

# The Press Versus the President

By Jeff Gerth, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 30 January 2023

## INTRODUCTION: 'I realized early on I had two jobs'

The end of the long inquiry into whether Donald Trump was colluding with Russia came in July 2019, when Robert Mueller III, the special counsel, took seven, sometimes painful, hours to essentially say no.

“Holy shit, Bob Mueller is not going to do it,” is how Dean Baquet, then the executive editor of the *New York Times*, described the moment his paper’s readers realized Mueller was not going to pursue Trump’s ouster.

Baquet, speaking to his colleagues in a town hall meeting soon after the testimony concluded, acknowledged the *Times* had been caught “a little tiny bit flat-footed” by the outcome of Mueller’s investigation.

That would prove to be more than an understatement. But neither Baquet nor his successor, nor any of the paper’s reporters, would offer anything like a postmortem of the paper’s Trump-Russia saga, unlike the examination the *Times* did of its coverage before the Iraq War.

In fact, Baquet added, “I think we covered that story better than anyone else” and had the prizes to prove it, according to a tape of the event published by *Slate*. In a statement to *CJR*, the *Times* continued to stand by its reporting, noting not only the prizes it had won but substantiation of the paper’s reporting by various investigations. The paper “thoroughly pursued credible claims, fact-checked, edited, and ultimately produced ground-breaking journalism that has proven true time and again,” the statement said.

But outside of the *Times*’ own bubble, the damage to the credibility of the *Times* and its peers persists, three years on, and is likely to take on new energy as the nation faces yet another election season animated by antagonism toward the press. At its root was an undeclared war between an entrenched media, and a new kind of disruptive presidency, with its own hyperbolic version of the truth. (The *Washington Post* has tracked thousands of Trump’s false or misleading statements.) At times, Trump seemed almost to be toying with the press, offering spontaneous answers to questions about Russia that seemed to point to darker narratives. When those storylines were authoritatively undercut, the follow-ups were downplayed or ignored.

Trump and his acolytes in the conservative media fueled the ensuing political storm, but the hottest flashpoints emerged from the work of mainstream journalism. The two most inflammatory, and enduring, slogans commandeered by Trump in this conflict were “fake news” and the news media as “the enemy of the American people.” They both grew out of stories in the first weeks of 2017 about Trump and Russia that wound up being significantly flawed or based on uncorroborated or debunked information, according to FBI documents that later became public. Both relied on anonymous sources.

Before the 2016 election, most Americans trusted the traditional media and the trend was positive, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. The phrase “fake news” was limited to a few reporters and a newly organized social media watchdog. The idea

that the media were “enemies of the American people” was voiced only once, just before the election on an obscure podcast, and not by Trump, according to a Nexis search.

Today, the US media has the lowest credibility—26 percent—among forty-six nations, according to a 2022 study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. In 2021, 83 percent of Americans saw “fake news” as a “problem,” and 56 percent—mostly Republicans and independents—agreed that the media were “truly the enemy of the American people,” according to Rasmussen Reports.

Trump, years later, can’t stop looking back. In two interviews with *CJR*, he made it clear he remains furious over what he calls the “witch hunt” or “hoax” and remains obsessed with Mueller. His staff has compiled a short video, made up of what he sees as Mueller’s worst moments from his appearance before Congress, and he played it for me when I first went to interview him, just after Labor Day in 2021, at his golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey.

During my interview with Trump, he appeared tired as he sat behind his desk. He wore golf attire and his signature red MAGA hat, having just finished eighteen holes. But his energy and level of engagement kicked in when it came to questions about perceived enemies, mainly Mueller and the media.

He made clear that in the early weeks of 2017, after initially hoping to “get along” with the press, he found himself inundated by a wave of Russia-related stories. He then realized that surviving, if not combating, the media was an integral part of his job.

“I realized early on I had two jobs,” he said. “The first was to run the country, and the second was survival. I had to survive: the stories were unbelievably fake.”

What follows is the story of Trump, Russia, and the press. Trump’s attacks against media outlets and individual reporters are a well-known theme of his campaigns. But news outlets and watchdogs haven’t been as forthright in examining their own Trump-Russia coverage, which includes serious flaws. Bob Woodward, of the *Post*, told me that news coverage of the Russia inquiry “wasn’t handled well” and that he thought viewers and readers had been “cheated.” He urged newsrooms to “walk down the painful road of introspection.”

Over the past two years, I put questions to, and received answers from, Trump, as well as his enemies. The latter include Christopher Steele, the author of the so-called dossier, financed by Hillary Clinton’s campaign, that claimed Trump was in service of the Kremlin, and Peter Strzok, the FBI official who opened and led the inquiry into possible collusion between Russia and Trump’s campaign before he was fired. I also sought interviews, often unsuccessfully, with scores of journalists—print, broadcast, and online—hoping they would cooperate with the same scrutiny they applied to Trump. And I pored through countless official documents, court records, books, and articles, a daunting task given that, over Mueller’s tenure, there were more than half a million news stories concerning Trump and Russia or Mueller.

On the eve of a new era of intense political coverage, this is a look back at what the press got right, and what it got wrong, about the man who once again wants to be president. So far, few news organizations have reckoned seriously with what transpired

between the press and the presidency during this period. That failure will almost certainly shape the coverage of what lies ahead.

## Chapter 1: A narrative takes hold

Trump entered the presidential race on June 16, 2015. In his campaign speech, he offered a rambling analysis of global affairs that briefly touched on Russia and Vladimir Putin, noting “all our problems with Russia” and the need to modernize America’s outdated nuclear arsenal to better deter the Russian leader.

The media covered his inflammatory comments about Mexico and China, and ignored Russia. The next day, Trump gave a long interview to Sean Hannity, the Fox News host and Trump supporter and friend, who would go on to become an informal adviser to the president. In the interview, Trump indicated he thought he could have good relations with Russia. Asked if he had any previous “contact” with Putin, Trump answered yes. When pressed by Hannity to elaborate, Trump replied, “I don’t want to say.” Trump, as he acknowledged at a debate in October 2016, didn’t know Putin.

Three days before Trump’s presidential announcement, Hillary Clinton entered the race, and it was she, not Trump, who began her campaign facing scrutiny over Russia ties. Weeks earlier, the *Times* had collaborated with the conservative author of a best-selling book to explore various Clinton-Russia links, including a lucrative speech in Moscow by Bill Clinton, Russia-related donations to the Clinton family foundation, and Russia-friendly initiatives by the Obama administration while Hillary was secretary of state. The *Times* itself said it had an “exclusive agreement” with the author to “pursue the story lines found in the book” through “its own reporting.” An internal Clinton campaign poll, shared within the campaign the day of Trump’s announcement, showed that the Russia entanglements exposed in the book and the *Times* were the most worrisome “Clinton negative message,” according to campaign records. Robert Trout, Clinton’s campaign lawyer, declined to comment on the record after an exchange of emails.

By 2016, as Trump’s political viability grew and he voiced admiration for Russia’s “strong leader,” Clinton and her campaign would secretly sponsor and publicly promote an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory that there was a secret alliance between Trump and Russia. The media would eventually play a role in all that, but at the outset, reporters viewed Trump and his candidacy as a sideshow. Maggie Haberman of the *Times*, a longtime Trump chronicler, burst into a boisterous laugh when a fellow panelist on a television news show suggested Trump might succeed at the polls.

Fairly quickly, Trump started to gain traction with voters, and it was clear his candidacy was no longer a joke. His popularity drew large television audiences and online clicks, boosting media organizations’ revenues while generating free publicity for the candidate. The relationship would remain symbiotic throughout the Trump era.

As Trump began to nail down the GOP nomination in 2016, he spoke critically about NATO. He focused mostly on America’s disproportionate share of the financial burden, though he occasionally called the alliance “obsolete” in an era of counterterrorism and voiced his hope to “get along” with Putin, prompting some concerns inside the national-security world.

Those concerns would be supercharged by a small group of former journalists turned private investigators who operated out of a small office near Dupont Circle in Washington under the name Fusion GPS.

In late May 2016, Glenn Simpson, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and a Fusion cofounder, flew to London to meet Steele, a former official within MI6, the British spy agency. Steele had his own investigative firm, Orbis Business Intelligence. By then, Fusion had assembled records on Trump's business dealings and associates, some with Russia ties, from a previous, now terminated engagement. The client for the old job was the *Washington Free Beacon*, a conservative online publication backed in part by Paul Singer, a hedge fund billionaire and a Republican Trump critic. Weeks before the trip to London, Fusion signed a new research contract with the law firm representing the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign.

Simpson not only had a new client, but Fusion's mission had changed, from collection of public records to human intelligence gathering related to Russia. Over lasagna at an Italian restaurant at Heathrow Airport, Simpson told Steele about the project, indicating only that his client was a law firm, according to a book co-authored by Simpson. The other author of the 2019 book, *Crime in Progress*, was Peter Fritsch, also a former *WSJ* reporter and Fusion's other cofounder. Soon after the London meeting, Steele agreed to probe Trump's activities in Russia. Simpson and I exchanged emails over the course of several months. But he ultimately declined to respond to my last message, which had included extensive background and questions about Fusion's actions.

As that work was underway, in June 2016, the Russia cloud over the election darkened. First, the *Washington Post* broke the story that the Democratic National Committee had been hacked, a breach the party's cyber experts attributed, in the story, to Russia. (The *Post* reporter, Ellen Nakashima, received "off the record" guidance from FBI cyber experts just prior to publication, according to FBI documents made public in 2022.) Soon, a purported Romanian hacker, Guccifer 2.0, published DNC data, starting with the party's negative research on Trump, followed by the DNC dossier on its own candidate, Clinton.

The next week, the *Post* weighed in with a long piece, headlined "Inside Trump's Financial Ties to Russia and His Unusual Flattery of Vladimir Putin." It began with Trump's trip to Moscow in 2013 for his Miss Universe pageant, quickly summarized Trump's desire for a "new partnership" with Russia, coupled with a possible overhaul of NATO, and delved into a collection of Trump advisers with financial ties to Russia. The piece covered the dependence of Trump's global real estate empire on wealthy Russians, as well as the "multiple" times Trump himself had tried and failed to do a real estate deal in Moscow.

The lead author of the story, Tom Hamburger, was a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter who had worked with Simpson; the two were friends, according to Simpson's book. By 2022, emails between the two from the summer of 2016 surfaced in court records, showing their frequent interactions on Trump-related matters. Hamburger, who recently retired from the *Post*, declined to comment. The *Post* also declined to comment on Hamburger's ties to Fusion.

By July, Trump was poised to become the GOP nominee at the party's convention in Cleveland. On July 18, the first day of the gathering, Josh Rogin, an opinion columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote a piece about the party's platform position on Ukraine under the headline "Trump campaign guts GOP's anti-Russian stance on Ukraine." The story would turn out to be an overreach. Subsequent investigations found that the original draft of the platform was actually strengthened by adding language on tightening sanctions on Russia for Ukraine-related actions, if warranted, and calling for "additional assistance" for Ukraine. What was rejected was a proposal to supply arms to Ukraine, something the Obama administration hadn't done.

Rogin's piece nevertheless caught the attention of other journalists. Within a few days, Paul Krugman, in his *Times* column, called Trump the "Siberian candidate," citing the "watering down" of the platform. Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor of *The Atlantic*, labeled Trump a "de facto agent" of Putin. He cited the Rogin report and a recent interview Trump gave to the *Times* where he emphasized the importance of NATO members paying their bills and didn't answer a question on whether nations in arrears could count on American support if Russia attacked them.

