

The Sleazy Origins of Russia-gate

Exclusive: Official Washington's groupthink is that Russian "disinformation" helped elect Donald Trump, but the evidence is actually much stronger that Russian "dirt" was helping Hillary Clinton, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

An irony of the escalating hysteria about the Trump camp's contacts with Russians is that one presidential campaign in 2016 did exploit political dirt that supposedly came from the Kremlin and other Russian sources. Friends of that political campaign paid for this anonymous hearsay material, shared it with American journalists and urged them to publish it to gain an electoral advantage. But this campaign was not Donald Trump's; it was Hillary Clinton's.

And, awareness of this activity doesn't require you to spin conspiracy theories about what may or may not have been said during some seemingly innocuous conversation. In this case, you have open admissions about how these Russian/Kremlin claims were used.

Indeed, you have the words of Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democratic member of the House Intelligence Committee, in his opening statement at last week's public hearing on so-called "Russia-gate." Schiff's seamless 15-minute narrative of the Trump campaign's alleged collaboration with Russia followed the script prepared by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele who was hired as an opposition researcher last June to dig up derogatory information on Donald Trump.

Steele, who had worked for Britain's MI-6 in Russia, said he tapped into ex-colleagues and unnamed sources inside Russia, including leadership figures in the Kremlin, to piece together a series of sensational reports that became the basis of the current congressional and FBI investigations into Trump's alleged ties to Moscow.

Since he was not able to go to Russia himself, Steele based his reports mostly on multiple hearsay from anonymous Russians who claim to have heard some information from their government contacts before passing it on to Steele's associates who then gave it to Steele who compiled this mix of rumors and alleged inside dope into "raw" intelligence reports.

Lewd Allegations

Besides the anonymous sourcing and the sources' financial incentives to dig up dirt, Steele's reports had numerous other problems, including the inability of a

variety of investigators to confirm key elements, such as the salacious claim that several years ago Russian intelligence operatives secretly videotaped Trump having prostitutes urinate on him while he lay in the same bed in Moscow's Ritz-Carlton used by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.

That tantalizing tidbit was included in Steele's opening report to his new clients, dated June 20, 2016. Apparently, it proved irresistible in whetting the appetite of Clinton's mysterious benefactors who were financing Steele's dirt digging and who have kept their identities (and the amounts paid) hidden. Also in that first report were the basic outlines of what has become the scandal that is now threatening the survival of Trump's embattled presidency.

But Steele's June report also reflected the telephone-tag aspects of these allegations: "Speaking to a trusted compatriot in June 2016 sources A and B, a senior Russian Foreign Ministry figure and a former top level Russian intelligence officer still active inside the Kremlin respectively, the Russian authorities had been cultivating and supporting US Republican presidential candidate, Donald TRUMP for a least 5 years.

"Source B asserted that the TRUMP operation was both supported and directed by Russian President Vladimir PUTIN. Its aim was to sow discord and disunity both within the US itself, but more especially within the Transatlantic alliance which was viewed as inimical to Russia's interests. ... In terms of specifics, Source A confided that the Kremlin had been feeding TRUMP and his team valuable intelligence on his opponents, including Democratic presidential candidate Hillary CLINTON, for several years. ...

"The Kremlin's cultivation operation on TRUMP also had comprised offering him various lucrative real estate development business deals in Russia, especially in relation to the ongoing 2018 World Cup soccer tournament. However, so far, for reasons unknown, TRUMP had not taken up any of these."

Besides the anonymous and hearsay quality of the allegations, there are obvious logical problems, especially the point that five years ago, you could have gotten astronomical odds about Trump's chances to win the U.S. presidency, although perhaps there is more an astrological explanation. Maybe the seemingly logical Putin went to some stargazing soothsayer to see the future.

There also may have been a more mundane reason why Trump's hotel deal fell through. A source familiar with those negotiations told me that Trump had hoped to get a half interest in the \$2 billion project but that Russian-Israeli investor Mikhail Fridman, a founder of Russia's Alfa Bank, balked because Trump was unwilling to commit a significant investment beyond the branding value of the Trump name.

Yet, one would assume that if the supposedly all-powerful Putin wanted to give a \$1 billion or so payoff to his golden boy, Donald Trump, whom Putin just knew would become President in five years, the deal would have happened.

