

RINAT AHKMETSIN: “NOTHING IS SECRET.”

The Financial Times, which had the scoop that Rinat Akhmetshin – the naturalized Russian lobbyist who attended the June 9, 2016 meeting in Trump Tower – appeared before Robert Mueller’s grand jury several weeks ago, has a long interview with him. The key, buried details are that he’s not all that interested in whether Russia tampered with the election.

I ask whether he thinks Russia intervened in the US elections. “They might have done,” he says, but doesn’t seem particularly fussed if they did. “It’s like someone steals your toothpaste from you because you couldn’t hide it well enough – I think there’s something honest about that.” He goes on to expound a curious theory of “personal responsibility” – the value he says he likes best about America.

Followed by the kicker line:

“Nothing is secret,” he had said. “If you’re not stupid, you should operate on that assumption.”

Along the way, though, the interview doesn’t answer two worthy questions. The piece reveals that Akhmetshin bumped his rates up from \$450 to \$600 an hour this year, but it doesn’t explain whether and if so who paid for his time at Trump Tower last year. Sure, it’s only about \$450, but who paid it?

More importantly, it doesn’t address the question I asked here: given Akhmetshin’s ties and past work for Fusion GPS, why did the intelligence company ask Christopher Steele to work on an anti-Trump dossier rather than Akhmetshin himself? Given his ties, did he know about it?

The interview describes Akhmetshin's claim that he doesn't work for Russia, but would never do anything to hurt it.

I will never f**k with Russian state," he says in idiosyncratic English spoken with a light Russian accent. "I will never do things against Russian government. It's stupid," he tells me. "Simply, the stakes are too high."

It describes his claim to be close with people at the CIA (which is why, he explains, Russia no longer trusts him). Akhmetshin also claims to have ties to French, British, and German intelligence. But he does go out drinking with Russian spooks when he's in Moscow.

The most remarkable passage in the interview (especially given the revelation that Paul Manafort's notes from the meeting suggest donations to Republicans were raised as well) however, is Akhmetshin's admission that, while he hadn't read the English language documents Natalia Veselnitskaya brought to the Trump Tower meeting, he had read the Russian versions.

Akhmetshin said he did not read the papers about Hillary Clinton's campaign funding that Veselnitskaya took to the meeting, but he had seen the Russian version of it before. He says the lawyer developed it with the help of private corporate intelligence and that it was about "how bad money ended up in Manhattan and that money was put into supporting political campaigns".

I find this revealing for several reasons. Remember that the early reports in the Steele dossier discuss pre-hacked email kompromat on Hillary Clinton. But why would a private intelligence company do a report in Russian, unless it was in Russia? Moreover, again, it seems Akhmetshin was already swimming in some of this Russian-based kompromat. So why didn't

Fusion have him collect on Trump? Did he work on the earlier, pre-June research paid by a Republican?

In short, the questions for Akhmetshin should go beyond the Trump Tower meeting, because there are obvious questions about his relationship with Fusion GPS.

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 election.

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.

HOW DOES INKING A LUXURY RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE DEAL IN MOSCOW GET YOU ELECTED PRESIDENT? IN THE US, I MEAN?

There’s an implicit premise of my posts covering yesterday’s big scoops on the emails between Felix Sater and Michael Cohen turned over to the House Intelligence Committee yesterday:

- The Steele Dossier and WaPo's Trump Tower Scoop
- Michael Cohen Starts Not Recalling His Negotiations with Dmitry Peskov, "Main Protagonist" of Campaign Versus Hillary

The NYT republished fragments of two of the emails. Here's the key one:

Michael I arranged for Ivanka to sit in Putins [sic] private chair at his desk and office in the Kremlin. I will get Putin on this program and we will get Donald elected. We both know no one else knows how to pull this off without stupidity or greed getting in the way. I know how to play it and we will get this done. Buddy our boy can become President of the USA and we can engineer it. I will get Putins [sic] team to buy in on this, I will manage this process.

On November 3, 2015, two months before the GOP primary started in earnest and barely over a year before the presidential election, mobbed up real estate broker and sometime FBI informant Felix Sater emailed Trump Organization Executive Vice President and Special Counsel to Trump, Michael Cohen. According to the fragment we read, Sater boasts of his access to Putin going back to 2006 (when the Ivanka incident reportedly happened), and said "we can engineer" "our boy" becoming "President of the USA."

Before HPSCI got the emails, the Trump Organization did a preemptive leak to the WaPo, which successfully cemented the interpretation of the "news" associated with these emails as proof of another contact between Trump associates and Russians. Cohen's statement to HPSCI, which WaPo's later reporting quoted, reaffirmed that view, even though key details about it – why, of all the things he couldn't

recall, was whether Putin associate Dmitry Peskov responded to an email in which Cohen asked for his personal response, or why Cohen would email a press contact like Peskov, who readily gives out his personal email, to a general email line that is less likely to be bugged by western intelligence – remain unexplained.

The NYT only released one paragraph of the emails it published; it's unclear whether that's all they got, or whether they've just chosen to redact all the context.

Nevertheless, this paragraph, presented as it is, ought to have elicited very different "news" reporting: a year before the election, Sater was boasting he could get Trump elected *because of his ties to Putin*. In an update (the NewsDiffs on NYT's version of this story are worth reviewing in detail, particularly for the way they shift emphasis away from Sater's claims in the email), the NYT reprinted Sater's lawyer's explanation, which doesn't address the underlying question at all, even while it replicates the spin that this would be nothing more than a "political win."

Through his lawyer, Mr. Sater declined on Monday to address why he thought the deal would be a political win for Mr. Trump. He said he brought the project to Mr. Cohen in late 2015, but that he was not working for the Trump Organization and "would not have been compensated" by them.

"During the course of our communications over several months, I routinely expressed my enthusiasm regarding what a tremendous opportunity this was for the Trump Organization," Mr. Sater said.

Again, perhaps the full emails justify this approach. But absent a better explanation, the question that should be answered by this scoop – well before the excitement of proof of yet one

more tie between a Trump associate and increasingly senior Russians – is why Sater believed whatever he was emailing Cohen about would lead to Trump’s election?

