

Hearing on FBI role in 2016 election erupts in vicious conflict between right-wing politicians

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At an all-day joint hearing by two committees of the House of Representatives, Democratic congressmen repeatedly defended the FBI and the US intelligence apparatus, while Republicans sought to discredit the investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Both sections of the US ruling class—gripped by an increasingly violent factional frenzy—are deeply reactionary. The Republican Party upholds the authoritarian and anti-democratic drive of the Trump White House. The Democratic Party opposes Trump by aligning itself with sections of the military-intelligence apparatus that reject his foreign policy as erratic and insufficiently confrontational towards Russia.

The nominal purpose of the hearing was to interrogate FBI official Peter Strzok about his role in the investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server and the initial stages of the probe into Russian actions in 2016, including possible coordination with officials of the Trump presidential campaign.

Strzok has become a major target of the Trump White House and its media supporters at Fox News and Breitbart, because of text messages he exchanged with his then-girlfriend, FBI lawyer Lisa Page, voicing disgust with Trump during the 2016 election campaign and the initial months of the Trump administration. Strzok was removed from the Mueller investigation after the text messages came to light and transferred to administrative duties, and Page has quit the FBI. Last month, Strzok was walked out of the FBI headquarters, and his security clearance was revoked.

The House Judiciary Committee and the House Government Oversight Committee summoned Strzok to testify at a public session of the two committees, less than two weeks after the Judiciary Committee took his testimony at a closed-door session that lasted 11 hours.

The Republican leaders of the two committees, Robert Goodlatte of Virginia and Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, staged the hearing as a media circus to allow Republican representatives to strike a pose as supporters of the

president, denouncing Strzok for his anti-Trump bias, and to whip up right-wing opposition to the Mueller investigation, which grew out of the probe initially led by Strzok.

The vicious tone of the hearing was set from the beginning, as Goodlatte read out a series of text messages by Strzok describing Trump in obscene and demeaning terms, during the period that he was in charge first of the Clinton email investigation and then the Russian investigation.

Strzok fired back in his opening statement, clearly conscious that he had support both within the intelligence apparatus and among the Democrats on the committee. He flatly defended his actions throughout both probes, while presenting the hearing as an effort to sabotage the FBI and virtually an act of treason. He declared, "I truly believe that today's hearing is just another victory notch in Putin's belt and another milestone in our enemies' campaign to tear America apart."

What followed was a political brawl, as Gowdy, Jim Jordan of Ohio, a leader of the ultra-right Freedom Caucus, and nearly every one of the dozens of Republican representatives on the two committee took a turn before the cameras to provide footage of their defense of Trump for Fox News, Breitbart and their reelection campaigns. They alternated with Democrats who were equally rabid in their defense of the FBI and the intelligence apparatus as a whole, baiting the Republicans as tools of Russia.

The Strzok text message provided plenty of ammunition for attacks by the Republicans, who were on the offensive through most of the hearing. The most notorious exchange between Page and Strzok came in August 2016, when she messaged him the question that Trump is "not ever going to become president, right?" Strzok replied, "No. No he won't. We'll stop it."

In response to repeated questions about this text, Strzok reiterated his preposterous claim that the "we" was a reference to the American voter, not the federal police agency for which both Page and Strzok worked, and which had just begun an investigation into the Trump campaign under Strzok's direction.

Gowdy took Strzok through a series of text messages he sent in the hours following the firing of FBI Director James Comey in May 2017, in which he and Page discussed investigative steps that should be taken while Comey's deputy Andrew McCabe was still in charge of the bureau. He noted that Strzok had immediately begun discussing impeachment, although special counsel Robert Mueller had only just been appointed.

The ferocity of the exchanges escalated in the afternoon. At one point, Representative Louie Gohmert of Texas cited Strzok's extramarital affair to undermine his credibility. "I can't help but wonder when I see you looking there with a little smirk, how many times did you look so innocent into your wife's eye and lie to her about Lisa Page?" he said.

Democrats began screaming about "witness harassment," although there is little doubt that Strzok, in the course of a 26-year FBI career, has dished out far more of a third degree in the course of interrogations he has conducted or supervised.

If the Republicans used the hearing to display their loyalty to Trump, the Democrats used it to grovel before the FBI and to the intelligence apparatus. They denounced any suggestion that a top FBI official like Strzok could be accused of lying under oath to Congress, when he denied that his personal feelings about Trump had any effect on his actions in the Clinton and Russia investigations.

Democrat after Democrat denounced the hearing itself as a service to Russian President Vladimir Putin and an insult to the "patriotic men and women" of the FBI. At one point, Strzok concluded a long speech defending the FBI by claiming the Republican questioning "deeply corrodes what the FBI is in American society, the effectiveness of their mission, and it is deeply destructive." Committee Democrats gave him a round of applause.

Strzok claimed that he could not have manipulated the results of the Russia investigation even if he had wanted too, because of layers of supervision above him and layers of agents below him. "They would not tolerate any improper behavior in me any more than I would tolerate it in them," he said.

This depiction of the FBI as a self-policing army of the righteous would be ludicrous if it were not so reactionary. Strzok is a top official of one of the most infamous and thuggish political police agencies in the world. It has been linked to assassinations, provocations, frame-ups, political spying and other crimes without number, not only during the notorious reign of J. Edgar Hoover, but throughout its history.

To recall only one very recent example, FBI agents arrested Ibragim Todashev, a potential key witness to the Boston Marathon bombing, on May 22, 2013 at his

residence in Florida. Within hours he had been shot to death, riddled with seven bullets, under circumstances that strongly suggested he had been executed to prevent him talking about the connections between US intelligence agencies and the two men who allegedly perpetrated the bombing, Tamerlan and Dzhokar Tsarnaev, with whom he was acquainted.

The FBI has long been notorious for racial bias and for whitewashing racially motivated killings by local police forces when it is called in to "investigate" by the Justice Department. That did not stop multiple members of the Congressional Black Caucus from striking a pose as enraged defenders of the FBI from unwarranted Republican smears.

Representative Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas, for example, denounced the Republicans for undermining the FBI, called the entire hearing a pro-Putin operation. She concluded by describing Trump's upcoming summit meeting with Putin in Helsinki, Finland, as his "annual performance review," as though Trump were a Putin employee.

One Democratic representative led Strzok through a series of questions that revealed divisions within the FBI over both the Clinton and Russia investigations. It is clear that both Comey's announcement in July 2016 that no charges would be brought against Clinton—in the course of which he denounced her conduct as "extremely careless"—and Comey's letter to Congress in October 2016 announcing that the Clinton investigation was being reopened were driven by internal pressures within the agency, with pro-Trump and pro-Clinton agents virtually at war with each other.

This only underscores the reactionary character of the two factions of the US ruling elite which are fighting it out by means of the Mueller investigation and the various counter-investigations conducted by the Republican-controlled House and Senate. The working class cannot align itself with either of these factions. It must conduct a politically independent struggle to defend democratic rights and advance its social interests, against both the Democrats and Republicans.



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