Whetting the Appetite

Despite the dubious quality of Steele's second- and third-hand information, the June report appears to have won the breathless attention of Team Clinton. And once the bait was taken, Steele continued to produce his conspiracy-laden reports, totaling at least 17 through Dec. 13, 2016.

The reports not only captivated the Clinton political operatives but influenced the assessments of Obama's appointees in the U.S. intelligence community. In the last weeks of the Obama administration, I was told that the outgoing intelligence chiefs had found no evidence to verify Steele's claims but nevertheless believed them to be true.

Still, a careful analysis of Steele's reports would have discovered not only apparent factual inaccuracies, such as putting Trump lawyer Michael Cohen at a meeting with a Russian official in Prague (when Cohen says he's never been to Prague), but also the sort of broad conspiracy-mongering that the mainstream U.S. news media usually loves to ridicule.

For instance, Steele's reports pin a range of U.S. political attitudes on Russian manipulation rather than the notion that Americans can reach reasonable conclusions on their own. In one report dated Sept. 14, 2016, Steele claimed that an unnamed senior official in President Vladimir Putin's Presidential Administration (or PA) explained how Putin used the alleged Russian influence operation to generate opposition to Obama's Pacific trade deals.

Steele wrote that Putin's intention was "pushing candidate CLINTON away from President OBAMA's policies. The best example of this was that both candidates [Clinton and Trump] now openly opposed the draft trade agreements, TPP and TTIP, which were assessed by Moscow as detrimental to Russian interests."

In other words, the Russians supposedly intervened in the U.S. presidential campaign to turn the leading candidates against Obama's trade deals. But how credible is that? Are we to believe that American politicians – running the gamut from Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren through former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to President Donald Trump – have all been tricked by the Kremlin to oppose those controversial trade deals, which are also broadly unpopular with the American people who are sick and tired of trade agreements that cost them jobs?

Steele's investigative dossier suggests that we can't really think for

ourselves. We are all Putin's puppets.

Greater Skepticism?

Normally, such a ludicrous claim – along with the haziness of the sourcing – would demand greater skepticism about the rest of Steele's feverish charges, but a curious aspect of the investigations into Russia's alleged "meddling" in Election 2016 is that neither Steele nor the "oppo research" company, Fusion GPS, that hired him – reportedly with funding from Clinton allies – has been summoned to testify.

Usually, official investigations begin with testimony from the people who are making the allegations, so their credibility and motives can be tested in an adversarial setting. Plus, some baseline information should be established: Who, for instance, paid for the contract? How much was the total and how much went to Steele? How much did Steele then pay his Russian contacts and did they, in turn, pay the alleged Russian insiders for information? Or are we supposed to believe that these "insiders" risked being identified as spies out of a commitment to the truth?

None of these answers would necessarily discredit the information, but they could provide important context as to whether this "oppo" team had a financial motive to sex-up the reports to keep Clinton's friends coming back for more. Arguably the funders of this "oppo" research should be called to testify as well regarding whether they would have kept ponying up more money if Steele's reports had concluded that there were no meaningful contacts between Trump's people and the Russians. Were they seeking the truth or just dirt to help Hillary Clinton win?

Since last November's election, Steele has ducked public inquiries and Glenn Simpson, the former Wall Street Journal journalist who heads Fusion GPS, has refused to divulge who hired his firm or answer other relevant questions. That means we still don't know which Clinton friends paid for the dirt and how much money was given to subcontractors like Steele and his Russian associates. (One source told me it may have totaled around \$1 million.)

According to various press reports, Fusion GPS first worked for a Republican opponent of Trump's, but then switched over to the Clinton side after Trump won the Republican race. With Steele generating his reports every few days or every few weeks, people close to Clinton's campaign saw the Russia allegations as a potential game-changer. They reached out to reporters to persuade them to publish Steele's allegations even if they could not be verified.

Before the election, a longtime Clinton operative briefed me on aspects of

Steele's investigation, including the "golden shower" allegations, and urged me to at least publish the accusations as a rumor citing the fact that some major news organizations were looking into the charges, an offer that I declined.