Even assuming Cohen’s personal intervention via Peskov got Putin to rubber stamp the missing permits in early January 2016, which was the most optimistic scenario short of the personal trip to Moscow Sater was pushing Cohen to take, how would that have had any influence on the Presidential election at that point 11 months away? Obviously, the actual building, its clients, the possibility it might be used to launder money, perhaps even back into Putin’s pockets – none of that would be in place in time for the election. Yet another luxury residence in a city most American voters will never visit isn’t going to flip many votes, if any. More realistically, the deal would be regarded just as reporters are now spinning it, as an inappropriate potential conflict of interest, even ignoring the Russophobia that would ratchet up later in the year.

The second email NYT published in part might be a quasi explanation.

Michael we can own this story. Donald doesn’t stare down, he negotiates and understand the economic issues and Putin only want to deal with a pragmatic leader, and a successful business man is a good candidate for someone who knows how to negotiate. “Business, politics, whatever it all is the same for someone who knows how to deal.”

That is, perhaps Sater believed that if Trump could negotiate with Putin successfully, voters would value his negotiating ability more highly than former Secretary of State Hillary’s. That’s probably what Trump voters actually did, but it required no fresh deals. But even here, Sater is again positioning his pitch in terms of what will impress Putin, not what will impress American voters.

Sater is a lot of things, but he's nowhere near the dumbest Trump associate. Why is it that he sent an email to Cohen promising a deal would help Trump get elected?

One more detail. This is not the first exchange Cohen had with the committees. Congress first got interested in Cohen at the end of May; Cohen refused the first requests, declaring them overly broad. And, as the NYT notes, Cohen's lawyer already started communicating with the committee, issuing a point-by-point refutation of the parts of the Steele dossier that pertain to Cohen.

Earlier this month, Mr. Cohen's lawyer, Stephen M. Ryan, wrote a letter to congressional investigators that contained what he said was a point-by-point refutation of a dossier suggesting that Mr. Cohen colluded with Russian operatives. That dossier, compiled by a retired British spy and briefed to Mr. Trump during the transition, was published online early this year.

"We do not believe that the committee should give credence to or perpetuate any of the allegations relating to Mr. Cohen unless the committee can obtain independent and reliable corroboration," Mr. Ryan wrote.

So was this found amid all his other emails, or is it something he only belatedly included?

Update: As Digby noted, there were rumors flying some weeks ago that Sater may be prepping to flip again, as he has for Robert Mueller's investigators in the past.

And according to Wood's sources, Sater may have already flipped and given prosecutors the evidence they need to make a case against Trump.

For several weeks there have been rumours that Sater is ready

to rat again, agreeing to help Mueller. 'He has told family and friends he knows he and POTUS are going to prison,' someone talking to Mueller's investigators informed me.

Sater hinted in an interview earlier this month that he may be cooperating with both Mueller's investigation and congressional probes of Trump.

"In about the next 30 to 35 days, I will be the most colourful character you have ever talked about," Sater told *New York Magazine*. "Unfortunately, I can't talk about it now, before it happens. And believe me, it ain't anything as small as whether or not they're gonna call me to the Senate committee."

I doubt Sater is cooperating, given the way his lawyer has adopted the spin Cohen first planted. If Sater is cooperating with some real dirt, it might explain why Cohen would roll out sharing these emails with a pre-emptive leak that succeeded, splendidly, in distracting the coverage from the more fundamental question raised here.

**RON DESANTIS
ATTEMPTING TO STOP
CRIMINAL
INVESTIGATION INTO
THEFT THAT**

BENEFITTED HIM

Florida Congressman Ron DeSantis has presented a bill that would defund the Robert Mueller investigation six months after the bill passed.

DeSantis has put forward a provision that would halt funding for Mueller's probe six months after the amendment's passage. It also would prohibit Mueller from investigating matters that occurred before June 2015, when Trump launched his presidential campaign.

The amendment is one of hundreds filed to a government spending package the House is expected to consider when it returns next week from the August recess. The provision is not guaranteed a vote on the House floor; the House Rules Committee has wide leeway to discard amendments it considers out of order.

It's interesting that DeSantis, of all people, would push this bill.

After all, he's one of a small list of members of Congress who directly benefitted from Guccifer 2.0's leaking. Florida political journalist Aaron Nevins obtained a huge chunk of documents from Guccifer 2.0.

Last year, a Republican political operative and part-time blogger from Florida asked for and received an extensive list of stolen data from Guccifer 2.0, the infamous hacker known for leaking documents from the DNC computer network.

The Wall Street Journal reported that Aaron Nevins, a former aide to Republican state Sen. Ellyn Bogdanoff, had reached out to Guccifer through Twitter, asking to

“feel free to send any Florida-based information.”

About 10 days later, Nevins received about 2.5 gigabytes of polling information, election strategy and other data, which he then posted on his political gossip blog HelloFLA.com.

“I just threw an arrow in the dark,” Nevins told the Journal.

After setting up a Dropbox account for Guccifer 2.0 to share the data, Nevins was able to sift through the data as someone who “actually knows what some of these documents mean.”

Among the documents stolen from the DCCC that Nevins published are five documents on the DCCC’s recruitment of DeSantis’ opponent, George Pappas. So effectively, DeSantis is trying to cut short the investigation into a crime from which he directly benefitted.

Call me crazy, but this seems like an ethical violation, and possibly a good reason to submit a bar complaint against DeSantis. And his constituents might want to ask why he’s trying to help Russia and its domestic enablers undermine democracy.

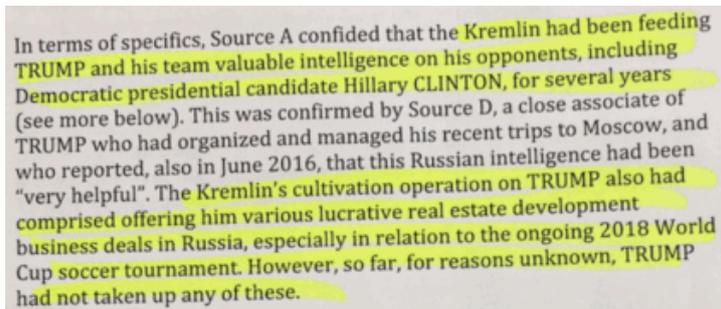
THE STEELE DOSSIER AND WAPO’S TRUMP TOWER SCOOP

For some reason, many people who’re convinced the Trump Russia investigation will hit paydirt but who haven’t been particularly attentive believe the Steele dossier must *all* be true. This, in spite of the fact that some parts of it clearly are not true. The best example of that

is report 086, labeled as July 25, 2015 (but which must actually date to July 2016), which quotes a former senior Russian intelligence official claiming FSB was having difficulty compromising western and G7 government targets. In the previous year, the Russians had been enjoying quite a lot of success against just those kinds of targets, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Russia's APT 29 is also believed to have compromised the DNC in July 2015), making it surprising anyone following Russian matters even marginally closely could present that report as credible.

