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How ‘New Cold Warriors’ Cornered Trump

By Gareth Porter
February 26, 2017

Opponents of the Trump administration have generally accepted as fact the common theme across mainstream media that aides to Donald Trump were involved in some kind of illicit communications with the Russian government that has compromised the independence of the administration from Russian influence.

But close analysis of the entire series of leaks reveals something else that is equally sinister in its implications: an unprecedented campaign by Obama administration intelligence officials, relying on innuendo rather than evidence, to exert pressure on Trump to abandon any idea of ending the New Cold War and to boost the campaign to impeach Trump.

A brazen and unprecedented intervention in domestic US politics by the intelligence community established the basic premise of the cascade of leaks about alleged Trump aides’ shady dealing with Russia. Led by CIA Director John Brennan, the CIA, FBI and NSA issued a 25-page assessment on Jan. 6 asserting for the first time that Russia had sought to help Trump win the election.

Brennan had circulated a CIA memo concluding that Russia had favored Trump and had told CIA staff that he had met separately with Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and FBI Director James Comey and that they had agreed on the “scope, nature and intent of Russian interference in our presidential election.”

In the end, however, Clapper refused to associate himself with the document and the NSA, which agreed to do so, was only willing to express “moderate confidence” in the judgment that the Kremlin had sought to help Trump in the election. In intelligence community parlance, that meant that the NSA considered the idea the Kremlin was working to elect Trump was merely plausible, not actually supported by reliable evidence.

In fact, the intelligence community had not even obtained evidence that Russia was behind the publication by WikiLeaks of the e-mails Democratic National Committee, much less that it had done so with the intention of electing Trump. Clapper had testified before Congress in mid-November and again in December that the intelligence community did not know who had provided the e-mails to WikiLeaks and when they were provided.

The claim – by Brennan with the support of Comey – that Russia had “aspired” to help Trump’s election prospects was not a normal intelligence community assessment but an extraordinary exercise of power by Brennan, Comey and NSA Director Mike Rogers.

Brennan and his allies were not merely providing a professional assessment of the election, as was revealed by their embrace of the the dubious dossier compiled by a private intelligence firm hired by one of Trump’s Republican opponents and later by the Clinton campaign for the specific purpose of finding evidence of illicit links between Trump and the Putin regime.

Salacious Gossip

When the three intelligence agencies gave the classified version of their report to senior administration officials in January they appended a two-page summary of the juiciest bits from that dossier – including claims that Russian intelligence had compromising information about Trump’s personal behavior while visiting Russia. The dossier was sent, along with the assessment that Russia was seeking to help Trump get elected, to senior administration officials as well as selected Congressional leaders.

Among the claims in the private intelligence dossier that was summarized for policymakers was the allegation of a deal between the Trump campaign and the Putin government involving full Trump knowledge of the Russian election help and a Trump pledge – months before the election – to sideline the Ukraine issue once in office. The allegation – devoid of any verifiable information – came entirely from an unidentified “Russian émigré” claiming to be a Trump insider, without any evidence provided of the source’s actual relationship to the Trump camp or of his credibility as a source.

After the story of the two-page summary leaked to the press, Clapper publicly expressed “profound dismay” about the leak and said the intelligence community “has not made any judgment that the information in this document is reliable,” nor did it rely on it any way for our conclusions.”

One would expect that acknowledgment to be followed by an admission that he should not have circulated it outside the intelligence community at all. But instead Clapper then justified having

passed on the summary as providing policymakers with “the fullest possible picture of any matters that might affect national security.”

By that time, US intelligence agencies had been in possession of the material in the dossier for several months. It was their job to verify the information before bringing it to the attention of policymakers.

A former US intelligence official with decades of experience dealing with the CIA as well other intelligence agencies, who insisted on anonymity because he still has dealings with US government agencies, told this writer that he had never heard of the intelligence agencies making public unverified information on a US citizen.

“The CIA has never played such a open political role,” he said.

The CIA has often tilted its intelligence assessment related to a potential adversary in the direction desired by the White House or the Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but this is the first time that such a slanted report impinges not only on domestic politics but is directed at the President himself.

