



Photo by Evan Vucci/AP; photo illustration by Nick Kirkpatrick/The Washington Post

EXCLUSIVE: HACKING DEMOCRACY

Doubting the intelligence, Trump pursues Putin and leaves a Russian threat unchecked

By **Greg Miller, Greg Jaffe and Philip Rucker**

Dec. 14, 2017



In the final days before Donald Trump was sworn in as president, members of his inner circle pleaded with him to acknowledge publicly what U.S. intelligence agencies had already concluded — that Russia's interference in the 2016 election was real.

Holding impromptu interventions in Trump's 26th-floor corner office at Trump Tower, advisers — including Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and designated chief of staff, Reince Priebus — prodded the president-elect to accept the findings that the nation's spy chiefs had personally presented to him on Jan. 6.

They sought to convince Trump that he could affirm the validity of the intelligence without diminishing his electoral win, according to three officials involved in the sessions. More important, they said that doing so was the only way to put the matter behind him politically and free him to pursue his goal of closer ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“This was part of the normalization process,” one participant said. “There was a big effort to get him to be a standard president.”

But as aides persisted, Trump became agitated. He railed that the intelligence couldn’t be trusted and scoffed at the suggestion that his candidacy had been propelled by forces other than his own strategy, message and charisma.

How Trump fought the intelligence on Russia and left an election threat unchecked

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The Washington Post examines how, nearly a year into his presidency, Trump continues to reject evidence that Russia supported his run for the White House. (Dalton Bennett, Thomas LeGro, John Parks, Jesse Mesner-Hage/The Washington Post)

Told that members of his incoming Cabinet had already publicly backed the intelligence report on Russia, Trump shot back, “So what?” Admitting that the Kremlin had hacked Democratic Party emails, he said, was a “trap.”

As Trump addressed journalists on Jan. 11 in the lobby of Trump Tower, he came as close as he ever would to grudging acceptance. “As far as hacking, I

think it was Russia,” he said, adding that “we also get hacked by other countries and other people.”

As hedged as those words were, Trump regretted them almost immediately. “It’s not me,” he said to aides afterward. “It wasn’t right.”

Nearly a year into his presidency, Trump continues to reject the evidence that Russia waged an assault on a pillar of American democracy and supported his run for the White House.

The result is without obvious parallel in U.S. history, a situation in which the personal insecurities of the president — and his refusal to accept what even many in his administration regard as objective reality — have impaired the government’s response to a national security threat. The repercussions radiate across the government.

Rather than search for ways to deter Kremlin attacks or safeguard U.S. elections, Trump has waged his own campaign to discredit the case that Russia poses any threat and he has resisted or attempted to roll back efforts to hold Moscow to account.

His administration has moved to undo at least some of the sanctions the previous administration imposed on Russia for its election interference, exploring the return of two Russian compounds in the United States that President Barack Obama had seized — the measure that had most galled Moscow. Months later, when Congress moved to impose additional penalties on Moscow, Trump opposed the measures fiercely.

President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a news conference at Trump Tower in New York on Jan. 11. (Photo by Jabin Botsford; photo illustration by Nick Kirkpatrick/The Washington Post)

Trump has never convened a Cabinet-level meeting on Russian interference or what to do about it, administration officials said. Although the issue has been discussed at lower levels at the National Security Council, one former high-ranking Trump administration official said there is an unspoken understanding within the NSC that to raise the matter is to acknowledge its validity, which the president would see as an affront.

Trump's stance on the election is part of a broader entanglement with Moscow that has defined the first year of his presidency. He continues to pursue an elusive bond with Putin, which he sees as critical to dealing with North Korea, Iran and other issues. "Having Russia in a friendly posture," he said last month, "is an asset to the world and an asset to our country."

His position has alienated close American allies and often undercut members of his Cabinet — all against the backdrop of a criminal probe into possible ties between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin.

This account of the Trump administration's reaction to Russia's interference and policies toward Moscow is based on interviews with more than 50 current and former U.S. officials, many of whom had senior roles in the Trump campaign and transition team or have been in high-level positions at the White House or at national security agencies. Most agreed to speak only on the condition of anonymity, citing the sensitivity of the subject.

Trump administration officials defended the approach with Russia, insisting that their policies and actions have been tougher than those pursued by Obama but without unnecessarily combative language or posture. "Our approach is that we don't irritate Russia, we deter Russia," a senior administration official said. "The last administration had it exactly backwards."

