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CIA Democrat complains of political spying by Republicans

A race for Congress in the Seventh District of Virginia between a CIA Democrat and a far-right Trump supporter has turned into a battlefield in the ongoing conflict within the US ruling class between sections of the military-intelligence apparatus and the Trump administration.

Democrat Abigail Spanberger, whose main political “credential” is eight years as an undercover CIA operative, is denouncing the Republican Party for obtaining a copy of her full federal security clearance document, known as an SF-86, from when she applied for a job as a postal inspector, prior to joining the CIA. The SF-86 is supposed to be confidential and was released by the US Postal Service (USPS) to the Republicans, allegedly by mistake.

The irony of a CIA operative complaining of “dirty tricks” on behalf of her political opponent is hard to top. Spanberger was an undercover CIA agent in Europe, during the period that the CIA operated torture prisons in eastern Europe for alleged “terrorists,” and CIA-chartered planes regularly flew prisoners, bound, gagged and blindfolded, between European locations, and other secret prisons in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Guantanamo Bay.

Congressional Republicans, evidently viewing Spanberger’s CIA record as her strong point, have sought to undermine it by publicizing the fact—taken from the SF-86—that she worked briefly as a substitute teacher in Alexandria, Virginia for a Saudi-financed Islamic school. She taught English there in 2002-2003, during the period she was waiting

for the CIA to complete the lengthy background check required before she could begin work as a spy. A 2005 valedictorian of the school was later charged with joining al-Qaeda. The Republicans are using Spanberger's time as a teacher at the school in a reactionary attempt to stoke anti-Muslim bigotry and bolster the reelection campaign of right-wing Representative David Brat. According to the Democrats, Republican operatives are calling voters in the Seventh District, asking them if they knew she taught at a school, funded by the Saudis, where students were arrested for terrorism.

This information reached the Republican Party by a dubious route. In response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request filed by America Rising, a conservative research group, the USPS released Spanberger's entire personnel folder, including her SF-86. The research group then passed Spanberger's information on to its client, the Congressional Leadership Fund (CLF), a "Super PAC" that has raised more than \$100 million to assist Republicans in the midterm elections, including Representative Brat.

On July 9, America Rising submitted a FOIA request to the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), seeking "records reflecting Ms. Spanberger's employment dates, annual salaries, title, and position description." On July 12, the NPRC informed America Rising that it sent the request to the USPS. On July 30, in response to the FOIA request, the Postal Service provided the security clearance document. Normally, the SF-86, which contains confidential medical and other highly personal information, would be withheld or heavily redacted under a FOIA privacy act exemption.

Instead, not only did the Postal Service provide the document unredacted, but it responded to the FOIA request with remarkable swiftness. Normally, FOIA requests take six months or longer to garner a response. In fact, Spanberger's campaign filed its own FOIA request for her employment records in December and has still not received them. The speedy delivery of non-redacted records suggests the involvement of higher-level officials of the Trump administration.

Ned Price, a former CIA officer and special assistant to President Barack Obama, told reporters on August 28, "I have never once heard of an SF-86 being released to the public pursuant to a FOIA request" and noted that it "strains credulity" to believe that it was a bureaucratic mistake.

Last Thursday the Postal Service claimed that "human error" was to blame for the release of Spanberger's security clearance application. USPS told Spanberger that the FOIA request did not go through the standard procedure for an open records request, but was

instead sent to the Postal Services' human resources department where a new employee allegedly treated the request as though Spanberger was seeking the records herself.

Rallying to Spanberger's defense, on August 30 more than 200 national security officials wrote to Daniel Coats, director of national intelligence, and Jeff T.H. Pon, director of the Office of Personnel Management, to declare their displeasure with the release of Spanberger's security clearance application, stating "it was with surprise, anger, and profound disappointment that we recently learned that our government — whether intentionally or not — violated the trust of one among our ranks."

"It is possible this situation may be the result of a single person's error," the letter continued. "Nevertheless, we note how peculiar it would be for the first victim of such an error to be Ms. Spanberger, who is the Democratic nominee in a competitive U.S. House of Representatives race in Virginia. ... Absent answers, however, we cannot dismiss the deeply troubling possibility that this was an act of political retribution by this administration in violation of U.S. law."

Responding to the release of Spanberger's security clearance document, Elissa Slotkin, another CIA Democrat, running in Michigan's 8th District, stated, "These are kind of techniques that we're used to seeing from our adversaries," she said, "not from American political organizations."

Also, in the wake of the release of Spanberger's records, House Democrat Elijah Cummings, apparently without irony, stated, "The right to privacy is sacred, and we must take all appropriate steps to prevent further damage to the individuals whose information was compromised." Of course, such privacy rights do not extend to the vast bulk of the population, who are spied on by the National Security Agency, the CIA and other intelligence agencies on a massive scale.

The Seventh District, which extends from the Richmond suburbs northward through a series of rural counties, reaching the exurbs of Washington DC. It was long a Republican stronghold and held by Eric Cantor, then House Majority Leader, until his upset defeat by Brat in the primary in 2014. An economics professor at a local college, Brat focused his campaign on right-wing anti-immigrant demagoguery of the type subsequently employed by Trump in his presidential campaign. Because of mounting popular hostility to the Trump administration, particularly in the Richmond suburbs, the contest between Brat and Spanberger is considered too close to call.

Along with the support of the military-intelligence apparatus, Spanberger has been endorsed by the AFL-CIO and various liberal and women's groups, including NARAL Pro Choice America and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence.