

Utah's Chris Stewart says there's no evidence Russia wanted to help Trump. He disputes U.S. intelligence findings and Putin's own admission



(Steve Griffin | Tribune file photo) Rep. Chris Stewart, R-Utah, makes his opening remarks during his town hall meeting at the West Valley City Hall in West Valley City Wednesday May 2, 2018.

Washington • Rep. Chris Stewart has seen a slew of intelligence documents about Russia's attack on the 2016 presidential election, and he's convinced the country was trying to sway the U.S. vote.

In whose favor? He's unsure.

"For someone to answer that question definitively, they'd have to crawl inside Mr. Putin's head," the Utah Republican said in an interview Thursday, referring to

Russian President Vladimir Putin. “It’s impossible to know. I’ve spent days, not just hours, but days, actually looking at intelligence.”

Stewart’s position contradicts that of U.S. intelligence agencies that have concluded Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign and created fake social media accounts with the aim to boost Donald Trump and hurt Clinton. It also clashes with what Putin’s admission last week that he favored Trump in the election.

But Stewart’s take is consistent with that of one person: the president.

Trump has acknowledged that Russia was likely behind the cyberattacks — after denying it during a summit with Putin in Finland last week — though he has insisted it was not to boost his campaign over Clinton’s. The president also says there was no collusion between his team and Russia, a point at the heart of expansive federal and congressional investigations.

“This Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story,” the president told NBC in May 2017, adding later, “It’s an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should’ve won.”

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in January 2017 there was no question Russia interfered with the election at the behest of Putin to help Trump win.

“We assess with high confidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election, the consistent goals of which were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for president-elect Trump.”

The Senate Intelligence Committee came to the same verdict.

“We see no reason to dispute the conclusions,” the committee’s chairman, Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., said in May.

Putin himself acknowledged last week that he wanted Trump to win the election.

“And did you direct any of your officials to help him do that?” Reuters’ Jeff Mason

asked the Russian president.

“Yes, I did. Yes, I did,” Putin said at the joint news conference. “Because he talked about bringing the U.S.-Russia relationship back to normal.”

Yet, the GOP-led House Intelligence Committee, which has been criticized as turning its probe into a partisan circling of the wagons to protect Trump, has said Russia didn’t have a clear choice, arguing there were “significant tradecraft failings” by the intelligence community to say Putin wanted to help Trump.

Stewart, who has written many spy novels, has stood by the House Intelligence Committee’s findings, and notes that recent indictments of 12 Russian agents by special counsel Robert Mueller lines up directly with the committee’s March report on the election meddling.

After an interview with The Salt Lake Tribune, Stewart’s spokeswoman emailed what the office said was a clarifying statement.

“I want to be clear. I’m not saying that Putin was trying to help Trump, I’m saying that the CIA’s tradecraft didn’t comply with their normal standards,” Stewart said in a statement. “Therefore, the CIA reached a conclusion that I’m not sure we can confidently conclude.”

Stewart’s position, shared by many of his GOP colleagues, is that Russia wasn’t trying to help Trump, just sew discord in the U.S. election.

The Utah congressman, though, was one of the first to raise alarm bells about Russia’s actions in 2016 even if Stewart wasn’t the biggest fan of Trump initially.

Our Mussolini

During the Republican primaries, Stewart was adamant that Trump should not be the GOP presidential nominee.

“As a Republican, I’m telling you: Donald Trump does not represent Republican ideals,” Stewart told University of Utah students in March 2016.

“He’s our Mussolini,” Stewart added, referring to the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

Later, when the “Access Hollywood” video emerged of Trump bragging about

assaulting women, Stewart called for Trump to step down and let vice presidential candidate Mike Pence lead the ticket.

On CNN last week, Stewart struck a different tone.

“I love this president,” Stewart told host Jake Tapper.

Stewart said in a subsequent Tribune interview that he wasn’t serious about the 2016 Mussolini comment or the recent remark that he loved the president.

“Both of them were tongue-in-cheek,” Stewart said. “Obviously I’m not declaring my love for the president.”

Stewart eventually voted for Trump and now says that he agrees with Trump’s policy goals — tax cuts, regulation reforms, etc. — though he’s not a fan of the president’s style.

“I wish he was more clear and more concise,” Stewart said.

The three-term congressman says he understands the president’s concern with the ongoing investigations into the Russia interference in the election because he believes Trump often conflates those probes with the legitimacy of his victory.

“I’m a little bit sympathetic with him on that because he’s been accused of a serious crime; he’s been accused of treason,” Stewart said last week. “People around him have been accused of treason for more than two years. And I understand why he would be sensitive about that.”

Early Call

Stewart visited Moscow in August 2016 and raised alarm bells about what he saw coming.

“We know they’re trying to meddle in nearly everything we do. I really mean that,” Stewart said, calling the Russian-led cyberattacks “astounding.”

“I’m not suggesting that they’ve indicated or that we have indicators that they’re necessarily going to go after our election process, but they did it in Norway, they did it in the Ukraine, they’ve done it in a couple other Western nations, so why in the world wouldn’t we presume the same thing in ours?” Stewart warned.

They did.

In the aftermath, Stewart has been steadfast in saying that Russia meddled in the election, though it wasn't aimed at boosting Trump's prospects for a win.

Asked about Putin's comment that he backed Trump, Stewart says that's par for the course, and shouldn't be taken at face value.

"Of course he's going to say that," Stewart said. "He's a KGB operative, so of course he's going to deceive. And the thing that he wants to do is weaken this president so what's one way he can do that, [he can say], 'Yeah, he's my guy.'"

In the end, Stewart says the entire Russia investigation isn't going to work out as some liberals hope: with a clear indictment of the president and proof of collusion. He doesn't see it.

"We haven't seen evidence of collusion, and I always add, yet, because I think that's fair," Stewart said. "But I'll be very, very surprised if we do. And I think Mr. Mueller will be surprised."



tburr@sltrib.com

Follow @thomaswburr

Source: <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2018/07/20/utahs-chris-stewart-says/>

[Disclaimer]