

Hinting at secret tapes, Trump warns ousted FBI director

WASHINGTON (AP) — Raging against a political firestorm, President Donald Trump on Friday shot a sharp warning at his ousted FBI director about possible “tapes” of their disputed private conversations, raising the provocative possibility that recording devices have been installed in the White House.

Trump’s top spokesman refused to comment on whether listening devices are active in the Oval Office or elsewhere, a non-denial that recalled the secretly taped conversations and telephone calls that ultimately led to President Richard Nixon’s downfall in the Watergate scandal.

Trump’s warning to fired FBI Director James Comey prompted new accusations of interference in an investigation into allegations of collaboration between Russia and the Trump presidential campaign last year.

It also escalated a potentially damaging standoff between a fuming, undisciplined president and the unorthodox lawyer he dismissed three days earlier. Not to mention Congress, which is also investigating.

Democrats quickly seized on the dispute, demanding the White House turn over any tapes that might exist of the president’s conversations with Comey.

Trump’s behavior raises “the specter of possible intimidation and obstruction of justice,” wrote Reps. John Conyers and Elijah Cummings, ranking Democrats on the House Judiciary and Oversight committees, in a letter to White House Counsel Don McGahn. “The president’s actions also risk undermining the ongoing criminal and counterintelligence investigations and the independence of federal law enforcement agencies.”

In an interview with Fox News Friday, Trump declined to comment on whether he has listening devices in the White House.

“Well that I can’t talk about. I



White House press secretary Sean Spicer speaks during the daily press briefing at the White House on Friday.

won’t talk about that. All I want is for Comey to be honest. And I hope he will be,” Trump said.

For a president whose tweets frequently rattle Washington — and foreign capitals — Trump’s message early Friday morning was particularly jarring: “James Comey better hope that there are no ‘tapes’ of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!” the president wrote.

The White House refusal to elaborate left open several questions: Was Trump, as his predecessor had in the 1970s, been covertly taping conversations? Was he trying to intimidate Comey? Was he suggesting Comey had recordings? Or was it merely a button-pushing claim launched over frustration at news coverage of the controversy.

The tweet appeared to refer to a series of three conversations in which, Trump claims, Comey assured him he was not under FBI investigation as part of the bureau’s probe into Russia’s interference in the 2016 election. Comey has not explicitly denied the account. But sources close to him have cast doubt on the president’s account, noting it would be extraordinary for

an FBI director to discuss an open investigation.

On Friday, a person close to the former director recounted a different version. At a one-on-one dinner at the White House in January, Trump asked Comey to pledge his loyalty to the president and Comey declined, instead offering to be honest with him, according to the person, who requested anonymity to discuss private conversations.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer denied that account, insisting that the president simply “wants loyalty to this country and the rule of law.” Details of the dinner were first reported by *The New York Times*.

The firing of Comey already has left Trump with the dubious distinction of being the first president since Nixon to dismiss a law enforcement official overseeing an investigation tied to the White House.

He also, like Nixon, has grown increasingly isolated in the White House, recently relying on only a small circle of family members and loyal advisers while livid about the West Wing’s failing efforts to get ahead of the damaging Russia story, according to several people close to

Trump. They also commented only on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Those people also describe him as deeply frustrated by what he views as unfair media coverage — irritation that emerged in a separate tweet in which he suggested he may shut down the regular press briefings at the White House.

Trump was widely known to record some phone conversations at his office in Trump Tower during his business career, sometimes remarking to aides after a call as to whether or not he had taped it.

“I would note that New York is a one-party consent state, and President Trump has always abided by the law,” said Sam Nunberg, a former campaign aide. Federal law and the law in New York State do not require both parties on a call to be aware that it was being recorded. In Florida, where the president frequently spends weekends, both parties must consent to recording.

Spicer, who kept his answers short during Friday’s briefing and largely dodged specific questions about Trump’s meeting with Comey, said he was not aware that any recording of the Trump-Comey meeting exists. Associates of the former FBI director, who remained out of sight Friday at his suburban Virginia home, said they believed any tapes would validate Comey’s side of the story.

It was not clear when Comey would speak for himself. He declined an invitation to appear at a closed meeting of the Senate intelligence committee next week.

The face-to-face meeting between the president and the director raised other concerns. It came just days after the FBI interviewed Trump’s then-National Security Adviser Mike Flynn about his conversations with the Russian ambassador and a day after acting Attorney General Sally Yates first alerted the White House that she believed Flynn had lied about the

conversations and could be blackmailed by Moscow.

Former National Intelligence Director James Clapper said Friday that Comey was uneasy about attending the dinner due to the “appearance of compromising the independence of the FBI which is a hallowed tenet in our system.”

Clapper also told MSNBC that he didn’t know if there was collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian officials, contradicting the president’s assertion that the former director had cleared him of wrongdoing.

The swirling controversy has obliterated any momentum from the House passage of the Republican health care bill last week and threatens to overshadow Trump’s first international trip, beginning next week, in which the president will meet with leaders in both the Middle East and Europe.

Trump, in an NBC interview Thursday, said that he had been intending to fire Comey — whom he derided as a “showboat” and “grandstander” — for months and that it had nothing to do with the Russia investigation. But he also said, “In fact when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said you know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story, it’s an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won.”

