

# White House focuses on Obama's handling of 2016 Russia election probe

wp [washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/07/23/obama-gabbard-russia-treason-claims](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/07/23/obama-gabbard-russia-treason-claims)

Cleve R. Wootson Jr., Warren P. Strobel

July 23, 2025

Trump's intelligence chief, Tulsi Gabbard, said former president Barack Obama orchestrated a "treasonous conspiracy" to undermine Trump.

8 min



Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and press secretary Karoline Leavitt talk to reporters at the White House on Wednesday. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

By [Cleve R. Wootson Jr.](#) and [Warren P. Strobel](#)

The White House on Wednesday escalated its effort to portray former president Barack Obama and members of his administration as part of a vast "treasonous conspiracy" to undermine President Donald Trump, sending its top intelligence official to the White House podium to assert that they should be investigated for criminal wrongdoing.

“This is not about Democrats or Republicans. This has to do with the integrity of our Democratic republic and American voters,” Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard said during an unusual appearance in the press briefing room.

The campaign to revisit the 2016 election and its aftermath responds to grievances the president has nursed for eight years over what he considers to be unfair treatment by the intelligence community — feelings of being wrongly targeted that inflamed his distrust of the government he has set out to remake. He has repeatedly focused on the issue in recent days, with Gabbard declassifying two batches of election-related investigative documents in less than a week.

On Wednesday, she and White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt batted away criticism that elevating what they described as fresh findings in the case was an effort to deflect attention from Trump’s own political struggles. Trump is under steady attack, including by some of his allies, for his administration’s handling of the release of Justice Department files concerning the disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, who died in 2019.

Gabbard spent more than 13 minutes detailing what she claimed was a “years-long coup” by Obama-era officials against Trump that laid the groundwork for nearly a decade’s worth of efforts to undermine, impeach and prosecute him. Gabbard said she had referred recently declassified documents to the Justice Department and FBI for criminal investigation, including into Obama.

On Wednesday afternoon, the Justice Department said it would be launching a “strike force” to assess evidence to support the criminal referrals and determine the next legal steps, though any effort to prosecute Obama would face formidable legal hurdles.

“We will investigate these troubling disclosures fully and leave no stone unturned to deliver justice,” Attorney General Pam Bondi said in a statement.

Gabbard’s appearance at the White House to denounce former senior government officials whom Trump considers political enemies appeared to be an unprecedented act for a serving senior intelligence official, who are supposed to remain apolitical. Gabbard pledged at her Senate confirmation hearing to check “my own views at the door” and deliver intelligence without bias or political influence.

Trump himself has not been shy about his desire for retribution.

“Whether it’s right or wrong, it’s time to go after people,” he said during a lengthy diatribe against Obama on Tuesday, speaking in the Oval Office while the visiting president of the Philippines sat by and watched.

A major Supreme Court ruling in 2024 granted presidents [broad immunity](#) from criminal prosecutions for acts committed while they are in office. Even if the Justice Department found that Obama committed any wrongdoing, as Gabbard alleges, courts could dismiss charges if they determined that his actions were committed while he was carrying out the responsibilities of being president.

Every American should read this: <https://t.co/45XFV8i71k>

— Karoline Leavitt (@PressSec) [July 19, 2025](#)

Trump hailed that decision by the high court when it was released because it made it harder for the Justice Department to prosecute him on charges that he tried to subvert the results of the 2020 election. Now it could, in turn, thwart his efforts to go after his predecessors. Other federal officials might be shielded in other ways. And, as with any investigation, federal prosecutors would need to present their case to a grand jury to determine if sufficient evidence exists to bring any charges.

The gist of the White House attack is that Obama and top officials of his administration wrongly tried to connect Trump with Russian efforts to sway the 2016 election. It's unclear whether any of the allegations, even if they were proved, would amount to a violation of a criminal statute.

Obama's office on Tuesday issued a [rare statement admonishing Trump](#), calling the allegations "bizarre" and "ridiculous."

Earlier Wednesday, Gabbard declassified an eight-year-old intelligence report by congressional Republicans that sought to cast doubt on a key element of the probe of Russia's 2016 election interference, the latest step in a campaign by her, CIA Director John Ratcliffe and Trump to portray the Russia investigation as a "hoax."

The previously secret 2017 report by Republican staff members on the House Intelligence Committee confirmed spy agencies' findings that Russian intelligence services, acting on President Vladimir Putin's orders, interfered in the 2016 contest between Trump and Hillary Clinton.

But the report asserted that the spy agencies were wrong in determining that Putin developed a preference for Trump and aspired to help. The Republicans said that assessment was based on weak or questionable intelligence. Former Democratic officials described the 2017 report as a partisan document that does not accurately reflect U.S. intelligence officials' work to unravel Russia's election interference.

The assessment by U.S. spy agencies that Putin hoped to see Trump elected has long been the most contentious aspect of their report on Moscow's actions in the 2016 election, which was released in January 2017. But it has been upheld by several [investigations](#), including a

years-long bipartisan probe by the Senate Intelligence Committee and the report of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III. Mueller concluded that Russian government actors successfully hacked computers and obtained emails from people associated with Clinton's campaign and Democratic Party organizations to sow discord in the United States, hurt Clinton and help Trump.

The 46-page report that Gabbard released Wednesday contains an investigation by Republican staff members working for Rep. Devin Nunes (R-California), who was then chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. The panel was riven by partisan tensions at the time, and the probe ultimately concluded that the spy agencies' finding that Putin wanted Trump to win was based on intelligence reports that contained flawed information or were subject to multiple interpretations.

Nunes currently works as CEO of Trump's social media company, Truth Social.

"These failures were serious enough to call into question judgments that allege Putin 'developed a clear preference for candidate Trump' and 'aspired to help his chances of victory' and that 'Russian leaders never entirely abandoned hope for a defeat of Secretary Clinton,'" the report says.

After Obama in late 2016 called on U.S. intelligence agencies to deliver an assessment of Russia's actions in the just-concluded U.S. presidential contest, his CIA chief, John Brennan, ordered that 15 previously unpublished intelligence reports based on information from CIA agents be published internally. Three of those reports were flawed, but those three became the foundation of the conclusion that Putin aspired to help Trump win, the House Intelligence Committee report said, adding that some CIA officers questioned how solid they were.

Brennan did not immediately respond to a request for comment relayed via an aide.

The House intelligence report stated that the assessment that Putin favored Trump's election was based on "one scant, unclear and unverifiable fragment of a sentence from a single" human source. The sentence fragment — "whose victory Putin was counting on" — was the only classified information cited by the assessment for its conclusion, the report stated. The report cited a senior CIA operations officer saying of the fragment, "We don't know what was meant by that" and "five people read it five ways."

But Michael van Landingham, a former CIA Russia analyst and one of the assessment's lead authors, said that the source was "very reliable and well-regarded" and that analysts familiar with the source material believe it clearly indicated Putin wanted Trump to win — something a recent CIA review of the assessment said was consistent with the raw intelligence.

Susan Miller, a retired CIA officer who led the compiling and writing of the January 2017 intelligence assessment, disputed the House report's findings on the underlying intelligence. "We had all the good sourcing. We did exactly what should have been done," she said.

“We had very, very exquisite access,” Miller said of the CIA’s sources in Russia. “There’s no doubt,” she said, that Moscow tried to influence the election in Trump’s favor.

Trump praised Gabbard’s work on the Russia investigation, a [sharp contrast](#) to his public rebukes of her last month over her statements that Iran’s leaders had not actively sought to build a nuclear weapon.

The top Democrats on the House and Senate intelligence committees denounced her release of the report.

“It’s appropriate that this shoddy and partisan report was released by Director Gabbard on the day that House Republicans are quite literally fleeing Washington, DC for six weeks rather than releasing the Epstein files that Trump is so desperate to cover up,” Rep. Jim Himes (Connecticut), the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said in a statement.

*Perry Stein and Ellen Nakashima contributed to this report.*