

# A timeline of the explosive lawsuit alleging a White House link in the Seth Rich conspiracy

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By **Philip Bump** August 1

NPR's David Folkenflik reported Tuesday morning on a lawsuit filed by a man named Rod Wheeler that makes a remarkable claim: The Trump White House — or President Trump personally — may have been aware of or involved in a discredited Fox News story about the killing of a Democratic National Committee staffer last July.

It's a complicated story that, we hasten to add, is based on allegations in a lawsuit filed by a person whose quotes in that discredited story were themselves discredited. But the lawsuit includes documentary evidence (like text messages), and Folkenflik was given access to recorded calls that bolster the story as presented. What's more, the lawsuit is predicated on Wheeler's assertion that he never said the quotes attributed to him.

Given the complexity of the story, we've taken the details in the lawsuit and arranged them as a timeline. First, though, it's important to understand the cast of characters.

**Rod Wheeler.** Wheeler is a former D.C. homicide detective who now does private investigation work. Wheeler has been contributing to Fox News for more than a decade, even through this weekend. It's Wheeler who's filed the lawsuit, as will be explained below.

**Ed Butowsky.** A wealthy businessman who strongly supported the candidacy of Donald Trump and makes frequent appearances on the Fox Business network. BuzzFeed profiled him earlier this year.

**Malia Zimmerman.** A reporter for Fox News.

**Seth Rich.** A former Democratic National Committee staffer who was killed last year. This is where the timeline begins.

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*July 10, 2016*

**Rich** is shot to death in Washington during what D.C. police describe as an attempted armed robbery. The case remains unsolved.

*July 22, 2016*

WikiLeaks releases a batch of emails stolen from the DNC. That **Rich** was killed shortly before these files were released eventually spawns conspiracy theories about the possibility that Rich may have been involved in a plot to release them that ended in his murder.

U.S. intelligence agencies dismiss that idea. Their evidence suggests that the DNC network was accessed over a long period of time by two different Russian government agencies, as early as the summer of 2015.

*Jan. 20, 2017*

Trump is inaugurated as president.

*February*

**Butowsky** reaches out to **Rich**'s family to offer to help fund an investigation into their son's death. They agree.

At some point before or during February, **Butowsky** apparently speaks with veteran journalist Seymour Hersh, who **Butowsky** says indicated a link between Rich and the FBI. Hersh told Folkenflik it was "gossip" and that **Butowsky** "took two and two and made forty-five out of it."

*Feb. 23*

**Butowsky** allegedly texts **Wheeler** to pitch him on pursuing the Rich investigation. That text:

The two speak on the phone.

*Feb. 28*

**Butowsky**, **Zimmerman** and **Wheeler** meet for the first time. **Wheeler** indicates that he's surprised **Zimmerman** is at the meeting.

**Butowsky** later introduces **Wheeler** to the **Rich** family but allegedly asks that he not mention the link to Fox News.

*March 14*

The **Rich** family retains **Wheeler** to investigate the killing, paid for by **Butowsky**.

*April 18*

According to the lawsuit, **Butowsky** allegedly texts **Wheeler** to ask him to join a meeting with White House press secretary Sean Spicer.

The lawsuit alleges that **Butowsky** explained the reason for the meeting as to “keep [Spicer] abreast” of the investigation.

*April 20*

**Butowsky** and **Wheeler** meet with Spicer. **Wheeler’s lawsuit** claims that Spicer was given a copy of the outline of **Wheeler’s** investigation and asked to be kept updated about it.

Spicer later acknowledged the meeting to NPR’s Folkenflik.

“It had nothing to do with advancing the president’s domestic agenda — and there was no agenda,” Spicer told Folkenflik. “They were just informing me of the [Fox] story.”

*April 25*

**Wheeler** meets with a D.C. detective investigating **Rich’s** murder, who indicates that he has no evidence that the killing was anything other than a robbery. **Butowsky** allegedly sends an email to **Wheeler** saying that if the detective doesn’t help, “we will go after him as being part of the coverup.”

