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September 2025 | Volume 54, Number 9

The Significance of the Recently Released Russia Hoax Documents

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WITHIN HOURS of her 2016 presidential campaign loss, a devastated Hillary Clinton attributed her defeat not to the American voters who rejected her, but to Russia, echoing a campaign theme she had been developing for months. “Hillary declined to take responsibility for her own loss” and “kept pointing her finger” at Russia, according to *Shattered*, a 2017 book about her campaign—“Her team coalesced around the idea that Russian hacking was the major unreported story of the campaign.”

The corporate media were also devastated, as they had spent the entire campaign mocking the idea that Trump and his anti-establishment positions on foreign policy, trade, and wokeness could appeal to voters. To the extent possible, they would help promote Clinton’s blame game.



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In early January 2017, the Clinton campaign’s “Steele dossier”—a secretly funded collection of made-up stories and gossip alleging that Russia had dirt on Trump and that Trump was colluding with Russia against the United States—was published. Washington would be consumed by the Russia collusion hoax for the next two-and-a-half years. The investigations it spurred would bankrupt Trump associates, destroy lives, and hamstring Trump’s ability to govern. It led to draconian censorship campaigns against conservatives. It hurt Republicans in the 2018 midterm elections and the 2020 general election. But no evidence was found that a single American, much less Trump himself, conspired with Russia.

Fast forward to today. Six months into Trump’s second term, CIA Director John Ratcliffe and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard have declassified and released long-suppressed documents detailing how President Obama and his spy chiefs laundered the Steele dossier and other falsehoods in an attempt to destroy Trump’s first presidency. The response from Democrats, the media, and many establishment Republicans has been to say that these suppressed documents contain nothing new or significant. Not true.

The Russia collusion hoax was anchored to two central claims: first, that Trump was a compromised agent of Russia, and second, that Russia interfered in the 2016 election to help Trump. The first claim was completely

debunked after years of investigation. It is on the second and far more plausible claim—which was just as key to the hoax—that the newly released documents shed new light. And the revelations are shocking.

The documents show that in early December 2016, the intelligence community planned to publish a top secret presidential daily brief holding that “Russian and criminal actors did not impact recent US election results by conducting malicious cyber activities against election infrastructure.” Once published, this brief would have been read by Obama and his top officials, as well as President-Elect Trump and his designated National Security Advisor, Lt. General Michael Flynn. But the day before publication, the FBI—which had co-authored the brief—announced that it was pulling its support for the brief and would be drafting a dissent. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence announced that the brief would be held for the following week.

In the end, the brief was never published. Instead, Obama ordered his top spy chiefs to put together an Intelligence Community Assessment—known as an ICA—on “Russia election meddling.” The chiefs were directed to look at how Moscow sought to influence the 2016 election—including with hacking, leaks, cyber activity against voting systems, and “fake news”—and to answer the questions, “Why did Moscow direct these activities?” and “What have the Russians hoped to accomplish?”

Prior to this order from Obama, the spy agencies had assessed that Russia’s efforts to interfere with the 2016 election were consistent with Russia’s previous and long-standing election-year meddling and cyber-hacking efforts. They found that Russia’s goal was to mess with and decrease confidence in U.S. elections, rather than help elect particular candidates. But on the evening of December 9, 2016, *The Washington Post* published a story sourced

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ISSN 0277-8432

to unnamed senior Obama officials claiming that the CIA had “concluded in a secret assessment that Russia intervened in the 2016 election to help Donald Trump.” That was a lie. The process by which such assessments are made by the CIA hadn’t taken place, much less concluded anything. The same false information was leaked to *The New York Times*: “American intelligence agencies,” it reported, “have concluded with ‘high confidence’ that Russia acted covertly . . . to harm Hillary Clinton’s chances and promote Donald J. Trump, according to senior administration officials.” Both papers were awarded Pulitzers the next year for their willingness to participate, without a bit of skepticism, in this disinformation operation.

THE RUSSIA COLLUSION HOAX WAS ANCHORED TO TWO CENTRAL CLAIMS: FIRST, THAT TRUMP WAS A COMPROMISED AGENT OF RUSSIA, AND SECOND, THAT RUSSIA INTERFERED IN THE 2016 ELECTION TO HELP TRUMP. THE FIRST CLAIM WAS COMPLETELY DEBUNKED AFTER YEARS OF INVESTIGATION. IT IS ON THE SECOND AND FAR MORE PLAUSIBLE CLAIM—WHICH WAS JUST AS KEY TO THE HOAX—THAT THE NEWLY RELEASED DOCUMENTS SHED NEW LIGHT. AND THE REVELATIONS ARE SHOCKING.

A few days later, Obama poured gasoline on the fire by publicly expressing concern that “potential hacking . . . could hamper vote counting and affect the actual election process itself.” Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, CIA Director John Brennan, and FBI Director James Comey were working furiously to throw together the ICA Obama had ordered. Typically, such an assessment would take a minimum of several months and include a wide variety of perspectives. This ICA was prepared in two weeks using only five CIA staffers to draft it. Comey, Brennan, and Clapper overruled strenuous

objections from senior intelligence officials who were aghast at the inclusion of unsubstantiated claims and unverified gossip. Some who complained had their promotions threatened. Others were told they were not privy to secret intelligence reviewed only by top leadership.

The finished ICA was reported on to Obama on January 5, 2017, and to Trump the next day. In addition to findings that were credible and substantiated, the report said Putin had developed “a clear preference” for Trump and “aspired to help his chances of victory.” It also included, contrary to the public testimony of Obama’s spy chiefs, a two-page summary of the Clinton campaign’s Steele dossier in the most classified version of the report.

Comey met privately with Trump at the end of his briefing to tell him about unverified allegations that Russia held proof of salacious sexual and financial impropriety on the part of Trump. Four days later, CNN reported extensively on the meeting and what Trump was told.

At this point, the Russia hoax was fully operational and would do severe damage to our country for years to come.

One document Ratcliffe released is a “tradecraft review” of the January 2017 ICA. Conducted by career officials at the CIA, the review found that the dishonest leaks by the Obama administration in December 2016 created an “anchoring bias” that polluted the entire document. The review also expressed concern about the ICA’s frantic production timeline; the refusal to allow analysts reviewing

the document to see the intelligence its conclusions were based on; and the over-involvement of Comey, Brennan, and Clapper. It found that the assessment gave a “higher confidence level than was justified” to the claim that Russia preferred Trump and that it was tainted by a “potential political motive.”

Gabbard released an even more explosive report. Authored in 2017 and 2018 by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence chaired by Rep. Devin Nunes, it had been hidden in a top secret vault for seven years. It conclusively debunked the ICA’s “key judgement” about Putin’s preference for Trump, excoriated the ICA for using the preposterous Steele dossier as a basis for its claims, and detailed how the views of career intelligence officials were overruled and dismissed.

THE DOCUMENTS SHOW THAT CAREER OFFICERS WERE PLEADING WITH THEIR BOSSES NOT TO ASSERT, FALSELY, THAT RUSSIA PREFERRED TRUMP AND NOT TO INCLUDE THE STEELE DOSSIER. ONE WROTE: “BASED SOLELY ON WHAT WE DO KNOW NOW . . . I BELIEVE [THE DOSSIER] SHOULD NOT BE INCLUDED IN THE PAPER.” THIS SAME OFFICIAL CHARACTERIZED IT AS SUFFERING FROM “POOR SOURCE TRADECRAFT,” AS HAVING “EXTREMELY SKETCHY” SOURCING, AND AS FAILING TO “MEET NORMAL [INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY] STANDARDS.”

Brennan had long publicly claimed that he had secret knowledge—separate and apart from the Steele dossier—to support his view that Russia interfered to help Trump. In August and September 2016, he had individually briefed the “Gang of Eight,” the top Senate and House officials who oversee the CIA, and it turned out that Brennan’s so-called secret knowledge was laughable. It was based mostly on three reports that “contained flawed information” and “became foundational sources” for the claim that Putin aspired to help

Trump. Veteran CIA officers had said the reports “contained substandard information that was unclear, of uncertain origin, potentially biased, implausible,” and “odd.”

