
TRUMP IS UNDER INVESTIGATION FOR TIES TO RUSSIA. WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

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Mondays intelligence hearing highlighted the big gray cloud of suspicion hanging over the White House. Heres what happened – and what to expect

A presidency under open-ended investigation for its ties to Russia. A director of the FBI, himself key in aiding the presidents election, not only confirming that inquiry but refuting the presidents claim of illegal surveillance by his predecessor.

The first open hearing into Donald Trumps alleged Russia connections on Monday ensured that the US president will operate under a cloud of suspicion until either the various inquiries deliver credible public conclusions or Trump leaves office, whichever comes first.

Testimony from the FBI director, James Comey, indicated that for Trump, the allegations are no weather pattern, lasting for a finite time, but rather the climate for his presidency □ what the House intelligence committee chairman, Devin Nunes, a Republican who was also a Trump transition official, angrily called a big gray cloud.

Here are critical questions for understanding that climate.

Where do the inquiries go next?

The next big calendar date for the public hearings is 28 March, when two Obama-era intelligence officials, the ex-director of national intelligence James Clapper and the ex-CIA director John Brennan, will appear before the House panel. Both were instrumental in the January assessment that the Russians had interfered in the US presidential election in an attempt to benefit Trump.

Two days later will see the first public hearing for the Senate intelligence committee, which is also investigating Russias involvement in the 2016 election. Neither Comey nor the National Security Agency (NSA) director, Mike Rogers, is scheduled to testify, though Rogers predecessor, Keith Alexander, is. That hearing will focus on Russias interference in other elections.

What about the FBIs investigation?

Comey pointedly did not reveal anything beyond confirming that the bureau has been conducting a counterintelligence investigation into Trump associates and Russia since late July.

Counterintelligence investigations, designed to identify security breaches and root out spies or compromised officials, move slowly and do not easily get resolved. They do not often lead to criminal charges. It is unknown if this investigation will lead to a grand jury empanelment, let alone a criminal case, let alone a conviction. In a comment likely to be seen as ominous at the White House, Comey said the inquiry was very complex and there is no way for me to give you a timetable as to when it will be done.

Ironically, Comey is himself under justice department inquiry for his own interjections in the election, which Hillary Clinton believes cost her the White House.

What happened in July 2016 that may have prompted the FBI investigation?

Several things that Adam Schiff, the lead Democrat on the committee, listed as data points connecting Trump to Russia:

The former Trump foreign policy adviser Carter Page gave a speech in Moscow attacking the USs often hypocritical focus on ideas such as democratization, inequality, corruption and regime change.

At the behest of the Trump campaign, the Republican party neutered a platform amendment that would call for arming Ukraine against Russian-backed forces. Trumps then campaign manager, Paul Manafort, had previously worked for the ousted prior Ukrainian leadership that backed Russia. WikiLeaks published hacked Democratic National Committee emails, prompting several cybersecurity firms and the Obama administration to attribute the hack to Russia. Days later, Trump publicly urged Russia to hack Clintons email.

What will Comeys relationship with Trump now be like?

Hard to say, but probably not warm. Comey did not just knock down Trumps claims that Obama had Trump Tower wiretapped. He corrected Trump in real time. When the official presidential Twitter account claimed Comey and Rogers had said Russia did not influence the election, Comey replied: It certainly wasnt our intention to say that today because we dont have any information on that subject. And thats not something that was looked at.

Already Comeys nominal boss, the attorney general, Jeff Sessions, has had to recuse himself from any inquiry into the Trump-Russia question. The White House chief of staff, Reince Priebus, came under fire for attempting to get the FBI to knock down news reports about Trump and Russia. Comey testified, to the frustration of Republicans, that he would not do that.

Trump has the power to fire Comey. To do so at this point would immediately raise comparisons to Richard Nixons Saturday night massacre, in which Nixons dismissal of the independent Watergate counsel prompted the resignation of the justice department leadership.

What about detente with Russia?

Much recent speculation has claimed that the scandal will prevent Trump from embracing Vladimir Putin. Yet the secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, is skipping a Nato meeting next month but keeping an appointment in Russia later in April. Whatever reason Tillerson cites □ the Nato meeting conflicts with Chinese president Xi Jinpings arrival in the US □ officials from every European capital will see the secretary of state in Moscow before they see him in Brussels. It is the latest mixed message on Trumps view of Nato, a key question before he is slated to meet Putin in Hamburg in July for the first time at the G20 summit.

Do Comey and Congress trust each other?

A subplot in the hearing came when Comey, questioned by the New York Republican Elise Stefanik, revealed that he had kept the counterintelligence inquiry from Congress until some time recently. That followed earlier warnings from Schiff that the FBI was dragging its feet on providing the House panel with critical information, as well as non-answers to the broader House that angered Democrats. Schiff also began the hearing by all but begging Comey to cooperate with a House inquiry he said was stretched thin.

The sensitivity of the matter prompted withholding it from Congress, Comey said, though Democrats point to Comeys fateful late-October letter to Congress, quickly leaked, speculating (ultimately without basis) that additional material damaging to Clinton might emerge from the FBI's investigation into the disgraced former congressman Anthony Weiner. Though he didn't say so, Comey might consider that leak a lesson in why he can't tell Congress everything.

On the Republican side, several members told Comey that he had put Trump under a cloud of suspicion that the administration was unlikely to disperse. Their dealings with Comey are likely to be affected by that cloud for as long as they see their fortunes yoked to their party's leader in the White House.

What unintended consequences might the various investigations have?

Several Republican members of the panel opted to focus on leaks they attributed to the intelligence agencies about Trump and Russia, events that support Trump's assertion that the allegations are merely the sour grapes of political enemies who range from Obama to the intelligence community.

They intimated that unless Comey and Rogers hunted the leakers down, they would allow a broad intelligence authority, known as section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (Fisa), to expire in December, as now they found the privacy implications of the provision — which undergirds the NSA's Prism and Upstream mass-communications-data collections — disturbing. (Those Republicans did not raise those concerns after Edward Snowden's revelations showed the vast privacy implications of 702 affecting ordinary Americans.)

It fell to the NSA's Rogers to point out that collection on targets in the United States has nothing to do with 702. Rogers is taking liberties with this — yes, 702's targets must be outside the US, but its dragnets capture those inside the US with whom those targets communicate or whom they discuss — but conversations with foreign agents such as Russian officials would be collected under the pre-702 sections of Fisa. All this suggested Republicans on the panel overseeing the intelligence community do not understand the surveillance laws they pass.

For civil libertarians, who consider 702 so broad as to be unconstitutional, the GOP turning against the surveillance authority resembles a dream come true. Yet endorsement of it remains prominent on the House intelligence committee's website.

Kaynak/Source: