

# Top Ten Questions About the Mueller Report

Daniel Lazare examines some of the missing pieces in the special counsel's 448-page tome on Russian interference.

By **Daniel Lazare**

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In January 2017, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper issued a **report** about Russian interference co-signed by three other agencies – the National Security Agency, the FBI, and the CIA – that was so evidence-free that even *The New York Times* **said** it was “unlikely to change the minds of skeptics who ... remember the intelligence agencies’ faulty assessments on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.”

“We assess Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016,” the report stated. “We also assess Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump. ... We assess with high confidence that Russian military intelligence (General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate or GRU) used the Guccifer 2.0 persona and DCLeaks.com to release U.S. victim data...”

That was it. No back-up, no substantiation, no analysis other than to point out that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hillary Clinton were on **bad terms** and that Russia hoped for better from Trump. Moreover, the report included a bizarre seven-page attack on RT, the Moscow-backed news outlet formerly known as Russia Today, for “highlight[ing] criticism of alleged U.S. shortcomings” by asserting, among

other things, “that the U.S. two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham.’” If Clapper & Co. couldn’t tell the difference between a news agency from a hostile intelligence service – or between legitimate criticism and a foreign attack – then what good was their judgment regarding other Russian government activities?

But with Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller’s 448-page tome on Russian interference, surely we’ve turned a corner, right?

Wrong. Mueller’s door-stopper of a report may be chockfull of facts, but it’s also filled with the non sequiturs, loose threads and self-serving arguments that we’ve come to expect from official Washington. It’s good on collusion, pointing out that reports of a Trump-Russia conspiracy remain unsubstantiated despite desperate Democratic efforts to spin it otherwise.

But it’s lousy on interference, regurgitating the standard intelligence-community line that Russia “interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion.” Simultaneously, it is remarkably incurious about how the scandal began, who propelled it along, and how it all snowballed into a mega-Watergate.

With that in mind, here are 10 questions that the report should answer but doesn’t.

### **No. 1: Was it Bernie in a Speedo?**

In its discussion of the Internet Research Agency, the alleged St. Petersburg troll farm that supposedly used

social media to interfere in the 2016 election, the report quotes [congressional testimony](#) by Facebook General Counsel Colin Stretch stating that the company had linked the Internet Research Agency to 470 phony accounts that “collectively made 80,000 posts between January 2015 and August 2017” that may have “reached as many as 126 million persons.”

This sounds alarming. But that’s not all Stretch said. He also testified that American Facebook users received a total of 33 trillion posts over the same period, a figure more than 400 million times greater. With a typical user receiving roughly 220 posts per day, he estimated that 29 million people may have come across one IRA item over more than two years and that each recipient may have then passed along to three or four others – hence the figure of 126 million. (See Gareth Porter, [“33 Trillion More Reasons Why The New York Times Gets It Wrong on Russia-gate,”](#) Nov. 2, 2018.)

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What might that item have been? Could it have been a cartoon of a [muscle-bound Bernie Sanders](#) in a Speedo? A picture of Jesus arm-wrestling with [a pro-Hillary Satan](#)? Why doesn’t the report mention the strange and inept material the Internet Research Agency put out or the less sensational figures issued by Facebook? Is it because Mueller wants to perpetuate the myth of massive Russian interference – the kind of interference, by the way, in which the U.S. engages with other countries around the

clock?

## **No. 2: Partial Accounting?**

The report says that 3,814 Twitter accounts controlled by the Internet Research Agency may also have reached 1.4 million users. This also sounds scary. But what the report doesn't say is that while the Internet Research Agency allegedly posted 176,000 tweets during the 10-week presidential campaign, that's a drop in the bucket compared to the one billion election-related messages that Americans tweeted overall. Why not cite that number too?

## **No. 3: Just Another Clickbait Operation?**

The report notes that only 8.4 percent of IRA tweets were election-related. If so, what does Mueller think the other 91.6 percent were about? Could it be that IRA was not an intelligence agency after all, but, as it's been argued, a "clickbait" operation aimed at drumming up business?

## **No. 4: Under-Cover Hoopla?**

The report discusses Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of the Internet Research Agency, saying that "IRA employees, claiming to be U.S. social activists and administrators of Facebook groups, recruited U.S. persons to hold signs (including one in front of the white House) that read 'Happy 55<sup>th</sup> Birthday Dear Boss,' as an homage to Prigozhin (whose 55<sup>th</sup> birthday was on June 1, 2016)." What kind of intelligence operation calls attention to itself in such a flamboyant manner? Is this yet more evidence that the Internet Research Agency was something entirely different?

## **No. 5: Investigation by News Clip?**

Although last summer's indictment of the Internet Research Agency was silent on the question of Russian involvement in Prigozhin's alleged activities, the Mueller report argues that his Kremlin links are strong after all. The evidence: a *New York Times* article, "Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian Oligarch Indicted by US., Is Known as 'Putin's Cook.'" After nearly two years, is this all that 19 attorneys and 40 FBI agents working for Mueller could come up with – a newspaper clip?

