Attorney General Jeff Sessions recuses himself from investigation as media, Democrats revive anti-Russian campaign

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US Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced Thursday afternoon that he would recuse himself from any role in the ongoing federal investigation into allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

He was responding to a renewed campaign by much of the corporate media and congressional Democrats, charging that when Sessions gave sworn testimony at his confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, he concealed his contacts with the Russian government during the election campaign.

The *Washington Post* triggered a daylong media firestorm with a report posted on its web site Wednesday night, revealing that Sessions had two encounters with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the 2016 campaign, but had denied any such meetings at the Judiciary Committee hearing.

Leading Democrats weighed in, with both Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi calling on Sessions to resign as attorney general because he "lied under oath," as Pelosi put it, although the video and transcript of the hearing suggest that Sessions' conduct constituted evasiveness typical of such affairs.

It is telling and remarkable that the Democrats' fulminations against Sessions have nothing to do with his reactionary and deeply antidemocratic actions in the three weeks since he became attorney general.

Sessions has reversed an Obama administration decision to phase out private for-profit prisons, now doing a booming business jailing detained immigrants, and withdrew a legal claim by the federal government that a Texas voter ID law was enacted with the intention of discriminating against minority voters and college students. He also prevailed in an internal Trump administration discussion over the rights of transgendered students, reversing official guidance to schools urging them to accommodate these students in their choice of bathrooms.

The attorney general in many ways personifies the ultra-right policies of the Trump administration and the congressional Republicans, but no Democrat called for Sessions' ouster over any of these actions. Their outrage has been confined to one subject: his alleged concealment of contacts with Russian government officials.

The actual substance of the two encounters between Sessions and Ambassador Kislyak amounts to very little. The first followed remarks by Sessions at a Heritage Foundation event in Cleveland during the Republican National Convention. Some 50 ambassadors attended the event and many spoke with Sessions informally afterwards, including the Russian envoy.

The second contact was a meeting between Kislyak and Sessions at the senator's office in Washington on September 8, 2016, which was recorded on his public calendar and attended by several of his top aides, one a military officer. At a brief press conference after he announced his recusal, Sessions said that Kislyak had requested the meeting, which came one day after Sessions had met with the Ukrainian ambassador, and that the topics included terrorism, religion and Russian policy in Ukraine, which Kislyak defended and Sessions criticized.

Sessions said that both meetings were part of his work as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and were not related to the Trump

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campaign, where he served as a top adviser on national security issues.

President Trump declared his support of Sessions during a tour of the aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford on Thursday, and White House aides said that there was no reason for Sessions to recuse himself. But congressional Republicans responded quickly to the media reports with demands that Sessions withdraw from any role in supervising the FBI investigation, now that his own conduct was an issue in the probe.

Sessions recused himself, citing Justice Department rules and the recommendation of senior career officials. Acting Deputy Attorney General Dana Boente became the supervising prosecutor for the FBI probe. Boente is a career Justice Department attorney who was appointed by Barack Obama as US Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, the jurisdiction that includes the Virginia suburbs of Washington DC. It handles most federal cases involving the Pentagon and CIA, which are headquartered there.

It was Boente who stepped in to replace Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, the Obama holdover who was fired because she refused to defend in court Trump's executive order banning travel from seven Muslim-majority countries. Several federal courts ultimately struck down the order as unconstitutional.

The statement by Senate Democratic leader Schumer, calling on Sessions to resign, is a hysterical denunciation that suggests, in quasi-McCarthyite language, the effective takeover of the US government by Moscow. "We must evaluate the scope of Russia's interference in our elections and assess if agents of their government have penetrated to the highest level of our government," Schumer declares. "(T)he integrity of our executive branch is at stake."

The anti-Russian campaign has been sustained by an endless series of leaks from top officials in the military-intelligence apparatus who oppose Trump's apparent willingness to defer confrontation with Russia in favor of targeting Iran and China.

These agencies have used the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as their main conduits for unsubstantiated claims that the Russian government was responsible for the hacking of Democratic Party emails that were then supplied to WikiLeaks. The media has kept the focus on the alleged Russian provenance of the emails, rather than on what the emails revealed: Clinton's gushing speeches to audiences of Wall Street bankers, as well as efforts by top DNC officials to sabotage Clinton's main rival, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

Several congressional investigations into the alleged Russian role are taking place alongside the major probe by the FBI. Democrats and Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee agreed Wednesday on the scope of their probe, which is to include the extent of Russian cyberactivity directed against the US government and institutions, and the US government response, as well as the sources of leaks of classified information from the various intelligence agencies to the US media.

Meanwhile, the Trump White House took two actions in response to the mounting pressure of these investigations. White House lawyers sent instructions to all staff Tuesday, requiring them to preserve materials that could be the subject of the investigation into the 2016 election campaign. This came in response to requests from the House and Senate intelligence committees.

In a potentially significant policy concession, White House officials confirmed that Trump had offered the position of senior director for Europe and Russia, at the National Security Council, to Fiona Hill. Hill is a former intelligence officer in both the Bush and Obama administrations who wrote a highly critical 2013 biography of Vladimir Putin, focusing on his background as an operative of the KGB secret police in the Soviet Union.

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