But other journalists saw the Rogin piece differently, introducing a level of skepticism that most of the press would ignore. Masha Gessen, a Russian-American journalist and harsh Putin critic, writing in the *New York Review of Books* that month, said labeling Trump a Putin agent was "deeply flawed." Gessen, in articles then and a few months later, said the accounts of the platform revisions were "slightly misleading" because sanctions, something the "Russians had hoped to see gone," remained, while the proposal for lethal aid to Ukraine was, at the time, a step too far for most experts and the Obama administration.

Matt Taibbi, who spent time as a journalist in Russia, also grew uneasy about the Trump-Russia coverage. Eventually, he would compare the media's performance to its failures during the run-up to the Iraq War. "It was a career-changing moment for me," he said in an interview. The "more neutral approach" to reporting "went completely out the window once Trump got elected. Saying anything publicly about the story that did not align with the narrative—the repercussions were huge for any of us that did not go there. That is crazy."

Taibbi, as well as Glenn Greenwald, then at *The Intercept*, and Aaron Mate, then at *The Nation*, left their publications and continue to be widely followed, though they are now independent journalists. All were publicly critical of the press's Trump-Russia narrative. (Taibbi, over the last month, surged back into the spotlight after Elon Musk, the new owner of Twitter, gave him access to the tech platform's files.)

At the end of July, the DNC held its nominating convention in Philadelphia. In attendance were legions of journalists, as well as Simpson and Fritsch. On the eve of the events, the hacked emails from the DNC were dumped, angering supporters of Bernie Sanders, who saw confirmation in the messages of their fears that the committee had favored Hillary.

The disclosures, while not helpful to Clinton, energized the promotion of the Russia narrative to the media by her aides and Fusion investigators. On July 24, Robby

Mook, Hillary's campaign manager, told CNN and ABC that Trump himself had "changed the platform" to become "more pro-Russian" and that the hack and dump "was done by the Russians for the purpose of helping Donald Trump," according to unnamed "experts."

Still, the campaign's effort "did not succeed," campaign spokeswoman Jennifer Palmieri would write in the *Washington Post* the next year. So, on July 26, the campaign allegedly upped the ante. Behind the scenes, Clinton was said to have approved a "proposal from one of her foreign-policy advisers to vilify Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference by Russian security services," according to notes, declassified in 2020, of a briefing CIA director John Brennan gave President Obama a few days later.

Trump, unaware of any plan to tie him to the Kremlin, pumped life into the sputtering Russia narrative. Asked about the DNC hacks by reporters at his Trump National Doral Miami golf resort on July 27, he said, "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the thirty thousand emails that are missing." The quip was picked up everywhere. Clinton national-security aide Jake Sullivan quickly seized on the remarks, calling them "a national-security issue." The comment became a major exhibit over the next several years for those who believed Trump had an untoward relationship with Russia. Clinton's own Russia baggage, meantime, began to fade into the background.

Hope Hicks, Trump's press aide, later testified to Congress that she told Trump some in the media were taking his statement "quite literally" but that she believed it was "a joke."

I asked Trump what he meant. "If you look at the whole tape," he said in an interview, "it is obvious that it was being said sarcastically," a point he made at the time.

I reviewed the tape. After several minutes of repeated questions about Russia, Trump's facial demeanor evolved, to what seemed like his TV entertainer mode; that's when, in response to a final Russia question, he said the widely quoted words. Then, appearing to be playful, he said the leakers "would probably be rewarded mightily by the press" if they found Clinton's long-lost emails, because they contained "some beauties." Trump, after talking with Hicks that day in Florida, sought to control the damage by tweeting that whoever had Clinton's deleted emails "should share them with the FBI."

That didn't mute the response. Sullivan immediately jumped in, saying the remarks at Doral encouraged "espionage."

On another track, Fusion became involved in an effort to promote another unproven conspiracy theory, that Trump's company was involved in back-channel communications with a Russian bank. Clinton personally supported pitching a reporter to explore the story as the campaign was not "totally confident" of its accuracy, according to 2022 court testimony by Mook. The back-channel theory was pushed to the media and the FBI at the same time, though the campaign did not direct and was not aware of all the various efforts.

Hundreds of emails were exchanged between Fusion employees and reporters for such outlets as ABC, the *Wall Street Journal*, Yahoo, the *Washington Post*, *Slate*, Reuters, and the *Times* during the last months of the campaign; they involved sharing of

“raw” Trump-related information and hints to contact government and campaign officials to bolster the information’s credibility, according to a federal prosecutor’s court filings in 2022. The lawyer who hired Fusion, Marc Elias, testified, in 2022, that he would brief Sullivan and other Clinton campaign officials about Fusion’s findings, having been updated himself through regular meetings with Simpson and Fritsch. With Elias as the intermediary, the Fusion founders could write in 2019 that “no one in the company has ever met or spoken to” Clinton.

In mid-August, after the *Times* published an investigation into the Ukrainian business dealings of Paul Manafort, Trump’s campaign chairman since May, the longtime Republican resigned. Manafort’s ties to business interests and a pro-Russian political party in Ukraine were well known, but the *Times* obtained a “secret ledger” purporting to show cash payments of almost \$13 million to Manafort. Manafort denied he dealt in cash and explained that the payments covered expenses for his whole team, but he nevertheless resigned from his post. (In a 2022 memoir, Manafort wrote that the amounts of money in the ledger were “in the range of what I had been paid” but “the cash angle was clearly wrong.”) Manafort’s finances and his work for Ukraine would eventually lead to his being convicted of multiple crimes, jailed, and then pardoned by Trump. (The Ukraine-related cases were based on banking records and wire transfers, as opposed to cash.) The *Times* won a Pulitzer Prize for the work on Manafort.

In late August, Nevada Democrat Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, wrote a letter to FBI director James Comey, hoping to prod the agency into probing Trump’s Russia ties and Russian election influence efforts. While not naming the Trump aide, Reid’s letter said “questions have been raised” about a volunteer foreign-policy adviser who had business ties in Russia, including their recent meetings with “high-ranking sanctioned individuals” in Russia. That fit the description of a recent, unsubstantiated Fusion/Steele dossier report, about Carter Page, a Trump volunteer with his own business dealings in Russia and previous contacts with Russian officials.

Reid, who died in 2021, never publicly disclosed how he knew about that information, but in an interview for the HBO documentary *Agents of Chaos* a few years before his death, he said that he first heard about the dossier from two unidentified “men that worked in the press for a long time,” according to a transcript of the interview.

By the time Reid wrote the letter, some reporters, aware of the dossier’s Page allegations, had pursued them, but no one had published the details. Hamburger, of the *Washington Post*, told Simpson the Page allegations were found to be “bullshit” and “impossible” by the paper’s Moscow correspondent, according to court records.

But not everyone held back. In late September, Michael Isikoff, chief investigative correspondent at Yahoo News, published a story about the allegation, confirmed that Reid was referring to Page, and added a new detail that he says was key: a senior law enforcement source said the Page matters were “being looked at.” That was accurate—the FBI was already investigating Steele’s dossier—but it would later emerge that the FBI clandestinely surveilled Page and those he communicated with on the campaign based on seriously flawed applications to the secret surveillance court. The applications not only relied heavily on the unsubstantiated dossier, but they left out

exculpatory evidence, including Page’s previous cooperation with the CIA and more recent statements he made to an undercover FBI informant, according to a subsequent Justice Department inquiry. Page would quickly deny the allegations to other reporters and write a letter to Comey denouncing the “completely false media reports” and mentioning his “decades” of having “interacted” with the “FBI and CIA.” But, after the Yahoo piece, he stepped down from his volunteer position with the campaign.

The Clinton campaign put out a statement on Twitter, linking to what it called the “bombshell report” on Yahoo, but did not disclose that the campaign secretly paid the researchers who pitched it to Isikoff. In essence, the campaign was boosting, through the press, a story line it had itself engineered.

Isikoff says he first learned about the Page allegations when he met that September with Steele in Washington, a meeting arranged by Fusion. After being the first reporter to go public with Steele’s claims, Isikoff, by late 2018, began publicly casting doubt about their accuracy—earning praise from Trump—and had a falling-out with Simpson, his former friend. In a 2022 interview, Isikoff pointed to his earlier description of the dossier as “third hand stuff” and added that, “in retrospect, it never should have been given the credence it was.”

The 2016 dossier’s conspiracy claim was never corroborated by the media, and the supposed plot involving the Russian bank, Alfa Bank, didn’t fare much better. Still, that fall Fritsch made frantic efforts to persuade reporters from several outlets, including Isikoff, to publish the bank story. Their best hope appeared to be the *Times*.

The Clinton campaign, in mid-September, was eagerly anticipating a “bombshell” story on “Trump-Russia” from the *Times*. It was causing a “Trump freak out,” headlined a private September 18 memo by Sidney Blumenthal, a longtime close Clinton confidant. His memo circulated among top campaign aides, the two Fusion leaders, Elias, and Michael Sussmann, then a partner in the same firm as Elias. (The memo was made public in 2022.)

Two hours after Sussmann received the memo, he texted the private phone of James Baker, the general counsel of the FBI, seeking a meeting on a “sensitive” matter. They met the next afternoon, where Sussmann briefed him about the back-channel allegations. Sussmann upped the ante with Baker by pointing out that the media—soon understood to be the *Times*—was about to publish something about the supposed secret Russian communication link.

Sussmann later testified to Congress that he gave the story to a *Times* reporter, Eric Lichtblau. The reporter and the lawyer had started communicating at the beginning of September, according to emails filed in court. (Sussmann was acquitted in 2022 of a charge that he had lied to Baker about who he was representing when he delivered the Alfa Bank allegations.)

Lichtblau later paired up with Steven Lee Myers, a former Moscow hand for the *Times*. Whereas Myers, in an interview, said he saw some “red flags” in the Alfa Bank tip, Lichtblau, he added, “believed in the Alfa thing more than I did.”

A few days after Sussmann’s meeting with Baker, Myers and Lichtblau met with the FBI, where officials, including Baker, asked them to hold off on publishing anything

until the bureau could further investigate the allegation, according to the journalists and public records. The *Times* agreed, and the bureau quickly concluded “there was nothing there,” according to Baker’s testimony and other evidence at Sussmann’s trial. Once the *Times* learned of the dead end, the story went into remission as Baquet told the reporters, “You don’t have it yet,” according to Myers and other current and former *Times* journalists.

In early October, the intelligence community put out a brief statement concluding that Russia had been behind the recent hacks, a pattern of behavior “not new to Moscow.” But, the report continued, it would be “extremely difficult,” even for a nation-state, to alter voter ballots or election data.

The report was quickly lost in a frenzied news cycle. First, the *Post* published a tape recording of Trump bragging, in vulgar terms, about some of his sexual activities. Then WikiLeaks published the first of a weeks-long series of leaked emails from the email account of John Podesta, Clinton’s campaign chairman, causing more problems for her campaign. Two weeks later the *Times* would report that a private security group had concluded that the GRU, a Russian intelligence agency, was behind the Podesta hack. (The Justice Department, in 2018, charged twelve GRU officials for the Podesta and DNC hacks, but the charges have never been litigated.)

As the election entered its final weeks, Lichtblau thought there was a bigger story beyond the FBI rejection of the Alfa Bank theory; the bureau, the paper had learned, was conducting a broader counterintelligence investigation into possible Russian ties to Trump aides. In mid-October, two *Times* reporters, Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo, were in California, where they met with a top federal official who cautioned them about the larger FBI inquiry, according to current and former *Times* reporters. (FBI records show that then-deputy director Andrew McCabe met the two reporters at the Broken Yoke Café in San Diego on October 16, during a conference there. I exchanged emails with McCabe in September, but after I sent him a detailed list of questions, he didn’t respond.)

