

Intelligence chiefs escalate anti-Russia campaign

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Two intelligence agency heads have reportedly told Special Counsel Robert Mueller and the Senate Intelligence Committee that President Donald Trump suggested that they publicly state that Trump and his campaign did not collude with Russia. CNN, citing unnamed sources, reported Thursday that Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats and National Security Agency Director Admiral Mike Rogers felt that Trump's suggestions were strange but did not constitute an order.

Both Coats and Rogers testified publicly before the Senate Intelligence Committee on June 7, where they declined to discuss their interactions with Trump, frustrating Democratic senators. According to CNN, they had asked the White House if these conversations with Trump were protected by executive privilege and therefore could not be discussed with Congress. The White House did not respond before the June 7 hearing, leaving Coats and Rogers to make vague statements that did not clarify whether the president had pressured them.

Coats and Rogers have since confirmed, in statements to Mueller's team and the Senate Intelligence Committee, that Trump asked them to state that he did not collude with Russia in the Kremlin's alleged interference into the 2016 US election. Their statements were reportedly made separately, with the statements before Senate investigators happening behind closed doors rather than in a public hearing.

The Department of Justice and the House and Senate intelligence committees are conducting parallel investigations into alleged Russian interference in the election as well as possible collusion between Trump or the Trump campaign and Russia. No substantive evidence has yet emerged to back any of these allegations, which are part of a campaign by the

Democratic Party, sections of the Republican Party, most of the news media and the dominant factions of the military-intelligence apparatus to shift US foreign policy back toward the anti-Russia line of President Barack Obama's second term.

Also on Thursday, Trump tweeted that he "did not make, and do[es] not have" any recordings of conversations he had with former FBI Director James Comey before Trump fired Comey in May. Trump had raised the possibility of "tapes" after he fired Comey.

The day before the leak about statements by Coats and Rogers, the Senate and House intelligence committees held hearings during which members of Congress and former US officials, including former Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson, made unsupported allegations that Russian intelligence agencies had compromised US voter registration systems, if not voting machines themselves.

These allegations focus on a different aspect of the anti-Russian campaign, which until now has mostly focused on claims that Russian intelligence agencies hacked into the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign and then gave the emails to WikiLeaks.

With these allegations still completely unproven, the focus during Wednesday's hearings shifted to claims that Russian military intelligence (the Russian General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate—GRU) infiltrated private companies that create software to manage voter registration rolls. This particular claim came to widespread public attention when NSA contractor Reality Leigh Winner leaked an NSA assessment to the *Intercept*.

Johnson, who headed the Department of Homeland Security from December 2013 until Trump took office in January 2017, asserted in his prepared remarks to the

House Intelligence Committee, “In 2016 the Russian government, at the direction of [President] Vladimir Putin himself, orchestrated cyberattacks on our nation for the purpose of influencing our election—plain and simple.”

Nevertheless, Johnson admitted that, to his knowledge, “the Russian government did not through any cyberintrusion alter ballots, ballot counts or reporting of election results,” although he did not rule out the possibility that the information released by WikiLeaks (which demonstrated Hillary Clinton’s subservience to Wall Street) might have influenced voters’ decisions.

Johnson described Russian interference in the election as “unprecedented” in its “scale and scope,” in part due to the leaking of information designed to influence people’s decisions, rather than limiting activities to covert infiltration.

The former DHS secretary voiced his displeasure that the DNC refused assistance from the DHS and the FBI after the hack, instead relying on the private cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike. According to Representative Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, a Republican, the DNC never turned the server over to law enforcement, making it far more difficult to provide evidence of who was responsible for the hacking.

When asked by Representative Terri Sewell of Alabama, a Democrat, about the evidence linking Russia to the US election interference, Johnson declined to discuss it in an open session. This did not stop him from saying in practically every other statement that “Russia” or “the Russians” were responsible.

Representative Chris Stewart of Utah, a Republican, sounded the most ominous note of the morning when he asked Johnson a series of questions implying that measures needed to be taken to prevent the US press from facilitating Russian “propaganda” and disinformation: “How do you protect against propaganda? How do you protect against false news stories? How do you protect against Internet trolls who we know are paid Russian employees? And the last question is ... how do you encourage a gullible press to be more mature in their judgment, more defined in their judgments, rather than play into Russian hands?”

In response, Johnson implied that it was better when

there were “gatekeepers” to news, before the Internet allowed “those who call themselves journalists” to have their voices heard without going through the corporate media.

Concurrent with Johnson’s testimony before the House Intelligence Committee, the Senate Intelligence Committee heard from cybersecurity experts, federal officials and state election officials, also about alleged Russian intrusion into voter registration systems. Jeanette Manfra, a senior DHS official, claimed that voter registration systems in 21 states were targeted by Russian intelligence, although only Arizona and Illinois have been confirmed as being among the 21.

It is worth noting that the NSA document leaked by *The Intercept*—generally cited as proof that Russian intelligence was behind these attacks—is an assessment only and does not contain any evidence, only assertions. Moreover, the claim that the GRU was behind the intrusions is described as an “analyst judgment” rather than “confirmed information.”

Additionally, it was reported this week that almost every registered voter in the United States had their information left on an unsecured Amazon cloud server used by a data-mining company hired by the Republican National Committee. This data, according to cybersecurity firm UpGuard, includes the “names, dates of birth, home addresses, phone numbers and voter registration details, as well as voter ethnicities and religions as ‘modeled’ by the firms’ data scientists,” of almost 200 million Americans.

It also included calculated “alignments” of voters based on their demographic information, including how likely they were to think that fossil fuels are important for US energy security or if they were likely to agree or disagree with Trump’s “America First” foreign policy. This exposure of voters’ information happened because of the incompetence of a Republican-linked US firm, not any foreign meddling.



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