

Re: Media inquiry 5.16

Christian J. Hilland

Tue 5/16/2017 12:56 PM

To: Colin Deppen <CDeppen@pennlive.com>; Press Office <press@fec.gov>;

2 attachments (38 KB)

Committees that reported a receipt from a Conservative Strikeforce PAC.xlsx; Disbursements to Strategic Campaign Group.xlsx;

Hi, Colin.

There appear to be two entities registered with the Commission in connection with the name Conservative Strikeforce.

The Conservative Strikeforce is registered as a traditional political action committee (PAC). This link will display its reported financial activity: <http://bit.ly/2qsmoVJ>.

Conservative Strikeforce Super PAC is registered as an independent expenditure-only political committee, more commonly referred to as a super PAC. This link will display its reported financial activity: <http://bit.ly/2pGOcbK>.

I've attached results of a database search for any receipts from Conservative Strikeforce, as reported by other political committees. No disbursements were reported by other political committees to Conservative Strikeforce. In addition, I've attached disbursements reported by other political committees to an entity named Strategic Campaign Group based in Virginia and in Washington, D.C. I would not know if this is the same organization as the one you referenced in your email.

Lastly, I've included a summary of a closed enforcement case involving The Conservative Strikeforce as a respondent. This particular case (MUR 6645) was combined with three other complaints filed against other respondents. You may access all documents involved in MUR 6645 through this link: <http://bit.ly/2pRkhtu>.

[MURs 6633, 6641, 6643 and 6645](#)

COMPLAINANTS: Allen West for Congress

RESPONDENTS: Republican Majority Campaign PAC and Randy G. Goodwin, in his official capacity as Officer and Gary Kreep in his official capacity as Officer; The Coalition of Americans for Political Equality PAC and Jeffrey Loyd, in his official capacity as Chairman; Nicholas Spears, in his official capacity as Secretary, and Margaret Berardinelli, in her official capacity as treasurer; Patriot Super PAC and Thomas Freiling, in his official capacity as treasurer, and Steve Elliott, in his official capacities as Advisory Committee Chair and Director; and The Conservative StrikeForce and Dennis Whitfield, in his official capacity as treasurer

SUBJECT: The complaints alleged that the respondents fraudulently misrepresented themselves as working on behalf of or in support of Allen West for Congress and fraudulently solicited contributions using West's name. West was a 2012 candidate for Florida's 18th Congressional District.

DISPOSITION: The Commission found no reason to believe that the respondents fraudulently solicited funds because: (1) the respondents were registered with the Commission and complied with Commission reporting requirements, including disclosure of expenditures and disbursements; and (2) the communications that they distributed included disclaimers required under the Act and Commission regulations, which were also sufficient to identify the entity that paid for the communication.

I hope this helps.

Regards,

Christian Hilland
Deputy Press Officer
Federal Election Commission

From: Colin Deppen <CDeppen@pennlive.com>

Sent: Tuesday, May 16, 2017 11:43 AM

To: Press Office

Subject: Media inquiry 5.16

Hello -

My name is Colin. I'm a reporter in Pennsylvania.

I'm following up on raid at Strategic Campaign Group's HQ in Annapolis.

I talked to our Republican senator, Pat Toomey, who said that while Conservative Strikeforce, an SGC associate, endorsed and raised money for him, he never saw a dime. He said the group also claimed a \$200 expense for email services performed for the campaign that they never provided.

I'm looking for whatever paper trail there may be detailing what Conservative Strikeforce raised for Toomey and how much it turned over, if possible, etc.

I was also interested in whether the group had raised money on behalf of any other Pennsylvania lawmakers in the state senate or elsewhere and hoped you could help guide me in tracking down this info.

I can be reached at this email address or by calling 814-389-8373.

Thank you for any response you can offer.

Best

Colin Deppen

Reporter

PennLive.com (Pittsburgh) / The Patriot News (Harrisburg)

CMTE_ID	CMTE_NM	RPT_YR	RPT_TP	CVG_END	FORM_TP
C0000130	REPUBLICAN PARTY OF VIRGINIA INC	2012	M10	20120930	F3X
C0000130	REPUBLICAN PARTY OF VIRGINIA INC	2012	30G	20121126	F3X
C0013065	AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE UNION	2010	Q2	20100630	F3X
C0027733	FAIRFAX COUNTY REPUBLICAN COMMITTEE (FEDERAL)	2008	12G	20081015	F3X
C0027733	FAIRFAX COUNTY REPUBLICAN COMMITTEE (FEDERAL)	2008	30G	20081124	F3X
C0027733	FAIRFAX COUNTY REPUBLICAN COMMITTEE (FEDERAL)	2008	30G	20081124	F3X
C0034332	BENNETT ELECTION COMMITTEE INC	2010	Q1	20100331	F3
C0034332	BENNETT ELECTION COMMITTEE INC	2010	12C	20100418	F3
C0034332	BENNETT ELECTION COMMITTEE INC	2010	12C	20100418	F3
C0034332	BENNETT ELECTION COMMITTEE INC	2010	Q2	20100630	F3
C0034332	BENNETT ELECTION COMMITTEE INC	2010	Q3	20100930	F3
C0037253	MICHAEL BURGESS FOR CONGRESS	2010	Q2	20100630	F3
C0037253	MICHAEL BURGESS FOR CONGRESS	2010	Q2	20100630	F3
C0037253	MICHAEL BURGESS FOR CONGRESS	2010	12G	20101013	F3
C0041064	SCHMIDT FOR CONGRESS COMMITTEE	2009	Q3	20090930	F3
C0041112	GARD FOR CONGRESS	2008	12P	20080820	F3
C0043224	HONEYCUTT FOR CONGRESS	2008	Q3	20080930	F3
C0043224	HONEYCUTT FOR CONGRESS	2008	Q3	20080930	F3
C0043224	HONEYCUTT FOR CONGRESS	2008	Q3	20080930	F3
C0044011	STEVE AUSTRIA FOR CONGRESS	2008	30G	20081124	F3
C0044011	STEVE AUSTRIA FOR CONGRESS	2008	30G	20081124	F3
C0044011	STEVE AUSTRIA FOR CONGRESS	2008	30G	20081124	F3
C0044011	STEVE AUSTRIA FOR CONGRESS	2008	30G	20081124	F3
C0044184	FAULK FOR CONGRESS	2010	30G	20101122	F3
C0045100	RICHARD HANNA FOR CONGRESS COMMITTEE	2010	12G	20101013	F3
C0045100	RICHARD HANNA FOR CONGRESS COMMITTEE	2010	30G	20101122	F3
C0045100	RICHARD HANNA FOR CONGRESS COMMITTEE	2010	YE	20101231	F3
C0045729	ACU-STRIKEFORCE POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE	2010	Q1	20100331	F3X
C0045729	ACU-STRIKEFORCE POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE	2010	Q1	20100331	F3X
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C0045729	ACU-STRIKEFORCE POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE	2010	YE	20101231	F3X
C0045729	THE CONSERVATIVE STRIKEFORCE	2011	30S	20110613	F3X
C0045729	THE CONSERVATIVE STRIKEFORCE	2011	30S	20110613	F3X
C0045729	THE CONSERVATIVE STRIKEFORCE	2011	Q2	20110630	F3X
C0045729	THE CONSERVATIVE STRIKEFORCE	2011	Q2	20110630	F3X
C0045729	THE CONSERVATIVE STRIKEFORCE	2011	YE	20111231	F3X

C0045831! MORAN FOR KANSAS	2009 Q2	20090630 F3
C0045831! MORAN FOR KANSAS	2010 Q1	20100331 F3
C0045831! MORAN FOR KANSAS	2010 Q2	20100630 F3
C0045887 KINZINGER FOR CONGRESS	2009 YE	20091231 F3
C0045887 KINZINGER FOR CONGRESS	2010 12P	20100113 F3
C0045887 KINZINGER FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q1	20100331 F3
C0045887 KINZINGER FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q3	20100930 F3
C0045887 KINZINGER FOR CONGRESS	2010 30G	20101122 F3
C0045989: PEG LUKSIK FOR SENATE	2010 Q1	20100331 F3
C0045989: PEG LUKSIK FOR SENATE	2010 Q1	20100331 F3
C0045989: PEG LUKSIK FOR SENATE	2010 Q1	20100331 F3
C0046004! WILLIAM RUSSELL FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q1	20100331 F3
C0046004! WILLIAM RUSSELL FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q1	20100331 F3
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C0046004! WILLIAM RUSSELL FOR CONGRESS	2011 Q1	20110331 F3
C0046004! WILLIAM RUSSELL FOR CONGRESS	2011 Q1	20110331 F3
C0046230! RUTH MCCLUNG FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q2	20100630 F3
C0046230! RUTH MCCLUNG FOR CONGRESS	2010 12P	20100804 F3
C0046230! RUTH MCCLUNG FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q3	20100930 F3
C0046230! RUTH MCCLUNG FOR CONGRESS	2010 30G	20101122 F3
C0046230! RUTH MCCLUNG FOR CONGRESS	2010 30G	20101122 F3
C0046596: TARKANIAN FOR SENATE	2010 Q2	20100630 F3
C0046721 TIM D'ANNUNZIO FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q2	20100630 F3
C0046721 TIM D'ANNUNZIO FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q2	20100630 F3
C0046836: TONY BUNTYN FOR CONGRESS COMMITTEE	2010 Q3	20100930 F3
C0047724! MORGAN GRIFFITH FOR CONGRESS	2010 Q2	20100630 F3
C0047724! MORGAN GRIFFITH FOR CONGRESS	2012 Q3	20120930 F3
C0049361! JACK DAVIS FOR CONGRESS	2011 30S	20110613 F3
C0049391! FRIENDS OF DAVID BELLAVIA	2011 Q1	20110331 F3
C0049391! FRIENDS OF DAVID BELLAVIA	2011 Q2	20110630 F3
C0050095! FRIENDS OF CHERILYN EAGAR	2011 YE	20111231 F3
C0050095! FRIENDS OF CHERILYN EAGAR	2012 Q2	20120630 F3
C0050095! FRIENDS OF CHERILYN EAGAR	2012 Q2	20120630 F3
C0050095! FRIENDS OF CHERILYN EAGAR	2012 Q2	20120630 F3
C0050095! FRIENDS OF CHERILYN EAGAR	2012 Q2	20120630 F3
C0050163! PALOMBO FOR CONGRESS COMMITTEE	2012 Q2	20120630 F3
C0051316! SAM VS THE MACHINE	2012 Q2	20120630 F3X
C0051316! SAM VS THE MACHINE	2012 Q2	20120630 F3X
C0052445! CONSERVATIVE MAJORITY FUND	2012 YE	20121231 F3X

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C0052445: CONSERVATIVE MAJORITY FUND	2013 YE	20131231 F3X
C0054243: JOHN BOLTON PAC	2013 YE	20131231 F3X

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4600 NORTH FAIRFAX DRIVE	SUITE 802 ARLINGTO VA	22203
4600 NORTH FAIRFAX DRIVE	SUITE 802 ARLINGTO VA	22203
4600 NORTH FAIRFAX DRIVE	SUITE 802 ARLINGTO VA	22203
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800 WEST AVE #645	MIAMI FL	33139
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4600 NORTH FAIRFAX DRIVE	STE 802 ARLINGTO VA	22203
4600 NORTH FAIRFAX DRIVE	STE 802 ARLINGTO VA	22203
4600 NORTH FAIRFAX DRIVE	SUITE 802 ARLINGTO VA	22203
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INC.	4600 N. FA #802	ARLINGTO VA	22203

TRANSACTION TRANSACTION PURPOSE MEMO_CI MEMO_TE TRANSACTION_PGI

#####	4492.84	VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT PHONE CALLS		
#####	2163.48	AUTOMATED PHONE CALLS		
#####	1250	INV. 202 MAILING CREATIVE FEE		
#####	15635	FUNDRAISING EXPENSE		
#####	9187	GOTV LITE PHONE CALLS		
#####	20500	GOTV LITE PHONE CALLS		
#####	2120	VOTER PHONE CALLS VOTER PHONE CALLS		
4/1/2010	6551	VOTER PHONE CALLS VOTER PHONE CALLS		
4/1/2010	2030	VOTER PHONE CALLS VOTER PHONE CALLS		
#####	6576.19	VOTER PHONE CALLS VOTER PHONE CALLS		
#####	3994.61	VOTER PHONE CALLS VOTER PHONE CALLS		
4/1/2010	2872.76	TELEPHONE SERVICE	G	
#####	2606.04	TELEPHONE SERVICE	G	
#####	3343.05	TELEPHONE SERVICE	G	
#####	560.71	ROBO-CALL		ROBO-CALL
	8/7/2008	993.85 #NAME?		#NAME?
#####	1000	SMALL BUSINESS PROGRAM	G	
#####	6767.27	SMALL BUSINESS PROGRAM	G	
#####	14497	SMALL BUSINESS PROGRAM	G	
#####	230.88	ROBOCALLS		ROBOCALLS
#####	208.13	ROBOCALLS		ROBOCALLS
#####	2523.71	ROBOCALLS		ROBOCALLS
#####	1283.53	ROBOCALLS		ROBOCALLS
#####	5500			
#####	275.42	AUTOMATED TELEPHONE MESS/G		
#####	943.26	AUTOMATED TELEPHONE CALLS	G	
#####	1517.32	AUTOMATED PHONE CALLS	G	
3/4/2010	5000	CONSULTII MGT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	5000	CONSULTII MGT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	2500	CONSULTII MGT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	5000	CONSULTII MGT & FUNDRAISING		
4/1/2010	2500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	1500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING		
4/8/2010	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & MANAGEMENT		
#####	3500	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & MANAGEMENT		
#####	2500	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & MANAGEMENT		
#####	2500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	10000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING		
#####	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT		
#####	1300	MANAGEMENT & FUNDRAISING SERVICES		
6/3/2011	2000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT		
#####	3500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT		
#####	850	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT		
7/6/2011	3500	CONSULTING - EXECUTIVE DIRECTION		

7/9/2011	8221.41	DIRECT M/ PRINTING & MAILSHOP
#####	3500	CONSULTING - EXECUTIVE DIRECTION
9/1/2011	3500	CONSULTING - EXECUTIVE DIRECTION
#####	9222.29	DIRECT M/ PRINTING & MAILSHOP
#####	3500	CONSULTING - EXECUTIVE DIRECTION
#####	3500	CONSULTING - EXECUTIVE DIRECTION
#####	30000	DIRECT M/ PRINTING & MAILSHOP
#####	25000	DIRECT M/ PRINTING & MAILSHOP
2/2/2012	5689.25	DIRECT MAIL PIECE
#####	3500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
2/9/2012	3500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
3/5/2012	3500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
4/5/2012	3500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
5/1/2012	3500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
6/2/2012	3500	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
#####	8879.12	DIRECT MAIL FUNDRAISING
#####	25000	CONSULTII FUNDRAISING & RESEARCH
6/6/2012	11000	SCOTT WALKER (WI) - INDEPENDS
#####	3500	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & FUNDRAISING
#####	3500	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & FUNDRAISING
8/6/2012	6977	IN-HOUSE FUNDRAISING MAILING
8/8/2012	3500	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & FUNDRAISING
#####	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & FUNDRAISING
#####	10196	TRAVEL & OFFICE EXPENSES
#####	8750	TELETOWN HALL
#####	10500	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & TELETOWN HALL
#####	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
#####	775	DIRECT MAIL - CREATIVE FEE
2/1/2013	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY
1/2/2013	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY
3/4/2013	4481.78	CONSULTING - STRATEGY
#####	1949.5	PRINTING FOR C-PAC EVENT
3/1/2013	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY
4/1/2013	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY
5/1/2013	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY
#####	5000	CONSULTING - STRATEGY
#####	7810.89	CONSULTING - STRATEGY & POSTAGE
8/1/2013	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
#####	18099.01	DIRECT MAIL - PRINTING & MAILSHOP
#####	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
#####	12000	DIRECT MAIL - PRINTING & MAILSHOP
#####	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
#####	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
#####	21000	DIRECT MAIL - PRINTING & MAILSHOP
#####	45000	DIRECT MAIL - PRINTING & MAILSHOP
#####	5000	CONSULTING - MANAGEMENT
#####	8000	DIRECT MAIL - PRINTING & MAILSHOP

	#####	3893 TELEPHONE TOWN HALL MEETING	
2/9/2010	6535	TELE-TOWN HALL EVENTS	P
5/5/2010	501.32	TELE-TOWN HALL EVENT	P
#####	3448.33	OTHER: TELE CONFERENCE	P
#####	3448.33	OTHER: TELE CONFERENCE	P
#####	3114.31	TELE CONFERENCE	
#####	2577.31	AUTOMATED CALLS	
#####	4277.23	CAMPAIGN STRATEGY CONSULTING	
#####	2500	CONSULTING	P
#####	239	TELE TOWN HALL	P
#####	2500	CONSULTING	P
#####	2932.84	VOTER CONTACT SERVICES	P
#####	6041.25	VOTER CONTACT SERVICES	P
#####	6412.5	TELETOWN HALL	P
4/8/2010	4420.48	TELETOWN HALL MAILING	P
4/1/2010	2975	TELETOWN HALL	P
#####	3610.5	TELETOWN HALL	P
#####	9482	TELETOWN HALL	P
#####	11375	TELETOWN HALL	P
#####	2000	TELETOWN HALL	P
#####	6000	TELETOWN HALL	P
#####	2000	TELETOWN HALL	P
#####	5000	TELEPHONE TOWNHALL	P
#####	5000	TELEPHONE TOWNHALL	P
#####	1087.57	ROBO CALLS	P
7/8/2010	711.97	ROBO CALLS	P
9/1/2010	1050.89	ROBO CALLS	G
#####	2174.75	ROBO CALLS	G
#####	609.89	ROBO CALLS	G
#####	5638.12	TELEPHONE SVCS TELEPHONE SVCS	
#####	2290.75	TELEPHONE ADVERTISING - TELE R	
#####	2374.13	TELEPHONE ADVERTISING - TELE R	
#####	5000	ADVERTISING	P
#####	758.67	TOWN HALL MEETING	C
#####	2120	PHONE CALLS	G
#####	5000	MARKETING STRATEGIST FOR CAS	
#####	300	IT CONSULTING	S
#####	1100	IT CONSULTING	S
#####	1018.38	PHONE CALLS PHONE CALLS	
#####	12200	POLITICAL STRATEGY POLITICAL STRATEGY CONSULTING	
#####	3000	POLITICAL STRATEGY POLITICAL STRATEGY CONSULTING	
#####	5273.46	POLITICAL STRATEGY POLITICAL STRATEGY CONSULTING	
#####	11500	POLITICAL STRATEGY POLITICAL STRATEGY CONSULTING	
5/3/2012	382.5	PHONE CALLS PHONE CA P	
#####	1800	TELETOWN HALL	
#####	562.5	TELETOWN HALL	
#####	8500	CONSULTING - STRATEGY	

24589.65 DATA PROCESSING & WEB BASED FUNDRAISING
3750 CONSULTIIX
3700 TELETOWN HALL - PAC DONOR FOLLOW-UP
9/3/2013 21000 COPY WRIT CREATIVE & MANAGEMENT CONSULTING
3750 CONSULTIIX
3750 CONSULTIIX
3750 CONSULTIIX
3750 CONSULTIIX
3750 CONSULTIIX
3750 CONSULTIIX
4975 VOTER CALLS
9/6/2013 23276.89 WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT/TELEMARKETING

From: [Christian J. Hilland](#)
To: [News and Views](#)
Subject: News and Views for Friday, May 12, 2017
Date: Friday, May 12, 2017 8:55:49 AM
Attachments: [News_and_Views_Final_05_12_17.pdf](#)

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FEC, Campaign Finance Law and Federal Employee News:

[Trump Orders New Commission to Study Voter Fraud \(Bloomberg BNA\)](#)

By Kenneth P. Doyle

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

President Donald Trump issued an executive order to create an advisory commission to study election integrity, following up on his unsupported claims of massive voter fraud.

Trump's order named Vice President Mike Pence as chairman of the 15-member commission, which was expected to include other Republicans who have been outspoken on voter fraud issues. The vice chairman of the commission is expected to be Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, who has spearheaded a national push for new voter identification laws.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said the new commission would be bipartisan, including at least two Democratic secretaries of state, Bill Gardner of New Hampshire and Matthew Dunlap of Maine. Republicans expected to join the commission include Connie Lawson, the secretary of state of Indiana, Ken Blackwell, former secretary of state of Ohio, and Christy McCormick, a commissioner on U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

Questions of Partisanship

Many Democrats have charged that Republican-led efforts to clamp down on alleged voter fraud are intended to suppress voter turnout among minorities and other groups that tend to vote Democratic.

Although they agreed to serve on the new Trump commission, both Gardner and Dunlap have said they have seen no evidence of widespread voter fraud. When Trump claimed earlier this year that there was major voter fraud in New Hampshire, Gardner was quoted in news reports as saying he was unaware of widespread fraud in the state.

Sanders said the new commission would “review policies and practices that enhance or undermine the American people's confidence in the integrity of federal elections and provide the president with a report that identifies system vulnerabilities that lead to improper registrations and voting.”

She said the report was expected to be complete by 2018 and that the experts and officials on the commission “will follow the facts where they lead.” The commission's meetings and hearings will be open to the public for comments and input, Sanders said.

Diversion From Russia Probe?

Trump's executive order said the new commission would be “solely advisory.” Its mission would be to conduct studies and public hearings aimed at producing a report that identifies “vulnerabilities in voting systems and practices used for Federal elections that could lead to improper voter registrations and improper voting, including fraudulent voter registrations and fraudulent voting.”

Some Trump critics said the president's latest move was an attempt to divert attention from an ongoing probe of alleged Russian efforts to interfere in the 2016 election and possible collusion with Trump's presidential campaign. Questions about the future direction of that probe were heightened by Trump's controversial May 9 firing of FBI Director James Comey.

Liz Kennedy of the Democratic-leaning nonprofit Center for American Progress said in a statement that Trump's call to study voting issues “grows out of the president's blatant, easily disproved lies about millions of illegal voters is a false start and a threat to American democracy.”

“Launching an investigation into American voters while attempting to shut down the investigation into Russian interference in the U.S. election and his campaign's collusion in that attack reeks of attempted misdirection,” she added.

Previous Efforts Bipartisan

Rick Hasen, a University of California, Irvine, law professor and election law expert, said on his Election Law Blog that the new commission didn't appear designed to ferret out the truth about allegations of voter fraud, given the partisan track record of Kobach and other Republican members. Hasen also said he was disappointed to see Christie McCormick, a Republican member of the Election Assistance Commission, on the new Trump advisory commission.

The EAC was established by law in the early 2000s as an advisory agency on voting issues and has sought to establish a record of bipartisanship. Hasen noted there also have been previous advisory commissions on voting issues that tried to conduct objective inquiries, relying on advice from professional staffers. These include a commission linked to former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford that investigated problems with the 2000 election, as well as other bipartisan commissions created after the 2004 and 2012 elections.

Hasen said he expected the latest commission not to live up to the standards of previous efforts, but he also suggested that might not matter in the end.

“The Administration's credibility is so low that few except the true believers are likely to believe anything produced by the likely worthless report,” he said.

Critics Call Trump Election Panel a ‘Sham’ (CQ-Roll Call)

‘We need to be vigilant and rely on the evidence and the data.’

By Kate Ackley

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17; 5:04 a.m.)

U.S. President Donald Trump, stands with House Speaker Paul D. Ryan and Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows after Republicans passed legislation aimed at repealing and replacing ObamaCare, during an event in the Rose Garden at the White House, on May 4, 2017 in Washington, D.C.

Voting-rights advocates lambasted a new Trump administration directive to probe alleged election fraud, calling the effort a distraction that also could ultimately prevent legitimate voters from casting ballots.

President Donald Trump signed the executive order Thursday creating a commission, led by Vice President Mike Pence, to study the U.S. voter registration and election system. It comes months after Trump alleged, without evidence, that thousands of noncitizens had voted in the 2016 elections.

Even many Republicans have said such a commission is an unnecessary use of government resources because numerous other studies show no indication of widespread election fraud.

Critics of the new Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity said the administration ought to focus instead on voter suppression concerns as well as potential Russian hacking and interference in the 2016 elections, a scandal that has only intensified this week with Trump’s firing of FBI Director James B. Comey.

“This is a sham commission that is going to be distracting us, distracting our country from very

real problems that we should be confronting,” said Myrna Pérez of the Brennan Center for Justice. “We need to be vigilant and rely on the evidence and the data.”

The Brennan Center at New York University’s School of Law recently issued a report after studying 42 jurisdictions with the most noncitizen residents, concluding that such instances of fraud are “extraordinarily rare,” Pérez said.

Critics of Trump’s commission also said they were concerned that its leaders, Pence and vice chairman Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, may have too much sway over the bipartisan panel.

“I do think that it is problematic to set up a commission headed by two Republicans if you want it to have credibility,” said Ellen Weintraub, a Democratic member of the Federal Election Commission. “This whole topic has been studied in great depth, and nobody’s come up with any real evidence of voter fraud.”

A concern, Weintraub said, is that “voter fraud allegations have been used in the past as a pretext for adopting measures that restrict people’s ability to vote. That’s the real fraud we ought to be worried about — disenfranchising people.”

Other members of the commission are expected to include Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson, a Republican who in the mid-2000s sponsored a strict voter identification law in her state. Democratic members include New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner and Maine Secretary of State Matthew Dunlap.

The executive order tasked the commission with identifying laws and rules that “undermine the American people’s confidence in the integrity of the voting process” and with exposing vulnerabilities in the voting system “that could lead to improper voter registration and improper voting, including fraudulent voter registration and fraudulent voting.”

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Thursday the administration expects the commission to complete its report by 2018.

“The experts and officials on this commission will follow the facts where they lead,” she told reporters. “Meetings and hearings will be open to the public for comments and input. And we will share those updates as we have them.”

Election lawyers said that it was notable that the president did not ask the commission to similarly evaluate cases of alleged voter suppression.

“This is not a good day for those who believe we should have a system where all eligible voters, but only eligible voters, can easily cast a ballot that will be fairly and accurately counted,” election lawyer Rick Hasen wrote on his blog.

Chris Carson, president of the League of Women Voters, said the executive branch should focus on protecting the U.S. election system from future foreign hacking incidents.

“The real purpose of this effort is to justify President Trump’s false claims of widespread voter fraud in the 2016 elections,” Carson said. “This is part of a wider effort to suppress the vote, keep certain politicians in power, and undermine our elections by spreading falsehoods.”

Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, added in a statement: “This executive order is a farce, plain and simple, and a seemingly naked attempt by President Trump to divert attention from his firing of FBI Director James Comey and the very serious investigation into possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia to influence the 2016 election. No one should be fooled.”

[Trump Picks Voter ID Advocate for Election Fraud Panel \(New York Times\)](#)

By Julie Hirschfeld Davis

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Thursday named Kris W. Kobach, the Kansas secretary of state who has pressed for aggressive measures to crack down on undocumented immigrants, to a commission investigating vote fraud, following through on his unsubstantiated claim that millions of “illegals” voted for his Democratic rival and robbed him of victory in the national popular vote.

Mr. Kobach, who has championed the strictest voter identification laws in the country, will be the vice chairman of the commission, which will be led by Vice President Mike Pence and is expected to include about a dozen others, including state officials from both political parties, said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy White House press secretary.

Mr. Trump signed an executive order on Thursday creating the commission, which Ms. Sanders said would have a broad mandate to review policies and practices that affect Americans’ confidence in the integrity of federal elections. Marc E. Lotter, Mr. Pence’s spokesman, said that voter suppression would be among the topics studied by the commission, which he said would take a wide-ranging look at problems at the state and national levels. But the order makes no mention of suppression or voting restrictions, specifying only “improper” or “fraudulent” registration and voting as issues to be explored.

Democrats and civil rights groups condemned the panel as a taxpayer-funded witch hunt, and the American Civil Liberties Union filed a legal request to the White House for records showing “concrete evidence” of fraudulent voting that would warrant the creation of such a commission.

“President Trump is attempting to spread his own fake news about election integrity,” said Dale Ho, the director of the A.C.L.U.’s Voting Rights Project. “If the Trump administration really

cares about election integrity, it will divulge its supposed evidence before embarking on this commission boondoggle.”

The commission was created at a tumultuous time in the White House, after Mr. Trump’s abrupt firing on Tuesday of James B. Comey, the F.B.I. director, who had been leading an investigation into possible ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. United States intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia worked to sway the election to Mr. Trump.

Ms. Sanders said the group would produce a report for Mr. Trump next year on “system vulnerabilities that lead to improper registrations and voting.” Its roots lie in Mr. Trump’s own long-festering grievances and his conviction that illegal voting — including ballots cast by people who were registered to vote in multiple states, were not citizens, or were impersonating people whose names had remained on voting rolls after they died — reduced his margin of victory.

There is no evidence to support Mr. Trump’s claims, which have been discredited repeatedly by fact-checkers, that millions of people voted illegally in 2016.

As a candidate, Mr. Trump repeatedly raised doubts about the integrity of the American voting system. After winning the election, he told members of Congress privately that three million to five million undocumented immigrants had voted illegally for Hillary Clinton, costing him the popular vote. And he promised to begin a major investigation.

Voting officials in both parties and academics across the country have long rejected the notion that fraudulent voting is widespread, finding instead that it is a sporadic and uncommon occurrence that has had no discernible effect on election outcomes. Mr. Trump’s own lawyers concluded as much about the 2016 contest, asserting in legal filings that it was “not tainted” as they sought to block recounts in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

“There are problems in the registration system that don’t translate into fraud, there are sporadic and very rare instances of fraud, and voter impersonation fraud is the rarest of all,” said Nathaniel Persily, a professor of political science at Stanford who served as the research director of the bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration in 2012.

“The notion that there is widespread voting by undocumented immigrants or other ineligible voters has been studied repeatedly and found to be false,” he said.

Mr. Kobach’s influential position on the panel intensified the controversy over its creation, particularly among immigration advocacy and civil rights groups, as well as Democrats who said they feared he would use the perch to try to prevent minority voters from casting ballots.

“Selecting Kris Kobach as vice chair reveals exactly the kind of discriminatory witch hunt the American people can expect from this commission,” said Representative Nancy Pelosi,

Democrat of California and the House minority leader. “The president’s ‘election integrity’ commission is clearly intended to accelerate the vile voter suppression efforts in states across the nation.”

Mr. Kobach was the driving force behind a Kansas law requiring new voters to produce a passport, a birth certificate or naturalization papers as proof of citizenship. He worked last year to disqualify the state and local votes of thousands of people who did not meet those criteria. He has advocated the proof-of-citizenship requirement at the federal level as well, alleging rampant voter fraud without producing proof of a widespread problem.

Mr. Kobach dismissed the criticism of him as a “silly reaction” and said he had no preconceived ideas of what the commission would find. He argued that there had been no previous national effort to gather “hard data,” rather than survey-based research, to quantify voting problems.

“If there’s no such thing as voter fraud, or voter fraud is insignificant, then the commission will be able to confirm that,” Mr. Kobach said in an interview. “What are they afraid of? Why do they not want to know these numbers?”

Ms. Sanders said the commission would also include the Republicans Connie Lawson, the secretary of state of Indiana, and Kenneth Blackwell, who formerly held that post in Ohio, as well as two top Democratic election officials: William M. Gardner of New Hampshire and Matthew Dunlap of Maine. Christy McCormick, a Republican member of the nonpartisan U.S. Election Assistance Commission appointed by President Barack Obama, has also been selected to serve on the panel.

“The president’s committed to the thorough review of registration and voting issues in federal elections, and that’s exactly what this commission is tasked with doing,” Ms. Sanders said. “The commission will review policies and practices that enhance or undermine the American people’s confidence in the integrity of federal elections and provide the president with a report that identifies system vulnerabilities that lead to improper registrations and voting.”

Civil rights groups reacted with alarm to the creation of the task force, arguing that Mr. Trump’s own claims of illegal voting by immigrants suggested that his intent was to work to restrict the voting rights of minorities.

Sherrilyn Ifill, the president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, called the commission “a thinly veiled voter suppression task force,” adding that it was “designed to impugn the integrity of African-American and Latino participation in the political process.”

Democratic lawmakers said the commission was ill-conceived at best and a potential front for discriminatory policies at worst.

“Instead of focusing on the myth of voter fraud, the president should be looking at ways to

make it easier for eligible Americans to vote, given how difficult it is for some individuals to vote in this country," said Senator Benjamin A. Cardin, Democrat of Maryland.

Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the minority leader, said the president was "chasing a unicorn" with taxpayer money and "perpetuating the dangerous myth that widespread voter fraud exists."

[Trump signs voter fraud, cybersecurity executive orders \(CBS News\)](#)

By Margaret Brennan

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 11:04 a.m.)

The White House says President Donald Trump has signed an executive order creating a commission to look at the public's confidence in the integrity of the voting system.

The commission will look at allegations of improper voting and fraudulent voter registration in states and across the nation.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders says Vice President Mike Pence will chair the panel, and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach will co-chair it.

She says the group plans to complete its work with a report to the president by 2018.

This order was spurred by Mr. Trump's unsubstantiated claim that millions of people voted illegally in the 2016 election, thus costing him the popular vote. Congressional leaders including House Speaker Paul Ryan and Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham have said they've seen no evidence to back up this claim.

President Trump tweeted shortly after taking office in January that he would be asking for a "major investigation" into voter fraud, vowing to "strengthen up voting procedures."

Democratic Federal Election Commissioner Ellen Weintraub asked Mr. Trump in a letter to disclose evidence of his charges of voter fraud presidential election.

"Your allegations are not properly a matter for a future investigation to take up, as you cannot have responsibly alleged this scheme without already having sufficient facts in hand to do so," Weintraub wrote.

The order comes as congressional and FBI probes into Russian meddling in the U.S. 2016 election are underway. FBI Director James Comey was leading the FBI's investigation into any ties between Trump campaign associates and Russia.

The commission, which will be driven by several state election officials, will include a review of voter registration, voter "suppression" and best practices.

Following the orders signing, Democratic leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-California, saying the commission is "clearly intended to accelerate the vile voter suppression efforts" across the country.

"If President Trump cannot believe that the majority of Americans voted against him, he should review his own conduct instead of trying to steal the vote from millions of citizens," said Pelosi.

Echoing Pelosi's statements, Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-Louisiana, called the order a "distraction from the real issues."

"President Trump says this commission is an effort to protect voting rights but it is really an effort to suppress and intimidate African-American and other minority voters," said Richmond in a statement.

The White House also confirmed that Trump signed an executive order aimed at modernizing and improving the nation's computer networks.

Trump's homeland security adviser Tom Bossert says the order will help keep the U.S. safer from cybersecurity risks. Among the new requirements is that agency heads must be accountable for implementing risk management measures.

Trump pledged in late January to strengthen the government's ability to protect its computer networks, but then canceled plans to sign an executive order on cybersecurity without explanation.

[Trump: 'No collusion' between my campaign and Russia \(The Hill\)](#)

By Max Greenwood

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 7:04 p.m. ET)

President Trump on Thursday flatly denied any collusion between his presidential campaign and Russia, claiming the narrative was "set up by the Democrats."

"This was set up by the Democrats. There's no collusion between me and my campaign and Russians," Trump told NBC's Lester Holt in an interview. "The other thing is, the Russians did not affect the vote, and everybody seems to think that."

The Senate and House intelligence committees are currently investigating Russia's efforts to meddle in the 2016 presidential election, as well as alleged ties between Trump's campaign and the Kremlin.

Former FBI Director James Comey also confirmed in March that the bureau was conducting its own probe into the matter and any coordination between the Trump campaign and Russia.

Trump told NBC News that he wants the FBI's investigation to "be so strong and so good." Democrats slammed Trump's dismissal of Comey earlier this week, voicing concerns that it was an attempt to tamp down on the bureau's Russia probe.

The U.S. intelligence community concluded in a report made public in January that Russia had sought to interfere in the presidential election in favor of Trump. Trump has repeatedly denied having any improper ties with Moscow.

The Senate Intelligence Committee announced Wednesday that it had delivered a subpoena to former Trump campaign adviser and White House national security adviser Michael Flynn, requesting documents as part of its Russia probe.

[Trump said he was thinking of Russia controversy when he decided to fire Comey \(Washington Post\)](#)

The Trump administration's shifting story on Comey

By Devlin Barrett and Philip Rucker

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 8:09 p.m.)

President Trump on Thursday said he was thinking of "this Russia thing with Trump" when he decided to fire FBI Director James B. Comey, who had been leading the counterintelligence investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election.

Recounting his decision to dismiss Comey, Trump told NBC News, "In fact, when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said, 'You know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made up story, it's an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won.'"

Trump's account flatly contradicts the White House's initial account of how the president arrived at his decision, undercutting public denials by his aides that the move was influenced in any way by his growing fury with the ongoing Russia probe.

Later in the same interview, Trump said he had no intention of trying to stop or hinder the FBI's Russia probe, which is examining whether any Trump associates coordinated with Russians to influence the election. Trump also said he wants the probe "to be absolutely done properly."

"I want that to be so strong and so good," Trump told NBC anchor Lester Holt. He added, "I want to get to the bottom. If Russia hacked, if Russia did anything having to do with our election, I want to know about it."

Trump's account of his decision to fire Comey — whom he denigrated as "a showboat" and "a

grandstander” — exposes the explanations made over the previous 48 hours by White House officials, including Vice President Pence, as misleading and in some cases false.

Initially, Trump aides had said the president fired Comey simply at the recommendation of Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein, who wrote a memorandum detailing what he considered to be Comey’s flawed handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server as secretary of state.

In media appearances, administration officials repeatedly highlighted Rosenstein’s reputation of integrity and bipartisan appeal, effectively using his independence as a shield against criticism that Comey’s firing was politically motivated by the president.

Officials insisted that Trump’s decision was not shaped in any way by his growing fury with the Russia controversy. Trump has publicly called the ongoing probes by the FBI, as well as the Senate and House, “a total hoax” and “a taxpayer charade.”

But Trump made clear in Thursday’s interview that Russia indeed was on his mind. And he said Sessions and Rosenstein’s recommendations did not prompt his decision.

“I was going to fire Comey,” Trump told Holt. “Oh, I was going to fire regardless of recommendation.”

The White House on Thursday struggled to explain its evolving and contradictory accounts of Trump’s decisionmaking process.

“Nobody was left in the dark,” Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the principal deputy White House press secretary, insisted at Thursday’s press briefing. She added, “It was a quick-moving process. We took the information we had as best we had it, and got it out to the American people as quickly as we could.”

In interview, Trump also detailed three conversations he said he had with Comey about the Russia investigation. The president said the FBI director assured him in each discussion that he was not under investigation — once at a White House dinner when Comey was seeking to remain in his post and again in two phone calls. Trump said Comey initiated one of the calls.

“I said, ‘If it’s possible, would you let me know am I under investigation?’ He said, ‘You are not under investigation,’” Trump said.

In offering more details about an assertion he made when firing Comey on Tuesday—that Comey had repeatedly assured him he was not under investigation—the president raised new questions about his conduct toward the ongoing FBI probe into whether any Trump associates coordinated with Russia to meddle with last year’s presidential election.

Trump has repeatedly criticized that investigation, calling it a waste of taxpayer money, and

denied he has any ties to Russia.

“There’s no collusion between me and my campaign and the Russians,” Trump told Holt.

Democrats have called for the appointment of a special counsel to investigate the matter without the threat of political interference.

In the NBC interview, Trump said Comey came to eat dinner with him at the White House. “I think he asked for the dinner. ... And he wanted to stay at the FBI, and I said I’ll, you know, consider and see what happens ... But we had a very nice dinner, and at that time he told me, ‘You are not under investigation.’ ”

The exchange as described by the president is remarkable since he said the FBI director was discussing an ongoing investigation with the president — something Justice Department policy generally prohibits — at the same time Comey was seeking assurances he would remain in his job.

Current and former officials said Trump’s description of statements by Comey is not accurate, but they declined to elaborate. Legal experts also expressed doubts about Trump’s account.

“I just can’t even begin to think about that comment being true,” said Michael Greenberger, a law professor at the University of Maryland who has previously worked in the Justice Department. “It defies belief in general because of the practices of not commenting on investigations, and it would especially defy belief in the case of Comey who prides himself on strict observance of propriety.”

Greenberger noted the implication of Trump’s statement is severe — that Comey may have offered that assurance to try to ingratiate himself with the president and remain in his job. “I just have a very hard time imagining that,” he said, though he added he also didn’t think Trump simply asking that question came close to a criminal act of trying to obstruct the investigation.

The federal law against obstruction of justice is broadly worded but in practice, prosecutors have a high bar for bringing charges that someone “corruptly or by threats or force, or by any threatening letter or communication” attempts to “influence, obstruct, or impede the due administration of justice.” Generally, such cases are only brought when prosecutors have clear evidence of the underlying motive behind a person’s actions.

White House spokeswoman Sanders would not provide further details about the conversations between Trump and Comey, such as when they occurred and whether all three were after the president’s Jan. 20 inauguration. She said commentary by legal experts on cable news showed there had been no conflict of interest with Trump asking the FBI director whether he was the subject of the Russia probe.

Robert Chesney, a University of Texas law professor who specializes in national security and constitutional issues, said that even assuming Trump's account is accurate, "legally speaking, I don't think that crosses any lines."

At base it is more a political issue than legal, he said. Offering a more extreme hypothetical—that Trump began firing anyone involved in the investigation—that could come closer to obstruction of justice. But then it would be a matter for Congress to act. "Our system is designed so that impeachment is the remedy," he said. "But the fact pattern you'd need is something more Nixonian."

FBI directors are appointed for 10-year terms, and Comey had been on the job less than four years. A president may fire an FBI director at any time for any reason, but it is very rare to do so because of the potential political blowback if the White House is perceived to be interfering with federal law enforcement work.

Comey's temporary replacement, Andrew McCabe, told senators at a hearing Thursday morning that no White House officials had tried to interfere with the Russia probe.

In the interview, Trump said he fired Comey because he had mismanaged the FBI and was an attention-seeker.

"Look, he's a showboat, he's a grandstander," the president said. "The FBI has been in turmoil. You know that. I know that. Everybody knows that. You take a look at the FBI a year ago, it was in virtual turmoil, less than a year ago. It hasn't recovered from that."

[Feds Find Voice Recorder In Closed-Door Meeting Room, Then Kept It Secret For Four Years \(Daily Caller News Foundation\)](#)

By Ethan Barton

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 6:39 p.m.)

Federal officials found a voice recorder somebody used to document a closed-door government meeting in 2013 but kept the discovery secret for nearly four years, The Daily Caller News Foundation's Investigative Group has learned.

Federal Election Commission (FEC) officials found the recorder in an agency meeting room July 9, 2013, but didn't tell the Inspector General (IG) for nearly a month, which hampered the watchdog's subsequent investigation. The IG also kept the public in the dark by not making its investigative report public until it was recently released in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

"An investigation was opened due to the possibility that the [recorder] may have been placed in an attempt to intercept oral communications in violation of [the law] or make public a commission investigation or enforcement matter in violation of [another law]," said the

report, which wasn't finished until August 2015, two years after the IG began its investigation.

The FEC regulates political campaign finances and investigates potential violations. Illegally recording closed-door federal meetings is punishable by up to five years in prison.

The "investigation was unable to determine the owner of the [recorder] and whether or not the [recorder] was used to attempt to record non-public meetings or confidential discussions," the report said. "This matter is closed due to the lack of investigative leads."

An FEC official found the recorder either on or under a chair in the back corner of a hearing room. The recorder was passed between officials and discussed among senior management – including Chairman Ellen Weintraub and Vice Chairman Donald McGahn II – before it was locked in a drawer.

The IG received an anonymous complaint about the device a month later.

"It does not appear that during this series of events did anyone with knowledge of the [recorder] think of or suggest contacting the [IG]," the report said. "The [IG] is unable to reach any conclusions due to multiple people handling the [recording device] and the fact that the [IG] was not notified by management at the time of discovery."

Investigators suspect the recorder was not used to record FEC discussions illegally, but their rationale is not explained in the report.

This "does not lessen the fact that the potential for abuse existed," the report said.

Investigators found a continuous, nearly 24-hour recording starting at 9:16 a.m. on June 27, 2013 on the device, which still had half-battery power remaining.

It captured an open meeting, "followed by a closed executive session involving discussions of the termination of an" FEC attorney, the report said. "Most of the rest of the recording consists of background noise."

Investigators also found numerous folders on the device, but their names were redacted.

The watchdog recommended the FEC issue a statement "regarding the importance of reporting to the [IG] all issues within its jurisdiction," the report said. It's unclear if the FEC complied.

"I am not aware of any additional information," FEC spokeswoman Judith Ingram told TheDCNF.

The IG declined to comment.

[**FBI searches Republican political consulting firm in Annapolis \(Washington Post\)**](#)

By Fenit Nirappil, Josh Hicks and Matea Gold

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 8:48 p.m.)

Federal authorities on Thursday searched the offices of a political consulting firm in Annapolis that has worked with Republican candidates locally and nationwide and was sued in 2014 on allegations of fraudulent fundraising practices.

Strategic Campaign Group says it supports Republican candidates on a range of services including mail, fundraising and telephone town halls. Its leaders include GOP strategists Kelley Rogers, Chip O'Neil and Dennis Whitfield.

The firm has close ties to Republican consultant Scott B. Mackenzie, a treasurer for multiple political action committees that have drawn scrutiny for spending little money on candidates and instead steering donations to consultants, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Rogers said in an interview that he helped lead one of those groups, the Conservative Strike Force.

On Thursday, six FBI agents showed up at the third-floor office of Strategic Campaign Group to gather computer files and documents related to the firm's direct mail and fundraising practices, Rogers said. Lindsay Ram, a spokeswoman for the FBI field office in Washington, confirmed that agents were "conducting law enforcement activity in Annapolis, off Main Street."

Rogers said agents appeared interested in work the firm did during Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli's 2013 gubernatorial race. Cuccinelli (R) sued the Strategic Campaign Group and the Conservative Strike Force in 2014, alleging they raised almost \$2.2 million to support his campaign but steered little of that money to him.

"Our suspicion is that this is just a carry-over from that," Rogers said. "I think the facts speak for themselves, and we tried to give the agents all the information they could possibly need."

The Conservative Strike Force agreed to pay Cuccinelli \$85,000 to settle the lawsuit, and Strategic Campaign Group said it would turn over donor information.

The Conservative Strike Force has paid Strategic Campaign Group at least \$493,000 for services since 2011, according to federal records. Strategic Campaign Group also received at least \$188,000 in that time period from the Conservative Majority Fund, another political action committee listing Mackenzie as its treasurer. Mackenzie did not return a voice mail seeking comment.

Both groups have spent a small portion of the donations they receive on the candidates they aim to support, according to federal records, and reported high spending on consultants and other firms.

The Federal Election Commission has been struggling for some time with the issue of political action committees that are formed solely to enrich those running them. Unlike nonprofits, which are governed by boards of directors, PACs can be run by a single consultant. And although candidates are prohibited under federal election law from using campaign donations for personal use, traditional political action committees and their super PAC brethren face few limitations on how they spend their funds.

Critics say “scam PACs” have proliferated in recent years, driven in part by the advent of big-money super PACs in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision. There has also been a surge in groups chasing small-dollar donors, often with misleading promises of how they plan to use those funds.

The Strategic Campaign Group has ties to Republicans in the Maryland state legislature, and Rogers has raised money for Gov. Larry Hogan (R), although Rogers said Thursday that federal agents did not appear interested in his local work.

In 2016, Strategic Campaign Group was paid by the campaigns of Maryland House Minority Leader Nicholas R. Kipke (R-Anne Arundel) and GOP Maryland congressional candidates Patrick McDonough and Charles Faddis, state and federal records show. Kipke said Thursday that the state GOP House and Senate political operations would suspend work with the company until the investigation is resolved.

Strategic Campaign Group also worked to support Republican Kathy Szeliga’s unsuccessful 2016 campaign for a U.S. Senate seat.

Virginia Republicans, mostly state lawmakers, have sent the company more than \$500,000 since 2009 for services including polling and robocalls, according to the Virginia Public Access Project.

[**Republican Strategy Firm in Maryland Raided by FBI: Reports \(Bloomberg\)**](#)

By Erik Larson

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 5:53 p.m. ET)

The Federal Bureau of Investigation carried out a raid on a Republican fundraising firm in Maryland that had been accused in a 2014 lawsuit of defrauding political donors, according to several area news outlets.

The target of the raid was Strategic Campaign Group Inc. in Annapolis, the Baltimore Sun reported on Thursday, along with local television stations. Nicole Schwab, a spokeswoman for the FBI’s Washington, D.C., field office, told Bloomberg News that agents had executed a court-approved search warrant in the vicinity of Main Street, Annapolis, where the fundraising firm is located.

Kelley Rogers, the president of Strategic Campaign Group, confirmed that his firm was the target of the raid, the newspaper reported.

It's unclear what the FBI was seeking at the offices of the group, which advises Republican candidates. Calls to several of the group's officials weren't immediately returned.

Strategic Campaign Group and its affiliates have been accused by various campaigns, including President Donald Trump's, of raising money without the candidate's approval.

Former Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli of Virginia, a Republican who ran for governor in 2013, filed a lawsuit against the group and its Conservative StrikeForce PAC, accusing the organization of fraud, for allegedly making unauthorized fundraising pitches. The suit was settled in 2015 and the PAC, which listed Scott B. Mackenzie as its treasurer, was required to pay Cuccinelli \$85,000.

Patriots For Trump, a PAC run by the same treasurer, shut down in 2015 after the Trump campaign sent a letter demanding that it stop raising donations without its authorization. According to Federal Election Commission filings the committee raised more than \$131,000 and spent \$122,000 to promote Trump's campaign.

While there's no indication that the raid was related to Cuccinelli's lawsuit, the litigation sheds some light on the firm's previous legal troubles. Cuccinelli said in his complaint that Strategic Campaign Group used national lists of conservative voters to seek cash for phone banks, rallies and voter-identification efforts.

"Defendants donated less than one-half of one percent of their total receipts in 2013 to the Cuccinelli campaign, and spent no money in support of the Cuccinelli campaign in the form of independent expenditures," the lawsuit said.

Rogers's clients have included numerous campaigns for president, Congress and statewide office, as well as conservative business groups and political action committees, according to the group's website.

Strategic Campaign Group's vice president is former congressional aide Chip O'Neil, according to the group's website. Its senior adviser is Dennis Whitfield, who served as chief of staff for the U.S. trade representative and then as deputy secretary of labor under President Ronald Reagan.

Whitfield has also provided political and communications advice to U.S. and foreign corporations, and was executive vice president of the American Conservative Union, which organizes the annual American Conservative Political Action Conference, known as CPAC.

Whitfield was also a director at BKSH and Associates, where he provided strategic government

relations counseling. That firm was formed in 1996 when Paul Manafort and Roger Stone left Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly and it merged with Gold and Liebengood. Manafort and Stone both went on to become close advisers to Trump. They had departed by the time Whitfield joined the firm.

[FBI raids office of GOP consulting firm in Maryland \(The Hill\)](#)

By Megan R. Wilson

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 3:15 p.m. ET)

The FBI has raided the Annapolis office of Strategic Campaign Group, a Republican fundraising and campaign consulting firm in Maryland, according to a local news outlet.

The firm, founded during the 2008 election cycle, has represented Republican candidates around the country. While the firm is based in Annapolis, Md., the investigation is being run out of Washington.

Founder Kelley Rogers credits himself with leading the charge in using technology in political campaigns, including holding allowing candidates and lawmakers to hold “telephone town halls” with constituents.

“Today, Strategic Campaign Group is the largest provider of Telephone Town Hall technology for Republican campaigns and conservative organizations in the United States,” its website says.

WBAL-TV, a local news station, first reported the raid on in the early afternoon on Thursday. A reporter for the television station posted a picture of FBI agents covering windows at the firm with trash bags as they began searching the office.

It is unclear what the FBI is investigating and what prompted the search warrant.

The firm has worked for Republican candidates for Congress, but has also had clients whose fundraising efforts raised concerns among campaign finance watchdogs. In recent years, those questionable groups began to represent a larger portion of its balance sheet.

Strategic Campaign Group worked for Conservative Strikeforce, which was formed during the 2008 presidential election cycle and lists Scott B. Mackenzie as its treasurer. Dennis Whitfield, a senior advisor at Strategic Campaign Group, is chairman of the political action committee (PAC).

Whitfield has held many senior roles in Washington, including serving as executive vice president of the American Conservative Union (ACU), senior vice president at the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB), and as chief of staff for the U.S. Trade Representative and as deputy secretary of the Labor Department during the Reagan

administration.

However, critics labeled the Conservative Strikeforce a "Scam PAC" — a political action committee that raises large sums and spends very little on campaigns, candidates or the causes it espouses. All of that is totally legal, though, as there are no federal guidelines for how unaffiliated PACs ought to spend their war chests.

"At the Conservative StrikeForce PAC we are dedicated to replacing the Obama administration with a strong conservative willing to make the difficult decisions necessary to steer our country in the right direction," its website declares. The PAC "assists candidates in two ways. We make direct cash contributions and we do independent expenditures on behalf of selected conservative candidates whom we support."

From 2010 to 2016, Conservative Strikeforce raised \$12 million, with only a small circle of firms receiving the cash. Strategic Campaign Group earned \$579,000 from the PAC during that time, and the PAC spent more than \$8 million on efforts to raise more funds. It gave \$320,000 to state and federal candidates over the last seven years.

In 2014, Ken Cuccinelli, who had just waged a campaign for governor in Virginia, slapped the group with a lawsuit. The former Virginia attorney general alleged that it had used his name to fundraise without authorization. The PAC ultimately settled with the Republican politician, including paying \$85,000 and handing over its distribution lists.

The Virginia lawsuit said Strategic Campaign Group is a part owner of the PAC, and Federal Election Commission (FEC) records show that the Conservative Strikeforce paid Strategic Campaign Group \$10,000 in 2015 for "reimbursement for legal settlement."

Strategic Campaign Group's client list also includes a PAC called Conservative Majority Fund, which also lists Mackenzie as a treasurer.

It ran ads during former President Barack Obama's 2012 reelection campaign questioning the authenticity of Obama's birthplace and perpetuating claims that the president "is not who he says he is."

From 2012 to 2016, Conservative Majority Fund raised \$8.4 million, and spent more than \$3 million on its fundraising efforts during that time, according to records tallied by The Hill.

It spent roughly \$13,000 on donations to campaigns in those four years, and paid the firm Infocision Management more than \$7 million, according to both FEC records and the Center for Responsive Politics. Strategic Campaign Group, meanwhile, earned just less than \$256,000.

Last November, the PAC donated \$5,000 to President Trump's campaign, but FEC records show the check was returned without being cashed.

CBS News interviewed Mackenzie last year about claims that the committees he manages are murky fundraising vehicles.

Mackenzie told the network that he takes "all the heat for decisions that other people make," while serving as a treasurer for about two-dozen PACs.

[Montana Candidate's Comments Raise Questions About Corporate Money \(CQ-Roll Call\)](#)

Gianforte and Quist both claim they refuse industry PAC contributions

By Simone Pathé

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 9:54 p.m.)

Republican Greg Gianforte, left, is running against Democrat Rob Quist in a special election to fill the at-large Montana congressional seat vacated by former Rep. Ryan Zinke, who's now serving as secretary of the Interior.

Comments made by Montana Republican Greg Gianforte on a national fundraising call last week raise questions about what he meant when he said that industry PACs could contribute to "our Victory Fund."

Both Gianforte and Democrat Rob Quist say they have refused to accept corporate PAC money in the race for Montana's at-large House seat. But when asked on last week's call, audio of which was obtained by CQ Roll Call, whether he still did not accept PAC money, Gianforte gave a confusing answer.

"We do not accept any industry PAC money, although if someone wanted to support through a PAC our Victory Fund allows that money to go to all the get-out-the-vote efforts," he said.

Gianforte went on.

"And the reason for that is I came off the governor's race last year having made a big deal about not taking any PAC money, and it would be a self-inflicted wound. We are starting to lessen that by taking political PAC money. That's why we took the leadership PAC money from members in the House but not industry PAC money directly to the campaign," Gianforte said.

Victory Fund?

But it's not clear what Gianforte meant when he said "our Victory Fund."

Like many candidates, including Quist, Gianforte has what is known as a joint fundraising committee. It's called the Gianforte Victory Fund. Money it receives is shared with the National Republican Congressional Committee and the Montana Republican State Central Committee.

Under a joint fundraising agreement, multiple candidates, PACs or party committees can join together to “share the costs of fundraising, and split the proceeds,” according to OpenSecrets.

They’re like “one-stop shopping,” said election lawyer Michael Toner, a former chairman of the FEC, because they allow donors to contribute in one place.

But the Gianforte campaign said Thursday that he was referring to the Republican Party, not that joint fundraising agreement, on the call and therefore wasn’t compromising his pledge not to accept corporate PAC money.

“Greg was simply stating that they can support the party if they want. (that's what he meant by ‘victory fund’ — not the JFA.) It was a confusing choice of words,” a spokesman for the campaign said in an email, suggesting that “victory” has sometimes been synonymous with the party.

The spokesman said Gianforte has always been clear that he won’t accept corporate PAC money.

Gianforte’s campaign says that both its campaign committee and its joint fundraising committee are only accepting money from political party and leadership PACs.

Quist has said he won’t take corporate PAC money but will accept labor and ideological PAC money. The Quist campaign confirmed Thursday that Quist’s pledge applies to the Quist Victory Fund, too, which he shares with the Montana Democratic Party.

Neither campaign’s joint victory funds have filed their first reports with the Federal Election Commission.

PAC attacks

The PAC pledge has long been a source of political attacks in Montana. During last year’s gubernatorial campaign, Gianforte knocked Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock for not accepting his pledge not to take PAC money. Democrats dismissed the pledge since Gianforte was able to kick \$6 million of his own money into his campaign.

When Gianforte headlined a fundraiser for the state GOP in Washington, D.C., last year, he faced questions about whether he’d be violating his pledge by helping the state party raise money from PACs. In order to avoid that appearance, his campaign told the Associated Press it wouldn’t accept money from the state party.

“We’re not planning to take any more money from the Republican party,” Gianforte’s gubernatorial campaign spokesman told the AP in March of last year.

In this year’s House race, both sides have been quick to try to capitalize on the other’s money

issues. During a recent debate, Quist attacked Gianforte for having financial ties to Russian businesses, including those that are on the U.S. sanctions list. Gianforte's wealth has been a frequent source of attack, with Democrats trying to brand him as a millionaire from New Jersey.

But Quist's personal financial troubles have also been fodder for Republicans. Major outside GOP groups have attacked him for trouble paying his taxes. Congressional Leadership, the super PAC backed by GOP leadership, released a new ad Thursday using Quist's financial issues to question his credibility and readiness to serve.

[Outside money floods House special elections in Georgia and Montana \(USA Today\)](#)

By Fredreka Schouten

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 3:26 p.m. ET)

WASHINGTON — Political parties and independent groups have unleashed more than \$20 million in federal races so far this year, in an early preview of the massive spending that will buffet the 2018 midterm contests for the House.

The Congressional Leadership Fund, a super PAC affiliated with House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., tops the organizations active in early races. The group has reported already spending more than \$5 million to protect Republican-held House seats in three elections this year, a USA TODAY tally of Federal Election Commission records shows.

Corry Bliss, the super PAC's executive director, predicts the group will spend a total of \$8.6 million on two fast-approaching special elections: the May 25 contest to fill an open House seat in Montana and the June 20 election for the suburban Atlanta seat vacated by House and Human Services Secretary Tom Price. The Georgia race, now down to a runoff between Democrat Jon Ossoff and Republican Karen Handel, already is on track to be the nation's most expensive House contest.

The leadership fund is looking ahead to the 2018 midterms when all 435 House members are up for re-election and has committed to spending \$100 million for those elections — twice its 2016 budget.

Officials also plan to open between 20 and 30 field offices in competitive House races around the country. It's the first time that the super PAC, which can raise unlimited sums, has added a voter-turnout operation to its election arsenal and a sign of the midterm's high stakes for the party.

"We are just getting warmed up," Bliss said of the group's aggressive efforts in special elections.

The president's party generally loses ground in midterm elections, and Republicans are

moving early to protect their majority in the House. Democrats need 24 seats to retake the chamber and hope they can capitalize on President Trump's near-record unpopularity and a contentious vote this month in the House to repeal the Affordable Care Act to nab seats from Republicans. Democrats view the upcoming special elections as an early test of party strength.

"The enthusiasm here is off the charts," Nancy Keenan, executive director of the Montana Democratic Party, said of the race for the state's at-large House seat.

The seat had been held by Republicans for two decades, and the GOP nominee Greg Gianforte, who ran unsuccessfully for governor last year, is considered the favorite. But recent polls show a tightening race. And the Democratic nominee, musician Rob Quist, recently raised more \$500,000 in just four days, Keenan said.

Quist and Gianforte also face Libertarian Mark Wicks in the election to fill the seat vacated by former Montana congressman and current Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.

Democrats face a steep climb in a rural state that Trump won by nearly 21 points last year. In one sign of the race's importance, however, Vice President Pence is set to stump for Gianforte on Friday in Billings, Mont. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, meanwhile, has pledged to campaign for Quist.

Seat once held by Newt Gingrich

Democrats and Republicans, however, are training most of their firepower on the special election that is still more than a month away in Georgia. Ossoff, a 30-year-old former congressional aide and documentary filmmaker, has raised big sums in his quest for a seat once held by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Ossoff collected an eye-popping \$8.3 million ahead of the first round of voting in mid-April. He has not yet released fundraising totals for next month's runoff with Handel. But Ossoff's campaign said he took in \$500,000 on April 19, the day after his first-place finish in the April 18 special election.

He received 48.1% of that vote, just shy of the 50% needed to capture the seat outright. That forced the June 20 runoff with Handel, the top Republican vote-getter.

The Congressional Leadership Fund spent \$3 million in the first round of the Georgia special election and will spend another \$3.5 million by Election Day, Bliss said. The super PAC is testing its new field operation in the race, deploying 90 full-time door knockers with the goal of talking to 200,000 additional voters.

Ossoff's team also has assembled a big get-out-the-vote operation of its own, with 150 people working in six field offices, according to his aides. The campaign's staff and volunteers had knocked on more than 250,000 doors ahead of the April 18 primary alone, they said.

The super PAC has sought to cast Ossoff as out of step with Georgians and more in line with national Democratic figures, such as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

Republicans also have targeted him for living outside the district he hopes to represent. Ossoff has said he and his fiancée Alisha Kramer are temporarily living closer to Atlanta's Emory University, where she is a medical student.

Handel, a former county commissioner, "has lived and worked and accomplished in the district for years and years," Bliss said. "The only thing Jon Ossoff ever did in the district was be born to really rich parents."

Ossoff "knows the district; he grew up in the district, and he's extremely familiar with the issues," countered his spokeswoman Sacha Haworth.

Ossoff's team contends that the leadership fund represents the real outsiders in the race.

Although super PACs have to disclose donors' identities, \$3.5 million of the nearly \$4.5 million the Congressional Leadership Fund reported raising through March 29 came from its nonprofit arm, the American Action Network, Federal Election Commission records show. The network does not identify its donors.

That shows that Republicans are relying "on anonymous donations of dark money" in their fight to keep the seat, Haworth said.

[Local DNC host committee gives out nearly \\$1 million in bonus checks \(Philly.com\)](#)

By Claudia Vargas

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 6:51 p.m. ET)

The Philadelphia 2016 Host Committee used some of the leftover money it raised for the Democratic National Convention to pay nearly \$1 million bonuses to staff and volunteers.

The rewards, which ranged from \$500 for interns and volunteers to \$310,000 for executive director Kevin Washo, were paid in November, four months after the convention. The amounts were listed in a year-end report filed with the Federal Election Commission on Jan. 31.

Former Gov. Ed Rendell, who served as chairman of the host committee, said that when he hired committee staff in 2015, he told them that in return for what he saw as low pay, he would take care of them at the end.

"If we do come out and raise enough money, we will decide what to do with it, but a significant part is bonuses and I told that to almost everyone we hired," Rendell said Thursday.

The committee raised \$86 million, of which \$10 million, the largest amount, came from Pennsylvania taxpayers. After all payments were settled with vendors, the committee was left with a surplus of about \$4 million.

On Nov. 25, all 12 of the host committee staff received bonus checks.

Washo, who had a monthly salary of \$13,000 for two years starting in March 2015, received the most. Rendell said Washo's payment was part bonus and part back pay for the volunteer work he did during the bid phase of the convention starting in August 2013 and until early 2015. Washo was part of a small team that worked to get the Democratic National Committee to pick Philadelphia for their convention. During that time, he was working for a Washington-based political consulting firm.

Washo said his work with the early committee was "above and beyond" a volunteer job.

Washo said the payouts were decided by him, Rendell, and chief operating officer Eliza Rose.

"It's performance. Everyone worked hard. We tried to be fair," he said.

Rose, who was paid between \$9,000 and \$10,000 monthly by the committee, received a \$43,238 bonus.

Chief finance officer Jason O'Malley, who was paid about \$8,000 monthly by the committee, received a \$220,000 bonus. Rendell said O'Malley's fundraising work deserved a "performance bonus."

Other staff bonuses range from \$13,357 for the office manager, who was paid \$3,000 monthly; to \$58,286 for communications director Anna Adams-Sarthou, who was paid between \$4,000 and \$5,000 per month.

Washo, now a government affairs principal at the Cozen O'Connor law firm, said he could not remember what scale, if any, was used to determine the bonus amounts.

"They were awards for service well done. We had a small staff and worked very long hours. ... We wanted them to know they are valued," he said Thursday.

After the bonuses were given out, the committee gave \$750,000 to the School District's Right Books Campaign, an effort of the Fund for the School District of Philadelphia to put nearly 80,000 books in elementary schools.

The committee has paid back the city for any money spent during the convention and given out \$10,000 grants to city nonprofits, including the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the Food Trust of Philadelphia, and the Committee of Seventy. It also gave \$25,000 each to Visit Philly and the Independence Visitor Center.

“In the end, on top of paying city services in the tune of \$500,000 ... the overall narrative, on top of making sure everything was paid, it was a successful event,” Washo said.

Still, the bonuses left some flabbergasted.

“That’s terrible,” said U.S. Rep. Robert Brady, the Democratic Party chairman in Philadelphia, and one of the biggest cheerleaders in the effort to bring the convention to Philadelphia.

Brady, who also served as an honorary vice chair of the host committee, said he was unaware such bonuses were given out until a reporter called him.

“I should’ve been on that committee,” he quipped.

But added that he was surprised there was money left over from the event.

After the convention, Rendell and Washo had said the committee was still \$1 million short of its \$64 million cash fund-raising goal. The host committee refused to release fund-raising documents to the public until the committee was legally required to file with the Federal Election Commission in late September. It was only then that it announced it had met and exceeded its fund-raising goal.

Rendell said the committee had budgeted for all sort of possibilities and that bills came in lower than expected.

“Some of the bills we were expecting came in at a third” of what was budgeted, he said, adding that the committee also received “some light checks” from donors post-convention.

The Cleveland 2016 Host Committee, which raised money for the Republican National Convention, had about \$500,000 left after all bills were settled, Emily Lauer, spokeswoman for the committee, said Thursday.

“We gave three \$50,000 grants to three different nonprofits, which were selected by the [host committee] officers,” Lauer said.

No bonuses were given to the Cleveland host committee staff. That committee is holding onto the leftover money for “a few years for any potential obligations,” she said.

When Philadelphia hosted the Republican National Convention in 2000, no bonuses were given to the host committee staff.

The 2016 host committee incorporated itself as a nonprofit, which makes the bonuses even more noteworthy. Asked about that, Rendell said the host committee was not a “permanent” nonprofit.

“If we were a permanent organization, no way we would give out those bonuses. We would

stretch out that money for future years,” he said, adding that the host committee is wrapping up its activities. “Our people worked 16 hours a day without question. They were pretty much brutalized.”

Donors to the 2016 host committee were not notified of the bonuses, Rendell said.

“But donors also didn’t know we were going to give three-quarter million to the School District,” he said, adding that no one had complained about the committee’s use of the extra funds. As of March, Washo, Rose, and O'Malley continued to receive monthly paychecks from the committee in addition to the November bonuses.

“Again, I think this was entirely appropriate,” Rendell said.

[Ex-Rep. Corrine Brown Found Guilty of Corruption \(Bloomberg BNA\)](#)

By Kenneth P. Doyle

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

Former Rep. Corrine Brown (D-Fla.) was convicted by a federal jury in Jacksonville, Fla., on corruption charges related to a fraudulent scholarship charity, the Justice Department announced (U.S. v. Brown, M.D. Fla., Criminal No. 16-93, verdict 5/11/17).

Brown, who lost her bid for re-election last year in a Democratic primary race, was convicted May 11 on 18 counts of an indictment charging her with conspiracy involving the fraudulent charity, called One Door for Education. The charity was touted as raising funds for scholarships for needy students but actually was used to funnel money to the former congresswoman and her associates, the DOJ said.

Brown also was found guilty of concealing material facts on required financial disclosure forms, obstructing the due administration of tax laws and filing false tax returns. In addition, the jury found Brown guilty of violating the Ethics in Government Act by concealing certain income on the required annual financial disclosure forms she submitted to the U.S. House.

Judge Timothy J. Corrigan of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida said he would schedule Brown's sentencing for a later date.

‘Violated Public Trust’

“Former Congresswoman Corrine Brown violated the public trust, the honor of her position, and the integrity of the American system of government when she abused one of the most powerful positions in the nation for her own personal gain,” Acting Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Blanco of the Justice Department's Criminal Division said in the DOJ statement.

Blanco said Brown deprived needy children of hundreds of thousands of dollars that could

have helped with their education and improved their opportunities for advancement, and she lied to the Internal Revenue Service and the public about secret cash deposits into her personal bank accounts.

“The Department of Justice is committed to fighting corruption and fraud wherever we find it, at all levels of government, regardless of their power and influence,” Blanco said.

\$800,000 in Donations

According to the DOJ, the evidence entered in Brown's trial showed that, between late 2012 and early 2016, she participated in a conspiracy and fraud scheme involving One Door in which Brown, her former chief of staff and others solicited more than \$800,000 in charitable donations. Donors were told the money would be used for college scholarships and school computer drives, among other charitable causes.

Prosecutors used testimony by donors to show that Brown and her co-conspirators solicited donations from individuals and corporate entities that Brown knew by virtue of her position as a House member. Many of the donors were led to believe that One Door was a properly registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit charity, when, in fact, it was not.

The DOJ said Brown and others used the vast majority of One Door donations for their personal and professional benefit, including tens of thousands of dollars in cash deposits made to Brown's personal bank accounts. In addition, the DOJ said, evidence showed that more than \$300,000 in One Door funds were used to pay for events hosted by Brown or held in her honor, including a golf tournament in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.; lavish receptions during an annual conference in Washington; and the use of a luxury box for a concert and a football game.

Trial evidence showed that, despite raising more than \$800,000 in donations, One Door granted only two scholarships totaling \$1,200 to students, the DOJ said.

Staffer Pleaded Guilty

Elias “Ronnie” Simmons, the former chief of staff in Brown's congressional office, pleaded guilty in February to involvement in the conspiracy involving the fraudulent charity. He also admitted to stealing tens of thousands of dollars in congressional salary payments disbursed to a close relative who performed no known work, the DOJ said. In addition, Simmons admitted he and Brown solicited donations from donors that Brown knew because of her position as a member of Congress.

Brown and Simmons were indicted together last July for their roles in the alleged fraud scheme, as well as for tax obstruction and failing to disclose income. After Simmons pleaded guilty, Brown elected to go to trial.

Another person involved in the matter, Carla Wiley, the president of One Door, also pleaded guilty to wire fraud conspiracy charges before Brown's trial.

The DOJ investigation of Brown was first disclosed in a statement last year from the House Ethics Committee, which said it was delaying its own probe of Brown to defer to the department. Ethics Committee investigations usually are delayed while a criminal probe is underway.

[File at the center of campaign audit of D.C. Council member is missing, officials say \(Washington Post\)](#)

By Aaron C. Davis

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 12:35 p.m.)

A file containing original documents and bank account information related to the campaign of a D.C. Council member has gone missing at the office where his campaign finances are under audit, according to D.C. elections officials.

Wesley Williams, a spokesman for the D.C. Office of Campaign Finance, says staffers there are “in the process of locating” the file containing records pertaining to D.C. Council Member Brandon T. Todd (D-Ward 4).

Williams said he did not know how long the file has been missing but said it had not affected the audit, because most of the information contained in the file was backed up electronically.

But two people with knowledge of the situation, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to do so, said the paperwork has not been seen in weeks. Such files are normally kept in a locked cabinet, the officials said.

The Office of Campaign Finance published an audit in late March that found Todd had been unable to document more than \$100,000 in contributions reported by his 2015 campaign.

Todd was the finance chairman of Mayor Muriel E. Bowser’s 2014 mayoral campaign and was her hand-picked choice to fill the remainder of her Ward 4 council term, which he won in a 2015 special election. He did not respond to a request for comment.

The audit into his 2015 finances also found that Todd had failed to report an additional \$34,000 in donations. Attorneys at the Office of Campaign Finance are weighing whether to fine the campaign for violations.

Meanwhile, a review of Todd’s campaign finances published last month by The Washington Post also found problems with his 2016 reelection campaign. The Post found Todd’s reports to regulators omitted required information about tens of thousands in reported donations.

The issue of the missing file became a spectacle at the Office of Campaign Finance on Monday when two supporters of Leon Andrews, who had lost to Todd, asked to see the public documents in Todd's campaign file.

Mary Pence, a retired family law attorney, said she and her husband, Dan, were initially told the file was not where it was supposed to be. The Pences, who have lived in the District for 39 years, repeatedly asked to speak with supervisors and ended up with campaign finance director Cecily E. Collier-Montgomery.

Pence said agency officials initially told her they would locate the file within a day. On Tuesday, Pence said she was told her inquiry would be treated like a Freedom of Information Act request, giving the agency 15 days to respond.

