

Kushner's security clearance downgraded

At least four countries have discussed manipulating the president's son-in-law

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The security clearance of White House senior adviser Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law, has been downgraded, according to two people informed of the decision.

Kushner had been operating with an interim clearance at the "top secret/sensitive compartmented information" level for more than a year. Now he is only authorized to access information at the lower "secret" level, according to a White House official and a person familiar with the decision.

The news set off rampant speculation among Trump allies that Kushner's days in the White House might be numbered. Tuesday saw the announcement of the departure of a top Kushner aide in the White House, deputy communications director Josh Raffel, the third departure of a Kushner ally in the West Wing in as many months.

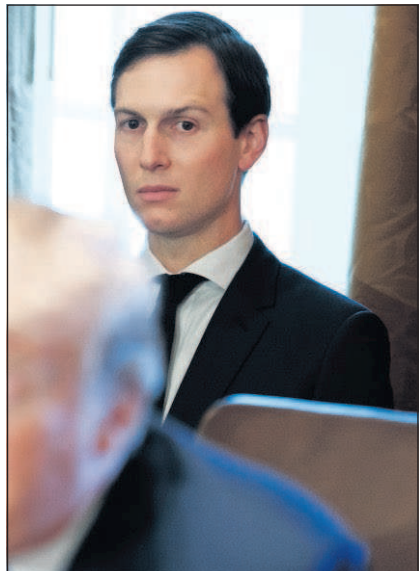
Chief of staff John Kelly ordered that White House officials with interim clearances pending since before June 1, 2017, lose their access to the nation's deepest secrets if they hadn't received permanent clearances. A White House official confirmed to the Associated Press that Kelly's order has been implemented.

Trump could have reversed Kelly's decision and unilaterally offered Kushner a clearance, but deferred to Kelly.

"I will let General Kelly make that decision and he's going to do what's right for the country and I have no doubt he'll make the right decision," Trump said Friday, when he addressed the security clearance issue for the first time.

Kushner's attorney told the AP that Kushner's ability to do his job won't be affected by any change to his clearance.

"Those involved in the process again have confirmed that there are dozens of people at Mr. Kushner's level whose process is delayed, that it is not uncommon for these clearance reviews



AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File

In this Nov. 1 file photo, White House senior adviser Jared Kushner listens as President Donald Trump speaks during a cabinet meeting at the White House in Washington.

to take this long in a new administration, and that the current backlogs are now being addressed," said Peter Mirijanian, a Kushner spokesman.

Kushner's portfolio once included the U.S. relationships with China and Japan and a host of domestic priorities, including infrastructure, trade and economic development. But his freewheeling reach in the foreign policy space — which was viewed as undermining Secretary of State Rex Tillerson — had already been curtailed somewhat under Kelly.

Still, Kushner is reportedly said to have reviewed the highly secret presidential daily brief and has been in the room for some of Trump's most consequential domestic and foreign policy decisions.

Kushner is one of dozens of White House aides who have been working without permanent security clearances for the better part of a year.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters Tuesday that she would not comment on individual security clearances but called Kushner "a valued member of the team, and he will continue to do the important work that he's been doing since he started in the administration."

The Washington Post reported Tuesday that officials in at least four countries had privately discussed ways they could manipulate Kushner by taking advantage of his complex business arrangements, financial difficulties and lack of foreign policy experience.

The nations included the United Arab Emirates, China, Israel and Mexico, the Post reported, citing current and former U.S. officials familiar with intelligence reports on the matter. The newspaper said it was unclear if any of those countries had acted on the discussions, but said Kushner's contacts with foreign government officials had raised concerns within the White House and were among the reasons Kushner had not yet been able to obtain a permanent security clearance.

Kushner's contacts with foreign officials have been a part of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation, a former U.S. official told the AP. Mueller's team, in its interviews for the ongoing Russia probe, has asked people about the protocols Kushner used when he set up conversations with foreign leaders.

The Kushner Cos., for example, had attempted to raise money for its struggling 666 Fifth Avenue skyscraper in New York from a large Chinese insurer with ties to the ruling Communist Party. Those talks ended after lawmakers and government ethics experts expressed worry that China could be using a deal to curry favor with the White House.