After Baquet heard the feedback from California, the story stayed on hold, according to current and former *Times* journalists. Finally, at the end of the month, the languishing story was published. The headline read “Investigating Donald Trump, FBI Sees No Clear Link to Russia.” The top of the piece dealt with the FBI’s doubts about the Alfa Bank allegation, and waited until the tenth paragraph to disclose the broader inquiry. It also noted the FBI believed the hacking operation “was aimed at disrupting the presidential election rather than electing Mr. Trump.” The piece mentioned a letter to Comey the day before from Senator Reid, who again was trying to spur the FBI to look into what he believed was “explosive information.” The letter, according to Myers, was an impetus for publishing the story. Another factor, *Times* journalists said, was the publication earlier that day of a piece about the Alfa-Trump allegation in *Slate*, which wrote less critically about the supposed back channel at length, though the title framed it as a question.

That piece's author, Franklin Foer, worked closely with Fusion, forwarding drafts of his stories to the private investigative firm prior to their publication, according to court records. Foer, now at *The Atlantic*, declined to respond to an email seeking comment.

Fusion's co-founders would later call the *Times* story "a journalistic travesty." Baquet, in April 2018, told Erik Wemple, the *Post*'s media critic, that the story was "not inaccurate based on what we knew at the time," but, he added, the "headline was off." A few weeks after Wemple's column, the *Times* explained to its readers what Baquet meant: in a piece about the FBI inquiry, the reporters said the headline that October night "gave an air of finality to an investigation that was just beginning" and that "the story significantly played down the case" because unnamed law enforcement officials in 2016 had "cautioned against drawing any conclusions."

That Halloween night the Clinton campaign, anticipating the imminent publication of the Alfa Bank story, was prepared to "light it up," Fritsch emailed a reporter that morning. Another story Fusion helped arrange appeared that day, too, in the left-leaning magazine *Mother Jones*. It said a "veteran spy" had provided the FBI information about an alleged five-year Russian operation to cultivate and coordinate with Trump. That came from Steele's dossier. Within hours, the FBI contacted Steele, who "confirmed" he had been a source for the article. After working with the bureau for several months as a confidential informant on the Russia inquiry, he was terminated by the FBI, bureau documents show.

Before the election, the author of the article, David Corn, provided a copy of the dossier to Baker, the FBI's general counsel, a longtime acquaintance. "It was a standard journalistic ploy to try and get information out of them, because I knew they had the dossier," Corn said in an interview. But, he added, "it didn't work."

At 8:36 at night on October 31, the campaign lit up, as Fritsch promised, on Twitter. Hillary tweeted out a statement by Jake Sullivan about "Trump's secret line of communication to Russia." Her aide only cited the *Slate* story on Alfa Bank.

Clinton had also been aware of the *Times*' unpublished story. She hoped it "would push the Russia story onto the front burner of the election," but was "crestfallen" when an aide showed her the headline, according to an account in *Merchants of Truth*, a 2019 book about the news media by Jill Abramson, a former executive editor of the *Times*. The story was a closely guarded secret, but campaign operatives had been pushing it with *Times* reporters and were aware of some internal deliberations, according to the book by Fusion's founders. Moreover, the candidate herself was aware of efforts to push the Trump-Russia story to the media, according to court testimony.

At the FBI, agents who debunked the Alfa Bank allegations appreciated the *Times*' report: "made us look on top of our game," one agent messaged another, according to court records.

After the election that ushered Trump into office, the *Times* began to undertake some soul-searching about its Trump-Russia coverage. The intelligence community did its own assessment on Russia, including a new take by the FBI.

Lichtblau left the *Times* in 2017, but continued to believe in the Alfa Bank story. He wrote a piece for Time magazine in 2019 about the supposed secret channel, even after the FBI, and other investigators, had debunked it.

In December, President Obama secretly ordered a quick assessment by the intelligence community of Russia's involvement in the election. Instead of the usual group of seventeen agencies, however, it was coordinated by the Director of National Intelligence and produced by the National Security Agency, which gathers electronic intercepts, the CIA, and the FBI.

In mid-December the *Post* reported that the FBI now backed the CIA view that Russia aimed to help Trump win the election, compared with a broader set of motivations, as the *Times* had reported on October 31. Strzok, the FBI official running the probe, texted a colleague about the unprecedented wave of leaks: "our sisters have been leaking like mad," he wrote, referring to intelligence agencies like the CIA. Strzok now believes the leaks originated elsewhere. "I now believe," he told me in a 2022 interview, "that it is more likely they came not from the CIA but from senior levels of the US government or Congress."

Trump, unaware of the coming tornado, including the most salacious contents of the dossier, set out to form a government and make peace with the press. He made the rounds of news organizations, meeting with broadcast anchors, editors at Condé Nast magazines, and the *Times*.

Trump's longest sit-down after the election was with the *Times*, including the then-publisher, editors, and reporters. For seventy-five minutes Trump's love/hate relationship with his hometown paper was on display.

At the end, he called the *Times* a "world jewel."

He added, "I hope we can get along."

## Chapter 2: The origins of fake news

In a windowless conference room at Trump Tower, on January 6, 2017, Comey briefed the president-elect about the dossier about him and Russia. Trump had heard, from aides, media "rumblings" about Russia, but, in an interview, he said he was unaware of the dossier until he met with Comey.

Comey's one-on-one with Trump came after the intelligence community briefed him on a new "Intelligence Community Assessment" (ICA) on Russian activities in 2016. The ICA claimed that Russia had mounted an "influence campaign" aimed at the election but had not targeted or compromised vote-tallying systems. Its most important, and controversial, finding was that "Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump," as opposed to Russia's usual goal, which was generally sowing chaos in the United States. An unclassified version of the ICA was released the same day in Washington. The dossier, actually a series of reports in 2016, was included in the assessment, but it remained secret, temporarily, because a summary of it was attached as a classified appendix.

"The only thing that really resonated," Trump said about the briefing, "was when he said four hookers," a reference to the unsubstantiated claim of a salacious encounter in

Moscow. Trump's immediate reaction was that "this is not going to be good for the family," he recalled. But his wife, Melania, "did not believe it at all," telling him, "That's not your deal with the golden shower," Trump recalled.

Trump's marriage might have survived but his hoped for honeymoon with the press was about to end. The dossier, largely suppressed by the media in 2016, was about to surface.

But first came the ICA. It received massive, and largely uncritical coverage.

Some other reporters weren't convinced. Gessen called the ICA "flawed" because it was based on "conjecture" and incorporated "misreported or mistranslated" and "false" public statements. They criticized the major media, including the *New York Times*, for describing the ICA as a "strong statement."

In an interview, Gessen said that their skepticism left them isolated and they began to "lose confidence."

The dossier wound up in the ICA because the FBI pushed it, despite reservations at the CIA. Agency analysts saw it as an "internet rumor," according to Justice Department documents. Two "senior managers in the CIA mission center responsible for Russia" also had reservations, according to a memoir by Brennan, the head of the agency at the time. Brennan testified that it didn't inform the report's analysis or judgments, though Adm. Mike Rogers, the head of the NSA, told the House Intelligence Committee it was "part of the overall ICA review/approval process." Whatever its significance, the fact that top government officials were using the dossier in an official report and a presidential briefing was the news hook the media needed.

On Sunday, January 8, McCabe, the FBI's deputy director, sent a memo to the bureau's leadership headlined "the flood is coming." He noted that CNN was "close to" publishing a piece about the dossier, with the "trigger" being Comey's brief and the dossier's attachment to the ICA.

The dam broke two days later when CNN disclosed the Comey briefing. Hours later, *BuzzFeed News* posted the full dossier, with a warning that the material was "unverified and potentially unverifiable." Both outlets cited the government use of the dossier to justify their going ahead.

It was a twist to the symbiotic relationship between the media and the national-security apparatus; usually, reporters use pending government action as a peg for their stories. In this case the government cited the media for its actions. Comey, in his 2018 book *A Higher Loyalty*, wrote that CNN had "informed the FBI press office they were going to run with it as soon as the next day," so "I could see no way out of" telling Trump. Comey also cited CNN's imminent disclosure in a subsequent explanation to Trump, according to Comey's notes.

Ben Smith, then the editor of *BuzzFeed News*, said in an interview the decision was a "journalistic no-brainer," especially since *BuzzFeed* was a "slightly fringy place." A *BuzzFeed* reporter, Ken Bensinger, got access to the dossier via David Kramer, a close associate of then-senator John McCain. He photographed the pages when Kramer was out of the room, according to Kramer's testimony in a libel suit. Kramer also testified he would not have granted "access" to Bensinger if he knew "*BuzzFeed* would publish."

(Kramer declined to comment after I sent him an email explaining what this article would say about him.)

Bensinger had been vetting the dossier, but was on vacation at Disney World with his family when CNN aired its story. A *BuzzFeed* editor called him to say the publication planned to publish the entire document, a possibility that had not previously been discussed, Bensinger said in an interview. A few minutes later, in a call with Smith and other editors, Bensinger voiced his opposition to publishing the raw material but was told the decision had already been made. Smith declined to discuss Bensinger's role, suggesting I ask him directly. (Bensinger joined the *New York Times* in August; Smith left last January, after two years as a media columnist, to co-found a new global media outlet, Semafor.)

Though many in the media later criticized Smith's decision—some even called it “fake news”—Smith held his ground in our conversation. He said some publications had “problematic” and “secret” relationships with the dossier's sponsor or author that prevented them from revealing the information. (*CJR* defended *BuzzFeed*'s decision at the time, but in 2021, with the dossier's credibility crumbling, Kyle Pope, *CJR*'s editor, said that was a mistake.)

Wolf Blitzer, a CNN host, said shortly after the story broke that “CNN would not have done a story about the dossier's existence” if officials “hadn't told Trump about it.” CNN, in its story, also said the sources used by the author of the report, described as a former British intelligence agent, soon to be outed as Steele, had been “checked out” over the past few months and found to be “credible enough.”

It turns out that a few weeks after the FBI began checking out the dossier, in the fall of 2016, it offered Steele as much as \$1 million if he could offer corroboration and he didn't, according to court testimony by an FBI official in October.

Steele, in response to my questions earlier this year, wrote that his “raw intelligence reports” were meant only “for client oral briefing, rather than a finished and assessed written intelligence product,” which would have contained “sourcing caveats.” Thus, Steele wrote, “the quality of the Dossier reports was fine imo.” He said only one minor detail had been “disproved,” with the rest either corroborated or unverified.

In response to follow-up questions, he provided additional corroborative information, but it was mostly off the record. In a lengthy 2017 interview with the FBI, Steele attributed a large majority of the dossier to his “primary sub-source,” according to the FBI report. But, in response to my questions, he declined to discuss the work of his main source, Igor Danchenko, a Russian living in the US. CNN's story claimed “his [Steele's] investigations related to Mr. Trump were initially funded by groups and donors supporting Republican opponents of Mr. Trump during the GOP primaries.” But the sponsors of the dossier, writing in a book in 2019, made clear the dossier came later, as a separate project, and the research trove commissioned by anti-Trump Republicans was never shared with Steele. Steele confirmed that in his response to my questions. (Other news outlets made the same mistake—and CNN repeated it in August 2018—though when the Associated Press got it wrong in February 2018 the news agency ran a correction the next day. CNN, in a deep dive into the dossier in November 2021,

correctly described the dossier sponsors. The 2017 CNN story later won the Merriman Smith Award from the White House Correspondents' Association; the citation noted how the network story made the dossier "part of the lexicon.")

