

Saving Sean Spicer from the media, Trump and himself

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(Photo: Andrew Harnik/AP)

There are times – particularly when I'm feeling charitable – when it's difficult to not sympathize with presidential press secretary Sean Spicer. The terms besieged, beleaguered and embattled all seem to have been invented to describe him.

For an hour or so each afternoon, the White House press corps turns Spicer into their personal dart board, flinging barbed and frequently disrespectful questions at him and often arguing with him if they're dissatisfied with his response.

The uproar over President Trump's allegations that former President Obama had tapped telephones in the Trump Tower campaign offices sent media everywhere into indignation overdrive, but reporters assigned to the White House all but scaled the podium in the briefing room to get at Spicer.

After weeks of explaining, clarifying and defending, Spicer finally conceded that the president's use of the word "wiretapping" shouldn't be taken literally and he didn't mean to suggest that the former president had personally ordered the eavesdropping.

He re-defined "wiretapping" to mean electronic surveillance generally – not simply telephones – and it was "the Obama administration" that Trump had in mind as the culprit, rather than Obama himself.

It was a hard sell and didn't accomplish much in the way of deflecting the media's torrent of darts.

Demands for proof of the wiretapping rained down on Spicer's head while his explanation that the issue was a matter for the appropriate committees of Congress to investigate did little to quell the storm.

In a remarkably contentious confrontation with reporters, Spicer insisted the president continued to believe his campaign was under surveillance and, to support his claim, produced and read from a handful of news articles referencing wiretapping or other similar activities involving Trump Tower.

He created an international furor, however, when he gave credence to a news account claiming that the Obama administration had enlisted British intelligence to spy on the Trump campaign. The Brits, understandably, hit the roof of Parliament and an apology was forthcoming from the White House.

Spicer has refused to back down, blaming the media and individuals in government who illegally leaked information. Even in the face of Congressional testimony from FBI Director James Comey that no evidence of wiretapping had been discovered, Spicer dug in and said no apology would be offered.

The loss in Congress of the president-backed legislation to repeal and replace Obamacare forced Spicer to defend the administration against suggestions that Trump was politically wounded by the defeat.

Each day, it seems, he's fended off repeated questions about accusations that some members of the Trump campaign staff colluded with Russian agents to discredit Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. He's even been called on to defend the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, over meetings between Kushner and Russian business executives.

He's struggled to explain the actions of the Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes, who has told reporters slightly different variations of having seen evidence that supports Trump's wiretapping allegation.

Spicer hasn't been helped by presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway who, in an interview, asserted that surreptitious surveillance can be conducted through television sets in America's living rooms and by cameras in microwave ovens in America's kitchens.

Left unsaid was how many photos of Hungry Man meatloaf dinner cartons were amassed by spy agencies.

Conway, who laid low for a week or so after a string of public blunders drew ridicule and disbelief, has become the loosest of cannons in an administration with more than its share of them.

Like press secretaries before him, Spicer has become the face of a president's administration, achieving the dubious distinction of driving his televised press briefings to an audience share exceeding that of afternoon soap operas.

Numerous reports suggest Trump tunes into Spicer's briefings, critiquing them in real time and even dispatching a staffer to the briefing room to deliver notes to the podium.

Trump's obsession with media coverage and his annoyance at what he deems unfair is well documented.

Because Spicer is the president's front man with reporters, he bears the brunt of whatever criticism and anger spills from the Oval Office.

Presidential press secretary is an extraordinarily difficult position under any circumstances. It demands serving two masters – the president and the news media – while maintaining an even disposition and a calmness of spirit in the face of an often hostile, skeptical band of reporters.

Spicer has displayed a combative side periodically, particularly when peppered repeatedly by the same question posed in slightly different form or when interrupted in mid-answer by a reporter who feels a challenge is in order.

By all accounts, his first briefing following the president's inaugural was an unmitigated disaster. He laid into the media with a ferocity seldom seen, berating them for deliberately misrepresenting the size of the crowd at the swearing-in ceremony, turning his back on the assembled reporters and stalking off the stage without taking questions.

Subsequent briefings have been noticeably more mellow, but the tension is never far below the surface.

As long as his boss continues to tee up debates and controversy with 140 characters blasted out at 6 a.m., Spicer will remain in the eye of the storm, explaining and establishing context favorable to the administration.

For her part, Conway should realize and accept the reality that she shouldn't add to Spicer's burdens or heighten his angst with tales similar to the microwave oven spying.

He'll still face the media darts on a daily basis, but at the very least he deserves a chance to become more adept at dodging them. Not sure, though, how much more sympathy remains in my heart.

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