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Intelligence agencies clash with Trump over Russia allegations

By Tom Eley

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Only one month into his administration, and two days after the ouster of his National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, President Donald Trump faces the growing prospect of congressional investigations into alleged ties to Moscow. Powerful sections of the American ruling class are seeking to put the US on a war footing against Russia in a campaign orchestrated by the major intelligence agencies, acting through their preferred media conduits, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

The crisis deepened on Wednesday, with the *Post* and *Times* claiming new revelations based on unnamed current and former intelligence sources, and leading Senate Republicans joining Democrats in calling for a congressional investigation into Trump's alleged connections to Russian intelligence agencies, both prior to and after the November election.

Meanwhile, figures in and around the Democratic Party began to allude to impeachment, drawing comparisons to the Watergate scandal—the 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Committee—that led to the resignation of Richard Nixon.

Trump responded Wednesday by publicly attacking the intelligence agencies he nominally directs, declaring the leaks to the *Times* and *Post* “illegal” and “criminal” at a joint press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He made similar comments earlier

in the day in a Twitter post, raising the prospect that the White House could attempt to organize a purge of the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency (NSA).

“From intelligence, papers are being leaked, things are being leaked,” Trump said at the White House appearance with Netanyahu. “It’s a criminal action, criminal act, and it’s been going on for a long time before me, but now it’s really going on.”

The litany of unsubstantiated allegations of Russian control over Trump continued. The lead *Times* report Wednesday cited “four current and former American officials” in claiming “that Trump associates had repeated contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials in the year before the election,” while Wednesday’s lead *Post* article cited a seemingly endless list of unnamed sources, including officials “who spoke on the condition of anonymity;” “current and former US officials;” “officials inside the National Security Council;” “several... senior officials... who discussed the sensitive matter on the condition of anonymity;” as well as unnamed “Senior Obama administration officials.”

In neither the *Times* nor the *Post* is a single source named. No statement is independently corroborated. No further evidence is presented beyond the anonymous statements themselves—along with broad accusations over “Russian interference” in the US elections, which are presented as fact.

It is now well established that Flynn’s December 29 phone call with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak—in which the incoming national security adviser reportedly indicated that sanctions targeting Russia would be reviewed by the Trump administration—was secretly recorded by the NSA.

There would be nothing illegal in such a discussion, and numerous historical precedents exist, some of them far more egregious than the claims being made about Flynn’s call—including the notorious instance of Reagan campaign officials intervening to prevent the release of US hostages in Iran until after the November 1980 election.

Instead, the intelligence agencies seized on the conversation to drive out Flynn, who advocated a temporary understanding with Russia so that the US could quickly move against Iran, and potentially China.

The NSA shared the transcript of the Flynn call with the FBI. At some point, multiple unnamed intelligence agents then shared the transcript with the media, as well as politicians and government officials. By last weekend, the transcript, which the White House refused to allow Flynn to review, was circulating widely in Washington. Flynn tendered his resignation on Monday evening. A concession from the Trump administration to the anti-Russia campaign, Flynn’s ouster only emboldened it.

The intervention of the intelligence apparatus against Trump has become so heavy-handed that on Wednesday it brought a warning from conservative writer Eli Lake, who supported Hillary Clinton in the general election.

“Normally intercepts of US officials and citizens are some of the most tightly held government secrets,” Lake wrote on *Bloomberg*. “This is for good reason. Selectively disclosing details of private conversations monitored by the FBI or NSA gives the permanent state the power to destroy reputations from the cloak of anonymity. This is what police states do.”

The warfare within the ruling class is being waged along a front that extends from the intelligence agencies through the Republican Party and into the Trump White House itself—as evidenced by the number of leaks coming from “current administration officials.” It is notable that Vice President Mike Pence, who would assume the presidency if Trump were to be impeached or resign, has been kept above the fray by all sides in the conflict.

Tuesday brought an ominous signal that the military brass may become involved. In a breach of democratic norms, Army Gen. Raymond Thomas, commander of US Special Operations forces—including the Navy SEALs and Army Green Berets—commented on the controversy that day.

“Our government continues to be in unbelievable turmoil,” said Thomas, in evident reference to the departure of Flynn, while speaking at a public event in Maryland. “I hope they sort it out soon because we’re a nation at war.” Later when given an opportunity to clarify his comment, Thomas instead reiterated it. “As a commander, I’m concerned our government be as stable as possible,” he said.

Two leading Republican senators, John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, have indicated support for the formation of a special committee to investigate the alleged ties between the Trump campaign and the Russian government.

In an appearance on *Good Morning America*, Graham announced his support for a full investigation into the Trump administration, carried out by an extraordinary “joint select committee.”

“If it is true, it is very, very disturbing to me, and Russia needs to pay a price when it comes to interfering in our democracy and other democracies,” Graham said. “And any Trump person who was working with the Russians in an unacceptable way also needs to pay a price.”

Graham came to the political essence of the controversy when host George Stephanopoulos, quoting Thomas Friedman of the *Times*, asked the senator, “What is going on between Donald Trump and the Republicans?”

“Trump is an outlier when it comes to the Russians,” Graham responded. “I do not know one Republican senator who believes Russia is anything but an enemy... I can’t explain Donald Trump’s view of Russia.”

Graham’s views were echoed by Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who told MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* program, “Let’s get everything out as quickly as possible on this Russia issue ... maybe there’s a problem that obviously goes

much deeper than what we now suspect.” Corker also questioned whether or not “the White House [is] going to have the ability to stabilize itself.”

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan have both accepted as fact alleged Russian “interference” in the US election. They have called for investigations by the regular congressional committees, while stopping short of acceding to demands for the formation of a special investigative committee.

Democrats, meanwhile, have begun to raise the possibility of impeachment.

“This is already bigger than Watergate,” said Democratic National Committee senior adviser Zac Petkanas, in a statement. “The sanctity of our democracy demands an immediate, independent, transparent investigation into the connections between Donald Trump, his staff, and the Russian government.”

There are many problems with this fallacious comparison. But there is one fundamental difference. In 1972 Richard Nixon used illegal methods to harass and discredit political opponents, at a moment when leading sections of the Democratic Party, adapting to mass popular anger, had presented themselves as opponents of the war in Vietnam. Responding to this mood, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* investigated Nixon’s abuses, uncovering the Watergate scandal that led to the resignation of Nixon, and ultimately, the end of the Vietnam War.

Forty-five years later, the *Times* and the *Post*, serving as mouthpieces of the CIA, are leading the charge against Trump from the right, not to accommodate mass popular antiwar sentiment, but for the opposite purpose, to help prepare the political conditions for war with Russia.