

Trump knew Flynn misled White House weeks before ouster

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just six days into his presidency, Donald Trump was informed his national security adviser had misled his vice president about contacts with Russia. Trump kept his No. 2 in the dark and waited nearly three weeks before ousting the aide, Michael Flynn, citing a slow but steady erosion of trust, White House officials said Tuesday.

Flynn was interviewed by the FBI about his telephone conversations with Russia's ambassador to the U.S., a sign his ties to Russia had caught the attention of law enforcement officials.

But in the White House's retelling of Flynn's stunning downfall, his error was not that he discussed U.S. sanctions with the Russian before the inauguration — a potential violation of a rarely enforced law — but the fact that he denied it for weeks, apparently misleading Vice President Mike Pence and other senior Trump aides about the nature of the conversations. White House officials said they conducted a thorough review of Flynn's interactions, including transcripts of calls secretly recorded by U.S. intelligence officials, but found nothing illegal.

Pence, who had vouched for Flynn in a televised interview, is said to have been angry and deeply frustrated.

"The evolving and eroding level of trust as a result of this situation and a series of other questionable incidents is what led the president to ask General Flynn for his resignation," White House spokesman Sean Spicer said Tuesday, one day after the president asked Flynn to leave.

Flynn, in an interview with The Daily Caller News Foundation, said Monday "there were no lines crossed" in his conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

The explanation of the episode left many questions unanswered, including why Trump didn't alert Pence to the matter and why Trump allowed Flynn to keep accessing classified information and taking part in the president's discussions with world leaders up until the day he was fired.

White House officials also struggled to explain why Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway had declared the president retained "full confidence" in Flynn just hours before the adviser had to submit his letter of resignation.

The White House shakeup, less than one month into Trump's tenure,



In this image made from a video taken on Dec. 10, 2015, President Donald Trump's former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, right, shakes hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Moscow. A U.S. official has told The Associated Press that Flynn was in frequent contact with Ambassador Sergey Kislyak on the day the Obama administration imposed sanctions on Russia after U.S. intelligence reported that Russia had interfered with the election.

marked another jarring setback for a new administration already dealing with tensions among top aides and a legal fight over the president's travel ban order. Flynn's firing also heightened questions about the president's friendly posture toward Russia. Democrats called for investigations into Flynn's contacts, and Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham said Congress needed to know whether he had been acting with direction from the president or others.

Trump initially thought Flynn could survive the controversy, according to a person with direct knowledge of the president's views, but a pair of explosive stories in The Washington Post in recent days made the situation untenable. As early as last week, he and aides began making contingency plans for Flynn's dismissal, a senior administration official said. While the president was said to be upset with Flynn, he also expressed anger with other aides for "losing control" of the story and making his young administration look bad.

Pence spokesman Marc Lotter said Pence became aware that he had received "incomplete information" from Flynn only after the first *Washington Post* report Thursday night. Pence learned about the Justice Department warnings to the White House around the same time.

The officials and others with knowledge of the situation were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and requested anonymity.

"The evolving and eroding level of trust ... is what led the president to ask Gen. Flynn for his resignation."
— Sean Spicer, White House spokesman

Ahead of the Jan. 20 inauguration, Pence and other officials insisted publicly that Flynn had not discussed sanctions in his talks with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. On Jan. 26, Acting Attorney General Sally Yates contacted White House counsel Don McGahn to raise concerns about discrepancies between the public accounting and what intelligence officials knew to be true about the contacts based on routine recordings of communications with foreign officials who are in the U.S.

The Justice Department warned the White House that the inconsistencies would leave the president's top national security aide vulnerable to blackmail from Russia, according to a person with knowledge of the discussion. The president was informed of the warnings the same day, Spicer said.

Flynn was interviewed by the FBI around the same time, according to a U.S. official who was briefed on the investigation.

It was not immediately known what questions the FBI asked of Flynn or what he told law enforce-

ment officials.

McGahn, along with chief of staff Reince Priebus and strategist Steve Bannon, also questioned Flynn multiple times in the ensuing weeks, a White House official said. Top aides also reviewed transcripts of Flynn's contacts with the ambassador, according to a person with knowledge of the review process.

At the same time, the official said Trump aides began taking steps to put some distance between the president and Flynn. CIA Director Mike Pompeo and retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, a top Flynn aide, started taking part in Trump's daily security briefings.

Top Trump advisers quietly met with Vice Admiral Robert Harward last week and spoke with the former Navy SEAL again Monday, the White House official said. Harward is seen as the top contender for the job, though former CIA Director David Petraeus and Kellogg, who has temporarily stepped into the role, are also under consideration.