Kushner stepped down as CEO of his family's real estate company to join his father-in-law's administration.

With a top-secret clearance, Kushner would have had access to information about covert operations and intelligence sources and methods. With a secret clearance, he would still have access to intelligence assessments, but not necessarily the information behind why the U.S. knows what is being shared with him.

The downgrade would mean that anyone giving top-secret material to Kushner could be accused of mishandling classified material, according to David Priess, who wrote a history of the President's Daily Brief, the highest-level intelligence document produced in the United States. Still, a president has the ultimate authority to classify or declassify information, so he could show the brief — covering hot spots around the globe, U.S. covert operations and intelligence about world leaders — "to whomever he damn well pleases," Priess tweeted.

There are three levels of security clearances. Disclosing information deemed "confidential" would "damage" national security. The unauthorized disclosure of "secret" information could cause "serious damage" to national security. "Top secret" disclosures would cause "exceptionally grave damage" to national security.

BRIEFLY

Hope Hicks declines to answer some questions in Russia probe

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's longtime aide Hope Hicks declined to answer questions about her time in the White House during a nine-hour, closed-door interview with the House intelligence committee Tuesday, saying she was advised not to.

The panel is investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election and any contacts between Trump's campaign and Russia. As one of Trump's closest aides, Hicks is a key eyewitness to his actions over the past several years. She was his spokeswoman during the 2016 presidential campaign and is now White House communications director.

The top Democrat on the intelligence panel, California Rep. Adam Schiff, said after the meeting was over that Hicks answered questions about her role in Trump's campaign and answered some questions about the transition period between the election and the inauguration. But she would not answer any questions about events since Trump took the oath of office, similar to some other White House officials who have spoken to the committee. Schiff said Hicks did not assert any type of executive privilege, but said she had been advised not to answer.

While the investigation is focused on Russian interference during the campaign, House investigators also had questions about her time in the White House, including her role in drafting a statement about a 2016 meeting between Trump campaign officials and Russians. That statement has been of particular interest to special counsel Robert Mueller, who is investigating matters related to the Russian meddling and potential obstruction of an ongoing federal inquiry.

GOP leaders move slowly on tighter gun law

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Paul Ryan on Tuesday showed little interest in stricter gun control proposals being floated in Congress, leaving the issue in the hands of wary Senate leaders and President Donald Trump, whose shifting views have left no clear strategy for legislative action.

As student survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting lobbied lawmakers for tougher gun laws, Ryan acknowledged "system failures" in Florida that he said Congress should review.

But GOP leaders did not promise votes on the matter and stopped short of offering solutions, beyond a pending bill aimed at increasing participation in the existing federal background check system. The bill uses new incentives and penalties to encourage better compliance with current law, but does not expand the pool of gun buyers required to undergo background checks before buying a gun.

Even as he endorsed the measure, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell downplayed its significance, saying it would not be a "panacea" for the rash of gun violence.

But McConnell said he wanted to "at least show some progress toward dealing with one element of the problem."

Republican leaders, who have majority control of the House and Senate, are reluctant to lead on legislation without knowing they have Trump's support and can rely on his popularity with a core flank of the GOP electorate to shield them from blowback.

But Trump has proven an inconsistent partner in such policy debate, including the issue of gun violence that has taken on fresh urgency since the Valentine's Day assault that left 17 dead.

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON & EVENING

Table with 24 columns (12 PM to 11:30 PM) and 10 rows of TV channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS) listing programs like 'Paid Program', 'The Talk', 'The Doctors', 'The Chew', etc.

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Large grid table with 24 columns (12 PM to 11:30 PM) and 40 rows of TV channels (A&E, AMC, ANPL, CMT, etc.) listing programs like 'S. Wars', 'Hard to Kill', 'Pit Bull Parolees', etc.

WEDNESDAY LATE NIGHT & THURSDAY MORNING

Table with 24 columns (12 AM to 11:30 PM) and 10 rows of TV channels (FOX, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS) listing programs like 'Anger M.', 'TMZ Live!', 'Colbert', etc.