

Trump White House in disarray amidst charges it sought to block FBI investigation into Flynn

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The Trump White House was under mounting pressure Tuesday in the wake of a report in the *New York Times* that Trump had met with FBI Director James Comey in February seeking to shut down the federal investigation into his former national security adviser, Michael Flynn.

It was the second media bombshell to explode in two days, following the report Monday afternoon by the *Washington Post* that Trump shared classified information about ISIS with two visiting Russian officials, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

In both instances, the media “exposés” actually represent attacks on Trump from within the military-intelligence apparatus. The *Times* report is based on material supplied by high-ranking FBI officials, while the *Post* article voices the concerns of officials in the CIA or National Security Agency.

The political motivation for these attacks was suggested by a question directed to White House spokesman Sean Spicer at an off-camera press “gaggle” on Tuesday, when one reporter asked him, “Sean, do you believe that this is a case of the intelligence community or elements in the intelligence community actively seeking to undermine the President and his foreign policy as he seeks to build a closer relationship with Russia?”

Spicer did not answer the question, but it has been evident for months that the driving force of the political warfare between the White House and the intelligence agencies is opposition to Trump’s moves to pull back from the CIA-led campaign to undermine and overthrow the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, as well as the broader effort to confront Russia.

The Democratic Party has chosen to spearhead this campaign, attacking the Trump administration from the right, rather than focus on Trump’s attacks on democratic rights, immigrants, environmental and safety regulations and social services, along with the overall policy of military aggression.

The highly-orchestrated character of this offensive against the Trump White House is demonstrated by the article posted on the web site of the *New York Times* Tuesday, just in time to be the lead item on the network television news programs that evening.

Times report claims that after meeting with Trump February 14 in the Oval Office, the day following the forced resignation of Flynn, Comey drafted a memo for his files documenting the conversation he had with the president. According to this third-hand report (the *Times* citing a memo read to them by an “associate” of Comey’s detailing what Comey wrote down about what Trump said to him), Trump asked him to drop any further investigation into Flynn now that he had quit his position as national security adviser.

“I hope you can let this go,” Trump allegedly said to Comey, describing Flynn as “a good guy.” Trump added that Flynn had done nothing wrong.

The *Times* posted its report under a banner headline, while declaring, in the text of the article, “The existence of Mr. Trump’s request is the clearest evidence that the president has tried to directly influence the Justice Department and F.B.I. investigation into links between Mr. Trump’s associates and Russia.” Without using the term, the newspaper was suggesting that Trump was guilty of obstruction of justice, an impeachable offense.

The article had an additional revelation, that “The memo was part of a paper trail Mr. Comey created documenting what he perceived as the president’s improper efforts to influence a continuing investigation.” In other words, Comey, an experienced political operator in the national security bureaucracy, was preparing a dossier to be used against Trump in the event that he moved against Comey—as he did May 9, firing the FBI director summarily.

Comey shared the memo of the February 14 conversation—and no doubt other documents—with “senior FBI officials and close associates,” according to the *Times*. One week after Comey’s firing, almost to the minute, the *Times* article based on the leaked Comey memo was posted on the newspaper’s web site.

The Trump White House flatly denied Comey’s version of the February 14 meeting, declaring in a statement, “The president has never asked Mr. Comey or anyone else to end any investigation, including any investigation involving General Flynn ... This is not a truthful or accurate portrayal of the

conversation between the president and Mr. Comey.”

The White House statement also referred to testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee last week by acting FBI director Andrew McCabe, previously Comey’s top deputy, who said, “There has been no effort to impede our investigation to date.” McCabe was being questioned about the investigation into alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government during the presidential election, not about the separate investigation into whether Flynn lied to the FBI in January 2017.

The *Times* report came only 24 hours after the *Washington Post* report that threw the Trump White House into disarray. The *Post* article said that Trump had revealed highly classified information about ISIS plans to attack airliners with bombs concealed in laptops during a meeting May 10 in the Oval Office with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Ambassador Kislyak.

The source of the classified information was an unnamed “U.S. partner,” and there was much press commentary to the effect that this partner might now be unwilling to share intelligence information with Washington. On Tuesday afternoon, the “partner” was revealed to be the state of Israel, and Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer issued an official reassurance that there would be no damage to US-Israeli collaboration on “anti-terror” operations.

The *Post* report set off a media frenzy, with claims that the revelation confirmed allegations of an illicit Trump-Russia connection, and calls from media pundits, including conservative Republicans, for the appointment of an independent counsel or even the initiation of impeachment proceedings.

In a vain effort to stem the tide, the White House brought General H. R. McMaster, Trump’s national security adviser, before television cameras on Tuesday morning to denounce the *Post* article and subsequent reports, and declare that Trump had done nothing to endanger US national security.

The other two US officials present at the meeting with the Russians—deputy national security adviser Dina Powell and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson—also issued statements in support of the president. The crisis atmosphere within the administration was reflected in the fact that State Department officials were unaware of the Tillerson statement when contacted by the press.

At one point Monday evening, several reporters could overhear a stormy meeting involving Spicer, his deputy Sarah Huckabee Sanders, White House Communications Director Michael Dubke, and chief White House strategist Stephen Bannon. The shouting was so loud that White House staffers turned up the TV volume in the press room to drown it out.

As in the controversy last week over the firing of Comey, Trump undermined his own political defenders with statements on Twitter that contradicted the official explanations of his conduct. Trump declared that he had every right as president to

divulge classified information—on this he is legally correct—and that Russia could be a valuable ally in the conflict against ISIS.

The statements from the White House did nothing to quiet the media clamor and the mounting criticism on Capitol Hill, not only from virtually all Democrats, but from leading congressional Republicans. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said, “We could do with a little less drama from the White House on a lot of things so that we can focus on our agenda.”

Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said of the Trump White House, “Obviously, they are in a downward spiral right now and have got to figure out a way to come to grips with all that’s happening. The chaos that is being created by the lack of discipline is creating an environment that I think makes—it creates a worrisome environment.”

House Speaker Paul Ryan, in a statement issued through a spokesman, said, “We have no way to know what was said, but protecting our nation’s secrets is paramount. The speaker hopes for a full explanation of the facts from the administration.”

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain gave vent to the anti-Russian sentiment of a section of the Republicans and all the Democrats. “Regrettably,” he declared, “the time President Trump spent sharing sensitive information with the Russians was time he did not spend focusing on Russia’s aggressive behavior, including its interference in American and European elections, its illegal invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, its other destabilizing activities across Europe, and the slaughter of innocent civilians and targeting of hospitals in Syria.”

Several right-wing Republicans from the neo-conservative wing of the party joined Democrats in calling for action to remove Trump from the presidency. Eric Edelman, a former Bush administration State Department official, said that McMaster and other top officials should resign immediately, or else delay “until a resignation becomes part of a push to either force a resignation or the invocation of the 25th Amendment.”

Another Bush administration foreign policy adviser, Eliot Cohen, said of Trump’s communication of classified information to Russian officials, “If deliberate, it would be treason.” He called on congressional Republicans “to get off the Trump train and name a select committee whose job it will be to determine whether Congress should move ahead to impeachment.”



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