

White House under siege as scandal follows scandal – and it won't end any time soon

Written by Kumuda Simpson, Lecturer in International Relations, La Trobe University



The White House appears to be in disarray amid outrage at reports that Donald Trump shared sensitive information with Russia. Reuters/Kevin Lamarque

The White House appears to be in disarray after [The Washington Post](#) alleged that President Donald Trump revealed highly classified intelligence about Islamic State to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russia's ambassador to the US, Sergey Kislyak.

And then, the next day, The New York Times reported [new allegations](#) that Trump asked James Comey, whom he later sacked as director of the FBI, to close the investigation into contacts between the president's then national security adviser, Mike Flynn, and Russia.

But, first, the Russian problem. The Post article asserted that current and former intelligence officials claimed that passing on the information compromised its source. The intelligence reportedly [came from Israel](#), a close ally of the US with access to Islamic State. It was sensitive enough that it hadn't been shared with other close allies and was codeword-protected.

Several other publications quickly picked up the story. [Reuters](#) provided more detail, including that the information related to potential terrorist threats involving laptops aboard aeroplanes.

It also reported that, in response to the "spontaneous" sharing of the sensitive intelligence, administration officials immediately contacted the CIA and NSA in damage control, fearing that Trump's actions could place Israel's source in danger.

In stark contrast to the often chaotic and contradictory handling of previous scandals, the White House was initially [very careful](#) in how it worded its responses. National Security Advisor General H. R. McMaster said that "[at no time were sources or methods discussed](#)".

As the national security blog Lawfare has pointed out, McMaster's statement [did not deny](#) that

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sensitive intelligence was shared, nor did it deny that Russia could use the information to discern both the source and the methods used to collect that intelligence.

[Trump took to Twitter](#) claiming he had every right to share the intelligence, and thus confirming the story.

Why it matters

This latest crisis to hit the White House comes on the heels of the [firing of Comey](#), who was overseeing an FBI investigation into the relationship between the Trump campaign and Russian interference in the US election.

It also follows questions about the potential breaching of security protocols when the White House allowed a member of the Russian press into the meeting with the Russian foreign minister and ambassador.

The optics of this are not good for Trump's credibility or [his claims that the Russia story is false](#). The latest allegations about Trump attempting to influence Comey on the Mike Flynn investigations make matters worse.

While there is a lot of outrage right now in response to what Trump did in his meeting with Lavrov, technically he didn't break the law. The US president has the authority to share intelligence as he or she sees fit. Yet the fallout from this decision is likely to be significant and potentially detrimental to US national security interests.

Many analysts have been concerned about the impact Trump's indiscretions could have on his relationships with allies. Indeed, [I've made this argument before](#), pointing out that the ability to trust Trump's integrity will determine what allies feel they can say, [and share](#), with him.

The original Washington Post article made exactly this point. It stated that Trump's [disclosure](#)

[risked damaging](#)

the intelligence-sharing relationship the US had with the source of the information, and could jeopardise the safety of that country's own sources and methods of intelligence-gathering.

This would [appear to be confirmed](#), with BuzzFeed reporting that sources within the Israeli defence and military establishment are cautioning their government not to share sensitive information with the White House.

This will likely be on some leaders' minds as the president prepares to visit the Middle East to meet leaders from Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

What it reveals about the president

As [Lawfare pointed out](#), there is another question that needs clarification – why did Trump do it?

[The New York Times reports](#) that Trump was boasting about the intelligence, an assertion that certainly doesn't appear out of place with Trump's previous [indis](#)
[criminate handling](#)
of classified information.

If this is indeed what motivated him, and the conversation was spontaneous bragging, then serious consideration needs to be given to whether Trump's incapacity to understand the implications of such behaviour render him unfit to be president.

Trump tweeted that he shared the intelligence with the aim of convincing the Russians that they have a shared interest with the US in fighting Islamic State. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [has suggested](#) there was a broad conversation about common terrorist threats from IS that both Russia and the US faced.

The desire to convince the Russians to do more in the fight against IS makes sense, but sharing

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highly sensitive information in the process suggests that Trump's strategy is woefully inept. It also reveals a disturbing lack of understanding about Russia's role in Syria.

While it supports the Assad regime even in the face of [ongoing atrocities](#), Russian President Vladimir Putin's overriding goal in Syria is to keep Assad in power. There is some evidence that, for now, [Islamic State remains useful](#) in achieving that goal. Russia has also focused much of its [military firepower](#) on anti-Assad forces while largely ignoring Islamic State.

It is likely that this story will only become more complicated and potentially compromising for Trump. It further justifies concerns about the decision to fire Comey, the investigation into Russian links with Trump associates and interference in the US election. Then there is the broader question of the competence of Trump and his staff.

It reinforces the concerns allies should have about the trustworthiness and stability of the Trump White House. Given all of that, this crisis is likely to deepen in the days to come.

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