
TRUMP ADMINISTRATION DENIES IT TRIED TO BLOCK SALLY YATES FROM TESTIFYING ON RUSSIA

-

29.03.2017

CNBC (28 March 2017)

The Trump administration forcefully denied it tried to bar former acting Attorney General Sally Yates from testifying at a House Intelligence Committee hearing on its Russia investigation, after reports suggested it may have tried to do so.

The Washington Post first reported that the White House aimed to block Yates from testifying, and NBC News later obtained the letters that formed the basis of the newspaper's story. On Tuesday, White House press secretary Sean Spicer called the report "100 percent false." He said the White House never took action to stop her from testifying.

"I hope she testifies. I look forward to it," Spicer told reporters during his daily briefing.

The development has increased partisan tension over the neutrality of the House panel's Russia investigation amid concerns about Republican chairman Rep. Devin Nunes' independence from the White House. In a statement Tuesday, the committee's ranking Democrat, Rep. Adam Schiff, urged "that the open hearing be rescheduled without further delay and that Ms. Yates be permitted to testify freely and openly."

In a letter to White House counsel dated Friday, Yates' lawyer said she intended to testify at the hearing despite Trump administration concerns that the information she shared could be covered by executive privilege. The lawyer, David O'Neil, wrote that there may not be a reason for Yates to withhold information related to former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn's contacts with Russia because top Trump administration officials have already discussed the situation publicly.

In a separate letter to O'Neil dated the same day, Associate Deputy Attorney General Scott Schools wrote that Yates' testimony is "likely covered by the presidential communications privilege and possibly the deliberative process privilege." He added, though, that Yates did not need the Justice Department's consent to testify, only the consent of the White House.

O'Neil's letter to the White House said Yates would still plan to testify if he did not hear from the White House by Monday morning that it was asserting executive privilege. Spicer said the White House never told Yates or her lawyer that it was invoking executive privilege.

Nunes, the California congressman, canceled the Russia hearing on Friday. It was originally set for Tuesday. Both Nunes and Spicer denied that the White House had any influence on the decision to cancel.

Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates speaks during a press conference to announce

environmental and consumer relief in the Volkswagen litigation at the Department of Justice in Washington, DC, June 28, 2016. Trump AG nominee Sessions once asked Yates if she should say 'no' to the president

Yates in January warned the White House that Flynn could be vulnerable to blackmail after he made incorrect statements about his contacts with Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to the United States. Flynn resigned in February, which the White House said was due to the contradictory statements he made to Vice President Mike Pence.

President Donald Trump fired Yates after she told Justice Department lawyers not to defend Trump's first executive order restricting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Democrats have criticized the neutrality of the House committee's investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible ties between the Trump campaign and Moscow due to Nunes' recent actions.

Schiff of California called on Monday for Nunes to recuse himself from "any investigation" into Trump's campaign and transition team. Nunes admitted that he met with an unidentified source on the White House grounds to review intelligence reports ahead of his claim that Trump transition members' communications were "incidentally" swept up by U.S. intelligence officials.

He faces criticism for not telling Schiff about the White House visit.

On Friday, Nunes' spokesman told MSNBC that the White House "had no input" in his decision to cancel the hearing with Yates.

Kaynak/Source: