

# CHAD WOLF COVERED UP RUSSIA'S 2020 SUPPORT FOR TRUMP

It's 2022 and John Durham is still chasing conspiracy theories that Hillary Clinton invented Russia's assistance for Trump in 2016.

But yesterday, DHS OIG released a report describing how Russia worked to help Trump again in 2020, a report that Chad Wolf then spent months covering up, ultimately burying it in election season dissemination controls. Among the policies the report suggests Wolf's intervention violated is a 2004 law passed to prevent the kind of intelligence disasters that led to the Iraq War.

It started in spring 2020. Shortly after it became clear that Biden would be the candidate, the part of DHS that focuses on disinformation campaigns wrote a report on overt efforts by Russia to suggest Biden was senile – a repeat, as DHS recognized, of attacks Russian used against Hillary.

In April 2020, CYMC started drafting an intelligence product titled "Russia Likely to Denigrate Health of US Candidates to Influence 2020 Electoral Dynamics," IA-44399-20 (the product).<sup>15</sup> The intelligence analyst who authored the product told us after Super Tuesday,<sup>16</sup> he noticed an uptick in Russian state media efforts to question candidate Joseph Biden's mental health. He said he discussed the issue with CYMC's mission manager, who mentioned similar actions occurring during the 2016 election. The analyst believed foreign efforts questioning a candidate's health were worth exploring because they could impact voters' willingness to vote for that candidate and began drafting the product. In its

initial form, the product was approximately two pages in length and included information relating to one “current Democratic presidential candidate” and to Russian activities to influence the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. This version did not contain any information about other countries’ influence efforts. Based on our analysis, the intelligence product initially followed I&A’s internal drafting and editing process – the product was reviewed by CYMC’s team lead, senior intelligence officer, and I&A’s domestic disclosure officer, and oversight offices as described in IA-901 and CYMC policy.

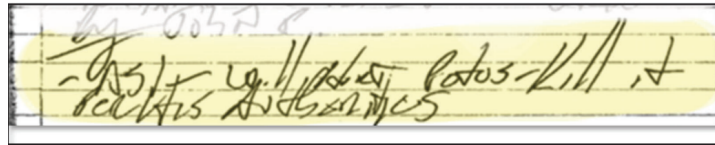
Someone reviewing for privacy considerations asked for an edit because it seemed like sharing the intelligence report might be deemed as endorsing those claims about Biden. That’s how a “tone box” noting Iranian and Chinese complaints about Trump got added, to “blunt” the political impact of the original report.

He told us it was a feature intended to draw a contrast between the actions of Russia and those of Iran and China, but also described the tone box as a “blunting feature” meant to balance the product. When asked whether intelligence products require balancing, he said the addition of the tone box was not politicization, yet also said it showed I&A’s political savviness, as the state and local customers of their products tended to be political.

This is the equivalent of shitty both-sides journalism, but – as the IG Report makes clear – it also created scope problems in the report, which was ultimately about Russia.

Just before the finalized and approved report was about to be publicly disseminated, the DHS

Chief of Staff got Wolf involved. At a July 8 meeting with the acting Chief of Intelligence and Analysis, according to his notes, Wolf told him to kill the report because it would hurt Trump.



The other attendees at that meeting, however, don't remember the meeting that way. In written answers to questions, Wolf claimed he held the report because it was of shoddy quality.

We also interviewed the Acting Secretary, the DHS Acting Chief of Staff, the DHS Deputy Chief of Staff, and the Counselor to the Secretary about what occurred during the July 8 meeting,<sup>18</sup> as the Acting USIA indicated to us that either they attended the meeting or were aware of the meeting. Not all of these officials recalled attending the meeting, and those who did recalled some details differently than the Acting USIA. Those who recalled attending the meeting all indicated the Acting Secretary did not make the alleged request to hold the product based on political considerations. More specifically, the Acting Secretary stated that he did not say the product would make the President look bad or would hurt the President's campaign, and did not claim during the meeting that he had the authority to prevent the dissemination of the product. The Acting Secretary also stated that the meeting "conversation focused around the quality of the work and the apparent problem that I&A lacked any quality control review.

The acting Chief of Staff didn't remember Wolf asking to kill the report because it would hurt

Trump, either. But he did acknowledge that this was the single time when the Acting Secretary inserted himself into the review process.

