

Congressional leaders receive briefing on Trump campaign informant

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Justice Department and intelligence officials conducted briefings Thursday for congressional leaders of both parties on the FBI's use of a confidential informant to meet with three advisers to the Trump campaign during the 2016 election.

The informant, Stefan Halper, a longtime national security official in Republican administrations going back to Richard Nixon, was tasked by the FBI to approach two Trump foreign policy advisers, George Papadopoulos and Carter Page, and a campaign co-chairman, Sam Clovis, to discuss their contacts with Russian government officials.

Halper's activities were only the tip of the iceberg, however, in the massive intervention by the US military-intelligence apparatus into the 2016 campaign, with rival factions within the state seeking to promote or undermine Clinton or Trump, and in that way determine the outcome of the election and select the next "commander-in-chief" for American imperialism.

The lengthy public wrangling between congressional Democrats, congressional Republicans and the White House has served mainly to conceal the implications of this state intervention into the 2016 campaign, whose gigantic scale entirely dwarfs the supposed "Russian meddling."

Trump, for his own reasons, has been denouncing the "deep state" conspiracy against his campaign in a series of harshly worded tweets in which he has branded the use of an FBI informant as "Spygate," and declared it to be "one of the biggest political scandals in US history."

In response, Trump's Democratic Party critics are adamantly defending FBI and CIA spying on the 2016 campaigns, claiming it was a legitimate defense of "national security" against supposed Russian interference.

Former FBI Director James Comey expressed concern that the exposure of any FBI informant would undermine the powers of the intelligence apparatus, tweeting Wednesday, "The FBI's use of Confidential Human Sources (the actual term) is ... essential to protecting the country."

After Thursday's briefings, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff of California, said, "Nothing we heard today has changed our view that there is no evidence to support any allegation that the FBI or any intelligence agency placed a spy in the Trump campaign or otherwise failed to follow appropriate procedures and protocols."

Initially, the White House plan was for a single session for Representative Devin Nunes, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, but this was scrapped under pressure from Democrats and Senate Republicans, who were both to be excluded. Two briefings were held with bipartisan congressional representation, and overseen by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, FBI Director Christopher Wray, and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats.

The first session, held at the Department of Justice, involved Nunes, House Government Oversight Committee Chairman Trey Gowdy, House Speaker Paul Ryan, and Schiff. The second session, held at the Capitol, involved Mitch McConnell and Charles Schumer, the leaders of the Senate majority and minority, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, and top Republican and Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, Richard Burr and Mark Warner.

Also attending were two representatives of Trump: White House Chief of Staff John Kelly and Emmett Flood, the newly appointed private attorney for Trump, representing him in dealings with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation. The White House

sought to conceal Flood’s presence at the briefings, while claiming that Kelly had only acted as a facilitator, to convene the meetings, but did not actually receive the briefings.

Behind these arguments were the concerns, expressed by some congressional Republican as well as all the Democrats, that it was improper for a Trump defense attorney to receive what was in effect a disclosure of the internal workings of an FBI investigation into Trump and his closest aides, including son-in-law Jared Kushner, son Donald Trump Jr., and former top officials of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign.

While no details have yet been made public from the two briefings, spokesman for the military-intelligence faction opposed to Trump have escalated their attack on the administration in response to the leaking of Stefan Halper’s identity and role as an informant.

Former Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper, in a series of media interviews linked to the publication of his new book, declared that in his opinion the alleged intervention by Russia into the 2016 campaign decided the election in favor of Trump.

Clapper acknowledged that the intelligence agencies had never drawn such a conclusion in their assessments of alleged Russian actions such as purchasing a small number of Facebook ads and helping distribute documents hacked from the Democratic National Committee—on the contrary, they explicitly declared that they were not able to judge the effect of these actions on the actual vote.

Nonetheless, he told PBS Tuesday, “As a private citizen, it’s what I would call my informed opinion that, given the massive effort the Russians made, and the number of citizens that they touched, and the variety and multi-dimensional aspects of what they did to influence opinion ... and given the fact that it turned on less than 80,000 votes in three states, to me it exceeds logic and credulity that they didn’t affect the election. And it’s my belief they actually turned it.”

MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow declared this a “bombshell” in her program Wednesday night. “The director of national intelligence for the last seven years,” she said, has concluded “that the current president of the United States was only installed in office because of a successful Russian intelligence operation.”

In the face of such claims, it is worth restating that

the alleged Russian intervention—which has never been substantiated with any significant evidence—consisted in buying \$100,000 worth of Facebook ads in a multi-billion-dollar campaign.

Meanwhile, a section of the congressional Republican Party has sought to escalate the factional warfare in Washington, demanding the appointment of a second special counsel to investigate the 2016 Clinton campaign, and particularly the role of the FBI in clearing Hillary Clinton of any crime in the use of a private email server while she was secretary of state in the Obama administration from 2009 to 2013. The 12 ultra-right congressmen also demanded the second special counsel, in effect, investigate the first special counsel, charging that the Mueller probe is the successor to an FBI investigation into Trump launched at the instigation of the Clinton campaign.



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