

Comey to testify before Congress as Trump-Russia investigation continues

Josh Varlin
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The political warfare in Washington escalated on Thursday with reports that former FBI Director James Comey will testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee next week. Congressional investigators and the FBI are also examining if there were additional unreported meetings between Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

Comey's testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, scheduled for June 8, will likely focus on Trump's May 9 dismissal of Comey and Comey's memos, in which he reportedly states that Trump asked him to end the FBI's probe into former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn. Trump also reportedly demanded an affirmation of loyalty from Comey. After the public session Thursday morning, Comey will privately testify in the afternoon.

The congressional investigations by the House and Senate intelligence committees are working parallel to a separate FBI probe headed by special counsel and former FBI Director Robert Mueller. Congress and the FBI are investigating alleged Russian interference into the 2016 elections as well as supposed ties between the Trump campaign or Trump administration and the Russian government.

Neither Russian interference in the election nor illicit Trump-Russia ties have been backed by substantive evidence. Nevertheless, the Democratic Party, sections of the Republican Party, most of the news media and the dominant factions of the military-intelligence apparatus have chosen to center their opposition to the Trump administration on its alleged "softness" toward Russia, rather than his administration's vicious attacks on immigrants, social programs and democratic rights.

The investigations have targeted many in Trump's inner circle, including his adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, Trump's personal lawyer Michael Cohen,

Michael Flynn and former Trump aides Paul Manafort, Carter Page and Roger Stone. The *Guardian* reported on Thursday that Nigel Farage, former leader of the right-wing UK Independence Party and British supporter of Trump, is also a "person of interest" in the FBI investigation.

Flynn, a retired general, was abruptly fired from his position as national security adviser in February after it was revealed that he lied to Vice President Mike Pence about his meetings with Kislyak. Flynn will reportedly comply with the Senate Intelligence Committee subpoena after previously invoking the Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination, arguing that the previous request was too broad. The committee has since narrowed the scope of the request.

Flynn's potential infractions include improperly reporting his work as a lobbyist on behalf of the Turkish government and making false statements on his filing for an extension of his security clearance related to a trip to Russia where he received compensation from Russian media company RT.

In a related development, CNN reported yesterday afternoon that Congress and the FBI are investigating if Sessions and Kislyak met privately at Washington's Mayflower Hotel on April 27, 2016, where then-candidate Trump was giving a foreign policy address. NBC News claims that "five current and former US officials... are aware of classified intelligence suggesting that there was some sort of private encounter between Trump and his aides [Sessions and Kushner] and the Russian envoy [Kislyak]." Sessions and Kushner have denied meeting privately with Kislyak that day.

During his Senate confirmation hearing in January, Sessions claimed that he "did not have any communications with the Russians" during the

campaign, but Sessions later admitted to meeting with Kislyak twice. This forced Sessions to recuse himself from Russia-related investigations.

Democratic Senators Patrick Leahy and Al Franken, both members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, sent three letters to the head of the FBI—first Comey, then acting FBI Director Andrew McCabe—requesting an investigation into whether Sessions’ denials of meetings with Russian officials constituted perjury. Franken received some media fame for “grilling” Sessions on talks with Russia during Sessions’ confirmation hearing.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is receiving renewed criticism after reports emerged that it is moving to return two Russian diplomatic compounds seized by the US government in late December 2016. Then-President Barack Obama alleged that the compounds—one in Maryland and one near New York City—were being “used by Russian personnel for intelligence-related purposes” and expelled 35 Russian diplomats allegedly involved in espionage. While none of these allegations have been proven, it is an open secret that nations, including the United States and the Russian Federation, have used diplomatic facilities for intelligence purposes.

Officials in the US intelligence and State Department apparatus denounced any move toward returning the compounds in an opinion piece by conservative *Washington Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin provocatively entitled “What is Trump’s possible justification for this gift to Putin?” An unnamed “former national security official” rhetorically asked, “And this would be a reward for WHAT Russian behavior?”

Two former State Department officials likewise denounced the move. Max Bergmann, a former Obama State Department official, said, “There is absolutely no justification for this.” Former State Department official Eliot Cohen told Rubin, “If, as reported, they were SIGINT [signals intelligence] facilities it’s worse than insane.”

These developments occur in the context of a vicious fight in the American ruling class centered primarily on foreign policy. There is no progressive or democratic content to the fight, illustrated by Republican Senator John McCain’s recent appearance in Australia, where he implicitly called for Australian support against

Trump in this internecine struggle.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly denied any Russian state involvement in leaks of Democratic National Committee emails during the 2016 election campaign. In a meeting with the international news media, Putin raised the possibility that Russia is being framed for the hacking or that the cyberattack was a false flag. He also said that “patriotic” Russian individuals may have been involved in the DNC leaks, but that Russia “never engage[s] in that at the state level.”

The White House and its congressional allies are attempting to shift focus onto the “unmasking,” or identification, of US persons that revealed contacts between Flynn and Kislyak, with implications that the unmasking may have been improper. Trump tweeted Thursday morning, “The big story is the ‘unmasking and surveillance’ of people that took place during the Obama Administration.”

Three subpoenas issued by the House Intelligence Committee are related to the “unmasking” issue, requesting more information from former National Security Adviser Susan Rice, former CIA Director John Brennan and former US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power. House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes, a Republican and Trump ally, reportedly issued these subpoenas without the assent of the ranking Democrat on the committee, Adam Schiff.

Journalist Megyn Kelly will interview Putin in St. Petersburg today as part of the debut of her new show, “Sunday Night with Megyn Kelly” on NBC. While the nightly news on Thursday focused on Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accord, recent developments in the Trump-Russia investigations and the Kelly-Putin interview will no doubt be used to refocus attention on the anti-Russia campaign in the coming days.



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