

Justice Department pulls support for parts of Obamacare

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration’s decision to stop defending in court the Obama health law’s popular protections for consumers with pre-existing conditions could prove risky for Republicans in the mid-term elections — and nudge premiums even higher.

The Justice Department said in a court filing late Thursday that it will no longer defend key parts of the Affordable Care Act, beginning with the unpopular requirement that people carry health insurance, but also including widely supported provisions that guarantee access for people with medical problems and limit what insurers can charge older, sicker adults.



AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File
Attorney General Jeff Sessions speaks on Capitol Hill in Washington.

Friday, the insurance industry warned in stark terms of “harm that would come to millions of Americans” if such protections are

struck down, causing premiums “to go even higher for older Americans and sicker patients.”

Weighing in on a Texas

challenge to the health law, the Justice Department argued that legally and practically the popular consumer protections cannot be separated from the unpopular insurance mandate, which Congress has repealed, effective next year.

That argument is likely to be lost on consumers, said Robert Blendon, a polling expert at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health — particularly in the heat of an election that will determine control of Congress.

“The pre-existing condition thing is what the ads will be run on,” said Blendon. “Pre-existing conditions have gotten to be an issue that people walking on

the streets understand ... it’s very emotional.”

Some Democratic politicians didn’t waste much time.

“Democrats will not allow Republicans to get away with quietly trying to strip away pre-existing conditions protections for millions of Americans through a legal backdoor,” said Rep. Frank Pallone, D-N.J., a spokesman for his party on health care.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York urged President Donald Trump to reverse the decision.

Administration officials at the departments of Health and Human Services and Treasury would not com-

ment, instead pointing to the Justice Department filing, which said other parts of the health law would continue to stand, including its Medicaid expansion covering about 12 million low-income people. HHS and Treasury administer the health law’s coverage and subsidies.

Loosening the health law’s rules on pre-existing conditions and on charging more to older adults is a key goal for the Trump administration. Partly that’s because those consumer protections also raise premiums across the board, as the cost of covering the sick is spread among all customers, including healthier people who previously benefited from lower rates.



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais, file
In this Feb. 14 file photo, Paul Manafort, President Donald Trump’s former campaign chairman, leaves the federal courthouse in Washington.

New charges filed against Manafort in Russia probe

WASHINGTON (AP) — Special counsel Robert Mueller has brought new obstruction charges against President Donald Trump’s campaign chairman and a longtime associate who prosecutors have said has ties to Russian intelligence.

The indictment was unsealed Friday against Paul Manafort and Konstantin Kilimnik just days after prosecutors accused the two men of attempting to tamper with witnesses as Manafort awaits trial on charges related to his foreign lobbying work.

The latest charges increase Manafort’s legal jeopardy if he continues an aggressive battle with prosecutors, and could be an effort by Mueller to induce a guilty plea and secure the testimony of a critical campaign adviser to Trump. They also come as Trump and his attorney, Rudy Giuliani, have heaped public criticism on the Mueller investigation in an attempt to undermine it.

The charges do not relate to Manafort’s work on the Trump campaign or involve allegations of Russian election interference, a fact that the president has routinely noted as he tried to distance himself from his former top campaign adviser.

On Friday, Trump also dismissed any talk of pardoning Manafort or his longtime personal attorney, Michael Cohen, who is under investigation by federal prosecutors in New York.

“They haven’t been

convicted of anything. There’s nothing to pardon. It is far too early to be thinking about it,” Trump told reporters.

The new indictment charges Manafort and Kilimnik with obstruction of justice and conspiracy to obstruct justice related to contacts they had with two witnesses earlier this year. The witnesses, who had worked with Manafort as he represented a pro-Russian political party in Ukraine, have told the FBI that they believed Manafort and Kilimnik were trying to get them to lie about the nature of their work.

The charges mark the second time since his October indictment that Manafort has faced additional criminal charges.

Through a spokesman, Manafort, 69, has maintained his innocence. The spokesman, Jason Maloni, said Friday that Manafort and his attorneys were reviewing the new charges.

Kilimnik, 48, has previously declined to comment on the allegations and denied being connected to Russian intelligence agencies. Kilimnik, who prosecutors say lives in Moscow, was not in U.S. custody Friday.

