

Combative Trump concedes Russia's role in election hacking

NEW YORK (AP) — In a combative and freewheeling news conference, President-elect Donald Trump said for the first time Wednesday that he accepts Russia was behind the election year hacking of Democrats that roiled the White House race. Looking ahead, he urged Congress to move quickly to replace President Barack Obama's signature health care law and insisted anew that Mexico will pay the cost of a border wall.



AP Photo/Evan Vucci
President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a news conference in the lobby of Trump Tower in New York, Wednesday.

The hour-long spectacle in the marbled lobby of Trump's Manhattan skyscraper was his first news conference since winning the election in early November, and the famously unconventional politician demonstrated he had not been changed by the weight of his victory.

He defiantly denied reports that Russia had collected compromising personal and financial information about him, lambasting the media for peddling "fake news" and shouting down a journalist from CNN, which reported on the matter. His family and advisers clapped and cheered him on throughout.

Trump's transition has been shadowed by U.S. intelligence assessments that Russia not only meddled in the election, but did so to help him defeat Democrat Hillary Clinton. After spending weeks challenging that idea, Trump finally accepted at least part of the intelligence conclusions.

"As far as hacking, I think it was Russia," Trump said, quickly adding that "other countries and other people" also hack U.S. interests. Still, he kept needling the intelligence agencies, saying it would be a "tremendous blot" on their record if officials were leaking information from his classified briefings.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said in a statement later that

he had spoken with Trump Wednesday evening and told him he does not believe any leaks came from the intelligence community.

One U.S. official told The Associated Press Tuesday night that intelligence people had informed Trump last week about an unsubstantiated report that Russia had compromising personal and financial information about him. Some media outlets reported on the document, which contains unproven information alleging close coordination between Trump's inner circle and Russians, as well as unverified claims about unusual sexual activities by Trump. The AP has not authenticated any of the claims.

Clapper said Wednesday he had told Trump the intelligence community "has not made any judgment that the information in this document is reliable."

Wednesday's news conference was initially billed as a chance for Trump to answer questions about his plans for distancing himself from his sprawling, family-owned real estate and licensing business. Lawyer Sheri Dillon stepped to the lectern midway through the event to announce that the president-elect was relinquishing control of the

Trump Organization to his adult sons and an executive, as well as putting his business assets in a trust. While new international business deals will be banned, the company will be allowed to start new projects in the U.S.

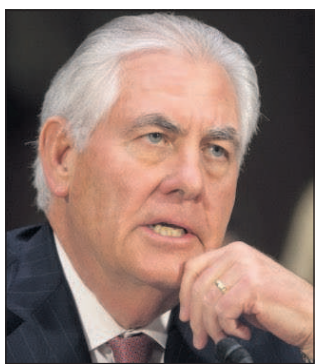
The move appears to contradict a previous pledge by the president-elect. In a tweet last month, Trump said that "no new deals" would be done while he was in office.

With dramatic flair, Trump aides piled stacks of manila folders on a table next to the lectern - in front of 10 American flags - before the news conference began. Trump said the folders contained documents he had signed formalizing the new business arrangements, though journalists were not able to view and independently verify the materials.

Some 250 journalists crammed into the Trump Tower lobby for the news conference, which was not only Trump's first since the election, but his first since July. Journalists shouted for his attention. At times, he skipped past questions he appeared to not want to answer, including an inquiry about whether he would keep in place sanctions Obama slapped on Russia in retaliation for the election-related hacking.

Tillerson takes tough line on Moscow

WASHINGTON (AP) — Barraged by questions about Russia, Donald Trump's pick for secretary of state promised a far more muscular approach toward the Kremlin on Wednesday, abandoning much of the president-elect's emphasis on improving ties between the Cold War foes. Instead, Rex Tillerson suggested the outgoing Obama administration responded too softly to Moscow's takeover of Ukrainian territory.



Tillerson

The surprising shift in tone by Tillerson, a former Exxon Mobil CEO and Russian "Order of Friendship" recipient, reflected the difficulty Trump will have in persuading Democrats and Republicans to broach a broad rapprochement with President Vladimir Putin's government. Calling Russia a "danger" to the United States, Tillerson said he would keep U.S. sanctions in place and consider new penalties related to Russian meddling in the presidential election. Although he said he

hadn't read last week's classified assessment by the U.S. intelligence community, Tillerson said it was a "fair assumption" that Putin would have ordered the operation that purportedly included hacking, propaganda and internet trolls to harm Hillary Clinton's candidacy and advance Trump's. But in a puzzling revelation, Tillerson conceded he hadn't yet talked with Trump about a Russia policy.

"Russia today poses a danger, but it is not unpredictable in advancing its own interests," Tillerson told the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He added that Trump's administration would be committed to the defense of America's NATO partners, an obligation the president-elect called into question during the campaign if allies failed to meet defense spending pledges.

While his prepared statement reflected some of Trump's desire for improved ties, Tillerson quickly pivoted under pressure from both sides of the aisle. On Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimea region, he said, "That was a taking of territory that was not theirs."

Still, he criticized President Barack Obama's sanctions on Russia, which ended up costing Exxon hundreds of millions of dollars. And he declared that he would have responded by urging Ukraine to send all available military units to its eastern border with Russia and recommending U.S. and allied support through defensive weapons and air surveillance, to send a message to Moscow.

Ethics chief blasts Trump plan to keep business profits

WASHINGTON (AP) — The director of the federal government's ethics agency Wednesday blasted President-elect Donald Trump's plan to maintain his business empire by turning it over to his sons instead of selling off all his corporate assets and placing remaining profits in a government-approved blind trust.

U.S. Office of Government Ethics Director Walter Shaub took the rare step of commenting publicly about a presidential ethics decision, warning that Trump's solution to a potential cascade of conflicts spurred by his global business holdings breaks 40 years of precedent by presidents from both parties.

Shaub, a 2013 Obama appointee who also worked at the agency during the George W. Bush administration, openly pleaded with Trump to reconsider his plan before his inauguration. Shaub said

Trump should commit to "divestiture," a process under which he would sell his corporate assets and place the profit in a blind trust administered by a neutral trustee approved by the OGE.

Emails between the OGE and the Trump transition team obtained by the Associated Press show that Shaub repeatedly tried to engage with Trump's aides late last year to persuade the president-elect and his Cabinet choices to agree to divestiture as the cleanest way to clear away potential ethics conflicts posed by their investments and businesses.

But while lawyers for several Trump picks, including prospective Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and senior adviser Jared Kushner, have worked closely with the OGE in shaping divestiture plans, Trump's own lawyers and aides gave the federal agency no official advance notice of his plan to turn

over his global empire to his sons, according to an official familiar with interactions between the two sides.

The official, who requested anonymity to detail the sensitive contacts between the two sides, said that Shaub met once with Trump's prospective White House counsel, Don McGahn, in recent weeks, but only to discuss ethics plans for several of Trump's picks, not for Trump's own plan to deal with his holdings.

An outside attorney for Trump, Sheri Dillon of firm Morgan Lewis & Bockius, said that Trump plans to have his companies' operations directed by his two sons, but they would pursue new deals only in the U.S., not abroad. Additionally, Dillon said, Trump would put his business assets in a trust but would hand over management of his international real estate firms to a management company based in New York.

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