In a different setting – when Gov. Bill Clinton was seeking the presidency and Republican "oppo" researchers were pushing various wild and salacious allegations about him – the Clinton team dismissed such claims and the motivations of the people behind them as "cash for trash."

Following the Storyline

Yet, Schiff's opening statement at the hearing on March 20 relied heavily on Steele's narrative and the supposed credibility of the ex-British spy and his anonymous Russian sources, even to the point of naming Americans who presumably joined in a scheme to collaborate with the Russians to help rig the U.S. election, an act that some commenters have compared to treason.

The California Democrat said, "Russian sources tell [Steele] that [Carter] Page [a Trump foreign policy adviser who made a public trip to Russia in early July 2016] also had a secret meeting with Igor Sechin, CEO of Russian gas giant Rosneft. ... According to Steele's Russian sources, Page is offered brokerage fees by Sechin on a deal involving a 19 percent share of the company."

These "Russian sources" also tell Steele, according to Schiff, that "the Trump campaign is offered documents damaging to Hillary Clinton, which the Russians would publish through an outlet that gives them deniability, like Wikileaks. The hacked documents would be in exchange for a Trump Administration policy that de-emphasizes Russia's invasion of Ukraine and instead focuses on criticizing NATO countries for not paying their fare share."

Schiff continued: "Is it a coincidence that the Russian gas company Rosneft sold a 19 percent share after former British Intelligence Officer Steele was told by Russian sources that Carter Page was offered fees on a deal of just that size? Is it a coincidence that Steele's Russian sources also affirmed that Russia had stolen documents hurtful to Secretary Clinton that it would utilize in exchange for pro-Russian policies that would later come to pass?"

However, is it also not possible that Steele and his profit-making colleagues made their reports conform to details that already were known or that they had reason to believe would occur, in other words, to match up their claims with independently known facts to give them greater credibility? That is a classic way for comen to establish "credibility" with marks who are either gullible or simply want to believe.

Also, clever prosecutors in presenting a "circumstantial case" – as Schiff was

doing on March 20 – can make innocent coincidences look suspicious. For instance, though Trump’s resistance to escalating tensions with Russia was well known through the primary campaign, Schiff made a big deal out of the fact that Trump’s people opposed a plank in the Republican platform that called for shipping lethal military supplies to Ukraine for the government’s war against ethnic Russian rebels in the east. Schiff presents that as the quo for the quid of the Russians supplying purloined emails from the Democratic National Committee to WikiLeaks (although WikiLeaks denies getting the emails from the Russians).

In his opening statement, Schiff said: “In the middle of July, Paul Manafort, the Trump campaign manager and someone who was long on the payroll of pro-Russian Ukrainian interests, attends the Republican Party convention. Carter Page, back from [a business meeting in] Moscow, also attends the convention.

“According to Steele, it was Manafort who chose Page to serve as a go-between for the Trump campaign and Russian interests. [Russian] Ambassador [Sergey] Kislyak, who presides over a Russian embassy in which diplomatic personnel would later be expelled as likely spies, also attends the Republican Party convention and meets with Carter Page and additional Trump Advisors J.D. Gordon and Walid Phares. It was J.D. Gordon who approved Page’s trip to Moscow.

“Ambassador Kislyak also meets with Trump campaign national security chair and now Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Sessions would later deny meeting with Russian officials during his Senate confirmation hearing. Just prior to the convention, the Republican Party platform is changed, removing a section that supports the provision of ‘lethal defensive weapons’ to Ukraine, an action that would be contrary to Russian interests.

“Manafort categorically denies involvement by the Trump campaign in altering the platform. But the Republican Party delegate who offered the language in support of providing defensive weapons to Ukraine states that it was removed at the insistence of the Trump campaign. Later, J.D. Gordon admits opposing the inclusion of the provision at the time it was being debated and prior to its being removed.”

Problems with the Conspiracy

So, not only is Schiff relying on Steele to provide key links in the conspiracy chain but Schiff ignores the surrounding reality that Trump had long opposed the idea of escalating the confrontation with Russia in Ukraine – as, by the way, did President Obama who resisted pressure to send lethal military hardware to Ukraine.

Plus, Schiff ignores other logical points, including that party platforms are essentially meaningless and that the savvy Putin would not likely take the huge risk of offending the odds-on winner of the presidential race, Hillary Clinton, for something as pointless as a word change in the GOP platform.

