

First indictment reported in Mueller probe of alleged Russian interference in 2016 election

By Patrick Martin
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Several major news outlets reported Friday that special prosecutor Robert Mueller has obtained the first indictment in his investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections and possible collusion by the Trump campaign.

CNN reported first on Friday that the secret federal grand jury empanelled by Mueller issued the indictment earlier that day. The network claimed “top lawyers who are helping to lead the Mueller probe, including veteran prosecutor Andrew Weissmann, were seen entering the court room at the D.C. federal court where the grand jury meets to hear testimony in the Russia investigation.”

Both Justice Department attorneys and grand jury members operate under a judicial gag order and could be prosecuted for leaking information to the media. CNN attributed its report to “sources briefed on the matter,” a euphemism for defense attorneys for the person or persons indicted, not covered by the gag order, who had been told to be ready to produce their clients on Monday for a court hearing.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported late Friday that it had confirmed the bringing down of the indictment, but like CNN did not name its sources or identify the person or persons indicted.

Press speculation focused on former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort and former Trump national security advisor General Michael Flynn, who have been accused in media reports of failing to disclose lobbying efforts on behalf of foreign clients in Ukraine and Russia. Indictment of either man on such charges—unrelated to the claims of Russian interference in the US election—would be a standard prosecutorial move to induce them to become cooperating witnesses against others in the Trump campaign or the administration, including Trump himself.

The reported indictment comes in the wake of a week of increasingly frenzied mutual mudslinging between the White House and congressional Democrats who have spearheaded the anti-Russia campaign and made it the nearly exclusive focus of their supposed opposition to the Trump administration. Both sides have been leaking furiously to the media, seeking to smear their opponents as collaborators with the Russian government.

On Tuesday, press reports revealed that the private investigation firm Fusion GPS, which commissioned a dossier of opposition research on Trump’s alleged ties to Russia that has been largely debunked, was paid for its work by a law firm acting on behalf of the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee.

Fusion GPS hired a retired British secret agent, Christopher Steele, to troll through his Moscow contacts for gossip connected with Trump’s business ventures in Russia, including the staging of a Miss Universe pageant. The raw material was circulated to the American media in the fall of 2016, but was so poorly substantiated that no major reports appeared until after the election.

It has been known since then that Fusion GPS was hired first by Republican operatives opposed to Trump to dig up dirt, and then by Democratic operatives for the same purpose. But it was only this week that the Democratic paymaster was identified as Marc Elias, a longtime Democratic Party-linked attorney at the firm Perkins Coie, while the Republican paymaster was named as the Washington Free Beacon, a right-wing publication financed by billionaire Peter Singer, an early backer of the presidential campaign of Senator Marco Rubio.

Republicans heading various congressional committees investigating the alleged Russian

involvement in the 2016 elections have sought to force Fusion GPS to divulge who paid for its investigation into Trump, in an effort to discredit the allegations of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia as manufactured by Democratic Party operatives.

There were also claims—at this point unsupported by evidence—that the FBI played a role in the investigation conducted by Steele. These claims were put forward by the *Wall Street Journal* in an extraordinary editorial published Wednesday night, under the headline, “Democrats, Russians and the FBI: Did the bureau use disinformation to trigger its Trump probe?”

The editorial claimed, “The Fusion news means the FBI’s role in Russia’s election interference must now be investigated,” and concluded by declaring that former FBI Director Mueller, now the special prosecutor running the investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election, “could best serve the country by resigning to prevent further political turmoil over that conflict of interest.”

On Wednesday, the *Daily Beast* reported that Cambridge Analytica, a British data analysis firm controlled by ultra-right billionaire Robert Mercer—and with Trump aide Stephen Bannon on its board—had contacted Julian Assange of WikiLeaks in the summer of 2016 seeking copies of emails deleted from Hillary Clinton’s private server. The thrust of this report was to assert an extremely tenuous connection between Trump supporters and the Russian hackers who supposedly supplied emails from the Clinton campaign and the DNC to WikiLeaks—although Assange has always maintained that emails were supplied to WikiLeaks anonymously.

The White House fired back with its own allegations of Democratic Party collusion with Russia, based not only on the media reports about Fusion GPS, but on reviving a scandal over donations to the Clinton Foundation by a Canadian billionaire with extensive business interests in the former Soviet Union, who later sold his holdings in the US uranium mining industry to a Russian firm.

President Trump took up this subject repeatedly in Twitter postings over several days, culminating in a lengthy multi-part tweet on Sunday morning in which he sought to portray Hillary Clinton and the Democrats as guilty of collusion with Russia, and backed an investigation into this supposed connection by the same

congressional committees now investigating his own campaign.

Asked directly about the uranium deal at Friday’s press briefing, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said: “I can tell you that we do think that there’s a lot of cause for concern regarding that deal, and we certainly think it should be looked into.” She denied suggestions that the White House was engaged in tit-for-tat scandal-mongering against the Democrats.

At the heart of the political warfare in Washington are significant issues of foreign policy, related to the ongoing US intervention in the Syrian civil war, directed at both Iran and Russia, and more generally to US policy towards Russia. The congressional Democrats are aligned with sections of the military-intelligence apparatus which regard Trump’s policies both as unduly friendly towards Russia, and as disruptive of relations with longstanding allies and clients of US imperialism, both in Europe and Asia.

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