

White House defends contacts with FBI over Russia reports

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House on Friday defended chief of staff Reince Priebus against accusations he breached a government firewall when he asked FBI Director James Comey to publicly dispute media reports that Trump campaign advisers had been frequently in touch with Russian intelligence agents.

President Donald Trump's spokesman, Sean Spicer, argued Priebus had little choice but to seek Comey's assistance in rebutting what Spicer said were inaccurate reports about contacts during last year's presidential campaign. The FBI did not issue the statement requested by Priebus and has given no sign one is forthcoming.

"I don't know what else we were supposed to do," Spicer said.

The Justice Department has policies in place to limit communications between the White House and

the FBI about pending investigations. Trump officials on Friday not only confirmed contacts between Priebus and the FBI, but engaged in an extraordinary public airing of those private conversations.

Spicer said it was the FBI that first approached the White House about the veracity of a *New York Times* story asserting that Trump advisers had contacts with Russian intelligence officials during the presidential campaign. Spicer said Priebus then asked both FBI Director James Comey and Deputy Director Andrew McCabe if they would condemn the story publicly, which they declined to do.

"The chief of staff said, well, you've put us in a very difficult situation," Spicer said. "You've told us that a story that made some fairly significant accusations was not true. And now you want us to just sit out there."

The FBI would not comment on the matter or verify the White House account.

Friday's revelations were the latest wrinkle in Trump's already complicated relationship with the FBI and other intelligence agencies. He's accused intelligence officials of releasing classified information about him to the media, declaring in a tweet Friday morning that the FBI was "totally unable to stop the national security 'leakers' that have permeated our government for a long time."

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi accused Priebus of "an outrageous breach of the FBI's independence" and called on the Justice Department's inspector general to look into all conversations Priebus and other White House officials have held with the FBI on ongoing investigations.

"The rule of law depends on the

FBI's complete independence, free from political pressure from the targets of its investigations," Pelosi said.

A 2009 memo from then-Attorney General Eric Holder said the Justice Department is to advise the White House on pending criminal or civil investigations "only when it is important for the performance of the president's duties and appropriate from a law enforcement perspective."

Ron Hosko, a retired FBI assistant director who oversaw criminal investigations, said the discussions between the FBI and the Trump White House were inadvisable.

"It is a very slippery slope," Hosko said. "Do I get in the position of where I'm updating the White House on my priority criminal cases? The answer is no, I should not be doing that."

Other FBI veterans said the

interactions between Priebus and the FBI were not unprecedented. Robert Anderson, a retired executive assistant director who served under Comey and oversaw counterintelligence investigations, said contacts between the bureau and White House are "usually very-well documented" in order to avoid the perception of inappropriate contacts.

CNN first reported that Priebus had asked the FBI for help, and a White House official confirmed the matter to The Associated Press Thursday night. On Friday morning, two other senior White House officials summoned reporters to a briefing to expand on the timeline of events.

The White House officials would only discuss the matter on the condition of anonymity. Two hours later, Trump panned news stories that rely on anonymous sources.

Trump blasts media, anonymous sources — after White House uses them

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump unloaded on the news media Friday for using anonymous sources — just hours after members of his own staff insisted on briefing reporters only on condition their names be concealed.

Unleashing a line of attack that energized an enthusiastic crowd at the nation's largest gathering of conservative activists, Trump said unethical reporters "make up stories and make up sources."

"They shouldn't be allowed to use sources unless they use somebody's name," he declared. "Let their name be put out there."

Trump told the Conservative Political Action Conference that while not all reporters are bad, the "fake news" crowd "doesn't represent the people. It will never represent the people and we're going to do something about it."

Trump didn't expand on what he had in mind or which news organizations he was talking about. But his broadsides represented an escalation of his running battle against the press,



President Donald Trump gestures as he speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference Friday.

AP Photo/Alex Brandon

which he has taken to calling "the opposition party."

The president has chafed at a number of anonymously sourced stories, including numerous reports describing contacts between his campaign advisers and Russian intelligence agents, which the White House has sharply disputed.

However, members of his White House team regularly demand anonymity when talking to reporters. That was the case Friday morning when Trump officials briefed reporters on chief of staff Reince Priebus' contact with

top FBI officials concerning the Russia reports.

Later Friday, after Trump's speech, several news organizations including *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, CNN and Politico were blocked from joining a White House media gaggle, according to news reports.

The Associated Press chose not to participate following the move by White House press secretary Sean Spicer. Lauren Easton, the AP's director of media relations, said in a statement: "The AP believes the public

should have as much access to the president as possible."

Trump's appearance at CPAC represented a triumph for both speaker and audience — each ascendant after years when they were far from the center of the political universe.

Elizabeth Connors of New York recalled past gatherings as collections of the "downtrodden."

Today, she said, "it's energized" after years in which "we've been just pushed down, pushed down, pushed down."

Nicholas Henderson of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, was there in his "Make America Great Again" hat and pronounced Trump's speech rousing.

"He touched on a lot of things we'd already heard before, which is reassuring, tells us he's still committed to those promises he made during the campaign," Henderson said.

Trump, who first appeared at CPAC as a reality TV star six years ago, recalled his past visits with nostalgia, saying the crowd helped put him on the path to the presidency.

"I loved the commotion," he said. "And then they did these polls where I went through the roof and I wasn't even running, right? But it gave me an idea."

From there, Trump's latest speech played out like a greatest hits reel from his 2016 campaign.

He reminisced about his victory in the Republican primaries. He vowed to "build the wall" along the Mexican border. He denounced Hillary Clinton's characterization of some of his supporters as belonging in a "basket of deplorables."

The crowd responded to his Clinton criticism with chants of "Lock her up!" just as they did at Trump rallies last year.

Further blurring the line between candidate and president, Trump departed the stage to the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want," the same exit music he used during his campaign.

As for Trump's criticism of anonymous sources, Gregg Leslie, legal defense director for the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said such arrange-

ments are "essential to good reporting" in many cases.

"There are just some things that people will come forward about anonymously that they cannot discuss openly," Leslie said, citing potential threats to jobs and even personal safety.

The Associated Press uses anonymous sources only if the material is factual information, not opinion or speculation, and is vital to the news report. It must come from a person who is reliable and in a position to have accurate information.

Long ago, Trump himself played fast and loose with sourcing. In the 1990s, when his personal life was tabloid fodder, a "spokesman" who identified himself as John Miller, would call to offer details about the businessman's failing marriage and the girlfriends he was juggling.

But *The Washington Post* reported it was actually Trump, posing as his own publicist. In later years Trump denied it, but he had owned up to it at the time, describing the Miller calls as a "joke gone awry," according to the *Post*.



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