There is also the point that if Trump were a true “Manchurian candidate,” he would have taken the more politically popular position of bashing Russia during the campaign and only reverse course after he got into the White House. That’s how the scheme is supposed to work. (And, of course, all embassies including American ones have spies assigned to them, so there is nothing unusual about Ambassador Kislyak presiding at an embassy with spies.)

Other independent-minded journalists have noted various chronological problems with Steele’s narrative, such as Marcy Wheeler at [her emptywheel.net Web site](http://www.emptywheel.net).

In other words, there are huge holes in both the evidence and the logic of Schiff’s conspiracy theory. But you wouldn’t know that from watching and reading the fawning commentary about Schiff’s presentation in the mainstream U.S. news media, which has been almost universally hostile to Trump (which is not to say that there aren’t sound reasons to consider the narcissistic, poorly prepared Trump to be unfit to serve as President of the United States).

The journalistic problem is that everyone deserves to get a fair shot from reporters who are supposed to be objective and fair regardless of a person’s popularity or notoriety or what the reporter may personally feel. That standard should apply to everyone, whether you’re a foreign leader despised by the U.S. government or a politician detested for your obnoxious behavior.

There is no professional justification for journalists joining in a TV-and-print lynch mob. We also have seen too often where such wrongheaded attitudes lead, such as to the groupthink that Iraq’s hated dictator Saddam Hussein was hiding WMDs, or in an earlier time to the McCarthyism that destroyed the lives of Americans who were smeared as unpatriotic because of their dissident political views.

So, yes, even Donald Trump deserves not to be railroaded by a mainstream media that wants desperately – along with other powerful forces in Official Washington – to see him run out of town on a rail and will use any pretext to do so, even if it means escalating the risks of a nuclear war with Russia.

And, if mainstream media commentators truly want a thorough and independent investigation, they should be demanding that it start by summoning the people who first made the allegations.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for

The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Trump's Dangerous Government of No

President Trump wants to show how different his policies are from President Obama's, but that negative approach is careening his young administration into trouble, observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The abortive attempt to pass House Speaker Paul Ryan's bill for tax cuts and partial dismantling of the health care system vividly demonstrated the consequences of trying to govern according to what one is against, rather than what one is for.

If this overwhelmingly negative approach had not been the Republicans' approach (and Donald Trump's), the story of the Affordable Care Act, and the politics surrounding it, would have been far different. That is certainly true given how the ACA is centered on a system of commercial insurance that was earlier associated at the state level with Mitt Romney.

But with Congressional Republicans deciding from the beginning of Barack Obama's presidency to oppose him at almost every turn and to deny him significant achievements (and, per Mitch McConnell, to make denying him a second term their top priority), and with the ACA being seen as Obama's premier domestic legislative accomplishment, total and automatic opposition to the ACA was the course taken. Trashing Obamacare became a mantra divorced from what the law was or was not doing, and divorced from any careful consideration of Americans' health care needs.

If the Republicans were to develop an alternative, they had seven years to do it. Instead, House Republicans spent that time, as part of the recitation of the mantra, passing dozens of repeal resolutions. When the dog finally caught the car – when the GOP won control of both the legislative and executive branches – the realities that the ACA was designed to deal with were still there.

Realities such as that if people who need extensive medical care now are to be covered, people who do not happen to need a lot of care right now will have to help pay for it, through buying commercial policies, paying penalties or taxes,

or whatever. It was impossible both to assure affordable health care coverage for the great majority of Americans and to have a system that, however it might be dressed up, didn't look a lot like Obamacare (impossible, that is, without going to a single-payer, Medicare-for-all system with which Democrats would be much more comfortable than Republicans). Hence the disarray among House Republicans and their political meltdown last week.

Blame-Shifting

President Trump has since been emphatic in trying to shift responsibility onto Democrats for anything unfavorable that happens henceforth with the health care system. But of course it is his administration, not Obama's or any other Democratic one, that is now responsible for administering the law.

His assertion of Democratic responsibility, coupled with his forecast that the ACA will "explode", gives him a motivation to sabotage the workings of the ACA. That sabotage has already begun, as it did earlier at the state level where Republican-controlled state governments refused federal funds to provide help under Medicaid to their citizens needing such assistance.

