

Trump sends mixed signals as conflict over Russia investigation intensifies

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12 August 2017

President Donald Trump told a press briefing Thursday that he was not considering firing special counsel Robert Mueller, who heads the Justice Department investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections and possible collusion with Moscow by the Trump campaign.

Trump again dismissed the significance of the Russia investigation, declaring, “They’re investigating something that never happened. There was no collusion between us and Russia,” and adding that he and his staff were cooperating with Mueller. He said questions about firing Mueller were raised only in the media, not in the White House. “I’m not dismissing anybody,” he said. “I mean, I want them to get on with the task.”

Trump was uncharacteristically restrained in commenting on the extraordinary pre-dawn FBI raid on the home of his former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, which took place July 26 but was only made public this week. He said the raid was “a very, very strong signal” by prosecutors, adding, “To do that early in the morning, whether or not it was appropriate, you’d have to ask them.”

The president appears to be distancing himself from Manafort—whose spokesman recently denied that he had become a “cooperating witness” in the Mueller probe. Trump gave only a tepid endorsement to his former campaign chairman, saying he “always found Paul Manafort to be a very decent man.”

The lead counsel for Trump in the Russian investigation, John Dowd, was not nearly so cautious in his language. He gave a statement to the *Wall Street Journal* Thursday, calling the raid “a gross abuse of the judicial process” and an “extraordinary invasion of privacy.”

Saying that the raid had been ordered largely for its “shock value,” he continued, “These methods are

normally found and employed in Russia not America.” Dowd also suggested that attorneys for Manafort were likely to bring a motion to suppress anything seized in the raid.

Also Thursday, Manafort revealed that he was changing lawyers, dropping the firm Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr (where Mueller worked before his appointment as special counsel) and switching to a firm that specialized in criminal defense in complex financial cases.

Press reports suggested that the switch was at least in part because of financial pressures on Manafort created by the special counsel’s investigation. Bloomberg reported that special counsel Mueller’s office has subpoenaed bank records for both Manafort and his longtime business partner Rick Gates, and that as a result, their business activities were adversely affected.

Politico reported that the FBI has approached Manafort’s son-in-law, real estate developer Jeffrey Yohai, to seek his cooperation in the Russia investigation.

According to Bloomberg, “the Manafort inquiry is just one thread of Mueller’s multifaceted effort, which includes the purchase of Trump real estate properties by wealthy Russians going back a decade, the foreign ties of Michael Flynn, who was briefly the administration’s National Security Adviser, and the dismissal of FBI chief James Comey by the President.”

While the legal machinery continues to grind, the political warfare within the ruling class continues unabated, even in the midst of the global alarm created by Trump’s bellicose threats to use nuclear weapons against North Korea.

Foreign Policy magazine published Thursday the text of an internal memorandum drafted by a National Security Council staffer, Rich Higgins, before he was

fired by his boss, National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster. In the document Higgins, part of the fascist wing of the White House staff headed by Steven Bannon, denounced what he termed a “deep state” conspiracy to undermine Trump, consisting of “globalists, bankers, Islamists, and establishment Republicans.”

The memo, written in May 2017 and actually read by Trump, according to the report, claimed that Trump was under attack because he represents “an existential threat to cultural Marxist memes that dominate the prevailing cultural narrative.” Higgins used this language to denounce those who asserted rights “based on sex or ethnicity,” including transgendered people in the military, against whom he apparently had a special phobia.

After McMaster learned of the memo’s existence in July, he forced Higgins to resign and then carried out a purge of other NSC officials brought on by Trump’s first national security advisor, retired General Michael Flynn.

The incendiary language of the Higgins memo was matched by comments from CNN counterterrorism analyst Philip Mudd, a Trump critic who served as deputy to Robert Mueller when he was FBI director. During an interview Thursday afternoon with CNN anchor Jake Tapper, Mudd declared that the opposition to Trump within the intelligence apparatus, focused on his allegedly pro-Russian policy, was so intense that “Government is going to kill this guy.”

Mudd pointed to the vicious character of the pre-dawn raid on Manafort, saying this was a demonstration directed at Trump himself.

Meanwhile Trump’s political standing among Senate Republicans continues to deteriorate. The Senate adjourned last week for its summer recess, after agreeing by unanimous consent to hold pro-forma sessions during the August break, at which one senator will convene the body and then immediately adjourn.

The purpose of this ritual is to avoid an actual recess of more than ten days, the period required for the president to be able to make a recess appointment. Numerous senators advocated this procedure to prevent Trump from firing Attorney General Jeff Sessions and making a recess appointment of a replacement who would, under Supreme Court precedent, be able to serve until the next Congress convenes in January

2019.

The concern is that Trump would fire Sessions and name a replacement who would take control of the Russia investigation, from which Sessions has recused himself, or even fire special counsel Mueller, replace him, or shut down the investigation altogether.

Following the adjournment, Trump has engaged in a series of Twitter attacks on Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader, for the collapse of Obamacare repeal legislation and other failings, an extraordinary public conflict between a president and the Senate leader of his own party.



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