

New report: Current Trump official a “person of interest” in FBI probe of White House-Russia ties

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On Friday, within minutes of President Donald Trump taking off on Air Force One for Saudi Arabia, the first leg of an nine-day overseas trip, new allegations published by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* added further fuel to the political warfare in Washington.

The conflict is a struggle between two factions of the ruling class and the state apparatus, both deeply reactionary, militaristic and anti-working class. It centers on differences over US imperialist foreign policy. The Democrats have chosen to base their opposition to Trump, who embodies the criminality of the financial oligarchy, on the charge that he is a dupe of Russian President Vladimir Putin. This, in turn, is based on entirely unsubstantiated charges that the Russian government hacked and leaked Democratic emails to tip the 2016 campaign to Trump.

The Democrats express the outlook of forces within the intelligence establishment who believe Trump cannot be trusted to continue and escalate the Obama administration's confrontation with Russia in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. They have virtually nothing to say about the ongoing attacks by Trump on health care, education and the environment, or the war against immigrants.

In Friday's article, the *Post* reported that the FBI investigation into possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian officials, now headed by special counsel Robert Mueller, has identified a current senior administration official as a “person of interest.” The report is the first indication that the investigation is looking not only at former Trump aides, such as one-time campaign manager Paul Manafort and former national security adviser Michael Flynn, but is, in the

words of the *Post*, “reaching into the highest levels of government.”

The newspaper cited “people familiar with the matter,” who would not further identify the Trump official under scrutiny, but said the person is “someone close to the president.” Current Trump administration officials who have acknowledged contacts with Russian officials include Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and White House adviser Jared Kushner, a multi-millionaire real estate investor and son-in-law to Trump.

The only response by the White House to the *Post* article was a pro-forma statement by press secretary Sean Spicer: “As the president has stated before, a thorough investigation will confirm that there was no collusion between the campaign and any foreign entity.”

The *Post* noted that the White House has acknowledged a Kushner meeting with Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to the United States, in late November. It added that Kushner himself has acknowledged he met with the head of a Russian development bank, Vnesheconombank, which has been targeted for US sanctions since July 2014.

The probe is accelerating, according to the newspaper's sources, with a grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia issuing subpoenas and various individuals being interviewed by investigators. The grand jury has issued subpoenas for records from Flynn, who was forced to resign as national security adviser last February for allegedly lying to Vice President Mike Pence about discussions he held with Ambassador Kislyak about Obama administration sanctions against Russia.

The special counsel and FBI are demanding records of Flynn's business, the Flynn Intel Group, which was reportedly paid over \$500,000 by a firm owned by a Turkish-American businessman with close ties to the Turkish government. The firm was paid to do research on the US-based émigré cleric Fethullah Gulen, repeatedly denounced by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a CIA asset involved in the a failed coup against his government last summer. Istanbul has called on the US to extradite Gulen.

Almost simultaneous with the appearance of the *Washington Post* article, the *New York Times* reported that in his Oval Office meeting with Russian Foreign Secretary Sergey Lavrov and Ambassador Kislyak on May 10, the day after he fired FBI Director James Comey, President Trump called Comey "a real nut job" and said of his decision to dismiss him: "I faced great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off."

The sudden firing of Comey, who was heading up the FBI investigation into allegations of Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton campaign emails and possible collusion by the Trump campaign, immediately raised charges of obstruction of justice, an impeachable offense. Trump himself seemed to substantiate the charge that he acted in order to stall or shut down the probe when, in a TV interview two days after the firing, he associated the decision with the Russia investigation.

Friday's *Times* article appears to provide further evidence that Comey's firing was motivated by a desire to impede the investigation. According to the newspaper, the quote by Trump was included in a document based on notes taken from inside the Oval office and circulated as the official account of the meeting.

White House spokesman Spicer did not contradict the report. Instead, he said that Comey's "grandstanding and politicizing" of the investigation had obstructed "our ability to engage and negotiate with Russia." He went on to denounce the leaking of classified information.

Senate Intelligence Committee leaders announced Friday night that Comey had agreed to testify in public session on a date to be set after Memorial Day (May 29).

Earlier on Friday, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who named former FBI Director Mueller as

special counsel on Wednesday, briefed the entire House of Representatives in closed door meeting. This followed a similar meeting with the full Senate the previous day.

Rosenstein acknowledged he had been told that Trump had decided to fire Comey the day before he submitted a memorandum to the president sharply critical of Comey's handling of the investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server during her tenure as secretary of state. Trump dismissed Comey the same day as Rosenstein's memo, May 9, but the White House initially issued a false story that the initiative for the move had come from the deputy attorney general.

Frustrated senators and congressmen, mostly Democrats, complained, however, that Rosenstein refused to give any further details on the firing, using the appointment of Mueller as an all-purpose justification for remaining silent. Nor did the Justice Department official answer questions about the ability of various House and Senate committees investigating the Russia issue to obtain access to witnesses and documents now that Mueller has been empowered.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Charles Grassley (Republican of Iowa) wrote in a statement: "I would not be surprised if the new Special Counsel Mueller stops Comey from testifying before the Senate Intelligence Committee even though Comey is willing."



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