“Obamagate” claims spark new round in internal US political warfare

Patrick Martin
22 May 2020

The Trump White House and Senate Republicans are launching a political counterattack after the failure of impeachment and the collapse of the bogus anti-Russia campaign carried out for three years by the Democratic Party. Under the banner of exposing “Obamagate”—a watchword first embraced by Trump via Twitter on May 9—they are demanding investigations and prosecutions of former Obama administration officials for their role in the anti-Russia campaign.

The immediate purpose of this effort is to deflect attention from the administration’s abysmal handling of the COVID-19 crisis, and collect as much mud as possible to throw against the presumptive presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, former Vice President Joe Biden. The longer-term goal is to further Trump’s drive to establish an authoritarian presidency without even the pretense of a legal domestic opposition.

On Wednesday, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee approved on a party-line vote the issuing of a subpoena to Blue Star Strategies, a consulting firm that worked with the Ukrainian gas company Burisma during the period that Hunter Biden, son of the Democratic frontrunner, was on the board of directors.

This is likely a prelude to subpoenas to Hunter Biden and others involved in his lucrative ($80,000-a-month) relationship with the Ukrainian oligarch and owner of Burisma, Mykola Zlochevsky, during the time when Joe Biden had the main responsibility for Ukraine policy in the Obama-Biden administration.

It was Trump’s effort to pressure the government of Ukraine into supplying politically useful material about the Bidens, by holding back US arms aid, that became the principal charge in his impeachment last year by the House of Representatives. Trump was acquitted in a Senate trial that ended in early February.

Committee Chairman Ron Johnson of Wisconsin said that he has already received documents from the State Department and the National Archives and would seek to issue a report by August, in plenty of time to influence the election.

A second Senate panel, the Judiciary Committee, chaired by Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, is working on a similar timetable, with plans to issue a report before the November 3 presidential vote. It began Thursday to discuss subpoenas of former top Obama administration and national security officials, with a vote set for June 4 to give Graham broad subpoena power.

Graham has suggested he will call, among others, former FBI Director James Comey, his former deputy Andrew McCabe, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, former CIA Director John Brennan, former Attorney General Loretta Lynch and former White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough. At least initially, Graham has downplayed calls by Trump for issuing subpoenas to Obama and Biden.

The initial focus of the Judiciary Committee will be the case of retired General Michael Flynn, who resigned in February 2017 as Trump’s national security adviser and later pled guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with then-Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak.

Over the past month, the Flynn case has become the war cry of Trump and his ultra-right backers at Breitbart News, Fox News and among congressional Republicans. They claim that Flynn was the victim of a “perjury trap” set up by Comey at the instigation of Obama and Biden to disrupt the incoming Trump administration.

Attorney General William Barr intervened to quash the sentencing of Flynn on perjury charges, taking the unprecedented action of dropping prosecution on charges to which Flynn had twice pled guilty before a federal judge. That judge, Emmett Sullivan, is now considering whether to allow the dropping of the charges and has asked for outside groups to file friend-of-the-court pleadings on the question.

The Senate investigations accelerated after a Tuesday meeting between Trump and leading Senate Republicans, at which he demanded they “get tough” against the Democrats by issuing subpoenas and holding televised hearings during the summer.

On the same day, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell abandoned his previous reluctance to hold such hearings, declaring that the Obama administration had used “the awesome power of the federal government to pry into their political rivals.”

“An American citizen’s campaign for the American presidency was treated like a hostile foreign power by our own

© World Socialist Web Site

law enforcement," he said, "in part because a Democrat-led executive branch manipulated documents, hid contrary evidence, and made a DNC-funded dossier a launchpad for an investigation."

As McConnell's comments demonstrate, the ultra-right pro-Trump effort has the advantage of being able to point to the completely concocted character of the anti-Russia campaign waged by a section of the military-intelligence apparatus, with the backing of the Democratic Party and the bulk of the media.

