

From: Megan Bloomgren
To: [Douglas Domenech](#)
Cc: [Swift, Heather](#); [Amy Mitchell](#); [Daniel Jorjani](#)
Subject: Re: Morning Energy, presented by Utah Diné Bikéyah: Zinke, Perry address their teams for first time — Keystone won't have to be built with American steel — Congressional pressure for FERC nominees continues
Date: Friday, March 03, 2017 9:32:20 AM

Kudos to Heather!!!

On Mar 3, 2017, at 10:30 AM, Douglas Domenech <douglas_domenech@ios.doi.gov> wrote:

Fantastic job team.

Sent from my iPhone

On Mar 3, 2017, at 7:22 AM, Swift, Heather <heather_swift@ios.doi.gov> wrote:

After the heart of a certain Twitter lover we are

Must follows: [@SecretaryPerry](#) and [@SecretaryZinke](#). ME is impressed with Zinke's early social media game and cautiously optimistic he'll bring a less stuffy online persona than previous agency heads. His first official day included tweets [congratulating Perry on his confirmation](#), touting a "[top notch](#)" rodeo in Montana and offering [behind-the-scenes pictures](#) of his memorable entrance.

-

Heather Swift

Department of the Interior

[@DOIPressSec](#)

Heather_Swift@ios.doi.gov | Interior_Press@ios.doi.gov

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **POLITICO Pro Energy** <politicoemail@politicopro.com>

Date: Fri, Mar 3, 2017 at 5:54 AM

Subject: Morning Energy, presented by Utah Diné Bikéyah: Zinke, Perry address their teams for first time — Keystone won't have to be built with American steel — Congressional pressure for FERC nominees continues

To: heather_swift@ios.doi.gov

By Anthony Adragna | 03/03/2017 05:51 AM EDT

With help from Darius Dixon

TRUMP'S ENERGY CABINET IS COMPLETE! Newly-confirmed Energy Secretary Rick Perry and Interior chief Ryan Zinke deliver their first remarks to agency personnel this morning, as President Donald Trump now has his energy and environmental Cabinet personnel fully installed. Zinke plans to [address his](#)

[employees](#) from the fancy-sounding Bison Bistro on agency grounds today at 11:00 a.m. on the Interior Department's 168th birthday. Perry plans to make [his inaugural remarks](#) at 10:30 a.m., according to a post on DOE's website.

That comes after Vice President Mike Pence swore in Perry to his new role shortly after 6:00 p.m. Thursday evening. "We collectively understand that the opportunity that we have been given, this maybe once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Mr. Vice President, to truly put America on a course that will deliver for future generations extraordinary opportunities," the former Texas governor said after taking his oath using the Bible signed by every person he ever swore in as governor.

Washington's most-watched commute: One day after Zinke [won the Internet](#) by coming to work by horse, everyone wondered how Perry could top him. And the former Texas governor played ball. "On a single-stage rocket ... what could go wrong," he quipped, before adding to a skeptical pool at the White House that he planned to "quietly drive over and go to work."

Must follows: [@SecretaryPerry](#) and [@SecretaryZinke](#). ME is impressed with Zinke's early social media game and cautiously optimistic he'll bring a less stuffy online persona than previous agency heads. His first official day included tweets [congratulating Perry on his confirmation](#), touting a "[top notch](#)" rodeo in Montana and offering [behind-the-scenes pictures](#) of his memorable entrance. Shortly after being sworn in, Perry [tweeted](#): "Thanks for this opportunity to serve you. Let's get to work!"

This one's for you: Perry hasn't even gotten a chance to enjoy the lovely view from his new office at the Energy Department yet, but the Heritage Foundation has already lined up an agenda for him. In a [7-page paper published shortly](#) after Perry's Senate confirmation, the conservative think tank pumped out a mission statement: Pull the conditional loan guarantees, stop tightening energy efficiency regulations, move the agency more towards basic science and away from deploying technology, and cease its use of the social cost of carbon/methane/nitrous oxide figures. Instead, DOE needs to focus more intently on cleaning up the Cold War nuclear sites, completing the licensing process for the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste project and expediting liquefied natural gas applications. The national labs also got some love from Heritage on an issue near and dear to those 17 sites: The group urges Perry to reduce the "bureaucratic micromanagement" of the labs, a subject reviewed several times by the agency and Congress that is still a sensitive topic for headquarters and the labs.

