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The Real Collusion Story

By MICHAEL DORAN | March 13, 2018 6:30 AM



Hillary Clinton at a “Get Out the Vote” rally in Concord, N.H., February 6, 2016. (Brian Snyder/Reuters)

In a textbook example of denial and projection, Trump foes in and out of government wove a sinister yarn meant to take him down.

Barack Obama keeps a close watch on his emotions. “I loved Spock,” he wrote in February 2015 in a presidential statement eulogizing Leonard Nimoy. Growing up in Hawaii, the young man who would later be called “No-Drama

Obama” felt a special affinity for the Vulcan first officer of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. “Long before being nerdy was cool, there was Leonard Nimoy,” the eulogy continued. “Leonard was Spock. Cool, logical, big-eared and level-headed.”

It is the rare occasion when Obama lets his Spock mask slip. But November 2, 2016, was just such a moment. Six days before the presidential election, when addressing the Congressional Black Caucus, he stressed that the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, threatened hard-won achievements of blacks: tolerance, justice, good schools, ending mass incarceration — even democracy itself. “There is one candidate who will advance those things,” he said, his voice swelling with emotion. “And there’s another candidate whose defining principle, the central theme of his candidacy, is opposition to all that we’ve done.”



The open display of emotion was new, but the theme of safeguarding his legacy was not. Two months earlier, on July 5, in Charlotte, N.C., Obama delivered his first stump speech for Hillary Clinton. He described his presidency as a leg in a relay race. Hillary Clinton had tried hard to pass affordable health care during Bill Clinton’s administration, but she failed — and the relay baton fell to the ground. When Obama entered the White House, he picked it up. Now, his leg of the race was coming to an end. “I’m ready to pass the baton,” he said. “And I know that Hillary Clinton is going to take it.”

But he was less certain than he was letting on. Hillary Clinton was up in the polls, to be sure, but she was vulnerable. Three weeks earlier, on June 15, a cyberattacker fashioning himself as Guccifer 2.0 had published a cache of emails stolen from the Democratic National Committee (DNC). They proved, as supporters of Vermont senator Bernie Sanders had long alleged, that the DNC had conspired with the Clinton campaign to undermine their candidate. Sanders was still withholding his endorsement of Clinton for president, even though her nomination as the Democratic candidate was now a foregone conclusion. At the very moment when Clinton had expected the Democratic party to unite behind her, its deepest chasm seemed to be growing wider. In contrast to Clinton, Obama held some sway over the Sanders insurgents. He came to Charlotte to urge them to support Clinton against their shared enemy, the presumptive Republican nominee for president, Donald Trump.

The insurgency was not the only Clinton vulnerability on Obama's mind. He had come to Charlotte, in addition, to deflect attention from the news conference that James Comey, the director of the FBI, had held that morning in Washington, D.C. The investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server was complete, Comey announced. The FBI would recommend no criminal charges — that was the honey. But Comey administered it with a dose of vinegar. He dwelled on Clinton's mishandling of classified material in such detail that it sounded as if he was laying the foundation for an indictment. The decision not to charge Clinton, his statement signaled, was an exercise in prosecutorial restraint, not a true exoneration.

From the perspective of the voters, Clinton's twin email travails — the hack of the DNC and the investigation into her server — were two faces of a single problem. Call it "Clinton, Inc." Sanders and Trump were painting Clinton as Wall Street's darling, the establishment candidate. She was the greatest defender and a prime beneficiary of a rigged political and financial system. Comey's statement had played directly into the hands of the Sanders insurgents. It left the distinct impression that laws are for the little people; they simply don't apply to Hillary Clinton, because, well, she's Hillary Clinton.

Which points to Obama's third and final job at Charlotte: humanizing the queen. "I saw how she treated everybody with respect, even the folks who aren't, quote/unquote, 'important,'" Obama testified. He enlarged Clinton's humility before the crowd, because it was invisible to the naked eye. With his jacket and tie off, the cuffs of his sleeves turned, and a winning smile spread from ear to ear, Obama came to loan Hillary Clinton his common touch.

Passing the baton to her was a team effort, however. It demanded hard work from countless enablers. These included not just Democrats but also many Republicans, who shared the conviction that Trump represented an extraordinary threat to our democracy. Desperate times call for desperate measures. To block Trump, Clinton's supporters bent rules and broke laws. They went to surprising lengths to strengthen her while framing him — both in the sense of depicting him in a particular light and of planting evidence against him.

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When it comes to ongoing FBI criminal investigations, presidents typically refrain from describing their preferred outcomes. They fear the appearance of exerting undue influence over Lady Justice. But in the case of Hillary Clinton's email abuses, Obama made an exception. "She would never intentionally put America in any kind of jeopardy," he remarked in a TV interview in April 2016. She has displayed "a carelessness in terms of managing emails," he allowed. "But I also think it is important to keep this in perspective."

Well-intentioned but careless, said the commander in chief, describing Hillary's use of a private email server. Three months later, Comey, in a Vulcan mind-meld with his boss, arrived at an identical conclusion.

Well-intentioned but careless, said the commander in chief. Three months later, the FBI finished its investigation, and James Comey arrived at an identical conclusion. "Although we did not find clear evidence that Secretary Clinton or her colleagues intended to violate laws governing the handling of classified information," he said in his July 5 statement, "there is evidence that they were extremely careless in their handling of very sensitive, highly classified information." Well-intentioned but careless — Comey was locked in

a Vulcan mind-meld with his boss.

As a political move, highlighting Clinton's intentions was astute. It had a commonsense feel. Americans instinctively take intentions into account when determining guilt. As a strict matter of law, however, it was vapid. The mishandling of classified information falls into the category of a "non-intent crime." It's a type of objective recklessness, like running over a pedestrian while blowing through a red light. Violations of this sort trigger criminal liabilities regardless of the offender's state of mind.

But let's assume that some clever lawyer in the Department of Justice discovered a very learned and superficially compelling rationale for applying Obama's fictive standard of intent. Even so, Hillary Clinton couldn't clear the hurdle. The sheer volume of classified material the FBI recovered from her server constituted proof of intent. "Fifty-two email chains . . . contain classified information," Comey said.

Particularly damning was the form this material took. It is impossible to paste a classified document into an unclassified email accidentally, because the three computer systems (Unclassified, Confidential/Secret, and Top Secret) are physically separate networks, each feeding into an independent hard drive on the user's desk. If a classified document appears in an unclassified email, then someone downloaded it onto a thumb drive and manually uploaded it to the unclassified network — an intentional act if ever there was one.

One of Clinton's emails suggests that downloading and uploading material in this fashion was a commonplace activity in her office. In June 2011, a staffer encountered difficulty transmitting a document to her by means of a classified system. An impatient Clinton instructed him to strip the classified markings from the document and send it on as an unclassified email. "Turn into nonpaper w no identifying heading and send nonsecure," Clinton instructed.

On three separate occasions staffers got sloppy and failed to strip the "nonpapers" of all markings that betrayed their classified origins. The FBI recovered one email, for example, that contained a "C" in parenthesis in the margin — an obvious sign that the corresponding paragraph was classified "Confidential." When an agent personally interviewed Clinton, on July 2, he showed her the document and asked whether she understood what the "C" meant. For anyone who has ever held a security clearance, "C's" in the margins are more ubiquitous than "C's" on water faucets — and no more baffling. But Clinton played the ditzzy grandmother. She had simply assumed, she said, that the "C" was marking an item in an alphabetized list.

In the 2,500-year life of the alphabet, this was a first: a list that started with the third letter and contained but a single item. The explanation was laughable, but any sensible answer would have constituted an acknowledgement of malicious

intent. Her only out was the “well-intentioned but careless” script that Obama had written for her. In other words, she lied to the FBI — a felony offense.

Before she ever told this howler, however, Comey had already prepared a draft of his statement exonerating her. The FBI let Hillary Clinton skate.

If Comey had followed the letter of the law, the trail of guilt may have led all the way to Obama himself.

But give Comey his due. If he had followed the letter of the law, the trail of guilt may have led all the way to Obama himself. As Andrew C. McCarthy has demonstrated at *National Review Online*, **Obama used a dummy email account to communicate with Clinton** via her private server. Did this make Obama complicit in Clinton’s

malfeasance? Anyone in Comey’s position would have thought twice before moving to prosecute her — and not only because the case might have ensnared the president himself. The FBI must enforce the law, but it must also be *seen* to be enforcing it. As a rule, these two imperatives buttress each other. During the 2016 election, Comey faced extraordinary circumstances. If he had followed the law to the letter, he would have toppled the leading candidate for president and decapitated the Democratic party. Clinton’s supporters, more than 50 percent of the electorate, would have erupted in outrage, screaming that a politicized FBI had thrown the election to Donald Trump.

