

Mocking Trump Doesn't Prove Russia's Guilt

Exclusive: President Trump is getting mocked for “trusting” Vladimir Putin’s denial about “meddling” in U.S. politics – and not accepting Official Washington’s groupthink – but ridicule isn’t evidence, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

If the bloody debacle in Iraq should have taught Americans anything, it is that endorsements by lots of important people who think something is true don’t amount to evidence that it actually is true. If endorsements were the same as evidence, U.S. troops would have found tons of WMD in Iraq, rather than come up empty.

So, when it comes to whether or not Russia “hacked” Democratic emails last year and slipped them to WikiLeaks, just because a bunch of people with fancy titles think the Russians are guilty doesn’t compensate for the lack of evidence so far evinced to support this core charge.

But the reaction of Official Washington and the U.S. mainstream media to President Trump saying that Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed sincere in denying Russian “meddling” was sputtering outrage: How could Trump doubt what so many important people think is true?

Yet, if the case were all that strong that Russia did “hack” the emails, you would have expected a straightforward explication of the evidence rather than a demonstration of a full-blown groupthink, but what we got this weekend was all groupthink and no evidence.

For instance, on Saturday, CNN responded to Trump’s comment that Putin seems to “mean it” when he denied meddling by running a list of important Americans who had endorsed the Russian-guilt verdict. Other U.S. news outlets and politicians followed the same pattern.

Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and a big promoter of the Russia-gate allegations, scoffed at what Trump said: “You believe a foreign adversary over your own intelligence agencies?”

The Washington Post’s headline sitting atop Sunday’s lede article read: “Trump says Putin sincere in denial of Russian meddling: Critics call that

‘unconscionable.’”

Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee and another Russia-gate sparkplug, said he was left “completely speechless” by Trump’s willingness to take Putin’s word “over the conclusions of our own combined intelligence community.”

Which gets us back to the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” and its stunning lack of evidence in support of its Russian guilty verdict. The ICA even admitted as much, that it wasn’t asserting Russian guilt as fact but rather as opinion:

“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 The New York Times, which has led the media groupthink on Russian guilt, initially published the surprised reaction from correspondent Scott Shane who wrote: “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.’”

In other words, the ICA was not a disposition of fact; it was guesswork, possibly understandable guesswork, but guesswork nonetheless. And guesswork should be open to debate.

Shutting Down Debate

But the debate was shut down earlier this year by the oft-repeated claim that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the assessment and how could anyone question what all 17 intelligence agencies concluded!

However, that canard was finally knocked down by President Obama’s own Director of National Intelligence James Clapper who acknowledged in sworn congressional testimony that the ICA was the product of “handpicked” analysts from only three agencies – the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

In other words, not only did the full intelligence community not participate in the ICA but only analysts “handpicked” by Obama’s intelligence chiefs conducted the analysis – and as we intelligence veterans know well, if you handpick the analysts, you are handpicking the conclusions.

For instance, put a group of analysts known for their hardline views on Russia in a room for a few weeks, prevent analysts with dissenting viewpoints from

weighing in, don't require any actual evidence, and you are pretty sure to get the Russia-bashing result that you wanted.

So why do you think Clapper and Obama's CIA Director John Brennan put up the no-entry sign that kept out analysts from the State Department and Defense Intelligence Agency, two entities that might have significant insights into Russian intentions? By all rights, they should have been included. But, clearly, no dissenting footnotes or wider-perspective views were desired.

If you remember back to the Iraq WMD intelligence estimate, analysts from the State Department's intelligence bureau, known as INR, offered unwelcome dissenting views about the pace of Iraq's supposed nuclear program, inserting a footnote saying they found it too difficult to predict the fruition of a program when there was no reliable evidence as to when – not to mention if – it had started.

DIA also was demonstrating an unusually independent streak, displaying a willingness to give due consideration to Russia's perspective. Here's the heterodox line DIA took in a major report published in December 2015:

“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 the Arab Spring 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.”

So, not only did the Jan. 6 report exclude input from INR and DIA and the other dozen or so intelligence agencies but it even avoided a fully diverse set of opinions from inside the CIA, FBI and NSA. The assessment – or guesswork – came only from those “hand-picked” analysts.

It's also worth noting that not only does Putin deny that Russia was behind the publication of the Democratic emails but so too does WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange who has insisted repeatedly that the material did not come from the Russians. He and others around WikiLeaks have strongly suggested that the emails came as leaks from Democratic insiders.

Seeking Real Answers

In the face of Official Washington's evidence-free groupthink, what some of us former U.S. intelligence analysts have been trying to do is provide both a fuller understanding of Russian behavior and whatever scientific analysis can be applied to the alleged “hacks.”

Forensic investigations and testing of relevant download speeds, reported by members of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), have undermined the Russia-did-it groupthink. But this attempt to engage in actual evaluation of evidence has been either ignored or mocked by mainstream news outlets.

Still, the suggestion in our July 24 VIPS memo that President Trump ask current CIA Director Mike Pompeo to take a fresh look at the issue recently had some consequence when Pompeo contacted VIPS member William Binney, a former NSA Technical Director, and invited him to explain his latest research on the impossibility of the Russians extracting the Democratic emails via an Internet hack based on known download speeds.

In typically candid terms, Binney explained to Pompeo why VIPS had concluded that the intelligence analysts behind the Jan. 6 report had been making stuff up about Russian “hacking.”

When news of the Binney-Pompeo meeting broke last week, the U.S. mainstream media again rejected the opportunity to rethink the Russia-did-it groupthink and instead treated Binney as some sort of “conspiracy theorist” with a “disputed” theory, while attacking Pompeo’s willingness to discuss Binney’s findings as “politicizing intelligence.”

Despite the smearing of Binney, President Trump appears to have taken some of this new evidence to heart, explaining his dispute with open-mouthed White House reporters on Air Force One who baited Trump with various forms of the same question: “Do you believe Putin?” amid the new jeering about Trump “getting played” by Putin.

Trump’s demeanor, however, suggested increased confidence that the Russian “hacking” allegations were the “witch hunt” that he has decried for months.

Trump also jabbed the press over its earlier false claims that “all 17 intelligence agencies” concurred on the Russian “hack.” And Trump introduced the idea of a different kind of “hack,” i.e., Obama’s political appointees at the heads of the agencies behind the Jan. 6 report.

Trump said, “You hear it’s 17 agencies. Well it’s three. And one is Brennan ... give me a break. They’re political hacks. ... I mean, you have Brennan, you have Clapper, you have [FBI Director James] Comey. Comey is proven to be a liar and he’s proven to be a leaker.”

Later, in deference to those still at work in intelligence, Trump said, “I’m with our [intelligence] agencies as currently constituted.”

While Trump surely has a dismal record of his own regarding truth-telling, he’s

not wrong about the checkered record of the triumvirate of Clapper, Brennan and Comey.

Clapper played a key role in the bogus Iraq-WMD intelligence when he was head of the National Geo-spatial Agency and hid the fact that there was zero evidence in satellite imagery of any weapons of mass destruction before the Iraq invasion. When no WMDs were found, Clapper told the media that he thought they were shipped off to Syria.

In 2013, Clapper perjured himself before Congress by denying NSA's unconstitutional blanket surveillance of Americans. After evidence emerged revealing the falsity of Clapper's testimony, he wrote a letter to Congress admitting, "My response was clearly erroneous – for which I apologize." Despite the deception, he was allowed to stay as Obama's most senior intelligence officer for almost four more years.

Clapper also has demonstrated an ugly bias about Russians. On May 28, as a former DNI, Clapper explained Russian "interference" in the U.S. election to NBC's Chuck Todd on May 28 with a tutorial on what everyone should know about "the historical practices of the Russians." Clapper said, "the Russians, typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique."

Brennan, who had previously defended torture as having been an effective way to gain intelligence, was CIA director when agency operatives broke into the computers of the Senate Intelligence Committee when it was investigating CIA torture.

Former FBI Director Comey is infamous for letting the Democratic National Committee arrange its own investigation of the "hacking" that was then blamed on Russia, a development that led some members of Congress to call the supposed "hack" an "act of war." Despite the risk of nuclear conflagration, the FBI didn't bother to do its own forensics.

And, by his own admission, Comey arranged a leak to The New York Times that was specifically designed to get a Special Prosecutor appointed to investigate Russia-gate, a job that fell to his old friend Robert Mueller, who has had his own mixed record as the previous FBI director in mishandling the 9/11 investigation.

There are plenty of reasons to want Trump out of the White House, but there also should be respect for facts and due process. So far, the powers-that-be in Washington – in politics, the media and other dominant institutions, what some call the Deep State – have shown little regard for fairness in the Russia-gate

“scandal.”

The goal seems to be to remove the President or at least emasculate him on a bum rap, giving him the bum’s rush, so to speak, while also further demonizing Russia and exacerbating an already dangerous New Cold War.

The truth should still count for something. No one’s character should be assassinated, as Bill Binney’s is being now, for running afoul of the conventional wisdom that Trump – like bête noire Putin – never tells the truth, and that to believe either is, well, “unconscionable,” as The Washington Post warns.

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New Cracks in Russia-gate Foundation

The Russia-gate groupthink always rested on a fragile foundation of dubious analysis and biased guesswork, but now has been shaken by new forensic studies of the purported “hack,” as Patrick Lawrence reported at The Nation.

By Patrick Lawrence

It is now a year since the Democratic National Committee’s mail system was compromised – a year since events in the spring and early summer of 2016 were identified as remote hacks and, in short order, attributed to Russians acting in behalf of Donald Trump.

A great edifice has been erected during this time. President Trump, members of his family, and numerous people around him stand accused of various corruptions and extensive collusion with Russians. Half a dozen simultaneous investigations proceed into these matters. Last week news broke that Special Counsel Robert Mueller had convened a grand jury, which issued its first subpoenas on August 3. Allegations of treason are common; prominent political figures and many media cultivate a case for impeachment.

The President’s ability to conduct foreign policy, notably but not only with regard to Russia, is now crippled. Forced into a corner and having no choice, Trump just signed legislation imposing severe new sanctions on Russia and European companies working with it on pipeline projects vital to Russia’s energy

sector. Striking this close to the core of another nation's economy is customarily considered an act of war, we must not forget.

In retaliation, Moscow has announced that the United States must cut its embassy staff by roughly two-thirds. All sides agree that relations between the United States and Russia are now as fragile as they were during some of the Cold War's worst moments. To suggest that military conflict between two nuclear powers inches ever closer can no longer be dismissed as hyperbole.

All this was set in motion when the DNC's mail server was first violated in the spring of 2016 and by subsequent assertions that Russians were behind that "hack" and another such operation, also described as a Russian hack, on July 5. These are the foundation stones of the edifice just outlined.

The evolution of public discourse in the year since is worthy of scholarly study: Possibilities became allegations, and these became probabilities. Then the probabilities turned into certainties, and these evolved into what are now taken to be established truths. By my reckoning, it required a few days to a few weeks to advance from each of these stages to the next. This was accomplished via the indefensibly corrupt manipulations of language repeated incessantly in our leading media.

Lost in a year that often appeared to veer into our peculiarly American kind of hysteria is the absence of any credible evidence of what happened last year and who was responsible for it. It is tiresome to note, but none has been made available. Instead, we are urged to accept the word of institutions and senior officials with long records of deception. These officials profess "high confidence" in their "assessment" as to what happened in the spring and summer of last year – this standing as their authoritative judgment.

Few have noticed since these evasive terms first appeared that an assessment is an opinion, nothing more, and to express high confidence is an upside-down way of admitting the absence of certain knowledge. This is how officials avoid putting their names on the assertions we are so strongly urged to accept – as the record shows many of them have done.

We come now to a moment of great gravity.

There has been a long effort to counter the official narrative we now call "Russiagate." This effort has so far focused on the key events noted above, leaving numerous others still to be addressed. Until recently, researchers undertaking this work faced critical shortcomings, and these are to be explained. But they have achieved significant new momentum in the past several weeks, and what they have done now yields very consequential fruit.

Forensic investigators, intelligence analysts, system designers, program architects, and computer scientists of long experience and strongly credentialed are now producing evidence disproving the official version of key events last year. Their work is intricate and continues at a kinetic pace as we speak. But its certain results so far are two, simply stated, and freighted with implications:

- There was no hack of the Democratic National Committee's system on July 5 last year – not by the Russians, not by anyone else. Hard science now demonstrates it was a leak – a download executed locally with a memory key or a similarly portable data-storage device. In short, it was an inside job by someone with access to the DNC's system. This casts serious doubt on the initial "hack," as alleged, that led to the very consequential publication of a large store of documents on WikiLeaks last summer.
- Forensic investigations of documents made public two weeks prior to the July 5 leak by the person or entity known as Guccifer 2.0 show that they were fraudulent: Before Guccifer posted them they were adulterated by cutting and pasting them into a blank template that had Russian as its default language. Guccifer took responsibility on June 15 for an intrusion the DNC reported on June 14 and professed to be a WikiLeaks source – claims essential to the official narrative implicating Russia in what was soon cast as an extensive hacking operation. To put the point simply, forensic science now devastates this narrative.