White House officials cast the president's refusal to acknowledge Russian interference in the election as an understandably human reaction. "The president obviously feels . . . that the idea that he's been put into office by Vladimir Putin is pretty insulting," said a second senior administration official. But his views are "not a constraint" on the government's ability to respond to future election threats, the official said. "Our first order in dealing with Russia is trying to counter a lot of the destabilizing activity that Russia engages in."

Others questioned how such an effort could succeed when the rationale for that objective is routinely rejected by the president. Michael V. Hayden, who served as CIA director under President George W. Bush, has described the Russian interference as the political equivalent of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, an event that exposed a previously unimagined vulnerability and required a unified American response.

"What the president has to say is, 'We know the Russians did it, they know they did it, I know they did it, and we will not rest until we learn everything there is to know about how and do everything possible to prevent it from happening again,'" Hayden said in an interview. Trump "has never said anything close to that and will never say anything close to that."

‘More than worth the effort’

The feeble American response has registered with the Kremlin.

U.S. officials said that a stream of intelligence from sources inside the Russian government indicates that Putin and his lieutenants regard the 2016 “active measures” campaign — as the Russians describe such covert propaganda operations — as a resounding, if incomplete, success.

Moscow has not achieved some its most narrow and immediate goals. The annexation of Crimea from Ukraine has not been recognized. Sanctions imposed for Russian intervention in Ukraine remain in place. Additional penalties have been mandated by Congress. And a wave of diplomatic retaliation has cost Russia access to additional diplomatic facilities, including its San Francisco consulate.

But overall, U.S. officials said, the Kremlin believes it got a staggering return on an operation that by some estimates cost less than \$500,000 to execute and was organized around two main objectives — destabilizing U.S. democracy and preventing Hillary Clinton, who is despised by Putin, from reaching the White House.

The bottom line for Putin, said one U.S. official briefed on the stream of post-election intelligence, is that the operation was “more than worth the effort.”

The Kremlin's Building One. U.S. officials say the Kremlin sees its 2016 election interference campaign as a success, if an incomplete one. (Photo by Alexander Nemenov/AFP/Getty Images; photo illustration by Nick Kirkpatrick/The Washington Post)

The Russian operation seemed intended to aggravate political polarization and racial tensions and to diminish U.S. influence abroad. The United States' closest alliances are frayed, and the Oval Office is occupied by a disruptive politician who frequently praises his counterpart in Russia.

“Putin has to believe this was the most successful intelligence operation in the history of Russian or Soviet intelligence,” said Andrew Weiss, a former adviser on Russia in the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations who is now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “It has driven the American political system into a crisis that will last years.”

U.S. officials declined to discuss whether the stream of recent intelligence on Russia has been shared with Trump. Current and former officials said that his daily intelligence update — known as the president's daily brief, or PDB — is often structured to avoid upsetting him.

Russia-related intelligence that might draw Trump's ire is in some cases included only in the written assessment and not raised orally, said a former senior intelligence official familiar with the matter. In other cases, Trump's main briefer — a veteran CIA analyst — adjusts the order of his presentation and text, aiming to soften the impact.

“If you talk about Russia, meddling, interference — that takes the PDB off the rails,” said a second former senior U.S. intelligence official.

Brian Hale, a spokesman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said that the briefing is “written by senior-level, career intelligence officers” and that the intelligence community “always provides objective intelligence — including on Russia — to the president and his staff.”

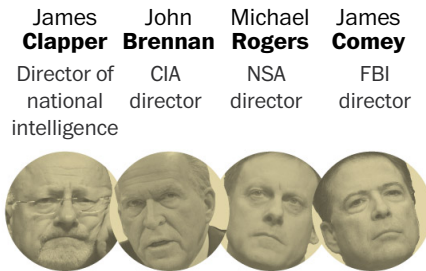
Trump's aversion to the intelligence, and the dilemma that poses for top spies, has created a confusing dissonance on issues related to Russia. The CIA continues to stand by its conclusions about the election, for example, even as the agency's director, Mike Pompeo, frequently makes comments that seem to diminish or distort those findings.

In October, Pompeo declared the intelligence community had concluded that Russia's meddling “[did not affect the outcome of the election](#).” In fact, spy agencies intentionally steered clear of addressing that question.