Guarding the bureau’s reputation for impartiality is a serious concern. But it is nevertheless a thoroughly political concern. Comey would have us believe that it was a unique moment in his career, the singular entry into the political arena of an otherwise apolitical servant of the law. Truth be told, Comey loves being in the thick of it, but not because he is a partisan brawler. He is not. It is the drama that he relishes — the grand stage. His favorite role is that of Joe Friday, the no-nonsense lawman, the guardian of legal processes before the encroachments of dirty politicians.

Joe Friday, however, was a simple detective, a confirmed bachelor, content to live quietly with his mother and his parakeet. And, of course, he was a TV fiction. In real life, humble straight shooters get clobbered with a brick before they ever reach the limelight. In real life, snagging the big part often requires the equivalent of leaving a bloody horsehead in the producer’s bed.

MCCABE AND THE LOVERS

And it requires a supportive staff. Midyear Exam, the codename for the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s emails, relied on a team of men and women with the right stuff — a quality that is hard to define but easy to recognize.

The right stuff did not require strong Democratic credentials, but they certainly helped. Andrew McCabe, the deputy director of the FBI, led the team. McCabe was not your FBI gumshoe of old. He spent no time in his younger days chasing bank robbers in Des Moines. He was part of a new breed — the post-9/11 FBI leadership, for whom the career fast track was counterterrorism. He came of age at the intersection of law enforcement with national security, shuttling between D.C. and New York. Along the way, he developed a valuable personal network. His wife, Jill, ran as a Democrat for a Virginia state-senate seat in 2015. The political organization of Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe, one of Hillary Clinton’s very closest associates, gave her nearly \$500,000.

Perhaps more important than having Democratic credentials was having a heightened understanding of the needs of senior leadership — in the FBI, certainly, but also in the DOJ. Right across the street from the J. Edgar Hoover Building sat Attorney General Loretta Lynch. She would be scrutinizing Midyear Exam in every detail. And not just Lynch. Hillary Clinton herself would be watching closely — and would be brought in for questioning, too. Being willing and able to treat

her with kid gloves was essential. She “might be our next president,” team member Lisa Page reminded Peter Strzok, the agent in charge of Midyear Exam. Referring to Clinton’s upcoming FBI interview, Page wrote, “The last thing you need us going in there loaded for bear.”

Like McCabe, Strzok had pursued a career at the nexus of law enforcement and counterterrorism. But he was less overtly political. A John Kasich sympathizer, he was by nature a middle-of-the-roader, and a Republican-leaning one, at that. Clinton left him cold. But Trump left him even colder — and his active personal life helped concentrate his mind on that antipathy. Strzok was having an affair with Page, who was an FBI lawyer on McCabe’s staff. Both were married. Page’s politics were typical of highly educated people in D.C.: She detested Trump and his supporters. He is “a loathsome human being,” she texted to Strzok, who readily agreed. After Trump captured the nomination, hostility to him quickly became part of their private idiom.

If “the ultimate aphrodisiac,” as Henry Kissinger famously claimed, is power, then wielding it together with an illicit lover must be the pinnacle of eroticism. Together, Strzok and Page explored the power of secrets, routinely leaking to the press to shape political outcomes. “Still on the phone with Devlin,” Page texted to Strzok, referring to former *Wall Street Journal* national-security reporter Devlin Barrett. Big news about the Hillary Clinton email story was breaking when Devlin and Page were on the phone together. “You might wanna tell Devlin he should turn on CNN, there’s news on,” Strzok texted back.

Page: He knows. He just got handed a note.

Strzok: Ha. He asking about it now?

Page: Yeah. It was pretty funny.

Influencing the nation’s politics was routine. And ridiculously easy: one quick call to “Devlin,” and boom! The world changed.

McCabe and the two lovers demonstrated the very essence of the right stuff: a breezy comfort with bending the law to the demands of politics.

Deploying secrets for political effect — deciding which to keep, which to tell, and how to tell them — was a task that they approached with alacrity. The ultimate goal, of course, was not propping up Hillary Clinton so much as maximizing the power and autonomy of the FBI. In pursuing this goal, McCabe and the two lovers demonstrated the very essence of the right stuff: a breezy comfort with bending the law to the demands of politics.

They honed their skills on Midyear Exam. As that test ended, an even bigger one loomed before them. At the end of July, Comey and McCabe would officially open an investigation into Russian meddling in the election, including possible coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign. On July 5, the day of Comey’s press conference on Clinton’s emails, a former British spy, Christopher Steele, flew to Rome to meet an old FBI contact. The information he brought had weighty implications for the impending investigation. But neither the information nor the implications are what we have been led to believe.

THE SUPER SPY

Steele — a former British spy and a Russia expert — was working on contract to Fusion GPS, a Washington-based public-relations firm, which, in turn, was on contract to a D.C. law firm, which, in turn, was on contract to the Hillary Clinton

campaign and the DNC. Steele, that is to say, was working for Hillary Clinton. His job, among other things, was to collect opposition research on Trump from his network of Russian sources.

When Steele arrived in Rome, his famous “dossier” did not exist. The dossier, as we have come to know it, is some 17 reports that he compiled between June and December 2016. In early July, Steele had been working on the Clinton account for only a few weeks and had written but one report, dated June 20. It claimed that Trump was Vladimir Putin’s Manchurian candidate. “[The] Russian regime has been cultivating, supporting, and assisting Trump for at least 5 years,” Steele reported. Putin’s goal was “to sow discord and disunity both within the US itself, but more especially within the Transatlantic alliance.” The Russian leader supported Trump, mainly, by supplying “valuable intelligence on his opponents, including Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.”

Putin had offered lucrative financial contracts, but Trump had turned them down. The wily Russian, however, had managed to get his hooks into Trump due to the American’s “sexual perversion.” During a visit to Moscow in 2013, Trump had hired prostitutes to stay with him in the same hotel suite used by the Obamas on one of their trips. The FSB, Russia’s secret police, had fitted the room with cameras and recording equipment. Trump had the prostitutes defile Obama’s bed by putting on a “golden shower” performance for him. All of it was caught on tape.

Earthshaking news: Vladimir Putin was blackmailing Donald J. Trump. No doubt, Steele’s FBI handler rushed this report to his superiors in Washington, D.C. They, in turn, raced it straight to Obama’s desk. Sorry, wrong. According to the *New York Times*, Steele’s explosive revelations wound their way to the J. Edgar Hoover Building only slowly. It took weeks before they appeared in Strzok’s in-box. Why?

Mike Morell, the former deputy director of the CIA, helps explain the delay. Morell did some digging into Christopher Steele’s dossier and shared the results of his research at a public forum in Washington, D.C., in March 2017. Steele, according to Morell, did not have direct access to the Russians whom he labeled as his “sources” — people who included former officers in the FSB. He “communicated” with them, if that is the right word, through paid intermediaries, who paid the so-called sources.

The chances of Steele having been played were thus great. Morell explained it like this:

If you’re paying somebody, particularly former FSB officers, they are going to tell you truth and innuendo and rumor, and they’re going to call you up and say, “Hey, let’s have another meeting, I have more information for you,” because they want to get paid some more.

This process, Morell said, “takes you nowhere.”

Steele’s report was, in a word, junk. And Morell, the man who expressed that opinion, was not just a seasoned intelligence professional; he was also a staunch supporter of Hillary Clinton for president. Nor did Steele’s FBI handler in Rome set off an alarm in Washington, because he, presumably, was also a seasoned professional who knew junk when he saw it. And he had many additional reasons to doubt the veracity of Steele’s reporting — reasons that Morell refrained from broaching. How, for example, could Steele be sure that the former FSB officers in his network were fully retired? The convoluted pipeline between Moscow and London gave Russian intelligence too many opportunities to inject disinformation into the flow of reports to London.

And let’s not neglect the glaring issue of plausibility. When in the history of the rivalry between the West and Russia has it been possible for a British spy to call up sources in Moscow and gain immediate access to the deepest secrets of the Kremlin? Steele, relying only on his wits, unearthed gems the likes of which glittered only in the dreams of the CIA, Mossad, and MI6, the greatest intelligence-gathering organizations on earth. To believe that tale, we must assume that Steele, like James Bond, is no ordinary secret agent. He’s a super spy.

Then there's the little matter of Steele's personal bias. According to one well-informed associate, Steele was "passionate about" preventing Trump from winning the election. His financial incentives, of course, oriented him in exactly the same direction. He was a paid piper — and he got paid only for collecting information detrimental to Trump. Isn't it possible — likely, even — that his shadowy paymasters in the demimonde of the Clinton campaign were calling the tune?

