

Revelation of meeting with Russian lawyer intensifies political crisis in Washington

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The revelation that Donald Trump Jr. met in June 2016 with a Moscow lawyer with ties to the Putin government and Russian oligarchs has become the focus of intensifying political warfare in Washington.

From the response of the Democrats and the media, one might think that Trump's son set up the meeting to turn over the US nuclear codes to the Kremlin. In reality, it seems that Trump Jr., then a campaign adviser to his father, met Natalia Veselnitskaya to get information damaging to Hillary Clinton.

This sort of "digging for dirt" is not exactly unusual in American politics. Individuals associated with the Clinton campaign reportedly met with Ukrainian government officials in March 2016 in search of material that might discredit Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort. Clinton herself has connections with governments and intelligence agencies all over the world, which she no doubt sought to leverage in her contest with Trump.

In any event, Trump Jr.'s clumsy contact with a Russian lawyer doesn't quite measure up to Nixon's efforts, during the 1968 presidential campaign, to sabotage the Paris Peace Talks, lest the sudden end of the Vietnam War cost him votes; or Reagan's efforts to persuade the Iranian regime not to release American hostages before Election Day in 1980.

The Trump Tower meeting, however, has acquired explosive significance in the context of the ferocious political battle that is being waged in Washington. Both Democrats and Republicans have said that the meeting with the Russian lawyer amounts to a "smoking gun" in the Trump-Russia investigations. Senator Tim Kaine, Clinton's former running mate, said that with the meeting "we are now moving beyond obstruction of justice" into "perjury, false statements and even potentially treason."

Treason—defined in US law as levying war against the United States or supporting and giving "aid and comfort" to its "enemies"—is a capital offense. If Kaine's words are taken literally, the 2016 Democratic vice-presidential candidate is suggesting that the son of the current president—and, by implication, the president himself—is potentially guilty of a crime that could lead to execution.

It is worth considering the issue that has generated this staggering level of political infighting. Neither the Democrats nor their media allies are working themselves into a frenzy over

the horrific destruction and loss of life in the Iraqi city of Mosul, or the ongoing plans to deny health care to millions of Americans, or the rounding up and deportation of thousands of immigrants, or the staggering level of wealth concentration and social inequality in the United States.

The conflict, rather, is entirely centered on issues of foreign policy. Trump's opponents in the Democratic Party and the most influential sections of the capitalist media (such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and CNN) are being uncharacteristically aggressive because they are being supported by large sections of the military-intelligence apparatus.

Trump's opponents do not believe for a minute that the fascist-minded president is an agent of Russia or any other foreign power. But they do fear—and not without some degree of legitimacy—that Trump's obsessive preoccupation with his business empire and personal wealth are colliding with the imperatives of American imperialism.

The United States is ruled by a financial-corporate oligarchy. But the Trump administration is an oligarchic government *with a kleptocratic and nepotistic twist*. The deep and impenetrable entanglement between Trump's business interests and those of other billionaire cabinet members and administration policy has fueled suspicions that this collection of oligarchs is subordinating basic imperialist strategic interests to their personal moneymaking schemes.

This is why the issue of Trump's relations with Russia and the role of different family members looms so large in this conflict. Given the fact that Russia is viewed as a hostile power, interfering with multiple US geostrategic interests, all signs that Trump is "soft on Putin" cause a high degree of alarm.

But even the divisions over policy toward Russia do not fully explain the astonishing level of political conflict within the ruling elite. This is more than a crisis over policy. It is a crisis of class rule, rooted in the intractable economic, political and social problems confronting American imperialism.

The decades-long erosion of the hegemonic position of the United States was covered over temporarily by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which was accompanied by triumphalist proclamations of the "end of history" and a "unipolar moment" of unchallenged US dominance. However, a quarter-century of

unending and expanding war centered in the Middle East and Central Asia has failed to prevent the emergence of new rivals. The struggle to maintain its control over key geostrategic regions of the world has brought the US into ever more direct conflict with its larger competitors.

The G20 meeting in Hamburg, Germany last week made clear that the US is being directly and openly challenged. German Chancellor Merkel's meetings with Chinese President Xi, and Merkel's insistence that Germany must stake out an independent foreign policy, underscored the reality of waning US influence internationally.

Trump's ruling-class critics worry that his actions are intensifying the crisis of US policy. Lawrence Summers, treasury secretary under Bill Clinton and economic advisor to Obama, voiced these concerns in a column published over the weekend. Trump was undermining "the idea that the United States should lead in the development of international community," which has been "a central tenet of American foreign policy since the end of World War II." His "erratic" behavior confirmed "the fears of those who believe that his conduct is currently the greatest threat to American national security."

The ruling class has no simple way out of its crisis. No doubt there are many discussions behind the scenes over scenarios for removing Trump from office, for installing Vice President Mike Pence, who has been busy meeting with top Republican donors in recent weeks, or arranging some other scenario. Even if Trump's ruling-class critics succeed in removing him through some sort of palace coup, however, that will not change the basic dynamic of decline and decay. They might, moreover, end up regretting what they set into motion.

The more fundamental problem of the ruling elite is that it lacks a political program capable of inspiring support that extends beyond the top 10 percent of the population. Both parties are ferociously hostile to anything that upsets the current distribution of wealth. A half-century of social counterrevolution has completely eroded the popular legitimacy of state institutions. The fact that different factions of the state are hurling mud at each other and engaging in the most filthy and corrupt maneuvers only deepens popular hostility.

History teaches that this type of conflict within the ruling class is always bound up with a revolutionary crisis. The real concerns of masses of workers, however, are entirely separate from and opposed to the issues dividing the ruling elite. Millions are angry over war, the assault on health care, the destruction of pensions, stagnating wages, declining life expectancy and police violence. These are the issues that will bring millions into struggle.

It is urgent that the working class intervene with its own program. It cannot passively await the outcome of the conflict within the ruling class. It must advance its own interests and its own solution. In the Perspective column published last month,

"Palace coup or class struggle: The political crisis in Washington and the strategy of the working class," we wrote:

Mass struggles are on the agenda in the United States. Protest rallies, demonstrations and strikes will tend to acquire a general nation-wide character. The political conclusion that flows from this analysis is that the fight of the working class against Trump and all that he represents will raise ever more urgently the necessity of a political mass movement, independent of and opposed to both the Republicans and the Democrats, against the capitalist system and its state. This objective tendency of social development must be developed as a conscious strategy of working class struggle. The task of linking the struggles against all the deplorable social conditions of life under capitalism with the political struggle against Trump and both big business parties, based on a socialist program, must be raised and become a topic of discussion within factories, workplaces, working class communities and schools and colleges throughout the country.

The question of preparation, of building a political leadership in key sections of the working class, of constructing a revolutionary vanguard, is the decisive issue. We urge readers and supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party to join this fight.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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