

In wake of Flynn guilty plea, anti-Russia campaign intensifies against Trump

By Patrick Martin
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In the wake of the guilty plea filed Friday by retired General Michael Flynn, former national security advisor in the early days of the Trump administration, Trump's opponents among congressional Democrats, the media and the intelligence apparatus have stepped up pressure on the White House.

Several leading Democrats suggested on Sunday television interview programs that the investigation into alleged Russian intervention in the 2016 US presidential election, headed by Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller, was likely to conclude that Trump was guilty of obstruction of justice, an impeachable offense.

The lenient character of Flynn's guilty plea to a single felony count of lying to the FBI—with the promise of a sentence of no more than six months in prison and a \$9,500 fine—has been universally interpreted to mean that Mueller plans to use Flynn's testimony against higher-ranking officials in the White House and the Trump campaign: Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, Trump's eldest son Donald Trump Jr., and the president himself.

Senator Diane Feinstein of California, one of the wealthiest and most influential Democrats in the upper house, appeared on the NBC program "Meet the Press," where she discussed the investigations by Mueller and by the Senate Judiciary Committee, on which she is the ranking Democrat. She declared, "I think what we're beginning to see is the putting together of a case of obstruction of justice. I think we see this in the indictments, the four indictments and pleas that have just taken place, and some of the comments that are being made."

Feinstein was referring to the step-by-step ratcheting up of the Mueller investigation: the guilty plea by a lower-level campaign aide, George Papadopoulos, to charges of lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian officials; the indictments of former campaign chairman Paul Manafort and his deputy Richard Gates on charges of money-laundering, conspiracy and filing false statements; and now the guilty plea by Flynn, the first former White House official to be charged in the investigation.

The alleged obstruction of justice took place when Trump importuned then FBI director James Comey to drop the ongoing investigation into Flynn's contacts with Russian officials during the transition period. In the course of that investigation, as Flynn now admits, he lied to FBI agents in an interview on January 24, 2017, four days after Trump's inauguration. He was fired two weeks later, allegedly for telling the same lie to Vice President Mike Pence.

Trump repeatedly urged Comey to "go easy" on Flynn, and when it became apparent the investigation was continuing, he fired him. This triggered a political uproar that led Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein to name Mueller, himself a retired FBI director, as a special counsel to run the Russian investigation, now expanded to include the actions of the Trump White House in seeking to block the probe.

Despite the hysterical allegations of "treason" and "Russian takeover" of the Trump administration, voiced by columnists at the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, among others, no section of the political establishment seriously believes that the Kremlin is in charge of the White House. These sentiments are voiced to channel popular opposition to the Trump administration in a right-wing and pro-war direction.

The real concern in sections of the ruling elite is that Trump's effort to establish a more collaborative relationship with Moscow cuts across the confrontational posture adopted by the Obama administration and the military-intelligence apparatus, beginning with the effort to subvert the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, the lone Russian ally in the Middle East, and intensifying with the US-backed ultra-right coup that removed a pro-Russian government in Ukraine.

It is significant that Feinstein, long one of the most cautious Senate Democrats on the question of potential impeachment of Trump, is now hinting at support for an effort to remove him, mainly citing his impact on foreign policy. "We've got major problems in the world with our allies now, in the Middle East, with North Korea," she said

on “Meet the Press.” “It goes on and on. And I think that this president is just precipitating more and more angst that’s going to lead to serious discord.”

In response to a direct question from interviewer Chuck Todd, “When do you hit your ‘enough is enough’ moment,” Feinstein replied, “Well, it happened about a month ago, and I can’t give you any particular event,” adding that it was the accumulation of reports of Trump’s increasingly erratic statements and actions.

The top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, Mark Warner of Virginia, adopted a similar stance in an interview on CNN’s “State of the Union” program. Asked about Trump’s latest tweet, in which he denied telling FBI Director Comey to drop the investigation into Michael Flynn, Warner said, “I believe FBI Director Comey. I think he was very credible in his testimony and his private meetings with us.”

CNN interviewer Jake Tapper cited another tweet, in which Trump said he had fired Flynn because he had lied to both Pence and the FBI: “That would seem to suggest that President Trump knew that Michael Flynn had lied to the FBI, which is, of course, a crime, when he fired Flynn and also when he, according to Comey, asked Comey to back off. That seems to be in the territory of obstruction of justice.”

Warner concurred, saying, “And, again, that’s why I think you’re going to see much more coming from the special prosecutor.”

He continued, “We also have mounting evidence, almost every week, of additional contacts between the Russian government or Russian officials and officials connected to the Trump campaign, under the guise of trying to improve relations ... there has never, there has never been, in modern American history, a political campaign that had this much outreach to a foreign government, and a foreign adversary in this case, throughout the campaign and throughout the transition.”

Warner is, like Feinstein, a charter member of the Democratic political establishment. A former telecommunications mogul, he is personally the wealthiest member of Congress, represents the state of Virginia, home of the CIA and Pentagon, and has the closest ties with the military-intelligence apparatus. He flirted with a presidential candidacy in 2008 before pulling back, and is expected to explore a 2020 candidacy as well.

Representatives of the super-rich like Warner and Feinstein are not targeting Trump because of his racist attacks on immigrants and Muslims, his gigantic tax-cut for American corporations—to be paid for through savage cuts in social spending—or his readiness to use US American military power around the world. Instead, they regard Trump

as a destabilizing factor, in both domestic and international politics, whose provocative behavior undermines the long-term interests of the capitalist ruling class.

A handful of House Democrats have begun raising the possibility of impeachment, more as a campaign slogan for the 2018 elections than as a practical possibility, given the current Republican majority in the House of Representatives. But the Mueller investigation seems more tailored to put pressure on Trump to resign to avoid legal measures against his own family as well as himself.

There is no sign at this stage of Trump acquiescing to such demands. On the contrary, the right-wing media outlets aligned with the White House, including Fox News and Breitbart News, have unleashed a fusillade of counterattacks against his critics. Some of their missiles have struck their targets.

Special counsel Mueller was compelled to reassign an FBI official playing a major role in his investigation after it became known that he and another member of the investigative team had exchanged anti-Trump emails. Peter Strzok, deputy head of counterintelligence at the FBI, has been demoted to a human resources position.

The top investigative reporter for ABC News, Brian Ross, was suspended without pay by the network Friday after he made a false report that Trump had told Flynn to contact Russian officials during the election campaign rather than during the transition, when such contacts between foreign governments and those about to assume office in Washington are routinely carried out.

However, the White House is increasingly bogged down in the response to the investigation, and sinking deeper into crisis. According to press reports, at least two dozen campaign or White House aides have been questioned by FBI agents and attorneys working as part of the Mueller probe, including Jared Kushner, former White House chief of staff Reince Priebus, former press secretary Sean Spicer, former foreign policy adviser J. D. Gordon, White House communications director Hope Hicks, and Gen. Keith Kellogg, chief of staff of the National Security Council. Trump’s White House lawyers, Donald McGahn and James Burnham—who do not represent him as a personal client but as president—have also been summoned to testify.

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