

Political warfare in Washington intensifies

Trump accuses fired FBI director of lying to Congress

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The deepening factional struggle within the US political establishment intensified Friday with a bizarre press conference by Donald Trump, in which the US president called FBI director James Comey a liar and said he would be “100 percent” willing to testify under oath.

Standing in the Rose Garden alongside the visiting president of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, Trump demanded the US’s European allies contribute more to pay for the NATO alliance and solidarized himself with the Saudi-led drive to diplomatically strangle the gulf state of Qatar.

Before taking questions, Trump taunted the press, declaring “Look at those hands up there... If I could only sell that.”

The president then proceeded to accuse fired FBI Director James Comey of lying under oath in his testimony the previous day before the Senate Intelligence Committee, in which Comey charged that Trump had pressured him to drop the FBI probe into collusion by his election team in connection with alleged Russian government interference in the 2016 US election.

He declared that Thursday’s testimony by Comey had vindicated his own role. He flatly denied that he had demanded a pledge of personal loyalty from Comey or asked him to drop the FBI investigation of his former national security adviser Michael Flynn over Flynn’s ties to Moscow. Trump fired Flynn in February for supposedly lying to Vice President Mike Pence about his discussions with the Russian ambassador to the US, Sergey Kislyak.

“Yesterday showed no collusion, no obstruction,” Trump said. Reiterating his charge that the furor over alleged Russian hacking and leaking of Democratic Party and Clinton campaign emails was a political witch-hunt, he declared, “That was an excuse by the Democrats, who lost an election they shouldn’t have lost.” He went on to

say, “but we were very, very happy, and, frankly, James Comey confirmed a lot of what I said, and some of the things he said just weren’t true.”

Asked if he had told Comey in a private White House meeting that he “hoped” the probe of Flynn could be dropped, Trump stated, “I didn’t say that, and there’d be nothing wrong if I did say it.”

In response to a question, Trump said he would be “100 percent” prepared to repeat his denials of Comey’s claims under oath to the special counsel Robert Mueller. Former FBI director Mueller was appointed to head up the FBI investigation last month after Trump fired Comey and Comey responded by leaking to the *New York Times* the fact that he had written contemporaneous memos after each of his nine private discussions with Trump.

Trump denounced Comey as a “leaker,” alluding to his admission to the Senate committee that he had organized the leak of his memo on the February 14 White House meeting where, he claims, Trump asked him to back off on the Flynn probe. Trump’s personal lawyer Mark Kasowitz suggested Thursday that the leak was illegal, and said he would refer the matter to the Justice Department inspector general and the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Comey’s nearly three-hour testimony, broadcast live by all of the major TV networks, and the response of the so-called “liberal” media generally aligned with the Democratic Party have underscored the reactionary content of the political campaign by sections of the intelligence establishment and the Democrats to demonize Russia and brand Trump a stooge of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Comey speaks for factions within the spy apparatus and the state more broadly that are determined to shift Trump’s more conciliatory line on Russia and reassert the

Obama administration policy of escalating economic, diplomatic and military confrontation with Moscow, or, if necessary, to force Trump out of office. The president, whose foreign policy is no less reckless and war-mongering, wants to prioritize US aggression against China, North Korea and other targeted countries such as Iran.

The Democrats are also seeking by means of their neo-McCarthyite campaign against Russia to channel mass anger within the US over Trump's attacks on democratic rights and social programs behind the war agenda of American imperialism.

In his Senate testimony Thursday, Comey combined allegations of White House interference in the Russia probe with inflammatory accusations against Moscow. In a laudatory editorial on Friday, the *New York Times* singled out for praise Comey's declaration, "This is about America." Russia "tried to shape the way we think, we vote, we act... They're coming after America."

The entire edifice of charges of supposed Russian interference in the election in support of Trump, promoted by the US spy agencies and the Democrats, rests on bald assertions backed by no substantive evidence.

The role of the media in promoting this hysterical campaign, whose logical outcome is war between the world's two largest nuclear powers, was underscored at the press conference by ABC News chief White House correspondent Jonathan Karl, the only major media representative called on by Trump. After asking Trump to respond to Comey's allegations, he invited the Romanian president to weigh in on Russian aggression, implying a lack of concern on the part of Trump. "Romania is no stranger to Russian aggression. How concerned are you and how concerned should we be?" Karl asked.

While remaining defiant on the Russia investigation, Trump did make a concession to his foreign policy critics. In response to a question from a Romanian reporter, he explicitly affirmed his support for Article 5 of the NATO charter, which obligates all member states to come to the defense of any member state that comes under foreign attack. Speaking at a NATO summit last month, Trump failed to state his administration's support for Article 5, sparking denunciations from US policy-makers and media commentators concerned over his previous remarks placing a question mark over Washington's continued commitment to the transatlantic military alliance.

At the same time, however, Trump reiterated his attacks on Washington's traditional European allies such as Germany and France for failing to raise their defense

spending to 2 percent of GDP and suggested that they be forced to pay for years of alleged under-funding of NATO.

In response to a question about his earlier hint that the White House might have recordings of Oval Office discussions, he said he would make an announcement on the issue shortly and added that the press would be "disappointed" when he does.

All indications are that the political warfare in Washington will intensify. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, one of those accused of holding secret and undisclosed meetings with Russian officials while serving on Trump's election campaign team, is set to testify next Tuesday before a Senate appropriations subcommittee on the Justice Department budget. Democrats have warned that he will be questioned on his Russia ties.

Earlier this week it was reported that Trump was furious with Sessions over his decision to recuse himself from the FBI investigation, and that Sessions had offered to resign as attorney general. Now he may be singled out as a vulnerable member of the Trump cabinet by the administration's Washington foes.

In closed door testimony Thursday following the open Senate Intelligence Committee hearing, Comey reportedly told senators that Sessions may have met a third time with Russian Ambassador Kislyak and failed to disclose the meeting when asked in congressional testimony. The reference is to an April 2016 function at a Washington hotel address by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that was attended by Sessions and Trump's son-in-law and top aide Jared Kushner.

Following Comey's testimony, New York Democratic Senator Charles Schumer, the Senate minority leader, said that Comey's statements "raise serious questions about Attorney General Sessions that he and the Justice Department must answer immediately."

In the furious struggle that has erupted between the various factions within the American state, characterized by mutual mudslinging, there does not exist anything resembling a "progressive" or "democratic" element.



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