

IF THE STEELE DOSSIER IS DISINFORMATION, REPUBLICANS HAVE BECOME WILLFUL PARTICIPANTS IN THE OPERATION

I was among the first people to argue that the Steele dossier had been planted either partially or predominantly with Russian disinformation.

**Republicans never
consider the
implications if the
Steele dossier is
disinformation**

I first suggested the dossier reflected a feedback loop – magnifying both the Alfa Bank and the Michael Cohen allegations – in March 2017 (there’s increasing evidence the Alfa Bank story was disinformation, too, which I’ve also argued). In November 2017, I showed evidence suggesting the Democrats were complacent in response to their discovery of the hack in May and June 2016, in part because the dossier falsely led them to believe that the Russians hadn’t accomplished such hacks and that the *kompromat* Russians had on Hillary consisted of old FSB intercepts of her, not newly stolen emails. In January 2018, I showed how the dossier would be useful to Russia, partly to thwart and partly to discredit the investigation into their operation. In August 2018, I laid out six specific false claims made in the dossier that would have led Democrats or the FBI to take action counter to their own interests:

- Russians hadn't had success hacking targets like Hillary
- Russians were planning to leak dated FSB intercepts rather than recent stolen emails
- Misattribution of both what the social media campaign included and who did it, blaming Webzilla rather than Internet Research Agency
- Carter Page, not George Papadopoulos or Roger Stone, was one key focus of Russian outreach
- Russia had grown to regret the operation in August, when instead they were planning the next phase
- Michael Cohen was covering up Trump's funding of the hackers rather than Trump's sexual scandals and an improbably lucrative business deal

Also in August 2018, I laid out the specific risk that Oleg Deripaska, who had influence over both Christopher Steele and Paul Manafort at the time, could have been manipulating both sides. In January, I wrote a much more detailed post that, in part, showed that that's what Deripaska seems to have done. The post also showed how any disinformation in the dossier succeeded in confusing and discrediting the most experienced investigators into Russian organized crime (both Steele and at both DOJ and FBI), as well as harming Democrats.

Long after I started laying out the implications

of the possibility that the dossier was disinformation, Republicans came to believe that was the case. Unsurprisingly, however, that's all they've done, point to Russia's success at feeding the FBI and Democrats disinformation (just as Russia got Don Jr, Roger Stone, and Mike Flynn to embrace and magnify *other* disinformation), as if that in some way uniquely damns Democrats. When, earlier this year, Chuck Grassley got footnotes declassified providing further evidence that the dossier was disinformation, Republicans just kept squawking that it was, without thinking through the implications of it.

Because Grassley and others raised the issue in the Rod Rosenstein hearing yesterday (and because I'm preparing a post on that hearing), I'm going back to look closely at three footnotes reflecting Russian knowledge of the dossier project. As with all my other posts criticizing the dossier, nothing here is meant to excuse the Democrats' refusal to come clean on it, or the ham-handed way the project was managed in the first place. But the footnotes don't actually say what the Republicans think they do, and in some ways they increase the import of Paul Manafort's interactions with Deripaska during the campaign.

The three references to June 2017 reporting on mid-2016 knowledge of the dossier

There were actually three mentions of June 2017 reporting related to the Steele dossier. I've included the context from the IG Report and footnotes below, but summarized, they are:

- Footnote 211: An intelligence report from June 2017 said someone associated with Oleg

Deripaska was or may have been aware of Steele's work by early July 2016.

- Footnote 342: An early June 2017 USIC report said two people affiliated with Russian intelligence were aware of Steele's work in "early 2016" (this is either a typo or inaccurate, as the earliest anyone could have known would have been May 2016, and more likely June 2016).
- Footnote 347: The FBI received reporting in early June 2017 that must come from 702 coverage revealing a bunch of details about a sub-source, including that the person had contact with the Presidential Administration in June/July 2016 and that he or she was strongly pro-Hillary.

I've highlighted the temporal references in the longer passages below, to make this more clear, but it's worth noting that all three of these references are to intelligence reports dated June 2017. Once you account for the error in footnote 342 (since Steele's election reporting didn't start until May 2016, awareness of it most post-date that), all three of the reports reflect some time to Steele's project in roughly the same time frame: May to early July 2016.

So it's possible that some if not all three of these reports are the same report. All the more so given that two key Deripaska deputies,

Konstantin Kilimnik and Victor Boyarkin, have been publicly identified as having links to Russian intelligence.

The Mueller Report describes evidence—including but not limited to witness interviews—that Kilimnik has ties to GRU.