"This may be something, the start of an inquiry that goes somewhere, or it may be nothing," Pence said.

"We've been reading in the newspaper what seems like a lot of inadequacies, and, really, horrific problems with Mr. Todd's findings. ... My greatest concern is ethical behavior by our elected officials."

The irregularities have drawn the attention of Karl A. Racine, the District's first elected attorney general. Racine has authority to investigate campaign finance violations but must notify the U.S. attorney's office if he initiates such a probe.

In an interview, Racine said he has had "discussions" with the U.S. attorney's office but would neither confirm nor deny an investigation.

A spokesman for U.S. Attorney Channing D. Phillips said he has "no comment on this particular matter."

Racine has introduced a package of campaign finance reforms that are pending before the D.C. Council. Asked whether he intended to investigate Todd's campaign finances, Racine said, "Issues of campaign finance are entirely appropriate matters for the Office of the Attorney General to focus resources on."

The Office of Campaign Finance is facing criticism from the D.C. Council and Todd's rivals over the timing of the audit release.

Preliminary findings were shared with Todd's campaign more than a year ago but were not made public until months after he won reelection last year to a full four-year term.

Todd and Bowser shared several of the same campaign operatives, including treasurer Ben Soto.

Soto said Wednesday that he was unaware that the candidate's file had gone missing.

He said OCF officials did not mention a missing file when they met two weeks ago to try to answer auditors' questions. Todd campaign officials have since filed to close the campaign account, saying they have answered all concerns.

"We've given them everything," Soto said. "The ball is in their court."

In an emailed response to questions from a Post reporter about the missing file, Williams sent a blind copy of the exchange to Michael Bennett, chairman of the D.C. Board of Elections, using Bennett's private email address — not his government account.

The D.C. Board of Elections oversees the Office of Campaign Finance; Bennett is appointed by Bowser.

Bennett seemed to approve of the explanation that Williams offered, that Todd's missing records were not problematic because most had been digitally scanned. "Good response," Bennett wrote to Williams.

Some D.C. Council members say the Office of Campaign Finance should be placed under an agency that is independent of the mayor. A majority of the council has said it will back legislation to prevent a repeat of the way the audit into Todd's campaign was not disclosed before his run for reelection.

Editorials, Blogs and OpEds:

[Super PACs gearing up for 2018 \(Open Secrets Blog\)](#)

By Ashley Balcerzak

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

Is it 2018 already? Hard to believe it's only been six months since the last election judging by the number of super PACs that have cropped up so far.

Through May 10, more than 140 groups that can spend unlimited amounts of money in elections independently from candidates have appeared since Jan. 1 of 2017, about 17 more than the previous presidential election cycle saw through the same date.

And they are quite an interesting bunch. Scour the FEC reports and you find new groups such as Deplorables Nation, Impeach Trump, National Committee Against Athletic Servitude, and our personal favorite, No Permanent Enemies No Permanent Friends Only Permanent Interests. We don't know much about these entities besides their names, addresses and treasurers, as they don't have to report their donations and expenditures (unless they air ads explicitly advocating for or against a candidate) until July, and not again until 2018. And almost

40 of the groups list P.O. boxes as their addresses, which doesn't exactly give us a clearer picture. The most groups hail from D.C. (16), California (16), New York (14) and North Carolina (13).

"This is of critical importance and perhaps one of the biggest factors eroding campaign finance contribution limits," said Craig Holman with Public Citizen. "Many single candidate super PACs are probably set up by the candidate's own staff or supporters or family for that matter, so these are means for candidates and political parties to get around the limits, and they can take unlimited amounts of contributions."

Last election, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) was able to solicit nearly \$100 million for the super PAC Right to Rise, because he did so before officially announcing he was running for president, working around laws prohibiting coordination. The earlier it was formed, and the longer he put off his declaration of candidacy, the longer the super PAC could work with Bush's team and fill the group's coffers.

We haven't found any such blatant ties among this year's crop of super PACs, but there are some familiar names. Main Voters' treasurer is Seth Tanner, an alum of the teams of Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass), former Gov. Bill Richardson (D-N.M.), and its custodian of records is Amy Pritchard, a political strategist and DNC alum. America First Action, Inc. lists Charles Gantt as the custodian of records, who was the Chief Financial Officer of Trump for America, Inc. Lab 736's treasurer, Kate Gage, is a former Obama policy adviser. Time to Act PAC's treasurer is Tommi Pryor, head of a digital marketing company whose clients include Republicans running for Congress or state offices.

One group is dedicated to a candidate who hasn't declared he will run for Congress: Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke. Clarke was in the news last year as a possible Trump appointee to the Department of Homeland Security (or even a replacement for FBI Director James Comey), and as the man overseeing a county jail where four inmates died in custody. A committee with a P.O. Box in Pinehurst, North Carolina is urging the sheriff to run against Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc) in 2018, and has already raised more than \$300,000 from almost 6,000 donors, according to the group's chairman, Jack Daly, former Republican counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee. (For comparison, Baldwin has \$2.5 million cash on hand as of March 31.) The cast of characters on the group's advisory board includes Duane "Dog the Bounty Hunter" Chapman, Nick Searcy, who plays a U.S. Marshal in the TV show "Justified," and Robert Davi, an actor and singer who played an FBI agent in "Die Hard."

Formed a week after the 2016 election, Ohio Freedom Fund is already backing that state's Republican Treasurer Josh Mandel for his battle against Sen. Sherrod Brown (D) next year, and is obscuring its donors. The AP found a majority of the funds came from a nonprofit named Citizens for a Working America, which is not required to disclose who funded it. We know that it is led by Joel Riter, a former aide to Mandel.

Change for Ohio District Two doesn't know who it wants to replace Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R), just that it wants him out. "While the opposing candidate is not yet known, we did not want to wait for that candidate to have our voices heard," said founder Emily Cobbs in an email. "This is truly about Brad not being the right Representative for Ohio District 2 and we are going to do everything in our power Repeal and Replace Wenstrup from now until November of 2018."

Another group, Deal Her Out, already has a website calling users to "Dump Elizabeth Warren," written on the side of a dumpster.

Finally, if you think it's too early to be raising money for 2018, tell that to the groups already preparing for 2020.

The Center for Public Integrity found that two groups backing Trump for his bid for a second term, Great America PAC and Committee to Defend the President (formerly Stop Hillary PAC), have already spent \$1.32 million. Last year, these two hybrid "Carey committees" (half regular PAC that can make campaign contributions, half super PAC) spent \$26 million, mostly on Trump's behalf.

At least two new groups are also looking forward three years: Draft Mo for President 2020 and California 2020, the latter saying it was too early to share its plans. Filmmaker Harry Knapp of Newbury Park, California and his two daughters, ages 22 and 24, "were fired up" after the election, so they started Draft Mo, which stands for Michelle Obama. Knapp, who had sold a piece of art to one of the super PACs supporting Hillary Clinton, was familiar with how the groups operated.

"We started talking about how folks effect change and what was interesting to us was that anyone can start a super PAC and become a part of the process, and that seemed like a powerful proposition to us," Knapp said. "We all felt that Michelle, although she declared she isn't running, was worth the effort to start a groundswell for her and her causes."



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[Trump Orders New Commission to Study Voter Fraud \(Bloomberg BNA\)](#)

By Kenneth P. Doyle

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

President Donald Trump issued an executive order to create an advisory commission to study election integrity, following up on his unsupported claims of massive voter fraud.

Trump's order named Vice President Mike Pence as chairman of the 15-member commission, which was expected to include other Republicans who have been outspoken on voter fraud issues. The vice chairman of the commission is expected to be Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, who has spearheaded a national push for new voter identification laws.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said the new commission would be bipartisan, including at least two Democratic secretaries of state, Bill Gardner of New Hampshire and Matthew Dunlap of Maine. Republicans expected to join the commission include Connie Lawson, the secretary of state of Indiana, Ken Blackwell, former secretary of state of Ohio, and Christy McCormick, a commissioner on U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

Questions of Partisanship

Many Democrats have charged that Republican-led efforts to clamp down on alleged voter fraud are intended to suppress voter turnout among minorities and other groups that tend to vote Democratic.

Although they agreed to serve on the new Trump commission, both Gardner and Dunlap have said they have seen no evidence of widespread voter fraud. When Trump claimed earlier this year that there was major voter fraud in New Hampshire, Gardner was quoted in news reports as saying he was unaware of widespread fraud in the state.

Sanders said the new commission would “review policies and practices that enhance or undermine the American people's confidence in the integrity of federal elections and provide the president with a report that identifies system vulnerabilities that lead to improper registrations and voting.”

She said the report was expected to be complete by 2018 and that the experts and officials on the commission “will follow the facts where they lead.” The commission's meetings and hearings will be open to the public for comments and input, Sanders said.

Diversion From Russia Probe?

Trump's executive order said the new commission would be “solely advisory.” Its mission would be to conduct studies and public hearings aimed at producing a report that identifies “vulnerabilities in voting systems and practices used for Federal elections that could lead to improper voter registrations and improper voting, including fraudulent voter registrations and fraudulent voting.”

Some Trump critics said the president's latest move was an attempt to divert attention from an ongoing probe of alleged Russian efforts to interfere in the 2016 election and possible collusion with Trump's presidential

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campaign. Questions about the future direction of that probe were heightened by Trump's controversial May 9 firing of FBI Director James Comey.

Liz Kennedy of the Democratic-leaning nonprofit Center for American Progress said in a statement that Trump's call to study voting issues “grows out of the president's blatant, easily disproved lies about millions of illegal voters is a false start and a threat to American democracy.”

“Launching an investigation into American voters while attempting to shut down the investigation into Russian interference in the U.S. election and his campaign's collusion in that attack reeks of attempted misdirection,” she added.

Previous Efforts Bipartisan

Rick Hasen, a University of California, Irvine, law professor and election law expert, said on his Election Law Blog that the new commission didn't appear designed to ferret out the truth about allegations of voter fraud, given the partisan track record of Kobach and other Republican members. Hasen also said he was disappointed to see Christie McCormick, a Republican member of the Election Assistance Commission, on the new Trump advisory commission.

The EAC was established by law in the early 2000s as an advisory agency on voting issues and has sought to establish a record of bipartisanship. Hasen noted there also have been previous advisory commissions on voting issues that tried to conduct objective inquiries, relying on advice from professional staffers. These include a commission linked to former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford that investigated problems with the 2000 election, as well as other bipartisan commissions created after the 2004 and 2012 elections.

Hasen said he expected the latest commission not to live up to the standards of previous efforts, but he also suggested that might not matter in the end.

“The Administration's credibility is so low that few except the true believers are likely to believe anything produced by the likely worthless report,” he said.



Critics Call Trump Election Panel a ‘Sham’ (CO-Roll Call)

‘We need to be vigilant and rely on the evidence and the data.’

By Kate Ackley

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17; 5:04 a.m.)

U.S. President Donald Trump, stands with House Speaker Paul D. Ryan and Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows after Republicans passed legislation aimed at repealing and replacing ObamaCare, during an event in the Rose Garden at the White House, on May 4, 2017 in Washington, D.C.

Voting-rights advocates lambasted a new Trump administration directive to probe alleged election fraud, calling the effort a distraction that also could ultimately prevent legitimate voters from casting ballots.

President Donald Trump signed the executive order Thursday creating a commission, led by Vice President Mike Pence, to study the U.S. voter registration and election system. It comes months after Trump alleged, without evidence, that thousands of noncitizens had voted in the 2016 elections.

Even many Republicans have said such a commission is an unnecessary use of government resources because numerous other studies show no indication of widespread election fraud.

Critics of the new Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity said the administration ought to focus instead on voter suppression concerns as well as potential Russian hacking and interference in the 2016 elections, a scandal that has only intensified this week with Trump’s firing of FBI Director James B. Comey.

“This is a sham commission that is going to be distracting us, distracting our country from very real problems that we should be confronting,” said Myrna Pérez of the Brennan Center for Justice. “We need to be vigilant and rely on the evidence and the data.”

The Brennan Center at New York University’s School of Law recently issued a report after studying 42 jurisdictions with the most noncitizen residents, concluding that such instances of fraud are “extraordinarily rare,” Pérez said.

Critics of Trump’s commission also said they were concerned that its leaders, Pence and vice chairman Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, may have too much sway over the bipartisan panel.

“I do think that it is problematic to set up a commission headed by two Republicans if you want it to have credibility,” said Ellen Weintraub, a Democratic member of the Federal Election Commission. “This whole topic has been studied in great depth, and nobody’s come up with any real evidence of voter fraud.”

A concern, Weintraub said, is that “voter fraud allegations have been used in the past as a pretext for adopting measures that restrict people’s ability to vote. That’s the real fraud we ought to be worried about — disenfranchising people.”

Other members of the commission are expected to include Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson, a Republican who in the mid-2000s sponsored a strict voter identification law in her state. Democratic members include New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner and Maine Secretary of State Matthew Dunlap.

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The executive order tasked the commission with identifying laws and rules that “undermine the American people’s confidence in the integrity of the voting process” and with exposing vulnerabilities in the voting system “that could lead to improper voter registration and improper voting, including fraudulent voter registration and fraudulent voting.”

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Thursday the administration expects the commission to complete its report by 2018.

“The experts and officials on this commission will follow the facts where they lead,” she told reporters. “Meetings and hearings will be open to the public for comments and input. And we will share those updates as we have them.”

Election lawyers said that it was notable that the president did not ask the commission to similarly evaluate cases of alleged voter suppression.

“This is not a good day for those who believe we should have a system where all eligible voters, but only eligible voters, can easily cast a ballot that will be fairly and accurately counted,” election lawyer Rick Hasen wrote on his blog.

Chris Carson, president of the League of Women Voters, said the executive branch should focus on protecting the U.S. election system from future foreign hacking incidents.

“The real purpose of this effort is to justify President Trump’s false claims of widespread voter fraud in the 2016 elections,” Carson said. “This is part of a wider effort to suppress the vote, keep certain politicians in power, and undermine our elections by spreading falsehoods.”

Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, added in a statement: “This executive order is a farce, plain and simple, and a seemingly naked attempt by President Trump to divert attention from his firing of FBI Director James Comey and the very serious investigation into possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia to influence the 2016 election. No one should be fooled.”



[Trump Picks Voter ID Advocate for Election Fraud Panel \(New York Times\)](#)

By Julie Hirschfeld Davis

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Thursday named Kris W. Kobach, the Kansas secretary of state who has pressed for aggressive measures to crack down on undocumented immigrants, to a commission investigating vote fraud, following through on his unsubstantiated claim that millions of “illegals” voted for his Democratic rival and robbed him of victory in the national popular vote.

Mr. Kobach, who has championed the strictest voter identification laws in the country, will be the vice chairman of the commission, which will be led by Vice President Mike Pence and is expected to include about a dozen others, including state officials from both political parties, said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy White House press secretary.

Mr. Trump signed an executive order on Thursday creating the commission, which Ms. Sanders said would have a broad mandate to review policies and practices that affect Americans’ confidence in the integrity of federal elections. Marc E. Lotter, Mr. Pence’s spokesman, said that voter suppression would be among the topics studied by the commission, which he said would take a wide-ranging look at problems at the state and national levels. But the order makes no mention of suppression or voting restrictions, specifying only “improper” or “fraudulent” registration and voting as issues to be explored.

Democrats and civil rights groups condemned the panel as a taxpayer-funded witch hunt, and the American Civil Liberties Union filed a legal request to the White House for records showing “concrete evidence” of fraudulent voting that would warrant the creation of such a commission.

“President Trump is attempting to spread his own fake news about election integrity,” said Dale Ho, the director of the A.C.L.U.’s Voting Rights Project. “If the Trump administration really cares about election integrity, it will divulge its supposed evidence before embarking on this commission boondoggle.”

The commission was created at a tumultuous time in the White House, after Mr. Trump’s abrupt firing on Tuesday of James B. Comey, the F.B.I. director, who had been leading an investigation into possible ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. United States intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia worked to sway the election to Mr. Trump.

Ms. Sanders said the group would produce a report for Mr. Trump next year on “system vulnerabilities that lead to improper registrations and voting.” Its roots lie in Mr. Trump’s own long-festering grievances and his conviction that illegal voting — including ballots cast by people who were registered to vote in multiple states, were not citizens, or were impersonating people whose names had remained on voting rolls after they died — reduced his margin of victory.

There is no evidence to support Mr. Trump’s claims, which have been discredited repeatedly by fact-checkers, that millions of people voted illegally in 2016.

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As a candidate, Mr. Trump repeatedly raised doubts about the integrity of the American voting system. After winning the election, he told members of Congress privately that three million to five million undocumented immigrants had voted illegally for Hillary Clinton, costing him the popular vote. And he promised to begin a major investigation.

Voting officials in both parties and academics across the country have long rejected the notion that fraudulent voting is widespread, finding instead that it is a sporadic and uncommon occurrence that has had no discernible effect on election outcomes. Mr. Trump's own lawyers concluded as much about the 2016 contest, asserting in legal filings that it was "not tainted" as they sought to block recounts in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

"There are problems in the registration system that don't translate into fraud, there are sporadic and very rare instances of fraud, and voter impersonation fraud is the rarest of all," said Nathaniel Persily, a professor of political science at Stanford who served as the research director of the bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration in 2012.

"The notion that there is widespread voting by undocumented immigrants or other ineligible voters has been studied repeatedly and found to be false," he said.

Mr. Kobach's influential position on the panel intensified the controversy over its creation, particularly among immigration advocacy and civil rights groups, as well as Democrats who said they feared he would use the perch to try to prevent minority voters from casting ballots.

"Selecting Kris Kobach as vice chair reveals exactly the kind of discriminatory witch hunt the American people can expect from this commission," said Representative Nancy Pelosi, Democrat of California and the House minority leader. "The president's 'election integrity' commission is clearly intended to accelerate the vile voter suppression efforts in states across the nation."

Mr. Kobach was the driving force behind a Kansas law requiring new voters to produce a passport, a birth certificate or naturalization papers as proof of citizenship. He worked last year to disqualify the state and local votes of thousands of people who did not meet those criteria. He has advocated the proof-of-citizenship requirement at the federal level as well, alleging rampant voter fraud without producing proof of a widespread problem.

Mr. Kobach dismissed the criticism of him as a "silly reaction" and said he had no preconceived ideas of what the commission would find. He argued that there had been no previous national effort to gather "hard data," rather than survey-based research, to quantify voting problems.

"If there's no such thing as voter fraud, or voter fraud is insignificant, then the commission will be able to confirm that," Mr. Kobach said in an interview. "What are they afraid of? Why do they not want to know these numbers?"

Ms. Sanders said the commission would also include the Republicans Connie Lawson, the secretary of state of Indiana, and Kenneth Blackwell, who formerly held that post in Ohio, as well as two top Democratic election officials: William M. Gardner of New Hampshire and Matthew Dunlap of Maine. Christy McCormick, a



Republican member of the nonpartisan U.S. Election Assistance Commission appointed by President Barack Obama, has also been selected to serve on the panel.

“The president’s committed to the thorough review of registration and voting issues in federal elections, and that’s exactly what this commission is tasked with doing,” Ms. Sanders said. “The commission will review policies and practices that enhance or undermine the American people’s confidence in the integrity of federal elections and provide the president with a report that identifies system vulnerabilities that lead to improper registrations and voting.”

Civil rights groups reacted with alarm to the creation of the task force, arguing that Mr. Trump’s own claims of illegal voting by immigrants suggested that his intent was to work to restrict the voting rights of minorities.

Sherrilyn Ifill, the president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, called the commission “a thinly veiled voter suppression task force,” adding that it was “designed to impugn the integrity of African-American and Latino participation in the political process.”

Democratic lawmakers said the commission was ill-conceived at best and a potential front for discriminatory policies at worst.

“Instead of focusing on the myth of voter fraud, the president should be looking at ways to make it easier for eligible Americans to vote, given how difficult it is for some individuals to vote in this country,” said Senator Benjamin A. Cardin, Democrat of Maryland.

Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the minority leader, said the president was “chasing a unicorn” with taxpayer money and “perpetuating the dangerous myth that widespread voter fraud exists.”



[Trump signs voter fraud, cybersecurity executive orders \(CBS News\)](#)

By Margaret Brennan

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 11:04 a.m.)

The White House says President Donald Trump has signed an executive order creating a commission to look at the public's confidence in the integrity of the voting system.

The commission will look at allegations of improper voting and fraudulent voter registration in states and across the nation.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders says Vice President Mike Pence will chair the panel, and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach will co-chair it.

She says the group plans to complete its work with a report to the president by 2018.

This order was spurred by Mr. Trump's unsubstantiated claim that millions of people voted illegally in the 2016 election, thus costing him the popular vote. Congressional leaders including House Speaker Paul Ryan and Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham have said they've seen no evidence to back up this claim.

President Trump tweeted shortly after taking office in January that he would be asking for a "major investigation" into voter fraud, vowing to "strengthen up voting procedures."

Democratic Federal Election Commissioner Ellen Weintraub asked Mr. Trump in a letter to disclose evidence of his charges of voter fraud presidential election.

"Your allegations are not properly a matter for a future investigation to take up, as you cannot have responsibly alleged this scheme without already having sufficient facts in hand to do so," Weintraub wrote.

The order comes as congressional and FBI probes into Russian meddling in the U.S. 2016 election are underway. FBI Director James Comey was leading the FBI's investigation into any ties between Trump campaign associates and Russia.

The commission, which will be driven by several state election officials, will include a review of voter registration, voter "suppression" and best practices.

Following the orders signing, Democratic leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-California, saying the commission is "clearly intended to accelerate the vile voter suppression efforts" across the country.

"If President Trump cannot believe that the majority of Americans voted against him, he should review his own conduct instead of trying to steal the vote from millions of citizens," said Pelosi.

Echoing Pelosi's statements, Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-Louisiana, called the order a "distraction from the real issues."

"President Trump says this commission is an effort to protect voting rights but it is really an effort to suppress and intimidate African-American and other minority voters," said Richmond in a statement.

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The White House also confirmed that Trump signed an executive order aimed at modernizing and improving the nation's computer networks.

Trump's homeland security adviser Tom Bossert says the order will help keep the U.S. safer from cybersecurity risks. Among the new requirements is that agency heads must be accountable for implementing risk management measures.

Trump pledged in late January to strengthen the government's ability to protect its computer networks, but then canceled plans to sign an executive order on cybersecurity without explanation.



[Trump: 'No collusion' between my campaign and Russia \(The Hill\)](#)

By Max Greenwood

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 7:04 p.m. ET)

President Trump on Thursday flatly denied any collusion between his presidential campaign and Russia, claiming the narrative was "set up by the Democrats."

"This was set up by the Democrats. There's no collusion between me and my campaign and Russians," Trump told NBC's Lester Holt in an interview. "The other thing is, the Russians did not affect the vote, and everybody seems to think that."

The Senate and House intelligence committees are currently investigating Russia's efforts to meddle in the 2016 presidential election, as well alleged ties between Trump's campaign and the Kremlin.

Former FBI Director James Comey also confirmed in March that the bureau was conducting its own probe into the matter and any coordination between the Trump campaign and Russia.

Trump told NBC News that he wants the FBI's investigation to "be so strong and so good." Democrats slammed Trump's dismissal of Comey earlier this week, voicing concerns that it was an attempt to tamp down on the bureau's Russia probe.

The U.S. intelligence community concluded in a report made public in January that Russia had sought to interfere in the presidential election in favor of Trump. Trump has repeatedly denied having any improper ties with Moscow.

The Senate Intelligence Committee announced Wednesday that it had delivered a subpoena to former Trump campaign adviser and White House national security adviser Michael Flynn, requesting documents as part of its Russia probe.



Trump said he was thinking of Russia controversy when he decided to fire Comey (Washington Post)

The Trump administration's shifting story on Comey

By Devlin Barrett and Philip Rucker

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 8:09 p.m.)

President Trump on Thursday said he was thinking of “this Russia thing with Trump” when he decided to fire FBI Director James B. Comey, who had been leading the counterintelligence investigation into Russia’s interference in the 2016 election.

Recounting his decision to dismiss Comey, Trump told NBC News, “In fact, when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said, ‘You know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made up story, it’s an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won.’”

Trump’s account flatly contradicts the White House’s initial account of how the president arrived at his decision, undercutting public denials by his aides that the move was influenced in any way by his growing fury with the ongoing Russia probe.

Later in the same interview, Trump said he had no intention of trying to stop or hinder the FBI’s Russia probe, which is examining whether any Trump associates coordinated with Russians to influence the election. Trump also said he wants the probe “to be absolutely done properly.”

“I want that to be so strong and so good,” Trump told NBC anchor Lester Holt. He added, “I want to get to the bottom. If Russia hacked, if Russia did anything having to do with our election, I want to know about it.”

Trump’s account of his decision to fire Comey — whom he denigrated as “a showboat” and “a grandstander” — exposes the explanations made over the previous 48 hours by White House officials, including Vice President Pence, as misleading and in some cases false.

Initially, Trump aides had said the president fired Comey simply at the recommendation of Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein, who wrote a memorandum detailing what he considered to be Comey’s flawed handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server as secretary of state.

In media appearances, administration officials repeatedly highlighted Rosenstein’s reputation of integrity and bipartisan appeal, effectively using his independence as a shield against criticism that Comey’s firing was politically motivated by the president.

Officials insisted that Trump’s decision was not shaped in any way by his growing fury with the Russia controversy. Trump has publicly called the ongoing probes by the FBI, as well as the Senate and House, “a total hoax” and “a taxpayer charade.”

But Trump made clear in Thursday’s interview that Russia indeed was on his mind. And he said Sessions and Rosenstein’s recommendations did not prompt his decision.

“I was going to fire Comey,” Trump told Holt. “Oh, I was going to fire regardless of recommendation.”

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The White House on Thursday struggled to explain its evolving and contradictory accounts of Trump's decisionmaking process.

"Nobody was left in the dark," Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the principal deputy White House press secretary, insisted at Thursday's press briefing. She added, "It was a quick-moving process. We took the information we had as best we had it, and got it out to the American people as quickly as we could."

In interview, Trump also detailed three conversations he said he had with Comey about the Russia investigation. The president said the FBI director assured him in each discussion that he was not under investigation — once at a White House dinner when Comey was seeking to remain in his post and again in two phone calls. Trump said Comey initiated one of the calls.

"I said, 'If it's possible, would you let me know am I under investigation?' He said, 'You are not under investigation,'" Trump said.

In offering more details about an assertion he made when firing Comey on Tuesday—that Comey had repeatedly assured him he was not under investigation—the president raised new questions about his conduct toward the ongoing FBI probe into whether any Trump associates coordinated with Russia to meddle with last year's presidential election.

Trump has repeatedly criticized that investigation, calling it a waste of taxpayer money, and denied he has any ties to Russia.

"There's no collusion between me and my campaign and the Russians," Trump told Holt.

Democrats have called for the appointment of a special counsel to investigate the matter without the threat of political interference.

In the NBC interview, Trump said Comey came to eat dinner with him at the White House. "I think he asked for the dinner. . . . And he wanted to stay at the FBI, and I said I'll, you know, consider and see what happens . . . But we had a very nice dinner, and at that time he told me, 'You are not under investigation.' "

The exchange as described by the president is remarkable since he said the FBI director was discussing an ongoing investigation with the president — something Justice Department policy generally prohibits — at the same time Comey was seeking assurances he would remain in his job.

Current and former officials said Trump's description of statements by Comey is not accurate, but they declined to elaborate. Legal experts also expressed doubts about Trump's account.

"I just can't even begin to think about that comment being true," said Michael Greenberger, a law professor at the University of Maryland who has previously worked in the Justice Department. "It defies belief in general because of the practices of not commenting on investigations, and it would especially defy belief in the case of Comey who prides himself on strict observance of propriety."

Greenberger noted the implication of Trump's statement is severe — that Comey may have offered that assurance to try to ingratiate himself with the president and remain in his job. "I just have a very hard time



imagining that,” he said, though he added he also didn’t think Trump simply asking that question came close to a criminal act of trying to obstruct the investigation.

The federal law against obstruction of justice is broadly worded but in practice, prosecutors have a high bar for bringing charges that someone “corruptly or by threats or force, or by any threatening letter or communication” attempts to “influence, obstruct, or impede the due administration of justice.” Generally, such cases are only brought when prosecutors have clear evidence of the underlying motive behind a person’s actions.

White House spokeswoman Sanders would not provide further details about the conversations between Trump and Comey, such as when they occurred and whether all three were after the president’s Jan. 20 inauguration. She said commentary by legal experts on cable news showed there had been no conflict of interest with Trump asking the FBI director whether he was the subject of the Russia probe.

Robert Chesney, a University of Texas law professor who specializes in national security and constitutional issues, said that even assuming Trump’s account is accurate, “legally speaking, I don’t think that crosses any lines.”

At base it is more a political issue than legal, he said. Offering a more extreme hypothetical—that Trump began firing anyone involved in the investigation—that could come closer to obstruction of justice. But then it would be a matter for Congress to act. “Our system is designed so that impeachment is the remedy,” he said. “But the fact pattern you’d need is something more Nixonian.”

FBI directors are appointed for 10-year terms, and Comey had been on the job less than four years. A president may fire an FBI director at any time for any reason, but it is very rare to do so because of the potential political blowback if the White House is perceived to be interfering with federal law enforcement work.

Comey’s temporary replacement, Andrew McCabe, told senators at a hearing Thursday morning that no White House officials had tried to interfere with the Russia probe.

In the interview, Trump said he fired Comey because he had mismanaged the FBI and was an attention-seeker.

“Look, he’s a showboat, he’s a grandstander,” the president said. “The FBI has been in turmoil. You know that. I know that. Everybody knows that. You take a look at the FBI a year ago, it was in virtual turmoil, less than a year ago. It hasn’t recovered from that.”



[Feds Find Voice Recorder In Closed-Door Meeting Room, Then Kept It Secret For Four Years \(Daily Caller News Foundation\)](#)

By Ethan Barton

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 6:39 p.m.)

Federal officials found a voice recorder somebody used to document a closed-door government meeting in 2013 but kept the discovery secret for nearly four years, The Daily Caller News Foundation’s Investigative Group has learned.

Federal Election Commission (FEC) officials found the recorder in an agency meeting room July 9, 2013, but didn’t tell the Inspector General (IG) for nearly a month, which hampered the watchdog’s subsequent investigation. The IG also kept the public in the dark by not making its investigative report public until it was recently released in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

“An investigation was opened due to the possibility that the [recorder] may have been placed in an attempt to intercept oral communications in violation of [the law] or make public a commission investigation or enforcement matter in violation of [another law],” said the report, which wasn’t finished until August 2015, two years after the IG began its investigation.

The FEC regulates political campaign finances and investigates potential violations. Illegally recording closed-door federal meetings is punishable by up to five years in prison.

The “investigation was unable to determine the owner of the [recorder] and whether or not the [recorder] was used to attempt to record non-public meetings or confidential discussions,” the report said. “This matter is closed due to the lack of investigative leads.”

An FEC official found the recorder either on or under a chair in the back corner of a hearing room. The recorder was passed between officials and discussed among senior management – including Chairman Ellen Weintraub and Vice Chairman Donald McGahn II – before it was locked in a drawer.

The IG received an anonymous complaint about the device a month later.

“It does not appear that during this series of events did anyone with knowledge of the [recorder] think of or suggest contacting the [IG],” the report said. “The [IG] is unable to reach any conclusions due to multiple people handling the [recording device] and the fact that the [IG] was not notified by management at the time of discovery.”

Investigators suspect the recorder was not used to record FEC discussions illegally, but their rationale is not explained in the report.

This “does not lessen the fact that the potential for abuse existed,” the report said.

Investigators found a continuous, nearly 24-hour recording starting at 9:16 a.m. on June 27, 2013 on the device, which still had half-battery power remaining.

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It captured an open meeting, “followed by a closed executive session involving discussions of the termination of an” FEC attorney, the report said. “Most of the rest of the recording consists of background noise.”

Investigators also found numerous folders on the device, but their names were redacted.

The watchdog recommended the FEC issue a statement “regarding the importance of reporting to the [IG] all issues within its jurisdiction,” the report said. It’s unclear if the FEC complied.

“I am not aware of any additional information,” FEC spokeswoman Judith Ingram told TheDCNF.

The IG declined to comment.



FBI searches Republican political consulting firm in Annapolis (Washington Post)

By Fenit Nirappil, Josh Hicks and Matea Gold

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 8:48 p.m.)

Federal authorities on Thursday searched the offices of a political consulting firm in Annapolis that has worked with Republican candidates locally and nationwide and was sued in 2014 on allegations of fraudulent fundraising practices.

Strategic Campaign Group says it supports Republican candidates on a range of services including mail, fundraising and telephone town halls. Its leaders include GOP strategists Kelley Rogers, Chip O'Neil and Dennis Whitfield.

The firm has close ties to Republican consultant Scott B. Mackenzie, a treasurer for multiple political action committees that have drawn scrutiny for spending little money on candidates and instead steering donations to consultants, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Rogers said in an interview that he helped lead one of those groups, the Conservative Strike Force.

On Thursday, six FBI agents showed up at the third-floor office of Strategic Campaign Group to gather computer files and documents related to the firm's direct mail and fundraising practices, Rogers said. Lindsay Ram, a spokeswoman for the FBI field office in Washington, confirmed that agents were "conducting law enforcement activity in Annapolis, off Main Street."

Rogers said agents appeared interested in work the firm did during Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli's 2013 gubernatorial race. Cuccinelli (R) sued the Strategic Campaign Group and the Conservative Strike Force in 2014, alleging they raised almost \$2.2 million to support his campaign but steered little of that money to him.

"Our suspicion is that this is just a carry-over from that," Rogers said. "I think the facts speak for themselves, and we tried to give the agents all the information they could possibly need."

The Conservative Strike Force agreed to pay Cuccinelli \$85,000 to settle the lawsuit, and Strategic Campaign Group said it would turn over donor information.

The Conservative Strike Force has paid Strategic Campaign Group at least \$493,000 for services since 2011, according to federal records. Strategic Campaign Group also received at least \$188,000 in that time period from the Conservative Majority Fund, another political action committee listing Mackenzie as its treasurer. Mackenzie did not return a voice mail seeking comment.

Both groups have spent a small portion of the donations they receive on the candidates they aim to support, according to federal records, and reported high spending on consultants and other firms.

The Federal Election Commission has been struggling for some time with the issue of political action committees that are formed solely to enrich those running them. Unlike nonprofits, which are governed by boards of directors, PACs can be run by a single consultant. And although candidates are prohibited under federal election law from using campaign donations for personal use, traditional political action committees and their super PAC brethren face few limitations on how they spend their funds.

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Critics say “scam PACs” have proliferated in recent years, driven in part by the advent of big-money super PACs in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision. There has also been a surge in groups chasing small-dollar donors, often with misleading promises of how they plan to use those funds.

The Strategic Campaign Group has ties to Republicans in the Maryland state legislature, and Rogers has raised money for Gov. Larry Hogan (R), although Rogers said Thursday that federal agents did not appear interested in his local work.

In 2016, Strategic Campaign Group was paid by the campaigns of Maryland House Minority Leader Nicholas R. Kipke (R-Anne Arundel) and GOP Maryland congressional candidates Patrick McDonough and Charles Faddis, state and federal records show. Kipke said Thursday that the state GOP House and Senate political operations would suspend work with the company until the investigation is resolved.

Strategic Campaign Group also worked to support Republican Kathy Szeliga’s unsuccessful 2016 campaign for a U.S. Senate seat.

Virginia Republicans, mostly state lawmakers, have sent the company more than \$500,000 since 2009 for services including polling and robocalls, according to the Virginia Public Access Project.



Republican Strategy Firm in Maryland Raided by FBI: Reports (Bloomberg)

By Erik Larson

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 5:53 p.m. ET)

The Federal Bureau of Investigation carried out a raid on a Republican fundraising firm in Maryland that had been accused in a 2014 lawsuit of defrauding political donors, according to several area news outlets.

The target of the raid was Strategic Campaign Group Inc. in Annapolis, the Baltimore Sun reported on Thursday, along with local television stations. Nicole Schwab, a spokeswoman for the FBI's Washington, D.C., field office, told Bloomberg News that agents had executed a court-approved search warrant in the vicinity of Main Street, Annapolis, where the fundraising firm is located.

Kelley Rogers, the president of Strategic Campaign Group, confirmed that his firm was the target of the raid, the newspaper reported.

It's unclear what the FBI was seeking at the offices of the group, which advises Republican candidates. Calls to several of the group's officials weren't immediately returned.

Strategic Campaign Group and its affiliates have been accused by various campaigns, including President Donald Trump's, of raising money without the candidate's approval.

Former Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli of Virginia, a Republican who ran for governor in 2013, filed a lawsuit against the group and its Conservative StrikeForce PAC, accusing the organization of fraud, for allegedly making unauthorized fundraising pitches. The suit was settled in 2015 and the PAC, which listed Scott B. Mackenzie as its treasurer, was required to pay Cuccinelli \$85,000.

Patriots For Trump, a PAC run by the same treasurer, shut down in 2015 after the Trump campaign sent a letter demanding that it stop raising donations without its authorization. According to Federal Election Commission filings the committee raised more than \$131,000 and spent \$122,000 to promote Trump's campaign.

While there's no indication that the raid was related to Cuccinelli's lawsuit, the litigation sheds some light on the firm's previous legal troubles. Cuccinelli said in his complaint that Strategic Campaign Group used national lists of conservative voters to seek cash for phone banks, rallies and voter-identification efforts.

"Defendants donated less than one-half of one percent of their total receipts in 2013 to the Cuccinelli campaign, and spent no money in support of the Cuccinelli campaign in the form of independent expenditures," the lawsuit said.

Rogers's clients have included numerous campaigns for president, Congress and statewide office, as well as conservative business groups and political action committees, according to the group's website.

Strategic Campaign Group's vice president is former congressional aide Chip O'Neil, according to the group's website. Its senior adviser is Dennis Whitfield, who served as chief of staff for the U.S. trade representative and then as deputy secretary of labor under President Ronald Reagan.

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Whitfield has also provided political and communications advice to U.S. and foreign corporations, and was executive vice president of the American Conservative Union, which organizes the annual American Conservative Political Action Conference, known as CPAC.

Whitfield was also a director at BKSH and Associates, where he provided strategic government relations counseling. That firm was formed in 1996 when Paul Manafort and Roger Stone left Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly and it merged with Gold and Liebengood. Manafort and Stone both went on to become close advisers to Trump. They had departed by the time Whitfield joined the firm.



FBI raids office of GOP consulting firm in Maryland (The Hill)

By Megan R. Wilson

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 3:15 p.m. ET)

The FBI has raided the Annapolis office of Strategic Campaign Group, a Republican fundraising and campaign consulting firm in Maryland, according to a local news outlet.

The firm, founded during the 2008 election cycle, has represented Republican candidates around the country. While the firm is based in Annapolis, Md., the investigation is being run out of Washington.

Founder Kelley Rogers credits himself with leading the charge in using technology in political campaigns, including holding allowing candidates and lawmakers to hold “telephone town halls” with constituents.

“Today, Strategic Campaign Group is the largest provider of Telephone Town Hall technology for Republican campaigns and conservative organizations in the United States,” its website says.

WBAL-TV, a local news station, first reported the raid on in the early afternoon on Thursday. A reporter for the television station posted a picture of FBI agents covering windows at the firm with trash bags as they began searching the office.

It is unclear what the FBI is investigating and what prompted the search warrant.

The firm has worked for Republican candidates for Congress, but has also had clients whose fundraising efforts raised concerns among campaign finance watchdogs. In recent years, those questionable groups began to represent a larger portion of its balance sheet.

Strategic Campaign Group worked for Conservative Strikeforce, which was formed during the 2008 presidential election cycle and lists Scott B. Mackenzie as its treasurer. Dennis Whitfield, a senior advisor at Strategic Campaign Group, is chairman of the political action committee (PAC).

Whitfield has held many senior roles in Washington, including serving as executive vice president of the American Conservative Union (ACU), senior vice president at the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB), and as chief of staff for the U.S. Trade Representative and as deputy secretary of the Labor Department during the Reagan administration.

However, critics labeled the Conservative Strikeforce a “Scam PAC” — a political action committee that raises large sums and spends very little on campaigns, candidates or the causes it espouses. All of that is totally legal, though, as there are no federal guidelines for how unaffiliated PACs ought to spend their war chests.

“At the Conservative StrikeForce PAC we are dedicated to replacing the Obama administration with a strong conservative willing to make the difficult decisions necessary to steer our country in the right direction,” its website declares. The PAC “assists candidates in two ways. We make direct cash contributions and we do independent expenditures on behalf of selected conservative candidates whom we support.”

From 2010 to 2016, Conservative Strikeforce raised \$12 million, with only a small circle of firms receiving the cash. Strategic Campaign Group earned \$579,000 from the PAC during that time, and the PAC spent more than

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\$8 million on efforts to raise more funds. It gave \$320,000 to state and federal candidates over the last seven years.

In 2014, Ken Cuccinelli, who had just waged a campaign for governor in Virginia, slapped the group with a lawsuit. The former Virginia attorney general alleged that it had used his name to fundraise without authorization. The PAC ultimately settled with the Republican politician, including paying \$85,000 and handing over its distribution lists.

The Virginia lawsuit said Strategic Campaign Group is a part owner of the PAC, and Federal Election Commission (FEC) records show that the Conservative Strikeforce paid Strategic Campaign Group \$10,000 in 2015 for "reimbursement for legal settlement."

Strategic Campaign Group's client list also includes a PAC called Conservative Majority Fund, which also lists Mackenzie as a treasurer.

It ran ads during former President Barack Obama's 2012 reelection campaign questioning the authenticity of Obama's birthplace and perpetuating claims that the president "is not who he says he is."

From 2012 to 2016, Conservative Majority Fund raised \$8.4 million, and spent more than \$3 million on its fundraising efforts during that time, according to records tallied by The Hill.

It spent roughly \$13,000 on donations to campaigns in those four years, and paid the firm Infocision Management more than \$7 million, according to both FEC records and the Center for Responsive Politics. Strategic Campaign Group, meanwhile, earned just less than \$256,000.

Last November, the PAC donated \$5,000 to President Trump's campaign, but FEC records show the check was returned without being cashed.

CBS News interviewed Mackenzie last year about claims that the committees he manages are murky fundraising vehicles.

Mackenzie told the network that he takes "all the heat for decisions that other people make," while serving as a treasurer for about two-dozen PACs.



[Montana Candidate's Comments Raise Questions About Corporate Money \(CQ-Roll Call\)](#)

Gianforte and Quist both claim they refuse industry PAC contributions

By Simone Pathé

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 9:54 p.m.)

Republican Greg Gianforte, left, is running against Democrat Rob Quist in a special election to fill the at-large Montana congressional seat vacated by former Rep. Ryan Zinke, who's now serving as secretary of the Interior.

Comments made by Montana Republican Greg Gianforte on a national fundraising call last week raise questions about what he meant when he said that industry PACs could contribute to "our Victory Fund."

Both Gianforte and Democrat Rob Quist say they have refused to accept corporate PAC money in the race for Montana's at-large House seat. But when asked on last week's call, audio of which was obtained by CQ Roll Call, whether he still did not accept PAC money, Gianforte gave a confusing answer.

"We do not accept any industry PAC money, although if someone wanted to support through a PAC our Victory Fund allows that money to go to all the get-out-the-vote efforts," he said.

Gianforte went on.

"And the reason for that is I came off the governor's race last year having made a big deal about not taking any PAC money, and it would be a self-inflicted wound. We are starting to lessen that by taking political PAC money. That's why we took the leadership PAC money from members in the House but not industry PAC money directly to the campaign," Gianforte said.

Victory Fund?

But it's not clear what Gianforte meant when he said "our Victory Fund."

Like many candidates, including Quist, Gianforte has what is known as a joint fundraising committee. It's called the Gianforte Victory Fund. Money it receives is shared with the National Republican Congressional Committee and the Montana Republican State Central Committee.

Under a joint fundraising agreement, multiple candidates, PACs or party committees can join together to "share the costs of fundraising, and split the proceeds," according to OpenSecrets.

They're like "one-stop shopping," said election lawyer Michael Toner, a former chairman of the FEC, because they allow donors to contribute in one place.

But the Gianforte campaign said Thursday that he was referring to the Republican Party, not that joint fundraising agreement, on the call and therefore wasn't compromising his pledge not to accept corporate PAC money.

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“Greg was simply stating that they can support the party if they want. (that's what he meant by ‘victory fund’ — not the JFA.) It was a confusing choice of words,” a spokesman for the campaign said in an email, suggesting that “victory” has sometimes been synonymous with the party.

The spokesman said Gianforte has always been clear that he won't accept corporate PAC money.

Gianforte's campaign says that both its campaign committee and its joint fundraising committee are only accepting money from political party and leadership PACs.

Quist has said he won't take corporate PAC money but will accept labor and ideological PAC money. The Quist campaign confirmed Thursday that Quist's pledge applies to the Quist Victory Fund, too, which he shares with the Montana Democratic Party.

Neither campaign's joint victory funds have filed their first reports with the Federal Election Commission.

PAC attacks

The PAC pledge has long been a source of political attacks in Montana. During last year's gubernatorial campaign, Gianforte knocked Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock for not accepting his pledge not to take PAC money. Democrats dismissed the pledge since Gianforte was able to kick \$6 million of his own money into his campaign.

When Gianforte headlined a fundraiser for the state GOP in Washington, D.C., last year, he faced questions about whether he'd be violating his pledge by helping the state party raise money from PACs. In order to avoid that appearance, his campaign told the Associated Press it wouldn't accept money from the state party.

“We're not planning to take any more money from the Republican party,” Gianforte's gubernatorial campaign spokesman told the AP in March of last year.

In this year's House race, both sides have been quick to try to capitalize on the other's money issues. During a recent debate, Quist attacked Gianforte for having financial ties to Russian businesses, including those that are on the U.S. sanctions list. Gianforte's wealth has been a frequent source of attack, with Democrats trying to brand him as a millionaire from New Jersey.

But Quist's personal financial troubles have also been fodder for Republicans. Major outside GOP groups have attacked him for trouble paying his taxes. Congressional Leadership, the super PAC backed by GOP leadership, released a new ad Thursday using Quist's financial issues to question his credibility and readiness to serve.



[Outside money floods House special elections in Georgia and Montana \(USA Today\)](#)

By Fredreka Schouten

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 3:26 p.m. ET)

WASHINGTON — Political parties and independent groups have unleashed more than \$20 million in federal races so far this year, in an early preview of the massive spending that will buffet the 2018 midterm contests for the House.

The Congressional Leadership Fund, a super PAC affiliated with House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., tops the organizations active in early races. The group has reported already spending more than \$5 million to protect Republican-held House seats in three elections this year, a USA TODAY tally of Federal Election Commission records shows.

Corry Bliss, the super PAC's executive director, predicts the group will spend a total of \$8.6 million on two fast-approaching special elections: the May 25 contest to fill an open House seat in Montana and the June 20 election for the suburban Atlanta seat vacated by House and Human Services Secretary Tom Price. The Georgia race, now down to a runoff between Democrat Jon Ossoff and Republican Karen Handel, already is on track to be the nation's most expensive House contest.

The leadership fund is looking ahead to the 2018 midterms when all 435 House members are up for re-election and has committed to spending \$100 million for those elections — twice its 2016 budget.

Officials also plan to open between 20 and 30 field offices in competitive House races around the country. It's the first time that the super PAC, which can raise unlimited sums, has added a voter-turnout operation to its election arsenal and a sign of the midterm's high stakes for the party.

"We are just getting warmed up," Bliss said of the group's aggressive efforts in special elections.

The president's party generally loses ground in midterm elections, and Republicans are moving early to protect their majority in the House. Democrats need 24 seats to retake the chamber and hope they can capitalize on President Trump's near-record unpopularity and a contentious vote this month in the House to repeal the Affordable Care Act to nab seats from Republicans. Democrats view the upcoming special elections as an early test of party strength.

"The enthusiasm here is off the charts," Nancy Keenan, executive director of the Montana Democratic Party, said of the race for the state's at-large House seat.

The seat had been held by Republicans for two decades, and the GOP nominee Greg Gianforte, who ran unsuccessfully for governor last year, is considered the favorite. But recent polls show a tightening race. And the Democratic nominee, musician Rob Quist, recently raised more \$500,000 in just four days, Keenan said.

In this March 6 photo, Greg Gianforte, right, receives congratulations from a supporter in Helena, Mont., after winning the Republican nomination for Montana's special election. (Photo: Matt Volz, AP)

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Quist and Gianforte also face Libertarian Mark Wicks in the election to fill the seat vacated by former Montana congressman and current Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.

Democrats face a steep climb in a rural state that Trump won by nearly 21 points last year. In one sign of the race's importance, however, Vice President Pence is set to stump for Gianforte on Friday in Billings, Mont. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, meanwhile, has pledged to campaign for Quist.

Seat once held by Newt Gingrich

Democrats and Republicans, however, are training most of their firepower on the special election that is still more than a month away in Georgia. Ossoff, a 30-year-old former congressional aide and documentary filmmaker, has raised big sums in his quest for a seat once held by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Ossoff collected an eye-popping \$8.3 million ahead of the first round of voting in mid-April. He has not yet released fundraising totals for next month's runoff with Handel. But Ossoff's campaign said he took in \$500,000 on April 19, the day after his first-place finish in the April 18 special election.

He received 48.1% of that vote, just shy of the 50% needed to capture the seat outright. That forced the June 20 runoff with Handel, the top Republican vote-getter.

The Congressional Leadership Fund spent \$3 million in the first round of the Georgia special election and will spend another \$3.5 million by Election Day, Bliss said. The super PAC is testing its new field operation in the race, deploying 90 full-time door knockers with the goal of talking to 200,000 additional voters.

Ossoff's team also has assembled a big get-out-the-vote operation of its own, with 150 people working in six field offices, according to his aides. The campaign's staff and volunteers had knocked on more than 250,000 doors ahead of the April 18 primary alone, they said.

The super PAC has sought to cast Ossoff as out of step with Georgians and more in line with national Democratic figures, such as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

Republicans also have targeted him for living outside the district he hopes to represent. Ossoff has said he and his fiancée Alisha Kramer are temporarily living closer to Atlanta's Emory University, where she is a medical student.

Handel, a former county commissioner, "has lived and worked and accomplished in the district for years and years," Bliss said. "The only thing Jon Ossoff ever did in the district was be born to really rich parents."

Ossoff "knows the district; he grew up in the district, and he's extremely familiar with the issues," countered his spokeswoman Sacha Haworth.

Ossoff's team contends that the leadership fund represents the real outsiders in the race.

Although super PACs have to disclose donors' identities, \$3.5 million of the nearly \$4.5 million the Congressional Leadership Fund reported raising through March 29 came from its nonprofit arm, the American Action Network, Federal Election Commission records show. The network does not identify its donors.

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That shows that Republicans are relying "on anonymous donations of dark money" in their fight to keep the seat, Haworth said.



[Local DNC host committee gives out nearly \\$1 million in bonus checks \(Philly.com\)](#)

By Claudia Vargas

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 6:51 p.m. ET)

The Philadelphia 2016 Host Committee used some of the leftover money it raised for the Democratic National Convention to pay nearly \$1 million bonuses to staff and volunteers.

The rewards, which ranged from \$500 for interns and volunteers to \$310,000 for executive director Kevin Washo, were paid in November, four months after the convention. The amounts were listed in a year-end report filed with the Federal Election Commission on Jan. 31.

Former Gov. Ed Rendell, who served as chairman of the host committee, said that when he hired committee staff in 2015, he told them that in return for what he saw as low pay, he would take care of them at the end.

“If we do come out and raise enough money, we will decide what to do with it, but a significant part is bonuses and I told that to almost everyone we hired,” Rendell said Thursday.

The committee raised \$86 million, of which \$10 million, the largest amount, came from Pennsylvania taxpayers. After all payments were settled with vendors, the committee was left with a surplus of about \$4 million.

On Nov. 25, all 12 of the host committee staff received bonus checks.

Washo, who had a monthly salary of \$13,000 for two years starting in March 2015, received the most. Rendell said Washo’s payment was part bonus and part back pay for the volunteer work he did during the bid phase of the convention starting in August 2013 and until early 2015. Washo was part of a small team that worked to get the Democratic National Committee to pick Philadelphia for their convention. During that time, he was working for a Washington-based political consulting firm.

Washo said his work with the early committee was “above and beyond” a volunteer job.

Washo said the payouts were decided by him, Rendell, and chief operating officer Eliza Rose.

“It’s performance. Everyone worked hard. We tried to be fair,” he said.

Rose, who was paid between \$9,000 and \$10,000 monthly by the committee, received a \$43,238 bonus.

Chief finance officer Jason O’Malley, who was paid about \$8,000 monthly by the committee, received a \$220,000 bonus. Rendell said O’Malley’s fundraising work deserved a “performance bonus.”

Other staff bonuses range from \$13,357 for the office manager, who was paid \$3,000 monthly; to \$58,286 for communications director Anna Adams-Sarthou, who was paid between \$4,000 and \$5,000 per month.

Washo, now a government affairs principal at the Cozen O’Connor law firm, said he could not remember what scale, if any, was used to determine the bonus amounts.

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“They were awards for service well done. We had a small staff and worked very long hours. ... We wanted them to know they are valued,” he said Thursday.

After the bonuses were given out, the committee gave \$750,000 to the School District’s Right Books Campaign, an effort of the Fund for the School District of Philadelphia to put nearly 80,000 books in elementary schools.

The committee has paid back the city for any money spent during the convention and given out \$10,000 grants to city nonprofits, including the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the Food Trust of Philadelphia, and the Committee of Seventy. It also gave \$25,000 each to Visit Philly and the Independence Visitor Center.

“In the end, on top of paying city services in the tune of \$500,000 ... the overall narrative, on top of making sure everything was paid, it was a successful event,” Washo said.

Still, the bonuses left some flabbergasted.

“That’s terrible,” said U.S. Rep. Robert Brady, the Democratic Party chairman in Philadelphia, and one of the biggest cheerleaders in the effort to bring the convention to Philadelphia.

Brady, who also served as an honorary vice chair of the host committee, said he was unaware such bonuses were given out until a reporter called him.

“I should’ve been on that committee,” he quipped.

But added that he was surprised there was money left over from the event.

After the convention, Rendell and Washo had said the committee was still \$1 million short of its \$64 million cash fund-raising goal. The host committee refused to release fund-raising documents to the public until the committee was legally required to file with the Federal Election Commission in late September. It was only then that it announced it had met and exceeded its fund-raising goal.

Rendell said the committee had budgeted for all sort of possibilities and that bills came in lower than expected.

“Some of the bills we were expecting came in at a third” of what was budgeted, he said, adding that the committee also received “some light checks” from donors post-convention.

The Cleveland 2016 Host Committee, which raised money for the Republican National Convention, had about \$500,000 left after all bills were settled, Emily Lauer, spokeswoman for the committee, said Thursday.

“We gave three \$50,000 grants to three different nonprofits, which were selected by the [host committee] officers,” Lauer said.

No bonuses were given to the Cleveland host committee staff. That committee is holding onto the leftover money for “a few years for any potential obligations,” she said.

When Philadelphia hosted the Republican National Convention in 2000, no bonuses were given to the host committee staff.



The 2016 host committee incorporated itself as a nonprofit, which makes the bonuses even more noteworthy. Asked about that, Rendell said the host committee was not a “permanent” nonprofit.

“If we were a permanent organization, no way we would give out those bonuses. We would stretch out that money for future years,” he said, adding that the host committee is wrapping up its activities. “Our people worked 16 hours a day without question. They were pretty much brutalized.”

Donors to the 2016 host committee were not notified of the bonuses, Rendell said.

“But donors also didn’t know we were going to give three-quarter million to the School District,” he said, adding that no one had complained about the committee’s use of the extra funds. As of March, Washo, Rose, and O’Malley continued to receive monthly paychecks from the committee in addition to the November bonuses.

“Again, I think this was entirely appropriate,” Rendell said.



Ex-Rep. Corrine Brown Found Guilty of Corruption (Bloomberg BNA)

By Kenneth P. Doyle

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

Former Rep. Corrine Brown (D-Fla.) was convicted by a federal jury in Jacksonville, Fla., on corruption charges related to a fraudulent scholarship charity, the Justice Department announced (U.S. v. Brown, M.D. Fla., Criminal No. 16-93, verdict 5/11/17).

Brown, who lost her bid for re-election last year in a Democratic primary race, was convicted May 11 on 18 counts of an indictment charging her with conspiracy involving the fraudulent charity, called One Door for Education. The charity was touted as raising funds for scholarships for needy students but actually was used to funnel money to the former congresswoman and her associates, the DOJ said.

Brown also was found guilty of concealing material facts on required financial disclosure forms, obstructing the due administration of tax laws and filing false tax returns. In addition, the jury found Brown guilty of violating the Ethics in Government Act by concealing certain income on the required annual financial disclosure forms she submitted to the U.S. House.

Judge Timothy J. Corrigan of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida said he would schedule Brown's sentencing for a later date.

'Violated Public Trust'

"Former Congresswoman Corrine Brown violated the public trust, the honor of her position, and the integrity of the American system of government when she abused one of the most powerful positions in the nation for her own personal gain," Acting Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Blanco of the Justice Department's Criminal Division said in the DOJ statement.

Blanco said Brown deprived needy children of hundreds of thousands of dollars that could have helped with their education and improved their opportunities for advancement, and she lied to the Internal Revenue Service and the public about secret cash deposits into her personal bank accounts.

"The Department of Justice is committed to fighting corruption and fraud wherever we find it, at all levels of government, regardless of their power and influence," Blanco said.

\$800,000 in Donations

According to the DOJ, the evidence entered in Brown's trial showed that, between late 2012 and early 2016, she participated in a conspiracy and fraud scheme involving One Door in which Brown, her former chief of staff and others solicited more than \$800,000 in charitable donations. Donors were told the money would be used for college scholarships and school computer drives, among other charitable causes.

Prosecutors used testimony by donors to show that Brown and her co-conspirators solicited donations from individuals and corporate entities that Brown knew by virtue of her position as a House member. Many of the



donors were led to believe that One Door was a properly registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit charity, when, in fact, it was not.

The DOJ said Brown and others used the vast majority of One Door donations for their personal and professional benefit, including tens of thousands of dollars in cash deposits made to Brown's personal bank accounts. In addition, the DOJ said, evidence showed that more than \$300,000 in One Door funds were used to pay for events hosted by Brown or held in her honor, including a golf tournament in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.; lavish receptions during an annual conference in Washington; and the use of a luxury box for a concert and a football game.

Trial evidence showed that, despite raising more than \$800,000 in donations, One Door granted only two scholarships totaling \$1,200 to students, the DOJ said.

Staffer Pleaded Guilty

Elias "Ronnie" Simmons, the former chief of staff in Brown's congressional office, pleaded guilty in February to involvement in the conspiracy involving the fraudulent charity. He also admitted to stealing tens of thousands of dollars in congressional salary payments disbursed to a close relative who performed no known work, the DOJ said. In addition, Simmons admitted he and Brown solicited donations from donors that Brown knew because of her position as a member of Congress.

Brown and Simmons were indicted together last July for their roles in the alleged fraud scheme, as well as for tax obstruction and failing to disclose income. After Simmons pleaded guilty, Brown elected to go to trial.

Another person involved in the matter, Carla Wiley, the president of One Door, also pleaded guilty to wire fraud conspiracy charges before Brown's trial.

The DOJ investigation of Brown was first disclosed in a statement last year from the House Ethics Committee, which said it was delaying its own probe of Brown to defer to the department. Ethics Committee investigations usually are delayed while a criminal probe is underway.



[File at the center of campaign audit of D.C. Council member is missing, officials say \(Washington Post\)](#)

By Aaron C. Davis

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 12:35 p.m.)

A file containing original documents and bank account information related to the campaign of a D.C. Council member has gone missing at the office where his campaign finances are under audit, according to D.C. elections officials.

Wesley Williams, a spokesman for the D.C. Office of Campaign Finance, says staffers there are “in the process of locating” the file containing records pertaining to D.C. Council Member Brandon T. Todd (D-Ward 4).

Williams said he did not know how long the file has been missing but said it had not affected the audit, because most of the information contained in the file was backed up electronically.

But two people with knowledge of the situation, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to do so, said the paperwork has not been seen in weeks. Such files are normally kept in a locked cabinet, the officials said.

The Office of Campaign Finance published an audit in late March that found Todd had been unable to document more than \$100,000 in contributions reported by his 2015 campaign.

Todd was the finance chairman of Mayor Muriel E. Bowser’s 2014 mayoral campaign and was her hand-picked choice to fill the remainder of her Ward 4 council term, which he won in a 2015 special election. He did not respond to a request for comment.

The audit into his 2015 finances also found that Todd had failed to report an additional \$34,000 in donations. Attorneys at the Office of Campaign Finance are weighing whether to fine the campaign for violations.

Meanwhile, a review of Todd’s campaign finances published last month by The Washington Post also found problems with his 2016 reelection campaign. The Post found Todd’s reports to regulators omitted required information about tens of thousands in reported donations.

The issue of the missing file became a spectacle at the Office of Campaign Finance on Monday when two supporters of Leon Andrews, who had lost to Todd, asked to see the public documents in Todd’s campaign file.

Mary Pence, a retired family law attorney, said she and her husband, Dan, were initially told the file was not where it was supposed to be. The Pencses, who have lived in the District for 39 years, repeatedly asked to speak with supervisors and ended up with campaign finance director Cecily E. Collier-Montgomery.

Pence said agency officials initially told her they would locate the file within a day. On Tuesday, Pence said she was told her inquiry would be treated like a Freedom of Information Act request, giving the agency 15 days to respond.

“This may be something, the start of an inquiry that goes somewhere, or it may be nothing,” Pence said.

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“We’ve been reading in the newspaper what seems like a lot of inadequacies, and, really, horrific problems with Mr. Todd’s findings. . . . My greatest concern is ethical behavior by our elected officials.”

The irregularities have drawn the attention of Karl A. Racine, the District’s first elected attorney general. Racine has authority to investigate campaign finance violations but must notify the U.S. attorney’s office if he initiates such a probe.

In an interview, Racine said he has had “discussions” with the U.S. attorney’s office but would neither confirm nor deny an investigation.

A spokesman for U.S. Attorney Channing D. Phillips said he has “no comment on this particular matter.”

Racine has introduced a package of campaign finance reforms that are pending before the D.C. Council. Asked whether he intended to investigate Todd’s campaign finances, Racine said, “Issues of campaign finance are entirely appropriate matters for the Office of the Attorney General to focus resources on.”

The Office of Campaign Finance is facing criticism from the D.C. Council and Todd’s rivals over the timing of the audit release.

Preliminary findings were shared with Todd’s campaign more than a year ago but were not made public until months after he won reelection last year to a full four-year term.

Todd and Bowser shared several of the same campaign operatives, including treasurer Ben Soto.

Soto said Wednesday that he was unaware that the candidate’s file had gone missing.

He said OCF officials did not mention a missing file when they met two weeks ago to try to answer auditors’ questions. Todd campaign officials have since filed to close the campaign account, saying they have answered all concerns.

“We’ve given them everything,” Soto said. “The ball is in their court.”

In an emailed response to questions from a Post reporter about the missing file, Williams sent a blind copy of the exchange to Michael Bennett, chairman of the D.C. Board of Elections, using Bennett’s private email address — not his government account.

The D.C. Board of Elections oversees the Office of Campaign Finance; Bennett is appointed by Bowser.

Bennett seemed to approve of the explanation that Williams offered, that Todd’s missing records were not problematic because most had been digitally scanned. “Good response,” Bennett wrote to Williams.

Some D.C. Council members say the Office of Campaign Finance should be placed under an agency that is independent of the mayor. A majority of the council has said it will back legislation to prevent a repeat of the way the audit into Todd’s campaign was not disclosed before his run for reelection.

[Super PACs gearing up for 2018 \(Open Secrets Blog\)](#)

By Ashley Balcerzak

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17)

Is it 2018 already? Hard to believe it's only been six months since the last election judging by the number of super PACs that have cropped up so far.

Through May 10, more than 140 groups that can spend unlimited amounts of money in elections independently from candidates have appeared since Jan. 1 of 2017, about 17 more than the previous presidential election cycle saw through the same date.

And they are quite an interesting bunch. Scour the FEC reports and you find new groups such as Deplorables Nation, Impeach Trump, National Committee Against Athletic Servitude, and our personal favorite, No Permanent Enemies No Permanent Friends Only Permanent Interests. We don't know much about these entities besides their names, addresses and treasurers, as they don't have to report their donations and expenditures (unless they air ads explicitly advocating for or against a candidate) until July, and not again until 2018. And almost 40 of the groups list P.O. boxes as their addresses, which doesn't exactly give us a clearer picture. The most groups hail from D.C. (16), California (16), New York (14) and North Carolina (13).

"This is of critical importance and perhaps one of the biggest factors eroding campaign finance contribution limits," said Craig Holman with Public Citizen. "Many single candidate super PACs are probably set up by the candidate's own staff or supporters or family for that matter, so these are means for candidates and political parties to get around the limits, and they can take unlimited amounts of contributions."

Last election, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) was able to solicit nearly \$100 million for the super PAC Right to Rise, because he did so before officially announcing he was running for president, working around laws prohibiting coordination. The earlier it was formed, and the longer he put off his declaration of candidacy, the longer the super PAC could work with Bush's team and fill the group's coffers.

We haven't found any such blatant ties among this year's crop of super PACs, but there are some familiar names. Main Voters' treasurer is Seth Tanner, an alum of the teams of Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass), former Gov. Bill Richardson (D-N.M.), and its custodian of records is Amy Pritchard, a political strategist and DNC alum. America First Action, Inc. lists Charles Gantt as the custodian of records, who was the Chief Financial Officer of Trump for America, Inc. Lab 736's treasurer, Kate Gage, is a former Obama policy adviser. Time to Act PAC's treasurer is Tommi Pryor, head of a digital marketing company whose clients include Republicans running for Congress or state offices.

One group is dedicated to a candidate who hasn't declared he will run for Congress: Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke. Clarke was in the news last year as a possible Trump appointee to the Department of Homeland Security (or even a replacement for FBI Director James Comey), and as the man overseeing a county jail where four inmates died in custody. A committee with a P.O. Box in Pinehurst, North Carolina is urging the sheriff to run against Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc) in 2018, and has already raised more than \$300,000 from almost 6,000 donors, according to the group's chairman, Jack Daly, former Republican counsel to the Senate Judiciary

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Committee. (For comparison, Baldwin has \$2.5 million cash on hand as of March 31.) The cast of characters on the group's advisory board includes Duane "Dog the Bounty Hunter" Chapman, Nick Searcy, who plays a U.S. Marshal in the TV show "Justified," and Robert Davi, an actor and singer who played an FBI agent in "Die Hard."

Formed a week after the 2016 election, Ohio Freedom Fund is already backing that state's Republican Treasurer Josh Mandel for his battle against Sen. Sherrod Brown (D) next year, and is obscuring its donors. The AP found a majority of the funds came from a nonprofit named Citizens for a Working America, which is not required to disclose who funded it. We know that it is led by Joel Riter, a former aide to Mandel.

Change for Ohio District Two doesn't know who it wants to replace Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R), just that it wants him out. "While the opposing candidate is not yet known, we did not want to wait for that candidate to have our voices heard," said founder Emily Cobbs in an email. "This is truly about Brad not being the right Representative for Ohio District 2 and we are going to do everything in our power Repeal and Replace Wenstrup from now until November of 2018."

Another group, Deal Her Out, already has a website calling users to "Dump Elizabeth Warren," written on the side of a dumpster.

Finally, if you think it's too early to be raising money for 2018, tell that to the groups already preparing for 2020.

The Center for Public Integrity found that two groups backing Trump for his bid for a second term, Great America PAC and Committee to Defend the President (formerly Stop Hillary PAC), have already spent \$1.32 million. Last year, these two hybrid "Carey committees" (half regular PAC that can make campaign contributions, half super PAC) spent \$26 million, mostly on Trump's behalf.

At least two new groups are also looking forward three years: Draft Mo for President 2020 and California 2020, the latter saying it was too early to share its plans. Filmmaker Harry Knapp of Newbury Park, California and his two daughters, ages 22 and 24, "were fired up" after the election, so they started Draft Mo, which stands for Michelle Obama. Knapp, who had sold a piece of art to one of the super PACs supporting Hillary Clinton, was familiar with how the groups operated.

"We started talking about how folks effect change and what was interesting to us was that anyone can start a super PAC and become a part of the process, and that seemed like a powerful proposition to us," Knapp said. "We all felt that Michelle, although she declared she isn't running, was worth the effort to start a groundswell for her and her causes."



[Critics Call Trump Election Panel a ‘Sham’ \(CO-Roll Call\)](#)

‘We need to be vigilant and rely on the evidence and the data.’

By Kate Ackley

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17; 5:04 a.m.)

U.S. President Donald Trump, stands with House Speaker Paul D. Ryan and Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows after Republicans passed legislation aimed at repealing and replacing ObamaCare, during an event in the Rose Garden at the White House, on May 4, 2017 in Washington, D.C.

Voting-rights advocates lambasted a new Trump administration directive to probe alleged election fraud, calling the effort a distraction that also could ultimately prevent legitimate voters from casting ballots.

President Donald Trump signed the executive order Thursday creating a commission, led by Vice President Mike Pence, to study the U.S. voter registration and election system. It comes months after Trump alleged, without evidence, that thousands of noncitizens had voted in the 2016 elections.

Even many Republicans have said such a commission is an unnecessary use of government resources because numerous other studies show no indication of widespread election fraud.

Critics of the new Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity said the administration ought to focus instead on voter suppression concerns as well as potential Russian hacking and interference in the 2016 elections, a scandal that has only intensified this week with Trump’s firing of FBI Director James B. Comey.

“This is a sham commission that is going to be distracting us, distracting our country from very real problems that we should be confronting,” said Myrna Pérez of the Brennan Center for Justice. “We need to be vigilant and rely on the evidence and the data.”

The Brennan Center at New York University’s School of Law recently issued a report after studying 42 jurisdictions with the most noncitizen residents, concluding that such instances of fraud are “extraordinarily rare,” Pérez said.

Critics of Trump’s commission also said they were concerned that its leaders, Pence and vice chairman Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, may have too much sway over the bipartisan panel.

“I do think that it is problematic to set up a commission headed by two Republicans if you want it to have credibility,” said Ellen Weintraub, a Democratic member of the Federal Election Commission. “This whole topic has been studied in great depth, and nobody’s come up with any real evidence of voter fraud.”

A concern, Weintraub said, is that “voter fraud allegations have been used in the past as a pretext for adopting measures that restrict people’s ability to vote. That’s the real fraud we ought to be worried about — disenfranchising people.”

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Other members of the commission are expected to include Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson, a Republican who in the mid-2000s sponsored a strict voter identification law in her state. Democratic members include New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner and Maine Secretary of State Matthew Dunlap.

The executive order tasked the commission with identifying laws and rules that “undermine the American people’s confidence in the integrity of the voting process” and with exposing vulnerabilities in the voting system “that could lead to improper voter registration and improper voting, including fraudulent voter registration and fraudulent voting.”

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Thursday the administration expects the commission to complete its report by 2018.

“The experts and officials on this commission will follow the facts where they lead,” she told reporters. “Meetings and hearings will be open to the public for comments and input. And we will share those updates as we have them.”

Election lawyers said that it was notable that the president did not ask the commission to similarly evaluate cases of alleged voter suppression.

“This is not a good day for those who believe we should have a system where all eligible voters, but only eligible voters, can easily cast a ballot that will be fairly and accurately counted,” election lawyer Rick Hasen wrote on his blog.

Chris Carson, president of the League of Women Voters, said the executive branch should focus on protecting the U.S. election system from future foreign hacking incidents.

“The real purpose of this effort is to justify President Trump’s false claims of widespread voter fraud in the 2016 elections,” Carson said. “This is part of a wider effort to suppress the vote, keep certain politicians in power, and undermine our elections by spreading falsehoods.”

Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, added in a statement: “This executive order is a farce, plain and simple, and a seemingly naked attempt by President Trump to divert attention from his firing of FBI Director James Comey and the very serious investigation into possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia to influence the 2016 election. No one should be fooled.”



[Trump signs voter fraud, cybersecurity executive orders \(CBS News\)](#)

By Margaret Brennan

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 11:04 a.m.)

The White House says President Donald Trump has signed an executive order creating a commission to look at the public's confidence in the integrity of the voting system.

The commission will look at allegations of improper voting and fraudulent voter registration in states and across the nation.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders says Vice President Mike Pence will chair the panel, and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach will co-chair it.

She says the group plans to complete its work with a report to the president by 2018.

This order was spurred by Mr. Trump's unsubstantiated claim that millions of people voted illegally in the 2016 election, thus costing him the popular vote. Congressional leaders including House Speaker Paul Ryan and Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham have said they've seen no evidence to back up this claim.

President Trump tweeted shortly after taking office in January that he would be asking for a "major investigation" into voter fraud, vowing to "strengthen up voting procedures."

Democratic Federal Election Commissioner Ellen Weintraub asked Mr. Trump in a letter to disclose evidence of his charges of voter fraud presidential election.

"Your allegations are not properly a matter for a future investigation to take up, as you cannot have responsibly alleged this scheme without already having sufficient facts in hand to do so," Weintraub wrote.

The order comes as congressional and FBI probes into Russian meddling in the U.S. 2016 election are underway. FBI Director James Comey was leading the FBI's investigation into any ties between Trump campaign associates and Russia.

The commission, which will be driven by several state election officials, will include a review of voter registration, voter "suppression" and best practices.

Following the orders signing, Democratic leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-California, saying the commission is "clearly intended to accelerate the vile voter suppression efforts" across the country.

"If President Trump cannot believe that the majority of Americans voted against him, he should review his own conduct instead of trying to steal the vote from millions of citizens," said Pelosi.

Echoing Pelosi's statements, Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-Louisiana, called the order a "distraction from the real issues."

"President Trump says this commission is an effort to protect voting rights but it is really an effort to suppress and intimidate African-American and other minority voters," said Richmond in a statement.

