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OPINION | POTOMAC WATCH

A Democrat Deflates a Trump 'Scandal'

An email from Sen. Amy Klobuchar shows that officials acted on the policy merits.



By

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Democrats have grown expert in these Trump days at creating fake scandals. So it's refreshing to read a previously undisclosed email in which Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a presidential aspirant, destroys a leading narrative even as she highlights her own party's excesses.

The "scandal" here involves Twin Metals Minnesota, which holds two mineral leases on government land outside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in the northeastern part of the state. The Interior Department had renewed the leases continuously for decades. But when Twin Metals got serious about a mine, the Obama administration jumped into bed with green activists who ardently opposed it.

In 2014, Interior delayed the renewals, calling for more "study." In early 2016, the department's solicitor issued a howler of a legal opinion, granting the government new authority to deny Twin Metals automatic lease renewals. It was an Obama extralegal classic: The opinion ignored precedent, existing rights and regular procedure. In a midnight kiss to green activists, the department officially blocked the leases on Dec. 15, 2016.

This highly irregular decision was destined to get a fresh look from the Trump team. The new president's appointees at the Interior and Agricultural departments all came to office determined to restore the law and regulatory certainty. In December 2017, the new Interior principal deputy solicitor found the prior opinion fatally flawed and moved to renew Twin Metals' leases. The company moved on to an arduous environmental review, and it could still be blocked by the feds or the state. Beyond some furious greens, that should have been the end of the matter.

Instead, we are in an age where every move by the executive branch is judged not on the policy merits but on a “corruption” scale. Early in 2017, stories started popping up about how Twin Metals was controlled by the family of a Chilean billionaire. And that billionaire also owns a house in Washington, which he rents out to . . . Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner. Scandal! Payoff! Sleaze!

It didn't matter to critics that the Chilean doesn't know the Trumps, that Ivanka Trump and Mr. Kushner have never met their landlord, or that they pay a market rent of \$15,000 a month. Nor did it matter that the decision was an obvious one for the Trump team to reconsider on the merits, or that the new opinion was rock-solid and corrected a legal embarrassment.

Democrats and activists have instead spun this as straight-up cronyism. Green groups routinely slam the decision as a favor to “Ivanka's landlord.” Minnesota's Democratic Gov. Mark Dayton decried the “shameful reversal” as proof that “big corporate money and special-interest influence now rule again.” House Democrats sent letters to Interior and Agriculture Secretaries David Bernhardt and Sonny Perdue harping on the landlord question. The goal is to gin up a scandal of the type activists used to run out other Trump appointees.

Enter Ms. Klobuchar. Or, at least enter an [email she wrote](#) to then-Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack on Dec. 16, 2016, the day after the leases were blocked. Government sources provided me this missive, in which a furious Ms. Klobuchar punctures the scandal narrative and skewers her own party for putting politics ahead of the law.

Ms. Klobuchar bluntly states that the decision not to renew the lease “just floored me. Trump will reverse this. When you guys leave and are out talking about a job message for rural America, I will be left with the mess and dealing with the actual jobs. But you guys sure got a good story in the New York Times.” She's the one who has to run for re-election in a state that still values its mining industry.

She lectures Mr. Vilsack that this “should have been handled through the normal process. It wasn't.” She notes that she'd asked written questions in July but got no response. She brutally observes that the failure to do this right is “most likely . . . why we have the trump administration to begin with.” She also snaps: “Who cares about answering some pesky questions from a woman senator from the Midwest when you guys and the White House and the activists have all the politics down, right?”

She notes that the company “had had the leases for years,” that the situation “will now end up in a lawsuit,” and that “trump will reverse the decision or a court will.” She adds: “I am not for or against this project but I just wanted a fair process based on science that told us the truth.” (Klobuchar state director Ben Hill says the senator “has serious concerns about this project being so close to the Boundary Waters and has always wanted a thorough environmental review,” and “does not believe the Trump administration will move forward in good faith to protect the environment.”)

Here is a Democratic lawmaker, steeped in a home-state issue, calling this what it was: an Obama administration perversion of policy and law, done to appease green donors. She reminds Mr. Vilsack that Republicans will reverse the decision, for the obvious reason that this did not go through a “normal” or “fair” process. The Democrats and activists decrying this “scandal” also know this, although we don’t have the benefit of their private correspondence.

Remember this story next time the left hurls another “corruption” accusation. Hard as it is for many to accept, Trump administration officials often act on what they believe to be sound policy. No ulterior motive required.

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