

Trump Says He Did Not Ask Putin About Suspected Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops

Amid no new signs of investigative developments, the president also said for the first time that he would have acted had he known about an earlier C.I.A. assessment.



By Charlie Savage, Michael Crowley and Eric Schmitt

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WASHINGTON — President Trump said in an interview published Wednesday that he did not bring up intelligence that Russia had covertly offered bounties to kill American troops when he spoke with President Vladimir V. Putin last week — apparently his first opportunity to directly confront Mr. Putin about the C.I.A. assessment since its existence became public late last month.

“That was a phone call to discuss other things, and frankly, that’s an issue that many people said was fake news,” Mr. Trump said in an interview with “Axios on HBO.”

But Mr. Trump hinted for the first time at blaming subordinates for failing to bring the matter to his attention. “If it reached my desk, I would have done something about it,” he said. Officials have said the assessment was in his written intelligence brief in February, although he rarely reads it.

Mr. Trump’s mixed message renewed attention on the White House’s failure to authorize any response after the C.I.A. concluded that Russia had offered and paid bounties, which prompted a bipartisan uproar. His administration has downplayed the intelligence with the apparent expectation that the furor would blow over.

Despite public comments by top military officials in recent weeks suggesting that the Pentagon was hunting for more information, three senior U.S. military officials said that no single Pentagon agency or military command was conducting a dedicated investigation into the issue and that they were instead relying largely on the intelligence community.

A C.I.A. spokesman declined to comment. But intelligence officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss confidential operations and assessments, said that the intelligence community had not created any special task force to investigate the issue. Rather, they described the agency as sharpening the focus in areas of regular collection and analysis in hopes of gleaning additional evidence.

After the existence of the assessment became public, White House officials defended their months of inaction by falsely suggesting that no one credited the intelligence or deemed the C.I.A. assessment worthy of sharing with Mr. Trump. Since the disclosure, no new National Security Council interagency meetings on the topic have been scheduled, one official said, adding that officials who were alarmed about the bounties intelligence — and the lack of response — have essentially given up because the White House’s narrative has made it politically impossible to reverse course and treat the intelligence as a serious matter.

Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut and a member of the Armed Services Committee, called on Wednesday for public disclosure of the intelligence supporting the C.I.A.’s conclusion. “Americans deserve & need to see the intelligence on Russians providing arms & money to the Taliban — for killing American troops in Afghanistan,” he wrote on Twitter.

“Declassify it right now,” Mr. Blumenthal added, saying the assessment would “disprove Trump’s denials.”

In the Axios interview, Mr. Trump claimed he was not told about the bounty suspicions because intelligence officials purportedly did not think the information was real — apparently an exaggerated reference to a dissent by National Security Agency analysts over the C.I.A.’s confidence level.

“It never reached my desk,” Mr. Trump told Axios. “You know why? Because they didn’t think — intelligence — they didn’t think it was real. They didn’t think — they didn’t think it was worthy of — I wouldn’t mind — if it reached my desk, I would have done something about it.”

Mr. Trump did not elaborate. But speaking to reporters on the White House lawn after Axios published the interview excerpt, Mr. Trump also said that “if it were true, I’d be very angry about it,” and “I would respond appropriately. Nobody has been tougher on Russia than I have.” Still, he said, “I don’t know why they’d be doing this.”

Mr. Trump is said to rarely look at his daily written briefings, though he insisted to Axios that he did. Administration officials have emphasized to lawmakers that none of the aides who discuss intelligence with the president had orally drawn his attention to the matter.

The president also said in the interview that he often received oral briefings, meandering into a discussion of violence along the border between India and China before reiterating, “I have so many briefings on so many different countries, but this one didn’t reach my desk.”

The New York Times first reported in late June that the C.I.A. had assessed months ago that Russia had covertly offered and paid bounties to a network of Afghan militants and criminals to incentivize more frequent attacks on American and coalition troops, citing officials familiar with the matter. Many other news organizations confirmed that reporting.

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C.I.A. analysts placed medium confidence in that assessment, which they had reached based on analyzing evidence like the accounts of interrogated detainees in Afghanistan; money transfers from a bank account controlled by Russia’s military intelligence agency, known as the G.R.U., to a Taliban-linked network; and travel patterns such as evidence that a middleman suspected of handing out the cash was now in Russia, officials have said.

