

Washington infighting intensifies with resignation of White House communications director

Patrick Martin
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White House communications director Hope Hicks said Wednesday she would resign and leave her position within the next few weeks, the latest casualty in the Trump inner circle from the political warfare that is intensifying in Washington.

Whatever the immediate circumstances or personal motives that may be involved, there is little doubt that Hicks was driven from her position by the assault on the Trump White House by the Democratic Party and its allies within the US intelligence apparatus, centered on unsupported allegations of Russian intervention into the 2016 elections to back the Trump campaign.

The crisis atmosphere in the White House is suggested by the fact that Hicks was the fifth person to serve as Trump's top communications official since December 2016, following Jason Miller, Michael Dubke, Sean Spicer and Anthony Scaramucci. At seven months, hers was the longest tenure of the five.

Hicks announced her resignation less than a day after a nine-hour, closed-door appearance before the House Intelligence Committee, where she flatly refused to answer any questions about any event that took place in the White House since Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2017. She did not explicitly invoke executive privilege, but said she was acting on instructions from the White House Counsel's office. Hicks did answer questions about the Trump campaign and the transition period from the election to the inauguration, which took up the bulk of the session.

But the panel's top Democrat, Representative Adam Schiff, complained that the committee Republicans had refused to issue a subpoena to compel her to testify about such episodes as her role in crafting a statement by Trump, issued last June, in response to the revelation that several Russians had visited Trump Tower during the campaign and had a private meeting with then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort, Trump's son Donald Jr. and son-in-law Jared Kushner.

In the first half of February, Hicks was near the center of the storm that erupted over the forced resignation of Rob Porter, staff secretary to the White House and another close Trump aide, after press reports of accounts by his two ex-wives of alleged domestic violence. Porter resigned February 7 after the British *Daily Mail* published a photograph showing Porter's first wife with a black eye, allegedly inflicted by him during their marriage.

A media furor followed in the United States, spearheaded by the *Washington Post*, which reported that White House Counsel Don McGahn had known of the allegations against Porter for more than a year. It emerged that charges of domestic abuse had been reported to the FBI and became the basis of a decision to deny Porter a permanent security clearance. The White House was compelled to resort to an interim clearance to keep him in the position of staff secretary, where he was responsible for handling sensitive papers for Trump and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly.

Many press reports identified Hicks as Porter's current girlfriend and criticized her prominent role in drafting the initial White House statements defending Porter, despite her personal relationship with him.

Hicks was more of a surrogate family member than a professional aide, according to numerous reports about the functioning of the Trump organization and the White House. She was initially an assistant to Trump's daughter Ivanka before working for Trump himself in his real estate business, and then joining the Trump presidential campaign.

In her role as communications director, despite having no previous media-related experience, she refused to be interviewed and never appeared before the podium in the White House briefing room. She apparently served as a conduit for Trump's instructions to the 40-member staff under her nominal supervision, including Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders.

Sanders told reporters Wednesday afternoon that Hicks

had already considered leaving the administration before the media furor over Porter. She denied that either the Porter resignation or the grilling before the House Intelligence Committee had been the trigger for Hicks's decision to leave. Hicks has also been interviewed at length by the office of Special Counsel Robert Mueller, which is investigating the allegations of Russian interference in the US election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign.

The resignation of Hicks came only one day after another major blow to Trump personally, the revelation that White House Chief of Staff Kelly had downgraded the security clearance of Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner, denying him access to the President's Daily Brief and other classified documents. Kushner's portfolio at the White House has included Israeli-Palestinian talks, US-China contacts, and other highly sensitive issues.

The reason for Kelly's decision was extremely murky. Hours after the decision was made public, the *Washington Post* reported that four countries in which Kushner's family had large business dealings and debts—Mexico, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and China—had discussed using these financial connections as leverage in their dealings with the Trump White House.

The article claimed that National Security Advisor and Army General H. R. McMaster had learned that Kushner was engaged in contacts with foreign countries that he did not officially report or coordinate with the National Security Council. "Kushner's contacts with certain foreign government officials have raised concerns inside the White House and are a reason he has been unable to obtain a permanent security clearance," the *Post* report claimed.

The article also claimed that Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein had notified White House Counsel McGahn on February 9 of problems that would significantly delay a top-level security clearance for Kushner. Rosenstein has been a frequent target of Trump criticism for his role in overseeing the Mueller investigation.

It is clear that the sections of the intelligence apparatus in conflict with Trump have seized on the issue of security clearances as a means of exerting additional pressure on his immediate entourage. Porter was forced out on February 7, Hicks is now leaving and Kushner's role will be severely reduced so long as he is barred from access to classified materials, which encompass virtually every document relating to US foreign relations, his main activity.

The White House has refused to discuss publicly either the delay in Kushner receiving a security clearance, or the reasons for it. Meanwhile, Kushner's personal press spokesman, Josh Raffel, announced Tuesday his own plans to leave the White House, like Hicks, "in the coming weeks."

A further expression of the extraordinary tensions within the Trump White House came in the form of a Twitter attack by Trump Wednesday against his own attorney general, Jeff Sessions, after Sessions announced that he had asked the inspector general of the Department of Justice, Michael Horowitz, to investigate claims of improper or illegal FBI surveillance against former Trump foreign policy adviser Carter Page. The charges were made in the so-called Nunes memo issued by Republican members of the House Intelligence Committee.

While Democrats on the committee denounced both the Nunes memo and Sessions's decision to open an investigation based upon it, Trump appeared to be following the lead of his favorite morning television program, "Fox & Friends," where a group of ultra-right pundits howled over the selection of Horowitz as the lead investigator, pointing out that he had been appointed to his position by President Obama.

This coverage generated a Trump tweet shortly thereafter, reading, "Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Actually, the inspector general has the power to initiate prosecution, and he was recently hailed by Trump and his ultra-right media backers for uncovering the emails between FBI official Peter Strzok and his FBI attorney girlfriend deploring Trump's candidacy during the 2016 campaign.

In addition to the Nunes memo, Horowitz is now investigating the FBI's handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while serving as Obama's secretary of state, including the series of announcements by then-FBI Director James Comey in July and October 2016 that had a considerable impact on the course of the election.



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