Presenting the intelligence

JAN. 6

Obama administration intelligence chiefs
brief president-elect and
transition-team members



Donald
Trump
President-
elect



JAN. 6

Comey briefs Trump privately on the
salacious allegations in the dossier



JAN. 7 TO 11

Trump aides try to persuade him
to accept the intelligence
community's consensus



On Jan. 6, two weeks before Trump was sworn in as president, the nation's top intelligence officials boarded an aircraft at Joint Base Andrews on the outskirts of Washington to travel to New York for one of the most delicate briefings they would deliver in their decades-long careers.

Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr., CIA Director John Brennan and National Security Agency chief Michael S. Rogers flew

together aboard an Air Force 737. FBI Director James B. Comey traveled separately on an FBI Gulfstream aircraft, planning to extend his stay for meetings with bureau officials.

The mood was heavy. The four men had convened a virtual meeting the previous evening, speaking by secure videoconference to plan their presentation to the incoming president of a classified report on Russia's election interference and its pro-Trump objective.

During the campaign, Trump had alternately dismissed the idea of Russian involvement — saying a hack of the Democratic National Committee was just as likely carried out by “somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds” — and prodded the Kremlin to double down on its operation and unearth additional Clinton emails.

The officials had already briefed Obama and members of Congress. As they made their way across Manhattan in separate convoys of black SUVs, they braced for a blowup.

“We were prepared to be thrown out,” Clapper said in an interview.

Instead, the session was oddly serene.

The officials were escorted into a spacious conference room on the 14th floor of Trump Tower. Trump took a seat at one end of a large table, with Vice President-elect Mike Pence at the other. Among the others present were Priebus, Pompeo and designated national security adviser Michael Flynn.

Following a rehearsed plan, Clapper functioned as moderator, yielding to Brennan and others on key points in the briefing, which covered the most highly classified information U.S. spy agencies had assembled, including an extraordinary CIA stream of intelligence that had captured Putin's specific instructions on the operation.

Trump seemed, at least for the moment, to acquiesce.

“He was affable, courteous, complimentary,” Clapper said. “He didn't bring up the 400-pound guy.”

A copy of the report was left with Trump's designated intelligence briefer. But there was another, more sensitive matter left to cover.

President Trump with then-FBI Director James B. Comey at a White House gathering on Jan. 22. (Pool photo by Andrew Harrer/Getty Images; photo illustration by Nick Kirkpatrick/The Washington Post)

Clapper and Comey had initially planned to remain together with Trump while discussing an infamous dossier that included salacious allegations about the incoming president.

It had been commissioned by an opposition research firm in Washington that had enlisted a former British intelligence officer to gather material. As The Washington Post reported in October, the research was [paid for by the Clinton campaign and the DNC](#).

But in the end, Comey felt he should handle the matter with Trump alone, saying that the dossier was being scrutinized exclusively by the FBI. After the room emptied, Comey explained that the dossier had not been corroborated and that its contents had not influenced the intelligence community's findings — but that the president needed to know it was in wide circulation in Washington.

Senior officials would subsequently wonder whether the decision to leave that conversation to Comey helped poison his relationship with the incoming president. When the dossier was posted online four days later by the news site BuzzFeed, Trump lashed out the next morning in a 4:48 a.m. Twitter blast.

“Intelligence agencies never should have allowed this fake news to ‘leak’ into the public,” Trump said. “One last shot at me. Are we living in Nazi Germany?” The Post was one of several news organizations that had been briefed on key allegations included in the dossier months earlier and had been attempting to verify them.

After leaving the Jan. 6 meeting at Trump Tower, Comey had climbed into his car and began composing a memo.

“I knew there might come a day when I would need a record of what happened, not just to defend myself but to defend the FBI and our integrity as an institution,” he testified to Congress in June. It was the first of multiple memos he would write documenting his interactions with Trump.

Clapper’s office released an abbreviated public version of the intelligence report later that day. Trump issued a statement saying that “Russia, China” and “other countries” had sought to penetrate the cyberdefenses of U.S. institutions, including the DNC.

In their Trump Tower interventions, senior aides had sought to cement his seeming acceptance of the intelligence. But as the first year of his presidency progressed, Trump became only more adamant in his rejections of it.

In November, during a 12-day trip to Asia, Trump signaled that he believed Putin’s word over that of U.S. intelligence.

