

GRASSLEY CONTINUES TO ASK WORTHWHILE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STEELE DOSSIER

In this post, I noted several details made clear by Christopher Steele's defense in a lawsuit pertaining to the dossier he did for opponents to Donald Trump:

- Steele also shared his dossier with an active British intelligence official, which is a second channel via which the US intelligence community may have obtained the dossier in spite of their hilariously unconvincing denials
- Steele's claims he wasn't sharing actual copies of the dossier with the press, at least, don't accord with other public claims
- Steele said absolutely nothing about how he shared the dossier with the FBI (which may have been an alternative channel via which it leaked)
- Steele obtained the most inflammatory claims in the dossier at a time when he claims neither to have been paid nor to have been actively collecting

intelligence (and paying sources)

Taken together, these inconsistencies suggest certain alternative stories about the dossier. For example, it's possible the dossier was used as a way to launder intelligence gathered via other means, as a way to protect sources and methods. It's likely the US IC had more awareness and involvement in the dossier than they've publicly claimed.

With that in mind, I find it very interesting that Chuck Grassley claims to have found inconsistencies in the story FBI and DOJ are giving him about the dossier.

As I noted at the time, Grassley raised some really good questions in a letter to FBI back on March 6, questions made all the more salient given three somewhat conflicting reports about whether the FBI ever paid Steele.

Yesterday, he held a presser to release another letter to FBI, which he sent last Friday. He explained that nine days after he sent his letter, Comey briefed him and Dianne Feinstein on the circumstances surrounding Mike Flynn's ouster, and answered a few of the questions Grassley had asked in his March 6 letter. But FBI never did respond to the letter itself, beyond sending a four sentence boilerplate letter on April 19, claiming the questions had been answered in the briefing.

In the letter, Grassley makes clear that documents the committee received from DOJ since (are these not FBI? If so are they NSD?) conflict with what Comey relayed in the briefing in that FBI actually had a more substantive relationship than Comey let on.

There appear to be material inconsistencies between the description of the FBI's relationship with Mr. Steele that you did provide in your briefing and information contained in Justice Department documents made

available to the Committee only after the briefing. Whether those inconsistencies were honest mistakes or an attempt to downplay the actual extent of the FBI's relationship with Mr. Steele, it is essential that the FBI fully answer all of the questions from the March 6 letter and provide all the requested documents in order to resolve these and related issues.

Significantly, after having asked these questions about public reports that FBI had discussed paying Steele,

All FBI records relating to the agreement with Mr. Steele regarding his investigation of President Trump and his associates, including the agreement itself, all drafts, all internal FBI communications about the agreement, all FBI communications with Mr. Steele about the agreement, all FBI requests for authorization for the agreement, and all records documenting the approval of the agreement.

[snip]

Did the agreement with Mr. Steele ever enter into force? If so, for how long? If it did not, why not?

Grassley is restating that question, asking for documentation of all payments to Steele.

Documentation of all payments made to Mr. Steele, including for travel expenses, if any; the date of any such payments; the amount of such payments; the authorization for such payments.

He asked about it in today's oversight hearing with Comey, and Comey insisted the appearance of conflict was easy to explain (and promised to explain it). I suspect DOJ may have paid for

Steele's travel to the US in October 2016, which might be fine, but that was also when Steele shared his dossier with David Corn. Otherwise, Comey refused to answer in a public forum questions about whether FBI made any representations to a judge relying on the dossier (for example for the FISA order), whether the FBI was aware that Steele paid sources who paid subsources, and whether Comey or the FBI knew that Fusion employed a former Russian intelligence officer who was (like Mike Flynn and Paul Manafort) were serving as an unregistered agent of a foreign power, in this case to help Russia fight Magnitsky sanctions.

The last question pertains to Fusion employee, Rinat Akhmetshin. In July 2016, Hermitage Capital Management filed a FARA complaint against him and number of other people alleging they were unregistered lobbyists for Prevezon Holdings, a Cyprus based firm that was seeking to push back against sanctions. The complaint alleges, among other things, that Akhmetshin is a former GRU officer, hired to generate negative publicity, and has been "accused of organizing, on behalf of Russian oligarch Andrey Melnichenko, for the computers of International Mineral Resources to be hacked to steal "confidential, personal and otherwise sensitive information" so that it could be disseminated."

Grassley surely raised the issue (as he also did in a March letter to Dana Boente in the latter's role as Acting Attorney General) to accuse Steele's associates of the same things Steele and others have accused Paul Manafort of (and Mike Flynn has admitted). But it seems an utterly valid issue in any case, not least because it raises questions of why Fusion brought in Steele when Akhmetshin could have collected Russian intelligence on Trump himself. Did he? If so, was that included in the parts of the dossier we haven't seen. More importantly, was Akhmetshin still around when the dossier got leaked? Does he have any ongoing ties with Russia that might lead to the murder of sourced named in the dossier?

In today's hearing, Grassley said that Fusion refused to cooperate with the questions he posed to them about the dossier. It seems the firms paid to compile that dossier are obfuscating on both sides of the Atlantic.