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The White House also confirmed that Trump signed an executive order aimed at modernizing and improving the nation's computer networks.

Trump's homeland security adviser Tom Bossert says the order will help keep the U.S. safer from cybersecurity risks. Among the new requirements is that agency heads must be accountable for implementing risk management measures.

Trump pledged in late January to strengthen the government's ability to protect its computer networks, but then canceled plans to sign an executive order on cybersecurity without explanation.



[Feds Find Voice Recorder In Closed-Door Meeting Room, Then Kept It Secret For Four Years \(Daily Caller News Foundation\)](#)

By Ethan Barton

(Publish Date/Time: 5/11/17; 6:39 p.m.)

Federal officials found a voice recorder somebody used to document a closed-door government meeting in 2013 but kept the discovery secret for nearly four years, The Daily Caller News Foundation’s Investigative Group has learned.

Federal Election Commission (FEC) officials found the recorder in an agency meeting room July 9, 2013, but didn’t tell the Inspector General (IG) for nearly a month, which hampered the watchdog’s subsequent investigation. The IG also kept the public in the dark by not making its investigative report public until it was recently released in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

“An investigation was opened due to the possibility that the [recorder] may have been placed in an attempt to intercept oral communications in violation of [the law] or make public a commission investigation or enforcement matter in violation of [another law],” said the report, which wasn’t finished until August 2015, two years after the IG began its investigation.

The FEC regulates political campaign finances and investigates potential violations. Illegally recording closed-door federal meetings is punishable by up to five years in prison.

The “investigation was unable to determine the owner of the [recorder] and whether or not the [recorder] was used to attempt to record non-public meetings or confidential discussions,” the report said. “This matter is closed due to the lack of investigative leads.”

An FEC official found the recorder either on or under a chair in the back corner of a hearing room. The recorder was passed between officials and discussed among senior management – including Chairman Ellen Weintraub and Vice Chairman Donald McGahn II – before it was locked in a drawer.

The IG received an anonymous complaint about the device a month later.

“It does not appear that during this series of events did anyone with knowledge of the [recorder] think of or suggest contacting the [IG],” the report said. “The [IG] is unable to reach any conclusions due to multiple people handling the [recording device] and the fact that the [IG] was not notified by management at the time of discovery.”

Investigators suspect the recorder was not used to record FEC discussions illegally, but their rationale is not explained in the report.

This “does not lessen the fact that the potential for abuse existed,” the report said.

Investigators found a continuous, nearly 24-hour recording starting at 9:16 a.m. on June 27, 2013 on the device, which still had half-battery power remaining.

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It captured an open meeting, “followed by a closed executive session involving discussions of the termination of an” FEC attorney, the report said. “Most of the rest of the recording consists of background noise.”

Investigators also found numerous folders on the device, but their names were redacted.

The watchdog recommended the FEC issue a statement “regarding the importance of reporting to the [IG] all issues within its jurisdiction,” the report said. It’s unclear if the FEC complied.

“I am not aware of any additional information,” FEC spokeswoman Judith Ingram told TheDCNF.

The IG declined to comment.

From: [Christian J. Hilland](#)
To: [News and Views](#)
Subject: News and Views for Monday, May 15, 2017
Date: Monday, May 15, 2017 8:38:21 AM
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FEC, Campaign Finance Law and Federal Employee News:

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[Congress Holds Keys to Change Church Politicking Ban \(Bloomberg BNA\)](#)

By Colleen Murphy

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17)

For those wondering what the future holds for church involvement in politics, the best clues

are in two bills introduced in Congress this session—not in President Donald Trump's executive order on the topic, nonprofit-sector specialists said.

Trump issued an order May 4 barring the Treasury Department from imposing tax penalties or revoking the tax-exempt status of an organization speaking out on politics, but practitioners have generally agreed it has little concrete impact because the Internal Revenue Service is already loath to crack down on the behavior.

The order stems from Trump's campaign promise to end the Johnson Amendment, a decades-old ban on 501(c)(3) politicking—though to do so requires a change to the tax law. The topic—at the delicate intersection of religion and politics—has created controversy in the sector, with supporters saying it protects charities and foes saying it chills free speech.

What to Expect

A bill (H.R. 172) that strikes the Johnson Amendment language entirely could lead to a “parade of horrors,” like dark money flowing into churches, said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, an organization that promotes the separation of church and state. Rep. Walter B. Jones (R-N.C.) introduced the measure in January.

Another measure (H.R. 781), permitting tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organizations to make some political statements as long as they are minimal, would require the IRS to begin reviewing churches’ books and following their spending, said John Van Drunen, executive vice president and general counsel at the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

Tyler and Van Drunen spoke May 12 at the American Bar Association tax section meeting. The impact of Trump's order was a topic that came up during several sessions.

Both bills—particularly H.R. 781, reintroduced in February by House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.) and Rep. Jody Hice (R-Ga.)—likely have legs as Republicans have vowed to kill the Johnson Amendment in tax reform. Even though there is a lot of opposition to the idea, including such language in tax reform legislation could bring the “core cluster of votes” needed to pass it, said John Pomeranz, an attorney at Harmon, Curran, Spielberg & Eisenberg LLP.

The topic is important to members of the House Ways and Means Committee, and practitioners should be open to talking it through, John Schoenecker, a committee staffer, said. “Let's get to yes on this one.”

[**Democratic National Convention host group got nearly \\$1M in bonuses \(Associated Press\)**](#)

(Publish Date/Time: 5/13/17)

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. – The committee that raised money for last summer's Democratic National Convention used surplus funds to hand out nearly \$1 million in bonuses for staff members as well as grants for Philadelphia schools and nonprofits, rankling some state lawmakers who ponied up \$10 million in tax dollars for the event.

The bonuses to the host committee staff came from a \$4 million post-convention surplus and were disclosed in a Jan. 31 filing with the Federal Election Commission. They were first reported by The Philadelphia Inquirer.

All told, the committee raised \$86 million in public and private money.

Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, the host committee's chairman, called the bonuses a reward for low pay and long hours. The 12 bonuses ranged from \$500 up to \$310,000 for the committee's executive director, Kevin Washo, whose committee salary was \$13,000 a month for two years.

Rendell told the Inquirer that Washo's payment was part bonus and part back pay for unpaid work he did in 2013 through early 2015 when a small team worked to get the Democratic National Committee to select Philadelphia for its convention.

Washo said the payouts were decided by him, Rendell and chief operating officer Eliza Rose, who received a \$43,000 bonus. The committee's chief finance officer, Jason O'Malley, paid about \$8,000 a month, received a \$220,000 bonus. O'Malley's fundraising work deserved a "performance bonus," Rendell said.

The committee's largest charitable contribution, \$750,000, went to the Philadelphia School District's Right Books Campaign. Other city nonprofit groups received grants of \$10,000 or \$25,000 from the committee, which also repaid the city \$500,000 for its costs, Washo said.

The state's \$10 million grant, requested by Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf from lawmakers, was the largest convention donation. The grant money was kept in a separate account from the millions raised from private donors, and covered costs approved by the state, Washo said.

The state dollars were to go toward renting the convention center in Philadelphia and construction there, all spent in July, according to an independent auditor's report.

The state Senate's ranking member, President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati, R-Jefferson, will seek an audit of the money by Pennsylvania's independently elected auditor general, his office said.

The host committee apparently didn't need the entire \$10 million from the state and should have approached Wolf's office and lawmakers about returning what it didn't need, Scarnati's chief of staff, Drew Crompton, said.

"They had at least \$4 million more than they needed and, even if it was after the fact, they can

certainly return a portion to the commonwealth," Crompton said.

[Gov. Wolf calls out Rendell, DNC 2016 host committee for spending \\$4M surplus \(Philly.com\)](#)

By Claudia Vargas

(Publish Date/Time: 5/14/1; 5:51 p.m. ET)

Gov. Wolf is asking the state auditor general review the \$10 million that state taxpayers donated to the Philadelphia 2016 Host Committee last year for the Democratic National Convention.

The donation was the biggest in an effort that raised \$86 million. Last week, the Inquirer reported that the host committee used a \$4 million surplus to give nearly \$1 million in bonuses to the 12-member host committee staff, \$1.2 million in grants to local nonprofits, and more than \$800,000 in municipal services refunds to the city.

Wolf said he was "disappointed" with how the extra money was spent.

"I am disappointed that when the host committee discovered there was a surplus, the first call was not to the commonwealth of Pennsylvania to discuss returning the money to the taxpayers," Wolf said in a statement released Sunday. "The commonwealth supports large events that have an economic benefit to Pennsylvania and the region, but when there is leftover funding, that money should be returned to taxpayers. I am disappointed that the surplus was instead spent on bonuses and grants."

Wolf noted that an independent audit of the \$10 million state grant was submitted to the state in December. The report indicated that the state grant was spent in compliance with the contract between the host committee and state -- on event expenses, including venue license fee and construction costs. Nevertheless, Wolf wants a second look.

"The report will be provided to the Auditor General's office tomorrow," the governor's news release said. Later, J.J. Abbott, spokesman for Wolf, said that the governor wanted to "cover all of our bases" by sending the audit to the auditor general.

Anna Adams-Sarthou, spokeswoman for the host committee, said Sunday: "We're confident in our accounting and the fact that we spent the state money appropriately. ... We welcome everyone to review the audit."

After the convention, host committee officials said the committee was still \$1 million short of its \$64 million cash fund-raising goal. The host committee refused to release fund-raising documents to the public until the committee was legally required to file with the Federal Election Commission in late September. Not until then did it announce that it had met and exceeded its fund-raising goal.

The nearly \$1 million in rewards to host committee staff was decided in November by the chairman of the committee, former Gov. Edward G. Rendell, executive director and treasurer Kevin Washo, and chief operating officer Eliza Rose. The checks ranged from \$500 for interns and volunteers to \$310,000 for Washo. (Rendell has said that Washo's pay was part bonus and part back pay for work he did early in the process.) The amounts were listed in a year-end report filed with the Federal Election Commission on Jan. 31.

Rendell has defended the bonuses, saying that the committee worked long hours for what he saw as low pay. On Saturday, he said no taxpayer money was used for the extra pay.

"None of the state money was earmarked for salaries," Rendell said. "We had to raise the money to pay our administrative costs. None of the taxpayer money was involved in this at all."

Committee staffers were paid monthly salaries that ranged from about \$4,000 to \$13,000. The largest amount went to Washo, who continued to be paid through the end of March, eight months after the convention wrapped up.

The Philadelphia host committee for the 2000 Republican National Convention did not pay any bonuses, nor were staff paid more than a month following the convention, according to financial reports from the time.

On Sunday, Abbott, Wolf's spokesman, said it is still early to say what, if anything, the state can do to recoup any money. "I think there will be more conversations about it," he said.

[Republican Strategy Firm in Maryland Raided by FBI: Reports](#)

By Erik Larson

(Publish Date/Time: 5/15/17)

The Federal Bureau of Investigation carried out a raid on a Republican fundraising firm in Maryland that had been accused in a 2014 lawsuit of defrauding political donors, according to several area news outlets.

The target of the raid was Strategic Campaign Group Inc. in Annapolis, the Baltimore Sun reported May 11, along with local television stations. Nicole Schwab, a spokeswoman for the FBI's Washington field office, told Bloomberg News that agents had executed a court-approved search warrant in the vicinity of Main Street, Annapolis, where the fundraising firm is located.

Kelley Rogers, the president of Strategic Campaign Group, confirmed that his firm was the target of the raid, the newspaper reported.

It's unclear what the FBI was seeking at the offices of the group, which advises Republican

candidates. Calls to several of the group's officials weren't immediately returned.

Strategic Campaign Group and its affiliates have been accused by various campaigns, including President Donald Trump's, of raising money without the candidate's approval.

Lawsuit Settled in 2015

Former Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli of Virginia, a Republican who ran for governor in 2013, filed a lawsuit against the group and its Conservative StrikeForce PAC, accusing the organization of fraud, for allegedly making unauthorized fundraising pitches. The suit was settled in 2015 and the PAC, which listed Scott B. Mackenzie as its treasurer, was required to pay Cuccinelli \$85,000.

Patriots For Trump, a PAC run by the same treasurer, shut down in 2015 after the Trump campaign sent a letter demanding that it stop raising donations without its authorization. According to Federal Election Commission filings the committee raised more than \$131,000 and spent \$122,000 to promote Trump's campaign.

While there's no indication that the raid was related to Cuccinelli's lawsuit, the litigation sheds some light on the firm's previous legal troubles. Cuccinelli said in his complaint that Strategic Campaign Group used national lists of conservative voters to seek cash for phone banks, rallies and voter-identification efforts.

“Defendants donated less than one-half of one percent of their total receipts in 2013 to the Cuccinelli campaign, and spent no money in support of the Cuccinelli campaign in the form of independent expenditures,” the lawsuit said.

Rogers's clients have included numerous campaigns for president, Congress and statewide office, as well as conservative business groups and political action committees, according to the group's website.

Strategic Campaign Group's vice president is former congressional aide Chip O'Neil, according to the group's website. Its senior adviser is Dennis Whitfield, who served as chief of staff for the U.S. trade representative and then as deputy secretary of labor under President Ronald Reagan.

Whitfield has also provided political and communications advice to U.S. and foreign corporations, and was executive vice president of the American Conservative Union, which organizes the annual American Conservative Political Action Conference, known as CPAC.

Whitfield was also a director at BKSH and Associates, where he provided strategic government relations counseling. That firm was formed in 1996 when Paul Manafort and Roger Stone left Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly and it merged with Gold and Liebengood. Manafort and Stone both went on to become close advisers to Trump. They had departed by the time

Whitfield joined the firm.

[Political signs at Paris Gibson Square cause controversy \(KRTV Great Falls News, MT\)](#)

By David Sherman

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17; Updated: 11:42 a.m. ET)

GREAT FALLS - On Thursday evening, several signs for the Rob Quist campaign were posted on the grass at the Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art in Great Falls.

Quist is the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in Montana's upcoming special election to replace Ryan Zinke. Greg Gianforte is the Republican candidate, and Mark Wicks is the Libertarian candidate.

The Quist campaign rented space at the Square for a political rally on Thursday evening, and Quist staffers posted the signs, which were removed when the event was over.

The yard signs caught the attention of some people who shared a photo of the signs on Facebook, and the photo was then posted to the E-City Beat website.

The E-City Beat post claims that: "In clear violations of the law, someone has placed Quist's campaign signs on properties owned by GFPS. There is a flock of them at Paris Gibson Square, the partially taxpayer-funded non-profit which leases its space from the District."

KRTV talked with Tracy Houck, the executive director of the Square, on Friday morning. Houck explained that the property is owned by the Great Falls Public School District, and leased to the Square for \$1 per year. The Square rents space to other organizations in the community for gatherings such as auctions, wedding, and, as in this case, political events.

Houck said that all of the preparation and handling of Quist rally, including the placement of the signs outside, was done by Quist campaign members, not by Square staff.

Houck explained, "There was some controversy in concern that we hosted a political rally in the square recently, and that was done by a private renter, who rented out the top floor, and the three rooms that we have. Very similar to other events, they paid just like anybody else would, and they put signs on the lawn indicating the event was here again just like we have other things."

Houck also also that the same would have been done for any political candidate who rented space, no matter the party affiliation.

A representative from the Square noted: "Standard after-hour rental fees were charged with additional costs for using linens. The Operations Director, not the Executive Director, handles rentals. If the signs were a violation, then it would be on the renter, not the organization. The

renter posted (and removed) the signs."

Houck posted on the Square's Facebook page:

Long term tenants include artist studios, the Montana Human Rights Network and the Montana Wilderness Association, both of which are able to also host events and rallies. Tomorrow night, the Electric City Pittie Committee is hosting an Art Auction. Tonight, it was Rob Quist. The Quist event was a paid rental. As a private rental, they could have charged admission and /or turned people away. It was not a function of the Square, not catered by staff or marketed by staff as a Square hosted event.

We contacted Montana's Office of the Commissioner of Political Practices for information, who declined to offer an opinion on the matter; we were told that because this is about a federal election, we need to contact the Federal Election Commission.

We explained the situation to a representative from the FEC, and they, too, declined to offer an opinion on the matter; they said, "We cannot speculate on the legality of specific situations or sets of circumstances."

We will continue investigating the issue and again contact the Montana COPP next week.

(UPDATE, MAY 13) A case presented to the Office of the Commissioner of Political Practices in 2016 provides details of a similar situation.

In that case, a person reported seeing campaign signs at the Butte-Silver Bow Civic Center during a high school basketball game.

In its review of the case, the COPP wrote:

The Butte-Silver Bow Civic Center is a public facility which is available for lease for "local sporting events and concerts as well as trade shows and political events".³ The Civic Center also has advertising space available for lease around the arena. Here, the City-County has made a determination that the public facility and advertising space is available to interested parties who are willing to lease the space at the going rate when being used for commercial purposes regardless of the type of event.

Under the facts you provided, the display of a political advertisement during a basketball tournament is an appropriate commercial use of the public space so long as it was leased by the candidate or committee at a fair market rate.

[A Seeker of Kansas Voter Fraud Gets a National Soapbox \(New York Times\)](#)

By Michael Wines and Julie Bosman

(Publish Date/Time: 5/14/17)

Kris W. Kobach, the Kansas secretary of state, oversees an office whose clerical and regulatory work costs the state's taxpayers barely \$5.5 million a year. But he has parlayed that modest post into a national platform for tough restrictions on voting rights and immigration, becoming both a celebrated voice within the Republican Party and a regular target of lawsuits by civil rights advocates.

Now, as vice chairman of the new Advisory Commission on Election Integrity announced by the White House on Thursday (Vice President Mike Pence is the titular chairman), Mr. Kobach has a far bigger soapbox for his views on voter fraud — which Republicans, including President Trump, call a cancer on democracy. Others say it is a pretense for discouraging the poor, minorities and other typically Democratic-leaning voters from casting ballots.

Academic studies regularly show — and most state election officials agree — that fraud is rare, and that the kind of fraud Republicans seek to address with voter ID laws is minuscule.

Mr. Kobach promised an impartial inquiry into election vulnerabilities during an interview on Friday, saying the commission would “go where the facts take us.” But in Kansas, the facts appear at best mixed, and critics say he is one of the most partisan and polarizing figures imaginable to preside over a fair inquiry on voter fraud.

Since taking office in 2011, he has persuaded the Kansas Legislature to enact some of the nation's most rigorous voting restrictions and to give him special authority to enforce them. The result has been a campaign against supposedly unchecked voting fraud, particularly by immigrants.

Most fraud claims, however, have proved vaporous, and convictions are sparse — nine since 2015 and only one of them a foreigner — and placed a heavy burden on ordinary citizens. In striking down some of Kansas' voting rules in 2016, a federal court said restrictive registration requirements had denied more than 18,000 Kansans their constitutional right to cast ballots.

In an editorial this month, The Kansas City Star mockingly called Mr. Kobach “the Javert of voter fraud,” after the ham-handed detective in “Les Miserables,” wasting tax dollars on “his own single-minded pursuit.”

Mr. Kobach is undeterred. In November, he echoed President Trump's baseless claim that he would have won the popular vote but for ballots cast by millions of illegal voters. And he has said that the few illegally registered foreigners he claims to have identified in Kansas are but the “tip of the iceberg” of fraudulent votes by immigrants.

“We've had substantial numbers of noncitizens getting on our voter rolls,” he said recently. “If other states are experiencing the same problem, then I think it would be appropriate for them to consider what Kansas has done.”

Kansas Republicans see Mr. Kobach as a rising star, and he is said to be preparing for a gubernatorial campaign in 2018. “Very smart guy, very passionate about his beliefs,” said Clayton Barker, the executive director of the Kansas Republican Party. “He has a very strong core group of supporters.”

His critics are contemptuous. “He’s a person who has built a political career on xenophobia,” said Dale Ho, director of the Voting Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union. “It’s worked great for him, but not for the people he has disenfranchised.”

Mr. Kobach called the xenophobia charge outrageous.

At 51, Mr. Kobach is building a political career for which he has meticulously prepared. He was a state champion debater in high school and class valedictorian. He made summa cum laude studying government (and heading the Republican Club) at Harvard, earned a Ph.D. in political science (and a place on the rowing team) at the University of Oxford and in 1995 earned a law degree (and was a law review editor) at Yale.

Yale colleagues called him a fish-out-of-water conservative in a decidedly liberal law school, but also a pleasant colleague. “Kris was totally opposite on the political spectrum from me,” said Jesselyn Radack, now director of the whistle-blower protection program at ExposeFacts, an advocacy group in Washington. “But at the same time, it was a ‘let me give you a ride to the airport’ sort of thing.”

After missionary work in Africa, a stint teaching law and a City Council seat in Overland Park, Kan., Mr. Kobach was named a White House fellow in 2001, and worked on immigration issues after the Sept. 11 attacks.

[Education secretary has long history of financing politics \(Associated Press\)](#)

(Publish Date/Time: 5/13/17)

Betsy DeVos, President Donald Trump’s education secretary, built her political resume by raising and contributing millions of dollars to support the cause of giving parents choices on where their children go to school.

The daughter of one wealthy businessman and the wife of another, DeVos has headed a series of groups that help rich contributors spend large sums on elections, including one that was assessed the biggest fine ever by the Ohio Elections Commission.

A look at her political activities.

WHO IS BETSY DEVOS

DeVos is the daughter of an auto parts manufacturer who married into another wealthy Michigan family, the one that runs Amway.

Her family is steeped in politics. Her father, Edgar Prince, was a major early donor to the Family Research Council. Her husband, Dick DeVos, lost a 2006 run for governor of Michigan, and DeVos herself served as the chairwoman of the state Republican Party. Her brother, Erik Prince, is the founder of the security company Blackwater, which has had key government contracts.

Her education experience is mainly through advocating for school choice. She attended private Christian schools. Her children, now grown, were educated through a combination of private schools and homeschooling.

During a 2001 appearance at a retreat of Christian philanthropists, she said, “Our desire is to confront the culture in ways that will continue to advance God’s kingdom.”

GIVING TO POLITICS

DeVos personally contributed at least \$2.3 million to candidates and political action committees from 2007 through last year.

Her family, including husband and one-time Michigan gubernatorial candidate Dick DeVos, mother Elsa Prince Broekhuizen, brother Erik Prince and father- and mother-in-law Richard and Helen DeVos contributed a combined \$19 million in that same period.

RAISING SOFT MONEY

Twenty years ago, DeVos wrote an opinion piece for the Washington publication Roll Call in which she said her family was the leading contributor of “soft money” donations to political parties. Unlike money given directly to a candidate, money given to the political parties is largely unregulated, thus the term “soft money.”

“We expect to foster a conservative governing philosophy consisting of limited government and respect for traditional American virtues,” she wrote. “We expect a return on our investment; we expect a good and honest government.”

PROMOTING BALLOT MEASURES

In 2000, DeVos was a key player in a ballot initiative fight in Michigan over whether the state would allow vouchers for private schools.

She and her husband contributed nearly \$1.6 million to the losing effort. The couple and their relatives paid for more than one-third of the campaign overall.

TROUBLE IN OHIO

In 2006, DeVos's school-choice group, All Children Matter, had a political action committee in Virginia, where contributions are unlimited. The group raised \$17.8 million that year, and more than 40 percent of it was contributed to affiliated PACs in other states.

The group asked Ohio campaign finance regulators if it would be OK to shift money from Virginia to Ohio, a state with strict campaign contribution limits. The state said it would be illegal.

The committee made the shift, anyway. All \$870,000 spent by the Ohio operation of All Children Matter that year was funneled through Virginia.

Ohio campaign finance regulators in 2008 ordered the group to pay \$5.3 million in fines, an amount it still has not paid.

INDEPENDENT EXPENDITURES

In recent years, DeVos's groups had significant independent spending on political races.

Generally, groups can spend without limits as long as they don't coordinate with campaign committees. In most places, they're not required to disclose the individuals who fund them, which is why some of this kind of expenditure is known as "dark money."

According to tax filings from 2011 through 2015, groups DeVos ran or that were subsidiaries of those she ran — American Federation for Children, American Federation for Children Action Fund, Great Lakes Education Project and Students First Pennsylvania — combined for nearly \$20 million in political spending. Some of that money may have been double-counted after being passed from one of the organizations to another.

It's not clear how much of that money was from DeVos herself.

BENEFITING FROM DARK MONEY

At least two groups that do not report their donors ran ad campaigns to support DeVos's confirmation.

Those groups are Club for Growth, a major supporter of conservative candidates across the country, and America Next, which was formed by then-Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal in 2013.

Editorials, Blogs and OpEds:

[The Pence Commission: Of "Public Confidence" and Trojan Horses \(More Soft Money Hard Law Blog\)](#)

By Bob Bauer

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17)

In apparent haste, with not all its members appointed, the President issued the executive order establishing the Pence vote fraud Commission. The appointments still to come will add only marginally to an understanding of this Commission's objectives. As the Order is written, and with the naming of Kansas Secretary of State Kobach as Vice Chair, those objectives are clear, and the outcome not hard to forecast. And yet there are extraordinary features to the Commission, none of them surprising, and none are the result of error or lack of foresight.

Begin with the leadership:

The Chair is the Vice President of the President who has announced that millions of illegal votes were cast in the last election, all against him (or for his opponent). Now Mr. Kobach, as Vice Chair, has joined the leadership ranks as a public supporter of the President's claims. He has said that the "White House has provided enormous evidence with respect to voter fraud." This is untrue. As for the problem of non-citizen voting, Kobach has asserted that there is a "lot of evidence" of it. This is also untrue. The larger point is that the Vice Chair of the Commission has reached these conclusions long ago, before a day of testimony or an hour of deliberation. What are the chances that this Commission will arrive at judgments contrary to the ones asserted so confidently by the President—and echoed by Mr. Kobach whose bid for national prominence rests on loudly ringing the alarm about voter fraud?

Now, onto the Commission's purposes:

Its mission is defined mostly by reference to laws, rules, policies or practices that either "enhance" or "undermine" the public's "confidence in the integrity of the voting process used in Federal elections." These are the first two of three statements of its purpose, only the third and last of them concerned with actual "vulnerabilities" in voting systems. Right at the beginning, at the core of the mission, is the politics of voter fraud. It can be agreed that "public confidence" in the electoral process is important. But it is also an easy talking point ready for use when a voting restriction is lacking in more substantial support.

We have seen how this has worked over the years. A virtual cottage industry of voter fraud alarmism has sprung up to shake public confidence in the voting systems. One way to understand the Commission is that it will continue, at the highest-level in the name of the President of the United States, on this course. It will operate to create or compound a problem of confidence that it will then announce it must solve. Its very existence is meant to communicate that illegal or improper voting is a major concern. After all, its Chair is none other than the Vice President of the United States. It can hold hearings to dramatize its point—which is the President’s point.

The Commission is an escalation in the campaign to persuade the American public that their voting systems are failing. It is not intended to bolster confidence, but to undermine it, and on the strength of this program, to advance reforms that are costly, unnecessary and a burden on lawful voting by eligible voters. And it is well understood that those burdens typically fall disproportionately on those populations of voters least able to bear them. It is also the belief of many agitating for these reforms that they will be more beneficial to the electoral aspirations of one political party. (Did not the President say that all the illegal voters in 2016, ostensibly millions of them, cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton?)

It was once said of Richard Nixon that he would chop down a tree, only to stand on the stump and deliver a speech in favor of conservation. This is the “public confidence” politics of the Pence Commission.

And, finally, the response from the election administration community:

As argued here, the Pence Commission has broken with the healthy movement toward nonpartisan, professional collaboration on election administration. It has cast aside the fundamental premise that voting process issues must be considered as a whole, no one challenge of administration isolated from the other, and on the best data available. Just as polling place lines have multiple sources, so should voting security be carefully addressed on the evidence and in relation to the functioning of all the component parts of a voting system. Reforms already underway, such as intra-state collaboration and best practices in the management of registration lists, will deal effectively with concerns about ineligible voters remaining on the rolls and any increased risk of illegal voting. But the Pence Commission splits off and highlights voting fraud, falsely promotes it as a problem of central importance, and hides behind the appeal to “public confidence” to escape the demands of rigorous analysis and sound administration.

This means that the only hope for the Commission to attain respectability is to build a record of consultation with the respectable. And given how the Commission is organized—its leadership, the background of presidential claims, and its disingenuous plan to “enhance” the very public confidence that it is undermining—election administration experts should keep their distance. Or they will be, in a word, used. Their cooperation will allow for the

Administration to pretend to have had serious bipartisan support for its work, which can be expected to result in politically charged claims and legislative and other proposals to restrict the right to vote.

One of the named Commissioners has committed to speak up if the Commission turns out to be a “Trojan horse” for delivering any such voting rights infringements. But the Trojan horse was an act of cunning, a deception. The Commission has been set up with its purposes quite openly advertised: it has been positioned within the city gates, to spare it the need to be sneaked in. The members of the community under invasion should retreat into their houses and lock their doors.



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[Congress Holds Keys to Change Church Politicking Ban \(Bloomberg BNA\)](#)

By Colleen Murphy

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17)

For those wondering what the future holds for church involvement in politics, the best clues are in two bills introduced in Congress this session—not in President Donald Trump's executive order on the topic, nonprofit-sector specialists said.

Trump issued an order May 4 barring the Treasury Department from imposing tax penalties or revoking the tax-exempt status of an organization speaking out on politics, but practitioners have generally agreed it has little concrete impact because the Internal Revenue Service is already loath to crack down on the behavior.

The order stems from Trump's campaign promise to end the Johnson Amendment, a decades-old ban on 501(c)(3) politicking—though to do so requires a change to the tax law. The topic—at the delicate intersection of religion and politics—has created controversy in the sector, with supporters saying it protects charities and foes saying it chills free speech.

What to Expect

A bill (H.R. 172) that strikes the Johnson Amendment language entirely could lead to a “parade of horrors,” like dark money flowing into churches, said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, an organization that promotes the separation of church and state. Rep. Walter B. Jones (R-N.C.) introduced the measure in January.

Another measure (H.R. 781), permitting tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organizations to make some political statements as long as they are minimal, would require the IRS to begin reviewing churches’ books and following their spending, said John Van Drunen, executive vice president and general counsel at the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

Tyler and Van Drunen spoke May 12 at the American Bar Association tax section meeting. The impact of Trump's order was a topic that came up during several sessions.

Both bills—particularly H.R. 781, reintroduced in February by House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.) and Rep. Jody Hice (R-Ga.)—likely have legs as Republicans have vowed to kill the Johnson Amendment in tax reform. Even though there is a lot of opposition to the idea, including such language in tax reform legislation could bring the “core cluster of votes” needed to pass it, said John Pomeranz, an attorney at Harmon, Curran, Spielberg & Eisenberg LLP.

The topic is important to members of the House Ways and Means Committee, and practitioners should be open to talking it through, John Schoenecker, a committee staffer, said. “Let's get to yes on this one.”



Democratic National Convention host group got nearly \$1M in bonuses (Associated Press)

(Publish Date/Time: 5/13/17)

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. – The committee that raised money for last summer's Democratic National Convention used surplus funds to hand out nearly \$1 million in bonuses for staff members as well as grants for Philadelphia schools and nonprofits, ranking some state lawmakers who ponied up \$10 million in tax dollars for the event.

The bonuses to the host committee staff came from a \$4 million post-convention surplus and were disclosed in a Jan. 31 filing with the Federal Election Commission. They were first reported by The Philadelphia Inquirer.

All told, the committee raised \$86 million in public and private money.

Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, the host committee's chairman, called the bonuses a reward for low pay and long hours. The 12 bonuses ranged from \$500 up to \$310,000 for the committee's executive director, Kevin Washo, whose committee salary was \$13,000 a month for two years.

Rendell told the Inquirer that Washo's payment was part bonus and part back pay for unpaid work he did in 2013 through early 2015 when a small team worked to get the Democratic National Committee to select Philadelphia for its convention.

Washo said the payouts were decided by him, Rendell and chief operating officer Eliza Rose, who received a \$43,000 bonus. The committee's chief finance officer, Jason O'Malley, paid about \$8,000 a month, received a \$220,000 bonus. O'Malley's fundraising work deserved a "performance bonus," Rendell said.

The committee's largest charitable contribution, \$750,000, went to the Philadelphia School District's Right Books Campaign. Other city nonprofit groups received grants of \$10,000 or \$25,000 from the committee, which also repaid the city \$500,000 for its costs, Washo said.

The state's \$10 million grant, requested by Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf from lawmakers, was the largest convention donation. The grant money was kept in a separate account from the millions raised from private donors, and covered costs approved by the state, Washo said.

The state dollars were to go toward renting the convention center in Philadelphia and construction there, all spent in July, according to an independent auditor's report.

The state Senate's ranking member, President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati, R-Jefferson, will seek an audit of the money by Pennsylvania's independently elected auditor general, his office said.

The host committee apparently didn't need the entire \$10 million from the state and should have approached Wolf's office and lawmakers about returning what it didn't need, Scarnati's chief of staff, Drew Crompton, said.

"They had at least \$4 million more than they needed and, even if it was after the fact, they can certainly return a portion to the commonwealth," Crompton said.



[Gov. Wolf calls out Rendell, DNC 2016 host committee for spending \\$4M surplus \(Philly.com\)](#)

By Claudia Vargas

(Publish Date/Time: 5/14/1; 5:51 p.m. ET)

Gov. Wolf is asking the state auditor general review the \$10 million that state taxpayers donated to the Philadelphia 2016 Host Committee last year for the Democratic National Convention.

The donation was the biggest in an effort that raised \$86 million. Last week, the Inquirer reported that the host committee used a \$4 million surplus to give nearly \$1 million in bonuses to the 12-member host committee staff, \$1.2 million in grants to local nonprofits, and more than \$800,000 in municipal services refunds to the city.

Wolf said he was “disappointed” with how the extra money was spent.

"I am disappointed that when the host committee discovered there was a surplus, the first call was not to the commonwealth of Pennsylvania to discuss returning the money to the taxpayers," Wolf said in a statement released Sunday. "The commonwealth supports large events that have an economic benefit to Pennsylvania and the region, but when there is leftover funding, that money should be returned to taxpayers. I am disappointed that the surplus was instead spent on bonuses and grants."

Wolf noted that an independent audit of the \$10 million state grant was submitted to the state in December. The report indicated that the state grant was spent in compliance with the contract between the host committee and state -- on event expenses, including venue license fee and construction costs. Nevertheless, Wolf wants a second look.

“The report will be provided to the Auditor General’s office tomorrow,” the governor’s news release said. Later, J.J. Abbott, spokesman for Wolf, said that the governor wanted to “cover all of our bases” by sending the audit to the auditor general.

Anna Adams-Sarthou, spokeswoman for the host committee, said Sunday: "We're confident in our accounting and the fact that we spent the state money appropriately. ... We welcome everyone to review the audit."

After the convention, host committee officials said the committee was still \$1 million short of its \$64 million cash fund-raising goal. The host committee refused to release fund-raising documents to the public until the committee was legally required to file with the Federal Election Commission in late September. Not until then did it announce that it had met and exceeded its fund-raising goal.

The nearly \$1 million in rewards to host committee staff was decided in November by the chairman of the committee, former Gov. Edward G. Rendell, executive director and treasurer Kevin Washo, and chief operating officer Eliza Rose. The checks ranged from \$500 for interns and volunteers to \$310,000 for Washo. (Rendell has said that Washo’s pay was part bonus and part back pay for work he did early in the process.) The amounts were listed in a year-end report filed with the Federal Election Commission on Jan. 31.

Rendell has defended the bonuses, saying that the committee worked long hours for what he saw as low pay. On Saturday, he said no taxpayer money was used for the extra pay.

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“None of the state money was earmarked for salaries,” Rendell said. “We had to raise the money to pay our administrative costs. None of the taxpayer money was involved in this at all.”

Committee staffers were paid monthly salaries that ranged from about \$4,000 to \$13,000. The largest amount went to Washo, who continued to be paid through the end of March, eight months after the convention wrapped up.

The Philadelphia host committee for the 2000 Republican National Convention did not pay any bonuses, nor were staff paid more than a month following the convention, according to financial reports from the time.

On Sunday, Abbott, Wolf's spokesman, said it is still early to say what, if anything, the state can do to recoup any money. "I think there will be more conversations about it," he said.



Republican Strategy Firm in Maryland Raided by FBI: Reports (Bloomberg)

By Erik Larson

(Publish Date/Time: 5/15/17)

The Federal Bureau of Investigation carried out a raid on a Republican fundraising firm in Maryland that had been accused in a 2014 lawsuit of defrauding political donors, according to several area news outlets.

The target of the raid was Strategic Campaign Group Inc. in Annapolis, the Baltimore Sun reported May 11, along with local television stations. Nicole Schwab, a spokeswoman for the FBI's Washington field office, told Bloomberg News that agents had executed a court-approved search warrant in the vicinity of Main Street, Annapolis, where the fundraising firm is located.

Kelley Rogers, the president of Strategic Campaign Group, confirmed that his firm was the target of the raid, the newspaper reported.

It's unclear what the FBI was seeking at the offices of the group, which advises Republican candidates. Calls to several of the group's officials weren't immediately returned.

Strategic Campaign Group and its affiliates have been accused by various campaigns, including President Donald Trump's, of raising money without the candidate's approval.

Lawsuit Settled in 2015

Former Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli of Virginia, a Republican who ran for governor in 2013, filed a lawsuit against the group and its Conservative StrikeForce PAC, accusing the organization of fraud, for allegedly making unauthorized fundraising pitches. The suit was settled in 2015 and the PAC, which listed Scott B. Mackenzie as its treasurer, was required to pay Cuccinelli \$85,000.

Patriots For Trump, a PAC run by the same treasurer, shut down in 2015 after the Trump campaign sent a letter demanding that it stop raising donations without its authorization. According to Federal Election Commission filings the committee raised more than \$131,000 and spent \$122,000 to promote Trump's campaign.

While there's no indication that the raid was related to Cuccinelli's lawsuit, the litigation sheds some light on the firm's previous legal troubles. Cuccinelli said in his complaint that Strategic Campaign Group used national lists of conservative voters to seek cash for phone banks, rallies and voter-identification efforts.

“Defendants donated less than one-half of one percent of their total receipts in 2013 to the Cuccinelli campaign, and spent no money in support of the Cuccinelli campaign in the form of independent expenditures,” the lawsuit said.

Rogers's clients have included numerous campaigns for president, Congress and statewide office, as well as conservative business groups and political action committees, according to the group's website.

Strategic Campaign Group's vice president is former congressional aide Chip O'Neil, according to the group's website. Its senior adviser is Dennis Whitfield, who served as chief of staff for the U.S. trade representative and then as deputy secretary of labor under President Ronald Reagan.

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Whitfield has also provided political and communications advice to U.S. and foreign corporations, and was executive vice president of the American Conservative Union, which organizes the annual American Conservative Political Action Conference, known as CPAC.

Whitfield was also a director at BKSH and Associates, where he provided strategic government relations counseling. That firm was formed in 1996 when Paul Manafort and Roger Stone left Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly and it merged with Gold and Liebengood. Manafort and Stone both went on to become close advisers to Trump. They had departed by the time Whitfield joined the firm.



[Political signs at Paris Gibson Square cause controversy \(KRTV Great Falls News, MT\)](#)

By David Sherman

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17; Updated: 11:42 a.m. ET)

GREAT FALLS - On Thursday evening, several signs for the Rob Quist campaign were posted on the grass at the Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art in Great Falls.

Quist is the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in Montana's upcoming special election to replace Ryan Zinke. Greg Gianforte is the Republican candidate, and Mark Wicks is the Libertarian candidate.

The Quist campaign rented space at the Square for a political rally on Thursday evening, and Quist staffers posted the signs, which were removed when the event was over.

The yard signs caught the attention of some people who shared a photo of the signs on Facebook, and the photo was then posted to the E-City Beat website.

The E-City Beat post claims that: "In clear violations of the law, someone has placed Quist's campaign signs on properties owned by GFPS. There is a flock of them at Paris Gibson Square, the partially taxpayer-funded non-profit which leases its space from the District."

KRTV talked with Tracy Houck, the executive director of the Square, on Friday morning. Houck explained that the property is owned by the Great Falls Public School District, and leased to the Square for \$1 per year. The Square rents space to other organizations in the community for gatherings such as auctions, wedding, and, as in this case, political events.

Houck said that all of the preparation and handling of Quist rally, including the placement of the signs outside, was done by Quist campaign members, not by Square staff.

Houck explained, "There was some controversy in concern that we hosted a political rally in the square recently, and that was done by a private renter, who rented out the top floor, and the three rooms that we have. Very similar to other events, they paid just like anybody else would, and they put signs on the lawn indicating the event was here again just like we have other things."

Houck also also that the same would have been done for any political candidate who rented space, no matter the party affiliation.

A representative from the Square noted: "Standard after-hour rental fees were charged with additional costs for using linens. The Operations Director, not the Executive Director, handles rentals. If the signs were a violation, then it would be on the renter, not the organization. The renter posted (and removed) the signs."

Houck posted on the Square's Facebook page:

Long term tenants include artist studios, the Montana Human Rights Network and the Montana Wilderness Association, both of which are able to also host events and rallies. Tomorrow night, the Electric City Pittie Committee is hosting an Art Auction. Tonight, it was Rob Quist. The Quist event was a paid rental. As a private

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rental, they could have charged admission and /or turned people away. It was not a function of the Square, not catered by staff or marketed by staff as a Square hosted event.

We contacted Montana's Office of the Commissioner of Political Practices for information, who declined to offer an opinion on the matter; we were told that because this is about a federal election, we need to contact the Federal Election Commission.

We explained the situation to a representative from the FEC, and they, too, declined to offer an opinion on the matter; they said, "We cannot speculate on the legality of specific situations or sets of circumstances."

We will continue investigating the issue and again contact the Montana COPP next week.

(UPDATE, MAY 13) A case presented to the Office of the Commissioner of Political Practices in 2016 provides details of a similar situation.

In that case, a person reported seeing campaign signs at the Butte-Silver Bow Civic Center during a high school basketball game.

In its review of the case, the COPP wrote:

The Butte-Silver Bow Civic Center is a public facility which is available for lease for "local sporting events and concerts as well as trade shows and political events".³ The Civic Center also has advertising space available for lease around the arena. Here, the City-County has made a determination that the public facility and advertising space is available to interested parties who are willing to lease the space at the going rate when being used for commercial purposes regardless of the type of event.

Under the facts you provided, the display of a political advertisement during a basketball tournament is an appropriate commercial use of the public space so long as it was leased by the candidate or committee at a fair market rate.



[A Seeker of Kansas Voter Fraud Gets a National Soapbox \(New York Times\)](#)

By Michael Wines and Julie Bosman

(Publish Date/Time: 5/14/17)

Kris W. Kobach, the Kansas secretary of state, oversees an office whose clerical and regulatory work costs the state's taxpayers barely \$5.5 million a year. But he has parlayed that modest post into a national platform for tough restrictions on voting rights and immigration, becoming both a celebrated voice within the Republican Party and a regular target of lawsuits by civil rights advocates.

Now, as vice chairman of the new Advisory Commission on Election Integrity announced by the White House on Thursday (Vice President Mike Pence is the titular chairman), Mr. Kobach has a far bigger soapbox for his views on voter fraud — which Republicans, including President Trump, call a cancer on democracy. Others say it is a pretense for discouraging the poor, minorities and other typically Democratic-leaning voters from casting ballots.

Academic studies regularly show — and most state election officials agree — that fraud is rare, and that the kind of fraud Republicans seek to address with voter ID laws is minuscule.

Mr. Kobach promised an impartial inquiry into election vulnerabilities during an interview on Friday, saying the commission would “go where the facts take us.” But in Kansas, the facts appear at best mixed, and critics say he is one of the most partisan and polarizing figures imaginable to preside over a fair inquiry on voter fraud.

Since taking office in 2011, he has persuaded the Kansas Legislature to enact some of the nation's most rigorous voting restrictions and to give him special authority to enforce them. The result has been a campaign against supposedly unchecked voting fraud, particularly by immigrants.

Most fraud claims, however, have proved vaporous, and convictions are sparse — nine since 2015 and only one of them a foreigner — and placed a heavy burden on ordinary citizens. In striking down some of Kansas' voting rules in 2016, a federal court said restrictive registration requirements had denied more than 18,000 Kansans their constitutional right to cast ballots.

In an editorial this month, The Kansas City Star mockingly called Mr. Kobach “the Javert of voter fraud,” after the ham-handed detective in “Les Miserables,” wasting tax dollars on “his own single-minded pursuit.”

Mr. Kobach is undeterred. In November, he echoed President Trump's baseless claim that he would have won the popular vote but for ballots cast by millions of illegal voters. And he has said that the few illegally registered foreigners he claims to have identified in Kansas are but the “tip of the iceberg” of fraudulent votes by immigrants.

“We've had substantial numbers of noncitizens getting on our voter rolls,” he said recently. “If other states are experiencing the same problem, then I think it would be appropriate for them to consider what Kansas has done.”

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Kansas Republicans see Mr. Kobach as a rising star, and he is said to be preparing for a gubernatorial campaign in 2018. “Very smart guy, very passionate about his beliefs,” said Clayton Barker, the executive director of the Kansas Republican Party. “He has a very strong core group of supporters.”

His critics are contemptuous. “He’s a person who has built a political career on xenophobia,” said Dale Ho, director of the Voting Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union. “It’s worked great for him, but not for the people he has disenfranchised.”

Mr. Kobach called the xenophobia charge outrageous.

At 51, Mr. Kobach is building a political career for which he has meticulously prepared. He was a state champion debater in high school and class valedictorian. He made summa cum laude studying government (and heading the Republican Club) at Harvard, earned a Ph.D. in political science (and a place on the rowing team) at the University of Oxford and in 1995 earned a law degree (and was a law review editor) at Yale.

Yale colleagues called him a fish-out-of-water conservative in a decidedly liberal law school, but also a pleasant colleague. “Kris was totally opposite on the political spectrum from me,” said Jesselyn Radack, now director of the whistle-blower protection program at ExposeFacts, an advocacy group in Washington. “But at the same time, it was a ‘let me give you a ride to the airport’ sort of thing.”

After missionary work in Africa, a stint teaching law and a City Council seat in Overland Park, Kan., Mr. Kobach was named a White House fellow in 2001, and worked on immigration issues after the Sept. 11 attacks.



[Education secretary has long history of financing politics \(Associated Press\)](#)

(Publish Date/Time: 5/13/17)

Betsy DeVos, President Donald Trump's education secretary, built her political resume by raising and contributing millions of dollars to support the cause of giving parents choices on where their children go to school.

The daughter of one wealthy businessman and the wife of another, DeVos has headed a series of groups that help rich contributors spend large sums on elections, including one that was assessed the biggest fine ever by the Ohio Elections Commission.

A look at her political activities.

—

WHO IS BETSY DEVOS

DeVos is the daughter of an auto parts manufacturer who married into another wealthy Michigan family, the one that runs Amway.

Her family is steeped in politics. Her father, Edgar Prince, was a major early donor to the Family Research Council. Her husband, Dick DeVos, lost a 2006 run for governor of Michigan, and DeVos herself served as the chairwoman of the state Republican Party. Her brother, Erik Prince, is the founder of the security company Blackwater, which has had key government contracts.

Her education experience is mainly through advocating for school choice. She attended private Christian schools. Her children, now grown, were educated through a combination of private schools and homeschooling.

During a 2001 appearance at a retreat of Christian philanthropists, she said, "Our desire is to confront the culture in ways that will continue to advance God's kingdom."

—

GIVING TO POLITICS

DeVos personally contributed at least \$2.3 million to candidates and political action committees from 2007 through last year.

Her family, including husband and one-time Michigan gubernatorial candidate Dick DeVos, mother Elsa Prince Broekhuizen, brother Erik Prince and father- and mother-in-law Richard and Helen DeVos contributed a combined \$19 million in that same period.

—

RAISING SOFT MONEY

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Twenty years ago, DeVos wrote an opinion piece for the Washington publication Roll Call in which she said her family was the leading contributor of “soft money” donations to political parties. Unlike money given directly to a candidate, money given to the political parties is largely unregulated, thus the term “soft money.”

“We expect to foster a conservative governing philosophy consisting of limited government and respect for traditional American virtues,” she wrote. “We expect a return on our investment; we expect a good and honest government.”

PROMOTING BALLOT MEASURES

In 2000, DeVos was a key player in a ballot initiative fight in Michigan over whether the state would allow vouchers for private schools.

She and her husband contributed nearly \$1.6 million to the losing effort. The couple and their relatives paid for more than one-third of the campaign overall.

TROUBLE IN OHIO

In 2006, DeVos’s school-choice group, All Children Matter, had a political action committee in Virginia, where contributions are unlimited. The group raised \$17.8 million that year, and more than 40 percent of it was contributed to affiliated PACs in other states.

The group asked Ohio campaign finance regulators if it would be OK to shift money from Virginia to Ohio, a state with strict campaign contribution limits. The state said it would be illegal.

The committee made the shift, anyway. All \$870,000 spent by the Ohio operation of All Children Matter that year was funneled through Virginia.

Ohio campaign finance regulators in 2008 ordered the group to pay \$5.3 million in fines, an amount it still has not paid.

INDEPENDENT EXPENDITURES

In recent years, DeVos’s groups had significant independent spending on political races.

Generally, groups can spend without limits as long as they don’t coordinate with campaign committees. In most places, they’re not required to disclose the individuals who fund them, which is why some of this kind of expenditure is known as “dark money.”

According to tax filings from 2011 through 2015, groups DeVos ran or that were subsidiaries of those she ran — American Federation for Children, American Federation for Children Action Fund, Great Lakes Education



Project and Students First Pennsylvania — combined for nearly \$20 million in political spending. Some of that money may have been double-counted after being passed from one of the organizations to another.

It's not clear how much of that money was from DeVos herself.

BENEFITING FROM DARK MONEY

At least two groups that do not report their donors ran ad campaigns to support DeVos's confirmation.

Those groups are Club for Growth, a major supporter of conservative candidates across the country, and America Next, which was formed by then-Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal in 2013.

[The Pence Commission: Of “Public Confidence” and Trojan Horses \(More Soft Money Hard Law Blog\)](#)

By Bob Bauer

(Publish Date/Time: 5/12/17)

In apparent haste, with not all its members appointed, the President issued the executive order establishing the Pence vote fraud Commission. The appointments still to come will add only marginally to an understanding of this Commission’s objectives. As the Order is written, and with the naming of Kansas Secretary of State Kobach as Vice Chair, those objectives are clear, and the outcome not hard to forecast. And yet there are extraordinary features to the Commission, none of them surprising, and none are the result of error or lack of foresight.

Begin with the leadership:

The Chair is the Vice President of the President who has announced that millions of illegal votes were cast in the last election, all against him (or for his opponent). Now Mr. Kobach, as Vice Chair, has joined the leadership ranks as a public supporter of the President’s claims. He has said that the “White House has provided enormous evidence with respect to voter fraud.” This is untrue. As for the problem of non-citizen voting, Kobach has asserted that there is a “lot of evidence” of it. This is also untrue. The larger point is that the Vice Chair of the Commission has reached these conclusions long ago, before a day of testimony or an hour of deliberation. What are the chances that this Commission will arrive at judgments contrary to the ones asserted so confidently by the President—and echoed by Mr. Kobach whose bid for national prominence rests on loudly ringing the alarm about voter fraud?

Now, onto the Commission’s purposes:

Its mission is defined mostly by reference to laws, rules, policies or practices that either “enhance” or “undermine” the public’s “confidence in the integrity of the voting process used in Federal elections.” These are the first two of three statements of its purpose, only the third and last of them concerned with actual “vulnerabilities” in voting systems. Right at the beginning, at the core of the mission, is the politics of voter fraud. It can be agreed that “public confidence” in the electoral process is important. But it is also an easy talking point ready for use when a voting restriction is lacking in more substantial support.

We have the seen how this has worked over the years. A virtual cottage industry of voter fraud alarmism has sprung up to shake public confidence in the voting systems. One way to understand the Commission is that it will continue, at the highest-level in the name of the President of the United States, on this course. It will operate to create or compound a problem of confidence that it will then announce it must solve. Its very existence is meant to communicate that illegal or improper voting is a major concern. After all, its Chair is none other than the Vice President of the United States. It can hold hearings to dramatize its point—which is the President’s point.

The Commission is an escalation in the campaign to persuade the American public that their voting systems are failing. It is not intended to bolster confidence, but to undermine it, and on the strength of this program, to advance reforms that are costly, unnecessary and a burden on lawful voting by eligible voters. And it is well

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understood that those burdens typically fall disproportionately on those populations of voters least able to bear them. It is also the belief of many agitating for these reforms that they will be more beneficial to the electoral aspirations of one political party. (Did not the President say that all the illegal voters in 2016, ostensibly millions of them, cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton?)

It was once said of Richard Nixon that he would chop down a tree, only to stand on the stump and deliver a speech in favor of conservation. This is the “public confidence” politics of the Pence Commission.

And, finally, the response from the election administration community:

As argued here, the Pence Commission has broken with the healthy movement toward nonpartisan, professional collaboration on election administration. It has cast aside the fundamental premise that voting process issues must be considered as a whole, no one challenge of administration isolated from the other, and on the best data available. Just as polling place lines have multiple sources, so should voting security be carefully addressed on the evidence and in relation to the functioning of all the component parts of a voting system. Reforms already underway, such as intra-state collaboration and best practices in the management of registration lists, will deal effectively with concerns about ineligible voters remaining on the rolls and any increased risk of illegal voting. But the Pence Commission splits off and highlights voting fraud, falsely promotes it as a problem of central importance, and hides behind the appeal to “public confidence” to escape the demands of rigorous analysis and sound administration.

This means that the only hope for the Commission to attain respectability is to build a record of consultation with the respectable. And given how the Commission is organized—its leadership, the background of presidential claims, and its disingenuous plan to “enhance” the very public confidence that it is undermining—election administration experts should keep their distance. Or they will be, in a word, used. Their cooperation will allow for the Administration to pretend to have had serious bipartisan support for its work, which can be expected to result in politically charged claims and legislative and other proposals to restrict the right to vote.

One of the named Commissioners has committed to speak up if the Commission turns out to be a “Trojan horse” for delivering any such voting rights infringements. But the Trojan horse was an act of cunning, a deception. The Commission has been set up with its purposes quite openly advertised: it has been positioned within the city gates, to spare it the need to be sneaked in. The members of the community under invasion should retreat into their houses and lock their doors.

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To: [News and Views](#)
Cc: [Press Staff](#)
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News and Views for Thursday, May 18, 2017

FEC, Campaign Finance Law and Federal Employee News:

[Nearly Half of Recent Campaign Money From Undisclosed Sources \(Bloomberg BNA Money and Politics Report\)](#)

By Kenneth P. Doyle

[5 things to watch in Trump's financial disclosures \(Politico\)](#)

By Darren Samuelsohn

[Did Toomey get scammed by PAC targeted in FBI raid? \(Pennlive\)](#)

By Colin Deppen

[Are Taxpayers Subsidizing Campaign Offices for These Two New York Congress Members? \(New York Observer\)](#)

By Will Bredderman

[Aaron Schock's attorneys ask for delay in fraud trial \(Journal-Courier\)](#)

By Andy Kravetz

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[Nearly Half of Recent Campaign Money From Undisclosed Sources \(Bloomberg BNA Money and Politics Report\)](#)

Snapshot

- Undisclosed donors provide nearly half of \$20 million in outside campaign spending in three current congressional races
- Big spending by trade associations, nonprofits and super PACS funded by non-disclosing entities, Bloomberg BNA finds

By Kenneth P. Doyle

Undisclosed donors provided nearly half of the more than \$20 million in outside campaign spending in three closely watched, current congressional election races, a Bloomberg BNA review of Federal Election Commission reports found.

Bloomberg BNA looked at FEC independent expenditure reports filed in the special election campaigns for U.S. House seats for Georgia, Montana and South Carolina. These races, for seats vacated by Republican lawmakers who joined President Donald Trump's administration, are being treated by both Republicans and Democrats as important bellwethers reflecting the mood of the electorate following Trump's first months in office and have drawn record campaign spending.

Of a total \$20.7 million, so far, in independent expenditures of \$50,000 or more in the three House races, just under \$4 million—nearly 20 percent—is from trade associations and nonprofit groups that disclose none of their donors.

This direct spending by non-disclosing nonprofits is only part of the story, however. Much of the rest of the outside campaign spending has come from super political action committees receiving large contributions from nonprofits or other entities that keep their original donors under wraps.

GOP Super PAC Funded by Non-Disclosing Group

For example, the Congressional Leadership Fund, a super PAC linked to House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and other Republican leaders, has spent a total of nearly \$8 million to influence the Georgia and Montana congressional races and has received \$5 million in contributions this year from an affiliated nonprofit, the American Action Network, which doesn't disclose donors.

Outside campaign money being spent in the special election races also has come from Democratic and Republican party committees, which, like super PACs, file disclosure reports with the FEC. The national party committees are required to take only individual contributions in limited amounts and disclose all original contributors of their funds.

Most of the independent campaign spending from trade associations and nonprofits is coming from well-known groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the nation's largest business lobby and a key supporter of Republicans. On the Democratic side, some spending has come from nonprofits such as the Planned Parenthood

Action Fund, which, like the Chamber, doesn't report its donors to the FEC.

Mystery Groups, Super PACs

Some entities spending in the current races are more mysterious, however, and have provided few clues about where their money is coming from.

For example, an organization called CLA Inc. spent nearly \$400,000 on campaign ads supporting state lawmaker Tommy Pope in a May 16 Republican primary in South Carolina, but has never previously filed campaign finance reports with the FEC. The background of CLA Inc. is unclear, but its FEC filings were signed by a veteran Washington lobbyist, Marc Himmelstein, who heads a firm called National Environmental Strategies and lobbies mainly for energy companies.

Pope appears to have lost a close election in South Carolina to a rival GOP candidate, Ralph Norman, though a recount is possible. The general elections in South Carolina and Georgia are set for June 20. The Montana special election is May 25.

In addition to little-known nonprofits spending directly to influence the congressional races, a significant amount of untraceable money is coming through super PACs.

The Congressional Leadership Fund, which got \$5 million from the non-disclosing American Action Fund, and other super PACs reported receiving most or even all of their contributions from entities that don't reveal their donors. These include two mysterious super PACs seeking to influence the South Carolina and Georgia elections—Hometown Freedom Action Network and Americans United for Values.

Debate Over Disclosure

The spending from undisclosed sources in the current congressional races comes as supporters and opponents of tougher disclosure rules continue to debate the impact of what critics call “dark money.”

“Sensational rhetoric” on the issue created a “false impression that nonprofits are a major source of campaign speech,” the Center for Competitive Politics (CCP), a nonprofit policy group that supports allowing some money from undisclosed sources to influence elections, said in a recent analysis.

In reality, the CCP study said, nonprofits that spend money in campaigns but disclose none of their donors consistently account for less than 5 percent of reported political spending. Regulated political committees and others, like the media, “continue to have the most prominent voices in elections” the CCP said.

Allowing a small role for nonprofits doesn't “drown out” candidates or undermine disclosure but adds to the diversity of views necessary in a healthy democracy, the CCP said.

The center's study didn't look at campaign money contributed to super PACs from other, non-disclosing groups, Luke Wachob, who worked on the CCP analysis, told Bloomberg BNA in phone interview. He discounted the impact of this funding—sometimes called “gray money”—because decisions about where the money is spent are up to the super PAC, he said.

‘Rabbit Hole’ or ‘Right to Know’

Searching for the original donors of all outside campaign money “leads you down a rabbit hole” in a chase for something that isn't very significant in terms of its overall impact on campaigns, Wachob said.

The Campaign Legal Center (CLC), which supports stronger disclosure rules, criticized the CCP study. The argument

that money from undisclosed sources is insignificant in recent elections is an “alternative fact,” CLC’s Brendan Fischer said in a blog post,

“Dark money—that is, election-related spending whose donors are kept secret from voters—continues to play a major and troubling role in U.S. elections,” Fischer said.

This spending gained in significance due to Supreme Court decisions rolling back restrictions on campaign money and weak rules and enforcement by the FEC, he said.

The original sources of all money seeking to influence campaigns should be disclosed so that voters can understand and assess who is providing that money and what interests they may have before candidates and officials, Fischer said.

“The public has a right to know who’s trying to influence campaigns,” he said.

[5 things to watch in Trump’s financial disclosures \(Politico\)](#)

By Darren Samuelsohn

(Publish Date/Time: 5/18/17, 5:29 AM)

President Donald Trump may boast about it, but he won’t be breaking new ground by releasing updated financial disclosure forms one year before it’s required.

Every president since Ronald Reagan has done the same.

Still, his 2016 disclosure to the Federal Election Commission—expected out as soon as this week—promises to generate intense scrutiny. The report, which aides said he would release voluntarily, will open a window into his books, likely showing how much cash flowed into his golf courses and hotels and more detail on how he wound down his business operations after winning the election.

But don’t expect the kitchen sink. The report won’t show how much Trump paid in taxes last year or his total business debt—the kinds of details that could show whether his businesses create conflicts of interest with his government gig.

Here are five things to watch when the forms come out:

How’s the Trump brand doing in the limelight?

Trump’s disclosure may put dollar figures around how his businesses fared financially during his presidential campaign.

He’s already boasting that his last two disclosure forms showed how rich he was. Last May, he claimed to be worth “in excess of \$10 billion” when filing a form that he declared the “largest in the history” of the FEC.

A year before that, he complained that the FEC document didn’t have boxes to check off for some of his most valuable properties. “This report was not designed for a man of Mr. Trump’s massive wealth,” Trump’s press release said.

Now Trump finds himself in a different position. He’s faced allegations for months that he’s profiting off his presidency, and the documents he’s set to release may make that case.

Not only is Trump positioned to give a new net worth figure, he'll also reveal revenue generated at Mar-a-Lago, the South Florida private club he visited frequently during the campaign and where he recently increased membership fees to \$200,000; the Bedminster, N.J., club that's been dubbed the "summer" White House; and the Trump National course in northern Virginia that he frequently visits when he's spending weekends at the White House.

But wait, there's more: Trump likely will disclose revenue he earned in 2016 on everything from his Charlottesville, Va., winery to royalties received from his 1987 autobiography "The Art of the Deal," as well as other books that previously languished in the back catalogs but have since earned a new audience.

Important caveat: Figures spelling out the value of Trump's assets won't be official appraisals. They'll be good-faith estimates—which Trump himself once acknowledged in a 2007 lawsuit deposition can fluctuate based on "even my own feelings."

Most important, Trump will only disclose revenues, which means he's only offering limited insight into the Trump Organization operation.

"It may be useful for boasting purposes," said Kathleen Clark, an ethics and law professor at Washington University in St. Louis. "It also is misleading. The company has business expenses, for goodness sake."

Is Trump still in charge of his companies?

Trump's financial disclosure forms are expected to shed some light on how he's rearranged his businesses since winning the White House in November.

The 2015 report he filed last year outlined 564 organizations – including corporations, partnerships, LLCs, foreign entities, non-profits and trusts – where Trump served in a senior leadership role, from president down to board member.

Each of those roles should be significantly diminished, if not gone, in this report. In January, Trump pledged to hand over day-to-day operations of his company to his adult sons Eric and Donald Trump Jr, as well as longtime senior Trump Organization executives.

Trump's report also should show how many of those 564 organizations still exist. Media reports since the November election have cataloged some being shuttered, including licensing deals for hotels in Azerbaijan, Brazil and Georgia. But Trump may also have added new LLCs too, accounting for businesses like trademarks he's won in China.

Important caveat: These disclosures will depend on the date range that Trump uses for his forms. Since it's voluntary, he could detail his businesses for just 2016 or he could include the first few months of 2017 after he was sworn into the White House.

Ethics experts also say Trump could juggle entities into different corporate shells, making it hard to tell which ones he's actually eliminated.

"It's like moving the Mercedes from one garage to another," said Richard Painter, the former George W. Bush White House ethics lawyer. "He still has the Mercedes in the garage."

What about those June 2016 stock sales?

Under fire to explain what Trump would do to address his business conflicts of interest in the weeks after he won the presidential election, a transition spokesman last December said the president-elect had sold all his stocks in June 2016.

Now it's time for Trump to prove it.

In his 2015 disclosures, Trump detailed at least \$61 million that he owned in stocks, hedge funds and mutual funds—the totals were spelled out in wide financial ranges. Among his holdings: at least \$25 million in the Blackrock's Obsidian hedge fund, \$600,000 million in Apple, \$500 million in Google, \$500,000 in Chevron and \$500,000 in Comcast.

The fire sale likely crimped Trump's bottom line. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has gone up more than 15.8 percent since last June, fueled by strong economic data, rising oil prices and the prospect of financial deregulation.

Important caveat: Trump's stock portfolio is only a small portion of his wealth, and the FEC filing he's releasing won't require him to say how much he made on the transactions.

Who does Trump owe money?

Trump's disclosure will allow closer scrutiny into how much debt he carries and whether any of the terms to his financing—interest rates or maturation terms—changed during the presidential campaign or transition.

In his 2015 form, Trump reported 16 major liabilities worth at least \$315 million, including mortgages on Trump Tower and his golf courses in Miami, northern Virginia and Monmouth County, N.J. He also reported loans for the 40 Wall Street skyscraper in New York and the new Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C.

Important caveat: The form won't be detailed enough to get a full read on Trump's debt. He doesn't need to say which foreign governments' financial institutions he's on the hook to. And he won't disclose corporate debt, so the forms likely show only a fraction of what he owes.

"It's absolutely not a complete representation of the debt Donald Trump owes through his businesses," said Clark. She pointed to an inconsistency: Trump in the past reported on his FEC form his total asset values and income that appeared to include his wider company properties but didn't follow the same criteria for his liabilities.

"Imagine applying for a credit card or a loan and listing all your revenue and all your income but not all your debt," she said.

What do the first lady's finances look like?

Melania Trump barely registered a year ago when Trump filed his financial disclosure form. The only income listed for the future first lady—in a range from \$15,001 to \$50,000—came via royalties tied to a licensing agreement with a company called Melania Marks Accessories. She also reported up to \$5 million in value from residential real estate in New York.

But media reports since May 2016 show there's more to Melania Trump's books.

In February, McClatchy reported that several companies connected to Melania Trump no longer had relationships to manufacture products tied to the first lady, including watches, jewelry and skin-care products. Melania Trump in April also reached a \$2.9 million settlement with the Daily Mail and Mail Online to close a defamation lawsuit she brought after the tabloid published a story falsely suggesting she'd worked for an escort service.

Important caveat: Since these developments happened recently, Trump might not include them on the form, meaning the world would wait until next May to see the changes in her finances.

[Did Toomey get scammed by PAC targeted in FBI raid? \(Pennlive\)](#)

By Colin Deppen

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 12:16 PM)

On Thursday, the FBI raided the offices of Strategic Campaign Group, a controversial GOP consultancy firm and one previously accused of failing to turn over money its affiliates had raised on behalf of Republican candidates.

The raid concerned work the company did on the failed 2013 gubernatorial bid of former Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, a Republican, according to Strategic Campaign Group.

The FBI has not discussed the case in the days since it visited Strategic Campaign Group's headquarters in Annapolis, Maryland, gathering untold evidence, computer files and reams of paperwork.

Cuccinelli sued the firm in 2014, alleging the company and one of its political action committees had duped donors. In his complaint, Cuccinelli dubbed the operation a "malicious" scam, and alleged that while the group had formed a PAC to help fund his campaign, he never saw a dollar of the money it raised.

Similar allegations and questions have been raised by lawmakers elsewhere in the country, and now campaign representatives for Sen. Pat Toomey, a Lehigh Valley Republican, say it appears his 2016 reelection bid was involved as well, along with anyone who may have donated to a Strategic Campaign Group-related fund on his behalf.

"They filed one (\$200) in-time expenditure with the FEC saying they did some email service on our behalf, but until you emailed me I had no idea anyone had even been doing anything," Mark Harris, a campaign consultant on Toomey's re-election bid, told PennLive via email.

"I had no idea they were even involved [in the campaign]," Harris added. "I suspect it's just part of their scam."

Most of the websites associated with the Strategic Campaign Group have been scrubbed in the days since the FBI's raid at the firm's D.C.-area headquarters.

Sites belonging to Conservative StrikeForce, a Strategic Campaign Group-operated PAC, have also disappeared. Screenshots embedded below reveal the PAC's endorsement of Toomey and soliciting of donations on his behalf, money his campaign says it never saw.

A donation tab on a Conservative StrikeForce webpage -- now deleted -- appearing to solicit donations on Sen. Pat Toomey's behalf. Toomey's campaign said it never saw any money as a result.

A now-deleted Conservative StrikeForce webpage lists Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA) as one of the PAC's endorsed candidates.

Toomey's staffers on Capitol Hill said they were prevented from commenting on campaign-related matters as government workers.

But Mark Harris said there was no coordination between Toomey's campaign and Strategic Campaign Group or its PACs. It appears, he added, that Toomey's campaign, like other prominent Republican campaigns elsewhere in the country, had been dragged into a fundraising ploy.

Strategic Campaign Group has denied any wrongdoing.

"They certainly never reached out to us. But I think that's their M.O. (modus operandi)," Harris added.

"I never interacted with them. ... They pick popular races to fundraise off of, but none of the money ever gets to the

candidates. I have no idea how much they raised (on Toomey's behalf)."

The Federal Election Commission isn't sure either. In an email to PennLive, the regulatory agency said based on what was reported by Conservative StrikeForce, there were no earmarks from individual contributors to specific candidates.

But the group's since-deleted donation tab on its website could easily give a supporter that impression. Additionally, according to FEC records provided to PennLive, "The Conservative StrikeForce" PAC reported \$8,299 in small, individual contributions in Pennsylvania last year alone. The PAC also reported \$28,345 in individual contributions from Pennsylvania in 2013-2014; \$41,919 in 2011-2012; and \$7,830 in 2009-2010.

In the end, Toomey's 2016 reelection bid went on to become one of the most expensive in U.S. history. He also succeeded in winning a second term in office, so the true impact of allegedly fraudulent fundraising activity around his campaign may never be known.

"They made one \$200 in-kind contribution and we just found out about it by looking at the FEC's website now," Harris told PennLive earlier this week. "They (Conservative StrikeForce) filed an FEC report saying they spent \$200 with a company on active engagement supporting federal candidate 'Toomey, Patrick Joseph' for voter contact emails."

Harris added: "I have no idea what that even means."

According to the Washington Post, "critics say 'scam PACs' have proliferated in recent years, driven in part by the advent of big-money super PACs in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision. There has also been a surge in groups chasing small-dollar donors, often with misleading promises of how they plan to use those funds."

In 2012, Congressman Allen West, R-Florida, filed a complaint with the FEC alleging so-called "scam PACs," including Conservative StrikeForce, had cost him reelection in 2012 by siphoning off funding from his campaign and using his name and image to raise funds for themselves.

West lost the race by a narrow margin, meaning that if those dollars had been turned over to his campaign, it might have helped keep him in office, the Congressman argued.

In response, the FEC said that while it agreed the PACs had used West's name to raise money and had turned over very little of that money, it disagreed with whether the activity "constitutes a fraud within the reach of (FEC) regulation."

"Whether it is prohibited by laws beyond the (regulation), criminal or otherwise, is not a matter within the Commission's jurisdiction," the FEC added.

After Ken Cuccinelli's failed bid for Governor of Virginia, he sued Conservative StrikeForce, alleging the Arlington-based super PAC had raised \$2.2 million in 2013 by largely promising donors the money would help Cuccinelli's campaign against Democrat Terry McAuliffe. The PAC only gave Cuccinelli's campaign \$10,000, he claimed.

The lawsuit was eventually settled for \$85,000, but, as last week's FBI action indicates, Strategic Campaign Group's troubles were only just beginning.

"This is a political fundraising swamp," Cucinelli said after his lawsuit with the firm was settled. "The scam PACs are real and they exist all over the country and they prey on people's intense feelings about politics."

[Are Taxpayers Subsidizing Campaign Offices for These Two New York Congress Members? \(New York Observer\)](#)

By Will Bredderman

(Publish Date: 5/17/17, 2:21 PM)

The federal government doles out massive sums to private landlords each month to maintain Congressman Gregory Meeks's and Congresswoman Grace Meng's formal offices in their Queens districts—while the two Democrats simultaneously rent campaign headquarters in the exact same buildings for far, far lower rates.

In 2010, the New York Post reported that Meeks's Build America Political Action Committee paid \$350 a month for Suite 535 at 153-01 Jamaica Avenue, in Jamaica, Queens. The problem, the tabloid noted, is that 153-01 Jamaica Avenue contains no Suite 535, and is in fact only three stories tall.

What the Post neglected to mention was that Meeks has reported the same phantom space as the headquarters of his two campaign committees, Friends for Gregory Meeks and Meeks for Congress, to the Federal Election Commission since late 2006. To this day, his periodic financial filings, his fundraiser invitations and his official campaign website all list this nonexistent office as the nexus and nerve-center of his political operations.

The Observer visited the location, and discovered the Meeks campaign and the Build America PAC are in fact lodged in Suite 205 of the building—directly adjacent to Suite 204, which serves as the congressman's taxpayer-financed district office.

An office of the Legal Aid Society occupies approximately half the building's second floor. The Meeks campaign and congressional office divide the remaining portion with a private law firm and with an outpost of the New York City Commission on Human Rights.

Public records show that the NYCCHR pays landlord BLDG Management \$8,076 a month for its space.

Meanwhile, FEC records indicate that the Meeks campaign committees and the PAC split the rent in Suite 205 (though both report their address in their filings as Suite 535). As of the most recent FEC disclosure, the PAC allocates \$412 a month toward the lease on the space, while the campaign sets aside \$1,271.

That latter figure has oscillated wildly at times in years past. In December 2014, for example, it inexplicably fell to \$746—while in October 2011, it dropped all the way to \$181.

Back in 2007, the rate gyrated between \$975 a month and \$1,212—except for October, when it sank to \$146, and in February, when it shot up to \$6,930.

The latest House disbursement records show that BLDG Management charges Washington \$10,675.30 a month for the district office—making Meeks's rent among the costliest in the entire country. The real estate company did not respond to calls for comment.