The Steele dossier is not a document that is either credible or not as a whole; it is a series of raw intelligence reports based off a series of sources, some of which conflict with each other, some of which may be credible, others of which are less so. Moreover, there are a number of details about the dossier as we received it or as we've since learned about its production that raise legitimate questions about its quality.

Two seemingly contradictory claims provide one example that is especially noteworthy given WaPo's report that the Trump organization inked a branding deal in Russia in late 2015. The very first report released as the Steele dossier, dated June 20, claims that the FSB has, for years, been trying to cultivate Trump by offering him "lucrative real estate development deals in Russia" but "for reasons unknown, TRUMP had not taken up any of these."



In terms of specifics, Source A confided that the Kremlin had been feeding TRUMP and his team valuable intelligence on his opponents, including Democratic presidential candidate Hillary CLINTON, for several years (see more below). This was confirmed by Source D, a close associate of TRUMP who had organized and managed his recent trips to Moscow, and who reported, also in June 2016, that this Russian intelligence had been "very helpful". The Kremlin's cultivation operation on TRUMP also had comprised offering him various lucrative real estate development business deals in Russia, especially in relation to the ongoing 2018 World Cup soccer tournament. However, so far, for reasons unknown, TRUMP had not taken up any of these.

The sourcing on this claim definitely includes "a close associate of TRUMP who had organized and managed his recent trips to Moscow" (though

how would they know FSB was dangling real estate to compromise Trump unless they were themselves tied to FSB?) and may include the trusted compatriot of a “senior Foreign Ministry figure.”

Compare that with the undated report (it probably dates to between July 19 and July 30, 2016) crediting “a separate source with direct knowledge” claiming that Trump’s “claimed minimal investment profile in Russia ... had not been for want of trying.”

Finally, regarding TRUMP’s claimed minimal investment profile in Russia, a separate source with direct knowledge said this had not been for want of trying. TRUMP’s previous efforts had included exploring the real estate sector in St Petersburg as well as Moscow but in the end TRUMP had had to settle for the use of extensive sexual services there from local prostitutes rather than business success.

Which is it? Has Trump been pushing for real estate deals but failing, or have figures close to Putin been trying to entice him with such deals only to have him respond with remarkable coyness?

A September 14 report, reported second-hand from two people in Petersburg, goes so far as to claim Trump had even paid bribes to get business deals in the city, but offered little more. Significantly, the sources said Aras Agalarov – who was involved in the June 9, 2016 meeting offering dirt on Clinton in New York’s Trump Tower – would have any details on real estate deals and sex parties and the clean-up thereof.

Speaking to a trusted compatriot in September 2016, two well-placed sources based in St Petersburg, one in the political/business elite and the other involved in the local services and tourist industry, commented on Republican US presidential candidate Donald TRUMP’s prior activities in the city.

Both knew TRUMP had visited St Petersburg on several occasions in the past and had been interested in doing business deals there involving real estate. The local business/political elite figure reported that TRUMP had paid bribes there to further his interests but very discreetly and only through affiliated companies, making it very hard to prove. The local services industry source reported that TRUMP had participated in sex parties in the city too, but that all direct witnesses to this recently had been “silenced” i.e. bribed or coerced to disappear.

The two St Petersburg figures cited believed an Azeri business figure, Araz AGALAROV (with offices in Baku and London) had been closely involved with TRUMP in Russia and would know most of the details of what the Republican presidential candidate had got up to there.

All of which is to say that in three different reports, Steele's sources offered conflicting details about whether Trump was trying to get business in Russia but had failed, or Russia was trying to suck Trump into business deals as part of a program to compromise him, only to have him inexplicably resist.

Which brings us to the WaPo's latest scoop, which reveals that between November 2015 and January 2016, the Trump organization signed a licensing deal for a big real estate project in Moscow, which ended up flopping because there was actually no deal behind it.

As part of the discussions, a Russian-born real estate developer urged Trump to come to Moscow to tout the proposal and suggested he could get President Vladimir Putin to say "great things" about Trump, according to several people who have been briefed on his correspondence.

The developer, Felix Sater, predicted in a November 2015 email that he and Trump Organization leaders would soon be celebrating – both one of the biggest residential projects in real estate history and Donald Trump's election as president, according to two of the people with knowledge of the exchange.

Sater wrote to Trump Organization Executive Vice President Michael Cohen, "something to the effect of, 'Can you believe two guys from Brooklyn are going to elect a president?' " said one person briefed on the email exchange. Sater emigrated to the United States from what was then the Soviet Union when he was 8 and grew up in Brooklyn.

Trump never went to Moscow as Sater proposed. And although investors and Trump's company signed a letter of intent, they lacked the land and permits to proceed and the project was abandoned

at the end of January 2016, just before the presidential primaries began, several people familiar with the proposal said.

[snip]

Discussions about the Moscow project began in earnest in September 2015, according to people briefed on the deal. An unidentified investor planned to build the project and, under a licensing agreement, put Trump's name on it. Cohen acted as a lead negotiator for the Trump Organization. It is unclear how involved or aware Trump was of the negotiations.

For six months, Christopher Steele pushed his sources for information on any deals Trump had planned in Russia. And only one of them – the one suggesting his go-between consult with Agalarov – offered any hint that a deal might have actually been done. Yet just months earlier, a deal *had* purportedly been signed, a deal personally involving Michael Cohen, who figures prominently throughout the dossier.

At least on their face, those are contradictory claims, ones that (because the WaPo story is backed by documents Congress will shortly vet) either emphasize how limited Steele's collection was, even on one of his key targets like Cohen, or may even hint he was getting disinformation.

Or perhaps reading them in tandem can elucidate both?

First, some comments on the WaPo story.

It seems the real story here is as much the details as the fact that the deal was proposed. For example, I'm as interested that Felix Sater, from whom (as the story notes) Trump has been trying to distance himself publicly for years, was still brokering deals for the Trump organization as late as November 2015 as any other part of the story. See this post for some reasons why that's so interesting.