Steele's reports certainly harmonized beautifully with the campaign's propaganda. On June 2, in a speech in San Diego, Hillary Clinton unveiled her main line of attack on Donald Trump's foreign policy. His ideas, she said, were "dangerously incoherent." In fact, they weren't "even really ideas — just a series of bizarre rants, personal feuds, and outright lies." Particularly mystifying was his attitude toward the Russian dictator: "He said if he were grading Vladimir Putin as a leader, he'd give him an A. . . . I'll leave it to the psychiatrists to explain his affection for tyrants."

But the demimonde wasn't about to leave it to mental-health professionals. It hired instead a British super spy. He immediately explained that Putin was extorting Trump. Two weeks after that, he flew to Rome to share his explanation with the FBI. By the time he left Rome, his handler might not have guessed that the Clinton campaign was funding the spy's work. The political nature of Steele's mission, however, would have been obvious.

In Rome on July 5, the FBI was beginning to acquire a new secret. But it was not the one contained in Steele's report. The Clinton campaign, the FBI would soon learn with certainty, was intent on framing Trump as Putin's puppet. That secret was truly explosive — and perhaps thrilling for the two lovers on McCabe's staff. In time, all of them — Strzok, Page, McCabe, and Comey — would all mishandle it, damaging their careers irreparably. In July, however, they were not yet in a rush to ruination. The team with the right stuff cautiously watched and waited. Not until September would they take their fateful missteps.



Hillary Clinton greets supporters at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Pa., July 28, 2016.

THE BIRTH OF THE COLLUSION THESIS

On July 22, WikiLeaks released the largest cache of DNC emails. The plan behind the hack now became clear: to sabotage the Democratic National Convention, which opened in Philadelphia on July 25. While Clinton was organizing a

celebration of Democratic unity, Guccifer 2.0 was working to flood the convention floor with enraged Bernie Sanders insurgents. In the event, Clinton managed to prevent the protests from ruining the convention. But they did damage her theater of power — and they also handed Trump a fresh opportunity to broadcast his “Crooked Hillary” theme. He took obvious delight in the rage of the Sanders followers. “An analysis showed that Bernie Sanders would have won the Democratic nomination if it were not for the Super Delegates,” Trump tweeted on the eve of the convention.

The statement hit Clinton like an iron bar to her kneecap. The thought that a malevolent foreign actor was helping Trump deliver the blow only increased the pain. Most observers assumed that Russian state-backed hackers stood behind Guccifer 2.0 (an assumption that has grown stronger with time). If Trump felt sheepish about benefiting from such people, he hid it well. “I will tell you this, Russia. If you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing,” he said on July 27, referring to Hillary Clinton’s messages that the FBI never recovered during its investigation of her private server.

In the eyes of his supporters, Trump’s appeal to Putin was a stage whisper, a mock gesture — and a pointed dig at Clinton. In her rush to hide emails from the FBI, Trump implied, she had delivered them up to Putin on a platter. But his brand of humor was lost on Clinton and her team. To them, the appeal to Putin was sinister. “I just think that’s beyond the pale,” said Clinton loyalist and former CIA director Leon Panetta. To shame Trump before the voters, the campaign shifted its rhetoric perceptibly. In June, Clinton had depicted Trump’s attitude toward Putin as irrational. Now the two were said to be in a partnership — a “bromance” was how John Podesta, Clinton’s campaign chairman, described it. “This has to be the first time that a major presidential candidate has actively encouraged a foreign power to conduct espionage against his political opponent,” said senior Clinton policy aide Jake Sullivan. “This has gone from being a matter of curiosity, and a matter of politics, to being a national-security issue.”

Shaming was all well and good, but it only resonated among committed voters. Winning the election required convincing independents that Trump was more than just a passive beneficiary of the DNC hack; he had to be an accomplice. Clinton’s campaign thus posted five questions on its website:

1. What’s behind Trump’s fascination with Vladimir Putin?
2. Why does Trump surround himself with advisers with links to the Kremlin?
3. Why do Trump’s foreign policy ideas read like a Putin wish list?
4. Do Trump’s still-secret tax returns show ties to Russian oligarchs?
5. Why is Trump encouraging Russia to interfere in our election?

Each question was followed by a short answer, leading to the inevitable conclusion that Trump was actively conspiring with Putin.

And so, the collusion thesis was born. The website did not spell out the details of the conspiracy, but the campaign’s demimonde left nothing to the imagination. Christopher Steele had discovered Russian “sources” who painted a vivid picture of the plot. Putin had decided against releasing the compromising videos of Trump. The Manchurian candidate was proving just too beneficial to Russia. In fact, a full-blown alliance had formed between Putin and Trump. Based on their “mutual interest in defeating . . . Hillary Clinton,” they struck a grand bargain: Putin would help elect Trump, who would deliver a supine American policy on Ukraine and NATO defense.

The super spy’s network was remarkable. His Russian sources were as close to Trump as they were to Putin. “An ethnic Russian close associate” of Trump’s “admitted that there was a well-developed conspiracy” between him and the Russians. Another source revealed more: The DNC hack was carried out “with the full knowledge and support of Trump and senior

members of his campaign team.” There it was: the proof the Clinton campaign needed. The great crime against Hillary Clinton was a joint Russian-American operation, and Trump was in on it from the beginning.

Steele’s startling discoveries hardly stopped there. But before revealing more, let’s pause and consider the purpose of his reports. How, precisely, did his direct employer, Fusion GPS, use them?

THE SUPER DUO

To hear Glenn Simpson tell it, his company, Fusion GPS, is a research organization. “What we do is provide people with factual information,” he told the Senate Judiciary Committee in August 2017. “Our specialty is public record information.” In truth, Simpson’s true specialty is not research but persuasion — more specifically, persuasion of reporters. He has a talent for convincing journalists to publish stories, true or not, that benefit his clients. In short, he is a public-relations flack.

But Simpson is no ordinary PR man; he’s a super flack. In the first decade of this century, he was in his early forties and working as an investigative journalist for the *Wall Street Journal*. He was reaching the pinnacle of his profession just as the Internet was gutting the print media. Simpson, however, had a marketable talent. “I call it journalism for rent,” he said at a public forum in August 2017. Journalism as we once knew might be dead, but deep-pocketed clients still needed to get stories into the press. And they needed to block other stories from being published. Simpson knew almost every member of the Washington press corps personally, and he understood the constraints under which they worked — what it took to get a story past an editor. He handed them canned articles. They got scoops; he got happy clients.

When pitching stories on Trump-Putin collusion, Simpson eventually discovered the great benefit of placing Christopher Steele directly in front of reporters. In September and October, he would fly the spy from London to the United States so the two of them could brief major media outlets as a team. Before that, in July and August, Simpson did not have the benefit of Steele’s physical presence. But neither was he alone. He still had the super spy’s reports — James Bond in a briefcase.

Con men stoke the greed of their marks by letting them catch glimpses of suitcases bulging with cash. Simpson gave his marks a sense that he was similarly loaded — but with valuable information, not money. “In September 2016, Steele and I met in Washington and discussed the information now known as the ‘dossier,’ ” wrote Jonathan Winer, in the *Washington Post*. A former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state, Winer admitted passing Steele’s information to his superiors. “I was allowed to review, but not to keep, a copy of these reports to enable me to alert the State Department,” he explained. Simpson, we infer, would let journalists catch a glimpse of the super spy’s “raw intelligence.” Then he would quickly take the document back — because, you understand, it was just too sensitive to leave lying around.

If journalists feared that Steele’s startling reports (such as, for example, the one about the golden shower) contained Russian disinformation, Simpson had a well-rehearsed spiel at the ready to reassure them. He inadvertently shared it before the House Intelligence Committee in November 2017. Steele, Simpson explained, had a “standard presentation” for journalists to explain how he avoided falling prey to the diabolical Russians. Sliding into the first person, he rattled off Steele’s lines:

I was the lead Russianist at MI6 in the final years of my career. And I was previously stationed in Moscow. And I speak Russian. And I’ve done Russian intelligence/counterintelligence issues all my life. And the central problem when you’re a Russian intelligence expert is disinformation, and that the Russians have . . . a long history and an advanced capability in disinformation. And so . . . before we go any further, I just want you to know that . . . this is . . . the fundamental problem

with my profession. And it should be assumed that in any sort of intelligence gathering . . . there will be some disinformation. And I'm trained to spot that and filter it out, but . . . you should understand that . . . no one's perfect.

Simpson staked the credibility of the dossier on just one thing: Steele's super awesomeness.

Simpson then switched to the first-person plural. Perhaps, when briefing journalists, this was the point at which he would speak, in his own voice, as the leader of the talented and experienced team at Fusion GPS:

And so we've essentially filtered out everything that we think is disinformation, and we're not going to present that to you here. We're going to present to you things that we think come from credible sources, but we're not going to warrant [*sic*] to you . . . that this is all true.

