

# FBI probing Trump-Russia links, wiretap claims bogus, says Comey

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The FBI is investigating whether Donald Trump's associates coordinated with Russian officials in an effort to sway the 2016 presidential election, Director James Comey said Monday in an extraordinary public confirmation of a probe the president has refused to acknowledge, dismissed as fake news and blamed on Democrats.

In a bruising five-hour session, the FBI director also knocked down Trump's claim that his predecessor had wiretapped his New York skyscraper, an assertion that has distracted White House officials and frustrated fellow Republicans who acknowledge they've seen no evidence to support it.

The revelation of the investigation of possible collusion with Russians, and the first public confirmation of the wider probe that began last summer, came in a remarkable hearing by one branch of government examining serious allegations against another branch and the new president's election campaign.

Tight-lipped for the most part, Comey refused to offer details on the scope, targets or timeline for the FBI investigation, which could shadow the White House for months, if not years. The director would not say whether the probe has turned up evidence that Trump associates may have schemed with Russians during a campaign marked by email hacking that investigators believe was aimed at helping the Republican defeat Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"I can promise you," the FBI director vowed, "we will follow the facts wherever they lead."



FBI Director James Comey takes a break after three hours of testifying on Capitol Hill in Washington, Monday before the House Intelligence Committee hearing on allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Comy for the first time put himself publicly at odds with the president by contradicting a series of recent tweets from Trump that asserted his phones had been ordered tapped by President Barack Obama during the campaign.

"With respect to the president's tweets about alleged wiretapping directed at him by the prior administration, I have no information that supports those tweets, and we have looked carefully inside the FBI," Comey said. The same was true, he added, of the Justice Department.

His confirmation of the Russia-links investigation was striking given the FBI's historic reluctance to discuss its work. But Comey said the intense public interest in the matter — and permission from the Justice Department — made it appropriate to do so.

Comy said the collusion inquiry began last July as part of a broader probe into Russian meddling in

American politics, meaning Trump was elected president as associates remained under investigation for possible connections to Russia.

Clinton allies on Monday contrasted Comey's silence during the campaign with public comments he made last year when closing out an investigation into Clinton's email practices and then, shortly before Election Day, announcing that the probe would be revived following the discovery of additional emails. Many Democrats blame Comey's public updates with stoking worries about Clinton's trustworthiness and turning voters against her.

Comy acknowledged that "some folks may want to make comparisons to past instances" where he and other officials were more open, but he said those were about concluded investigations.

In the current case, it's not clear how long it will take for the FBI to decide if a crime

was committed, but counter-intelligence investigations are known for being complicated and time-intensive — and for frequently concluding without charges. Comy would not commit to a timetable.

Regardless of the outcome, the investigation is unquestionably an unwelcome distraction for an administration that has struggled to move past questions about ties to Russia. The White House tried anew Monday to distance itself from two former senior members of Trump's team, Paul Manafort and Michael Flynn, who have been under scrutiny for foreign contacts.

Rep. Devin Nunes, the California Republican who chairs the committee, told Comy that revelations about the investigation had placed a "big gray cloud" over people trying to lead the country.

"The faster you can get to the bottom of this, it's going to be better for all Americans," he said.

## SUPREME COURT NOMINEE

# I'll be unbiased or 'hang up the robe'

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch pledged to be independent or "hang up the robe" as the U.S. Senate began rancorous hearings Monday on President Donald Trump's conservative pick to fill a Supreme Court seat that has been vacant for more than a year.

Gorsuch sought to take the edge off Democratic complaints that he has favored the wealthy and powerful in more than 10 years as a federal judge. The 49-year-old Coloradan told the Senate Judiciary Committee he has tried to be a "neutral and independent" judge and has ruled both for and against disabled students, prisoners and workers alleging civil rights violations.

"But my decisions have never reflected a judgment about the people before me, only my best judgment about the law and facts at issue in each particular case," Gorsuch said. That was his opening statement a day ahead of expected pointed questioning from committee Democrats.