It's also quite significant that whoever leaked this to the WaPo did not explain who the investors were. Schedule another scoop in a week or so for when some outlet reveals that detail, because I suspect that's as big a part of the story as the fact that the deal got signed. What entity came to Cohen months after Trump had kicked off his presidential campaign, and offered up the kind of branding deal that Trump loves (and which at least some of Steele's sources say Trump had been seeking for over a decade), yet without the permits that would be a cinch if Putin and the FSB were really pushing the deal as part of a plan to compromise the candidate?

The sourcing, too, is of particular interest. WaPo describes its story as coming from, "several people familiar with the proposal and new records reviewed by Trump Organization lawyers;" in another place it describes its sources as, "several people who have been briefed on his correspondence." It explains that the emails are going to be turned over to Congress soon.

The new details from the emails, which are scheduled to be turned over to congressional investigators soon, also point to the likelihood of additional contacts between Russia-connected individuals and Trump associates during his presidential bid.

This all feels like an attempt, on the part of Trump lawyer Michael Cohen, to reveal to Trump via non-obstructive channels what he has found in a review of documents he's about to turn over, with an emphasis on some of the most damning parts (Sater and the timing), but without yet revealing the public detail of the investors. By releasing it in this form, Cohen's associates give Trump warning of what's about to come, while blunting the damage the revelation will have in more fleshed out form.

Finally, the WaPo emphasizes Sater's push for

Trump to get Putin to say nice things. *Particularly* given the lack of permits here, that suggests Sater recognized the deal was *not* actually done, it needed powerful push from Putin. A push that, given the January collapse, apparently didn't come in timely fashion. That may be the more interesting take-away here. The deal was, when Sater bragged about it to the guy who (according to Steele's dossier) would shortly go on to clean up Paul Manafort's earlier corrupt discussions with Russia, illusory. But it makes it clear that Cohen, if and when he had those discussions, was aware of the Trump organization's earlier, failed effort to finally brand a building in Moscow. It would mean that if those dodgy meetings in Prague actually happened, they came against the backdrop of Putin deciding not offer the help needed to make the Trump deal happen in the months before the election started.

All that may suggest the Steele dossier may instead be rich disinformation on a key point, disinformation that hid how active such discussions really were.

In any case, the WaPo story is not definitive one way or another. It may be utterly damning, the kind of hard evidence Cohen is about to turn over that he is aware could really blow the investigation into Trump wide open, or it could be yet more proof that Trump continued to resist the allure of real estate deals in Russia, as some of Steele's sources claimed. But it does raise some important questions that reflect back on the Steele dossier.

Update: NYT got the actual language of two of the Sater emails, which have now been delivered to HPSCI.

Michael I arranged for Ivanka to sit in Putins [sic] private chair at his desk and office in the Kremlin. I will get Putin on this program and we will get Donald elected. We both know no one else knows how to pull this off without stupidity or greed getting in the way. I

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Michael we can own this story. Donald doesn't stare down, he negotiates and understand the economic issues and Putin only want to deal with a pragmatic leader, and a successful business man is a good candidate for someone who knows how to negotiate. "Business, politics, whatever it allis the same for someone who knows how to deal."

Why does Sater tie the Trump Tower deal so closely with getting Trump elected?

THE ARPAIO PARDON — DON'T OBSESS ABOUT THE RUSSIAN INVESTIGATION

It seems there are two likely responses to the Arpaio pardon: to use it as a teaching opportunity about race, or to use it to panic about the Russian investigation.

I'm seeing far too many people choosing the latter option, focusing on what Trump's pardon of Joe Arpaio might do for the Russian investigation. That, in spite of the fact that Trump has already spoken openly of pardoning Mike Flynn, just like he did of Arpaio, to say nothing of his spawn or the father of his grandchildren.

The targets of the Russian investigation already

know Trump can and is considering pardoning them.

But a pardon of them – at least some of them – is a very different thing than an Arpaio pardon. That's because, for some of the crimes in question, in case of a pardon, Robert Mueller could just share the evidence with a state (usually NY) or NYC prosecutor for prosecution. It's possible that accepting a pardon for Trump or Kushner business related crimes could expose those businesses to lawsuit, and both family's businesses are pretty heavily in debt now.

Most importantly, a Paul Manafort or Mike Flynn pardon would deprive them of their ability to invoke the Fifth Amendment, meaning they could more easily be forced to testify against Trump, including to Congress.

Presidents implicated in crimes have used a variety of means to silence witnesses who could implicate them, but Poppy Bush's Cap Weinberger pardon – the most recent example of a President pardoning a witness who could incriminate him – was not the primary thing that protected Poppy and Reagan, Congress' immunization of witnesses was. Thus far, most Republicans in Congress seem determined to avoid such assistance, and Trump's attacks on Mitch McConnell and Thom Tillis for not sufficiently protecting him probably have only exacerbated the problem.

I wrote a piece explaining why (in my opinion) George W Bush commuted Scooter Libby's sentence, but never pardoned him: it kept Libby silent without adding any personal risk. If Trump were competent, he'd be making similar calculations about how to keep witnesses out of prison without making it easier to incriminate him. But he's usually not competent, and so may fuck this up royally.

In any case, given that some Republicans (including both Arizona's Senators) have made lukewarm objections to the Arpaio pardon, I'd imagine any pardons of Russian witnesses would meet more opposition, particularly if those

pardons came before the 2018 elections. Add in the fact that sleazeball Manafort has no purported service to point to to justify a pardon, as Trump cited with Arpaio (and would to justify a Flynn pardon). The backlash against Trump pardoning witnesses against him will likely be far worse than the already existing backlash here.

Pardoning Arpaio was easy. Pardoning Manafort and Flynn and Don Jr and Kushner and everyone else who can implicate the President will not be easy, neither legally nor politically. So don't confuse the two.

Meanwhile, Trump has just pardoned a man whose quarter century of abuse targeting people of color has made him the poster child of abuse, not just from a moral perspective, but (given the huge fines Maricopa has had to pay) from a governance perspective.

Like it or not, a lot of white people have a hard time seeing unjustified killings of people of color as the gross civil rights abuse it is, because when cops cite fear or danger in individual cases, fearful white people – who themselves might shoot a black kid in haste in the name of self-defense – side with them. Those white people might easily treat Black Lives Matter as an annoyance blocking their commute on the freeway.

