



Trump says FBI is 'unable' to stop national security leaks

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February 24, 2017

President Donald Trump took to Twitter on Friday morning to say he is not winning the fight against the national security "leakers" from his administration or left over from the previous administration, who have already done significant damage to his presidency.

The most damaging leaks against the Trump White House were reports to media outlets citing "current and former U.S. officials" that Trump's former national security adviser, Mike Flynn had extensive contact with Russian counterparts and did not disclose those contacts to White House higher-ups, including the vice president. Those revelations led to Flynn's forced resignation on February 13.

On Friday, Trump stated that the FBI is "totally unable" to stop the individuals who have been leaking information against his government. "They can't even find the leakers within the FBI itself," he said. "FIND NOW."

Later in the day, in a speech at the Conservative Political Action Convention (CPAC), Trump took aim at the members of the media who have been reporting the leaks. Describing the outlets reporting the leaks as "fake news" and "enemies of the people," Trump continued that the national security leaks would come to a halt if reporters just published the names of their sources.

"I'm against the people that make up stories and make up sources," he said referring to what he called "fake news" stories that rely on anonymous sources. "They shouldn't be allowed to use sources unless they use somebody's name. Let their name be put out there," Trump said. "You will see stories dry up like you've never seen before."

Trump has already authorized an investigation into the White House leaks, but it is not likely to happen very quickly, according to Cato Institute homeland security and civil liberties analyst, Patrick Eddington.

"Leak investigations of this nature have been conducted obviously multiple times in the past. My guess is, given the potential number of suspects they would have to look at, it may well take the FBI some time to determine [the source of the leaks]," Eddington said.

A lot of the investigation will depend on how the information was passed from U.S. government sources to reporters. After the 2013 revelations of the scope of NSA surveillance by former intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, both journalists and their sources have adopted more secure and sophisticated means to communicate without leaving a trace. This includes apps that allow for fully encrypted communications, encrypted emails, burn phones, and other tools that can allow two people to communicate without producing traceable metadata.

"If the communications of the sources in question were encrypted and there's no easily definable metadata that can be used to guide them back to it, it may be very difficult for the FBI the necessarily track down folks," Eddington explained. "To a degree, it's going to come down to how good was the communications security of the reporters and their sources."

The punishment for anyone caught leaking classified government information will be incredibly serious, if they are prosecuted under the U.S. code dealing with the disclosure of classified information, or the Espionage Act, or face harsh charges under the Military Code of Justice.

"Whenever we talk about this kind of thing, we are talking about potentially real jail time," Eddington said.

Trump has complained bitterly about the press gaining access to leaked transcripts of his calls with foreign leaders, including Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, and Russian President Vladimir Putin. He warned that these kinds of leaks could potentially undermine U.S. foreign relations and even national security if they occur in a different context.

"What happens when I'm dealing with the problem of North Korea? What happens when I'm dealing with the problems in the Middle East? Are you folks going to be reporting all of that very, very confidential information?" Trump asked members of the media during his first solo press conference last week.

Nathan Wilson is the CEO of a consulting firm and Air Force veteran who coordinated with federal law enforcement as an incident investigator. He stated firmly, "We've got a problem with what's going on with the FBI not being able to find the leaks."

Wilson also commented on the magnitude of the task the FBI is facing given the possible wide dissemination of the information within the intelligence agencies spanning both the Trump and Obama administrations, and even beyond intelligence officials to second and third parties. "They need the ability of other agencies to work in conjunction, and I think we are going to see that pulled together."

When the perpetrators are found, Wilson believes they should face heavy penalties for their actions. "If you don't send a message and you don't take accountability for your actions, people will continue to do these things," he said, not taking any form of punishment off the table.

One final element makes the Trump administration's leak problem even more challenging and potentially far-reaching. In the final days of Obama's presidency, he signed an executive order that allowed the NSA to share raw signals intelligence with all of the other 16 intelligence agencies. That means personal communications from phone calls to emails and satellite communications can now be analyzed by the vast network of intelligence analysts in each agency.

That broad base of individuals who could potentially have access to communications from Trump administration officials or campaign staff greatly complicates the challenge of finding the leakers, a needle in a haystack.