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Previous administrations were wary of the messaging app Signal. Trumpworld has embraced it

Amid the furor over the use of a commercial messaging app to discuss a military strike, the Trump administration has insisted that using Signal is routine and authorized. But former and current officials disagree. [Andrew Feinberg](#) reports

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When White House National Security Adviser Mike Waltz created a group chat using [Signal](#) to discuss planning for airstrikes on Iran-backed [Houthi](#) rebels in [Yemen](#), it wasn't the first time Trump



The encrypted messaging program has been popular in Trumpworld since long before President Donald Trump returned to the White House in January, according to sources familiar with the operations of Trump's 2024 presidential campaign, his transition, and his first tumultuous months in the White House.

Trump's transition team, headed by now-Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and Education Secretary Linda McMahon, was notable among modern presidential transition efforts because it deliberately eschewed federal resources — including technology — that had been used by incoming administrations for decades.

The decision to refuse government IT help during the months before Trump returned to office was made in part to avoid the mandatory record-keeping that comes with using official resources, according to a source familiar with Trump's thinking at the time. The Independent understands, according to this source, that Trump's decision was driven by his memory of how emails sent and received by his 2016-2017 transition team were later released to groups that made Freedom of Information Act requests for them, and to Department of Justice investigators under the command of then-special counsel Robert Mueller during the probe into alleged ties between the president's 2016 campaign and the Russian government.



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The encrypted messaging program has reportedly been popular among Trump figures for a while (*REUTERS*)

During the transition this time around, staffers and incoming officials would frequently communicate on their personal devices, often on Signal, a source familiar with the transition effort told The Independent. The Trump transition source said the number of informal group chats among incoming officials grew as the transition effort went on and more people were recruited to join the incoming administration.

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The use of Signal took a shocking turn this week when The Atlantic's top editor, Jeffrey Goldberg, reported that he'd been invited — accidentally — to a group chat with a slew of senior Trump White House and cabinet officials by Waltz.

The magazine on Wednesday published the bombshell text messages, which included a detailed timeline of the Houthi airstrikes, leading to White House Press Secretary **Karoline Leavitt** announcing that the National Security Council and the White House Counsel's office would be probing the shocking breach with the aid of **Elon Musk**, the SpaceX founder and GOP mega donor who has been a constant presence at Trump's side since he was sworn in nearly 70 days ago.

"Elon Musk has offered to put his technical experts on this, to figure out how this number was inadvertently added to the chat — again, to take responsibility and ensure this can never happen again," Leavitt said. Musk himself has been reported to be a prolific Signal user.

Tulsi Gabbard refuses to say if she was on group chat during Senate grilling

An analysis by The Independent has found that many Trump administration officials, like Musk, have active Signal accounts affiliated with their personal phone numbers. They include top national security personnel in the bombshell group chat reported on by The Atlantic in recent days, like National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles, Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy **Stephen Miller**, Deputy National Security Adviser Alex Wong, and Secretary of State **Marco Rubio**.

Under the Presidential Records Act, as well as other laws governing the treatment of sensitive and national defense-related information, the use of personal devices for official communications among incoming White House aides is supposed to stop when staffers have access to government IT systems. But sources tell The Independent that never fully happened, in part because the Signal group chats established during the transition period continued, with more set up as needed.

The White House has described the continued use of Signal as routine and authorized by the administration's own legal team. Director of National Intelligence **Tulsi Gabbard** ducked questions about whether she was on her personal or government device when she was included in the group chat about military strikes in Yemen. She claimed that the encrypted app is "pre-installed on government devices" as a way of enabling officials to communicate on "fast-moving" matters during testimony before the House Intelligence Committee on Wednesday morning..



These Trump administration officials — (left to right top) Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, Vice President JD Vance, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, (left to right bottom) National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller and Secretary of State Marco Rubio — participated in a Signal group chat that has become the focus of the administration's first major scandal (*AFP via Getty Images*)

John Ratcliffe, the CIA director, also said the application is widely used by officials and staff at CIA's Virginia headquarters. He told the House panel: "One of the first things that happened when I was confirmed as CIA director was Signal was loaded onto my computer at the CIA as it is for most CIA officers."

