

Senate hearing revives Democratic campaign over alleged Trump-Russia connections

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A hearing before a Senate subcommittee Monday became the occasion for the Democratic Party and the bulk of the corporate media to revive their campaign of unsupported allegations that the Trump presidential campaign collaborated with the Russian government in the course of the 2016 election.

The two witnesses were former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and former Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, who served as acting attorney general for the first 10 days of the Trump administration. She was fired by Trump on January 30 for opposing his executive order to ban travel from seven predominately Muslim countries.

Clapper added little to his previous appearances before House and Senate committees in which he repeatedly claimed there is massive evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election, while declining to detail any of it on the grounds that the subject is classified. These unsupported allegations are accompanied by the declaration that there is no evidence of collusion between Trump campaign aides and the alleged Russian hackers.

The testimony of Yates was widely anticipated because of the dramatic circumstances of her dismissal from the Department of Justice, after she instructed US attorneys not to defend Trump's first executive order imposing a temporary ban on visitors and refugees from seven mainly Muslim countries. She has not previously spoken in public either about her firing or about the discussions she had with White House officials that led to the ouster of Trump's first national security adviser, retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn.

Yates described a series of meetings and phone calls with White House Counsel Donald McGahn between January 26 and January 30, during the second week of the Trump administration. Yates requested a meeting

with McGahn on January 26 to inform him, and through him Trump, that the Justice Department had become aware that Flynn had given a false account of his contacts with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergei Kislyak, during the transition period between the November 8 election and Trump's inauguration on January 20.

In particular, Flynn had denied that in a phone conversation with Kislyak on December 29, 2016 he discussed the sanctions that the Obama administration had just imposed on the Russian government for its alleged interference in the US elections, including the expulsion of dozens of Russian diplomats stationed in the US.

Yates told McGahn that these denials were false, and that Flynn had lied about the matter to Vice President Mike Pence. Furthermore, she argued, since the Russians knew Flynn had lied, they could use this as leverage to pressure him on other issues, rendering him vulnerable to blackmail.

At the Senate hearing, Yates declined to say how she knew Flynn had lied, citing secrecy concerns. But media reports--including a *Washington Post* article from February 9 that led directly to Flynn's firing--claim that US intelligence agencies monitored the Flynn-Kislyak phone call as part of routine surveillance of the top Russian official in the United States, and that the transcript of their conversations had been made available to Yates, who took the matter to the White House.

The three-hour Senate hearing was dominated by wrangling between Democrats, who sought to present the Flynn firing in the most unflattering light--repeatedly raising the question of why it took Trump 18 days to fire the national security adviser after his lying had been exposed--and Republicans seeking

to turn the spotlight onto the question of who in the military-intelligence apparatus or the Obama administration had leaked the Flynn-Kislyak report to the media.

Both Clapper and Yates denied that they had been the anonymous sources for the media reports, or that they had authorized subordinates to do the leaking. They also rebuffed suggestions that the “unmasking” of Flynn’s name was a criminal act. Intelligence reports on phone calls to and from Kislyak would normally list any American interlocutors as “US person #1,” and so on, rather than naming them.

Senator Richard Durbin, the Democratic minority whip, cited the 18-day delay, declaring, “And during those 18 days, General Flynn continued to hire key senior staff on the National Security Council, announced new sanctions on Iran’s ballistic missile program, met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe along with President Trump at Mar-a-Lago, and participated in discussions about responding to a North Korean missile launch and spoke repeatedly to the press about his communications with Russian Ambassador Kislyak.”

Democrat Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota noted darkly, “After they knew about this on January 28 Flynn was allowed to join President Trump on an hour-long telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin.”

Democrat Al Franken, also of Minnesota, cited press reports that President Barack Obama had warned President-elect Trump at a private meeting shortly after the election not to bring Flynn into his White House. Franken asked rhetorically whether Trump feared firing Flynn because it might draw attention to “all these other people in the administration who have had contacts [with Russia].”

The *New York Times* wrote, “Yates’s testimony seemed to contradict public statements made by White House press secretary Sean Spicer and White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus” because they described her meeting with McGahan as a “heads-up” about Flynn, while Yates described her purpose as delivering a warning of some urgency.

Charges of “Russian hacking” during the elections have been employed by the Democrats, speaking for a powerful section of the military-intelligence apparatus, to torpedo any shift by the Trump administration away

from the confrontational policy towards Russia adopted by the Obama administration, particularly since the 2014 ultra-right coup in Ukraine that was heavily backed by Washington.

The anti-Russian propaganda has served two additional purposes. The Democrats have used it to conceal the actual content of the tens of thousands of hacked emails made public by WikiLeaks, coming from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager, John Podesta. These emails demonstrated both Clinton’s close ties to Wall Street--providing the text of several flattering and lavishly paid speeches she made to financial industry audiences--and the machinations of top DNC officials to insure that Clinton and not Bernie Sanders won the Democratic presidential nomination.

Even more importantly, the anti-Russian campaign has been developed as a political diversion. The Democrats have intervened repeatedly at protest demonstrations and town hall meetings, seeking to direct popular hostility to Trump behind their efforts to pressure the White House for a more aggressive foreign policy, particularly in relation to Syria, Russia’s only Arab ally, and more generally throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe.



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