*May 9*

Trump fires FBI Director James B. Comey.

*May 10*

**Butowsky** and **Zimmerman** allegedly call **Wheeler** and inform him that they’ve identified an FBI source who can confirm emails between **Rich** and WikiLeaks.

*May 11*

**Zimmerman** shares a draft of her story with **Wheeler**. It doesn’t include quotes from **Wheeler** about that FBI link.

*May 14*

**Wheeler** claims that **Butowsky** had repeatedly made remarks about how the White House was paying attention to the story. On May 14, **Butowsky** calls **Wheeler** and leaves a message that **Wheeler** shared with Folkenflik.

“A couple of minutes ago,” **Butowsky** says, “I got a note that we have the full attention of the White House on this and tomorrow let’s close this deal.”

He then texts **Wheeler** to inform him that Trump read **Zimmerman’s** article and wants it published.

To NPR, both Spicer and **Butowsky** deny that the president reviewed the story. **Butowsky** told Folkenflik he was “joking with a friend.”

*May 15*

The Washington Post, continuing a second week of scoops about the Trump administration, reports that Trump revealed classified information in a private May 10 meeting with the Russian foreign minister.

**Zimmerman** informs **Wheeler** that her story is going to be posted shortly. She asks **Wheeler** for quotes on specific topics, neither of which relates to the alleged source at the FBI.

With the story set to publish, **Butowsky** allegedly emails **Wheeler** and the hosts and producers of Fox News’ “Fox and Friends.” He reinforces a key point of what he hopes to accomplish: Undercut the idea that Trump’s election was aided by Russian interference. (Emphasis is from the lawsuit.)

**Zimmerman**’s story is posted on a local news station in D.C.

*May 16*

The story goes up on Fox News’ website. It includes quotes from **Wheeler** about the FBI source that he claims in the lawsuit he never gave to **Zimmerman**.

In a recording of a three-way call that day with **Butowsky** and **Zimmerman** provided to Folkenflik, she seems to acknowledge that.

“Not the part about, I mean, the connection to WikiLeaks, but the rest of the quotes in the story did” come from **Wheeler**, she says. **Butowsky** tells **Wheeler**, “One day you’re going to win an award for having said those things you didn’t say.”

**Zimmerman** says that her superiors at Fox News told her to keep the quotes. **Wheeler** had first called **Butowsky** to complain. **Butowsky** allegedly pointed the finger at the White House.

These quotes that **Wheeler** says were fabricated by **Zimmerman** are the heart of his lawsuit.

Spicer is asked about the story during the White House press briefing. He claims not to be aware of the story.

Q: Sean, can we get a White House reaction or the President’s reaction to the report that said Rich was emailing WikiLeaks before his murder?

MR. SPICER: I don’t — I’m not aware of — generally, I don’t get updates on DNC — former DNC staffers. I’m not aware of that.

That night, **Wheeler** appears on Sean Hannity’s Fox News program and supports the story, though he claims not to have personal knowledge of a Rich-WikiLeaks link.

*May 17*

The local D.C. station reports that **Wheeler** was backtracking on the statements attributed to him — including statements made on-air.

FOX 5 DC: “You have sources at the FBI saying that there is information...”

WHEELER: “For sure...”

FOX 5 DC: “...that could link Seth Rich to WikiLeaks?”

WHEELER: “Absolutely. Yeah. That’s confirmed.”

*May 23*

Fox News retracts its story.

*Update:* At Tuesday’s daily press briefing, press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders addressed the allegation. “The president had no knowledge of the story,” Sanders said, “and it’s completely untrue that he or the White House [were involved] in the story.”

Fox News also released a statement later Tuesday, denying allegations in the lawsuit: “The accusation that FoxNews.com published Malia Zimmerman’s story to help detract from coverage of the Russia collusion issue is completely erroneous. The retraction of this story is still being investigated internally and we have no evidence that Rod Wheeler was misquoted by Zimmerman.”

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