

Opinions

The Russia facts are hiding in plain sight



By **David Ignatius** Opinion writer December 14

President Trump's recent denunciations of the Russia investigation recall the famous legal advice: "If the facts are against you, argue the law. If the law is against you, argue the facts. If the law and the facts are against you, pound the table and yell like hell."

Trump shouted out his defense earlier this month: "What has been shown is no collusion, no collusion!" he told reporters over the whirl of his helicopter on the White House lawn. Since then, Trump's supporters have been waging a bitter counterattack against special counsel Robert S. Mueller III, alleging bias and demanding: "Investigate the investigators."

But what do the facts show? There is a growing, mostly undisputed body of evidence describing contacts between Trump associates and Russia-linked operatives. Trump partisans have claimed that Mueller's investigation is biased because some members of his staff supported Trump's rival, Hillary Clinton. But Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein disagreed Wednesday, arguing that Mueller "is running his office appropriately."

As Republicans seek to discredit the investigation, it's useful to remember just what we've learned so far about how the Trump campaign sought harmful information about Clinton from sources that, according to U.S. intelligence, were linked to Moscow. This isn't a fuzzy narrative where the truth is obscured; in the Trump team's obsessive pursuit of damaging Clinton emails and other negative information, the facts are hiding in plain sight.

From the start of the campaign, Trump spoke of his affinity for Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Trump's aides followed his lead. In March 2016, a young adviser named George Papadopoulos met a London professor who introduced him to a Russian woman described as "Putin's niece." This began months of efforts by Papadopoulos to broker Trump-Russia contacts, described in the plea agreement that Mueller announced in October.

Russian operatives by that March had already hacked the computers of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta. Through cutouts, the Russians over the next eight months allegedly spooled out damaging information about Clinton to the media, sometimes egged on by Trump and his associates.

Papadopoulos got the first hint the Russians might share Clinton emails in a late-April meeting with the professor, who told him “the Russians had emails of Clinton . . . thousands of emails,” according to the plea agreement.

Dishing dirt on Clinton was the pitch of a June 3 email to Donald Trump Jr. from the publicist for Russian oligarch Aras Agalarov’s pop-singer son. He said Russian authorities “offered to provide the Trump campaign with some official documents and information that would incriminate Hillary.”

Don Jr. eagerly met Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya on June 9 at Trump Tower. When she claimed that an anti-Putin U.S. businessman had looted money from Russia, Don Jr. pressed her: “He asked if I had any financial documents from which it would follow that the funds stolen from Russia were then involved in financing the Clinton’s Foundation,” she told the Senate Judiciary Committee last month.

Trump’s hunt for Clinton emails continued in June, when Jared Kushner hired Cambridge Analytica to do campaign research. The firm learned that WikiLeaks planned to publish a stash of the Clinton material, and Cambridge Analytica’s chief executive asked Julian Assange “if he might share that information with us,” according to the Wall Street Journal. Trump promised “very, very interesting” revelations about Clinton in June, the same month an alleged Russian cutout dubbed “Guccifer 2.0” began leaking DNC documents.

WikiLeaks dumped nearly 20,000 Clinton emails on July 22. Three days later, Trump tweeted: “The new joke in town is that Russia leaked the disastrous DNC e-mails . . . because Putin likes me.” Two days after that, at a July 27 news conference, Trump said: “Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing.”

Roger Stone, a Trump friend and sometime adviser, kept beating the WikiLeaks drum through August 2016, saying he was communicating with Assange and that more damaging Clinton leaks were coming. WikiLeaks contacted Don Jr., too, in five messages that continued until Election Day.

“I love WikiLeaks,” said Trump at an October 2016 rally. And no wonder. This was the campaign’s secret weapon.

U.S. intelligence agencies said on Jan. 6, 2017, they had “high confidence” that Russian intelligence had used WikiLeaks and Guccifer 2.0 “to release U.S. victim data obtained in cyber operations.” CIA Director Mike Pompeo has since described WikiLeaks as a “hostile intelligence service.”

The next time Trump demands a probe of Mueller’s investigation or the FBI’s handling of Clinton emails, remember that he isn’t arguing the facts or the law about collusion with Russia. He’s pounding the table.

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