

Democrats, McCain back independent commission on alleged Trump-Russia ties

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Leading congressional Democrats, backed by Senator John McCain, the former Republican presidential candidate, are pushing for the establishment of an independent commission into alleged collusion between the Russian government and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump.

The pressure for the establishment of such a commission—which would require a vote by the Republican-controlled Congress and the consent of President Trump himself—intensified in the wake of last Wednesday’s extraordinary action by Representative Devin Nunes, the Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

Nunes visited the White House and gave Trump a closed-door briefing on information he had received about US intelligence agencies collecting the communications of Trump transition team members, reportedly including Trump himself, in the course of their surveillance of foreign government officials.

Nunes provided details to Trump which he did not share with either Republican or Democratic members of his own committee. Even some congressional Republicans described his actions as “bizarre,” and Nunes later apologized to the members of his committee at another closed-door session.

Nunes announced Friday that he was postponing a scheduled public hearing, set for Tuesday, March 28, at which former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, former CIA Director John Brennan, and former Deputy Attorney General Sally Quinn were to testify about alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential elections and possible contacts between Russia and the Trump campaign.

The committee’s ranking Democrat, Adam Schiff of California, denounced the postponement, saying it was part of an effort by the White House to “choke off public information.” He said that the canceled public hearing

made it quite clear that the White House was unhappy with “the events of the week,” which included the nationally televised hearing Monday where FBI Director James Comey confirmed that his agency was investigating possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian government officials, although he presented no evidence and refused to discuss any details.

Speaking on the CBS program “Face the Nation,” Schiff claimed, “We know that Russia was involved in hacking our democracy. We know that the evidence or information is sufficient to warrant an FBI investigation of this.”

This is typical of the slippery language and McCarthy-style innuendo that characterizes the Democratic Party-media campaign over Trump and Russia. By “hacking our democracy,” Schiff was referring to the actions of unidentified hackers who obtained emails from the Democratic National Committee and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta and supplied them to WikiLeaks, which made them public.

Far from undermining democracy, the publication of these emails documented a Democratic Party conspiracy against democracy. The emails detailed the efforts of the DNC to sabotage Clinton’s main challenger, Bernie Sanders, and Clinton’s efforts to ingratiate herself with major banks while concealing from ordinary voters her endearments addressed to the Wall Street fat cats.

Schiff went on to denounce President Trump for “interfering in the House investigation,” concluding, “I do think the events of this week call out the need for an independent commission, quite separate and apart from what we do in Congress.”

The most prominent Republican to back the formation of an independent commission is Senator John McCain, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, who is identified with an ultra-hawkish foreign policy stance towards Russia.

This is the issue that underlies the entire campaign over Trump's alleged ties with Russia, which has been concocted from anonymous and unverified leaks from the military-intelligence apparatus to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. There is a ferocious opposition in the US ruling elite to any shift away from the policy of confrontation with Russia, in the Middle East, Ukraine and the Baltic states, pursued over the past decade.

At last Monday's hearing, Schiff played the role of chief prosecutor on the Trump-Russia connection, citing a series of contacts between Russian officials and figures in Trump's entourage and suggesting darkly that these were not coincidental, but likely part of a monumental conspiracy.

However, the three most prominent individuals he named—former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, former foreign policy adviser Carter Page, and longtime Trump confidant and right-wing political operative Roger Stone—responded by offering to testify publicly and under oath before the committee. All have flatly denied any collusion between the Trump campaign and the hacking—by Russians or otherwise—of the Clinton campaign.

The Democratic minority leader in the US Senate, Charles Schumer of New York, added a new element to the campaign over Trump and Russia when he suggested during the week that it would be “unseemly” for the US Senate to approve the nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the US Supreme Court while the president who nominated Gorsuch was under FBI investigation.

Appearing Sunday on the ABC program “This Week,” Schumer denied that this amounted to calling for a delay in filling the vacancy on the Supreme Court for years. “Let's see where this investigation goes for a few months and delay it,” he said. “If the investigation looks like it's nowhere, fine. If it looks like it's really serious, yeah, we ought to consider what I said.”

Schumer said after the lengthy appearance of Gorsuch before the Senate Judiciary Committee, at which the nominee refused to answer any questions about his attitude to specific legal and judicial issues, that Democrats would filibuster his nomination. This would force the Republicans, who hold only a 52-48 majority in the Senate, to win the support of eight Democrats for Gorsuch, which appears unlikely, or to change the Senate rules to make confirmation of the nominee possible with a simple majority vote.

By linking Gorsuch's fate to the FBI investigation into the Russian role in the US elections, Schumer was

suggesting that the alleged Trump-Russia connection could be used as leverage in a wider array of issues, ranging from judicial nominations to tax and budgetary policy.

At the same time, Democrats have intensified their rhetorical fire on the issue, with several more representatives declaring that the alleged Russian hacking was an act of war, implying that it should be dealt with as such, through some form of cyberwar retaliation.

Representative Bonnie Watson Coleman of New Jersey told a meeting of the House Homeland Security Committee, “I think this attack that we've experienced is a form of war, a form of war on our fundamental democratic principles.”

Similar statements were made by two Democrats, Jackie Speier and Eric Swalwell, during the House Intelligence Committee hearing where FBI Director Comey testified.

The ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ben Cardin of Maryland, called the hacking of the DNC and Podesta—for which no conclusive link to Russia has been established—America's “political Pearl Harbor.”

The *Washington Post* published an op-ed column Sunday by Jennifer Palmieri, former spokeswoman for the Clinton presidential campaign, under the headline, “The Clinton campaign warned you about Russia. But nobody listened to us.”

Bemoaning the failure of the media to take up the allegations of connections between Trump and Russia during the election campaign, Palmieri declared, “Now that Trump is president, though, the stakes are higher, because the Russian plot succeeded.”

She added, “If Clinton had won with the help of the Russians, the Republicans would have impeachment proceedings underway for treason. No doubt. Instead, dealing with Russia falls nearly solely on Democrats' shoulders.”

Palmieri concluded, echoing Schumer, that every issue addressed in Congress should be tied to demands for the formation of an independent commission into the Trump-Russia connection. “Members of Congress should use every procedural tool available to force votes on such a commission,” she concluded.



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