Manafort told the Office that he did not believe Kilimnik was working as a Russian “spy.”⁸⁵⁹ The FBI, however, assesses that Kilimnik has ties to Russian intelligence.⁸⁶⁰ Several pieces of the Office’s evidence—including witness interviews and emails obtained through court-authorized search warrants—support that assessment.

It makes no such claims about Boyarkin, though it does note that he served as defense attaché in the past, the kind of job often used for official cover. But when Treasury sanctioned Boyarkin in December 2018 along with all the people who implemented the Russian interference campaign in 2016, it identified Boyarkin as a former GRU officer.

Victor Alekseyevich Boyarkin (Boyarkin) is a former GRU officer who reports directly to Deripaska and has led business negotiations on Deripaska’s behalf. Deripaska and Boyarkin were involved in providing Russian financial support to a Montenegrin political party ahead of Montenegro’s 2016 elections. Boyarkin was designated pursuant to Executive Orders (E.O.) 13661 and 13662 for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Oleg Deripaska, who was previously designated pursuant to E.O. 13661 for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of a senior Russian government official, as well as pursuant to E.O. 13662 for operating in the energy sector of the Russian Federation economy, as well as with entities 50 percent or more

owned by designated persons.

The government refers to both of these guys as GRU-linked publicly. So if either showed up in a classified intelligence report, that affiliation would likely be more explicit. Both Kilimnik and Boyarkin were the target of retroactive surveillance as part of the investigation in Paul Manafort. And because they were interacting with Manafort, it would be likely one or both of them would learn of any issues involving Manafort, like the dossier, if such information came to Deripaska. To be clear, it is speculation that one of these men was the person associated with Deripaska who got wind of the dossier, but the description would fit both, both were under surveillance, and both would have a reason to be informed of the dossier if feeding disinformation to it was part of a larger project.

If either of them were one of the people named in the intelligence reports, it would mean Deripaska's actions towards Manafort during the election would have been conducted by someone who knew of the Steele dossier. It would also mean that Boyarkin's outreach (via Kilimnik) to Manafort in July 2016 would have come just after (this intelligence report reflects) learning of the dossier.

For example, in response to a July 7, 2016, email from a Ukrainian reporter about Manafort's failed Deripaska-backed investment, Manafort asked Kilimnik whether there had been any movement on "this issue with our friend."⁸⁹⁷ Gates stated that "our friend" likely referred to Deripaska,⁸⁹⁸ and Manafort told the Office that the "issue" (and "our biggest interest," as stated below) was a solution to the Deripaska-Pericles issue.⁸⁹⁹ Kilimnik replied:

I am carefully optimistic on the question of our biggest interest.

Our friend [Boyarkin] said there is lately significantly more attention to the campaign in his boss' [Deripaska's] mind, and he will be most likely looking for ways to reach out to you pretty soon, understanding all the time sensitivity. I am more than sure that it will be resolved and we will get back to the original relationship with V. 's boss [Deripaska].⁹⁰⁰

Eight minutes later, Manafort replied that Kilimnik should tell Boyarkin's "boss," a reference to Deripaska, "that if he needs private briefings we can accommodate."⁹⁰¹

It would also mean that when Manafort traveled to Madrid in early January 2017 he may have learned whatever the Deripaska people knew of the disinformation effort.

Manafort's activities in early 2017 included meetings relating to Ukraine and Russia. The first meeting, which took place in Madrid, Spain in January 2017, was with Georgiy Oganov. Oganov, who had previously worked at the Russian Embassy in the United States, was a senior executive at a Deripaska company and was believed to report directly to Deripaska.⁹⁴⁰ Manafort initially denied attending the meeting. When he later acknowledged it, he claimed that the meeting had been arranged by his lawyers and concerned only the Pericles lawsuit.⁹⁴¹ Other evidence, however, provides reason to doubt Manafort's statement that the sole topic of the meeting was the Pericles lawsuit. In particular, text messages to Manafort from a number associated with Kilimnik suggest that Kilimnik and Boyarkin-not Manafort's counsel-had arranged the meeting between Manafort and Oganov.⁹⁴²

Kilimnik's message states that the meeting was supposed to be "not about money or Pericles" but instead "about recreating [the] old friendship"- ostensibly between Manafort and Deripaska-"and talking about global politics."943

According to an old Ken Vogel story, Manafort called Reince Priebus the day the dossier came out – at a time when he'd still be in Madrid with Oganov (he returned on January 12) and suggested he discredit the Russian investigation by focusing on the Steele dossier.

