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Trump says he'd consider accepting information from foreign governments on his opponents

By **Colby Itkowitz** and **Tom Hamburger**

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President Trump on Wednesday said he would consider accepting information on his political opponents from a foreign government, despite the concerns raised by the intelligence community and special counsel Robert S. Mueller III over Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

In an Oval Office interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, Trump also said he wouldn't necessarily alert the FBI if a foreign country approached his campaign with "oppo research" about his Democratic challenger.

"I think you might want to listen; there isn't anything wrong with listening," Trump said. "If somebody called from a country, Norway, 'We have information on your opponent,' oh, I think I'd want to hear it."

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When Stephanopoulos asked the president whether he'd want that kind of “interference” in American politics, Trump pushed back on the word.

“It's not an interference, they have information — I think I'd take it,” Trump said. “If I thought there was something wrong, I'd go maybe to the FBI, if I thought there was something wrong.”

Although Mueller did not find enough evidence to establish a criminal conspiracy involving the Trump campaign in his probe of Russia's role in the 2016 election, his report said that the Russian government interfered in the election in a “sweeping and systemic fashion” and that Trump's campaign was open to assistance from Russian sources.

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Trump's remarks go further than those of his son-in-law and adviser, Jared

Kushner, who told Axios last week that he didn't know whether he'd contact the FBI if Russians reached out again.

And they are likely to reignite a debate on the 2020 campaign trail and in Congress over what should be considered acceptable behavior by candidates — a debate that was unresolved by Mueller's decision not to bring charges against any Americans related to Russia's attack on the U.S. political system.

Trump dismissed the idea that his son, Donald Trump Jr., should have told the FBI about his 2016 contacts with the Russians, including the Trump Tower meeting Trump Jr. hosted after he was promised damaging information about Democrat Hillary Clinton as part of a Russian government effort to help his father's campaign.

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“You're a congressman, someone comes up and says, ‘I have information on your opponent,’ do you call the FBI?” Trump asked.

“If it's coming from Russia, you do,” Stephanopoulos said, pointing out that Al

Gore's campaign contacted the FBI when it received a stolen briefing book in 2000 and that the FBI director said recently that the agency should have been notified when the Trump campaign received an offer of information on Clinton.

"The FBI director is wrong," Trump said.

An FBI spokeswoman declined to comment.

The FBI offers generic defensive briefings to campaigns, warning them of foreign influence efforts, and at a May 7 Senate hearing, FBI Director Christopher A. Wray said any suspected attempts should be reported.

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"I think my view is that if any public official or member of any campaign is contacted by any nation-state or anybody acting on behalf of a nation-state about influencing or interfering with our election, then that is something that the FBI would want to know about," Wray said.

It is illegal to accept foreign campaign contributions, although an exchange of information is a more murky matter.

Mueller found that it was not clear whether courts would accept that opposition

research provided free by a foreign government constituted a “thing of value” and thus an illegal foreign campaign contribution.

Ultimately, Mueller also found that he could not sustain a criminal case around the meeting, in part because it would be difficult to prove that Trump Jr. knew it could violate the law.

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Trevor Potter, counsel to John McCain’s presidential campaigns, said that any candidate who takes intelligence from a foreign government would be compromised and left beholden to that country.

“The Founders feared exactly such foreign attempts to interfere in U.S. politics,” he said.

Republicans have accused Clinton’s campaign of also accepting foreign assistance. An opposition research firm funded by Clinton’s campaign hired a former British spy who interviewed Russian sources and others and produced a dossier that included lurid and unproven allegations against Trump.

Democrats jumped on Trump’s remarks Wednesday and called for the passage of

legislation to explicitly require candidates to disclose a foreign government's help as it would campaign contributions.

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“Does he not know the oath of office requires him to defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic?” said Sen. Mark R. Warner (Va.), the highest-ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Warner said that if the president “does not have enough of a moral compass” to understand this is wrong, “perhaps we need legislation saying that there is a duty to report such offers of assistance to law enforcement. I just can't understand this. I think every past presidential campaign — Republican or Democrat — would have recognized that obligation.”

Appearing on CNN shortly after Trump's remarks aired, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) said a change in campaign law is needed “to deter the kind of unethical unpatriotic conduct the president engaged in the last campaign and is completely willing to do all over again. He learned nothing.”

Matt Zapotosky and Rosalind S. Helderman contributed to this report.

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