The egregious triple abuse of the power in publishing a highly partisan opinion on Russia and Trump’s election, appending raw and unverified private allegations impugning Trump’s loyalty and then leaking that fact to the media begs the question of motive. Brennan, who initiated the whole effort, was clearly determined to warn Trump not to reverse the policy toward Russia to which the CIA and other national security organizations were firmly committed.

A few days after the leak of the two-page summary, Brennan publicly warned Trump about his policy toward Russia. In an interview on Fox News, he said, “I think Mr. Trump has to understand that absolving Russia of various actions that it’s taken in the past number of years is a road that he, I think, needs to be very, very careful about moving down.”

Graham Fuller, who was a CIA operations officer for 20 years and was also National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East for four years in the Reagan administration, observed in an e-mail, that Brennan, Clapper and Comey “might legitimately fear Trump as a loose cannon on the national scene,” but they are also “dismayed at any prospect that the official narrative against Russia could start falling apart under Trump, and want to maintain the image of constant and dangerous Russian intervention into affairs of state.”

Flynn in the Bull’s Eye

As Trump’s National Security Adviser, Michael Flynn presented an easy target for a campaign to portray the Trump team as being in Putin’s pocket. He had already drawn heavy criticism not only by attending a Moscow event celebrating the Russian television RT in 2016 but sitting next to Putin and accepting a fee for speaking at the event. More importantly, however, Flynn had argued that the United States and Russia could and should cooperate in their common interest of defeating Islamic State militants.

That idea was anathema to the Pentagon and the CIA. Obama's Defense Secretary Ashton Carter had attacked Secretary of State John Kerry's negotiating a Syrian ceasefire that included a provision for coordination of efforts against Islamic State. The official investigation of the US attack on Syrian forces on Sept. 17 turned up evidence that CENTCOM had deliberately targeted the Syrian military sites with the intention of sabotaging the ceasefire agreement.

The campaign to bring down Flynn began with a leak from a "senior US government official" to Washington Post columnist David Ignatius about the now-famous phone conversation between Flynn and Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak on Dec. 29. In his column on the leak, Ignatius avoided making any explicit claim about the conversation. Instead, he asked "What did Flynn say, and did it undercut the US sanctions?"

And referring to the Logan Act, the 1799 law forbidding a private citizen from communicating with a foreign government to influence a "dispute" with the United States, Ignatius asked, "Was its spirit violated?"

The implications of the coy revelation of the Flynn conversation with Kislyak were far-reaching. Any interception of a communication by the NSA or the FBI has always been considered one of the most highly classified secrets in the US intelligence universe of secrets. And officers have long been under orders to protect the name of any American involved in any such intercepted communication at all costs.

But the senior official who leaked the story of Flynn-Kislyak conversation to Ignatius – obviously for a domestic political purpose – did not feel bound by any such rule. That leak was the first move in a concerted campaign of using such leaks to suggest that Flynn had discussed the Obama administration's sanctions with Kislyak in an effort to undermine Obama administration policy.

The revelation brought a series of articles about denials by the Trump transition team, including Vice President-elect Mike Pence, that Flynn had, in fact, discussed sanctions with Kislyak and continued suspicions that Trump's aides were covering up the truth. But the day after Trump was inaugurated, the Post itself reported that the FBI had begun in late December go back over all communications between Flynn and Russian officials and "had not found evidence of wrongdoing or illicit ties to the Russian government...."

Two weeks later, however, the Post reversed its coverage of the issue, publishing a story citing "nine current and former officials, who were in senior positions at multiple agencies at the time of the calls," as saying that Flynn had "discussed sanctions" with Kislyak.

The story said Flynn's conversation with Kislyak was "interpreted by some senior US officials as an inappropriate and potentially illegal signal to the Kremlin that it could expect a reprieve from sanctions that were being imposed by the Obama administration in late December to punish Russia for its alleged interference in the 2016 election."

The Post did not refer to its own previous reporting of the FBI's unambiguous view contradicting that claim, which suggested strongly that the FBI was trying to head off a plan by Brennan and

Clapper to target Flynn. But it did include a crucial caveat on the phrase “discussed sanctions” that few readers would have noticed. It revealed that the phrase was actually an “interpretation” of the language that Flynn had used. In other words, what Flynn actually said was not necessarily a literal reference to sanctions at all.

Only a few days later, the Post reported a new development: Flynn had been interviewed by the FBI on Jan. 24 – four days after Trump’s inauguration – and had denied that he discussed sanctions in the conversation. But prosecutors were not planning to charge Flynn with lying, according to several officials, in part because they believed he would be able to “parse the definition of the word ‘sanctions’.” That implied that the exchange was actually focused not on sanctions per se but on the expulsion of the Russian diplomats.

Just hours before his resignation on Feb. 13, Flynn claimed in an interview with the Daily Caller that he had indeed referred only to the expulsion of the Russian diplomats.

“It wasn’t about sanctions. It was about the 35 guys who were thrown out,” Flynn said. “It was basically, ‘Look, I know this happened. We’ll review everything.’ I never said anything such as, ‘We’re going to review sanctions,’ or anything like that.”

The Russian Blackmail Ploy

Even as the story of the Flynn’s alleged transgression in the conversation with the Russian Ambassador was becoming a political crisis for Donald Trump, yet another leaked story surfaced that appeared to reveal a shocking new level of the Trump administration’s weakness toward Russia.

The Post reported on Feb. 13 that Acting Attorney General Sally Yates, an Obama holdover, had decided in late January – after discussions with Brennan, Clapper and FBI Director James Comey in the last days of the Obama administration – to inform the White House Counsel Donald McGahn in late January that Flynn had lied to other Trump administration officials – including Vice President Mike Pence – in denying that he discussed sanctions with Kislyak. The Post cited “current and former officials” as the sources.

That story, repeated and amplified by many other news media, led to Flynn’s downfall later that same day. But like all of the other related leaks, the story revealed more about the aims of the leakers than about links between Trump’s team and Russia.

The centerpiece of the new leak was that the former Obama administration officials named in the story had feared that “Flynn put himself in a compromising position” in regard to his account of the conversation with Kislyak to Trump members of the Trump transition.

Yates had told the White House that Flynn might be vulnerable to Russian blackmail because of the discrepancies between his conversation with the Ambassador and his story to Pence, according to the Post story.

But once again the impression created by the leak was very different from the reality behind it. The idea that Flynn had exposed himself to a potential Russian blackmail threat by failing to tell Pence exactly what had transpired in the conversation was fanciful in the extreme.

Even assuming that Flynn had flatly lied to Pence about what he had said in the meeting – which was evidently not the case – it would not have given the Russians something to hold over Flynn, first because it was already revealed publicly and second, because the Russian interest was to cooperate with the new administration.

The ex-Obama administration leakers were obviously citing that clumsy (and preposterous) argument as an excuse to intervene in the internal affairs of the new administration. The Post's sources also claimed that "Pence had a right to know that he had been misled..." True or not, it was, of course, none of their business.

Pity for Pence

The professed concern of the Intelligence Community and Justice Department officials that Pence deserved the full story from Flynn was obviously based on political considerations, not some legal principle. Pence was a known supporter of the New Cold War with Russia, so the tender concern for Pence not being treated nicely coincided with a strategy of dividing the new administration along the lines of policy toward Russia.

All indications are that Trump and other insiders knew from the beginning exactly what Flynn had actually said in the conversation, but that Flynn had given Pence a flat denial about discussing sanctions without further details.

On Feb. 13, when Trump was still trying to save Flynn, the National Security Adviser apologized to Pence for "inadvertently" having failed to give him a complete account, including his reference to the expulsion of the Russian diplomats. But that was not enough to save Flynn's job.

The divide-and-conquer strategy, which led to Flynn's ouster, was made effective because the leakers had already created a political atmosphere of great suspicion about Flynn and the Trump White House as having had illicit dealings with the Russians. The normally pugnacious Trump chose not to respond to the campaign of leaks with a detailed, concerted defense. Instead, he sacrificed Flynn before the end of the very day the Flynn "blackmail" story was published.

But Trump's appears to have underestimated the ambitions of the leakers. The campaign against Flynn had been calculated in part to weaken the Trump administration and ensure that the new administration would not dare to reverse the hardline policy of constant pressure on Putin's Russia.