[H]e said he did not recall the Acting Secretary referring to the product's effect on the President or the President's campaign, noting he "would have remembered such an outrageous comment." Nonetheless, the Acting Chief of Staff also told us he could not recall another instance when the Acting Secretary was involved with other intelligence-related products to the same extent he was with the product, even though officials from the Office of the Secretary had previously voiced concerns over other I&A products. He stated, "During my tenure as Acting Chief of Staff, this is the only product I recall rising to the Secretary's level..." The Acting Chief of Staff also stated that, other than the intelligence product in question, he could not recall any other instances in which the Acting Secretary had requested a meeting with I&A leadership related to pre-release distributions of I&A intelligence products.

After the July 8 meeting, the report was revised – to add a reference to "covert" efforts to spread the anti-Biden message, through proxies.

Within 2 days of the July 8 meeting, I&A revised the product. The revisions were minimal, mostly consisting of adding and defining the words "covert" and "overt."

This is a minor report for the content of the report, which measured how the report was held up and Wolf's role in it. But it is fairly important with respect to the content of the report itself. The IC was collecting intelligence showing that some of the outlets pushing the claim that Biden was senile were

proxies hiding their ties to Russia. That's the kind of information that American voters should know: that the attack lines on Biden were not entirely organic, but were an effort pushed covertly by Russia.

In any case, Wolf intervened again to prevent the dissemination of the report.

The Deputy Under Secretary for Intelligence Enterprise Operations told us that after receiving the advanced notification, the Acting Secretary reached out and spoke with her and the new Acting USIA to express concern because the Acting Secretary did not think the product changed and he did not understand the value it added.

I&A did another draft, which was approved on September 4.

I&A ultimately approved the product for dissemination on September 4.

Wolf got a heads up about that, too, and used it as an opportunity to spin his own involvement.

As I&A prepared the finalized product for dissemination on September 4, 2020, the new Acting USIA emailed the Acting Secretary to inform him about changes to the product's content and dissemination process, and shared a draft of the product.<sup>20</sup> The Acting Secretary did not respond to I&A, and we have no evidence that he made any further comments or requests to I&A relating to the product. However, in an email to his staff on the same day about the product, he focused on messaging the benefits of the involvement of the Office of the Secretary in the intelligence process, writing: "we need to turn this into a good news story. Key point is that I&A produced a better, clearer document because they were not left on their

own.”

This document *should* have gone out that day, just barely making it under the wire of a newly adopted policy withhold certain kinds of reports within 60 days of an election.

In July 2020, I&A adopted a policy ceasing dissemination of unclassified products on foreign influence threats to elections 60 days prior to election day—in this case, September 4, 2020. Its reason for doing so was to safeguard “the Department’s role as a fair, neutral, and nonpartisan institution when it comes to US elections.... [Politics should not] play a role in the decisions of Intelligence Community leaders and officers regarding collection activities or analytic assessments.”

Had the report gone out, we would have had a US intelligence product demonstrating that Russia was pushing the same attack line as Fox News. Here’s part of the report as finalized on September 4:

~~(U//FOUO)~~ We assess Russian malign influence actors are spreading unsubstantiated allegations that former Vice President Joe Biden<sup>USPER</sup> is of ill-health because they judge this narrative will resonate with some American voters and reduce their confidence in him as a candidate. Russia is using both covert proxy websites and overt state media to amplify these allegations, often in conjunction with other election-related malign influence narratives, which is consistent with their tactics used in 2016 to undermine a former presidential candidate.<sup>b</sup> Russia’s malign influence efforts focus on propagating divisive narratives—often deliberately blending in with the US domestic media environment—to sow division, undermine democratic values and institutions, and advance strategic interests.

But it didn’t happen. After Wolf succeeded in stalling the report twice, the report was disseminated via other channels, resulting in narrower circulation and still more delay.

DHS’ Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency disseminated the product to the National Association of Secretaries of State and the National Association of State Election Directors on September 8, 2020. I&A’s Field Operations Division dissemination

occurred even later. As a result, I&A does not appear to have completed its dissemination until October 15, 2020.

DHS' own review concluded that the report should have more clearly stated its conclusion: that Russia was targeting Democrats again.

[T]he piece seems to almost avoid the main message that is made explicit in the key judgment – that Russian influence actors are targeting the Democratic candidates in 2020[.]

The United States learned, at great cost, about how intently Russia was attempting to sow divisions in the United States by pushing certain campaign attacks. Even under Trump's control, the government put in place efforts to prevent that from happening again.

And then Chad Wolf ensured those efforts would fail to identify Russia's repeat performance of its 2016 attacks.