New Analyses

This article is based on an examination of the documents these forensic experts and intelligence analysts have produced, notably the key papers written over the past several weeks, as well as detailed interviews with many of those conducting investigations and now drawing conclusions from them. Before proceeding into this material, several points bear noting.

One, there are many other allegations implicating Russians in the 2016 political process. The work I will now report upon does not purport to prove or disprove any of them. Who delivered documents to WikiLeaks? Who was responsible for the "phishing" operation penetrating John Podesta's e-mail in March 2016?

We do not know the answers to such questions. It is entirely possible, indeed, that the answers we deserve and must demand could turn out to be multiple: One thing happened in one case, another thing in another. The new work done on the mid-June and July 5 events bears upon all else in only one respect. We are now on notice: Given that we now stand face to face with very considerable cases of duplicity, it is imperative that all official accounts of these many events be subject to rigorously skeptical questioning. Do we even know that John Podesta's

e-mail was in fact “phished”? What evidence of this has been produced? Such rock-bottom questions as these must now be posed in all other cases.

Two, houses built on sand and made of cards are bound to collapse, and there can be no surprise that the one resting atop the “hack theory,” as we can call the prevailing wisdom on the DNC events, appears to be in the process of doing so.

Neither is there anything far-fetched in a reversal of the truth of this magnitude. American history is replete with similar cases. The Spanish sank the *Maine* in Havana harbor in February 1898. Iran’s Mossadegh was a Communist. Guatemala’s Árbenz represented a Communist threat to the United States. Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh was a Soviet puppet. The Sandinistas were Communists. The truth of the *Maine*, a war and a revolution in between, took a century to find the light of day, whereupon the official story disintegrated. We can do better now. It is an odd sensation to live through one of these episodes, especially one as big as Russiagate. But its place atop a long line of precedents can no longer be disputed.

Three, regardless of what one may think about the investigations and conclusions I will now outline – and, as noted, these investigations continue – there is a bottom line attaching to them. We can even call it a red line. Under no circumstance can it be acceptable that the relevant authorities – the National Security Agency, the Justice Department (via the Federal Bureau of Investigation), and the Central Intelligence Agency – leave these new findings without reply. Not credibly, in any case. Forensic investigators, prominent among them people with decades’ experience at high levels in these very institutions, have put a body of evidence on a table previously left empty. Silence now, should it ensue, cannot be written down as an admission of duplicity, but it will come very close to one.

It requires no elaboration to apply the above point to the corporate media, which have been flaccidly satisfied with official explanations of the DNC matter from the start.

Qualified experts working independently of one another began to examine the DNC case immediately after the July 2016 events. Prominent among these is a group comprising former intelligence officers, almost all of whom previously occupied senior positions. Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPs), founded in 2003, now has 30 members, including a few associates with backgrounds in national-security fields other than intelligence. The chief researchers active on the DNC case are four: William Binney, formerly the NSA’s technical director for world geopolitical and military analysis and designer of many agency programs now in use; Kirk Wiebe, formerly a senior analyst at the NSA’s SIGINT Automation Research Center; Edward Loomis, formerly technical director in the

NSA's Office of Signal Processing; and Ray McGovern, an intelligence analyst for nearly three decades and formerly chief of the CIA's Soviet Foreign Policy Branch. Most of these men have decades of experience in matters concerning Russian intelligence and the related technologies. This article reflects numerous interviews with all of them conducted in person, via Skype, or by telephone.

The customary VIPS format is an open letter, typically addressed to the President. The group has written three such letters on the DNC incident, all of which were first published by Robert Parry at www.consortiumnews.com. [Here is](#) the latest, dated July 24; it blueprints the forensic work this article explores in detail. They have all argued that the hack theory is wrong and that a locally executed leak is the far more likely explanation.

In a letter to Barack Obama dated January 17, three days before he left office, the group explained that the NSA's known programs are fully capable of capturing all electronic transfers of data. "We strongly suggest that you ask NSA for any evidence it may have indicating that the results of Russian hacking were given to WikiLeaks," the letter said. "If NSA cannot produce such evidence – and quickly – this would probably mean it does not have any."

The day after Parry published this letter, Obama gave his last press conference as President, at which he delivered one of the great gems among the official statements on the DNC e-mail question. "The conclusions of the intelligence community with respect to the Russian hacking," the legacy-minded Obama said, "were not conclusive." There is little to suggest the VIPS letter prompted this remark, but it is typical of the linguistic tap-dancing many officials connected to the case have indulged so as to avoid putting their names on the hack theory and all that derives from it.

Cyber-Evidence

Until recently there was a serious hindrance to the VIPS's work, and I have just suggested it. The group lacked access to positive data. It had no lump of cyber-material to place on its lab table and analyze, because no official agency had provided any.

Donald Rumsfeld famously argued with regard to the WMD question in Iraq, "The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." In essence, Binney and others at VIPS say this logic turns upside down in the DNC case: Based on the knowledge of former officials such as Binney, the group knew that (1) if there was a hack and (2) if Russia was responsible for it, the NSA would have to have evidence of both. Binney and others surmised that the agency and associated institutions were hiding the absence of evidence behind the claim that they had to maintain

secrecy to protect NSA programs.

“Everything that they say must remain classified is already well-known,” Binney said in an interview. “They’re playing the Wizard of Oz game.”

New findings indicate this is perfectly true, but until recently the VIPS experts could produce only “negative evidence,” as they put it: The absence of evidence supporting the hack theory demonstrates that it cannot be so. That is all VIPS had. They could allege and assert, but they could not conclude: They were stuck demanding evidence they did not have – if only to prove there was none.

Research into the DNC case took a fateful turn in early July, when forensic investigators who had been working independently began to share findings and form loose collaborations wherein each could build on the work of others. In this a small, new website called www.disobedientmedia.com proved an important catalyst. Two independent researchers selected it, Snowden-like, as the medium through which to disclose their findings.

One of these is known as Forensicator and the other as Adam Carter. On July 9, Adam Carter sent Elizabeth Vos, a co-founder of Disobedient Media, a paper by the Forensicator that split the DNC case open like a coconut.

By this time Binney and the other technical-side people at VIPS had begun working with a man named Skip Folden. Folden was an IT executive at IBM for 33 years, serving 25 years as the IT program manager in the United States. He has also consulted for Pentagon officials, the FBI, and the Justice Department. Folden is effectively the VIPS group’s liaison to Forensicator, Adam Carter, and other investigators, but neither Folden nor anyone else knows the identity of either Forensicator or Adam Carter. This bears brief explanation.

The Forensicator’s July 9 document indicates he lives in the Pacific Time Zone, which puts him on the West Coast. His notes describing his investigative procedures support this. But little else is known of him. Adam Carter, in turn, is located in England, but the name is a coy pseudonym: It derives from a character in a BBC espionage series called *Spooks*. It is protocol in this community, Elizabeth Vos told me in a telephone conversation this week, to respect this degree of anonymity.

Kirk Wiebe, the former SIGINT analyst at the NSA, thinks Forensicator could be “someone very good with the FBI,” but there is no certainty. Unanimously, however, all the analysts and forensics investigators interviewed for this column say Forensicator’s advanced expertise, evident in the work he has done, is unassailable. They hold a similarly high opinion of Adam Carter’s work.

Forensicator is working with the documents published by Guccifer 2.0, focusing for now on the July 5 intrusion into the DNC server. The contents of Guccifer's files are known – they were published last September – and are not Forensicator's concern. His work is with the metadata on those files. These data did not come to him via any clandestine means. Forensicator simply has access to them that others did not have. It is this access that prompts Kirk Wiebe and others to suggest that Forensicator may be someone with exceptional talent and training inside an agency such as the FBI.

"Forensicator unlocked and then analyzed what had been the locked files Guccifer supposedly took from the DNC server," Skip Folden explained in an interview. "To do this he would have to have 'access privilege,' meaning a key."

What has Forensicator proven since he turned his key? How? What has work done atop Forensicator's findings proven? How?

The Transfer Rate

Forensicator's first decisive findings, made public in the paper dated July 9, concerned the volume of the supposedly hacked material and what is called the transfer rate – the time a remote hack would require. The metadata established several facts in this regard with granular precision: On the evening of July 5, 2016, 1,976 megabytes of data were downloaded from the DNC's server. The operation took 87 seconds. This yields a transfer rate of 22.7 megabytes per second.

These statistics are matters of record and essential to disproving the hack theory. No Internet service provider, such as a hacker would have had to use in mid-2016, was capable of downloading data at this speed. Compounding this contradiction, Guccifer claimed to have run his hack from Romania, which, for numerous reasons technically called delivery overheads, would slow down the speed of a hack even further from maximum achievable speeds.

What is the maximum achievable speed? Forensicator recently ran a test download of a comparable data volume (and using a server speed not available in 2016) 40 miles from his computer via a server 20 miles away and came up with a speed of 11.8 megabytes per second – half what the DNC operation would need were it a hack. Other investigators have built on this finding. Folden and Edward Loomis say a survey published August 3, 2016, by www.speedtest.net/reports is highly reliable and use it as their thumbnail index. It indicated that the highest average ISP speeds of first-half 2016 were achieved by Xfinity and Cox Communications. These speeds averaged 15.6 megabytes per second and 14.7 megabytes per second, respectively. Peak speeds at higher rates were recorded intermittently but still did not reach the required 22.7 megabytes per second.

“A speed of 22.7 megabytes is simply unobtainable, especially if we are talking about a transoceanic data transfer,” Folden said. “Based on the data we now have, what we’ve been calling a hack is impossible.” Last week Forensicator reported on a speed test he conducted more recently. It tightens the case considerably. “Transfer rates of 23 MB/s (Mega Bytes per second) are not just highly unlikely, but effectively impossible to accomplish when communicating over the Internet at any significant distance,” he wrote. “Further, local copy speeds are measured, demonstrating that 23 MB/s is a typical transfer rate when using a USB-2 flash device (thumb drive).”

Time stamps in the metadata provide further evidence of what happened on July 5. The stamps recording the download indicate that it occurred in the Eastern Daylight Time Zone at approximately 6:45 pm. This confirms that the person entering the DNC system was working somewhere on the East Coast of the United States.

In theory the operation could have been conducted from Bangor or Miami or anywhere in between – but not Russia, Romania, or anywhere else outside the EDT zone. Combined with Forensicator’s findings on the transfer rate, the time stamps constitute more evidence that the download was conducted locally, since delivery overheads – conversion of data into packets, addressing, sequencing times, error checks, and the like – degrade all data transfers conducted via the Internet, more or less according to the distance involved.

Russian ‘Fingerprints’

In addition, there is the adulteration of the documents Guccifer 2.0 posted on June 15, when he made his first appearance. This came to light when researchers penetrated what Folden calls Guccifer’s top layer of metadata and analyzed what was in the layers beneath. They found that the first five files Guccifer made public had each been run, via ordinary cut-and-paste, through a single template that effectively immersed them in what could plausibly be cast as Russian fingerprints. They were not: The Russian markings were artificially inserted prior to posting. “It’s clear,” another forensics investigator self-identified as HET, wrote in a report on this question, “that metadata was deliberately altered and documents were deliberately pasted into a Russianified [W]ord document with Russian language settings and style headings.”

To be noted in this connection: The list of the CIA’s cyber-tools WikiLeaks began to release in March and labeled Vault 7 includes one called Marble that is capable of obfuscating the origin of documents in false-flag operations and leaving markings that point to whatever the CIA wants to point to. (The tool can also “de-obfuscate” what it has obfuscated.) It is not known whether this tool was deployed in the Guccifer case, but it is there for such a use.

It is not yet clear whether documents now shown to have been leaked locally on July 5 were tainted to suggest Russian hacking in the same way the June 15 Guccifer release was. This is among several outstanding questions awaiting answers, and the forensic scientists active on the DNC case are now investigating it.

In a note Adam Carter sent to Folden and McGovern last week and copied to me, he reconfirmed the corruption of the June 15 documents, while indicating that his initial work on the July 5 documents – of which much more is to be done – had not yet turned up evidence of doctoring.

In the meantime, VIPS has assembled a chronology that imposes a persuasive logic on the complex succession of events just reviewed. It is this:

- On June 12 last year, Julian Assange announced that WikiLeaks had and would publish documents pertinent to Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign.
- On June 14, CrowdStrike, a cyber-security firm hired by the DNC, announced, without providing evidence, that it had found malware on DNC servers and had evidence that Russians were responsible for planting it.
- On June 15, Guccifer 2.0 first appeared, took responsibility for the "hack" reported on June 14 and claimed to be a WikiLeaks source. It then posted the adulterated documents just described.
- On July 5, Guccifer again claimed he had remotely hacked DNC servers, and the operation was instantly described as another intrusion attributable to Russia. Virtually no media questioned this account.