#### **No. 6: Another Source on GRU Hack?**

"By no later than April 12, 2016," the report continues, "the GRU gained access to the DCCC [i.e. Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee] computer network using the credential stolen from a DCCC employee who had been successfully spearphished the day before." How does team Mueller know what the GRU was up to when the Democratic National Committee refused to grant the FBI access to its computers? Does he have another source he's not telling us about?

#### **No. 7: More on Mifsud?**

The report's discussion of Maltese academic Joseph Mifsud is strikingly incomplete. After all, it was Mifsud who got Russia-gate rolling by telling President Donald Trump's foreign-policy adviser, George Papadopoulos, over breakfast at a London hotel that Russia had "dirt" on Hilary Clinton in the form of "thousands of emails." It was this tip, which Papadopoulos relayed to top Australian diplomat Alexander Downer, that prompted the formal FBI investigation known as "Crossfire Hurricane" when word reached Washington.

This makes Mifsud an important guy. Yet the report says little about him other than he “maintained various Russian contacts while living in London” and that one such contact was a former employee of the Internet Research Agency. Yet abundant evidence suggests that Mifsud in fact enjoyed extensive ties to Western intelligence.

Stephan Roh, a Swiss-German lawyer who hired him as a consultant, writes in a self-published book that Mifsud has “only one master: the Western Political, Diplomatic, and Intelligence World, his only home, of which he is still deeply dependent.” Photographs have surfaced of Mifsud with British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and with Claire Smith, a top British intelligence official with whom he taught a course for Italian military and law-enforcement personnel at a private institute in Rome that Roh partly owns.

British and Russian intelligence agents normally do not team up in such a manner. So why doesn't Mueller mention such links? The report also notes that Mifsud introduced Papadopoulos to an attractive young woman named Olga Polonskaya, whom he falsely billed as Putin's niece and who offered to help set up a meeting between Trump and the Russian president.

But why would Mifsud go to such lengths? Isn't Mueller curious as to whether he was trying to lead Papadopoulos into a trap? Or is this another avenue he doesn't want to go down in order to maintain a narrative about evil Russians targeting a hapless west?

The report doesn't mention Downer by name and also doesn't

mention Christopher Steele, the ex-MI6 agent whose 35-page “golden showers” dossier on Trump’s alleged Russia links created a media frenzy. It also doesn’t mention that *The Washington Post* reported that the “golden showers” section was written by a Clinton operative. Since Steele is as crucial to the story as Mifsud or Downer, shouldn’t we know more about him as well – who recruited him, who provided him advice along the way, who fed him information?

#### **No. 8: Something Missing on Millian?**

On the other hand, the report devotes two pages to Sergei Millian, the Belarus-American who may also have tried to lure Papadopoulos into a trap by offering to “share with you a disruptive technology that might be instrumental in your political work for the campaign.” But it fails to mention that Millian was simultaneously a source for the Steele Dossier. A connection like this fairly cries out for an investigation. Yet Mueller is apparently uninterested – why?

#### **No. 9: Failure to Inform on Sater?**

Mueller likewise neglects to mention that Felix Sater, the Russian-American mobster pushing Trump Tower Moscow, was an FBI informant and that Henry Oknyansky, a Russian expatriate who tried to interest the Trump campaign in still more dirt on Clinton, was as well. Why the reticence?

#### **No. 10: Eavesdropping on Next Administration?**

After President Barack Obama slapped sanctions on Russia for alleged election interference in December 2016, the report says: “Members of the intelligence community were surprised

by Russia's decision not to retaliate. When analyzing Russia's response, they became aware of [future National Security Adviser Michael] Flynn's discussions of sanctions with [Russian ambassador Sergey] Kislyak."

How did intelligence agents become aware of such discussions? Were they listening in? Is Mueller at all concerned that intelligence agencies were apparently eavesdropping on an incoming presidential administration?

One could go on – about the report's dubious attempts to paint *WikiLeaks* as an arm of the GRU (see my story, "[The 'Guccifer 2.0' Gaps in Mueller's Full Report](#)," April 18, 2019), about the thin evidence the report marshals in its effort to brand Paul Manafort's associate Konstantin Kilimnik a Russia spy (volume one, p. 133), about the FBI's attempt to use the defunct Logan Act – a two-century old law banning private diplomacy that has been dormant since 1852 – to launch an investigation into Flynn (volume two, p. 37), and so on.

But the point should be clear. The Mueller report is an exercise in disinformation. It generates more questions than answers about what may well have been an effort to sabotage U.S.-Russian relations and cripple the White House.

"I can't do anything with Russia," Trump complained after two months in office. "There's things I'd like to do with Russia, with trade, with ISIS, they're all over me with this." Did it occur to Mueller that this is just the sort of policy paralysis that a phony Russia-gate scandal was designed to achieve?

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Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy” (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique* and blogs about the Constitution and related matters at [Daniellazare.com](http://Daniellazare.com).

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