

HAPPY 108TH BIRTHDAY TO MARY COFFEY

(Mr. OLSON asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. OLSON. Mr. Speaker, 100 years is a century. It is a really long time. 108 years of life is a blessing.

A young lady I work for in the Texas 22nd Congressional District, who lives in my hometown of Sugar Land, is such a blessing. Her name is Mary Coffey, and she celebrated her 108th birthday on March 20.

In a recent article in the Fort Bend Star, Mary described her keys to being blessed: Number one, trust Jesus and lead several Bible studies with your friends; number two, get plenty of exercise; number three, eat healthy; and number four is about personal hygiene, have jar after jar after jar of Pond's cold cream available when you need it most.

For 108 years, Mary has inspired all of us.

Happy 108th birthday, Mary. Let's go out; maybe go out dancing if you promise not to wear me out.

INVESTIGATION INTO RUSSIAN CONNECTIONS IS LONG OVERDUE

(Ms. KAPTUR asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend her remarks.)

Ms. KAPTUR. Mr. Speaker, today The Washington Post reported that the United Arab Emirates arranged a secret meeting in January between Blackwater founder and major Trump contributor Erik Prince and a Russian close to President Vladimir Putin. The meeting was an apparent effort to establish a back-channel line of communication between Moscow and President-elect Donald Trump, according to U.S., European, and Arab officials.

Erik Prince, by the way, is the brother to Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education. The UAE's incentive to broker this meeting comes from the deteriorating relationship between them and Iran. They wanted to drive a wedge between Russia, Iran, and Syria. Agreement on that deal would need a handsome reward, like the easing of U.S. sanctions on the Russian Federation for its invasion of Ukraine.

Blackwater is the private security firm that became infamous for U.S. abuses in Iraq after a series of incidents, including one in 2007 in which the company's guards were charged and criminally convicted of killing civilians.

"Officials said Zayed and his brother, the UAE's national security adviser, coordinated the Seychelles meeting with Russian Government officials with the goal of establishing an unofficial back channel between Trump and Putin." The UAE at one point paid Erik Prince's firm a reported half a billion dollars to consult on defensive security.

An independent bipartisan commission to investigate Trump officials and Russian connections is long overdue.

[From the Washington Post, Apr. 3, 2017]

BLACKWATER FOUNDER HELD SECRET SEYCHELLES MEETING TO ESTABLISH TRUMP-PUTIN BACK CHANNEL

(By Adam Entous, Greg Miller, Kevin Sieff and Karen DeYoung)

The United Arab Emirates arranged a secret meeting in January between Blackwater founder Erik Prince and a Russian close to President Vladimir Putin as part of an apparent effort to establish a back-channel line of communication between Moscow and President-elect Donald Trump, according to U.S., European and Arab officials.

The meeting took place around Jan. 11—nine days before Trump's inauguration—in the Seychelles islands in the Indian Ocean, officials said. Though the full agenda remains unclear, the UAE agreed to broker the meeting in part to explore whether Russia could be persuaded to curtail its relationship with Iran, including in Syria, a Trump administration objective that would likely require major concessions to Moscow on U.S. sanctions.

Though Prince had no formal role with the Trump campaign or transition team, he presented himself as an unofficial envoy for Trump to high-ranking Emiratis involved in setting up his meeting with the Putin confidant, according to the officials, who did not identify the Russian.

Prince was an avid supporter of Trump who gave \$250,000 last year to support the GOP nominee's campaign, records show. He has ties to people in Trump's circle, including Stephen K. Bannon, now serving as the president's chief strategist and senior counselor. Prince's sister Betsy DeVos serves as education secretary in the Trump administration. And Prince was seen in the Trump transition offices in New York in December.

U.S. officials said the FBI has been scrutinizing the Seychelles meeting as part of a broader probe of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election and alleged contacts between associates of Putin and Trump. The FBI declined to comment.

The Seychelles encounter, which one official said spanned two days, adds to an expanding web of connections between Russia and Americans with ties to Trump—contacts that the White House has been reluctant to acknowledge or explain until they have been exposed by news organizations.

"We are not aware of any meetings and Erik Prince had no role in the transition," said Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary.

"Erik had no role on the transition team. This is a complete fabrication," said a spokesman for Prince in a statement. "The meeting had nothing to do with President Trump. Why is the so-called underresourced intelligence community messing around with surveillance of American citizens when they should be hunting terrorists?"

Prince is best known as the founder of Blackwater, a security firm that became a symbol of U.S. abuses in Iraq after a series of incidents including one in 2007 in which the company's guards were accused—and later criminally convicted—of killing civilians in a crowded Iraqi square. Prince sold the firm, which was subsequently rebranded, but has continued building a private paramilitary empire with contracts across the Middle East and Asia.

Prince would probably have been seen as too controversial to serve in any official capacity in the Trump transition or administration. But his ties to Trump advisers, experience with clandestine work and relation-

ship with the royal leaders of the Emirates—where he moved in 2010 amid mounting legal problems for his American business—would have positioned him as an ideal go-between.

The Seychelles meeting came after private discussions in New York involving high-ranking representatives of Trump, Moscow and the Emirates.

The White House has acknowledged that Michael T. Flynn, Trump's original national security adviser, and Trump adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner met with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, in late November or early December in New York.

Flynn and Kushner were joined by Bannon for a separate meeting with the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who made an undisclosed visit to New York later in December, according to the U.S., European and Arab officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

In an unusual breach of protocol, the UAE did not notify the Obama administration in advance of the visit, though officials found out because Zayed's name appeared on a flight manifest.

Officials said Zayed and his brother, the UAE's national security adviser, coordinated the Seychelles meeting with Russian government officials with the goal of establishing an unofficial back channel between Trump and Putin.

Officials said Zayed wanted to be helpful to both leaders who had talked about working more closely together, a policy objective long advocated by the crown prince. The UAE, which sees Iran as one of its main enemies, also shared the Trump team's interest in finding ways to drive a wedge between Moscow and Tehran.

Zayed met twice with Putin in 2016, according to Western officials, and urged the Russian leader to work more closely with the Emirates and Saudi Arabia—an effort to isolate Iran.

At the time of the Seychelles meeting and for weeks afterward, the UAE believed that Prince had the blessing of the new administration to act as its unofficial representative. The Russian participant was a person whom Zayed knew was close to Putin from his interactions with both men, the officials said.

When the Seychelles meeting took place, official contacts between members of the incoming Trump administration and the Russian government were under intense scrutiny, both from federal investigators and the press.

Less than a week before the Seychelles meeting, U.S. intelligence agencies released a report accusing Russia of intervening clandestinely during the 2016 election to help Trump win the White House.

The FBI was already investigating communications between Flynn and Kislyak. The Washington Post's David Ignatius first disclosed those communications on Jan. 12, around the time of the Seychelles meeting. Flynn was subsequently fired by Trump for misleading Vice President Pence and others about his discussions with Kislyak.

Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador in Washington, declined to comment.

Government officials in the Seychelles said they were not aware of any meetings between Trump and Putin associates in the country around Jan. 11. But they said luxury resorts on the island are ideal for clandestine gatherings like the one described by the U.S., European and Arab officials.

"I wouldn't be surprised at all," said Barry Faure, the Seychelles secretary of state for foreign affairs. "The Seychelles is the kind of place where you can have a good time away from the eyes of the media. That's even