It does not require too much thought to read into this sequence. With his June 12 announcement, Assange effectively put the DNC on notice that it had a little time, probably not much, to act preemptively against the imminent publication of damaging documents. Did the DNC quickly conjure Guccifer from thin air to create a cyber-saboteur whose fingers point to Russia? There is no evidence of this one way or the other, but emphatically it is legitimate to pose the question in the context of the VIPS chronology. WikiLeaks began publishing on July 22. By that time, the case alleging Russian interference in the 2016 elections process was taking firm root. In short order Assange would be written down as a "Russian agent."

By any balanced reckoning, the official case purporting to assign a systematic hacking effort to Russia, the events of mid-June and July 5 last year being the foundation of this case, is shabby to the point taxpayers should ask for their money back. The Intelligence Community Assessment, the supposedly definitive report featuring the "high confidence" dodge, was greeted as farcically flimsy when issued January 6.

Ray McGovern calls it a disgrace to the intelligence profession. It is spotlessly free of evidence, front to back, pertaining to any events in which Russia is implicated.

'Hand-Picked' Analysts

James Clapper, the former director of national intelligence, admitted in May that "hand-picked" analysts from three agencies (not the 17 previously reported) drafted the ICA.

There is a way to understand "hand-picked" that is less obvious than meets the eye: The report was sequestered from rigorous agency-wide reviews. This is the way these people have spoken to us for the past year.

Behind the ICA lie other indefensible realities. The FBI has never examined the DNC's computer servers – an omission that is beyond preposterous. It has instead relied on the reports produced by CrowdStrike, a firm that drips with conflicting interests well beyond the fact that it is in the DNC's employ. Dmitri Alperovitch, its co-founder and chief technology officer, is on the record as vigorously anti-Russian. He is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, which suffers the same prejudice. Problems such as this are many.

"We continue to stand by our report," CrowdStrike said, upon seeing the VIPS blueprint of the investigation. CrowdStrike argues that by July 5 all malware had been removed from the DNC's computers. But the presence or absence of malware by that time is entirely immaterial, because the event of July 5 is proven to have been a leak and not a hack. Given that malware has nothing to do with leaks, CrowdStrike's logic appears to be circular.

In effect, the new forensic evidence considered here lands in a vacuum. We now enter a period when an official reply should be forthcoming. What the forensic people are now producing constitutes evidence, however one may view it, and it is the first scientifically derived evidence we have into any of the events in which Russia has been implicated. The investigators deserve a response, the betrayed professionals who formed VIPS as the WMD scandal unfolded in 2003 deserve it, and so do the rest of us. The cost of duplicity has rarely been so high.

I concluded each of the interviews conducted for this column by asking for a degree of confidence in the new findings. These are careful, exacting people as a matter of professional training and standards, and I got careful, exacting replies.

All those interviewed came in between 90 percent and 100 percent certain that the forensics prove out. I have already quoted Skip Folden's answer: impossible

based on the data.

“The laws of physics don’t lie,” Ray McGovern volunteered at one point.

“It’s QED, theorem demonstrated,” William Binney said in response to my question. “There’s no evidence out there to get me to change my mind.” When I asked Edward Loomis, a 90 percent man, about the 10 percent he held out, he replied, “I’ve looked at the work and it shows there was no Russian hack. But I didn’t do the work. That’s the 10 percent. I’m a scientist.”

Editor’s note: In its chronology, VIPS mistakenly gave the wrong date for CrowdStrike’s announcement of its claim to have found malware on DNC servers. It said June 15, when it should have said June 14. VIPS has acknowledged the error, and we have made the correction.

Patrick Lawrence is a longtime columnist, essayist, critic, and lecturer, whose most recent books are *Somebody Else’s Century: East and West in a Post-Western World* and *Time No Longer: America After the American Century*. His website is patricklawrence.us. [This article was originally published at The Nation at <https://www.thenation.com/article/a-new-report-raises-big-questions-about-last-years-dnc-hack/>]

Clapper’s Unhinged Russia-Bashing

Exclusive: Russia-gate’s credibility rests heavily on ex-Director of National Intelligence Clapper who oversaw a “trust us” report, but a recent speech shows Clapper to be unhinged about Russia, as David Marks describes.

By David Marks

Whatever the ultimate truth about the murky Russia-gate affair, it appears that it is Donald Trump’s willingness to consider friendship and cooperation with the Russians that is driving this emotional debate.

For some of the older U.S. intelligence and military officers, there appears to be a residual distrust and fear of Moscow, a hangover from the Cold War now transferred, perhaps almost subliminally, into the New Cold War and a sense that Russia is America’s eternal enemy.

James Clapper, President Obama’s last Director of National Intelligence, is a fascinating example of how this antagonism toward Russia never seems to change, as he revealed in [a June 7 speech](#) to the Australian National Press Club.

“The Russians are not our friends; they, (Putin specifically) are avowedly opposed to our democracy and values, and see us as the cause of all their frustrations,” Clapper declared.

In reaching that harsh judgment, Clapper ignored the U.S. government’s own role in the mounting tensions – expanding NATO to Russia’s borders, renouncing the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and locating new missile bases in Eastern Europe. Instead, Clapper blamed the renewed arms race and resulting tensions on the Russians:

“The Russians are embarked on a very aggressive and disturbing program to modernize their strategic forces – notably their submarine and land-based nuclear forces. They have also made big investments in their counter-space capabilities. They do all this – despite their economic challenges – with only one adversary in mind: the United States. And, just for good measure, they are also in active violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty.”

That Clapper would offer such a one-sided account of the reasons behind the worsening antagonisms and the emerging arms race – leaving out the fact that the United States, despite its own budgetary and economic problems, spends about ten times more on its military than Russia does – suggests that he is not an objective witness on anything regarding Russia.

A Shrill Voice

Clapper’s shrill voice confirms his cold-warrior perspective, caught in the past but applying his thinking to the present, still believing that he has a special understanding of America’s interests and is protecting them. Clearly, the Russians have been at the center of Clapper’s frustrations for many years and Russia-gate just gives him the opportunity to rekindle anti-Moscow hysteria.

Clapper is repeating with new gusto what he has sold to recent presidents, Republicans and Democrats, for decades. His entire attack on Trump beats the drum of Russian deviousness. Yet, Clapper ignores the context of the Russians actions.

Way ahead of the Russians, the U.S. intelligence community mastered computer hacking and mounted the first known software attack on a country’s strategic infrastructure by – along with Israel – unleashing the Stuxnet cyber-attack against Iranian centrifuges. U.S. intelligence also has a long record of subverting elections and toppling elected leaders, both before and since the computer age.

But Clapper only sees evil in Russia, even during the 1990s when the U.S. government advisers and American political operatives were propping up President

Boris Yeltsin amid the rapacious privatizing of Russia's industries and resources, which made Russian oligarchs and their U.S. advisers very rich.

Clapper said, "Interestingly, every one of the non-acting Prime Ministers of Russia since 1992 has come from one of two domains: the oil and gas sector, or the security services. To put this in perspective, and as I have pointed out to U.S. audiences, suppose the last ten presidents of the U.S. were either CIA officers, or the Chairman of Exxon-Mobil. I think this gives you some insight into the dominant mind-set of the Russian government."

With such remarks, Clapper acts as if he doesn't know much about recent U.S. government staffing, which has been dominated by people with backgrounds in the oil industry, leading Wall Street banks, and the intelligence community. Indeed, the man who brought Clapper from Air Force intelligence into the White House was President George H.W. Bush, former director of the CIA *and* an oil company executive.

Bush's son, George W., also came from the oil industry, as did his Vice President Dick Cheney. Meanwhile, both Republican and Democratic administrations have filled senior economic policy positions from the ranks of Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street investment banks. And the U.S. intelligence community has wielded broad power over the few recent U.S. presidents, such as Barack Obama, who came into the White House with more limited government and private-sector experience.

Clapper, having been a senior executive for Booz Allen Hamilton, knows full well that giant intelligence contractors have a powerful influence in how they serve U.S. interests with an eye to profiteering from conflict. And along with Clapper, other White House advisers drift between intelligence contractors and government.

It's also true that a U.S. president doesn't need to have previous employment within the oil sector to do its bidding. Considering the influence of the millions spent on campaign donations and lobbying by the industry, the U.S. government is easily wed to oil and gas – as well as to the military and intelligence complex – at least as much as the Russian government. Indeed, the current Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, *was* the Chairman and CEO of Exxon Mobil.

Classic Projection

Clapper's perception of the Russians as evil for allegedly practicing the same sins as the U.S. government exemplifies classic projection of the highest order.

In case after case, Clapper justifies painting darkness onto the Russians with

half the data, while ignoring the information that cancels out his perspective. Perhaps he is representative of many in Washington who have lost their rationality and morality in defense of the greatness of the United States. His ethics become situational.

As Director of National Intelligence, Clapper lied to Congress in 2013 about the National Security Agency's massive gathering of private data from Americans. Clapper's deception gave the final push to Edward Snowden who revealed the truth about NSA surveillance.

Subsequently, Clapper led the charge against Snowden, while excusing his own false congressional testimony by saying, "I responded in what I thought was the most truthful, or least untruthful, manner."

Despite this history, the U.S. mainstream media has treated Clapper as a great truth-teller as he adds ever more fuel to the Russia-gate fires. From his Australian speech, most news outlets highlighted his best news-bite, when he declared: "Watergate pales, really, in my view compared to what we're confronting now."

Like other powerful government officials, Clapper may think it is his duty to a higher cause that allows him to defy the truth and transcend the law, a classic symptom of the *super-patriot* who thinks he knows best what's good for America, a dangerous creature that the U.S. government seems to produce in quantity.

In that sense, Clapper has played a central role in Russia-gate. He was the official who oversaw the key Jan. 6 report on alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election. After promising much public evidence, he released a report that amounted to "trust us."

Clapper has since been a star congressional witness pushing Russia-gate and his confidence in Putin's guilt. But Clapper did acknowledge that the Jan. 6 report – besides containing no actual evidence – was prepared by "handpicked" analysts from the CIA, NSA and FBI, not from a consensus of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies as had been widely reported.

So, as we listen to the debate on Russia-gate, Clapper and his fellow national-security-state representatives are revealing not just their political perspectives but deeply disturbed minds. Those who angrily criticize the Russians are completely blind to their own participation in a similar destructive process. They perceive themselves as the cure when they are a primary cause of the illness they denounce.

In 1956, in the *Undiscovered Self*, the eminent psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote about the state of the human mind and how it affected the political world: "And

just as the typical neurotic is unconscious of his shadow side, so the normal individual, like the neurotic, sees his shadow in his neighbor or in the man beyond the great divide. It has even become a political and social duty to apostrophize the capitalism of one and the communism of the other as the very devil, so to fascinate the outward eye and prevent it from looking at the individual life within. ...

“We are again living in an age filled with apocalyptic images of universal destruction. What is the significance of that split, symbolized by the Iron Curtain, which divides humanity into two halves? What will become of our civilization and man himself, if the hydrogen bombs begin to go off, or if the spiritual and moral darkness of State absolutism should spread?”

Jung’s words still ring with foreboding truth.

David Marks is a veteran documentary filmmaker and investigative reporter. His work includes films for the BBC and PBS, including Nazi Gold, on the role of Switzerland in WWII and biographies of Jimi Hendrix and Frank Sinatra.

‘Getting Trump’ with the New McCarthyism

Special Report: Many Democrats and progressives are embracing a New McCarthyism in their drive to negate last November’s election and remove President Trump from office, but is that right, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Yes, I get it. A lot of people want to remove Donald Trump from the presidency for a lot of understandable reasons: his breathtaking incompetence, his relentless narcissism, his destructive policies, etc. But he was elected under the U.S. constitutional system. He may have lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by nearly three million ballots but he did prevail in the Electoral College.

And, unlike George W. Bush, who also lost the popular vote, Trump didn’t have to steal Florida – and thus the White House – by enlisting Republican justices on the U.S. Supreme Court to stop the vote count prematurely. We now know that if all the ballots considered legal under Florida law had been counted Al Gore would have won regardless of which standard of “chad” was used. But Trump didn’t have to resort to such bald-faced cheating.

And, yes, of course, there were many other problems with the election, such as Republican efforts to suppress African-American and other minority votes. But it's not as if the U.S. electoral process has ever been the gold standard of democracy that some Americans like to believe. The system has now – and always has had – serious shortcomings, but it also has enabled the diverse United States to function for more than two centuries without major political violence, with the exception of the Civil War when the process broke down over the South's insistence on slavery.

So, whether one likes it or not – and many people really don't like it – Donald Trump is the constitutionally elected President of the United States. And, despite the many imperfections in that electoral process, the idea of negating a presidential election is very serious business.

Whatever the hurt feelings of the editors at The New York Times and The Washington Post, whatever snarky jokes are told on late-night TV, whatever connect-the-dots conspiracy theories are popular on MSNBC, the idea of telling 63 million Americans that their votes don't count, that the elites know best, that the President who won under the rules of the game must be ridden out of Washington on a rail will not go down as easily as some people think.