“He said he didn’t meddle,” Trump said to reporters aboard Air Force One after he and Putin spoke on the sidelines of a summit in Vietnam. “Every time he sees me, he says, ‘I didn’t do that,’ and I believe, I really believe, that when he tells me that, he means it.”

As those remarks roiled Washington, Trump sought to calm the controversy without fully conceding the accuracy of the intelligence on

Russia. He also aimed a parting shot at the spy chiefs who had visited him in January in New York.

“As to whether I believe it or not,” he said the next day, “I’m with our agencies, especially as currently constituted with their leadership.”

‘Don’t walk that last 5½ feet’

In the early days of his presidency, Trump surrounded himself with aides and advisers who reinforced his affinity for Russia and Putin, though for disparate reasons not always connected to the views of the president.

Flynn, the national security adviser, saw Russia as an unfairly maligned world power and believed that the United States should set aside its differences with Moscow so the two could focus on higher priorities, including battling Islamist terrorism.

Some on the NSC, including Middle East adviser Derek Harvey, urged pursuing a “grand bargain” with Russia in Syria as part of an effort to drive a wedge into Moscow’s relationship with Iran. Harvey is no longer in the administration.

Others had more idiosyncratic impulses. Kevin Harrington, a former associate of Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel brought in to shape national security strategy, saw close ties with oil- and gas-rich Russia as critical to surviving an energy apocalypse — a fate that officials who worked with him said he discussed frequently and depicted as inevitable.

The tilt of the staff began to change when Flynn was forced to resign after just 24 days on the job for falsehoods about his conversations with the Russian ambassador. His replacement, Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, had more conventional foreign policy views that included significant skepticism of Moscow.

National security adviser H.R. McMaster at the White House in September. (Photo by Jahi Chikwendiu, photo illustration by Nick Kirkpatrick/The Washington Post)

The change helped ease the turmoil that had characterized the NSC but set up internal conflicts on Russia-related issues that seemed to interfere with Trump's pursuit of a friendship with Putin. Among them was the administration's position on NATO.

The alliance, built around a pledge of mutual defense against Soviet or Russian aggression among the United States and its European allies, became a flash point in internal White House battles. McMaster, an ardent NATO supporter, struggled to fend off attacks on the alliance and its members by Trump's political advisers.

The president's chief strategist, Stephen K. Bannon, moved to undermine support for NATO within weeks of arriving at the White House. After securing a position on the NSC, Bannon ordered officials to compile a table of arrears — alleged deficits on defense spending by every NATO member going back 67 years. Officials protested that such a calculation was impractical, and they persuaded Bannon to accept a partial list documenting underspending dating from 2007.

Bannon and McMaster clashed in front of Trump during an Oval Office discussion about NATO in the spring, officials said. Trump, sitting behind his desk, was voicing frustration that NATO member states were not meeting their defense spending obligations under the treaty. Bannon went further, describing Europe as “nothing more than a glorified protectorate.”

McMaster snapped at Bannon. “Why are you such an apologist for Russia?” he asked, according to two officials with knowledge of the exchange. Bannon shot back that his position had “nothing to do with Russians” and later told colleagues how much he relished such confrontations with McMaster, saying, “I love living rent-free in his head.”

Bannon and his allies also maneuvered to sabotage displays of unity with the alliance. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg arrived for an April visit at the White House, McMaster’s team prepared remarks for Trump that included an endorsement of Article 5 — the core NATO provision calling for members to come to one another’s defense.

But the language was stripped out at the last minute by NATO critics inside the administration who argued that “it didn’t sound presidential enough,” one senior U.S. official said. A month later, Stephen Miller, a White House adviser close to Bannon, carried out a similar editing operation in Brussels where Trump spoke at a dedication ceremony for NATO’s gleaming new headquarters.

Standing before twisted steel wreckage from the World Trade Center that memorialized NATO’s commitment to defend the United States after the 9/11 attacks, Trump made no mention of any U.S. commitment to mutual defense.

Trump finally did so in June during a meeting with the president of Romania. Officials said that in that case, McMaster clung to the president’s side until a joint news conference was underway, blocking Miller from Trump and the text. A senior White House official said that Trump has developed a good relationship with Stoltenberg and often praises him in private.

