

Senators call for retaliation against Russia at “hacking” hearing

By Tom Hall
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The US Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing on “foreign cyber threats to the United States” yesterday. Instead of a critical evaluation of the dubious and wholly unsubstantiated allegations by the White House and US intelligence agencies that Russia hacked the email systems of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton Campaign chairman John Podesta, the hearing provided an opportunity for senators to kowtow before the US intelligence agencies and bray for war against Russia.

There were no new facts revealed in the proceedings, which lasted for three hours. The three intelligence officials called to testify—Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, NSA director and head of the US Cyber Command Michael Rogers, and Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence Marcel Lettre—pointedly refused to provide any evidence to substantiate the claim that Russia was responsible for the email hacks. This did not prevent them or the committee from treating the claim, which has never been backed up by any credible evidence, as accomplished fact.

Senators took turns demanding ever more severe retribution against Russia for the country’s alleged meddling in the 2016 US election. John McCain, the Republican chair of the committee and a leading anti-Russian hawk, declared in his opening statement, “This appearance of weakness has been provocative to our adversaries, who have attacked us again and again, with growing severity. Unless we demonstrate that the costs of attacking the United States outweigh the perceived benefits, these cyber threats will only grow.” He attempted repeatedly to extract statements from the assembled spy chiefs calling the alleged Russian hacking an “act of war” against the United States.

Alaska Republican Dan Sullivan complained that

“retaliation” against Russia “doesn’t seem to be happening.” Explaining the type of “retaliation” he favored, Sullivan cited a hypothetical scenario where the United States launched a clandestine cyber-attack to collapse the Iranian financial system, something which would amount to an act of war.

Senators denounced President-elect Donald Trump for questioning the spy agencies’ findings and for citing the claim of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, whose organization published the emails, that the Russians were not the source of the leak.

Missouri Democrat Claire McCaskill associated any questioning of US intelligence agencies with treason. “I assume the biggest benefactors of the American people having less confidence in the intelligence community [due to questioning its findings] are in fact ... Iran, North Korea, China, Russia and ISIS,” she said.

“The notion that the soon-elected leader of this country would put Julian Assange on a pedestal compared to the men and women of the intelligence community and the military ... I think it should bring about a hue and cry; no matter whether you’re Republican or a Democrat there should be howls,” she added.

Indiana Democrat Joe Donnelly concurred, declaring “I can tell you on behalf of all [residents of Indiana] that when it comes down to a choice between you people, our intelligence agencies, and Julian Assange, we are on your team every time.” Senators asked questions about how Trump’s remarks had “demoralized” the intelligence community.

Republican Senator Lindsay Graham demanded that the United States stop “throwing pebbles” against Russia and start throwing rocks, in the form of devastating economic sanctions. “To those of you who want to throw rocks, you are going to get a chance here

soon, and if we don't throw rocks, we are going to make a huge mistake.”

“We are in the fight of our lives,” Graham added. “Putin is up to no good, and he better be stopped.”

Oklahoma Republican James Inhofe, who served as a national security advisor to the Trump election campaign, asked Clapper about the lack of retaliation against China for its alleged role in the 2015 hacking of the federal Office of Personnel Management's database, echoing remarks made by Trump's press secretary last weekend aimed at redirecting the anti-Russian campaign against China.

Clapper's response was significant. Citing the character of the Chinese hack as “espionage,” the spy chief declared, “People that live in glass houses shouldn't throw publicly too many rocks.” In other words, the United States is guilty of what it accuses its official adversaries of doing, and worse.

Clapper argued before the committee that Russia's alleged (but similarly unsubstantiated) promotion of “fake news” stories on social media and through critical reporting of the election by Russian state-owned news outlets such as RT, formed, with the email hacks, a multi-pronged approach aimed at influencing the outcome of the presidential election. “RT was very active in promoting a particular point of view, disparaging our system, our alleged hypocrisy about human rights, etc. Whatever crack, fissure they could find in our tapestry, they would exploit it,” Clapper declared.

The logic of this argument, which was not challenged by any of the committee members, is ominous. By equating activities on social media and journalism with foreign espionage, Clapper is establishing the basis for expanding the attack against Russia into an attack against the fundamental rights to freedom of speech and of the press.

With consummate hypocrisy, Clapper argued for a massive increase in US government resources aimed at doing exactly what he and the committee accused Russia of doing: covertly influencing the politics of foreign countries. At several points throughout his testimony he called for the creation of a “USIA on steroids,” referring to the United States Information Agency, which was responsible for the dissemination of anti-communist propaganda during the Cold War. McCain and Graham concurred, lamenting that current

US propaganda outfits Radio Free Europe and Voice of America were falling behind.

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