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SENATOR SAYS TRUMP OPEN TO COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION OVERHAUL

White House disputes Sen. Joe Manchin's characterization, saying President opposes 2013 'Gang of Eight' bill backed by most Democrats

By Laura Meckler
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President Donald Trump, who has ordered a multipronged crackdown on immigration, said privately that he is open to the sort of comprehensive overhaul passed by the Senate in 2013 and backed by most Democrats, according to one senator who met with Mr. Trump on Thursday.

The White House quickly disputed the characterization offered by Sen. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.) and said Mr. Trump was only voicing general support for addressing the issue.

The 2013 effort, nicknamed the "Gang of Eight" bill after its sponsors, provided a path to citizenship for most of the 11 million people living in the U.S. illegally, as well as increased border-security measures and an overhaul of the legal immigration system. It passed the Senate with support of all Democrats and some Republicans, but died in the GOP-controlled House.

Since then, there has been little talk of another comprehensive immigration measure, and with Republicans controlling both houses of Congress and the White House, it is seen as very unlikely that such an effort could succeed.

Mr. Manchin, who was part of a bipartisan White House meeting on Thursday, said Mr. Trump made his comments when asked about immigration by Sen. Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.), who voted for the 2013 measure.

"He said it has a lot of merit – let's look at it," Mr. Manchin said. He said Mr. Trump was referring to the 2013 measure. "It was surprising basically on some of the things he's talked about, but he says, 'You know, we don't have an immigration policy,' which he's correct."

Mr. Manchin said that Mr. Alexander argued that Mr. Trump was positioned to break through on this issue. "If we're ever going to have an immigration policy, sir, you're the president [who] can do it.' That's what Lamar said," said Mr. Manchin.

A spokesman for Mr. Alexander didn't address the question of Mr. Trump's position but confirmed that the Tennessee senator urged the president to work on the issue.

"Senator Alexander thinks it is appropriate to allow the president to characterize his own position. But the senator did suggest that it is important to fix our immigration system and

that the president is in a unique position to help do that," said the spokesman, Taylor Haulsee.

Later, White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Mr. Trump wasn't referring to any particular legislation in his comments on immigration. "He said, `If you guys want to get together and work on a solution... I'm glad to, like, listen to you,'" he told reporters. Mr. Spicer said the president opposes the 2013 immigration bill.

In an effort to win bipartisan support, the 2013 bill included enforcement measures but also what some Republican critics called "amnesty" for undocumented immigrants. Mr. Trump has focused only on enforcement, with executive orders ramping up deportations, ordering a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border and, citing terrorism concerns, suspending the refugee program and entry to the U.S. by people from seven Muslim-majority nations.