

As special counsel zeros in on Trump, political warfare in Washington heats up

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The political conflict within the American ruling class and state over alleged Russian meddling in US politics and collusion by the Trump administration has entered a new and more explosive stage.

Reports emerged this week that Special Counsel Robert Mueller, longtime head of the FBI, interviewed Attorney General Jeff Sessions and former FBI Director James Comey, and is planning to question former White House adviser Stephen Bannon and Trump himself. This triggered a frenzied counterattack from the president, Republican lawmakers and pro-Trump right-wing media outlets.

Both contending factions are reactionary. Trump embodies the fascistic and militarist outlook of the US financial oligarchy. The Democratic Party, no less an instrument of Wall Street, is spearheading the campaign by sections of the military/intelligence establishment to force Trump to take a more confrontational line against Russia, or possibly remove him from office.

The right-wing character of the Democratic opposition to Trump is underscored by three facts. First, the escalation of the fabricated anti-Russia campaign coincides with the Democrats' capitulation to Trump's assault on immigrants, signaled by their cave-in on DACA recipients and Trump's border wall during the stage-managed three-day government shutdown.

Second, the Democrats are rushing to defend the FBI, the ruling class' premier police agency, against attacks by Republican opponents of Mueller's investigation.

Third, they are using the intensification of Mueller's anti-Russia investigation to escalate the campaign for Internet censorship. They are charging that Russia is behind a pro-Trump social media campaign to derail the Mueller probe, and demanding that Facebook and Twitter step up their clampdown on oppositional information and opinion.

At an impromptu back-and-forth with a group of

reporters late Wednesday, Trump said he would be willing to meet with Mueller and answer questions under oath, adding that he would have to clear it with his lawyers.

Mueller is homing in on Trump's inner circle in what has all the earmarks of an obstruction of justice case—a key charge in the impeachment drives against Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton. The special counsel's team of FBI investigators questioned Sessions for several hours last week, making him the first Trump cabinet member to be hauled before his office.

Sessions recused himself from the Russia investigation—based on entirely unproven allegations of Russian “meddling” in the 2016 election campaign to boost Trump and undermine his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton—after it emerged that he had falsely told Congress he had had no contacts with Russian officials while serving as a top adviser to the Trump campaign. He was heavily involved, nevertheless, in the decision to fire Comey last May after Comey refused to clear Trump of collusion charges and rebuffed White House pressure on him to drop his investigation of Michael Flynn.

Flynn, a retired general, was forced to resign from his post as Trump's national security adviser in February after it emerged that he had lied about his discussions during the Trump transition with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Intercepted communications between Kislyak and Moscow showed that, contrary to Flynn's denials, he discussed sanctions against Russia imposed by the Obama administration.

According to press reports, Mueller wants to question Trump on his decisions to fire Flynn and Comey and his threats last year to fire Sessions, whose recusal paved the way for the appointment by his deputy attorney general of Mueller as special counsel.

Trump's lawyers are reportedly in discussions with

Mueller on the parameters of an interview, which would likely include face-to-face questioning.

In late 2017, Mueller indicted two former Trump campaign officials, Paul Manafort and Rick Gates, on money laundering and other charges not related to alleged collusion with the Russian government. His office also announced that a foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign, George Papadopoulos, had pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russians during the election campaign.

Last month, Flynn pleaded guilty to one count of lying to the FBI about his conversations with Kislyak in the run-up to Trump's inauguration. In his plea deal, Flynn pledged to cooperate with Mueller's investigation.

By the end of 2017, Mueller's team had interviewed Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, NSA Director Mike Rogers, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, former White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, former acting Attorney General Sally Yates, White House Counsel Don McGahn and other members of Trump's campaign and White House inner circle.

Trump and Republican lawmakers, backed by media outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Breitbart News*, have launched a multi-pronged attack on Mueller and the FBI. Trump has repeatedly excoriated Deputy FBI Director Andrew McCabe, a holdover from the Comey regime whose wife ran unsuccessfully as a Democrat for the Virginia State Senate in 2015. Republican legislators have called for his resignation.

This week it was reported that Trump and Sessions pressured FBI Director Christopher Wray to fire McCabe. Wray refused and threatened to resign if McCabe was ousted. He has, however, replaced his chief of staff, a Comey holdover denounced by Trump and Republican lawmakers, as well as the agency's general counsel.

Republicans have stepped up their agitation over the revelation that during the 2016 election campaign, a former top investigator in the Mueller probe, Peter Strzok, exchanged text messages with his girlfriend, FBI lawyer Lisa Page, expressing opposition to Trump and support for Clinton, the favored candidate of the intelligence establishment. Mueller removed him from the investigation when he became aware of the texts last July. But the White House and congressional Republicans have repeatedly cited the case to charge the FBI and Mueller with anti-Trump bias.

The result is a farcical and cynical spectacle in which the Republicans badmouth the FBI and the Democrats jump at the chance to claim the mantle of law-and-order

and defend the police agencies of the state.

This week, White House spokesman Raj Shah said in a statement that Trump "believes politically motivated senior leaders" of the FBI "have tainted the agency's reputation for unbiased pursuit of justice." He added that Director Wray would "clean up the misconduct at the highest levels of the FBI."

The Republican Party has more recently launched a campaign over news that the FBI has no record of text messages exchanged between Strzok and Page from mid-December 2016 until May 17, 2017, the day Mueller was appointed special counsel. Republican senators Charles Grassley, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Ron Johnson, the chairman of the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, announced Tuesday night that they had written to Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz about the missing messages.

Finally, right-wing media outlets and some Republican officials are waging a twitter campaign, under the hashtag #ReleaseTheMemo, calling for the release of a classified four-page memo drafted by staffers for House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes arguing that the Obama administration violated surveillance laws to spy on the Trump campaign and transition team. Thus far, the White House has withheld a decision on whether to support the demand.

Representative Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, who has been in the forefront of the anti-Russia hysteria, called the memo "a deep disservice to our law enforcement professionals." He and Senator Feinstein issued the letter this week demanding that Facebook and Twitter investigate supposed Russian involvement in the social media campaign around the Nunes memo.



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