On sensitive matters related to Russia, senior advisers have at times adopted what one official described as a policy of “don’t walk that last 5½ feet” — meaning to avoid entering the Oval Office and giving Trump a chance to erupt or overrule on issues that can be resolved by subordinates.

Another former U.S. official described being enlisted to contact the German government before Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit at the White House in March. The outreach had two aims, the official said — to warn Merkel that her encounter with Trump would probably be acrimonious because of their

diverging views on refugees, trade and other issues, but also to urge her to press Trump on U.S. support for NATO.

The signature moment of the trip came during a brief photo appearance in which Trump wore a dour expression and appeared to spurn Merkel's effort to shake his hand, though Trump later said he had not noticed the gesture.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Trump at a joint White House news conference in March. (Photo by Jabin Botsford, photo illustration by Nick Kirkpatrick/The Washington Post)

His demeanor with the German leader was in striking contrast with his encounters with Putin and other authoritarian figures. "Who are the three guys in the world he most admires? President Xi [Jinping] of China, [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan and Putin," one Trump adviser said. "They're all the same guy."

Merkel has never fit into that Trump pantheon. Before her arrival, senior White House aides witnessed an odd scene that some saw as an omen for the visit. As McMaster and a dozen other top aides met with Trump in the

Oval Office to outline issues Merkel was likely to raise, the president grew impatient, stood up and walked into an adjoining bathroom.

Trump left the bathroom door open, according to officials familiar with the incident, instructing McMaster to raise his voice and keep talking. A senior White House official said the president entered the restroom and merely “took a glance in the mirror, as this was before a public event.”

TRUMP'S RELATIONSHIP WITH NATO

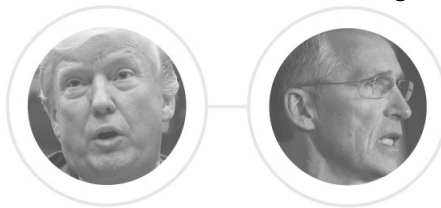
KEY EVENTS



JAN. 15

President-elect Trump calls NATO “obsolete,” alarming European allies. Trump repeats the claim that NATO is not focused on terrorism, an assertion disputed by U.S. partners. NATO has sent troops to Afghanistan and has an established counterterrorism agenda.

Stoltenberg

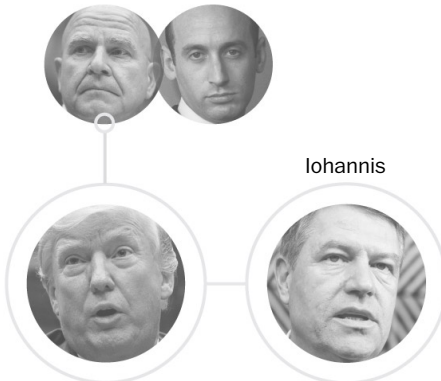


APRIL 12

President Trump says NATO is “no longer obsolete” during a joint news conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. NATO critics in the administration remove language that endorses Article 5 of the alliance’s founding treaty, which states an attack on one country is an attack on all.

McMaster

Miller



Iohannis

JUNE 9

Trump, standing alongside Romanian President Klaus Iohannis at the White House, publicly endorses Article 5. National security adviser H.R. McMaster blocked Trump adviser Stephen Miller from Trump and the speech until the news conference began.

McMaster gained an internal ally on Russia in March with the hiring of Fiona Hill as the top Russia adviser on the NSC. A frequent critic of the Kremlin, Hill was best known as the author of a respected biography of Putin and was seen as a reassuring selection among Russia hard-liners.

Her relationship with Trump, however, was strained from the start.

In one of her first encounters with the president, an Oval Office meeting in preparation for a call with Putin on Syria, Trump appeared to mistake Hill for a member of the clerical staff, handing her a memo he had marked up and instructing her to rewrite it.

When Hill responded with a perplexed look, Trump became irritated with what he interpreted as insubordination, according to officials who witnessed the exchange. As she walked away in confusion, Trump exploded and motioned for McMaster to intervene.

McMaster followed Hill out the door and scolded her, officials said. Later, he and a few close staffers met to explore ways to repair Hill's damaged relationship with the president.

Hill's standing was further damaged when she was forced to defend members of her staff suspected of disloyalty after details about Trump's Oval Office meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak — in which [the president revealed highly classified information](#) to his Russian guests — were leaked to The Post.