New McCarthyism

National Democrats and many progressives are also embracing a troubling New McCarthyism to justify what amounts to a "soft coup" against Trump.

In a normal world – after Tuesday's testimony before the House Intelligence Committee – former CIA Director John Brennan would have been led away in a straitjacket or given the role of General Jack D. Ripper in a remake of the Cold War dark comedy, "Dr. Strangelove." Instead, Brennan's Russo-phobic ramblings were made the lead story in the Times, the Post and other major American newspapers.

While General Ripper worried about Russian operatives polluting our "precious bodily fluids," Brennan warned that any conversation with a Russian or some Russian intermediary might put Americans on a treasonous path even if they "do not even realize they are on that path until it gets too late."

He also testified, "I know what the Russians try to do. They try to suborn individuals and try to get individuals, including U.S. individuals, to act on their behalf, wittingly or unwittingly." In other words, any American who has some contact with Russia or Russians may be a spy or mole whether he or she knows it or not. Subversion or possible subversion is everywhere. Trust no one.

Yes, I'm sure those devious Russ-kies do what all intelligence agencies,

including the CIA, seek to do. And, in many cases, there is nothing wrong with the process. Unofficial give-and-take between adversaries can increase understanding – and that can be especially important to the future of humankind when the United States and Russia are still armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons.

Indeed, such informal contacts may have helped avert nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis when Washington-based KGB station chief Aleksandr Feklisov approached ABC News correspondent John Scali with a plan to dismantle missile bases in Cuba in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba. Though there remain historical questions about the significance of that initiative, it shows the value that such contacts can have despite the alarmist concerns raised by the likes of Brennan. In the New Cold War, we'd have to investigate Scali's loyalty.

Despite the paranoid fantasies, Brennan's testimony was widely praised as he suggested that any dealing with Russia or Russians or Russian businesses or possible Russian cutouts could put an American under counterintelligence suspicions because, hey, you never know.

"We see that Russian intelligence agencies do not hesitate at all to use private companies and Russian persons who are unaffiliated with the Russian government to support their objectives," Brennan warned.

No Edward R. Murrow

There was a time when some Democrats, some Republicans and a few courageous journalists objected to this kind of broad-brush challenge to the patriotism of American citizens. CBS News correspondent Edward R. Murrow famously stood up to Sen. Joe McCarthy and his Red Scare in the 1950s. It was then-Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton who chastised President George H.W. Bush during a 1992 presidential debate for making an issue of Clinton's student trip to Moscow during the Cold War.

After Bush referenced Clinton's Moscow visit, Clinton hit back: "When Joe McCarthy went around this country attacking people's patriotism, he was wrong. He was wrong, and a senator from Connecticut stood up to him, named Prescott Bush. Your father was right to stand up to Joe McCarthy. You were wrong to attack my patriotism."

But that was then. These days, Hillary Clinton and her Democratic allies have led the smearing of Trump supporters as possible Kremlin agents, albeit without proof of the so-called "collusion" or even clear evidence that Russia did "meddle" in last November's election.

And the backdrop for this New Cold War is that since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – and the end of the Old Cold War – many Americans have done business in Russia and many Russians have invested in the United States. A Russian oligarch, Mikhail Prokhorov, even owns the Brooklyn Nets of the National Basketball Association.

The recent tensions are also not entirely the making of Russia or its President Vladimir Putin. The past several U.S. administrations have exploited the disarray from the Soviet collapse to push NATO up to Russia's borders.

U.S. officials also encouraged the violent 2014 putsch in Ukraine that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Actively involved in Yanukovich's overthrow were senior U.S. officials, including Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt, and Sen. John McCain. Several weeks before the coup, Nuland and Pyatt were caught on an unsecure phone line discussing who should take over the Ukrainian government and musing how to "midwife" or "glue this thing."

The coup also followed the specific targeting of Ukraine as "the biggest prize" by neocon Carl Gershman, the president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, which sponsored scores of political and media operations inside Ukraine. (Gershman is now calling for regime change in Russia.)

But the U.S. mainstream media essentially ignored this evidence of U.S. complicity in the Ukraine coup and accepted the State Department's propaganda line that the post-coup resistance to Yanukovich's overthrow among ethnic Russians in Crimea and eastern Ukraine was simply the result of "Russian aggression." The New York Times even denied that there had been a coup in an article that studiously ignored the evidence that there had been a coup, including the Nuland-Pyatt phone call.

Swallowing U.S. Propaganda

Similarly, the mainstream U.S. media has swallowed every evidence-free claim from the Obama administration's intelligence agencies without any skepticism. Indeed, the MSM has hyped those claims beyond even what the Obama team says by ignoring factual admissions from former CIA Director Brennan and former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper about the limited nature of the intelligence "assessment" on Russian election interference.

The MSM has so enjoyed claiming that the Russian "meddling" allegations are the consensus judgment of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies that a blind eye and a deaf ear have been turned to Brennan and Clapper contradicting that beloved

groupthink.

In recent testimony, Clapper and Brennan acknowledged that the Jan. 6 report alleging Russian “meddling” was actually the work of hand-picked analysts from only four agencies – the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation under the oversight of the DNI’s office. But that fact continues to be ignored by the MSM, with the Post on Wednesday castigating Trump for refusing “to fully accept the unanimous conclusion of U.S. intelligence agencies.”

If a non-MSM news outlet had published such a misleading claim from a different perspective – after U.S. senior officials had denied it – we would be hearing charges of “fake news” or perhaps accusations of “Russian disinformation.” But clearly the Post doesn’t want to give up on this formulation of unanimity among the 17 intelligence agencies even if it’s not true.

The Post must feel that it’s less impressive to say that the Russia-did-it conclusion was reached by “hand-picked” analysts at four agencies while other intelligence agencies, which could have supplied important context, such as the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, were excluded.

What has also been remarkable about the months-long investigations into alleged Russian “meddling” is how little evidence has been evinced to support the accusations. While there has been a parade of Obama appointees testifying before Congress – making broad accusations while demurring whenever evidence is requested on the grounds of secrecy or privacy – we haven’t heard from any of the people accused of having these untoward contacts with Russians, even though some have volunteered to testify.

“I’m not going to identify the individuals [under suspicion] because this is information that, again, is based on classified sources and intelligence,” Brennan said on Tuesday, although the identities of the suspected “traitors” have been widely publicized through leaks to the major U.S. news media.

Speaking Up

One of those Americans, onetime Trump foreign policy adviser Carter Page, responded to Brennan’s testimony in a letter to the House Intelligence Committee.

Page noted he was “an unpaid, informal” adviser to the campaign and “throughout my interactions with the Russians in 2016, I consistently made it crystal clear that all of my benign statements and harmless actions in Moscow as well as elsewhere overseas were solely made as a scholar and a business person speaking only on behalf of myself. In other words, in no way connected to then-candidate

Trump. Both in Russia and in countries around the world, this was precisely the same position I had maintained stretching back over a decade.”

Regarding Brennan’s demurrals about naming names, Page pointed out that it has been widely reported that he was put under a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act warrant. According to press accounts, that was, in part, because of a speech he made in Moscow in 2016. His identity, in communications intercepted by U.S. intelligence, had already been “unmasked” or exposed to the public, but whatever evidence there is against him has been hidden.

Page wrote: “underscoring what a complete mockery this process has become, my identity has already been publicly revealed in the wake of the felonies committed [by the Obama administration, including] baseless FISA warrant, Male-1 unmasking, etc.).

“Serving as a loyal Clinton/Obama regime surrogate, Brennan’s spineless practice of hiding behind this lame confidentiality excuse rather than taking any responsibility for their illegal actions only stirs up more misunderstanding and illegitimate fears which continue to damage our great country. This further underscores the urgent need for the public disclosure of these related documents.”

Joining the Stampede

Yet, congressional Democrats have recognized the political gain that they can extract from this New McCarthyism, as reflected in an exchange between Rep. Jim Himes, D-Connecticut, and Brennan at Tuesday’s hearing. Himes cited a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a leading think tank for the Military-Industrial Complex.

Himes said: “I want to use my five minutes to try to paint a more specific picture around the methods and mechanisms that the Russians used to suborn ... our democracy and our electoral process. And I want to start with a quote by a report I know you’re familiar with, CSIS’ report, ‘The Kremlin Playbook’ in which they say that Russia, quote, ‘Seeks to corrode democracy from within by deepening political divides,’ unquote.

“The Russians stir the pot, heighten anxieties and know that when they trigger chaos, even if it ends up negatively affecting them, that they are serving the purpose of weakening us. I want to talk about people because you made reference to people and I don’t want to do it specifically, I want to do it in the abstract.

“‘The Kremlin Playbook’ ... says further that Russia looks to corrode democracy by, quote, ‘Investing in rising politicians, cultivating relationships with

prominent businessmen, or helping to ensure that its business affiliates become well-positioned in government.'

"Mr. Brennan, assuming that you agree with that, how specifically has the Kremlin gone about cultivating relationships with key Americans in an effort ... to influence our policy?"

Brennan: "It is traditional intelligence collection tradecraft ... to identify individuals that you think are either very influential or rising stars, and you will try to develop a relationship with them and the Russians frequently will do that through cutouts or through false-flag operations. They won't identify themselves as Russians or as members of Russian government. They will try to develop a personal relationship and then over time they will try to get individuals to do things on their behalf.

"And that's why again, having been involved in a lot of counterintelligence cases over the years and seeing this pattern over and over again, my radar goes up when I see that the Russians are actively involved in a particular intelligence operational campaign and that U.S. persons are being contacted by Russian officials. ... these are contacts that might've been totally, totally innocent and benign as well as those that might have succumbed somehow to those Russian efforts. ..."

Himes: "do Americans who are suborned in such a way ... do they necessarily need to know that they are doing Russia's bidding?"

Brennan: "No, many times they do not. They do not even know that the person that they're interacting with is a Russian. Many times they know that individuals may be Russian officials, but they don't know that there is an intelligence connection or intelligence motive for behind it. ..."

No Doubts

Himes: "There's hardly anyone left today who doubts that Russia attacked us, but we have to realize the true thrust of the Russian attack is what they have triggered in us, the partisanship. Every time we refuse to face facts, every time we attack the messenger rather than confront the actions that happened, every time we undercut our allies in our alliances and our values, I think we're playing precisely in the Russians fondest hopes.

"We're doing something about that in my opinion, the gray, cold warriors, be it Ronald Reagan or Harry Truman would never have allowed."

Responding to Hines's comments, Page wrote: "This offers a precise depiction of the Clinton/Obama regime's playbook based on their continued false evidence

regarding former Trump campaign supporters such as myself, in the wake of their sad disappointment as sore losers. Immediate disclosure of their falsified FISA warrant documents upon which these same tactics were based last year is an essential way to cease this process which has been weakening all Americans.”

Page added, “Other gray, cold warriors of bygone eras had J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy to do precisely this dirty work: attacking the messengers. In other words, attacking those who wanted to see positive changes in their country’s policies based on realistic strategies which can benefit all citizens while creating a viable pathway to increased peace around the world.”

A core problem with what Brennan and other Obama administration officials have set in motion is that the suspicions are so vague at this point – even some 10 months into the investigation – that a paranoia has taken over. There is a McCarthyistic element to these allegations, including guilt by association regarding any contact with any Russian or even some intermediary who might somehow be a Russian “false-flag.” Anyone or everyone might be a Russian “mole.”

So, yes, I get the desire to get rid of Trump because of his unfitness and ineptness. But the “Russia thing” – as Trump calls it – is unleashing an ugliness that many of us thought was a thing of the past, an era of evidence-free accusations of disloyalty and a crazed hostility toward the other nuclear superpower that could end in a miscalculation that could end life on the planet. Is this really what Democrats and progressives want to embrace?

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](#)).

New Cracks in Russia-gate ‘Assessment’

Exclusive: President Obama’s ex-intelligence chiefs admit they limited input into the Russia-gate “assessment,” which was handled by “hand-picked” analysts, raising the specter of politicized intelligence, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

At the center of the Russia-gate scandal is a curious U.S. intelligence “assessment” that was pulled together in less than a month and excluded many of the agencies that would normally weigh in on such an important topic as whether

Russia tried to influence the outcome of a U.S. presidential election.

The Jan. 6 report and its allegation that Russia “hacked” Democratic emails and publicized them through WikiLeaks have been treated as gospel by the mainstream U.S. media and many politicians of both parties, but two senior Obama administration intelligence officials have provided new information that raises fresh doubts about the findings.

On Tuesday, former CIA Director John Brennan told the House Intelligence Committee that only four of the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies took part in the assessment, relying on analysts from the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under the oversight of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Brennan said the report “followed the general model of how you want to do something like this with some notable exceptions. It only involved the FBI, NSA and CIA as well as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It wasn’t a full inter-agency community assessment that was coordinated among the 17 agencies, and for good reason because of the nature and the sensitivity of the information trying, once again, to keep that tightly compartmented.”

