

Obama, rapping Putin, warns U.S. could strike back on cyber

By **JOSH LEDERMAN** and **JULIE PACE**
Associated Press



In this Monday, Sept. 28, 2015 file photo, U.S. President Barack Obama and Russia's President Vladimir Putin pose for members of the media before a bilateral meeting at the United Nations headquarters.

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama put Russia's Vladimir Putin on notice Friday that the U.S. could use offensive cyber muscle to retaliate for interference in the U.S. presidential election, his strongest suggestion to date that Putin had been well aware of campaign email hacking.

"Whatever they do to us, we can potentially do to them," Obama declared.

Caught in the middle of a post-election controversy over Russian hacking, Obama strongly defended his administration's response, including his refusal before the voting to ascribe motive to the meddling or to discuss now what effect it might have had. U.S. intelligence assessments say it was aimed at least in part on helping Donald Trump defeat Hillary Clinton, and some Democrats say it may well have tipped the results in his favor.

Though Obama avoided criticizing President-elect Trump by name, he called out Republicans who he said fail even now to acknowledge the seriousness of Russia's involvement in U.S. elections.

Obama expressed bewilderment about GOP lawmakers and voters who now say they approve of Putin, and he said unless that changes the U.S. will be vulnerable to foreign influence.

"Ronald Reagan would roll over in his grave," Obama said as he closed out the year at a White House news conference. Afterward he left for the family's annual vacation in Hawaii.

Obama declined to state explicitly that Putin knew about the email hacking that roiled the presidential race,

but he left no doubt who he felt was responsible. He said that "not much happens in Russia without Vladimir Putin" and repeated a U.S. intelligence assessment "that this happened at the highest levels of the Russian government."

Obama said he confronted Putin in September, telling the former KGB chief to "cut it out." That was one month before the U.S. publicly pointed the finger at Russia. Suggesting his directive to Putin had been effective, Obama said the U.S. "did not see further tampering" after that date.

The president has promised a "proportional" yet unspecified response to the hacking of the Democratic Party and Clinton's campaign chairman. Emails stolen during the campaign were released in the final weeks by WikiLeaks. On Friday, CIA Director John Brennan said in a message

to employees that the FBI agrees with the CIA's conclusion that Russia's goal was to help Trump win.

Trump has dismissed the CIA's assessment and talk about Russian hacking as "ridiculous," while arguing both Democrats and the CIA are trying to undermine the legitimacy of his victory.

Clinton has even more directly cited Russian interference. She said Thursday night, "Vladimir Putin himself directed the covert cyberattacks against our electoral system, against our democracy, apparently because he has a personal beef against me."

The Senate intelligence committee said Friday that it will conduct a bipartisan investigation and hold hearings about what led the intelligence agencies' finding. "The committee will follow the intelligence wherever it leads," said chairman Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C.

At the same time, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., chairman of the House intelligence committee, complained that his committee's oversight into the hacking has been stymied because the intelligence agencies have not provided information to the committee.

Obama said he'd leave it to political pundits to debate the question of whether the hacking swayed the election outcome. He did, however, chide the media for that he called an "obsession" with the emails that were made public during the election's final stretch.

He said his reticence to detail publicly the U.S. response to Russia reflected a need to retaliate "in a thoughtful, methodical way."

"The idea that somehow public shaming is gonna be effective, I think doesn't read the thought process in Russia very well," Obama said.

Dems to use hearings on Trump picks to court working class

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Determined to hold around two dozen Senate seats in 2018, Democrats will use the coming series of confirmation hearings to try to distinguish themselves from President-elect Donald Trump's billionaire nominees and convince working-class voters who elected him that he's not on their side.

While Democrats have little leverage to stop the Republican's picks in the Senate, they still plan a fight. To highlight what they say is the hypocrisy of Trump's campaign promise to be a champion for the economically struggling little guy, they'll focus on the nominees' wealth, ties to Wall Street and willingness to privatize Medicare, among other issues. In some cases, they'll seek to drag out the process by demanding more information and ensuring a full airing of potential conflicts of interest.

"We're going to give each of them a thorough examination to determine whether they'll actually stand up for workers against the special interests or rig the system even more," said incoming Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York, echoing some of Trump's own campaign rhetoric.

