

FBI director to testify on wiretapping, Russia hacking charges

By Patrick Martin
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The conflict within the US ruling elite over charges of Russian interference in the US elections is set to come to a head today with the public testimony of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director James Comey before the House Intelligence Committee.

Comey is to speak publicly and under oath on the two issues the committee and its Senate counterpart are investigating: the claim by Democrats that Russian intelligence agencies hacked the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Clinton campaign during the presidential election, and the claim by President Trump that the Obama administration conducted illegal surveillance of his campaign during the same period.

No evidence has been presented to support either claim, although the corporate media has treated the allegations of Russian hacking as virtually proven because they come from anonymous “sources” within the military-intelligence apparatus. The Trump claim, by contrast, is treated as baseless, with backing only from the far-right commentators on Fox News and talk radio.

Behind the mutual mudslinging and claims of Obama spying and Trump campaign collusion with Russia are real but largely unstated conflicts within the US ruling elite over foreign policy. The bulk of the US national security apparatus is opposed to Trump’s apparent shift in foreign policy away from immediate confrontation with Russia, which has been stoked up steadily over the past three years since the US-backed ultra-right coup in Ukraine.

The Democrats also used the allegations that Russian hacking was involved in the release of emails from the DNC and Clinton campaign Chairman John Podesta to distract attention from the content of the emails, which exposed efforts by the DNC to rig the outcome of the Democratic primary campaign for Hillary Clinton and

against Bernie Sanders. The emails also provided the texts of Clinton’s lavishly paid speeches to Wall Street banks, showing her groveling before the financial speculators and pledging to safeguard their interests.

After eight months of media attacks on his alleged connections to Russia, Trump responded March 4 with a series of tweets claiming that Obama had ordered the wiretapping of his campaign offices in Trump Tower. When challenged to provide evidence of this claim, the White House asked the House and Senate intelligence committees, already investigating the “Russian hacking” allegations, to look into his allegations as well.

Speaking on Sunday television interview programs, on the eve of the House Intelligence Committee hearing, the Republican chairman of the committee, Devin Nunes, and the ranking Democrat, Adam Schiff, both said that Comey would deny that the Obama White House had ordered any wiretapping of Trump Tower or the Trump campaign, or that any such surveillance had been conducted in the course of an FBI investigation into alleged Russian interference into the US elections.

Nunes told Fox News Sunday that the FBI had informed him Friday that there had been no warrant obtained under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act for wiretapping of the Trump campaign—the legal step required to authorize such an FBI operation as a counterintelligence measure. “There was no FISA warrant that I’m aware of...to tap Trump Tower,” he said.

Schiff confirmed this, speaking on NBC’s “Meet the Press” program. He said, “Once again, no evidence to support the president’s claim that he was wiretapped by his predecessor.” He added that he expected Comey to say as much when he testifies before the committee,

so that “we can put an end to this wild goose chase.”

Nunes added on Fox that there was no evidence in any of the briefings he had received from the FBI of collusion between the Trump campaign and alleged Russian hacking of the Democratic campaign.

The only “crime” that he was aware of, Nunes continued, was the leaking of classified information about US government surveillance of the Russian ambassador to Washington, Sergey Kislyak, which had revealed conversations between Kislyak and retired General Michael Flynn during the period that Flynn was President-elect Trump’s top national security aide.

Flynn was forced to resign after only 24 days as White House national security adviser after he was revealed to have lied about the content of his conversations with Kislyak before taking office. His deceptions were exposed by transcripts of the telephone conversations obtained through FBI surveillance of Kislyak and leaked to the media.

Additional uproar was created by Trump’s declaration, through his press secretary, Sean Spicer, that the British government had been the instrument of Obama’s alleged wiretapping, through its surveillance agency the General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the equivalent of the US National Security Agency.

The notion that the GCHQ would conduct surveillance against an American target at the request of the US government is not at all bizarre—only the attribution of the request to Obama personally, when it would have come from the intelligence agencies. As detailed in the exposures of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, the security agencies of the US, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand regularly share intelligence under the so-called Five Eyes program.

In particular, because of US laws that bar the NSA from spying on Americans, and similar laws in each of the other countries, it is routine for the NSA to ask the GCHQ to spy on a targeted American, and for the GCHQ to ask the NSA to spy on a targeted Briton, essentially subcontracting the surveillance to evade the legal limitations.

Spicer’s remarks produced a short-lived international incident, as the GCHQ took the unusual step of issuing a public statement denouncing his comments as ridiculous and unbelievable, while the White House

agreed not to repeat the allegation. The real concern on the part of the spy agencies, both in Britain and the US, was that for political reasons Trump and his aides had drawn attention to a relationship they preferred to keep hidden.

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