For context, Congress pays a combined \$9,700 each month for fellow Queens Congressman Joseph Crowley's two district offices, while rent at Bronx Congressman Eliot Engel's three official sites together totals a little less than \$7,000. Manhattan Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney's trio of offices collectively cost the taxpayer \$9,500 every month.

Of the entire New York City House delegation, only Congressman Jerrold Nadler's Lower Manhattan office runs a higher rate: \$10,855.59 per month.

The Observer was unable to gain access to the locked campaign suite at 153-01 Jamaica Avenue, but did enter the district office. Given the proportions of the building, it seems unlikely that the latter is vastly larger than either of

the other two spaces it shares the floor with—most likely not enough to justify the \$2,600 discrepancy between the NYCCHR’s rent and that of the congressional office, and almost certainly not the nearly \$9,000 spread between the monthly lease for the district office and that of the campaign office.

It appears similarly impossible that the Meeks campaign accounts and the Build America PAC have continually made the same error about “Suite 535” through nearly 11 years’ worth of filings with multiple levels of government. At the Observer’s request, the firm Competitive Advantage Research conducted a comprehensive review of New York State campaign finance databases for the appearance of the 153-01 Jamaica Avenue address.

The analysis turned up 58 donations the two campaign committees and the PAC made to state and local candidates while listing their location as Suite 535.

“Meeks has apparently fabricated a door number at a real address and given it out as the address of his own campaign to several New York committees, who all report it as his address when transacting with the Meeks campaign,” said CAR founder Jonathan Reznick. “More alarmingly, he also gives this door number to the FEC as the address of his campaign, all in an apparent attempt to give the impression that the campaign office is in a distinct location within the building from his own taxpayer-funded district office.”

It is unclear where the Meeks campaign might have come up with the number 535, although there are 535 voting members of the House and Senate. But the number that stunned good government advocate Susan Lerner, executive director of the group Common Cause New York, was the district office’s astronomical rent.

She called for an independent investigation to ascertain the true market value of both the campaign and district office spaces. Lerner also asserted it was highly questionable for a politician to have his government berth physically adjoining his political headquarters.

“It’s just bad practice to have your district office and your campaign office side-by-side. It results in a blurring of lines between your taxpayer-financed district office and your campaign,” she said. “It does appear as if the taxpayer is paying for a campaign office in addition to a district office, and that’s simply improper.”

It may be more than just improper: House ethics standards state explicitly that the use of public resources for campaign purposes may warrant criminal prosecution. Media representatives at the FEC and the Office of Congressional Ethics both told the Observer they would not comment on individual politicians’ specific situations.

Meeks, who chairs the Congressional Black Caucus Political Action Committee, has been the subject of numerous corruption allegations and investigations since his election in 1998. Neither his campaign nor his congressional spokesman responded to requests for comment.

Unfortunately, itemized accounting of congressional disbursements only goes back to early 2016, so it is unclear what the House paid for Meeks’s rent in years prior. A congressional directory from 2005 places the congressman’s district office at a different location, indicating that it may have moved into 153-01 Jamaica Avenue contemporaneously with the campaign in 2006.

Permits filed with the New York City Department of Buildings show considerable construction, including the insertion of partition walls, on the second floor of the structure during the latter half of that year.

The House disbursement list also shows that the federal government shells out \$8,375.79 per month to Mehran Properties for Congresswoman Meng’s district office at 40–13 159 Street in the Flushing section of Queens, as well as another \$111 to \$733 to the same company for utilities. (The allocation for Meeks appears to pay utilities costs directly to the vendors).

A \$1,000 donation the congresswoman’s campaign, Grace for New York, made to Queens Assemblyman Francisco

Moya in January 2016 reveals that her campaign office is in the exact same one-story structure—even though she has registered her committee with the FEC from a post office box in the neighborhood of Fresh Meadows.

Moya's campaign records shows a donation of \$1,000 to Meng's account at that same address just a few months before.

For that space, Meng's campaign has paid Mehran Properties \$440 a month since October 2015. As with Meeks's campaign, the only utilities payments Grace for New York shows are for telephone and Internet service—not for water or electricity.

But long before her congressional office assumed that address, Meng's campaign began reporting monthly payments of \$2,750 to Mehran Properties for office in April 2012.

Meng's monthly campaign office fees dipped slightly to \$2,450 per month in 2014, FEC filings show. That February, the 113th Congress directory identified her Flushing district office as situated in a non-Mehran property at 32-26 Union Street. The congresswoman had heralded the opening of that site on her Facebook page in June 2013, and on her House website two months later.

By the next Congress in February 2016, the directory referred to her Flushing office at its current Mehran-owned location, 40-13 159 Street. The Observer was unable to find any official or informal notice of the relocation, although a congressional phone book published in September 2015 put the outpost at its present address.

Between May and June 2014, the Meng campaign's rental fees to Mehran halved, from \$2,450 to \$1,225 a month.

By October, the rate had plunged to just \$440—a figure that remained consistent at least through November of last year. These precipitous declines in price would appear to coincide, roughly, with her district office's move to a Mehran property.

Lerner again called for an independent assessment of the true market value of both the campaign and district offices.

"We want to be assured that the taxpayer is paying only for the district office, and that the campaign office hasn't obtained some kind of discount," the advocate said. "If there is a better deal, that deal should be going to the taxpayer, not to the campaign."

Alex Mehran, one of the owners of Mehran Properties, insisted to the Observer that his company's transactions with the House of Representatives and with Meng's campaign were completely unrelated. He attributed the rent drop-off for the campaign to its move to a smaller space, though he refused to divulge the whereabouts of the old location, or any specific details about its dimensions.

"As a real estate company, were able to do it for that price," he said. "One deal had nothing to do with the other."

That price is far lower than what other Congress members in New York pay each month for their campaign offices. Engel, the Bronx congressman, gives the Benjamin Franklin Democratic Club \$2,000 a month to make use of their space as his headquarters—while Brooklyn Congresswoman Yvette Clarke has a \$1,500 rental arrangement with the Progressive Democrats Political Association.

Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez pays \$2,000 a month to rent campaign space from a Brooklyn daycare center.

The only other New York House member with a comparable monthly campaign office rent is Crowley, who pays \$600 a month—and, as the Post revealed recently, his landlord is his own brother.

A spokesman for Meng told the Observer that her leadership PAC, At the Table!, chips in \$60 a month for the campaign office—bringing the total rent paid to \$500—and that the space is only 153 square feet. The district office, he maintained, is 2,573 square feet.

The press representative further asserted that the varying rents the campaign paid over the past few years reflect changes in office space and location, even as Mehran Properties remained the landlord the entire time.

“These were all different campaign spaces of varying sizes that were rented at different times,” said Jorden Goldes. “That is the only reason why there was a difference in price from year to year.”

The congresswoman was re-elected a vice chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee in February.

[Aaron Schock's attorneys ask for delay in fraud trial \(Journal-Courier\)](#)

By Andy Kravetz

PEORIA — Attorneys for former U.S. Rep. Aaron Schock asked a judge on Wednesday to move his trial date to January.

In an eight-page motion, George J. Terwilliger asked for the expected delay, saying several pending motions and motions anticipated later after all the evidence was handed over by the government, made a delay necessary. The government, he said, doesn't oppose the motion.

“This is a complex case involving sensitive constitutional issues and voluminous discovery, which is not yet complete despite the Court's deadlines. Mr. Schock anticipates filing additional motions once discovery is complete,” he wrote in the motion.

It's likely the topic will be discussed during a mid-morning telephone conference Friday with U.S. District Judge Colin Bruce. The judge wrote in an order last week that he was doubtful the trial would go on as planned in July.

Schock, 35, was indicted in November on charges of wire fraud, mail fraud, making false statements, filing a false tax return, theft of government funds and falsification of Federal Election Commission filings. The charges allege a course of conduct that began when Schock, a Peoria Republican, was first elected to Congress in 2008 and continued until October 2015, about six months after he resigned from office.

[Report: Ethics Office Investigating Chris Collins Investments \(Roll Call\)](#)

Inquiry over improperly attracting investors to biotech company

By Rema Rahman

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 10:10 AM)

The Office of Congressional Ethics is reportedly conducting an inquiry into whether Rep. Chris Collins improperly attracted investors to an Australian biotech company and gave a stock tip to then-Rep. Tom Price.

Citing two anonymous sources, the The Buffalo News reported several investors in the Buffalo area were being interviewed this week to look at potential roles played by Collins in urging investors to buy stock in the company.

The New York Republican is the largest shareholder in the company, Innate Immunotherapeutics, according to the report.

A spokesman said in a statement to Roll Call that the congressman did nothing wrong.

“Despite the continued partisan attacks insinuating otherwise, Congressman Collins has followed all ethical guidelines related to his personal finances during his time in the House and will continue to do so,” Spokesman Michael Kracker said.

Kracker said Collins’ relationship with the company dated back 15 years and that it worked to develop a treatment for secondary progressive multiple sclerosis, an illness that has affected one of Collins’ close family members.

The Office of Congressional Ethics does not acknowledge if it is conducting an inquiry of members of Congress. It may send a report to the House Ethics Committee, which would make what OCE found public after a certain amount of time.

The OCE could also determine the allegations go nowhere. It is not clear at what stage the Collins probe stands.

The ethics office has received at least four requests for inquiry involving Collins and investments in the company.

They note Collins was involved in a bill that would benefit the company, which would raise questions on if he violated a law that bars lawmakers from making money using insider information when investing.

The probe also includes looking into a stock tip Collins gave Price before the Georgia Republican left Congress to become Health and Human Services secretary. The report states Price bought \$100,000 in a private discount stock sale two days after Collins bought 4 million shares.

The anonymous sources said investigators are expected to interview up to six Buffalo-area investors this week.

[Campaign finance reform advocates working to get initiative on ballot \(Casper Star-Tribune\)](#)

By Laura Hancock

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 11:00 AM)

A group of Wyomingites is pushing for campaign finance reform in the state and nationally through a ballot initiative – including a former legislative candidate who believes a liberal dark money group that supported him actually interfered in his race.

Wyoming Promise members want an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would repeal a number of U.S. Supreme Court decisions that have loosened limits on how much people and groups spend in races. One decision is Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, in which justices decided corporate and union political action committees could raise and spend an unlimited amount of money for and against candidates, as long as the PACs work independently of candidates, said Shelby Shadwell of Laramie, Wyoming Promise’s treasurer.

On Monday, the Wyoming Secretary of State’s office announced that Wyoming Promise could begin the process of collecting signatures from the state’s residents to get an initiative on the ballot. It must collect at least 38,818 signatures, a number based on a percentage of votes cast in the 2016 general election.

The organization hopes to get the initiative on the November 2018 ballot and has 18 months to collect signatures. If members don’t gather enough names before the 2018 election, the initiative still has a chance for the 2020 ballot, Shadwell said.

Wyoming Promise is mirroring the goals of American Promise, on which former Republican U.S. Sen. Al Simpson serves as an adviser, Shadwell said.

Wyoming Promise and others believe the rich and powerful have more control over politicians than ordinary people

because of the amount of money they spend on their campaigns, Shadwell said.

“We need to end legalized bribery and regulate and have campaign finance reform,” he said.

The chairman of Wyoming Promise is Kenneth Chestek, of Laramie, who ran for the Legislature in 2016 as a Democrat against Rep. Bill Haley, R-Centennial.

The Wyoming Hunters and Anglers Alliance sent mail to residents in House District 46 accusing Haley of wanting the federal government to turn public lands over to the state for selloff to private people and companies.

Chestek, a law professor at the University of Wyoming, said the mailings were upsetting to him. He didn’t agree with them, he said.

“That’s part of why I’m involved in this effort,” he said. “I’ve always hated the Citizens United decision. When it impacted my race for the Legislature, it got me upset enough to take this action.”

Amending the U.S. Constitution is the only way the state Legislatures and Congress can reform campaign finance laws, he said.

The identities of the people backing the hunters’ group are not entirely known. Such groups on the left and right are called dark money.

If the initiative makes it to the ballot box, a statement will say the U.S. Constitution needs an amendment to ensure spending in Wyoming and at the federal level is free and fair.

Based “on the American values of fair play, leveling the playing field and ensuring that all citizens, regardless of wealth, have an opportunity for their political views to be heard, there is a compelling reason to regulate political spending so that the voices of natural persons are not overwhelmed by corporate spending,” the proposed initiative states.

There are two ways to amend the Constitution, Shadwell said.

Congress can propose an amendment that voters in at least three-fourths of the states can ratify. Or two-thirds of the states can pass ballot measures calling for a constitutional convention in which representatives of each state meet to draft an amendment. The states would have to ratify the amendment, Shadwell said.

Eighteen states thus far have passed resolutions calling on Congress to draft the amendment to regulate political spending.

About five have called for a Constitutional convention, he said.

Wyoming Promise’s proposed initiative states either way of amending the Constitution is suitable, Shadwell said.

The Wyoming group, as with the national organization, aims to be bipartisan, he said.

“A 28th amendment to the Constitution is the only way to overturn the (Citizens United) decision,” he said. “We can’t limit the amount of dark money and unlimited political spending in the system, which is a huge problem no matter what side of the political spectrum you’re on. Republicans don’t like it. Democrats don’t like their politicians being bought off, either.”

[Pence Takes Steps to Build War Chest as White House Stumbles \(Bloomberg News\)](#)

By Bill Allison

(Publish Date: 5/17/17, 5:55 PM)

Political action committee registered Wednesday with FEC

Neither Biden nor Cheney had active leadership PACs in office

While President Donald Trump's White House grapples with the fallout from his firing of the former FBI director, Vice President Mike Pence has taken steps to begin building his own political war chest.

Pence launched Great America Committee, a leadership PAC, a move that will enable him to channel money to congressional Republicans ahead of the 2018 midterm elections. The political action committee's registration was posted Wednesday on the Federal Election Commission website.

"The Vice President is playing a leading role in passing legislation on the Hill," said Nick Ayers, a senior adviser to Pence in the 2016 campaign who will be running the PAC. "He wants to support House and Senate members who are helping pass the president's agenda."

It's unusual for vice presidents to set up their own fundraising vehicles. Neither Joseph Biden nor Dick Cheney, the two vice presidents who preceded Pence, had one while in office. It's not entirely unprecedented, though: George H.W. Bush formed the Fund for America's Future when he was preparing for his 1988 presidential run.

"Launching a leadership PAC sometimes signals an intent to run for higher office, which in Pence's case, has been a topic of public interest ever since he was first nominated," said Sheila Krumholz, executive director of the Center for Responsible Politics, which studies money in politics.

The move comes as President Donald Trump's biggest campaign promises -- such as overhauling the U.S. tax code and replacing the Affordable Care Act -- face stronger headwinds following reports that he asked former FBI Director James Comey to drop an investigation into former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn. Some Republican lawmakers have raised concerns that his agenda will stall as a result of the controversy.

Planning for the PAC began in December, Ayers said. The group will manage the database of donors and supporters that Pence compiled over his six terms in Congress and as Indiana governor. It will also pay expenses for Pence's political activities, reducing the burden on Trump's campaign and the Republican National Committee. The PAC can raise up to \$5,000 per year from individual donors and other federal PACs, according to election law.

Marc Lotter, Pence's spokesman, declined to comment on the PAC because federal rules bar him from discussing political activities.

Vice presidents typically headline events for their party committees, raising money in amounts up to \$339,000. Most of that money, however, can't be contributed directly to candidates or used on their behalf. Leadership PACs of the kind Pence has formed can use all the money they raise to support candidates.

In the 2016 election cycle, Republican leadership PACs donated \$30.1 million to congressional candidates. The top fundraiser was House Speaker Paul Ryan's Prosperity PAC, which brought in \$4.2 million that cycle.

"The general theory on having a leadership PACs is that it's good to have friends and even better to have friends that owe you favors, because you never know when you'll have to call them in," said Krumholz.

[Gehrke: GOP lawsuit has left a party saddled with debt, scraping for donors \(Salt Lake Tribune\)](#)

By Robert Gehrke

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 9:30 AM)

On Saturday, Republican delegates will elect a person to lead their party — a party that controls every major elected office in the state yet is deeply divided, struggling to raise money, mired in tens of thousands of dollars in months-old debt and operating on a skeleton budget.

The current party chairman, James Evans, has tried to put a rosy spin on the finances, using promises of money coming in to make the debt seem not so bad.

Maybe it's his business background — until recently he owned payday loan stores — that makes him believe in paying today's debt with tomorrow's windfall.

But here's the reality: As of Tuesday, the Utah Republican Party had \$10,200 in the bank.

Meanwhile, the conservative party is staring at — conservatively — \$100,000 in past due bills, many of them a year or more old, that have spawned collection calls to party headquarters and in one instance a lawsuit that the party recently resolved.

For example, Republicans still owe \$6,441 to Thanksgiving Point for a golf tournament fundraiser held in 2015. Days ahead of its 2017 convention, it still owes \$13,000 for audio/visual services for its 2016 gathering.

For more than a year, the party has owed \$23,000 to Eventbrite, which built an online registration system for the 2016 caucuses — although the party is disputing the amount because it says Eventbrite botched the job. It also still owes \$21,000 to Smartmatic for an online voting program for the caucuses.

Last year, as my colleague Paul Rolly reported, Redstone Design sued the GOP for failing to pay its bills. Recently the party paid Redstone about \$12,000 to settle the account and Redstone, Evans said, is again doing work for the party's upcoming convention.

Hopefully Redstone got its cash up front.

And there is a looming fine expected from the Federal Election Commission stemming from an audit of the party's finances leading up to the 2012 presidential election, when the Utah GOP was channeling vast amounts of money to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. Evans estimates the fines could be as high as \$30,000.

That sampling of the debt doesn't include the biggest unresolved expense: More than \$300,000 in legal fees left behind by the Republican Party's stubborn and virtually fruitless yearslong challenge to SB54, which created a way for candidates to get on the primary ballot by gathering signatures.

Earlier this year, the party's State Central Committee voted to finally drop its appeal, after they had suffered a string of defeats. But rabid Republicans on the committee changed their minds and resurrected the appeal.

The attorneys have agreed to accept whatever payment the party can raise from supporters of the suit, but so far the backers of the lawsuit — while vocal and adamant they should press forward — have been reluctant to help pay for it.

The lawsuit did more than rack up legal bills. It also drove away the party's traditional donors, many of whom supported the electoral changes pushed by Count My Vote and the compromise measures in SB54.

Evans said he the donor exodus has tied his hands in a way that past party chairmen have not experienced. He

cannot, for example, hit up a member of the congressional delegation or other elected officials to simply shake the money tree when a bill comes due.

Moreover, he said, backers of SB54 and other politically connected Utahns are using their clout "intimidating others not to give."

Overall, Evans downplays the financial morass. Other party chairmen have been saddled with debt and he predicts — using some questionable accounting — the party could be in the black this year.

He has slashed the party's payroll from \$22,000 a month to just over \$3,300. And he is trying to diversify the party's fundraising, attempting to sell ads in the party's convention program and on its website to businesses that want to reach the Republican rank-and-file.

He also wants the party's roughly 4,000 state delegates to each pledge to raise or contribute \$50, potentially generating as much as \$200,000 for the party.

Evans is seeking a third term as chairman of the party and has two challengers, his current vice-chairman Phill Wright and Davis County Chairman Rob Anderson.

Whoever wins Saturday will have an unenviable job, getting the finances on track, while trying to mend the SB54 rift and marshaling the party's resources — whatever they may be — to try to defend Republican seats in what could be a very bad 2018 election.

Maybe it's enough to make being elected the Utah Democratic chairman seem not quite as bad.

Editorials, Blogs and OpEds:

[New CCP Issue Brief: "Dark Money" Drops to 2.9% of Campaign Spending in 2016 \(Center for Competitive Politics blog\)](#)

Brief finds that nonprofits have never accounted for more than 5% of all election campaign spending

By Matt Nese

(Publish Date: 5/17/17)

Alexandria, VA – The Center for Competitive Politics, America's largest nonprofit defending First Amendment political free speech rights, released a new Issue Brief today analyzing the amount of so-called "dark money," or election campaign spending by nonprofits that are not required to publicly report the private information of their supporters to the government unless the contributions are earmarked for campaign ads, over the last six election cycles. Among other things, CCP's Brief found:

"Dark money" declined in both absolute and relative terms from the last presidential election cycle, down to \$184 million from \$309 million.

"Dark money" accounted for only 2.9% of all campaign expenditures in 2015-2016.

Nonprofits have never accounted for more than 5% of all election campaign spending in any election cycle.



“For years, opponents of free speech have made it seem like campaign spending by nonprofits is dominating our politics. It’s not,” said CCP President David Keating. “Nonprofits play a small but important role in campaigns. If only politicians and PACs could speak about candidates, Americans would be worse off.”

“The hysteria over ‘dark money’ is overblown. By far, candidates and political committees continue to have the loudest voice in campaigns,” said CCP Senior Policy Analyst Luke Wachob. “Unfortunately, some lawmakers want to tip the balance even more in their favor by restricting nonprofit speech.”

Election Cycle	Percentage Spending by Political Committees ³	Percentage Spending by Nonprofits (“Dark Money”) ⁴
2005-2006	99.8%	0.2%
2007-2008	98.1%	1.9%
2009-2010	96.3%	3.7%
2011-2012	95.1%	4.9%
2013-2014	95.4%	4.6%
2015-2016	97.1%	2.9%

To read the Issue Brief by Wachob, please go to http://www.campaignfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-05-08_Issue-Brief_Wachob_Putting-Dark-Money-In-Context.pdf.

[Roosevelt Institute Study on “Political Money” is Not the Revelation It Claims to Be \(Center for Competitive Politics blog\)](#)

By Joe Albanese

(Publish Date: 5/16/17)

A new study on the impact of “money in politics” has been released by the Roosevelt Institute, and sympathetic outlets are already hailing it as a vindication of those who long argued that political spending directly influences policymaking in government. Despite its headline-grabbing claims, however, the study exaggerates the scale of political spending, overestimates its impact, and is riddled with other logical and methodological flaws. The authors are Thomas Ferguson of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Paul Jorgensen of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and Jie Chen of the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

This paper specifically tests the influence of “high finance” on alterations to the Dodd-Frank Act, and of telecommunications companies on the passage of network neutrality regulations. (This post will focus on the former, for the sake of brevity). The authors’ hypothesis is that lawmakers watered down banking regulations in direct response to financial incentives from corporate interests in that sector. They attempt to prove this theory by

examining data on political spending that they say has been previously missed by media and academia. In so doing, the authors aim to reveal the “true size” of such spending beyond regular campaign contributions.

The authors examined the connection between industry political spending and the likelihood of a Democrat in the House of Representatives “changing their mind” on Dodd-Frank (a seemingly polite way of insinuating corruption). In particular, the study’s focus was on Democrats who voted for Dodd-Frank and then later voted for measures to “weaken” it in five subsequent bills.

Overall, the paper purports to find that:

Every \$100,000 that Democrats received from the finance sector increased the odds of “changing their mind” on Dodd-Frank by 13.9%;

Representatives who voluntarily retired from Congress after the 2014 elections were 3 times likelier to cast a “pro-bank” vote; and

Representatives on the House Financial Services Committee were 90% more likely to “side with the banks.”

For all the talk that this study has decisively proven correct the arguments for further restrictions on “money in politics,” the reality falls dramatically short. It severely overestimates the level of political spending and the causal relationship between money spent and votes cast. The study’s biggest problems fall into two basic categories: disqualifying flaws specific to its methodology, and basic misunderstandings about the complexities involved with political giving.

I. Everything Is Bribery

The study spends more than half of its space building a narrative of a conspiratorial system whereby special interests hijack the government, wreck the economy, and make themselves rich in the process. But the litany of overbroad definitions, omitted variables, and mischaracterizations in its actual analytical model undermines its ability to quantitatively prove this hypothesis.

a. “Political Spending”

Perhaps most glaring is the “full-spectrum analysis” of political money. It should be noted that the study never cites final estimations for total spending, calculation methods, or its sources, despite insisting that “factors like political money...can be measured fairly precisely.” Nor does it define terms like “outside spending,” which has a conventional definition that may be less helpful in a paper aiming to upend existing conceptions and calculations of political spending. The authors’ categories and the amounts of estimated money for each area are discussed below:

“Payments to Lawyers for Services,” an amount that the authors describe as “substantial” but “unknown.” This category is described mainly as contributions from law firms that “have had major banks as principal clients.” Supposedly, “[p]olitical contributions from members of these firms mostly track the interests of their clients,” and thus should be counted as if they come directly from finance. This is nonsensical on many fronts. Wouldn’t lawyers favor increased regulations so that firms need more legal counsel? Is the main political motivation of finance employees (who make up all industry contributions to candidates and parties) really to serve the interests of their firms’ clients? Do other industries that service or benefit from finance also act as their proxies? Given the central importance of finance to the U.S. economy, almost every business should be implicated in this arrangement by the authors’ logic.

“Payments to Political Figures,” which are “not easily quantified,” but may be “many hundreds of millions of dollars.” This category refers to things like speaking fees, book contracts, and consulting fees – basically private sector work that a politician might engage in after leaving office. Finance is certainly not the only industry that

participates; after all, aren't, for example, universities that hire former lawmakers to teach also potentially trying to gain influence? Is there no legitimate reason to pay former politicians to utilize their experiences in and knowledge of government? If there is, how is this category subdivided to account for that?

"Foundations and Charitable Grants," which the authors concede are mostly not political. They estimate \$296 billion in total giving in 2006, with "maybe 3-5%" (\$8.8 to \$14.8 billion) being "broadly political." This description is rife with questions: What is the definition of "political"? How do these foundations and grants directly influence politicians on specific policy questions? The authors allude to instances of grants supposedly meant to curry favor with lawmakers' spouses, but do not explain how this is incorporated into their analytic model.

"Think Tanks" (specifically in Washington, D.C.), which collectively spent about \$411 million in 2005. Like "Foundations and Charitable Grants," there are a host of questions about how this spending influences specific lawmakers on specific policy questions. Think tanks, after all, are usually nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations that study numerous issues.

"Value of Stock Tips, IPOs to Political Figures," which are "very large in certain periods." The authors note that "stocks in both finance and telecommunications often did extraordinarily well" in advance of the 2008 crash (compared to what other industries is unclear), and that "[o]ne can conjecture that both sectors were likely involved heavily" in insider trading, "but without going through the mountains of evidence that Congress for a long time made very difficult to access, it is impossible to say for sure." It is hard to respond to "conjecture" without evidence.

"Public Relations Spending," of which, "[s]ome certainly affects politics." This section is particularly stunning in its imprecision. Not only is there no estimate of this amount or how much of it affects politics, but suggesting that non-political advertising by an industry can be labeled "political spending" undermines the purpose of categorizing such spending to begin with.

The study also accounts for more traditional measures of political spending ("Lobbying" and "Formal Campaign Spending") that are more strictly regulated. But, here too, the authors fail to tell us the extent to which these factors are emphasized in their model.

Recall that the above-mentioned categories ostensibly represent "political" spending that can be measured "fairly precisely." The bafflingly expansive and opaque categories constructed by the authors already disqualify them from being taken seriously as an input in any quantitative model. What the authors describe amounts to nothing more than a list of funding sources that they assume are corrupting politicians, but do not bother to accurately count. In short, it is an editorial dressed up as social science.

b. Omitted Variables

After spending over half the paper preaching about corrupt politicians, what does it actually study? It looks at just five congressional votes from 2013 to 2015 to modify portions of the Dodd-Frank Act. The report then looks at the numbers of House Democrats observed "breaking" with their party to cast a "pro-bank" vote. The total number of Democrats that broke with the party on each vote, respectively, is 36, 3, 17, 32, and 3. This is an overall sample of just 91 yeas or nays, which may include multiple votes by the same member of Congress. From these 91 deviations on just five House votes to amend a single piece of legislation covering one issue area, the study concluded that there are "direct links between political contributions to individual members of Congress" and policy decisions in general.

Even within these scant observations, there seems to be too few control variables to draw a causal link. Besides the primary variables examining political money and "pro-bank" votes, there are variables for ideology, whether a Representative voluntarily left the House after the 2014 elections, and whether he or she was a member of the House Financial Services Committee. Not included are numerous other factors that could affect a lawmaker's vote,

such as district economic performance, pressure from party leadership on each vote, media coverage, public opinion on the issue, and the presence or absence of electoral challengers, among other considerations.

To be sure, some of these factors are hard to quantify (though that did not stop the authors from ambitiously re-defining all “political money”), and the authors dismiss others as “fixed effects.” As they explain:

This tactic [looking at multiple votes from the same Representative over time] makes sorting out competing influences much more tractable. It controls automatically for many sources of possible variation, including the individual representative’s own personality, values, and party affiliation. In effect, the procedure turns the representative into his or her own control. No less helpfully, in the very short run, it is not plausible that many other influences, such as variations in the strength of market propaganda in different districts, or most other institutional factors, including district and constituency characteristics, could change rapidly enough to matter. They can thus be treated as constants or “fixed effects.”

By contrast, factors like political money do change, sometimes dramatically, and they can be measured fairly precisely, as we explained earlier, provided one is willing to do the work. [Emphasis added.]

It is hard to imagine a scenario over the “very short run” (presumably the 3-5-year period between Dodd-Frank’s passage and the five subsequent votes) where political spending can change “dramatically” without other factors also changing (most obviously, public opinion, which regularly shifts with changing political winds). The authors posited that interactions with lobbyists, margin of electoral victory, and even change in ideology could be factors, but only included ideology in their model.

The authors’ rationale is that unchanging constituency composition and party-line attitudes about banking regulation meant that there was little reason for a Representative who supported Dodd-Frank in 2010 to independently “change his or her mind” about the legislation 3-5 years’ down the road. However, aspects of Dodd-Frank could have become less popular within a district or had a negative impact on the district’s economy or financial sector that lawmakers observed only after it was implemented. Parties also emphasize some votes more than others – Democratic leaders could have pushed for Dodd-Frank’s passage as a priority to their Party and President Obama, but were less concerned with stopping all subsequent bills that altered specific parts of the law while keeping it intact. Furthermore, a lawmaker could reasonably vote “yes” on Dodd-Frank, thinking it to be a positive bill overall, and still vote “yes” on an amendment that removed a particular provision of the massive and complex bill that she thought was bad for the country or her district.

Had the authors included votes on other banking or economic regulations in their analysis, it may have shed light on whether it was the defectors’ original votes on Dodd-Frank or subsequent votes that were aberrations. Alas, they only provide the vote on Dodd-Frank as a benchmark of lawmakers’ “true” views on financial regulation in general. Any vote contradicting the original vote on passage of Dodd-Frank is assumed to be evidence of corruption.

Given the insufficient variables, not to mention the questionable and vague measurements of political money, it is difficult to put much stock in the model’s results. The study further fails to report any measure of fit – as is typically included in regression analyses – so it is difficult to even fully measure the adequacy of the limited model that the authors employ.

Finally, it should also be noted that one of the study’s topline results – that members of the House Financial Services Committee are 90% more likely to cast a “pro-bank” decision in the five votes examined – is not statistically significant. (Significance levels are usually set at 0.05, meaning a 95% confidence interval. The p-value for this variable is over two times too large to qualify for that level). This is a fact the authors choose to share with their readers in footnote 58 of Appendix I on page 38 of the study. This, to say the least, greatly undermines the authors’ decision to highlight that result anyway – let alone as a topline finding.

II. The Mistakes That Just Won't Go Away

Past studies that try to find a direct, causal link between political spending and policy decisions by lawmakers have been regularly stymied by one major flaw. Namely, the link is neither direct nor causal. While its Executive Summary might indicate otherwise, the details of this study reveal that it falls into the same familiar trap.

One of the overarching reasons for this is the authors' reliance on examining the spending of an entire industry. In this study, the culprit is "an almost monolithic financial sector" opposed to Dodd-Frank. Odds are, when you directly refer to an entire industry as "monolithic," your arguments will lack nuance.

Firms within an industry may have overlapping policy interests, but that does not make them identical. The study itself notes the division between telecom companies supporting and opposing net neutrality, but does not similarly examine differences within the finance industry. For example, Dodd-Frank affects community banks differently than financial behemoths that can better absorb the cost of the law's regulations, even though they belong to the same industry. To suggest that banks large and small have the exact same views on every bill related to Dodd-Frank is overly simplistic.

Treating firms as unitary political actors can also be wrongheaded – they are made up of executives, employees, and shareholders with varying viewpoints that change over time. Businesses cannot even make direct contributions to federal candidates; at best, they can set up and operate political action committees (PACs) that solicit funds, and whose contributions to candidates are capped at \$5,000 per election. In short, contributions from finance firms to candidates actually come from their employees.

If it is simplistic to conflate the interests and goals of firms, it is downright ridiculous to do the same for the various employees of a multitude of businesses. Individuals have distinct reasons for participating in politics, and it is hard to believe that politicians regularly examine every donor's employer and attempt to ascertain those firms' policy preferences before casting a vote. They would have to weigh every contribution from every firm and sector, and then decide which money is ultimately the most compelling. This complex calculus presents a difficult balancing act. If a policy clearly helps one industry but hurts another, then other interest groups might simply increase their contributions to change a politician's vote in their favor – assuming that political spending is truly a paramount factor.

A more straightforward (and logical) proposition is that donors choose to spend their limited resources on candidates that they already support, not on candidates whose minds they need to change first. That is not to say that organizations don't try to sway politicians through issue advocacy, lobbying, or original research, but one would be hard-pressed to prove that spending money to advance arguments is unjustifiable. This study certainly does not.

III. Conclusion

The authors of this paper – and its enthusiastic backers – declare it to be a groundbreaking work that definitively proves the relationship between political money and policymaking. An examination of what spending the authors consider to be political and how they measure changes in policymaking shows that this contention is far from true. Even more objectionable is how the authors conduct themselves in a fashion that can aptly be described as demagogic, problems with their analysis notwithstanding.

The paper makes numerous insinuations of widespread governmental corruption, while offering only vague anecdotal references as evidence (see footnotes 2, 15, and 16 for examples). Although it excludes such references from its final model, refraining from the use of innuendo as an analytical tool is no virtue, particularly when the writers choose to indulge in it elsewhere. Gratuitous references to "free market propaganda," "Gilded Age politics," and "orgies of deregulation" further detract from the study and make it difficult to take seriously as an unbiased analysis of the American political system. Combining such rhetoric with purposeful obfuscation – the vague

definitions of what “political” money they’ve actually counted, the burying of illuminating flaws in the footnotes of appendices – makes for a fatal mix.

Interestingly enough, we find some common ground in the authors’ acknowledgement that our expansive campaign finance laws have created a “maze” of bureaucracy and regulation that redirects political spending without actually cutting it off. Reducing the use of money to facilitate political speech is neither possible in a democratic system, nor desirable as a matter of First Amendment principles. If the authors want fewer forms of political spending or fewer politicians bucking party line congressional votes, then the simple solution is to remove limits on campaign contributions. Doing so would strengthen parties, incentivize candidate-centered campaigns over independent expenditures, and simplify the public’s ability to participate in politics.

One should not expect the authors to take this approach, however. Their writing makes it clear that their views are a conclusion in want of evidence, as seen by their frustration with existing research that “facilitates blithe dismissal” of the claims that they feel so strongly to be true. For now, those claims continue to simply be feelings, lacking empirical proof.

[Supporters of Public Financing Still Cannot Make a Convincing Case \(Center for Competitive Politics\)](#)

By Joe Albanese

(Publish Date: 5/17/17)

A debate about taxpayer-financing of political campaigns has sprung up in New Hampshire over the last few weeks. The discussion began when former Vice President Joe Biden visited the Granite State in late April, making headlines when he told a crowd that taxpayer financing would “change the whole damn world.” Progressives have long touted publicly-funded campaigns as a means of increasing electoral competition and electing like-minded candidates.

The New Hampshire Union Leader smartly pushed back against “Biden’s bad idea” in a straightforward editorial. Among other issues, the editorial noted the imprudence of paying politicians to run for office, especially if it forces taxpayers to support candidates with which they disagree. In response, John Rauh, a former candidate for U.S. Senate in the early 90s, wrote a piece defending Biden with a series of strange, unconvincing arguments.

First, Rauh waves off the objection to paying politicians to run for office, saying it “fails to acknowledge that our current system of selling influence to wealthy donors who buy influence by financing our elections undermines values that are fundamental to our democracy...” There is little to no evidence of this problem actually existing – or of taxpayer-funded campaigns being the solution. CCP’s research has found that taxpayer-financing programs fail to reduce the influence of lobbyists and special interests in states in which these schemes are implemented, including neighboring Maine. A 2003 survey of nearly 40 academic studies also concluded that campaign contributions should not be viewed as a way of buying policy outcomes. Even studies that (incorrectly) claim to prove the relationship between contributions and policy lament the lack of supporting evidence in scholarly research. If anything, there are ample examples to demonstrate that tax-financing programs exacerbate and offer new avenues for public corruption.

Rauh says that taxpayers must subsidize politicians to prevent the undermining of our democratic values by “wealthy donors.” But the right of such donors to contribute to candidates, parties, and other organizations is protected by the First Amendment. Does this mean that the Constitution undermines our fundamental values? Forcing Americans to subsidize candidates with whom they disagree in order to water down the rights of other Americans is a perverse way for government to dictate how political speech must be exercised.

Responding to the Union Leader’s criticism that taxpayer-financing programs may prop up bigoted or fringe candidates, Rauh pleads guilty as charged: “The editorial is obviously right that public funds will be provided to

candidates some citizens disagree with. That is the price we would pay to get rid of a system that has no place in a democracy." I'm not so sure that directly subsidizing racist or otherwise corrupt candidates is a price Americans are willing or should be willing to pay simply so that those running for office can spend less time meeting constituents and doing the work of fundraising for their campaign.

Rauh quickly adds that "in every system that has been adopted, there are provisions whereby citizens decide which candidates qualify for public financing." Such provisions did not succeed in excluding unacceptable candidates in the past. But even if they did, this type of provision would contradict the whole purpose of public financing as a means of broadening electoral choices. Giving voters a veto over who gets taxpayer subsidies introduces the possibility that they will simply grant funding to members of their own preferred parties while denying it to others. This could further entrench the major party duopoly, or even lead to government-enforced dominance by just one party in the many states and districts that skew clearly red or blue. For public financing to be truly inclusive, it must allow a broad range of candidates to benefit. The inherent unfairness to taxpayers of that reality, and the inevitability of such a system benefitting unsavory candidates, means that the prudent solution is to avoid public financing entirely.

Next, Rauh acknowledges that public financing cannot prevent spending by wealthy candidates, super PACs, or other organizations whose speech rights are protected by the First Amendment. Although he's correct, one would think this acknowledgement renders his entire rationale for public financing moot; if money in politics is inherently corrupting, then the continued existence of private contributions and independent spending means the underlying "problem" has not been solved.

Rauh counters that public financing is really only meant to give candidates sufficient resources to run an adequate campaign, not cancel out all other political spending and giving. After all, as Rauh points out, "[c]andidates do not need the most money to win. If they did Hillary would be President." That is 100% true, but a stunning admission nonetheless. If money doesn't dictate electoral outcomes – which CCP completely agrees with – then why would campaign contributions be able to corrupt politicians so easily? The entire argument for wealthy donors "undermining" democracy falls apart at that point.

Finally, Rauh argues that the "disturbing lack of confidence in our elected leaders," as expressed by low approval ratings for the president and Congress, "clearly indicates our system for selecting our national leaders is deeply flawed." Assuming for the sake of argument that approval ratings are the primary metric by which we should decide our entire electoral system (despite the fact that voters overwhelmingly re-elect their own representatives and that approval ratings fluctuate over time), how are we supposed to know which reforms are the best solution? The focus of Rauh's ire is private campaign contributions, but why then is he using current approval ratings to critique a right that has been constitutionally protected for over 40 years, since *Buckley v. Valeo*? There is simply no real reason to think that public financing is the silver bullet to make Americans love their politicians.

By the end of Rauh's piece, we are left with the same conclusions as before: there is no consistent rationale for public financing of campaigns, such systems have not achieved their stated goals in the past, and it is inherently unfair to force taxpayers to subsidize politicians with whom they may not agree. Joe Biden's call for taxpayer-funded campaigns might have been a good applause line for his supporters, but it is not good policy for New Hampshire or for the country.

[Trump's commission on voter fraud is, well, fraudulent \(Washington Post editorial\)](#)

(Publish Date: 5/17/17, 8:08 PM)

PRESIDENT TRUMP has empaneled a commission to investigate voter fraud. The real fraud is the commission itself.

The Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity is to be led by Vice President Pence and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach. Mr. Kobach, a Republican, is a longtime champion of voter suppression laws who seconded as

“absolutely correct” the president’s fabricated assertion that Hillary Clinton’s victory in the popular vote, which she won by nearly 3 million ballots, was a result of “millions of people who voted illegally.”

Mr. Kobach is notorious for erecting impediments to the ballot box — specifically, ones that would disproportionately discourage and deter minority and other Democratic-leaning voters. His presence as the commission’s vice chair — Mr. Pence’s other responsibilities make it likely that Mr. Kobach will be the panel’s driving force — makes a farce of the idea that the commission’s work will be dispassionate, fair and clear-eyed.

More likely, given Mr. Kobach’s record, is that it will endeavor to create further pretexts for GOP-dominated state legislatures determined to throw up barriers to minority turnout with laws such as North Carolina’s, which was struck down by a federal appeals court as an unconstitutional effort to “target African Americans with almost surgical precision.” The Supreme Court, citing a dispute over who represents the state, on Monday declined to review that decision, but its conservative majority may not block future such legislation.

The fix was in from the moment Mr. Trump promised, in January, that he would establish a commission on fraudulent voting, a nonissue that has been almost entirely conjured from thin air by Republicans seeking to enhance their electoral chances. Multiple studies have shown, and the overwhelming consensus of both Republican and Democratic voting officials at the state and local levels has been, that fraudulent voting, particularly of the in-person variety, is all but nonexistent in the United States. A thorough survey three years ago came up with 31 credible instances of voter impersonation that could have been prevented by ID laws, out of more than 1 billion votes cast in elections from 2000 to 2014.

Republicans are quick to conflate their baseless allegations of widespread fraud with real — and inconsequential — instances of duplicative voter-registration rolls owing mainly to individuals who have moved from one state to another. That hardly ever translates into multiple or illegal votes cast. Among those whose names have appeared on more than one state’s rolls are Stephen K. Bannon, the White House chief strategist; Sean Spicer, its press secretary; Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser; and Tiffany Trump, the president’s younger daughter. None of them is believed to have voted illegally.

Mr. Kobach said the 12-member commission, which will include a few Democrats, “does not begin with foregone conclusions.” However, his record in Kansas and elsewhere offers ample proof to groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, that regard him as the king of voter suppression.

Faced with the hostility of minority and other voting blocs, Republicans would rather suppress votes than compete for them. By establishing this commission, Mr. Trump is giving them a hand.

[5 Points On What Trump’s Bogus Elections Commission Is Really About \(Talking Points Memo\)](#)

By Tierney Sneed

(Publish Date/Time: 5/16/17, 6:00 AM)

The people who professionally study election protocols are very worried about the commission President Trump has created to ostensibly study election protocols. The so-called “Presidential Commission on Election Integrity,” which was unveiled in an executive order last week, is being viewed with deep skepticism in the voting rights community.

That is in no small part due to Trump’s outlandish and unsubstantiated claims that millions of people voted illegally in the 2016 election; the commission appears to be the result of Trump’s promises of a “major investigation” into voter fraud.

But there are also other hints, tells and coded language signaling that the aims of the commission are less concerned with nonpartisan study of election protocols and more likely to be seeking to trumpet allegations of voter

fraud, which has historically been used as an excuse to enact restrictive voting laws.

Here are five points on what Trump's bogus 'Elections Integrity' commission is really about:

1

Beware the heavy emphasis on voter fraud.

Voter "fraud" or "fraudulent" voting is mentioned five times in the executive order, which goes on to define four types of alleged illegal voting that will be within the purview of the commission. Prospective commissioners floated for the commission—and especially its vice chair, Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach—have made careers out of fanning the flames around flimsy fears of voter fraud and advocating for stricter voter laws.

Study after study has found voter fraud—and particularly the types of fraud prevented by a voter ID—to be extremely rare. Yet Kobach said that it was "a very large number" that was "probably in excess of a million," when defending Trump's baseless allegation that millions of illegal voters were the reason he lost the popular vote.

What these stricter laws end up doing is making it harder for certain groups, particularly low income voters and minorities, to vote. One of the two Democrats reportedly tapped for the commission, Maine Secretary of State told TPM last week he would "walk away" if the commission was used as a "trojan horse" to impede access to the ballot box.

2

The who is as important as the what.

The Trump administration is stressing that commission will be bipartisan, but the lack of participation to this point by any moderate, widely-respected Republican election officials is notable. Instead the GOPers tapped so far for the commission are on the fringe when it comes to voting issues.

Vice President Mike Pence is chairing the commission and joining him in serving on it is Indiana's Secretary of State Connie Lawson (R). Indiana authorities, under both their watch, launched a sketchy raid of a voter registration drive last fall, and the two Republicans have been accused of overhyping the results. Lawson has since purged Indiana's voter rolls of nearly half-million names ahead of the next election. Previously, as a state legislator, Lawson was an original sponsor of the state's 2005 voter ID law, which was upheld in a seminal Supreme Court case.

Former Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell has also been tapped for Trump's commission. Blackwell was at the forefront of the initial push to implement voter ID laws in the mid-aughts. As Ohio's top elections official, he was investigated by Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee for his handling of the 2004 elections in the state. He imposed stringent requirements on voter registration drives, including a directive to ignore registrations not printed out on 80-pound stock paper.

Maine Secretary of State Matt Dunlap (D) stands out among the group, for being skeptical of voter restrictions and instead, as he described himself to TPM last week, as a "strong advocate for voter access" who was skeptical of restrictive laws. The other Democrat so far named, New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner has some—let's say—unique views on administering elections and once said that early voting, which is used disproportionately by minority voters, "cheapens the value" of election day. He is also supportive of a Republican bill in the state that adds new requirements for certain voters to prove they live in the state, a move critics say is to make it harder for students to vote.

3

Red flag: No mention in the order of voter suppression.

Reports leading up to the formal unveiling of the commission suggested looking at voter suppression would also be among its charges, as a way to get Democrats to sign on.

The executive order makes no such reference in the commission's mission, suggesting that the study of voter suppression is not actually a priority of the commission.

Kobach has continued to claim that voter suppression will also be studied. But it's hard to take that seriously, given that voter suppression is not defined, nor even mentioned in the entire executive order text and many of the people floated to be on the commission have played it down as an issue.

4

Telltale sign: A peculiar focus on "confidence" in the election system.

The main focus of commission, the order says, is to study whether the public's "confidence" is being "undermined" or "enhanced" by certain election protocols. The emphasis on confidence reflects a broader shift in the legal defense of restrictive voting laws: in the absence of legitimate cases of voter fraud to justify the new laws, proponents have argued that because people believe there is a prevalence of voter fraud, the laws are necessary.

"All of us who work in this area know that measuring confidence in electoral rules is something that is both easy to do and amenable to gross manipulation," Nate Persily, who served as a senior research director for President Obama's Presidential Commission on Election Administration, told TPM over email.

Persily, an election law expert at Stanford Law, has worked on studies that showed factors like partisanship, education and one's trust in government influence confidence in an election, beyond actual instances of fraud or restrictions placed on voting ostensibly meant to prevent fraud.

5

The order is fixated on voter registration issues.

The order mentions time and again the commission's interest in instances of "fraudulent" or "improper" voter registration. This is no coincidence. Overblown concern about non-citizens being registered to vote is the latest frontier in the campaign to enact stricter laws.

Kobach has been seeking to implement a proof-of-citizenship registration requirement, while elsewhere organizations that conduct voter registration have been targeted by GOP lawmakers.

Election experts and voting rights advocates acknowledge that yes, occasionally mistakes are made and people such as felons or non-citizens are accidentally registered to vote, for instance, while getting a driver's license. But oftentimes, the ineligible voter never casts a ballot, and doesn't even realize he or she was registered, and thus prosecutions have been rare.

Furthermore, the order disregards the importance of intent in the commission's investigation of irregularities.

The commission will study acts conducted "regardless of the state of mind or intent of that individual," the order says in its definition of "improper voting" and "improper voter registration."

"They seem to want to reach even those individuals and elections administrators who make an honest mistake or in the course of administering an election to hundreds of millions of Americans," said Janai Nelson, Associate Director-

Counsel of the NAACP-LDF.

Nelson worried that those instances “may be manipulated to paint a picture of voter fraud that really is not existent.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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[Nearly Half of Recent Campaign Money From Undisclosed Sources \(Bloomberg BNA Money and Politics Report\)](#)

Snapshot

- Undisclosed donors provide nearly half of \$20 million in outside campaign spending in three current congressional races
- Big spending by trade associations, nonprofits and super PACS funded by non-disclosing entities, Bloomberg BNA finds

By Kenneth P. Doyle

Undisclosed donors provided nearly half of the more than \$20 million in outside campaign spending in three closely watched, current congressional election races, a Bloomberg BNA review of Federal Election Commission reports found.

Bloomberg BNA looked at FEC independent expenditure reports filed in the special election campaigns for U.S. House seats for Georgia, Montana and South Carolina. These races, for seats vacated by Republican lawmakers who joined President Donald Trump's administration, are being treated by both Republicans and Democrats as important bellwethers reflecting the mood of the electorate following Trump's first months in office and have drawn record campaign spending.

Of a total \$20.7 million, so far, in independent expenditures of \$50,000 or more in the three House races, just under \$4 million—nearly 20 percent—is from trade associations and nonprofit groups that disclose none of their donors.

This direct spending by non-disclosing nonprofits is only part of the story, however. Much of the rest of the outside campaign spending has come from super political action committees receiving large contributions from nonprofits or other entities that keep their original donors under wraps.

GOP Super PAC Funded by Non-Disclosing Group

For example, the Congressional Leadership Fund, a super PAC linked to House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and other Republican leaders, has spent a total of nearly \$8 million to influence the Georgia and Montana congressional races and has received \$5 million in contributions this year from an affiliated nonprofit, the American Action Network, which doesn't disclose donors.

Outside campaign money being spent in the special election races also has come from Democratic and Republican party committees, which, like super PACs, file disclosure reports with the FEC. The national party committees are required to take only individual contributions in limited amounts and disclose all original contributors of their funds.

Most of the independent campaign spending from trade associations and nonprofits is coming from well-known groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the nation's largest business lobby and a key supporter of Republicans. On the Democratic side, some spending has come from nonprofits such as the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, which, like the Chamber, doesn't report its donors to the FEC.

Mystery Groups, Super PACs

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Some entities spending in the current races are more mysterious, however, and have provided few clues about where their money is coming from.

For example, an organization called CLA Inc. spent nearly \$400,000 on campaign ads supporting state lawmaker Tommy Pope in a May 16 Republican primary in South Carolina, but has never previously filed campaign finance reports with the FEC. The background of CLA Inc. is unclear, but its FEC filings were signed by a veteran Washington lobbyist, Marc Himmelstein, who heads a firm called National Environmental Strategies and lobbies mainly for energy companies.

Pope appears to have lost a close election in South Carolina to a rival GOP candidate, Ralph Norman, though a recount is possible. The general elections in South Carolina and Georgia are set for June 20. The Montana special election is May 25.

In addition to little-known nonprofits spending directly to influence the congressional races, a significant amount of untraceable money is coming through super PACs.

The Congressional Leadership Fund, which got \$5 million from the non-disclosing American Action Fund, and other super PACs reported receiving most or even all of their contributions from entities that don't reveal their donors. These include two mysterious super PACs seeking to influence the South Carolina and Georgia elections—Hometown Freedom Action Network and Americans United for Values.

Debate Over Disclosure

The spending from undisclosed sources in the current congressional races comes as supporters and opponents of tougher disclosure rules continue to debate the impact of what critics call “dark money.”

“Sensational rhetoric” on the issue created a “false impression that nonprofits are a major source of campaign speech,” the Center for Competitive Politics (CCP), a nonprofit policy group that supports allowing some money from undisclosed sources to influence elections, said in a recent analysis.

In reality, the CCP study said, nonprofits that spend money in campaigns but disclose none of their donors consistently account for less than 5 percent of reported political spending. Regulated political committees and others, like the media, “continue to have the most prominent voices in elections” the CCP said.

Allowing a small role for nonprofits doesn't “drown out” candidates or undermine disclosure but adds to the diversity of views necessary in a healthy democracy, the CCP said.

The center's study didn't look at campaign money contributed to super PACs from other, non-disclosing groups, Luke Wachob, who worked on the CCP analysis, told Bloomberg BNA in phone interview. He discounted the impact of this funding—sometimes called “gray money”—because decisions about where the money is spent are up to the super PAC, he said.

‘Rabbit Hole’ or ‘Right to Know’

Searching for the original donors of all outside campaign money “leads you down a rabbit hole” in a chase for something that isn't very significant in terms of its overall impact on campaigns, Wachob said.



The Campaign Legal Center (CLC), which supports stronger disclosure rules, criticized the CCP study. The argument that money from undisclosed sources is insignificant in recent elections is an “alternative fact,” CLC's Brendan Fischer said in a blog post,

“Dark money—that is, election-related spending whose donors are kept secret from voters—continues to play a major and troubling role in U.S. elections,” Fischer said.

This spending gained in significance due to Supreme Court decisions rolling back restrictions on campaign money and weak rules and enforcement by the FEC, he said.

The original sources of all money seeking to influence campaigns should be disclosed so that voters can understand and assess who is providing that money and what interests they may have before candidates and officials, Fischer said.

“The public has a right to know who's trying to influence campaigns,” he said.



[5 things to watch in Trump's financial disclosures \(Politico\)](#)

By Darren Samuelsohn

(Publish Date/Time: 5/18/17, 5:29 AM)

President Donald Trump may boast about it, but he won't be breaking new ground by releasing updated financial disclosure forms one year before it's required.

Every president since Ronald Reagan has done the same.

Still, his 2016 disclosure to the Federal Election Commission—expected out as soon as this week—promises to generate intense scrutiny. The report, which aides said he would release voluntarily, will open a window into his books, likely showing how much cash flowed into his golf courses and hotels and more detail on how he wound down his business operations after winning the election.

But don't expect the kitchen sink. The report won't show how much Trump paid in taxes last year or his total business debt—the kinds of details that could show whether his businesses create conflicts of interest with his government gig.

Here are five things to watch when the forms come out:

How's the Trump brand doing in the limelight?

Trump's disclosure may put dollar figures around how his businesses fared financially during his presidential campaign.

He's already boasting that his last two disclosure forms showed how rich he was. Last May, he claimed to be worth "in excess of \$10 billion" when filing a form that he declared the "largest in the history" of the FEC.

A year before that, he complained that the FEC document didn't have boxes to check off for some of his most valuable properties. "This report was not designed for a man of Mr. Trump's massive wealth," Trump's press release said.

Now Trump finds himself in a different position. He's faced allegations for months that he's profiting off his presidency, and the documents he's set to release may make that case.

Not only is Trump positioned to give a new net worth figure, he'll also reveal revenue generated at Mar-a-Lago, the South Florida private club he visited frequently during the campaign and where he recently increased membership fees to \$200,000; the Bedminster, N.J., club that's been dubbed the "summer" White House; and the Trump National course in northern Virginia that he frequently visits when he's spending weekends at the White House.

But wait, there's more: Trump likely will disclose revenue he earned in 2016 on everything from his Charlottesville, Va., winery to royalties received from his 1987 autobiography "The Art of the Deal," as well as other books that previously languished in the back catalogs but have since earned a new audience.

Important caveat: Figures spelling out the value of Trump's assets won't be official appraisals. They'll be good-faith estimates—which Trump himself once acknowledged in a 2007 lawsuit deposition can fluctuate based on "even my own feelings."

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Most important, Trump will only disclose revenues, which means he's only offering limited insight into the Trump Organization operation.

"It may be useful for boasting purposes," said Kathleen Clark, an ethics and law professor at Washington University in St. Louis. "It also is misleading. The company has business expenses, for goodness sake."

Is Trump still in charge of his companies?

Trump's financial disclosure forms are expected to shed some light on how he's rearranged his businesses since winning the White House in November.

The 2015 report he filed last year outlined 564 organizations – including corporations, partnerships, LLCs, foreign entities, non-profits and trusts – where Trump served in a senior leadership role, from president down to board member.

Each of those roles should be significantly diminished, if not gone, in this report. In January, Trump pledged to hand over day-to-day operations of his company to his adult sons Eric and Donald Trump Jr, as well as longtime senior Trump Organization executives.

Trump's report also should show how many of those 564 organizations still exist. Media reports since the November election have cataloged some being shuttered, including licensing deals for hotels in Azerbaijan, Brazil and Georgia. But Trump may also have added new LLCs too, accounting for businesses like trademarks he's won in China.

Important caveat: These disclosures will depend on the date range that Trump uses for his forms. Since it's voluntary, he could detail his businesses for just 2016 or he could include the first few months of 2017 after he was sworn into the White House.

Ethics experts also say Trump could juggle entities into different corporate shells, making it hard to tell which ones he's actually eliminated.

"It's like moving the Mercedes from one garage to another," said Richard Painter, the former George W. Bush White House ethics lawyer. "He still has the Mercedes in the garage."

What about those June 2016 stock sales?

Under fire to explain what Trump would do to address his business conflicts of interest in the weeks after he won the presidential election, a transition spokesman last December said the president-elect had sold all his stocks in June 2016.

Now it's time for Trump to prove it.

In his 2015 disclosures, Trump detailed at least \$61 million that he owned in stocks, hedge funds and mutual funds—the totals were spelled out in wide financial ranges. Among his holdings: at least \$25 million in the Blackrock's Obsidian hedge fund, \$600,000 million in Apple, \$500 million in Google, \$500,000 in Chevron and \$500,000 in Comcast.

The fire sale likely crimped Trump's bottom line. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has gone up more than 15.8 percent since last June, fueled by strong economic data, rising oil prices and the prospect of financial deregulation.

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Important caveat: Trump's stock portfolio is only a small portion of his wealth, and the FEC filing he's releasing won't require him to say how much he made on the transactions.

Who does Trump owe money?

Trump's disclosure will allow closer scrutiny into how much debt he carries and whether any of the terms to his financing – interest rates or maturation terms -- changed during the presidential campaign or transition.

In his 2015 form, Trump reported 16 major liabilities worth at least \$315 million, including mortgages on Trump Tower and his golf courses in Miami, northern Virginia and Monmouth County, N.J. He also reported loans for the 40 Wall Street skyscraper in New York and the new Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C.

Important caveat: The form won't be detailed enough to get a full read on Trump's debt. He doesn't need to say which foreign governments' financial institutions he's on the hook to. And he won't disclose corporate debt, so the forms likely show only a fraction of what he owes.

"It's absolutely not a complete representation of the debt Donald Trump owes through his businesses," said Clark. She pointed to an inconsistency: Trump in the past reported on his FEC form his total asset values and income that appeared to include his wider company properties but didn't follow the same criteria for his liabilities.

"Imagine applying for a credit card or a loan and listing all your revenue and all your income but not all your debt," she said.

What do the first lady's finances look like?

Melania Trump barely registered a year ago when Trump filed his financial disclosure form. The only income listed for the future first lady—in a range from \$15,001 to \$50,000—came via royalties tied to a licensing agreement with a company called Melania Marks Accessories. She also reported up to \$5 million in value from residential real estate in New York.

But media reports since May 2016 show there's more to Melania Trump's books.

In February, McClatchy reported that several companies connected to Melania Trump no longer had relationships to manufacture products tied to the first lady, including watches, jewelry and skin-care products. Melania Trump in April also reached a \$2.9 million settlement with the Daily Mail and Mail Online to close a defamation lawsuit she brought after the tabloid published a story falsely suggesting she'd worked for an escort service.

Important caveat: Since these developments happened recently, Trump might not include them on the form, meaning the world would wait until next May to see the changes in her finances.



[Did Toomey get scammed by PAC targeted in FBI raid? \(Pennlive\)](#)

By Colin Deppen

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 12:16 PM)

On Thursday, the FBI raided the offices of Strategic Campaign Group, a controversial GOP consultancy firm and one previously accused of failing to turn over money its affiliates had raised on behalf of Republican candidates.

The raid concerned work the company did on the failed 2013 gubernatorial bid of former Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, a Republican, according to Strategic Campaign Group.

The FBI has not discussed the case in the days since it visited Strategic Campaign Group's headquarters in Annapolis, Maryland, gathering untold evidence, computer files and reams of paperwork.

Cuccinelli sued the firm in 2014, alleging the company and one of its political action committees had duped donors. In his complaint, Cuccinelli dubbed the operation a "malicious" scam, and alleged that while the group had formed a PAC to help fund his campaign, he never saw a dollar of the money it raised.

Similar allegations and questions have been raised by lawmakers elsewhere in the country, and now campaign representatives for Sen. Pat Toomey, a Lehigh Valley Republican, say it appears his 2016 reelection bid was involved as well, along with anyone who may have donated to a Strategic Campaign Group-related fund on his behalf.

"They filed one (\$200) in-time expenditure with the FEC saying they did some email service on our behalf, but until you emailed me I had no idea anyone had even been doing anything," Mark Harris, a campaign consultant on Toomey's re-election bid, told PennLive via email.

"I had no idea they were even involved [in the campaign]," Harris added. "I suspect it's just part of their scam."

Most of the websites associated with the Strategic Campaign Group have been scrubbed in the days since the FBI's raid at the firm's D.C.-area headquarters.

Sites belonging to Conservative StrikeForce, a Strategic Campaign Group-operated PAC, have also disappeared. Screenshots embedded below reveal the PAC's endorsement of Toomey and soliciting of donations on his behalf, money his campaign says it never saw.

A donation tab on a Conservative StrikeForce webpage -- now deleted -- appearing to solicit donations on Sen. Pat Toomey's behalf. Toomey's campaign said it never saw any money as a result.

A now-deleted Conservative StrikeForce webpage lists Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA) as one of the PAC's endorsed candidates.

Toomey's staffers on Capitol Hill said they were prevented from commenting on campaign-related matters as government workers.

But Mark Harris said there was no coordination between Toomey's campaign and Strategic Campaign Group or its PACs. It appears, he added, that Toomey's campaign, like other prominent Republican campaigns elsewhere in the country, had been dragged into a fundraising ploy.

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Strategic Campaign Group has denied any wrongdoing.

"They certainly never reached out to us. But I think that's their M.O. (modus operandi)," Harris added.

"I never interacted with them. ... They pick popular races to fundraise off of, but none of the money ever gets to the candidates. I have no idea how much they raised (on Toomey's behalf)."

The Federal Election Commission isn't sure either. In an email to PennLive, the regulatory agency said based on what was reported by Conservative StrikeForce, there were no earmarks from individual contributors to specific candidates.

But the group's since-deleted donation tab on its website could easily give a supporter that impression. Additionally, according to FEC records provided to PennLive, "The Conservative StrikeForce" PAC reported \$8,299 in small, individual contributions in Pennsylvania last year alone. The PAC also reported \$28,345 in individual contributions from Pennsylvania in 2013-2014; \$41,919 in 2011-2012; and \$7,830 in 2009-2010.

In the end, Toomey's 2016 reelection bid went on to become one of the most expensive in U.S. history. He also succeeded in winning a second term in office, so the true impact of allegedly fraudulent fundraising activity around his campaign may never be known.

"They made one \$200 in-kind contribution and we just found out about it by looking at the FEC's website now," Harris told PennLive earlier this week. "They (Conservative StrikeForce) filed an FEC report saying they spent \$200 with a company on active engagement supporting federal candidate 'Toomey, Patrick Joseph' for voter contact emails."

Harris added: "I have no idea what that even means."

According to the Washington Post, "critics say 'scam PACs' have proliferated in recent years, driven in part by the advent of big-money super PACs in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision. There has also been a surge in groups chasing small-dollar donors, often with misleading promises of how they plan to use those funds."

In 2012, Congressman Allen West, R-Florida, filed a complaint with the FEC alleging so-called "scam PACs," including Conservative StrikeForce, had cost him reelection in 2012 by siphoning off funding from his campaign and using his name and image to raise funds for themselves.

West lost the race by a narrow margin, meaning that if those dollars had been turned over to his campaign, it might have helped keep him in office, the Congressman argued.

In response, the FEC said that while it agreed the PACs had used West's name to raise money and had turned over very little of that money, it disagreed with whether the activity "constitutes a fraud within the reach of (FEC) regulation."

"Whether it is prohibited by laws beyond the (regulation), criminal or otherwise, is not a matter within the Commission's jurisdiction," the FEC added.

After Ken Cuccinelli's failed bid for Governor of Virginia, he sued Conservative StrikeForce, alleging the Arlington-based super PAC had raised \$2.2 million in 2013 by largely promising donors the money would



help Cuccinelli's campaign against Democrat Terry McAuliffe. The PAC only gave Cuccinelli's campaign \$10,000, he claimed.

The lawsuit was eventually settled for \$85,000, but, as last week's FBI action indicates, Strategic Campaign Group's troubles were only just beginning.

"This is a political fundraising swamp," Cucinelli said after his lawsuit with the firm was settled. "The scam PACs are real and they exist all over the country and they prey on people's intense feelings about politics."



[Are Taxpayers Subsidizing Campaign Offices for These Two New York Congress Members? \(New York Observer\)](#)

By Will Bredderman

(Publish Date: 5/17/17, 2:21 PM)

The federal government doles out massive sums to private landlords each month to maintain Congressman Gregory Meeks's and Congresswoman Grace Meng's formal offices in their Queens districts—while the two Democrats simultaneously rent campaign headquarters in the exact same buildings for far, far lower rates.

In 2010, the New York Post reported that Meeks's Build America Political Action Committee paid \$350 a month for Suite 535 at 153-01 Jamaica Avenue, in Jamaica, Queens. The problem, the tabloid noted, is that 153-01 Jamaica Avenue contains no Suite 535, and is in fact only three stories tall.

What the Post neglected to mention was that Meeks has reported the same phantom space as the headquarters of his two campaign committees, Friends for Gregory Meeks and Meeks for Congress, to the Federal Election Commission since late 2006. To this day, his periodic financial filings, his fundraiser invitations and his official campaign website all list this nonexistent office as the nexus and nerve-center of his political operations.

The Observer visited the location, and discovered the Meeks campaign and the Build America PAC are in fact lodged in Suite 205 of the building—directly adjacent to Suite 204, which serves as the congressman's taxpayer-financed district office.

An office of the Legal Aid Society occupies approximately half the building's second floor. The Meeks campaign and congressional office divide the remaining portion with a private law firm and with an outpost of the New York City Commission on Human Rights.

Public records show that the NYCCHR pays landlord BLDG Management \$8,076 a month for its space.

Meanwhile, FEC records indicate that the Meeks campaign committees and the PAC split the rent in Suite 205 (though both report their address in their filings as Suite 535). As of the most recent FEC disclosure, the PAC allocates \$412 a month toward the lease on the space, while the campaign sets aside \$1,271.

That latter figure has oscillated wildly at times in years past. In December 2014, for example, it inexplicably fell to \$746—while in October 2011, it dropped all the way to \$181.

Back in 2007, the rate gyrated between \$975 a month and \$1,212—except for October, when it sank to \$146, and in February, when it shot up to \$6,930.

The latest House disbursement records show that BLDG Management charges Washington \$10,675.30 a month for the district office—making Meeks's rent among the costliest in the entire country. The real estate company did not respond to calls for comment.

For context, Congress pays a combined \$9,700 each month for fellow Queens Congressman Joseph Crowley's two district offices, while rent at Bronx Congressman Eliot Engel's three official sites together totals a little less than \$7,000. Manhattan Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney's trio of offices collectively cost the taxpayer \$9,500 every month.

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Of the entire New York City House delegation, only Congressman Jerrold Nadler's Lower Manhattan office runs a higher rate: \$10,855.59 per month.

The Observer was unable to gain access to the locked campaign suite at 153-01 Jamaica Avenue, but did enter the district office. Given the proportions of the building, it seems unlikely that the latter is vastly larger than either of the other two spaces it shares the floor with—most likely not enough to justify the \$2,600 discrepancy between the NYCCHR's rent and that of the congressional office, and almost certainly not the nearly \$9,000 spread between the monthly lease for the district office and that of the campaign office.

It appears similarly impossible that the Meeks campaign accounts and the Build America PAC have continually made the same error about "Suite 535" through nearly 11 years' worth of filings with multiple levels of government. At the Observer's request, the firm Competitive Advantage Research conducted a comprehensive review of New York State campaign finance databases for the appearance of the 153-01 Jamaica Avenue address.

The analysis turned up 58 donations the two campaign committees and the PAC made to state and local candidates while listing their location as Suite 535.

"Meeks has apparently fabricated a door number at a real address and given it out as the address of his own campaign to several New York committees, who all report it as his address when transacting with the Meeks campaign," said CAR founder Jonathan Reznick. "More alarmingly, he also gives this door number to the FEC as the address of his campaign, all in an apparent attempt to give the impression that the campaign office is in a distinct location within the building from his own taxpayer-funded district office."

It is unclear where the Meeks campaign might have come up with the number 535, although there are 535 voting members of the House and Senate. But the number that stunned good government advocate Susan Lerner, executive director of the group Common Cause New York, was the district office's astronomical rent.

She called for an independent investigation to ascertain the true market value of both the campaign and district office spaces. Lerner also asserted it was highly questionable for a politician to have his government berth physically adjoining his political headquarters.

"It's just bad practice to have your district office and your campaign office side-by-side. It results in a blurring of lines between your taxpayer-financed district office and your campaign," she said. "It does appear as if the taxpayer is paying for a campaign office in addition to a district office, and that's simply improper."

It may be more than just improper: House ethics standards state explicitly that the use of public resources for campaign purposes may warrant criminal prosecution. Media representatives at the FEC and the Office of Congressional Ethics both told the Observer they would not comment on individual politicians' specific situations.

Meeks, who chairs the Congressional Black Caucus Political Action Committee, has been the subject of numerous corruption allegations and investigations since his election in 1998. Neither his campaign nor his congressional spokesman responded to requests for comment.

Unfortunately, itemized accounting of congressional disbursements only goes back to early 2016, so it is unclear what the House paid for Meeks's rent in years prior. A congressional directory from 2005 places the congressman's district office at a different location, indicating that it may have moved into 153-01 Jamaica Avenue contemporaneously with the campaign in 2006.

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Permits filed with the New York City Department of Buildings show considerable construction, including the insertion of partition walls, on the second floor of the structure during the latter half of that year.

The House disbursement list also shows that the federal government shells out \$8,375.79 per month to Mehran Properties for Congresswoman Meng's district office at 40–13 159 Street in the Flushing section of Queens, as well as another \$111 to \$733 to the same company for utilities. (The allocation for Meeks appears to pay utilities costs directly to the vendors).

A \$1,000 donation to the congresswoman's campaign, Grace for New York, made to Queens Assemblyman Francisco Moya in January 2016 reveals that her campaign office is in the exact same one-story structure—even though she has registered her committee with the FEC from a post office box in the neighborhood of Fresh Meadows.

Moya's campaign records shows a donation of \$1,000 to Meng's account at that same address just a few months before.

For that space, Meng's campaign has paid Mehran Properties \$440 a month since October 2015. As with Meeks's campaign, the only utilities payments Grace for New York shows are for telephone and Internet service—not for water or electricity.

But long before her congressional office assumed that address, Meng's campaign began reporting monthly payments of \$2,750 to Mehran Properties for office in April 2012.

Meng's monthly campaign office fees dipped slightly to \$2,450 per month in 2014, FEC filings show. That February, the 113th Congress directory identified her Flushing district office as situated in a non-Mehran property at 32-26 Union Street. The congresswoman had heralded the opening of that site on her Facebook page in June 2013, and on her House website two months later.

By the next Congress in February 2016, the directory referred to her Flushing office at its current Mehran-owned location, 40–13 159 Street. The Observer was unable to find any official or informal notice of the relocation, although a congressional phone book published in September 2015 put the outpost at its present address.

Between May and June 2014, the Meng campaign's rental fees to Mehran halved, from \$2,450 to \$1,225 a month.

By October, the rate had plunged to just \$440—a figure that remained consistent at least through November of last year. These precipitous declines in price would appear to coincide, roughly, with her district office's move to a Mehran property.

Lerner again called for an independent assessment of the true market value of both the campaign and district offices.

“We want to be assured that the taxpayer is paying only for the district office, and that the campaign office hasn't obtained some kind of discount,” the advocate said. “If there is a better deal, that deal should be going to the taxpayer, not to the campaign.”

Alex Mehran, one of the owners of Mehran Properties, insisted to the Observer that his company's transactions with the House of Representatives and with Meng's campaign were completely unrelated. He attributed the rent



drop-off for the campaign to its move to a smaller space, though he refused to divulge the whereabouts of the old location, or any specific details about its dimensions.

“As a real estate company, were able to do it for that price,” he said. “One deal had nothing to do with the other.”

That price is far lower than what other Congress members in New York pay each month for their campaign offices. Engel, the Bronx congressman, gives the Benjamin Franklin Democratic Club \$2,000 a month to make use of their space as his headquarters—while Brooklyn Congresswoman Yvette Clarke has a \$1,500 rental arrangement with the Progressive Democrats Political Association.

Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez pays \$2,000 a month to rent campaign space from a Brooklyn daycare center.

The only other New York House member with a comparable monthly campaign office rent is Crowley, who pays \$600 a month—and, as the Post revealed recently, his landlord is his own brother.

A spokesman for Meng told the Observer that her leadership PAC, At the Table!, chips in \$60 a month for the campaign office—bringing the total rent paid to \$500—and that the space is only 153 square feet. The district office, he maintained, is 2,573 square feet.

The press representative further asserted that the varying rents the campaign paid over the past few years reflect changes in office space and location, even as Mehran Properties remained the landlord the entire time.

“These were all different campaign spaces of varying sizes that were rented at different times,” said Jordan Goldes. “That is the only reason why there was a difference in price from year to year.”

The congresswoman was re-elected a vice chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee in February.



