survived.

Finally, the relationship with Russia is complicated. If it were up to me, I would pursue a policy of quarantine against Moscow and treat Putin and his henchmen like the diplomatic equivalent of Ebola. Past U.S. presidents though have disagreed. Barack Obama for example cooperated with Russia on arms control, the Iran agreement and

counterterrorism, while challenging Russia on cyberwar and Ukraine. On Syria, he did a little of both.

Indeed, it was Obama's secretary of state, John Kerry, who proposed in August a plan by which the U.S. would share sensitive targeting information with Russia in Syria to forge a partnership in fighting the Islamic State. At the time, military leaders balked at the idea of sharing such intelligence with a country that was bombing the rebels the U.S. were ostensibly supporting in Syria.

Trump has said he would like to pursue partnership with Russia as well in Syria. Of course, it's politically much harder for him to do that when his campaign is being investigated by the FBI for its ties to Russia. It's even harder after last week, when he fired the FBI director leading that investigation. This latest blunder sets back this agenda even further.

Perhaps we'll learn eventually that this was all a grand scheme of the Kremlin's. It's also possible that the intelligence breach reported Monday by the *Washington Post* is less than meets the eye -- a gaffe without huge consequences. The most likely explanation for now is troubling enough: The president is bad at his job. Stupid trumps sinister.



Let President Trump try to work with Russia

Duncan Hunter
President Trump is under assault for his posture toward Russia and

Vladimir Putin. This is true even as American presidents are fully within their prerogative to establish working relationships with world

leaders, and President Trump most certainly deserves the same opportunity.

None of what has incited controversy should be seen as altering the view that Russia is a

competitor that will take advantage of any weakness.

Recall in 2001 when President George W. Bush said he found Putin to be “very straightforward and trustworthy” and he “was able to get a sense of his soul.”

Then there was President Obama’s hot mic moment with outgoing Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, telling him that Putin should give him more “space” and that “after my election, I have more flexibility.” No less unforgettable

was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s presentation of a “reset button” to the Russian foreign minister.

Despite these exercises in diplomacy, Putin has been emboldened. So much so, even after Bush saw his soul and Obama was afforded flexibility, Putin invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea.

President Trump is acting as any president would, but his administration faces new challenges

with Russia. Russia is fighting the Islamic State in Syria while also factoring into the debate on North Korea and Iran. All the while, Putin makes no apology for defending Russia’s interests.

Neither does President Trump when it comes to our own. This was underscored by the missile strike in Syria that occurred without Putin’s knowledge or consent.

Now a recent meeting in the Oval Office with a Russian diplomat is inciting new fears, even though it in

no way shifted the U.S.-Russia relationship — just as Presidents Bush or Obama were unable to influence Russia through their own diplomatic endeavors.

If anything, President Trump is demonstrating a willingness to work with Russia but only to a point. A more accurate presumption should be that President Trump might not care too much what Putin thinks when it comes to putting America first.

**NATIONAL
REVIEW
ONLINE**

Trump Shared Classified Information? Remember Obama & Clinton

For Democrats, there is nothing like having the media and the intelligence bureaucracy on the team.

We don’t know all the details, but let’s stipulate that if President Trump disclosed to Russian diplomats secret information that was shared with the U.S. by a foreign intelligence service, as the *Washington Post* alleges, that could have been a reckless thing to do. General H. R. McMaster, the president’s national-security adviser, claims the *Post*’s story is not true; but there has been pushback from critics who say that McMaster’s denial was lawyerly.

The matter boils down to whether Trump disclosed a city in Islamic State territory from which an allied intelligence service (perhaps through a source who infiltrated ISIS, or through a collection method that enabled intelligence to penetrate ISIS operations) discovered a threat to civil aviation (reportedly involving explosives hidden in laptop computers). In asserting that the report is “false,” McMaster insisted that Trump had not “disclosed” any “intelligence sources or methods” or “military operations that were not already publicly known.” That denial, however, arguably sidesteps what the *Post* actually reports. The paper claims not that Trump provided the identity of the source or the nature of the intelligence method involved but that the president mentioned a city that is the locus of the information. By saying Trump did not “disclose” the source, is McMaster saying there’s no way that what was revealed could compromise the source?

It is reasonably argued that this tip could enable to Russians to figure out which ISIS cell has been infiltrated, thereby endangering the mole or other penetration method. It

is also reasonably argued, though, that the *Post*’s own reporting of what McMaster describes as a standard diplomatic exchange of sensitive intelligence has given the Islamic State valuable information it would not otherwise have learned.

In any event, without going into details: Trump concedes that he discussed “facts pertaining to terrorism and airline flight safety”; and the *Post* maintains that it was persuaded by “officials” (not further identified) to withhold from its report the name of the city, lest “important intelligence capabilities” be jeopardized. If knowledgeable government officials did plead with the *Post* to refrain from reporting these details, that would be cause for concern that the president erred, perhaps significantly.