MEANWHILE, PRUITT SPRINGS INTO ACTION: Thousands of oil and gas companies no longer have to report detailed technical information about their operations' methane emissions after EPA

Administrator Scott Pruitt pulled an Obama-era mandatory information request, Pro's Alex Guillén [reports](#). That comes one day after 11 state attorneys general [asked](#) the agency to abandon what they called an "unnecessary and onerous burden on oil and gas producers." Pruitt's action marks EPA's first step away from an Obama-era plan to regulate methane emissions from existing oil and gas operations.

METHANE CRA STILL COMING: Senior Republicans say they're still committed to bringing up a Congressional Review Act resolution nullifying a BLM rule aimed at curbing methane emissions on public lands but wouldn't comment on whether they had the votes for passage. "It's on the list, but the order hasn't been decided yet," Senate Majority Whip [John Cornyn](#) told ME. A senior GOP Senate aide told ME the CRA would be brought up when "attendance" could be assured, suggesting a close final vote.

TGIF MY FRIENDS! I'm your host Anthony Adragna, and Sens. John Hoeven and Angus King are currently the only members of the Senate mustache club. Your end-of-the-week quiz: At the start of the 1st Congress (in 1789), how many House seats were there? Send your tips, energy gossip and comments to aadragna@politico.com, or follow us on Twitter [@AnthonyAdragna](#), [@Morning_Energy](#), and [@POLITICOPro](#).

Pro subscribers: Are you getting all the content you want? Make sure your keywords are up to date and customized via your settings page at <http://politico.pro/1iDALk9>.

A KEYSTONE-SHAPED LOOPHOLE: The Keystone XL pipeline won't have to comply with Trump's executive order requiring infrastructure projects to be built with American steel, a White House spokeswoman [told](#) Pro's Ben Lefebvre. That order called for U.S. steel to be used in "all new pipelines, as well as retrofitted, repaired or expanded pipelines" inside the U.S. projects "to the maximum extent possible." But that won't include Keystone: "The Keystone XL pipeline is currently in the process of being constructed, so it does not count as a new, retrofitted, repaired, or expanded pipeline," the White House spokeswoman said.

PAGE MET WITH RUSSIAN ENVOY: Oil industry consultant Carter Page, a former unpaid foreign policy adviser to Trump, met with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the GOP convention last summer, POLITICO's Josh Meyer [reports](#). Page declined to comment about what they discussed during their conversation, saying in a text message that "Everyone assumes everything is nefarious!" Trump officials have distanced themselves from Page, who left the campaign in late September.

**** A message from Utah Diné Bikéyah:** The protection of the Bears Ears National Monument reflected the will of Utahns and Native

Americans. Now, President Trump and Interior Secretary-nominee Ryan Zinke are considering undermining this designation and threatening this sacred public land. Join us as we ask them to honor Tribes and stand with Bears Ears: <http://bit.ly/2luGehY> **

'THEY REALLY NEED TO BE EDUCATED': Senate Democrats are deeply concerned with the targeted cuts to EPA from the Trump administration, but they have a blunt reality check for the president's team: they'll need 60 votes for legislation to pass the Senate. "I think they really need to be educated about how everything works," [Tom Udall](#), top Democrat on the subcommittee handling EPA funding, told ME. "A lot of Republicans were not very supportive of this, so that's encouraging to me." [Brian Schatz](#), another appropriator, said Congress simply wouldn't go along with the 24 percent EPA cut sought by Trump's team. "They're still in campaign mode and they're still declaring things to be true that they wish to be true, but now that they have to govern and contend with co-equal branches of government, they're getting knocked around a little bit," the Hawaii Democrat told ME.

CONCERTED FERC PUSH CONTINUES: Senior congressional Republicans continue to push Trump's team to fill FERC vacancies, as the agency seeks a quorum necessary to conduct much of its business. "I've expressed my interest in getting those filled," Senate EPW Chairman [John Barrasso](#) told ME. That comes as two senior House Republicans — Energy and Commerce Chairman [Greg Walden](#) (R-Ore.) and former Chairman [Fred Upton](#) (R-Mich.) — sent a letter to Trump warning "without a quorum, major decisions are stalled, including those involving the licensing of interstate natural gas pipelines, liquefied natural gas terminals, and hydropower projects." They called for Trump to "swiftly" nominate FERC commissioners.

