

Trump's firing of Comey: A breakdown of constitutional government

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The political crisis brought to a head by President Donald Trump's firing of FBI Director James Comey is rapidly intensifying, with calls for Trump's impeachment and threats by the White House to go even further in attacking democratic rights and constitutional norms.

Trump provoked further recriminations from within the political establishment with his tweeted threat Friday, warning that Comey should be careful what he says to the media and to Congress about his private discussions with the president, because tapes of their conversations might exist. This led to immediate responses from both Democrats and Republicans that any tapes could be subpoenaed as part of the ongoing investigations into the conduct of the 2016 elections.

There were unconfirmed press reports of an impending purge within the White House staff, with Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, chief strategist Stephen Bannon and press spokesman Sean Spicer all potential targets. As more than one media commentator noted, this would leave the White House staff under the direction of "Ivanka and Jared," the president's daughter and son-in-law, making even more extreme the personalist and quasi-dictatorial character of the Trump administration.

Trump fueled such speculation by suggesting that daily White House press briefings might be canceled, to be replaced by infrequent press conferences by the president himself. He refused to allow any White House spokespeople to appear on the Sunday television interview programs after the networks rejected demands that they refrain from asking questions about the Comey firing and its aftermath.

The *Washington Post* published an editorial Sunday warning that Trump's conduct "threatened the independence of federal law enforcement and sullied key institutions of U.S. democracy," adding that "The

president injected himself into an investigation where he has absolutely no right to interfere." While demanding that congressional and FBI investigations into alleged Russian interference in the US election be stepped up, the newspaper published an op-ed column by Harvard Professor Laurence Tribe calling for Trump's impeachment.

Even more extraordinary were the remarks of retired Gen. James Clapper, the director of national intelligence under President Obama. Interviewed Sunday morning on the CNN program "State of the Union," Clapper had the following exchange with host Jake Tapper after Tapper asked for his response to the firing of Comey:

Clapper: I think, in many ways, our institutions are under assault, both externally—and that's the big news here, is the Russian interference in our election system. And I think as well our institutions are under assault internally.

Tapper: Internally from the president?

Clapper: Exactly.

Clapper is no friend of democracy or accountability. By rights, he should be serving a prison sentence for perjury, having denied under oath, during congressional testimony in 2013, that there was widespread US government spying on the communications of Americans. A few weeks later, the revelations of Edward Snowden exposed him as a liar.

If the retired general, who until January 20 stood at the head of 17 agencies with more than 100,000 spies, analysts and agents, now declares that Trump, the nominal commander-in-chief, is a threat to the institutions of the American state, that is a sign of a

state machine at war with itself. This is only one step removed from advocating that the military-intelligence apparatus step in to “preserve order,” the pretext invariably given in country after country for coups and military takeovers.

No one should believe that “it can’t happen here.” Both sides in the conflict within the ruling elite are turning to the military as the final arbiter. Trump himself has filled his cabinet with former and currently serving generals in an effort to strengthen his ties with the military. He has repeatedly addressed military audiences while offering his top commanders free rein to order more aggressive battlefield tactics and troop buildups, and promising police similar leeway within the United States.

The Democratic Party is incapable of raising a single democratic principle in opposition to Trump. It has chosen to oppose the president on the basis of the completely reactionary and bogus claim that he owes his presidency to alleged Russian intervention into the 2016 campaign. Its media supporters have followed suit: two *New York Times* columnists (Nicholas Kristof and Tim Egan) yesterday suggested that Trump may be guilty of treason, while a third (Thomas Friedman) appealed openly to the military last month to carry out a palace coup.

The world is confronting a crisis of historic dimensions in the center of global capitalism. Decades of social and political reaction, unending war and the artificial suppression of class conflict are coming to a head. Wealth and power have been concentrated to an extraordinary degree in the hands of a narrow oligarchy, while the vast majority of the population is driven into increasingly desperate economic straits and deprived of any political influence.

The dysfunctionality of American society is everywhere in evidence. Crumbling roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, deepening poverty and social misery, collapsing schools, the slashing of social spending and private pensions are in their totality the consequence of the subordination of all rational consideration of the public interest to a manic drive for profit.

Social anger among working people—who see the government shutting them out from any access to decent health care, poisoning the water supply in cities such as Flint to enrich speculators and their bribed

politicians—is reaching the boiling point. Both parties and all of the official institutions—Congress, the Supreme Court, the media—are discredited. What is unfolding is a breakdown of the entire framework of constitutional government.

If Trump is a rogue president who accepts no legal or constitutional limits on his actions, he only mirrors the conduct of the corporate CEOs, bankers and hedge fund moguls who crashed the world economy in 2008 with impunity, and now reap untold profits while working people suffer the consequences.

There is no way out of this crisis through the existing political framework. If Trump is replaced through the machinations of the Democrats or its allies in the military-intelligence apparatus, the result will be a further turn to the right, an acceleration of militarism and reaction, and potentially a US nuclear war with Russia. Trump himself can prevail only through the mobilization of ultra-right and fascistic elements, both within the military and outside it, with the most ominous consequences for the social interests and democratic rights of working people.

The only way to resolve the political crisis on a progressive and democratic basis is through the political mobilization of the working class. Only the working class, fighting on the basis of a socialist program, independently and in opposition to the two parties of big business and their stooges in the trade unions, can open a new road forward.

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