

## White House Dismisses Reports of Bounties, but Is Silent on Russia

Robert C. O'Brien, the national security adviser, told Fox News that President Trump knew nothing about the reports because the briefer "decided not to" share unverified intelligence with him.



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First President Trump denied knowing about it. Then he called it a possible "hoax." Next, the White House attacked the news media. And now an unnamed intelligence official is to blame.

The one thing Mr. Trump and his top officials have not done is to address the substance of intelligence reports that Russia paid bounties to Taliban-affiliated fighters to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan, or what they might do in response.

Nor has the White House — amid the denials, qualifications and accusations — publicly discussed what that intelligence could mean for Mr. Trump's efforts to thaw relations with Russia and court President Vladimir V. Putin despite Moscow's continued aggression toward the United States and its allies.

On Wednesday, Mr. Trump repeated his claim that he was "never briefed" about the intelligence, which his aides called unverified but which many U.S. intelligence officials deemed credible. Officials say it appeared in the president's daily written intelligence briefing in late February. Writing on Twitter, Mr. Trump called stories about the bounties "a made up Fake News Media Hoax started to slander me & the Republican Party."

His national security adviser, Robert C. O'Brien, said on Fox News that Mr. Trump's C.I.A. briefer, the person who delivers an in-person briefing to him every few days, had not brought it to his attention.

"The president was not briefed, because at the time of these allegations, they were uncorroborated," Mr. O'Brien said. "And as a result, the president's career C.I.A. briefer decided not to brief him."

The administration has not publicly acknowledged that the information was provided to Mr. Trump in his written briefing, and has not responded to questions about whether they were saying he simply chose not to read it.

But it would be unusual, if not unprecedented, for intelligence with grave implications to be withheld from the president on the grounds that it lacked definitive consensus. Former Obama administration officials have said that even the intelligence that formed the basis of the May 2011 raid in Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden was inconclusive and disputed among national security officials.

Mr. O'Brien did not name the C.I.A. briefer but said she was "an outstanding officer." He added, "I certainly support her decision."

The person who usually handles that job is Beth Sanner, a C.I.A. analyst with three decades of experience. Ms. Sanner is said to have a good relationship with Mr. Trump, but the White House has cited her briefings before when deflecting responsibility for a crisis.

In May, Mr. Trump conceded that he had been warned about the emerging coronavirus in a late January briefing, but said he was told "it was not a big deal." Intelligence officials have acknowledged that it was Ms. Sanner who provided that briefing and claimed that she underplayed the threat from the virus.

But in that case, there were many other warnings Mr. Trump ignored from both government officials and health experts, as well as former officials speaking publicly and reports in the news media.

Former officials say that unlike his predecessors, Mr. Trump often does not read the President's Daily Brief, the summary prepared for him by the intelligence agencies. And he registers only information relayed to him orally, a fact that administration officials acknowledged when meeting with lawmakers this week.

Even then, officials have said, Mr. Trump is often unfocused and easily distracted during his briefing. Ms. Sanner, who began briefing the president last year, has acquired a reputation for effectively presenting information to Mr. Trump in ways that engage him.

In his interview on Wednesday, Mr. O'Brien repeated White House assertions that intelligence officials lacked "consensus" about the bounties, which was based on intelligence that included intercepted electronic data showing large financial transfers from Russia's military intelligence agency to a Taliban-linked account.

Mr. O'Brien said that public disclosure of the matter by leakers would make it more difficult to "get to the bottom" of the reports. He added that the C.I.A. had filed a criminal report with the Department of Justice.

Mr. Trump responded vaguely when asked in an interview on Wednesday with the Fox Business Network about how he would respond if Russia were proven to have put bounties on U.S. troops.

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"The Russians would hear about it, and anybody else would hear about it that was involved," he said, insisting that he would always protect the military.

Mr. O'Brien told reporters that the National Security Council had drawn up undisclosed options for a potential response. He was among several senior Trump officials at a White House briefing on Tuesday for House Democrats, which lawmakers complained was hampered by the absence of any intelligence professionals who could walk them through the nuances of the competing strands of intelligence.

