15 MONTHS AND 15,000 WORDS LATER, BOOSTERS STILL OBSCURE THE TIMELINE ON THE STEELE DOSSIER

Jane Mayer is a great journalist. But in a 15,000 word profile on Christopher Steele and his dossier, she adds just two new bits of news, and along the way muddles the timeline as badly as all the Steele boosters who have gone before her.

The Singer feint

Mayer emphasizes something that Democrats have: that the Fusion project on Trump was initiated by right wing billionaire Paul Singer, not the Democrats.

> [I]n the **spring** of 2016, Steele got a call from Glenn Simpson, a former investigative reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* who, in 2011, had left journalism to co-found Fusion GPS. Simpson was hoping that Steele could help Fusion follow some difficult leads on Trump's ties to Russia. Simpson said that he was working for a law firm, but didn't name the ultimate client.
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> The funding for the project originally came from an organization financed by the New York investor Paul Singer, a Republican who disliked Trump. But, after it became clear that Trump would win the Republican nomination, Singer dropped out. At that point, Fusion persuaded Marc Elias, the general counsel for the Clinton campaign, to subsidize the unfinished research. This bipartisan funding history belies the argument that the research was corrupted

> by its sponsorship. [my emphasis]

This is misleading, of course, as is Mayer's use of the term "spring." That's because, as least according to the public record, Steele wasn't brought on to the project until after Democrats started funding the dossier. Yes, Singer started funding the oppo research on Trump, but not the paid HUMINT that got leaked in early 2017.

The continued silence about Guccifer 2.0

One reason all this matters is because of the way Mayer ignores the same thing every other Steele booster did: the release of Democratic documents by Guccifer 2.0 on June 15. Mayer, like all the other boosters, jumps immediately from the (erroneous) WaPo reporting on the DNC hack to the WikiLeaks release.

> On June 14, 2016, five days after the Trump Tower meeting, the Washington *Post* broke the news that the Russians were believed to have hacked into the Democratic National Committee's e-mail system. The first reports were remarkably blasé. D.N.C. officials admitted that they had learned about the hack months earlier. (It later surfaced that in November of 2014 Dutch intelligence officials had provided U.S. authorities with evidence that the Russians had broken into the Democratic Party's computer system. U.S. officials reportedly thanked the Dutch for the tip, sending cake and flowers, but took little action.) When the infiltration of the D.N.C. finally became public, various officials were quoted as saying that the Russians were always trying to penetrate U.S. government systems, and were likely just trying to understand American politics better.
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> The attitudes of Democratic officials

> changed drastically when, three days before the start of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, WikiLeaks dumped twenty thousand stolen D.N.C. e-mails onto the Internet. The e-mails had been weaponized: what had seemed a passive form of spying was now "an active measure," in the parlance of espionage.

As I've noted, repeatedly, the first Steele report, dated June 20 and so completed on the same day Guccifer 2.0 promised to release a "dossier" of his own on Clinton, describes the dirt Russians were peddling as old FSB intercepts, not recent hacked emails. The Steele report remained *way* behind public contemporaneous reporting on the hack-and-leak, and by jumping right to Wikileaks, boosters avoid dealing with several more reports that conflicted with known public facts.

So Guccifer 2.0 not only proves Steele's sources were at best misinformed about the operation against Clinton and possibly even peddling disinformation, but — particularly given Simpson's assertion that the Democrats were using the dossier to "understand what the heck was going on" it might have led Democrats to be complacent as they considered how to respond to the DNC hack.

The continued silence about precisely when Simpson hired Steele

The timing about when in "spring" Simpson hired Steele matters for one more reason. As I laid out here, Perkins Coie's hiring of Simpson closely coincides with the time Perkins Coie and their clients, the Democrats, met with the FBI on the hack and asked for, but did not get, a public announcement about Russia being the culprit. But we don't know which came first and

what relationship there was between them (though Simpson seems to suggest there was one).

Given how many pieces relying on Simpson and the Democrats as sources we've seen, the continued inability to nail down which came first, the FBI refusal to attribute the hack or the hiring of Steele, is notable.

When a misleading "spring" turns into a misleading "late summer"

Perhaps the most remarkable move in this piece comes with Mayer's claim (after admitting that she was among the reporters who got briefed by Steele in "late summer") that no news outlet reported based off Steele's allegations.

> In late summer, Fusion set up a series of meetings, at the Tabard Inn, in Washington, between Steele and a handful of national-security reporters. These encounters were surely sanctioned in some way by Fusion's client, the Clinton campaign. The sessions were off the record, but because Steele has since disclosed having participated in them I can confirm that I attended one of them. Despite Steele's generally cool manner, he seemed distraught about the Russians' role in the election. He did not distribute his dossier, provided no documentary evidence, and was so careful about guarding his sources that there was virtually no way to follow up. At the time, neither *The New Yorker* nor any other news organization ran a story about the allegations.

Unless she is playing word games here (perhaps meaning "allegations" to refer exclusively to the pee tape), it's mindboggling she made this

claim. A key part of the debate over the Nunes memo in the last month (she makes reference to the Schiff memo, so she has to be aware of this) is about what Michael Isikoff's September 23 article — which itself relied on Steele's reporting — is doing in the FBI's application for a FISA order on Carter Page. Isikoff first admitted his reporting relied on Steele days after the dossier was leaked. In the wake of the Nunes memo release, Isikoff admitted that in even more detail.

