

# The Real Motive Behind the FBI Plan to Investigate Trump as a Russian Agent

Coverage of this episode by *The New York Times* and *CNN* further stigmatizes any dissent from new Cold War policy toward Russia, writes Gareth Porter.

By **Gareth Porter**

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*The New York Times* and *CNN* led media coverage last month of discussions among senior FBI officials in May 2017 of a possible national security investigation of President Donald Trump himself, on the premise that he may have acted as an agent of Russia.

The episode has potentially profound political fallout, because the *Times* and *CNN* stories suggested that Trump may indeed have acted like a Russian agent. [The New York Times story](#) on Jan. 11 was headlined, “F.B.I. Opened Inquiry into Whether Trump Was Secretly Working on Behalf of Russia.” [CNN followed three days later](#) with: “Transcripts detail how FBI debated whether Trump was ‘following directions’ of Russia.”

By reporting that Russia may have been able to suborn the president of the United States, these stories have added an even more extreme layer to the dominant national political narrative of a serious Russian threat to destroy U.S. democracy. An analysis of the FBI’s idea of Trump as possible Russian agent reveals, moreover, that it is based on a devious concept of “unwitting” service to Russian

interests that can be traced back to former CIA director John O. Brennan.

## **The Proposal That Fell Apart**

The FBI discussions that drove these stories could have led to the first known investigation of a U.S. president as a suspected national security risk. It ended only a few days after the deliberations among the senior FBI officials when on May 19, 2017, the Justice Department chose Robert Mueller, a former FBI director, to be special counsel. That put control over the Trump-Russia investigation into the hands of Mueller rather than the FBI.

Peter Strzok, who led the bureau's counter-espionage section, was, along with former FBI General Counsel James A. Baker, one of those involved in the May 2017 discussions about investigating Trump. Strzok initially joined Mueller's team but was fired after a couple of months when text messages that he had written came to light exposing a deep animosity towards Trump that cast doubt over his impartiality.

The other FBI officials behind the proposed investigation of Trump have also since left the FBI; either fired or retired.

The entirety of what was said at the meetings of five or six senior FBI officials in the immediate aftermath of Trump's firing of James Comey as FBI director on May 9, 2017, remains a mystery.

## **Closed-door Testimony**

The CNN and *Times* stories were based on transcripts either obtained or, in the case of the *Times*, on portions read

to it, of private testimony given to the House Judiciary and Government Oversight and Reform committees last October by Baker, one of the participants in the discussions of Trump as a possible Russian agent.

Excerpts of Baker's testimony published by CNN make it clear that the group spoke about Trump's policy toward Russia as a basis for a counter-intelligence investigation. Baker said they "discussed as [a] theoretical possibility" that Trump was "acting at the behest of [Russia] and somehow following directions, somehow executing their will."

Baker went on to explain that this theoretical possibility was only "one extreme" in a range of possibilities discussed and that "the other extreme" was that "the President is completely innocent."

He thus made it clear that there was no actual evidence for the idea that he was acting on behalf of Russia.

Baker also offered a simpler rationale for such an investigation of Trump: the president's firing of FBI Director Comey. "Not only would [firing Comey] be an issue of obstructing an investigation," he said, "but the obstruction itself would hurt our ability to figure what the Russians had done, and that is what would be the threat to national security."

But the idea that Comey's firing had triggered the FBI's discussions had already been refuted by a text message that Strzok, who had been leading the FBI's probe into the Trump campaign's contacts with Russians, sent immediately after the firing to Lisa Page, then legal counsel to Andrew McCabe, formerly the bureau's deputy director who was then

acting director.

“We need to open *the case we’ve been waiting on* now while Andy is acting,” Strzok wrote, referring to McCabe.

As Page later confirmed to congressional investigators, according to the CNN story, Strzok’s message referred to their desire to launch an investigation into possible collusion between Trump and the Russians. Strzok’s message also makes clear he, and others intent on the investigation, were anxious to get McCabe to approve the proposed probe before Trump named someone less sympathetic to the project as the new FBI director.

### **Why the FBI Wanted to Investigate**

*The New York Times* story argued that the senior FBI officials’ interest in a counter-intelligence investigation of Trump and the Russians sprang from their knowledge of the sensational charges in the opposition research dossier assembled by British ex-spy Christopher Steele (paid for by the DNC and the Clinton campaign) that the Putin government had “tried to obtain influence over Mr. Trump by preparing to blackmail and bribe him.”

But the *Times* writers must have known that Bruce Ohr, former associate deputy attorney general, had already given McCabe, Page and Strzok information about Steele and his dossier that raised fundamental questions about its reliability.

Ohr’s first contacts at FBI headquarters regarding Steele and his dossier came Aug. 3, 2016, with Page and her boss McCabe. Ohr later met with Strzok.

Ohr said he told them that Steele’s work on the dossier had

been financed by the Clinton campaign through the Perkins-Cole law firm. He also told them that Steele, in a July 30, 2016 meeting, told him he was “desperate that Donald Trump not get elected and was passionate about him not being president,” according to Ohr’s contemporaneous notes of the meeting.

So, key figures in the discussion of Trump and Russia in May 2017 knew that Steele was acting out of both political and business motives to come up with sensational material.

Strzok and Page may have started out as true believers in the idea that the Russians were using Trump campaign officials to manipulate Trump administration policy. However, by May 2017, Strzok had evidently concluded that there was no real evidence.

