

A Look Back at Clapper's Jan. 2017 'Assessment' on Russia-gate

On the 2nd anniversary of the "assessment" blaming Russia for interfering in the 2016 election there is still no evidence other than showing the media "colluded" with the spooks, says Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Special to Consortium News



The banner headline atop page one of *The New York Times* print edition two years ago today, on January 7, 2017, set the tone for two years of Dick Cheney-like chicanery: "Putin Led Scheme to Aid Trump, Report Says."

Under a media drumbeat of anti-Russian hysteria, credulous Americans were led to believe that Donald Trump owed his election victory to the president of Russia, whose "influence campaign" according to the *Times* quoting the intelligence report, helped "President-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton."

Hard evidence supporting the media and political rhetoric has been as elusive as proof of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2002-2003. This time, though, an alarming increase in the possibility of war with nuclear-armed Russia has ensued – whether by design, hubris, or rank stupidity. The possible consequences for the world are even more dire than 16 years of war and destruction in the Middle East.

If It Walks Like a Canard...

The CIA-friendly *New York Times* two years ago led the media quacking in a campaign that wobbled like a duck, *canard* in French.

A glance at the title of the Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) (which was not endorsed by the whole community) – “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections” – would suffice to show that the widely respected and independently-minded State Department intelligence bureau should have been included. State intelligence had demurred on several points made in the Oct. 2002 Estimate on Iraq, and even insisted on including a footnote of dissent. James Clapper, then director of national intelligence who put together the ICA, knew that all too well. So he evidently thought it would be better not to involve troublesome dissenters, or even inform them what was afoot.

Similarly, the Defense Intelligence Agency should have been included, particularly since it has considerable expertise on the G.R.U., the Russian military intelligence agency, which has been blamed for Russian hacking of the DNC emails. But DIA, too, has an independent streak and, in fact, is capable of reaching judgments Clapper would reject as anathema. Just one year before Clapper decided to do the rump “Intelligence Community Assessment,” DIA had formally blessed the following heterodox idea in its “December 2015 National Security Strategy”:

“The Kremlin is convinced the United States is laying the groundwork for regime change in Russia, a conviction further reinforced by the events in Ukraine. Moscow views

the United States as the critical driver behind the crisis in Ukraine and believes that the overthrow of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich is the latest move in a long-established pattern of U.S.-orchestrated regime change efforts.”

Any further questions as to why the Defense Intelligence Agency was kept away from the ICA drafting table?

Handpicked Analysts

With help from the *Times* and other mainstream media, Clapper, mostly by his silence, was able to foster the charade that the ICA was actually a bonafide product of the entire intelligence community for as long as he could get away with it. After four months it came time to fess up that the ICA had not been prepared, as Secretary Clinton and the media kept claiming, by “all 17 intelligence agencies.”

In fact, Clapper went one better, proudly asserting – with striking naiveté – that the ICA writers were “handpicked analysts” from only the FBI, CIA, and NSA. He may have thought that this would enhance the ICA’s credibility. It is a no-brainer, however, that when you want handpicked answers, you better handpick the analysts. And so he did.

Why is no one interested in the identities of the handpicked analysts and the hand-pickers? After all, we have the names of the chief analysts/managers responsible for the fraudulent NIE of October 2002 that greased the skids for the war on Iraq. Listed in the NIE itself are the principal analyst Robert D. Walpole and his chief assistants Paul Pillar, Lawrence K. Gershwin and Maj. Gen. John R. Landry.

The Overlooked Disclaimer

Buried in an inside page of the *Times* on Jan. 7, 2017 was a cautionary paragraph in an [analysis](#) by reporter Scott Shane. It seems he had read the ICA all the way through, and had taken due note of the derriere-protecting caveats included in the strangely cobbled together report. Shane had to wade through nine pages of drivel about “Russia’s Propaganda Efforts” to reach Annex B with its curious disclaimer:

“Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents. ... High confidence in a judgment does not imply that the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong.”

Small wonder, then, that Shane noted: “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. That is a significant omission...”

Since then, Shane has evidently realized what side his bread is buttered on and has joined the ranks of Russia-gate aficionados. Decades ago, he did some good reporting on such issues, so it was sad to see him decide to blend in with the likes of David Sanger and promote the NYT official Russia-gate narrative. An embarrassing [feature](#), “The Plot to Subvert an Election: Unraveling the Russia Story So Far,” that Shane wrote with NYT colleague Mark Mazzetti in September, is full of gaping holes, picked apart in [two pieces](#) by **Consortium News**.

Shades of WMD

Sanger is one of the intelligence community's favorite go-to journalists. He was second only to the disgraced Judith Miller in promoting the canard of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the U.S. invasion in March 2003. For example, in a July 29, 2002 [article](#), "U.S. Exploring Baghdad Strike As Iraq Option," co-written by Sanger and Thom Shanker, the existence of WMD in Iraq was stated as flat fact no fewer than seven times.

