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Trump's White House: a 'fine-tuned machine' or a wretched mess?

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Even those of us who fully expected Donald Trump to become mired in a major political crisis didn't think it could possibly happen during his first month in the White House.

Just how grim Mr Trump's situation is becoming may not be immediately obvious. But a closer look reveals a critical condition and worse prognosis.

Far from the "fine-tuned machine" he describes, his administration is a wretched mess.

His main policy initiative, the notorious "travel ban", was so incompetently drafted that it was immediately blocked by the courts and will probably have to be discarded altogether in favour of a workable executive order.

Mr Trump's early record of legislation and other substantive accomplishments is strikingly thin compared to most of his predecessors. And of the 696 senior positions that require Senate confirmation, 661 still have no nominees.

Last week his national security adviser, Michael Flynn, may have set a record for the earliest resignation-in-disgrace of any major appointee. Worse, it points to a far larger scandal involving

ties to Russia that is just starting to seriously unravel. Robert Harward, Mr Trump's choice to replace Mr Flynn, refused the coveted position.

Before Mr Trump's inauguration, Barack Obama imposed new sanctions against Moscow. Mr Flynn called the Russian ambassador and implied that they could be lifted, providing Russia did not overreact.

After initially calling retaliation essential, Mr Putin did nothing. Mr Trump then fulsomely praised his brilliance. Mike Pence, the US vice president, assured the public that sanctions weren't discussed because Mr Flynn lied to both him and the FBI.

As a former military intelligence chief, Mr Flynn knows all such conversations are routinely recorded by the National Security Agency.

But he may have believed he was protected because he was acting at the explicit or implicit behest of Mr Trump.

Weeks before the media revealed the truth, Mr Trump learnt that Mr Flynn was lying about the conversation and was also, therefore, open to Russian blackmail. Yet he took no action, and did not inform Mr Pence about the deception.

Clearly he would never have fired Mr Flynn if the truth had remained hidden. Indeed, he still insists Mr Flynn is a "wonderful man" who was "just doing his job" and "doing something right", but has been "treated very, very unfairly by the media".

Mr Trump is outraged, not by Mr Flynn's misdeeds and lies, but at the officials who told journalists, and the press that told the public the truth.

But it gets much worse.

Trump campaign officials are now known to have been in "constant contact" with Russian intelligence officers over the past year. There is no plausible innocuous explanation for this, especially since, as Mr Trump publicly begged them to in July, Russian intelligence was actively interfering with the American election.

The circumstantial evidence suggesting they were in cahoots is becoming almost incontestable.

US investigators have also corroborated some parts of what initially seemed a highly dubious dossier alleging Russian efforts to compromise Mr Trump on financial and sexual grounds. Since those details are correct, the entire document is inevitably being taken more seriously.

It will provide an indispensable road map for any serious investigation of the real Trump-Russia relationship.

All this may finally explain his mystifying adulation of Russia's thuggish president, Vladimir Putin. Mr Trump and his minions are plainly hiding the truth about their dealings with Russia, and it is now a national imperative to uncover it.

Congress, fully controlled by Mr Trump's Republican party, must either conduct a credible investigation itself or, more appropriately, appoint a special commission or independent prosecutor.

Republican lawmakers would rather not act at all, and certainly not before the midterm elections. Most don't like or trust Mr Trump and would undoubtedly prefer Mr Pence as president.

But the process of investigating, and possibly removing, a president from their own party is still too much for almost all of them.

As senator Rand Paul shamelessly explained "We'll never even get started with doing the things we need to do, like repealing Obamacare, if we're spending our whole time having Republicans investigate Republicans."

But, eventually, even such hyper-partisan hands will be forced.

Unless Mr Trump and his defenders can quickly concoct convincing answers to questions they have yet to even acknowledge exist, additional leaks, damaging revelations and, possibly, resignations will continue to steadily pile up until, probably very suddenly, the whole house of cards begins to come crashing down.

At this rate, that may happen sooner than anyone could have imagined.