[Aaron Schock's attorneys ask for delay in fraud trial \(Journal-Courier\)](#)

By Andy Kravetz

PEORIA — Attorneys for former U.S. Rep. Aaron Schock asked a judge on Wednesday to move his trial date to January.

In an eight-page motion, George J. Terwilliger asked for the expected delay, saying several pending motions and motions anticipated later after all the evidence was handed over by the government, made a delay necessary. The government, he said, doesn't oppose the motion.

“This is a complex case involving sensitive constitutional issues and voluminous discovery, which is not yet complete despite the Court's deadlines. Mr. Schock anticipates filing additional motions once discovery is complete,” he wrote in the motion.

It's likely the topic will be discussed during a mid-morning telephone conference Friday with U.S. District Judge Colin Bruce. The judge wrote in an order last week that he was doubtful the trial would go on as planned in July.

Schock, 35, was indicted in November on charges of wire fraud, mail fraud, making false statements, filing a false tax return, theft of government funds and falsification of Federal Election Commission filings. The charges allege a course of conduct that began when Schock, a Peoria Republican, was first elected to Congress in 2008 and continued until October 2015, about six months after he resigned from office.



[Report: Ethics Office Investigating Chris Collins Investments \(Roll Call\)](#)

Inquiry over improperly attracting investors to biotech company

By Rema Rahman

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 10:10 AM)

The Office of Congressional Ethics is reportedly conducting an inquiry into whether Rep. Chris Collins improperly attracted investors to an Australian biotech company and gave a stock tip to then-Rep. Tom Price.

Citing two anonymous sources, the The Buffalo News reported several investors in the Buffalo area were being interviewed this week to look at potential roles played by Collins in urging investors to buy stock in the company.

The New York Republican is the largest shareholder in the company, Innate Immunotherapeutics, according to the report.

A spokesman said in a statement to Roll Call that the congressman did nothing wrong.

“Despite the continued partisan attacks insinuating otherwise, Congressman Collins has followed all ethical guidelines related to his personal finances during his time in the House and will continue to do so,” Spokesman Michael Kracker said.

Kracker said Collins’ relationship with the company dated back 15 years and that it worked to develop a treatment for secondary progressive multiple sclerosis, an illness that has affected one of Collins’ close family members.

The Office of Congressional Ethics does not acknowledge if it is conducting an inquiry of members of Congress. It may send a report to the House Ethics Committee, which would make what OCE found public after a certain amount of time.

The OCE could also determine the allegations go nowhere. It is not clear at what stage the Collins probe stands.

The ethics office has received at least four requests for inquiry involving Collins and investments in the company.

They note Collins was involved in a bill that would benefit the company, which would raise questions on if he violated a law that bars lawmakers from making money using insider information when investing.

The probe also includes looking into a stock tip Collins gave Price before the Georgia Republican left Congress to become Health and Human Services secretary. The report states Price bought \$100,000 in a private discount stock sale two days after Collins bought 4 million shares.

The anonymous sources said investigators are expected to interview up to six Buffalo-area investors this week.

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[Campaign finance reform advocates working to get initiative on ballot \(Casper Star-Tribune\)](#)

By Laura Hancock

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 11:00 AM)

A group of Wyomingites is pushing for campaign finance reform in the state and nationally through a ballot initiative – including a former legislative candidate who believes a liberal dark money group that supported him actually interfered in his race.

Wyoming Promise members want an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would repeal a number of U.S. Supreme Court decisions that have loosened limits on how much people and groups spend in races. One decision is *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, in which justices decided corporate and union political action committees could raise and spend an unlimited amount of money for and against candidates, as long as the PACs work independently of candidates, said Shelby Shadwell of Laramie, Wyoming Promise's treasurer.

On Monday, the Wyoming Secretary of State's office announced that Wyoming Promise could begin the process of collecting signatures from the state's residents to get an initiative on the ballot. It must collect at least 38,818 signatures, a number based on a percentage of votes cast in the 2016 general election.

The organization hopes to get the initiative on the November 2018 ballot and has 18 months to collect signatures. If members don't gather enough names before the 2018 election, the initiative still has a chance for the 2020 ballot, Shadwell said.

Wyoming Promise is mirroring the goals of American Promise, on which former Republican U.S. Sen. Al Simpson serves as an adviser, Shadwell said.

Wyoming Promise and others believe the rich and powerful have more control over politicians than ordinary people because of the amount of money they spend on their campaigns, Shadwell said.

"We need to end legalized bribery and regulate and have campaign finance reform," he said.

The chairman of Wyoming Promise is Kenneth Chestek, of Laramie, who ran for the Legislature in 2016 as a Democrat against Rep. Bill Haley, R-Centennial.

The Wyoming Hunters and Anglers Alliance sent mail to residents in House District 46 accusing Haley of wanting the federal government to turn public lands over to the state for selloff to private people and companies.

Chestek, a law professor at the University of Wyoming, said the mailings were upsetting to him. He didn't agree with them, he said.

"That's part of why I'm involved in this effort," he said. "I've always hated the *Citizens United* decision. When it impacted my race for the Legislature, it got me upset enough to take this action."

Amending the U.S. Constitution is the only way the state Legislatures and Congress can reform campaign finance laws, he said.

The identities of the people backing the hunters' group are not entirely known. Such groups on the left and right are called dark money.

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If the initiative makes it to the ballot box, a statement will say the U.S. Constitution needs an amendment to ensure spending in Wyoming and at the federal level is free and fair.

Based “on the American values of fair play, leveling the playing field and ensuring that all citizens, regardless of wealth, have an opportunity for their political views to be heard, there is a compelling reason to regulate political spending so that the voices of natural persons are not overwhelmed by corporate spending,” the proposed initiative states.

There are two ways to amend the Constitution, Shadwell said.

Congress can propose an amendment that voters in at least three-fourths of the states can ratify. Or two-thirds of the states can pass ballot measures calling for a constitutional convention in which representatives of each state meet to draft an amendment. The states would have to ratify the amendment, Shadwell said.

Eighteen states thus far have passed resolutions calling on Congress to draft the amendment to regulate political spending.

About five have called for a Constitutional convention, he said.

Wyoming Promise’s proposed initiative states either way of amending the Constitution is suitable, Shadwell said.

The Wyoming group, as with the national organization, aims to be bipartisan, he said.

“A 28th amendment to the Constitution is the only way to overturn the (Citizens United) decision,” he said. “We can’t limit the amount of dark money and unlimited political spending in the system, which is a huge problem no matter what side of the political spectrum you’re on. Republicans don’t like it. Democrats don’t like their politicians being bought off, either.”



[Pence Takes Steps to Build War Chest as White House Stumbles \(Bloomberg News\)](#)

By Bill Allison

(Publish Date: 5/17/17, 5:55 PM)

Political action committee registered Wednesday with FEC

Neither Biden nor Cheney had active leadership PACs in office

While President Donald Trump's White House grapples with the fallout from his firing of the former FBI director, Vice President Mike Pence has taken steps to begin building his own political war chest.

Pence launched Great America Committee, a leadership PAC, a move that will enable him to channel money to congressional Republicans ahead of the 2018 midterm elections. The political action committee's registration was posted Wednesday on the Federal Election Commission website.

"The Vice President is playing a leading role in passing legislation on the Hill," said Nick Ayers, a senior adviser to Pence in the 2016 campaign who will be running the PAC. "He wants to support House and Senate members who are helping pass the president's agenda."

It's unusual for vice presidents to set up their own fundraising vehicles. Neither Joseph Biden nor Dick Cheney, the two vice presidents who preceded Pence, had one while in office. It's not entirely unprecedented, though: George H.W. Bush formed the Fund for America's Future when he was preparing for his 1988 presidential run.

"Launching a leadership PAC sometimes signals an intent to run for higher office, which in Pence's case, has been a topic of public interest ever since he was first nominated," said Sheila Krumholz, executive director of the Center for Responsible Politics, which studies money in politics.

The move comes as President Donald Trump's biggest campaign promises -- such as overhauling the U.S. tax code and replacing the Affordable Care Act -- face stronger headwinds following reports that he asked former FBI Director James Comey to drop an investigation into former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn. Some Republican lawmakers have raised concerns that his agenda will stall as a result of the controversy.

Planning for the PAC began in December, Ayers said. The group will manage the database of donors and supporters that Pence compiled over his six terms in Congress and as Indiana governor. It will also pay expenses for Pence's political activities, reducing the burden on Trump's campaign and the Republican National Committee. The PAC can raise up to \$5,000 per year from individual donors and other federal PACs, according to election law.

Marc Lotter, Pence's spokesman, declined to comment on the PAC because federal rules bar him from discussing political activities.

Vice presidents typically headline events for their party committees, raising money in amounts up to \$339,000. Most of that money, however, can't be contributed directly to candidates or used on their behalf. Leadership PACs of the kind Pence has formed can use all the money they raise to support candidates.

In the 2016 election cycle, Republican leadership PACs donated \$30.1 million to congressional candidates. The top fundraiser was House Speaker Paul Ryan's Prosperity PAC, which brought in \$4.2 million that cycle.

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“The general theory on having a leadership PACs is that it’s good to have friends and even better to have friends that owe you favors, because you never know when you’ll have to call them in,” said Krumholz.



[Gehrke: GOP lawsuit has left a party saddled with debt, scraping for donors \(Salt Lake Tribune\)](#)

By Robert Gehrke

(Publish Date/Time: 5/17/17, 9:30 AM)

On Saturday, Republican delegates will elect a person to lead their party — a party that controls every major elected office in the state yet is deeply divided, struggling to raise money, mired in tens of thousands of dollars in months-old debt and operating on a skeleton budget.

The current party chairman, James Evans, has tried to put a rosy spin on the finances, using promises of money coming in to make the debt seem not so bad.

Maybe it's his business background — until recently he owned payday loan stores — that makes him believe in paying today's debt with tomorrow's windfall.

But here's the reality: As of Tuesday, the Utah Republican Party had \$10,200 in the bank.

Meanwhile, the conservative party is staring at — conservatively — \$100,000 in past due bills, many of them a year or more old, that have spawned collection calls to party headquarters and in one instance a lawsuit that the party recently resolved.

For example, Republicans still owe \$6,441 to Thanksgiving Point for a golf tournament fundraiser held in 2015. Days ahead of its 2017 convention, it still owes \$13,000 for audio/visual services for its 2016 gathering.

For more than a year, the party has owed \$23,000 to Eventbrite, which built an online registration system for the 2016 caucuses — although the party is disputing the amount because it says Eventbrite botched the job. It also still owes \$21,000 to Smartmatic for an online voting program for the caucuses.

Last year, as my colleague Paul Rolly reported, Redstone Design sued the GOP for failing to pay its bills. Recently the party paid Redstone about \$12,000 to settle the account and Redstone, Evans said, is again doing work for the party's upcoming convention.

Hopefully Redstone got its cash up front.

And there is a looming fine expected from the Federal Election Commission stemming from an audit of the party's finances leading up to the 2012 presidential election, when the Utah GOP was channeling vast amounts of money to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. Evans estimates the fines could be as high as \$30,000.

That sampling of the debt doesn't include the biggest unresolved expense: More than \$300,000 in legal fees left behind by the Republican Party's stubborn and virtually fruitless yearslong challenge to SB54, which created a way for candidates to get on the primary ballot by gathering signatures.

Earlier this year, the party's State Central Committee voted to finally drop its appeal, after they had suffered a string of defeats. But rabid Republicans on the committee changed their minds and resurrected the appeal.

The attorneys have agreed to accept whatever payment the party can raise from supporters of the suit, but so far the backers of the lawsuit — while vocal and adamant they should press forward — have been reluctant to help pay for it.

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The lawsuit did more than rack up legal bills. It also drove away the party's traditional donors, many of whom supported the electoral changes pushed by Count My Vote and the compromise measures in SB54.

Evans said he the donor exodus has tied his hands in a way that past party chairmen have not experienced. He cannot, for example, hit up a member of the congressional delegation or other elected officials to simply shake the money tree when a bill comes due.

Moreover, he said, backers of SB54 and other politically connected Utahns are using their clout "intimidating others not to give."

Overall, Evans downplays the financial morass. Other party chairmen have been saddled with debt and he predicts — using some questionable accounting — the party could be in the black this year.

He has slashed the party's payroll from \$22,000 a month to just over \$3,300. And he is trying to diversify the party's fundraising, attempting to sell ads in the party's convention program and on its website to businesses that want to reach the Republican rank-and-file.

He also wants the party's roughly 4,000 state delegates to each pledge to raise or contribute \$50, potentially generating as much as \$200,000 for the party.

Evans is seeking a third term as chairman of the party and has two challengers, his current vice-chairman Phill Wright and Davis County Chairman Rob Anderson.

Whoever wins Saturday will have an unenviable job, getting the finances on track, while trying to mend the SB54 rift and marshaling the party's resources — whatever they may be — to try to defend Republican seats in what could be a very bad 2018 election.

Maybe it's enough to make being elected the Utah Democratic chairman seem not quite as bad.

[New CCP Issue Brief: “Dark Money” Drops to 2.9% of Campaign Spending in 2016 \(Center for Competitive Politics blog\)](#)

Brief finds that nonprofits have never accounted for more than 5% of all election campaign spending

By Matt Nese

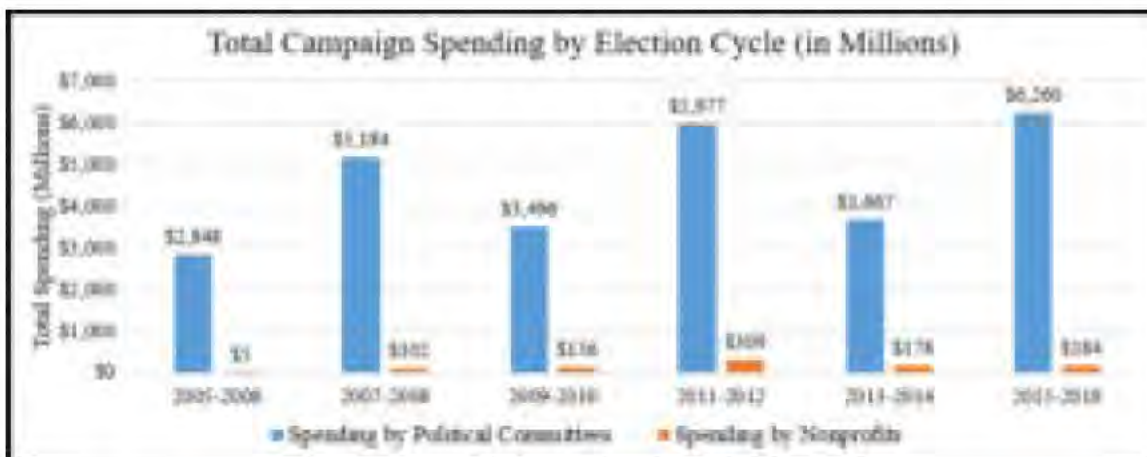
(Publish Date: 5/17/17)

Alexandria, VA – The Center for Competitive Politics, America’s largest nonprofit defending First Amendment political free speech rights, released a new Issue Brief today analyzing the amount of so-called “dark money,” or election campaign spending by nonprofits that are not required to publicly report the private information of their supporters to the government unless the contributions are earmarked for campaign ads, over the last six election cycles. Among other things, CCP’s Brief found:

“Dark money” declined in both absolute and relative terms from the last presidential election cycle, down to \$184 million from \$309 million.

“Dark money” accounted for only 2.9% of all campaign expenditures in 2015-2016.

Nonprofits have never accounted for more than 5% of all election campaign spending in any election cycle.



“For years, opponents of free speech have made it seem like campaign spending by nonprofits is dominating our politics. It’s not,” said CCP President David Keating. “Nonprofits play a small but important role in campaigns. If only politicians and PACs could speak about candidates, Americans would be worse off.”

“The hysteria over ‘dark money’ is overblown. By far, candidates and political committees continue to have the loudest voice in campaigns,” said CCP Senior Policy Analyst Luke Wachob. “Unfortunately, some lawmakers want to tip the balance even more in their favor by restricting nonprofit speech.”

Election Cycle	Percentage Spending by Political Committees ¹	Percentage Spending by Nonprofits ("Dark Money") ¹
2005-2008	99.8%	0.2%
2007-2008	98.1%	1.9%
2009-2010	96.3%	3.7%
2011-2012	95.1%	4.9%
2013-2014	95.4%	4.6%
2015-2016	97.1%	2.9%

To read the Issue Brief by Wachob, please go to http://www.campaignfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-05-08_Issue-Brief_Wachob_Putting-Dark-Money-In-Context.pdf.

[Roosevelt Institute Study on “Political Money” is Not the Revelation It Claims to Be \(Center for Competitive Politics blog\)](#)

By Joe Albanese

(Publish Date: 5/16/17)

A new study on the impact of “money in politics” has been released by the Roosevelt Institute, and sympathetic outlets are already hailing it as a vindication of those who long argued that political spending directly influences policymaking in government. Despite its headline-grabbing claims, however, the study exaggerates the scale of political spending, overestimates its impact, and is riddled with other logical and methodological flaws. The authors are Thomas Ferguson of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Paul Jorgensen of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and Jie Chen of the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

This paper specifically tests the influence of “high finance” on alterations to the Dodd-Frank Act, and of telecommunications companies on the passage of network neutrality regulations. (This post will focus on the former, for the sake of brevity). The authors’ hypothesis is that lawmakers watered down banking regulations in direct response to financial incentives from corporate interests in that sector. They attempt to prove this theory by examining data on political spending that they say has been previously missed by media and academia. In so doing, the authors aim to reveal the “true size” of such spending beyond regular campaign contributions.

The authors examined the connection between industry political spending and the likelihood of a Democrat in the House of Representatives “changing their mind” on Dodd-Frank (a seemingly polite way of insinuating corruption). In particular, the study’s focus was on Democrats who voted for Dodd-Frank and then later voted for measures to “weaken” it in five subsequent bills.

Overall, the paper purports to find that:

Every \$100,000 that Democrats received from the finance sector increased the odds of “changing their mind” on Dodd-Frank by 13.9%;

Representatives who voluntarily retired from Congress after the 2014 elections were 3 times likelier to cast a “pro-bank” vote; and

Representatives on the House Financial Services Committee were 90% more likely to “side with the banks.”

For all the talk that this study has decisively proven correct the arguments for further restrictions on “money in politics,” the reality falls dramatically short. It severely overestimates the level of political spending and the causal relationship between money spent and votes cast. The study’s biggest problems fall into two basic categories: disqualifying flaws specific to its methodology, and basic misunderstandings about the complexities involved with political giving.

I. Everything Is Bribery

The study spends more than half of its space building a narrative of a conspiratorial system whereby special interests hijack the government, wreck the economy, and make themselves rich in the process. But the litany of overbroad definitions, omitted variables, and mischaracterizations in its actual analytical model undermines its ability to quantitatively prove this hypothesis.

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a. “Political Spending”

Perhaps most glaring is the “full-spectrum analysis” of political money. It should be noted that the study never cites final estimations for total spending, calculation methods, or its sources, despite insisting that “factors like political money... can be measured fairly precisely.” Nor does it define terms like “outside spending,” which has a conventional definition that may be less helpful in a paper aiming to upend existing conceptions and calculations of political spending. The authors’ categories and the amounts of estimated money for each area are discussed below:

“Payments to Lawyers for Services,” an amount that the authors describe as “substantial” but “unknown.” This category is described mainly as contributions from law firms that “have had major banks as principal clients.” Supposedly, “[p]olitical contributions from members of these firms mostly track the interests of their clients,” and thus should be counted as if they come directly from finance. This is nonsensical on many fronts. Wouldn’t lawyers favor increased regulations so that firms need more legal counsel? Is the main political motivation of finance employees (who make up all industry contributions to candidates and parties) really to serve the interests of their firms’ clients? Do other industries that service or benefit from finance also act as their proxies? Given the central importance of finance to the U.S. economy, almost every business should be implicated in this arrangement by the authors’ logic.

“Payments to Political Figures,” which are “not easily quantified,” but may be “many hundreds of millions of dollars.” This category refers to things like speaking fees, book contracts, and consulting fees – basically private sector work that a politician might engage in after leaving office. Finance is certainly not the only industry that participates; after all, aren’t, for example, universities that hire former lawmakers to teach also potentially trying to gain influence? Is there no legitimate reason to pay former politicians to utilize their experiences in and knowledge of government? If there is, how is this category subdivided to account for that?

“Foundations and Charitable Grants,” which the authors concede are mostly not political. They estimate \$296 billion in total giving in 2006, with “maybe 3-5%” (\$8.8 to \$14.8 billion) being “broadly political.” This description is rife with questions: What is the definition of “political”? How do these foundations and grants directly influence politicians on specific policy questions? The authors allude to instances of grants supposedly meant to curry favor with lawmakers’ spouses, but do not explain how this is incorporated into their analytic model.

“Think Tanks” (specifically in Washington, D.C.), which collectively spent about \$411 million in 2005. Like “Foundations and Charitable Grants,” there are a host of questions about how this spending influences specific lawmakers on specific policy questions. Think tanks, after all, are usually nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations that study numerous issues.

“Value of Stock Tips, IPOs to Political Figures,” which are “very large in certain periods.” The authors note that “stocks in both finance and telecommunications often did extraordinarily well” in advance of the 2008 crash (compared to what other industries is unclear), and that “[o]ne can conjecture that both sectors were likely involved heavily” in insider trading, “but without going through the mountains of evidence that Congress for a long time made very difficult to access, it is impossible to say for sure.” It is hard to respond to “conjecture” without evidence.

“Public Relations Spending,” of which, “[s]ome certainly affects politics.” This section is particularly stunning in its imprecision. Not only is there no estimate of this amount or how much of it affects politics, but suggesting

that non-political advertising by an industry can be labeled “political spending” undermines the purpose of categorizing such spending to begin with.

The study also accounts for more traditional measures of political spending (“Lobbying” and “Formal Campaign Spending”) that are more strictly regulated. But, here too, the authors fail to tell us the extent to which these factors are emphasized in their model.

Recall that the above-mentioned categories ostensibly represent “political” spending that can be measured “fairly precisely.” The bafflingly expansive and opaque categories constructed by the authors already disqualify them from being taken seriously as an input in any quantitative model. What the authors describe amounts to nothing more than a list of funding sources that they assume are corrupting politicians, but do not bother to accurately count. In short, it is an editorial dressed up as social science.

b. Omitted Variables

After spending over half the paper preaching about corrupt politicians, what does it actually study? It looks at just five congressional votes from 2013 to 2015 to modify portions of the Dodd-Frank Act. The report then looks at the numbers of House Democrats observed “breaking” with their party to cast a “pro-bank” vote. The total number of Democrats that broke with the party on each vote, respectively, is 36, 3, 17, 32, and 3. This is an overall sample of just 91 yeas or nays, which may include multiple votes by the same member of Congress. From these 91 deviations on just five House votes to amend a single piece of legislation covering one issue area, the study concluded that there are “direct links between political contributions to individual members of Congress” and policy decisions in general.

Even within these scant observations, there seems to be too few control variables to draw a causal link. Besides the primary variables examining political money and “pro-bank” votes, there are variables for ideology, whether a Representative voluntarily left the House after the 2014 elections, and whether he or she was a member of the House Financial Services Committee. Not included are numerous other factors that could affect a lawmaker’s vote, such as district economic performance, pressure from party leadership on each vote, media coverage, public opinion on the issue, and the presence or absence of electoral challengers, among other considerations.

To be sure, some of these factors are hard to quantify (though that did not stop the authors from ambitiously re-defining all “political money”), and the authors dismiss others as “fixed effects.” As they explain:

This tactic [looking at multiple votes from the same Representative over time] makes sorting out competing influences much more tractable. It controls automatically for many sources of possible variation, including the individual representative’s own personality, values, and party affiliation. In effect, the procedure turns the representative into his or her own control. No less helpfully, in the very short run, it is not plausible that many other influences, such as variations in the strength of market propaganda in different districts, or most other institutional factors, including district and constituency characteristics, could change rapidly enough to matter. They can thus be treated as constants or “fixed effects.”

By contrast, factors like political money do change, sometimes dramatically, and they can be measured fairly precisely, as we explained earlier, provided one is willing to do the work. [Emphasis added.]

It is hard to imagine a scenario over the “very short run” (presumably the 3-5-year period between Dodd-Frank’s passage and the five subsequent votes) where political spending can change “dramatically” without other factors also changing (most obviously, public opinion, which regularly shifts with changing political

winds). The authors posited that interactions with lobbyists, margin of electoral victory, and even change in ideology could be factors, but only included ideology in their model.

The authors' rationale is that unchanging constituency composition and party-line attitudes about banking regulation meant that there was little reason for a Representative who supported Dodd-Frank in 2010 to independently "change his or her mind" about the legislation 3-5 years' down the road. However, aspects of Dodd-Frank could have become less popular within a district or had a negative impact on the district's economy or financial sector that lawmakers observed only after it was implemented. Parties also emphasize some votes more than others – Democratic leaders could have pushed for Dodd-Frank's passage as a priority to their Party and President Obama, but were less concerned with stopping all subsequent bills that altered specific parts of the law while keeping it intact. Furthermore, a lawmaker could reasonably vote "yes" on Dodd-Frank, thinking it to be a positive bill overall, and still vote "yes" on an amendment that removed a particular provision of the massive and complex bill that she thought was bad for the country or her district.

Had the authors included votes on other banking or economic regulations in their analysis, it may have shed light on whether it was the defectors' original votes on Dodd-Frank or subsequent votes that were aberrations. Alas, they only provide the vote on Dodd-Frank as a benchmark of lawmakers' "true" views on financial regulation in general. Any vote contradicting the original vote on passage of Dodd-Frank is assumed to be evidence of corruption.

Given the insufficient variables, not to mention the questionable and vague measurements of political money, it is difficult to put much stock in the model's results. The study further fails to report any measure of fit – as is typically included in regression analyses – so it is difficult to even fully measure the adequacy of the limited model that the authors employ.

Finally, it should also be noted that one of the study's topline results – that members of the House Financial Services Committee are 90% more likely to cast a "pro-bank" decision in the five votes examined – is not statistically significant. (Significance levels are usually set at 0.05, meaning a 95% confidence interval. The p-value for this variable is over two times too large to qualify for that level). This is a fact the authors choose to share with their readers in footnote 58 of Appendix I on page 38 of the study. This, to say the least, greatly undermines the authors' decision to highlight that result anyway – let alone as a topline finding.

II. The Mistakes That Just Won't Go Away

Past studies that try to find a direct, causal link between political spending and policy decisions by lawmakers have been regularly stymied by one major flaw. Namely, the link is neither direct nor causal. While its Executive Summary might indicate otherwise, the details of this study reveal that it falls into the same familiar trap.

One of the overarching reasons for this is the authors' reliance on examining the spending of an entire industry. In this study, the culprit is "an almost monolithic financial sector" opposed to Dodd-Frank. Odds are, when you directly refer to an entire industry as "monolithic," your arguments will lack nuance.

Firms within an industry may have overlapping policy interests, but that does not make them identical. The study itself notes the division between telecom companies supporting and opposing net neutrality, but does not similarly examine differences within the finance industry. For example, Dodd-Frank affects community banks differently than financial behemoths that can better absorb the cost of the law's regulations, even though

they belong to the same industry. To suggest that banks large and small have the exact same views on every bill related to Dodd-Frank is overly simplistic.

Treating firms as unitary political actors can also be wrongheaded – they are made up of executives, employees, and shareholders with varying viewpoints that change over time. Businesses cannot even make direct contributions to federal candidates; at best, they can set up and operate political action committees (PACs) that solicit funds, and whose contributions to candidates are capped at \$5,000 per election. In short, contributions from finance firms to candidates actually come from their employees.

If it is simplistic to conflate the interests and goals of firms, it is downright ridiculous to do the same for the various employees of a multitude of businesses. Individuals have distinct reasons for participating in politics, and it is hard to believe that politicians regularly examine every donor's employer and attempt to ascertain those firms' policy preferences before casting a vote. They would have to weigh every contribution from every firm and sector, and then decide which money is ultimately the most compelling. This complex calculus presents a difficult balancing act. If a policy clearly helps one industry but hurts another, then other interest groups might simply increase their contributions to change a politician's vote in their favor – assuming that political spending is truly a paramount factor.

A more straightforward (and logical) proposition is that donors choose to spend their limited resources on candidates that they already support, not on candidates whose minds they need to change first. That is not to say that organizations don't try to sway politicians through issue advocacy, lobbying, or original research, but one would be hard-pressed to prove that spending money to advance arguments is unjustifiable. This study certainly does not.

III. Conclusion

The authors of this paper – and its enthusiastic backers – declare it to be a groundbreaking work that definitively proves the relationship between political money and policymaking. An examination of what spending the authors consider to be political and how they measure changes in policymaking shows that this contention is far from true. Even more objectionable is how the authors conduct themselves in a fashion that can aptly be described as demagogic, problems with their analysis notwithstanding.

The paper makes numerous insinuations of widespread governmental corruption, while offering only vague anecdotal references as evidence (see footnotes 2, 15, and 16 for examples). Although it excludes such references from its final model, refraining from the use of innuendo as an analytical tool is no virtue, particularly when the writers choose to indulge in it elsewhere. Gratuitous references to “free market propaganda,” “Gilded Age politics,” and “orgies of deregulation” further detract from the study and make it difficult to take seriously as an unbiased analysis of the American political system. Combining such rhetoric with purposeful obfuscation – the vague definitions of what “political” money they've actually counted, the burying of illuminating flaws in the footnotes of appendices – makes for a fatal mix.

Interestingly enough, we find some common ground in the authors' acknowledgement that our expansive campaign finance laws have created a “maze” of bureaucracy and regulation that redirects political spending without actually cutting it off. Reducing the use of money to facilitate political speech is neither possible in a democratic system, nor desirable as a matter of First Amendment principles. If the authors want fewer forms of political spending or fewer politicians bucking party line congressional votes, then the simple solution is to remove limits on campaign contributions. Doing so would strengthen parties, incentivize candidate-centered campaigns over independent expenditures, and simplify the public's ability to participate in politics.

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One should not expect the authors to take this approach, however. Their writing makes it clear that their views are a conclusion in want of evidence, as seen by their frustration with existing research that “facilitates blithe dismissal” of the claims that they feel so strongly to be true. For now, those claims continue to simply be feelings, lacking empirical proof.

[Supporters of Public Financing Still Cannot Make a Convincing Case \(Center for Competitive Politics\)](#)

By Joe Albanese

(Publish Date: 5/17/17)

A debate about taxpayer-financing of political campaigns has sprung up in New Hampshire over the last few weeks. The discussion began when former Vice President Joe Biden visited the Granite State in late April, making headlines when he told a crowd that taxpayer financing would “change the whole damn world.” Progressives have long touted publicly-funded campaigns as a means of increasing electoral competition and electing like-minded candidates.

The New Hampshire Union Leader smartly pushed back against “Biden’s bad idea” in a straightforward editorial. Among other issues, the editorial noted the imprudence of paying politicians to run for office, especially if it forces taxpayers to support candidates with which they disagree. In response, John Rauh, a former candidate for U.S. Senate in the early 90s, wrote a piece defending Biden with a series of strange, unconvincing arguments.

First, Rauh waves off the objection to paying politicians to run for office, saying it “fails to acknowledge that our current system of selling influence to wealthy donors who buy influence by financing our elections undermines values that are fundamental to our democracy...” There is little to no evidence of this problem actually existing – or of taxpayer-funded campaigns being the solution. CCP’s research has found that taxpayer-financing programs fail to reduce the influence of lobbyists and special interests in states in which these schemes are implemented, including neighboring Maine. A 2003 survey of nearly 40 academic studies also concluded that campaign contributions should not be viewed as a way of buying policy outcomes. Even studies that (incorrectly) claim to prove the relationship between contributions and policy lament the lack of supporting evidence in scholarly research. If anything, there are ample examples to demonstrate that tax-financing programs exacerbate and offer new avenues for public corruption.

Rauh says that taxpayers must subsidize politicians to prevent the undermining of our democratic values by “wealthy donors.” But the right of such donors to contribute to candidates, parties, and other organizations is protected by the First Amendment. Does this mean that the Constitution undermines our fundamental values? Forcing Americans to subsidize candidates with whom they disagree in order to water down the rights of other Americans is a perverse way for government to dictate how political speech must be exercised.

Responding to the Union Leader’s criticism that taxpayer-financing programs may prop up bigoted or fringe candidates, Rauh pleads guilty as charged: “The editorial is obviously right that public funds will be provided to candidates some citizens disagree with. That is the price we would pay to get rid of a system that has no place in a democracy.” I’m not so sure that directly subsidizing racist or otherwise corrupt candidates is a price Americans are willing or should be willing to pay simply so that those running for office can spend less time meeting constituents and doing the work of fundraising for their campaign.

Rauh quickly adds that “in every system that has been adopted, there are provisions whereby citizens decide which candidates qualify for public financing.” Such provisions did not succeed in excluding unacceptable candidates in the past. But even if they did, this type of provision would contradict the whole purpose of public financing as a means of broadening electoral choices. Giving voters a veto over who gets taxpayer subsidies introduces the possibility that they will simply grant funding to members of their own preferred parties while denying it to others. This could further entrench the major party duopoly, or even lead to government-enforced dominance by just one party in the many states and districts that skew clearly red or blue. For public financing

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to be truly inclusive, it must allow a broad range of candidates to benefit. The inherent unfairness to taxpayers of that reality, and the inevitability of such a system benefitting unsavory candidates, means that the prudent solution is to avoid public financing entirely.

Next, Rauh acknowledges that public financing cannot prevent spending by wealthy candidates, super PACs, or other organizations whose speech rights are protected by the First Amendment. Although he's correct, one would think this acknowledgement renders his entire rationale for public financing moot; if money in politics is inherently corrupting, then the continued existence of private contributions and independent spending means the underlying "problem" has not been solved.

Rauh counters that public financing is really only meant to give candidates sufficient resources to run an adequate campaign, not cancel out all other political spending and giving. After all, as Rauh points out, "[c]andidates do not need the most money to win. If they did Hillary would be President." That is 100% true, but a stunning admission nonetheless. If money doesn't dictate electoral outcomes – which CCP completely agrees with – then why would campaign contributions be able to corrupt politicians so easily? The entire argument for wealthy donors "undermining" democracy falls apart at that point.

Finally, Rauh argues that the "disturbing lack of confidence in our elected leaders," as expressed by low approval ratings for the president and Congress, "clearly indicates our system for selecting our national leaders is deeply flawed." Assuming for the sake of argument that approval ratings are the primary metric by which we should decide our entire electoral system (despite the fact that voters overwhelmingly re-elect their own representatives and that approval ratings fluctuate over time), how are we supposed to know which reforms are the best solution? The focus of Rauh's ire is private campaign contributions, but why then is he using current approval ratings to critique a right that has been constitutionally protected for over 40 years, since *Buckley v. Valeo*? There is simply no real reason to think that public financing is the silver bullet to make Americans love their politicians.

By the end of Rauh's piece, we are left with the same conclusions as before: there is no consistent rationale for public financing of campaigns, such systems have not achieved their stated goals in the past, and it is inherently unfair to force taxpayers to subsidize politicians with whom they may not agree. Joe Biden's call for taxpayer-funded campaigns might have been a good applause line for his supporters, but it is not good policy for New Hampshire or for the country.

[Trump's commission on voter fraud is, well, fraudulent \(Washington Post editorial\)](#)

(Publish Date: 5/17/17, 8:08 PM)

PRESIDENT TRUMP has empaneled a commission to investigate voter fraud. The real fraud is the commission itself.

The Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity is to be led by Vice President Pence and Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach. Mr. Kobach, a Republican, is a longtime champion of voter suppression laws who seconded as “absolutely correct” the president’s fabricated assertion that Hillary Clinton’s victory in the popular vote, which she won by nearly 3 million ballots, was a result of “millions of people who voted illegally.”

Mr. Kobach is notorious for erecting impediments to the ballot box — specifically, ones that would disproportionately discourage and deter minority and other Democratic-leaning voters. His presence as the commission’s vice chair — Mr. Pence’s other responsibilities make it likely that Mr. Kobach will be the panel’s driving force — makes a farce of the idea that the commission’s work will be dispassionate, fair and clear-eyed.

More likely, given Mr. Kobach’s record, is that it will endeavor to create further pretexts for GOP-dominated state legislatures determined to throw up barriers to minority turnout with laws such as North Carolina’s, which was struck down by a federal appeals court as an unconstitutional effort to “target African Americans with almost surgical precision.” The Supreme Court, citing a dispute over who represents the state, on Monday declined to review that decision, but its conservative majority may not block future such legislation.

The fix was in from the moment Mr. Trump promised, in January, that he would establish a commission on fraudulent voting, a nonissue that has been almost entirely conjured from thin air by Republicans seeking to enhance their electoral chances. Multiple studies have shown, and the overwhelming consensus of both Republican and Democratic voting officials at the state and local levels has been, that fraudulent voting, particularly of the in-person variety, is all but nonexistent in the United States. A thorough survey three years ago came up with 31 credible instances of voter impersonation that could have been prevented by ID laws, out of more than 1 billion votes cast in elections from 2000 to 2014.

Republicans are quick to conflate their baseless allegations of widespread fraud with real — and inconsequential — instances of duplicative voter-registration rolls owing mainly to individuals who have moved from one state to another. That hardly ever translates into multiple or illegal votes cast. Among those whose names have appeared on more than one state’s rolls are Stephen K. Bannon, the White House chief strategist; Sean Spicer, its press secretary; Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser; and Tiffany Trump, the president’s younger daughter. None of them is believed to have voted illegally.

Mr. Kobach said the 12-member commission, which will include a few Democrats, “does not begin with foregone conclusions.” However, his record in Kansas and elsewhere offers ample proof to groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, that regard him as the king of voter suppression.

Faced with the hostility of minority and other voting blocs, Republicans would rather suppress votes than compete for them. By establishing this commission, Mr. Trump is giving them a hand.

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[5 Points On What Trump's Bogus Elections Commission Is Really About \(Talking Points Memo\)](#)

By Tierney Sneed

(Publish Date/Time: 5/16/17, 6:00 AM)

The people who professionally study election protocols are very worried about the commission President Trump has created to ostensibly study election protocols. The so-called “Presidential Commission on Election Integrity,” which was unveiled in an executive order last week, is being viewed with deep skepticism in the voting rights community.

That is in no small part due to Trump's outlandish and unsubstantiated claims that millions of people voted illegally in the 2016 election; the commission appears to be the result of Trump's promises of a “major investigation” into voter fraud.

But there are also other hints, tells and coded language signaling that the aims of the commission are less concerned with nonpartisan study of election protocols and more likely to be seeking to trumpet allegations of voter fraud, which has historically been used as an excuse to enact restrictive voting laws.

Here are five points on what Trump's bogus ‘Elections Integrity’ commission is really about:

1

Beware the heavy emphasis on voter fraud.

Voter “fraud” or “fraudulent” voting is mentioned five times in the executive order, which goes on to define four types of alleged illegal voting that will be within the purview of the commission. Prospective commissioners floated for the commission—and especially its vice chair, Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach—have made careers out of fanning the flames around flimsy fears of voter fraud and advocating for stricter voter laws.

Study after study has found voter fraud—and particularly the types of fraud prevented by a voter ID—to be extremely rare. Yet Kobach said that it was “a very large number” that was “probably in excess of a million,” when defending Trump's baseless allegation that millions of illegal voters were the reason he lost the popular vote.

What these stricter laws end up doing is making it harder for certain groups, particularly low income voters and minorities, to vote. One of the two Democrats reportedly tapped for the commission, Maine Secretary of State told TPM last week he would “walk away” if the commission was used as a “trojan horse” to impede access to the ballot box.

2

The who is as important as the what.

The Trump administration is stressing that commission will be bipartisan, but the lack of participation to this point by any moderate, widely-respected Republican election officials is notable. Instead the GOPers tapped so far for the commission are on the fringe when it comes to voting issues.

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Vice President Mike Pence is chairing the commission and joining him in serving on it is Indiana's Secretary of State Connie Lawson (R). Indiana authorities, under both their watch, launched a sketchy raid of a voter registration drive last fall, and the two Republicans have been accused of overhyping the results. Lawson has since purged Indiana's voter rolls of nearly half-million names ahead of the next election. Previously, as a state legislator, Lawson was an original sponsor of the state's 2005 voter ID law, which was upheld in a seminal Supreme Court case.

Former Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell has also been tapped for Trump's commission. Blackwell was at the forefront of the initial push to implement voter ID laws in the mid-aughts. As Ohio's top elections official, he was investigated by Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee for his handling of the 2004 elections in the state. He imposed stringent requirements on voter registration drives, including a directive to ignore registrations not printed out on 80-pound stock paper.

Maine Secretary of State Matt Dunlap (D) stands out among the group, for being skeptical of voter restrictions and instead, as he described himself to TPM last week, as a "strong advocate for voter access" who was skeptical of restrictive laws. The other Democrat so far named, New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner has some—let's say—unique views on administering elections and once said that early voting, which is used disproportionately by minority voters, "cheapens the value" of election day. He is also supportive of a Republican bill in the state that adds new requirements for certain voters to prove they live in the state, a move critics say is to make it harder for students to vote.

3

Red flag: No mention in the order of voter suppression.

Reports leading up to the formal unveiling of the commission suggested looking at voter suppression would also be among its charges, as a way to get Democrats to sign on.

The executive order makes no such reference in the commission's mission, suggesting that the study of voter suppression is not actually a priority of the commission.

Kobach has continued to claim that voter suppression will also be studied. But it's hard to take that seriously, given that voter suppression is not defined, nor even mentioned in the entire executive order text and many of the people floated to be on the commission have played it down as an issue.

4

Telltale sign: A peculiar focus on "confidence" in the election system.

The main focus of commission, the order says, is to study whether the public's "confidence" is being "undermined" or "enhanced" by certain election protocols. The emphasis on confidence reflects a broader shift in the legal defense of restrictive voting laws: in the absence of legitimate cases of voter fraud to justify the new laws, proponents have argued that because people believe there is a prevalence of voter fraud, the laws are necessary.

"All of us who work in this area know that measuring confidence in electoral rules is something that is both easy to do and amenable to gross manipulation," Nate Persily, who served as a senior research director for President Obama's Presidential Commission on Election Administration, told TPM over email.

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Persily, an election law expert at Stanford Law, has worked on studies that showed factors like partisanship, education and one's trust in government influence confidence in an election, beyond actual instances of fraud or restrictions placed on voting ostensibly meant to prevent fraud.

5

The order is fixated on voter registration issues.

The order mentions time and again the commission's interest in instances of "fraudulent" or "improper" voter registration. This is no coincidence. Overblown concern about non-citizens being registered to vote is the latest frontier in the campaign to enact stricter laws.

Kobach has been seeking to implement a proof-of-citizenship registration requirement, while elsewhere organizations that conduct voter registration have been targeted by GOP lawmakers.

Election experts and voting rights advocates acknowledge that yes, occasionally mistakes are made and people such as felons or non-citizens are accidentally registered to vote, for instance, while getting a driver's license. But oftentimes, the ineligible voter never casts a ballot, and doesn't even realize he or she was registered, and thus prosecutions have been rare.

Furthermore, the order disregards the importance of intent in the commission's investigation of irregularities.

The commission will study acts conducted "regardless of the state of mind or intent of that individual," the order says in its definition of "improper voting" and "improper voter registration."

"They seem to want to reach even those individuals and elections administrators who make an honest mistake or in the course of administering an election to hundreds of millions of Americans," said Janai Nelson, Associate Director-Counsel of the NAACP-LDF.

Nelson worried that those instances "may be manipulated to paint a picture of voter fraud that really is not existent."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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From: POLITICO Influence
To: [Caroline Hunter](#)
Subject: POLITICO Influence: Home Depot lobbyist joins administration — Citigroup adds Runyan — Avenue Strategies signs two more
Date: Friday, May 12, 2017 2:36:46 PM

By Theodoric Meyer | 05/12/2017 02:30 PM EDT

With David Beavers, Aubree Eliza Weaver and Daniel Lippman

HOME DEPOT LOBBYIST HEADED TO HUD: Michael Dendas, a former lobbyist for **Home Depot**, is headed to the Department of Housing and Urban Development as a senior adviser on the congressional affairs team, according to an internal agency email obtained by **POLITICO's Lorraine Woellert**. Dendas had worked as a lobbyist for Home Depot since 2013 before deregistering in the first quarter of this year, according to disclosure filings. He was previously a lobbyist for the **U.S. Chamber of Commerce**.

CITIGROUP ADDS RUNYAN: Rob Runyan, a former Treasury Department spokesman in the Obama administration, has joined **Citigroup** as a senior vice president for communications, government and regulatory affairs. Before coming to Treasury, Runyan worked for Sen. [Tom Carper](#) (D-Del.) as press secretary and digital director and for **Edelman** as a senior account executive.

LEWANDOWSKI'S FORMER FIRM SIGNS TWO MORE: Avenue Strategies, the lobbying firm that **Corey Lewandowski** and **Barry Bennett** founded after the election and that Lewandowski abruptly left last week, has signed two more clients. **Jason Osborne**, who joined the firm earlier this year, will lobby for the Northern Mariana Islands on workforce, visa and economic development issues and for the **Center for Sportfishing Policy** on fishing issues, according to the filings. Osborne signed both clients before Lewandowski left the firm.

CONGRATULATIONS FLOW IN FOR LIGHTHIZER: The Senate confirmed **Robert Lighthizer**, a former lobbyist, as the U.S. trade representative on Thursday afternoon, prompting a flood of congratulatory statements from trade groups including the Internet Association, the **Software & Information Industry Association** and the Telecommunications Industry Association. Lighthizer spent years as a lobbyist for **Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom**. (He also lobbied for the Brazilian government decades ago.)

- One group, the [Coalition for a Prosperous America](#), sent out a statement congratulating Lighthizer and then retracted it later in the afternoon, explaining that it had been "sent out erroneously" after the cloture vote on Lighthizer's nomination and that Lighthizer's confirmation wasn't expected until next week. But the Senate had actually confirmed Lighthizer by that point. The group didn't respond to a question about whether it would be retracting the retraction.

Good afternoon, and welcome to PI. Switching jobs? Sign a new client? Just want to vent? **Your tips are always appreciated:** tmeyer@politico.com. You can also follow me on Twitter: [@theodoricmeyer](#).

KUSHNER FAMILY FIRM BACKS OUT OF CHINESE INVESTOR EVENTS: "The real estate company owned by the family of **Jared Kushner**, son-in-law and senior adviser to President Trump, said on Friday that its employees would no longer take part in a cross-

country roadshow in China this month," **The New York Times'** **Javier C. Hernández** reports. "Executives from **Kushner Companies**, including **Nicole Meyer** , Mr. Kushner's sister, were expected to appear in the southern cities of Shenzhen and Guangzhou and the central city of Wuhan this month, according to ads for the events. But after an uproar, the company and its Chinese partner said on Friday that Kushner Companies would no longer be present at those events, although it will continue to actively court investors." [Full story](#).

TEXAS OFFICIAL RESIGNS OVER BROWNSTEIN HYATT WORK: "Texas' top health care fraud investigator resigned Wednesday night under pressure from the governor, the result of media inquiries that revealed Texas Health and Human Services Inspector General **Stuart Bowen** was moonlighting" as a consultant for **Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck**, **The Texas Tribune's** **Edgar Walters** reports. (The news was [first reported](#) by **Texas Monthly** .) "An unsigned contract found in Bowen's government email inbox, provided to The Texas Tribune by state officials, revealed that [Brownstein Hyatt] offered to pay Bowen \$300 per hour for 'business development strategy and consulting services.' He would also receive a 15 percent 'origination fee' from the lobby firm for any work it engaged in with the government of Iraq."

- Brownstein Hyatt "registered as a foreign agent for the government of Iraq in late 2016 and worked [to establish contact between Iraqi government officials and the administration of President Donald Trump](#). A letter sent by the firm in February to U.S. Secretary of State **Rex Tillerson** invokes Bowen's name as a friend of Trump administration officials." [Full story](#).

- "Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck asked Stuart Bowen to consult on behalf of its clients," the firm said in a statement provided to PI. "Before any work started, Brownstein confirmed with Bowen that his employer's ethics advisor said consulting for Brownstein was permissible because it created no conflict with Bowen's work at the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. Bowen did not provide legal or lobbying services for Brownstein or its clients nor did he work on any efforts to reverse the travel ban. Bowen has never been an employee of Brownstein."

A NOTE ON WHAT QGA PUBLIC AFFAIRS IS UP TO: PI reported on Thursday that EFB Advocacy, a firm formed by four veterans of QGA Public Affairs after QGA mostly shut down this spring, had signed six new clients. Some additional context: EFB is working for one of those clients, **United for Medical Research**, as a subcontractor under QGA, which continues to represent the group as well.

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A NEW ENGLAND GETAWAY NEXT MONTH: Sen. [Sheldon Whitehouse](#) (D-R.I.) is hosting his annual "Burning of the Gaspee Celebration and Fundraiser" at the Rhode Island Yacht Club in Cranston, R.I., on June 9, according to an invitation. It commemorates the burning of a British ship by some rowdy Rhode Islanders in 1772. Whitehouse is up for reelection next year.

BOB DOLE LOBBYING FOR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: "The troubled government of the Democratic Republic of Congo is pouring millions of dollars into a new Washington lobbying campaign featuring prominent Republicans," the **Center for Public Integrity's** **Carrie Levine** reports. "Among those working on the Congolese effort: former U.S. Sen. **Bob Dole** and **Adnan Jalil**, who worked for Donald Trump's presidential campaign helping it communicate with Congress. Also involved is [Jason Epstein](#) , a longtime lobbyist who has represented the Turkish embassy and other foreign clients." The contract had generated [earlier headlines](#) over its massive size: \$5.6 million. [Full story](#).

BIG CANDY STRIKES DEAL WITH PARTNERSHIP FOR A HEALTHIER

AMERICA: Five candymakers represented by the **National Confectioners Association** have struck a deal with the **Partnership for a Healthier America**, agreeing to print calorie counts on the front of the packages of more candies and chocolates, and to offer more of them in smaller package sizes.

IF YOU MISSED IT: "Federal authorities on Thursday searched the offices of a political consulting firm in Annapolis that has worked with Republican candidates locally and nationwide and was sued in 2014 on allegations of fraudulent fundraising practices," **The Washington Post's Fenit Nirappil, Josh Hicks and Matea Gold** report. "**Strategic Campaign Group** says it supports Republican candidates on a range of services including mail, fundraising and telephone town halls. Its leaders include GOP strategists **Kelley Rogers, Chip O'Neil** and **Dennis Whitfield** Rogers said agents appeared interested in work the firm did during Virginia Attorney General **Ken Cuccinelli's** 2013 gubernatorial race." [Full story.](#)

JOB MOVES:

- The **American Beverage Association** has added **Karen Bailey-Chapman** as senior vice president for political affairs. She was previously the founder and president of **KB Advocacy**.

- **Amy Farrell** will join the **American Wind Energy Association** next month as senior vice president for government and public affairs. She previously worked for the **American Petroleum Institute**. **Korn Ferry** handled her recruitment.

- **FleishmanHillard** is adding three to its Washington, D.C. office. **Sarah Craighill** will be a senior vice president on the public affairs team and previously worked for the **Glover Park Group**. **Therese Quiao** will be a social media producer and previously worked for the **National Breast Cancer Coalition**. **Corey Gartenhaus** will manage paid social media programs for the firm's clients and previously worked for **Billy Casper Golf**.

- **Heather Strawn** has joined **Lundbeck** as vice president for government affairs. She previously worked for **AbbVie**, and before that spent time at **AstraZeneca**, **PhRMA** and as legislative director for former Rep. **Mike Rogers** (R-Mich.).

SPOTTED: At the Ball for the Mall last night benefiting the **Trust for the National Mall**, according to a PI tipster: **Wolf Blitzer**, who served as emcee; the presidential historian **Douglas Brinkley** of **Rice University**, who presented **David Rubenstein** of the **Carlyle Group** with an award honoring his philanthropy; **Tom Quinn** of **Venable**; **Blair Larkins** of the **Bockorny Group**; **Chris Berardini** of **Quicken Loans**; **Eric Hoplin** of the **Financial Services Roundtable**; **Gerry Harrington** of the **Capitol City Group**; **Joe Lai**, a special assistant to the president for legislative affairs; **Julie Chase** of **LEVICK**; **Lanny Griffith** of the **BGR Group**; **Larry Seyfried** of the **American Bankers Association**; **Mat Lapinski** of **Crossroads Strategies**; **Matt Haller** of the **International Franchise Association**; **Nick Owens** of **Magnolia Strategy Partners**; and **Tara Foscatto** of **PNC**.

NEW JOINT FUNDRAISERS:

RDH Victory (R.D. Huffstetler, Democratic Party of Virginia)

NEW PACs:

American Uprising PAC (Super PAC)
Everytown For Gun Safety Action Fund, Inc. PAC (Everytown PAC) (Lobbyist/Registrant PAC)
Jobs Kickstart Democracy - JKD PAC (Leadership PAC: John Delaney)
StandUpOC (PAC)
The People's House Project, Inc.: (PAC)

NEW LOBBYING REGISTRATIONS:

None

NEW LOBBYING TERMINATIONS:

BGR Government Affairs: Egalet Corporation
Cepheid: Cepheid
U.S. Government Relations Intl.: Lakewood-Amedex, Inc.

To view online:

<http://www.politico.com/tipsheets/politico-influence/2017/05/home-depot-lobbyist-joins-administration-220289>

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The Daily 202: Trump's warning to Comey deepens doubts about his respect for the rule of law
Friday, May 12, 2017 11:23:49 AM

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The Daily 202



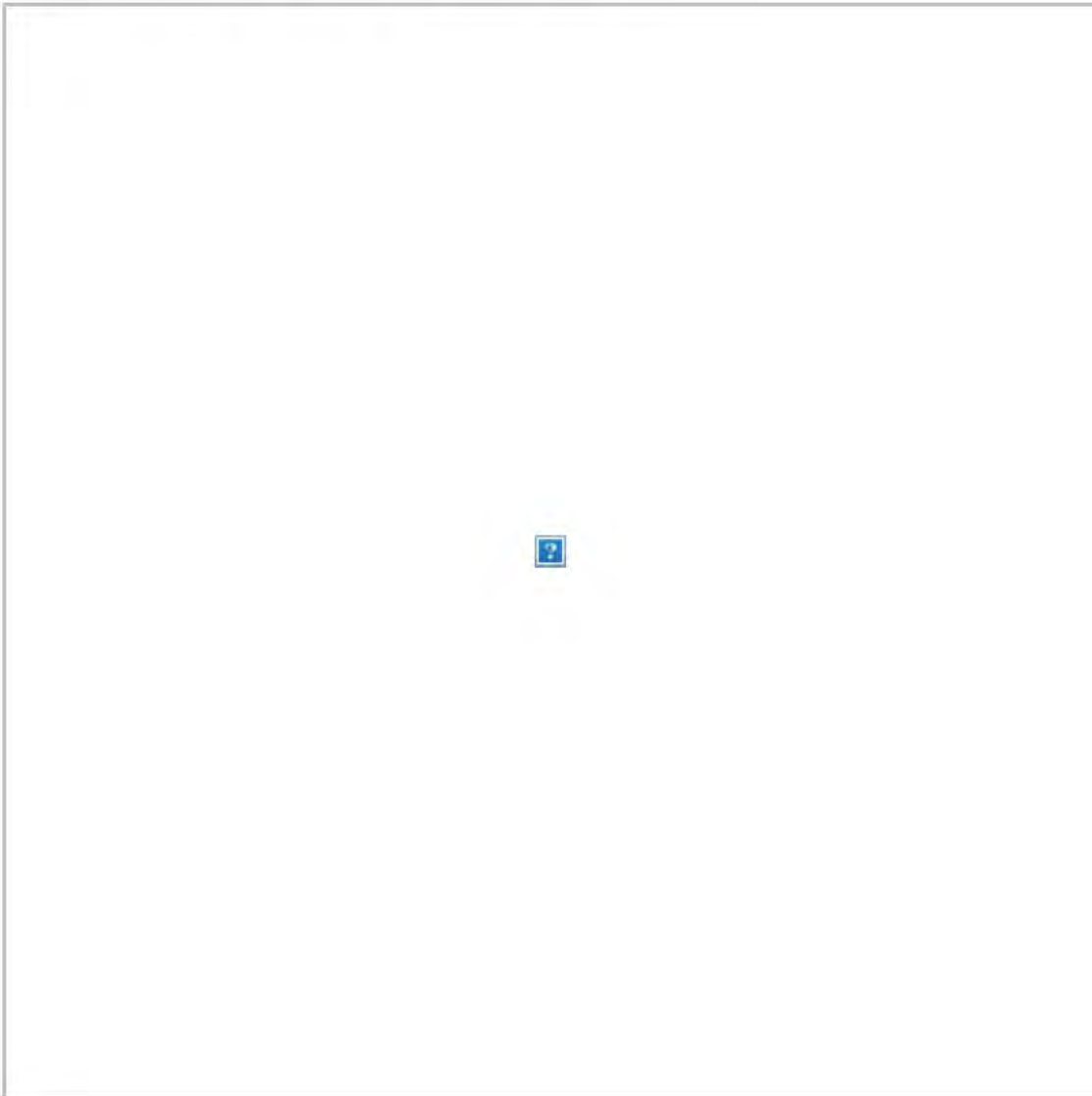
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Trump's warning to Comey deepens doubts about

his respect for the rule of law



Donald Trump walks across the South Lawn at the White House. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)



BY JAMES HOHMANN
with Breanne Deppisch

THE BIG IDEA: The biggest news out of Donald Trump's Thursday interview with NBC was his confession that the Russia investigation was on his mind when he fired FBI director James Comey. Undercutting 48 hours of denials by his aides, the president

said: “In fact, when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said, ‘You know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made up story, it’s an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won.’”

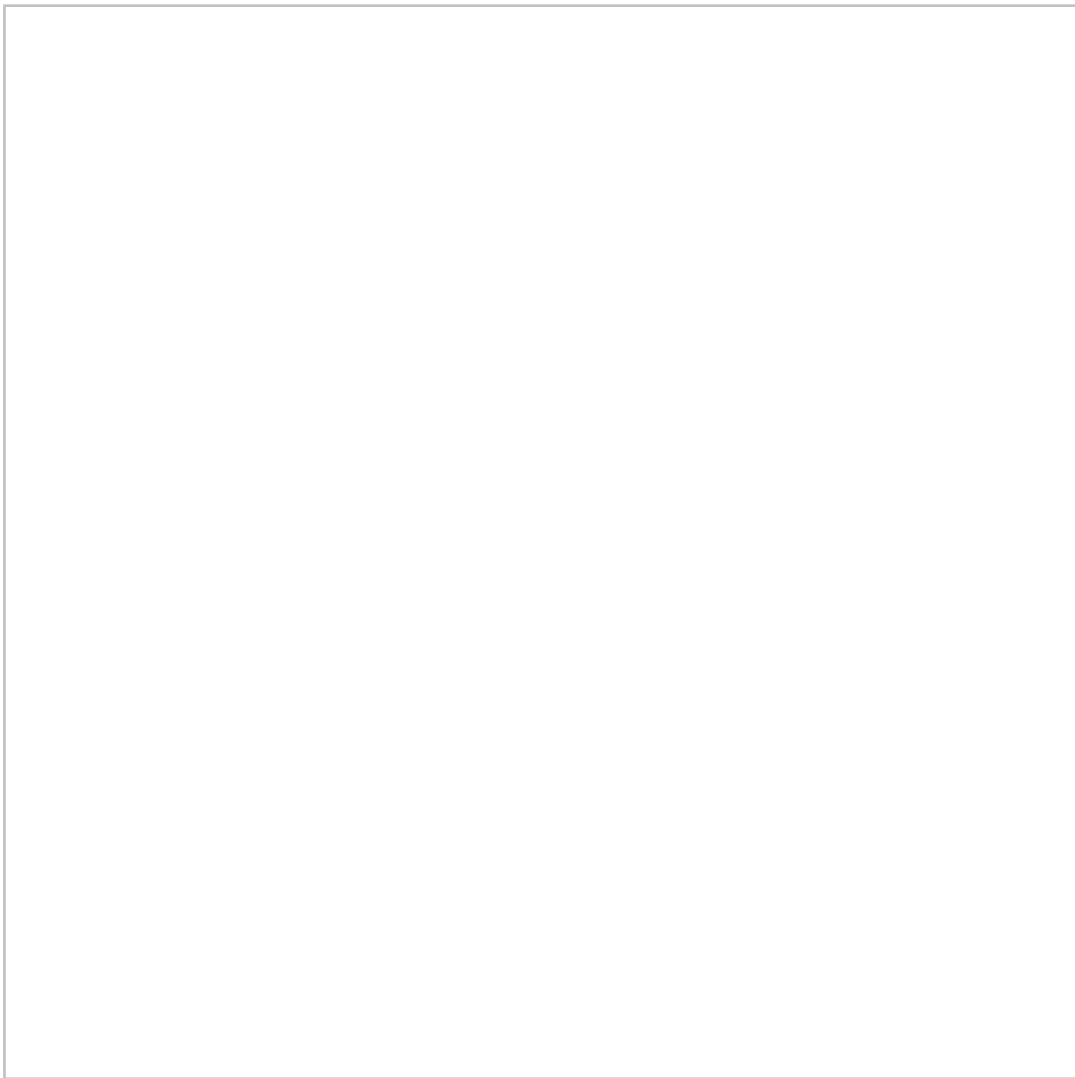
But what may ultimately get Trump into bigger trouble is his story about Comey assuring him he was not under investigation during a one-on-one dinner at the White House. [Lester Holt](#) asked the president to elaborate on his claim, made in the letter firing Comey, that he’d been told three times he was not under federal investigation. “He wanted to stay at the FBI, and I said I’ll, you know, consider and see what happens,” [Trump](#) said. “But we had a very nice dinner, and at that time he told me, ‘You are not under investigation.’” ([Watch a 13-minute video of Holt’s sit-down here.](#))

It would be a big dang deal if the FBI director was discussing an ongoing investigation with the president — generally prohibited by Justice Department policy — at the same time he was also asking to keep his job.

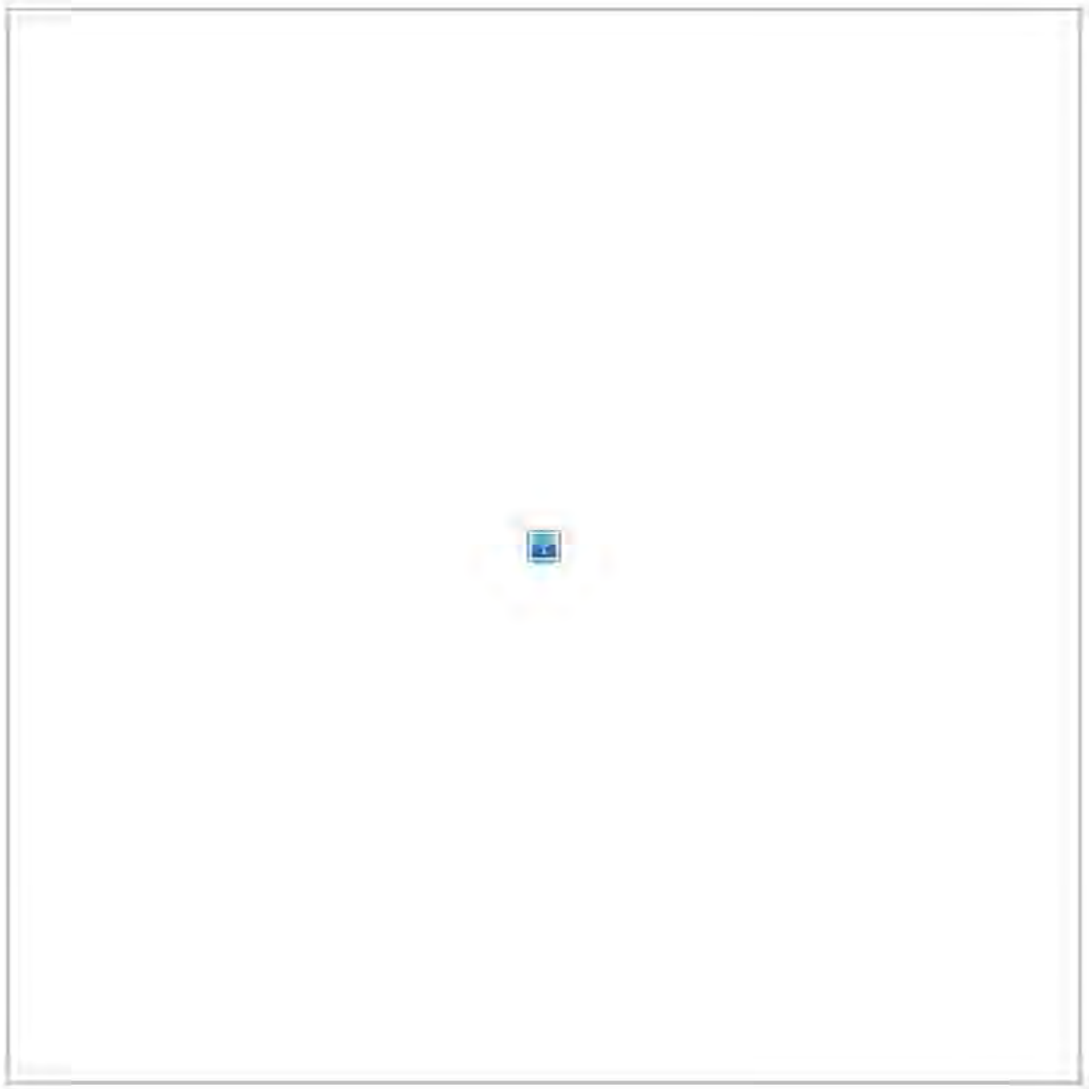
But on the front page of today’s New York Times, [Michael Schmidt](#) paints a very different picture of the Jan. 27 dinner: “The conversation that night, Mr. Comey now believes, was a harbinger of his downfall ... according to two people who have heard his account of the dinner. ... **As they ate, the president and Mr. Comey made small talk about the election and the crowd sizes at Mr. Trump’s rallies. The president then turned the conversation to whether Mr. Comey would pledge his loyalty to him. Mr. Comey declined to make that pledge.** Instead, Mr. Comey has recounted to others, he told Mr. Trump that he would always be honest with him, but that he

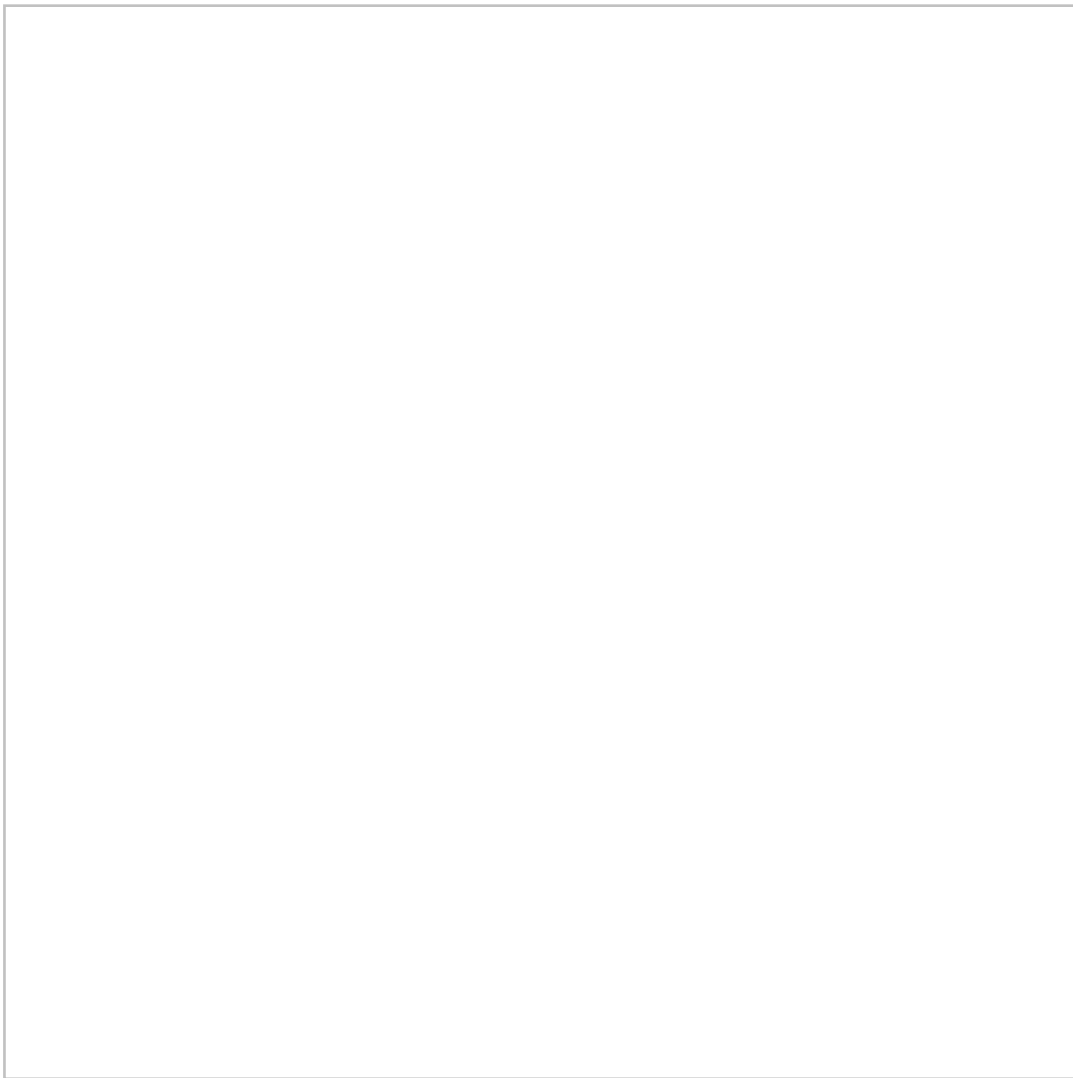
was not 'reliable' in the conventional political sense. ... By Mr. Comey's account, his answer to Mr. Trump's initial question apparently did not satisfy the president ... **Later in the dinner, Mr. Trump again said to Mr. Comey that he needed his loyalty. Mr. Comey again replied that he would give him 'honesty' and did not pledge his loyalty** ... But Mr. Trump pressed him on whether it would be 'honest loyalty.' 'You will have that,' Mr. Comey told his associates he responded."

-- Apparently reacting to that account, Trump went on a tweetstorm this morning:



-- Irate about the wall-to-wall coverage of the contradictions and inconsistencies in his and his staff's evolving statements, the president also threatened this morning to cancel the daily press briefings:

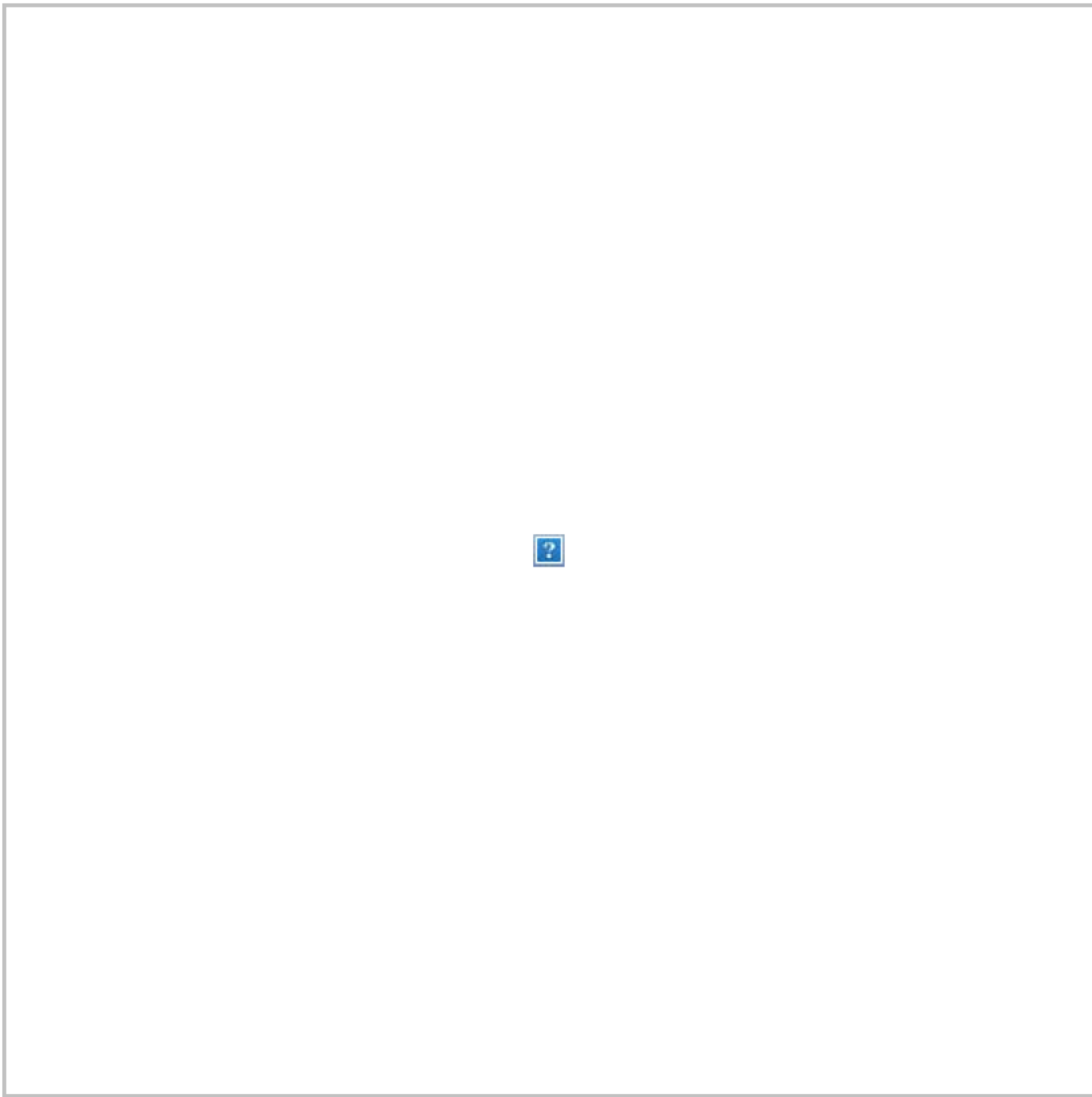




-- Bigger picture: This saga, which the president just escalated in a big way, should be viewed through the prism of Trump's entire career. Threatening to release a secret tape of the FBI director, in addition to asking him if he is under investigation during what was essentially a job interview, would both fit with a pattern dating back to when the president counter-sued the Justice Department over alleged racial discrimination at his family's apartment buildings.