The same white people might find Joe Arpaio's tortuous camps for people of color objectionable, because those camps make the systemic aspect far more apparent. They're far more likely to do so, though, if this pardon is primarily seen as Trump's endorsement of systematic white supremacy rather than a test run to protect himself.

Moreover, white supremacy is something that will remain and must be fought even if Robert Mueller indicts Trump tomorrow. It was a key, if not the key, factor in Trump's win. We won't beat the next demagogue following in Trump's model if we don't make progress against white supremacy.

You can't do anything, personally, to help the Robert Mueller investigation. You can do something to fight white supremacy. And if that doesn't happen, then we'll face another Trump down the road, just as surely as Sarah Palin paved the way for Trump.

The Arpaio pardon is an abuse, horrifying, yet more evidence of how outrageous Trump is.

But it's also a teaching opportunity about white supremacy. Better to use it as such rather than cause for panic about the Russia investigation.

Related posts

emptywheel, You're not the audience for the Arpaio pardon, cops are

bmaz, Some thoughts on the Arpaio pardon

TRUMP BITCHED OUT MCCONNELL ABOUT NOT PROTECTING HIM IN RUSSIA PROBE ON DAY MANAFORT RAID STORY BROKE

Donald Trump continues his habit of alienating people he needs to help him survive his presidency. The NYT provides details of the souring relationship between Trump and Mitch McConnell, which it says culminated in an August 9 phone call.

█ In a series of tweets this month, Mr.

Trump criticized Mr. McConnell publicly, then berated him in a phone call that quickly devolved into a profane shouting match.

During the call, which Mr. Trump initiated on Aug. 9 from his New Jersey golf club, the president accused Mr. McConnell of bungling the health care issue. He was even more animated about what he intimated was the Senate leader's refusal to protect him from investigations of Russian interference in the 2016 election, according to Republicans briefed on the conversation.

Mr. McConnell has fumed over Mr. Trump's regular threats against fellow Republicans and criticism of Senate rules, and questioned Mr. Trump's understanding of the presidency in a public speech. Mr. McConnell has made sharper comments in private, describing Mr. Trump as entirely unwilling to learn the basics of governing.

In offhand remarks, Mr. McConnell has expressed a sense of bewilderment about where Mr. Trump's presidency may be headed, and has mused about whether Mr. Trump will be in a position to lead the Republican Party into next year's elections and beyond, according to people who have spoken to him directly.

In point of fact, the tweets started on August 9 (about 2:25PM) and continued through the next morning. Both the tweet described as occurring before and the one occurring after the phone call reference only the TrumpCare debacle, not the Russian investigation.

According to the NYT, Trump was "even more animated" about McConnell's "refusal" to protect him from Russian investigations.

August 9 was the day the WaPo first broke (around 10:00AM) the story of the July 26 raid

on Paul Manafort's home. The raid itself, of course, was conducted by the FBI. But all the stories about it include allusions about the fact that it came after Manafort's interview with the Senate Intelligence Committee and immediately after Manafort reluctantly agreed to cooperate with the Senate Judiciary Committee on threat of subpoena; Manafort had tried and failed to limit his appearance to SSCI.

Now go back to the language the NYT uses. "Refusal" to protect Trump. That's sure an interesting word, "refusal." Did Trump contact McConnell about the subpoena to Manafort back on July 25? Or did McConnell refuse some other tangible request from Trump? If so does Robert Mueller know about it?

In response to reports on the raid, Trump lawyer John Dowd made all sorts of crazy comments to the press about how FBI had acted improperly because they hadn't exhausted all options for obtaining the materials seized on July 26. Even Fox News said Dowd was trying to protect the President with his comments. And some of the reporting noted that among the seized documents were Manafort's notes for his interview with SSCI.

That is, all the reporting on the raid intimated that it had as much to do with the Congressional testimony as Mueller's own investigation.

And sometime that day, Trump called McConnell and complained the Majority Leader wasn't providing him sufficient protection. *Refused* to protect him, in fact.

In any case, Trump's attacks have gotten the thin-skinned McConnell wondering "whether Mr. Trump will be in a position to lead the Republican Party into next year's elections and beyond," which sure seems like a bad opinion for Trump to have fostered given that McConnell would have a big influence on how any impeachment trial would proceed if it ever got to the Senate.

Update: Coverage of the Glenn Simpson (head of

Fusion GPS, which did the Steele dossier) interview with SJC makes clear that his was the first voluntary testimony, meaning Manafort (and Don Jr) have not sat for an interview yet.

ROHRABACHER CAN'T REMEMBER TALKING ASSANGE PARDON WITH TRUMP BUT IS SURE TRUMP WANTS MIND-BOGGLING INFO FROM JULIAN ASSANGE

In this post, I noted that Dana Rohrabacher might try to broker a deal between Assange and President Trump trading information on WikiLeaks' DNC email source for – it appears – a pardon. As I noted, the meeting was first reported – at 8:02 PM -- by the Daily Caller.

At 12:22 AM ET, Julian Assange tweeted that “I do not speak to the public through third parties. Only unmediated statements coming directly from me can be considered authoritative.”

This morning, Rohrabacher issued a statement (posted in my last post) that ends with a promise he will share information *already in hand* with the President.

The congressman plans to divulge more of what he found directly to President Trump.

The Daily Caller has written a new story, based on an interview with Rohrabacher. In it Rohrabacher first claimed that “he can't

remember” if he has spoken to anyone in the White House about a pardon for Assange.

A pardon of Assange would have to come directly from President Donald Trump, and Rohrabacher told TheDC, “I can’t remember if I have spoken to anybody in the White House about this.”

Apparently Rohrabacher has so many conversations with the White House that he can’t remember them all.

He goes on to suggest he hasn’t gotten the information he (in his statement) promised to divulge to Trump.

The congressman has yet to receive the information that has been promised to him by Assange, but he said he is confident he will receive it.

But – Rohrabacher is sure – the information his office thought he had this morning but which he doesn’t have any more is sure to be mind-boggling.

“If I had to bet on it, I would bet that we are going to get the information that will be mind-boggling and of major historical significance,” Rohrabacher said. He said if it is significant enough, he will bring it directly to Trump.