Even before Trump’s provocative tweets, the White House was scrambling to clarify why Comey was fired. It initially cited a Justice Department memo criticizing Comey’s handling of last year’s investigation into Hillary Clinton’s emails as the impetus, only to have that version undercut by Trump himself.

Senate intelligence committee Chairman Richard Burr said he doesn’t think the FBI’s Trump-Russia investigation was the reason for the firing. But he called Trump’s tweet “inappropriate.”

Dozens of countries hit by massive cyber attack

NEW YORK (AP) — Dozens of countries were hit with a huge cyberextortion attack Friday that locked up computers and held users’ files for ransom at a multitude of hospitals, companies and government agencies.

It was believed to be the biggest attack of its kind ever recorded.

The malicious software behind the onslaught appeared to exploit a vulnerability in Microsoft Windows that was supposedly identified by the National Security Agency for its own intelligence-gathering purposes and was later leaked to the internet.

Britain’s national health service fell victim, its hospitals forced to close wards and emergency rooms and turn away patients. Russia appeared to be the hardest hit, according to security experts, with the country’s Interior Ministry confirming it was struck.

All told, several cybersecurity firms said they had identified the malicious software responsible for tens of thousands of attacks in more than 60 countries, including the United States, though its effects in the U.S. did not appear to be widespread, at least in the initial hours.

Computers were infected with what is known as “ransomware” — software that freezes up a machine and flashes a message demanding payment to release the user’s data.

In the U.S., FedEx reported that its Windows computers were “experiencing interference” from malware, but wouldn’t say if it had been hit by ransomware.

Mikko Hypponen, chief research officer at the Helsinki-based cybersecurity company F-Secure, called the attack “the biggest ransomware outbreak in history.”

Security experts said the attack appeared to be caused by a self-replicating piece of software that enters companies and organizations when employees click on email attachments, then spreads quickly internally from computer to computer when employees share documents and other files.

EPA allows mine to pursue permits near Alaska bay

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — In a sharp reversal, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has cleared a way for a company to seek permits to develop a massive copper and gold deposit near the headwaters of a world-class salmon fishery in southwest Alaska.

As part of a court settlement with the Pebble Limited Partnership, the EPA agreed to begin the process of withdrawing proposed restrictions on development in the Bristol Bay region, an area that produces about half of the world’s sockeye salmon.

The agreement, signed Thursday but released on Friday, comes four months into the Trump administration, which supporters of the proposed Pebble Mine hoped would give it a fairer shake than they believed they received under President Barack Obama.

The mining industry has seen promising signs from the administration, including a willingness to take a different look at projects and to review regulations seen as overly burdensome, said Luke Popovich, a spokesman for the National Mining Association.

“I think the public is in no danger of seeing genuine environmental protection diminished,” he said. “We’re simply asking for a more efficient process.”

Environmental groups see the Pebble agreement as potentially giving a go-ahead to industry to challenge EPA actions or to seek permits about which they previously might have been uncertain.

“It obviously sends a psychological message to big mining companies that if they were nervous about getting permits in the past ... that this is their golden opportunity to get their mine through the process,” said Brett Hartl, government affairs director for the Center for Biological Diversity environmental group.

Critics of the Pebble settlement called it a backdoor deal and a slap in the face to residents of the region who petitioned the EPA in hopes of securing environmental protections.

Pebble sued in federal court over what it claimed was EPA’s collusion with mine opponents.

Attorney general sparks fear with push for harsh sentences

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation’s federal prosecutors should bring the toughest charges possible against most crime suspects, Attorney General Jeff Sessions instructed in a move that critics assailed as a return to failed drug-war policies that unduly affected minorities and filled prisons

with nonviolent offenders.

The move announced Friday is a reversal of Obama-era policies that is sure to send more people to prison and for much longer terms. It has long been expected from Sessions, a former federal prosecutor who cut his teeth during the height of the crack cocaine epidemic and who has promised to make combating violence and drugs the Justice Department’s top priority.

Advocates warned the

shift would crowd federal prisons and strain Justice Department resources. Some involved in criminal justice during the drug war feared the human impact would look similar.

“It ruined families and took away a large number of African-American men from their communities at their prime working years,” said Georgetown law professor Paul Butler, who was a federal prosecutor during the 1990s. “You had people who weren’t able to

be responsible fathers for their kids, who weren’t able to serve a couple of years for making a mistake, then come home and do better. That’s the era Jeff Sessions wants to return us to.”

The announcement is an unmistakable undoing of Obama administration criminal justice policies that aimed to ease overcrowding in federal prisons and contributed to a national rethinking of how drug criminals were prosecuted and sentenced.

BUTTE CHALLENGE

THANK YOU

A special thank you to everyone who helped with the East Oregonian and Hermiston Herald 18th Annual Butte Challenge 5 & 10k Walk & Run. Each of you had a part in the success of this event.

We should all be proud to be living in such a wonderful community!

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Also, thank you to our volunteers: Audra Workman, Shannon Paxton, Sam & Leslie Weimer, Jaimie Renteria, Cheri Montee, Jessica Oster, Lorena Wiley, Samantha Parsons & Kathy Aney for donating their time to make this such a great community event.

The Hermiston High School Cross Country team is very grateful.