But it would be the fallout from the dossier, even more than the document itself, that would be the most enduring legacy for Trump. At a news conference the next day, Trump said "I think it was Russia" that was behind the hacking and Putin "should not be doing it. He won't be doing it. Russia will have greater respect for our country." After Trump trashed CNN for its report, the network's correspondent Jim Acosta interrupted Mara Liasson of NPR to ask a question as part of a response to Trump's comments. Trump declined, saying "you are fake news," the first time he had publicly labeled an individual journalist using those words. Trump would go on to make the words a hallmark of his presidency—about once a day in his first year alone—and the phrase became Collier's Dictionary's Word of the Year for 2017.

Jonathan Karl, the ABC White House correspondent, in his 2020 book *Front Row at the Trump Show*, wrote that "Acosta was, in fact, rudely interrupting Mara Liasson," and most reporters saw it that way. More broadly, Karl said the media coverage of Trump was "relentlessly and exhaustively negative," rather than "striving for fairness and objectivity," and did "as much to undermine the credibility of the free press as the president's taunts." A year later, Karl wrote another Trump book, *Betrayal*, that called out the former president's "lying" and "incompetence," culminating in "the betrayal of democracy at the end." He acknowledged his criticism could make him "sound like a member of the opposition party," but the ABC correspondent was okay with that: "so be it," he added.

It didn't take long for Steele's name to become public as the author of the dossier. Bradley Hope, then at the *Wall Street Journal*, said in an interview that he discovered Steele's name after talking to two people in the private intelligence world. They quickly told him the *BuzzFeed*-published reports contained clues indicating they were Steele's, including the "exact style" and "the shoddiness of it." Other sources, he said, "verified" Steele's role.

Steele, in his response to me, accused one of the Journal coauthors, Alan Cullison, of a "breach of confidence" with Kramer, the McCain confidant who provided the dossier to *BuzzFeed*. Steele went on to also attack Hope for what "looks like a post-hoc cover story," adding, in a subsequent reply, that his explanation "seems implausible" based on the formatting his company uses. Finally, Steele linked the story to a "politically partisan line taken against me" and others "by the *WSJ* to benefit Trump and the Republicans."

Hope, in an email, called Steele's claim "100% false," adding that Steele's "conspiracy speculation" leads Hope "to doubt the whole analytical framework" Steele "uses to view the world." Cullison, in an email, said "Kramer did not tell me" Steele's identity and "the story of Steele's identity was born of Bradley's work." Kramer declined to comment after I disclosed all sides of the dispute to him.

The *Times* quickly weighed in after the Journal disclosure, first with an explainer that said it would not name the "research firm and the former British spy because of a confidential source agreement with The *New York Times*." Yet hours later, the paper did

just that, publishing another story that identified Fusion as the firm that hired Steele. (The online version of the explainer was later altered to identify the parties but the newspaper never disclosed the change to readers.)

The *WSJ* and the *Times* stories were not well received by Fusion. At first, they feared for Steele's safety. Then they felt the *Times*' behavior was "improper," because it had "unilaterally" published material "it had learned off the record," the founders wrote in their book.

Hours after the *Times* story ran, the *Post* upped the temperature on Russia even more. Columnist David Ignatius disclosed that incoming national security adviser Michael Flynn had phoned Russia's US ambassador "several times" at the end of the year, according to "a senior US government official." Ignatius noted the talks had come on the day the Obama administration had expelled Russian diplomats in retaliation for the country's hacking activities, so he questioned whether Flynn had "violated" the spirit of an "unenforced" law barring US citizens from trying to resolve "disputes."

Ignatius went on to write that it might be a "good thing" if Trump's team was trying to de-escalate the situation. But Ignatius didn't know the substance of the conversations. Hours before his story went online, Ignatius appeared on MSNBC and, while not disclosing his upcoming Flynn exclusive, said "it was hard to argue" against the need to "improve relations with Russia."

The existence of Flynn's talks with the ambassador was known by Adam Entous, a reporter then at the *Post*, but he held off writing anything because the mere fact of a contact wasn't enough to justify a story. "It could have been something innocent," Entous, now with the *Times*, said in an interview, "something he would be praised for."

On the heels of the Ignatius column, the FBI's "investigative tempo increased," according to FBI records, and the Senate intelligence panel announced an inquiry into Russia's election activities. (The House Intelligence Committee announced a similar effort later that month.)

Two days after the Senate announcement, Bob Woodward, appearing on Fox News, called the dossier a "garbage document" that "never should have" been part of an intelligence briefing. He later told me that the *Post* wasn't interested in his harsh criticism of the dossier. After his remarks on Fox, Woodward said he "reached out to people who covered this" at the paper, identifying them only generically as "reporters," to explain why he was so critical. Asked how they reacted, Woodward said: "To be honest, there was a lack of curiosity on the part of the people at the *Post* about what I had said, why I said this, and I accepted that and I didn't force it on anyone."

Trump at the time tweeted a "thank you" to Woodward and asked the media to "apologize." That, of course, never happened. Trump's relationship with the media, by then, had reached "the point of no return," according to a former aide.

As Trump prepared to take office, the possibility of another Watergate was on the mind of some reporters, several journalists told me, intensifying the competition. "There was a feeding frenzy to try and be first with the story," Entous explained to me.

The day before Trump's inauguration, the *Times* featured a story: "Intercepted Russian Communications Part of Inquiry into Trump Associates." The piece, once

posted, evoked a strong reaction from Strzok, who was leading the FBI inquiry: “no substance and largely wrong,” he texted, adding “the press is going to undermine its credibility.”

Hours later, Liz Spayd, the *Times*’ public editor, posted a column criticizing the October 31 piece, which reported that the FBI had found no clear link between Trump and Russia. Spayd wrote that the story “downplayed its significance” and disclosed that the FBI had asked the paper to delay publication. Spayd also contrasted the paper’s “relentless” coverage of the Clinton email matter with its “timid” pursuit of the Russia investigation in 2016. Baquet defended his handling of the story to Spayd.

After the column came out, Baquet quickly emailed several colleagues, saying Spayd’s piece was “really bad,” mainly for its disclosure of confidential information regarding deliberations about whether to publish the Alfa Bank matter. One year later, Baquet told the *Post*’s Wemple that “we would have cast that [October] story differently but it was never meant to give the Trump campaign a clean bill of health.”

Spayd, in an email to me, complained that the *Times* had “two standards.” Before the election, she wrote, the October 31 piece was “downplayed” because the paper “didn’t know whether the allegations held up,” but after the election, “the *Times* produced a steady stream of stories about whether Trump conspired with Russians to win the election without knowing whether the allegation was actually true.”

Trump told me he noticed the difference in coverage once he took office. Not only did he have to run the country, he had to fight off “unbelievably fake” stories. Spayd, a former editor of *CJR*, left the *Times* a few months after the column was published, and the position of public editor was ultimately abolished.

Even as those debates were unfolding in the *Times* newsroom, the paper was about to land what it thought was its bombshell. The paper was so sure of itself that it let a filmmaker capture internal deliberations, which wound up airing in a 2018 series on Showtime called *The Fourth Estate*.

As the story is being edited, Mark Mazzetti, an investigative reporter in the Washington bureau who was also helping edit some of the Trump-Russia coverage, is shown telling senior editors he is “fairly sure members of Russian intelligence” were “having conversations with members of Trump’s campaign.” (The story would say the conversations were based on “phone records and intercepted calls” and involved “senior Russian intelligence officials.”) He asks Baquet, “Are we feeding into a conspiracy” with the “recurring themes of contacts?”

Baquet responded that he wanted the story, up high, to “show the range” and level of “contacts” and “meetings, some of which may be completely innocent” and not “sinister,” followed by a “nut” or summary “graph,” explaining why “this is something that continues to hobble them.”

Baquet’s desire to flush out the details of supposed contacts is similar to his well-founded skepticism in October 2016 about the supposed computer links between a Russian bank and the Trump organization.

Mazzetti reports back that the story is “nailed down.”

Baquet asks, “Can you pull it off?”

“Oh yeah,” Mazzetti replies.

So Baquet signs off, adding that it’s the “biggest story in years.”

Elisabeth Bumiller, the Washington bureau chief, adds her seal of approval: “There’ll be hair on fire.”

As for the specific details Baquet asked to be included in the story, the reporters simply wrote that their sources “would not disclose many details.” The piece did contain a disclaimer up high, noting that their sources, “so far,” had seen “no evidence” of the Trump campaign colluding with the Russians.

But in the next paragraph it reported anonymous officials being “alarmed” about the supposed Russian-Trump contacts because they occurred while Trump made his comments in Florida in July 2016 wondering whether Russia could find Hillary’s missing emails.

The story said “the FBI declined to comment.” In fact, the FBI was quickly ripping the piece to shreds, in a series of annotated comments by Strzok, who managed the Russia case. His analysis, prepared for his bosses, found numerous inaccuracies, including a categorical refutation of the lead and headline; “we are unaware,” Strzok wrote, “of ANY Trump advisers engaging in conversations with Russian intelligence officials.” Comey immediately checked with other intelligence agencies to see if they had any such evidence, came up empty, and relayed his findings to a closed Senate briefing, according to testimony at a Senate hearing months later.

In the article’s discussion of the dossier, it described Steele as having “a credible track record” and noted the FBI had recently contacted “some” of Steele’s “sources.” Actually, the FBI had recently interviewed Steele’s “primary” source, a Russian working at a Washington think tank, who told them Steele’s reporting was “misstated or exaggerated” and the Russian’s own information was based on “rumor and speculation,” according to notes of the interview released later. The day the *Times* piece appeared in print, Strzok emailed colleagues and reported that Steele “may not be in a position to judge the reliability” of his network of sources, according to Justice Department documents released in 2020.

CNN quickly followed the *Times* story with a more modest account, noting Trump advisers had been in “constant communication during the campaign with Russians known to US intelligence.” The White House, a few days later, told reporters that the two top FBI officials, Comey and McCabe, had privately told the White House that the *Times* story was inaccurate, with McCabe calling it “bullshit.” This was consistent with Strzok’s analysis, but the FBI, following custom, stayed silent, according to the pool report for White House correspondents and a former government official. The White House had told the FBI it was getting “crushed” on the *Times* story, according to the pool report, which most media outlets ignored.

Strzok, in an interview, said his analysis was done for senior FBI leadership, including “Comey, Andy, and Bill” Priestap, his supervisor, “to say there were problems there.” I emailed Comey’s lawyer and a close associate seeking an interview. Comey never responded.

Trump allies put out a similar message about the *Times* piece. Devin Nunes, then the Republican chairman of the House intelligence panel, repeatedly reached out to reporters to try and knock it down, noting his investigation, which included access to FBI and other intelligence material, had seen no such evidence as cited by the *Times*. But reporters were skeptical. One asked Nunes if he was working with the White House in “some sort of coordinated effort to push back,” according to a transcript.

Nunes, at one briefing in the wake of the *Times* piece, seemed to toss in the towel: “I can’t control what you guys write,” the transcript shows. It wasn’t until June, after there was a public rebuke of the story by Comey, that news outlets saw fit to question its reliability.

The *Times* piece “was the peak of the frenzy” over Trump and Russia, Cullison, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who covered the issue, told me. “It’s kind of like the Watergate burglary,” Woodward said, because it helped “launch the issue.” The day after the story appeared in print, Trump held a press briefing where he called the *Times* story “a joke” and “fake news.”

He was asked whether his use of “fake news” wasn’t “undermining confidence in our news media.”

“No, no,” he replied, he just wanted a more “honest” press. “The public doesn’t believe you people anymore,” and “now, maybe I had something to do with that.”