Another White House ally, Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, claimed during a recent appearance on Fox News that the Biden administration had “authorized Signal as a means of communication that was consistent with presidential record-keeping requirements for its administration” and said that practice had “continued into the Trump administration.”

And on Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a post on X (formerly Twitter) that Signal was just one of “a number of different platforms for President Trump’s top officials to communicate as safely and efficiently as possible” by the White House Counsel’s Office.

But multiple people familiar with White House operations say that the encrypted application is not compliant with record-keeping requirements on White House or National Security Council information or communications systems. This is because the program’s “disappearing messages” feature is incompatible with laws like the Presidential Records Act that require that all communications by and among White House staff be archived.

Karoline Leavitt

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X

Jeffrey Goldberg is well-known for his sensationalist spin. Here are the facts about his latest story:

1. No “war plans” were discussed.

2. No classified material was sent to the thread.

3. The White House Counsel’s Office has provided guidance on a number of different Show more

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A former Biden administration official who spoke to The Independent explained that most White House staffers’ phones were delivered with all text messaging capabilities disabled, with only a limited few staffers in the press office getting the ability to text on a limited basis and only with strict controls linked to PRA compliance.

Two other sources, both of whom worked at the National Security Council during previous administrations, said they cannot recall ever seeing Signal installed on the Apple iPhone devices issued to them during the onboarding process at the White House.

One of the former NSC officials conceded that Signal might be permitted at other agencies as Gabbard and Ratcliffe stated in their House testimony on Wednesday. But they said their experience was that to the extent that text messaging had been allowed on White House phones it was limited to basic functions to comply with PRA record-keeping requirements.

A third source who currently works in the Trump White House also told The Independent that Signal was not pre-installed on their government-issued phone. They said the only way they could communicate with anyone on Signal is to use their personal device.

According to a fourth source — a person deeply familiar with White House communications infrastructure — the lack of access to Signal on White House devices is by design.

The phones issued to White House officials are managed by the Presidential Information Technology Community, an umbrella organization established during the Obama administration to encompass “the entities that provide information resources and information systems to the President, Vice President, and the Executive Office of the President” including the National Security Council, the White House’s Office of Administration, the Secret Service, the White House Military Office and the White House Communications Agency.

Marco Rubio admits 'someone made a mistake' in Signal group chat scandal

This source told The Independent that the iPhones issued to White House and NSC personnel are highly

Instead, the source said users can only choose from a curated group of applications that have been pre-approved by the PITC for installation on White House-issued devices.

“Signal is not listed as an app to be installed, so it’s definitely not pre-installed on those devices,” they said.

Asked about a Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency guidance warning of Chinese espionage efforts and recommending Signal for “secure communications,” they replied that the CISA document was encouraging use of “free messaging applications” on personal devices and again stressed that Signal has never been approved for official use on government-owned devices issued by the White House or Pentagon.

While Signal’s popularity as a messaging solution has grown in recent years, the government has warned employees that despite the encryption built into the program it is still vulnerable to some forms of attacks.

A Defense Department memorandum issued on March 13 said Russian hackers could use the “linked device” feature of the application — which allows a user to send and receive messages from a laptop or desktop computer — to “spy on encrypted communications.”

“The hacking groups embed malicious QR codes in phishing pages or conceal them in group invite links. After gaining access via the malicious code, the groups add their own devices as a linked device. This allows the group to view every message sent by the unwitting user in real time, bypassing the end-to-end encryption,” the memorandum said.

A former Pentagon official who worked in the office of former Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and on former president Joe Biden’s 2020 campaign said the Signal application was used by some administration personnel — but never for official communications.

“It was actually used very scantily and always, always informally for things like: ‘Are you coming in today?’ Other than that level of personal discussions, it was never, ever, ever used — I don’t know how much more strongly I can say that,” they said.

That former official’s account was confirmed by a second ex-Defense Department official — a veteran of the Biden and Obama administrations who served in multiple senior national security roles. They told The Independent that Signal use was never at any time authorized in the Pentagon “in any official capacity” on any government-issued device, even if there might have been some “de minimus” use in some very limited instance on staffers’ personal devices.

He said anyone who would suggest that Signal was officially endorsed by the Defense Department for internal use was not delivering an accurate rendering of events.

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“I don't know if they're intentionally lying, but they are certainly not speaking the truth,” he said.

The Independent has contacted the White House for comment.

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