

# The curious journey of Carter Page, the former Trump adviser who can't stay out of the spotlight

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By **Dan Zak** November 16

Carter Page, PhD, is texting us in big paragraphs, from somewhere in New York, about his upended life.

“It’s sort of like an extended plebe year . . .” he writes.

(At Page’s alma mater, the U.S. Naval Academy, first-year plebes endure a humbling boot-camp-style orientation.)

“ . . . bringing the humiliation to a national and global level courtesy of the U.S. Government’s propaganda network and some mainstream media brands,” he continues.

The texts keep coming, sometimes in all caps, sometimes illustrated by a clip from the financial-crisis dramedy “The Big Short,” or a reference to “Legacy of Ashes,” a scathing history of CIA blunderings. Here comes another text now:

“ . . . THAT’S PRECISELY WHY I’M LEANING IN AGAINST THESE GUYS NOW . . . AFTER BAY OF PIGS, MOSSADEGH IN IRAN, CIA IN VIETNAM, AFTER SCREWING UP SOVIET ASSESSMENTS THROUGHOUT THE FIRST COLD WAR. . . .”

There are no good answers anymore — to the Russia thing, to the latest episode of America’s ongoing identity crisis — and so we are left with weak metaphors and unusual suspects. We’re left to wonder about Carter Page, the former backbench Trump adviser who keeps boomeranging into the public square because of his murky associations with Russians.

Page has spent 25 years burnishing a classic Washington résumé, and it seems to have landed him a classic Washington booby prize: a featured role in a marquee scandal. And yet unlike most others caught in this kind of churn, Page keeps putting himself out there. There’s no lawyering-up, no umbrella-wielding fixer shielding him from cameras. He’s been on MSNBC, the Kremlin-funded RT, “PBS NewsHour” and even a D.C. nightlife website, in conversation with a punk rock star. Most recently he’s been in front of Congress for marathon hearings.

*“Have you ever emailed with Donald Trump?”*

*“No.”*

*“Text message?”*

*“No.”*

*“Snapchat?”*

*“No.”*

*“Instagram?”*

*“Never.”*

That was Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.) interrogating Page on Nov. 2 in front of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. The hearing transcript was released last week. Some of it was weird:

“I think yourself and others have referred to this dark cloud, right,” Page said. “The dark cloud was darkest over myself.”

“Dr. Page,” said Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.), “I’m not really asking about dark clouds.”

But the clouds remain. Special counsel Robert S. Mueller III and his team are somewhere underneath Washington, with their flashlights and pickaxes, while the rest of us remain aboveground, peering at the ominous cumulonimbus around Carter Page, scanning every inopportune grin, every halt in his speech, every bounce of an eyebrow. He’s capable of both oversharing and evasion, sometimes in the same breath, and our collective paranoia flares: Is he just a goofball, or is this some kind of act?

## **‘I have been completely demonized’**

“A small fish,” he called himself in a letter to Congress.

“An idiot,” said a Russian agent caught on tape in a 2013 FBI investigation of a spy ring.

“An impostor,” a Russian parliamentarian told the New York Times.

“A gray spot,” Page’s former Russian boss told Politico.

A “world-class dork and sucker,” wrote Republican strategist Rick Wilson in the Daily Beast.

“The only mystery about Carter Page is why he continues to talk to people,” former federal prosecutor Cynthia Alksne said on MSNBC last week.

One thing is clear: Carter William Page, 46, is not an idiot.

He was an altar boy and Eagle Scout in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Competed in track and field at a Catholic high school. Came home from skateboarding one day and saw Reagan and Gorbachev on TV, meeting in Reykjavik about nuclear arms. He went to Moscow as a midshipman in 1991 and resolved to spend his career helping improve relations between the superpowers.

“It remains one of my primary objectives today,” Page wrote to Congress, “even though I have been completely demonized and indeed slandered literally around the world by the Clinton campaign. . . .”

He spent his senior year at the Naval Academy interning with the House Armed Services Committee and writing a thesis on the battle for information between the Reagan White House and Congress over the Strategic Defense Initiative. After Page presented his thesis in 1993, an admiral scurried up to ask how he knew so much intel about the Department of Defense, according to Page’s faculty adviser, Steve Frantzich.

Frantzich wasn’t surprised last year when candidate Donald Trump, asked by The Washington Post to name his foreign-policy advisers, said “Carter Page, PhD.”