A Supreme Court confirmation hearing is a major occasion on Capitol Hill — the last one was in 2010 — but Monday's was overshadowed by a separate event in the Capitol complex. On the House side, FBI Director James Comey was testifying that the bureau is investigating Russian meddling in last year's election and possible links and coordination between Russia and associ-

ates of Trump.

Blending the two hearings, Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut referred to "a looming constitutional crisis" that the Supreme Court might need to resolve. The court's eight current justices are roughly divided ideologically between conservatives and liberals.

The Russian story line as well as Trump's verbal attacks on federal judges both during the campaign and as president have

fed into Democratic efforts to force Gorsuch to break publicly with the man who nominated him. Gorsuch already has told some senators in private meetings that he found the criticism of the judges disheartening. But Blumenthal said the nominee needs to make a statement "publicly and explicitly and directly."

For their part, Republicans uniformly portrayed Gorsuch as a genial, principled judge whose qualifications make him eminently suitable for the nation's highest court. "I'm looking for a judge, not an ideologue," Sen. John Kennedy of Louisiana said.

Actual questioning is to begin Tuesday. Committee chairman Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican, said he expects a committee vote on Gorsuch's nomination on April 3, which would allow the full Senate to take up the nomination that week. Gorsuch could be on the bench by the time the justices meet for a round of arguments in mid-April.



Gorsuch

## BRIEFLY

### Al-Qaida steps up violence against Syrian government

BEIRUT (AP) — Under pressure from fellow insurgents and escalating airstrikes by the U.S.-led coalition, Syria's al-Qaida branch is stepping up violence against President Bashar Assad's strongholds with precise, high-profile attacks, including a surprising breach of the capital in the most serious infiltration in years.

Sunday's attack, in which insurgents used tunnels they control in northeastern Damascus neighborhoods to hit government positions, appears to have caught the Syrian military off guard. It was a grim reminder that the fighting is far from over, despite significant advances by Assad's forces against rebels across the country in the past year.

The government dispatched

some of its elite forces to halt the offensive, which began shortly before sunrise with two suicide bombers from an al-Qaida-linked group. The bombers, a Saudi and a Syrian, detonated their explosives-laden trucks against army positions on the eastern edge of the capital amid a barrage of artillery shells that landed in the heart of Damascus.

Dozens of insurgents penetrated the city's defenses and captured several blocks northeast of Damascus, triggering fierce clashes that lasted for hours before the fighters were pushed back to where they started.

### Electronics banned in some flights

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. government is temporarily barring passengers on certain flights originating in eight other countries from bringing laptops, iPads,

cameras and most other electronics in carry-on luggage starting Tuesday.

The reason for the ban was not immediately clear. U.S. security officials would not comment. The ban was revealed Monday in statements from Royal Jordanian Airlines and the official news agency of Saudi Arabia.

A U.S. official told The Associated Press the ban will apply to nonstop flights to the U.S. from 10

international airports serving the cities of Cairo in Egypt; Amman in Jordan; Kuwait City in Kuwait; Casablanca in Morocco; Doha in Qatar; Riyadh and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia; Istanbul in Turkey; and Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The ban was indefinite.

A second U.S. official said the ban will affect nine airlines in total, and the Transportation Security Administration will inform the affected airlines Tuesday.

### British exit to begin on March 29

LONDON (AP) — Britain will begin divorce proceedings from the European Union on March 29, starting the clock on two years of intense political and economic negotiations that will fundamentally change both the nation and its European neighbors.

Britain's ambassador to the EU, Tim Barrow, informed European Council President

Donald Tusk of the exact start date on Monday morning.

"We are on the threshold of the most important negotiation for this country for a generation," Brexit Secretary David Davis said. "The government is clear in its aims: a deal that works for every nation and region of the U.K. and indeed for all of Europe — a new, positive partnership between the U.K. and our friends and allies in the European Union."

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