After which Rohrabacher, who can’t remember whether he has talked to anyone at the White House about this – much less the President!!! – asserts that “there has already been some indication that the president will be very anxious to hear what I have to say.”

“And there has already been some indication that the president will be very anxious to hear what I have to say if that is the determination that I make,” Rohrabacher added.

Call me crazy, ~~but I think Assange demanded the Daily Caller back off their prior reporting~~ [see update], perhaps to get reassurances from Trump he'll get a pardon before he (through his proxy Rohrabacher) actually hands over the information. I don't blame Assange for that – as I noted earlier, he's only got one shot to produce his case, and if it is easily debunked, both he and Trump will be screwed.

Assange sure seems pretty uncertain about this information that Rohrabacher – who may or may not have already received it – is sure will be mind-boggling.

Update: Here is Assange's statement about the visit, which makes no mention of disclosing his source.

WikiLeaks' publisher Julian Assange and his lawyer Jennifer Robinson met with U.S. Congressman Dana Rohrabacher yesterday at the Congressman's request. Mr. Assange explained how the ongoing proceedings against WikiLeaks over its publications on war, diplomacy and rendition violate the First Amendment rights of WikiLeaks and its readers. The grand jury proceedings against Mr. Assange and his staff started in July 2010 and have been repeatedly condemned by press freedom groups, the ACLU, Human Rights Watch and the United Nations. The proceedings are the largest ever conducted against a publisher and are widely viewed by legal scholars to be unconstitutional. The alleged source of the publications was granted clemency by President Obama in January. However the grand jury proceedings against the publisher continue and have expanded under the Trump administration. Mr. Assange faces potential life imprisonment. Now at seven years, the grand jury is one of the longest and most expensive in US history.

Mr. Assange does not speak through third

parties. Only statements issued directly by him or his lawyers can be considered authoritative.

It also claims that Rohrabacher requested the visit, not vice versa.

Update: Curiously, Don Jr, who we know is happy to take meetings with just about anyone if they can produce information that damages dad's enemies, just followed Assange on Twitter.

Update: The Daily Caller insists that Assange didn't get them to back off any reporting, and instead explains that the contradictions between their Wednesday story and their Thursday one (and in Rohrabacher's statements) derive instead from the poor wording of the statement from Rohrabacher's office. My apologies for the insinuations that their failure to point out these multiple contradictions doesn't just stem from bad reporting.

Update: Washington Times has more, which not only underscores how newsworthy are Daily Caller's contradictions, but also confirms that Rohrabacher is now talking a back and forth process.

"I will have discussions with President Trump before going public, and that should happen hopefully within two weeks of now, by the end of the month," he said. "In the end, the American people are going to know more than what they know now, and it will be with more certainty."

Rohrabacher declined to say if he was given a physical set of files by Assange to support a counter-narrative on how WikiLeaks acquired emails damaging to Hillary Clinton's candidacy. U.S. spy agencies say Russia hacked those emails and gave them to WikiLeaks.

"I told you, I'm not going to go into details on that," said the Orange County

conservative about whether he was given physical files. At one point, however, Rohrabacher implied he had not been given documents.

“We did not go into detail [about how WikiLeaks acquired Democratic emails], but that will obviously be something that will be provided in greater detail shortly,” he said.

“This is not a one step process, it’s a two-step or three step-process. There are some things we just have to go to the president with and see what he says, and then see how we can actually work its way so the American people know the truth,” he said.

Update, 8/19: In an article revealing that Charles Johnson has refused to cooperate with the Senate Intelligence Committee’s request for information on how he helped now-deceased rat-fucker Peter Smith attempt to find hacked files from Hillary’s server, Michael Isikoff provides his own version of the Rohrabacher/Assange deal. His version lacks the contradictions of the right wing press. It explains that Assange would basically trade “irrefutable” evidence he didn’t get the DNC emails from Russia (which is different than proving they didn’t come from Russia) in exchange for a pre-emptive pardon.

Johnson said he and Rohrabacher came back from their meeting with a specific proposal that the congressman intends to present to President Trump soon: Grant a preemptive pardon to Assange (who has been under Justice Department investigation for years, although he has never been charged) and the WikiLeaks founder would, in exchange, turn over “irrefutable” evidence that he didn’t get the Democratic National Committee emails from Russia, but from another source.

“Assange wants to have a deal with the president,” Johnson said. “He believes he should be pardoned in the same way that Chelsea Manning was pardoned.” Once Assange turns his evidence over, showing the Russians were not the source of the DNC emails, then the “president could put the kibosh” on the whole Russia investigation being conducted by special counsel Robert Mueller.

Johnson declined to say what Assange’s supposed evidence actually is (though he did say it did not include any documents). But he insisted he has spoken to unidentified figures in the White House who have told him the president wants to hear the proposal. “I know the president is interested in this,” he said. “There will be a meeting between Rep. Rohrabacher and President Trump.”

A spokesman for Rohrabacher confirmed that Johnson had arranged the meeting between the congressman and Assange. “My understanding is that there is not yet a concrete proposal, but that Dana does believe that if Assange does turn over the proof he’s promised, then he deserves a pardon,” the spokesman said.

There’s a lot that’s batshit about these claims, not least the suggestion that Chelsea Manning got a full pardon, rather than a commutation after 7 years of imprisonment and abusive treatment by the federal government.

But it’s also hard to imagine how, having laid out this deal in such stark terms, Robert Mueller won’t begin to show some interest in it.

DANA ROHRABACHER BROKERING DEAL FOR MAN PUBLISHING A CIA EXPLOIT EVERY WEEK

Yesterday, right wing hack Charles Johnson brokered a three hour meeting between Dana Rohrabacher and Julian Assange. At the meeting, Assange apparently explained his proof that Russia was not behind the hack of the DNC. In a statement, Rohrabacher promises to deliver what he learned directly to President Trump.

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange on Wednesday told Rep. Dana Rohrabacher that Russia was not behind leaks of emails during last year's presidential election campaign that damaged Hillary Clinton's candidacy and exposed the inner workings of the Democratic National Committee.

The California congressman spent some three hours with the Australian-born fugitive, now living under the protection of the Ecuadorian embassy in the British capital.

Assange's claim contradicts the widely accepted assessment of the U.S. intelligence community that the thousands of leaked emails, which indicated the Democratic National Committee rigged the nomination process against Sen. Bernie Sanders in favor of Clinton, were the result of hacking by the Russian government or persons connected to the Kremlin.

