

GOP leaders, Trump split on Russia hacking probe

President-elect calls allegations 'ridiculous'

By ALAN FRAM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress' top Republicans on Monday endorsed investigations into the CIA's belief that Russia meddled in last month's election to help Donald Trump win, suggesting potential battles ahead with the incoming commander in chief over Moscow and U.S. intelligence.

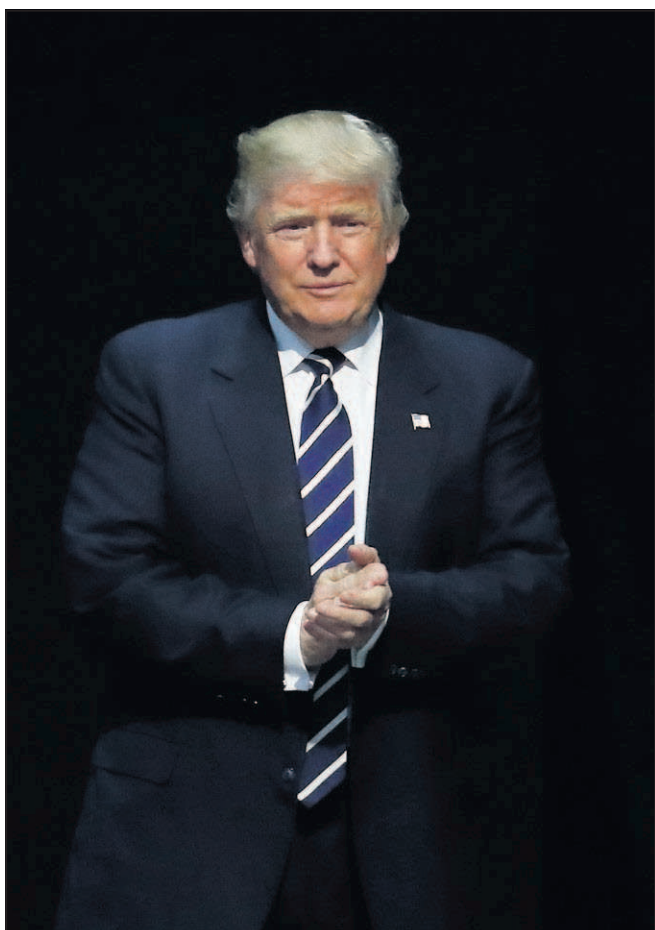
Congressional GOP leaders steered toward a path contrasting starkly with the president-elect's belittling dismissal of the CIA and his past praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin. "The Russians are not our friends," declared Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

The Senate's intelligence panel, led by Richard Burr, R-N.C., will conduct a bipartisan inquiry, according to McConnell, who also expressed support for a related probe by the Armed Services Committee, chaired by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. Though declining to say whether he believes Russia tried tilting the election toward Trump, McConnell said, "I hope that those who are going to be in positions of responsibility in the new administration share my view" about Moscow.

Shortly afterward, House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., released a statement backing an investigation the House Intelligence Committee has already started on cyber threats posed by foreign countries and extremist groups. He called any Russian intervention "especially problematic because under President Putin, Russia has been an aggressor that consistently undermines American interests."

Underscoring the possible collisions ahead between Trump and the men leading his party in Congress, McConnell and Ryan struck tones markedly more confrontational toward Russia than he has.

Trump on Sunday called the CIA's contention "ridicu-



President-elect Donald Trump arrives to speak to supporters during a rally, in Grand Rapids, Mich. Trump is facing an early test with fellow Republicans over U.S. relations with Russia.

Trump selects Tillerson for State, dismissing Russia ties

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump has selected Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson to lead the State Department, dismissing concerns about the businessman's close ties with Russia, two people close to Trump's transition said Monday night.

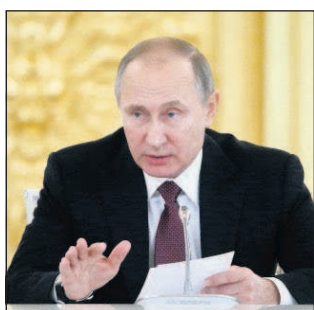
Trump's decision caps a lengthy process that often played out in public and exposed rifts within his transition team. It also sets Trump up for a potential fight with Congress over confirming Tillerson, who has connections with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Trump was set to announce Tillerson's nomination Tuesday morning. The people close to his transition team insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to disclose the decision ahead of that announcement.