Trump’s disclosure was certainly not illegal. The president is in charge of classified information. He has unreviewable authority to disclose it himself and to authorize executive-branch subordinates to disclose it. But legality (as Jim Geraghty explains in the “Morning Jolt”) is not the point. The question is competence: Was the president trying to impress the Russians with his range of intelligence knowledge, even though the Russians would naturally assume an American president knew such things? If so, the incident would raise questions about Trump’s conduct of foreign policy. Avoidable gaffes can gravely imperil intelligence sources. The doubts they can create about our government’s reliability in keeping secrets may induce allied intelligence services to withhold vital information from us. And avoidable gaffes can happen to an official who is not well versed in the give-and-take of high-level diplomatic exchanges. That would not be an excuse: President of the United States is not an entry-level position.

All that said, how unusual is this sort of thing, really? It is a good question that Steve Hayward raises at *Power Line* — along with a

Washington Post report reminding us that, less than a year ago, the Obama administration was offering to share with Russia intelligence about ISIS operations in Syria . . . which sounds an awful lot like what Trump was doing.

When Osama bin Laden was killed, President Obama was not content to explain that fact to the American people. His administration gratuitously disclosed that the raid on the al-Qaeda emir’s compound in Pakistan produced a “trove” of actionable intelligence. From a national-security standpoint, this political grandstanding was a foolish: It gave al-Qaeda operatives a heads-up that their cells and activities had likely been exposed, providing them the opportunity to disappear before our forces could roll them up. And then there is the Obama administration’s leak disclosing (to the *Washington Post*) General Michael Flynn’s conversations with Russian ambassador Sergei Kislyak. This was done with obvious malevolence to hurt Flynn and Trump (who had named Flynn national-security adviser). The beneficiary, however, was Russia. It received valuable information that its ambassador was under surveillance and that whatever countermeasures the Kremlin’s intelligence services had been taking had failed. This is apt to make Russian operatives more difficult to monitor in the future.

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More to the point, does anyone believe that American presidents other than Trump do not make highly questionable disclosures in their negotiations with hostile regimes? Remember when Obama told Putin’s factotum, Medvedev, to tell of Vlad he’d have much more “flexibility” to accommodate Russian concerns after his 2012 reelection — patently signaling that Putin

should just be patient and not pay too much attention to campaign rhetoric about dealing sternly with Moscow? And what of the to-and-fro over Obama’s coveted Iran nuclear deal? Is it necessary to remind Democrats that Obama entered secret side deals with the “death to America” regime that were withheld from Congress and the American people? That was not an instance of what Trump was apparently doing — sharing some intel with a hostile government in the (probably naive) hope of getting cooperation from that government against a common enemy. Obama was actually partnering with a hostile regime through arrangements that were against American interests and that promoted Iranian interests.

Of course, the media and the intelligence bureaucracy happily gobbled up the Ben Rhodes fiction that the Iranian regime was “moderating,” and that Obama’s nuclear deal was the only alternative to war. So it was “anything goes.” That wasn’t planetloads of intel that Obama was covertly sending to the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism; it was planetloads of cash. But to judge from the coverage, this was apparently okay because, after all, he’s Obama — the smartest, most thoughtful, most sophisticated negotiator in the history of negotiators.

And Trump is, well, Trump.

How about Secretary “Extremely Careless” herself, Hillary Clinton? If she had done the same thing Trump did, the media wouldn’t be saying she was grossly negligent in handling top-secret information. We’d be hearing, instead, that what she did was fine because it was communicated in a high-level diplomatic exchange — and that it’s not like she handed the Russians a document that was “marked classified.” Or more likely, we would be hearing *nothing at all* about her conversation with the Russians, because “current and former

intelligence officials" would not be leaking to the *Washington Post*.

You should read the FBI reports of interviews with Mrs. Clinton's former State Department staffers sometime. In explaining their actions, in the context of an investigation about the mishandling — the *serial* mishandling — of classified information, one of the themes that comes through is: Statecraft involves a lot of exchanges of sensitive information with foreign governments; sometimes tough calls about transmitting information have to be made in the heat of the moment,

and it's not always practical to weigh carefully the need to safeguard information against the imperative of getting it into the right hands promptly.

Could there have been more sympathy for Clinton's aides in the press and official Washington? The lesson appears to be that if administration officials repeat often enough the party line that "we were all working really hard, we all understand that classified information is really important, and we all really did our best to protect it," the media and intelligence-agency chiefs will forgive the

transmission and storage of even thousands of classified e-mails on an unsecured server that was undoubtedly hacked by hostile intelligence services.

Provided, that is, that the administration officials are Democrats.

When Democrats mishandle classified information, they are earnest progressives who understandably suffer the occasional lapse while struggling to make the international community a better place. When Republicans do it, they are incompetent morons.

I'm not suggesting that Trump be cut slack. This seems like it could be a serious error, and one that was easily avoidable. But after a couple of years of hearing the Iran deal and Mrs. Clinton's homebrew server explained away, I'm just wondering when the media suddenly got so interested again in harmful White House dealings with hostile powers and the proper safeguarding of classified information.