

Trump's AG nominee asserts independence

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's nominee for attorney general asserted independence from the White House today, saying he believed that Russia had tried to interfere in the 2016 presidential election, that the special counsel investigation shadowing Trump is not a witch hunt and that his predecessor was right to recuse himself from the probe.

Those comments by William Barr at his Senate confirmation hearing pointedly departed from Trump's own views and underscored Barr's efforts to reassure Democrats that he will not be a loyalist to a president who has appeared to demand it from law enforcement.

Some Democrats are concerned about that very possibility, citing a memo Barr wrote to the Justice Department before his nomination in which he criticized an aspect of special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. Barr told senators he was merely trying to warn Justice Department officials against "stretching a statute" to conclude that the president had obstructed justice.

Trump has repeatedly castigated Mueller's investigation, calling it a "witch hunt," and lambasted and ultimately pushed out his first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, for removing himself from the matter because of his work with the 2016 Trump campaign.

"I will not be bullied into doing anything that I think is wrong, whether it be by editorial boards, Congress or the president," Barr told senators on the Judiciary Committee. He said that, at 68 years old and partially retired, "I feel that I'm in a position in life where I can do the right thing and not really care about

the consequences." Barr repeatedly praised Mueller, who has been investigating whether the Trump campaign coordinated with the Kremlin to sway the election, and said he would not undermine his work. He called him a friend of 30 years and said he couldn't imagine that Mueller would do anything that would justify his firing.

"I don't believe Mr. Mueller would be involved in a witch hunt," he said when asked by the Republican chairman of the committee, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

Barr would oversee the final stages of the investigation. He said he would consult with ethics officials on whether he would need to recuse because of a critical unsolicited memo to the Justice Department last year, but the decision would be ultimately his.

He also disclosed having discussed Mueller with Trump during a meeting in 2017 when Barr declined to join his legal team. Trump wanted to know what Mueller, who worked for Barr when he led the Justice Department between 1991 and 1993, was like.

"He was interested in that, wanted to know what I thought about Mueller's integrity and so forth and so on," Barr told senators. "I said Bob is a straight shooter and should be dealt with as such."

Barr also said "it is vitally important" that Mueller be allowed to complete his investigation and that Congress and the public should learn the results. He also insisted that Trump never sought any promises, assurances or commitments before selecting him to be the country's chief law enforcement officer.



William Barr

"I believe it is in the best interest of everyone — the president, Congress, and, most importantly, the American people — that this matter be resolved by allowing the special counsel to complete his work," Barr said.

He also defended his decision to send an unsolicited memo to the Justice Department criticizing Mueller's investigation into whether the president had sought to obstruct justice. He said he raised his concerns at a lunch last year with the deputy attorney general, Rod Rosenstein, who appointed Mueller and oversees his work. Rosenstein did not respond and was "sphinx-like," Barr recalled.

He said he followed up with a memo to Rosenstein in June that argued that Mueller should not be able to interview the president about his decision to fire James Comey as FBI director. He said there were other instances in which he had

given advice to the Justice Department, such as cautioning against a prosecution of Democratic Sen. Robert Menendez.

Barr also sent the memo to White House lawyers and discussed it with Trump's personal attorneys and a lawyer who represents Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Copies also were sent by Barr to White House lawyer Emmet Flood, Solicitor General Noel Francisco and Pat Cipollone, who is now White House counsel. Barr said he discussed the memo's contents with Trump's attorneys, Jay Sekulow and Jane and Martin Raskin.

At issue for Democratic senators is whether Barr can oversee without bias or interference the final stages of Mueller's probe into potential ties between Russia and the 2016 Trump campaign, and whether he will permit the findings to be made public.

WORLD IN BRIEF

Associated Press

Dems rebuff Trump invite, thwart effort to bypass Pelosi

WASHINGTON — The White House ran quickly into the limits of trying to bypass Speaker Nancy Pelosi in shutdown negotiations when rank-and-file House Democrats declined an invitation to lunch today with President Donald Trump.

The administration is trying to peel off Democratic support for Trump's demand for border wall money and negotiate directly with centrist lawmakers and some newly elected freshmen, including those in districts where Trump is popular.

Pelosi gave her blessing for lawmakers to accept the White House invitation, but White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders said "unfortunately" no Democrats accepted.

The outreach was a shift for the White House as the shutdown is now in its 25th day, with no resolution in sight.

Extremists attack hotel in Nairobi; al-Shabab claims role

NAIROBI, Kenya — Extremists launched a deadly attack on a luxury hotel in Kenya's capital today, sending people fleeing in panic as explosions and heavy gunfire reverberated through the complex. A witness said he saw five bodies at the hotel entrance alone.

Al-Shabab — the Somalia-based Islamic extremist group that carried out the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi that left 67 people dead — claimed responsibility.

As night fell, gunfire continued more than two hours after the first shots were heard at the complex, which includes the DusitD2 hotel, along with bars, restaurants, banks

and offices and is in a well-to-do neighborhood with large numbers of American, European and Indian expatriates.

The violence appeared to fit the pattern of attacks al-Shabab often carries out in Somalia's capital, with an explosion followed by a group of gunmen storming the place. Like the Westgate Mall attack, this one appeared aimed at wealthy Kenyans and foreigners living in the country.

Iowa's King off House committees after remarks about race

WASHINGTON — Veteran Republican Rep. Steve King will be blocked from committee assignments for the next two years after lamenting that white supremacy and white nationalism have become offensive terms.

King, in his ninth term representing Iowa, will not be given committee assignments in the Con-

gress that began this month, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said Monday night. King served on the Agriculture, Small Business and Judiciary committees in the last Congress, and he chaired Judiciary's subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice.

The action by the GOP steering committee came after King and McCarthy met to discuss the remarks on white supremacy, the latest in a years-long pattern of racially insensitive remarks by King.

One Republican did not join the chorus of criticism. Asked about King's remarks Monday, President Donald Trump said, "I haven't been following it."

Federal judge bars citizenship question from 2020 census

NEW YORK — A federal judge blocked the Trump administration today from asking about citizen-

ship status on the 2020 census, the first major ruling in cases contending that officials ramrodded the question through for Republican political purposes to intentionally undercount immigrants.

In a 277-page decision that won't be the final word on the issue, U.S. District Judge Jesse Furman ruled that while such a question would be constitutional, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross had added it arbitrarily and not followed proper administrative procedures.

Among other things, the judge said, Ross didn't follow a law requiring that he give Congress three years notice of any plan to add a question about citizenship to the census.

The ruling came in a case in which a dozen states or big cities and immigrants' rights groups argued that the Commerce Department, which designs the census, had failed to properly analyze the effect the question would have on households where immigrants live. The U.S. Supreme Court is also poised to address the issue Feb. 19.

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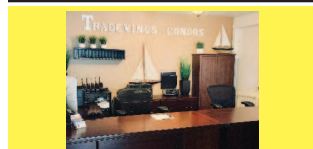
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