"They just wanted to make sure that we knew that the president didn't know anything," said Representative Adam Smith, Democrat of Washington and the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who attended the meeting. "I cannot recall under Bush, Obama, Clinton, them wanting to come out and say, 'Look, the president didn't know anything.'"

Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, did most of the talking in the nearly two-hour session. But Mr. Meadows, a former North Carolina congressman, did not seem to understand the nuances of intelligence and so could not clearly explain some of the more complicated issues that lawmakers raised, according to people briefed on the meeting.

The director of national intelligence, John Ratcliffe, repeatedly told lawmakers the events in question happened well before he took over his post in late May from the former acting director, Richard Grenell.

The lawmakers, including Representative Abigail Spanberger of Virginia, a former C.I.A. officer, pushed back and asked why, after the assessment was included in the President's Daily Brief in late February, Mr. Trump was not given a heads-up before any of the five or six phone calls he subsequently had with Mr. Putin, including one call in which Mr. Trump invited the Russian leader to a Group of 7 meeting.

Sticking to talking points, White House officials acknowledged that the C.I.A. had concluded that a Russian bounty plot existed, but did not explain in detail the supporting evidence behind the assessment.

That evidence, The Times has reported, included detainee interrogations, the recovery of about \$500,000 from a Taliban-related target and intercepts of electronic communications showing financial transfers between the Russian military intelligence unit and Afghan intermediaries.

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Instead, the White House officials focused on skepticism from the National Security Agency, which assessed that it did not have information to corroborate the C.I.A.'s conclusion.

But the House Democrats were not briefed in detail on the intercepts of the electronic communications showing the financial transfers, which other U.S. officials say have reconciled many of the differences between the C.I.A. and National Security Agency assessments. They received no explanation for why the material was not addressed.

A member of Congress familiar with the intelligence file said that it did not address when or how Mr. Trump was briefed on the material. Nor did it detail any connection to specific U.S. or coalition deaths in Afghanistan. The lawmaker said that gaps remained in the intelligence community's understanding of the overall program, including its precise motive, which officials have speculated could range from revenge to forcing the United States out of Afghanistan more quickly.

At the White House briefings, there was some discussion about whether Iran might have paid bounties to the Haqqani network to target U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Those reports appear to have surfaced after the killing of Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, who led the powerful Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, in a U.S. drone strike in early January at Baghdad's international airport. Iran had vowed to avenge General Suleimani's death.

While many Republicans rushed to defend Mr. Trump's handling of the matter, some called for more focus on Russia's threat to American interests.

"I'm interested in hearing the administration speak clearly about their plans that aren't just hypothetical sanctions sometime out in the future," said Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska.

Senator Tammy Duckworth, Democrat of Illinois, said a briefing for Senate Armed Services Committee members had little value because the Pentagon had sent officials who lacked detailed knowledge. For example, she said, the briefers had not even seen all of the documents in the intelligence file, which senators had separately been able to read, and did not know whether any casualties in Afghanistan were now being studied as possible bounty killings.

The Times has reported that investigators are said to be focused on at least two attacks on American troops in Afghanistan, including one bombing and a firefight in April 2019 near Bagram Air Base that killed three Marines.

"It really didn't answer the questions we had," Ms. Duckworth said.

With lawmakers in both parties asking for more information, Gina Haspel, the C.I.A. director, and Gen. Paul M. Nakasone, the head of the National Security Agency, along with Mr. Ratcliffe, were scheduled to deliver on Thursday the highest-level briefing yet about the American intelligence to a select group of bipartisan House and Senate leaders, known as the Gang of Eight.

Asked on Wednesday about the Russian bounties, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said U.S. intelligence officials "handled this incredibly well" to minimize risk to American troops in Afghanistan. He also said that it would be "nothing new" if Russia undermined American in Afghanistan, noting that the Taliban had long received funding from foreign nations, including Russia and Iran.

Mr. Pompeo refused to directly address whether Mr. Trump should have been told about intelligence indicating the Russian bounty offers.

During a visit to Arizona on Wednesday, Vice President Mike Pence demurred when asked about the matter. "I was never briefed about that matter," he said, "and I'm not going to discuss classified materials."

Nicholas Fandos, Adam Goldman, Lara Jakes and Charlie Savage contributed reporting.