

Trump boosts NASA budget

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AP Photo/Evan Vucci
President Donald Trump speaks in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, Tuesday, after signing a bill to increase NASA's budget to \$19.5 billion and directs the agency to focus human exploration of deep space and Mars.

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump signed legislation Tuesday adding human exploration of Mars to NASA's mission. Could sending Congress into space be next?

Flanked at an Oval Office bill-signing ceremony by astronauts and lawmakers, Trump observed that being an astronaut is a "pretty tough job." He said he wasn't sure he'd want it and, among lawmakers he put the question to, Sen. Ted Cruz said he wouldn't want to be a space traveler, either.

But Cruz, R-Texas, offered up a tantalizing suggestion. "You could send Congress to space," he said to laughter, including from the president.

Trump, who faces a crucial House vote later this week on legislation long promised by Republicans to overhaul the Obama-era Affordable Care Act health law, readily agreed. The health care bill is facing resistance from some conservative members of the party.

"What a great idea that could be," Trump said, before turning back to the space

exploration measure sponsored by Cruz and Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla.

The new law authorizes \$19.5 billion in spending for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration for the budget year that began Oct. 1. Cruz said the authorization bill is the first for the space agency in seven years, and he called it a "terrific" achievement.

Trump last week sent Congress a budget proposal that seeks \$19.1 billion in

spending authorization for the agency next year.

"For almost six decades, NASA's work has inspired millions and millions of Americans to imagine distant worlds and a better future right here on earth," Trump said. "I'm delighted to sign this bill. It's been a long time since a bill like this has been signed, reaffirming our commitment to the core mission of NASA: human space exploration, space science and technology."

The measure amends current law to add human exploration of the red planet as a goal for the agency. It supports use of the International Space Station through at least 2024, along with private sector companies partnering with NASA to deliver cargo and experiments, among other steps.

After signing the bill, Trump invited several lawmakers to comment, starting with Cruz. When Trump invited Vice President Mike Pence to speak, he suggested that Nelson be allowed to say a few words. Nelson traveled into space when he was in the House.

"He's a Democrat. I wasn't going to let him speak," Trump quipped, to laughter. Nelson ultimately got a chance to briefly praise his bill.

Pence also announced that Trump plans to re-launch the National Space Council, with Pence as chairman, to coordinate U.S. space policy. The council was authorized by law in 1988, near the end of the Reagan administration, but ceased to operate soon after Bill Clinton took office in January 1993.

AP FACT CHECK Trump tweets vs. FBI testimony on Russia

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump produced a running commentary on FBI Director James Comey's testimony to Congress. Thanks to the length of the hearing and the immediacy of Twitter, Comey was able to comment on the president's commentary without leaving his seat.

It was a nearly real-time exchange Monday that circled back on itself, like a cat chasing its tail.

TRUMP tweet: "The NSA and FBI tell Congress that Russia did not influence electoral process."

THE FACTS: No such assurance was offered by Comey or his fellow witness at the hearing, National Security Agency Director Mike Rogers. They did not offer any conclusions about whether Russia succeeded in influencing the election.

COMEY, asked about the tweet while he was still testifying: "I'm sorry, I haven't been following anybody on Twitter while I've been sitting here."

He went on: "We've offered no opinion, have no view, have no information on potential impact because it's never something that we looked at."

He confirmed, though, that the FBI is investigating whether and how Russia tried to shape the election, a probe he says includes any potential coordination between Trump campaign associates and Russia's government.

TRUMP tweet: "FBI Director Comey refuses to deny he briefed President Obama on calls made by Michael Flynn to Russia."

THE FACTS: "Refuses to deny" is true, but perhaps misleading.

Throughout the hearing, Comey declined to deny any assertion made by his questioners that mentioned Flynn or any other individuals, explaining that the FBI is not in the business

of correcting or verifying such reports.

Flynn helped Trump in the campaign, became national security adviser at the start of Trump's presidency and was fired after he was found to have misled senior members of the administration about his contacts with Russia's top diplomat to the U.S.

TRUMP tweet: "FBI Director Comey: fmr. DNI Clapper 'right' to say no evidence of collusion between Russia and Trump Campaign."

THE FACTS: Trump leaves out an important nuance in this tweet about the former director of national intelligence, James Clapper.

Comey agreed there was no evidence of collusion in a report prepared by the U.S. intelligence community under Clapper, but that's different than saying no such evidence has been discovered.

The Jan. 6 report does not take up the question of contacts between Trump associates and Russia. Instead it focuses on Russia's actions, via cyber operations and propaganda, to try to help Trump's election chances and hurt Hillary Clinton's.

Clapper indeed said he had seen no evidence of collusion at the time he left government. But he updated that comment Monday with a statement from spokesman Shawn Turner, saying Clapper "could not account for intelligence or evidence that may have been gathered since the inauguration on January 20th."

COMEY, when asked if he was aware of collusion between Trump associates and Russia, beyond the findings of the report: "It's not something I can comment on."

ROGERS: "Likewise, I'm not going to comment on an ongoing investigation's conclusions."

New Trump hotels face political fights, ethics questions

NEW YORK (AP) — You might have expected the Trump Organization to tap the brakes on expansion plans given all the criticism over potential conflicts of interest while its owner sits in the Oval Office.

It's hitting the accelerator instead.

The company owned by President Donald Trump is launching a chain of new hotels with plans to open in cities large and small across the country. Called Scion, they will be the first Trump-run hotels not to bear the family's gilded name. The hotels will feature modern, sleek interiors and communal areas, and offer rooms at \$200 to \$300 a night, about half what it costs at some hotels in Trump's luxury chain.