Many in Washington's political elite celebrated the fall of Flynn as a turning point in the struggle to maintain the existing policy orientation toward Russia. The day after Flynn was fired the Post's national political correspondent, James Hohmann, wrote that the Flynn "imbroglio" would now make it "politically untenable for Trump to scale back sanctions to Moscow" because the "political blowback from hawkish Republicans in Congress would be too intense..."

But the ultimate target of the campaign was Trump himself. As neoconservative journalist Eli Lake put it, “Flynn is only the appetizer. Trump is the entree.”

Susan Hennessey, a well-connected former lawyer in the National Security Agency’s Office of General Counsel who writes the “Lawfare” blog at the Brookings Institution, agreed. “Trump may think Flynn is the sacrificial lamb,” she told The Guardian, “but the reality is that he is the first domino. To the extent the administration believes Flynn’s resignation will make the Russia story go away, they are mistaken.”

The Phony “Constant Contacts” Story

No sooner had Flynn’s firing been announced than the next phase of the campaign of leaks over Trump and Russia began. On Feb. 14, CNN and the New York Times published slight variants of the same apparently scandalous story of numerous contacts between multiple members of the Trump camp with the Russian at the very time the Russians were allegedly acting to influence the election.

There was little subtlety in how mainstream media outlets made their point. CNN’s headline was, “Trump aides were in constant touch with senior Russian officials during campaign.” The Times headline was even more sensational: “Trump Campaign Aides Had Repeated Contacts with Russian Intelligence.”

But the attentive reader would soon discover that the stories did not reflect those headlines. In the very first paragraph of the CNN story, those “senior Russian officials” became “Russians known to US intelligence,” meaning that it included a wide range of Russians who are not officials at all but known or suspected intelligence operatives in business and other sectors of society monitored by US intelligence. A Trump associate dealing with such individuals would have no idea, of course, that they are working for Russian intelligence.

The Times story, on the other hand, referred to the Russians with whom Trump aides were said to be in contact last year as “senior Russian intelligence officials,” apparently glossing over a crucial distinction that sources had made to CNN between intelligence officials and Russians being monitored by US intelligence.

But the Times story acknowledged that the Russian contacts also included government officials who were not intelligence officials and that the contacts had been made not only by Trump campaign officials but also associates of Trump who had done business in Russia. It further acknowledged it was “not unusual” for American business to come in contact with foreign intelligence officials, sometimes unwittingly in Russia and Ukraine, where “spy services are deeply embedded in society.”

Even more important, however, the Times story made it clear that the intelligence community was seeking evidence that Trump’s aides or associates were colluding with the Russians on the alleged Russian effort to influence the election, but that it had found no evidence of any such collusion. CNN failed to report that crucial element of the story.

The headlines and lead paragraphs of both stories, therefore, should have conveyed the real story: that the intelligence community had sought evidence of collusion by Trump aides with Russia but had not found it several months after reviewing the intercepted conversations and other intelligence.

Unwitting Allies of the War Complex?

Former CIA Director Brennan and other former Obama administration intelligence officials have used their power to lead a large part of the public to believe that Trump had conducted suspicious contacts with Russian officials without having the slightest evidence to support the contention that such contacts represent a serious threat to the integrity of the US political process.

Many people who oppose Trump for other valid reasons have seized on the shaky Russian accusations because they represent the best possibility for ousting Trump from power. But ignoring the motives and the dishonesty behind the campaign of leaks has far-reaching political implications. Not only does it help to establish a precedent for US intelligence agencies to intervene in domestic politics, as happens in authoritarian regimes all over the world, it also strengthens the hand of the military and intelligence bureaucracies who are determined to maintain the New Cold War with Russia.

Those war bureaucracies view the conflict with Russia as key to the continuation of higher levels of military spending and the more aggressive NATO policy in Europe that has already generated a gusher of arms sales that benefits the Pentagon and its self-dealing officials.

Progressives in the anti-Trump movement are in danger of becoming an unwitting ally of those military and intelligence bureaucracies despite the fundamental conflict between their economic and political interests and the desires of people who care about peace, social justice and the environment.