After his contentious, seventy-seven-minute press briefing in the wake of the *Times* story in February 2017, Trump left for Florida, believing that the *Times* story was “the final nail in the coffin,” according to an aide who went with him.

Soon after his plane landed, he turned to Twitter and called the “FAKE NEWS media” the “enemy of the American people,” citing several news organizations, including the *Times* and CNN.

The phrase was coined more than a decade ago by Pat Caddell, a Democratic pollster going back to the 1970s. Caddell, who died in 2019, became disillusioned with the party, and became an analyst on Fox News. He explained to *The New Yorker* in 2017 why he wound up in Trump’s orbit:

“People said he was just a clown,” he told the writer Jane Mayer, “but I’ve learned that you should always pay attention to successful ‘clowns.’” Mayer reported that Trump met with Caddell in South Carolina, on his way to Florida, and hours before the “enemies” tweet. It was a few days before the 2016 election when Caddell, appearing on a now defunct conservative podcast, *Media Madness*, said the media was on a “political jihad against Trump” and “they’re making themselves the enemies of the American people.”

It went unnoticed. But once Trump adopted, and turbocharged, Caddell’s slogan, the war between the president and the media had been officially declared and chances of a truce were slim.

Marty Baron, the executive editor of the *Post* at the time, thought then that going forward, Trump “would vilify” the press, “actually dehumanize us,” he told the newspaper in 2021 upon his retirement. Just after the 2017 tweet, Baron offered a strong response from the press, even though Trump had not included the *Post* in his list of

enemies: speaking at a conference, he said, “We’re not at war with the administration, we’re at work.”

The *Times* had its own take on the tweet’s “escalating rhetoric” and Trump’s relationship with the Washington press corps. A story published one week later, coauthored by the paper’s White House correspondent, explained how Trump “has stumbled into the most conventional of Washington traps: believing he can master an entrenched political press corps with far deeper connections to the permanent government.”

That echoes how NBC’s chief foreign correspondent, Richard Engel, described the leak of the dossier on MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow Show, hours after it was posted in January. The “intelligence community,” Engel’s “senior intelligence source” had told him, had decided to “drop” the dossier “like a bomb” on Trump because they were “angry” and wanted to “put him on notice” that they needed answers to the Russia-related questions swirling around him.

For Trump and his allies, Engel’s remarks and the *Times* account describe what they saw as a “Deep State” out to get the president. In the days after Trump’s declaration, the *Times* surveyed its new digital subscribers, millions of whom flocked to the paper during his presidency, to better understand their motivations: the administration’s “vilification of the press,” one subscriber replied, in a typical response, according to “New Digital Subscribers Survey” data provided to me by a *Times* staffer.

Trump would often call the *Times* “failing,” including the day after the controversial story about Russia-Trump ties, but in fact the soaring digital-subscriber base throughout his presidency offset the steady fall in revenue from print subscribers and advertising.

On March 1, 2017, the *Times* stood by the accuracy of its explosive story about Trump’s Russia connections but tried some clarification. Whereas the first story cited four anonymous sources, now the *Times* had found “more than a half dozen officials” said to have “confirmed contacts of various kinds.” Then, however, the story muddied the original question of whether Trump associates had contacted “senior Russian intelligence officials” by noting that “the label ‘intelligence official’ is not always cleanly applied in Russia.”

FBI officials thought the story was a mess. Messages later made public from that day indicated the bureau thought the *Times* would try to “correct” its mistakes from a few weeks earlier and “save their reputation.” But, as Strzok saw it, the paper was “doubling down on the inaccuracies.”

Strzok met with reporters from the paper the next day, according to FBI records. When I asked him about his dealings with them he said that “anytime I talked to the media it was at the direction of and with the participation of members of the FBI’s Office of Public Affairs.”

Baquet’s original concerns in mid-February, about distinguishing between “innocent” and “sinister” contacts, were not addressed in the March 1 story. Then, two days later, another *Times* story—“Trump Team’s Links to Russia”—addressed the problem, while referencing the disputed February story. The article noted it would have

been “absurd and contrary to American interests” to avoid meetings with Russians before or after the campaign and that the repeated Trump-related contacts involved “courtesy calls, policy discussions, and business contacts” and “nothing has emerged publicly indicating anything more sinister.” One of the writers interviewed Konstantin Kilimnik, the former Ukrainian business partner of Manafort’s, who ran Trump’s 2016 campaign for a few months and whose name appeared in the February story about Trump aides overheard talking to senior Russian intelligence officials.

Kilimnik was described in the article as having been under investigation in Ukraine in 2016 “on suspicion of ties to Russian spy agencies,” but, the article said, no charges were brought. Kilimnik, born in Russia, told the *Times* that he had never been questioned. If he did have any such ties, “they would arrest me.” Kilimnik, in an email to me, said his interaction then with the *Times* arose because two *Times* reporters joined a “background talk” at a “dinner with a friend.” As was often the case, the news cycle shifted within hours. Early on a Saturday morning, Trump tweeted that his predecessor, Barack Obama, “had my ‘wires tapped’ in Trump Tower” before the election. The claim was quickly denied by spokespersons for Obama and the federal government, and a new line of attack against Trump was opened.

Trump says he based his tweet on something he saw on Fox News that morning. “I was watching Bret Baier Saturday morning,” he said in an interview, referring to an episode that ran the night before, “and he had used the words spying on my campaign.” Trump thought the tweet “was innocuous” until an aide told him, “Sir, the lines are lit up.”

A transcript of Baier’s show, *Special Report*, has him talking about a “wiretap at Trump Tower with some computer and Russian banks,” adding that “the Obama administration was pretty aggressive with a couple of FISAs.”

Most media went big on the wiretapping flap. The next day, James Clapper, the former Director of National Intelligence under Obama, went on *Meet the Press* to say “there was no such wiretap activity.” He also said that during his time in office, which ended January 20, “we had no evidence of such collusion,” speaking of Trump’s campaign and Russia.

The *Post* put the collusion denial at the end of its story, while the *Times* ignored it.

On March 20, Comey appeared before the House Intelligence Committee and gave official blessing to the collusion narrative running rampant in the media. He testified that the FBI was “investigating the nature of any links between individuals associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government, and whether there was any coordination between the campaign and Russia’s efforts.”

Before Comey’s testimony, Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat, read an opening statement in which he quoted from the dossier’s unsubstantiated allegation about Carter Page meeting with a sanctioned Russian official close to Putin in 2016 to discuss an extraordinarily lucrative business deal in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. The California Democrat would go on MSNBC two days later to state that there was “more than circumstantial evidence now” of collusion. He offered no substantiation. Schiff

declined to comment through his press aide, Lauren French, who said, in an email, “this isn’t something we’re going to move forward on.”

The *Post* did a major story a week later that seemed to burnish the dossier’s main conspiracy allegation.

It didn’t hold up. Two weeks after that the *Post* followed with the disclosure of the Carter Page FISA surveillance, a story that turned out to have significant omissions.

The *Post* landed a long story about Sergei Millian, a Belarusian-American businessman, on March 29. The top of the piece identified Millian as the source behind the dossier’s most serious allegation, a “well-developed conspiracy” between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin, the same ground covered by the *Wall Street Journal* and ABC in January. The claim that Millian was a key informant whose information was “central to the dossier” was stated without any attribution or sourcing. In 2021 the *Post* retracted the parts of the story describing Millian as a dossier source after John Durham, a special counsel looking into the origins of the Trump-Russia investigations, indicted Steele’s main source for lying to the FBI. Durham alleged the fact of Millian being a source had been “fabricated.” The *Post* editor’s note explained that Durham’s indictment “contradicted” information in the March story, and additional reporting in 2021 further “undermined” the account. The *Post* also deleted parts of a few other stories that repeated the allegation that Millian was a dossier source.

After the retractions, the *Post* editor who replaced Baron, Sally Buzbee, said to the *Times* that the paper had been “very skeptical about the contents of the dossier.” Some *Post* reporters—though not the authors of the piece—had called the contents “garbage” and “bullshit.” Buzbee and other *Post* journalists declined my requests for an interview. A *Post* spokesperson said that the piece was part of an effort “to scrutinize the origins of the dossier” and that the paper had “made it clear how hard it was to verify the dossier.”

In early April, the *Post* story on Page landed, calling the surveillance “the clearest evidence so far that the FBI had reason to believe during the 2016 presidential campaign that a Trump campaign adviser was in touch with Russian agents. Such contacts are now at the center of an investigation into whether the campaign coordinated with the Russian government to swing the election in Trump’s favor.” It noted Page’s “effusive praise” for Putin and mentioned Schiff’s congressional recitation of the Page allegations in the dossier. Relying on anonymous sources, it gave a vague update on the dossier’s credibility: “some of the information in the dossier had been verified by US intelligence agencies, and some of it hasn’t.”

At the *Times*, the newsroom was irked about getting beaten by the *Post*. “*Times* is angry with us about the WP scoop,” Strzok texted to an FBI colleague, a few days later.

But the *Post* scoop was incomplete. Its anonymous sources mirrored the FBI’s suspicions but left out the bureau’s missteps and exculpatory evidence, as subsequent investigations revealed. It turns out that the secret surveillance of Page was an effort to bring in heavier artillery to an FBI inquiry that, in the fall of 2016, wasn’t finding any nefarious links, as the *Times* reported back then. Agents were able to review “emails between Page and members of the Donald J. Trump for President Campaign concerning

campaign related matters,” according to an inquiry in 2019 by the Justice Department Inspector General. FBI documents show the surveillance of Page targeted four facilities, two email, one cell, and one Skype.

Still, even with the added surveillance capability, the investigation had not turned up evidence for any possible charges by the date of the *Post* piece, which came four days after the secret surveillance, called FISA, for the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, was renewed for the second time. (Page was never charged.)

The IG review also found that the FISA warrant process was deeply flawed. It relied heavily on the dossier, including the fabricated Millian allegation of a conspiracy, the IG found. Furthermore, the report said the warrants contained seventeen “significant errors and omissions,” such as leaving out exculpatory information about Page, including his previous work for the CIA and comments he made to an undercover FBI informant. And by the time of the *Post* piece, the dossier’s credibility was collapsing; the FBI knew the CIA called it “internet rumor,” and on its own the FBI “did not find corroboration for Steele’s election reporting,” according to the IG report.

The *Post* spokesperson, who would only speak on background, said the article on Page was “fair and accurate” and meant to reflect “how deeply the FBI’s suspicions were about Page.” They acknowledged the story was incomplete, noting that “at that time there was a lot that was not publicly known.”

Trump, by the spring of 2017, was more than uneasy with Comey. In one of his chats, he told the director his policies were “bad” for Russia because he wanted “more oil and more nukes” and the FBI inquiry was creating a “cloud” over his dealings with foreign leaders, according to Comey’s notes.

Finally, he had enough. Trump met with senior officials, and his deputy counsel told him that firing Comey would prolong, not curb, the FBI investigation and possibly result in the appointment of a special counsel, according to lawyers briefed on the meeting.

“The president acknowledged” the dire prognosis in the meeting, according to William Barr, who, as attorney general in 2019, oversaw the end of the Mueller inquiry. But the president didn’t care, declaring, according to Barr: “I’m still going to fire the son of a bitch.”

He did just that.

### Chapter 3: A contested Pulitzer

Trump’s firing of Comey on May 9 was nothing like his hit TV show, *The Apprentice*. The boss couldn’t move on to the next episode, nor would the ousted employee quietly walk away.

The firestorm that erupted in the aftermath of Comey being axed required a do-over, in part because of shifting White House explanations for his dismissal. So Trump sat down two days later for an interview with Lester Holt, the *Nightly News* anchor for NBC.

