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Clinton campaign appeals to Republicans and the military

By Patrick Martin

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Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton continued her bid for support from right-wing elements disaffected with her Republican opponent Donald Trump, giving her first post-convention interview to Fox News, the semi-official cable network of the Republican right.

Her campaign kept up its criticism of Trump from a right-wing, patriotic standpoint with a series of Clinton surrogates attacking Trump as unfit to be commander-in-chief and suggesting that Russian President Vladimir Putin was intervening in the US election on his behalf. (See “Democratic Party seeks to turn elections into referendum on aggression against Russia.”)

Clinton’s one-on-one interview Sunday with Chris Wallace, the host of Fox News Sunday, was her first appearance on the right-wing cable network since she declared her candidacy more than 15 months ago.

Fox has waged a furious campaign against Clinton over that period, centered on allegations that she was responsible for the deaths of four Americans, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens, at the US mission in Benghazi, Libya, and claims that her use of a private email server while secretary of state had compromised US national security.

Significantly, however, Sunday’s interview by Wallace began with a question on Democratic Party claims that Russian intelligence agencies had hacked into the computer system of the Democratic National Committee and released emails from DNC officials showing that they had collaborated with the Clinton

campaign to undermine her main challenger for the Democratic nomination, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

“Do you think that Vladimir Putin wants to defeat you or see you defeated and Donald Trump elected president?” Wallace asked.

Clinton replied, “We know that Russian intelligence services, which is part of the Russian government, which is under the firm control of Vladimir Putin, hacked into the DNC. And we know that he arranged for a lot of those emails to be released.”

No serious evidence has actually been presented in support of the allegation that the Russian government is responsible for the theft and leaking of the DNC emails, and not a shred of evidence has been put forward to back the claims of a Trump-Putin alliance. These charges have been widely promoted by the *New York Times* to create a political climate in which Clinton can attack Trump from the right, presenting herself as an advocate of a more belligerent and militarist policy towards Russia.

Clinton continued, “And we know that Donald Trump has shown a very troubling willingness to back up Putin, to support Putin, whether it’s saying that NATO wouldn’t come to the rescue of allies if they were invaded, talking about removing sanctions from Russian officials after they were imposed by the United States and Europe together because of Russia’s aggressiveness in Crimea and Ukraine.”

She added, in truly McCarthyite fashion, “for Trump to both encourage that and to praise Putin despite what appears to be a deliberate effort to try to affect the election I think raises national security issues.”

Clinton went on to outline a generally right-wing perspective on economic and social policy, rebuffing suggestions from Wallace that she was “offering more government programs” and “more spending, more entitlements, more taxes.” She answered “no, no, no” to these claims, adding that her so-called “jobs program,” based on infrastructure spending (along lines already backed by the current Republican Congress) was “going to be public/private sector. I mean, I’m looking for ways to start an infrastructure bank, seed it with federal dollars, but bring in private investors who want to make those commitments.”

In a subsequent panel discussion, Julie Pace of the Associated Press reported that the Clinton campaign was seeking to line up prominent Republicans and retired military figures who would vouch for the Democratic candidate to Republican voters. The Democrats’ strategy was to portray Clinton as “a steady hand on foreign policy, a steady hand on commander-in-chief, someone who understands military threats, threats from abroad, that could be what leads some of these people to line up behind her.”

This is combined with an effort to present Trump as an unpatriotic critic of the US military, initially based on his comments at campaign rallies and at the Republican convention that the US military was “a disaster.” The criticism of Trump as insufficiently pro-military was expanded to a full-scale media barrage over Trump’s crudely racist and anti-Muslim comments about the family of Humayun Khan, a US Army captain who was one of the first Muslim-American soldiers killed in the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Khizr Khan, the soldier’s father, an immigrant from Pakistan and a lawyer in the Washington, DC area, spoke at the Democratic National Convention on its final day, as one of a series of speakers chosen to portray Trump as unfit to play the role of commander-in-chief for US imperialism.

