

Senate hearing sets stage to escalate bipartisan campaign against Russia

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The first public hearing of the Senate Intelligence Committee on alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US elections was a calculated exercise in warmongering propaganda, in which Democrats and Republicans joined forces to demonize Russian President Vladimir Putin and depict Russia as a global threat to US interests.

In a significant shift from the campaign waged over the past several months, through leaks from US intelligence agencies depicting the Democratic Party and the Hillary Clinton campaign as the main target of Russian activities, the Senate hearing heard claims that Russian cyber-operations had targeted Republicans and Democrats alike.

These purportedly included the presidential and US Senate campaigns of Marco Rubio, as well as House Speaker Paul Ryan, allegedly targeted by a Russian disinformation campaign last week, in the wake of his failure to win passage of legislation repealing Obamacare.

While no evidence was presented of the supposed attacks on Rubio and Ryan—just as no evidence has been provided that Russian operatives hacked the Clinton campaign—the effect of these charges was to present the issue of Russian cyberattacks as a threat to both parties that required a bipartisan response by the US government and its military and intelligence agencies.

“We are all targets of a sophisticated and capable adversary and we must engage in a whole-of-government approach to combat Russian active measures.” That was the message delivered by Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr, a North Carolina Republican, as the hearing opened. He added that efforts by Russia to “discredit the United States and weaken the West are not new,” as he introduced a panel of “experts” who claimed that the Putin regime was merely continuing the methods of the Soviet-era KGB.

The committee’s vice chairman, Democrat Mark Warner of Virginia, a multimillionaire telecom CEO before entering politics, claimed that Russian President

Vladimir Putin was responsible for “a deluge of disinformation in a broader attempt to undermine America’s strength and leadership throughout the world.”

Warner emphasized that Republicans as well as Democrats were the victims of Russian-sponsored hacking and “fake news,” making a bipartisan response necessary. “I want to make clear, at least for me: This is not about whether you have a ‘D’ or an ‘R’ next to your name,” he said. “It is not about relitigating last fall’s election. It is about clearly understanding and responding to this very real threat.”

Senator Rubio—who participated in the hearing as a member of the Intelligence Committee—claimed that his election campaign aides were targeted by hacking attacks from unknown IP addresses within Russia, both last summer, when he was running for reelection as a senator, and as recently as Wednesday, the day before the hearing.

The attack against Paul Ryan was “revealed”—without any supporting evidence—by Clint Watts, a former FBI agent and now a cyber “expert” at the Foreign Policy Research Institute Program on National Security. Watts claimed that a Russian-sponsored social media campaign had been launched against Ryan “hoping to foment further unrest amongst US democratic institutions.”

Watts told reporters outside the hearing that other Republican presidential candidates had been targeted by Russian “active measures” to sow disinformation, and that “gray outlets” continued issuing tweets directed at President Trump “at high volumes when they know he is online, pushing conspiracy theories,” hoping he will retweet them.

Another witness, retired General Keith Alexander, former director of the National Security Agency, said the Trump administration needed to pressure Russia to back off on cyberattacks. The US government should let Russia know “what things they can’t do and why they cannot do those,” and he urged the committee to adopt a bipartisan

approach “for the good of the nation.”

The Senate hearing marked a distinct shift in the focus of the “Russian hacking” story as it has been developed over the past six months and used to fight out foreign policy differences in Washington.

Not only did the witnesses declare that Russia had attacked Republican and Democrats alike, but they conflated the circulation of unfavorable news stories (whether true or false), the spreading of rumors on social media, and outright hacking to obtain private documents, branding all of these illegitimate and even criminal. The logical conclusion would be to restrict all political commentary during a US election campaign to what is approved by the two officially sanctioned capitalist parties.

The anti-democratic implications of this line of argument were brought out in an extraordinary exchange between Rubio and the former FBI agent Watts. Rubio declared that the Putin regime was engaging in a “blitzkrieg ... of informational warfare” aimed at fomenting social divisions within the United States. Watts replied that there were many instances of fake news intended “to steer Americans unwittingly in many different directions that can cause all sorts of danger and even violence in certain cases.”

After the hearing, Rubio expanded on the theme, telling reporters that Russian operatives “use things like Ferguson, like Occupy Wall Street, legitimate movements in America ... but then they try amplify on that and exacerbate it in the hopes of then being able to report back to the world and their own people that America’s a disaster. It’s not new, but they now have the Internet and technology that they can use to rapidly spread exaggerated news and sometimes false news in a way that furthers their aims.”

Such comments point to the real danger that any upsurge of social struggles in the United States, any challenge by the working class to the policies of Wall Street and American imperialism, will be branded the work of “Russian agents.”

The Senate hearing was almost overshadowed in media coverage of Thursday’s events by the House side of the investigation, focused on the backlash against the secret briefing given by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes to President Trump last week.

The *New York Times* reported on its web site Thursday afternoon that two White House officials had supplied Nunes information about US intelligence agencies monitoring the communications between Trump transition

officials and foreign governments. Nunes then made a surreptitious visit to the White House to brief Trump on material supplied by Trump’s own aides.

The *Times* named the two officials as Ezra Cohen-Watnick, the senior director for intelligence at the National Security Council, and Michael Ellis, a lawyer in the White House Counsel’s Office with the title “assistant to the president,” who formerly worked on the staff of the House Intelligence Committee, giving him a direct connection to Nunes.

Within minutes of the appearance of this story, the White House sent a letter to top Republican and top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and the Senate Intelligence Committee, inviting them to view materials relating to the “incidental collection” of Trump transition team communications—presumably similar to the material that was shown to Nunes alone last week.

Nunes has indicated that the interception of communications between Trump transition officials and foreign governments was due to the monitoring of foreign government officials, not the monitoring of Trump aides. Thus it would not vindicate Trump’s claim, tweeted on March 4, that President Obama had ordered the wiretapping of Trump Tower during the election campaign. However, Trump claimed that Nunes’s revelation did amount to a partial vindication.

Whether the US government bugged Trump Tower is a secondary question, and given the size of the US intelligence apparatus, and the myriad techniques for surveillance, a question for which a definitive answer is hardly possible.

What is clear is that the entire campaign around supposed Russian hacking during the 2016 election has been mounted for the purpose of shifting the foreign policy of the Trump administration and compelling the White House to continue the campaign of confronting Russia in the Middle East, Ukraine and the Baltic states, embarked on by the Obama administration and backed by the military-intelligence apparatus.



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