

Bill Kaplan: Congressional oversight, not impeachment

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Trump's spin doctor, Attorney General William Barr, tried to clear Trump both before and after Special Counsel Robert Mueller's redacted report was released. Not so fast. The "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election" did not "exonerate" Trump, the White House staff or his presidential campaign. Mueller indicted 34 people, including 26 Russians. He secured a conviction or guilty plea deal from 7, including Trump's Campaign Chair Paul Manafort, National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and Trump's personal lawyer Michael Cohen (Russia won't allow its citizens to be extradited). The common thread in those court cases was lying.

Mueller focused on three questions: Did Russia interfere in the 2016 presidential election to help elect Trump; did the Trump campaign coordinate with the Russians; and did Trump and others try to obstruct the investigation. Despite Trump's refusal to meet with Mueller's prosecutors and the 37 times that Trump had "no recollection" to written questions, much was learned (Washington Post).

Wisconsin Democratic Representative Ron Kind said: "The most troubling conclusion of the Mueller Report is it definitively proves that Russia intervened in the last election on behalf of the Trump Campaign, and made multiple contacts with Trump Campaign officials. It is also troubling that (Trump) repeatedly lied about those contacts and still refuses to take steps against future Russian interference in our elections. The question then becomes why (Trump) refuses to protect our country from another attack by Russia?"

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The Mueller Report said: “Manafort briefed Konstantin Kilimnik (Russian business partner with ‘ties to Russian intelligence’) on the state of the Trump Campaign and Manafort’s plan to win the election. That briefing encompassed the Campaign’s messaging and its internal polling data. ...It also included discussion of ‘battleground’ states, which Manafort identified as Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Minnesota.” Moreover, Russian interference in Wisconsin continued.

In October, 2018 the Justice Department indicted a Russian national for interfering in the 2018 midterm elections, including Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin’s reelection campaign. The Russian urged that voters contribute to a campaign committee opposing Baldwin. Baldwin recently tweeted: “Reading through the redacted Mueller Report, it is clear that Attorney General Barr has not been straight with the American people. Special Counsel Mueller must come before Congress, so we have all the facts and the full truth about (Trump’s) actions and wrongdoing.”

Barr and other Republicans have tried to pretend that Trump is in the clear because Mueller did not indict Trump for obstructing the investigation, notwithstanding multiple incidents in which Trump tried to block the inquiry. But Mueller’s hands were tied by the longstanding policy of the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel that a sitting president can not be indicted. Moreover, despite the Trump Campaign’s soliciting and welcoming Russian help on multiple occasions, Mueller “did not establish” that the Trump Campaign “coordinated” with Russia. Much still needs to be uncovered.

Congressional oversight with public hearings, not impeachment, is the best way forward to develop a fuller chronology and accounting. The 2020 elections will bring change.

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