Brennan hadn’t allowed some of the information to go through normal vetting procedures when it was collected. And he “personally directed that two of the most important reports not be formally disseminated when he first learned of them,” supposedly because they were so sensitive—a questionable explanation given that the CIA has a special reporting channel for sensitive reports that are restricted to the president and other named individuals.

The only classified information cited in the ICA for the claim that Putin “aspired to help Trump’s chances of victory” was a fragment of a sentence that came from someone who did not

personally know Putin. The fragment, consisting of the words, “whose victory Putin was counting on,” had been collected prior to the July 2016 Republican National Convention. So who could even know to which victory it referred? Furthermore, it is not known whether the fragment reflected the sub-source’s opinion

of Putin’s thinking, Putin’s actual statements to his sub-source, or the views of someone else reflecting on Putin’s thinking to the sub-source. Its meaning was so unclear that “five people read it five ways,” according to the report.

For these reasons, experienced CIA officers initially omitted the fragment from the ICA. But Brennan ordered that it be included. One senior CIA officer, alarmed that it was the only evidence offered for the ICA’s main conclusion, noted the lack of “direct information that Putin wanted to get

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Trump elected.” The ICA also failed to address the strong anti-Trump bias on the part of the source of the fragment.

The ICA claimed that “a Russian political expert possessed a plan that recommended engagement with [Trump’s] team because of the prospects for improved US-Russian relations.” This claim was viewed as “lacking authoritativeness” and the CIA decided not to publish the intelligence even internally when they received it in February 2016. That’s probably because the so-called “plan” was in fact only an anonymous email with “no date, no identified sender, no clear recipient, and no classification”—not to mention that it was passed along by a foreign country with a noted anti-Trump bias.

The ICA then claimed that Putin’s inner circle “strongly preferred

Republican over Democratic candidates because they judged that Republicans had historically been less focused on democracy and human rights.” The phrase “strongly preferred Republican” never appeared in the raw intelligence report and the ultimate source for the claim is unknown. What’s more, the claim that Republicans cared less about democracy and human rights in Russia was implausible. The Select Committee report noted that President Reagan was famous for his “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” speech, but a myriad of other examples could be cited.

The ICA claimed that the “clear preference” report was corroborated by liaison, diplomatic, and press reporting, when in fact none of that was true. The liaison reporting was from 2014 and “didn’t mention Trump

at all.” The diplomatic report was a post-election overview from the U.S. ambassador noting that a Russian pundit said Trump and Putin should “work together like businessmen,” hardly corroboration for the claim that Putin’s inner circle preferred Republicans. Indeed, that same ambassador’s note quoted a Russian foreign minister saying that “we do not feel any euphoria” about Trump’s win.

BACK IN JANUARY 2017, SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADER CHARLES SCHUMER WARNED PRESIDENT-ELECT TRUMP TO STOP CRITICIZING THE FBI AND THE CIA. “LET ME TELL YOU,” HE SAID, “YOU TAKE ON THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY, THEY HAVE SIX WAYS FROM SUNDAY AT GETTING BACK AT YOU. SO, EVEN FOR A PRACTICAL, SUPPOSEDLY HARD-NOSED BUSINESSMAN, HE’S BEING REALLY DUMB TO DO THIS.” THANKS TO TRUMP’S VICTORY LAST NOVEMBER, IT MAY BE OBAMA’S SPY CHIEFS WHO WILL REGRET TAKING ON TRUMP.

The ICA also omitted intelligence that Putin was telling people he “did not care who won the election,” that he had “outlined the weaknesses of both major candidates,” and that Russia was “strategically placed to outmaneuver either [candidate].” If anything, Russia was preparing for Clinton’s victory and felt she was more predictable. The Kremlin worried that Trump officials would “likely adhere to conservative anti-Russian positions.” Putin “took exception” to a “favorable view” of Trump and said there was “no basis for enthusiasm” for Trump.

The original *New York Times* report on the CIA’s assessment said that although Russia had allegedly hacked both Republicans and Democrats, it had only released Democrats’ embarrassing emails. In fact, the CIA had no evidence that Russia held embarrassing emails or information on Republicans. It did have evidence that Russia had embarrassing information on

Clinton that was never released. This included the fact that Obama and other party leaders thought Clinton’s health to be “extraordinarily alarming,” that Clinton was suffering from “intensified psycho-emotional problems, including uncontrolled fits of anger, aggression, and cheerfulness,” and perhaps that she had been placed on “heavy tranquilizers.” If Putin favored Trump, it would be odd not to have released this information in the closing days of the campaign.

