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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Patrick Martin
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Justice Department probe of Russia-Trump inquiry has become a “criminal investigation”

The Justice Department probe into the origins of the anti-Russia campaign launched by the FBI in 2016 has become a criminal investigation, the *New York Times* reported Thursday night. The probe is headed by John Dunham, the US Attorney in Connecticut, who was appointed by Attorney General William Barr to look into the origins of the FBI investigation into the presidential campaign of Donald Trump and its possible connections to Russia.

The effect of the elevation of the probe to the status of a criminal investigation means that Dunham can convene a grand jury and compel testimony through subpoenas, rather than merely seeking voluntary cooperation of witnesses. Among those expected to be interrogated are former intelligence officials like Peter Strzok, Andrew McCabe, James Comey, John Brennan, and James Clapper, all well-known public critics of President Trump. Dunham has contacted these officials but not yet interviewed them.

The timing of the report in the *Times*—undoubtedly based on a leak from the White House or Department of Justice—is significant. It comes at the end of a week in which the House impeachment inquiry has taken closed-door testimony regarded by both House Democrats and the White House as deeply damaging to the president, and virtually ensuring that articles of impeachment will be drafted.

The stepping-up of the Dunham inquiry is an effort by Trump to strike back at his opponents, both within the military-intelligence apparatus and the congressional Democrats, after a month of unfavorable headlines about the impeachment inquiry.

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The Justice Department launched the Dunham inquiry in May as a measure of political retaliation against Trump's opponents within the national-security apparatus, who initiated the Russia-Trump investigation that ultimately was headed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller. This probe, begun in July 2016, became the source of the long-running fraud, peddled assiduously by the Democrats and corporate media, that Russian "meddling" played a major role in the 2016 election and even accounted for Trump's Electoral College victory over Hillary Clinton.

The Mueller investigation ultimately failed to prove anything of the kind. Its report merely accepted the intelligence agency claims about Russian actions without question, while abiding by a Justice Department rule forbidding it to indict a sitting president (meaning that Trump could not be charged for his blatant efforts to curtail or shut down the Mueller probe itself).

But Trump and his ultra-right supporters have been baying for revenge against those who began the intelligence operation against him, and the Dunham probe was to be a down payment.

Initially, Dunham's review was limited to the period of the election campaign itself, ending with the inauguration. But more recently, according to press reports citing witnesses interviewed by his four-person team, Dunham has begun investigating events in the spring of 2017, up to the point when Trump fired Comey as FBI Director and former FBI Director Mueller was appointed as special counsel.

There is little doubt that the initial FBI probe into alleged connections between the Trump campaign and the Russian government was politically motivated. The official story is that the FBI acted on the basis of a tip from Australian diplomat Alexander Downer, who passed on the claim by Trump foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos that Russia had a large supply of unflattering Hillary Clinton emails that it would make public.

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This became the basis for opening Operation Crossfire Hurricane, an FBI-led investigation that included contributions from the CIA and the National Security Agency, in the course of which the FBI obtained warrants from the Federal Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) to wiretap Carter Page, another Trump foreign policy operative with ties to Russia. The FBI probe became the source of a series of media leaks, during the final stages of the election campaign and then with greater and greater intensity in 2017, through the intelligence apparatus, the Democratic Party and much of the corporate media, sought to direct popular opposition to Trump into a right-wing campaign aimed at promoting a

foreign policy more openly hostile to Russia. FBI deputy director Andrew McCabe was charged with lying to an inspector-general about these leaks and was ultimately fired.

Trump and his supporters hailed the *Times* report as proof that the “hoax” behind the Russia investigation would now be criminally investigated.

Trump’s opponents heading the impeachment campaign bemoaned the report of criminal investigation. A joint letter issued by House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler (D-N.Y.) and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) said, “These reports, if true, raise profound new concerns that the Department of Justice under AG Barr has lost its independence and become a vehicle for President Trump’s political revenge... If the Department of Justice may be used as a tool of political retribution or to help the President with a political narrative for the next election, the rule of law will suffer new and irreparable damage.”

The truth is that both the Justice Department probe and the impeachment inquiry are “tools of political retribution” being wielded by rival factions in a vicious struggle within the US ruling elite.

The Democrats are not targeting Trump for removal because of his real crimes against immigrants and other sections of the working class, or his efforts to build up an executive dictatorship in violation of the Constitution. They have limited the impeachment inquiry to issues of US imperialist foreign policy where Trump has run afoul of the consensus of the national-security establishment on a more aggressive intervention in the Syrian civil war and against Russia generally.

Trump is in turn seeking to use the Department of Justice as a weapon against his opponents, raising the prospect that such war criminals as Brennan and Clapper could be hauled before a grand jury, and even face the threat of jail, not for their support for torture, assassination and American military aggression, but for their backroom machinations against Trump.

Meanwhile, two other investigations into the same area are continuing. Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz has reportedly submitted to Barr a draft of his report on alleged misconduct by the FBI in relations to warrants sought from the FISC against Trump campaign officials. He notified congressional leaders Thursday that his report was “nearing completion.”

A separate review of both the anti-Trump investigation and the FBI handling of probes into the Clinton Foundation is being headed by another US Attorney, John Huber of Utah, who was appointed in 2017 by then Attorney General Jeff Sessions. No information has

been forthcoming from that investigation, which overlaps considerably with the probes by Horowitz and Dunham.

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