But Brennan’s excuse about “tightly compartmented” information was somewhat disingenuous because other intelligence agencies, such as the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), could have been consulted in a limited fashion, based on their areas of expertise. For instance, INR could have weighed in on whether Russian President Vladimir Putin would have taken the risk of trying to sabotage Hillary Clinton’s campaign, knowing that – if she won as expected and learned of the operation – she might have sought revenge against him and his country.

The Jan. 6 report argued one side of the case – that Putin had a motive for undermining Clinton because he objected to her work as Secretary of State when she encouraged anti-Putin protests inside Russia – but the report ignored the counter-argument that the usually cautious Putin might well have feared infuriating the incoming U.S. President if the anti-Clinton ploy failed to block her election.

A balanced intelligence assessment would have included not just arguments for believing that the Russians did supply the Democratic emails to WikiLeaks but the reasons to doubt that they did.

Pre-Cooked Intelligence

However, the restricted nature of the Jan. 6 report – limiting it to analysts from CIA, NSA and FBI – blocked the kind of expertise that the State Department,

the Defense Department, the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies might have provided. In other words, the Jan. 6 report has the look of pre-cooked intelligence.

That impression was further strengthened by the admission of former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee on May 8 that “the two dozen or so analysts for this task were hand-picked, seasoned experts from each of the contributing agencies.”

Yet, as any intelligence expert will tell you, if you “hand-pick” the analysts, you are really hand-picking the conclusion. For instance, if the analysts were known to be hard-liners on Russia or supporters of Hillary Clinton, they could be expected to deliver the one-sided report that they did.

In the history of U.S. intelligence, we have seen how this approach has worked, such as the determination of the Reagan administration to pin the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II and other acts of terror on the Soviet Union.

CIA Director William Casey and Deputy Director Robert Gates shepherded the desired findings through the process by putting the assessment under the control of pliable analysts and sidelining those who objected to this politicization of intelligence.

The point of enlisting the broader intelligence community – and incorporating dissents into a final report – is to guard against such “stove-piping” of intelligence that delivers the politically desired result but ultimately distorts reality.

Another painful example of politicized intelligence was President George W. Bush’s 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq’s WMD that removed INR’s and other dissents from the declassified version that was given to the public.

Lacking Evidence

The Jan. 6 report – technically called an Intelligence Community Assessment (or ICA) – avoided the need to remove any dissents by excluding the intelligence agencies that might have dissented and by hand-picking the analysts who compiled the report.

However, like the declassified version of the Iraq NIE, the Russia-gate ICA lacked any solid evidence to support the conclusions. The ICA basically demanded that the American public “trust us” and got away with that bluff because much of the mainstream U.S. news media wanted to believe anything negative about then-President-elect Trump.

Because of that, the American people were repeatedly – and falsely – informed that the findings about Russian “hacking” reflected the collective judgment of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies, making anyone who dared question the conclusion seem like a crackpot or a “Russian apologist.”

Yet, based on the testimonies of Clapper and Brennan, we now know that the ICA represented only a hand-picked selection of the intelligence community – four, not 17, agencies.

There were other biases reflected in the ICA, such as a bizarre appendix that excoriated RT, the Russian television network, for supposedly undermining Americans’ confidence in their democratic process.

This seven-page appendix, dating from 2012, accused RT of portraying “the US electoral process as undemocratic” and offered such “proof” as RT’s staging of a debate among third-party presidential candidates who had been excluded from the Republican-Democratic debates between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama.

“RT broadcast, hosted and advertised third-party candidate debates,” the report said, as if allowing political figures in the United States who were not part of the two-party system to express their views, was somehow anti-democratic, when you might think that letting Americans hear alternatives was the essence of democracy.

“The RT hosts asserted that the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham,’” the report continued. Yet, polls have shown that large numbers of Americans would prefer more choices than the usual two candidates and, indeed, most Western democracies have multiple parties, So, the implicit RT criticism of the U.S. political process is certainly not out of the ordinary.

The report also took RT to task for covering the Occupy Wall Street movement and for reporting on the environmental dangers from “fracking,” topics cited as further proof that the Russian government was using RT to weaken U.S. public support for Washington’s policies (although, again, these are topics of genuine public interest).

Assessing or Guessing

But at least the appendix offered up some “evidence” – as silly as those examples might have been. The main body of the report amounted to one “assessment” after another with no verifiable evidence included, at least in the unclassified version that the American people were allowed to see.

The report also contained a warning about how unreliable these “assessments”

could be: “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.”

In other words, “assessing” in intelligence terms often equates with “guessing” – and if the guessers are hand-picked by political appointees – it shouldn’t be surprising that they would come up with an “assessment” that would please their bosses, in this case, President Obama and his appointees at CIA, NSA, FBI and ODNI.

The timing and speed of the Jan. 6 report also drew some attention at Tuesday’s House Intelligence Committee hearing, where Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-New York, noted that President Obama requested the ICA on Dec. 9 and the last entry was dated Dec. 29.

“This report was produced in just 20 days in December,” Stefanik said, adding: “It’s of concern to me that there was a two-month lag” between when Obama’s intelligence agencies first alleged Russian “hacking” of Democratic emails and when Obama ordered the ICA.

Of course, the ICA’s flaws do not mean that Russia is innocent or that WikiLeaks is telling the truth when it asserts that the two batches of Democratic emails – one from the Democratic National Committee and the other from Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta – did not come from the Russians.

But the Jan. 6 report has served as the foundation for a series of investigations that have hobbled the Trump administration and could lead to the negation of a U.S. presidential election via the impeachment or forced resignation of President Trump.

The seriousness of that possibility would seem to demand the most thorough examination and the fullest vetting of the evidence. Even just the appearance that the ICA might be one more case of politicized intelligence would do more to destroy Americans’ faith in their democratic system than anything that Putin might dream up.

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](#)).

Do High-Level Leaks Suggest a Conspiracy?

Widespread concern inside Official Washington about President Trump's unfitness for the job is fueling a campaign of high-level leaks that is taking on the look of a "soft coup," says ex-CIA officer Philip Giraldi.

By Philip Giraldi

Back in my time in the CIA, there were two places in the headquarters building one could go that were free speech zones – places where it was safe to vent about senior management without necessarily being admonished or even reported. They were the Historical Intelligence Collection room off the library, where no one ever went to look at the books, and the office supplies storage room in the basement.

The supplies room had a lot of dark corners and concealing shelves where it was possible to be anonymous and it was completely unsupervised in the belief that true-blue CIA officers would never stoop to taking even a single pencil more than was actually needed to get the job done.

I don't know if those rooms still exist, but I sometimes think of them when the subject of government conspiracies come up. I have this vision of two or three conspirators huddled in the corner behind the staplers back in 1975 discussing how one would go about eliminating the likes of Senator Frank Church, who at that time was heading a major congressional investigation into CIA improprieties.

If there had been such a gathering, I would imagine that the *Washington Post* would have found out about it on the next day as intelligence officers are gregarious and like to talk. This has been my principal problem with the debate in some quarters about the 9/11 Commission. Their report did indeed miss many important angles in order to protect certain governmental interests, but if there had been a genuine conspiracy involving what must have been hundreds of people to demolish the Twin Towers with explosives, it surely would have leaked long ago.

Two months ago, I would have dismissed as fantasy any thoughts of a conspiracy based in America's national security agencies to bring down Donald Trump. But now I am not so sure. Many of my friends who are former intelligence officers are increasingly asking questions. It is worth pointing out that none of us are fans of what the White House has been doing and saying – quite the contrary.

Defense of the Constitution

Still, alerting the country to concerns over what might be a developing soft coup orchestrated by the intelligence and law-enforcement agencies to nullify the results of a national election in no way equates to trying to protect Donald Trump and his uncouth and ill-informed behavior. It is rather a defense of the Constitution.

Donald Trump said on Wednesday that “This is the single greatest witch hunt of a politician in American history!” He might be right. He was referring to Deputy Attorney General Rob Rosenstein’s appointment of the highly-respected Robert Mueller as independent counsel to investigate “any links and/or coordination between Russian government and individuals associated with the campaign of President Donald Trump, and any matters that arose or may arise directly from the investigation.”

Trump’s bombast puts everyone but his most tone-deaf supporters on edge, but there are two points that he has been making repeatedly that are essential to any understanding of what is going on.

First, the investigation into Russia and the Trumpsters has been a high priority at FBI and also in Congress for nearly a year. Yet so far no one has produced evidence that anyone broke any law or even that someone did something wrong.

Second, and more importantly, the vilification of Trump and Russia has been driven by a series of leaks that come from the very top of the national security apparatus, leaks that appear not to have been seriously investigated.

This involvement of FBI and CIA in the campaign, whether inadvertently or by design, was particularly evident in the various reports that surfaced and were leaked to the press during the campaign and right up to the inauguration. The leaks of that type of information, to include technical intelligence and Special Access Program “codeword” material, require top-level access as well as the ability to arrange clandestine contacts with major players in the media, something far beyond the reach of most employees at CIA or the FBI.

The Lavrov Leak

Similar leaks have been appearing since that time. I confess to finding Monday’s detailed account of what President Trump discussed with Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov, which included corroborating material that likely did more damage than the information that was actually shared, highly suggestive of the possibility that something like a conspiracy is, in fact, functioning.

Given the really tight-security control of that transcript after it was

determined that it contained sensitive information, one might reasonably assume that the leaks to the media came directly out of Donald Trump's own National Security Council or from the highest levels of the office of the DNI, CIA, or FBI.

On Wednesday, the anonymous sources struck again, revealing that "Michael Flynn and other advisers to Donald Trump's campaign were in contact with Russian officials and others with Kremlin ties in at least 18 calls and emails during the last seven months of the 2016 presidential race." That sort of information had to come from the top level of the FBI and would have been accessible to only a few, but even though the leaks of what constitutes highly-classified information have been recurring for many months, no one has been fired or arrested.

The emphasis on Russia derives from the government and media consensus that Moscow was behind the hacking of Democratic National Committee (DNC) computers that led to the exposure of what the DNC was doing to destroy the candidacy of Bernie Sanders. There is also a related consensus that the Russian hacking was intended to damage American democracy and also to help the Trump campaign, a narrative that the President has described as a "made-up thing," a view that I share. All of these assertions are regarded as unquestionably true as measured by inside-the-beltway groupthink, with even the White House now conceding that there was Russian interference in the election.

Sometimes the hysteria over Russia produces over-the-top stories in the mainstream media, including last week's completely speculative piece wondering whether the entourage of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had sought to sneak a recording device into the White House during his White House visit. It was the type of tale that might have been inspired by a leak from someone in the National Security Council who personally observed the context of the meeting and was able to provide corroborating details.

Where's the Beef?

Nevertheless, in spite of the overwhelming groupthink, it has been repeated *ad nauseam* by people like myself that no actual evidence has been produced to support any of the claims being made about Russia and Trump. There is more evidence that the White House was penetrated by Ankara – through the good services of Michael Flynn – than by Moscow, but Congress has not called for an investigation into Turkey's lobbying.

Ray McGovern, a former senior CIA analyst, is even speculating that the Agency might have been the actual hacker into the DNC, leaving a trail behind that would have suggested that it was done by the Russians. His concern arises from

the recent WikiLeaks revelation that the CIA had developed cyber-warfare capabilities to do just that.

McGovern, like myself, is also asking why former CIA Director John Brennan has not been summoned by the Senate Committee looking into Russia-gate. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has testified twice, while former FBI Director James Comey, current NSA Director Mike Rogers, and former Justice Department senior official Sally Yates have all appeared once. Brennan's absence is conspicuous as he was the senior national security official most closely tied to the Obama Administration, may have had the tools at hand to fake the Russian connection, and has also been plausibly linked to "encouraging" British Intelligence to provide damaging information on Michael Flynn.

I now suspect that there is indeed a group at the top of the U.S. national security system that wants to remove Donald Trump and has wanted to do so for quite some time. If that is true, I believe that they have been operating with that goal in mind for at least the past year. It is not a traditional conspiracy or cabal in that it does not meet and conspire together, but I suspect the members know what they are doing in a general sense and are intervening whenever they can to keep Trump off balance.

Their program is simple: convince the nation that the President and his team colluded with the Russians to rig the 2016 election in his favor, which, if demonstrable even if not necessarily true, would provide grounds for impeachment. They are motivated by the belief that removing Trump must be done "for the good of the country" and they are willing to do what they consider correcting a mistake made by the American voters. They are assisted in their effort by the mainstream media, which agrees with both the methods employed and the overall objective and is completely on board with the process.

Saving the country from Trump is certainly an attractive notion. I suspect the Comeys, Clappers, and Brennans, together with a host of former senior officers who appear regularly on television, if they were involved, see themselves as great patriots. But they must understand that the blunt instrument they are using is far more dangerous than the current occupant of the White House.

