

Democrats begin open discussion of impeachment

By Patrick Martin
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Two top leaders of the House Democratic caucus appeared on television interview programs Sunday to promote the notion that President Donald Trump could be impeached now or prosecuted after he leaves office for violations of campaign finance laws.

Representative Jerry Nadler of New York will chair the House Judiciary Committee after the new Democratic majority takes control of the House in January. That committee would have jurisdiction over the drafting of articles of impeachment, and Nadler has previously indicated a willingness to consider impeachment based on the findings of the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into allegations of Russian “meddling” in the 2016 elections.

On Sunday, however, Nadler suggested that Trump could be subject to impeachment for a different issue, his role in authorizing payments during the 2016 campaign to two women who claimed to have had sexual relationships with him, in order to conceal their stories until after Election Day.

Trump’s former legal “fixer,” Michael Cohen, has pleaded guilty to violating campaign finance laws in making the payment to one woman, adult film actress Stephanie Clifford (Stormy Daniels), and in organizing the payment to the other woman, Playboy model Karen McDougal, by the company that publishes the *National Enquirer* tabloid. In both instances, according to legal documents filed by the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York last Friday, Cohen says he acted on the instructions of then-presidential candidate Trump, who is referred to in the court papers as “Individual 1.”

On the CNN program “State of the Union” Sunday, host Jake Tapper read from the court filing and then asked, “If it is proven that the president directed or coordinated with Cohen to commit these felonies... are those impeachable offenses?”

Nadler responded, “They would be impeachable offenses. Whether they are important enough to justify an impeachment is a different question. But, certainly, they would be impeachable offenses, because, even though they were committed before the president became president, they were committed in the service of fraudulently obtaining the office.”

On the CBS Sunday interview program “Face the Nation,” Representative Adam Schiff, who will chair the House Intelligence Committee in January, gave a slightly different

response to the same issue. He raised first of all the likelihood that Trump could be indicted after he leaves office, assuming that the Department of Justice declines to bring an indictment against a sitting president.

“He may be the first President in quite some time to face the real prospect of jail time,” Schiff said. “We have been discussing the issue of pardons that the President may offer to people or dangle in front of people. The bigger pardon question may come down the road as the next president has to determine whether to pardon Donald Trump.”

Schiff cited the US attorney’s argument that the purpose of the hush money payments was to improve Trump’s chances in the 2016 elections. “To have the Justice Department basically say that the President of the United States not only coordinated, but directed an illegal campaign scheme that may have had an election-altering impact, is pretty breathtaking.”

Asked whether this would be an impeachable offense, Schiff avoided a direct answer, instead suggesting that impeachment might be appropriate once Special Counsel Mueller delivers his report on alleged Russian intervention into the 2016 elections and possible collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government.

Schiff continued: “Is a crime directed and coordinated by the President which helped him obtain office sufficient to warrant his removal from that office? That’s a legitimate question to ask... But I think we also need to see this as part of a broader pattern of potential misconduct by the President, and it’s that broad pattern I think that will lead us to a conclusion about whether it rises to the level to warrant removal from office.”

Senator Angus King of Maine, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats, voiced a note of caution on the impeachment issue while appearing on Sunday interview programs on both NBC and Fox News. He cited the Cohen testimony and the court filing by the US Attorney in New York City as implicating Trump in a felony, but added that impeachment was inherently a political and not a legal process.

“My concern is that, if impeachment is moved forward on the evidence that we have now, at least a third of the country would think it was just political revenge, and a coup against the president,” he said. “That wouldn’t serve us well at all.”

King was clearly harking back to the political backlash

suffered by the Republican Party in 1998-99 as a result of the unsuccessful attempt to impeach Democratic President Bill Clinton.

The precedent is certainly relevant. In advancing the suggestion that Trump could be impeached over the Cohen revelations, these Democrats are taking up the position adopted by the House Republicans in 1998, when they impeached Clinton for lying about his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Twenty years later, the Democrats hint at impeaching Trump for covering up his sexual relationships with Stephanie Clifford and Karen McDougal.

The striking resemblance demonstrates how sex witch-hunts have become one of the main methods by which the US ruling elite regulates its political affairs. The Democrats and Republicans do not discuss, openly or honestly, actual policy differences, because both parties are moving drastically to the right, backing measures to serve the interests of the wealthy that are deeply unpopular. Instead, they resort to systematic lies, demagoguery and distortion, to keep the American population politically disoriented, while employing methods of scandal and mudslinging against their political rivals.

The Democrats employed this tactic against Trump during the 2016 campaign, albeit unsuccessfully, with the release of the “Access Hollywood” tapes in which Trump was recorded boasting of his ability to carry out sexual assaults on women with impunity because of his wealth and celebrity status.

Both during the campaign and especially since Trump entered the White House, however, the Democrats have relied on a separate and even more reactionary campaign: the bogus allegations that the Russian government manipulated the 2016 election and installed Trump in the White House as a stooge or agent of President Vladimir Putin.

The Russia investigation, conducted first by the FBI under former Director James Comey, and now by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, was instigated by powerful sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, with the backing of the Democrats and most of the corporate media, to pressure Trump into adopting a more hardline position on US relations with Russia, in Syria, in Ukraine, and more generally.

There is little doubt that the Trump Organization sought to build a Trump Tower in Moscow and was willing to curry favor with the Putin regime to do so. That is neither illegal nor particularly surprising. Trump has sought similar relationships in dozens of countries, sometimes financially successful, other times not. That is part of his corrupt business model.

But there is no evidence that the Russian government played any significant role in the US elections, let alone engineered a victory by Trump which involved winning the states of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania by a combined 80,000 votes, giving him a majority in the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote nationally by a sizeable margin.

The Trump administration has responded to the Russia investigation on two levels: the effort to mobilize an extreme

right-wing base through fascistic demagoguery and anti-immigrant chauvinism; and making the foreign policy adjustments demanded by his opponents within the military-intelligence apparatus.

One Trump supporter, Republican Representative Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, appearing on the same CNN program as Schiff, denounced the campaign by the media and the Democrats portraying Trump as a stooge of Russia and pointed out Trump’s actual foreign policy record: “He is actually one of the most hawkish presidents against Russia I’ve seen since Reagan, and probably including Reagan, from sanctions to lethal aid to Ukraine, to bombing and killing 200 Russian mercenaries and taking them out in 10 minutes.”

Open discussion of impeachment is emerging under conditions of intense conflict within the ruling class over a variety of issues, including but not limited to foreign policy in relation to Russia. Trump has clearly alienated dominant factions of the military-intelligence apparatus and the ruling class. Amidst growing signs of a renewed economic crisis—including sharp falls in the stock markets, Trump’s main selling point to the ruling elite for the past two years—and growing social unrest, sections of the ruling elite see in Trump someone who is incapable of adequately defending their interests.

However, the Democrats oppose Trump from the standpoint of an alternative right-wing party of imperialism. They don’t seek to stop Trump’s fascistic persecution of immigrants, or his attacks on democratic rights and social programs, or his anti-China militarism. The conflict within the state is a conflict between two reactionary factions of the ruling class, in which there is no democratic or progressive side.

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