The use of weak, disputed, and contradicted intelligence to make the claim about Russia preferring Trump wasn’t the only problem with the ICA. Its use of the Steele dossier was another. Brennan lied publicly when he testi-

fied to Congress on May 23, 2017, that the dossier “was not in any way used as a basis for the [ICA] that was done.” Not only was it cited as the fourth bullet point of “evidence” that “Putin aspired to help Trump,” it was falsely described as “Russian plans and intentions” and having come from “an FBI source.” The dossier was presented in a two-page summary that implied some of its findings had been corroborated, misrepresenting “both the significance and credibility” of the dossier, according to the Select Committee report. Further, by hiding the dossier summary in the highest classified version, the Obama spy chiefs were “better able to shield the assessment from scrutiny.”

The documents released by Ratcliffe and Gabbard show that career officers were pleading with their bosses not to assert, falsely, that Russia preferred Trump and not to include the Steele dossier in any way, shape, or

form. One wrote: “Based solely on what we DO know now, my bottom line is this—unless FBI is prepared to provide much better sourcing—I believe this should NOT be included in the paper.” Noting that the document had not been formally issued as an FBI product, this same official characterized it as suffering from “POOR SOURCE TRADECRAFT,” as having “extremely sketchy” sourcing, and as failing to “meet normal [intelligence community] standards.”

Career senior intelligence officials worried about the dossier’s author being funded by an anti-Trump entity, even though they didn’t yet know that the funding came from the Clinton campaign. They also worried about the lack of transparency regarding the dossier’s sub-sources—a concern validated weeks later when the FBI finally got around to interviewing primary sub-source Igor Danchenko, a Russian national the FBI had suspected of being a spy, and determined that the salacious allegations in the dossier lacked any credibility. Despite this, the FBI defended the use of the dossier for years and hid Danchenko’s identity from Congress by hiring him as a confidential informant—a ruse allowing them to claim that revealing his identity would endanger ongoing investigations.

When Comey insisted that the information in the document was good, one intelligence official wondered why, if so, it hadn’t been used against Trump during the campaign. Including the Steele dossier in the ICA, this official added, would be like taking supermarket tabloids seriously. Pointing to a December 12, 2016, *National Enquirer* story headlined, “Muslim Spies in Obama’s CIA,” he asked rhetorically if that report should be included in an ICA as well.

Confronted by a reviewer who wrote that there was “no intelligence to directly support” the claim that Russia aspired to help Trump, and that making the claim would “open the [intelligence

community] to a line of very politicized inquiry that is sure to come up when this paper is shared with the Hill,” Brennan called him and another dissenting official into his office and told them he knew better. Confronted with demands from senior officials that the Steele dossier not be included, Brennan insisted it stay in. “[D]oesn’t it ring true?” he asked.

In the wake of these recent document releases, the Department of Justice announced in July that it had formed a strike force—a means of allowing federal investigators across multiple agencies to pursue criminals engaged in conspiracies. An unnamed federal prosecutor began securing additional documents from the spy agencies. After collecting the necessary documents, the federal prosecutor will begin speaking with whistleblowers and others with knowledge about how the Russia hoax operation was run. Once his team has a clear picture, they will bring in some of the targets of the investigation for interviews. With the statute of limitations at five years for most of these potential crimes, the Department of Justice may have to show that the conspiracy against Trump is ongoing, a task made easier by the fact that some of Obama’s spy chiefs continue to defend their actions.

Back in January 2017, three days before he was briefed on the Steele dossier, Senate Democratic Leader Charles Schumer warned President-Elect Trump against criticizing the FBI and the CIA. “Let me tell you,” he said, “you take on the intelligence community, they have six ways from Sunday at getting back at you. So, even for a practical, supposedly hard-nosed businessman, he’s being really dumb to do this.”

Thanks to Trump’s victory last November, it may be Obama’s spy chiefs who will regret taking on Trump. ■

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