“I always expected he would have some sort of important role to play,” said Frantzich. Page “was someone who, all the way, had taken opportunities to their full extent.”

Page served in the Navy and collected degrees: a master’s from Georgetown, an MBA from New York University. He moved to Moscow in 2004 to work for Merrill Lynch (the brokerage has since merged with Bank of America, where no one could speak to his employment), at a time when many young Americans were seeking fortune in those virgin capitalist forests.

There, Page says he was involved in billions of dollars worth of energy transactions and advised Gazprom, a state-owned oil-and-gas company. Moscow businessmen interviewed by the New York Times and Politico cast doubt on some of Page’s résumé bullet points, recalling him as more of a small-time player. A Gazprom representative also downplayed his role, saying Page merely worked for Merrill Lynch while the bank was a corporate broker for Gazprom. (Asked about these accounts, Page replied via text, “I don’t care anymore,” a response that embodies his fatigue with what he calls a “river of media dishonesty.”)

By 2009, he was back in New York and introducing himself as “Carter Page, Global Energy Capital” — the name of his financial advisory firm, which has an address in a Midtown building that shares an atrium with Trump Tower. Its website, under the “management” tab, lists only his name.

He completed his PhD through SOAS University of London in 2011, with a dissertation on Russia and energy. Page wrote that one goal of the paper was to question the West’s fear and skepticism of former Soviet states; his acknowledgments thank advisers to Russian presidents and deputy U.S. secretaries of state.

Page was now a kind of scholar-fellow-intellectual-consultant-businessman-adviser-analyst-entrepreneur. He was smart and capable but didn't stand out in New York foreign-policy circles, according to a think-tank acquaintance, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he's involved with organizations that want to steer clear of the Russia inquiry.

Page is "very engaged and very interested and feels very passionate about certain policy issues," the acquaintance says. "He's very soft-spoken." Some people now "portray him as an opportunist. My impression of Carter is he doesn't put himself out there enough."

### **'Anyone who came to us with a pulse'**

In January 2013, Page met a Russian attaché named Victor Podobnyy at an energy symposium in New York. Podobnyy was actually an intelligence agent who was hitting up various American businesspeople as potential sources.

"He got hooked on Gazprom, thinking that if they have a project, he could rise up," Podobnyy said to a fellow agent in 2013, according to a federal complaint against members of an alleged spy ring. "It's obvious that he wants to earn lots of money." (Page today says this exchange "doesn't even warrant a comment.")

The FBI debriefed him about the meeting, and Page cooperated. It would not be their last interaction.

In December 2015, Page asked Ed Cox, chairman of the New York state Republican Party, to recommend him to the Trump campaign, which Page saw as a movement aligned with some of his ideas.

That's pretty much all it took.

"Anyone who came to us with a pulse, a résumé and seemed legit would be welcomed," a Trump campaign official told The Post in May.

Within weeks, Trump casually announced Page's name to the world.

Trump's foreign-policy committee met once with the candidate, on March 31, 2016, according to Page. He did not attend, but his name was already out there.

That summer, about the time the FBI obtained a secret court order to monitor his communications, Page flew to Moscow to give a speech at the New Economic School — a private institute where President Barack Obama also spoke, in 2009 — about "fundamental trends in the world economy." The speech was critical of U.S. foreign policy in parts, though Page disclaimed that he was speaking as a private citizen, not as a representative of the campaign.

His trip drew attention apart from his speech: Yahoo reported that intelligence officials had been told that Page met with a Russian oil titan and discussed U.S. sanctions, which Page heatedly denies. (He has since filed a defamation suit.) Harry Reid, then the Senate minority leader, asked the FBI to look into the matter, prompting Page to leave the Trump campaign.

In December, after the election, Page returned to Moscow to give another speech and appear on state-sponsored Russia Today, where the host seemed to pooh-pooh his relevance to the Trump campaign while nonetheless devoting 26 minutes of airtime to him.

Days before the inauguration, BuzzFeed released a dossier of unverified dirt on the Trump campaign's alleged collusion with the Russian government. Page's name appeared throughout the 35-page document, whose research had been funded by the Hillary Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee.

This completed his transformation in the public eye from obscure campaign volunteer to shadowy operative. Page denies every claim in what he calls the “dodgy dossier.” He has compared his struggle with that of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who was surveilled and harassed by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

The official response from the Trump camp after the dossier release: “Carter Page is an individual who the president-elect doesn't know.”

