

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Sunday abandoned a strategy of showing deference to the special counsel examining [Russia](#)'s interference in the 2016 presidential election, lashing out at what he characterized as a partisan investigation and alarming Republicans who feared he might seek to shut it down.

Mr. Trump has long suggested that allegations that he or his campaign conspired with Russia to influence the election were a “hoax” and part of a “witch hunt,” but until this weekend he had largely heeded the advice of lawyers who counseled him not to directly attack Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel, for fear of antagonizing prosecutors.

“Why does the Mueller team have 13 hardened Democrats, some big Crooked Hillary supporters, and Zero Republicans?” [Mr. Trump wrote](#) on Twitter. “Another Dem recently added...does anyone think this is fair? And yet, there is NO COLLUSION!”

The attack on Mr. Mueller, a longtime Republican and former [F.B.I.](#) director appointed by a Republican president, [George W. Bush](#), drew immediate rebukes from some members of the party who expressed concern that it might presage an effort to fire the special counsel. Such a move, they warned, would give the appearance of a corrupt attempt to short-circuit the investigation and set off a bipartisan backlash.

“If he tried to do that, that would be the beginning of the end of his presidency, because we’re a rule-of-law nation,” Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, an ally of the president, [said on “State of the Union”](#) on CNN. “When it comes to Mr. Mueller, he is following the evidence where it takes him, and I think it’s very important he be allowed to do his job without interference, and there are many Republicans who share my view.”

[Continue reading the main story](#)

RECENT COMMENTS

John

51 minutes ago

Fellow subscribers and commenters:If you haven't, please read this article <https://www.nytimes...>

Robert Sonnen

53 minutes ago

25th Amendment now!Let Mr. Trump get the psychiatric and geriatric assistance he so badly needs.AND: let the American people rest. And...

Russell

53 minutes ago

There's no end of things to be bothered by in this article, but the fact that Trey Gowdy has no idea what 'fulsome' means cannot be left off...

- [SEE ALL COMMENTS](#)

- WRITE A COMMENT

Among them was Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona, a sharp critic of Mr. Trump who appeared on the same program. “People see that as a massive red line that can’t be crossed,” [he said](#). He urged Mr. Trump’s advisers to prevail on him not to fire Mr. Mueller. “We have confidence in Mueller.”

Representative Trey Gowdy, Republican of South Carolina, said if the president was innocent, he should “act like it” and leave Mr. Mueller alone, warning of dire repercussions if the president tried to fire the special counsel.

“I would just counsel the president — it’s going to be a very, very long, bad 2018, and it’s going to be distracting from other things that he wants to do and he was elected to do,” Mr. Gowdy [said on “Fox News Sunday](#).” “Let it play out its course. If you’ve done nothing wrong, you should want the investigation to be as fulsome and thorough as possible.”

The House speaker, Paul D. Ryan, Republican of Wisconsin, issued a statement likewise warning Mr. Trump to back off. “As the speaker has always said, Mr. Mueller and his team should be able to do their job,” said AshLee Strong, a spokeswoman. His counterpart, Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, had no comment, as did a number of other top Senate Republicans.

Late in the day, the White House tried to douse the furor. “In response to media speculation and related questions being posed to the administration, the White House yet again confirms that the president is not considering or discussing the firing of the special counsel, Robert Mueller,” Ty Cobb, a White House lawyer, said in a statement.

The president’s tweet followed a statement by Mr. Trump’s personal lawyer, John Dowd, on Saturday calling on the Justice Department to [end the special counsel investigation](#). Mr. Trump followed up that evening with a tweet arguing that “the Mueller probe should never have been started in that there was no collusion and there was no crime.”

The two weekend tweets were the first time Mr. Trump has used Mr. Mueller’s name on Twitter, not counting a message he once retweeted, and reflected what advisers called a growing impatience fueled by anger that the investigation was now looking at his business activities.

The New York Times reported last week that Mr. Mueller [has subpoenaed](#) records from the Trump Organization. Mr. Trump’s lawyers met with Mr. Mueller’s team last week and received more details about how the special counsel is approaching the investigation, including the scope of his interest in the Trump Organization.

For months, Mr. Trump had been reassured by his lawyers that the investigation would wrap up soon — by Thanksgiving, then Christmas,

then New Year's. But with the expansion into Mr. Trump's business, it seems increasingly clear that Mr. Mueller is not ready to conclude his inquiry.

A top adviser to Mr. Trump said on Sunday that the White House had grown weary of the inquiry. "We have cooperated in every single way, every single paper they've asked for, every single interview," Marc Short, the president's legislative director, [said on "Face the Nation"](#) on CBS. "There's a growing frustration that after a year and millions and millions of dollars spent on this, there remains no evidence of collusion with Russia."

A president cannot directly fire a special counsel but can order his attorney general to do so. Even then, a cause has to be cited, like conflict of interest. Since Attorney General Jeff Sessions, a former campaign adviser, has recused himself from the Russia investigation — to Mr. Trump's continuing irritation — the task would fall to the deputy attorney general, Rod J. Rosenstein.