A soft coup engineered by the national security and intelligence agencies would be far more threatening to our democracy than anything Donald Trump or even the Russians can do.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer, is executive director of the Council for the National Interest. [This article is re-posted with the author's permission. It first appeared at The American Conservative at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/do-high-level-leaks-suggest-a-co>

Turning Gen. Flynn into Road Kill

Exclusive: Although no actual evidence was presented, two ex-Obama administration officials destroyed the reputation of retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, portraying him as a liar and a potential traitor, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Not to defend retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn for his suspect judgment, but it should be noted that his case represents a disturbing example of how electronic surveillance and politicized law enforcement can destroy an American citizen's life in today's New McCarthyism.

The testimony on Monday by former acting Attorney General Sally Yates and former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper offered no evidence of Flynn's wrongdoing – those facts were deemed “classified” – yet the pair thoroughly destroyed Flynn's reputation, portraying him as both a liar and a potential traitor.

That Senate Democrats, in particular, saw nothing troubling about this smearing of the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and, briefly, President Trump's national security adviser was itself troubling. Republicans were a bit more skeptical but no one, it seemed, wanted to be labeled as soft on Russia.

So, there was no skepticism toward Yates's curious assertion that Flynn's supposed lying to Vice President Mike Pence about the details of a phone call with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak somehow opened Flynn to Russian blackmail – her core explanation for why she rushed to Trump's White House with warnings of this allegedly grave danger.

Yates also talked ominously about “underlying” information that raised further questions about Flynn's patriotism, but that evidence, too, couldn't be shared with the American people; it was classified, leaving it to your imagination the depth of Flynn's perfidy.

Despite the thinness of Yates's charges – and the echoes of Sen. Joe McCarthy with his secret lists of communists that he wouldn't release – the mainstream U.S. news media has bestowed on Yates a hero status without any concern that she

might be exaggerating the highly unlikely possibility that the Russians would have blackmailed Flynn.

Her supposition was that since Vice President Mike Pence's account of the Kislyak-Flynn conversation deviated somewhat from the details of what was actually said, the Russians would seize on the discrepancy to coerce Flynn to do their bidding.

But that really makes no sense, in part, because even if the Russians did pick up the discrepancy, they would assume correctly that U.S. intelligence had its own transcript of the conversation, so there would be no basis for blackmail.

Yates's supposed alarm might make for a good spy novel but it has little or no basis in the real world. But it is hard for Americans to assess her claims because all the key facts are classified.

Ignorance Is Strength

The public does not even know what was said between Kislyak and Flynn on Dec. 29, 2016, when Kislyak called Flynn, who was on vacation in the Dominican Republic. The two apparently discussed the worsening U.S.-Russian relations, since President Obama had just imposed new sanctions on Russia, but it's unclear how specific the references to the sanctions were.

The details are important here, as is the fact that Flynn might well have failed to recall all the details because he was not at his office and did not have staff support for note-taking or recording. For all we know, Flynn was in his bathing suit, Pina Colada in hand.

So, the assumption that Flynn was intentionally lying when he later briefed Pence and other colleagues is a stretch. Yet he is being convicted in the court of public opinion without the evidence being presented or without him getting a serious chance to defend himself.

Yates's own motives might also deserve examination. Her behavior has the look of a partisan prosecutor who likely would have been in line for a top job under President Hillary Clinton. Would that influence her eagerness to twist facts to destroy Flynn and hurt Flynn's boss?

After all, the mood inside the Obama administration in its final days was one of doing whatever it could to strengthen the "resistance" to the incoming Trump administration. After the Inauguration, there were massive anti-Trump protests with calls for Obama holdovers to join the #Resistance. Yates, as an Obama holdover and acting Attorney General, was in a perfect position to "resist."

While the anti-Trump sentiment was understandable in a political sense, it created a motive for Yates to exaggerate an alleged threat and thus initiate an immediate crisis inside the Trump administration, a goal that she accomplished.

There was also a payback factor against Flynn who had infamously joined in the Republican National Convention's chant of "lock her up." Thus, Clinton partisans had a strong motive to create the circumstances to lock Flynn up, which now seems quite possible.

Rush to Judgment

Yet, amid this rush to judgment on Russia-gate, the American public hasn't had a chance to hear from Flynn or the other Trump advisers who have been portrayed as Russian agents based on innuendo, including the contents of an opposition research dossier compiled by a former British intelligence officer and apparently funded by unknown Clinton supporters.

Taking another step backward, we don't even know the evidence behind the allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 campaign. To back up those charges, President Obama's intelligence chiefs issued a sketchy report on Jan. 6, 2017, that offered no evidence – only assertions – about Russian operatives hacking into Democratic email accounts and then somehow slipping the information to WikiLeaks.

The Russian government and WikiLeaks both deny that scenario, and the Jan. 6 report does little more than repeat over and over how confident its writers are that Russia is guilty.

On Monday, former DNI Clapper did clarify one point that Democrats have consistently misstated: that the report was not the consensus judgment of the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies, but rather was the work of just three of the agencies: Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation.

But the bigger problem with the Jan. 6 report is that it was entirely one-sided, citing reasons to believe the Russians were guilty but ignoring equally strong reasons to doubt the Russians' guilt.

For instance, the report focused on Russia's presumed motive for "hacking" and distributing emails harmful to Hillary Clinton's campaign, citing Russian President Vladimir Putin's concern that Clinton would be a threat to worsen the already frayed relationship between the two nuclear superpowers.

But the report ignores the downside for Russia trying to interfere with the U.S. election campaign and then failing to stop Clinton, which looked like the most

likely outcome until Election Night.

If Russia had accessed Democratic emails and slipped them to WikiLeaks for publication, Putin would have to think that the National Security Agency, with its exceptional ability to track electronic communications around the world, might well have detected the maneuver and would have informed Clinton.

So, on top of Clinton's well-known hawkishness, Putin would have risked handing the expected incoming U.S. president a personal reason to take revenge on him and his country. Historically, Russia has been very circumspect in such situations, usually holding its intelligence collections for internal purposes only, not sharing them with the public.

While it is conceivable that Putin decided to take this extraordinary risk in this case – despite the widely held view that Clinton was a shoo-in to defeat Trump – an objective DNI report would have examined this counter argument for him not doing so.

But the DNI report was not driven by a desire to be evenhanded; it was, in effect, a prosecutor's brief, albeit one that lacked any real evidence that the accused is guilty.

The DNI report also included a seven-page appendix, dating from 2012, that is an argumentative attack on RT, the Russian government-backed television network, which is accused of portraying "the US electoral process as undemocratic."

The proof for that accusation includes RT's articles on "voting machine vulnerabilities" although virtually every major U.S. news organization has run similar stories, including some during the last campaign on the feasibility of Russia hacking into the actual voting process, something that even U.S. intelligence says didn't happen.

The report adds that further undermining Americans' faith in the U.S. democratic process, "RT broadcast, hosted and advertised third-party candidate debates." Apparently, the DNI's point is that showing Americans that there are choices beyond the two major parties is somehow seditious.

"The RT hosts asserted that the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a 'sham,'" the report said. Yet, polls have shown exactly that sentiment, that large numbers of Americans would prefer more choices than the usual two candidates and, indeed, most Western democracies have multiple parties.

So, RT's implicit criticism of the U.S. political process is certainly not out of the ordinary. It is extraordinary, however, that the U.S. intelligence

community would consider that by allowing American third-party nominees to express their opinions, RT was somehow subverting the American democratic process.

The report also takes RT to task for covering the Occupy Wall Street movement and for reporting on the environmental dangers from “fracking,” topics cited as further proof that the Russian government was using RT to weaken U.S. public support for Washington’s policies (although, again, these are topics of genuine public interest).

Given the weakness – indeed the absurdity – of these attacks on RT, Americans might have reason to wonder how strong the evidence is regarding the 2016 election, too. But we are not allowed to see that evidence at all. It’s classified.

As for Michael Flynn, there may well be legitimate criticism of him for agreeing to give a paid speech at RT’s tenth anniversary in 2015, apparently without clearing it with the Pentagon.

I’m also told that Flynn made friends with some Russian military officers whom he met amid Russia’s cooperation with the U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and in the fight against terrorism.

Of course, President Obama himself developed a cooperative relationship with President Putin and his predecessor Dmitri Medvedev. Putin played a key role in persuading Iran to accept tight constraints on its nuclear program, an agreement that Obama considered his greatest foreign policy achievement.

It was only after the U.S.-orchestrated putsch in Ukraine in early 2014 and Russia’s reaction to a new hostile regime on its borders that the U.S.-Russia relationship became clearly antagonistic. Though most U.S. politicians and the media solely blame Putin and Russia, an objective assessment would put blame on the U.S. side as well.

But objectivity is in very short supply in today’s Washington, especially since the embittered Democrats saw in Trump’s hopes for restoring a more cooperative relationship with Russia a political vulnerability that could be exploited with the prospect that the scandal could be expanded into possible impeachment.

In Official Washington’s view, Michael Flynn becomes just road kill in the larger competition for power.

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](#)

Fresh Doubts about Russian ‘Hacking’

Exclusive: The gauzy allegations of Russia “hacking” the Democrats to elect Donald Trump just got hazier with WikiLeaks’ new revelations about CIA cyber-spying and the capability to pin the blame on others, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

WikiLeaks’ [disclosure of documents](#) revealing CIA cyber-spying capabilities underscores why much more skepticism should have been applied to the U.S. intelligence community’s allegations about Russia “hacking” last year’s American presidential election. It turns out that the CIA maintains a library of foreign malware that could be used to pin the blame for a “hack” on another intelligence service.

That revelation emerged from documents that WikiLeaks published on Tuesday from a CIA archive that WikiLeaks said had apparently been passed around within a community of former U.S. government hackers and contractors before one of them gave WikiLeaks some of the material.

The documents revealed that the CIA can capture the content of encrypted Internet and cell-phone messages by grabbing the material in the fraction of a second before the words are put through encryption.

Another program called “Weeping Angel” can hack Samsung “smart” TVs with built-in Internet connections, allowing the CIA and British intelligence to covertly use the TVs as listening devices even when they appear to be turned off.

Besides the 1984-ish aspects of these reported capabilities – Orwell’s dystopia also envisioned TVs being used to spy on people in their homes – the WikiLeaks’ disclosures add a new layer of mystery to whether the Russians were behind the “hacks” of the Democratic Party or whether Moscow was framed.

For instance, the widely cited Russian fingerprints on the “hacking” attacks – such as malware associated with the suspected Russian cyber-attackers APT 28 (also known as “Fancy Bear”); some Cyrillic letters; and the phrase “Felix Edmundovich,” a reference to Dzerzhinsky, the founder of a Bolsheviks’ secret police – look less like proof of Russian guilt than they did earlier.

Or put differently – based on the newly available CIA material – the possibility

that these telltale signs were planted to incriminate Moscow doesn't sound as farfetched as it might have earlier.

A former U.S. intelligence officer, cited by The Wall Street Journal on Wednesday, acknowledged that the CIA's "Umbrage" library of foreign hacking tools could "be used to mask a U.S. operation and make it appear that it was carried out by another country... That could be accomplished by inserting malware components from, say, a known Chinese, Russian or Iranian hacking operation into a U.S. one."

While that possibility in no way clears Moscow in the case of the Democratic "hack," it does inject new uncertainty into the "high confidence" that President Obama's intelligence community expressed in its assessment of Russian culpability. If the CIA had this capability to plant false leads in the data, so too would other actors, both government and private, to cover their own tracks.

Dubious Forensics

Another problem with the U.S. intelligence community's assessment is that the forensics were left to private contractors working for the Democrats, not conducted independently by U.S. government experts.

That gap in the evidentiary trail widens when one notes that CrowdStrike, the Democratic Party's consultant, offered contradictory commentary about the skills of the hackers.

CrowdStrike praised the hackers' tradecraft as "superb, operational security second to none" and added: "we identified advanced methods consistent with nation-state level capabilities including deliberate targeting and 'access management' tradecraft – both groups were constantly going back into the environment to change out their implants, modify persistent methods, move to new Command & Control channels and perform other tasks to try to stay ahead of being detected."

In other words, CrowdStrike cited the sophistication of the tradecraft as proof of a state-sponsored cyber-attack, yet it was the sloppiness of the tradecraft that supposedly revealed the Russian links, i.e. the old malware connections, the Cyrillic letters and the Dzerzhinsky reference.

As Sam Biddle wrote for The Intercept, "Would a group whose 'tradecraft is superb' with 'operational security second to none' really leave behind the name of a Soviet spy chief imprinted on a document it sent to American journalists? Would these groups really be dumb enough to leave cyrillic comments on these documents? Would these groups that 'constantly [go] back into the environment to change out their implants, modify persistent methods, move to new Command &

Control channels' get caught because they precisely *didn't* make sure not to use IP addresses they'd been associated [with] before?

"It's very hard to buy the argument that the Democrats were hacked by one of the most sophisticated, diabolical foreign intelligence services in history, and that we know this because they screwed up over and over again."

Sources and Methods

The WikiLeaks' disclosures on Tuesday also demonstrate that the pro-transparency Web site has a well-placed source with access to sensitive U.S. intelligence data.