But instead of tamping down the controversy, it fanned the Russia flames for the media. A tweet from the show on May 11 set the narrative for the Holt interview: “Trump

on firing Comey: ‘I said, you know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story.’” Those few words, by suggesting Comey’s firing was aimed at getting the FBI inquiry off his back, provided fresh ammunition to anti-Trumpers.

The full interview, which was available online, presented a more nuanced story, and appeared to reflect what his advisers told him: firing Comey could prolong, not end, the investigation. Trump told Holt, soon after the controversial words, that the firing “might even lengthen out the investigation” and he expected the FBI “to continue the investigation,” to do it “properly,” and “to get to the bottom.”

The media focused on the “Russia thing” quote; the *New York Times* did five stories over the next week citing the “Russia thing” remarks but leaving out the fuller context. The *Post* and CNN, by comparison, included additional language in their first-day story. The White House was upset and repeatedly asked reporters to look at the full transcript, according to a former Trump aide and two reporters.

On the heels of the NBC interview came a leak of Comey’s notes of private conversations with Trump, including one at a dinner in January where Trump was said to have asked the FBI director to pledge loyalty to him. The *Times* piece reported that the inquiry into Trump and Russia “has since gained momentum as investigators have developed new evidence and leads.”

Comey, once out of office, had his internal memos leaked to the *Times*, hoping that might “help prompt” the appointment of a special counsel, he testified to Congress a few weeks later. At the same hearing, he criticized the paper’s story of February 14, one of whose authors was Michael Schmidt, the reporter who received his leaked memos.

On June 8, at a Senate hearing, Comey was asked whether the *Times* story was “almost entirely wrong.”

He said yes.

He told a senator they were “correct” when they said he had “surveyed the intelligence community” after the article came out “to see whether you were missing something.” Comey also agreed he later told senators, in a closed briefing shortly after the *Times* piece was published, “I don’t know where this is coming from, but this is not the case.” Finally, in his own voice, Comey testified that the story “in the main, it was not true.”

Back at the Washington bureau, *Times* journalists were uncomfortable, but confident, as captured by a filmmaker documenting the paper’s Russia coverage. Bumiller, the bureau chief, tells colleagues in New York, “The FBI won’t even tell us what’s wrong with the story, so we don’t know what Comey’s talking about.”

Mazzetti, a reporter on the original story, remarks how “uncomfortable” it is to have the former FBI director “challenging aspects of our story” because “it became a way to bludgeon the press and discredit our reporting.” Still, he added, “we’re very confident of the story” after going back to “our sources.”

“We were solid,” they told him.

In response to queries by Wemple, who questioned many Russia-related dossier stories, the *Times* said a review “found no evidence that any prior reporting was inaccurate,” but if “more information” is provided by the FBI “we would review that as

well.” (The detailed criticism by Strzok of the 2017 piece was released in 2020. The *Times* reported on it, on page 14, and quoted its own spokeswoman Eileen Murphy as saying “we stand by our reporting.”)

Despite the criticism from Comey, the *Times* continued to aggressively report on Trump and Russia. On July 9 the paper landed a major scoop about a meeting in 2016 between Donald Trump Jr. and a Russian lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya, that rekindled the collusion narrative.

The meeting took place in June 2016 at Trump Tower, and it was prompted by an email from a British PR agent, acting on behalf of the son of a Russian businessman. The message promised incriminating information from the Russian government on Clinton. Trump’s son was eager to receive the dirt: “I love it,” he replied. The *Times* obtained the material before it was turned over to Mueller.

Hicks, Trump’s communications aide, told Trump the emails looked “really bad” and the reaction to them would be “massive,” but the president initially directed her to “leave it alone,” according to Mueller’s final report. Then, the report goes on, Trump dictated a statement to Hicks that left out the derogatory information promised in the emails.

For the *Times*, Trump’s mess was a pot of gold: two of the *Times* stories about the meeting and the emails were part of its winning Pulitzer Prize package.

In the end, the “I love it” email showed a receptiveness by Trump’s world to dirt from Russia. But the meeting itself was a “flop,” wrote Barry Meier, a former *Times* reporter, in his book about the Trump dossier, *Spooked*.

Ironically, the only information given to the Trump delegation at the meeting was a memo, prepared by Fusion, the sponsor of the dossier, about some obscure Clinton donors mixed up in Russian business dealings. Fusion, it turns out, had worked for American lawyers representing a Russian real estate company, and Veselnitskaya was their Russian lawyer.

A week after the Trump Tower story, the president conducted a serendipitous interview with three *Times* reporters, including Schmidt, who asked if Comey’s sharing of the dossier with Trump before his inauguration was “leverage.” Trump replied, “Yeah, I think so, in retrospect.”

After the Oval Office sit-down, an aide, worried about the possibility of repercussions from an impromptu interview, sought Trump’s reaction.

“I loved that,” the aide, who requested anonymity, recalled him saying. “It was better than therapy. I’ve never done therapy, but this was better.”

Trump would later tell me it was “possible” he said what the aide remembered, but didn’t recall it. But, he added, “I’ll often sit down with hostile press, just to see if it’s possible to get them to write the truth. It almost never works. I do it almost as a chess game.”

That summer the pieces on Mueller’s chess board were quietly shifting. By August, the collusion investigation had not panned out, according to 2020 testimony by Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general who oversaw Mueller. Some reporters like Schmidt shifted gears, too, focusing instead on possible obstruction.

By late October, the Republican-led House Intelligence Committee had obtained banking records showing Fusion's client for the dossier was Marc Elias, the lawyer for the Clinton campaign and the DNC.

The *Post* broke the story, citing "people familiar with the matter." Ken Vogel, a *Times* reporter, quickly tweeted that Elias had "pushed back vigorously" when Vogel had "tried to report this story," telling the reporter he was "wrong." Elias did not respond to an email seeking comment.

A few weeks later Mueller reached a plea agreement with Michael Flynn, who left the job of national security adviser just a few weeks after Trump took office over his recollections of his transition contacts with the Russian ambassador. In the deal, Flynn pleaded guilty on December 1 to lying to the FBI about those conversations. Flynn's guilty plea, along with those of others in the Trump orbit, served an important media role: vindicating the views of those in the press who suspected a wider conspiracy, and undercutting the push-back from those, some of them who even would become Trump critics, that the coverage had gone too far.

Flynn later tried to withdraw his plea after a Justice Department review found exculpatory evidence, including the fact that the lead agent on his case wanted to shut it down in early January but was overruled by higher-ups. The Justice Department then moved to have the charges dismissed, but a federal judge wanted to know more, so Flynn was pardoned by Trump.

The day after Flynn appeared in court, the *Times* reported that Strzok, the FBI's manager of the Russia inquiry, had been "removed" months earlier by Mueller over "possible anti-Trump texts."

The story described Strzok—who was an anonymous source for the paper—as "one of the most experienced and trusted" investigators. The *Times* reported that Strzok was transferred back to the FBI because he reacted to news events "in ways that could appear critical of Mr. Trump," according to unnamed "people briefed on the case."

Hundreds of Strzok's texts later became public. Many were quite critical of Trump and his supporters.

For example, one, from before the election, had Strzok responding to whether Trump would "ever become president" with this reply: "No. No he won't. We'll stop it." Strzok, who was fired by the FBI in 2018, testified that his personal beliefs didn't affect his official actions. And in 2019 the Justice Department's Inspector General said he failed "to find documentary or testimonial evidence that political bias or improper motivation" influenced the opening of the investigation, which was done by Strzok.

The *Times*, and other outlets, reported on Strzok's anti-Trump messages, though they received the most attention on outlets like Fox.

The *Times* did not report on all of Strzok's texts, including one that would come out in a few weeks; it might have helped readers better understand why Mueller failed to bring any criminal charges involving collusion or conspiracy with Russia.

But before that omission, the *Times* exposed another piece of the FBI's Russia puzzle. The paper landed a major story at the end of the year, in time to be included in its Pulitzer package that ultimately shared the prize for national reporting.

The piece claimed to solve “one of the lingering mysteries of the past year” by focusing on a critical question: What prompted the FBI, in late July 2016, “to open a counterintelligence investigation into the Trump campaign?” The answer, the piece went on, citing anonymous sources, wasn’t the sensational, unsubstantiated dossier, but “firsthand information from one of America’s closest allies” that “so alarmed” the FBI.

The three characters in this drama are a twenty-eight-year-old campaign volunteer on energy issues, an Australian diplomat, and a Maltese professor living in the UK. Each has disputed aspects of what transpired.

The events at issue boil down to a suggestion from the Trump aide, George Papadopoulos, relayed to the diplomat, Alexander Downer, at a London wine bar that traces back to another suggestion Papadopoulos heard a few weeks earlier from Joseph Mifsud, the academic, about the Russians allegedly having dirt on Hillary Clinton involving emails.

Papadopoulos, two months before the *Times* article, had pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about some of the details of his meeting with Mifsud, including the date of the meeting and his downplaying of what he “understood” were Mifsud’s “substantial connections to high-level Russian government officials.”

Papadopoulos had tried, unsuccessfully, to broker meetings for the campaign with Russia. Before he disappeared in November, Mifsud gave interviews to journalists from Italy, the US, and Britain, denying he had worked for or with the Kremlin. The *Times* story contained no denials by Mifsud, though the paper said in its statement that it reached out to him on “multiple occasions.” (Other papers writing about Mifsud, such as the *Washington Post*, would quote his denials to reporters before he disappeared. It turned out that early on, the FBI checked with another government agency—presumed to be the CIA—and found no “derogatory” information on Mifsud, according to a subsequent report by the Inspector General of the Justice Department. And Mifsud told the FBI in early 2017, during an interview in Washington, that he had no advance knowledge of the DNC hacks and “did not make any offers or proffer any information to Papadopoulos,” who “must have misunderstood their conversation,” according to FBI documents. Mifsud was never charged with lying to the FBI.)

Downer later tipped off the US about his London conversation, and the FBI, two days later, opened an investigation (named Crossfire Hurricane) based on his tip. “This investigation,” the document authorizing the inquiry reads, “is being opened to determine whether individual(s) associated with the Trump campaign are witting of and/or coordinating activities with the government of Russia.” The short document also spelled out the lack of direct evidence: it said that Papadopoulos had “suggested the Trump team had received some kind of suggestion from Russia.”

Strzok, who wrote and approved the opening communication, described how he viewed it in an interview with me: “There never was a case opened on the Trump campaign—it was opened to identify whoever might have received the Russian offer.”

In his 2020 memoir *Compromised*, the former FBI official writes that interviewing the source (Downer) was crucial to getting “to the bottom” of the allegations, but McCabe, the second-ranking FBI official, directed the case be opened

“immediately.” So the interview came days later. Downer was “never able to provide better clarity” to the “quite opaque” chat at the wine bar, according to a 2022 memoir by Barr. Strzok says Barr’s account is “inaccurate,” claiming, in an interview, that Downer’s conversations, first with Papadopoulos, and later with him, were “very clear and very detailed.”

McCabe was asked in a congressional hearing in December 2017, two weeks before the *Times* article disclosing the opening of the inquiry, why the surveillance was done on Page, and not on Papadopoulos.

His reply: The “Papadopoulos comment didn’t particularly indicate that he was the person that had had—that was interacting with the Russians.” McCabe’s testimony would not become public until much later.

Barr’s memoir, *One Damn Thing After Another*, describes the opening of the investigation as a “travesty” because “it amounted to a “throwaway comment in a wine bar” that, in the end, “amounted to a ‘suggestion’ of a ‘suggestion.’”

