

WAS THE REAL TARGET OF THE SPY STING RUSSIAN OFFICIAL #1?

It appears the White House may have gotten itself caught in the kabuki it played with the press on the Russian spies now swapped for some spies in Russian custody. But the timing of the kabuki suggests the target of the spy sting may not have been the illegals, but two Russian officials working under official cover.

Here's the relevant chronology:

January 20: Surveillance against Anna Chapman starts

February: NSC, possibly including Obama, briefed on evidence against Russian spies

February 9: On orders from Russia Center, Richard Murphy purchases laptop to bring to Moscow

February 21: Murphy departs for Russia

March 3: Murphy returns from Russia, having swapped laptop for an identical one

March 7: Murphy hands off laptop to Michael Zottoli

April 7: Russian Official #1 aborts laptop chat with Chapman because he identifies surveillance

June 5: Mikhail Semenko's laptop chats with Russian Official #2 surveilled

June 9: Chapman's laptop chats with Russian Official #1 surveilled

June 11: Obama briefed about Russian spy swap

June 16: Chapman's laptop chats with Russian Official #1 surveilled

June 18: Obama chairs NSC meeting on Russian spy swap

June 24: Obama and Dmitri Medvedev go to Ray's Hell Burger

June 25: Complaint against 9 spies dated

June 26: FBI collects evidence against last two remaining spies; FBI agent says to Chapman, "I know you are going back to Moscow in two weeks."

June 27: Spies arrested

June 29: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov complains about timing of arrest; Obama reported to be miffed about timing of arrest; DOJ attributes timing to pending travel—presumably Chapman's

Week of July 5: White House almost cancels spy swap because names of proposed spies in Russia leaked

July 10: Two weeks after FBI Agent said Chapman would be traveling to Russia in two weeks

Now, as I noted when the DOJ first pushed the excuse of—presumably—Chapman's pending travel for the timing of the arrest, the excuse doesn't seem to make any sense given that FBI had knowingly allowed Murphy to travel to Russia back in February. The excuse is even weirder now given that we know NSC was briefed about the investigation at that time.

Add in the fact that Obama knew of the prisoner swap when he met with Medvedev, and the fact that the complaints against most of the spies were written the day after that meeting, it sure looks like the timing had more to do with Medvedev than anything else.

Now, on Thursday, Rahm pushed back against any indication that Obama might have been involved in the decision to roll up the spies. First, Rahm claims that the decision to arrest the

spies now was entirely that of law enforcement and intelligence.

JIM LEHRER: Was the decision on this spy swap the president's?

RAHM EMANUEL: Well, first of all, what the president does appreciate is the work of the law enforcement community, as well as the intelligence community for their hard work in this case.

It wasn't the decision of the president. It was the decision, obviously, of the law enforcement community and the intelligence community. But he does appreciate what they did and making America safer and the hard work that they did to get this done.

JIM LEHRER: Did the president – let me rephrase it then. Did the president sign off on this spy swap?

RAHM EMANUEL: The president was briefed about it.

Then when Lehrer presses (sort of), Rahm goes all spooky on his.

JIM LEHRER: Was the president aware that this spy ring existed before it was revealed publicly and these guys – these people were arrested?

RAHM EMANUEL: I think, Jim, it's important – there will be a lot of postscripts on this.

JIM LEHRER: OK.

RAHM EMANUEL: And I think that what you should take away from this, obviously, the president was informed appropriately, known what was going on.

And they made the decision to go forward on this action. There will be a lot of writing about it, but I think, at this time, let me just say the cautionary

note, the less said, the better.

JIM LEHRER: OK.

(CROSSTALK)

RAHM EMANUEL: Or how about, as I always like to say, less is more?

JIM LEHRER: Less is more.

RAHM EMANUEL: Yes.

JIM LEHRER: Yes, sir, whatever you say.

Ix-Nay on the Resident-Pay's involvement in spy Wap-Say!

But the news of the June meetings was revealed in a background briefing to reporters yesterday—which may suggest Rahm was hushing talk of Obama's involvement until the swap had been completed.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of timing, though, has to do with the surveillance on Russian Official #1. Two times, two days after he conducted a laptop chat with Chapman, the NSC met and discussed a spy swap.

June 5: Mikhail Semenko's laptop chats with Russian Official #2 surveilled

June 9: Chapman's laptop chats with Russian Official #1 surveilled

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So the meetings at which NSC first got briefed and then discussed in detail a spy swap occurred just after FBI caught Russians working spies in the US.

And while we're at it, presumably we've not just

expelled these 10 minor spies, right? We've expelled Russian Official #1 and Russian Official #2, right? The ones who were handling Chapman and Semenko directly (Russian Official #2, official the "second secretary" of the Russian UN Mission, has been involved in handling some of the illegals as far back as 2004)?

That is, was it Russian Official #1—who would be working under official cover and therefore be immune from arrest but would nevertheless be identified as a Russian spy through this investigation—that was the target of this kabuki, and not the illegals?