AWK-WARD: Nevada Rep. [Dina Titus](#) [tweeted](#) shortly before Perry's confirmation vote "Any senator that supports Perry's nomination is advocating for the Trump administration's position on Yucca Mountain." (Side note: That position on Yucca Mountain is not super clear.) But Titus' own Nevada colleagues — Republican [Dean Heller](#) and Democrat [Catherine Cortez Masto](#) — both [backed](#) Perry's nomination.

GAO TO THE NRC: SHOW YOUR MATH: The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has been less than fully transparent in how it explains the fees it puts on the industries it oversees, government watchdogs say in a new report. About 90 percent of the NRC's budget is covered with fees on nuclear power plants but, in a [report released Thursday](#), the Government Accountability Office says the agency's fee rules haven't defined "key terms, use terms consistently, or provide key calculations, and included errors, all of which obscured NRC's calculations and limited industry stakeholders' ability to understand them." The NRC has started a project aimed at increasing

the transparency of its fee calculations, GAO said, but that "they have not established goals for performance or a way to measure progress toward meeting these goals."

Piggybacking on the report, Republican Rep. [Adam Kinzinger](#) and Democrat Rep. [Mike Doyle](#) introduced the Nuclear Utilization of Keynote Energy Act, H.R. 1320, on Thursday, which aims to improve the "efficiency" of NRC licensing and regulatory processes.

ISSA JOINS BIPARTISAN CLIMATE CAUCUS: California Reps. [Darrell Issa](#) (R) and [Juan Vargas](#) (D) are the latest pair of lawmakers to join the Climate Solutions Caucus, Issa's office confirmed to ME. "Coastal communities, like mine in Southern California, are counting on us to come up with solutions that encourage a strong and vibrant economy, while also ensuring we are taking care of our environment," Issa said.

MINIBUSES LEAVING THE STATION? House Appropriators are hoping to avoid another short-term stopgap spending bill by bundling up the remaining fiscal 2017 spending bills into the packages for the floor, POLITICO's Sarah Harris [reports](#). Speaker [Paul Ryan](#) earlier Thursday [ruled out](#) the possibility of considering individual spending bills on the House floor, citing a time crunch.

WINTER IS COMING? Frustrated with the leaks from the federal bureaucracy, advisers to Trump are pushing him to remove remaining officials from the Obama administration and install new people more loyal to him, POLITICO's Josh Dawsey [reports](#). But the reality is more complex with some Cabinet secretaries saying they need the Obama people during a rocky transition and other advisers warning that aggressively going after federal employees carries its own risks. "The administration needs to be careful not to make too many dramatic changes because the federal bureaucracy itself is a powerful machine, and they tend to have very establishment ideas," Newsmax CEO Chris Ruddy, a longtime Trump friend, said.

MAIL CALL! FIRST DAY, FIRST DOCUMENT REQUEST: House Oversight Chairman [Jason Chaffetz](#) isn't forgetting about seven unresolved, Obama-era document requests and sent Zinke [a letter](#) to "reiterate" his demands. Chaffetz is seeking information on BLM's fracking rule, Obama's decision to use the Antiquities Act on a number of national monuments and BLM activities in Nevada and Utah, among others. The letter also reiterates a fairly meta request for a briefing on how Interior responds to demands from members of Congress and FOIA requests.

MINING GROUP PUSHES ROSS TO SLASH

REGULATIONS: Warning it takes between seven and 10 years to obtain the necessary permits for projects, the National Mining Association sent Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross [a letter](#) urging the Trump administration to take action to streamline the process. "The

length, complexity and uncertainty of the permitting process are primary reasons investors give for not investing in U.S. mineral projects," CEO Hal Quinn wrote in a letter obtained Thursday. "These best practices include better coordination among state and federal agencies, clarifying responsibilities, minimizing duplication, setting goals and timeframes and introducing more accountability among agencies."

MORMON LEADERS BACK BEARS EARS: More than 200 members of the Mormon faith sent [a letter](#) to Zinke and congressional leaders urging them to support the Obama-era Bears Ears National Monument designation. "We urge you to reject any proposal to repeal it or change its boundaries," they said.

CONSERVATIVES HOPE REINS SUPREME: FreedomWorks sent [a letter](#) to Senate offices Thursday urging them to push leadership to take up the REINS Act (S. 21) for a full chamber vote. House members passed the bill, which would require explicit congressional approval for any new major regulation, as one of their first actions this Congress. But the Senate has never taken it up. The legislation would need the support of eight Democratic senators to clear the chamber — an unlikely feat despite the number of moderates up for reelection in 2018.