In December of 2017, Trump gave an end-of-the-year interview to Schmidt of the *Times* at Mar-a-Lago. He told the paper the Mueller inquiry made the United States “look very bad.” He repeated the words “no collusion” more than a dozen times. Schmidt, speaking on camera to the film crew documenting the paper’s pursuit of the story, offered this assessment of Trump: “He may be demented, but he’s very transparent.”

On January 24, more Strzok texts were released. One was written shortly after Mueller’s appointment; the man leading the FBI inquiry was weighing whether to join him. Strzok was hesitant, he wrote, because “there’s no big there, there.” Other FBI documents, released in 2020, reflect the same assessment: the inquiry into possible ties between the campaign and Russia, according to one of the agents involved in the case, “seemed to be winding down” then.

Strzok’s message was cited dozens of times in news stories, including the lead of an article in the *Wall Street Journal* and further down in a piece by the *Washington Post*. The *Times*, however, did not mention the message in a story—that day, or in the coming years.

“We should have run it,” a former *Times* journalist who was involved in the Russia coverage said. In its statement, the *Times* said it had reported on the matter “thoroughly and in line with our editorial standards.”

The *Journal*, in its piece, noted Strzok’s “skepticism about the burgeoning investigation.” Gerard Baker, who was the *Journal*’s top editor at the time, said, in an email, that he was “initially skeptical but completely open-minded about the Russian collusion story,” in light of “Trump’s evident sympathy for Putin” and the “slightly shady” background of Manafort, the former campaign chairman. In the end, Baker, now an editor-at-large for the paper, says he found the performance by the media in the Trump-Russia saga, “for the most part,” to be “among the most disturbing, dishonest, and tendentious I’ve ever seen.”

The day after the Strzok text release, the *Times* landed another scoop, coauthored by Schmidt. Schmidt had developed a relationship with White House Counsel Donald McGahn, who was already cooperating, at Trump’s request, with the special counsel. The

story said Trump had “ordered” Mueller fired shortly after his appointment, “but ultimately backed down after the White House counsel threatened to resign rather than carry out the directive.”

Trump called the piece “fake news,” which had become his go-to phrase to attack stories he didn’t like.

McGahn didn’t return an email from me seeking an interview. He told the special counsel he had not told Trump of his plan to resign, “but said that the story was otherwise accurate,” according to the final report. McGahn also told investigators that “he never saw Mr. Trump go beyond his legal authorities,” according to a subsequent *Times* piece.

Schmidt, in a 2020 book, acknowledged that the January 2018 piece left the impression, though it didn’t explicitly state, that McGahn’s threat to resign had been delivered directly to Trump.

Meanwhile, one year into Trump’s presidency, the other investigations into possible collusion with the Russians were proceeding quietly in Congress. But the partisan divide over the issue came to the fore in February, when the GOP-led House intelligence panel released a memo of some preliminary findings about what it considered to be FBI abuses of the secret surveillance court to investigate Page.

The memo asserted that the dossier formed an “essential part” of the surveillance warrant used against Page, and was “minimally corroborated” by the time of some of the renewals.

At the *Times*, the coverage of the GOP memo was skeptical while a dueling memo, a few weeks later from the ranking Democrat on the committee, was portrayed more favorably.

The *Times*, at the start of the piece about the Republican memo, called it “politically charged”; noted, in the next sentence, how it “outraged Democrats”; and did not quote the memo’s allegation of the dossier’s “essential” role in the surveillance. The same day, in a separate piece, the *Times* again called the GOP memo “politically charged” and quoted the “scathing” criticism by Democrats.

Later that month, the Democrats released their own memo. It said the surveillance warrant “made only narrow use of information from Steele’s sources.” The *Times* story called it a “forceful rebuttal” to Trump’s complaints about the FBI’s inquiry. In the end, the allegations of abuse by Nunes were confirmed in 2019 when the Inspector General released a report that was a “scathing critique” of the FBI, as the *Times* told readers at the time.

In a statement to *CJR*, the *Times* said: “We stand behind the publication of this story,” referring to its reporting on the Nunes memo.

In February 2018, the *Times* and *Post* shared a George Polk Award for “uncovering connections between Trump officials and well-connected Russians, which triggered the investigation by Robert Mueller III.” One of the articles in the *Times* package of twelve submitted for the prize was the February 2017 piece that had been strongly faulted by Comey and the FBI, according to a list “provided by Polk to The Washington *Times*,” the paper wrote a few weeks later. The administrator of the awards, John Darnton, a former *New York Times* correspondent, didn’t deny the accuracy of the

Washington *Times* article, but, in an email to me, wrote that “we don’t go into the details of the submissions.”

A few days later, a prize-winning journalist writing for the *New Yorker*, Jane Mayer, wrote a lengthy piece about Steele and his work. Then she went on Rachel Maddow’s show on MSNBC to note how the dossier “was looking better and better every day, more and more credible,” but “somebody like Mueller” was the best bet to “really nail down a lot of the things that you need to know.” Mayer declined to comment for the record.

In April, the winners of the most prestigious award in journalism, the Pulitzer Prize, were announced.

Once again, the *Post* and *Times* shared an award for reporting on “Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and its connection to the Trump campaign, the President-elect’s transition team and his eventual administration.” The *Times* package did not include the disputed piece that was part of the Polk submission.

“I think the Pulitzers make a statement,” Baquet told the *Times* newsroom the day of the announcement. He compared the recent attacks against the paper to criticism of its coverage of civil rights and the Vietnam War. But even though the attacks “hurt us,” Baquet said, “the *New York Times* is still here.”

Baron declined to be interviewed but, in an email to me, defended the *Post*’s coverage, writing that “the evidence showed that Russia intervened in the election, that the Trump campaign was aware of it, welcomed it and never alerted law enforcement or intelligence agencies to it. And reporting showed that Trump sought to impede the investigation into it.”

A *Post* spokesperson, in September 2022, cited the Pulitzer award in a brief general statement responding to a list of questions I submitted to Buzbee. The statement said the paper was “proud of our coverage of the investigation into Russia’s interference in the 2016 campaign, including our stories that were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for furthering the nation’s understanding of this consequential period. We approached this line of coverage with care and a great sense of responsibility. On the few occasions in which new information emerged that caused us to reexamine past reporting, we did so forthrightly.”

The Pulitzer awards became the subject of criticism, most famously from Trump, but also from other journalists. One of those was Tom Kuntz, who worked for twenty-eight years at the *Times*, and now runs Real Clear Investigations, a nonprofit online news site that has featured articles critical of the Russia coverage by writers of varying political orientation, including Aaron Mate and Paul Sperry. Mate would later win the Izzy award from Ithaca College, named after the left-leaning journalist I.F. Stone, for his stories in *The Nation* “that exposed the hollowness and hyperbole of the so-called Russiagate scandal.”

In November 2021, Trump threatened to sue the Pulitzer board after the indictment of the dossier’s main collector. In short order, the *Post* retracted a significant section of an article about the dossier. Buzbee gave a statement to Just the News, an online outlet, defending the paper’s award-winning coverage and pointing out,

accurately, that the corrected article was not part of the award submission. Buzbee went on to note, like the *Times*, that the paper's disclosure of "contacts between certain members of Trump's administration and Russian officials had been affirmed" by the Mueller report.

In 2022, the Pulitzer board announced that it had commissioned two "independent" reviews of the 2018 awards to the *Post* and *Times*; they both found that "no passages or headlines, contentions or assertions in any of the winning submissions were discredited by facts that emerged subsequent to the conferral of the prizes," so the awards "stand." The board did not disclose the identity of the reviewers or post their actual findings. In December, Trump made his threat to sue the Pulitzer board a reality; he filed a defamation lawsuit against the board's members in Okeechobee county, Florida.

The *Times*, in its statement to *CJR*, referenced the Pulitzer board's upholding of the award, substantiation by Mueller's report and an inquiry by the Senate intelligence panel, and the paper's adherence to its own rigorous standards. "The mission—and responsibility—of The *New York Times* is to report thoroughly and impartially on matters of newsworthy importance. The foreign manipulation of the 2016 elections was among the most consequential and unprecedented in United States history. We reported on them with teams of people, who thoroughly pursued credible claims, fact-checked, edited and ultimately produced groundbreaking journalism that was proven true and true again."

Trump, in a statement, trashed the board's decision to stand by the award, criticized the "veil of secrecy," and lumped the decision in with the House panel looking into the events of January 6, saying he would continue to "right the wrong" he saw in each inquiry.

The month after the Pulitzers were announced, Showtime aired the four-part documentary film about the *Times*' pursuit of the Russia story, *The Fourth Estate*. Other films were in the works, including a few that would feature Steele's work and efforts by reporters to delve into the Russia story. Some that involved Steele were dropped, according to journalists familiar with them, while Steele declined to comment, citing contractual obligations.

One stalled project involved the *Washington Post* and Robert Redford's production company, according to journalists familiar with the project, including Entous, the former *Post* reporter. They say the *Post* dropped out of the project in 2021; a *Post* spokesperson, who would not talk on the record, said it was "correct" that the *Post* had backed out some time ago but declined to discuss the proposed project. An email to the Redford-founded Sundance Institute seeking comment went unanswered.

## Chapter 4: Helsinki and the \$3,000 Russian disinformation campaign

Trump, in July 2018, finally had a summit meeting with Vladimir Putin, the man he mistakenly claimed in 2015 to have met years earlier and his supposed puppet master, according to Steele's dossier.

In advance of the summit, Trump met with his national security adviser, John Bolton, to discuss how to deal with Russian meddling. The president “remained unwilling or unable to admit any Russian meddling because he believed doing so would undercut the legitimacy of his election and the narrative of the witch hunt against him,” Bolton wrote in his 2020 memoir *The Room Where It Happened*.

At a press briefing, the final question was whether US intelligence or Putin should be believed with regard to meddling in the 2016 election. After going on a tangent about the server at the DNC, Trump said, “I don’t see any reason why it would be” Russia that did it. Then, a bit later in his answer, he expressed “great confidence in my intelligence people.”

The first remark received all the attention. Some outlets, like the *Times*, didn’t include his comments about “great confidence” in US intelligence in their stories, while others, such as the *Post*, did.

Trump flew home to Washington, and when aides talked to him the next day about the reaction, he said he meant the opposite.

A clarification was released, but the cleanup was not enough for critics such as Roger Cohen, then a columnist at the *Times*, who wrote of the “disgusting spectacle of the American president kowtowing in Helsinki to Vladimir Putin.”

Rachel Maddow, the MSNBC host, saw the day’s events as affirmation of her having covered the Trump-Russia matter “more than anyone else,” because, as her blog pointed out, Americans were now “coming to grips with a worst-case scenario that the US president is compromised by a hostile foreign power.”

For his part, Trump, when asked about Helsinki in my interview, blasted Bolton. “Bolton was one of the dumber people, but I loved him for the negotiations,” he said, because “all these countries,” aware of Bolton’s hawkish views, “thought we were going to blow them up” when Bolton sat in on the negotiations. (Bolton declined to comment.)

Trump insisted to me that while “I said nice things” about Putin, “I killed them with Nord Stream,” the German/Russian pipeline his administration sanctioned in 2019 until “Biden comes in and approves it.” (The Biden administration waived sanctions on the project in May 2021, and then, after Russia invaded Ukraine, reinstated the sanctions.)

I tried to ask Trump what he thought about Russia’s nuclear capabilities. His former aides have publicly and privately said he was fixated on Moscow’s nuclear arsenal, including the large number of Russian nuclear weapons targeting the US. But Trump demurred, implying it involved classified information, and talked instead about his deceased uncle, who was a professor of engineering at MIT and did some research related to nuclear energy.

