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Trump-Comey Feud Eclipses a Warning on Russia: 'They Will Be Back'

By PETER BAKER and DAVID E. SANGER JUNE 10, 2017

WASHINGTON — Lost in the showdown between President Trump and James B. Comey that played out this past week was a chilling threat to the United States. Mr. Comey, the former director of the F.B.I., testified that the Russians had not only intervened in last year's election, but would try to do it again.

"It's not a Republican thing or Democratic thing — it really is an American thing," Mr. Comey told the Senate Intelligence Committee. "They're going to come for whatever party they choose to try and work on behalf of. And they're not devoted to either, in my experience. They're just about their own advantage. And they will be back."

What started out as a counterintelligence investigation to guard the United States against a hostile foreign power has morphed into a political scandal about what Mr. Trump did, what he said and what he meant by it. Lawmakers have focused mainly on the gripping conflict between the president and the F.B.I. director he fired with cascading requests for documents, recordings and hearings.

But from the headquarters of the National Security Agency to state capitals that have discovered that the Russians were inside their voter-registration systems, the worry is that attention will be diverted from figuring out how Russia disrupted American democracy last year and how to prevent it from happening again. Russian hackers did not just breach Democratic email accounts; according to Mr. Comey,

they orchestrated a “massive effort” targeting hundreds of — and possibly more than 1,000 — American government and private organizations since 2015.

“It’s important for us in the West to understand that we’re facing an adversary who wishes for his own reasons to do us harm,” said Daniel Fried, a career diplomat who oversaw sanctions imposed on Russia before retiring this year. “Whatever the domestic politics of this, Comey was spot-on right that Russia is coming after us, but not just the U.S., but the free world in general. And we need to take this seriously.”

Mr. Comey’s willingness to discuss the threat in public was something of a change of heart. As F.B.I. director, he supervised counterintelligence investigations into computer break-ins that harvested emails from the State Department and the White House, and that penetrated deep into the computer systems of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Yet President Barack Obama’s administration did not want to publicize those intrusions, choosing to handle them diplomatically — perhaps because at the time they looked more like classic espionage than an effort to manipulate American politics.

Mr. Comey’s special agents failed to react aggressively to evidence of the breach of the Democratic National Committee, spending nine months exchanging phone calls and vague warnings with young information-technology specialists at the committee while Russian intelligence agencies cleaned out the organization’s emails. Only when emails from Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign began showing up on WikiLeaks and other sites did the bureau recognize the scope of the operation.

In October, Mr. Comey declined to sign a statement publicly accusing Russia of meddling in the election — not because he doubted the evidence, aides later said, the issue was already a matter of public discussion and he argued that it would seem too political so close to Election Day. Now many members of Mr. Obama’s national security team say they wish they had raised the alarm about Russia earlier.

And there is no evidence that the Russians have stopped. The N.S.A. suspects that a group calling itself the Shadow Brokers, which has published tools used by the agency to breach foreign computer networks, is a front for Russia, probably the G.R.U., the military intelligence arm.

The recent leak of a classified N.S.A. document, for which a contractor has been arrested, provided evidence that the G.R.U. was trying to penetrate a company that provides software used to check voter registrations at polling places, perhaps to wreak havoc. That data may be useful in future races.

The Homeland Security Department is also looking at new evidence of computer code buried in the electrical power grid. Russia is believed to be behind two major attacks on Ukraine's grid, and there are warnings that those techniques could also be turned on the United States.

"This is part of what the Russians call 'new generation warfare,'" Heather A. Conley, a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and an author of "The Kremlin Playbook," said Thursday. "It's a strategy of influence, not of brute force."

The strategy's central concept, she said, refined in attacks on Eastern European countries, is that it is "better to collapse a country from within."

Eric S. Edelman, who was an under secretary of defense under President George W. Bush, said Russian information warfare capabilities were highly developed. "In the Cold War, the Soviet efforts in this regard were ham-handed and could be countered with relative ease," he said. "Today, the Russians are much more sophisticated, and they see things like disinformation, propaganda and what we used to call 'active measures' as part of a suite of capabilities."

Graham Allison, a longtime Russia scholar at Harvard, said, "Russia's cyberintrusion into the recent presidential election signals the beginning of what is almost sure to be an intensified cyberwar in which both they — and we — seek to participate in picking the leaders of an adversary." The difference, he added, is that American elections are generally fair, so "we are much more vulnerable to such manipulation than is Russia," where results are often preordained.

In Washington, however, the issue has become partisan, because Mr. Trump insists that any discussion of Russian meddling in the election is an attack on his legitimacy. He has dismissed the Russia inquiry as "fake news" generated by Democrats to explain their defeat.

He repeated that during a news conference on Friday. “That was an excuse by the Democrats who lost an election that some people think they shouldn’t have lost,” he said.

Mr. Trump has rarely expressed concern about Russia’s role last year or its continuing efforts in Europe. Under questioning at the Senate panel hearing on Thursday, Mr. Comey said the president never asked him after taking office what the government should be doing to protect against future Russian intervention.

“There should be no fuzz on this whatsoever,” Mr. Comey said. “The Russians interfered in our election during the 2016 cycle. They did it with purpose. They did it with sophistication. They did it with overwhelming technical efforts. And it was an active-measures campaign driven from the top of that government. There is no fuzz on that.”

He added, “That’s about as un-fake as you can possibly get and is very, very serious.”

Mr. Comey’s warning about the Russian threat was overshadowed by his confrontation with Mr. Trump, who fired him last month.

“What we didn’t talk enough about was the purpose we were there, about Russia’s involvement and Russia’s intent, how doggedly that they tried everything humanly possible and they will continue to keep trying and hitting on us to change how we do business in America, how we elect our officials, the confidence we have in our government,” Senator Joe Manchin III, Democrat of West Virginia, said Friday on “Morning Joe” on MSNBC.

Similar warnings have been issued by others in the intelligence community, led by James R. Clapper Jr., who has sounded the alarm since retiring in January as director of national intelligence. “I don’t think people have their head around the scope of what the Russians are doing,” he said recently.

But few doubt that the Russians have concluded that their attack on the American system was successful beyond their dreams — they started a scandal that has consumed the American political process.

“They can win two ways,” Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, a Rhode Island Democrat who has been investigating the election hacking through the Senate Judiciary Committee, said Thursday. “They can do it” trying to influence votes, “or they can get caught doing it,” and undercut confidence in the American electoral system.

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