The White House subsequently tightened the circle of aides involved in meetings with Russian officials. Trump was accompanied only by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during a meeting with Putin at a July summit of Group of 20 nations in Hamburg. In prior administrations, the president's top aide on Russia was typically present for such encounters, but Hill has frequently been excluded.

A senior administration official said that the NSC “was not sidelined as a result” of Hill's difficult encounters with Trump, that Hill is regularly

included in briefings with the president and that she and her staff “continue to play an important role on Russia policy.”

An insult to Moscow

White House officials insist that the Trump administration has adopted a tougher stance toward Moscow than the Obama administration on important fronts.

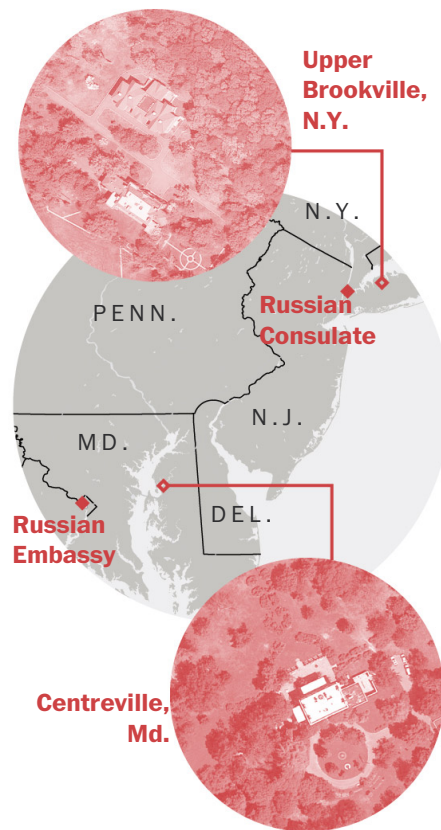
They point to Trump’s decision, after a chemical weapons attack in Syria, to approve a U.S. military strike on a base where Russian personnel and equipment were present. They cite Trump’s decision in early August to sign legislation imposing additional economic sanctions on Moscow and steps taken by the State Department at the end of that month ordering three Russian diplomatic facilities — two trade offices and the consulate in San Francisco — closed. They also said that the NSC is preparing options for the president to deal with the threat of Russian interference in American elections.

“Look at our actions,” a senior administration official said in an interview. “We’re pushing back against the Russians.”

Senior Trump officials have struggled to explain how. In congressional testimony in October, Attorney General Jeff Sessions was pressed on whether the administration had done enough to prevent Russian interference in the future. “Probably not,” Sessions said. “And the matter is so complex that for most of us we are not able to fully grasp the technical dangers that are out there.”

The administration’s accomplishments are to a large measure offset by complicating factors — Trump had little choice but to sign the sanctions — and competing examples. Among them is the administration’s persistent exploration of proposals to lift one of the most effective penalties that Obama imposed for Russia’s election interference — the seizure of two Russian compounds.

THE 'DACHAS'



Russia used those sprawling estates in Maryland and New York as retreats for its spies and diplomats but also — according to CIA and FBI officials — as platforms for espionage. The loss of those sites became a major grievance for Moscow.

Lavrov has raised the confiscation of those properties in nearly every meeting with his American counterparts, officials said, accusing the United States of having “stolen our dachas,” using the Russian word for country houses.

Putin may have had reason to expect that Russia would soon regain access to the compounds after Trump took office. In his recent guilty plea, Flynn admitted lying to the FBI about a conversation with the Russian ambassador in late December. During the call, which came as Obama was announcing sanctions on Russia, Flynn urged the ambassador not to overreact, suggesting the penalties would be short-lived.

After a report in late May by The Post that the [administration was considering returning the compounds](#), hard-liners in the administration mobilized to head off any formal offer.

Several weeks later, the FBI organized an elaborate briefing for Trump in the Oval Office, officials said. E.W. “Bill” Priestap, the assistant director of

the counterintelligence division at the FBI, brought three-dimensional models of the properties, as well as maps showing their proximity to sensitive U.S. military or intelligence installations.

Appealing to Trump's "America first" impulse, officials made the case that Russia had used the facilities to steal U.S. secrets. Trump seemed convinced, officials said.

