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NATIONAL SECURITY

Special Counsel Examines Possible Role Flynn Played in Seeking Clinton Emails From Hackers

Mueller probe of potential link between Trump campaign and Russia follows trail of GOP operative's correspondence



Former national security adviser Mike Flynn is seen in February at the White House. PHOTO: JIM LO SCALZO/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Shane Harris

Aug. 25, 2017 4:51 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—Special counsel Robert Mueller is examining what role, if any, former national security adviser Mike Flynn may have played in a private effort to obtain Hillary Clinton's emails from Russian hackers, according to people familiar with the matter.

The effort to seek out hackers who were believed to have stolen Mrs. Clinton's emails, first reported by *The Wall Street Journal*, was led by a longtime Republican activist, Peter W. Smith. In correspondence and conversations with his colleagues, Mr. Smith portrayed Mr. Flynn as an ally in those efforts and implied that other senior Trump campaign officials were coordinating with him, which they have denied. He also named Mr. Flynn's consulting firm and his son in the correspondence and conversations.

The special counsel is investigating potential coordination between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and Russia in the 2016 election.

Mr. Smith believed that some 33,000 emails that Mrs. Clinton said were personal and had been deleted had been obtained by hackers. Last year, in the final months of the presidential campaign, he made contact with what he said were five groups of hackers, two of which he believed were comprised of Russians, who claimed to have obtained the emails.

"We knew the people who had these were probably around the Russian government,"



Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election, left a meeting on Capitol Hill in Washington, June 21, 2017. PHOTO: ANDREW HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Smith told the Journal in an interview in May.

Mr. Smith suspected the emails could reveal embarrassing details about Mrs. Clinton's involvement in the response to the Benghazi terrorist attacks, as well as her work with the Clinton Foundation, and wanted to release them publicly to harm Mrs. Clinton's candidacy. There is no evidence that the server was ever hacked.

Investigators working for Mr. Mueller have been conducting interviews and collecting information as they seek to determine whether Mr. Flynn was involved in Mr. Smith's effort, and if his son, Michael G. Flynn, and the consulting firm Flynn Intel Group had a role, the people said. At the time Mr. Smith was trying to find the emails, Mr. Flynn was a senior adviser to the Trump campaign and had been on a short list of potential vice presidential candidates.

A lawyer for Mr. Flynn and a lawyer for his son declined to comment. Mr. Flynn's firm has been dissolved.

The investigators' inquiries show Mr. Mueller considers Mr. Smith's effort to be potentially significant in the context of the wider probe into whether there was any collusion between people associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government. Mr. Mueller's mandate from the Justice Department allows him to investigate "any links and/or coordination between the Russian government and individuals associated with the [Trump] campaign." Investigators had already been focused on Mr. Flynn, using a grand jury to assist in a criminal investigation of the former White House adviser focused on his work in the private sector on behalf of foreign interests.

Mr. Mueller's team is also inquiring about the nature of Mr. Smith's relationship with several Trump campaign advisers and aides to the president, the people familiar with the matter said.

U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 election in a campaign that was directed by the highest levels of its government. Its tactics included hacking state election systems; infiltrating and leaking information from party committees and political strategists; and disseminating through social media and other outlets negative stories about Mrs. Clinton, the Democratic nominee, and positive ones about Mr. Trump, according to an intelligence report issued in January.

The Russian government has denied any meddling. President Trump has described Mr. Mueller's probe as a "witch hunt" and denied any collusion by the campaign.

Peter Carr, a spokesperson for the special counsel, declined to comment.

U.S. officials with knowledge of the intelligence said investigators also have examined reports from intelligence agencies that describe Russian hackers discussing how to obtain emails from Mrs. Clinton's server and then transmit them to Mr. Flynn via an intermediary.

It isn't known if those hackers are ones that Mr. Smith contacted.

In a document Mr. Smith used to explain his efforts and recruit assistance, he named several Trump campaign officials he said were working "in coordination" with him, including Steve Bannon, the former chief strategist for the president, and Kellyanne Conway, the former campaign manager and now White House counselor. They both said they were unaware of Mr. Smith's work and played no role in it.

The investigators have also been trying to determine whether Mr. Smith or anyone working with him paid hackers for Mrs. Clinton's emails, the people with knowledge of the investigation said. Mr. Smith set up a limited-liability company in Delaware, called KLS Research LLC, that he intended to use to pay people assisting him with his work and to collect contributions, people with direct knowledge of Mr. Smith's efforts said.

Mr. Smith told the Journal that he never intended to pay for any of the emails found by hackers. Ultimately, he said, he couldn't verify that all the emails the hacker groups claimed to have found were genuine, and so he didn't acquire them. Instead, Mr. Smith said he encouraged the hackers to give the emails to WikiLeaks.

The website released emails that intelligence officials have said were stolen from the Democratic National Committee and Mrs. Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta.

Mr. Smith's comments about his work are believed to be the only ones he gave to a journalist. On May 14, about 10 days after the interview, Mr. Smith died after asphyxiating himself in a hotel room in Rochester, Minn., according to local authorities. He was 81 years old.

Mr. Smith's body was found in the Aspen Suites hotel, located across the street from the Mayo Clinic, according to a medical examiner's report. An associate of Mr. Smith said that he had recently visited the clinic.

In a note found near Mr. Smith's body, he apologized and said that "no foul play whatsoever" had occurred with his death, according to local authorities.

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Appeared in the August 26, 2017, print edition as 'Flynn Probe Looks at Emails.'

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