Assange, said Rohrabacher, "emphatically stated that the Russians were not involved in the hacking or disclosure of those emails." Rohrabacher, who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging

Threats, is the only U.S. congressman to have visited the controversial figure.

The conversation ranged over many topics, said Rohrabacher, including the status of Wikileaks, which Assange maintains is vital to keeping Americans informed on matters hidden by their traditional media. The congressman plans to divulge more of what he found directly to President Trump.

I'm utterly fascinated that Assange has taken this step, and by the timing of it.

It comes not long after Rod Wheeler's lawsuit alleging that Fox News and the White House worked together to invent a story that murdered DNC staffer Seth Rich was in contact with WikiLeaks. Both that story and this one have been promoted aggressively by Sean Hannity.

It comes in the wake of the VIPS letter that – as I've begun to show – in no way proves what it claims to prove about the DNC hack.

It comes just after a very long profile by the New Yorker's Raffi Khatchadourian, who has previously written more sympathetic pieces about Assange. I have a few quibbles with the logic behind a few of the arguments Khatchadourian makes, but he makes a case – doing analysis on what documents got released where that no one else has yet publicly done (and about which numerous people have made erroneous claims in the past) – that Assange's claims he wasn't working with Russia no longer hold up.

But his protestations that there were no connections between his publications and Russia were untenable.

[snip]

Whatever one thinks of Assange's election disclosures, accepting his contention that they shared no ties with the two Russian fronts requires willful blindness. Guccifer 2.0's handlers

predicted the WikiLeaks D.N.C. release. They demonstrated inside knowledge that Assange was struggling to get it out on time. And they proved, incontrovertibly, that they had privileged access to D.N.C. documents that appeared nowhere else publicly, other than in WikiLeaks publications. The twenty thousand or so D.N.C. e-mails that WikiLeaks published were extracted from ten compromised e-mail accounts, and all but one of the people who used those accounts worked in just two departments: finance and strategic communications. (The single exception belonged to a researcher who worked extensively with communications.) All the D.N.C. documents that Guccifer 2.0 released appeared to come from those same two departments.

The Podesta e-mails only make the connections between WikiLeaks and Russia appear stronger. Nearly half of the first forty documents that Guccifer 2.0 published can be found as attachments among the Podesta e-mails that WikiLeaks later published.

The Assange-Rohrabacher meeting also follows a NYT story revealing that the author of a piece of malware named in the IC's first Joint Analysis Report of the DNC hack, Profexor, has been cooperating with the FBI. The derivative reports on this have overstated the connection Profexor might have to the DNC hack (as opposed to APT 28, presumed to be associated with Russia's military intelligence GRU).

A member of Ukraine's Parliament with close ties to the security services, Anton Gerashchenko, said that the interaction was online or by phone and that the Ukrainian programmer had been paid to write customized malware without knowing its purpose, only later learning it was used in Russian hacking.

Mr. Gerashchenko described the author only in broad strokes, to protect his safety, as a young man from a provincial Ukrainian city. He confirmed that the author turned himself in to the police and was cooperating as a witness in the D.N.C. investigation. "He was a freelancer and now he is a valuable witness," Mr. Gerashchenko said.

It is not clear whether the specific malware the programmer created was used to hack the D.N.C. servers, but it was identified in other Russian hacking efforts in the United States.

But Profexor presumably is describing to the FBI how he came to sell customized access to his tool to hackers working for Russia and who those hackers were.

In other words, this bid by Assange to send information to Trump via someone protected by the Constitution's Speech and Debate Clause, but who is also suspected – even by his Republican colleagues! – of being on Russia's payroll, comes at a very interesting time, as outlets present more evidence undermining Assange's claims to have no tie to Russia.

Coming as it does as other evidence is coming to light, this effort is a bit of a Hail Mary by Assange: as soon as Trump publicizes his claims (which he'll probably do during tomorrow's shit-and-tweet) and they get publicly discredited, Assange (and Trump) will have little else to fall back on. They will have exposed their own claims, and provided the material others can use to attack Trump's attempts to rebut the Russia hack claims. Perhaps Assange's claims will be hard to rebut; but by making them public, finally, they will be revealed such that they can be rebutted.

I'm just as interested in the reporting on this, though, which was first pushed out through right wing outlets Daily Caller and John Solomon.

The story is presented exclusively in terms of Assange's role in the DNC hack, which is admittedly the area where Assange's interests and Trump's coincide.

Yet not even the neutral LAT's coverage of the meeting, which even quotes CIA Director and former Wikileaks fan Mike Pompeo, mentions the more immediate reason why Assange might need a deal from the United States. Virtually every week since March, Wikileaks has released a CIA exploit. While some of those exploits were interesting and the individual exploits are surely useful for security firms, at this point the Vault 7 project looks less like transparency and more like an organized effort to burn the CIA. Which makes it utterly remarkable a sitting member of Congress is going to go to the president to lobby him to make a deal with Assange, to say nothing of Assange's argument that Wikileaks should get a White House press pass as part of the deal.

Dana Rohrabacher is perhaps even as we speak lobbying to help a guy who has published a CIA hack of the week. And that part of the meeting is barely getting notice.

LAWFARE DISAPPEARS DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT FOR CENTRIST FAILURES TO CLAIM A “SEA- CHANGE” BECAUSE OF RUSSIA

In a piece that calls Max Blumenthal – author of three books of original journalism – an “activist,” Lawfare's Quinta Jurecic attempts to lay out how the left has split on its response

to Russia's interference in last year's election. She does a fine job avoiding generalizations about the *current* stance of the various parts of the left she portrays. But she creates a fantasy past, in which even the center-left has been distrustful of the intelligence community, to suggest the center-left's embrace of the Russia investigation represents a "sea-change" in its comfort with the spooks.

The story of the American left under Trump, as in the larger story, is one of bifurcation and polarization. It's a story of a profound emerging divide over the role of patriotism and the intelligence community in the left's political life. To put the matter simply, some on the left are actively revisiting their long-held distrust of the security organs of the American state; and some are rebelling against that rapprochement.

[snip]

But these arguments have taken place against the backdrop of a much greater and more visible embrace of the investigation on the part of the center-left—and a concurrent embrace by many center-left commentators of actively patriotic vocabulary that is traditionally the province of the right, along with a skepticism about Russia that has not been in fashion in Democratic circles since the Scoop Jackson wing of the party bolted. As Trump has attacked and belittled the intelligence community's assessment of Russian election interference, the center-left has embraced not only the report but also the intelligence community itself.