Connect these dots, and you see a tapestry that suggests this president views the rule of law with disdain:

- Remember when he attacked U.S. federal judge **Gonzalo Curiel**'s ability to adjudicate a fraud lawsuit against Trump University last summer because his parents were from Mexico?
- Or when he attacked a federal judge in Seattle and later the Ninth Circuit in February for blocking his travel ban? The president personally called out **James L. Robart** for putting “our country in such peril” and warned: “If something happens blame him and the court system.”
 - He **fired** acting attorney general **Sally Yates** after she warned the White House counsel that the national security adviser was compromised and vulnerable to blackmail by the Russians. Ostensibly Trump dismissed Yates because she refused to defend what she saw as an unconstitutional travel ban. [We learned this week](#) that the career prosecutor had been kept in the dark before it was unveiled.
 - At a debate last October, Trump said he would “instruct the attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look” into **Hillary Clinton** if he got elected. “It's awfully good someone with the temperament of Donald Trump is not in charge of the law in our country,” Clinton said. To which Trump replied, “Because you'd be in jail!”



People protest in front of the White House over Trump's firing of James Comey. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

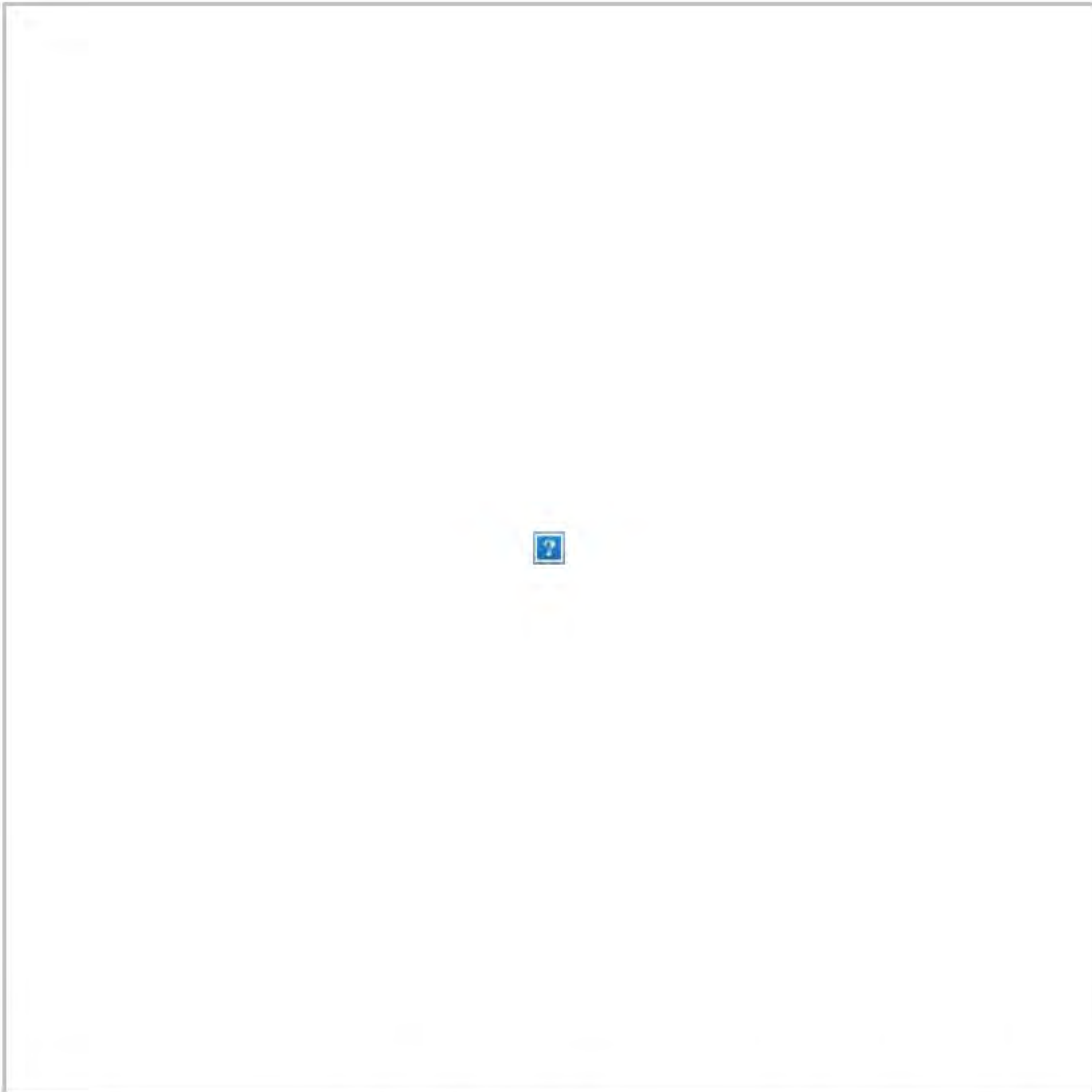
-- Legal experts and DOJ veterans, meanwhile, express doubts about Trump's account of his conversation with Comey, [Devlin Barrett](#) and [Philip Rucker](#) report on the front page of *The Post*. "I just can't even begin to think about that comment being true," said Michael Greenberger, a law professor at the University of Maryland who previously worked in the Justice Department. "It defies belief in general because of the practices of not commenting on investigations, and it would especially defy belief in the case of Comey, who prides

himself on strict observance of propriety.” Greenberger noted the implication of Trump’s statement is severe. “I just have a very hard time imagining that,” he said, though he added he also didn’t think Trump simply asking that question came close to a criminal act of trying to obstruct the investigation.

-- Another dispute: Trump claimed during the NBC interview that Comey requested the dinner. Comey’s allies are adamant that Trump asked for it. One current and one former senior FBI official close to Comey told NBC that the White House asked for the dinner. “The president is not correct,” the former official said. “The White House called him out of the blue. Comey didn’t want to do it. He didn’t even want the rank and file at the FBI to know about it.” But in the end, “He’s still the commander in chief. He’s your boss. How do you say no?”

The same former senior FBI official also said Comey would never have told the president he was not under investigation. “He tried to stay away from it [the Russian-ties investigation],” the official, who worked closely with Comey and keeps in touch with him, [per Ken Dilanian and Pete Williams](#). “He would say, ‘Look sir, I really can’t get into it, and you don’t want me to.’”

-- “Comey thought he had a year,” [Chris Smith reports in Vanity Fair](#), quoting people familiar with his thinking. “That’s the amount of time it was likely going to take the Justice Department’s Office of the Inspector General to probe Comey’s actions in handling the investigation of Clinton’s e-mails. If Trump was looking for a pretext to fire (him), a critical inspector general’s report could presumably provide it. Next year.”



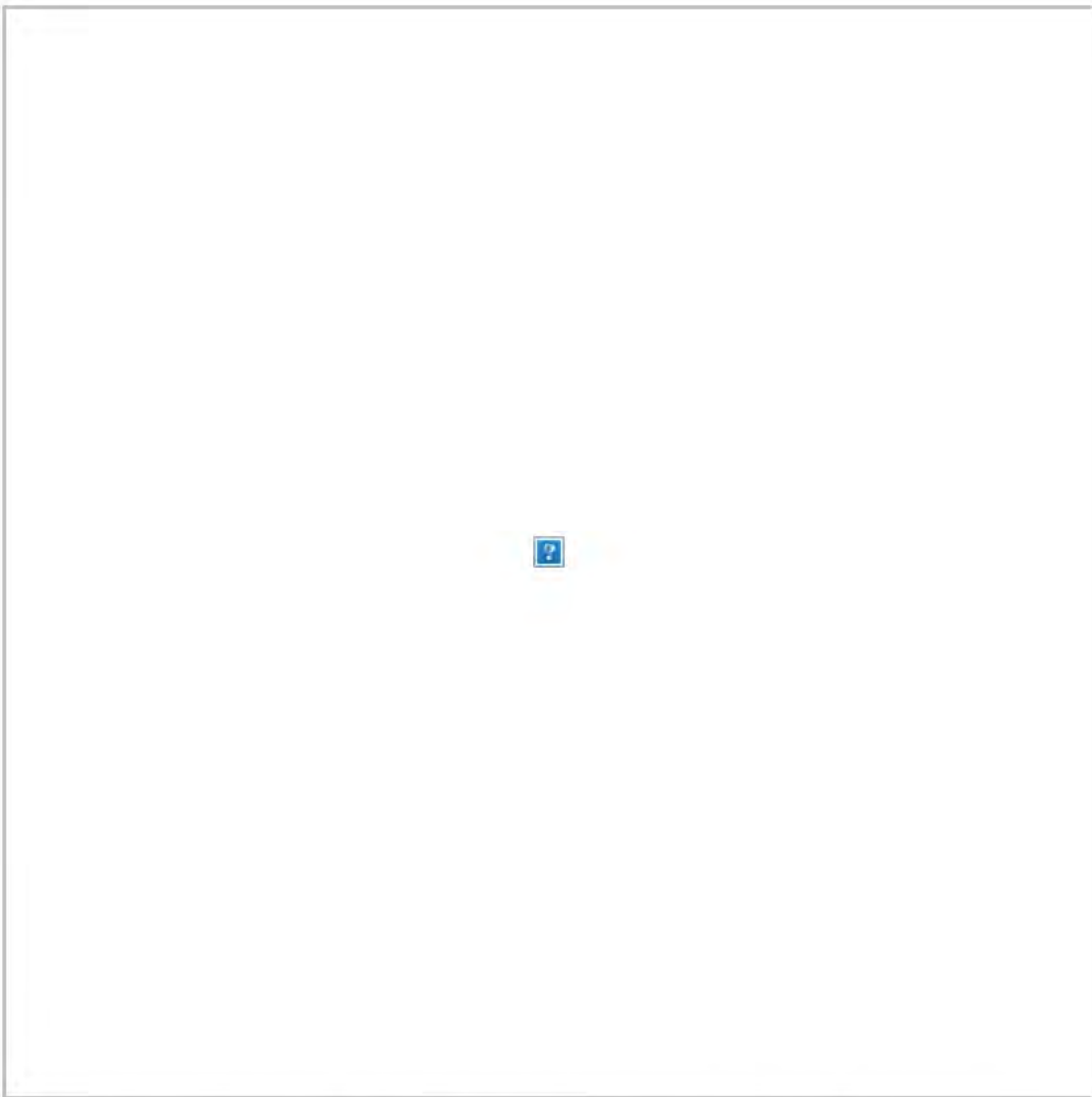
James Comey hangs out in the backyard of his house in McLean, Virginia. (Sait Serkan Gurbuz/AP)

-- Trump's tweets this morning will dramatically ratchet up the pressure on Comey to testify before Congress so that he can sort all this out, as well as clear his name. If he does not rebut the president's version of events, Comey's legacy will suffer. Sens. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) and Mark Warner (D-Va.) have invited Comey to address the Senate Intelligence Committee next Tuesday, but he still has not responded.

-- Even if Comey said what Trump claims, [Eugene Robinson](#) **notes** that typical investigative procedure is to start at the bottom of an organization and work your way up: “‘You are not under investigation’ does not mean ‘you will never be under investigation.’”

-- There’s another question also worth considering: **If the focus of an investigation asks an FBI agent whether he or she is under investigation, does the agent have to tell the truth?** “I was a criminal investigator for years, and if someone had asked me if they were under investigation and they were under investigation, I would have said no,” Dana Ridenour, who spent 21 years with the FBI as a special agent, [told Philip Bump](#). The reason was simple: She wouldn’t want to tip off the target of the investigation. “As a criminal investigator,” she said, “I don’t know of any reason I would have to disclose to somebody that they were under investigation.”

-- **The White House nixed tentative plans for Trump to visit FBI headquarters today after the president was warned that he would “not be greeted warmly” at the agency**, per [NBC](#). FBI officials made it clear the presidential visit would “not draw many smiles or cheers” after Trump unceremoniously fired a very popular director.



Sarah Huckabee Sanders speaks during the daily briefing. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

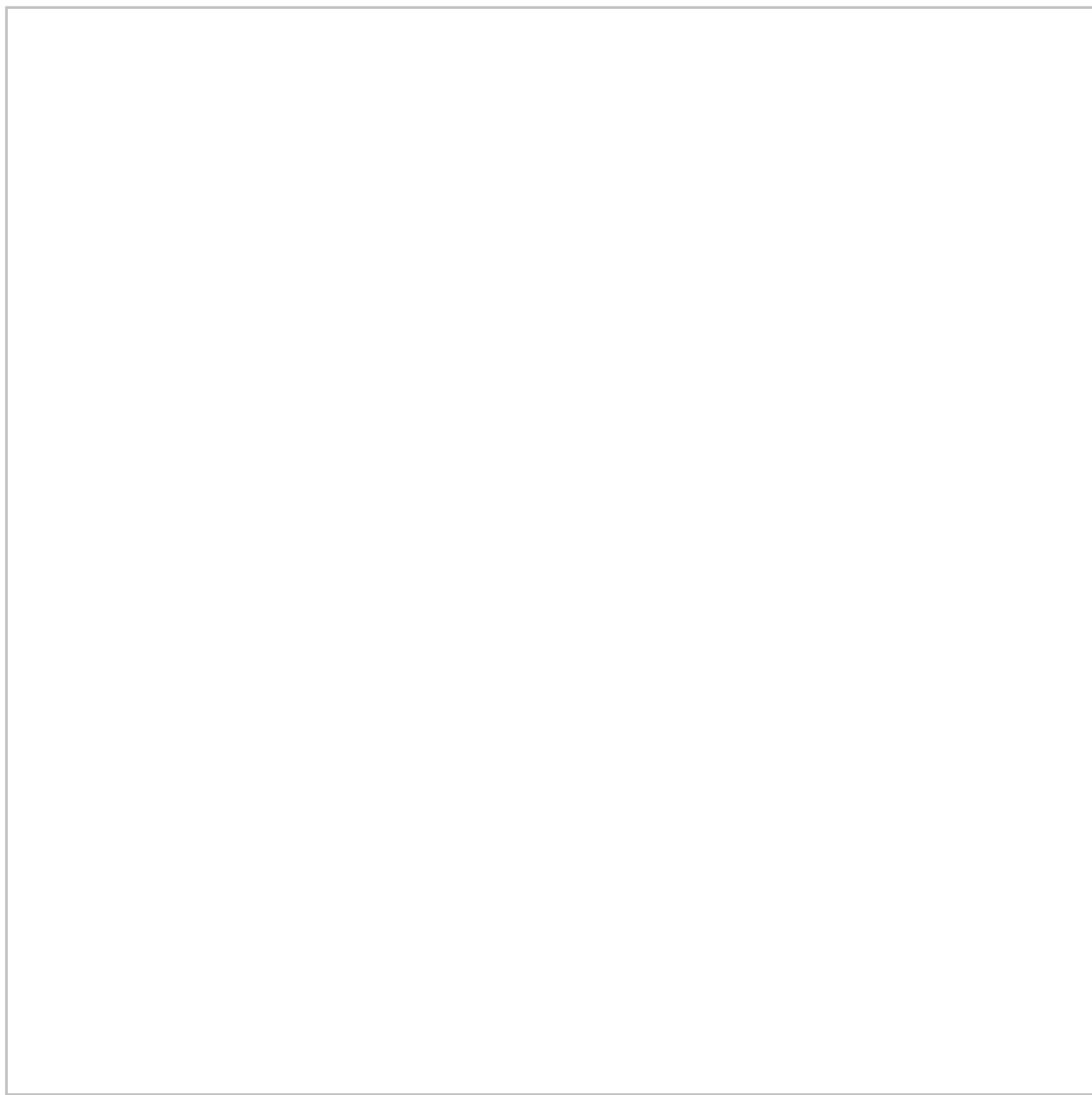
THE CREDIBILITY GAP:

-- This White House has lost the presumption of truthfulness:

Another very important takeaway from the NBC interview is that Trump admitted the memo by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein was basically a formality that he had ordered up to create a justification for firing the director. "I was going to fire Comey," Trump told Holt. "I was going to fire regardless of

recommendation.”

Compare that quote to some of the [previous denials](#) by the president’s spokespeople. On Tuesday night, press secretary Sean Spicer claimed that Trump was not even aware the Justice Department was thinking about firing Comey until he received the memo from Rosenstein. Then, in Sean’s telling, he acted swiftly that same day. **“It was all him,” Spicer said of Rosenstein. “No one from the White House. That was a DOJ decision.”** Sarah Huckabee Sanders reiterated the same talking point on Wednesday: “When you receive a report that is so clear and a recommendation by someone like the deputy attorney general, you have no choice but to act.”

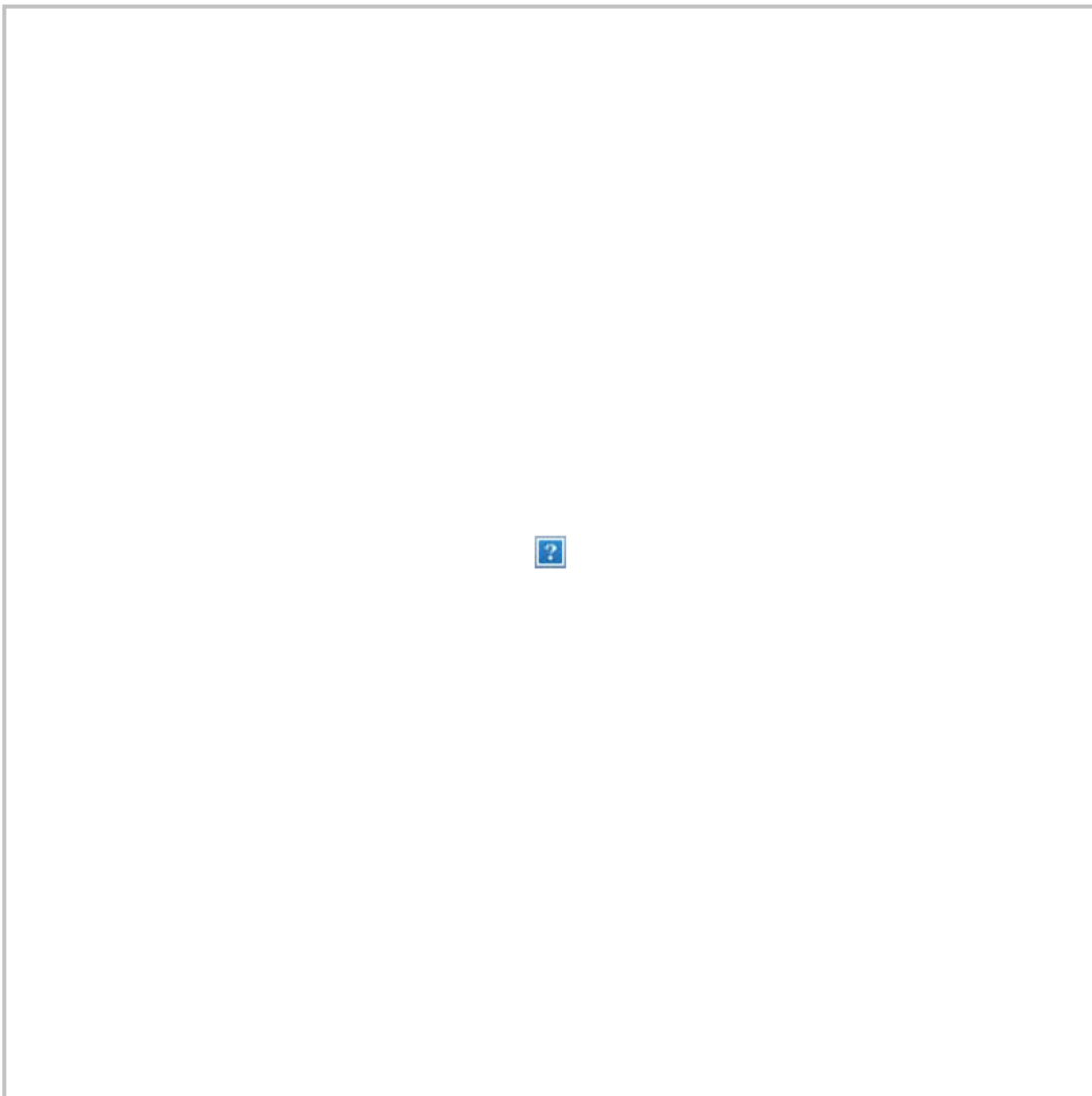


Who is Rod J. Rosenstein?

-- Sources have told The Post that Rosenstein threatened to resign after the narrative emerging from the White House cast him as a prime mover of the decision.

Today's Wall Street Journal adds that Rosenstein pressed White House counsel Don McGahn to correct what he felt was an inaccurate White House depiction of the events. "Mr. Rosenstein left the impression that he couldn't work in an environment where facts weren't accurately reported," [per Del Quentin Wilber, Aruna Viswanatha and Rebecca Ballhaus.](#)

Trying to clean up the mess yesterday, Huckabee Sanders claimed falsely that the White House had never made any attempt to pin the decision on Rosenstein. She also suggested during the daily press briefing that Trump was trying to accelerate the conclusion of the investigation by axing Comey: **"Look, again, the point is, we want this to come to its conclusion.** We want it to come to its conclusion with integrity. And we think that we've actually, by removing Director Comey, taken steps to make that happen."

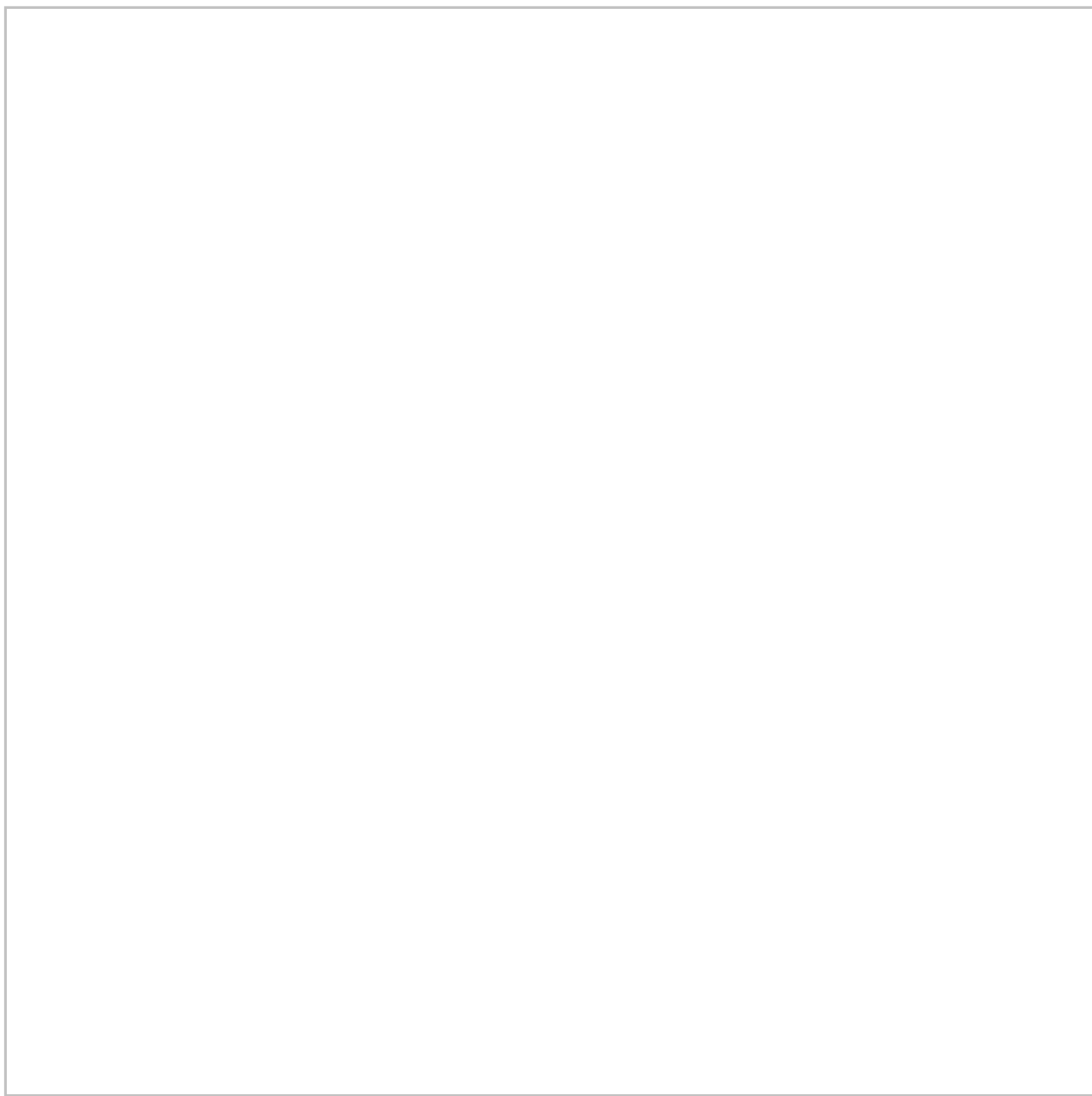


Andrew McCabe, Acting Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, testifies before the Senate Intelligence Committee. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

-- What's more, testifying before the Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday, acting FBI director Andrew McCabe directly rejected the White House's characterization of the Russian probe as a low priority and delivered a passionate defense of Comey. [From Matt Zapotosky and Karoun Demirjian](#):

“McCabe, who had been the No. 2 official in the FBI until President Trump fired Comey this week, said that the bureau considered the probe of possible coordination between the Kremlin and the Trump team during the 2016 election campaign a ‘highly significant investigation’ and that it would not be derailed because of a change in leadership. McCabe’s assertion directly contradicted (Hackabee Sanders’s) description of the Russian case as ‘probably one of the smallest things that they’ve got going on their plate.’”

McCabe promised that if the White House tries to interfere in the bureau’s work, he will alert the committee, and he promised he would not offer any status updates about the matter to the president or those who work for him. ([Read the full transcript of McCabe’s testimony here.](#))



Fallout of FBI director's firing continues into third day

-- This story is likely to dominate the news at least through next week.

Rosenstein may testify next week or possibly brief the full Senate. Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer jointly extended an invitation for such an all-hands meeting. [Aides expect](#) he'll accept.

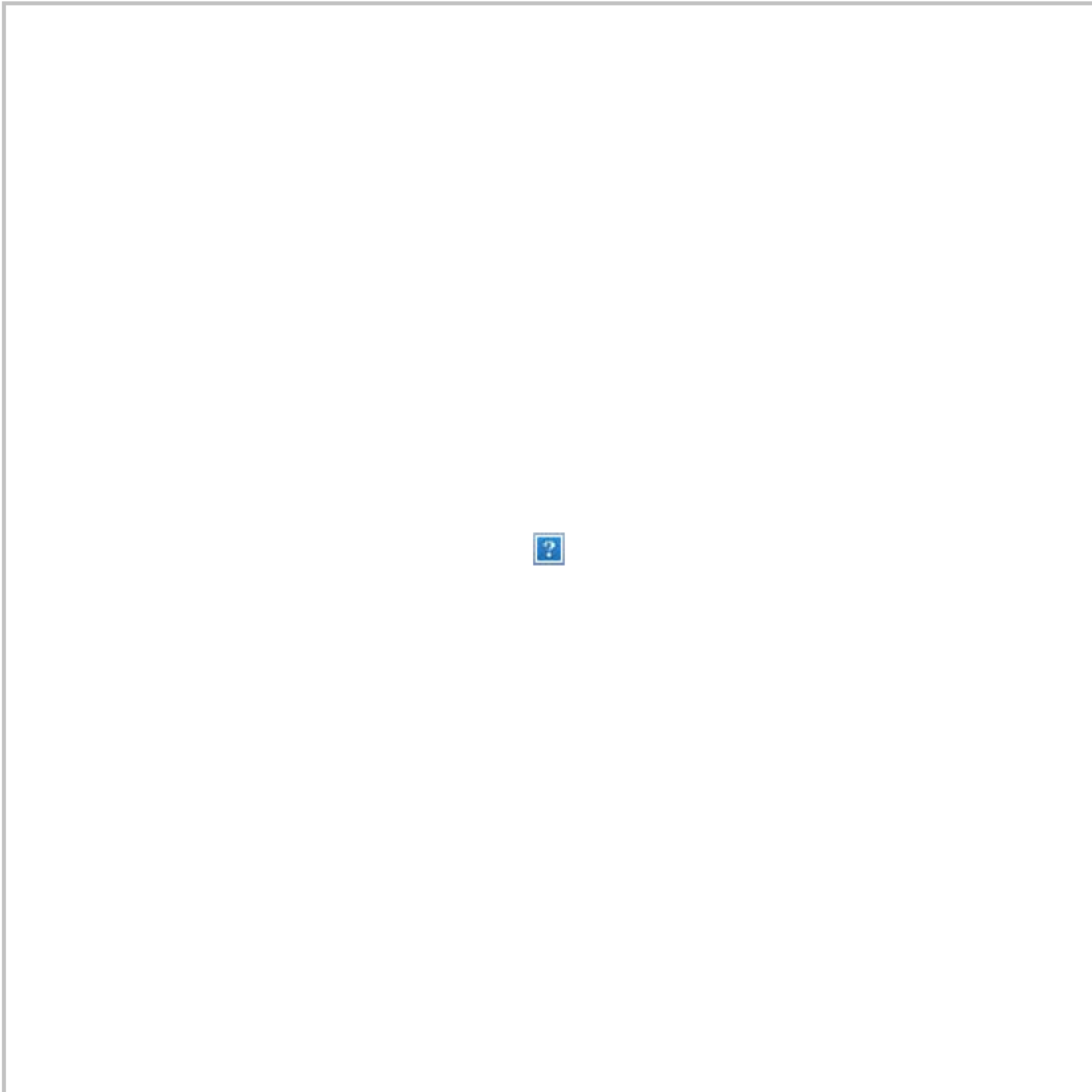
The deputy attorney general made a surprise appearance at the Capitol yesterday to meet in a secure facility with the leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee to discuss “deconfliction” —

keeping the FBI's and committee's investigations of alleged ties between the Trump campaign and the Russian government from stepping on each other's toes. **Afterwards, Mark Warner said he "still has concerns" about Rosenstein, while Richard Burr refused to say whether he has confidence in Rosenstein to oversee the Justice Department's Russia-related investigations.** ([Karoun, Ed O'Keefe and Paul Kane have more about the scene on the Hill.](#))

-- **Trump's admission that the Russia investigation weighed heavily on his deliberations about firing Comey will also create new headaches for Attorney General Jeff Sessions.** Sessions, who admittedly consulted with the president as he made the decision, recused himself from the Russia probe and all matters relating to the 2016 campaign, including the investigation into Clinton's server.

"Refusing to recuse oneself from a conflict or breaking the promise to recuse from a conflict is a serious breach of legal ethics," [conservative Post blogger Jennifer Rubin writes](#). "He needs to testify immediately under oath; if there is no satisfactory explanation, he must resign."

"Someone could file a bar complaint, and/or one with DOJ's office of professional responsibility, if Sessions had a conflict of interest when it came to the firing decision, and if he did not follow the ethics rules, including those of DOJ by acting when he had a conflict of interest," Norman Eisen, who worked as an ethics lawyer in the Obama administration, [told Rubin](#). "The fact that he broke his recusal commitment, if he did, would be relevant context, and violating an agreement can sometimes in itself be an ethics violation."



Trump's shifting story on Comey turns to threats

-- **Michael Gerson, a former top speechwriter for George W. Bush, writes in his column that “all of this is consistent with — even mandated by — Trump’s contempt for institutions”:** “This was always the main question: Would President Trump go beyond mere Twitter abuse and move against institutions that limit his power? By any reasonable standard, we now have an answer. ... He has called the FBI investigation process ‘rigged.’ If the system is dirty, only a fool would not play by the same rules. This is the logic of conspiratorial disdain for government. An independent, nonpolitical

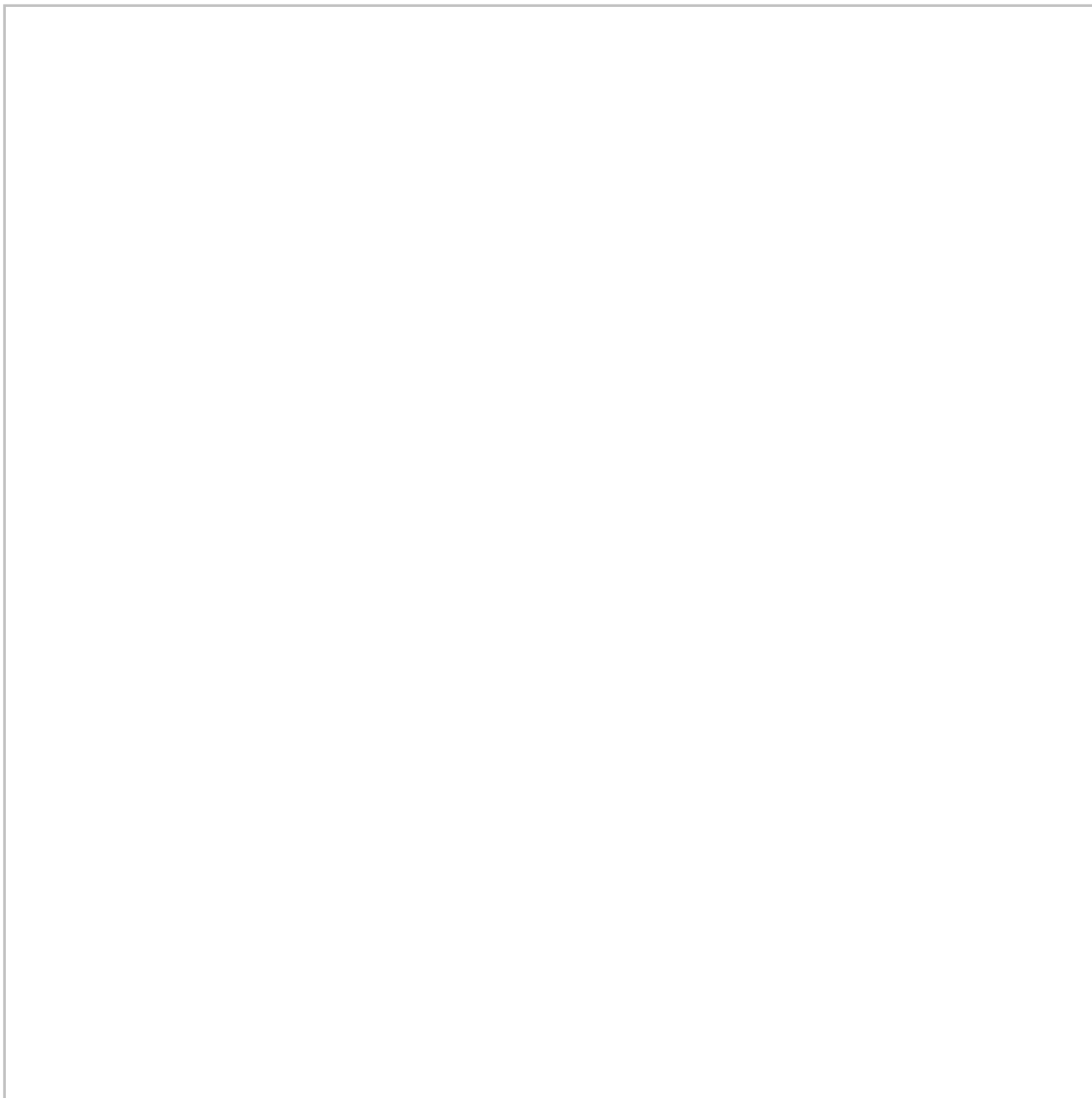
FBI? What a joke. It is all political. And politics is power. And power is making people do what you want, or destroying those who get in your way. The gospel according to Nixon...

“It is dangerous to have a leader with disdain for the law. It is also dangerous to have a leader who believes that anything legal is permissible,” Gerson adds. “Trump’s firing of Comey was legal. It also violated a democratic norm — a proper presidential deference for an ongoing investigation and the independence of law enforcement. There is no evidence that such considerations even occur to Trump. In their place: What kind of sucker would not press all his advantages? Republicans often talk of judicial restraint; less, recently, of presidential restraint. Presidential limits are often found in norms, not laws — what Lord Moulton called ‘obedience to the unenforceable.’”

-- Charles Krauthammer thinks Comey probably needed to go, but the conservative columnist believes Trump could easily have arranged for him to gracefully step aside: “Instead we got this — a political ax murder, brutal even by Washington standards. (Or even Roman standards. Where was the vein-opening knife and the warm bath?) No final meeting, no letter of resignation, no presidential thanks, no cordial parting. Instead, a blindsided Comey ends up in a live-streamed O.J. Bronco ride, bolting from Los Angeles to be flown, defrocked, back to Washington. ... **If Trump thought this would kill the (Russia) inquiry and the story, or perhaps even just derail it somewhat, he’s made the blunder of the decade.** Whacking Comey has brought more critical attention to the Russia story than anything imaginable. ... So why did he do it? Now we know: The king

asked whether no one would rid him of this troublesome priest, and got so impatient he did it himself.”

-- A few hours after Trump fired Comey, a prominent Republican politician gave David Ignatius this blunt assessment of the Trump White House: “These guys scare me.” “Normally, it’s wise not to overstate the importance of particular events,” Ignatius writes in his column today. “They’re rarely as earthshaking as they initially seem. But this may be one of those moments when the worst-case situation is actually happening: The president really did just fire the person who was running an investigation in which he is a possible target. How should conscientious citizens respond to that? ... **The Trump presidency is a test. We’ll find out how strong our institutions are and, even more, whether this generation of leaders is worthy of our Founding Fathers. So far, the evidence is mixed.**”

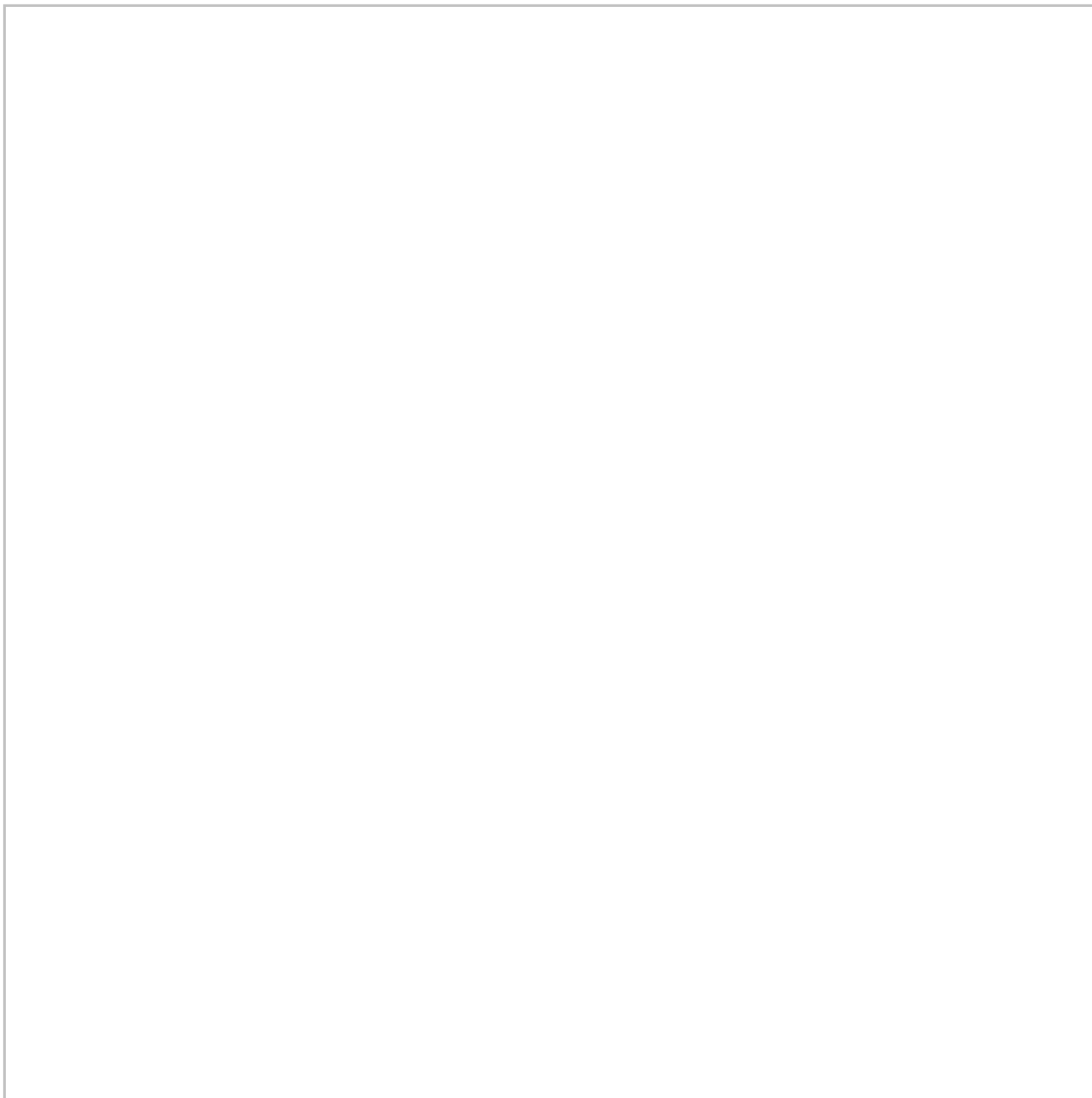


Archibald Cox appears before the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1973. (Bob Burchette/The Washington Post)

-- **“It’s impossible not to compare today to Watergate. And our officials are falling short,”** [writes Philip Allen Lacovara](#), a former U.S. deputy solicitor general in the Justice Department who served as counsel to Watergate special prosecutors Archibald Cox and Leon Jaworski: “One comparison — the behavior of senior Justice Department officials in the face of presidential pressure — is disappointing. Another — the insistent focus of the president and his allies on stopping damaging leaks rather than getting to the bottom of

the underlying conduct — is chilling.”

-- **Even longtime Trump supporter Joe Walsh, a former Republican congressman from Illinois who now has a syndicated talk-radio show, thinks firing Comey, and using a bogus cover story, represents “an abuse of power”:** **“That’s tin-pot dictator territory.”** “Whenever I criticize Trump, I lose listeners and Twitter followers,” Walsh writes. “And I don’t take that lightly — I don’t want to lose the folks who are good enough to tune in daily to hear what I have to say. But if I start pulling my punches just because I’m a Trump backer, then I’m not really doing my job. ... These days, for a conservative radio or TV talker, the easiest way to go is to be pro-Trump 100 percent of the time. Exhibit A is Sean Hannity ... (But) I believe a true Trump supporter should call him out when he’s wrong. It’s the only way to help him make good on the promises he made. ... Every time he does wrong, Trump makes it harder to get (good) things done.”



Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.) gives his victory speech last November. He won a very tough race and will have another next year. (Jack Dempsey/AP)

-- Additional Republican lawmakers are joining the call for an independent investigation:

Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.), who represents a suburban Denver district carried by Clinton, just endorsed a special counsel.

“There’s so much distrust and politicizing that it would be better for everybody that it had a special counsel,” [he told the Denver Post](#). “Do I think there’s anything there? No. But I think until this politicizing issue comes off the table, it will be hard for Congress to get anything done.”

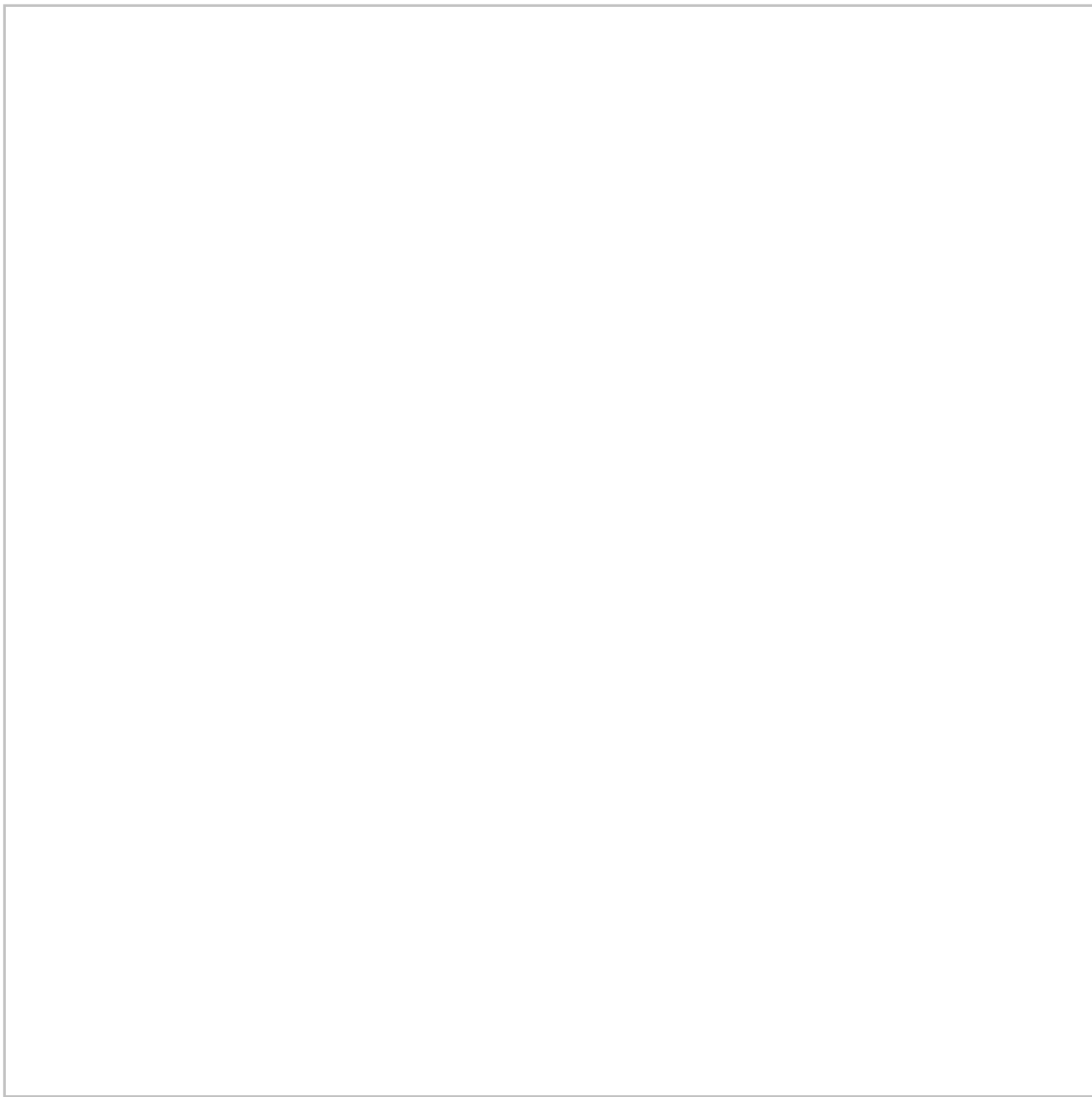
... I don't think the FBI is best to handle this. They were compromised under Comey and it will take time under a new leader. Comey was a horrible director who should have been fired on day one, but he wasn't, and it does look odd that he's fired now, in the middle of the investigation."

Other House Republicans calling for an independent

investigation include: Justin Amash (Mich.), Barbara Comstock (Va.), Carlos Curbelo (Fla.), Darrell Issa (Calif.), Walter Jones (N.C.), Tom McClintock (Calif.) and Erik Paulsen (Minn.).

Three GOP senators are calling for or expressing openness to setting up an independent investigation:

John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Lisa Murkowski. Another 17 have said they don't see why Trump had to fire Comey, but they haven't expressed support for another outside investigation. ([Amber Phillips whip count is here.](#))



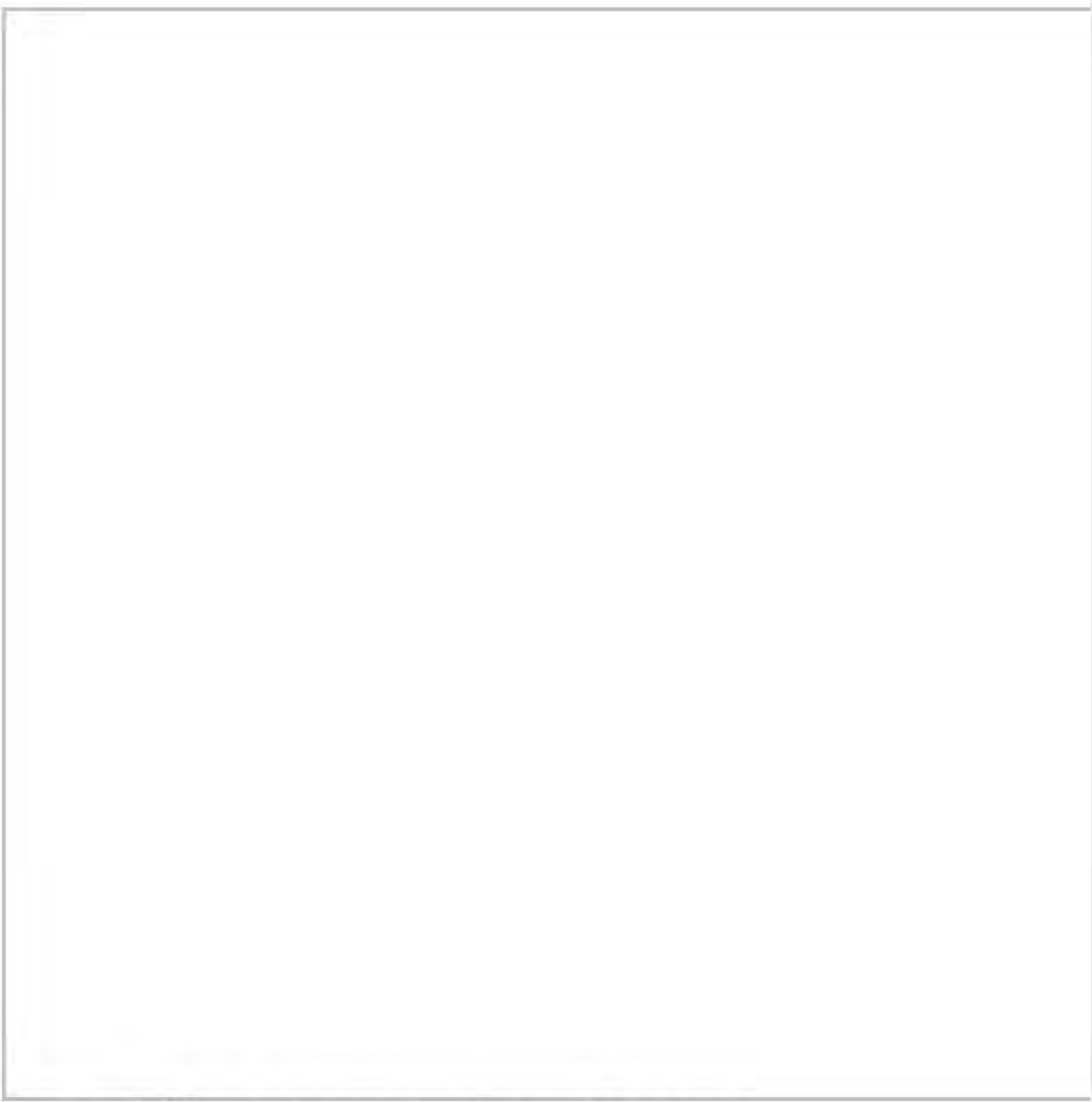
Trump greets New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie at the clubhouse at Trump National in New Jersey last November. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

-- Who Trump picks as Comey's replacement is becoming more and more significant:

The Post's Editorial Board calls on senators of both parties to not accept any nominee for FBI director unless they are completely independent: "It is essential that this White House not be allowed to export its credibility-destroying dysfunction to the Justice Department and the FBI."

“Some of the names being floated — such as former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, and former GOP senator Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire — would be disastrous choices,” adds conservative columnist Marc Thiessen. “Trump cannot pick a partisan ally or elected official. He needs to pick someone above politics — a longtime FBI or Justice Department veteran, or a respected federal judge — who will command instant respect on Capitol Hill and inside the bureau. ... **If the president loses just three Republican votes for his FBI candidate, he would suffer a devastating congressional defeat.** Moreover, a bad choice could prompt enough Republicans to break away and support Democrats in the creation of an independent counsel ... A strong nomination erases a host of perceived sins. So Trump had better pick wisely. **Things could get much better — or much worse — depending on his next move.**”

Welcome to the Daily 202, **PowerPost's** morning newsletter.
[Sign up to receive the newsletter.](#)



Sessions: 'We've got too much complacency about drugs'





WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING:

-- Jeff Sessions issued a sweeping new criminal charging policy, overturning a memo from the Obama administration and directing his federal prosecutors to charge defendants with the most serious, provable crimes carrying the most severe penalties possible. [Sari Horwitz and Matt Zapotosky report](#): “The Eric Holder memo (had) instructed prosecutors to avoid charging certain defendants with drug offenses that would trigger long mandatory minimum sentences. Defendants who met a set of criteria such as not belonging to a large-scale drug trafficking organization, gang or cartel, qualified for lesser charges — and in turn less prison time — under Holder’s policy. But Sessions’s new charging policy, sent to more than 5,000 assistant U.S. attorneys across the country and all assistant attorneys general in Washington, orders prosecutors to ‘charge and pursue the most serious, readily provable offense’ and rescinds Holder’s policy immediately. **The Sessions memo marks the first significant criminal justice effort by the Trump administration to bring back the toughest practices of the drug war**, which had fallen out of favor in recent years with a bipartisan movement to undo the damaging effects of mass incarceration.”

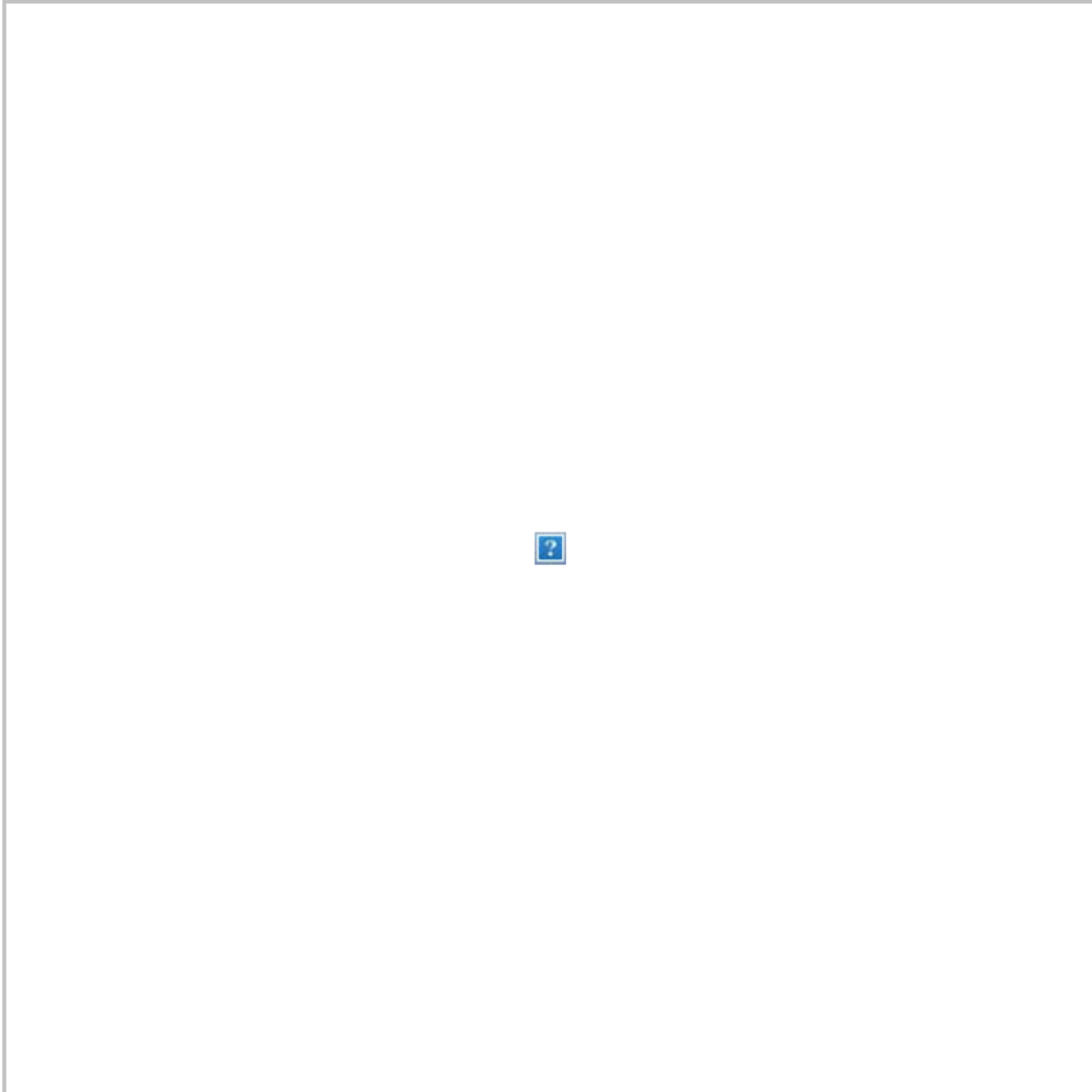
-- Congressional leaders reached a bipartisan deal to make it easier for the Department of Veterans Affairs to fire employees, overhauling long-guaranteed civil service protections to bring accountability to the troubled agency. The agreement, announced Thursday by key senators and led by Marco Rubio, clears a path for passage of a dramatic change that has stalled in Congress for three

years following a scandal over waiting times at VA hospitals. [Lisa Rein reports](#): “Few managers or their staffs were let go for falsifying appointment records to look like they were meeting goals set by the agency, and the real delays resulted in the deaths of dozens of sick veterans as they waited to see a doctor. The episode embarrassed the Obama administration and cost the former president’s VA secretary his job. While House Republicans, after the scandal, sought to let VA officials quickly terminate poor performers or employees involved in misconduct, federal employee unions and their Democratic allies in Congress resisted what they view as a move to undercut due-process rights. ... The bill could be an early test of how far Congress is willing to go to erode job protections for 2 million civil servants across the government.”

-- Another rollback of the Obama legacy: Trump’s EPA just reached a settlement with a Canadian company hoping to build a massive gold, copper and molybdenum mine in Alaska’s Bristol Bay watershed -- clearing the way for the firm to apply for federal permits. [Juliet Eilperin and Brady Dennis report](#): “The settlement between the EPA and the Pebble Limited Partnership ... could revive a controversial project that was effectively scuttled under the Obama administration. And **it underscores how [Trump’s] commitment to support mining extends far beyond coal, to gold, copper and other minerals.** ... While the move does not grant immediate approval to the Pebble Mine project ... it reverses the agency’s 2014 determination that a large-scale mine in the area be barred because it would imperil the region’s valuable sockeye salmon fishery.”

-- MARK YOUR CALENDARS: Our next “Daily 202 Live” is next

Wednesday evening with Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.). We'll talk from 6:15 p.m. to 7 p.m. at Post headquarters about the news of the day and his new book: "The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis – and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance." I'll include a link to RSVP in Monday's 202. You can follow @PostLive on Twitter for more information.



Then-Florida congresswoman Corrine Brown attends a rally in 2013. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty)

GET SMART FAST:

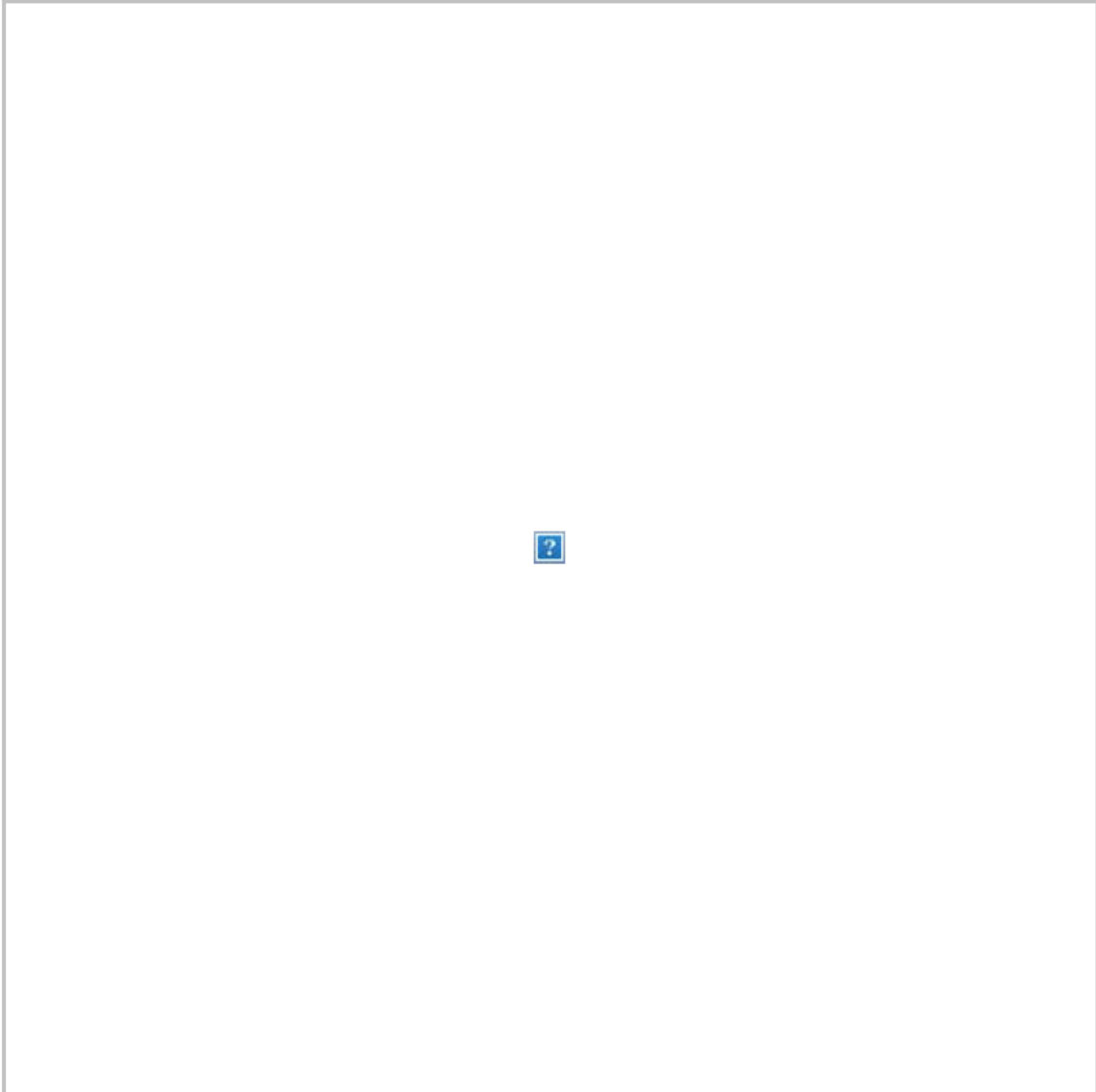
1. **Ex-Rep. Corrine Brown (D-Fla.) was convicted of taking for**

herself thousands of dollars for a bogus charity – shelling out the funds instead for lavish parties, trips and shopping excursions. She was found guilty on 18 out of 22 charges -- including lying on her taxes and on her congressional financial disclosure forms – and could spend the rest of her life in prison. No sentencing date has been set. ([Miami Herald](#))

2. **ICE said it has arrested 1,378 people in a six-week initiative targeting violent gangs in the U.S.,** marking what officials called the largest gang crackdown in the agency's history. Officials said more than two-thirds of those arrested were U.S. citizens, and the largest groups targeted were the Bloods, Crips, and MS-13. ([Maria Sacchetti](#))
3. **Authorities removed a statue of Jefferson Davis in New Orleans, capping days of tension and protests over the fate of the city's 116-year-old monument.** As crews hoisted the statue of the Confederate leader from his longtime perch, a group of protesters gathered at the base, chanting "President Davis." ([J. Freedom du Lac, Janell Ross and Avi Selk](#))
4. **The Mormon Church, which automatically enrolls every male child in the congregation as a Boy Scout, said it will stop participating in the group's teen programs.** Scouting has taken an increasingly liberal stance on gay and transgender men. For now, church officials said they will continue participation in a separate program for students ages 8-13. ([Julie Zauzmer](#))
5. **2020 watch: Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) spoke to the Greater Des Moines Partnership yesterday.** About 200 representatives from eight Iowa counties are in D.C. for their

annual fly-in. Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), another potential presidential candidate (in 2024), spoke to the same group on Wednesday. ([Des Moines Register](#))

6. **A Republican lawmaker in Oklahoma is under fire after suggesting a new proposal to save the state money: rounding up the state's 82,000 non-English-speaking students and handing them over to ICE authorities.** State Rep. Mike Ritze, a physician by trade, disagrees with the idea that the state should educate non-citizens and claims his proposal would save the state \$60 million. It is unclear whether he accounted for the fact that many ESL students are, in fact, U.S. citizens. ([Peter Holley](#))
7. **An Australian senator became the first-ever woman to breast-feed her infant in the country's parliament,** earning praise – and criticism – from around the world. ([New York Times](#))
8. **Cincinnati authorities have reopened an investigation into the death of Gabriel Taye, an enthusiastic, well-dressed eight-year-old who loved neckties, and – horrifyingly – would go on to hang himself using one of them.** Police say peers had bullied him to the point of unconsciousness in the school bathroom just two days before – video footage that the school district obtained but declined to make public. ([Samantha Schmidt](#))
9. **An sheriff's helicopter crew in Orange County, California, warned a group of paddle-boarders to get out of the water, yelling down by loudspeaker that they were “within feet” of fifteen great white sharks and should "exit the water in a calm manner."** A woman was recently critically injured by a 10-foot shark on the same Dana Point beach. ([AP](#))



How Keith Schiller, Trump's former bodyguard, followed his boss to the White House

TWO PROFILES OF TRUMP INSIDERS:

-- **“The bodyguard chosen by Trump to deliver the ‘terminated’ letter to the FBI director,”** by Jenna Johnson and Rosalind S.

Helderman: "Former police detective Keith Schiller was at the Manhattan prosecutor’s office more than 18 years ago when he spotted a local celebrity: Marla Maples, there to discuss an alleged theft and flanked by a man described as her bodyguard. ‘I looked at him, totally not impressed by his stature,’ [Schiller recalled], ‘A light

goes off. I said: 'Bodyguard, I can do this' ... I'm no stranger to putting my hands on people.' Now with Trump in the White House, Schiller sits at a desk just steps from the president as director of Oval Office Operations. He serves as one of Trump's most trusted aides ... That a person with Schiller's profile is now a senior White House aide with near-round-the-clock access to the president is just one more way in which the Trump White House has broken with norms set by previous administrations ...

“Schiller has long been critical of Comey, telling those around him that the FBI was not aggressive enough in its investigation of [Clinton’s] use of a private email server, and his views helped shape those of his boss. ... He has also repeatedly gotten physical on Trump’s behalf, punching a protester outside of Trump Tower, forcibly removing a reporter from a news conference and confronting many who interrupted Trump’s campaign rallies.”

-- **“Sarah Huckabee Sanders is suddenly the star of the feel-bad story of the day,” by Paul Farhi:** “In two days of briefings, Sanders has kept her answers short and crisp, her voice steady and calm and inflected with her Arkansas upbringing. **She has rarely interrupted her questioners with Spicer-ian interjections of ‘Hold on!’** — lending a somewhat less combative and adversarial quality to the briefings. ... Her relative poise in the face of a skeptical news media immediately gave rise to speculation among journalists that Sanders was in line to replace Spicer as Trump’s chief spokesperson. There’s nothing to support that notion, but that didn’t stop CNN from mulling over the possibility.”

-- **Buzzing online: Will Cecily Strong, who resembles Sarah, play**

her on "Saturday Night Live" tomorrow?

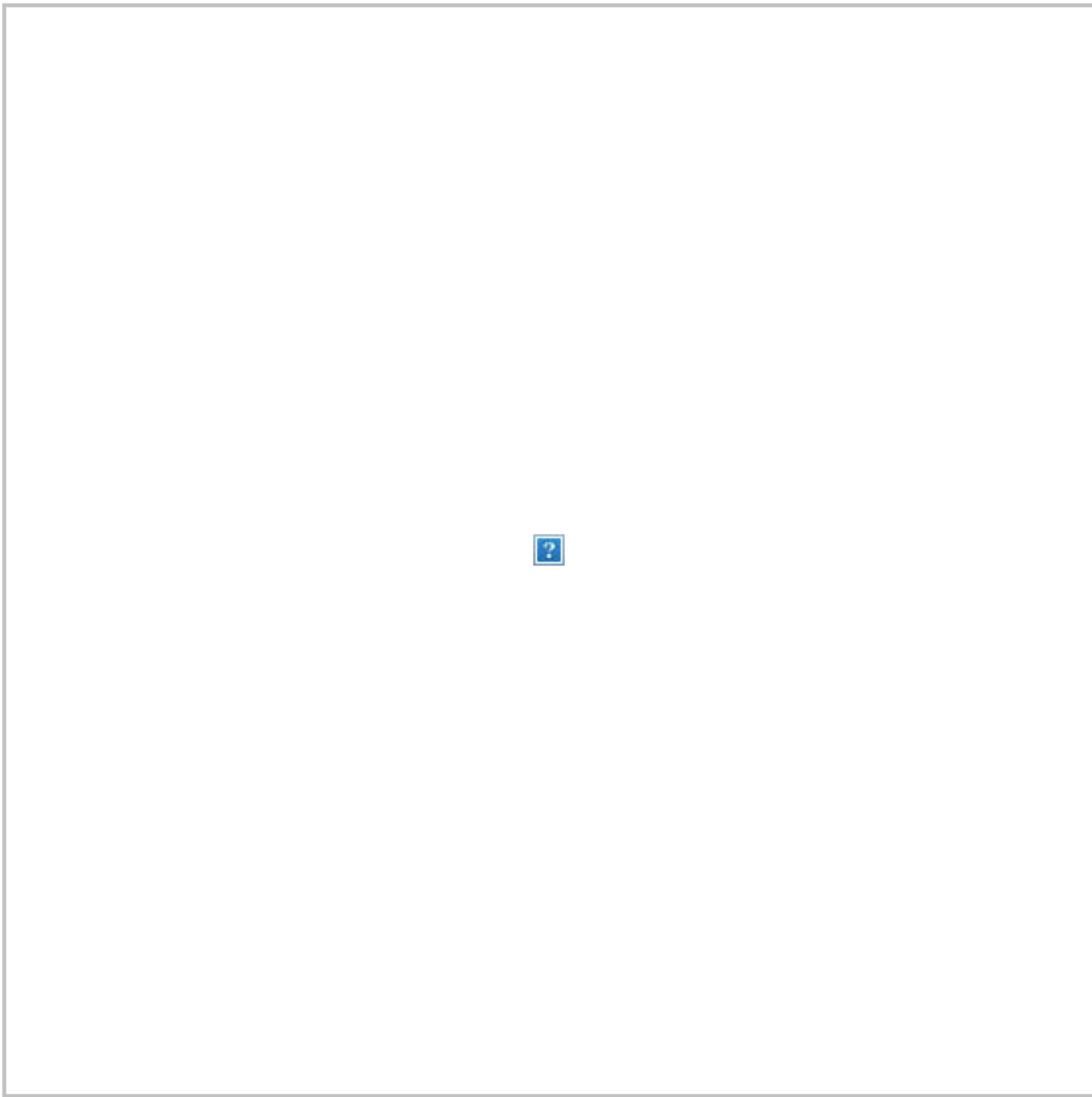
-- Inside the West Wing, the mood right now is dour. [From Politico:](#)

“Several White House officials said aides who didn’t need to see the president stayed away from the Oval Office — and kept their doors closed. ... Trump did the lengthy interview with Holt even though some on his staff believed it was a bad idea and gave his answers off-the-cuff. One person who spoke to him said he’d been ‘fixated’ on his news coverage and believed his press team was failing him and that he needed ‘to take the situation into his own hands.’ ...

“The episode highlights two fundamental issues of the Trump presidency: It is often impossible to work for Trump in the White House — and it is often impossible for Trump to be happy with those who work for him. ‘They’re hostages,’ said longtime political consultant Mark Corallo, who served as Attorney General John Ashcroft’s spokesman under President George W. Bush. ...

“Another White House official said there is a ‘widespread recognition this was handled terribly but not a real sense that we can do much here.’ ...

“Sanders gave staff members a stern lecture on leaking to the media during a staff meeting Thursday morning, according to several people familiar with the incident, saying it was damaging the White House. The lecture seemed to take staffers by surprise, said one person present. ‘The rules aren’t normal,’ said one White House official. ‘If you can’t work in that universe, then don’t work here.’”