Simpson staked the credibility of the dossier on just one thing: Steele's super awesomeness. On his own, Simpson would have been flacking salacious rumor, but paired with Steele, he was briefing "credible intelligence." Together, they became a super duo.

The purpose of the dossier would change over time. In July and August, the goal was not to get Steele's reports directly into the press. Nobody knew better than Simpson, a highly experienced reporter, that Steele's claims were unverifiable and, therefore, unprintable. The best he could achieve was an article that reinforced the main suppositions of the collusion thesis — an article such as "Trump and Putin: A Love Story," which David Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker*, wrote and published in early August. "Putin," sees in Trump a grand opportunity," Remnick explained. "He sees in Trump weakness and ignorance, a confused mind. He has every hope of exploiting him."

Remnick stopped just short of claiming that Putin was actually blackmailing Trump, but his depiction of their relations matched, in general, the story that emerged from Steele's reports. Remnick took pains, for example, to instruct readers:

The gathering of *kompromat* — compromising material — is a familiar tactic in Putin's arsenal. For years, the Russian intelligence services have filmed political enemies in stages of sexual and/or narcotic indulgence, and have distributed the grainy images online.

Did Remnick personally rely on a Fusion GPS briefing? We do not know. Jane Mayer, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, recently confessed that she received a briefing, in September, directly from super spy himself — so the potential for communication certainly existed. Regardless of what inspired Remnick, his approach represented a win for Simpson. If, with the help of the dossier or any other tool of persuasion, he could convince journalists that Putin was blackmailing Trump with compromising videos, then it was just that much easier to convince them to report stories about, say, the danger to the Western alliance that Trump represented — a story that would require nothing more than stringing together a few quotes from Trump with a few ominous warnings from foreign-policy experts. The dossier, in short, helped Simpson sell a master narrative.

A DIABOLICAL MASTERMIND

By choosing to convince voters that Trump was somehow an accomplice to the DNC hack, the Clinton campaign had set itself a difficult challenge: defining the role of Putin's American partners in crime. After all, the hack did not require the assistance of a Tom Cruise character. No one broke into DNC headquarters, crawled through a ventilator shaft, rappelled from a cable, and slid a disk into a hard drive. The hackers carried out the operation unilaterally, electronically, and probably from offshore. They required no accomplices on American soil.

Steele solved this problem by finding "sources" who revealed that the crucial contributions of Trump's team came in the planning stages. As it turns out, Steele reported, the idea to hack the DNC actually originated from the American side. It

was Trump's team that defined the objective of the operation: "leaking the DNC e-mails to Wikileaks during the Democratic Convention" in order "to swing supporters of Bernie Sanders away from Hillary Clinton and across to Trump."

This report solved half of the Clinton campaign's problem: It established Trump's guilt. But a conspiracy can't grab the popular imagination if it is devoid of actual conspirators. Here again, the super spy's "sources" came to the rescue. On the day-to-day level, the job of managing the Trump-Putin collusion fell to Paul Manafort, who, at that time, was still Trump's campaign manager. But Manafort was not the architect of the DNC hack. Fortunately, the super spy was running a mole who was able to identify that criminal genius. The plot, Steele reported, "was conceived and promoted by Trump's foreign policy adviser Carter Page."

Here the super spy's vaunted ability to filter out Russian disinformation appears to have failed him. Carter Page (who is no relation to Lisa Page on McCabe's team) played a negligible role in the campaign. The Trump people had placed him on a team of foreign-policy advisers, to be sure, but they had thrown the group together in haste to counter the accusation that the campaign lacked an expert bench. Page did not know Donald Trump personally. He worked in finance, with a focus on investing in Russia's energy sector, but he had no notable achievements to his name. A former boss described him, very unkindly, as "a gray spot," a man "without any special talents or accomplishments."

Steele's allegations against Page make sense only in a Marvel Comics universe. Carter Page: by day, a mild-mannered businessman; by night, a diabolical mastermind.

The role that the super spy ascribed to Page may have been absurd, but what choice did he have? The conspiracy needed a face. That person had to have plausible connections to Russia plus a certain amount of visibility. In Trump's orbit, there were only two candidates: Manafort and Page. Manafort's ties, however, were to Ukraine, not Russia — and he was too well known. He had been working in Washington since the Reagan era.

Page, by contrast, had direct connections to Russia, having lived in Moscow for some three years. The modesty of his career was actually a plus, because Clinton's propagandists could present it as shadowy rather than unsuccessful. For an unknown, Page was surprisingly visible. His trip to Moscow in July 2016 had received significant press attention, not least because he had expressed opinions in favor of rapprochement with Russia and critical of American foreign policy.

With the aid of Fusion GPS, the Clinton campaign rolled out their master narrative on Trump-Putin collusion. A new orthodoxy immediately gripped the establishment press, which amplified the overwrought propaganda, complete with suggestions of dirty deals, dark conspiracies, and blackmail. It was Jeffrey Goldberg, the national correspondent (now editor) of *The Atlantic*, who first trumpeted the new line. In his aptly titled article, "It's Official: Hillary Clinton Is Running against Vladimir Putin," Goldberg alleged that Trump "has chosen . . . to unmask himself as a de facto agent of Russian President Vladimir Putin."

In "Putin's Puppet," Franklin Foer of *Slate* examined the matter from the Russian side: "Vladimir Putin has a plan for destroying the West — and that plan looks a lot like Donald Trump," he wrote. David Remnick's article discussing Putin's affinity for grainy sex videos made identical points. All three authors noted, with grave concern, the Russian ties of Paul Manafort and . . . Carter Page.

With the exception of Fox News, the broadcast media beat the same drum. CNN might not have accused Page of masterminding the hack of the DNC, but it recognized a dangerous man when it saw one. On August 8, for example, it devoted a long segment entirely to Page. "What's really remarkable here," Jim Sciutto, CNN's chief national-security correspondent told anchorman Wolf Blitzer, is that Page's positions "match almost word for word the positions of the Kremlin, on, for instance, alleged U.S. orchestration of pro-democracy in and around Russia. And that is sparking concern from Russia experts and former policy makers even inside the GOP."

So Page was “sparking concern” even among Never-Trump Republicans? How ominous! But imagine how much more ominous it would have sounded if journalists could have reported that Page was also sparking concern in the FBI! At that moment, John Brennan, the director of the CIA, was doing his damndest to hand journalists precisely that story.



CIA director John Brennan testifies on Capitol Hill, June 16, 2016.

A VENTRILOQUIST AND HIS DUMMY

While the establishment press was singing in harmony with the Clinton campaign, a cacophonous debate erupted inside government. At the end of July, James Clapper, the director of National Intelligence, said at a public forum that the intelligence community was not “ready yet to make a call on attribution” — not ready, that is, to attribute the DNC hack to Putin. Clapper was also unready to say that the intention of the hackers was to get Trump elected. The goal, he said, may simply have been “to stir up trouble.” When combined with similar comments by other intelligence officials, Clapper’s statements undercut Hillary Clinton’s efforts to brand Trump as Putin’s active accomplice.

Enter John Brennan. In early August, Brennan launched a personal campaign to force a consensus in support of Clinton’s propaganda. Before long, Clapper became his partner in this effort. They would succeed, however, only after the election — and then only by establishing an ad hoc and highly unorthodox intelligence-assessment team. To man the team, Brennan and Clapper handpicked a small number of analysts, tasking them with reaching a consensus before the inauguration of Donald Trump. The team, no surprise, did not disappoint. In January 2017, it produced the “consensus” that Brennan had been trying to orchestrate for the previous five months. By then, it was still useful as a propaganda tool against President Donald Trump, though it had arrived far too late to help Hillary Clinton win the election.

Of course, Brennan has never admitted his political motives. On the contrary, according to an in-depth *Washington Post* investigation (based on interviews with either Brennan himself or people very close to him), the CIA director claimed to be in possession of eye-popping intelligence reports about the DNC hack. These reports supposedly “captured Putin’s specific instructions on the operation’s audacious objectives — defeat or at least damage the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, and help elect her opponent, Donald Trump.” Yet even if this intelligence trove actually did exist and truly did convince

the CIA director, it obviously did not have the same persuasive impact on his colleagues, as evidenced by Brennan's failure to deliver a consensus assessment of Putin's motives.

In his mission to transform the intelligence community into an official choir of the Clinton campaign, Brennan ran up against a 6'7" wall in the form of James Comey. According to the *New York Times*, in August 2016, "a critical split" emerged between "the CIA and counterparts at the FBI, where a number of senior officials continued to believe . . . that Russia's cyberattacks were aimed primarily at disrupting America's political system, and not at getting Mr. Trump elected." As a component of this disagreement, Brennan may also have pressured Comey to investigate possible collusion with Russia by aides and associates of Trump.

