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Decoding the Wiretapping Claims

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Donald Trump's political career is built on a lie about Barack Obama.

That's the first thing to remember when trying to divine the meaning of Trump's accusation that he was wiretapped on Obama's orders: Trump tells a lot of lies. It's possible that the wiretapping claims are the latest in the pattern, as unconnected from reality as the claim that Obama was born in Africa.

But that scenario is not the only one worth considering. It's also plausible that Trump's accusation is an untruth built on some truths. Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute, writing for the website Just Security, published a useful summary of the situation this weekend.

As Sanchez explains, Trump appears to be basing his claims on a story in Breitbart that inaccurately summarized reporting from Louise Mensch of Heat Street, from the BBC and from The Guardian. Those other accounts reported that "the FBI sought an order from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court authorizing them to monitor transactions between two Russian banks and four persons connected with the Trump campaign," Sanchez wrote.

If this is true (and there are skeptics), it suggests the F.B.I. was either investigating Trump's associates or — less explosively — was monitoring the Russian banks and happened to pull in Trump's associates. Even if they weren't the targets of the investigation, of course, any communications between Trump campaign officials and the banks raise serious questions, given the Trump camp's denials about communicating with Russians during the campaign.

No matter what the truth is, the weekend's developments are yet more reason for a truly independent inquiry.

The most likely explanation for Trump's tweetstorm is that he's trying to deflect attention from his Russia problems. But if Trump wants the inquiry to assess whether there was any wrongdoing by federal investigators as well, that's fine. The crucial step now is an inquiry that isn't controlled by the Trump administration or Republican leaders in Congress. It needs to be independent and bipartisan.

Be sure to read my colleagues' scoop on this story — and James B. Comey's extraordinary rebuke of the president — if you haven't yet.