[snip]

Political leaders of the center-left

always had a quiet peace with the national security apparatus. But the peace was a quiet one, generally speaking, one without overly demonstrative displays of affection or support.

[snip]

[B]roadly speaking, the center-left these days sounds a lot like the mainstream right of the last few decades before Trump came along: hawkish towards Russia and enthusiastic about the U.S.

intelligence apparatus as one of the country's key lines of defense. And the mainstream right sounds a lot like the center-left on the subject—which is to say very quiet.

This new posture for the center-left, to some degree anyway, has politicians speaking the language of the intelligence world: the language of active patriotism.

Perhaps Jurecic has been asleep since 9/11, and has overlooked how aggressively supportive centrist Democrats have been of the National Security establishment? There's no sea-change on the center left – none. What she actually presents evidence for is a sea-change *on the right*, with increased skepticism from some of those (like Devin Nunes) who have been the intelligence community's biggest cheerleaders in the past.

To create this fantasy past, the foreign policy history Jurecic focuses on is that of the Cold War (a history that stops short of NATO expansion), not more recent history in which members of the center-left voted for a disastrous Iraq War (which Russia opposed), misrepresented (to both Russia and the left) the regime change goals of the Libya intervention, and applauded the CIA effort to back (al Qaeda allied) rebels to carry out regime change in

Syria. To say nothing of the center-left's failure to hold banks accountable for crashing the world economy. The only place those policies show up is in Jurecic's explanation why "younger" people are more isolationist than their elders.

There's another stream of thought too, from voices who tend to be younger and more focused on left-wing domestic policy, rather than Cold War-inflected foreign policy—people whose formative political experience dates to the Iraq War, rather than anything to do with the Soviet Union. This stream tends toward isolationism.

It's not just that the Iraq War and the Wall Street crash, not the Cold War, provided the formative moment for these young people (though many of Jurecic's claims about the young are immediately supported by descriptions of Glenn Greenwald or other old farts). It's that these were disastrous policies. And through all of them, the center-left that Jurecic portrays as distrusting the IC were instead enabling and often – certainly for the entire Obama Administration – directing them.

Jurecic's fantasy of past skepticism about the IC relies on the Democrats' changing views towards Jim Comey, particularly the treatment of him (and to a lesser degree Robert Mueller) as messiahs.

As Americans gathered to watch James Comey testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee, a meme emerged on certain corners of the left-leaning internet: people had a crush on the former FBI director. It was his patriotism, his scrupulousness, his integrity that did it. "Get you a man who loves you like [C]omey loves the FBI," wrote one commenter. "Is COMEY ... attractive?" asked another. Declared one : "Comey should be the next Bachelor."

The trend may have started with Comey, but it hasn't ended with him. Earlier this month, *Vogue* reported that special counsel Robert Mueller, too, has been transformed into an unlikely object of adoration.

The point of these outbursts of affection—whatever level of queasiness or amusement they might inspire—is not actually that anyone finds the former FBI director or the special counsel attractive. In the odd parlance of the internet, this kind of language is a way to express intense emotional involvement with an issue. Half-jokingly and with some degree of self-awareness, the many people who profess their admiration are projecting their swirling anxiety and anticipation over the Russia investigation and the fate of the Trump presidency onto Mueller and Comey.

Not only does Jurecic ignore the wild swing Democrats exhibited about Comey, whom many blamed for Hillary's loss (something both I and, later, Lawfare predicted). But she makes no mention of what happened in 2013 with Jim Comey's confirmation process, in which a man who signed off on torture and legitimized an illegal dragnet by strong-arming the FISA Court was pushed through by Democrats with one after another fawning statement of admiration, where the only procedural or voting opposition came from Republicans.

You don't approve Comey with no probing questions about his hawkish past if you're at all embarrassed about your support for the IC. Yet that's what the allegedly skeptical Democratic party did.

There's a reason all this matters, especially given the way Jurecic wields the concept of patriotism in her invention of a sea-change in center-left support for spooks.

I'm on the more progressive ("hard") left that Jurecic generally portrays as opposing the Russia investigation. Yet I may have written more, myself, than all of Lawfare about it. I think it is real and important. I support the investigations into Russian interference and Trump's tolerance for it.

But I also think that as part of that review, the center-left – and institutions of centrist policy, starting with Brookings – need to reflect on how their own epic policy failures have discredited centrist ideology and created an opportunity that both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin found all too easy to exploit.

Trump succeeded, in part, because he deceitfully promised to reinvest in the crumbling US interior, rather than overseas. Putin has attracted support in a Europe still paying for the German banks' follies, a Europe struggling to accommodate refugees escaping a destabilized Middle East. That doesn't make either of them positive forces. Rather, it makes them opportunists capitalizing on the failures of centrist hegemony. But until the center is either replaced or offers policies that haven't already failed, Trump and Putin will continue to exploit those failures.

I consider myself a patriot. But true patriotism – as opposed to the messianism she celebrates as patriotism on the center-left – requires honest criticism of America's disastrous economic and foreign policy failures. Messianism, by contrast, is a position of impotence, where necessary work is supplanted by hope that a strong man will rescue us all.

Ben Wittes and Lawfare generally are right that caricatures of them as handmaidens of the Deep State are too simple. But Jurecic's analysis is associated with a think tank paid for by funders that include entities that have backed disastrous destabilizing policies in the Middle East – like Qatar, UAE, Haim Saban – as well as those who profit from them – like Northrop Grumman. It was paid for by the banks that

centrists didn't hold accountable for the crash, including JP Morgan and Citi. It was paid for by big oil, including Exxon. It was even paid for by Dianne Feinstein, the Democrat who presided over the solicitous Comey confirmation process. Jurecic completely disappeared from her narrative of Democrats embracing Comey.

That a Brookings-affiliated analyst has just invented a fantasy past skepticism for spooks on the center-left – the center-left that has championed failed policies – even as she deems the tribalism she portrays as “patriotism” is itself part of the problem. It dodges the work of true patriotism: ensuring America is strong enough to offer the rest of the world something positive to support, rather than something that demagogues like Trump and Putin can effectively consolidate power over.