

# Plea deal by former Trump aide brings Russia probe closer to White House

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In a major escalation of the political warfare in Washington, Special Counsel Robert Mueller on Friday secured a plea deal from Rick Gates, a longtime associate of former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort and himself a deputy campaign manager during the 2016 campaign and consultant on the Trump transition team after the election.

Gates pleaded guilty to charges of money laundering, tax evasion, bank fraud and lying to the FBI. The charges were laid out in an indictment unsealed Thursday in Alexandria, Virginia. He also pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy, failure to register as an agent of a foreign entity and making false statements to investigators, which were contained in a previous indictment unveiled last October.

Manafort is similarly charged in the two sets of indictments, but has thus far refused to enter into a plea agreement and maintains his innocence.

As part of his plea deal, Gates agreed to cooperate with the Mueller investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections and possible collusion by the campaign of President Donald Trump. There are many indications that Mueller's team is also building a case of obstruction of justice against the Trump White House.

With his guilty plea, Gates becomes the third Trump aide to enter into a plea agreement with Mueller, the former long-time director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and agree to cooperate with his investigation. The other two are Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security advisor, and George Papadopoulos, a foreign policy aide during the election campaign.

The indictment unveiled Thursday underscored the ruthlessness with which Mueller is proceeding. It had been widely reported that he was ratcheting up the

pressure on Gates to turn state's evidence against his long-time business associate Manafort, and earlier this week media reports were circulating that Gates was about to enter a guilty plea. Evidently, however, Gates continued to resist and Mueller responded by unsealing the new set of charges, threatening Gates with up to six years in prison if he refused to change his plea.

This follows a political counteroffensive by Trump and congressional Republicans in recent weeks, including the release of a memo drafted by staffers for the Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes, documenting the fact that the FBI illegally obtained a warrant from the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court to wiretap a former Trump campaign aide, Carter Page, by failing to inform the court that information it used to secure the warrant was paid for by the Democratic Party and the Hillary Clinton election campaign.

The Nunes memo exposed the politically motivated and fraudulent character of the entire anti-Russia campaign mounted by dominant factions of the intelligence and military establishment in alliance with the Democratic Party and major media outlets, led by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Trump and leading Republicans used the Nunes revelations to attack the FBI as waging a political vendetta, while Democrats and most of the media sprung to the defense of the FBI and the intelligence establishment, implying that criticism of the police and spy agencies was tantamount to giving treasonous aid and comfort to the enemy—Moscow.

In the infighting between two reactionary factions of the ruling class, the Democrats are leading the campaign, in the name of defending American "democracy" from Russian subversion, to whip up a war fever and prepare for a military conflict between

the world's two biggest nuclear powers, and simultaneously crack down on free speech and political opposition on the Internet in the name of combating Russian-inspired "fake news."

The Mueller investigation is the spearhead of a furious struggle within the ruling class and the state, primarily over US imperialist foreign policy. The Democrats, who fiercely defend the Mueller probe, speak for predominant sections of the intelligence/military apparatus that consider Trump to be insufficiently aggressive in continuing and escalating the anti-Russian policy carried out by the Obama administration. They view Russia as a key obstacle to imposing US domination over the Middle East and preparing to confront and defeat China.

In recent weeks, the Democrats and news media such as the *Times*, the *Post* and broadcast outlets like CNN and NBC have fumed over Trump's failure to impose new sanctions on Russia passed months ago by overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress. They have also agitated for a more aggressive military escalation against the Russian-backed regime in Syria and Russian military forces supporting it against US-backed proxy fighters.

It is believed that Gates' surrender to Mueller may badly undermine Manafort's legal defense and provide information damaging to the White House inner circle, including Trump.

Neither of the two sets of indictments against Manafort and Gates concerns alleged crimes that occurred during the 2016 election campaign. However, the second set released Thursday centers on activities by the two accused in support of the Russian-backed government of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who was driven from office in 2014 in a fascist-led coup directed and financed by Washington.

The latest indictments assert that Manafort and Gates used offshore accounts to conceal tens of millions of dollars they received as consultants to Yanukovich, and then laundered the funds to evade US taxes. It alleges that one of their firms had close ties to Oleg Deripaska, an aluminum magnate and ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Gates' plea deal comes in the midst of an increasingly hysterical campaign in the media against Russia. Just weeks ago, the US government released new national security and defense documents declaring

that the preparation for "great power conflict" had supplanted the "war on terror" as the focus of Pentagon defense policy, and identifying Russia and China as the chief threats.

On February 3, a Russian fighter jet was shot down in Syria by al-Nusra Front fighters indirectly allied with the US in Washington's proxy war against the Assad regime. Days later, the US killed perhaps dozens of Russian military contractors in an air and artillery barrage in Syria's Deir Ezzor province.

The following week, the top US intelligence chiefs testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee in a neo-McCarthyite exercise in anti-Russian propaganda. The intelligence officials, egged on particularly by committee Democrats, claimed in unison that Russia was responsible for the growth of social and political discord in the US.

Last Friday, the Justice Department announced that a federal grand jury commissioned by Mueller had returned criminal indictments against 13 Russian citizens and three Russian companies in connection with the 2016 US presidential election. This was seized on by the media to launch a new barrage of war propaganda, including a front-page lead article in the *New York Times* declaring that Russia is engaged in a "virtual war" against the United States, and denouncing Trump for failing to fulfill his duties as commander in chief.



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