That reinforces the suggestion from WikiLeaks' associate, former British Ambassador Craig Murray, that the emails purloined from Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta originated from U.S. intelligence intercepts and were then leaked by an American insider to WikiLeaks, not obtained via a "hack" directed by the Russian government.

Podesta's association with the international lobbying firm, the Podesta Group, could justify U.S. intelligence monitoring his communications as a way to glean information about the strategies of Saudi Arabia and other foreign clients.

Murray suggested that the earlier WikiLeaks' release of Democratic National Committee emails came from a Democratic insider, not from Russia. In addition, WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange has denied that Russia was the source of either batch of Democratic emails, although he refused to say who was.

Of course, it would be possible that Russia used American cutouts to launder the emails without WikiLeaks knowing where the material originated. And some cyber-experts, who were cited in press reports about the new WikiLeaks' disclosures on Tuesday, speculated, without evidence, that perhaps Russia was the source of them, too.

Still, there are now fresh reasons to doubt the Official Narrative that Russia "hacked" into Democratic emails in a covert operation intended to throw the U.S. election to Donald Trump.

Those doubts already existed – or should have – because the U.S. intelligence community refused to release any hard proof that the Russians were responsible for the purloined Democratic emails.

On Jan. 6, just one day after Director of National Intelligence James Clapper vowed to go to the greatest possible lengths to supply the public with the evidence behind the accusations, his office released a 25-page report that

contained no direct evidence that Russia delivered hacked emails from the DNC and Podesta to WikiLeaks.

The DNI report amounted to a compendium of reasons to suspect that Russia was the source of the information – built largely on the argument that Russia had a motive for doing so because of its disdain for Democratic nominee Clinton and the potential for friendlier relations with Republican nominee Trump.

A Big Risk

But the DNI's case, as presented, was one-sided, ignoring other reasons why the Russians would not have taken the risk.

For instance, while it is true that many Russian officials, including President Putin, considered Clinton to be a threat to worsen the already frayed relationship between the two nuclear superpowers, the report ignores the downside for Russia trying to interfere with the U.S. election campaign and then failing to stop Clinton, which looked like the most likely outcome until Election Night.

If Russia had accessed the DNC and Podesta emails and slipped them to WikiLeaks for publication, Putin would have to think that the National Security Agency, with its exceptional ability to track electronic communications around the world, might well have detected the maneuver and would have informed Clinton.

So, on top of Clinton's well-known hawkishness, Putin would have risked handing the expected incoming president a personal reason to take revenge on him and his country. Historically, Russia has been very careful in such situations, holding its intelligence collections for internal purposes only and not sharing them with the public.

While it is conceivable that Putin decided to take this extraordinary risk in this case – despite the widely held view that Clinton was a shoo-in to defeat Trump – an objective report would have examined this counter argument for him not doing so.

But the DNI report was not driven by a desire to be evenhanded; it was, in effect, a prosecutor's brief, albeit one that lacked any real evidence that the accused is guilty.

Though it's impossible for an average U.S. citizen to know precisely what the U.S. intelligence community may have in its secret files, some former NSA officials who are familiar with the agency's eavesdropping capabilities say Washington's lack of certainty suggests that the NSA does not possess such evidence.

That's the view of William Binney, who retired as NSA's technical director of world military and geopolitical analysis and who created many of the collection systems still used by NSA.

Binney, in [an article](#) co-written with former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, said, "With respect to the alleged interference by Russia and WikiLeaks in the U.S. election, it is a major mystery why U.S. intelligence feels it must rely on 'circumstantial evidence,' when it has NSA's vacuum cleaner sucking up hard evidence galore. What we know of NSA's capabilities shows that the email disclosures were from leaking, not hacking."

Released last summer – around the time of the Democratic National Convention – the DNC emails revealed senior party officials showing a preference for former Secretary of State Clinton over Sen. Bernie Sanders although the DNC was supposed to remain neutral.

Later in the campaign, the Podesta leak exposed the contents of speeches that Clinton gave to Wall Street banks, which she wanted to keep secret from the American voters, and the existence of pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

News articles based on the WikiLeaks' material embarrassed the DNC and the Clinton campaign, but the rupture of secrets was not considered a very important factor in Clinton's loss to Donald Trump. Clinton herself blamed that surprising outcome on FBI Director James Comey's last-minute decision to briefly reopen the investigation into her improper use of a private server for her emails as Secretary of State.

After Comey's move, Clinton's poll numbers cratered and she seemed incapable of reversing the trend. More generally, Clinton faced criticism for running an inept campaign that included her insulting many Trump supporters by calling them "deplorables" and failing to articulate a clear, hopeful vision for the future.

However, after the shock of Trump's stunning victory began to wear off, the outgoing Obama administration and angry Democrats began singling out Putin as a chief culprit in Clinton's defeat.

Despite the appearance that they were scapegoating America's old adversary – the Russkies – liberals and Democrats have used the allegations to energize their base and put the young Trump administration on the defensive, even though hard evidence to support the accusations is still lacking.

The liberals and Democrats also don't seem to care that they are using these dubious allegations to ratchet up tensions between the world's two nuclear superpowers, thus putting the future of the world at risk.

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A Demand for Russian 'Hacking' Proof

More than 20 U.S. intelligence, military and diplomatic veterans are calling on President Obama to release the evidence backing up allegations that Russia aided the Trump campaign – or admit that the proof is lacking.

MEMORANDUM FOR: President Barack Obama

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: A Key Issue That Still Needs to be Resolved

As President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take the oath of office Friday, a pall hangs over his upcoming presidency amid an unprecedentedly concerted campaign to delegitimize it. Unconfirmed accusations continue to swirl alleging that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized "Russian hacking" that helped put Mr. Trump in the White House.

As President for a few more days, you have the power to demand concrete evidence of a link between the Russians and WikiLeaks, which published the bulk of the information in question. Lacking that evidence, the American people should be told that there is no fire under the smoke and mirrors of recent weeks.

We urge you to authorize public release of any tangible evidence that takes us beyond the unsubstantiated, "we-assess" judgments by the intelligence agencies. Otherwise, we – as well as other skeptical Americans – will be left with the corrosive suspicion that the intense campaign of accusations is part of a wider attempt to discredit the Russians and those – like Mr. Trump – who wish to deal constructively with them.

Remember the Maine?

Alleged Russian interference has been labeled "an act of war" and Mr. Trump a "traitor." But the "intelligence" served up to support those charges does not pass the smell test. Your press conference on Wednesday will give you a chance to respond more persuasively to NBC's Peter Alexander's challenge at the last one (on Dec. 16) "to show the proof [and], as they say, put your money where

your mouth is and declassify some of the intelligence. ...”

You told Alexander you were reluctant to “compromise sources and methods.” We can understand that concern better than most Americans. We would remind you, though, that at critical junctures in the past, your predecessors made judicious decisions to give higher priority to buttressing the credibility of U.S. intelligence-based policy than to protecting sources and methods. With the Kremlin widely accused by politicians and pundits of “an act of war,” this is the kind of textbook case in which you might seriously consider taking special pains to substantiate serious allegations with hard intelligence – if there is any.

During the Cuban missile crisis, for instance, President Kennedy ordered us to show highly classified photos of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba and on ships en route, even though this blew sensitive detail regarding the imagery intelligence capabilities of the cameras on our U-2 aircraft.

President Ronald Reagan’s reaction to the Libyan terrorist bombing of La Belle Disco in Berlin on April 5, 1986, that killed two and injured 79 other U.S. servicemen is another case in point. We had intercepted a Libyan message that morning: “At 1:30 in the morning one of the acts was carried out with success, without leaving a trace behind.” (We should add here that NSA’s dragnet SIGINT capability 30 years later renders it virtually impossible to avoid “leaving a trace behind” once a message is put on the network.)

President Reagan ordered the U.S. Air Force to bomb Col. Muammar Qaddafi’s palace compound to smithereens, killing several civilians. Amid widespread international consternation and demands for proof that Libya was responsible for the Berlin attack, President Reagan ordered us to make public the encrypted Libyan message, thereby sacrificing a collection/decryption capability unknown to the Libyans – until then.

As senior CIA veteran Milton Bearden has put it, there are occasions when more damage is done by “protecting” sources and methods than by revealing them.

Where’s the Beef?

We find the New York Times- and Washington Post-led media Blitz against Trump and Putin truly extraordinary, despite our long experience with intelligence/media related issues. On Jan. 6, the day after your top intelligence officials published what we found to be an embarrassingly shoddy report purporting to prove Russian hacking in support of Trump’s candidacy, the Times banner headline across all six columns on page 1 read: **“PUTIN LED SCHEME TO AID TRUMP, REPORT SAYS.”**

The lead article began: "President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia directed a vast cyberattack aimed at denying Hillary Clinton the presidency and installing Donald J. Trump in the Oval Office, the nation's top intelligence agencies said in an extraordinary report they delivered on Friday to Mr. Trump." Eschewing all subtlety, the Times added that the revelations in "this damning report ... undermined the legitimacy" of the President-elect, and "made the case that Mr. Trump was the favored candidate of Mr. Putin."

On page A10, however, Times investigative reporter Scott Shane pointed out: "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."

Shane continued, "Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to 'trust us.' There is no discussion of the forensics used to recognize the handiwork of known hacking groups, no mention of intercepted communications between the Kremlin and the hackers, no hint of spies reporting from inside Moscow's propaganda machinery."

Shane added that the intelligence report "offers an obvious reason for leaving out the details, declaring that including 'the precise bases for its assessments' would 'reveal sensitive sources and methods and imperil the ability to collect critical foreign intelligence in the future.'"

Shane added a quote from former National Security Agency lawyer Susan Hennessey: "The unclassified report is underwhelming at best. There is essentially no new information for those who have been paying attention." Ms. Hennessey served as an attorney in NSA's Office of General Counsel and is now a Brookings Fellow in National Security Law.

Everyone Hacks

There is a lot of ambiguity – whether calculated or not – about "Russian hacking." "Everyone knows that everyone hacks," says everyone: Russia hacks; China hacks; every nation that can hacks. So do individuals of various nationalities. This is not the question.

You said at your press conference on Dec. 16 "the intelligence that I have seen gives me great confidence in their [U.S. intelligence agencies'] assessment that the Russians carried out this hack." "Which hack?" you were asked. "The hack of the DNC and the hack of John Podesta," you answered.

Earlier during the press conference you alluded to the fact that "the information was in the hands of WikiLeaks." The key question is how the material from "Russian hacking" got to WikiLeaks, because it was WikiLeaks that published

the DNC and Podesta emails.

Our VIPS colleague William Binney, who was Technical Director of NSA and created many of the collection systems still in use, assures us that NSA's "cast-iron" coverage – particularly surrounding Julian Assange and other people associated with WikiLeaks – would almost certainly have yielded a record of any electronic transfer from Russia to WikiLeaks. Binney has used some of the highly classified slides released by Edward Snowden to demonstrate precisely how NSA accomplishes this using trace mechanisms embedded throughout the network. [See: "[U.S. Intel Vets Dispute Russia Hacking Claims](#)," Dec. 12, 2016.]

NSA Must Come Clean

We strongly suggest that you ask NSA for any evidence it may have indicating that the results of Russian hacking were given to WikiLeaks. If NSA can produce such evidence, you may wish to order whatever declassification may be needed and then release the evidence. This would go a long way toward allaying suspicions that no evidence exists. If NSA cannot give you that information – and quickly – this would probably mean it does not have any.

In all candor, the checkered record of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper for trustworthiness makes us much less confident that anyone should take it on faith that he is more "trustworthy than the Russians," as you suggested on Dec. 16. You will probably recall that Clapper lied under oath to the Senate Intelligence Committee on March 12, 2013, about NSA dragnet activities; later apologizing for testimony he admitted had been "clearly erroneous." In [our Memorandum](#) for you on Dec. 11, 2013, we cited chapter and verse as to why Clapper should have been fired for saying things he knew to be "clearly erroneous."

In that Memorandum, we endorsed the demand by Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner that Clapper be removed. "Lying to Congress is a federal offense, and Clapper ought to be fired and prosecuted for it," said Sensenbrenner in an interview with The Hill. "The only way laws are effective is if they're enforced."

Actually, we have had trouble understanding why, almost four years after he deliberately misled the Senate, Clapper remains Director of National Intelligence – overseeing the entire intelligence community.

Hacks or Leaks?

Not mentioned until now is our conclusion that leaks are the source of the WikiLeaks disclosures in question – not hacking. Leaks normally leave no electronic trace. William Binney has been emphasizing this for several months and suggesting strongly that the disclosures were from a leaker with physical

access to the information – not a hacker with only remote access.

