Evasions, anti-Russian demagogy at Comey hearing before US Senate

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Wednesday's day-long appearance by former FBI Director James Comey before the Senate Judiciary Committee was the latest round in the ongoing political warfare in Washington, as Democratic and Republican members of the committee traded accusations of manipulating investigations and doing the bidding of Russia.

Both the posturing of the senators and the stonewalling by Comey, appearing on a video link from his living room, seemed incongruous in the context of the mounting political crisis in the United States.

The hearing came the day after the first debate of the presidential campaign, in the course of which President Trump reiterated his threats not to respect the outcome of the balloting and made an open appeal to fascists and white supremacists to "stand by" his campaign. Not a single Democrat or Republican on the Judiciary Committee, supposedly charged with responsibility for upholding the US legal system, made any reference to the brazen lawlessness promoted by Trump the night before.

The Judiciary Committee is headed by South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham, a sharp critic of Trump during the campaign for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination who has since become one of Trump's most slavish Senate flatterers. Graham is locked in a tight reelection battle with Democrat Jaime Harrison, who has raised a huge campaign war chest and is "killing me financially," by Graham's own admission. His political career is now completely tied to Trump.

Graham launched an investigation earlier this year into the origins of the FBI probe into alleged connections between then-candidate Trump and the Russian government, codenamed Crossfire Hurricane. This was the initial form of what became the Mueller investigation, named after former FBI Director Robert Mueller, who was named special counsel and took over the probe after Trump fired Comey as FBI director in May 2017.

The Judiciary Committee investigation is based on the findings of Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz, who was sharply critical of one aspect of Crossfire Hurricane—the FBI wiretapping of former Trump foreign policy aide Carter Page, on the basis of a warrant obtained under the Federal Intelligence Surveillance Act. Horowitz found that the FBI application for the FISA warrant contained at least 17 serious errors, including suppression of the fact that Page was serving as a CIA informant when he met with a number of Russian government officials.

While the Horowitz report documented the cavalier attitude of FBI officials to such legal requirements as evidence and probable cause, he was careful not to claim that the entire investigation into the Trump campaign was either illegal or politically motivated.

This has not stopped efforts, driven by the Trump White House, to obtain either Justice Department or congressional sanction for Trump's claims that the Obama-Biden administration had engaged in illegal surveillance of the Republican presidential campaign. Trump has repeatedly expressed the view that Obama, Biden and dozens of other officials in their administration should be liable to lengthy prison terms for this alleged spying.

Attorney General William Barr has appointed US Attorney John Durham to conduct an internal investigation into the origins of the Russia probe, with Trump aides expressing the hope that Comey and other top officials will be indicted. One FBI lawyer has been indicted for falsifying an email message relating to Carter Page, but the Durham investigation has so far failed to deliver the desired pre-election bombshell with less than five weeks remaining to Election Day.

The conflict that played out Wednesday before the Senate committee is a continuation of political warfare between two reactionary factions of the ruling class that

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has raged since Trump's nomination as the Republican presidential candidate in 2016. On the one side is the fascistic president and his Republican enablers. On the other is the nominal opposition of the Democrats, who have relentlessly promoted the fabricated and unsubstantiated claims of Russian "meddling" and Trump administration "collusion" put forward by sections of the intelligence apparatus at odds with Trump over foreign policy questions, particularly related to Russia and the Middle East.

The Senate Judiciary Committee hearings are the congressional version of Durham's probe, with the same goal: to dig up or manufacture political mud that can be of assistance to Trump's reelection campaign. In preparation for Comey's appearance, the Trump administration produced two political stink bombs in quick succession.

On September 25, Attorney General William Barr sent a letter to Graham revealing that the Russian who had been a "sub-source" for the notorious Steele dossier—a lengthy document alleging significant Russian financial and government connections with Trump's business enterprises, as well as seedy details of Trump's alleged sexual activities in Moscow—was suspected of himself being a Russian intelligence agent. The source was identified as Igor Danchenko, a Ukrainian-born lawyer employed at a Washington think tank.

Then, on September 29, Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe released a one-page letter after Barr agreed to its declassification. The letter claims that the CIA had learned in July 2016 from Russian intelligence contacts that Hillary Clinton was taking steps to trigger a Trump-Russia scandal in the hopes that this would deflect attention from the FBI investigation into her use of a private email server while she was US secretary of state.

The combined effect of these two documents was meant to suggest—in an extremely convoluted and murky fashion—that Hillary Clinton had been acting as a dupe of Russian intelligence when she began voicing charges that Trump had close political ties to Russia and was acting as an instrument of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The result was Wednesday's hearing, in which both Republican and Democratic senators traded charges that their political rivals were Russian stooges. Graham and other Republicans denounced Comey for the bogus FISA warrant to wiretap Carter Page, absurdly striking a pose as defenders of the civil liberties of the American people.

The Democrats responded with equally reactionary diatribes against Trump as the supposed agent of Moscow, reiterating the phony charges that were the basis of the Mueller investigation. Ranking Judiciary Committee member Diane Feinstein readily admitted that the FISA application to wiretap Carter Page and the Steele dossier as a whole were riddled with false information, but she claimed that these were only minor aspects of the anti-Russia investigation.

Comey, for his part, defended Crossfire Hurricane, saying it had been "done by the book." He flatly rejected claims that the Russia investigation as a whole was a fabrication. But he seemed mainly concerned not to become collateral damage in the political warfare.

He claimed dozens of times that he could not remember, did not know, or was not aware of various aspects of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation, denials which became increasingly implausible as they accumulated throughout the day. Eventually, Senator Mike Lee, a Utah Republican, said with exasperation, "With all due respect, Mr. Comey, you don't seem to know anything about an investigation that you ran."

Comey also rebuffed the claim made by President Trump during the Tuesday night debate that Joe Biden was personally responsible, during his final days as vice president, for the FBI investigation into Trump's national security advisor Michael Flynn, who was fired for lying about his contacts with the Russian ambassador during the transition period between the election and Trump's inauguration.

"I would remember it because it'd be highly inappropriate for a president or vice president to suggest prosecution or investigation of anyone—and it did not happen," Comey said.

Comey also welcomed suggestions from Democrats, notably Senate Minority Whip Richard Durbin, that Trump could be vulnerable to Russian blackmail because he needs money to pay for Trump Organization loans and debts totaling $421 million for which he is personally responsible. The *New York Times* revealed the existence of these debts in its front-page expose Monday based on 20 years of Trump's personal tax returns.

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