CHEMISTRY COUNCIL PUSHES FOR INFRASTRUCTURE SPENDING: As Trump lays the groundwork for shepherding a \$1 trillion infrastructure package through Congress, companies and industries are strategizing on how to get their priorities included in the legislation. The latest move comes from the American Chemistry Council, which commissioned [a report](#) from PricewaterhouseCoopers on how an infrastructure spending boost could fuel a chemical manufacturing "renaissance." The report identifies shortcomings in the truck, marine and rail infrastructure the industry relies on. The council's member companies include giants like Dow, DuPont, Honeywell, 3M, Merck and Monsanto (h/t POLITICO Influence).

LIFE COMES AT YA FAST: One year ago, more than 95 percent of California was in drought conditions. Today? Just 8.73 percent, federal scientists [report](#). That's the lowest level of drought in the Golden State since 2011.

MOVERS, SHAKERS: Todd Lester has joined FTI Consulting as senior managing director in its economic consulting branch and a member of the Energy, Power and Products practice.

Thomas Cunningham has joined Statoil's Washington office as director of international affairs; he was most recently with Atlantic Council Global Energy Center after 13 years with the State Department.

QUICK HITS

— Lawyers Request EPA Intervention For Lead In East Chicago Water. [Indiana Public Media](#).

— Was Aubrey McClendon a Billionaire, or Broke? [The Wall Street Journal](#).

— Judge throws out recall effort against Sen. Ericksen. [KGMI](#).

— Top Trump Advisers Are Split on Paris Agreement on Climate Change. [The New York Times](#).

— Oil Falls to Three-Week Low as Record U.S. Supply Outweighs OPEC. [Bloomberg](#).

HAPPENING TODAY

8:20 a.m. — POLITICO Playbook [breakfast](#) on the first 100 days of the Trump administration, Newseum, 555 Pennsylvania Ave. NW

12:00 p.m. — "Carbon Capture: Tomorrow Just Happened," American Energy Society, 2075 Rayburn

THAT'S ALL FOR ME!

**** A message from Utah Diné Bikéyah:** The designation of the Bears Ears National Monument reflected the will of a majority of Utahns and Native American Tribes. This monument permanently protected public lands threatened by vandalism and looting in southeast Utah that we consider sacred. Yet already, politicians are pushing President Trump and Interior Secretary-nominee Ryan Zinke to reduce or undo its protections. We call on President Trump to resist efforts to seize or sell off Bears Ears and other parks and monuments. Stand with Bears Ears. Let's protect our national public lands for future generations of all people. Learn more at: <http://bit.ly/2luGehY> **

To view online:

<https://www.politicopro.com/tipsheets/morning-energy/2017/03/zinke-perry-address-their-teams-for-first-time-021654>

Stories from POLITICO Pro

Zinke shows up on horseback for first day at Interior [Back](#)

By Eric Wolff | 03/02/2017 09:54 AM EDT

Newly confirmed Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke decided to ride to work on a horse this morning, his first day on the job.

According to [a picture](#) posted by the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, Zinke donned a black Stetson and

saddled up for his inaugural trip to his new office.

An Interior spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Zinke's unorthodox commute.

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EPA pulls methane information request [Back](#)

By Alex Guillén | 03/02/2017 04:36 PM EDT

EPA says more than 15,000 oil and gas companies no longer have to report detailed technical information about methane emissions from their operations.

The move was announced via a Federal Register [notice](#) that will be published on March 7 but will take immediate effect.

It is the agency's first step away from an Obama-era plan to regulate methane emissions from existing oil and gas operations. EPA in November directed oil and gas operators to respond to an "information collection request" on the topic that the agency estimated would cost companies, which are required by law to respond, about \$42 million in total.

"By taking this step, EPA is signaling that we take these concerns seriously and are committed to strengthening our partnership with the states," EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt said in a release. "Today's action will reduce burdens on businesses while we take a closer look at the need for additional information from this industry."

EPA also noted it received a letter on Wednesday from eleven state attorneys general or governors, including new Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter, [asking](#) EPA to drop the "onerous" request.

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AGs ask EPA to drop methane information request [Back](#)

By Alex Guillén | 03/01/2017 12:50 PM EDT

Eleven state attorneys general today [asked](#) EPA to halt its ongoing direction for oil and gas companies to answer questions related to Obama-era plans for methane emission regulations.

EPA [finalized](#) its Information Collection Request just days after the election. The ICR requires oil and gas companies to answer a litany of technical questions and is the first step toward regulating methane emissions from existing oil and gas operations.

