

# Trump threatens Comey over leaked account of White House dinner

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The crisis engulfing the Trump administration was compounded Friday by the president's early morning tweet threatening fired FBI Director James Comey over leaked accounts of a White House dinner that contradicted the story given out by the president in an interview the previous day with NBC News.

In the interview, broadcast two days after Trump fired Comey without warning, the president told Lester Holt that Comey had requested the January 27 meeting to persuade the president to keep him at his FBI post. According to Trump, during the one-on-one dinner, he asked Comey if he was a target of the FBI investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible collusion between the Trump campaign and the Putin government. Comey assured him he was not, Trump said, calling this one of three occasions on which the FBI head gave this assurance.

Late Thursday evening, the *New York Times* posted a story that cited two unnamed Comey associates who flatly rejected Trump's account, saying the ex-FBI director had told them he had been summoned to the White House a week after Trump's inauguration and only reluctantly agreed to the meeting, for fear of compromising the investigation he was overseeing. The associates denied that Comey told Trump he was not a target of the investigation, which would have been a clear violation of FBI and Justice Department protocol concerning ongoing investigations.

Instead, the Comey surrogates said, Trump asked twice for the FBI head to pledge his loyalty to the president, which Comey refused to do.

The White House quickly dismissed this account of the dinner as incorrect. But evidently in response to the *Times* article, Trump tweeted early Friday morning, "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press."

This obvious attempt to intimidate Comey only strengthened the hand of those who are arguing that Trump's firing of the FBI head in the midst of an investigation into his own campaign constituted obstruction of justice, a potential ground for impeachment. Trump had already exacerbated the crisis over the firing by contradicting previous White House accounts, which depicted top Justice Department officials as the initiators of the move and gave as its rationale Comey's violations of Justice Department procedures in the FBI investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email account during her tenure as secretary of state.

In the NBC interview, Trump said he had already decided to fire Comey prior to a highly critical assessment of Comey's role in the email probe by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. Even more damaging, legally and politically, was his tacit acknowledgement that he was motivated by anger over the investigation into his campaign, not by violations of Justice Department regulations.

In a separate Friday morning tweet, Trump responded to media commentaries on the shifting and contradictory explanations from White House spokespeople for the firing by threatening to end daily White House press briefings.

Trump's thuggish and authoritarian response to the investigations, by House and Senate committees as well as the FBI, into alleged Russian hacking and Trump campaign collusion underscores the gangster-like character of his government of billionaires and generals. At the same time, the opposition being mounted by the Democratic Party and its media allies, such as the *Times*, is entirely reactionary.

The charges of Russian meddling are completely unsubstantiated and driven by demands for a more

aggressive war policy in Syria and an escalation of the US-NATO military confrontation with Russia. There is no serious opposition from these quarters to Trump's savage attacks on health care, education and other social services, or his assault on immigrants and democratic rights more generally.

The Democrats are allied with powerful sections of the military-intelligence establishment that consider Trump too "soft" on Russia and dangerously erratic and unreliable in pursuing the global interests of US imperialism. Should Trump be removed from office as a result of this campaign, the government that replaces him will be no less one of war and reaction.

Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who oversaw a vast expansion of domestic surveillance and an escalation of US drone assassinations and wars in the Middle East under President Obama, gave an interview Friday afternoon on MSNBC in which he vouched for Comey's version of events as against the White House story line. He dismissed claims that Comey had given Trump assurances that he was not a target of the FBI probe and said he "did not know" if there had been collusion between the Trump campaign and Moscow. This contradicted repeated claims by Trump that Clapper had asserted there was no such collusion.

A focal point of the White House press briefing on Friday was the question of whether there are tapes of Trump's conversations with Comey. Several reporters referred to Trump's tweet that morning and asked point blank if there is a White House taping system or recordings of the January 27 dinner meeting between Comey and Trump.

White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer declined either to affirm or deny the existence of such tapes. "The president has nothing further to add on that," he said.

Later on Friday, asked about tapes by Fox News, Trump said, "That I can't talk about. I won't talk about it."

The question of tapes could become a major issue should the political warfare in Washington escalate to the point of outright demands for Trump's resignation or the initiation of impeachment proceedings. A major turning point in the Watergate crisis occurred on July 16, 1973, when Nixon aide Alexander Butterfield told the Senate Watergate Committee that there was a taping

system in the White House, including the Oval Office. Nixon fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox in October of that year—the so-called "Saturday Night Massacre"—when Cox refused to withdraw a subpoena for White House tapes. Nixon's refusal to comply with a congressional subpoena for the tapes became an article of impeachment.

CNN reported Friday that a "source familiar with the matter" said Comey was "not worried about any tapes" of conversations between him and Trump, adding that "if there is a tape, there's nothing he is worried about" that could be on it.

While most Republican legislators have continued to back Trump, talk of impeachment in the media and among Democrats is on the rise. CNN counted 11 Democrats in Congress who have raised the question—10 House members and Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal. The ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, Mark Warner of Virginia, on Thursday accused Trump of obstruction of justice.

In its lead editorial Friday, the *Washington Post* wrote: "The FBI is in trouble and must be protected—from the White House, first and foremost... The disorderly firing process and shifting rationales have shredded what was left of the White House's credibility."

Also on Friday, Representatives John Conyers of Michigan and Elijah Cummings of Maryland, the top Democrats on the House judiciary and oversight committees, respectively, sent a letter to the White House demanding copies of any recordings that might exist. The letter noted that "it is a crime to intimidate or threaten any potential witness with the intent to influence, delay or prevent their official testimony."



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