

Trump lashes out at investigation of alleged Russia ties

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Responding to press questions at the White House Thursday afternoon, President Trump denounced the ongoing congressional and FBI investigations into possible collusion between his presidential campaign and the Russian government, calling the entire media-fueled furor over alleged Russian intervention in the US elections a “witch-hunt.”

While claiming to “respect” the decision of Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein Wednesday to appoint former FBI Director Robert Mueller as a special counsel to take charge of the Russian investigation, Trump seemed to include this within the “witch-hunt.”

He asserted as much in a series of tweets early Thursday morning, fuming that no such special counsel had been appointed to investigate “all of the illegal acts that took place in the Clinton campaign & Obama administration,” and then proclaiming himself the victim of “the single greatest witch-hunt of a politician in American history.”

These comments reveal the intensity of the conflict that is raging within the American state, pitting different factions of the ruling class and the state apparatus against each other. Trump nominated Rosenstein as the number two official in the Department of Justice and could fire him or Mueller tomorrow, just as he fired FBI Director James Comey on May 9.

For now, however, he cannot do so, despite the reported urging of some of his closest advisers, for fear that this would trigger political convulsions that might lead to the initiation of impeachment proceedings by Congress. Only one president has ever fired a special prosecutor named to investigate his actions—Richard Nixon, who was forced to resign from office ten months after he fired Watergate prosecutor Archibald

Cox.

In his brief remarks Thursday as he stood side by side with the visiting president of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, Trump denied ever asking Comey to drop the FBI investigation into former national security adviser Michael Flynn, who was forced to resign February 13 for lying about his discussions with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

Comey, acting through anonymous FBI “associates,” leaked a memo to the *New York Times* memorializing a conversation with Trump the following day, February 14, in which he claims Trump asked him to go easy on Flynn because the former general was a “good guy.” The publication of the *Times* report late Tuesday touched off a political uproar in Washington, with renewed claims by Democrats—and a few Republicans—that Trump might be guilty of obstruction of justice, an impeachable offense.

While giving a flat “no” to a question about his conversations with Comey, and calling suggestions of an impeachable offense “totally ridiculous,” Trump was noticeably more cautious in discussing possible collusion between his campaign and the Russian government. He said, “there is no collusion between—certainly myself and my campaign, but I can only speak for myself—and the Russians. Zero.”

This cryptic remark was immediately parsed by media commentators as an effort to distance Trump from aides such as his former campaign chairman Paul Manafort, as well as Flynn, who are reportedly among the principal subjects of the FBI investigation into contacts between Russia and the Trump campaign.

On Capitol Hill, the appointment of Mueller as special counsel was greeted with bipartisan enthusiasm, albeit for different reasons. Democrats hailed it as a step that vindicated their single-minded focus on the anti-

Russian campaign, which has been virtually the sole basis of their criticism of the Trump administration, while they have been largely silent on its right-wing attacks on democratic rights and social programs.

Congressional Republicans were relieved because the Justice Department investigation is expected to shunt aside the various congressional investigations and could delay any further anti-Trump revelations—if there are any—for a considerable period.

Deputy Attorney General Rosenstein made an hour-long appearance Thursday afternoon before all 100 members of the US Senate, meeting behind closed doors, to explain his actions in the dismissal of Comey and the appointment of Mueller. He reportedly told the senators that he knew Trump had decided to fire Comey when he drafted a memorandum blasting Comey's conduct during the FBI investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server, but that Trump had not pressured him to produce the memo.

According to senators who spoke to the press afterwards, Rosenstein gave few details about the firing of Comey because this action could itself become part of the probe conducted by Mueller. The newly appointed special counsel is charged with investigating possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia, efforts to cover up that collusion subsequently (including, potentially, the firing of Comey), and any efforts to impede Mueller's own investigation. In other words, the Mueller investigation could expand more or less indefinitely, with Trump's own responses to the investigation becoming part of its jurisdiction.

Lindsey Graham, Republican senator from South Carolina, said "the takeaway I have is that everything he said was that you need to treat this investigation as if it will be a criminal investigation," not a counterintelligence investigation. From a legal standpoint, that would mean that Mueller will focus not on the actions of the Russian government or allied hackers, but on the actions of Trump campaign officials who supposedly collaborated with them.

Democratic Minority Whip Richard Durbin of Illinois said that Rosenstein had declined to discuss either specific statements by President Trump or the role of Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who formally recused himself from any role in the Russia investigation.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the various congressional committees that are investigating the alleged Russian

connection to the Trump campaign have formally requested documents from the Justice Department and the FBI relating both to the firing of Comey and to the memorandum by Comey detailing his discussions with Trump. Comey has also been asked to testify in person and in public by both Senate and House committees.



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