The AGs note EPA itself predicted it would cost companies more than \$42 million and 284,000 hours to comply with the request.

"We believe the EPA's requests to be an unnecessary and onerous burden on oil and gas producers that is more harassment than a genuine search for pertinent and appropriate information," the letter says.

EPA's request "comes at a time when the oil and gas industry is recovering from its most significant economic downturn in decades," it adds. "Many of the company can ill-afford the time and expense to comply with yet another empty regulatory burden."

The signatories include EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt's successor as Oklahoma attorney general, Mike Hunter.

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White House: Keystone exempt from 'Buy American' requirements [Back](#)

By Ben Lefebvre | 03/02/2017 09:12 PM EDT

The Keystone XL pipeline will not be subject to President Donald Trump's executive order requiring infrastructure projects to be built with American steel, a White House spokeswoman said today.

Trump signed the order calling for the Commerce Department to develop a plan for U.S. steel to be used in "all new pipelines, as well as retrofitted, repaired or expanded pipelines" inside the US projects "to the maximum extent possible."

By the White House's judgment, that description would not include Keystone XL, which developer TransCanada first proposed in 2008.

"The Keystone XL pipeline is currently in the process of being constructed, so it does not count as a new, retrofitted, repaired, or expanded pipeline," the White House spokeswoman said.

That interpretation removes one potential [hurdle](#) for Keystone, and it clarifies shifting rhetoric from Trump on the order.

"We put you heavy into the pipeline business because we approved, as you know, the Keystone Pipeline, but they have to buy ... steel made in this country and pipelines made in this country," Trump told U.S. Steel chief executive Mario Longhi at a Feb. 23 meeting.

However, in his address to Congress earlier this week, Trump spoke of the order in the same sentence as Keystone but carefully described it as directing "that new American pipelines be made with American steel."

Removing the steel condition could help convince TransCanada to fully drop the \$15 billion NAFTA complaint against the US, which it suspended earlier this week.

A TransCanada spokesman declined today to comment on the NAFTA lawsuit.

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Former Trump adviser Carter Page also met with Russian envoy

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By Josh Meyer | 03/02/2017 07:32 PM EDT

When Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak traveled to the GOP convention last summer, he met with then Sen. Jeff Sessions, as well as with two other Trump campaign advisers, including oil industry consultant Carter Page.

Page, at the time an unpaid foreign policy adviser to Trump, engaged in a conversation with the ambassador at the same July 20 luncheon in Cleveland where Sessions, now attorney general, and Kislyak chatted, according to J.D. Gordon, a national security adviser to the Trump campaign who was also present at the lunch.

Page declined to comment Thursday about what he and the Russian ambassador discussed, saying it was a private, off-the-record conversation. "Everyone assumes everything is nefarious!" Page said in a text message. "Thanks, but no comment."

Contacts between Russian officials and Trump campaign staff are now the subject of investigations by the FBI and congressional committees into Russian interference in the election, and whether Trump campaign representatives played any role in it. On Thursday, Sessions recused himself from investigations into Russian efforts to sway the 2016 election in Trump's favor.

The disclosure that other Trump officials met with Kislyak raise additional questions about White House assertions that the Trump campaign had little or no contact with Russian officials prior to the election.

Page's conversation with Kislyak just days after news reports of Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee is part of a broader pattern of activity by Page that raised U.S. suspicions about his interactions with the Russians, according to a former Obama White House official. At the time of the lunch, Page had just returned from a trip to Moscow.

The official said the Obama administration was gravely concerned in

its final days about increasingly apparent ties between Trump associates and Russians, and about what appeared to be promises made by more than one individual to people affiliated with Russian President Vladimir Putin about policy changes that would occur once Trump was sworn in as president. The Obama official declined to discuss specifics but said Page was one of the Trump associates whose activities had drawn the most U.S. attention and concern.

Trump has defended Sessions. White House spokesman Sean Spicer repeated Thursday afternoon that Sessions and other officials have not done anything wrong. "There's no there there," Spicer told reporters.

Gordon, a retired Navy commander, said Page and Kislyak spoke at some length about how to improve relations between the two countries on issues like counterterrorism and energy security. "Carter told him we should have a new chapter of U.S.-Russia relations that build on mutual respect and common goals and that there is no need to keep up this hostility," Gordon said. "He said we should have better relations with Russia."