National Security Agency analysts had lower confidence in the intelligence because they placed greater emphasis on surveillance and wanted to see intercepts picking up explicit discussions among people who did not know they were being eavesdropped on, officials have said.

Current and former national security officials have said that there was rarely courtroom-level certainty in the murky world of intelligence, that disputes over confidence levels were routine, and that medium-confidence intelligence of this magnitude would have been briefed to the president in previous administrations. Indeed, they said, it was put in Mr. Trump’s written daily briefing in late February and distributed more broadly within the intelligence community in early May.

In his Axios interview, Mr. Trump claimed that former Bush administration officials who disliked him had called the bounty suspicions a “fake issue.” In his later remarks at the White House, Mr. Trump named Colin Powell, President George Bush’s national security adviser and then secretary of state under George W. Bush.

But Mr. Powell, who has been out of office for more than a decade, did not say that the intelligence was fake or untrue. Rather, in an interview with MSNBC on July 9, he criticized news media coverage as overhyping a complex issue.

The G.R.U.’s apparent use of bounties to drive up attacks on American service members amid peace talks with the Taliban was seen as an escalation of longstanding Russian assistance to the Taliban, including covert provisions of small arms.

The National Security Council convened an interagency meeting about the problem in late March, and then officials developed a list of potential responses, ranging from protesting to the Kremlin to a more serious punishment like imposing new sanctions. But months passed, and the administration did not authorize any of them.

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Now that the bounty suspicions are well-known, American intelligence officers are most likely sorting through many new leads, some legitimate but others from information peddlers eager to offer what they think the Americans want to hear, said Marc Polymeropoulos, a former C.I.A. field officer in Afghanistan who retired last year as the agency's acting chief of operations in Europe and Eurasia.

Mr. Trump has long taken pains to avoid personally criticizing Mr. Putin and even seemed intent on downplaying evidence of broader Russian military and financial support for the Taliban.

Asked about claims to that effect by Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., the former top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Mr. Trump dismissed the notion. "I didn't ask Nicholson about that," he said, before saying that the general "didn't have great success" in his command, which ended in 2018.

Mr. Trump also suggested to Axios that Russia's provision of arms to the Taliban was a kind of understandable payback for the United States backing fighters opposing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s.

"We supplied weapons when they were fighting Russia, too," Mr. Trump said.

Some senior congressional Democrats said they believed that top American officers who had spoken about the issue — like Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military's Central Command, and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — were taking it seriously. But the lawmakers said they had much less faith in Mr. Trump and many of his top civilian national security aides.

"I do not have confidence that the national security team writ large within the Trump administration is committed to getting to the bottom of this and dealing with it," said Representative Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat who heads the House Armed Services Committee.

Asked about the bounty reports by Senator Christopher S. Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, at a July 22 Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Stephen E. Biegun, the deputy secretary of state, cautioned that he had to avoid discussing classified information in public. But he insisted that administration officials would take action if there were even a suggestion that Russia was putting bounties on American service members.

"Any suggestion that the Russian Federation, or any part of the Russian government, is employed in providing resources to fighters from other countries to attack American soldiers will be met," he said, with "the most severe consequences."

Notably, Mr. Biegun added that any such "suggestion" would "be the subject of a conversation between very senior officials in both governments, in no uncertain terms."

Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin have stepped up their personal diplomacy since the conclusion in 2019 of the Russia investigation by the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III. At the same time, broader diplomatic relations between Washington and Moscow have remained adversarial, and intelligence officials accuse Russia of continued election interference and hacking plots.

Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin have spoken eight times this year, according to a Kremlin list of the Russian leader's diplomatic activity — twice as many times as they spoke in all of 2019.

Several of those calls involved Mr. Trump's efforts this spring to win Russian and Saudi support for higher global oil prices. But Mr. Trump has shown a keen interest in a new arms control treaty with Russia that would cap China's nuclear arsenal. Mr. Trump said their recent call was "to discuss nuclear nonproliferation," which he called "a much bigger issue than global warming."

During a conversation on June 1, Mr. Trump extended an invitation to Mr. Putin to join a gathering of Group of 7 leaders that Mr. Trump hoped to convene in September. Russia was expelled from what was then the Group of 8 after its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Leaders from other nations in the group have said that Moscow has not yet earned the official readmittance that Mr. Trump proposes.

Helene Cooper and Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting.