

Bill Kaplan: Trump, Ryan and GOP on slippery slope

Posted on Tuesday, Feb 21, 2017

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After Watergate Nixon was asked to explain his lawbreaking. Nixon said: “Well, when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal”. Trump, an admirer of Nixon, has reprised Nixonian rhetoric, calling Trump supporters the “silent majority” and himself the “law and order” president. And, like Nixon he may be heading toward a constitutional crisis.

The press revelations about findings by U.S. intelligence agencies on Kremlin meddling in the 2016 presidential election are breathtaking: “We assess Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election”. The Russian clandestine operation sought to “help” Trump by “discrediting” Clinton. Now a White House scandal has added urgency to get to the bottom of what’s going on between Trump and Putin.

The Washington Post reported that White House national security adviser Michael Flynn had been caught in secret contact with the Kremlin during the 2016 campaign and after the election, before Trump took office. When President Obama imposed sanctions on Russia for its interference in the 2016 election, Flynn spoke to Russia’s ambassador to the U.S. Was Flynn trying to undercut then-President Obama, and what did Trump know? Flynn later lied to Vice-President-elect Pence about discussing the sanctions with the Russian ambassador. Shortly after Trump took the oath of office then-acting Attorney General Sally Yates told the White House that Flynn had misled Pence.

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Trump was “immediately informed” by the White House counsel, but not Pence. And, no action was taken against Flynn. Additional Washington Post reporting on Flynn forced Trump’s hand; Flynn resigned. Chaos. Trump, White House chief of staff Reince Priebus, House Speaker Paul Ryan and Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson railed against leaks to the media (Nixon’s obsession with leaks led to Watergate). On Friday, Trump escalated: calling the media “the enemy of the American people”. Arizona GOP Senator John McCain responded: “That’s how dictators get started”. There’s more.

Earlier, Wisconsin Democratic Representative Ron Kind, member of the GOP-led Ways and Means Committee, tried unsuccessfully to have Trump’s tax returns released to the committee. What is Trump hiding? What are Republicans afraid of? The Washington Post editorialized: “Trump should start clearing up questions about Russian (financial) connections by sharing his tax returns”.

At the same time Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin stepped up to the plate. Baldwin called on “Attorney General Jeff Sessions to appoint an independent Special Counsel to investigate possible illegal communications between ... Flynn and representatives of the Russian government, as well as efforts by Flynn and other White House officials to conceal any wrongdoing”. Will Sessions put country ahead of Trump and party?

GOP used to stand for Grand Old Party. On Friday, former GOP House Leader Bob Michael, who worked well with Democrats and Republicans, died. Back in 1994 Michael said: “I didn’t crave power when I was leader. ... power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Ryan, pay attention to the slippery slope.

— *Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.*