He added that Kislyak suggested the two countries cooperate "so that we don't have problems like the Tsarnaev brothers," the Chechen-Americans who set off two pressure-cooker bombs at the 2013 Boston Marathon, more than a year after Russia tried to warn U.S. officials about one of them.

Page and Sessions were among several people affiliated with the Trump campaign who engaged with Kislyak while in Cleveland, including at the lunch, which was part of a State Department-funded initiative to bring foreign ambassadors to both political conventions, Gordon said. "The Trump campaign advisers were there to interact with the ambassadors, just like [the ambassadors] were interacting with the Democrats in Philadelphia the next week," Gordon said. "That was the whole point of the program."

Trump officials have distanced themselves from Page, who left the campaign in late September. The founder and managing partner of Global Energy Capital, Page spent seven years as an investment banker at Merrill Lynch in London, Moscow and New York. His website says he has been involved in more than \$25 billion of transactions in the energy and power sector, and that he spent 3 years in Moscow where he was an adviser on key transactions for Russian state-owned gas company Gazprom and other energy-related companies.

After Trump identified Page as one of his foreign policy and energy advisers last March, Page said in a Bloomberg News interview that he had been an investor in, and adviser to, the Gazprom. He also criticized the Obama administration sanctions on Russia imposed because of its annexation of Crimea.

Officially, Page's role was "advising Mr. Trump on energy policy and Russia," according to a campaign release at the time. Throughout the spring and summer, Page sent policy memos to the campaign and kept in contact with Trump's national security advisory board, including Sessions, Gordon said. "He wanted access to Trump, he wanted his policy memos to be reflected in Trump speeches. And he wanted to go to Russia, which we thought was a bad idea," he added.

He said Page was discouraged from taking that trip by some campaign officials but went anyway after others in the campaign approved the trip, though he was told he could not represent the campaign.

During the trip, two weeks before the GOP convention, Page made remarks critical of U.S. policy at an event in Moscow held by a Russian organization with ties to pro-Putin oligarchs. At the time, Page refused to comment on whether he was meeting with Russian officials. "It was a terrible idea," Gordon said of the trip. "It just reflected negatively on the campaign, because people drew conclusions that weren't there. And he fed right into it and walked right into the lion's den."

By September, three months after his conversation with Kislyak in Cleveland, U.S. intelligence officials were seeking to determine whether Page had opened up private communications with senior Russian officials, [Yahoo News reported](#), including talks about the possible lifting of economic sanctions if the Republican nominee became president.

After lawmakers were briefed on suspected efforts by Russia to meddle in the election, then-Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada asked FBI Director James Comey to investigate meetings between a Trump official, later identified as Page, and "high ranking sanctioned individuals" in Moscow who Reid believed were evidence of "significant and disturbing ties" between the Trump campaign and Moscow.

In late September, as allegations of ties between Page and Russian officials intensified, he took leave from the campaign. His name later appeared repeatedly in the controversial dossier on Trump-Russia ties compiled by a former British Intelligence operative that alleges a pattern of interactions between the Trump campaign and Moscow.

On Thursday, Page said he's never been questioned by the FBI, insisted that he has done nothing wrong and blamed Democrats and the Clinton campaign for drumming up false allegations against him.

When pressed for details of his talk with Kislyak and his visits to Moscow, Page said, "Go ask the Clinton campaign and associates about their illegal activities. That's a real story for you, as opposed to this same fake news theme."

Page wrote Comey in September asking the FBI director to quickly clear him of wrongdoing, saying what a "complete waste of time this witch-hunt directed at me is," and blaming the Clinton campaign, the media and others. He said his July 7 commencement address at the New Economic School in Moscow was based on his scholarly research, that his visit was "outside of my informal, unpaid role" on the Trump campaign and that he had divested any stake in Gazprom. Also, he said, he had "not met this year with any sanctioned official in Russia despite the fact that there are no restrictions on U.S. persons speaking with such individuals."

Three weeks ago, Page wrote to the Justice Department, asking to be publicly cleared. In the 37-page letter, Page said that besides harming his reputation and ability to advise the Trump campaign, the "continued false questions aimed at me also carry immediate risks to U.S. national security as political opponents of the President try to derail his agenda - most likely their main objective for this whole exercise."

Page said that he has not heard from either the FBI or Justice Department on the status of any investigations. Kislyak and the press office at the Russian embassy in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.

In an interview with MSNBC's Chris Hayes Thursday night, Page initially evaded questions on whether he met with Kislyak in Cleveland, before saying, "I'm not going to deny that I talked to him. Although I will say that I never met him anywhere outside of Cleveland, let's just say that much."

