

Dossier fails the test of time; Trump-Russia collusion claims now called 'likely false'



Dossier author Christopher Steele acknowledged he was desperate to stop the Trump campaign and prompt the FBI to ratchet up its investigation. (Associated Press/File) - Photo by: Victoria Jones

Yahoo News' Michael Isikoff, an early public conduit for Christopher Steele's anti-Trump dossier, now says the former British spy's sensational Russia collusion charges lack apparent evidence and are "likely false."

As Election Day loomed in September 2016, Mr. Isikoff was the first Washington journalist to write about Mr. Steele's memos. He focused on Mr. Steele's contention that Trump campaign volunteer Carter Page met with nefarious operatives of Russian President Vladimir Putin during a publicly announced trip to Moscow in July 2016.

As reported by the Daily Caller, Mr. Isikoff this month told Mediaite columnist John Ziegler: "When you actually get into the details of the Steele dossier, the specific allegations, we have not seen the evidence to support them,

and in fact, there is good grounds to think that some of the more sensational allegations will never be proven and are likely false.”

Mr. Isikoff is best friends with Fusion GPS co-founder Glenn Simpson, who hired Mr. Steele in May and June 2016 with money funneled through a law firm from the Hillary Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee. Mr. Isikoff was one of a handful of mainstream journalists who met with Mr. Steele in Washington as arranged by Mr. Simpson.

Mother Jones magazine’s David Corn wrote the second Washington dossier story based on an interview with Mr. Steele, who acknowledged he was desperate to stop the Trump campaign and prompt the FBI to ratchet up its investigation.

Mr. Isikoff and Mr. Corn would team up on a March 2018 best-selling book, “Russian Roulette.” It told Mr. Steele’s story in a favorable light amid a narrative on Moscow’s direct election interference by hacking Democratic Party computers.

The book helped Mr. Steele attract a large liberal following on social media that loyally attested to the dossier’s accuracy.

Mr. Steele also had a big fan in Rep. Adam B. Schiff, California Democrat, who read his charges at a March 2017 hearing of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Mr. Schiff assumes the committee’s chairmanship in January. Republicans speculate that he will continue to collect and research Fusion GPS’s anti-Trump memos.

It has been 31 months since Mr. Steele submitted his first dossier memo in June 2016 to Fusion GPS; 30 months since the FBI opened an investigation that came to rely heavily on his work; 27 months since Mr. Isikoff wrote the first dossier story; 24 months since BuzzFeed posted the entire dossier; 24 months since the House and Senate intelligence committees opened their separate probes; and 19 months since special counsel Robert Mueller took charge of the Trump-Russia investigation.

The Washington Times looked at Mr. Steele’s core collusion charges to see how they have stood up:

□ **Accusation:** The Trump campaign was a partner in an “extensive conspiracy” with the Kremlin to interfere in the 2016 election.

Today: There is no confirmed public evidence. No Trump person has been charged in such a conspiracy. Mr. Mueller's office informed President Trump that he isn't a target.

□ **Accusation:** Then-Trump attorney Michael Cohen secretly traveled to Prague in August 2016 and met with Putin aides to organize cash payments to hush up hackers who infiltrated Democratic Party computers.

Today: There is no confirmed public evidence. Cohen, who has pleaded guilty to tax evasion charges and is cooperating with Mr. Mueller, still vehemently denies he ever went to Prague. No court filings indicate he has any knowledge of Trump collusion, and he has said he doesn't.

McClatchy news service has published two stories asserting that Mr. Mueller has evidence Cohen went to Prague.

Fusion's Mr. Simpson told Congress that Cohen could have traveled to Prague by way of a yacht and Russian aircraft.

Daniel Jones, a former Senate Democratic aide, told the FBI in 2017 that he had amassed \$50 million from wealthy donors to keep investigating Mr. Trump. He said he hired Fusion GPS and Mr. Steele.

□ **Accusation:** Carter Page met with two Putin operatives and discussed a brokerage fee in return for pushing an end to U.S. sanctions on wealthy Russians and businesses.

Today: Pro-Russia energy investor Mr. Page embarked on perhaps the most suspicious course of action when he traveled to Moscow to deliver a public college speech in July 2106. He once worked in Moscow as a Merrill Lynch banker.

The FBI wiretapped him for one year based largely on the dossier. No evidence has emerged publicly that he ever met with Putin people or discussed bribes. He has told the FBI and Congress that he didn't. He has not been charged.

□ **Accusation:** Mr. Page and campaign chairman Paul Manafort worked as a team to coordinate election interference with the Kremlin.

Today: No public evidence to support this scenario. The two say they don't know

each other and have never spoken. Manafort stands convicted of tax fraud and other charges. Mr. Mueller has made no court filing that indicates he is involved in a Russian election conspiracy.

Manafort attorney Kevin Downing filed a court paper saying he asked Mr. Mueller for any evidence of his client talking to Russian government officials. There was none, the attorney said.