Mayer's quasi bombshell

Which brings us to one of the two new pieces of news. Mayer reports on an additional report Steele did in late November that reports a MFA claim that Russia vetoed Mitt Romney as Secretary of State.

> One subject that Steele is believed to have discussed with Mueller's investigators is a memo that he wrote in late November, 2016, after his contract with Fusion had ended. This memo, which did not surface publicly with the others, is shorter than the rest, and is based on one source, described as "a senior Russian official." The official said that he was merely relaying talk circulating in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but what he'd heard was astonishing: people were saying that the Kremlin had intervened to block Trump's initial choice for Secretary of State, Mitt Romney. (During Romney's run for the White House in 2012, he was notably hawkish on Russia, calling it the single greatest threat to the U.S.) The memo said that the Kremlin, through unspecified channels, had asked Trump to appoint someone who would be prepared to lift Ukraine-related sanctions, and who would coöperate on security issues of interest to Russia, such as the conflict in Syria. If what the source heard was

> true, then a foreign power was exercising pivotal influence over U.S. foreign policy—and an incoming President.

Mayer goes on to raise reasons to doubt the credibility of this report — not least, that Trump never liked Romney (and especially had it in for Mormons in the wake of the election, when Mormons were among the most vocal opponents to Trump) — but she presents them as details that might corroborate the report.

> As fantastical as the memo sounds, subsequent events could be said to support it. In a humiliating public spectacle, Trump dangled the post before Romney until early December, then rejected him. There are plenty of domestic political reasons that Trump may have turned against Romney. Trump loyalists, for instance, noted Romney's public opposition to Trump during the campaign. Roger Stone, the longtime Trump aide, has suggested that Trump was vengefully tormenting Romney, and had never seriously considered him. (Romney declined to comment. The White House said that he was never a first choice for the role and declined to comment about any communications that the Trump team may have had with Russia on the subject.) In any case, on December 13, 2016, Trump gave Rex Tillerson, the C.E.O. of ExxonMobil, the job. The choice was a surprise to most, and a happy one in Moscow, because Tillerson's business ties with the Kremlin were long-standing and warm. (In 2011, he brokered a historic partnership between ExxonMobil and Rosneft.) After the election, Congress imposed additional sanctions on Russia, in retaliation for its interference, but Trump and Tillerson have resisted enacting them.

I'm curious, however, by a bigger question, which first leads me to the other consistent timing issue in Steele booster narratives.

The continued virgin birth of the December 13 report

Mayer tells the standard narrative of how Steele had Sir Andrew Wood brief John McCain on the dossier, which led to David Kramer obtaining it.

> The week before Thanksgiving, Wood briefed McCain at the Halifax International Security Forum. McCain was deeply concerned. He asked a former aide, David Kramer, to go to England to meet Steele. Kramer, a Russia expert who had served at the State Department, went over the dossier with Steele for hours. After Kramer promised to share the document only with McCain, Steele arranged for Kramer to receive a copy in Washington. But a former national-security official who spoke with Kramer at the time told me that one of Kramer's ideas was to have McCain confront Trump with the evidence, in the hope that Trump would resign. "He would tell Trump, 'The Russians have got you,' " the former official told me. (A lawyer for Kramer maintains that Kramer never considered getting Trump to resign and **never promised to show the dossier only to McCain**.) Ultimately, though, McCain and Kramer agreed that McCain should take the dossier to the head of the F.B.I. On December 9th, McCain handed Comey a copy of the dossier. The meeting lasted less than ten minutes, because, to McCain's surprise, the F.B.I. had possessed a copy since the summer. According to the former national-security official, when Kramer learned about the meeting his reaction was

> "Shit, if they've had it all this time, why didn't they *do* something?" Kramer then heard that the dossier was an open secret among journalists, too. He asked, "Is there anyone in Washington who *doesn't* know about this?" [my emphasis]

After including the denial that Kramer promised exclusivity to McCain (bolded above), Mayer lays out what has become the presumptive story on how BuzzFeed got the dossier, from Kramer.

> By a process of elimination, speculation has centered on McCain's aide, Kramer, who has not responded to inquiries about it, and whose congressional testimony is sealed.

Except all that would support Kramer leaking a dossier in its December 9 form, not a dosser in its December 13 form, which is what we got.

The question is all the more pressing, because we now know that there's another version of the dossier, one that might include the late November report but not (yet) the December 13 report, which may be how the FBI obtained it.

The other scoop: a different murder?

So there are two scoops: the report that Russian chatter took credit for Trump humiliating Mitt Romney, which might be true (in spite of all the reasons to believe it's not), or might instead be more disinformation, in this case disinformation that served Russian bureaucrats' self-interest in looking good for Putin.

The other scoop is that, while Mayer notes there is no evidence that Oleg Erovinkin was a Steele source, there may be another death that Mueller is investigating in relation to the dossier.

> No evidence has emerged that Erovinkin

> was a Steele source, and in fact Special Counsel Mueller is believed to be investigating a different death that is possibly related to the dossier.

None of the two known potentially suspicious American deaths, that of Seth Rich or Peter Smith, would seem to match the dossier timeline. There are, however, a few other Russians that might be potentially related deaths.

I'd love to see a 15,000 word piece that finally answers some of these questions about the dossier. But for now we've just got my neverending pieces asking the questions.