The Sanger/Shanker article appeared just a week after then-CIA Director George Tenet [confided](#) to his British counterpart that President George W. Bush had decided "to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy." At that critical juncture, Clapper was in charge of the analysis of satellite imagery and hid the fact that the number of confirmed WMD sites in Iraq was zero.

Despite that fact and that his "assessment" has never been proven, Clapper continues to receive praise.

During a [briefing](#) I attended at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington several weeks ago, Clapper displayed master circular reasoning, saying in effect, that the assessment had to be correct because that's what he and other intelligence directors told President Barack Obama and President-elect Donald Trump.

I got a chance to question him at the event. His disingenuous answers brought a painful flashback to one of the most shameful episodes in the annals of U.S.

intelligence analysis.

Ray McGovern: My name is Ray McGovern. Thanks for this book; it's very interesting [Ray holds up his copy of Clapper's memoir]. I'm part of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. I'd like to refer to the Russia problem, but first there's an analogy that I see here. You were in charge of imagery analysis before Iraq.

James Clapper: Yes.

RM: You confess [in the book] to having been shocked that no weapons of mass destruction were found. And then, to your credit, you admit, as you say here [quotes from the book], "the blame is due to intelligence officers, including me, who were so eager to help [the administration make war on Iraq] that we found what wasn't really there."

Now fast forward to two years ago. Your superiors were hell bent on finding ways to blame Trump's victory on the Russians. Do you think that your efforts were guilty of the same sin here? Do you think that you found a lot of things that weren't really there? Because that's what our conclusion is, especially from the technical end. There was no hacking of the DNC; it was leaked, and you know that because you talked to NSA.

JC: Well, I have talked with NSA a lot, and I also know what we briefed to then-President Elect Trump on the 6th of January. And in my mind, uh, I spent a lot of time in the SIGINT [signals intelligence] business, the forensic evidence was overwhelming about what the Russians had done. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind whatsoever. The Intelligence Community Assessment that we

rendered that day, that was asked, tasked to us by President Obama – and uh – in early December, made no call whatsoever on whether, to what extent the Russians influenced the outcome of the election. Uh, the administration, uh, the team then, the President-Elect's team, wanted to say that – that we said that the Russian interference had no impact whatsoever on the election. And I attempted, we all did, to try to correct that misapprehension as they were writing a press release before we left the room.

However, as a private citizen, understanding the magnitude of what the Russians did and the number of citizens in our country they reached and the different mechanisms that, by which they reached them, to me it stretches credulity to think they didn't have a profound impact on election on the outcome of the election.

RM: That's what the *New York Times* says. But let me say this: we have two former Technical Directors from NSA in our movement here, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity; we also have forensics, okay?

Now the President himself, your President, President Obama said two days before he left town: The conclusions of the intelligence community – this is ten days after you briefed him – with respect to how WikiLeaks got the DNC emails are “inconclusive” *end quote*. Now why would he say that if you had said it was conclusive?

JC: I can't explain what he said or why. But I can tell you we're, we're pretty sure we know, or knew at the time, how WikiLeaks got those emails. I'm not going to go into the technical details about why we believe that.

RM: We are too [pretty sure we know]; and it was a leak onto a thumb drive – gotten to Julian Assange – really simple. If you knew it, and the NSA has that information, you have a duty, you have a duty to confess to that, as well as to [Iraq].

JC: Confess to what?

RM: Confess to the fact that you've been distorting the evidence.

JC: I don't confess to that.

RM: The Intelligence Community Assessment was without evidence.

JC: I do not confess to that. I simply do not agree with your conclusions.

William J. Burns (Carnegie President): Hey, Ray, I appreciate your question. I didn't want this to look like Jim Acosta in the White House grabbing microphones away. Thank you for the questioning though. Yes ma'am [Burns recognizes the next questioner].

The above exchange can be seen starting at 28:45 in this [video](#).

Not Worth His Salt

Having supervised intelligence analysis, including chairing National Intelligence Estimates, for three-quarters of my 27-year career at CIA, my antennae are fine-tuned for canards. And so, at Carnegie, when Clapper focused on the rump analysis masquerading as an "Intelligence Community Assessment," the scent of the duck came back strongly.

Intelligence analysts worth their salt give very close scrutiny to sources, their possible agendas, and their records for truthfulness. Clapper flunks on his own record, including his performance before the Iraq war – not to mention his giving sworn testimony to Congress that he had to admit was “clearly erroneous,” when documents released by Edward Snowden proved him a perjurer. At Carnegie, the questioner who followed me brought that up and asked, “How on earth did you keep your job, Sir?”