Smoke rises from a chimney at the Russian Consulate in San Francisco on Sept. 1, a day after the Trump administration ordered its closure. (Photo by Eric Risberg/AP; photo illustration by Nick Kirkpatrick/The Washington Post)

"I told Rex we're not giving the real estate back to the Russians," Trump said at one point, referring to Tillerson, according to participants. Later, Trump marveled at the potential of the two sites and asked, "Should we sell this off and keep the money?"

But on July 6, Tillerson sent an informal communication to the Kremlin proposing the return of the two compounds, a gesture that he hoped would help the two sides pull out of a diplomatic tailspin. Under the proposed terms, Russia would regain access to the compounds but without

diplomatic status that for years had rendered them outside the jurisdiction of U.S. law enforcement.

The FBI and some White House officials, including Hill, were livid when they learned that the plan had been communicated to Russia through a “non-paper” — an informal, nonbinding format. But “Tillerson never does anything without Trump’s approval,” a senior U.S. official said, making clear that the president knew in advance.

Administration officials provided conflicting accounts of what came next. Two officials indicated that there were additional communications with the Kremlin about the plan. One senior official said that Tillerson made a last-minute change in the terms, proposing that the Maryland site be returned “status quo ante,” meaning with full diplomatic protections. It would again be off-limits to law enforcement agencies, including the FBI.

State Department officials disputed that account, however, saying that no such offer was ever contemplated and that the final proposal shared with the Kremlin was the non-paper sent on July 6 — one day before Trump met with Putin in Hamburg.

Tillerson “never directed anyone to draft” a revised proposal to the Kremlin, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said in a written statement. “We considered possible options for restoring Russian access for recreational purposes in a way that would meet the security concerns of the U.S. government.” By the end of July, Congress had passed a new sanctions bill that “imposed specific conditions for the return of the dachas,” she said, “and the Russians have so far not been willing to meet them.”

Moscow made clear through Lavrov and others in mid-July that it regarded the overture, and the idea that any conditions would be placed on the return of the sites, as an insult. State Department officials interpreted that response as evidence that Russia’s real purpose was the resumption of espionage.

‘He was raging. He was raging mad.’

With no deal on the dachas, U.S.-Russia relations plunged into diplomatic free fall.

Even before Trump was sworn in, a group of senators including John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.) had begun drafting legislation to impose further sanctions on Russia.

In the ensuing months, McCain's office began getting private warnings from a White House insider. "We were told that a big announcement was coming regarding Russia sanctions," a senior congressional aide said. "We all kind of assumed the worst."

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had blocked the sanctions bill from moving forward at the behest of Tillerson, who kept appealing for more time to negotiate with Moscow.

But after Comey's firing in early May, and months of damaging headlines about Trump and Russia, an alarmed Senate approved new sanctions on Russia in a 98-to-2 vote.

Trump at times seemed not to understand how his actions and behavior intensified congressional concern. After he emerged from a meeting in Hamburg with Putin, Trump said he and the Russian leader had agreed upon the outlines of a cooperative cybersecurity plan.

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) described the proposed pact as "pretty close" to "the dumbest idea I've ever heard" and introduced additional provisions to the sanctions bill that would strip Trump of much of his power to undo them — a remarkable slap at presidential prerogative.

Then, in late July, new information surfaced about the extent of Trump's interactions with Putin in Hamburg that sent another wave of anxiety across Capitol Hill.

At the end of a lavish banquet for world leaders, Trump wandered away from his assigned seat for a private conversation with the Russian leader — without a single U.S. witness, only a Kremlin interpreter.

A Trump administration official described the reaction to the encounter as overblown, saying that Trump had merely left his seat to join the first lady, Melania Trump, who had been seated for the dinner next to Putin.

Whatever the reason, little over a week later both chambers of Congress passed the sanctions measure with overwhelming margins that would withstand any Trump veto.

Trump's frustration had been building as the measure approached a final vote. He saw the bill as validation of the case that Russia had interfered, as an encroachment on his executive authority and as a potentially fatal blow to his aspirations for friendship with Putin, according to his advisers.

In the final days before passage, Trump watched MSNBC's "Morning Joe" program and stewed as hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski declared that the bill would be a slap in the face to the president.

"He was raging," one adviser said. "He was raging mad."

After final passage, Trump was "apoplectic," the adviser recalled. It took four days for aides to persuade him to sign the bill, arguing that if he vetoed it and Congress overturned that veto, his standing would be permanently weakened.