The president-elect had moved toward choosing Tillerson after a meeting Saturday, their second discussion in a week. Trump was said to be drawn to the prospect of having an international businessman serve as the nation's top diplomat.



LEFT: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington. RIGHT: Russia's President Vladimir Putin delivers a speech at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia.



lous" and blamed the disclosures concerning its assessment on Democrats who he said were embarrassed over losing last month's election.

The chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., released a letter Monday to National Intelligence Director James Clapper complaining that recent reports of the CIA's conclusion clashed with Clapper's prior statement that he lacked "good insight" about the connection between Russian hacking of

Democratic campaign documents and their release by WikiLeaks. Nunes requested a briefing on the subject for this week.

The GOP leaders expressed their views after a weekend in which Trump also said he would not need daily intelligence briefings, a staple of presidents' days for decades and a flouting of a convention common for presidential transitions.

The president-elect continued his cavalcade of meetings in his Trump

Tower offices in New York on Monday with potential appointees for his new administration and other leading GOP, congressional and corporate figures. Among them was Carly Fiorina, who unsuccessfully vied with Trump this year for their party's nomination.

Fiorina, the former Hewlett-Packard CEO, was there to discuss national security issues and is seen by some Trump advisers as a candidate to be director of national intelligence, overseeing the government's 17 intelligence agencies.

BRIEFLY

Trump's avoidance of formal news conferences continues

NEW YORK (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump on Monday canceled the only news conference he has scheduled since his election, continuing to communicate with the public via Twitter and carefully curated, one-on-one interviews.

Trump aides said Monday that an announcement planned for Thursday on the future of Trump's business empire had been rescheduled. Spokesman Sean Spicer said in an email that moving the announcement "ensures the legal team has ample time to ensure the proper protocols are put in place so his sole focus will remain on the country and achieving his ambitious agenda with the help of the world-class cabinet he has built."

Trump has kept up an active Twitter profile and has done a handful of television interviews, including a lengthy sit-down that aired Sunday on Fox News. But for decades most presidents-elect have held a news conference within days of the election. Those events differ from one-on-one interviews, because the president-elect must field questions from a broader range of journalists.

Trump has also lagged his predecessors in setting up a pool of journalists to provide the public with information about his whereabouts. His team has started traveling more regularly with a pool, though the journalists still do not fly on the same plane as Trump.

Every president and president-elect in recent memory has traveled with a pool of journalists when leaving the White House grounds. News organizations take turns serving in the small group, paying their way and sharing the material collected in the pool with the larger press corps. The White House depends on having journalists nearby at all times to relay the president's first comments on breaking news.

Syria rebels retreat in Aleppo in 'terrifying' collapse

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian rebels retreated from former strongholds in eastern Aleppo in a "terrifying" collapse Monday, holding onto a small sliver of territory packed with fighters and thousands of civilians as government troops pressed on with their rapid advance.

The Syrian military said it had gained control of 99 percent of the former opposition enclave in eastern Aleppo, signaling an impending end to the rebels' four-year hold over parts of the city as the final hours of battle played out.

"The situation is very, very critical," said Ibrahim al-Hajj of the Syrian Civil Defense, volunteer first responders who operate in rebel-held areas. He said he was seeking shelter for himself and his family, fearing clashes or capture by the government.

Retaking Aleppo, which has been divided between rebel- and government-controlled zones since 2012, would be President Bashar Assad's biggest victory yet in the country's civil war. But it does not end the conflict: Significant parts of Syria are still outside government control and huge swaths of the country are a wasteland. More than a quarter of a million people have been killed.

On Sunday, the Islamic State group re-occupied the ancient town of Palmyra, taking advantage of the Syrian army and its Russian backers' preoccupation with the fighting in Aleppo.

Recount efforts end; Trump wins

Presidential election recount efforts ended Monday in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, with both states certifying Republican Donald Trump as the winner in contests that helped put him over the top in the Electoral College stakes.

Trump's victory in Wisconsin was reaffirmed following a statewide vote recount that showed him defeating Democrat Hillary Clinton by nearly 23,000 votes. Meanwhile, a federal judge issued a stinging rejection of a Green Party-backed request to recount paper ballots in Pennsylvania's presidential election and scan some counties' election systems for signs of hacking.

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