

Trump administration maintains silence on claims of wiretapping by Obama

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Trump administration officials continued Tuesday to refuse to provide any evidence in support of the extraordinary claims made by the US president in a series of tweets early Saturday morning, in which he said President Obama had ordered illegal wiretapping of Trump offices during the presidential election campaign.

The issue has dominated the American media since then, and White House press secretary Sean Spicer was repeatedly questioned on the subject at a press briefing Tuesday afternoon. Reporters asked whether Trump would withdraw his claim, whether Trump had any independent information to support the charge, and why he had asked Congress to investigate the issue when he could, as commander-in-chief, simply instruct US intelligence agencies to state whether such wiretapping had taken place.

Spicer could give no convincing or coherent answers to any of these questions. He did state that Trump has not been in contact with FBI Director James Comey on the question of the alleged wiretapping.

The FBI would be the US government agency charged with carrying out such an action against Trump's offices in New York City, where the local FBI office was well known to be a stronghold of pro-Trump agents. It was the New York agents who reportedly pressured Comey into issuing his letter to Congress, only 10 days before the election, announcing the resumption of the probe into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server, an action calculated to give a boost to the Trump campaign in the final days before the vote.

The fact that the president of the United States is charging his predecessor with ordering the wiretapping of his campaign's phone communications is an indication of the intense and explosive character of the

conflict that is raging within the American state. What is systematically concealed from the American people, however, are the real issues driving this conflict, which center on questions of foreign and military policy.

On the one side are the dominant forces within the intelligence apparatus, aligned with the Democratic Party and most major media outlets, which continue to prosecute a months-long campaign against Trump's perceived "softness" toward Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, based on unsubstantiated allegations of Russian hacking and interference in the US election. This faction is determined to prevent any turn away from an aggressive policy of confrontation with Moscow, including the possibility of war with the world's second largest nuclear power.

Trump and his supporters within the ruling elite have indicated a desire to improve relations with Russia, at least for the present, in order to focus US pressure, including military preparations, against Iran and China.

The Democrats, for their part, have concentrated their fire not on Trump's brutal assault on immigrants and authoritarian promotion of law-and-order, or on his frontal attack on social programs and lifting of business regulations, but rather on his attacks on the CIA and his supposed affinity for Putin. Their response to Trump's unsubstantiated accusations against Obama is to treat as absurd any suggestion that the US intelligence agencies would spy on an American citizen—as though the revelations by Edward Snowden and others of pervasive and illegal domestic surveillance never happened.

The same questions about Trump's wiretapping claims were raised at a confirmation hearing Tuesday before the Senate Judiciary Committee for Trump's nominees for deputy attorney general and associate attorney general, the second- and third-ranking officials

in the Department of Justice.

Because Attorney General Jeff Sessions has recused himself from any investigation related to the presidential campaign, where he played a prominent role as a Trump surrogate and adviser, the nominee for deputy attorney general, Rod Rosenstein, a longtime federal prosecutor under both Republican and Democratic presidents, would be in charge of the ongoing federal probe into charges of Russian interference in the US election.

Senate Democrats sought to extract a commitment from Rosenstein that he would appoint a special prosecutor from outside the Trump Justice Department to handle the inquiry, but Rosenstein declined, saying he did not know anything about the investigation and would not until he took office.

The hearing saw a series of vituperative clashes between Republican and Democratic senators over the allegations of Russian interference in the election and collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government, while Rosenstein, whose nomination was the supposed subject of the meeting, looked on.

The Democratic leader in the Senate, Chuck Schumer of New York, sent a formal request Monday to Michael Horowitz, the inspector general of the Department of Justice, for an immediate investigation into any political interference into Russia-related probes by the Department of Justice (DOJ), which includes the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“Has the investigation into Russia been compromised by political interference?” Schumer asked. “Have there been any attempts by any White House official to interfere with the investigation? Did Attorney General Sessions, who is now recused from this investigation, or his close associates personally manage the work of career officials at DOJ or the FBI in the course of the investigation thus far?”

Schumer also called on Horowitz to look into any Justice Department role in the firing of former White House National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and whether Sessions and Trump had discussed the inquiries into alleged Russian interference in the election.

Congressional Republican leaders have agreed to refer Trump’s charges of wiretapping by Obama to the same intelligence committee investigations that are considering the Russian role. But they were publicly

non-committal or even openly skeptical of Trump’s tweets.

The chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes of California, said his committee had seen nothing to validate the claim of wiretapping made by Trump. He was speaking at a press conference to announce that his committee would hold the first public hearing on the claims of Russian interference in the US elections on March 20.

His Senate counterpart, Richard Burr of North Carolina, echoed the statement by Nunes that no evidence of wiretapping has been made available to Congress.

Senator John McCain of Arizona was more categorical, saying that if there was no basis for Trump’s charges, there was “no reason for an investigation.”



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