The new charges will factor heavily into whether U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson allows Manafort to remain on house arrest. Citing the allegations, prosecutors have asked Jackson to consider jailing Manafort. A hearing is set for next week.

Ex-Senate aide appears in federal court

WASHINGTON (AP) — A former employee of the Senate intelligence committee appeared before a federal court Friday on charges that he lied about his contacts with reporters, a case that President Donald Trump said could be a “terrific thing” as his administration tries to crack down on classified leaks.

James A. Wolfe, the longtime director of security for the committee, was charged Thursday evening with three counts of lying to investigators. The committee is one of multiple congressional panels investigating potential ties between Russia and the Trump campaign.

Though Wolfe is not charged with actually disclosing classified information, prosecutors say he was in regular contact with multiple journalists who covered the committee, including meeting them at restaurants, in bars, private residences and in a Senate office building.

Wolfe, 57, made a brief appearance in federal court in Baltimore on Friday. U.S.



AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, file
James Wolfe, center, former director of security with the Senate Intelligence Committee, escorts former FBI director James Comey to a secure room to continue his testimony.

Magistrate Judge J. Mark Coulson released him from custody and ordered him to appear at the federal courthouse in Washington next week. He did not enter a plea.

Wolfe, of Ellicott City, Maryland, did not answer questions from reporters.

On Friday morning, Trump said the Justice Department had caught “a

very important leaker” and said it could be a “terrific thing.” He said he was still getting details on the case.

“I’m a big, big believer in freedom of the press,” Trump told reporters before departing for a trip to Canada. “But I’m also a believer in classified information. Has to remain classified.”

Wolfe’s indictment was announced soon after *The*

New York Times revealed that the Justice Department had secretly seized the phone records and emails of one of its journalists, Ali Watkins, as part of the leak investigation involving Wolfe. The newspaper said Watkins was approached by the FBI about a three-year relationship she had had with Wolfe when she worked at other publications. The newspaper also said that Watkins said Wolfe was not a source of classified information for her during their relationship.

In a statement Thursday night, Watkins’ attorney, Mark MacDougall, said: “It’s always disconcerting when a journalist’s telephone records are obtained by the Justice Department — through a grand jury subpoena or other legal process. Whether it was really necessary here will depend on the nature of the investigation and the scope of any charges.”

Each false statement count is punishable by up to five years in prison, though if convicted, Wolfe would almost certainly face only a fraction of that time.

U.S. says it will intensify fight against IS in Afghanistan

BRUSSELS (AP) — The U.S. will intensify combat against the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan during the Kabul government’s temporary halt to attacks on the Taliban, senior U.S. officials said Friday.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said this could, for example, allow the U.S. to partially shift the focus of aerial surveillance from the Taliban to IS fighters as well as al-Qaida extremists, who remain a threat 17 years after the U.S. invaded.

Mattis spoke to reporters during a break in a NATO defense ministers meeting, which included a discussion of progress and problems in Afghanistan. The ministers also discussed more broadly the international campaign against IS, which has focused since 2014 on eliminating the group’s so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

In remarks to ministers at the start of the meeting,



AP Photo/Virginia Mayo, Pool
U.S. Secretary for Defense Jim Mattis speaks during a media conference after a meeting of NATO defense ministers at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Friday.

Mattis argued for continuing military pressure on IS even after the fighting in Syria is over. He did not mention that President Donald Trump has said he wants the U.S. to exit Syria as soon as it can, perhaps within a matter of months.

“As operations ultimately draw to a close, we want to avoid leaving a vacuum in Syria that can be exploited” by IS and other extremists, he said. “Our fight is not

over,” he added. “We must deal ISIS an enduring, not just a territorial, defeat.”

Later he said leaving Syria before a U.N.-led peace process was underway “would be a strategic blunder.”

Army Gen. John Nicholson, the top U.S. general in Afghanistan, said the fight against IS in the eastern Nangarhar province had already been intensifying this year and would be fur-

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— Jim Mattis,
Secretary of Defense

ther stepped up during the Afghan cease-fire against the Taliban, which does not apply to other opposition groups. Nicholson spoke with reporters on the sidelines of the NATO meeting.

Speaking separately at a NATO news conference, Mattis said the cease-fire could put U.S. forces in a better position to fight other extremist groups such as the IS affiliate and remnants of al-Qaida.

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