Spicer said other "questionable incidents" had contributed to Flynn's firing. According to one person with knowledge of the matter, those incidents included Flynn seeking a security clearance for his son during the transition.

At the time, it was Pence who was again put in the position of defending Flynn on television, saying he had not sought a clearance for the retired general's son.

A U.S. official told The Associated Press that Flynn was in frequent contact with Kislyak on the day the Obama administration slapped sanctions on Russia for election-related hacking, as well as at other times during the transition. Spicer said Flynn was not discussing sanctions at the president's behest.

Before he resigned Monday night, Flynn told the investigative news nonprofit affiliated with the website The Daily Caller that he and Kislyak spoke only generally about the Russian diplomats expelled by President Barack Obama as part of the previous administration's response to Moscow's interference in the U.S. presidential election.

"It wasn't about sanctions. It was about the 35 guys who were thrown out," Flynn said. "It was basically: 'Look, I know this happened. We'll review everything.' I never said anything such as, 'We're going to review sanctions,' or anything like that."

Flynn exit creates vacuum that pragmatists may fill

WASHINGTON (AP) — The dramatic departure of President Donald Trump's hard-hitting national security adviser creates a vacuum of power and raises a key question about U.S. foreign policy: Will the pragmatists in the administration now gain clout?

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, both known as level-headed technocrats, stand to fill some of the void. It would be a shift that would mollify anxious U.S. allies and even Republicans who worry Trump is veering too far from traditional U.S. positions. But the duo will be contending with Steve Bannon, Trump's influential senior adviser, and Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, who is already playing an outsize role in his diplomacy.

"It's dysfunctional as far as national security is concerned," Republican Sen. John McCain said. "Who is in charge? I don't know of anyone outside of the White House who knows."

Critics of Trump's foreign policy plans are hoping the shakeup leads to a rethink of his desire to seek closer U.S.-Russian relations and a less hostile administration stance on Islam — a tone Flynn helped to set through often inflammatory statements about the religion. Many lawmakers from both parties were appalled to learn that Flynn, in the weeks before Trump's inauguration, discussed with Russia's ambassador sanctions that the Obama administration was imposing as punishment for Russia's alleged interference in the presidential election.

Flynn, who in 2015 was paid to appear at a gala for Russian state-controlled television network RT, was the face of Trump's potential Russia reboot, designed around working with Russia to fight the Islamic State group. In Moscow, Russian lawmakers bitterly mused that paranoia had forced Flynn out, while analysts there surmised that the Kremlin's honeymoon with Trump was ending.

Russia cloud over Trump not likely to fade with Flynn

WASHINGTON (AP) — Questions about the Trump administration's ties to Russia are hardly going to disappear with the firing of national security adviser Michael Flynn. Investigations are underway, and more are likely by the new administration and on Capitol Hill.

U.S. agencies, including the FBI, have been probing Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. And three congressional committees are conducting their own investigations that include looking at contacts between Russian officials and members of the Trump campaign and administration.

This isn't the first time Trump has distanced himself from an adviser in light of a relationships with Moscow. In late August, Paul Manafort resigned as Trump's campaign chairman after disclosures by The Associated Press about his firm's covert lobbying on behalf of the former pro-Russian ruling political party in Ukraine. Trump's own ties to Russia have been

questioned in light of his friendly posture toward the long-time U.S. adversary and reluctance to criticize President Vladimir Putin, even for Putin's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region.

"This isn't simply about a change in policy toward Russia, as the administration would like to portray. It's what's behind that change in policy," said California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, one of the congressional bodies investigating. Schiff said there are continuing questions about the Trump campaign's ties to Russia and whether anyone assisted Moscow in hacking.

"It's not just that an administration official was caught lying. It's that the national security adviser to the president was caught lying and on a matter of central importance. So this is big," Schiff said.

The Obama administration said Russia interfered in the 2016 election with the goal of electing Trump. Trump has

acknowledged that Russia hacked Democratic emails but denies it was to help him win.

The investigations and the unusual firing of the national security adviser just 24 days into his job have put Republicans in the awkward position of investigating the leader of their party. Senior GOP lawmakers continue to deny Democrats' requests that an independent panel be established to carry out the Russia investigation. So the congressional probes are ultimately in the hands of the Republican chairmen, and the executive branch's investigation has been overseen ultimately by Trump appointees.

On Tuesday, Republican leaders focused on the idea that Flynn misled Vice President Mike Pence about the nature of his contacts with the Russian ambassador. Democrats say a key issue is whether Flynn broke diplomatic protocol and potentially the law by discussing U.S. sanctions with Moscow before Trump's inauguration.

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