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Conflict in Washington escalates with report Trump sought to fire special prosecutor

A report published Thursday night by the *New York Times*, charging that President Trump ordered the firing of special counsel Robert Mueller last June, and was only dissuaded when his top lawyer threatened to resign in protest, marks a new stage in the ongoing political warfare in Washington.

The report set the tone for news coverage throughout Friday, with media pundits proclaiming that Trump's proposed action added to evidence that he was guilty of obstruction of justice, an impeachable offense. The *Times* followed up its news report with a lengthy editorial Friday night demanding to know what Trump was afraid Mueller would uncover in his ongoing investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

The editorial, of greater length and more prominent display than normal, suggests a further escalation of the media campaign over the Russia probe. Under the screaming headline, "Why Does President Trump Fear the Truth?", the *Times* declared that its report on the attempt to fire Mueller established a pattern: "The president of the United States has tried repeatedly to shut down an investigation into whether his campaign coordinated with Russian officials to help him win the 2016 election."

The substance of the *Times* report was confirmed in detail by numerous other media outlets, and conceded even by ultra-right pro-Trump media like Fox News. In the seven months since the events described by the *Times*, Trump has continually denied that he had ever planned to fire Mueller, and he repeated that denial in Davos, Switzerland Friday,

where he was attending the World Economic Forum, branding the *Times* report “fake news.”

According to the media accounts, Trump was enraged by the appointment of Mueller as a special prosecutor in the wake of his May 9 firing of FBI Director James Comey, who then was heading the Russian investigation.

Press reports in early June that Mueller was investigating not only the question of Russian interference and possible collusion with the Trump campaign, but also Trump’s own conduct in seeking to block the investigation, including the firing of Comey. In response, Trump demanded that his White House counsel, Don McGahn, contact the Justice Department and tell Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein to dismiss Mueller.

Rosenstein was supervising Mueller’s conduct because Attorney General Jeff Sessions had recused himself from all investigations into the Trump election campaign, in which he had played a prominent role.

McGahn refused to transmit the order, telling Trump that to fire Mueller would produce a political firestorm that would destroy his presidency, and he threatened to resign. Trump then relented, and no action was taken.

According to the *Times* account, Mueller himself learned of the threat to fire him “in recent months as his investigators interviewed current and former senior White House officials in his inquiry into whether the president obstructed justice.” McGahn and another reputed eyewitness to the event, former White House chief of staff Reince Priebus, have been interviewed in the Russia investigation. A third eyewitness, former White House chief political counselor Stephen Bannon, is to be interviewed shortly.

The *Times* report detailed what it claimed were pretexts suggested by Trump to argue that Mueller had conflicts of interest that disqualified him from running the Russia investigation, ranging from flimsy—Mueller had been interviewed by Trump to replace Comey as FBI director, and he had worked at the law firm that also represented Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner—to ludicrous—Mueller had resigned from the Trump National Golf Club in suburban Virginia in a dispute over fees.

The real reason, as in the firing of Comey, is that Trump wanted to shut down the Russia investigation, which was launched by his political enemies within the military-intelligence apparatus, opposed to any suggestion of a retreat from the confrontational anti-Moscow foreign policy line embraced by the Obama administration during its second term.

The original pretext for the investigations, the claim of massive Russian interference in the US elections, is a fabrication. For example, the total amount spent by alleged Russian

entities on Facebook advertising directed against Hillary Clinton amounted to barely \$100,000, a drop in the bucket compared to the billions expended by both capitalist parties, with the Democrats having far superior financial resources since Clinton was the favored candidate of Wall Street.

One effect of the anti-Russia campaign, however, has been to provoke Trump to take retaliatory actions against his political opponents, such as the firing of Comey, which could arguably constitute obstruction of justice. Even if not obstruction in a legal or criminal sense, it was a potentially impeachable political offense, particularly if the Democratic Party were to win control of the House of Representatives in the November 2018 elections.

In the wake of the Comey firing, even sections of congressional Republicans warned that Trump should halt any efforts to block the Russia investigation. It was to avoid further erosion in Trump's congressional support that McGahn opposed the firing of Mueller of June 2017.

This crisis was followed shortly by two significant personnel shifts. Trump fired his personal attorney Marc Kasowitz, replacing him with two experienced Washington lawyers, John Dowd and Ty Cobb, the latter with longstanding familiarity with Mueller. More importantly, Priebus was removed and replaced by retired General John Kelly, previously the head of the Department of Homeland Security. Kelly's elevation brought the military brass to its greatest-ever influence in a US administration, with former or serving generals heading the White House staff, the National Security Council and the Pentagon.

The consolidation of this military cabal, among other things, was effectively a pledge that there would be no softening of US policy towards Russia. And since then, the Trump administration has maintained economic sanctions on Russia, approved the shipment of lethal weapons to Ukraine, and stepped up US military intervention in Syria, now openly directed at the ouster of the Russian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad.

There remain, however, major conflicts between the Trump White House and its political opponents in the ruling elite, in both the Democratic Party and the military-intelligence apparatus. There is no progressive side in this conflict. Both factions are ruthless, right-wing defenders of US imperialism.

The main significance of the *Times* report is that it amounts to a further warning to Trump not to attempt to remove Mueller, under conditions where the White House is currently

negotiating the terms under which Trump himself is to give testimony to the Russia investigation.

This was underscored by the ranking Democrat in the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Mark Warner of Virginia, a multi-millionaire former telecommunications boss with close ties to the CIA and Pentagon. He declared that firing Mueller would be a “red line that the President cannot cross,” adding, “Any attempt to remove the Special Counsel, pardon key witnesses, or otherwise interfere in the investigation, would be a gross abuse of power, and all members of Congress, from both parties, have a responsibility to our Constitution and to our country to make that clear immediately.”

Warner and several other senators and congressmen renewed calls for Congress to pass legislation to insulate Mueller and future special counsels from presidential retaliation, by inserting a three-judge panel to oversee and rule on whether there was “just cause” in such a firing.