Page also denied acting as a liaison between Russia and the Trump campaign, and said he "was not aware of" speaking to any intelligence officials during his July 2016 visit to Moscow, where he met with "scholars and professors and some students there."

Page also refused to answer whether he was in contact with anyone at the White House, saying that while he knows "various people there ... I don't talk about any specific discussions."

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Appropriators predict series of Fiscal 2017 minibuses [Back](#)

By Sarah Ferris | 03/02/2017 02:53 PM EDT

House Republican leaders are considering passing "packages" of Fiscal 2017 spending bills to avoiding another stopgap spending measure in April.

House Appropriations Chairman [Rodney Frelinghuysen](#) believes "it

is likely" the panel will bundle the remaining fiscal 2017 spending bills and send them to the House floor before next month's deadline, according to a committee aide.

"The commitment and intention from the committee and leadership is to pass all remaining bills. It is likely that it would be processed via 'packages' of bills," the aide said, adding that those bundles would come from the House side.

Frelinghuysen has personally discussed that path with GOP leaders, the aide said.

That strategy offers the clearest indication yet on how GOP leaders plan to avoid a major spending fight and a potential government shutdown in April.

Earlier today, House Speaker [Paul Ryan ruled out](#) the possibility of considering individual spending bills on the House floor, citing a time crunch.

That statement signals a shift from the plan some House lawmakers had been expecting after House GOP leaders announced they would vote on the Fiscal 2017 defense package next week.

Some lawmakers have openly speculated the Senate could turn the defense bill into a larger spending package. But Ryan declined today to say whether he expects the measure to come back to the House with additional appropriations measures attached.

"Whether or not they can take it up, or if they are going to do something with it, merge it with something else, that's more of a Senate question," Ryan said.

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Ryan not ruling out fiscal 2017 spending package ahead of CR deadline [Back](#)

By Sarah Ferris | 03/02/2017 02:03 PM EDT

House Speaker [Paul Ryan](#) suggested today that Congress will need to pass another stopgap spending bill or bundled appropriations package to finish out fiscal 2017 and avoid government shutdown.

Ryan told reporters the House would not have time to vote on all 11 spending bills still pending for fiscal 2017 before the current continuing resolution expires April 28.

"Are we going to have 11 bills moving? No," Ryan said. "We don't have the time for that."

The speaker was asked about the fate of fiscal 2017 appropriations just after House GOP leaders [announced](#) this year's defense spending bill would get a vote next week. That measure has bipartisan support in the House, and some Democrats are hopeful it could make it through the Senate as part of a package with other domestic spending.

Any decision to package the bills would likely take place in the upper chamber, and Ryan declined to comment on the prospects.

"We're passing that bill off the floor here in the House. Whether or not they can take it up, or if they are going to do something with it, merge it with something else, that's more of a Senate question," Ryan said.

He added that House leaders are planning to pass the defense bill "first" because a short-term spending bill is "uniquely bad for the military."

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Trump's advisers push him to purge Obama appointees [Back](#)

By Josh Dawsey | 03/02/2017 07:19 PM EDT

Advisers to President Donald Trump are urging him to purge the government of former President Barack Obama's political appointees and quickly install more people who are loyal to him, amid a cascade of damaging stories that have put his nascent administration in seemingly constant crisis-control mode.

A number of his advisers believe Obama officials are behind the leaks and are seeking to undermine his presidency, with just the latest example coming from reports that Attorney General Jeff Sessions met twice last year with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. and apparently misled senators about the interactions during his confirmation hearing.

That was coupled with a New York Times story that Obama appointees spread information about the investigation into the Trump campaign's contacts with Russia in an attempt to create a paper trail about the probe. Trump's aides have also blamed Obama appointees for other damaging leaks, like Trump's erratic phone calls with foreign leaders.

Inside the White House, the chatter about Obama officials in the government has heightened in recent weeks, one administration official said. And advisers are saying it is time to take action.

"His playbook should be to get rid of the Obama appointees immediately," said Newt Gingrich, a top surrogate. "There are an amazing number of decisions that are being made by appointees that

are totally opposed to Trump and everything he stands for. Who do you think those people are responding to?"

"If you employ people who aren't loyal to you, you can't be surprised when they leak," said Roger Stone, another longtime adviser. A third person close to Trump said: "He should have gotten these people who are out to get him out a long time ago, a long, long time ago. I think they know that now."