By law, the CIA cannot spy on Americans; only the FBI has the authority to investigate citizens. But the CIA can share reports with the FBI about efforts by foreign agents to suborn individual Americans, and it can strongly urge the bureau to take action on the basis of those leads. Brennan, it would appear, did just that in July 2016.

That was the moment when the FBI opened a counterintelligence investigation into Russian efforts to influence the Trump campaign. As we mentioned, Peter Strzok, who had been in charge of Midyear Exam, took charge of this investigation, too. The genesis and scope of it, however, is shrouded in a fog of deliberate misinformation. From the little we know, the probe seems to have centered on George Papadopoulos, a young foreign-policy adviser to the Trump campaign. Acting mostly on his own initiative, Papadopoulos reached out to Russians in the hopes of brokering a meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. In the process, he may have bumped into Russian intelligence agents.

Papadopoulos's activities took place, primarily, in London — a part of the world where the CIA has greater reach than the FBI. How did Comey come to learn of them? The answer is unclear, but certain clues point to Brennan.

One of these is Brennan's own testimony before the House Intelligence Committee in March 2017. The CIA, he explained, had shared certain information with the FBI — an apparent reference to the Papadopoulos leads. This was information, he said, "that required further investigation by the bureau to determine whether or not U.S. persons were actively conspiring, colluding with Russian officials." Was Brennan taking responsibility for kick-starting the investigation into the Trump campaign? He seemed to be saying that he had dropped the Papadopoulos file on Comey's desk and said, "Investigate Trump!"

If this supposition about the origins of the investigation in July is correct, it may also help explain Brennan's behavior in late August, when he grew increasingly exasperated with Comey. In an effort to gain allies, Brennan turned to friends in Congress for help. With the blessing of Obama, he organized a series of briefings for the so-called Gang of Eight — the Democratic and Republican leaders in both chambers of Congress, and the chairs and ranking minority members on the Senate and the House intelligence committees. According to the *New York Times*, Brennan told these senior lawmakers that he "had information indicating that Russia was working to help elect Donald J. Trump president," a view that was not supported by an authoritative intelligence assessment.

Obama and Brennan explained the briefings as an effort to forge bipartisan unity in the face of the Russian threat. But if Brennan couldn't force a consensus inside the intelligence community, how could he possibly convince Republicans and Democrats to join hands — during a polarizing election, no less?

This high-minded bipartisanship was simply cover for a highly partisan move. The true motive of the briefings was to ventriloquize the Democrats on the Hill. If Brennan himself had gone public with his claims about Putin, he would have called down attacks on himself for passing off Clinton propaganda as an official intelligence assessment — and for meddling, as the director of the CIA, in domestic politics. Democratic lawmakers who received his briefings, however, operated under no such constraints. They were perfectly free to pass along Brennan's views to the public as their own.

Democratic lawmakers became the ventriloquist's dummies, moving their lips mechanically as CIA director Brennan spoke.

They became the ventriloquist's dummies, moving their lips mechanically as the CIA director spoke.

Brennan placed one of them center stage. On August 25, he gave a briefing that differed from the others; he tailored its content especially to the bare-knuckle politics of its recipient, Senate

Minority Leader Harry Reid. During the 2012 election, Reid had assisted President Obama by falsely claiming that his Republican presidential challenger, Mitt Romney, had paid no taxes for ten years. When later asked if spreading a false rumor wasn't reminiscent of McCarthyism, Reid responded, "They can call it whatever they want. Romney didn't win, did he?" With the certain knowledge that Reid, who was in any case retiring after the 2016 election, would do whatever it took to win, Brennan indulged his own partisan political passions. He told Reid, according to the *New York Times*, "that unnamed advisers to Mr. Trump might be working with the Russians to interfere in the election."

If Reid's response is anything to go by, Brennan did much more than that: He briefed the senator on information taken directly from Steele's dossier; and he complained about the recalcitrance of the director of the FBI. Two days after the briefing, Reid wrote a letter to Comey, which he immediately shared with the press. Claiming there was mounting evidence of "a direct connection between the Russian government and Donald Trump's presidential campaign," Reid demanded that the FBI launch an immediate investigation. The American people, he wrote, deserve all the facts "before they vote this November."

The Trump campaign, Reid continued bluntly, "has employed a number of individuals with significant and disturbing ties to Russia and the Kremlin." He was particularly concerned with Trump associates who may have served as what he called "complicit intermediaries" between the Russian government and hackers. "The prospect of individuals tied to Trump, Wikileaks, and the Russian government coordinating to influence our election raises concerns of the utmost gravity and merits full examination." In an unmistakable reference to Steele's reports on Carter Page, Reid informed Comey that "questions have been raised" about a Trump adviser who allegedly "met with high-ranking sanctioned individuals while in Moscow."

Serving as Brennan's dummy, Reid publicized the Marvel Comics rendering of Carter Page, and he demanded that the FBI launch an investigation on the basis of it. Before long, Comey would obey.



President Obama and Hillary Clinton at a campaign rally in Charlotte, N.C., July 5, 2016.

THE CUTOUT

Shortly after Reid's letter, Obama asked the FBI for an update on its investigation of Russian tampering with the election. The president, Lisa Page texted to her lover Peter Strzok, "wants to know everything we're doing." The text probably refers to Obama's preparations for the G-20 meeting in China, where he personally lodged a complaint with Putin about the Russian hacking. But the request is intriguing. Obama was engaging the FBI just as it stood ready to use the allegations of the Steele dossier as a basis for broadening its investigation of Trump. When Comey informed Obama about "everything we are doing," did he discuss the Carter Page allegations? Did he note their source, Christopher Steele? And what about the president himself? Did Obama nudge Comey to comply with the demands of Brennan and Reid?

Whatever signals the president may have sent, McCabe and his lovebirds certainly began supporting the efforts of Brennan and Reid to paint Trump as Putin's puppet. The form of support was nuanced and clandestine. If Peter Strzok and Lisa Page had contacted their favorite reporter, Devlin Barrett, and leaked the fact that a Trump adviser was coming under investigation, the leak would have implicated the FBI. Trump and his supporters would then have castigated Comey, accusing him of intervening in politics. To avoid such problems, the lovers used a pair of cutouts — intermediaries who laundered the FBI's information in the same way that Reid had laundered information for Brennan.

Who better to play this role than the super duo, Simpson and Steele? Either directly or through an intermediary, Strzok shared with Steele the news of the impending investigation of Carter Page. He did so with the certain knowledge that Steele would channel it to Simpson, who, in turn, would incorporate it into his standard press briefings. (FBI representatives would later deny having used Steele as a cutout with the press, but their self-defense, as we shall see below, is demonstrably false.)

The experience of the journalist Julia Ioffe demonstrates how diligent Simpson was at spreading the news that Strzok was surreptitiously feeding him. In mid September, Ioffe published a profile on Carter Page for *Politico*. "As I started looking into Page," she relates, "I began getting calls from two separate 'corporate investigators' digging into what they claim are

all kinds of shady connections Page has to all kinds of shady Russians.” One of those investigators was, presumably, Simpson; the other one probably represented another dank corner of the Clinton demimonde. Both emphasized an allegation that came directly from Steele’s dossier: namely, that Page, during his trip to Moscow in July, had met with Igor Sechin, who is a key Putin ally and the chairman of the Russian state oil company. The “corporate investigators,” however, now had something else to push, something new and very newsworthy: “The FBI was investigating Page.”

As knowledge of the FBI’s interest in Carter Page spread, Steele’s credibility soared. To exploit the opportunity, Simpson flew Steele to the United States to brief select media outlets in person. Thanks to the information that McCabe’s team was leaking to the press through Steele, Simpson could repackage the super spy. No longer just a former MI6 operative working as an “independent” researcher, Steele was now a trusted colleague of the FBI’s. He possessed unique insight into the fears of American counterintelligence officials about Trump’s nefarious relations with Putin.

For the first time, Steele agreed to go on the record as a quoted source for journalists. This round of briefings generated an article, written by veteran Yahoo reporter Michael Isikoff. Entitled “U.S. Intel Officials Probe Ties between Trump Adviser and Kremlin,” it focused, naturally, on Carter Page. Isikoff reported that American officials had “received intelligence reports” that Page had met with Sechin. “At their alleged meeting,” Isikoff reported, “Sechin raised the issue of the lifting of sanctions with Page, the Western intelligence source said.” A Western intelligence source? That would be Christopher Steele. By identifying the super spy in this manner, Isikoff disguises (wittingly or unwittingly) Steele’s identity as a Clinton operative and as the author and disseminator of the reports in question. The moniker had the added benefit of making Steele seem to work for a Western government, creating the illusion of transatlantic trepidation about the cunning Carter Page.