This campaign was launched, as the WSWS has explained, to preempt left-wing opposition to the Trump administration and channel popular hostility to Trump in a thoroughly right-wing direction, either to remove Trump from office through the methods of a palace coup or to pressure his administration to adopt a more stridently anti-Russian stance in relation to the Middle East, Ukraine and Eastern Europe in general.

There is no progressive or democratic side in this ferocious conflict within the American ruling elite, initially provoked by significant differences over foreign policy, but having escalated as sections of the US ruling elite came to the conclusion that Trump was too erratic and unstable to be trusted with managing the increasingly explosive social and political crisis at home.

The anti-Russia campaign began in the summer of 2016, with the launching of Crossfire Hurricane, an FBI investigation into alleged connections between a handful of Trump aides and the Russian government, which led to the electronic surveillance of former Trump foreign policy adviser Carter Page on the basis of FBI affidavits to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, later revealed to be riddled with lies and distortions.

The fall election campaign sparked an internal conflict within the FBI between pro-Trump and pro-Clinton factions. On October 7, the "intelligence community" issued a warning that Russia was seeking to intervene in the election on behalf of Trump. Then, on October 29, Comey released his notorious letter to Congress announcing the reopening of the FBI's investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server during her tenure as secretary of state. This unprecedented action, in violation of Justice Department rules against interfering with an election, arguably tipped the outcome to Trump, given his narrow margins in industrial states like Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

After Trump's surprise election victory, the attention of the intelligence agencies and the Obama administration shifted to Flynn, Trump's top foreign policy aide and his choice to become White House national security adviser. Obama warned Trump against naming Flynn, who had been fired in 2014 as part of an internal conflict within the intelligence establishment, with Clapper and CIA Director John Brennan pressing for his dismissal.

On December 29, 2016, Obama imposed stiff diplomatic sanctions on the Russian government, expelling a large number of its representatives in the United States on the spurious grounds that he was "retaliating" for Russian interference in the US presidential election. In fact, there has never been any evidence that Russian actions consisted of anything more than purchasing a few Facebook ads, for less than $100,000, trivial in comparison to the $5 billion expended by the campaigns for Trump and Clinton.

Immediately after Obama's announcement of sanctions, Flynn called the Russian ambassador to the United States, Kislyak, to urge the Putin government not to respond in kind, assuring him that the incoming Trump administration would review the matter afresh. Such contacts are routine during any transition between outgoing and incoming US administrations, but Flynn apparently considered the content of the discussions to be politically embarrassing and lied about them when interviewed by FBI agents.

On January 5, 2017, Obama and his closest aides were briefed by the intelligence agencies on the anti-Russia investigation, on the eve of a similar briefing delivered to President-elect Trump in New York City. It appears that Obama was less enthusiastic about the targeting of Flynn than the security chiefs, including Clapper and Comey, and Flynn continued to receive full briefings from the outgoing national security adviser, Susan Rice.

On January 12, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, a regular conduit for the intelligence agencies, made public the December 29 Flynn-Kislyak phone call, touching off the chain of events that led to Flynn's firing a month later. It is perhaps ironic, in view of the current "Obamagate" campaign, that Ignatius voiced the then-common view in the "intelligence community" that Obama was dragging his feet on the anti-Russia campaign. His column was headlined, "Why Did Obama Dawdle on Russian Hacking?"

These apparently tactical differences led Comey to send FBI agents to the White House on January 24, 2017 to interview Flynn about his conversations with Kislyak without notifying the Department of Justice, in violation of the usual protocol, because Acting Attorney General Sally Yates reportedly shared Obama's concern that too direct an attack on Flynn and Trump might backfire.

Besides the various Senate investigations, the Department of Justice is conducting its own review of the origins of the Russia investigation, which led ultimately to the appointment of special counsel Robert Mueller. This review, headed by US Attorney John Durham, is expected to include testimony under oath from the same set of former Obama aides who are to be subpoenaed by the Senate.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site