

Bill Kaplan: Russia scandal bombshell hits Trump

Posted on Monday, Jul 16, 2018

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On Friday, Special Counsel Robert Mueller and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein dropped a bombshell. The New York Times headline was damning: “12 Russian Agents Charged In Drive To Upset (20)16 Vote”. The Department of Justice (DOJ) said: “The indictment charges twelve Russian nationals (military intelligence officers) for committing federal crimes that were intended to interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election. ... (They) engaged in a sustained effort to hack into the computer networks of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the Democratic National Committee, and the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton and released that information on the internet... .”

Moreover, these Russian agents “also conspired to hack into the computers of state boards of elections, secretaries of state, and U.S. companies that supplied software and other technology related to the administration of elections to steal voter data stored on those computers” (DOJ). The “voter data” was from 500,000 Illinoisans. Previously, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) indicated that Russians had tried to hack voter registration databases in 21 states, including Wisconsin. The DHS now suspects “that the Russians scanned all 50 states” (Politico).

Trump was briefed about the indictments before the NATO summit and his meeting with Russian President Putin on Monday. Nevertheless, Trump attacked Mueller’s investigation: “I (Trump) would call it the witch hunt. ... It really hurts our relationship with Russia.” Mind-boggling! Trump’s dissembling and lies have been exposed.

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Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin appropriately tweeted: “Russia attacked our American democracy to interfere with our elections. This isn’t a hoax and the special counsel’s investigation is not a witch hunt. It has produced results (with) more indictments today (32 so far, including 5 guilty pleas) and must continue. Putin directed this attack and should be held accountable.” However, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson, after meeting with Russian officials in Moscow, said: “We’ve blown it (Russian election interference) way out of proportion.” Johnson has downplayed the scandal from the beginning. Jaw-dropping.

While Johnson was in Russia the Senate Intelligence Committee, led by North Carolina GOP Senator Richard Burr, “released a report finding Russia had interfered in the 2016 presidential election with a clear preference for helping Trump defeat former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton” (Washington Post). And, other Republicans have stepped up to warn Trump not to fire Mueller. Former GOP Attorney General Dick Thornburgh (1988-1991) said: “Mueller is the right person to investigate Russia’s apparent assault on our democracy. ... We must let him do his job.” In addition, former GOP Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (2003-2007) said: “When Trump talks about firing the special counsel or his power to pardon himself, he makes it seem as though he has something to hide. ... Congress must never abandon its role as an equal branch of government. In this moment, that means protecting Mueller’s investigation.”

There will be more bombshells. Most Republicans, including Speaker Ryan, have abdicated their oversight role. Where are Wisconsin GOP Representatives Jim Sensenbrenner (institutionalist) and Mike Gallagher (former U.S. Marine)? Checks and balances are imperative.

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