

Report: FBI probe moves into White House

Trump told Russians Comey was 'a nut job'

Associated Press



AP Photo/Susan Walsh

President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference with Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos in the East Room of the White House on Thursday.

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump told Russian diplomats last week his firing of “nut job” James Comey had eased the pressure on him, even as the FBI’s Trump-Russia investigation had moved into the White House, according to reports Friday that pursued the president as he began his maiden foreign trip.

White House hopes that Trump could leave scandalous allegations at home were crushed in a one-two punch of revelations that landed shortly after his departure. A *Washington Post* report, citing anonymous sources familiar with the matter, said a senior Trump adviser is now considered a “person of interest” in the law enforcement investigation into whether Trump’s campaign associates coordinated with Russia in an effort to sway the 2016 election.

And *The New York Times* reported that the president had told Russian officials he felt the dismissal of his FBI director had relieved “great pressure” on him. The White House has said the firing was unrelated to the FBI’s Russia investigation.

Late Friday, the Senate intelligence committee announced that Comey had agreed to testify at an open hearing at an undetermined date after Memorial Day.

Comedy will certainly be asked about encounters that precipitated his firing, including a January dinner in which, Comey has told associates, Trump asked for his loyalty. In the Oval Office weeks later, Comey told associates, the president asked him to shut down an investigation into former national security adviser Michael Flynn.

Comedy is known to produce memos documenting especially sensitive or unsettling encounters, such as after the February meeting.

Comedy turned down an invitation to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

The new headlines were

a fresh indication that Trump would not be able to change the subject from what appears to be an intensifying investigation reaching toward the president and his inner circle.

The White House repeated its assertion that a “thorough investigation will confirm that there was no collusion between the campaign and any foreign entity.”

It did not deny the *Times* report that Trump was critical of Comey to the Russians the day after he fired him.

The *Times* reported Trump noted the Russia investigation as he told Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Ambassador to the U.S. Sergey Kislyak of his decision to fire Comey.

“I just fired the head of the FBI. He was crazy, a real nut job,” the *Times* reported that Trump said during the May 10 meeting. “I faced great pressure because of Russia. That’s taken off.”

White House spokesman Sean Spicer called the president’s rhetoric part of his deal-making.

“By grandstanding and politicizing the investigation into Russia’s actions, James Comey created unnecessary pressure on our ability to engage and negotiate with Russia,” Spicer said. “The investigation would have always continued, and obviously the termination of Comey would not have ended it. Once again, the real story is that our national security has been undermined by the leaking of private and highly classified conversations.”

As for the separate report of a “person of interest” under investigation, the *Post* said the senior White House adviser “under scrutiny” is

someone close to the president but did not name the person.

Among Trump’s senior White House advisers are several former campaign officials, including his son-in-law Jared Kushner, Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller and Kellyanne Conway. In March, Kushner volunteered to answer lawmakers’ questions about meetings he had with Russian officials during the transition.

A spokeswoman for House Speaker Paul Ryan said he would not discuss information provided in classified briefings and said the House Oversight committee had already asked for documents related to Comey’s firing.

Earlier this week, the Justice Department appointed former FBI Director Robert Mueller to take over the federal investigation in an effort to re-establish independence from the White House.

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein told Congress Friday he stands by a memo he wrote bluntly criticizing Comey. But he made clear it was not his intention for Trump or other White House officials to use the document to justify firing Comey, which is what they have done.

In closed-door meetings with lawmakers on Thursday and Friday, Rosenstein said he wrote the memo after Trump told him one day before the May 9 firing that he wanted to dismiss Comey. Rosenstein said that though he was personally fond of Comey, “I thought it was appropriate to seek a new leader.”

The Justice Department

on Friday released the text of Rosenstein’s opening remarks for the briefings on Capitol Hill.

Trump has said he plans to nominate a new FBI director soon, but there was no announcement Friday.

The appointment of Mueller as special counsel has drawn generally favorable comments from Democrats and from some Republicans as well.

But lawmakers at both congressional sessions expressed frustration that Rosenstein would say little in answer to their questions about his actions — or others’ — before Comey’s firing.

“There was considerable frustration in the room,” said Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., a member of the Armed Services Committee. “This renewed my confidence that we should not have confidence in this administration. I don’t think (Rosenstein) did a lot to bolster our confidence in him today.”

The White House has struggled since Comey’s firing to explain the chain of events that led to it and the Justice Department’s involvement in that decision. Trump has insisted at times that the decision was his alone, but he also has pointed to the “very strong” recommendation from Rosenstein.

Rosenstein made it clear to the lawmakers that he drafted his memo only after Trump told him of his plans to dismiss the FBI director. “My memorandum is not a statement of reasons to justify a for-cause termination,” he said. But he added, “I wrote it. I believe it. I stand by it.”

The memo focused on Comey’s handling of the Hillary Clinton email investigation, particularly the FBI director’s decision to divulge details to the public at various junctures during her presidential campaign against Trump. Rosenstein denounced that decision as “profoundly wrong and unfair.”

Trump has reacted furiously to the appointment of a special counsel, a prosecutor with wide authority to investigate Russia’s interference and other potential crimes uncovered.

Trump to Muslims on first foreign trip: Drive out terrorists

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump will use his first visit to the Middle East to call for unity in the fight against radicalism in the Muslim world, casting the challenge as a “battle between good and evil” and urging Arab leaders to “drive out the terrorists from your places of worship,” according to a draft of the speech obtained by The Associated Press.

Abandoning some of the harsh anti-Muslim rhetoric of his presidential campaign, the draft of the speech, slated to be delivered in Saudi Arabia on Sunday, envisions new partnerships with America’s traditional allies in the Middle East. It notably refrains from mentioning democracy and human rights — topics Arab leaders often view as U.S. moralizing — in favor of the more limited goals of peace and stability.

“We are not here to lecture — to tell other peoples how to live, what to do or who to be. We are here instead to offer partnership in building a better future for us all,” the document said.

Trump left Washington Friday afternoon for Riyadh, the first stop on his maiden trip overseas as president. The marathon trip will also take him to Israel, the Vatican, Belgium and Italy. The trip is a key test of the president’s diplomatic skills and a chance to add substance to a foreign policy he has described as “America First.”

The White House confirmed the draft was authentic, but cautioned the president had not yet signed off on the final product.

“The president has not seen this draft,” White House spokesman Sean Spicer said. “This is one of five drafts that have been written by various people. He continues to take input and is writing a final version.”

Trump attorney didn’t want him to sign financial disclosure

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump’s attorneys initially wanted him to submit an updated financial disclosure without certifying the information as true, according to correspondence with the Office of Government Ethics.

Attorney Sheri Dillon said she saw no need for Trump to sign his 2016 personal financial disclosure because he is filing voluntarily this year. But OGE director Walter Shaub said his office would only work with Dillon if she agreed to follow the typical process of having Trump make the certification.

The Associated Press obtained the letters under a Freedom of Information Act request.

Trump led his family’s private company until becoming president, and even now maintains financial ties to it. He has avoided full transparency about his finances by breaking the long tradition of major-party political candidates making their tax returns public.

Trump has routinely pointed to his previous public financial disclosures to justify his billionaire status and to dismiss calls for him to provide more information to the public. The filings are self-reported, though, making the personal certification all the more important to show the president is attesting for their accuracy.

The documents indicate that after OGE pushed back, Trump now plans to certify the information by mid-June. But his attorney’s effort to sidestep certification of his personal financial disclosure marks another departure from the norm. Each year, the OGE processes thousands of those forms, all of which are certified.

“This is not at all typical; in fact I’ve never heard of anyone trying this,” said Marilyn Glynn, an OGE employee for 17 years before retiring in 2008. Her positions included acting director and general counsel. “It would be as unusual as not signing your taxes.”

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