



NEW YORK: This file photo taken on January 11, 2017 shows US President-elect Donald Trump whispers to his daughter Ivanka during a press conference at Trump Tower. — AFP

IVANKA TRUMP: A WHITE HOUSE FORCE, JUST NOT AN 'EMPLOYEE'

A BRAND ALL TO HER OWN

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump will have a security clearance, a West Wing office and the ear of her father on important policy matters. But don't call her an employee. When it comes to government work, "employee" is more than just a word. That designation triggers an array of transparency and ethical provisions, including a law prohibiting conflicts of interest. Government watchdogs are concerned that by refusing to call Ivanka Trump an employee, White House counsel Don McGahn could be attempting to give her a loophole if she improperly mingles her government policy roles with her business and financial interests.

In a letter yesterday to McGahn, they ask him to reconsider, saying the position as designed "creates a middle space that does not exist." It is signed by two former White House lawyers and three other transparency and ethics advocates, all of whom have been highly critical of the Trump administration's approach to ethics. "On the one hand, her position will provide her with the privileges and opportunities for service that attach to being a White House employee," they write. "On the other hand, she remains the owner of a private business who is free from the ethics and conflicts rules that apply to all White House employees." The White House rejects that notion.

An unprecedented situation

As an adult first daughter with an interest in politics and a clothing and lifestyle brand of her own, Ivanka Trump is in an unprecedented situation. There's no protocol for this, said a senior White House official who requested anonymity to discuss a personnel matter. She's family, not an employee. Another person close to Ivanka Trump earlier told The Associated Press that Ivanka believes she can offer more independent perspective to her father by not serving as a White House staffer.

Richard Painter, one of the letter's signatories and President George W. Bush's chief ethics counselor, said he cannot recall a White House that had such high-powered "non-employees." One of the most politically active close relatives of a sitting president was Hillary Clinton. And she successfully fought to be considered a federal employee because of the privacy benefits it involves. A June 1993 ruling by a federal appeals court enabled Clinton to keep secret the details of the health care reform panel that she led.

Ivanka Trump is choosing to be in a less formal role than her husband, Jared Kushner, who is a senior adviser to the president and, as an employee, must follow the rules. She has relinquished control of her brand but, like her father, continues to own and financially benefit from her businesses. She will "voluntarily comply with the rules that would apply if she were a government employee, even though she is not," her attorney Jamie Gorelick said this week. Gorelick, who also helped Kushner through the White House appointment process, said McGahn's office agreed with the decision. Ivanka Trump and Kushner have said they will not accept government pay.

Fred Wertheimer, one of the authors of the letter to McGahn and president of the Washington watchdog Democracy 21, said Ivanka Trump "should not be treated differently than any other government employee just because she is the president's daughter." "This is untenable. She can make a decision at any time not to comply and there's no penalty or sanction whatsoever," he said. "We don't normally have White House employees voluntarily complying with rules that were enacted to protect the American people."

The senior White House official left open the possibility of altering the Ivanka Trump arrangement at some point - again stressing that this is new territory. Others in Trump's White House have drawn outside scrutiny for govern-

ment work without the usual set of rules that accompanies it. Billionaire Carl Icahn, a special adviser to the president on regulatory reform and one of his close friends, merited a 700-word press release when he agreed to join the administration. The announcement concluded that "he will not be serving as a federal employee or a special government employee and will not have any specific duties."

Sprawling portfolio

Icahn has a sprawling business portfolio that is directly affected by government regulations, and at the same time Trump has tasked him to help fulfill his campaign promise of reducing regulations. Since Icahn isn't technically a White House employee, he's had to do nothing to clear out potential conflicts of interest. Bloomberg News reported earlier this month that Icahn is already making his mark on policy. He's lobbying the Trump administration to change a government rule that forces refineries - including his own - to buy renewable fuel credits.

Icahn's energy interests and his advocacy for Scott Pruitt as head of the Environmental Protection Agency prompted seven Democratic senators to write in February to McGahn demanding a fuller explanation of what exactly his White House role is. "Publicly reported facts suggest a conflict of interest between Mr. Icahn and advice he gave President Trump on the nomination of Mr. Pruitt," the senators wrote. Having received no answer, they followed up with a second letter to McGahn this month. Wertheimer calls the Icahn situation "possibly the worst conflict of interest I've ever seen."

White House spokeswoman Stephanie Grisham said Icahn is in no way a government employee or official. "He is simply a private citizen whose opinion the president respects and whom the president speaks with from time to time," she said. — AP

THE WIRETAP FLAP FROM TWEETS TO CAPITOL HILL

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's startling allegation that former President Barack Obama tapped his phones during last year's election is pitting the White House against U.S. intelligence officials, sparking grave concern in law enforcement circles and alarming Democrats and Republicans alike. A look at the controversy:

Trump's allegation

On Saturday, March 4, while at his Florida estate, Trump angrily tweeted that Obama was behind a politically motivated plot to upend his campaign. He alleged that the former president conducted surveillance in October at Trump Tower, the New York skyscraper where he ran his campaign and transition. He also maintains a residence there.

He compared the alleged surveillance to "Nixon/Watergate" and "McCarthyism." Moreover, he called Obama a "Bad (or sick) guy." The tweets reflected the president's growing frustration with swirling reports about his advisers' alleged ties to Russia. Questions about his campaign's ties to Russia have been compounded by US intelligence agencies' assessment that Russia interfered with the election to help Trump triumph over Hillary Clinton, along with disclosures about his aides' contacts with a Russian official.

Obama denies it's true

No president can legally order a wiretap against a US citizen. Obtaining one would require officials at the Justice Department to seek permission from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act court, which is shrouded in secrecy. Obama spokesman Kevin Lewis said a "cardinal rule" of the Obama administration was that no White House official ever interfered in Justice Department investigations, which are supposed to be conducted free of political influence. "As part of that practice, neither President Obama nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any US citizen," Lewis said, adding that "any suggestion otherwise is simply false."

Trump kicks it to committee

A few days later, Trump asked Congress to investigate his allegations. Without saying where the president got the information that led to his tweets, White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Trump was "going off information that he's seen." If the allegation were true, she said, "this is the greatest overreach and the greatest abuse of power that I think we've ever seen and a huge attack on democracy itself."

Trump stands alone

With Democrats and some Republicans on Capitol Hill refusing to embrace Trump's wiretap allegation, the president was out on a limb. Sen John McCain, R-Ariz, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, pressured Trump to provide the public with more information about his allegation. "The dimensions of this are huge. It's accusing the president of the United States of violating the law. That's never happened before," he said.

For a while, it appeared that the White House was walking back Trump's tweets. White House press secretary Sean Spicer tried to clarify Trump's comments, saying the president wasn't using the word wiretapping literally. "The president used the word wiretap in quotes to mean broadly surveillance and other activities," Spicer said. He also suggested Trump wasn't accusing Obama specifically, but instead referring to the actions of the Obama administration. But Trump himself didn't back down. He predicted in an interview with Fox News that there would be "some very interesting items coming to the forefront over the next two weeks." He didn't elaborate. It remains unclear if he's holding onto some evidence that justifies his tweets.

Comey talks

In testimony Monday at a politically charged congressional hearing, FBI Director James Comey brought the curtain down on speculation about the wiretap. "With respect to the president's tweets about alleged wiretapping directed at him by the prior administration, I have no information that supports those tweets, and we have looked carefully inside the FBI," Comey said. The same was true, he added, of the Justice Department. With the denial by the nation's top enforcement official, the controversy appeared dead. — AP