□ **Accusation:** Mr. Trump actively supported ongoing computer hacking.

Today: No public evidence.

□ **Accusation:** The Trump “team” paid Russian hackers.

Today: No public evidence. Mr. Mueller brought indictments against the Russian intelligence officers who did the hacking and stole emails released by WikiLeaks. There is no indication that the funding came from Trump people.

□ **Accusation:** Mr. Trump maintained an eight-year relationship with Kremlin operatives in quid pro quo intelligence-sharing.

Today: No public evidence.

□ **Accusation:** Russian entrepreneur Aleksey Gubarev, owner of computer server provider XBT Holding, hacked the Democrats under pressure from Moscow intelligence.

Today: No public evidence. Mr. Gubarev’s attorneys say no U.S. authority has asked to interview him. The Mueller indictment against Russian hackers doesn’t mention XBT.

A U.S. District judge dismissed Mr. Gubarev’s libel lawsuit against BuzzFeed but not because the dossier is true. The judge ruled that BuzzFeed, which had published the unverified memos, was protected from libel because the FBI and intelligence agencies were using the dossier in their probes.

Mr. Gubarev is suing Mr. Steele for defamation in a London court. Mr. Steele has signed declarations saying his allegations needed to be investigated further.

‘Absolute dynamite’

In "Russian Roulette," Mr. Isikoff and Mr. Corn paint a favorable portrait of Mr. Steele and his Orbis Business Intelligence in London.

"Steele was the heart of the operation. ... Steele, who possessed a phenomenal memory, was a master of vacuuming up huge amounts of information and analyzing material," they wrote.

The book says Mr. Steele relied heavily on a Russian "collector" who traveled to Moscow and learned supposed dirt on candidate Trump.

"Two weeks or so later, Steele flew to meet his chief collector in a European city," the book says. "As Steele listened and took notes, he could scarcely believe what he was hearing. His collector, relaying what he had been told by his contacts, informed Steele that the Russians had been targeting and cultivating Trump for years and had even gathered kompromat on him, specifically tales of weird sexual indiscretions that the collector said 'were an open secret' in Moscow.

"Steele was horrified. 'I thought I had heard and seen everything in my career,' he told associates. Steele immediately notified Simpson. He had 'absolute dynamite,' Steele said, mentioning the sexual kompromat," the book says.

Mr. Steele would include in the dossier's June 20 memo a tale of Mr. Trump engaging in sex with Russian prostitutes at Moscow's Ritz-Carlton hotel. Mr. Trump has denied this and told The Washington Times in April 2017 that the FBI's reliance on Mr. Steele was a "disgrace."

"Russian Roulette" was somewhat guarded in endorsing Mr. Steele's sex charge: "As with Steele's first report, none of the sources in the memos were identified. Steele later told associates one of the sources for the information was the paramour of a Kremlin insider. In short, it was pillow talk."

In an interview this month, Mediaite's Mr. Ziegler asked Mr. Isikoff whether the Steele dossier "has been somewhat vindicated." Mr. Isikoff said, "No."

The Times asked Mr. Isikoff which Steele allegation he has come to doubt. He declined to answer, saying he was waiting for Mr. Mueller's report "like everybody else."

Mr. Trump tweeted: "Michael Isikoff was the first to report Dossier allegations and now seriously doubts the Dossier claims. The whole Russian Collusion thing

was a HOAX, but who is going to restore the good name of so many people whose reputations have been destroyed?”

Five Trump campaign figures have been convicted of crimes not directly related to any Russia election collusion, which was Mr. Mueller’s main task assigned by the Justice Department. Each report of a plea deal has spurred speculation among liberal pundits and politicians that Mr. Trump is doomed.

□ George Papadopoulos, a Trump campaign volunteer, pleaded guilty to lying to FBI agents about when he joined the campaign and met with a Maltese professor in London. The professor told him he heard that Moscow owned thousands of Hillary Clinton emails. It may have been a reference to 30,000 emails during her tenure as secretary of state that she ordered destroyed.

Papadopoulos has said he never acted on the gossip and never met any Russians. He said he believes the FBI wiretapped him and assigned at least one spy to try to entrap him.

□ Paul Manafort was convicted in a federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, of tax fraud, bank fraud and failure to disclose foreign bank accounts. He pleaded guilty in a D.C. federal court to witness tampering and conspiracy to defraud the United States.

□ Rick Gates, Manafort’s onetime business partner, pleaded guilty to making false statements and conspiracy against the United States.

□ Retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about intercepted phone calls he conducted with the Russian ambassador during the Trump transition.

□ Cohen pleaded guilty to tax evasion on income from a taxicab business, lying to a bank and campaign finance offenses. He later said he lied to Congress about when negotiations ended with the Kremlin on building a Trumphotel.

No court filings indicate that any of the five participated in or witnessed collusion with Russia.

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