

US national security

James Clapper resigns as US director of national intelligence

Clapper will stay on until the end of the Obama administration, marking end to a turbulent tenure defined by Snowden's revelations of NSA surveillance



James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, has submitted his resignation. Photograph: Gabriella Demczuk/Getty Images

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The United States' intelligence chief has resigned ahead of Donald Trump's inauguration.

James Clapper's turbulent tenure as director of national intelligence was defined by combating whistleblower [Edward Snowden's National Security Agency revelations](#) and defending his own integrity after those disclosures contradicted his statements to Congress.

Clapper, who had clashed with President-elect Donald Trump's aide Michael Flynn, told a hearing of the House intelligence committee on Wednesday that he had submitted his resignation on Wednesday night and felt "pretty good" about it.

"I've got 64 days left and I think I'd have a hard time with my wife with anything past that," Clapper, a career intelligence officer and air force general, told the committee. Clapper's final day will be the day of the presidential inauguration, on 20 January.

Clapper is only the fourth director of national intelligence, a position nominally atop the 16 intelligence agencies but without significant budgetary or operational authority over them. The recently created position, established in a 2004 law, waxes and wanes in power with the personality of its occupant.

Clapper, appointed by Barack Obama in 2010 largely on the strength of his relationship with former defense secretary Robert Gates, has been perhaps its most forceful – and unquestionably its most controversial.

While the job is formally non-political, Clapper in 2014 played a leading role in firing Flynn from the directorship of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Flynn, a retired US army lieutenant general, became one of the only national security officials of any note to back Trump, and is expected to take a leading role in Trump's administration, reportedly national security adviser.

"I want to thank you for honorably serving us since the 1960s," said Adam Schiff, the panel's top Democrat, who joked that he wanted Clapper to remain for "four years extra".

Clapper held numerous senior positions in the intelligence community throughout his decades-long career, including the leadership of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Imagery and Mapping Agency, before serving as Gates's undersecretary of defense for intelligence. But it is his time as director of national intelligence during the Snowden disclosures that is likely to define his career in Washington.

In March 2013, months before Snowden provided the Guardian and the Washington Post with voluminous NSA data documenting sweeping domestic and international communications dragnets, Clapper had a public colloquy with Senator Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat on the intelligence committee.

Wyden asked Clapper: "Does the NSA collect any type of data at all on millions, or hundreds of millions, of Americans?"

Clapper replied, untruthfully: "No sir," rubbing his head. "Not wittingly."



<https://youtu.be/PgLiDH79ePk>

'Does the NSA collect any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?'

After Snowden revealed otherwise, Clapper offered a shifting series of explanations for his publicly uttered falsehood. He first said it was the **"least untruthful"** answer he could provide in an unclassified hearing. Later he said he **misunderstood** which particular communications collection program Wyden was asking about – despite Wyden's staff alerting Clapper's before the hearing as to the question – and apologized to the committee.

Later still, his lawyer, Robert Litt, would deny that Clapper lied and said the director simply **forgot**. Litt would also say that Clapper finds open intelligence-committee hearings, a requirement of congressional oversight, as annoying as folding fitted sheets, citing a distinctive turn of phrase used by his boss.

Senator Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican, **called on Clapper to resign** for lying to Congress. It was not the first such call: GOP senator Lindsey Graham wanted Clapper's resignation in 2011 after Clapper forecast that the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi would **"prevail"** over his opposition.

But Obama stuck by his appointee, who struck a highly combative tone over the Snowden disclosures, even implying that journalists publishing them were **"accomplices"** to Snowden, who has been charged under the Espionage Act. During the departure ceremony for NSA director Keith Alexander in 2014, Clapper mocked "Eddie Snowden" and his admirers.

A just-published profile in Wired magazine will serve as Clapper's final explanation of the episode while in office.

"The popular narrative is that I lied, but I just didn't think of it. Yes, I made a mistake, but I didn't lie. There's a big difference," **Clapper told Wired**.

"I'm quite sure that will be the first line of my Washington Post obituary. But that's life in the big city."

For years before their famous exchange, Wyden had written numerous letters to Clapper seeking **additional disclosure** of widespread surveillance, particularly those programs with a domestic reach. He pointed to their history in reacting to Clapper's resignation.

"During Director Clapper's tenure, senior intelligence officials engaged in an deception spree regarding mass surveillance. Top officials, officials who reported to Director Clapper, repeatedly misled the American people and even lied to them," Wyden said.

"Regardless of what was going through the director's head when he testified, failing to correct the record was a deliberate decision to lie to the American people about what their government was doing. And within a few months, of course, the truth came out."

As Clapper's resignation became public, two intelligence committee members, independent Angus King of Maine and

Republican James Lankford of Oklahoma, wrote to Trump to urge the president-elect to prioritize the selection of Clapper's replacement.

A new director of national intelligence can “build an intelligence community leadership team that will put a high value on collaboration”, they wrote, and advise Trump on appointing new heads of the component intelligence agencies.

This article was amended on 17 November 2016. A previous version incorrectly stated that Senator John McCain had once called for Clapper's resignation.

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