Khan denounced Trump's frequent anti-Muslim slurs and his call for a complete ban on Muslim immigration, which would have prevented his own family from moving to the United States in 1980 and thus deprived the US military of the services of his son in the Iraq war 24 years later.

Trump responded in character to Khan's convention appearance in an interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC News recorded Friday for broadcast Sunday morning. He directly attacked the family, noting that Ghazala Khan, the young soldier's mother, who appeared at the Democratic convention side-by-side with her husband in traditional Muslim garb, "had nothing to say." Trump continued: "She probably—maybe she wasn't allowed to have anything to say. You tell me, but plenty of people have written that."

The clear insinuation of this slur was that Mrs. Khan had been forbidden to speak by her husband or was otherwise barred by her Islamic faith from speaking publicly because of her sex. The truth was that Ghazala Khan has high blood pressure and does not speak in public about her son's death, as she explained in a statement to the press this weekend.

The Khan-Trump controversy was the main subject of discussion on the Sunday television interview programs, with NBC, ABC and CNN all airing interviews with Khizr Khan, while Trump himself, his campaign manager Paul Manafort and a leading surrogate, Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, were all grilled on the issue.

Much of the media punditry consisted of declarations that Trump had "crossed the line" by publicly smearing a "Gold Star mother" (the mothers of US soldiers killed in action may join the Gold Star Mothers Club, a congressionally chartered patriotic support group). The effect of this line of criticism was to transform Trump's anti-Muslim smear into an attack on the military and allow the Democrats to wrap themselves in the flag, which is Clinton's apparent strategy for the final 100 days of the presidential campaign.

Even more reactionary was the appearance of retired Gen. John Allen on the same program that broadcast Trump's comments about Ghazala Khan. Allen was a major speaker at the Democratic National Convention—a highly unusual role for a retired Marine Corps general and former commander of US forces in Afghanistan.

He gave the main indictment of Trump as unfit to be commander-in-chief during the Thursday night session of the convention, in the same group of speakers that included Khizr Khan, in the hours leading up to Hillary Clinton's acceptance speech.

Allen appeared on ABC Sunday to respond to Trump's criticism of him as a "failed commander" in the US war against ISIS. (After retirement, Allen was a presidential envoy in the Middle East, coordinating the US-led "coalition" now at war with Islamic State forces in both Iraq and Syria.)

Allen declared that Trump had no credibility on military policy, since he had never been to either Afghanistan or Iraq. He went on to denounce Trump's criticism of the Obama administration as though it was an attack on the US military. "He's called it a disaster," Allen said. "He says our military can't win anymore. That's a direct insult to every single man and woman who's wearing the uniform today."

The retired general continued that a President Trump would order US soldiers to engage in war crimes: "He's talked about needing to torture. He's talked about needing to murder the families of alleged terrorists. He's talked about carpet-bombing ISIL. Who do you think is going to be carpet-bombed when all that occurs? It's going to be innocent families."

No one should conclude from this that General Allen is genuinely outraged at the prospect of US forces carrying out torture, murder and the carpet-bombing of innocent people. Such practices have gone on every day in US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan. What concerns him is Trump's pledge to proclaim such methods as the official policy of the US government—a declaration sure to spark even greater resistance to US forces in the Middle East, as well as politically undermining US allies.

More significant—and ominous—was Allen's response when Stephanopoulos asked him what US military officers would do in response to an order from a President Trump enshrining torture and carpet-bombing as US policy.

The retired general declared, "That's a great question, George. And I think we would be facing a civil-military crisis, the like of which we've not seen in this country before." He went on to repeat the phrase "civil-military crisis" three more times, expressing the hope that a quiet conversation might dissuade President Trump from issuing such orders, while leaving unstated, but open, the possibility of outright military defiance.

Allen's comments are truly extraordinary. They give expression to the increasing tendency on the part of the American military to free itself from civilian authority. While presented in this case as the military balking at illegal orders to commit war crimes, the far more likely scenario is one in which the military brass demands that its nominal civilian overseers drop any restrictions on the unlimited use of military violence against its enemies.