"Hey, here are the votes," aides told the president, according to a second Trump adviser. "If you veto it, they'll override you and then you're f---ed and you look like you're weak."

Trump signed but made his displeasure known. His signing statement asserted that the measure included "clearly unconstitutional provisions." Trump had routinely made a show of bill signings, but in this case no media was allowed to attend.

The reaction from Russia was withering. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev taunted the president in a Facebook post that echoed Trump's style, saying that the president had shown "complete impotence, in the most humiliating manner, transferring executive power to Congress."

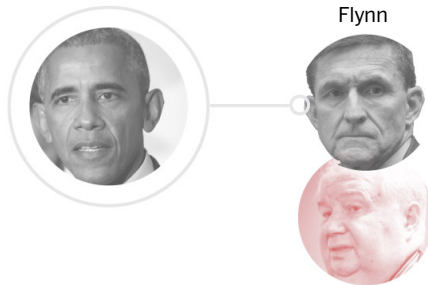
Putin, who had shown such restraint in late December 2016, reacted to the new sanctions with fury, ordering the United States to close two diplomatic properties and slash 755 people from its staff — most of them Russian nationals working for the United States.

Rather than voice any support for the dozens of State Department and CIA employees being forced back to Washington, Trump expressed gratitude to Putin.

“I want to thank him because we’re trying to cut down on payroll,” Trump told reporters during an outing at his golf club in Bedminster, N.J. — remarks his aides would later claim were meant as a joke. “We’ll save a lot of money.”

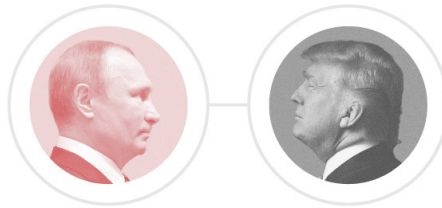
U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS

KEY EVENTS



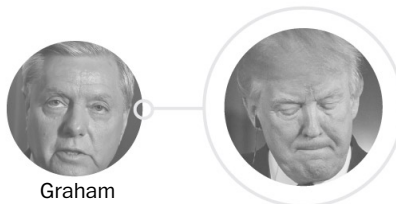
DEC. 29, 2016 Kislyak

President Barack Obama announces sanctions meant to punish Russia for its election interference. Michael Flynn, the incoming national security adviser, asks Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak to have Moscow withhold a strong diplomatic response. The next day, Putin announces he will not retaliate.



JULY 8

During the Group of 20 summit, President Trump says he “strongly pressed” Russian President Vladimir Putin twice about Russia’s election meddling. Afterward, Trump promises to “move forward in working constructively with Russia.” The two leaders have a second meeting that was not immediately disclosed by the White House.



AUG. 2

After Trump said he agreed with Putin on a cooperative cybersecurity plan, Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) introduced additional provisions to a sanctions bill that would strip Trump of much of his power to undo them. The bill passes, and Trump reluctantly signs it on Aug. 2 – setting off a diplomatic fight between the United States and Russia.

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‘Congress and the media will scream bloody murder’

Trump has never explained why he so frequently seems to side with Putin.

To critics, the answer is assumed to exist in the unproven allegations of coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign, or the claim that Putin has some compromising information about the American president.

Aides attribute Trump’s affection for Putin to the president’s tendency to personalize matters of foreign policy and his unshakable belief that his bond with Putin is the key to fixing world problems.

“When will all the haters and fools out there realize that having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing,” Trump tweeted last month. “There always playing politics - bad for our country. I want to solve North Korea, Syria, Ukraine, terrorism, and Russia can greatly help!”

White House officials present Trump as the latest in a long line of presidents who began their tenures seeking better relations with Moscow, and they argue that the persistent questions about Russia and the election only advance the Kremlin’s aims and damage the president. “This makes me pissed because we’re letting these guys win,” a senior administration official said of the Russians. Referring to the disputed Florida tallies in the 2000 presidential election, the official said: “What if the Russians had created the hanging chads? How would that have been for George Bush?”

The allegations of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign, which the president has denied categorically, also contribute to his resistance to endorse the intelligence, another senior White House official said. Acknowledging Russian interference, Trump believes, would give ammunition to his critics.

Still others close to Trump explain his aversion to the intelligence findings in more psychological terms. The president, who burns with resentment over perceived disrespect from the Washington establishment, sees the