A projector shows Trump footage onscreen, as workers wait at an event promoting EB-5 in China. (AP)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST WATCH:

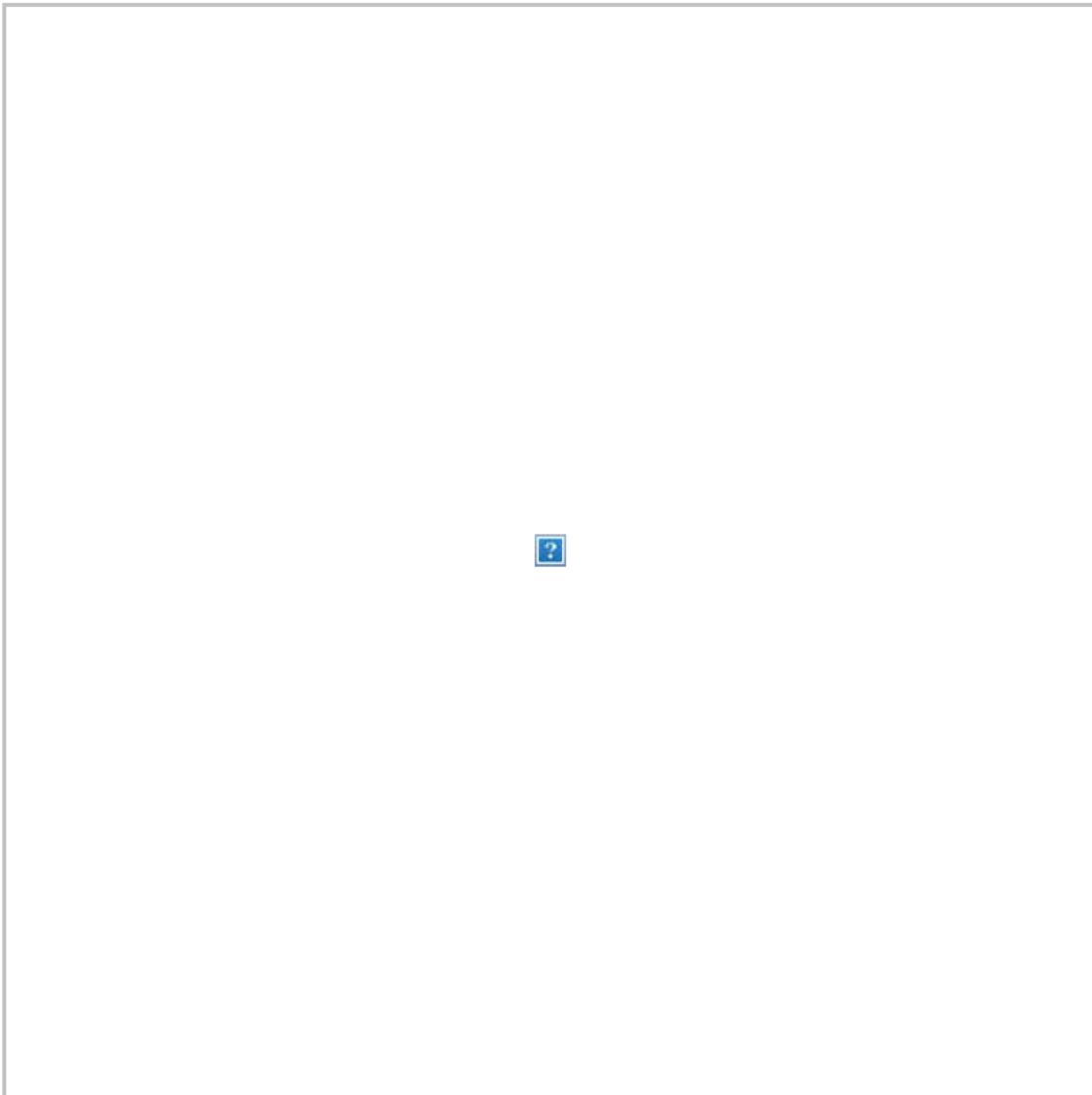
-- **“Changes to a controversial visa program under consideration by the Trump administration could hurt a real-estate project partially owned by the family of [Jared Kushner].”** **Shawn Boburg reports:** “The decision, which rests with Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, stands as an early test of how the Trump administration will handle matters that could carry significant consequences for the financial interests of the president’s extended family. **At the center of**

an ongoing controversy is the Kushner Cos.’ use of a federal visa program to raise \$150 million from Chinese investors for two luxury towers in New Jersey. Under the EB-5 program, wealthy foreigners can get a fast-track visa if they invest at least \$500,000 in an eligible project. Program critics have nicknamed it ‘visas for cash.’ The changes Kelly is considering ... would make it much more difficult to attract foreign money to projects in relatively prosperous areas, such as the one in Jersey City, experts said.” Kushner’s sister Nicole Kushner Meyer generated criticism last weekend when she pitched her company’s project to investors in China, mentioning Jared Kushner’s name and featuring a photo of Trump.

Sen. Charles Grassley, a longtime critic of the EB-5 program, said Thursday that Meyer “may have left investors with the false impression” that they would get special treatment because of her brother’s position in the White House, and sent a letter to Kelly demanding that he quickly implement the proposed program changes.

-- A part-owner of several New York City hotels and restaurants has joined a lawsuit accusing Trump of has violating the Constitution’s emoluments clause, which bars federal officials from taking payments from foreign governments. [David A. Fahrenthold reports](#): “Eric Goode is a part-owner of four boutique hotels and three restaurants in Manhattan. On Wednesday, he officially joined a lawsuit that was filed just days after Trump’s inauguration by a watchdog group, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. The lawsuit alleges that Trump is in violation of the Constitution because his business continues to accept payment for hotel rooms, banquet halls and food from foreign states and state-

owned businesses. Although Trump has said that he no longer has day-to-day control of the Trump Organization — having passed it to his sons Donald Jr. and Eric — documents show that Trump remains the beneficiary of his businesses, and he can legally withdraw money from them at any time.”



Trump speaks during a school choice event at the White House. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

TRUMP AGENDA:

-- A federal judge in D.C. signaled readiness to become the third judge nationwide, if needed, to halt Trump’s revised “travel ban”

executive order. [Spencer S. Hsu reports](#): “U.S. District Judge Tanya S. Chutkan postponed ruling on two combined challenges to the White House action by Iranian-American organizations and a Shi’a Muslim group, saying she would wait for decisions expected after federal appeals courts arguments this month on halts imposed March 15 by judges from Hawaii and Maryland. But Chutkan said she was persuaded by arguments that the groups’ missions and the lives of more than a dozen individual plaintiffs would be unconstitutionally harmed by the travel ban. ‘Upon consideration of the parties’ submissions, the court is inclined to agree with Plaintiffs that they are likely to succeed on the merits of their claims. However ... The existence of two other nationwide injunctions temporarily casts uncertainty on the issue of whether the harms Plaintiffs allege are actually imminent or certain,’ Chutkan wrote in a two-page order. She notes that the 13-member U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit in Richmond is expected to issue a ruling Monday, and arguments before the 9th Circuit in San Francisco are set for May 15. She concluded: ‘In the event that both existing injunctions are overturned, this court is prepared to issue a ruling without delay.’”

-- The Navy said it is developing a response to Trump’s comments in Time Magazine, in which the president criticized their state-of-the-art electromagnetic aircraft catapults as “no good” and said they need to go back to “goddamned steam,” the method used for decades. [Dan Lamothe reports](#): “The new catapult to which Trump referred takes up significantly less space on a ship than steam systems and works by tapping into a redesigned turbine system that generates more power than those on old carriers. The new electromagnetic system also is expected to be able to launch

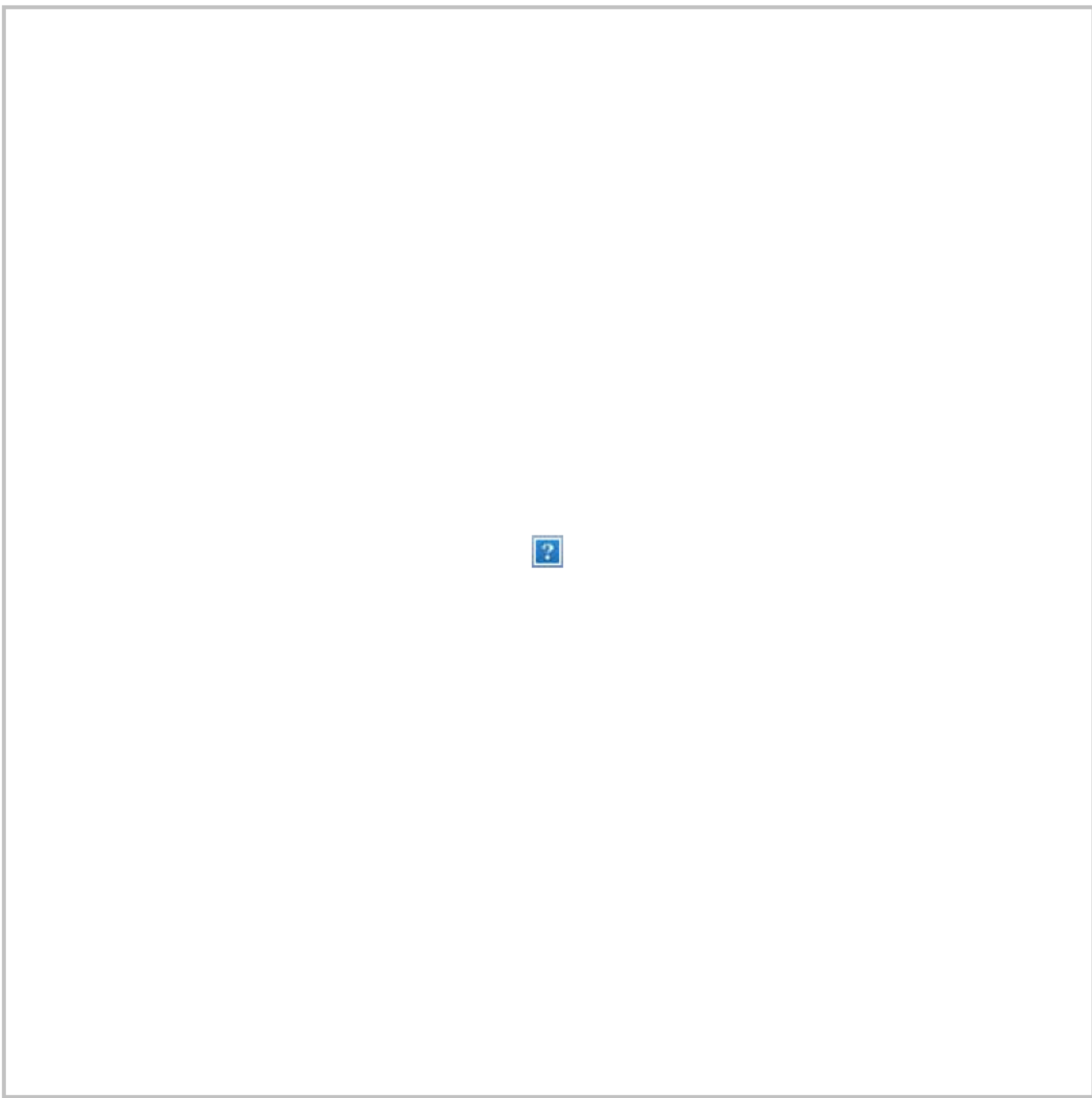
unmanned aircraft and require less maintenance. ... **A Pentagon official ... said that Trump's comments caught defense officials off-guard and are inaccurate.** 'You can see elements of reality in what he said, but I think he may have spoken without having all of the information in front of him,' the official said. 'I think he either has time-late information, or the information he has is not correct.'"

-- **Emerging signs that Trump may deploy thousands more U.S. troops to Afghanistan have been met with a variety of reactions in Kabul, but many are concerned that it may not be enough to turn around the long, expensive war that the Taliban has fought to a draw.** [Pamela Constable reports](#) from the ground: "[Many] Afghan observers agree on one thing: Without a complementary political policy aimed at bolstering the weak Kabul government, pressing fractious leaders to get along and fending off the country's meddlesome neighbors, no U.S. military surge alone can solve the broader problems that have made peace and stability so elusive. 'There is more fighting and more ground held by Taliban now than ever before, and increasing the troops can help reverse that,' said [one member] of the government's High Peace Council. 'But people have lost their trust in the government. No matter how many troops you bring now, it will have no lasting impact unless there is real reform and good governance.'"

-- **"When asked Thursday if the White House had injected uncertainty into the Senate health-care negotiations — which, before Comey's firing, was the Senate GOP's main focus — Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-La.) simply grinned, stepped into an elevator and smiled broadly again as the door shut, leaving the question**

unanswered,” Kelsey Snell and Sean Sullivan report. “Even if Republicans stick together and are ultimately able to confirm a new FBI director, time spent on that is time not spent on health care. Senate Republicans are trying to write their own health-care bill after the House narrowly passed its own version last week, an ambitious and complicated endeavor. ‘It is going to be difficult at best. Anything like that adds to it,’ said Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), speaking of the Comey firing’s impact. ... ‘We should be able to walk, chew gum and confirm an FBI director at the same time,’ said Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.)”

-- **Bloomberg, “The Economist Who Helped Write Trump’s Tax Plan in Five Days,” by Lynnley Browning:** “On April 21, [Trump] surprised his top advisers when he told the Associated Press that a tax plan would be coming in five days. Among [the staffers] responsible for quickly putting together the one-page, bullet-point outline released on April 26 was Shahira Knight, special assistant to Trump for tax and retirement policy. An economist, Knight, 46, works at the National Economic Council, where she’s **one of the few senior people with a tax background.** A former House Ways and Means Committee staffer, she also knows her way around Congress. That experience could come in handy as the administration tries to push through an ambitious tax overhaul. **If the House and Senate can’t agree on how to pay for lower corporate and individual rates, they may pass a temporary measure similar to the Bush-era tax cuts Knight worked on while at Ways and Means.**”



Pence says Christianity is most persecuted faith

-- Mike Pence said Trump will “prioritize” protecting Christians abroad, seeking to reassure Christian leaders looking for the White House to focus more on the plight of persecuted Christians abroad. [Julie Zauzmer reports](#): “Protecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign policy priority of the Trump administration,” Pence said, speaking at the D.C.-based World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians. “[Trump and Pence] have both spoken frequently about the importance of religious freedom. But after more than 100 days of the administration, some Christian advocates have started looking for more results.

Some are asking when Trump will appoint someone to the position of ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, whether the State Department will implement training on religious freedom promised last year and how the administration is advocating on behalf of people persecuted for their Christian faith in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.”

-- For your radar: An ally of Vladimir Putin and top cleric of the Russian Orthodox Church met privately with Mike Pence yesterday morning. [Time Magazine's Elizabeth Dias reports:](#) “Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev of Moscow, who chairs the Russian Orthodox Church’s external relations department, spoke with Pence backstage at evangelist Franklin Graham’s Washington summit on religious violence against Christians. ‘It is only one united, international anti-terrorist coalition which can combat terrorism and win,’ Hilarion told Time during an interview in a suite at the Trump International Hotel in D.C. ... ‘The two countries should put these political differences aside.’ **A White House spokesman confirmed Pence's meeting with Hilarion and said the cleric's comments also reflected President Trump's views.** Hilarion says that after talking with Pence, he feels ‘very positive’ about the future of the relationship between the U.S. and Russia.”

-- The Congressional Hispanic Caucus is irate that Trump has appointed an immigration hard-liner to run a federal office that is supposed to help immigrants solve problems with applications for visas, green cards and U.S. citizenship. [Maria Sacchetti reports:](#) “In a letter to [DHS secretary John Kelly], lawmakers called Julie Kirchner’s appointment as ombudsman for U.S. Citizenship and

Immigration Services 'offensive, insensitive and malicious.' Kirchner previously led the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a conservative advocacy group that favors deportations, the construction of a border wall with Mexico, and a sharp reduction in legal immigration from 1 million people a year to 300,000. 'We do not believe that a person who has spent over a decade attacking immigrant communities will now work effectively and thoughtfully to advance the rights of immigrants and fulfill the important duties that are required of this role,'" members wrote.

-- Trump signed an [executive order on cybersecurity](#) that makes clear that agency heads will be held accountable for protecting their networks, and calls on government and industry to reduce the threat from automated attacks on the Internet. [Ellen](#)

[Nakashima reports](#): "Picking up on themes advanced by the Obama administration, Trump's order also requires agency heads to use Commerce Department guidelines to manage risk to their systems. It commissions reports to assess the country's ability to withstand an attack on the electric grid and to spell out the strategic options for deterring adversaries in cyberspace. (Officials) said the order was not, however, prompted by Russia's targeting of electoral systems last year. In fact, the order is silent on addressing the security of electoral systems or cyber-enabled operations to influence elections, which became a significant area of concern during last year's presidential campaign."

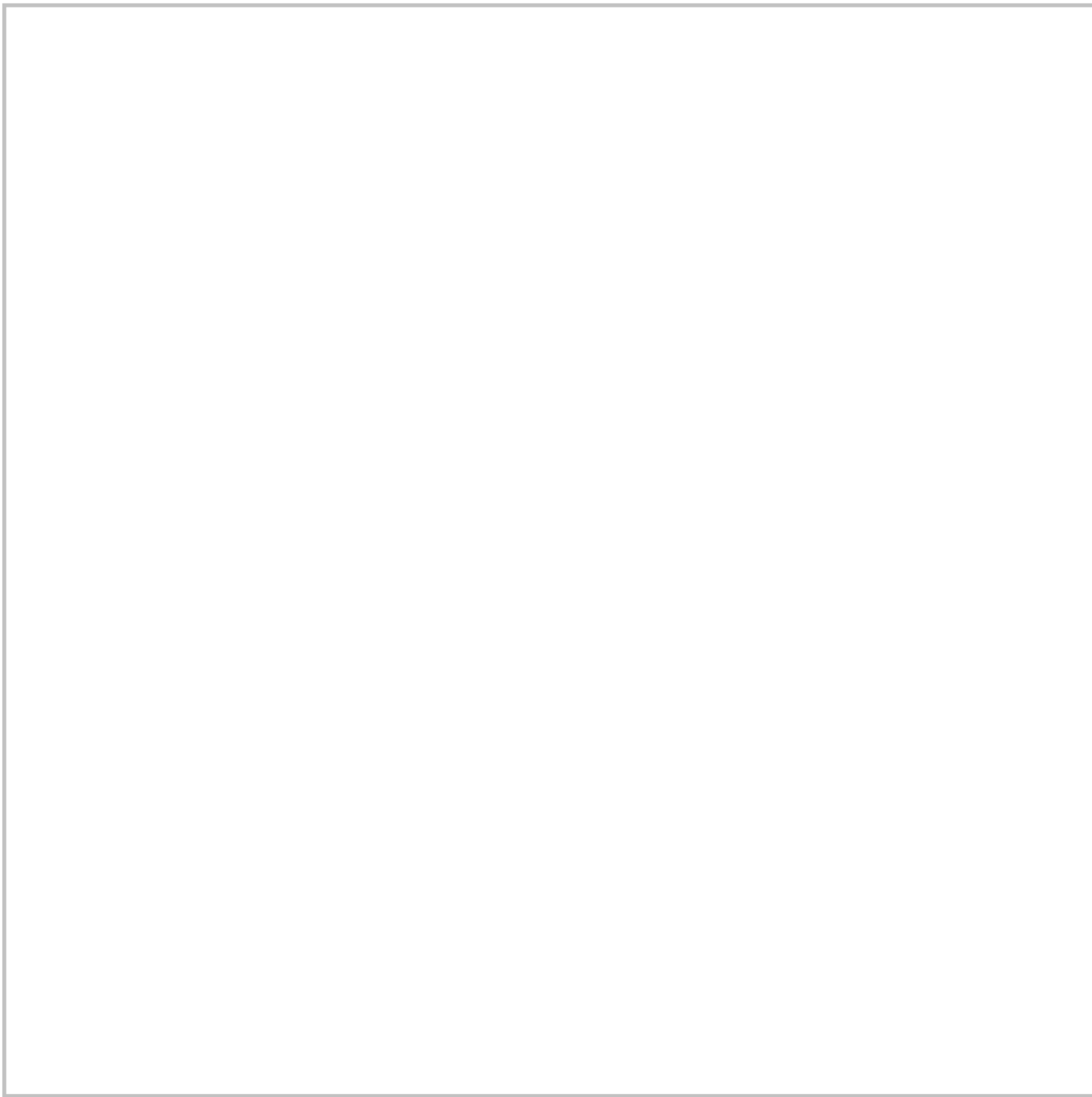
TRADE UPDATES:

-- The "TRUMP EFFECT" was on full display in the Senate Thursday with a majority of Democrats embracing an opponent

of trade deals to become U.S. trade representative. [Paul Kane explains](#): "Fully 37 Democrats voted to confirm the new USTR, abandoning their partisan posture and instead embracing [Trump's] pledge to renegotiate existing trade deals and to scuttle those in the works. Those Democrats were joined by 45 Republicans who voted for [Robert Lighthizer], a rare bipartisan moment coming a day after Democrats demanded an independent criminal investigation of Trump's 2016 campaign ... 'In our party, I think there's an intensity about this issue that maybe wasn't there a few years ago,' said Sen. Bob Casey. Casey said that the 2016 campaign brought the trade issue to the fore unlike any presidential race in recent memory, and Trump's sweep of the industrial Midwest sent a shock through the party that altered its view on how global deals should be considered."

-- **New York Times, "Steel Industry, Seeing a New Dawn, Is Cheering for Trump,"** by **Patricia Cohen**: "Across the steel industry, stock prices — and spirits — have been on the rise, lifted by [Trump's] vow to protect American manufacturers against cheaper imports and invest as much as \$1 trillion in infrastructure over the next decade. Mr. Trump's attention to trade and manufacturing — which helped him gain the White House — means more here than any of the stumbles and missteps that feed late-night television comics. At this Berkeley County mill, neither the administration's backtracking on a promise to use American-made steel in the Keystone XL Pipeline or its messy battles with congressional Republicans and low approval ratings have damped optimism about the president or his agenda. **'If you could design a perfect administration from the perspective of the steel industry, this would be it,'** said Thomas Gibson, president of the American Iron and Steel Institute."

-- The administration reached a preliminary deal with China to ease market access for a variety of industries -- including beef and financial services -- as the part of a White House effort to soften economic barriers between the two countries. [Damian Paletta reports](#): “The 10-part agreement, announced by [Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross], comes as part of an ongoing negotiation between the two countries following a meeting between [Trump and President Xi Jinping] 'U.S.-China relationships are now hitting a new high, especially in trade,' Ross told reporters Thursday. ... Washington has agreed to advance a new rule that would allow China to export cooked poultry to the United States. ... And there were numerous other parts of the preliminary agreement. This included language that appears to pave the way for U.S. firms to export liquid natural gas to China, the expediting of Chinese safety reviews for U.S. biotechnology applications, and cooperation between Chinese and U.S. regulators over financial transactions.”



Kelley Rogers, president of Strategic Campaign Group, at his office in Annapolis yesterday after it was searched by FBI agents. (Josh Hicks/The Washington Post)

FRONTIERS OF CAMPAIGN FINANCE:

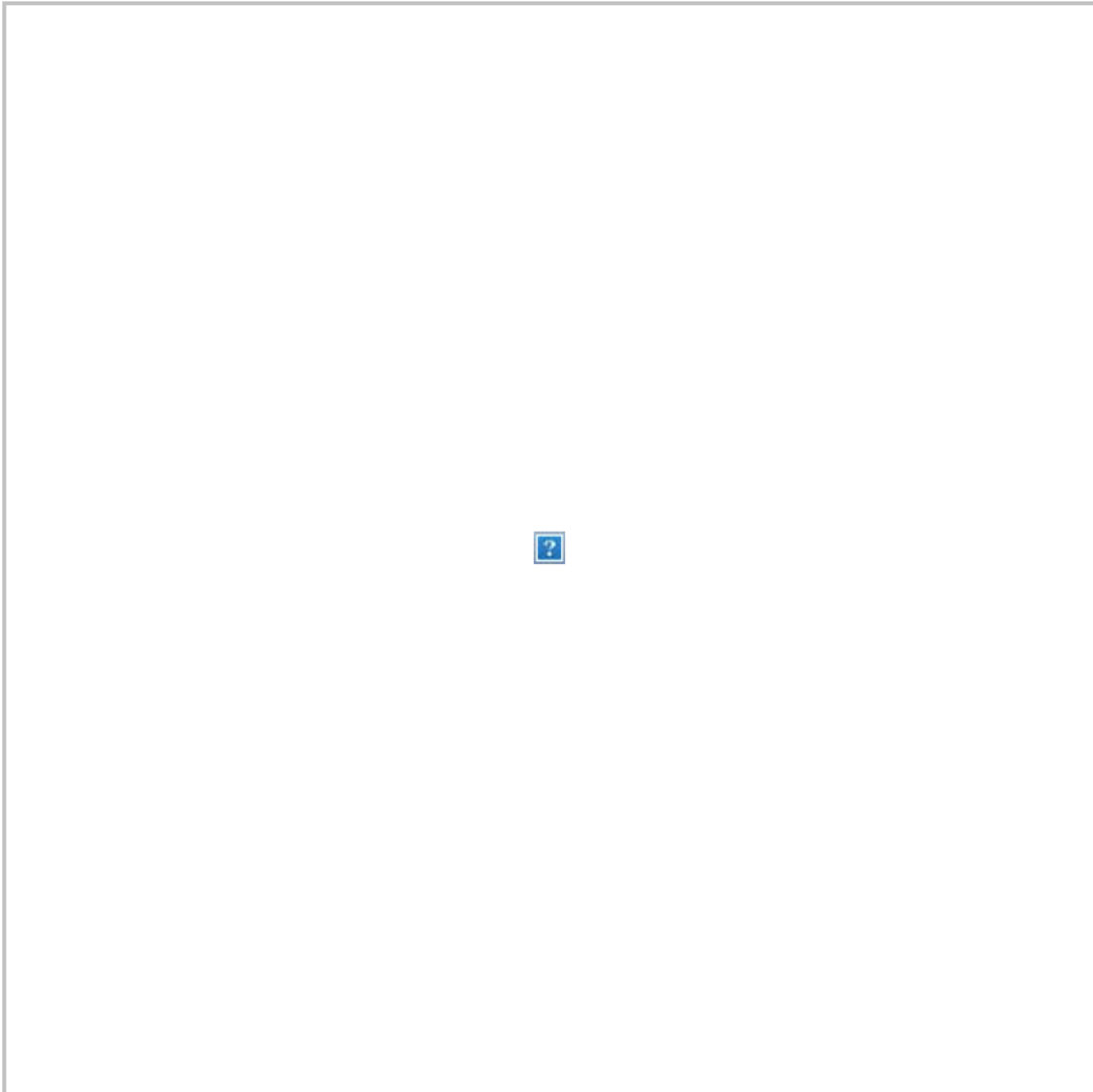
-- Federal authorities on Thursday searched the offices of a political consulting firm in Annapolis that has worked with Republican candidates locally and nationwide and was sued in 2014 on allegations of fraudulent fundraising practices. From Fenit Nirappil, Josh Hicks and Matea Gold: “Strategic Campaign Group says it supports Republican candidates on a range of services including mail, fundraising and telephone town halls. Its leaders

include GOP strategists Kelley Rogers, Chip O'Neil and Dennis Whitfield. **The firm has close ties to Republican consultant Scott B. Mackenzie, a treasurer for multiple political action committees that have drawn scrutiny for spending little money on candidates and instead steering donations to consultants,** according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Rogers said in an interview that he helped lead one of those groups, the Conservative Strike Force.

“On Thursday, six FBI agents showed up at the third-floor office of Strategic Campaign Group to gather computer files and documents related to the firm’s direct mail and fundraising practices, Rogers said. Rogers said agents appeared interested in work the firm did during Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli’s 2013 gubernatorial race. Cuccinelli (R) sued the Strategic Campaign Group and the Conservative Strike Force in 2014, alleging they raised almost \$2.2 million to support his campaign but steered little of that money to him. The Conservative Strike Force agreed to pay Cuccinelli \$85,000 to settle the lawsuit, and Strategic Campaign Group said it would turn over donor information...

“The Federal Election Commission has been struggling for some time with the issue of political action committees that are formed solely to enrich those running them. Unlike nonprofits, which are governed by boards of directors, PACs can be run by a single consultant. And although candidates are prohibited under federal election law from using campaign donations for personal use, traditional political action committees and their super PAC brethren face few limitations on how they spend their funds. **Critics say ‘scam PACs’ have proliferated in ... the wake of the Supreme Court’s**

2010 Citizens United decision.”



Floodwaters in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew. (AP Photo/Brian Blanco)

WAPO HIGHLIGHTS:

-- **“N.C. said it still needs \$929 million in aid for Hurricane Matthew. It got \$6.1 million,” by Angela Fritz:** “The rain is done, and the flood is long over ... but North Carolina is still feeling the effects of Hurricane Matthew. Its unmet need is enormous, the governor says, and they aren’t getting the money. **In a soon-to-be-announced disaster relief allocation from the federal**

government, Gov. Roy Cooper expects to get just 0.7 percent of what he and North Carolina lawmakers in Congress say the state still needs to get back on its feet. More than 2,000 people were rescued from high water in North Carolina alone. Half of the state's 100 counties were in a state of emergency, and 52 shelters housed more than 4,300 displaced people. In the days after the storm, Congress gave North Carolina around \$332 million for immediate disaster relief ... [But] Cooper says it wasn't enough to cover the full extent of the damage, [and] requested an additional \$929 million. But in the omnibus spending bill passed earlier this month, Congress only gave HUD \$400 million. **In other words, the department that allocates long-term disaster relief has a budget that's less than half of what Cooper says North Carolina needs to recover from Hurricane Matthew alone."**

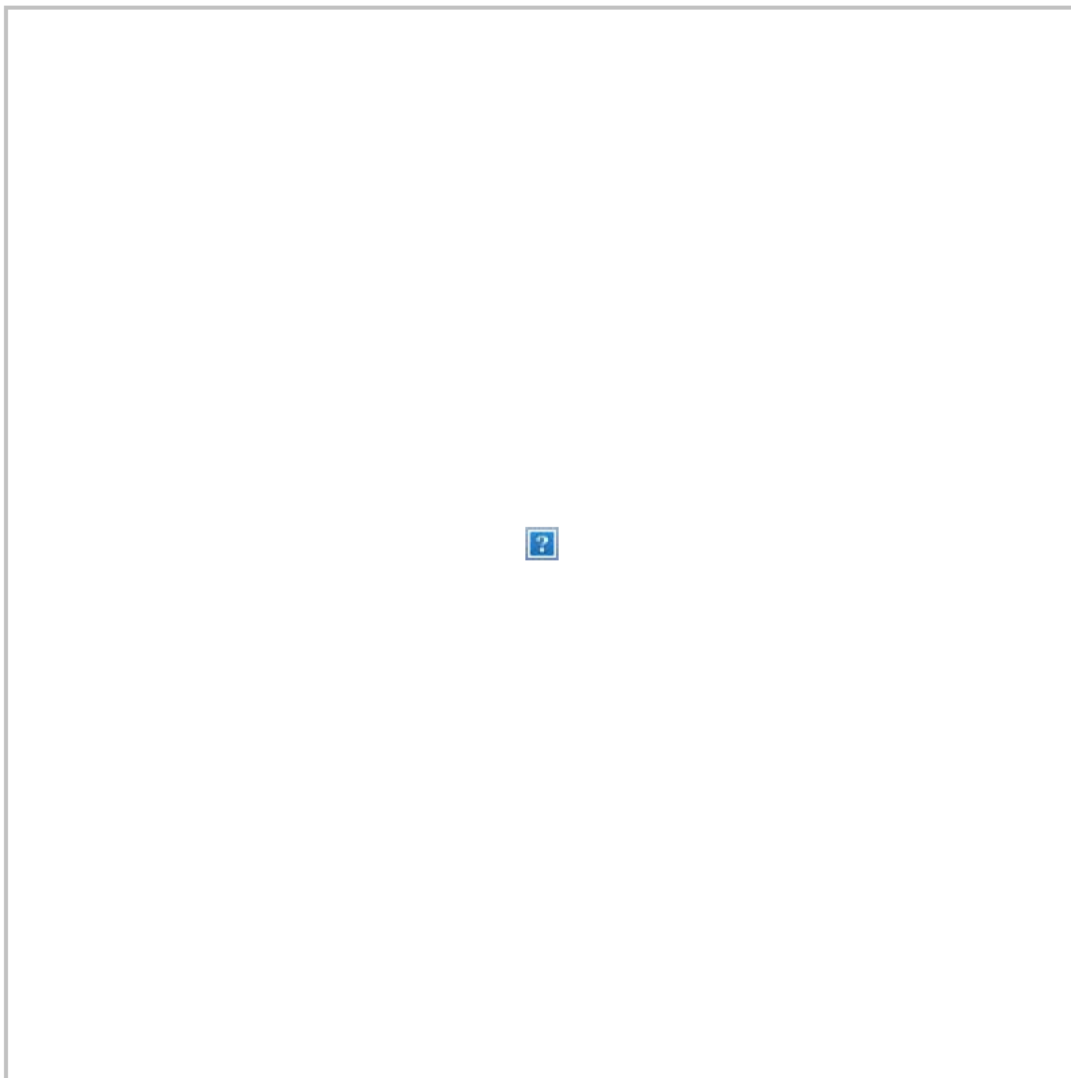
THE NEW WORLD ORDER:

-- French President-elect Emmanuel Macron's party announced a list of legislative candidates that is heavy on political novices, a sign of France's reshaped and unsettled landscape ahead of crucial June parliamentary elections. [Michael Birnbaum reports:](#) "The 429 announced candidates, of whom more than half are new to politics and half are women, were a first indication of the direction of Macron's still-fluid party, which the president-elect — himself a relative political neophyte — formed just a year ago and which has no representatives in Parliament. **In a measure of the challenge of building a movement from scratch, candidates were still being vetted hours before the announcement.** What's at stake: "If Macron does not win a governing majority in the 577-seat National Assembly,

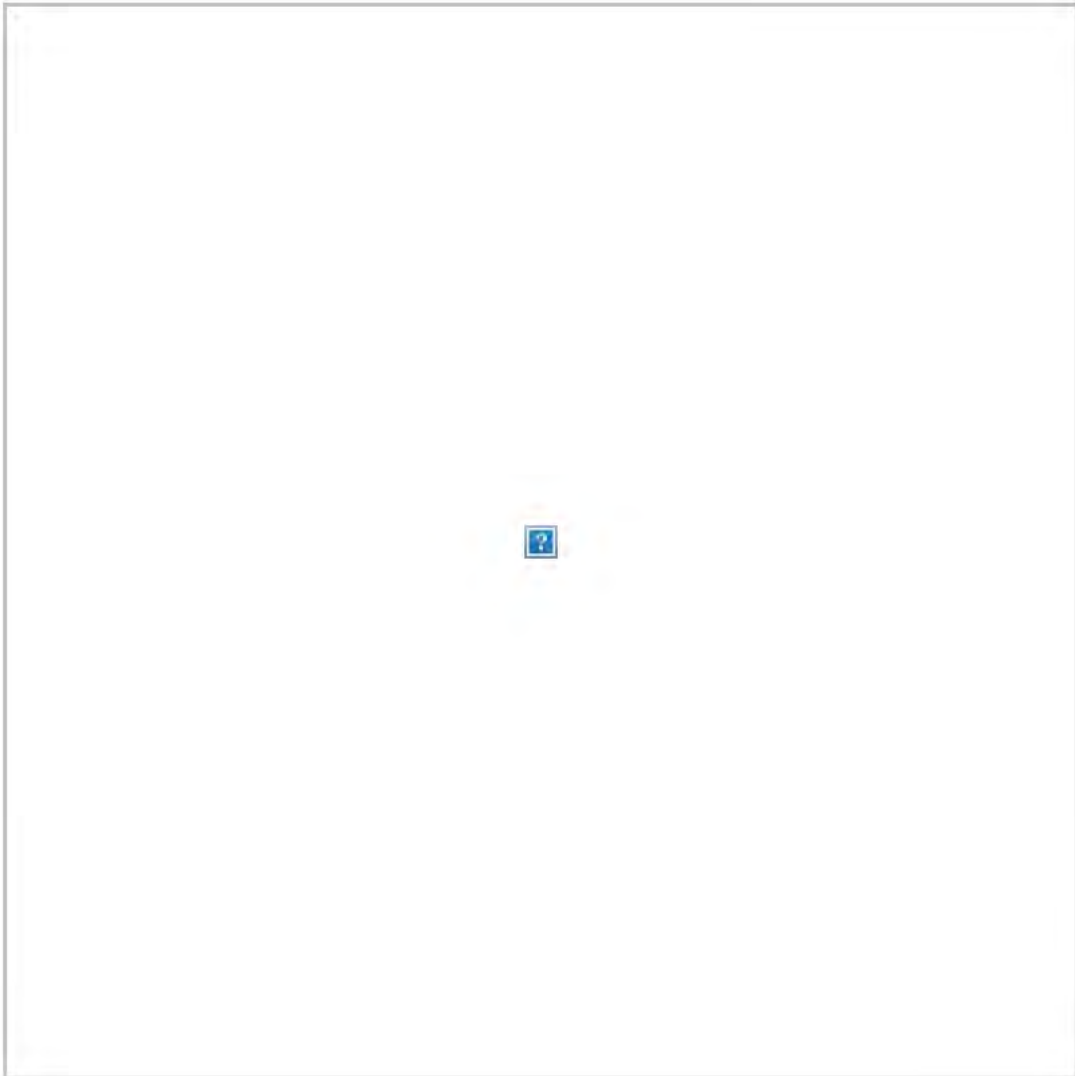
he could be forced into a power-sharing arrangement with an opposing party that could severely curtail his agenda. And another five years of stagnation could lead to a roaring comeback for Le Pen in the next election, in 2022.”

SOCIAL MEDIA SPEED READ:

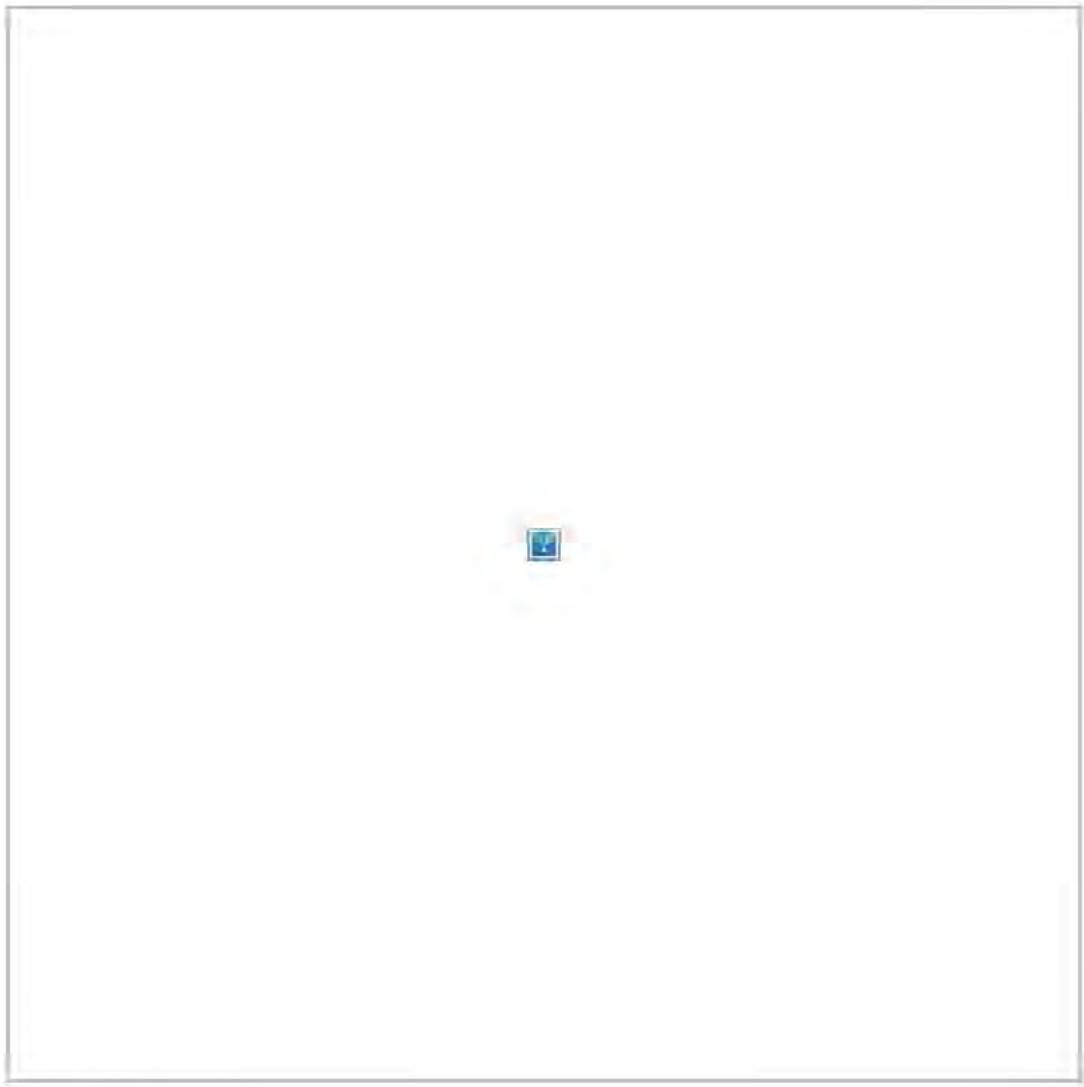
The new New Yorker cover:



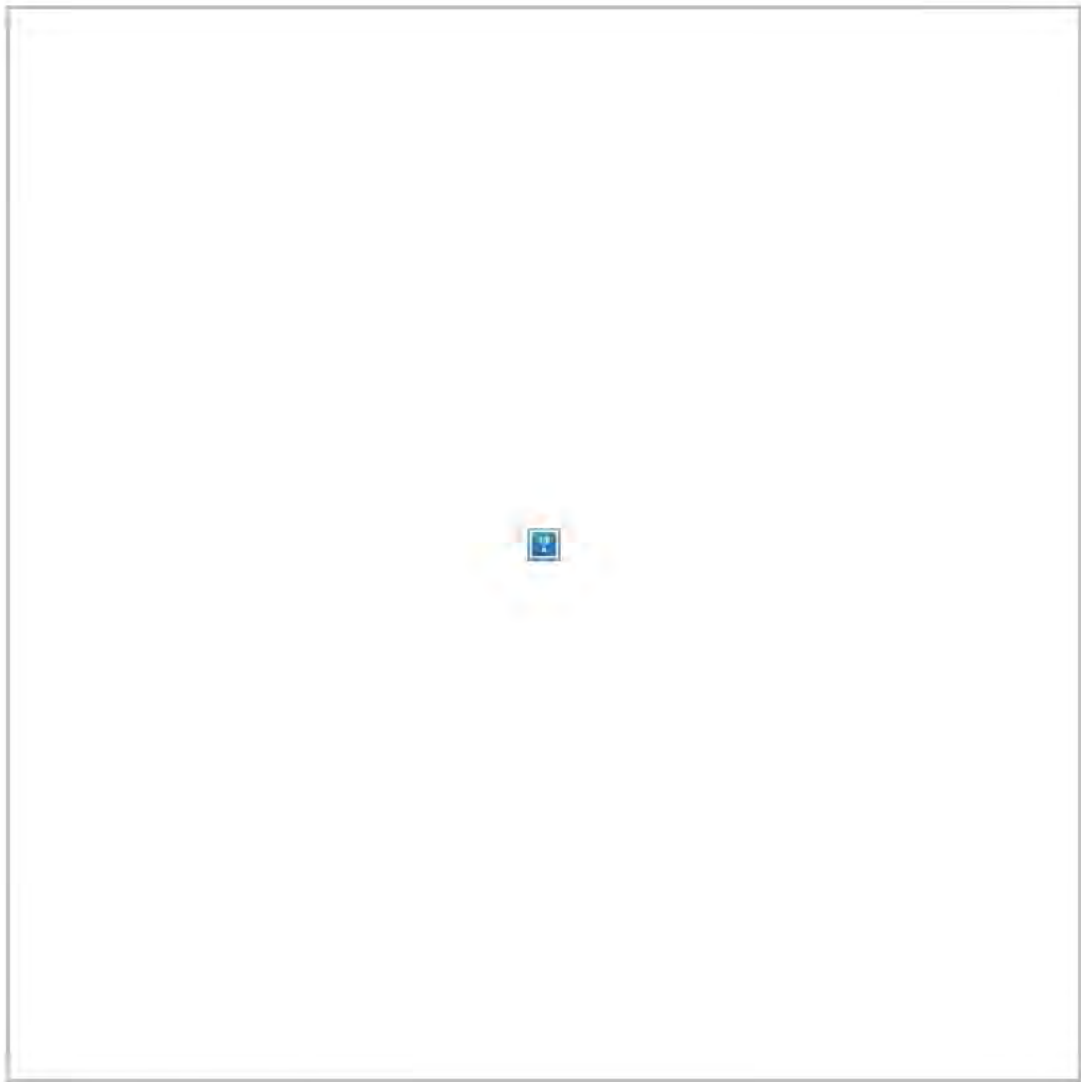
The White House remains obsessed with the results of last year's election:



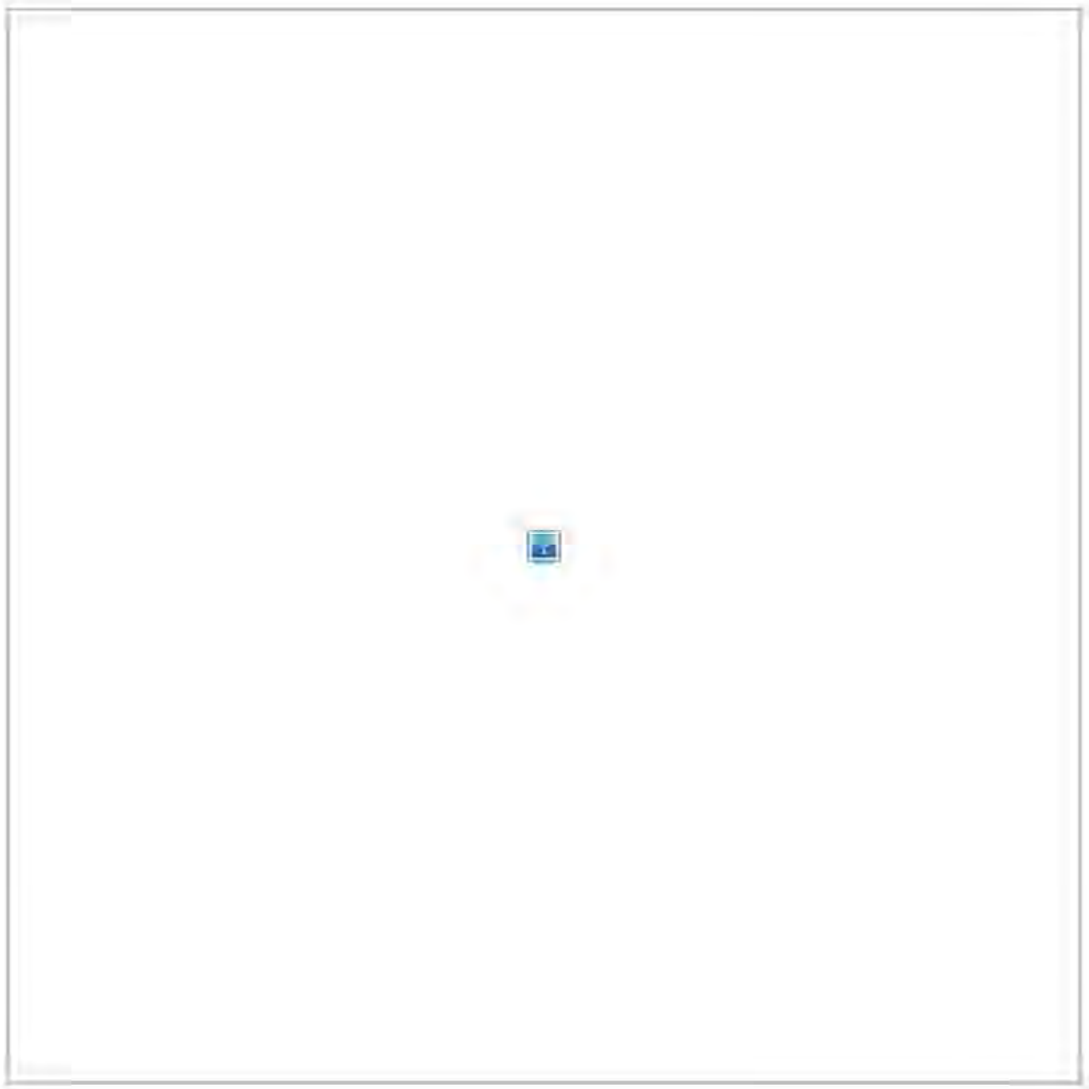
The president reopened his longtime feud with Rosie O'Donnell by retweeting this post from last December:

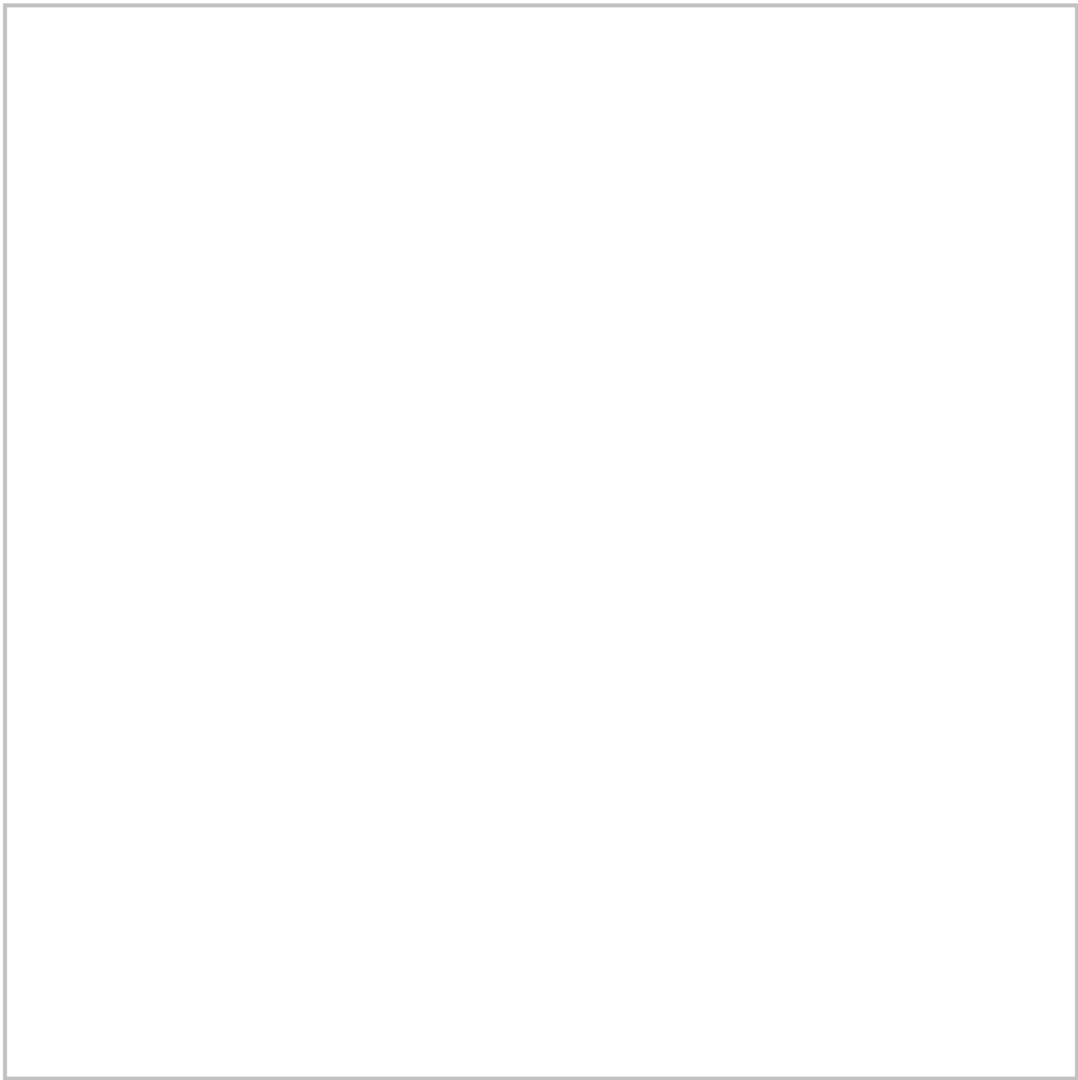


Trump added this:

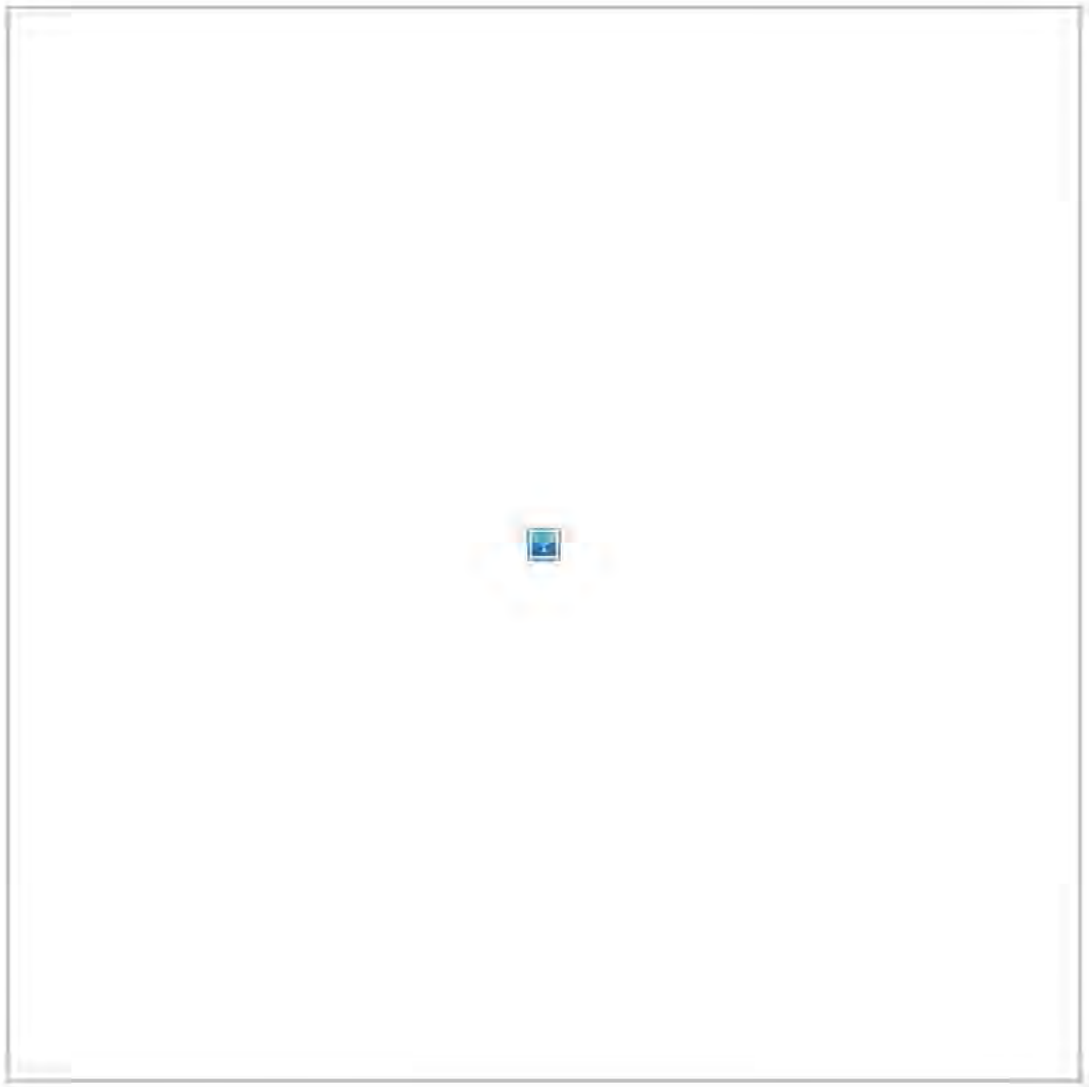


Rosie pushed back:

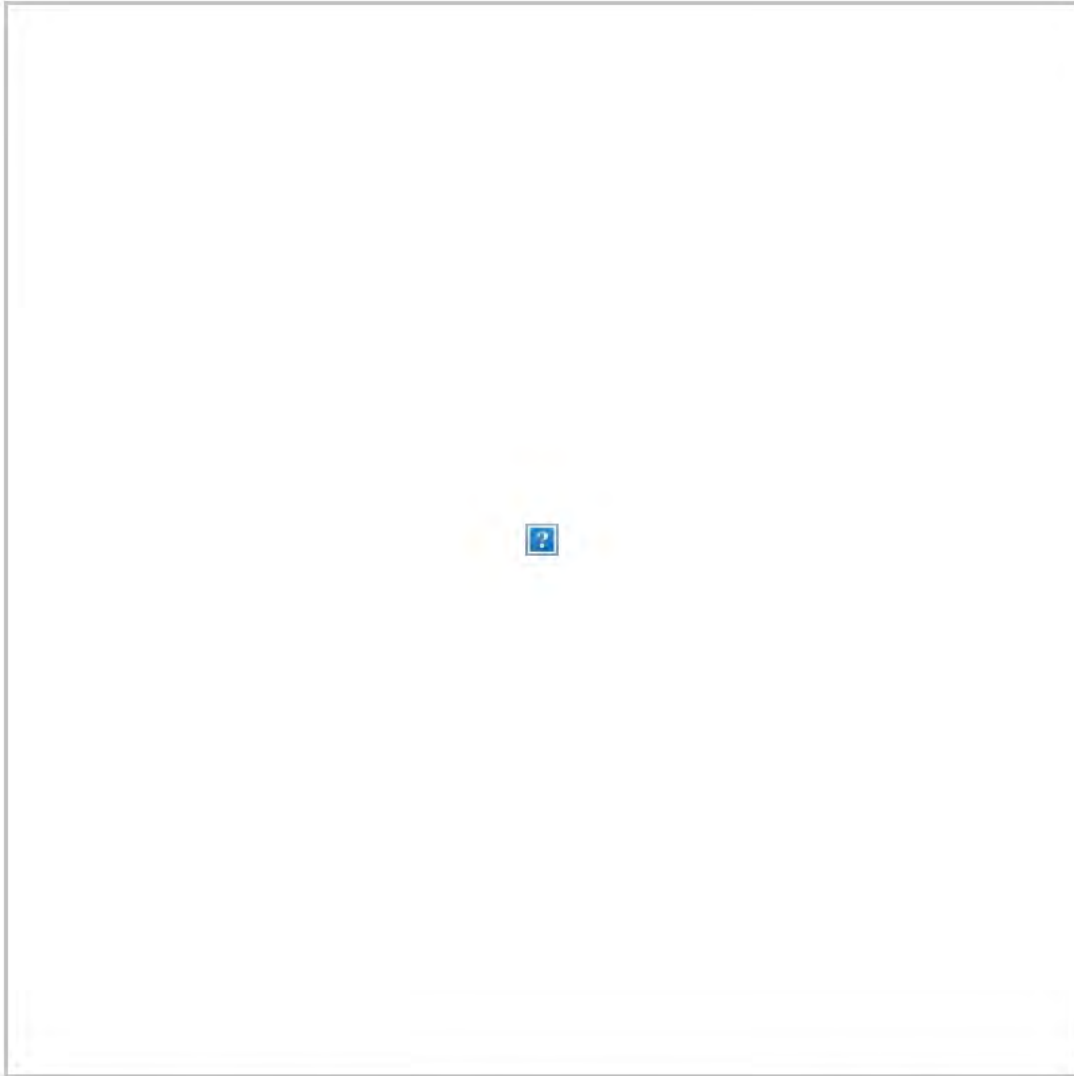




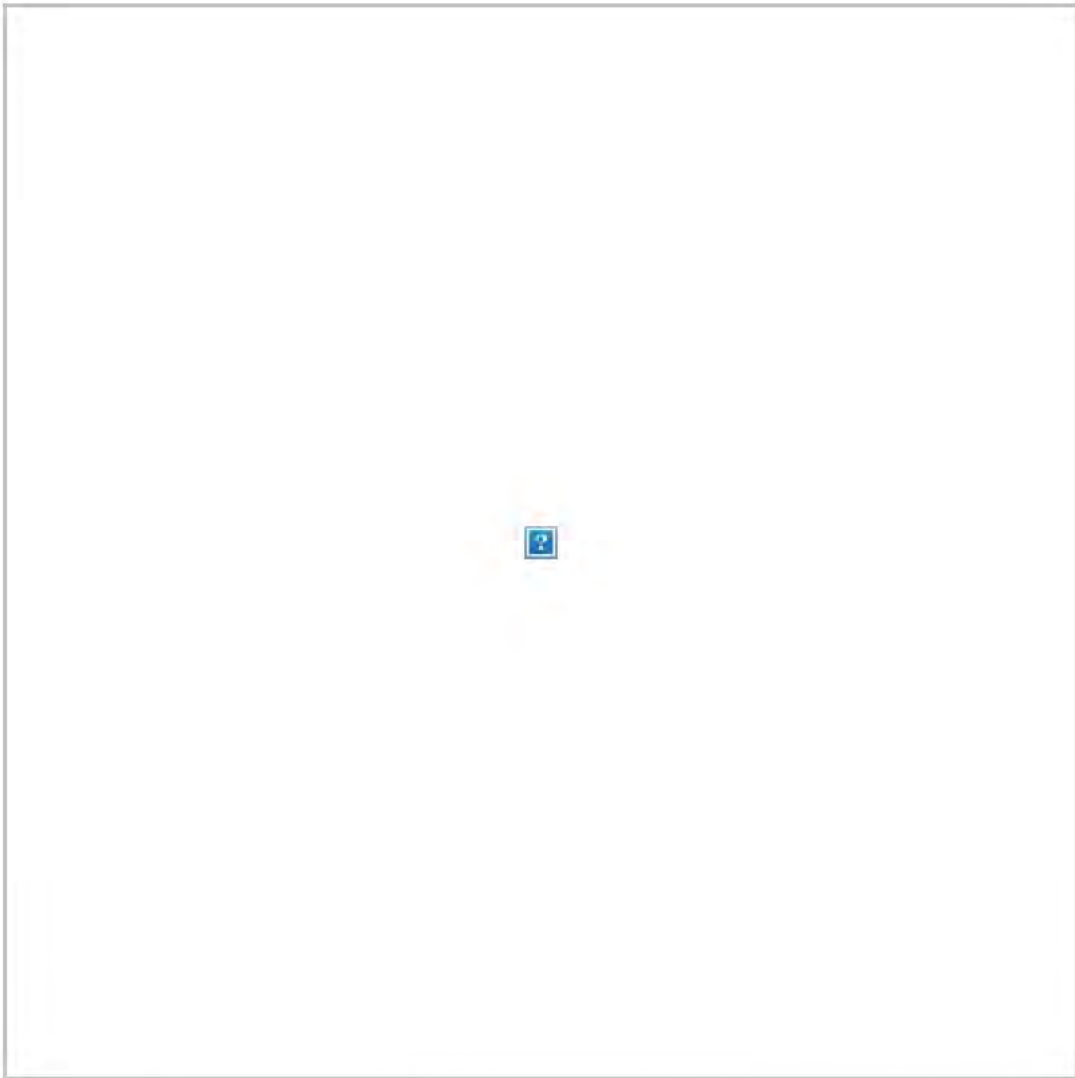
Then POTUS tweeted this:



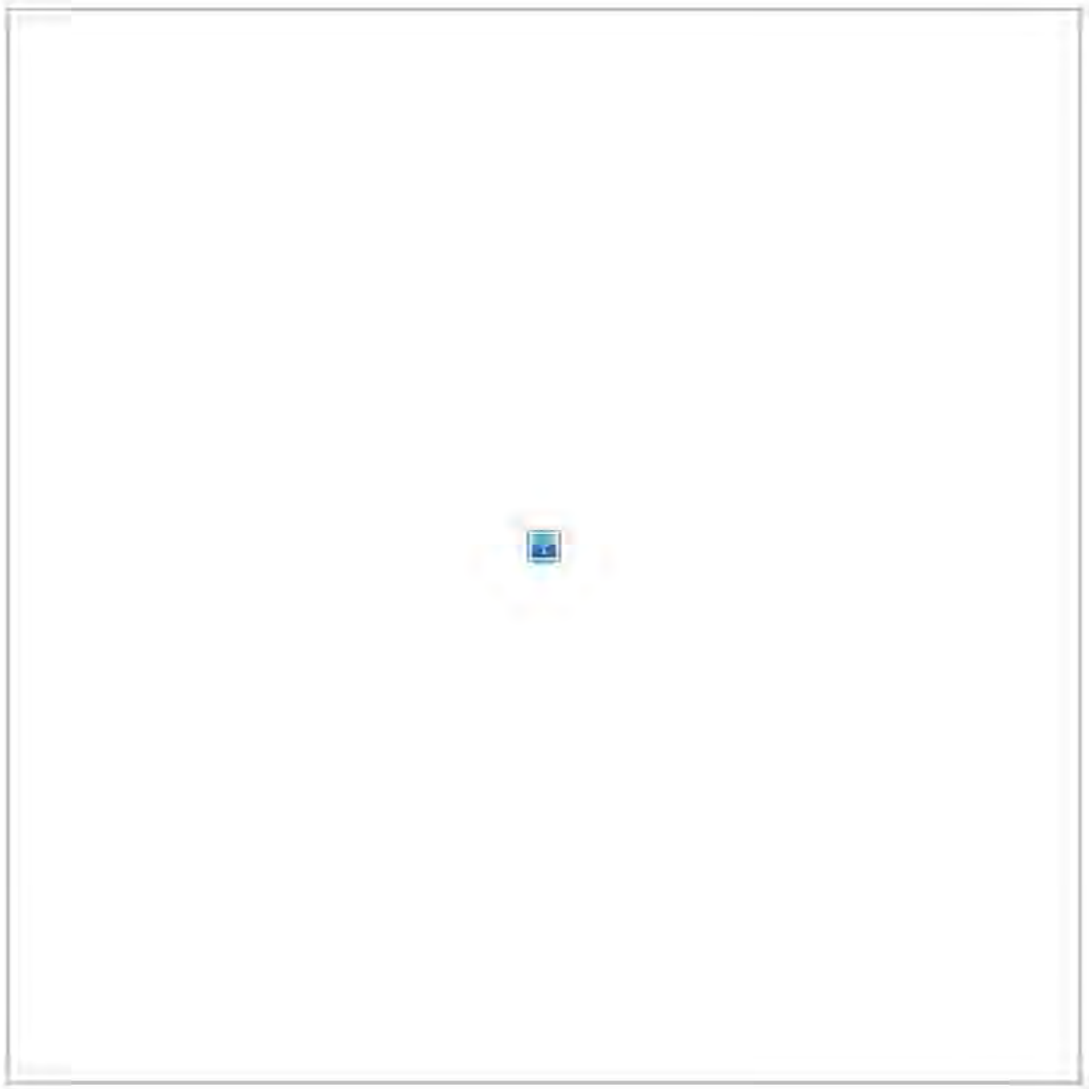
That is not how Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.), the Senate Intelligence panel's ranking member, sees it:

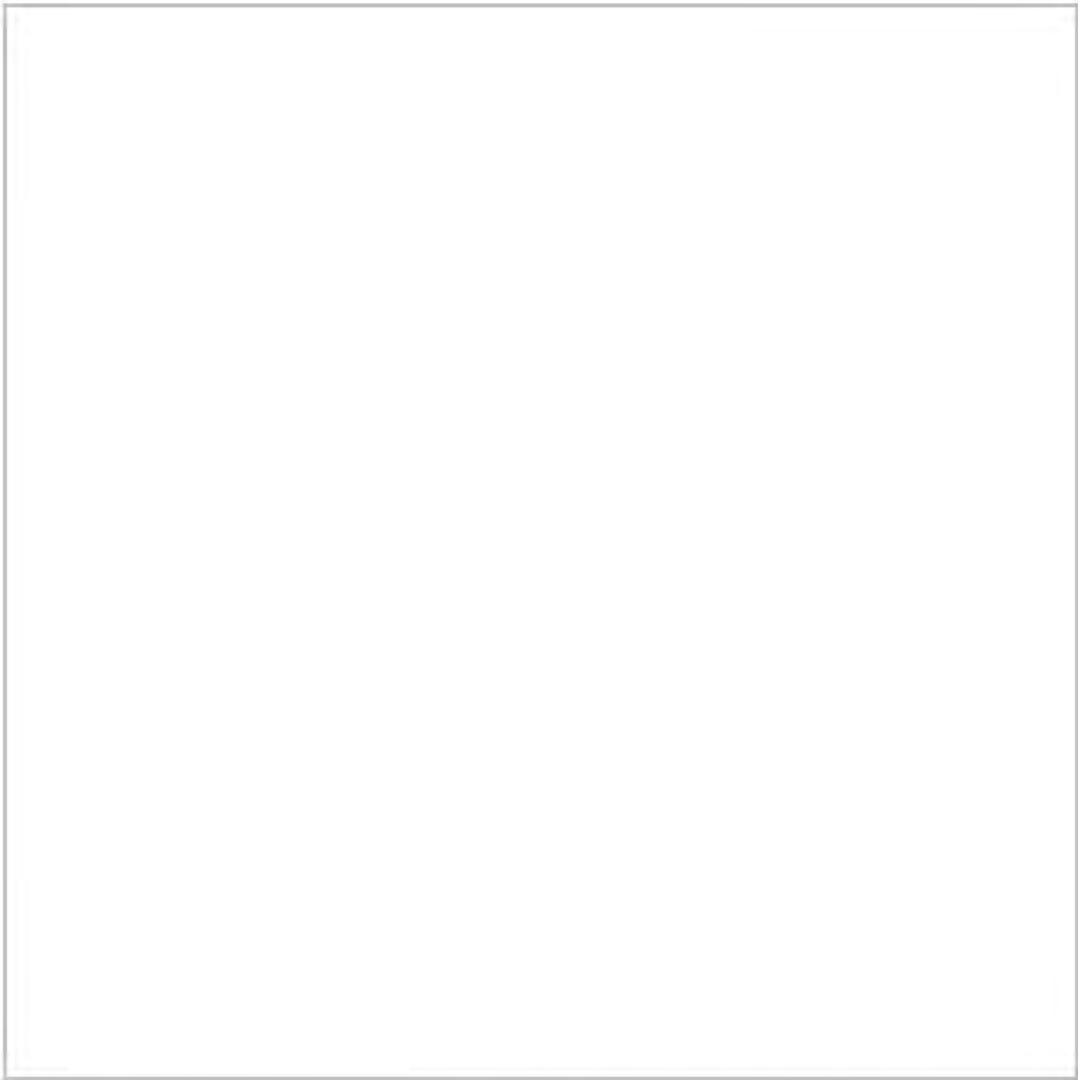


Under fire for meeting with the Russians, Trump noted that he also met with a leader of rival Ukraine the same day:

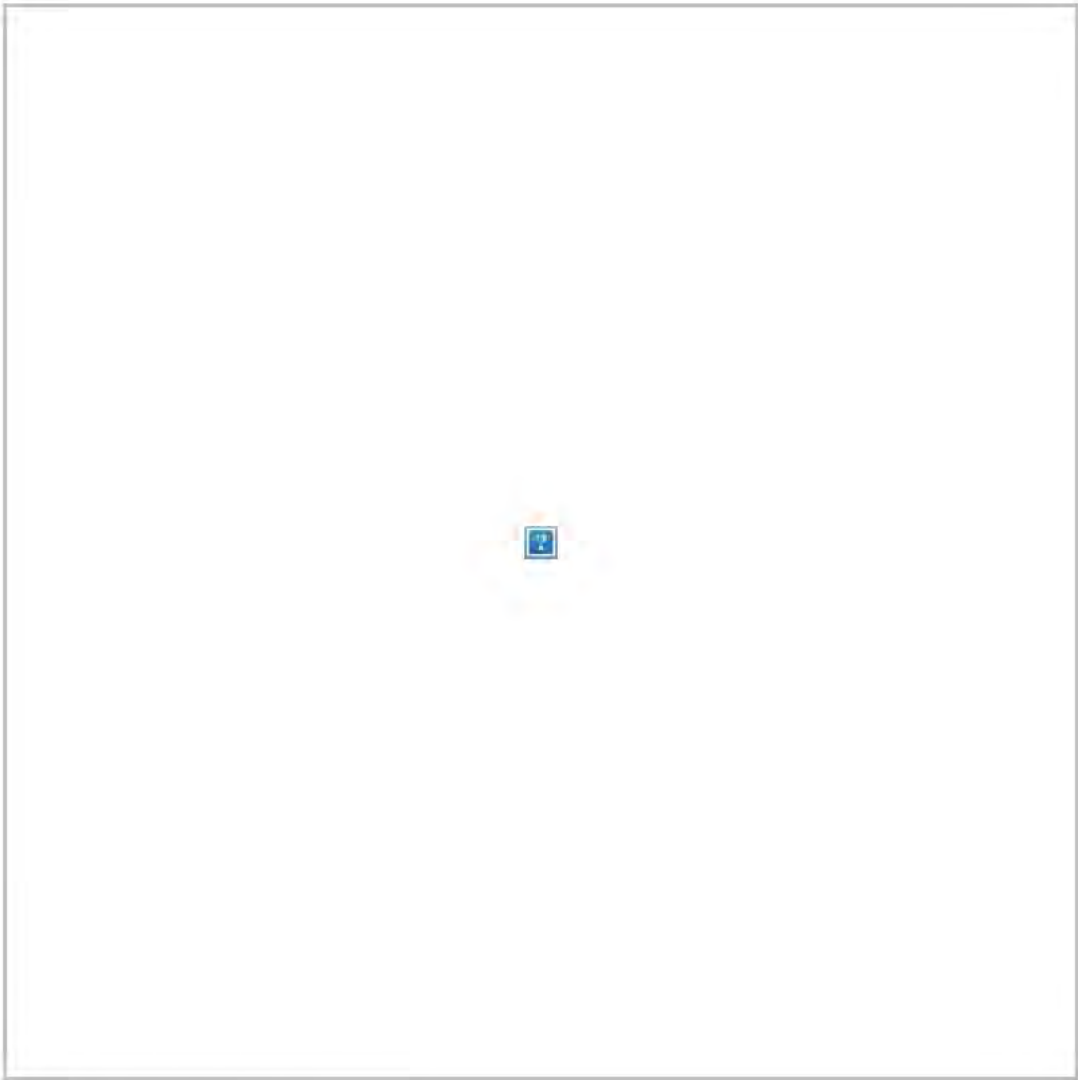


There was an outcry online that the White House omitted Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak's presence at the meeting in an official readout -- and none of the pictures released by the White House showed him. We only found out he was there because a Putin-controlled news agency published their own pictures:

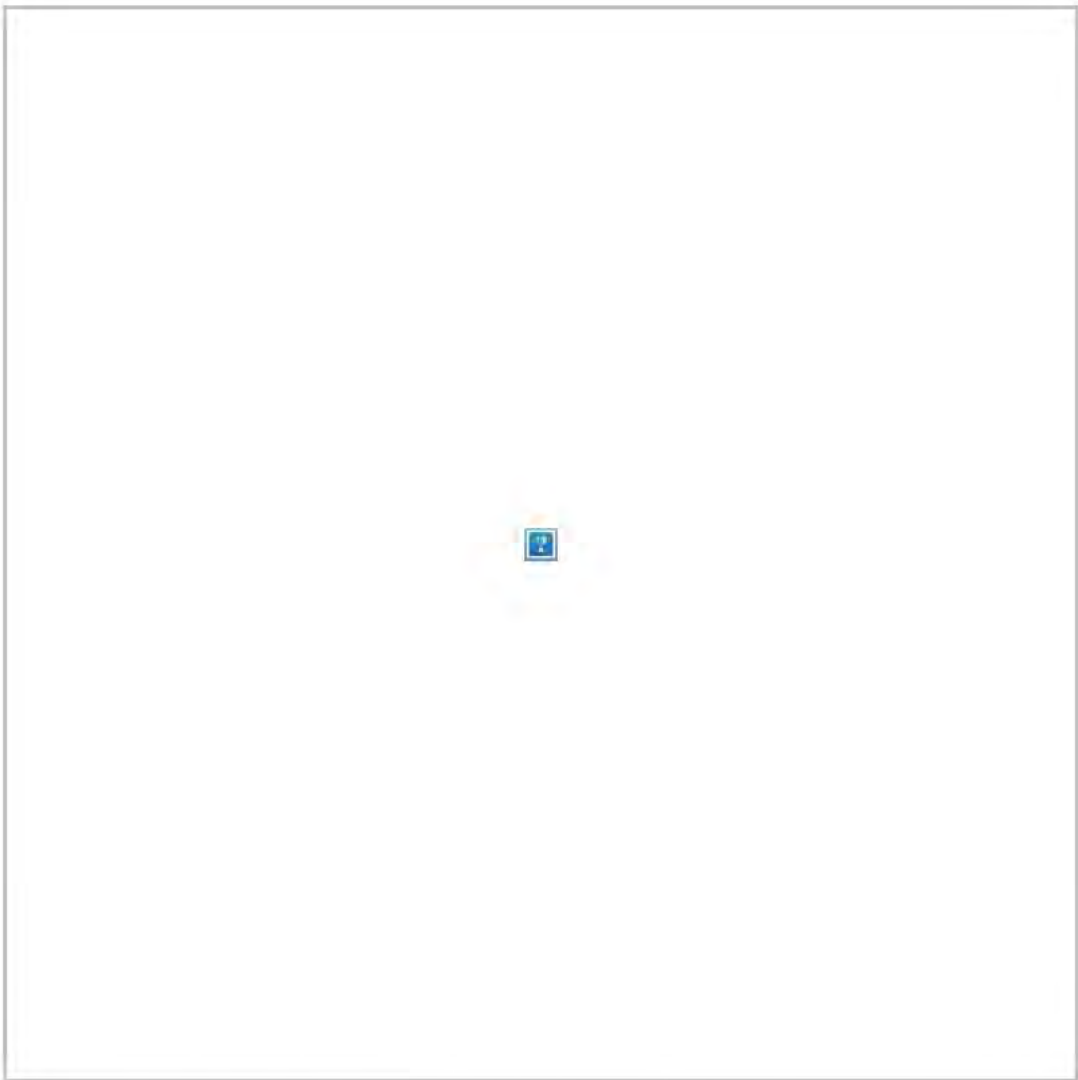




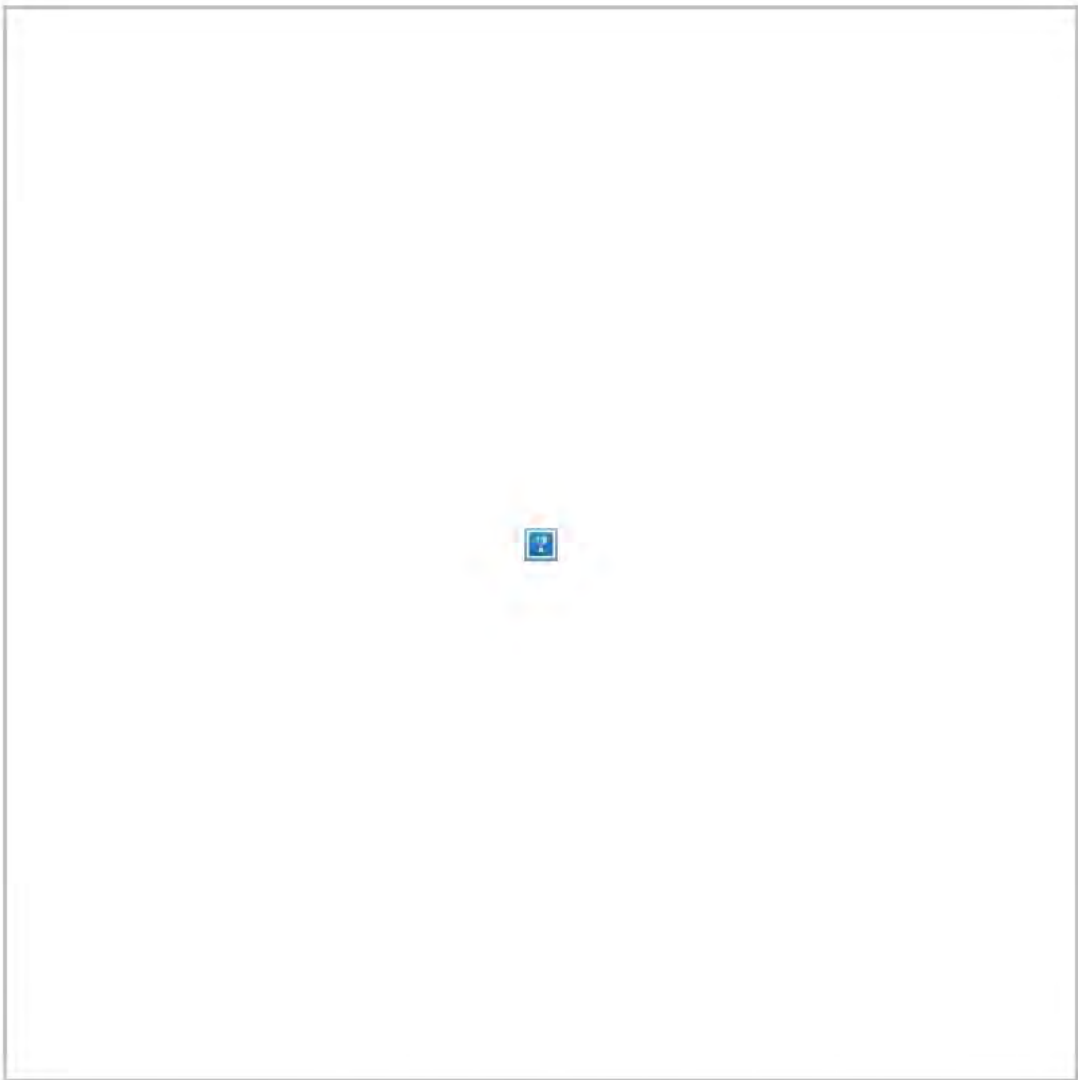
The Russian Embassy continues to troll the U.S. on Twitter:



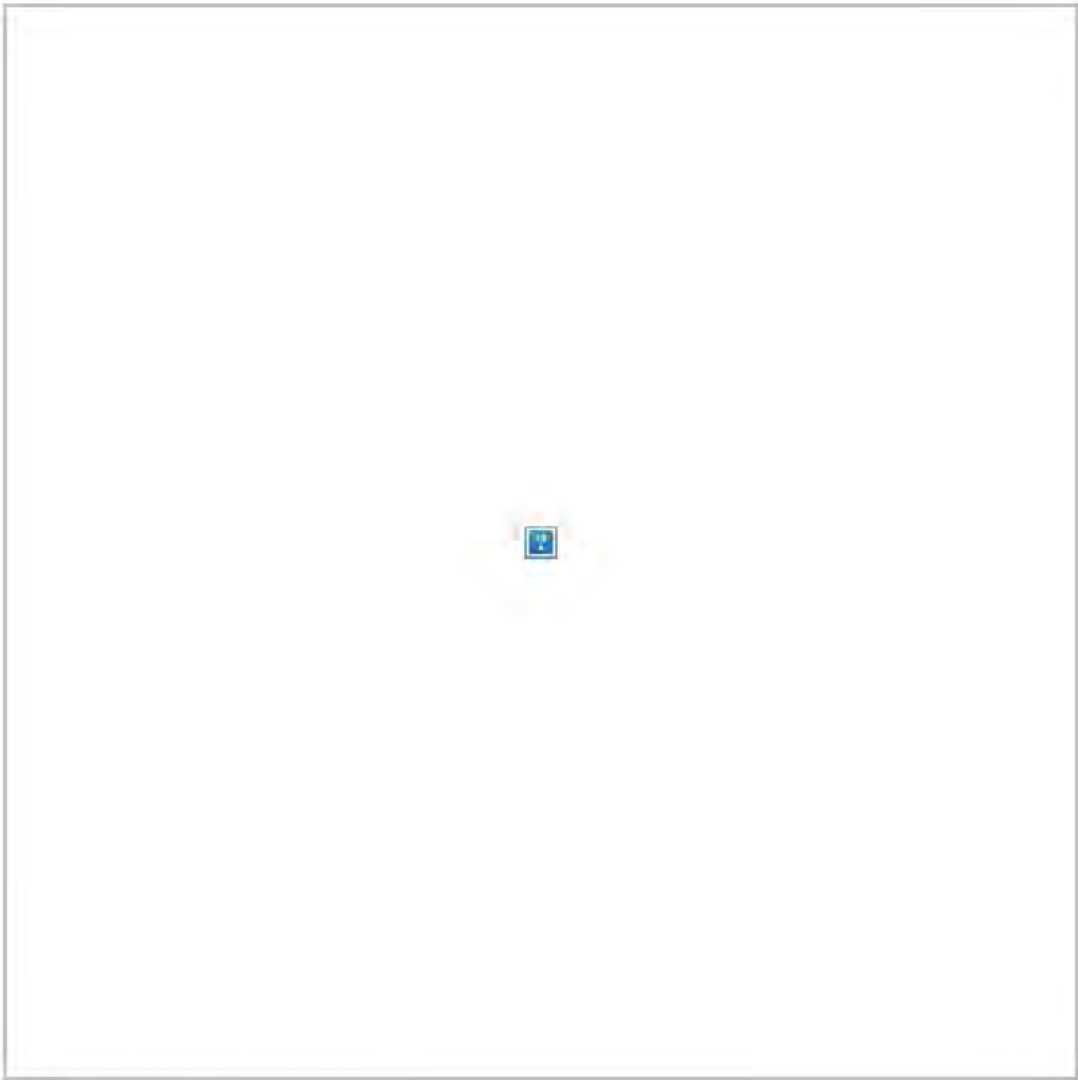
CNN's senior White House correspondent:



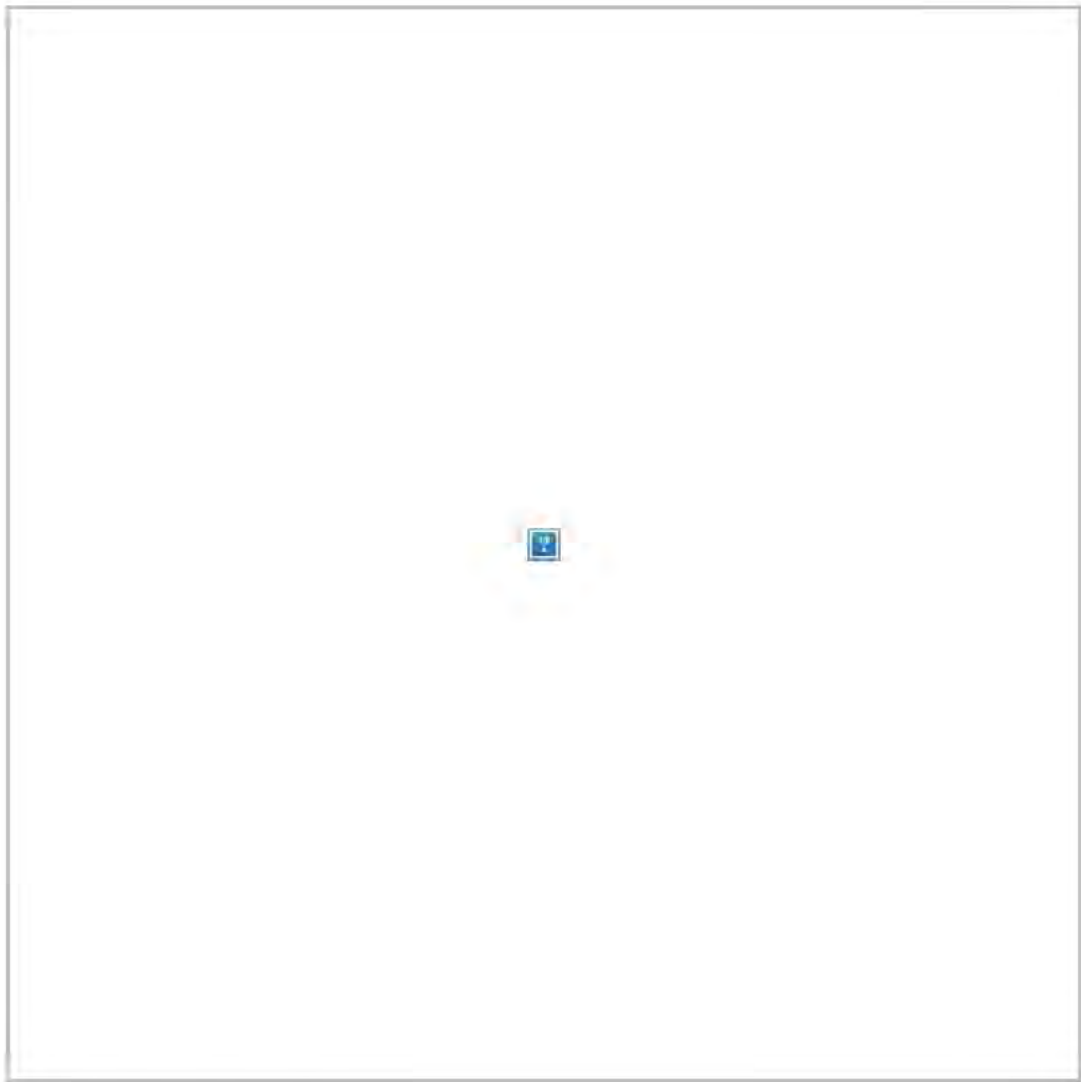
Good point from Jeb Bush's former communications director:



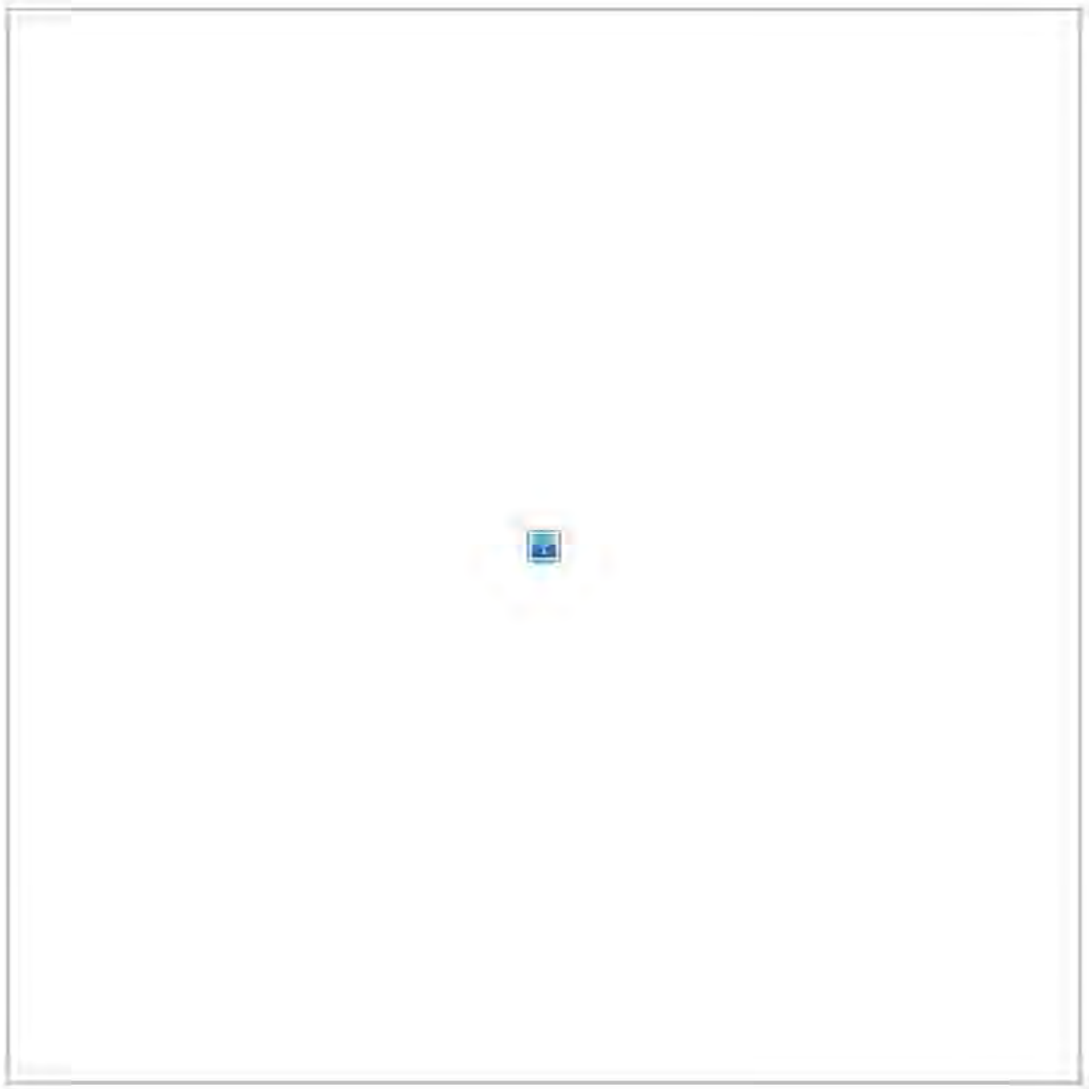
The former strategist for John McCain and John Kasich continues to decry Trump:

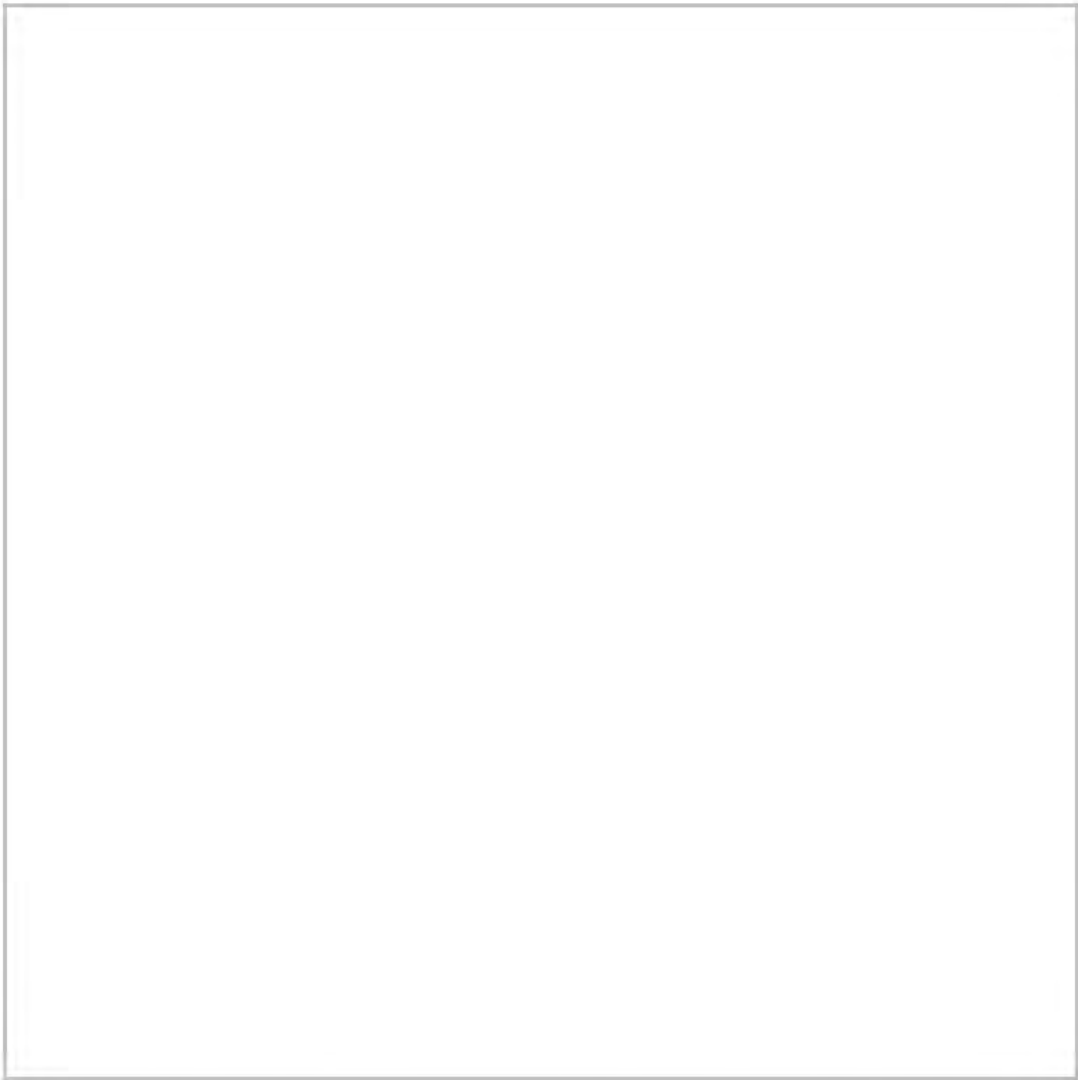


One way of looking at things:

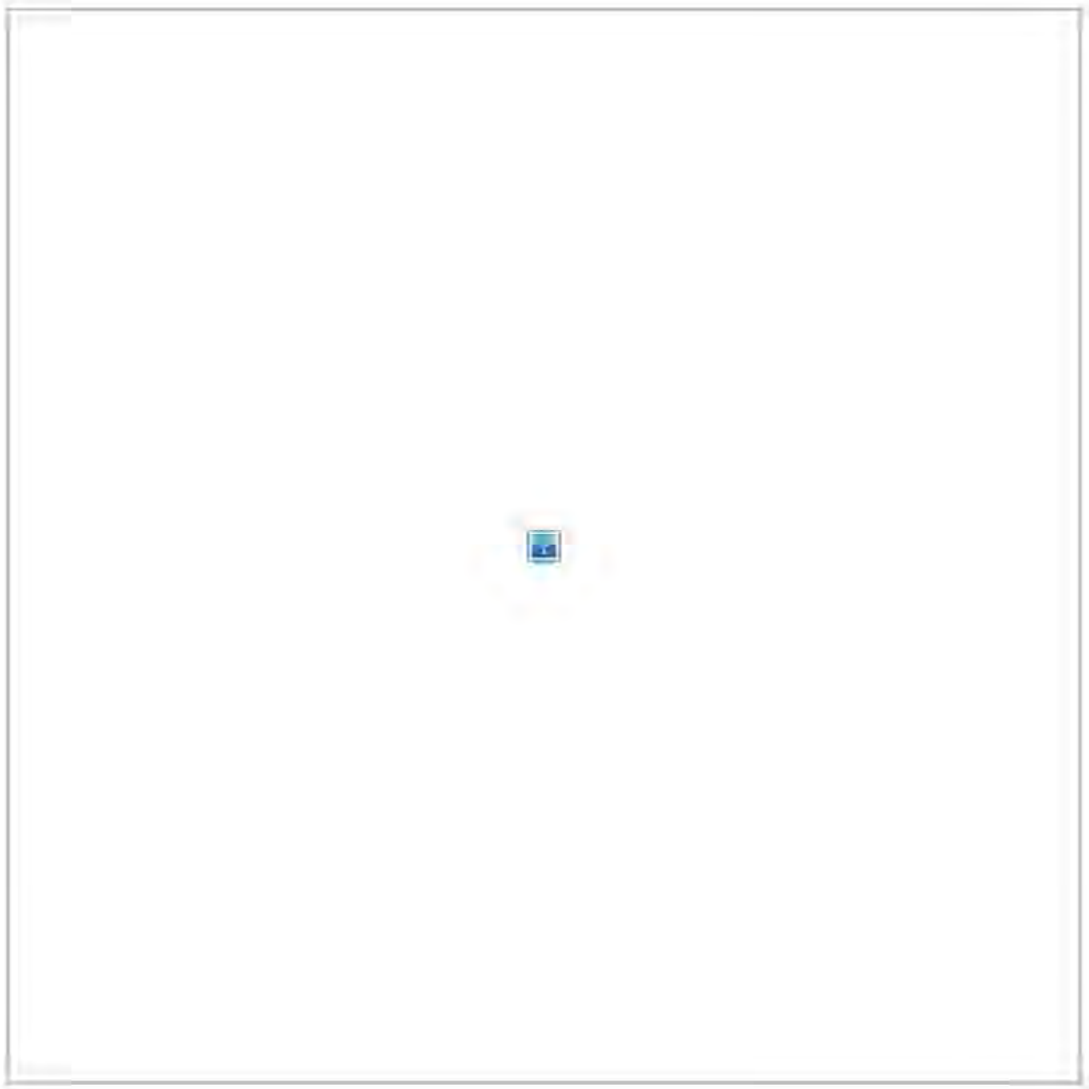


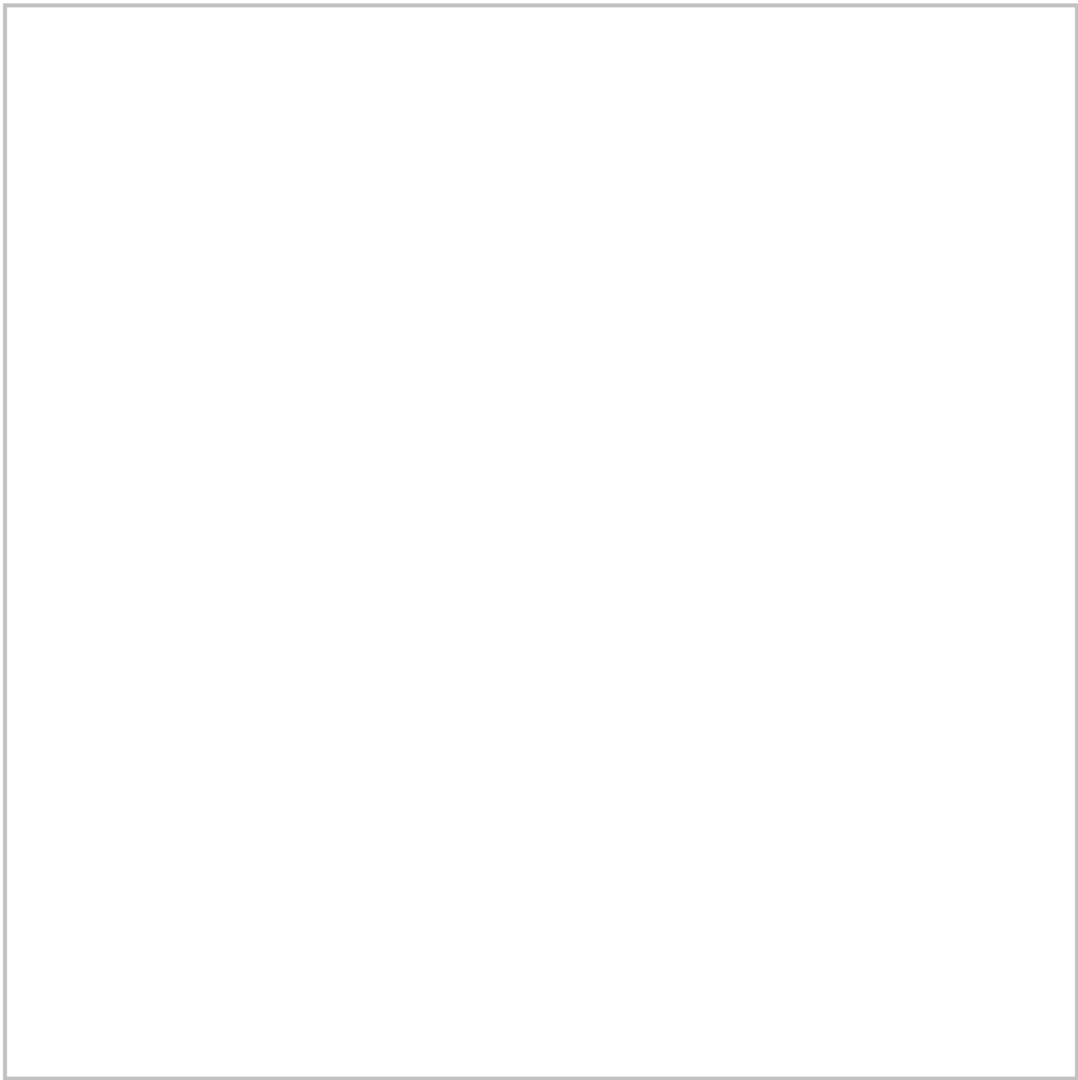
More fact checking:



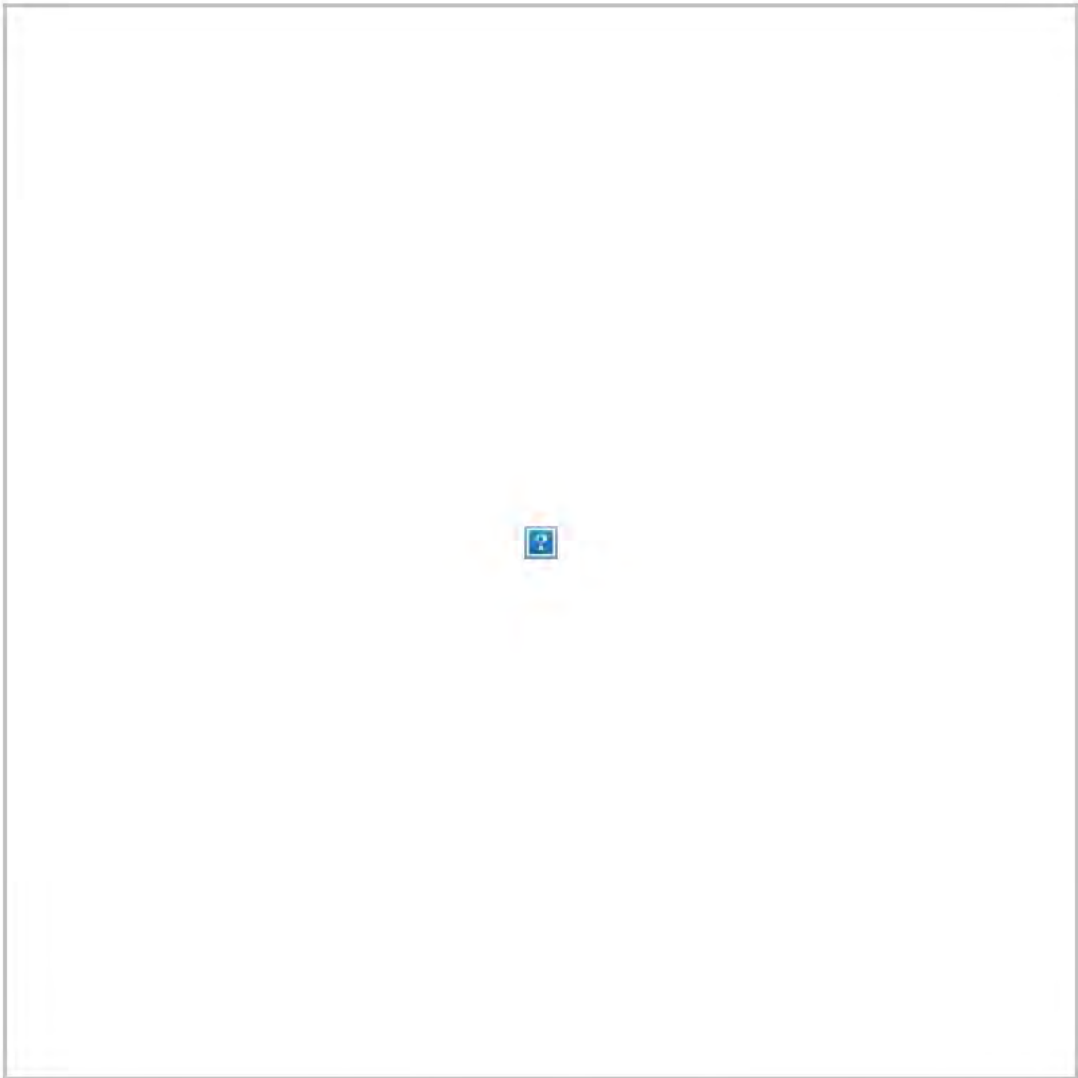


The Boston Globe's Annie Linskey had some fun with Trump's use of the word "showboat" to describe Comey:

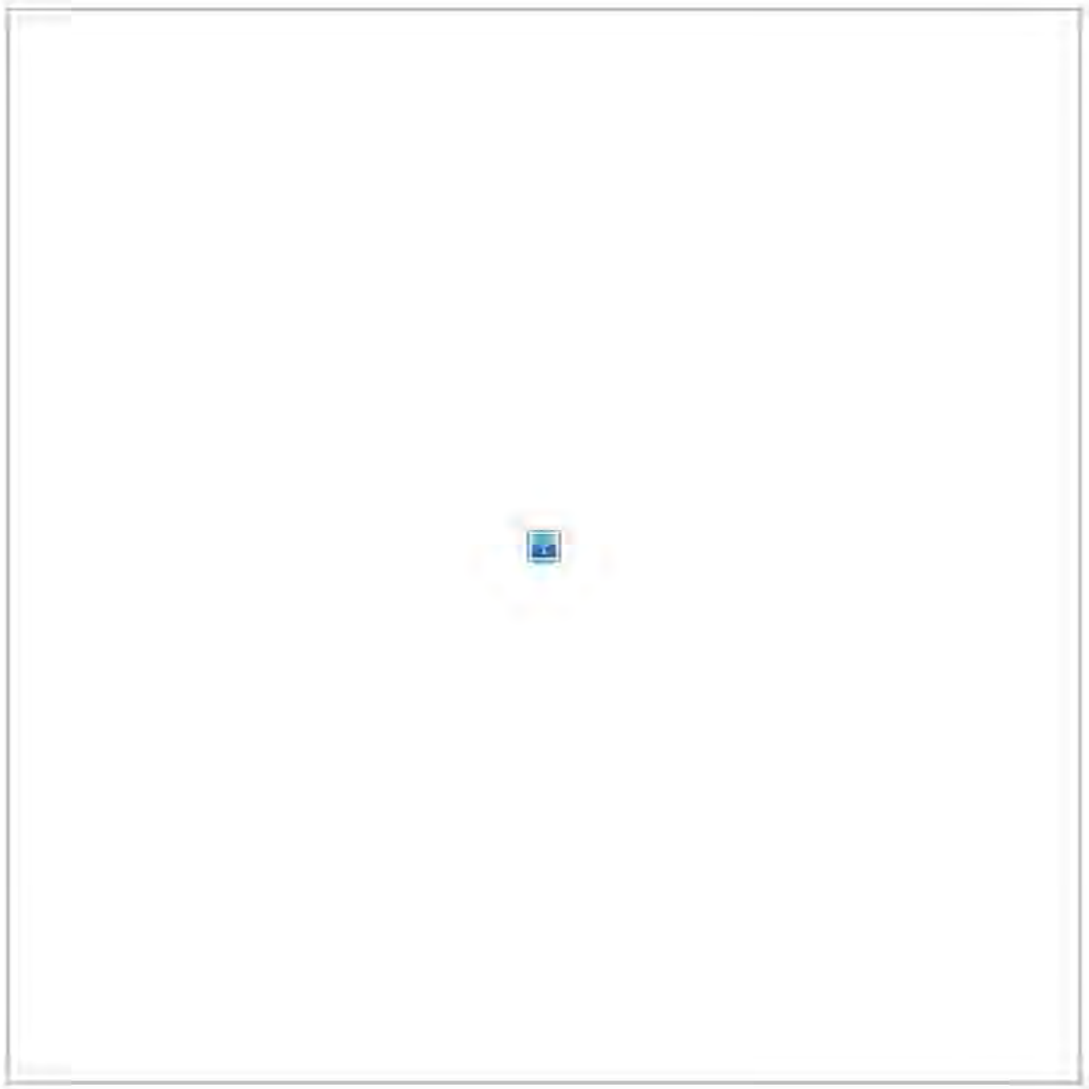


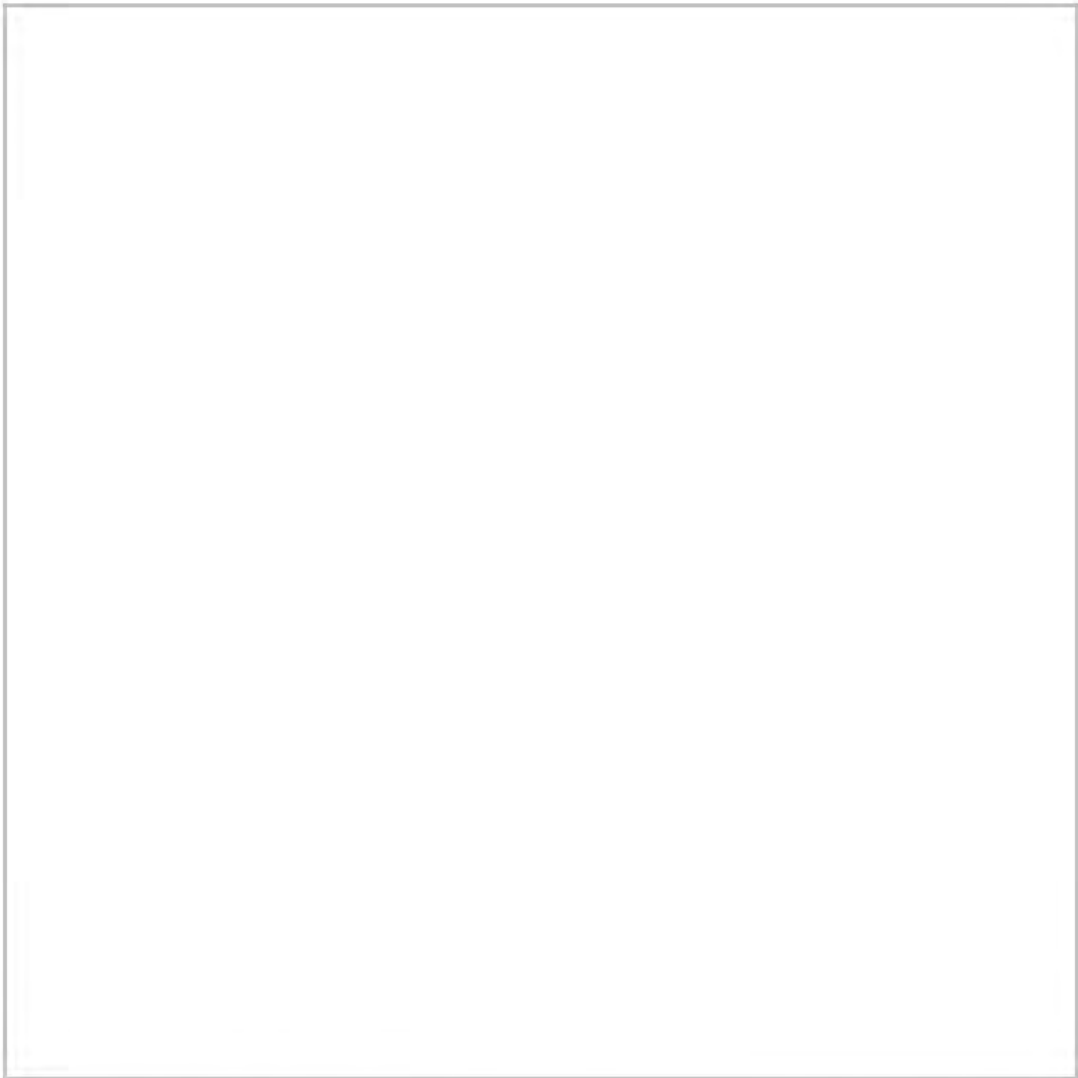


The DCCC is raising money off Comey's ouster:

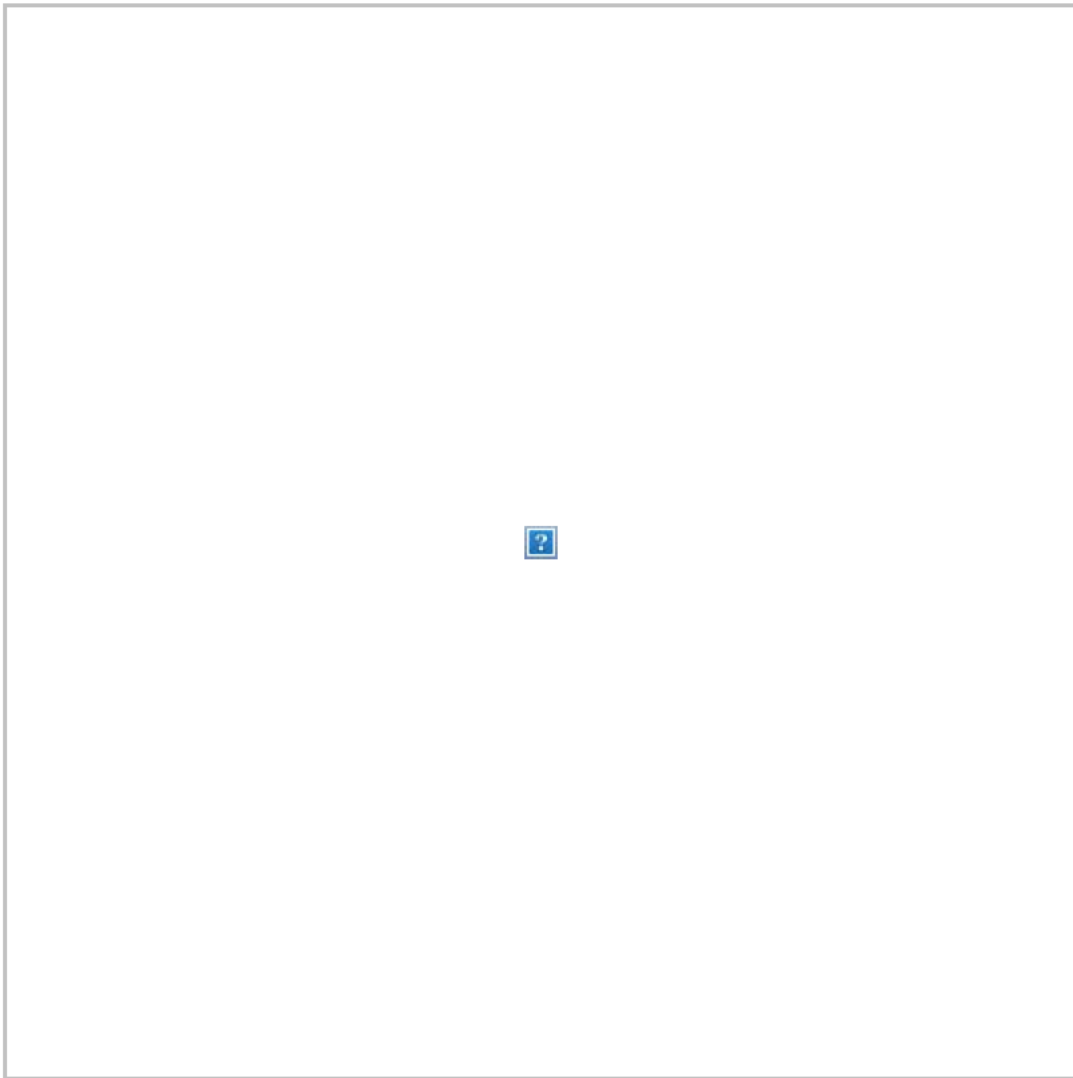


A lot of attention was paid to a random detail in a magazine profile that Trump got two scoops of ice cream for dessert while all of his guests got one.





Wily Republicans, looking to tip the balance of power on the powerful D.C. Circuit, called for Trump to put Merrick Garland in charge of the FBI. Recall that Lee was an outspoken supporter of the GOP strategy to not even give Judge Garland a hearing last year:



GOOD READS FROM ELSEWHERE:

-- Politico Magazine, **[“The Secret Weapon Democrats Don’t Know How to Use,”](#)** by Michael Kruse: “No Democrat in the House of Representatives did what Cheri Bustos did last November. She wasn’t the sole member of her party to win in a congressional district Donald Trump also took—there were 11 others—but she was the only one to post a 20-point landslide, and she did it in agricultural, industrial, blue-collar northwestern Illinois. A former newspaper reporter, the wife of a county sheriff and the mother of three grown sons, the 55-year-old third-term representative has won by wider margins every time she’s

run. If Democrats are going to wrest control of the House from Republicans, argue many party strategists, it's going to happen in large part by doing more of whatever it is Bustos is doing ...

“The Bustos blueprint, she told me ... is rooted in unslick, face-to-face politicking. She shows up. She shakes hands. She asks questions—a lot of questions. When she does talk, she talks as much as she can about jobs and wages and the economy and as little as she can about guns and abortion and other socially divisive issues—which, for her, are ‘no-win conversations,’ she explained. And at a time when members of both parties are being tugged toward their respective ideological poles, the more center-left Bustos has picked her spots to buck such partisanship ...”

-- **The New Yorker, “The Return of Tony Blair,” by Sam Knight:**

“For the first time in a decade, [Tony Blair] has resumed speaking directly to the British public ... to encourage the forty-eight per cent of voters who opposed Brexit to ‘rise up’ and overturn the outcome. ‘I don’t know if we can succeed,’ Blair said. ‘But I do know we will suffer a rancorous verdict from future generations if we do not try.’ He eschews traditional political labels such as left or right, liberal or conservative, preferring the dichotomy ‘open versus closed’ to describe what is happening in the world today. **‘This is what interests me,’ Blair said. ‘Is it possible to define a politics that is what I would call post-ideological?’** ... Brexit was many other things, but it was also the final repudiation of Blairism. The center no longer held, and the country had to choose. It could be open or closed. How the decision plays out will be the central preoccupation of British politics for the next ten years, possibly more ... **For many**

British people, especially those who voted to stay in the E.U. and who fear for the future of their country, the return of Blair ought to be the most plausible and exciting thing in the world. He is the best politician in the country by a mile. He has the answers. But he is also Tony Blair.”

-- “A first-person account of a surreal day in DC”: CNN's Hunter Schwarz breaks down what it's like to be a reporter in Trump's Washington.

HOT ON THE LEFT:

“Police Investigating Teacher For Reportedly Tearing Hijab Off 8-Year-Old Student,” from HuffPost: “New York City education officials have fired a substitute teacher after he reportedly pulled the hijab off an 8-year-old student in the Bronx. Oghenetega Edah, 31, was working as a substitute teacher in a classroom at The Bennington School in the Bronx at the time of the incident on May 2. Edah was reportedly trying to discipline an 8-year-old student when he ripped off her head covering, hurting her eye in the process, according to [an NYPD spokesperson]. The

HOT ON THE RIGHT:

“Assistant principal resigns after argument with teen abortion protesters,” from Justin Wm. Moyer: “An assistant principal in Pennsylvania resigned Thursday after a heated argument last month with two teenage abortion protesters that was caught on video. Zachary Ruff, of STEM Academy in Downingtown, Pa., was filmed confronting two abortion protesters April 21 in front of the school. One protester carried a sign with a graphic image of an aborted fetus. ‘There is no holocaust happening in America,’ said Ruff, who has been with the Downingtown district for 13

student was taken to Jacobi Medical Center for examination and was found to be uninjured. 'I didn't expect a teacher to do that to a child,' the student's father, Mohamed Alzockary, said. 'She's OK right now ... but kids, they're nervous.' This is the latest in a spate of incidents targeting Muslim Americans in recent months ... [including] a spike in classroom bullying and harassment of Muslim students, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center."

years. 'If you want to talk about a holocaust happening in America, go into an inner city, and talk to the poor and underprivileged.' As the argument stretched for almost 20 minutes, Ruff said: 'You and Trump can go to hell' and 'Listen here, son: I'm as gay as the day is long and twice as sunny. I don't give a f — what you think Jesus tells me.' At one point, he sang, 'I Love a Parade' to silence the protesters."

DAYBOOK:

At the White House: Trump will meet with H. R. McMaster and Gary Cohn. In the afternoon, Trump will meet with Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly.

Pence will travel to Billings, Montana, to participate in listening sessions with Montana business leaders in the energy producing and coal mining industry as well as Crow Nation tribal leaders. He will then join Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to tour Westmoreland Coal Company's Absaloka Mine on the Crow Indian Reservation, and participate in a business listening session at Westmoreland

Resources, Inc. Finally, **he'll campaign for Greg Gianforte in the special election to replace Zinke.**

QUOTE OF THE DAY:

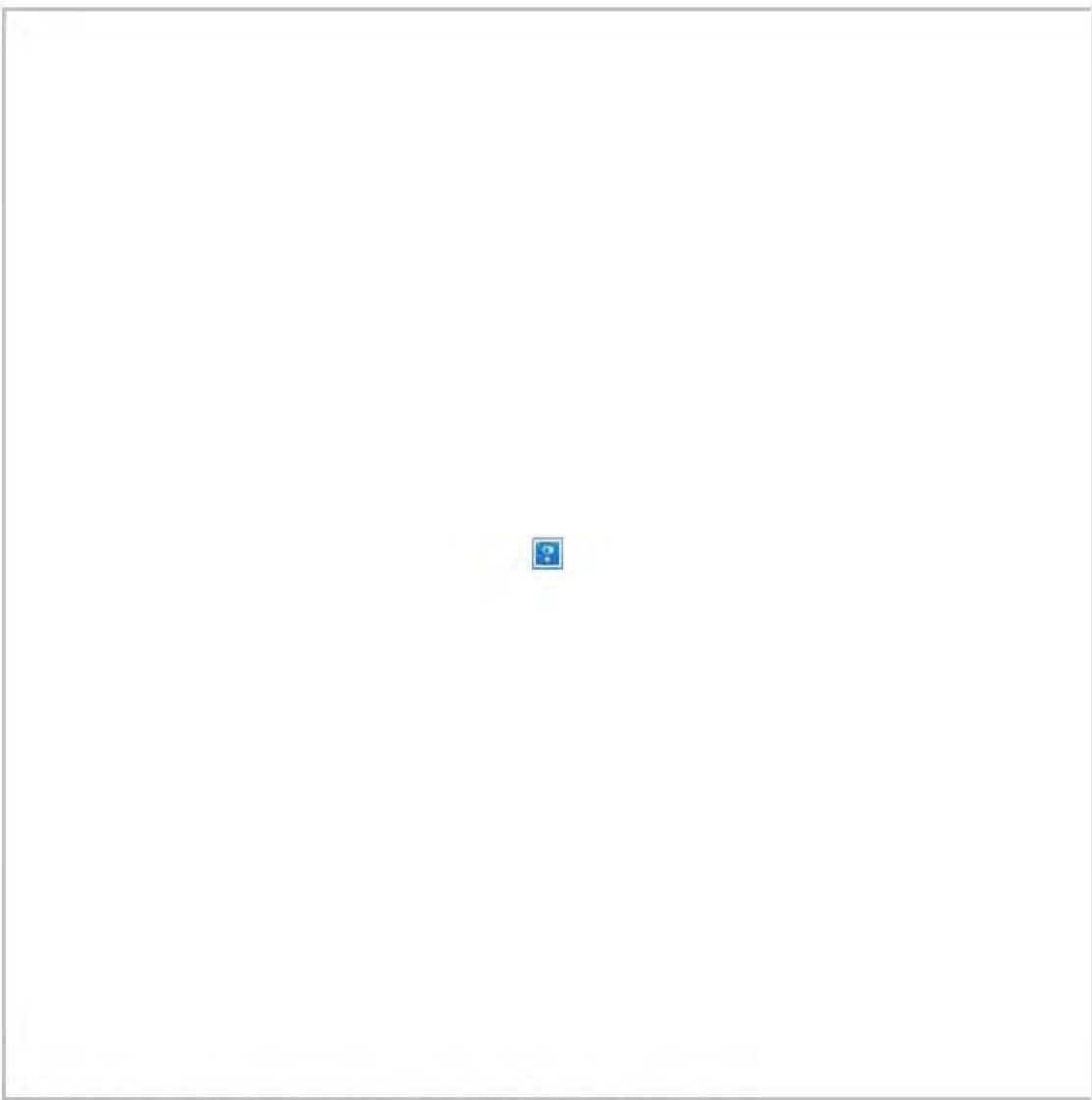
If you happen to spot Robert Mugabe with his eyes closed for long periods during a high-level meeting, don't worry. According to his spokesman, the longtime president of Zimbabwe is not sleeping — he's simply resting his eyes. **“At 93, there is something that happens to the eyes and the President cannot suffer bright lights,” George Charamba said in an interview with a state-run newspaper. “If you look at his poise, he looks down, avoids direct lighting.”** The spokesman added that he feels “like a failure” when the press reports that “the President is sleeping in conferences.” (Adam Taylor)

NEWS YOU CAN USE IF YOU LIVE IN D.C.:

-- TGIF! (Unfortunately, it's going to be rainy and cold until Sunday.) The **Capital Weather Gang** forecasts: “Clouds and sprinkles dominate our morning, with steadier rain arriving either during the late afternoon or into the evening. Plan on adding extra time for your evening commute just in case. We should briefly be able to pop into the mid-50s to near 60 before the steadier rain arrives. Yep, that's well below our average high temperature of 74 for the city.”

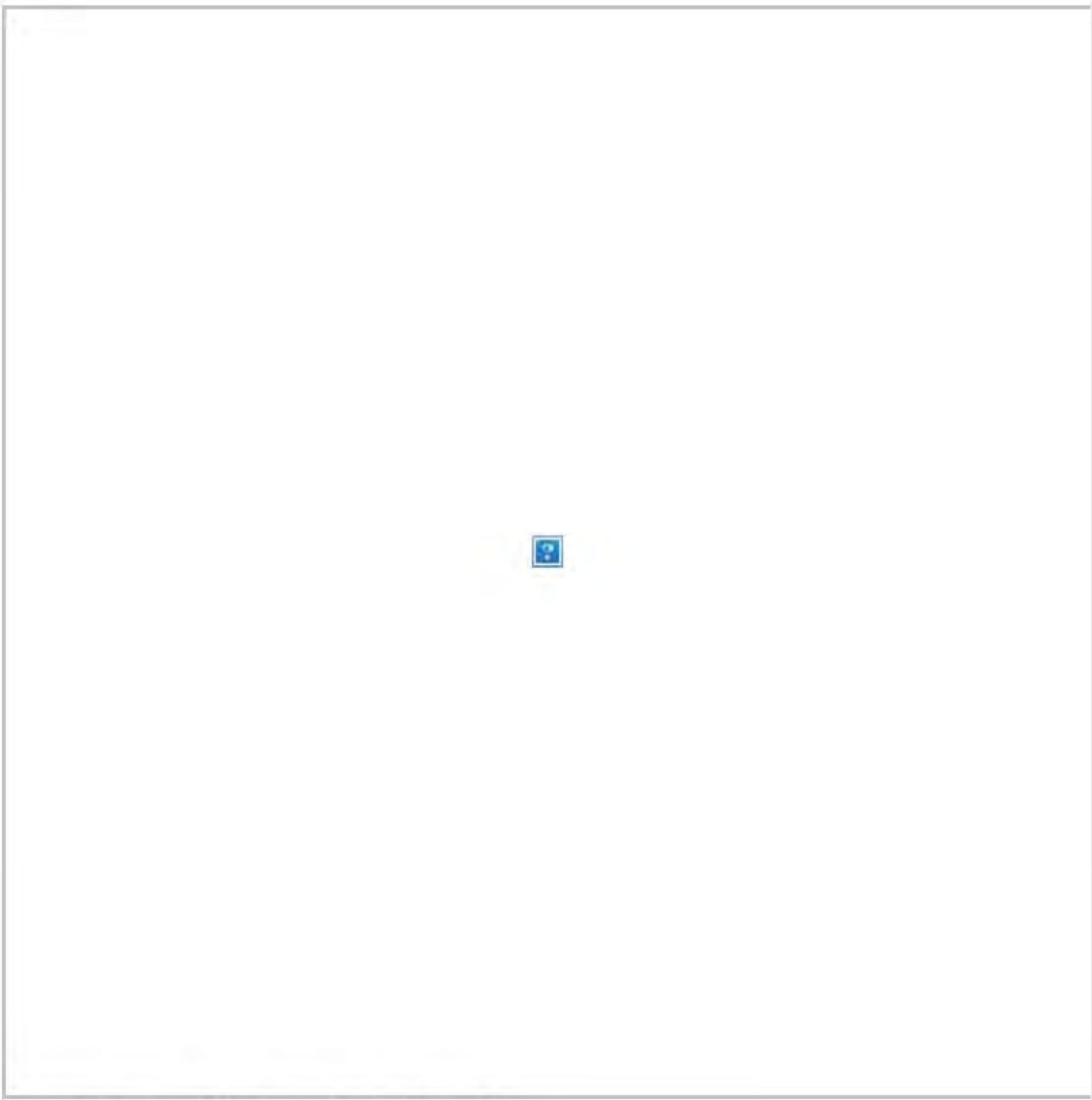
VIDEOS OF THE DAY:

Stephen Colbert responds to Trump calling him a "no-talent guy:"



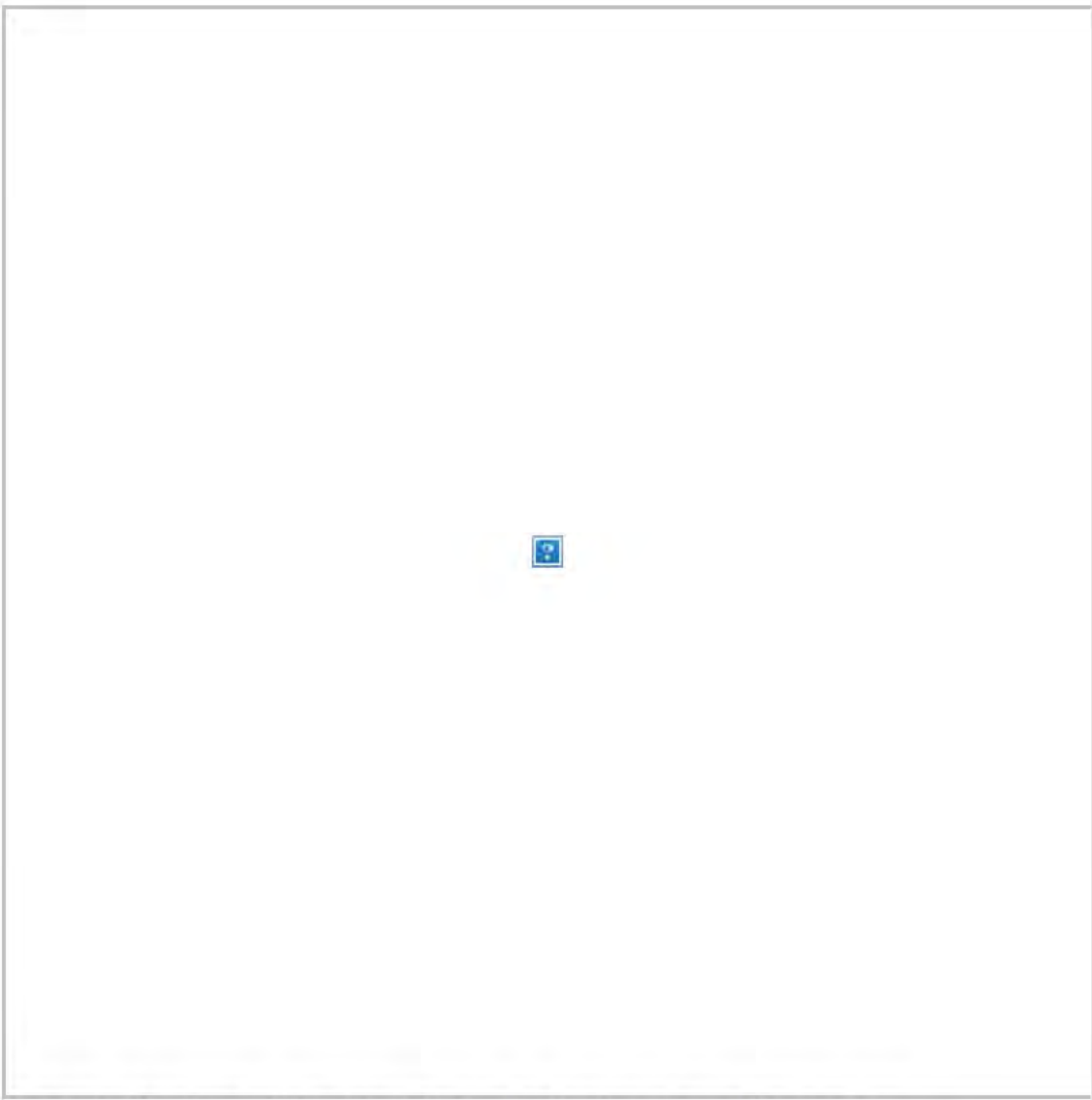
Stephen Reacts To Trump Calling Him 'A No-Talent Guy'

And Colbert's full monologue:



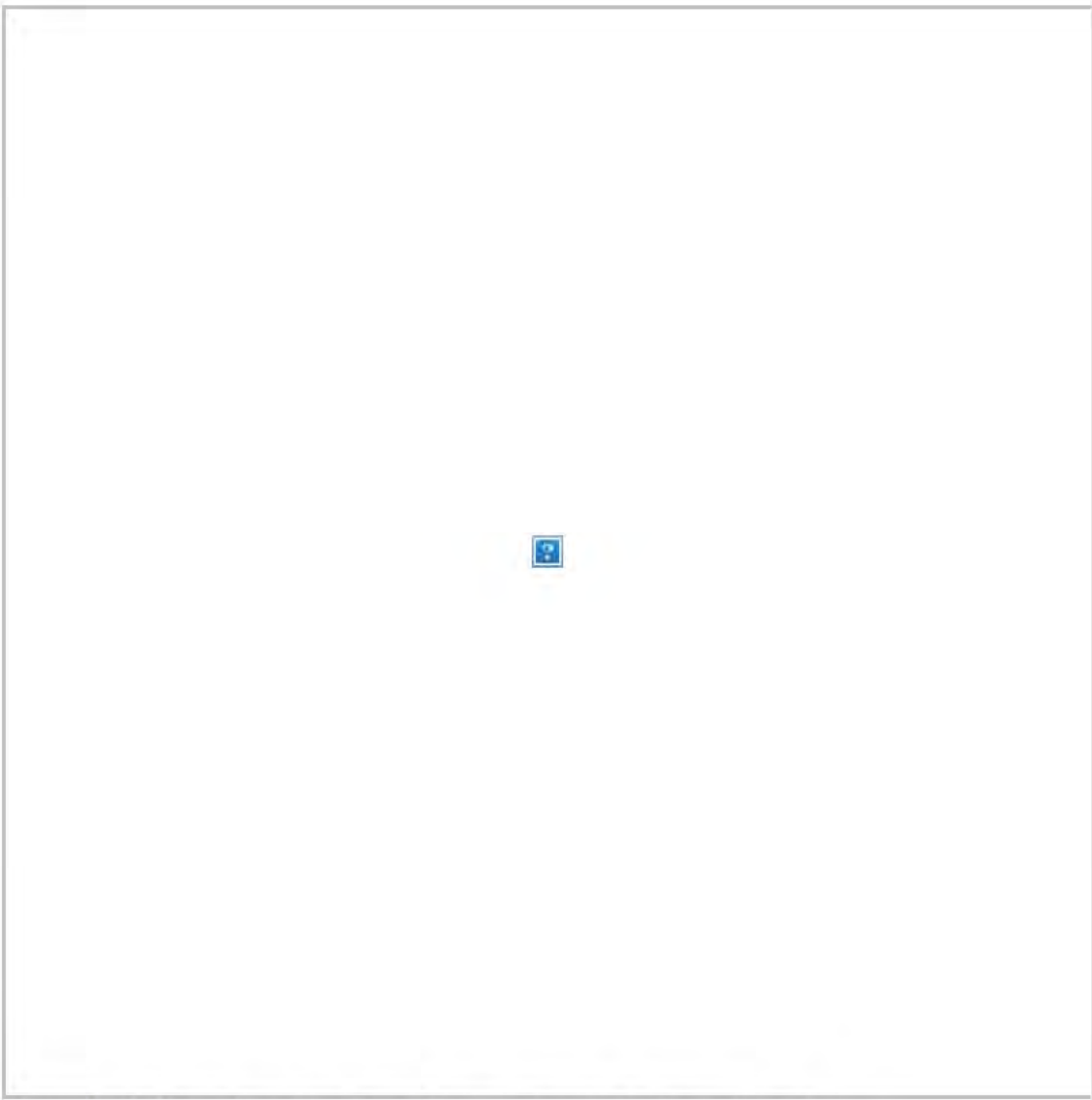
James Comey, You Just Got Trump'd!

Watch this adorable kid try to get an apology from Mike Pence:



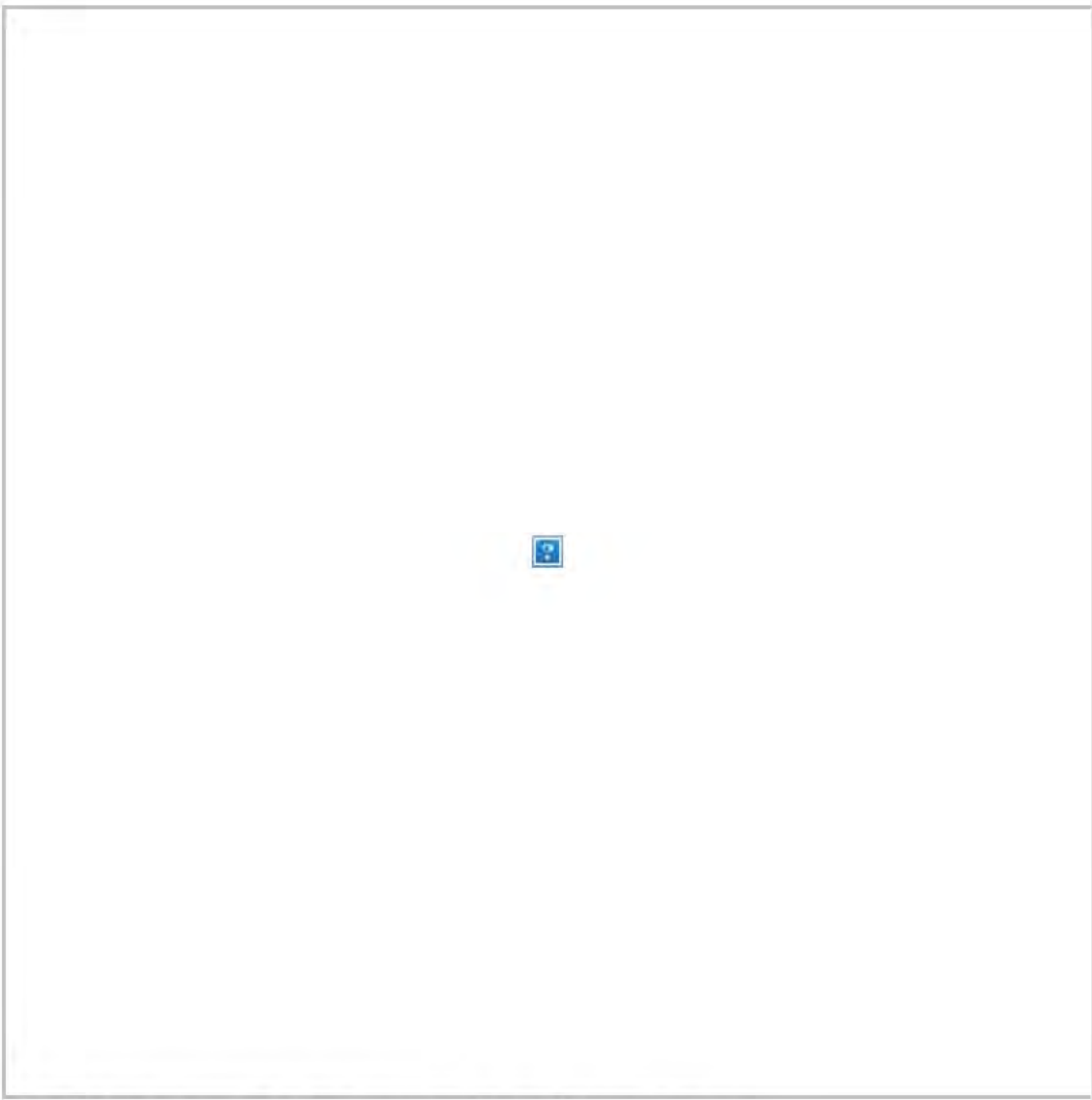
Adorable Kid Stops At Nothing To Get An Apology From Mike Pence

Seth Meyers takes a closer look at the Comey firing:



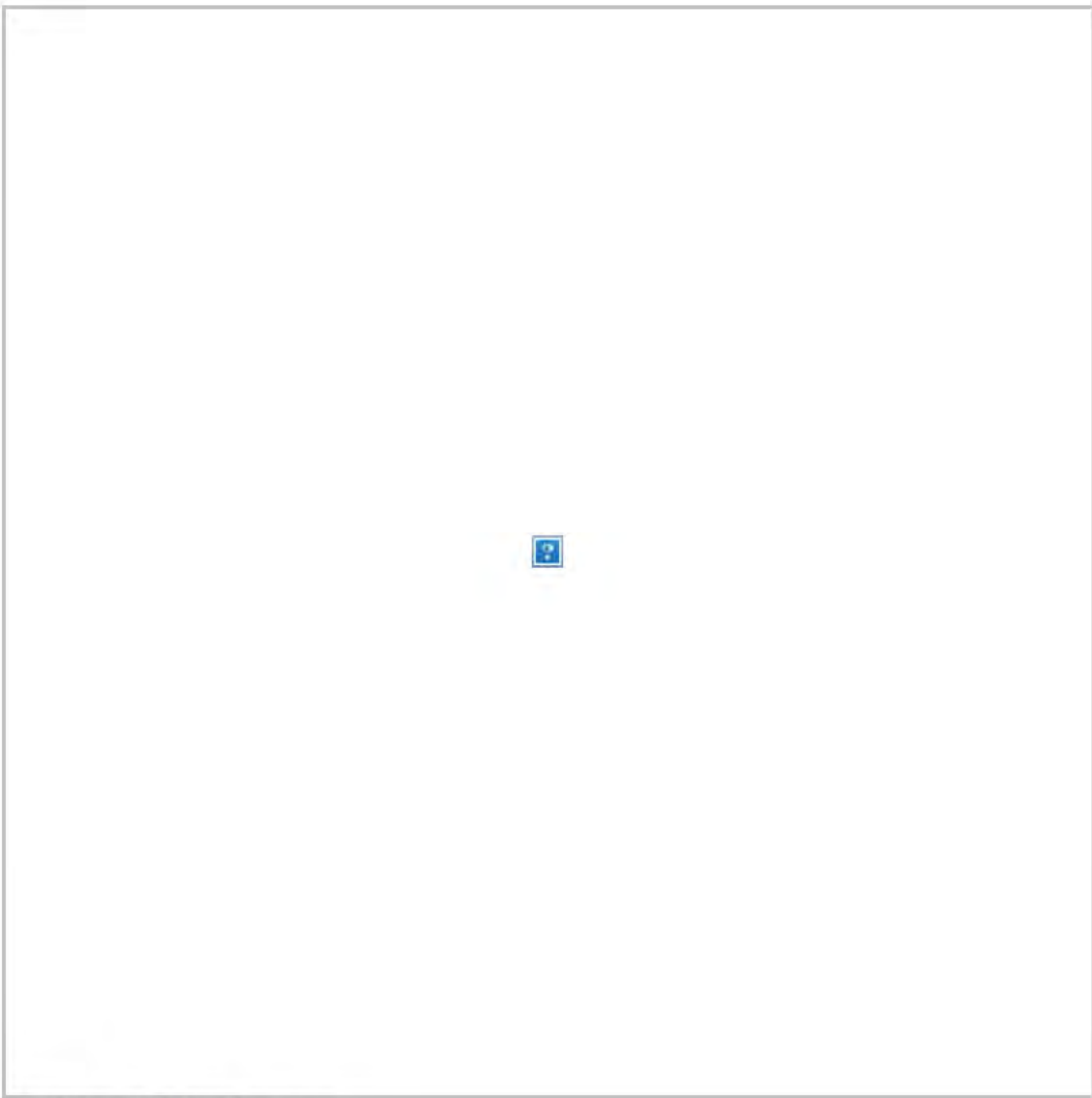
Trump's Shifting Story on Firing James Comey: A Closer Look

See New Orleans react to the removal of Confederate statues:



New Orleans reacts to the removal of Confederate statues

Happy Mother's Day:



Hashtags: #MomQuotes

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