Confirmation of the article’s central claims came from two other sources. The first was a “senior U.S. law enforcement official,” who told Isikoff that Page’s meetings in Moscow were “being looked at.” Would that be Andrew McCabe, Peter Strzok, or Lisa Page? The second confirmation came from “a congressional source familiar with . . . briefings” that lawmakers had received about Carter Page’s meetings in Moscow. Would that be Harry Reid? Whether these were indeed the correct identities, it is obvious where Isikoff found his sources: on Glenn Simpson’s Rolodex. Here was a story processed and canned in Fusion GPS’s information factory. All Isikoff had to do was add water and shake. His sources were all part of a single network conspiring to hoodwink the public.

Why did Comey participate in this fraud? Perhaps it was to get Brennan and Reid off his back. On the risk side of the ledger, the dangers were minimal. Today the Isikoff article is a fingerprint on a hot bullet casing, irrefutable proof placing the FBI at the scene of the crime. But in September 2016, the chances of anyone ever tying the bureau to it were negligible. Although the article announced with great flourish the opening of an investigation into Carter Page, it’s not even clear that, at this point, Page was truly an official target of the probe.

The important thing to Brennan and Reid was helping Hillary Clinton win the election. What they desired most from the FBI was a public statement that the Trump team was under investigation for conspiring with Putin. With the Isikoff article, Comey didn’t fully satisfy them, but he threw them a bone.

On the reward side of the ledger, he showed Hillary Clinton and her friends that he was, despite everything, a team player. And his contribution to the team effort was indeed significant. The FBI’s leaks were indispensable in giving super-flack Glenn Simpson a stable of seemingly independent sources willing to go on the record about the grave concern sweeping the Western world about, of all people, Carter Page.



FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe speaks at a press conference, July 20, 2016.

GET CARTER

“Mr. Page is not an advisor and has made no contribution to the campaign,” said a Trump spokesman in reaction to the media storm over the Isikoff article. If Carter Page thought this disavowal would return some normalcy to his life, he was sadly mistaken. It actually put a target on his back. So long as he was officially affiliated with the Trump campaign, Comey would no doubt hesitate to seek a surveillance warrant, for fear of laying the FBI open to the charge of engaging in politically motivated spying. After the disavowal, Comey had more room for maneuver. He therefore gave the go-ahead to seek a surveillance warrant.

Widening the probe to include Page carried a little additional risk for Comey, but not much. If Clinton were to win the election, as everyone expected, then she would never punish him for the move. If Trump were to win and learn about the probe, it would certainly enrage him. But the investigation could also be useful as leverage. Peter Strzok put it well in a text to Lisa Page a month earlier. On August 15, 2016, referring to the possibility of a Trump victory, Strzok wrote:

I want to believe the path u threw out 4 consideration in Andy's [McCabe's] office — that there's no way he gets elected — but I'm afraid we can't take that risk. It's like an insurance policy in the unlikely event u die be4 you're 40.

Strzok, presumably, was saying that a counterintelligence operation against Trump and his team would give the FBI leadership a species of job insurance, similar to the job insurance that J. Edgar Hoover enjoyed in his day. Presidents dared not fire Hoover, because he kept a black book on them all.

Strzok's team began the process of seeking a surveillance warrant on Carter Page from the court established by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, known as FISA. The FISA court's proceedings are not public, because they treat top-secret intelligence. To seek a warrant against Carter Page required the FBI to show probable cause that he was acting as an agent of Russia. In preparation for the warrant application, the FBI flew Steele to Rome for a face-to-face meeting with his main FBI contact. According to the *New York Times*, the handler told Steele that the FBI “would pay him \$50,000” if he “could get solid corroboration of his reports.” It was an incriminating admission. Steele's reports on Page's Moscow trip were two

months old. The U.S. government — that is, the FBI and the CIA — hadn't produced an iota of corroboration — and yet on the basis of those stale reports, it had suddenly decided to target Page as a probable agent of a foreign power.

Why? Because without the Carter Page who appeared in the Steele dossier — without the Marvel Comics villain, there existed no credible intelligence pointing to a criminal conspiracy between Trump and Putin. If the investigation was to be sufficiently broad to dig up dirt on Trump, it had to include the fanciful allegations against Page. These, however, were impossible to corroborate — because they were fictive. They did, however, include one claim that, if shorn of context, wasn't as transparently silly as the others: namely, that Page had met with Sechin, the chairman of the Russian state oil company. To be sure, Steele's report of the meeting contained the outlandish claim that Page had negotiated with Sechin on lifting American sanctions against Russia. But if McCabe's team were to downplay this aspect as much as possible and focus instead on whether the meeting actually took place (it didn't) — well, that could make it appear like a worrisome allegation calling out for a sober follow-up.

The super spy sprang into action. He tapped his daisy chain of paid Russian informants, and before McCabe's team submitted the FISA warrant application, he produced some short reports supposedly confirming the meeting with Sechin. Steele discovered in his network another "source": the friend of one of Sechin's friend, who had heard from Sechin and from Sechin's personal assistant that indeed Sechin had met with Page. Confirmation?! The "source" also reported that Sechin offered Page, in return for Trump lifting of U.S. sanctions on Russia, a personal reward: a 19 percent stake in the Russian state-owned oil company — a haul worth millions upon millions, or probably billions.

No mere criminal mastermind, Page was master negotiator as well! Cartoonish depictions such as this constitute the primary basis on which the FBI made the case that Page was probably a foreign agent and that, in addition, he had probably broken American law — the legal standard for issuing surveillance warrants. The application for a warrant against Page is locked behind a top-secret classification. But McCabe testified before the House Intelligence Committee in December 2017 that without Steele's information, the FBI could not have secured a surveillance warrant. And according to Senators Chuck Grassley and Lindsey Graham, who have read the original warrant application and the three renewal applications, "the bulk" of the material on which the FBI made its case against Page came in the Steele dossier. What is more, the application contained, in the words of the two senators, "no additional information corroborating the dossier allegations" — no additional information, that is, except for one newspaper article: the Isikoff piece.

McCabe's team supported an application based primarily on Steele's allegations by offering the judges an article that itself was based *solely* on Steele's reports.

ALFA SHMALFA

Placing Page under surveillance marked the high point of the cooperation between McCabe's team and the super duo Simpson and Steele. But nefarious partnerships are prone to unravel; and when they do, they unravel quickly. Only ten short days after McCabe's team pulled the wool over the eyes of the FISA-court judges, Simpson and Steele broke off relations with the FBI in a fit of anger and bitterness.

Relations started to fray amid an effort by the super duo to stage a repeat of their Isikoff triumph. At some point in October, Simpson brought Steele to the United States for a second round of in-person briefings with major news outlets. Unfortunately, not one of these outlets has seen fit to disclose the subject of the briefings, so their precise details are sketchy. Still serving as FBI cutouts, the super duo probably updated reporters on the FISA warrant application and other aspects of the Trump-Russia investigation. If so, they may have intended for that information to serve as filler in articles about a new scoop that Simpson was offering reporters. A journalist whom Fusion GPS briefed at that time subsequently

told the *Washington Times* that Simpson was pushing a story about a secret computer link-up between Trump and a Russian bank.

According to the *New York Times*, news of the link-up had started to see the light of day thanks to the “classified” briefings that Brennan had organized for trusted Democrats on Capitol Hill. Intelligence officers disclosed, in the words of the *Times*, “the possibility of financial ties between Russians and people connected to Mr. Trump,” including “a mysterious computer back channel between the Trump Organization and the Alfa Bank, which is one of Russia’s biggest banks and whose owners have longstanding ties to Mr. Putin.” John Brennan had designed those briefings to be leaky, so it should come as no surprise that word of the Alfa Bank investigation flowed directly to Fusion GPS.

Following the winning formula that had produced the Isikoff article, Simpson provided reporters with the scoop. At first, the plan proceeded flawlessly. Franklin Foer of *Slate* ran a breathless story about the secret communications between the servers. Do we know with certainty that Foer’s information came directly from Fusion GPS? No. It’s certainly possible that, as we saw in the case of Julia Ioffe, some other agent emerged from the shadows of the Clinton demimonde to serve it up to him. Whatever the source of the information, Foer thought he might just have discovered the greatest piece of incriminating evidence yet — and Hillary Clinton agreed.

The Clinton campaign called on the FBI to investigate.

The speed and enthusiasm of her endorsement suggest more than a measure of coordination. She immediately sent out not one, but two tweets flagging Foer’s piece. One of them attached a statement from her campaign, which added heart palpitations and comic-book

imagery to Foer’s breathlessness. *Slate*’s discovery of a “secret hotline,” the statement said, might unlock the mystery behind Trump’s love for Putin, and it might also explain why Russia was “masterminding” cyber theft designed “to hurt Hillary Clinton’s campaign.” The Clinton campaign called on the FBI to investigate.