This, of course, makes it even harder to pin the blame on President Putin, or anyone else. And we suspect that this explains why NSA demurred when asked to join the CIA and FBI in expressing “high confidence” in this key judgment of the report put out under Clapper’s auspices on Jan. 6, yielding this curious formulation:

“We also assess Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him. All three agencies agree with this judgment. CIA and FBI have high confidence in this judgment; NSA has moderate confidence.” (Emphasis, and lack of emphasis, in original)

In addition, former U.K. Ambassador Craig Murray has said publicly he has first-hand information on the provenance of the leaks, and has expressed surprise that no one from the New York Times or the Washington Post has tried to get in touch with him. We would be interested in knowing whether anyone from your administration, including the intelligence community, has made any effort to contact Ambassador Murray.

What to Do

President-elect Trump said a few days ago that his team will have a “full report on hacking within 90 days.” Whatever the findings of the Trump team turn out to be, they will no doubt be greeted with due skepticism, since Mr. Trump is in no way a disinterested party.

You, on the other hand, enjoy far more credibility – AND power – for the next few days. And we assume you would not wish to hobble your successor with charges that cannot withstand close scrutiny. We suggest you order the chiefs of the NSA, FBI and CIA to the White House and ask them to lay all their cards on the table. They need to show you why you should continue to place credence in what, a month ago, you described as “uniform intelligence assessments” about Russian hacking.

At that point, if the intelligence heads have credible evidence, you have the option of ordering it released – even at the risk of damage to sources and methods. For what it may be worth, we will not be shocked if it turns out that they can do no better than the evidence-deprived assessments they have served up in recent weeks. In that case, we would urge you, in all fairness, to let the American people in on the dearth of convincing evidence before you leave office.

As you will have gathered by now, we strongly suspect that the evidence your intelligence chiefs have of a joint ***Russian-hacking-WikiLeaks-publishing***

operation is no better than the “intelligence” evidence in 2002-2003 – expressed then with comparable flat-fact “certitude” – of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Obama’s Legacy

Mr. President, there is much talk in your final days in office about your legacy. Will part of that legacy be that you stood by while flames of illegitimacy rose willy-nilly around your successor? Or will you use your power to reveal the information – or the fact that there are merely unsupported allegations – that would enable us to deal with them responsibly?

In the immediate wake of the holiday on which we mark the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it seems appropriate to make reference to his legacy, calling to mind the graphic words in his “Letter From the Birmingham City Jail,” with which he reminds us of our common duty to expose lies and injustice:

“Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up, but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Marshall Carter-Tripp, Foreign Service Officer (ret) and former Office Director in the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research

Thomas Drake, former Senior Executive, NSA

Bogdan Dzakovic, Former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security, (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC, Iraq & Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Larry Johnson, former CIA Intelligence Officer & former State Department

Counter-Terrorism Official, ret.

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, USAF (Ret.); ex-Master SERE Instructor for Strategic Reconnaissance Operations (NSA/DIA) and Special Mission Units (JSOC)

Brady Kiesling, former U.S. Foreign Service Officer, ret. (Associate VIPS),

John Kiriakou, Former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and former Senior Investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Karen Kwiatkowski, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

Linda Lewis, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret.)

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Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Peter Van Buren, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Kirk Wiebe, former Senior Analyst, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA (ret.)

Robert Wing, former Foreign Service Officer (associate VIPS)

Ann Wright, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat

The Scheme to Take Down Trump

Exclusive: The U.S. intelligence community's unprecedented assault on an incoming U.S. president – now including spreading salacious rumors – raises questions about how long Donald Trump can hold the White House, says Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Is a military coup in the works? Or are U.S. intelligence agencies laying the political groundwork for forcing Donald Trump from the presidency because they can't abide his rejection of a new cold war with Russia? Not long ago, even asking such questions would have marked one as the sort of paranoid nut who believes that lizard people run the government. But no longer.

Thanks to the now-notorious 35-page dossier concerning Donald Trump's alleged sexual improprieties in a Moscow luxury hotel, it's clear that strange maneuverings are underway in Washington and that no one is quite sure how they will end.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper added to the mystery Wednesday evening by releasing a 200-word statement to the effect that he was shocked, shocked, that the dossier had found its way into the press. Such leaks, the statement said, "are extremely corrosive and damaging to our national security."

Clapper added: "that this document is not a US Intelligence Community product and that I do not believe the leaks came from within the IC. The IC has not made any judgment that the information in this document is reliable, and we did not rely upon it in any way for our conclusions. However, part of our obligation is to ensure that policymakers are provided with the fullest possible picture of any matters that might affect national security."

Rather than vouching for the dossier's contents, in other words, all Clapper says he did was inform Trump that it was making the rounds in Washington and that he should know what it said – and that he thus couldn't have been more horrified than when *Buzzfeed* posted all 35 pages on its website.

But it doesn't make sense. As *The New York Times* noted, "putting the summary in a report that went to multiple people in Congress and the executive branch made it *very likely that it would be leaked*" (emphasis in the original). So even if the "intelligence community" didn't leak the dossier itself, it distributed it knowing that someone else would.

Then there is the *Guardian*, second to none in its loathing for Trump and Vladimir Putin and hence intent on giving the dossier the best possible spin. It printed a quasi-defense not of the memo itself but of the man who wrote it: Christopher Steele, an ex-MI6 officer who now heads his own private intelligence firm. "A sober, cautious and meticulous professional with a formidable record" is how the *Guardian* described him. Then it quoted an unnamed ex-Foreign Office official on the subject of Steele's credibility:

"The idea his work is fake or a cowboy operation is false, completely untrue.

Chris is an experienced and highly regarded professional. He's not the sort of person who will simply pass on gossip. ... If he puts something in a report, he believes there's sufficient credibility in it for it to be worth considering. Chris is a very straight guy. He could not have survived in the job he was in if he had been prone to flights of fancy or doing things in an ill-considered way."

In other words, Steele is a straight-shooter, so it's worth paying attention to what he has to say. Or so the *Guardian* assures us. "That is the way the CIA and the FBI, not to mention the British government, regarded him, too," it adds, so presumably Clapper felt the same way.

What is Afoot?

So what does it all mean? Simply that U.S. intelligence agencies believed that the dossier came from a reliable source and that, as a consequence, there was a significant possibility that Trump was a "Siberian candidate," as *Times* columnist Paul Krugman once described him. They therefore sent out multiple copies of a two-page summary on the assumption that at least one would find its way to the press.

Even if Clapper & Co. took no position concerning the dossier's contents, they knew that preparing and distributing such a summary amounted to a tacit endorsement. They also knew, presumably, that it would provide editors with an excuse to go public. If the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency feel that Steele's findings are worthy of attention, then why shouldn't the average reader have an opportunity to examine them as well?

How did Clapper expect Trump to respond when presented with allegations that he was vulnerable to Russian blackmail and potentially under the Kremlin's thumb? Did he expect him to hang his head in shame, break into great racking sobs, and admit that it was all true? If so, did Clapper \then plan to place a comforting hand on Trump's shoulder and suggest, gently but firmly, that it was time to step aside and allow a trusted insider like Mike Pence to take the reins?

Based on the *sturm und drang* of the last few days, the answer is very possibly yes. If so, the gambit failed when Trump, in his usual high-voltage manner, denounced the dossier as "fake news" and sailed into the intelligence agencies for behaving like something out of "Nazi Germany." The intelligence community's hopes, if that's what they were, were dashed.

All of which is thoroughly unprecedented by American political standards. After all, this is a country that takes endless pride in the peaceful transfer of power every four years or so. Yet here was the intelligence community attempting

to short-circuit the process by engineering Trump's removal before he even took office.

But the *Guardian* then upped the ante even more by suggesting that the CIA continue with the struggle. Plainly, the Republican congressional leadership has "no appetite" for an inquiry into Steele's findings, the paper's New York correspondent, Ed Pilkington, wrote, adding:

"That leaves the intelligence agencies. The danger for Trump here is that he has so alienated senior officials, not least by likening them to Nazis, that he has hardly earned their loyalty."

What was the *Guardian* suggesting – that *disloyal* intelligence agents keep on searching regardless? And what if they come up with what they claim is a smoking gun?

Explained Pilkington: "To take a flight of fancy, what if it [i.e. Steele's findings] were substantiated? That would again come down to a question of politics. No US president has ever been forced out of office by impeachment (Richard Nixon resigned before the vote; Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton were acquitted by the Senate). Any such procedure would have to be prepared and approved by a majority of the House of Representatives, and then passed to the Senate for a two-thirds majority vote. As the Republicans hold the reins in both chambers, it would take an almighty severing of ties between Trump and his own party to even get close to such a place."

It's a long shot, but the *Guardian's* recommendation is that rogue agents keep on digging until they strike pay dirt, at which point they should go straight to Congress and persuade – if not pressure – the Republican leadership to initiate the process of throwing Trump out of office.

This is not the same as sending an armored column to attack Capitol Hill, but it's close. Essentially, the *Guardian* was calling on the intelligence agencies to assume ultimate responsibility regarding who can sit in the Oval Office and who cannot.

A Desperate Establishment

All of which demonstrates how desperate the military-intelligence complex has grown after Clapper's report on alleged Russian hacking of Democratic emails met with such a derisory reception following its publication on Jan. 6. Even the *Times* admitted that it provided "no new evidence to support assertions that Moscow meddled covertly through hacking and other actions" while the *Daily Beast* said it was "unlikely to convince a single skeptic" due to a notable absence of anything by way of back-up data.

The Steele dossier was supposed to take up the slack. Yet it has fallen short as well. It asserts, for example, that Trump attorney Michael Cohen traveled to Prague to discuss hacking with a Russian official named Oleg Solodukhin, a claim that both men have since denied. It misspells the name of a major Russian bank and gets its Russian geography wrong too.

As Owen Matthews points out in a very smart article in *Newsweek*, it “seems to be under the impression that the suburb of Barvikha on the tony Rublevskoe highway is a closed government compound, instead of just an expensive vacation home area favored by the new rich.”

The dossier misspells the name of an Azeri real-estate mogul named Aras Agalarov and “reports his association with Trump as news in August 2016 – when Agalarov publicly organized Trump’s visit to the Miss Universe pageant in 2013 and arranged a meeting with top Russian businessmen for Trump afterward, both of which were widely reported at the time.”

Other aspects of the dossier don’t add up either. It reports that the Russian government “has been cultivating, supporting and assisting Trump for at least five years” in order to “encourage splits and divisions in the Western alliance.” But as Matthews points out, Trump wasn’t in politics five years ago and was considered a long shot for months after entering the presidential race in mid-2015. So how could the Kremlin be sure that their man would ultimately prevail?

The dossier says that Trump “accepted a regular flow of intelligence from the Kremlin, including on Democratic and other political rivals.” But Trump gave no hint of having inside information when he called for “Crooked Hillary” to be locked up for purging her email files; to the contrary, he did so on the basis of information available on every front page. The memo says that the Russians also had “compromising material” on Clinton. If so, then why wasn’t it used?

Hearsay Evidence

The discrepancies go on. But this is what one would expect of a document based entirely of hearsay in which Source A claims to have gotten a juicy tidbit from Source B, who heard it from Source C deep inside the Kremlin.

Grasping at straws, the *Guardian*’s Ed Pilkington conceded that no news agency has been able to verify the dossier’s findings. But, he said, they are “unlikely to be discarded as quickly or as conclusively as Trump would like” for the simple reason that “the flip side of information that cannot be classed reliable is that neither can it be classed unreliable.”

But the same could be said for information that someone got from a friend whose

brother-in-law heard from a park ranger that Barack and Michelle like to while away their evenings snorting cocaine. It can't be classed as reliable because no one can verify that it's true. But it can't be classed as unreliable because no one can prove that it's wrong. So maybe the best thing to do is to impeach Obama in the few days he has remaining just to be sure.

This not to say that the so-called President-elect's legitimacy is not open to question. To the contrary, it is questionable in the extreme given that he lost the popular election by more than 2.86 million votes. In a democratic country, this should count for something. But the intelligence community is not attacking him on democratic grounds, needless to say, but on imperial.

Trump is a rightwing blowhard whose absurd babblings about Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen reveal a man who is dangerously ignorant about how the world works. But he has managed to seize on one or two semi-good ideas over the years. One is that Obama administration's confrontational policies toward Russia are a recipe for disaster, while another is that toppling Syria's Bashar al-Assad with Al Qaeda and ISIS still up and about will only hasten their march on Damascus.

Both views are perfectly sensible. But because Washington's endlessly bellicose foreign-policy establishment is wedded to the opposite, it sees them as high treason.

This is very serious. U.S. foreign policy has been marked by a high degree of continuity since World War II as Republican and Democratic presidents alike pledged to uphold the imperial agenda. But Trump, as radical in his way as William Jennings Bryan was in 1896 or Henry A. Wallace in 1948, is bucking the consensus to an unprecedented degree.

Even though its policies have led to disaster after disaster, the foreign-policy establishment is aghast. Consequently, it is frantically searching for a way to prevent him from carrying his ideas out. The intelligence agencies appear to be running out of time with the inauguration only a few days away. But that doesn't mean they're giving up. All it means, rather, is that they'll go deeper underground. Trump may enter the White House on Jan. 20. But the big question is how long he'll remain.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).
