



Donald Trump confirms Star story on his secret bombshell remarks about Canada

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August 31, 2018

WASHINGTON—High-stakes trade negotiations between Canada and the U.S. were dramatically upended on Friday morning after inflammatory secret remarks by President Donald Trump were obtained by the Toronto Star.

Trump's comments were viewed by Canadian negotiators as evidence for their suspicions that the U.S. was not making a legitimate effort to compromise. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's officials confronted the president's officials with the leaked quotes at a high-level meeting on Friday morning.

Trump's words caused a U.S. media firestorm. By the end of the day, Trump had confirmed the accuracy of the Star's report, said he was fine with the leak because now Canada knows his true feelings and also complained at length that the leak was a breach of his trust.

Canada and the U.S. were not able to reach a deal by Trump's informal deadline of Friday. The talks were scheduled to resume on Wednesday.

Trump made his controversial statements in an Oval Office interview with Bloomberg News on Thursday. He said, "off the record," that he is not making any compromises at all with Canada — and that he could not say this publicly because "it's going to be so insulting they're not going to be able to make a deal."

"Here's the problem. If I say no — the answer's no. If I say no, then you're going to put that and it's going to be so insulting they're not going to be able to make a deal ... I can't kill these people," Trump said of the Canadian government.

In another remark he did not want published, Trump said that any deal with Canada would be "totally on our terms." He suggested he was scaring the Canadians into submission by repeatedly threatening to impose tariffs on imports of Canadian-made cars.

"Off the record, Canada's working their ass off. And every time we have a problem with a point, I just put up a picture of a Chevrolet Impala," Trump said. The Impala is produced at the General Motors plant in Oshawa, Ont.

Bloomberg agreed to Trump's request to keep the comments off the record. But the Star, which obtained the quotes from a source, is not bound by any promises Bloomberg made to the president, and it published the quotes after they became part of the critical negotiations.

Trump corroborated the quotes in an afternoon tweet.

“Wow, I made OFF THE RECORD COMMENTS to Bloomberg concerning Canada, and this powerful understanding was BLATANTLY VIOLATED. Oh well, just more dishonest reporting. I am used to it. At least Canada knows where I stand!” he said.

In a speech in Charlotte later, Trump said: “These are very dishonourable people. But I said, in the end it’s OK, because at least Canada knows how I feel. So it’s fine. It’s fine. It’s true.”

Trudeau, who was in Oshawa as the drama unfolded, said, “We will only sign a deal if it is a good deal for Canada.” Trudeau and Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland maintained their practice of refusing to respond directly to Trump’s regular incendiary statements.

“Over the past year and a half, there’s a lot of things that have been said from time to time,” Trudeau said. “I think people have noticed that our government’s approach is always to stay constructive, positive, to engage on the substance of issues, and to demonstrate that we understand that the path forward is one of making sure that there’s a win-win-win on all sides.”

Trade experts said it was unclear how the disclosure of the quotes would affect the talks.

“I suspect that the negotiators on both sides are mostly focusing on the issues, not the rhetoric. Of course, as part of their own strategy, they each might bring up Trump’s comments. All of this is uncharted territory in trade negotiations, though, so nothing would surprise me,” said Simon Lester, associate director of trade policy at the Cato Institute.

Eric Miller, president of a U.S.-Canada consultancy, said the disclosure “will reverberate in the background of the NAFTA talks for the remainder of the negotiations.”

“For Canada, it will enhance the scrutiny the government will face about any outcome,” Miller said. But it is also “damaging” to the U.S., he said, because it appears to reveal their strategy, “and when it comes to the end, if each party is saying that it’s a good deal that’s a much easier sell in every country than if some parties are facing persistent questions about whether they were rolled.”