Clearly, this was the cue for McCabe’s lovers to chime in. Their role was to affirm by means of a leak that the FBI was taking very seriously this threat to national security, investigating with all the diligence that the American people expect of their premier law-enforcement agency. Foer’s story came out on October 31 — a week and a day before the voters went to the ballot box. If McCabe’s team had stuck to the script, the media would have spent the final week before the election talking of nothing but the “secret hotline” that connected Putin to the lair of his evil minion high atop Trump Tower.

But McCabe’s team double-crossed Steele and Simpson — or so the super duo must have felt. On the same day the *Slate* article appeared, the *New York Times* reported that the FBI had investigated the link between Alfa Bank and Trump Tower. The Bureau, the *Times* said, had concluded “that there could be an innocuous explanation, like a marketing email or spam, for the computer contacts.” This single sentence wiped out weeks of diligent work by Fusion GPS. As if to console Simpson and Steele, the article did reveal that the FBI, all summer long, had been conducting an investigation into the potential ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. And the *Times* even disclosed details of the probe — information that came courtesy, one assumes, of briefings from Fusion GPS.

But to Simpson and Steele the inclusion of those details was the bitterest of consolation. The damage the *Times* visited on their propaganda campaign was not limited to undermining the Alfa Bank story. The article included two additional facts, each as destructive as the other: The FBI’s wide-ranging investigation into Trump had revealed no collusion with Putin, and the FBI did not even believe that Putin was trying to get Hillary Clinton elected. In a convulsive fit of journalistic integrity, the *Times* had rejected Fusion GPS’s master narrative — and it had done so on the basis of authoritative leaks from the FBI. Someone in the J. Edgar Hoover Building had dropped a pallet of bricks on Simpson and Steele. Who?



FBI director James Comey testifies on Capitol Hill, July 7, 2016.

THE RETURN OF JOE FRIDAY

The collapse of the “secret hotline” story was part of a larger falling-out between the FBI and the super duo — and not by any means the most important part. The event that truly doomed their relations was an announcement, on October 28, that the FBI was reopening the Clinton email investigation. And the character standing at the center of that decision was James Comey.

The bureau had learned that Huma Abedin, Hillary Clinton’s trusted right hand, had forwarded thousands of emails to a computer in her home, which Anthony Weiner had put to personal use. Weiner was a former congressman, and he was Abedin’s husband. But he was also a criminal under investigation by the FBI. In her “well-intentioned but careless” use of government correspondence, Abedin had streamed thousands of official emails to the laptop of a pedophile.

James Comey’s July statement closing the Clinton email case coincided with Guccifer 2.0’s release of the DNC emails, and it helped build the impression of Hillary Clinton as the entitled CEO of Clinton, Inc. This reopening of the case, coming just a week before the election, was also timed for maximum visibility and carried a similar political valence. It was the third in a string of blows that Clinton received in the final stage of the election. The first came at a September 11 memorial commemoration in New York, where she had stumbled badly and seemed to faint, raising doubts about her stamina and health. On October 7, WikiLeaks published the first trove of emails stolen, presumably by Russian intelligence, from her campaign manager John Podesta. The emails were further grist for the mill of those who argued that Bill and Hillary Clinton were running a Tammany Hall for the 21st century. With Clinton stumbling, both literally and figuratively, the director of the FBI seemed determined to knock her back down.

What was he thinking? Comey now claims that he assumed Hillary Clinton would win. He feared that, after the election, people would come to learn that he had hidden the issue of Abedin’s laptop from the public, and they would accuse him of giving unfair consideration to Clinton. That calculation may indeed have been part of his thinking. But he may also have been hedging against a Trump victory. The announcement about the laptop was a card that he could play to ingratiate

himself to Trump — to offset the damage of the leaks about the Russia investigation. On top of those machinations, there was the old story: Comey's love of the spotlight. Here he was again in a national drama playing the entirely principled and apolitical lawman. He was in Joe Friday heaven.

For their part, Clinton and her camp read the FBI director's move as treachery most vile. In a scream of rage masquerading as a letter to Comey, Harry Reid spoke for the team. Comey, he wrote, was breaking the law by engaging in partisan political activity in support of Trump. Whereas Comey never hesitated to publicize damaging "innuendo" against Clinton, he was protecting Trump from public humiliation. "It has become clear that you possess explosive information about close ties and coordination between Donald Trump, his top advisers, and the Russian government — a foreign interest openly hostile to the United States, which Trump praises at every opportunity," Reid fumed. "The public has a right to know this information." To underscore that point, he published the letter immediately.

Glenn Simpson and Christopher Steele shared the sense of betrayal. Simpson later testified to the House intelligence committee:

At that point I felt like the rules had just been thrown out and that Comey had violated . . . one of the more sacrosanct policies, which is not announcing law enforcement activity in the closing days of an election. . . . We decided that if James Comey wasn't going to tell people about this investigation that, you know, he had violated the rules, and [it] would only be fair if the world knew that both candidates were under FBI investigation.

So Simpson and Steele "began talking to the press."

And with that, the super duo brought about the end of their secret partnership with McCabe's team. The bureau expects its cutouts to behave as cutouts: that is to say, they must launder secrets. Sensitive and classified information must never appear in the press in a form that betrays its FBI origins.

Comey announced the reopening of the Clinton email case on Friday, October 28. Simpson moved quickly. He arranged a Skype interview between Steele, who was now back in London, and David Corn, a veteran journalist at *Mother Jones*. On October 31, Corn reported that "a former senior intelligence officer for a Western country who specialized in Russian counterintelligence" told him "that in recent months he provided the bureau with memos, based on . . . Russian sources, contending that the Russian government has for years tried to co-opt and assist Trump — and that the FBI requested more information from him." The FBI response, Steele told Corn, was "shock and horror." In August, the FBI asked for more of Steele's memos. "It's quite clear there was or is a pretty substantial inquiry going on." To ensure that Corn understood the nature of the inquiry, Steele shared with him the text of the reports that he had given to the Bureau.

Steele's decision to expose his partnership with the FBI gave McCabe's team no choice but to terminate the relationship. The break-up was ugly, but its very messiness would later prove useful. In late 2017, congressional investigators would begin questioning the FBI's senior leaders about the role Steele had played as a cutout. The senior leaders would point to the break-up as proof of the FBI's integrity. Steele, they said, had been lying all along to the Bureau about his work with journalists. McCabe's team had no idea that he was funneling the FBI's secrets to the media. It was the *Mother Jones* interview that alerted them to Steele's duplicity; the moment it became clear, they immediately terminated the relationship.

This alibi won't wash. McCabe's team was fully aware, in September, that Steele stood behind the Isikoff article. In fact, the appearance of "a senior U.S. law enforcement official" in the article implicates McCabe's team more or less directly. In short, Steele's FBI handlers were aware of his role in leaking information at that time, and it caused them no consternation. On the contrary, after the Isikoff article, the FBI drew Steele even closer, flying him to Rome and offering him \$50,000. His work as a cutout received further tacit commendation when McCabe's team used the Isikoff article to dupe the FISA-court judges.

We have a word to describe the use of fabricated evidence to make an innocent man appear guilty: The Obama administration *framed* Carter Page. But not only Carter Page. The Obama administration *framed* Donald Trump.

The troubles that eventually befell Steele and McCabe's team have no bearing on the simple facts: They worked as partners in prosecuting a campaign of innuendo against Carter Page in September, and again in placing him under surveillance in October. What is more, the surveillance order went beyond McCabe's team, to the highest levels in the FBI and the DOJ. James Comey had to sign off on that decision — and that fact implicates him in a serious abuse of power.

Steele's description of Carter Page's activities in Moscow is comical.

We have a word to describe the use of fabricated evidence to make an innocent man appear guilty: The Obama administration *framed* Carter Page. But not only Carter Page. According to Steele's dossier, Page was in Moscow to cut a deal on another's behalf: He was an emissary — the trusted agent of Donald Trump. Without Steele's allegations against Carter Page — without, that is, the story of Page negotiating with Sechin to remove the sanctions — there was no credible allegation of a Trump-Putin conspiracy. The FBI, therefore, carried out a campaign of innuendo against Donald Trump in September. And the Obama administration placed him under investigation in October, if not earlier. The Obama administration *framed* Donald Trump.

SECOND SIGHT

During the Watergate scandal, the press popularized the phrase “the non-denial denial.” The Nixon White House had a special talent for issuing statements that sounded like categorical denials of allegations but that, upon close parsing, affirmed them to be true. In the matter of the Steele dossier, Obama officials, some of their allies in Congress, and senior leaders in the FBI have developed an analogous ploy: the “non-verification verification.” These are statements that distance the speaker from the laughable fantasies of the Steele dossier while still affirming that the tale of collusion it weaves must be taken seriously.

