

TRUMP'S LAWYER: I DID NOT GO TO PRAGUE I DID NOT GO TO PRAGUE I DID NOT GO TO PRAGUE I DID NOT GO TO PRAGUE

Four days ago, Michael Cohen (or the Trump Organization) pre-empted revelations that would leak as soon as he turned over a third tranche of documents to the House Intelligence Committee by revealing a seemingly damning detail from it: along with Trump's associate Felix Sater, Cohen was pursuing a Trump Tower deal in Moscow well after Trump's campaign was in full swing. Sure enough, more damning information was still to come: Sater somehow imagined the deal – whatever it was – would get Trump elected. Then still more damning information: in January 2016, Cohen reached out to trusted Putin aide Dmitry Peskov to push for help on the deal. That's when Cohen began to not recall precisely what happened, and also ignore questions about why he hadn't told Trump about this call, unlike the other actions he took on this deal.

Again, these events were connected to Cohen's delivery of a tranche of documents on August 28 to HPSCI.

Today, the letter Cohen sent to HPSCI on August 14 after reviewing and delivering two previous tranches of documents got liberated (this copy by the Daily Beast, but multiple outlets got copies). So the letter, which includes four pages plus backup rebutting the allegations made about Cohen in the Steele dossier, reflects the understanding Cohen's lawyers had two weeks before they delivered emails showing Cohen was contacting Putin's trusted aide in support of a deal that Sater believed would get Trump elected.

Before I look at the letter, let me reiterate what I have suggested elsewhere (I plan to return to these shortly). There are real, unanswered questions about the provenance of the document as leaked by BuzzFeed. Some of the circumstances surrounding its production – most notably its funders and their claimed goals, and Steele’s production of a final report, based off voluntarily provided information, for free – raise real questions about parts of the dossier. I think it quite likely some parts of the dossier, especially the last, most inflammatory report (which accuses Cohen of attending a meeting where payments *from Trump* to the hackers that targeted the Democrats were discussed), were disinformation fed by the Russians. I believe the Intelligence Community is almost certainly lying about what they knew about the dossier. I believe the Russians know precisely how the dossier got constructed (remember, a suspected source for it died in mysterious circumstances in December), and they expect the exposure of those details will discredit it.

So while I think there are truths in the dossier, I do think its current form includes rumor and even affirmative disinformation meant to discredit it.

With that said – and remembering all the time that shortly after this letter got written, documents were disclosed showing Cohen was involved in brokering a deal that Sater thought might get Trump elected – here’s my analysis of the document.

The entire letter is pitched around the claim that HPSCI “included Mr. Cohen in its inquiry based solely upon certain sensational allegations contained” in the Steele dossier. “Absent those allegations,” the letter continues, “Mr. Cohen would not be involved in your investigation.” The idea – presented two weeks before disclosure of emails showing Cohen brokering a deal with Russians in early 2016 – is if Cohen can discredit the dossier, then he will have shown that there is no reason to

investigate him or his role brokering deals with the Russians. Even the denial of any documents of interest is limited to the dossier: "We have not uncovered a single document that would in any way corroborate the Dossier's allegations regarding Mr. Cohen, nor do we believe that any such document exists."

With that, Cohen's lawyers address the allegations in the dossier, one by one. As a result, the rebuttal reads kind of like this:

I Did Not Go to Prague I Did Not Go to Prague I Did Not Go to Prague I Did Not Go to Prague

Cohen literally denies that he ever traveled to Prague six times, as well as denying carefully worded, often quoted, versions of meeting with Russians in a European capital in 2016. Of course that formulation – He did not participate in meetings of any kind with Kremlin officials in Prague in August 2016 – stops well short of other potential ties to Russians. And two of his denials look very different given the emails disclosed two weeks later showing an attempt to broker a deal that Felix Sater thought might get Trump elected, including an email from him to one of the most trusted agents of the Kremlin.

Mr. Cohen is not aware of any "secret TRUMP campaign/Kremlin relationship."

Mr. Cohen is not aware of any indirect communications between the "TRUMP team" and "trusted agents" of the Kremlin.

As I said above, I think it highly likely the dossier includes at least some disinformation seeded by the Russians. So the most charitable scenario of what went down is that the Russians, knowing Cohen had made half-hearted attempts to broker the Trump Tower deal Trump had wanted for years, planted his name hoping some kind of awkwardness like this would result.

If so, Mission accomplished!

All that said, the way in which Cohen has orchestrated this disclosure – up to and including his failures to recall and answer obvious questions – is either great lawyering and/or sign that this earlier deal making is a real problem.

It may be that HPSCI only investigated Cohen because he was badly implicated in the Steele dossier. But if so, it led to the disclosure of earlier deal-making, including an attempt to reach out to one of Putin's most trusted associates, that will likely give HPSCI a whole new reason to investigate.