

The Tangled Threads of Russia-gate

Exclusive: Once a Washington groupthink takes hold, as it has in the fervent belief about Russia-gate, respect for facts and logic fly out the window since all these important people can't be wrong, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A curious feature about the Russia-gate “scandal” is that its proponents ignore the growing number of moments when their evidence undercuts their narrative. Instead, they press ahead toward a predetermined destination in much the way that true-believing conspiracy theorists are known to do.

For instance, The New York Times ran a story on Monday, entitled “Operative Offered Trump Campaign Access to Putin,” detailing how a conservative operative “told a Trump adviser that he could arrange a back-channel meeting between Donald J. Trump and Vladimir V. Putin, the Russian president, according to an email sent to the Trump campaign” – and apparently described to the Times by a helpful source on Capitol Hill.

The Times quoted the email from National Rifle Association member Paul Erickson to Trump campaign adviser Rick Dearborn as saying, “Putin is deadly serious about building a good relationship with Mr. Trump. ... [Putin] wants to extend an invitation to Mr. Trump to visit him in the Kremlin before the election.”

An NRA conference in Louisville, Kentucky, was supposed to be the location for the “first contact” between the Russians and the Trump campaign, according to the email.

The Times treated its new information as further confirmation of nefarious connections between the Trump campaign and the Russian government. Immediately after introducing this May 2016 email, which had the subject line, “Kremlin Connection,” the Times reprised the background of former FBI Director Robert Mueller conducting a special-prosecutor investigation into “Russian interference in the election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign.”

Note how the Times’ reference to “Russian interference” was treated as flat fact although the Times still hedges on “possible collusion” between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign. Like much of the U.S. mainstream media, the Times no longer bothers to use “alleged” in front of “Russian interference” even though no solid evidence of a coordinated Kremlin effort has been presented.

But there is a bigger problem with this “scoop”: If the Russia-gate narrative were correct – that the Kremlin had identified Trump years earlier as a likely

U.S. president and undertook a multi-year campaign to bribe and blackmail him to be Moscow's Manchurian candidate or Putin's "puppet" as Hillary Clinton charged – the Russians wouldn't need some little-known "conservative operative" to serve as an intermediary in May 2016 to set up a back-channel meeting.

The Contradiction

In other words, assuming that the Times' story is correct, the email suggests the opposite of the impression that the Times wants its readers to get. The email is either meaningless in that it led to no actual meeting or it contradicts the storyline about a longstanding Russian operation to plant a patsy in the White House.

Times reporter Nicholas Fandos noted that it was unclear what Dearborn did in response to this overture, although the Times reported that Dearborn had forwarded a similar proposal by Christian conservative activist Rick Clay to Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who rebuffed the offer.

On Monday, I read the rest of the Times email story looking for some acknowledgement of the problems with its implied scenario, but found none. Fandos made references to other low-level efforts by Russians to make contact with Trump's advisers (without noticeable success, I might add), but again these examples actually run counter to the image of Trump as the Kremlin's prized chump.

If Putin had several years ago foreseen what no one else did – that Trump would become the U.S. president – then these ad hoc contacts with members of Trump's entourage in 2016 would not have been needed.

The Times' scoop parallels the story of the plea deal that Russia-gate prosecutors struck with low-level Trump foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos who admitted lying about his contacts with an obscure academic in Stirling, Scotland, who supposedly offered to be another intermediary between Trump's team and the Kremlin.

According to court documents, Papadopoulos, a 30-year-old campaign aide, got to know a professor of international relations who claimed to have "substantial connections with Russian government officials," with the professor identified in press reports as Joseph Mifsud, who is associated with the University of Stirling.

The first contact between Mifsud and Papadopoulos supposedly occurred in mid-March 2016 in Italy, with a second meeting in London on March 24 when the professor purportedly introduced Papadopoulos to a Russian woman whom the young campaign aide believed to be Putin's niece, an assertion that Mueller's

investigators determined wasn't true.

Trump, who then was under pressure for not having a foreign policy team, included Papadopoulos as part of a list drawn up to fill that gap, and Papadopoulos participated in a campaign meeting on March 31 in Washington at which he suggested a meeting between Trump and Putin, a prospect that other senior aides reportedly slapped down.

In other words, at least based on the reporting about the Dearborn email and the Papadopoulos overture, there is no reason to believe that Trump was colluding with Moscow or had any significant relationship at all.

If these developments point to anything, it is to the opposite; that Russia was fishing for some contacts with what – however implausibly – was starting to look like a possible future U.S. president, but with whom they were not well-connected.

Gotcha Moments

There have been similar problems with other Russia-gate “gotcha” moments, such as disclosures of a possible Trump hotel deal in Moscow with Mikhail Fridman of Russia's Alfa Bank. Though Trump's presumed financial tie-ins to Russian oligarchs close to Putin were supposed to be fundamental to the Russia-gate narrative, the outcome of the hotel deal turned out to be a big nothing.

One source knowledgeable about the proposed deal told me it fell apart because Trump was willing to put little on the table beyond the branding value of the Trump name. However, if Putin were actually trying to buy Trump's loyalty, money presumably would have been no obstacle. Indeed, you would think that the more money used to line Trump's pockets the better. But the hotel deal collapsed; there is no Trump hotel in Moscow.

Other Russia-gate cases are equally disconnected from what had been the original narrative about senior Russians spending years cultivating Trump as their Manchurian candidate.

The accusations against Trump's onetime campaign chief Paul Manafort focus on his alleged failure to report income from – and pay taxes on – work that he did for the elected government of Ukraine before any involvement in the Trump campaign.

Last week's guilty plea from former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn related to purportedly false statements and omissions that he made when questioned by FBI agents about calls to Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the transition, i.e., after Trump had been elected.

Despite the breathless coverage on MSNBC and the Times' excited headlines about how the "inquiry grows," there remain other core problems for the narrative. No matter how often the U.S. mainstream media asserts the suspicion of Russian "hacking" of Democratic emails as flat fact, no solid proof has yet been presented – and the claim has been denied by both the Russian government and WikiLeaks, which published the key emails.

Sleight of Hand

The Times and other mainstream media outlets play their sleight of hand on this key point by asserting that "U.S. intelligence agencies" have "concluded" that Russian intelligence services "hacked" the emails from the Democratic National Committee and Clinton's campaign chief John Podesta, but that summary ignores the specifics.

First of all, by using this summary of the facts, the Times and other outlets continue to give the false impression that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the conclusion, a false claim that Hillary Clinton and the mainstream press have asserted over and over, although it is now clear that no such consensus ever existed.

Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified that the Jan. 6 report on alleged Russian interference was produced by "hand-picked" analysts from only three organizations: the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency.

And, even those "hand-picked" analysts stipulated that they were not asserting Russian guilt as fact but only as their best guess. They included the disclaimer: "Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents."

Even New York Times reporter Scott Shane initially noted the absence of evidence, writing: "What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies' claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to 'trust us.'"

Former senior U.S. intelligence officials, including the NSA's ex-technical director William Binney, have raised further doubts about whether a "hack" occurred. Binney conducted tests on download speeds and determined that the extraction of one known batch of Democratic emails was not possible over the Internet, but did match the speed of a USB download onto a thumb drive, suggesting a leak from a Democratic insider.

So, rather than the many disparate strings of Russia-gate coming neatly together more than a year after last year's election, the various threads either are becoming hopelessly tangled or flying off in different directions.

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](#)).
