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As Trump, Republicans move to derail Russia probe, Democrats rush to defend FBI

Two developments on Monday, one day before Donald Trump's first State of the Union address, signaled a sharp intensification of the conflict within the US ruling class and state.

Deputy FBI Director Andrew McCabe, whom Trump has repeatedly attacked as a stooge of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, unexpectedly vacated his office some five weeks ahead of his expected retirement. Later in the day, the Republican majority on the House Intelligence Committee defied warnings from the Justice Department and voted to release to the public a classified memo drafted by the staff of Chairman Devin Nunes that charges the FBI with abusing surveillance laws to spy on Trump election campaign officials. The document reportedly accuses the top FBI leadership of being anti-Trump and working to undermine his administration.

The House Republicans defied warnings from the Justice Department that release of the memo would jeopardize US intelligence operations. Assistant Attorney General Stephen Boyd wrote to Congress last week declaring that making the memo public without giving the Justice Department and the FBI a chance to review it "would be extraordinarily reckless."

Both of these developments signal an escalation of an increasingly ferocious drive by the White House and its closest Republican allies in Congress to discredit and derail the investigation by Special Counsel and former FBI Director Robert Mueller into alleged

Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible collusion and obstruction of justice by Trump and other administration officials.

The vote in the House Intelligence Committee was along strict party lines, with the Republican majority voting down a motion by the Democrats to simultaneously release a rebuttal memo drawn up by their staff. Trump has five days to review the memo and block its release, but that is highly unlikely. Trump, through his chief of staff, retired General John Kelly, warned the Justice Department that the president wanted to see the contested memo made public.

These developments follow reports last week that Mueller has already questioned James Comey, the FBI director heading up the Russia probe who was fired by Trump last May, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who recused himself from the Russia investigation last March after he was caught lying to Congress about his contacts with Russian officials. It was also reported that Mueller intended to interview fired White House adviser Stephen Bannon and Trump himself in the coming weeks, pointing in the direction of an obstruction of justice case against the president.

Throughout the increasingly bitter Russia investigation—a concocted scandal based on completely unproven allegations of Russian “meddling”—the Democrats have assumed the role of patriotic defenders of the intelligence and police agencies and of Mueller against criticisms by the White House and congressional Republicans. This is in line with the right-wing basis on which they have mounted their opposition to the fascistic president.

The Democrats’ priorities—which have nothing to do with the defense of the democratic rights and social conditions of working people, immigrant and native-born alike—were summed up this weekend when Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer announced he would demand that any budget resolution include a provision protecting Mueller from being fired by the White House. This followed by only days his agreement to negotiate a budget deal without any protection for immigrants in the DACA program threatened with deportation by Trump’s termination of the program last September.

In this conflict between two right-wing camps of American imperialism, the Democrats are allied with the dominant sections of the military/intelligence complex, which oppose any softening of the aggressive military posture adopted by the Obama administration toward Russia. They are determined to maintain pressure on Trump to escalate the offensive against Moscow, or, if necessary, remove him from office.

The McCarthyite campaign against Russia also serves definite political purposes for the Democrats, who are seeking to channel popular opposition to Trump in a reactionary and militaristic direction. This is underscored by the efforts, led by the Democratic Party and its media allies such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, to use the anti-Russian campaign as justification for censoring the Internet to exclude oppositional and antiwar views under the fraudulent banner of combating foreign-inspired “fake news.”

In the wake of McCabe’s early retirement and the vote to release the Nunes memo, the Democrats have rushed to vouch for the integrity of the bureaucrats and professional killers who spy on the American people and the world population and organize countless conspiracies against the democratic rights of the population.

Following the House Intelligence Committee vote, Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the committee, announced that the Republican leadership, in addition to pushing through the release of the Nunes memo, had said for the first time that the committee was investigating the FBI and the Justice Department. Schiff denounced this as a “wholesale broadside against two of our respected institutions.”

Obama-era attorney general Eric Holder lashed out against “bogus attacks on the FBI and DOJ (Department of Justice) to distract attention from a legitimate criminal inquiry.”

In an interview with *Politico*, Democratic Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee Mark Warner, a multimillionaire tech company CEO, said of White House threats to fire Mueller and other Justice Department officials, “That’s extraordinarily dangerous, extraordinarily reckless,” because Americans might “lose faith in the integrity of our law enforcement agencies.”

He linked the Nunes memo to supposed Russian subversion via social media, declaring, “The biggest group supporting these phony theories are actually Russian bots: Russian-activated accounts who are trying to push these stories.”

At a White House press briefing Monday, spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders denied that Trump played any role in McCabe’s early retirement. However, Trump and congressional Republicans have been targeting McCabe since the 2016 election campaign. They have associated him with the decision of Comey not to charge Hillary Clinton in connection with the investigation of her use of a private email server while she was secretary of state. They point to the fact that in 2015, McCabe’s wife ran for a Virginia State Senate seat as a Democrat and received nearly \$500,000 in campaign funds from a political action committee controlled by then-Governor Terry McAuliffe, a close associate of the Clintons.

Last week, the *Washington Post* reported that after Trump fired Comey, he met privately with McCabe, who was then acting FBI director, and demanded to know for whom he had voted in the 2016 election.

CNN reported Monday that Attorney General Sessions told FBI Director Christopher Wray that he needed to appoint a new senior team at the agency and specifically suggested getting rid of McCabe and the bureau's top lawyer, James Baker. The latter was reassigned late last year. Wray subsequently told McCabe that he was bringing in his own team and McCabe would not be included.

It has also been reported that the Justice Department's inspector general will soon issue a report on the FBI's handling of the Clinton email probe that will criticize McCabe as well as other Justice Department officials.

The Nunes memo reportedly centers on allegations that the FBI misled the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) court in applying for a warrant in the late summer or fall of 2016 to spy on Carter Page, a former Moscow-based investment banker who had served as a foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign.

It is widely reported that the alleged abuse of the FISA court involves using information from the "Trump dossier" compiled by former British intelligence agent Christopher Steele to obtain the FISA warrant without informing the court that Steele's investigation had been funded by the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee.

According to the *New York Times*, the memo specifically targets Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who appointed Mueller as special counsel and is overseeing his investigation, citing the fact that Rosenstein applied for an extension of the FISA warrant to spy on Page. Trump has reportedly complained in recent days of Rosenstein's role and pushed for his removal.

It appears that the Justice Department is itself internally split over the Nunes memo. In a speech Friday in Virginia, Attorney General Sessions seemed to diverge from the warning issued by Assistant Attorney General Boyd against releasing the memo. He said he would not condone "a culture of defensiveness" and added that his department would not conceal "errors when they occur."