***President didn’t trust investigations; focused on Ukraine instead***

By John Schaaf

In the last few months, two independent federal investigations ended, and President Donald Trump’s distrust of both investigations has led to a more important inquiry: the impeachment process in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In March of this year, the FBI investigation of Russia’s possible interference in the 2016 presidential election, led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller, was the first investigation to conclude.

Described as a conservative Republican when he was appointed FBI Director in 2001 by President George W. Bush, Mueller conducted a 22-month investigation that established Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election principally through two operations:

“First, a Russian entity carried out a social media campaign that favored presidential candidate Donald J. Trump and disparaged presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Second, a Russian intelligence service conducted computer-intrusion operations against the Clinton Campaign and then released stolen documents.”

The second investigation into 2016 election interference reached the same conclusions as the Mueller investigation. That investigation was conducted by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, led by Chairman Richard Burr, a North Carolina Republican who was an adviser to the President’s 2016 campaign.

Like Mueller, Burr’s committee found that Russia sought to influence the election by supporting candidate Trump at the direction of the Kremlin, not only against Clinton, but also Republican candidates during the presidential primaries. For example, Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio were targeted and denigrated, as was Jeb Bush.

According to testimony to the Burr Committee, Russian media and internet trolls sought "to impact primaries for both major parties and may have helped sink the hopes of candidates more hostile to Russian interests.”

The Burr committee said most of Russia’s operations “focused on exacerbating existing tensions on socially divisive issues, including race, immigration, and Second Amendment rights -- in an attempt to pit Americans against one another and against their government.”

The two separate investigations agreed with earlier findings of the U.S. intelligence community, but the President did not agree the Russians were responsible.

He frequently criticized Mueller’s investigation as a witch hunt, and at last year’s Helsinki summit, when asked if he would condemn Russia for election meddling, the President said his intelligence officials - including Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats - told him "they think it's Russia", but Russian President Vladimir Putin told him it's not Russia.

"I don't see any reason why it would be," Mr. Trump said, siding with Russian denials instead of the conclusions of Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the F.B.I., and the House and Senate Intelligence Committees.

The President’s distrust of Republican-led investigations opened the door for him to believe it was Ukraine, and not Russia, that interfered in the 2016 election.

Based on that belief, a few months ago the White House started trying to persuade Ukraine’s new president to investigate Ukraine’s involvement in the 2016 election, and the employment of former Vice-President Joe Biden’s son by a Ukrainian company.

When word leaked out that the persuasion efforts might include holding up about $400 million in military aid intended to help Ukraine’s fight against Russia, the U.S. House initiated an impeachment inquiry.

Some of the witnesses who’ve testified privately before House committees will be called to testify publicly. Based on their testimony, the House will determine if the President stalled Congressionally-approved aid until Ukraine agreed to conduct investigations which could help the President’s political prospects, and if so, was that a misuse of his office?

So, the President’s distrust of U.S. national security and law enforcement investigations may have resulted in White House actions leading to House votes on impeachment articles and a Senate trial to determine if he should be convicted and removed from office.

*John Schaaf of Georgetown is a retired attorney, and he can be reached at John.Schaaf1975@gmail.com*