

TRUMP BOASTS OF HIRING ONLY THE BEST, BUT PICKS HAUNT HIM

'EVERY EMPLOYEE IS A POTENTIAL LIABILITY ON A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN'

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump likes to boast that he hires only the best people. But his personnel choices keep coming back to haunt him. One of the people Trump hired for the White House was working as a foreign agent while advising him during the election. His campaign chairman caught the Justice Department's attention for similarly surreptitious work. And a third campaign adviser was reportedly under surveillance by the FBI as part of an investigation into whether or not he was a Russian spy.

The tales of Michael Flynn, Paul Manafort and Carter Page - none of whom still work for Trump - have created a steady drip of allegations that have clouded Trump's early presidency and raised persistent questions about his judgment. At worst, Trump's personnel picks appear to have left his campaign - and perhaps his White House - vulnerable to the influence of foreign powers. At best, they expose the long-term implications of his understaffed and inexperienced campaign organization and undermine his promises to surround himself with top-notch talent.

"Vetting new hires is standard procedure for presidential campaigns for exactly this reason," said Alex Conant, who advised Sen. Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential campaign. "Every employee is also a potential liability on a presidential campaign." During the campaign, Trump said he hired "top, top people" and would fill his administration "with only the best and most serious people." Yet Manafort, Flynn and Page have indeed become political liabilities for Trump that he can't shake in the White House.

All three are being scrutinized as part of the FBI and congressional inves-

tigations into whether Trump associates helped Russia meddle in the 2016 election. The president has denied any nefarious ties to Russia and says he has no knowledge that his advisers were working with Moscow during the election. The president's culpability appears greatest with Flynn, a retired US Army lieutenant general who traveled with Trump frequently during the campaign and was tapped as national security adviser after the election.

Foreign lobbying

Flynn had been lobbying for a company with ties to Turkey during the 2016 election and even wrote an editorial on behalf of his client that was published on Election Day. "No one expects them to do the equivalent of an FBI background check, but a simple Google search could have solved a lot of these problems," Dan Pfeiffer, who served as senior adviser to President Barack Obama, said of Trump's team. After Trump's victory, Flynn's lawyers alerted the transition team that he may have to register as a lobbying for a foreign entity, according to a person with knowledge of those discussions.

The White House hired him anyway. After the inauguration, Flynn's lawyers told the White House counsel's office that the national security adviser would indeed have to move forward with that filing. Flynn was fired in February after the White House said he misled Vice President Mike Pence and other top officials about his conversations with Russia's ambassador to the United States. Lobbying for foreign interests is legal and lucrative. Both Republican and Democratic operatives offer their services to overseas clients.

But the Justice Department requires Americans working on behalf of foreign

interests to register, disclosing the nature of their work, the foreigners they dealt with and the amount of money they made. Willful failure to register for foreign lobbying work can carry up to a five-year prison sentence, but the Justice Department rarely brings criminal charges and instead urges violators to register. On Wednesday, a spokesman for former Trump campaign chairman Manafort said that he, too, under pressure from the Justice Department, would formally file for prior foreign lobbying.

Unpaid advisers

Manafort's work for political interests in Ukraine occurred before he was hired as Trump's campaign chairman, spokesman Jason Maloni said, though the US government raised questions about his activities after he was hired by Trump. Manafort was pushed out of Trump's campaign in August after The Associated Press reported that his consulting firm had orchestrated a covert Washington lobbying operation on behalf of Ukraine's ruling political party without disclosing that work to the US government.

The White House did not respond to questions Wednesday about when Trump learned about Manafort's foreign lobbying work and his discussions with the US government about registering as a foreign agent. The questions surrounding Page are perhaps the most serious. On Tuesday, The Washington Post reported that the Justice Department obtained a highly secretive warrant to monitor his communications because there was reason to believe he was working as a Russian spy. In March, Trump personally announced Page as part of a newly minted foreign policy advisory team.

But as questions began swirling about Page's ties to Russia, the campaign started moving away from the little-known investment banker. Trump has since said he has no relationship with him. The New York Times reported Wednesday that the Justice Department only obtained the warrant after the campaign distanced itself from Page. In an interview yesterday with ABC's "Good Morning America," Page described his affiliation with the Trump campaign as having served as "an informal member of a committee which was put together - a team of individuals who were looking at various foreign policy issues."

Chris Ashby, a Republican elections lawyer, said that while it's easy to blame Trump for missing red flags about his campaign advisers, it's not always possible to dig up details that potential hires aren't willing to disclose on their own. "In the ideal world, you could rely on paid background checks, but you'd have to have the money and the time," Ashby said. "The farther down the ranks you go and certainly when you reach the ranks of unpaid advisers, that becomes impractical." —AP



MEXICO: Mexican journalist Noe Zavaleta gestures during an interview with AFP in Xalapa, Veracruz state, Mexico. —AFP

MEXICO REPORTERS DEFY THREATS TO KEEP WRITING

XALAPA, Mexico: Mexican reporter Noe Zavaleta has mourned murdered colleagues and received death threats himself, but he refuses to stop working despite the fear. His is the deadliest country for journalists outside of war zones-but with all the corruption and violence, there is just too much news for him to quit. "I have had to bury colleagues and see other companions leave the country. But you still panic when it happens to you," he says, in his home town of Xalapa in the eastern state of Veracruz.

Like hundreds of other journalists in Mexico, the 36-year-old has been threatened for writing about organized crime. But he keeps cranking out the stories for investigative magazine Proceso: about links between politicians and organized crime, corruption, disappearances and mass graves. "You're constantly discovering more subjects, more injustices, more material."

Bodyguards, panic button

Zavaleta knew what he was getting into when he joined the magazine in 2012 to replace a journalist who had been murdered. His predecessor in the post, Regina Martinez, had reported on corruption and abuses by Veracruz state authorities. Her killing has never been solved. Zavaleta also worked with the photographer Ruben Espinosa, who fled Veracruz after receiving threats from authorities. He was murdered in Mexico City in 2015.

Zavaleta received threats last year for a report about an ex-governor accused of corruption. He saw unknown men stalking around his office, his home and that of his girlfriend. "You panic. You don't know what to do," he says. He fled to the capital and reported the intimidation to the federal authorities. They provided him with two bodyguards who stayed by his side for half the year.

He still carries a panic button to alert authorities if he is in danger. "I am still working," Zavaleta says with a smile. "If I suffer more intimidation and if I have to get out again and make it public, then that is what I will do."

Journalists murdered

International media rights group Reporters without Borders ranks Mexico as the third most deadly country in the world, behind Syria and Afghanistan. Mexico has seen 102 journalists murdered since 2000 — 20 of them in Veracruz. March was a particularly brutal month. Three reporters were murdered and a fourth hospitalized after being shot, authorities said. One regional newspaper shut down for a lack of security. In 2016 in Mexico, 400 journalists were attacked and 11 killed, according to rights group Artículo 19.

Cost of protection

Not all journalists get bodyguards because the authorities' budgets do not always allow it, Zavaleta says-and even the protectors are at risk. One of his former bodyguards was shot dead in late March while protecting another journalist. "They were always complaining that they needed bullet-proof vests and a better vehicle," he says. "That didn't get authorized the whole six months they were with me, because there wasn't the budget for it." —AFP

FOUR BODIES FOUND IN NEW YORK PARK NEAR AREA OF GANG VIOLENCE

CENTRAL ISLIP: The bodies of four men, all described as having suffered "significant trauma," were discovered in a park in a suburban New York neighborhood that has for years contended with a growing problem of gang violence. The victims, who were not immediately identified, were found in a wooded area near a recreation center in Central Islip, east of New York City. Justin Meyers, assistant to the Suffolk County police commissioner, said Thursday that the killings all appeared to be "recent homicides."

The discovery of the bodies comes about a month after the arrest of eight MS-13 gang members in connection with the September killings of two teenage girls in nearby Brentwood. Meyers declined to comment on whether the killings of the four men were gang-related. Gang violence has been a problem in Central Islip, Brentwood and other

Long Island communities for more than a decade, but Suffolk County police and the FBI began pouring resources into a crackdown after the killings of the girls, along with two other Brentwood High School students involved in separate killings, sparked outrage.

Prosecutors said Kayla Cuevas, 16, was targeted last summer by a group of four gang members, including two juveniles, because she had been feuding with MS-13 members at school and on social media. The posse, which had been roving in a car looking for gang enemies, attacked when they came across her walking with Nisa Mickens, 15, in the street. The inseparable best friends were attacked with a machete and baseball bats, officials said. Nisa "was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time, hanging out with her childhood friend," former US Attorney Robert Capers said in announcing the arrests. —AP