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WHITE HOUSE

Trump's Obama obsession

The president finds his predecessor to be a convenient foil as he wades through persistent controversy.

By **EDWARD-ISAAC DOVERE** | 03/04/17 11:55 AM EST | Updated 03/04/17 01:01 PM EST



“This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!” Trump tweeted of Obama on Saturday morning. | Getty

Donald Trump just can't quit Barack Obama.

From entering politics as the chief promoter of the birtherism conspiracy—complete with claims of mysterious calls coming in to him with new information to detectives he claimed he sent to Hawaii but were never heard from again—to waking up Saturday morning tweeting, “How low has President Obama gone to tapp [sic] my phones,” Obama's always there.

There's a political advantage to it—Obama is just as infuriating a figure as he was six weeks ago to the Republican base and the pro-Trump media that powered the president's campaign.

And there's a diversionary advantage to churning up a new controversy that this time takes away airtime and mindshare from the questions of just how many top administration officials had just how many undisclosed meetings with Russian officials. But there also seems to be a true sense in Trump's mind that Obama is practically sitting beneath the floorboards of the West Wing, chipping away at his presidency.

So much for Trump trying to make them out as buddies.

"I was tough on him, he was tough on me, and I like him, he likes me. I think he likes me. I mean, you're going to have to ask him, but I think he likes me," Trump said in an interview with Sean Hannity shortly after the inauguration. A few weeks later in an interview with Bill O'Reilly, that had morphed into, "We get along. I don't know if he'll admit this, but he likes me."

"This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!" Trump tweeted Saturday morning.

And it's not just the Russia furor that has Trump bringing up Obama. The list goes on: complaints about a rocky transition that Trump backtracked on the day he made them, crowds at the inauguration that he said were bigger than Obama's despite immediate evidence to the contrary, insisting that the raid in Yemen in which a Navy SEAL was killed was put through by Obama though it was ordered by him.

WHITE HOUSE

The definitive Trump-Russia timeline of events

By **MATTHEW NUSSBAUM**

White House press secretary Sean Spicer did not respond Saturday morning to questions about whether he knows of a reason why Obama is on the president's mind so much, or whether Trump still thinks he has a good relationship with Obama. Obama's current spokespeople also declined to respond about the current status of the relationship, or whether they've

continued to talk on the phone as they were doing with some frequency during the transition.

Kevin Lewis, a spokesman for Obama, aggressively pushed back against Trump's accusations. "A cardinal rule of the Obama Administration was that no White House official ever interfered with any independent investigation led by the Department of Justice," Lewis said in a statement. "As part of that practice, neither President Obama nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any U.S. citizen. Any suggestion otherwise is simply false."

The Obama circle continues to be frustrated that Trump's comments are taken seriously, in the same way they were when Trump was taking potshots from the sidelines while Obama was in the White House.

"No President can order a wiretap. Those restrictions were put in place to protect citizens from people like you," tweeted Ben Rhodes, the former deputy national security adviser who's working for Obama in his new office.

Responding to Trump's tweet that "I'd bet a good lawyer could make a great case out of the fact that President Obama was tapping my phones in October, just prior to Election!" Rhodes tweeted, "No. They couldn't. Only a liar could do that."

Exasperated and annoyed, Obama aides try to cast their problem with Trump continually pulling their old boss into the conversation as about more than politics.

"My concern about Trump isn't his day-to-day nonsense, it's the notion that he could be governed by conspiracy theories and paranoia in a time of actual crisis," said Bill Burton, former deputy White House press secretary for Obama. "All the rest of this is just the mutterings of a man deeply in over his head."

"No surprise he's trying to change the subject, but this kind of diversionary maneuver works better in a campaign than in government when you have to deal in facts, and in this area, some very bad facts," said Anita Dunn, who was a White House communications director for Obama.

Trump accuses Obama of 'wire tapping' Trump Tower phones

By ELI STOKOLS

Trump's accusation of his predecessor Saturday hit a new high, but not one out of step even in a week centered on an address to a joint session of Congress that was strategically less aggressive and to many seemed like the high point of his presidency so far.

Asked in his pre-address interview on Fox & Friends about the protests going on at Republican lawmakers' town halls, Trump said, "I think he is behind it." Asked about the leaks of national security information, Trump said, "I think that President Obama is behind it because his people are certainly behind it."

And then in the speech to Congress, Trump tweaked some statistics as he urged, "we must honestly acknowledge the circumstances we inherited," including the number of people out of the workforce, the debt racked up under Obama, the trade deficit and "a series of tragic foreign policy disasters."

There are elements of undeniable truth to Trump's claims: Organizing for Action, the group formed out of Obama's old campaign apparatus, is helping organize some of the protests, and some of the leaks appear to have been coming from people in career positions who served during the Obama administration. As has been made partially public, there was a massive intelligence investigation into the Trump's campaigns possible ties to Russia, elements of which have continued to leak. And despite Obama's efforts toward a smooth transition and so far holding to the presidential tradition of not criticizing his successor, he couldn't have been clearer that he didn't want Trump anywhere near the Oval Office.

But even as Trump has lodged severe claims against his predecessor, the president has not offered evidence directly implicating Obama, who's spending most of his days in his new Washington office setting up his foundation and preparing to write a book that he signed a multi-million dollar deal for this week.

If there was a wiretap, after all, Trump now has the authority as president to make it public. Matt Miller, a former Justice Department spokesman under

Attorney General Eric Holder, tweeted, “By confirming it publicly, Trump has also pretty much guaranteed no one can be charged for leaking the existence of this FISA warrant. Oops!”

As is usually the case, Trump’s supporters in the conservative media gave him all he seems to feel he needs. The Twitter fury that Trump greeted the world with Saturday morning appears to have wormed its way from conservative radio host Mark Levin to White House chief strategist Steve Bannon’s former Breitbart News website to the president pecking out on his phone, “Just found out that Obama had my ‘wires tapped’ in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!”

Very quickly, he got an echo from a reliable source.

“What did OBAMA know and when did he know it??” Hannity wrote on Twitter.

Daniel Lippman contributed to this report.