## **‘An American innocent’**

And what now? Confusion, still, at the highest levels.

“I'm still trying to figure out what the hell your role was with the Trump campaign,” Gowdy said to Page in the hearing on Nov. 2.

“Where I spent most time, frankly . . . was responding to these false stories” in the media, Page replied.

In recent weeks he has appeared for hours and hours in front of Congress, by himself, without legal counsel, and pundits have called his testimony both self-aggrandizing and self-incriminating. He emerged from a Senate hearing last month in an unfortunate bucket hat; after the House hearing he smiled his way through a CNN interview about his trip to Moscow.

“Did anybody ever say to you anything about, ‘Hey, you know, here in Russia we have some stuff that might help you?’” anchor Jake Tapper asked.

“Absolutely — ” Page said, tripping over his words, “not — no, not in that sense, no.”

People have told him to please, for the love of God, get a lawyer. Or at least a media consultant.

“It's a Catch-22,” Page says by phone. “There's crazy stuff said about me nonstop, and so if I say nothing to the media, then it sort of spins out of control, right? . . . On the other hand, I start doing interviews — and I'm a media hound.”

He talks, then regrets it, but how can he not talk?

“He’s so nice” but “incredibly socially awkward,” says amateur Russia sleuth Jeff Jetton, co-owner of a D.C. ramen restaurant. In March, he published a Q&A with Page on the nightlife website Brightest Young Things. “I mean, there’s a five percent chance that he’s a spy or whatever but, if so, his cover that he’s doing is so f---ing insane.”

“I’ve come to see Carter as an American innocent — he’s lamblike out there, and he doesn’t know it,” says Stephen F. Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies and politics at NYU and Princeton, and a Russiagate skeptic who has corresponded with Page. “He was easy to mock, or turn into some sinister person who has something to hide.

“For all I know he’s a hired assassin of the KGB,” Cohen adds with a chuckle. “But I don’t think so.”

But Rep. Eric Swalwell points out that Page managed to find his way into the Trump campaign, traveled to Russia, interacted with officials in energy, banking and government — and has been shifty about everything since the moment we learned his name.

“I don’t think this is Forrest Gump here,” says the California Democrat. “He knows how to be evasive. The guy wouldn’t give us a straight answer if we asked him what time zone we were in.”

Page’s tone has changed. His May letter to the House committee was quirky and occasionally disturbing: He misquoted Maya Angelou. He cited the dictionary definition of the pronoun “my.” One footnote included the text of a vulgar message Page said he received from a stranger, accusing him of treason and threatening to beat him with a baseball bat. Page characterized the government’s interest in him as a “witch hunt” by the “Clinton/Obama regime.”

This month, he wrote to Congress more measuredly: “I hope that the lessons from the extraordinary damage suffered by the Trump campaign and myself may help America avoid future domestic attacks” by “big-money opposition political research” and “illicit activities of the U.S. Government.”

Page’s friend from the think-tank world offers a simpler theory: “The reason why Carter’s name kept coming back is because they don’t have any targets. . . . If you have a huge demand to find collusion or Russian interference. . . you only have four or five people who had any possible association [with] Russians.”

Now, three of them have been charged, though not all in connection to the campaign: George Papadopoulos, another little-known foreign-policy adviser to the campaign, who pleaded guilty to lying about Russian contacts; and campaign manager Paul Manafort and his deputy Rick Gates, indicted on a dozen counts, including allegedly laundering millions from dealings with a Russia-friendly Ukrainian political party. (Both pleaded not guilty to all charges.)

As for Page? He says he has no sources of income, that he’s burning through savings. He is suing multiple media outlets for what he calls false and libelous reporting about his Moscow meetings — “perhaps the most dangerous, reckless, irresponsible and historically-instrumental moments in modern-day sensational crime story journalism,” according to his official complaint.

He remains hopeful, even as his name came up again and again Tuesday during another congressional hearing with Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Page has been taking continuing-education courses on law, he says, to better understand his own predicament. “No subject,” he says in a text, “has ever been as engrossing and fundamentally important as the one that I’m studying now.”

And he is still going to church — though for his personal safety, he says, he stays home and live-streams Mass on the Web.

“My Bishop informs me that it doesn’t officially meet my obligation,” Page texts, “but I cut that corner a bit in this particular instance.”

*This story has been updated.*

*Karla Adam in London contributed to this report.*

 **226 Comments**

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