THE POST-PRESS MICHAEL COHEN DETAILS IN THE STEELE DOSSIER

I'm doing a long response on this unfortunately terrible John Sipher post trying to calm questions about the Steele dossier. As part of Sipher's post, he makes these claims about Michael Cohen, the allegations against whom in the Steele dossier are actually far more inflammatory than against Carter Page and Paul Manafort.

> We do not have any reporting that implicates Michael Cohen in meetings with Russians as outlined in the dossier. However, recent revelations indicate his long-standing relationships with key Russian and Ukrainian interlocutors, and highlight his role in a previously hidden effort to build a Trump tower in Moscow. During the campaign, those efforts included email exchanges with Trump associate Felix Sater explicitly referring to getting Putin's circle involved and helping Trump get elected.
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> Further, the Trump Administration's effort lift sanctions on Russia immediately following the inauguration seems to mirror Orbis reporting related to Mr. Cohen's promises to Russia, as reported in the Orbis documents. A June 2017 Yahoo News article by Michael Isikoff described the Administration's efforts to engage the State Department about lifting sanctions "almost as soon as they took office." Their efforts were halted by State Department officials and members of Congress. Following the inauguration, Cohen was

> involved, again with Felix Sater, to engage in back-channel negotiations seeking a means to lift sanctions via a semi-developed Russian-Ukrainian plan (which also included the hand delivery of derogatory information on Ukrainian leaders) also fits with Orbis reporting related to Cohen.

He also botches the most inflammatory claims about Cohen, getting (in this reference but not another one) the date of the December 13 report wrong, that it mentioned Cohen, not Page, and that Cohen – or anyone else on the Trump team – personally paid hackers.

> By late fall 2016, the Orbis team reported that a Russian-supported company had been "using botnets and porn traffic to transmit viruses, plant bugs, steal data and conduct 'altering operations' against the Democratic Party leadership." Hackers recruited by the FSB under duress were involved in the operations. According to the report, Carter Page insisted that payments be made quickly and discreetly, and that cyber operators should go to ground and cover their tracks.
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> [snip]
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> Trump campaign operative Carter Page is also said to have played a role in shuttling information to Moscow, while Trump's personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, reportedly took over efforts after Manafort left the campaign, personally providing cash payments for Russian hackers.

I'm not so much interested in those typos – I'm sure they'll be fixed. But I am interested in Sipher's apparent lack of curiosity about the Cohen reporting.

I've long noted that that most inflammatory report (the one Sipher claims came out in late fall but actually came out as the IC was looking for a compelling case against Russia in December) came out after David Corn had already publicly revealed the existence of the dossier (and just a few weeks before a likely source for the dossier died in suspicious circumstances). We now know that Steele claims the information in it was offered up for free.

Those details should raise real questions about that last report.

But as pseudonymous in NC has been pointing out, the other three reports invoking Cohen were produced in remarkably quick succession, based on mid-October meetings.

> It's worth clearing your mind and reading 134-135-136 in sequence to see how that strand developed.
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> 134/Oct 18: "Kremlin insider" in mid-October conversation with trusted compatriot emphasizes "a key role" played by Cohen. Some redaction in Buzzfeed doc, no indication of a meeting.
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> 135/Oct 19: "Kremlin insider" in mid-October conversation (the same one?) says Cohen met "in an EU country in August 2016", but unsure of "the exact date/s and locations."
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> 136/Oct 20: "Kremlin insider" speaking on October 19 "clearly indicated" in "cryptic" terms that meeting was in Prague using plausibly deniable contacts and location.
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> Assuming the same or very similar provenance for all three notes – and given the compressed timeframe, I think we're okay to do that – that's a lot of elaboration on Cohen in three days from at least two separate conversations, where presumably the one described in

> 136 was guided by Steele's feedback on the earlier one.

On top of the quick succession of these inflammatory reports just weeks before the election, there are two other reasons to take note of the timing.

First, as Steele has admitted, he started briefing reporters on the existence and contents of the dossier by late September, and briefed reporters (including Michael Isikoff, whom Sipher cites repeatedly in his post without noting he got briefed on the Steele dossier in real time) *in person* in mid-October.

> The journalists initially briefed at the end of September 2016 by [Steele] and Fusion at Fusion's instruction were from the New York Times, the Washington Post, Yahoo News, the New Yorker and CNN. [Steele] subsequently participated in further meetings at Fusion's instruction with Fusion and the New York Times, the Washington Post and Yahoo News, which took place in mid-October 2016. In each of those cases the briefing was conducted verbally in person.

As I note, the claim that these were the only reporters who got briefed (by someone) conflicts with the claims of BBC's Paul Wood.

Whatever the truth of the total numbers of reporters who got briefed, they had already been briefed and were presumably actively trying to confirm details from the dossier — with unknown operational security — in advance of those three Cohen reports.

That by itself ought to raise real questions about those reports.

Then there's the fact that Cohen traveled to London in in October. The BuzzFeed review of Cohen's (sole, Cohen claims) passport shows three trips to Europe: once to Italy in July,

once to the London in October, and another trip to London in November, after the election.

> The stamps indicate he traveled abroad at least four times in 2016: twice to London, once to St. Maarten, and once to Italy in July. The Italian trip is the most intriguing, because it places Cohen in what's known as the Schengen Area: a group of 26 European countries, including the Czech Republic, that allows visitors to travel freely among them without getting any additional passport stamps.
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> Upon entering the Schengen Area, visitors get a rectangular stamp with the date, a country code, their port of entry, and a symbol showing how they entered — such as an airplane or a train. In Cohen's passport, that mark appears on page 17, with a date of July 9. The mark is too faint to be fully legible. The exit stamp, similar but with rounded edges, is also light, but the letters "cino" are legible, indicating he flew out of Leonardo da Vinci–Fiumicino Airport in Rome. That stamp is dated July 17.
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> [snip]
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> Regarding the three other 2016 stamps in his passport, Cohen said he visited London twice, where his daughter is studying: once in October for a birthday party and again in November for Thanksgiving. He said he vacationed in the Caribbean island of St. Maarten in January.

Cohen's Twitter feed shows a break between October 5 and October 12, which may reflect a trip overseas. And while I don't buy a lot of this post, it shows Cohen's daughter's birthday was in early October.

That could either be inculpating or exonerating

with respect to Cohen’s role in meeting with Russians; it offered a time and place where Cohen might have met with Russians (though presumably under close view of Steele and his buddies).

But it should raise real questions about whether reports on Cohen have been injected with disinformation. Once reporters started reporting this out, it’s far more likely Russian sources would also learn about the dossier and feed deliberate disinformation to known Steele sources.