The company has signed letters of intent with more

than 20 developers to build the hotels, said Trump Hotels CEO Eric Danziger. The last three were signed in just one week earlier this month.

"It's full steam ahead. It's in our DNA. It's in the Trump boys' DNA," said Danziger. The "boys" are Eric and Donald Jr., who are running their father's company while he is president.

The bold expansion plan raises some thorny ethical questions.

The Trump family won't be putting up any money to build the hotels. Instead, it plans to get local real estate developers and their investors to foot the bill, as do most major hotel chains.

One of the first going up could be in Dallas. A development company there originally planned to raise money from unnamed investors in Kazakhstan, Turkey

and Qatar, but recently told the Dallas Morning News that it now will tap only the company's U.S. partners.

Government ethics experts say turning to outside money, whether foreign or American, raises the specter of people trying to use their investment to gain favor with the new administration — like contributing to a political campaign, but with no dollar limits or public disclosure.

"This is the new version of pay-to-play, 'Get in there and do business with the Trump Organization,'" said Richard Painter, who was the chief White House ethics lawyer to President George W. Bush.

The Trump family will have to overcome some political obstacles, too. Already, politicians in a few cities mentioned as possible sites have vowed to fight

the first family, raising the prospect of a struggle to get zoning and other permits to start building.

The son of German and Polish refugees from World War II, CEO Danziger is no stranger to long odds. He never went to college, instead taking a job as a bellman at a San Francisco hotel at 17. He worked himself up over the decades to CEO spots at several major hospitality companies.

When Danziger led Starwood Hotels and Resorts in the 1990s, he expanded the number of hotels from 20 to nearly 600.

The 62-year-old executive has similar ambitions for the Trump family. He said he hopes to open 50 to 100 Scions in three years, and is planning to add to Trump's existing line of luxury hotels.

No promises and no one above law, Supreme Court pick says

WASHINGTON (AP) — Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch declared Tuesday he's made no promises to Donald Trump or anyone else about how he'll vote on abortion or other issues and testified he'll have no trouble as a justice holding anyone accountable, including the president who picked him.

Gorsuch also called Trump's attacks on federal judges "disheartening" and "demoralizing."

During the long second day of his Senate confirmation hearings, Gorsuch made two other notable statements in response to questions from members of the Judiciary Committee, and both also related to Trump, who nominated him.

Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina asked Gorsuch whether Trump had asked him to overturn Roe v. Wade, the case establishing a right to abortion, and what he would have done had Trump asked him to do so.

"Senator, I would have walked out the door," Gorsuch replied. "That's not what judges do." Later in the day, Gorsuch acknowledged that he and Trump discussed abortion during his Supreme Court interview, but only how divisive an issue it is. Their conversation touched on abortion, Gorsuch said, after Trump bemoaned his loss of Gorsuch's native Colorado in November.

No new threat led to airline laptop limits, officials say

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. and British officials said Tuesday the decision to bar laptops and tablets from the cabins of some international flights wasn't based on

BRIEFLY

any specific threat but on longstanding concerns about terrorists targeting jetliners.

Unimpressed, some travelers and civil liberties groups denounced the ban, raising concerns that included lost worktime on long flights and worries that checking laptops in baggage will make them more vulnerable to theft.

Under the new bans, electronic devices larger than smartphones, such as laptops, tablets and gaming devices, will have to be checked on some international flights. American officials announced the U.S. ban early Tuesday, and the British followed later in the day after discussions between the countries.

The U.S. ban affects flights from Amman, Jordan; Kuwait City, Kuwait; Cairo; Istanbul; Jeddah and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Casablanca, Morocco; Doha, Qatar, and Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. About 50 flights a day, all on foreign carriers, will be affected. Senior Trump administration officials who briefed reporters about the ban said no U.S.-based airlines have nonstop flights from those cities to the U.S.

Closer U.S.-Russia ties uncertain as Tillerson plans trip

WASHINGTON (AP) — With Russia-tinged investigations swirling around his administration, President Donald Trump has yet to fulfill a campaign pledge of closer cooperation with Moscow. A planned trip by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Russia could test if detente proves anything more than talk.

In a move alarming U.S. allies, Tillerson plans to skip a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Belgium next month, according to U.S. officials. The top American diplomat almost always attends such gatherings, and Tillerson will follow up

his absence in Brussels by traveling to Russia's capital shortly afterward.

The juxtaposition of the trips — one taken and one avoided — has reinforced concerns about America's commitment to NATO, which Trump has repeatedly fueled by dressing down allies as deadbeats who aren't paying enough for their own defense and who take U.S. help for granted.

Trump will take part in a meeting of NATO heads of state in Brussels on May 25, the White House announced Tuesday. Spokesman Sean Spicer said the president looks forward to discussing "issues critical to the alliance, especially allied responsibility-sharing and NATO's role in the fight against terrorism."

Police: Mom let 2-year-old handle gun before fatal shooting

PHOENIX (AP) — A woman arrested after her 2-year-old son picked up her loaded handgun and fatally shot his 9-year-old brother said she previously allowed the younger boy to practice pulling the trigger of the weapon when it was unloaded, Phoenix police said Tuesday.

Landen Lavamia was shot in the head Monday and has since died, police said.

Wendy Lavamia, 28, "described allowing the 2-year-old to practice pulling the trigger of this gun when empty on previous occasions," police said court records.

Police said Monday night that the 9-year-old had died as a result of being shot but corrected that information Tuesday morning to say he remained on life support.

Sgt. Vince Lewis, a Phoenix Police Department spokesman, said Landen Lavamia was pronounced dead late Tuesday afternoon.

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