

## White House aides struggle to defend Trump wiretap claims

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March 6

washingtonpost.com

The White House on Monday attempted to defend President Trump's unfounded claim that former president Barack Obama wiretapped Trump Tower near the end of the presidential campaign, sending out several administration officials — both on and off camera — to reiterate the assertion without providing supporting evidence.

In tweets over the weekend, Trump claimed he had “just learned” that Obama wiretapped his midtown Manhattan skyscraper, where he lives and which housed his presidential campaign — accusing the former president of a potentially illegal act and writing that Obama was a “bad (or sick) guy.”

Trump has since provided no proof to back up his assertion, which has been rebuffed by Obama, FBI Director James B. Comey and former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. On Monday, senior administration officials contorted themselves trying to defend the president's claims, which seemed to emanate largely in response to a rant on conservative talk radio and in an article on Breitbart News, the conservative website that Stephen K. Bannon, Trump's chief strategist, formerly led.

Speaking to reporters from the White House briefing room without cameras present, White House press secretary Sean Spicer referred reporters to his weekend statement calling on the House and Senate intelligence committees to investigate the wiretapping charges as part of their broader probe of alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. He refused to add clarity or context to Trump's Twitter missives, saying neither the president nor the White House would comment further until the congressional investigations are completed.

“I'm just going to let the tweet speak for itself,” Spicer said. “I think the president speaks very candidly.”

Spicer, citing news reports, said there was sufficient evidence to warrant further investigation at the congressional level.

“I think that there's no question that something happened. The question is, is it surveillance, is it a wiretap or whatever?” Spicer said. “But there's been enough reporting that strongly suggests that something occurred.”

Asked whether he could unequivocally say that Trump's tweet was based on more than a talk radio report and the Breitbart article, Spicer declined, again referring to his calls for the intelligence panels to take the lead.

Asked about the specific sourcing behind the president's tweets, Spicer said there were several options: “It could be FISA, it could be surveillance,” he said, referring to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, under which a secret court can issue warrants for electronic surveillance on potential spies or terrorists. If there was a FISA wiretap of Trump during the campaign, it would mean that the court had found there was probable cause to believe he was acting as an “agent of a foreign power,” as the law requires.

In perhaps the clearest sign of the uncomfortable situation the president's tweets created for his aides, the normally media-hungry White House went largely dark Monday. Although several top officials did defend Trump in TV interviews, Spicer did not allow cameras into the briefing room for his news conference Monday, and Trump signed an executive order for his revamped travel ban in private.

Speaking on NBC's “Meet the Press” on Sunday, Clapper did provide the White House with a bit of cover, saying there was “no evidence” of collusion between Trump and Russia during the campaign. But he also undercut the president's assertion that Obama had wiretapped him, saying, “There was no such wiretap activity mounted against the president-elect at the time as a candidate or against his campaign.”

Spicer urged reporters to note Clapper's comments about an apparent lack of collusion, but gave less weight to his remarks rebutting Trump's claims of wiretapping. Asked about the difference, Spicer said, “He said that he wasn't aware of anything. I take him at his word that he wasn't aware, but that doesn't mean that it didn't exist.”

This reverse-engineering of evidence has happened before, as when the president declared erroneously that his inauguration crowd was the largest in history and when he claimed without evidence that at least 3 million undocumented immigrants illegally voted for Hillary Clinton in the general election.

The public face of this latest effort has mostly been deputy press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who was dispatched to a Sunday news show — even though Spicer and chief of staff Reince Priebus usually take that task — and to two Monday morning talk shows.

Huckabee Sanders admitted that she had not discussed the matter with the president, and she lacked answers to questions. When asked Monday by ABC News's George Stephanopoulos whether the president accepted that Comey had refuted his tweets, she responded: "You know, I don't think he does."

Like Spicer, Huckabee Sanders claimed Trump's accusations are supported by news media reports, even though a list of such articles provided by the White House contained no such evidence. She also attempted to recast the president's words with a softer tone.

"Look, the president firmly believes that the Obama administration may have tapped into the phones at Trump Tower," Huckabee Sanders said on NBC's "Today" show on Monday. "This is something that we should look into. We'd like to know for sure."

Huckabee Sanders repeatedly urged that the news media and others give the president the same benefit of the doubt that they seemed to be giving to those accusing the Trump campaign of coordinating with the Russian government.

"Look," she said on the "Today" show, "I haven't had the chance to have the conversation directly with the president, and he's at a much higher classification than I am, so he may have access to documents that I don't know about, but I do know that we take this very seriously."

White House counselor Kellyanne Conway followed a similar script Monday on Fox News's "Fox & Friends," saying there have been numerous media reports that there was "politically motivated activity all during the campaign and suggesting that there may be more there."

"He's the president of the United States," Conway said. "He has information and intelligence that the rest of us do not. And that's the way it should be for presidents."

At times, it seemed that even West Wing officials had not coordinated their responses with one another. Asked about Conway's comment Monday, Spicer said he hadn't talked with her about what she meant.

"I can't specifically respond to you in terms of what she was referring to, whether she was referring to the exact nature of this charge or whether generally speaking he is given information," Spicer said.

Ultimately, the White House all but stated that the best person to explain or defend the president's claims was the president himself. Asked by a reporter how it was appropriate for Trump to make an explosive statement and then send out his aides to "clean it up," Spicer again referred back to Trump's social media feed.

"The president's tweets," he said, "speak for themselves."

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