The reality, however, is more complicated: The White House has thousands of open jobs across the agencies, many nonpolitical civilian employees are critical of the administration, and some Cabinet secretaries say they need the Obama people during a rocky transition.

Only a few dozen Obama political appointees remain in the federal government apparatus, according to the Partnership for Public Service. Many of them are in crucial positions, including Robert Work, a top official at the Department of Defense, and Thomas Shannon, the acting deputy at the State Department.

Even if Trump were to ax those remaining senior political appointees, he would still have to reckon with the hundreds of thousands of civilian employees, who stay with every administration. Many of them are skeptical of Trump because they resent his assault on Washington and its culture, his impulsive decisions and his seeming lack of intellectual curiosity about their agencies and work.

They have spent the past six weeks on edge. Many are quietly on the job market, but others have been clashing with Trump appointees, either in the open or privately among colleagues, according to officials across agencies. From Homeland Security to Defense and beyond, it's become a regular conversation among employees about what lines they will not cross before quitting, and how best to slow-walk orders from above to frustrate implementation.

Amid those conversations is a running thread: how long they'd be willing to hold out to bear witness, and try to improve a climate they increasingly hate, or whether to leak information about changes they see in order to try and stop them. "I want to be able to tell people what's happening here," one State Department official said.

"Nixon essentially tried to bypass the federal bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy won and removed him from office," said Newsmax CEO Chris Ruddy, a longtime Trump friend. "The administration needs to be careful not to make too many dramatic changes because the federal bureaucracy itself is a powerful machine, and they tend to have very establishment ideas."

Gingrich added: "Ninety-five percent of the bureaucrats are against him."

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

Some in Trump's inner circle increasingly fear that the FBI and the intelligence community are out to damage him. But some of the damaging leaks have also come from within his administration, advisers say, because the West Wing is plagued by competing factions that are vying for Trump's attention and affection.

"You hire a bunch of people in the West Wing who are hacks and aren't loyal to you, and you'll have a bunch of leaks," Stone said. "There aren't that many Trump loyalists in the White House."

In meetings, Trump aides like Stephen Miller, his senior policy adviser, have frequently complained about leaks and blamed the Obama appointees and longtime bureaucrats. Other aides have complained about having to sit in inter-agency meetings with Obama holdovers in senior positions. And Trump aides have told their people at agencies not to share plans and documents with Obama holdovers or others who are not sympathetic to them.

Yet across federal agencies, there are few Trump people. Candidates for only about three dozen of 550 critical Senate-confirmed positions have even been nominated, according to the Partnership for Public Service.

Several advisers and people close to Trump described the problem like this: During the transition, aides ignored hundreds of names that had been developed during New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's time leading the transition. For several weeks after he was removed, work stopped as the team came to grips with Trump's improbable win.

Then, little was done to pick officials beneath the Cabinet level after Trump made a series of wham-bam choices. Picks have frequently been held up by the White House because they weren't loyal to Trump during the campaign, and people have grown increasingly skittish about being employed in a West Wing frequently described as chaotic and dysfunctional.

"I wish I had more of my staff on board," Sessions said Thursday, during a news conference in which he announced that he would recuse himself from any investigation related to the presidential campaigns.

In a twist, it will be an Obama appointee, Dana Boente, who will now be handling the investigation into the Trump campaign and Russian officials. Sally Yates, who was previously the No. 2 Justice Department official under Obama, was fired in late January after she refused to defend his controversial travel ban.

Gingrich said he blamed Sen. Chuck Schumer for slow-walking the nominees, though Schumer's office notes that many of the picks were

not properly vetted: At least three have already dropped out. The Office of Government Ethics remains overwhelmed with applications now, "but they are beginning to catch up," one person involved in the nominations said. At many agencies, no top positions are filled, which means the layers of political appointees that report to them haven't been picked, either.

"I didn't get it early on. This is not about slowing down the Cabinet. This is about keeping working control of the government for Obama," Gingrich said. "It's actually very shrewd on Schumer's part. Trump is not going to have control of the government until at least June."






Others say it could be even longer. And that a massive purge is not the answer.

"The solution is not to purge the Obama holdovers but rather to actually identify people and move them forward," said Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, which has advised the Trump team. "Historically, it has taken a year plus for administrations to get their entire team in place. I'm afraid the Trump team is behind that, and that would not be a good thing. He has to have his own team in place if he's going to be able to get things done."

Edward-Isaac Dove contributed to this report.

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