

Political warfare escalates over Mueller investigation into Trump-Russia claims

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On Sunday, President Donald Trump continued to deny suggestions that he is about to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller in an effort to shut down the Justice Department investigation into allegations of Russian government intervention in the 2016 elections and Trump campaign collusion with Moscow.

In response to shouted questions from the press as he returned from a weekend at Camp David, Trump said he had no plans to fire Mueller because there was “no collusion whatsoever” between his campaign and Russia, and therefore the Justice Department probe would inevitably exonerate him.

Top White House officials repeated these assurances in appearances on several Sunday television interview programs. Both Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and White House legislative director Marc Short flatly denied that there was any discussion of firing Mueller, while both carefully noted that the president retained the power to do so at his discretion.

Mueller’s investigation has been the target of furious attacks for the past week by right-wing media outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Breitbart News* and Fox News, with increasingly strident denunciations and demands for Mueller’s ouster.

The tone was set by Jeannine Pirro, a former municipal judge who hosts a Fox News program. She demanded not merely the removal of Mueller, but the imprisonment of FBI officials for alleged political crimes against the president. “The only thing that remains is whether we have the fortitude to not just fire these people immediately, but to take them out in cuffs,” she said during a Saturday night broadcast.

Another Fox News host, Jesse Watters, declared that “we may now have proof the investigation was weaponized to destroy his presidency for partisan political purposes and to disenfranchise millions of

American voters.” He concluded, “Now, if that’s true, we have a coup on our hands in America.”

Congressional Democrats fired back in a series of statements beginning Friday, when Representative Jackie Speier told a local television station in California, “I believe that the president wants all of this shut down. He wants to shut down these investigations and he wants to fire special counsel Mueller.”

Speier said there was a widespread “rumor” that Trump might fire Mueller as soon as Congress begins its year-end recess this Friday, timing the action for the holiday period in order to minimize the legislative and popular response.

Democratic Party-linked groups were said to be preparing for nationwide protests against such an action—a revealing glimpse of the real priorities of the Democratic Party, which has organized no such protests against the Republican tax cut for the wealthy, the expiration of the CHIP health insurance program for poor children, or the impending mass roundups of young immigrants temporarily protected under the DACA program, which Trump has shut down.

Representative Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, warned that House Republicans were preparing to shut down all inquiries into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election in tandem with a Trump firing of Mueller. He noted that the intelligence panel has not scheduled any witnesses for beyond this week.

Schiff pointed to the refusal of Trump’s son, Donald Trump Jr., to answer a question about discussions with his father on how to handle press reports of a June 2016 meeting with a Russian delegation at Trump Tower. The younger Trump claimed attorney-client privilege, although neither he nor his father are attorneys.

The latest stage in the political warfare surrounding

the Russia investigation has centered on two batches of emails. Last week, the FBI released emails exchanged between Peter Strzok, a top FBI counterintelligence official, and FBI lawyer Lisa Page in 2015 and 2016.

The two, then engaged in an extramarital affair, made disparaging comments about Trump (and Bernie Sanders) and indicated sympathy for the Hillary Clinton campaign. Strzok played a role in the investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server and then both he and Page worked for Mueller's investigative team, until the emails came to light last summer and Strzok was transferred out (Page had previously left the probe).

The release of these emails became a cause célèbre with congressional Republicans and Fox News, which presented them as proof that the Mueller probe was "infected" with partisan political bias against Trump.

A second uproar was raised on Saturday when the attorney for the Trump transition organization, Trump for America, which conducted activities to prepare the incoming Trump administration between Election Day and the inauguration, sent a letter to four congressional committees Saturday charging that Mueller had improperly acquired tens of thousands of emails from the transition team.

The emails were retained by the General Services Administration, the government agency that provides infrastructure and communications services during a presidential transition. GSA officials turned the emails over wholesale to Mueller after his investigation sought access.

The letter from Kory Langhofer, the Trump for America attorney, makes a number of self-contradictory claims, calling the emails "private property" while at the same time asserting various forms of privilege that would only apply to communications within the executive branch, and which Trump administration officials have not themselves asserted in response to document requests from Mueller.

Langhofer's claims were added to volleys fired at Mueller by the ultra-right media as evidence of "overreach" and "Gestapo tactics" by the special prosecutor. There is, of course, ample irony in pro-fascist media outlets like *Breitbart* complaining of such methods on the part of the government.

The entire furor may have been instigated by the

White House as part of an effort to put maximum pressure on Mueller to rein in his investigation and bring it to a conclusion. Trump's private lawyers and representatives of Mueller are to meet this week to discuss the further course of the investigation.

The most revealing aspect of the current fulminations, however, is the role of the Democratic Party, which entered into the Russia investigation in tandem with the military/intelligence agencies, which opposed suggestions by Trump of a softening of the hard line against Russia initiated by the Obama administration during its second term.

The private emails between the two high level FBI officials, Strzok and Page, confirms what has long been evident: that Clinton had the overwhelming support of senior officials in the military-intelligence apparatus, who regarded Trump as an unstable and potentially dangerous wielder of the powers of the commander-in-chief.

In response to the ultra-right hysteria over FBI political bias against Trump, congressional Democrats have embraced this notorious instrument of repression and political spying as a bastion of democracy. At a meeting of the House Judiciary Committee, where Republicans grilled Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein over the Strzok-Page emails, one Democrat after another jumped to the defense of the FBI.

The senior Democrat on the committee, Jerrold Nadler of New York, called the Republican attacks on the FBI "wildly dangerous" to American institutions. Representative Eric Swalwell, Democrat of California, said it was "sickening" to listen to Republicans smear the FBI.

Democrat Chris Coons, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, issued an email statement declaring, "The men and women of the FBI are among the most professional and committed public servants in our nation," adding that they "serve all of us."



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