

Slotkin, Former Intelligence Briefer, Presses White House on Russia Reports

The experience of Representative Elissa Slotkin as an intelligence official told her there was something very unusual in the way the White House handled disturbing reports on Russia.



By Emily Cochrane

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WASHINGTON — From the moment President Trump publicly denied knowledge of intelligence that suggested that Russia had offered bounties for killing American troops in Afghanistan, something seemed off to Representative Elissa Slotkin, Democrat of Michigan.

Ms. Slotkin, a former White House national security aide and intelligence briefer whose tasks included ensuring that previous presidents were made aware of such potentially momentous reports, began calling around to some of her former colleagues from the George W. Bush administration. Check me on this, she said. What would we have done?

The answer was clear, Ms. Slotkin said in an interview. They would have alerted superiors to make sure the president learned of the assessment.

“If I had been at the National Security Council under either Bush or Obama, and this had come in, I would have slapped a cover note on top of it, sent it up the chain to the national security adviser and said, ‘Sir, I want to flag this,’” Ms. Slotkin said. “‘There’s some conflicting views. But it’s important — I think we should flag it for the president ahead of his calls.’”

The emergence of the disturbing reports and Mr. Trump’s responses — a combination of denial, claims of ignorance and attacks on leakers and the news media — have raised broader questions about how the president and his White House handle intelligence matters. And based on her personal experience, Ms. Slotkin has taken a lead role in demanding answers.

Ms. Slotkin, 43, is a first-term member of the House, where she is one of a tight-knit circle of moderate female lawmakers with deep experience on national security and was part of a small group of Democrats who went to the White House this week to be briefed about the Russian bounties.

More than a decade ago she was a young analyst at the C.I.A., where Ms. Slotkin described her role as being a “human sifter” of the most important intelligence information filtering in about Iraq.

After her team’s daily 6:15 a.m. briefing, she would comb through new intelligence and foreign media reports and State Department cables to see what needed further examination and what needed to reach Mr. Bush in the memo she wrote every night. At times during her intelligence career, she would personally provide briefings to Mr. Bush and other senior administration officials, alongside other senior intelligence officials.

So for Ms. Slotkin, the White House’s explanation for Mr. Trump’s ignorance of the intelligence — that it was too uncertain to share with the president — made no sense.

“When a piece of information like this comes in that, allegedly, the Russians are paying a bounty for the deaths of American soldiers, and I hear that his senior staff doesn’t take that information to him — even though he’s on the phone with Putin five times — it just, for me, fits into a bigger narrative about this president,” Ms. Slotkin said.

“It’s deeply concerning to me,” she added.

Since arriving in Washington last year, Ms. Slotkin, who served in Iraq as a C.I.A. analyst and in President Barack Obama’s Defense Department before running for Congress in 2018, has drawn heavily on her national security experience. She resisted the push to impeach Mr. Trump until an intelligence whistle-blower came forward to reveal that the president had tried to enlist a foreign power, Ukraine, to investigate his political rivals in a way that could affect a future election. During the inquiry that followed, Ms. Slotkin later told The New York Times, she identified personally with the national security officials who came forward to testify, drawing attacks from Mr. Trump.

Now she is reliving her own government experience once again as one of a large number of lawmakers in both parties who are demanding more information from the administration about its handling of the Russian intelligence.

“It’s been surprising how much I’ve toggled between my old life and my current life,” Ms. Slotkin said in an interview. “It sometimes pulls me in different directions.”

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This week, after all, was finally supposed to be infrastructure week in the House, a few months before her first attempt to win re-election in a district that Mr. Trump won by seven points. Ms. Slotkin had spent last week preparing to celebrate the pipeline-safety and water-quality projects she fought to include in the House’s sweeping, trillion-dollar infrastructure plan that passed on Wednesday.

But on Friday, as The Times reported that the administration had intelligence that indicated that Russia secretly offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants to kill American and allied troops, Ms. Slotkin found herself drawn back into her former life. She has spent hours explaining to colleagues the granular procedure of filtering intelligence information, and she pressured White House officials to explain what would have been unthinkable in a different administration — that the president could have been unaware of such an explosive assessment.

Democratic leaders have capitalized on Ms. Slotkin’s expertise, along with that of Representatives Abigail Spanberger of Virginia, a former C.I.A. operations officer, and Mikie Sherrill of New Jersey, a former Navy helicopter pilot, putting them out front as they raise questions about the intelligence and Mr. Trump’s handling of it. The three freshmen were chosen to accompany senior Democrats to a classified briefing at the White House on Tuesday.

Afterward, Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, the majority leader, made a point of singling out their expertise, noting at a news conference that “all of them have experience or particular responsibilities in the intel and national security sphere.”

“We can ask questions about the way things might be written or the way information might be caveated or what’s not being said,” Ms. Spanberger said. “It’s sort of a natural mode to go into and say, ‘I hear you talking about one element of this larger discussion, but I’m going to need more information.’”

For Ms. Slotkin, the visit was her first return to the White House for a briefing as a member of Congress.

“New carpets,” Ms. Slotkin observed afterward, adding that she recognized some personnel in the Situation Room. “New ways to secure your phone.”

But like her colleagues, she walked away with unanswered questions about how the intelligence was conveyed to the president and frustrated at the absence of the intelligence officials she knew would have been responsible for corroborating and conveying the reports.

Since the briefing, Ms. Slotkin has convened some of her colleagues to outline the typical trajectory for intelligence once it reaches the United States, as well as the significance of the escalation between the two countries.

Ms. Slotkin first gravitated toward national security work after the Sept. 11 attacks, eager to help prevent another assault on American security. The C.I.A. recruited her as a Middle East analyst, and she ultimately served three tours in Iraq.

In 2007, she moved to the National Security Council, where she specialized on Iraq under both Mr. Bush and Mr. Obama. During the Obama administration, she moved to the Pentagon, where she eventually became acting assistant secretary of defense. There, she managed diplomatic and defense relationships in Europe and the Middle East, directly confronting Russian military officials after Russian jets struck Syria in 2015 and negotiating directly with top Russian generals over the airspace in Syria.

In an interview, she recalled flying to Moscow and having intelligence exchanges before Russia invaded Ukraine, all while knowing they would not always be truthful.

“I don’t believe that the president’s policy reflects the very complicated relationship with the Russians,” she said.

Asked about the possibility that Mr. Trump had been informed of the intelligence about Russian bounties, which intelligence officials have said was included in his intelligence briefings as early as this February, Ms. Slotkin paused.

“I can only go by what he says and then what his senior staff says,” she said. “And to be honest, I don’t like thinking about the fact that he may have been aware of this.”

“I don’t want to think about a commander in chief who doesn’t have the back of U.S. forces,” she added, reflecting on her husband, a retired Army colonel, and her stepdaughter, an active-duty Army officer. “But if he knew, and just didn’t care, it might have been worse.”