Democrats gave up their ability to block Trump's nominees in 2013, when then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid changed Senate rules and reduced the number of votes needed to end filibusters. Now in the majority, Republicans can confirm the nominees along partisan lines.

The limits of the Demo-

cratic minority have already been tested, as California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who will be the top Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee in the new session, has repeatedly asked Judiciary Chairman Charles Grassley for more time to review documents ahead of Jan. 10-11 hearings for Sen. Jeff Sessions, Trump's choice for attorney general. Grassley, an Iowa Republican, has declined to delay the hearings.



Chuck Schumer

Still, Democrats are hoping a populist message will resonate outside of Washington, where in the 2018 elections the party faces multiple tough races in deep red states full of white, working-class voters who overwhelmingly supported Trump over Democrat Hillary Clinton this year. Democrats are defending 23 seats, including in states such as North Dakota, Montana, Indiana and West Virginia that went overwhelmingly for Trump and also in once traditional Democratic states that flipped, like Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Much of their focus will be on the wealthy business executives whom Trump has tapped for his Cabinet — notably Steve Mnuchin, a former Goldman Sachs executive picked to head the Treasury Department.

On Friday, Democrats launched a website asking people who had been impacted by foreclosure practices connected to Mnuchin to share their stories. OneWest, a bank formerly owned by a group of investors headed by Mnuchin, foreclosed thousands of properties in the aftermath of the housing crisis.

N. Carolina GOP strips some of Democratic governor's power

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — North Carolina Republicans stripped the incoming Democratic governor of some of his authority on Friday and they were on the cusp of an even greater power grab, an extraordinary move that critics said flies in the face of voters.

Just last week, it appeared Republicans were ready to finally accept Democrats' narrow win in a contentious governor's race. As it turns out, they weren't done fighting. In a surprise special session in the dying days of the old administration, some say the Republican-dominated legislature has thrown the government into total disarray, approving two bills aimed at emasculating incoming Gov. Roy Cooper's administration. One of them was signed into law by the current governor.

Cooper, the current attorney general, has threatened to sue. And many in the state are accusing Republicans of letting sour grapes over losing the governor's mansion turn into a legislative coup.

"This was a pure power grab," said retired school librarian Carolyn White, 62, a long-time demonstrator once arrested as part of the "Moral Monday" protests against GOP-led legislative policies. "I got arrested two years ago. Did it make any difference? No. But just like the civil rights movement, it's forward together. You just have to keep going forward."

The protesters were so loud that Senate and House cleared the galleries — a highly unusual move. More than 50 people were arrested this week, and as demonstrators were led away from the Legislative Building, some chanted "all political power comes from the people." Those that remained behind could only watch the debate through glass windows or listen to it online.

Hundreds stomped their

feet and yelled outside the gallery, causing several Republican lawmakers to note they were having trouble hearing during the debate. Democrats repeatedly stated their objections.

"The kindergartners are getting rowdy," said Republican Rep. Dana Bumgardner.

He said Democrats were "creating out of thin air a talking point for the next election."

Republican Gov. Pat McCrory, who lost to Cooper by about 10,000 votes, quickly signed into law a bill that merges the State Board of Elections and State Ethics Commission into one board comprised equally of Democrats and Republicans. The previous state elections board law would have allowed Cooper to put a majority of Democrats on the elections panel.

The law would also make elections for appellate court judgeships officially partisan again.

Another bill that received final legislative approval would force Cooper's Cabinet choices to be subject

to Senate confirmation and would allow Cooper to designate up to 425 state employees as his political appointees, compared to a cap of 1,500 for McCrory.

Before adjourning, lawmakers also confirmed a salaried appointment to the state Industrial Commission for the wife of McCrory's chief of staff. McCrory nominated her.

McCrory must decide whether to sign the second law passed by the General Assembly, a body that has repeatedly tugged him to the right even though he campaigned as a moderate in 2012 as Charlotte's former mayor.

Republicans insist the legislation is simply adjusting the constitutional powers already granted to the General Assembly. Many provisions had been debated for years but had either gotten blocked or the Democratic viewpoint previously won out.

Democrats said it was an attempt by the GOP to cling to power a week after the Republican incumbent conceded.

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