The unrivaled master of the move is John Brennan. In a recent appearance on NBC's *Meet the Press*, Brennan defended the FBI's use of the Steele dossier in its FISA warrant application. He railed against the FBI's critics, whom he depicted as partisan hacks. He played the role of sober intelligence professional. Expressing his personal appraisal of the dossier when he was still director of the CIA, he said, “There were things in that dossier that made me wonder whether or not they were, in fact, accurate and true.”

Exactly what things? Was it the dossier's view of Page as the diabolical mastermind of the DNC hack that struck the CIA director as credible? Avoiding the dossier's specific allegations, Brennan maintained his front and asserted, with the somber tone of a button-down national-security professional, that Steele's reports contain valuable intelligence leads. “I think Jim Comey has said that it contained salacious and unverified information,” Brennan continued. “Just because it was unverified didn't mean it wasn't true.”

The non-verification verification is central to the distinctive nature of the Obama administration's abuse of power. Most of our debate has focused on how the FBI used the Steele dossier to validate the investigation of Carter Page. This issue is important, to be sure, but it must not deflect us from seeing that the reverse is also true: The administration deliberately used the investigation of Page to validate the dossier.

Consider, again, the coy Brennan. When questioners push him to explain what in the Steele dossier he finds compelling, he habitually takes shelter behind secret sources — evidence hidden behind a classified screen, where only he, the chief intelligence professional, was permitted to see it. “I was aware of intelligence . . . about contacts between Russian officials

and U.S. persons that raised concerns in my mind about whether . . . those individuals were cooperating with the Russians . . . and it served as the basis for the FBI investigation to determine whether such collusion [or] cooperation occurred.”

Brennan’s somber and self-righteous appeal to hidden secrets is the oldest con in the book.

John Brennan sees things that we cannot see. If he indeed has access to secrets that transform stories from Marvel Comics into the stuff of everyday reality, then he has done a very poor job of explaining what they are. Moreover, no disinterested intelligence professional has supported him. Brennan’s somber and self-righteous appeal to

hidden secrets is the oldest con in the book. Just replace his top-secret computer monitor with a crystal ball or dried chicken bones, and his scam is the same one that Gypsy fortunetellers ran on superstitious peasants in early-modern Europe, or that soothsayers were operating in Homer’s Greece.

With respect to the framing of Trump, however, the second-sight scam required elaborate orchestration, the work of many hands. The key was the double-tracking of the dossier. Hillary Clinton’s enablers channeled it simultaneously into the press and into the government. They then recruited people inside government to verify to the outsiders that it was a serious document, a guide to the intelligence that reporters were not allowed to see. Without this double-tracking and official or quasi-official authentication, journalists would never have believed that they were catching a glimpse of what Brennan and the FBI saw in their crystal balls — pardon me, their top-secret monitors. And without leaks about investigations, journalists would have had no dossier-related news to report. Official statements that the dossier “was being looked into” transformed it into a legitimate topic for reputable news outlets.

This con failed in its primary goal of preventing the election of Trump, but it was nevertheless a partial success. It instilled in a significant portion of the American public the conviction that Trump indeed conspired with Putin. This conviction is especially prevalent among the lofty-minded — a class of people that includes Republicans as well as Democrats.

The bipartisan character of the delusion was the greatest factor that legitimated the appointment of Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel leading the investigation into Trump’s alleged relations with Russia. The lofty-minded have greeted every indictment that Mueller has handed down as confirmation of their collusion delusion. In reality, those indictments only prove that a phalanx of crack investigators armed with nearly unlimited resources, a grand jury, and an expansive mandate can draw blood almost at will. If a similar phalanx were to target Hillary Clinton and the shenanigans surrounding the Clinton Foundation, how much blood would flow? In other words, Mueller’s indictments are just the latest form of the non-verification verification.

Regardless of Mueller’s intentions, his probe serves as precisely the kind of “insurance policy” that Strzok seems to have been discussing with his lover, Lisa Page, in August 2016. Trump cannot shut down the Mueller probe and excise the rot in the DOJ and the FBI without appearing to obstruct justice. In practical terms, then, the Mueller probe is the cover-up.

Of course, the lofty-minded refuse to see it this way. The political damage that Mueller’s team is inflicting on Trump helps explain why a surprising number of people mount passionate and sincere defenses of the dossier and the super spy who compiled it. The logic of partisan politics will always lead a significant percentage of people to insist, with varying degrees of true belief, that a sow’s ear really is a silk purse. But partisanship is not by any means the only factor at work here. Even people with well-deserved reputations for intellectual seriousness passionately defend the integrity of Christopher Steele, a man whom the *New York Times* insists on calling, despite all contrary evidence, “a whistleblower.”

For a complete understanding of the dossier’s tenacious hold on lofty minds, one must supplement conventional political analysis with psychology. What we are witnessing is nothing less than a textbook case of denial and projection — the most perfect case imaginable.

The event that shaped the dossier more than any other was the hack of the DNC. Guccifer 2.0 first began releasing documents on June 15. A week later, Steele produced his first report. The Hillary Clinton that emerged from the DNC emails was preternaturally unsuited to a populist moment. Here she was: the Hillary Clinton who made high-priced speeches to Wall Street on the eve of the Iowa caucuses. Here was the co-executive of the international slush funds of the Clinton Foundation and the Clinton Global Initiative. Here was the power-hungry political boss who worked with the DNC to fix the Democratic primaries. Clinton's supporters instinctively understood the size of the wound that the hack opened up, and they worked frantically to cauterize it — which meant deflecting attention from the greed, entitlement, and sleaze that characterized Clinton, Inc.

The dossier quickly became a tool for denying the deficiencies of Bill and Hillary Clinton, projecting them onto Donald Trump. Is Bill Clinton a sexual predator? That's nothing. Trump pays teams of prostitutes to pee on him! Did Hillary Clinton preside over the failed "reset" with Russia? That's nothing. Putin is blackmailing Trump, and he fears Hillary! Did Bill Clinton pocket a \$500,000 fee for a speech he gave in Moscow, shortly before the sale of American uranium to Russian interests? That's nothing. Trump's been dependent on Putin for years! Do the emails from the DNC prove that Hillary Clinton rigged the primaries? That's nothing. Trump conspired with Putin to rig the entire election!

In the wake of the DNC hack, leading figures in the press and senior officials in the Obama administration faced a choice. They could depict Carter Page as he really was: an unknown man of modest accomplishments who played no role of note in the Trump organization. Or they could conspire with Fusion GPS to promote the fiction that he was a sly operative in a sinister network. In a fateful choice, they opted for dishonesty and deception over truth.

Once the enablers of Hillary Clinton compromised their own integrity, they internalized her program of denial and projection. Their own egos are now invested in perpetuating it. To avoid owning up to their shortcomings, they insist, in ever-shriller tones, on the personal integrity of the super spy and the credibility of his reports. The mere acknowledgement of a simple truth — that the "dossier" is junk — would constitute an admission either of deep professional malfeasance or of gob-smacking gullibility.

Choose your poison, Hillary enablers:
You duped people and thereby
abetted a gross abuse of power; or
you were yourself badly duped.

Choose your poison: You duped people and thereby abetted a gross abuse of power; or you were yourself badly duped. That is the dilemma that the lofty-minded now face. The choice is excruciating. It requires abandoning satisfying self-images and embracing painful self-truths — while also handing a well-deserved victory to a hated political enemy. As a consequence, the Steele dossier has proved to

be as consequential as it is asinine.

THE GREATEST DENIER

Of course, no one is in deeper denial than Hillary Clinton herself. After she had conceded to Trump on the night of the election, Obama called her. Taking the phone, she said, "Mr. President, I'm sorry."

Sorry, no doubt, that the baton had fallen to the ground once again. Sorry that she would not be the first female president. Sorry that she would not hold the reins of power. But was contrition an aspect of any component of her sorrow?

If there is one thing Hillary Clinton does not do well, it is contrition. In an interview last September, she clung to the fiction that the election was stolen. Her belief that Trump conspired with Putin was absolute. "There certainly was communication, and there certainly was an understanding of some sort," Clinton said. She had "no doubt" that Putin

sought a Trump victory, that there was “a tangle of financial relationships” between Trump and Russia, and that Trump’s associates “worked really hard to hide their connections with Russians.” Were those, in her mind, clear signs of collusion? “I’m convinced of it,” she said.

She will remain convinced until the day she dies. The alternative, a rigorous examination of conscience, is too painful to contemplate. How much longer will Hillary Clinton’s damaged psyche hold America hostage?



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