The next questioner, a former manager of State Department intelligence, posed another salient question: Why, he asked, was State Department intelligence excluded from the “Intelligence Community Assessment”?

Among the dubious reasons Clapper gave was the claim, “We only had a month, and so it wasn’t treated as a full-up National Intelligence Estimate where all 16 members of the intelligence community would pass judgment on it.” Clapper then tried to spread the blame around (“That was a deliberate decision that we made and that I agreed with”), but as director of national intelligence the decision was his.

Given the questioner’s experience in the State Department’s intelligence, he was painfully aware of how quickly a “full-up NIE” can be prepared. He knew all too well that the October 2002 NIE, “Iraq’s Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction,” was ginned up in less than a month, when Cheney and Bush wanted to get Congress to vote for war on Iraq. (As head of imagery analysis, Clapper signed off on that meretricious estimate, even though he knew no WMD sites had been confirmed in Iraq.)

It's in the Russians' DNA

The criteria Clapper used to handpick his own assistants are not hard to divine. An Air Force general in the mold of Curtis LeMay, Clapper knows all about “the Russians.” And he does not like them, not one bit. During an interview with NBC on May 28, 2017, Clapper referred to “the historical practices of the Russians, who typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique.” And just before I questioned him at Carnegie, he muttered, “It’s in their DNA.”

Even those who may accept Clapper’s bizarre views about Russian genetics still lack credible proof that (as the ICA concludes “with high confidence”) Russia’s main military intelligence unit, the G.R.U., created a “persona” called Guccifer 2.0 to release the emails of the Democratic National Committee. When those disclosures received what was seen as insufficient attention, the G.R.U. “relayed material it acquired from the D.N.C. and senior Democratic officials to WikiLeaks,” the assessment said.

At Carnegie, Clapper cited “forensics.” But forensics from where? To his embarrassment, then-FBI Director James Comey, for reasons best known to him, chose not to do forensics on the “Russian hack” of the DNC computers, preferring to rely on a computer outfit of tawdry reputation hired by the DNC. Moreover, there is zero indication that the drafters of the ICA had any reliable forensics to work with.

In contrast, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, working with independent forensic investigators, examined metadata from a July 5, 2016 DNC intrusion that was alleged to be a “hack.”

However, the metadata showed a transfer speed far exceeding the capacity of the Internet at the time. Actually, all the speed turned out to be precisely what a thumb drive could accommodate, indicating that what was involved was a copy onto an external storage device and not a hack – by Russia or anyone else.

WikiLeaks had obtained the DNC emails earlier. On June 12, 2016 Julian Assange announced he had “emails relating to Hillary Clinton.” NSA appears to lack any evidence that those emails – the embarrassing ones showing that the DNC cards were stacked against Bernie Sanders – were hacked.

Since NSA’s dragnet coverage scoops up everything on the Internet, NSA or its partners can, and do trace all hacks. In the absence of evidence that the DNC was hacked, all available factual evidence indicates that earlier in the spring of 2016, an external storage device like a thumb drive was used in copying the DNC emails given to WikiLeaks.

Additional [investigation](#) has proved Guccifer 2.0 to be an out-and-out fabrication – and a faulty basis for indictments.

A Gaping Gap

Clapper and the directors of the CIA, FBI, and NSA briefed President Obama on the ICA on Jan. 5, 2017, the day before they briefed President-elect Trump. At Carnegie, I asked Clapper to explain why President Obama still had serious doubts. On Jan. 18, 2017, at his final press conference, Obama saw fit to use lawyerly language to cover his own derriere, saying: “The conclusions of the intelligence community with respect to the Russian hacking were not conclusive as to whether WikiLeaks was witting or not in being the conduit through which we heard about the DNC e-mails that were leaked.”

So we end up with “inconclusive conclusions” on that admittedly crucial point. In other words, U.S. intelligence does not know how the DNC emails got to WikiLeaks. In the absence of any evidence from NSA (or from its foreign partners) of an Internet hack of the DNC emails the claim that “the Russians gave the DNC emails to WikiLeaks” rests on thin gruel. After all, these agencies collect everything that goes over the Internet.

Clapper answered: “I cannot explain what he [Obama] said or why. But I can tell you we’re, we’re pretty sure we know, or knew at the time, how WikiLeaks got those emails.”

Really?

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year CIA career he supervised intelligence analysis as Chief of Soviet Foreign Policy Branch, as editor/briefer of the *President’s Daily Brief*, as a member of the Production Review Staff, and as chair of National Intelligence Estimates. In retirement he co-founded Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

(Clarification: After a reader’s comment, this article was amended to show that the *Times* was quoting from the ICA and that the Shane article, which the author said was buried inside, was not the same as the paper’s front page story.)