In a text message to Page on May 19, 2017, Strzok said he was reluctant to join the Mueller investigation, because of his “gut sense and concern” that “there’s no big there there.”

Why, then, were Strzok, Page, McCabe and others so determined to launch an investigation of Trump at about the same time in May 2017?

A *CNN* article about the immediate aftermath of the Comey firing reported that Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein and senior FBI officials “viewed Trump as a leader who needed to be reined in, according to two sources describing the sentiment of the time.”

That description by anti-Trump law enforcement officials suggests that the proposed counter-intelligence

investigation of Trump served as a means to maintain some leverage over his treatment of the FBI in regard to the Russia issue.

That motivation would be consistent with the decision by McCabe on May 15, 2017 – a few days after the discussions in question among the senior FBI officials – to resume the bureau's relationship with Steele.

The FBI had hired Steele as a paid source when it had earlier launched its investigation of Trump campaign official's contacts with Russians in July 2016. But it had suspended and then terminated the relationship over Steele's unauthorized disclosure of the investigation to David Corn of *Mother Jones* magazine in October 2016. So, the decision to resume the relationship with Steele suggests that the group behind the new investigation were thinking of seizing an opportunity to take off the gloves against Trump.

### **The 'Unwitting Collaboration' Ploy**

The discussion by senior FBI officials of a counter-intelligence investigation of Trump has become part of the political struggle over Trump mainly because of the stories in the *Times* and *CNN*.

The role of the authors of those stories illustrates how corporate journalists casually embraced the ultimate conspiracy theory – that the president of the United States was acting as a Russian stooge.

The reporters of the *CNN* story – Jeremy Herb, Pamela Brown and Laura Jarrett – wrote that the FBI officials were “trying to understand why [Trump] was acting in ways that

seemed to benefit Russia.”

*The New York Times* story was more explicit. Co-authors Adam Goldman, Michael S. Schmidt and Nicholas Fandos wrote that the FBI officials “sought to determine whether Mr. Trump was knowingly working for Russia or had unwittingly fallen under Moscow’s influence.”

The same day the *Times* story was published, the lead author on the piece, Adam Goldman, was interviewed by *CNN*. Goldman referred to Trump’s interview with *NBC*’s Lester Holt in the days after the Comey firing as something that supposedly pushed the FBI officials over the edge. Goldman declared, “The FBI is watching him say this, and they say he’s telling us why he did this. He did it on behalf of Russia.”

But Trump said nothing of kind. What he actually said – as the *Times* itself quoted Trump, from the *NBC* interview –was: “[W]hen I decided just to do it, I said to myself – I said, you know this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story.” The *Times* article continued: “Mr. Trump’s aides have said that a fuller examination of his comments demonstrates that he did not fire Mr. Comey to end the Russia inquiry. ‘I might even lengthen out the investigation, but I have to do the right thing for the American people,” Mr. Trump added. ‘He’s the wrong man for that position.’ ” Goldman was evidently trying to sell the idea of Trump as a suspected agent of Russia.

Goldman also gave an interview to *The New Yorker*’s Isaac Chotiner, in which the interviewer pressed him on the weakest point of the Trump-as-Russian-agent theory. “What would that look like if the President was an unwitting agent

of a foreign power?" asked Chotiner.

The *Times* correspondent, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the alleged Russian efforts to influence the 2016 election, responded: "It is hard to say what that would look like." Goldman then reiterated the concept. "People were very careful to tell me that: 'It is wittingly or unwittingly.'" And in answer to a follow-up question, Goldman referred to evidence he suggested might be held by the FBI that "perhaps suggests that the President himself may be acting as a foreign agent, either wittingly or unwittingly...."

The idea that American citizens were somehow at risk of being led by an agent of the Russian government "wittingly or unwittingly" did not appear spontaneously. It had been pushed aggressively by former CIA Director John O. Brennan both during and after his role in pressing for the original investigation.

When Brennan testified before the House Intelligence Committee in May 2017, he was asked whether he had intelligence indicating that anyone in the Trump campaign was "colluding with Moscow." Instead of answering the question directly, Brennan said he knew from past experience that "the Russians try to suborn individuals, and they try get them to act on their behalf either wittingly or unwittingly." And he recalled that he had left the government with "unresolved questions" about whether the Russians had been successful in doing so in regard to unidentified individuals in the case of the 2016 elections.

Brennan's notion of "unwitting collaboration" with Russian



subversion is illogical. Although a political actor might accidentally reveal information to a foreign government that is valuable, real “collaboration” must be mutually agreeable. A policy position or action that may benefit a foreign government, but is also in the interest of one’s own government, does not constitute “unwitting collaboration.”

The real purpose of that concept is to confer on national security officials and their media allies the power to cast suspicion on individuals on the basis of undesirable policy views of Russia rather than on any evidence of actual collaboration with the Russian government.

The “witting or unwitting” ploy has its origins in the unsavory history of extreme right-wing anti-communism during the Cold War. For example, when the [House Un-American Activities Committee](#) was at its height in 1956, Chairman Francis E. Walter [declared](#) that “people who are not actually Communist Party members are witting or unwitting servants of the Communist cause.”

The same logic – without explicit reference to the phrase – has been used to impugn the independence and loyalty of people who have contacts with Russia.

It has also been used to portray some independent media as part of a supposedly all-powerful Russian media system.

The revelation that it was turned against a sitting president, however briefly, is a warning signal that national security bureaucrats and their media allies are now moving more aggressively to delegitimize any opposition to the new Cold War.

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