It was about a week before Trump's inauguration, and Manafort wanted to brief Trump's team on alleged inaccuracies in a recently released dossier of memos written by a former British spy for Trump's opponents that alleged compromising ties among Russia, Trump and Trump's associates, including Manafort.

"On the day that the dossier came out in the press, Paul called Reince, as a responsible ally of the president would do, and said this story about me is garbage, and a bunch of the other stuff in there seems implausible," said a person close to Manafort.

[snip]

According to a GOP operative familiar with Manafort's conversation with Priebus, Manafort suggested the errors in the dossier discredited it, as well as the FBI investigation, since the bureau had reached a tentative (but later aborted) agreement to pay the former British spy to continue his research and had briefed both Trump and then-President Barack Obama on the dossier.

Manafort told Priebus that the dossier

was tainted by inaccuracies and by the motivations of the people who initiated it, whom he alleged were Democratic activists and donors working in cahoots with Ukrainian government officials, according to the operative.

This would have been one of the few communications Manafort had with anyone in the Trump Administration (per court records, he had no direct communication after the inauguration, though he did use Sean Hannity as a back channel after that).

From that Manafort call to the present, the push to discredit the Russian investigation by treating the dossier as *the Russian investigation* and discrediting the former by unpacking the (admitted, egregious) problems in the latter has been *the primary* response to the Russian investigation. If Manafort was tipped to the fact that the dossier was full of baseless allegations because the Russians had put them there, it would mean the entire GOP effort since has been one of the intended goals of the disinformation.

Again, this rests on speculation, but if, in fact, Manafort's interlocutors were the people identified as those who learned of the dossier, then everything the Republicans have been doing since would be part of that disinformation campaign.

210 and 211: Deripaska's contemporaneous knowledge of the Steele dossier

Ohr told the OIG that, based on information that Steele told him about Russian Oligarch 1, such as when Russian Oligarch 1 would be visiting the United States or applying for a visa, and based on Steele at times seeming to be speaking on Russian Oligarch 1's behalf, Ohr said he had the impression that

Russian Oligarch 1 was a client of Steele. 210 We asked Steele about whether he had a relationship with Russian Oligarch 1. Steele stated that he did not have a relationship and indicated that he had met Russian Oligarch 1 one time. He explained that he worked for Russian Oligarch 1's attorney on litigation matters that involved Russian Oligarch 1 but that he could not provide "specifics" about them for confidentiality reasons. Steele stated that Russian Oligarch 1 had no influence on the substance of his election reporting and no contact with any of his sources. He also stated that he was not aware of any information indicating that Russian Oligarch 1 knew of his investigation relating to the 2016 U.S. elections. 211

210 As we discuss in Chapter Six, members of the Crossfire Hurricane team were unaware of Steele's connections to Russian Oligarch 1. [redacted]

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342: On top of disinformation, FBI believed both Steele and his sources may have been boasting

According to the Supervisory Intel Analyst, the cause for the discrepancies between the election reporting and

explanations later provided to the FBI by Steele's Primary Sub-source and sub-sources about the reporting was difficult to discern and could be attributed to a number of factors. These included miscommunications between Steele and the Primary Sub-source, exaggerations or misrepresentations by Steele about the information he obtained, or misrepresentations by the Primary Sub-source and/or sub-sources when questioned by the FBI about the information they conveyed to Steele or the Primary Sub-source. 342

342 In late January 2017, a member of the Crossfire Hurricane team received information [redacted] that RIS [may have targeted Orbis; redacted] and research all publicly available information about it. [redacted] However, an early June 2017 USIC report indicated that two persons affiliated with RIS were aware of Steele's election investigation in early 2016. The Supervisory Intel Analyst told us he was aware of these reports, but that he had no information as of June 2017 that Steele's election reporting source network had been penetrated or compromised.

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347: FBI used 702 collection to test Steele's sub-sources

FBI documents reflect that another of Steele's sub-sources who reviewed the election reporting told the FBI in August 2017 that whatever information in the Steele reports that was attributable to him/her had been "exaggerated" and

that he/she did not recognize anything as originating specifically from him/her. 347

347 *The FBI [received information in early June 2017 which revealed that, among other things, there were [redacted]] personal and business ties between the sub-source and Steele's Primary Sub-source; contacts between the sub-source and an individual in the Russian Presidential Administration in June/July 2016; [redacted] and the sub-source voicing strong support for candidate Clinton in the 2016 U.S. elections. The Supervisory Intel Analyst told us that the FBI did not have Section 702 coverage on any other Steele sub-source.*

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