The years-long drumbeat about getting rid of the ACA has probably been the biggest source of hesitation to insurers about participating in the insurance exchanges created under the act. Since entering office, the Trump administration has been curtailing advertising encouraging people to sign up for insurance and moving away from enforcement of ACA-related requirements such as the individual mandate.

We are seeing here an example of the most perverse possible consequence when a party of No becomes a government of No: the intentional undermining of a public program to make it work poorly rather than well.

The handling of the ACA is perhaps an extreme example because it became an extreme Republican obsession. But some of the same dynamics may be seen elsewhere, including foreign policy. For example, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Iran nuclear agreement, occupied a place in Barack Obama's foreign policy comparable in significance to the ACA in domestic policy. So again, it elicited reflexive Republican opposition.

It does not appear that Trump will pull directly out of the JCPOA; doing so would obviously negate any assertions that the agreement would "explode" on its own. The preferred methods of sabotage include imposition of enough additional sanctions on Iran that the Iranians would proclaim the agreement was voided by the United States reneging on its obligations. And like the ACA, the JCPOA requires ongoing attention and implementation. For the United States to remain

in compliance, the administration will have to renew some waivers to existing sanctions legislation.

Thus Trump could in effect sabotage the agreement by doing nothing. The JCPOA example illustrates another attribute of a government of No, which is a failure to consider what the alternatives are to whatever is the policy being opposed, and to consider the relative merits of each alternative. Opposition to the JCPOA has all along failed to face the fact that the alternative to the agreement, which is no agreement, would mean an end to the special limitations on Iran's nuclear program and an end to the enhanced international inspections of that program.

In many other areas of foreign policy, in which circumstances and problems are imposed on policymakers at least as much as they tend to be with domestic policies, it is difficult to come up with approaches that look new and different, as well as being prudent and effective. There are only so many things the United States can do with good effect, and chances are that the relevant options have already been thoroughly considered.

Tackling ISIS

Thus, key attributes of many policies look very similar from one administration to another. This has been the case so far with some of the major foreign policy challenges facing the Trump administration, such as the fight against ISIS.

Although candidate Trump had berated Obama for not taking more effective action against the group, when Trump's Secretary of State presented to a gathering last week the administration's plans for dealing with ISIS, those plans, in the words of the *New York Times* report on the meeting, "closely parroted Mr. Obama's strategy." Consistent with that resemblance, so far the Trump administration has followed the general lines of Obama's policies regarding military activity in Syria.

Similarly with the problem of North Korea and its nuclear weapons: even though Secretary Tillerson spoke earlier this month about a "new approach" toward North Korea, as Jeffrey Lewis observes, the supposedly new approach is "in fact, the old approach," with even many of the same exact words that the Obama administration had used.

For any administration that thinks more in terms of what it wants rather than what it opposes, such similarities are not necessarily a problem. The continuities are accepted, while asserting responsible stewardship of the nation's interests and openness to adjustments and improvements in existing policies where appropriate.

But for an administration of No, the similarities *are* a problem. With its coming to power based overwhelmingly on rejection of what came before, how can it defend continuation of what it rejected?

A resulting hazard is the temptation on the part of such an administration to go out of its way to pursue policies that look new and different even though they are not prudent or effective. Such a hazard may be materializing with moves to become more deeply immersed in the Yemeni civil war on the side favored by the Saudis and Emiratis, whose intervention in the conflict has multiplied the human suffering without bringing the war any closer to a conclusion.

Other motivations probably are also at play, including an itch to be assertive anywhere there is a possible Iran angle (an itch exhibited by Secretary of Defense James Mattis, whose department has forwarded a proposal for escalation of the U.S. involvement in Yemen). But an escalation that can be portrayed, as this one is, as a removing of “Obama-era restrictions” will be attractive to the Trump White House because it can be described as contrary to something Obama did. Trump’s setback on health care and his sliding poll numbers will tend to make the temptation all the greater.

Damage that results from succumbing to this sort of temptation is likely to continue until and unless this administration can decide, more than it has so far, what it stands for – in the sense of workable policies, not just slogans or promises – and not just what it is against.

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