Finally, when asked about his remarks at Helsinki that were seen by many as denigrating the American intelligence community, Trump didn’t say he had misspoken, as Kellyanne Conway, in her 2022 memoir, says he told her. Instead, he clarified his initial remarks in a different way. Trump said he wasn’t thinking of the entire intelligence community but rather his distrust of James Clapper, John Brennan, and James Comey, the

former heads of the various intelligence agencies under President Obama: “These guys were terrible people,” he said.

After Conway’s book came out, I asked Trump again about his remarks: he doubled down.

“I was disparaging them; who would I trust more? Comey, Clapper, Brennan, and the American sleaze or Putin?” He added, “I don’t think we needed too much of a clarification.”

In the aftermath of the summit, Trump’s critics believed the worst. A Yougov/Economist poll found that two-thirds of Democrats were definitely or somewhat sure that “Russia tampered with vote tallies in order to get Donald Trump elected.”

Despite the US intelligence community’s assessment in January 2017 that it couldn’t measure “the impact that Russian activities had on the outcome of the 2016 election,” the *Times* weighed in, at over ten thousand words in September, with its own verdict: “The Plot to Subvert an Election,” the headline read. The first sentence described an obscure banner of Putin that unfurled on his birthday, a few weeks before the election, on a Manhattan bridge. The report quickly noted that the banner was promoted by a fake Twitter account that ultimately was traced back to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a privately owned troll operation in Russia.

This was part, the *Times* concluded in the fourth paragraph, of “the most effective foreign interference in an American election in history.” To help buttress its sweeping conclusion, the *Times* wrote that the Facebook posts by the IRA had an “eventual audience of 126 million Americans,” describing that as an “impressive” reach that almost matched the numbers of voters in the election.

For most of the media, and official Washington, the impact of Russian activities on the 2016 election loomed large, though a number of rigorous academic studies that the media largely ignored painted a more benign footprint.

Gareth Porter, a veteran journalist and historian, called the *Times*’ description of the IRA’s “eventual audience” of 126 million “bogus” because Facebook had told Congress, and reporters, months earlier that the figure was only a potential audience for IRA content over two years, including nine months after the election. When Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified, several months before the piece, he said “approximately 126 million people may have been served content” from the IRA.

Facebook data submitted to Congress about the IRA’s ads on its site further diminished their impact: more than half of the impressions associated with the IRA’s Facebook ads came after the election.

Porter, writing in Consortium News, said the *Times*’ use of the 126 million audience number, plus the piece’s failure to reflect that Facebook users were exposed to 33 trillion news feeds during the relevant period, “should vie in the annals of journalism as one of the most spectacularly misleading use of statistics of all time.”

As for the IRA’s supposed “efficiency,” noted in the article, the *Times* piece didn’t include Facebook submissions to Congress that called the IRA’s targeting “relatively rudimentary,” with only a small fraction having anything to do with the election or specific geographic targets.

Court filings in 2019 showed that the total value of the IRA's Facebook ads that were deemed election-related amounted to \$2,930, in a political cycle where billions of dollars were spent. The only reporter to write about that finding was Sperry, of Real Clear Investigations.

Even before that, studies, largely ignored by the media, pointed to a more modest impact. A book by Harvard researchers, *Network Propaganda*, published by Oxford University Press in October 2018, found "strong" evidence of Russian interference operations in America but noted that "evidence of its impact is scant." A study by Danish and American scholars published by the National Academy of Science the following year found "no evidence" that interaction with the IRA accounts "substantially impacted" the "political attitudes and behaviors" of Twitter users.

The deep dive by Harvard researchers warned that "overstating the impact" of Russian information operations "helps consolidate" the aim of the operations to "disorient American political communications."

Still, several years after the 2016 election, many voters believe Russian meddling had a big impact on those results, and the mainstream narrative in journalism was that it had. A study by Rasmussen in April 2022 found that 47 percent of voters, including 72 percent of Democrats, think Russian interference likely changed the outcome of the 2016 race.

Legal developments involving people in Trump's orbit kept the Russia narrative simmering. In late November 2018, Michael Cohen, Trump's former lawyer, pleaded guilty to lying to Congress about attempts by Trump to conduct a real estate deal in Moscow. Cohen had told both intelligence committees of Congress that "the Moscow Project ended in January 2016," but documents show he was in communication with others, though not Trump, about the project through June of 2016, according to the criminal information filed by the special counsel.

The project never happened, but the media viewed the attempt as more evidence of Russian ties. After all, Cohen was once a Trump insider, so many in the press saw his cooperation with Mueller as a chance to fill in some of the missing pieces of the puzzle. Did Cohen really go to Prague in 2016 as part of the campaign's conspiracy with Russia, as the dossier had alleged? Cohen had always denied it, and the press, except for the McClatchy News Service, had basically dismissed it as a tall tale, after considerable efforts to verify it.

Cohen, even as a cooperating witness, continued to deny it. McClatchy, in 2019, ran an editor's note saying Mueller's report "states that Mr. Cohen was not in Prague," but was "silent" on whether Cohen's phone "pinged in or near Prague, as McClatchy reported," according to an account in the Washington Examiner. Mate, writing in *The Nation* in 2021, called the note "tepid." (Susan Firey, a spokesperson for the newspaper chain, did not reply to an email.)

As 2019 arrived, *BuzzFeed*, the outlet that posted the dossier two years earlier, dropped a seeming bombshell: Trump had directed Cohen to lie to Congress about the Moscow Project. The story was attributed to two anonymous law enforcement sources.

The special counsel's office issued a rare denunciation of the *BuzzFeed* story the next day, calling it "not accurate."

Mueller's final report said that Trump "knew Cohen provided false testimony to Congress" but the evidence obtained by investigators "does not establish the president directed or aided Cohen's false testimony." After the report was released, *BuzzFeed's* then-editor in chief, Ben Smith, insisted in a post that his reporters' anonymous sources saw it differently: they "interpreted the evidence Cohen presented as meaning that the president 'directed' Cohen to lie."

When the original story was posted and then denounced, Greenwald, the cofounder of *The Intercept*, used the brushback to list the "Ten Worst, Most Embarrassing US Media Failures on the Trump Russia Story." He pointed out that all the "errors" went in the same direction: "exaggerating the grave threat posed by Moscow and the Trump circle's connections to it."

Meanwhile, the Mueller investigation was winding down. The inquiry had issued more than 2,800 subpoenas, interviewed 500 witnesses, and generated enormous interest. There were 533,000 news articles published involving Russia and Trump or Mueller, between Mueller's appointment and the release of his report, according to a study by NewsWhip, a media analytics company. The articles led to 245 million interactions on social media, the study, funded by the media site Axios, also found.

With the release of the findings imminent, Barr was briefed on the inquiry, sat down with Mueller and his colleagues, and learned of their two overarching conclusions: no case of conspiracy or collusion between the Russians and Trump—though there had been offers from Russian-affiliated individuals to help the Trump campaign—and ten episodes that raised possible obstruction-of-justice issues but no analysis or determination of whether they constituted a crime.

Barr asked Mueller and his team to promptly deliver their final report with the proper redactions, such as classified or grand jury information. The lengthy two volumes came back without the redactions, so Barr, unfamiliar with the details, went about writing a letter to inform Congress of the topline results.

Barr sent his letter to Congress on March 24. It said it was meant to "summarize the principal conclusions reached" by Mueller. With regard to possible obstruction, the letter noted the report "presented evidence on both sides of the question" but left unresolved what Mueller had called "difficult issues." The report specifically said it "does not exonerate" Trump, which Barr quoted in his letter.

The three-page letter was released. Those hoping for Trump's downfall were disappointed. The president declared victory, tweeting bombastically about "complete and total exoneration." And Mueller and his team cried foul: their beef, it turns out, was, at least in part, with the media.

Mueller's team wanted more information to be released. So did the media: one *Times* article wondered "what Barr might have left out." Mueller's team forwarded summaries to Barr and attached a letter from Mueller stating that Barr's communiqué three days earlier "did not fully capture the context, nature and substance of this office's work and conclusions." The letter quickly leaked to the *Washington Post* and was

covered extensively by the media, which highlighted concerns that Barr had left out “more damaging” material, as the *Times* wrote.

The blowback pissed Barr off. He finally got Mueller on the phone, after the special counsel returned from a haircut the morning of March 28. Over speakerphone, Mueller agreed that Barr’s letter was “not factually wrong” but explained his concern to the attorney general: “without more context, there is a vacuum that the press is filling with misrepresentations. It is the way the press is covering it that is the problem, not what you said,” according to Barr’s book. Two of Mueller’s top aides, Aaron Zebley and James Quarles, did not respond to emails seeking comment.

The next day, Barr wrote another letter to Congress noting that “some media reports and other public statements” had mischaracterized his first letter as a “summary” of Mueller’s “investigation and report,” when it was only a summary of the “principal conclusions.” He asked people to wait to read the whole report “on their own” and not in “piecemeal fashion.”

Barr was now a villain to some, but not others. And new schisms in the media emerged over prior coverage.

Isikoff had previously begun having doubts about the credibility of the dossier, but Barr’s letter pushed him further down that road. He went on MSNBC soon after the letter’s release and criticized the network for its coverage of the dossier, including its being “endorsed multiple times” and having “people saying it’s more and more proving to be true. And it wasn’t.” A few months later, on his own podcast, the Yahoo journalist pressed Rachel Maddow about coverage of Russia and Steele’s dossier. She was not happy: “You’re trying to litigate the Steele dossier through me as if I am the embodiment of the Steele dossier, which I think is creepy, and I think it’s unwarranted.”

Isikoff says he’s only been on MSNBC a few times since 2019, but before that he “was a semi-regular” guest.

A few weeks after Barr’s letter, Mueller’s report, now redacted and coming in at over four hundred pages, was released. It consisted of two volumes: the first spelled out Russian meddling and links or contacts between Russians and Trump’s universe, while the second contained the ten instances of possible obstruction.

The report found “multiple links between Trump Campaign officials and individuals tied to the Russian government,” including “Russian offers of assistance to the Campaign,” which were sometimes welcomed and sometimes declined. In the end, “the investigation did not establish that the Campaign coordinated or conspired with the Russian government” in its election activities.

The report mentions the 2018 indictment of twelve Russian intelligence officials charged with hacking data related to the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign in 2016, though the report is far from definitive. First, it notes that the charged officers “appear to have stolen thousands of emails and attachments.” The report also says the investigators “could not rule out that stolen documents were transferred to WikiLeaks through intermediaries.” (The case has never been brought to trial.)

The first volume of the report also notes that the Russian government intervened in the 2016 election in “sweeping and systemic fashion,” through two activities, the

hacking and dumping operation involving Clinton-campaign-related emails and a social media campaign run by a Russian entity, the IRA. The report implied the IRA was a government-controlled body by writing that it was part of an “active measures” campaign, “typically” done by “Russian security services.”

For the most part the media, having already learned that there was no overarching conspiracy, fleshed out the new details, including the more than a hundred “links” cited by Mueller. The most troubling contact involved Manafort, Trump’s campaign chairman for part of 2016, and Kilimnik, who ran Manafort’s consulting-business office in Ukraine. On August 2, 2016, the two men met in Manhattan, where Manafort shared campaign polling data, some private and some public, with Kilimnik. The Mueller report said Kilimnik is someone that the “FBI assesses to have ties to Russian intelligence.” (Mueller indicted Kilimnik in 2018 for obstruction of justice, unrelated to the 2016 election, but the case has never gone forward.)

Andrew Weissmann, one of Mueller’s prosecutors, went on CNN after the release of the Mueller report to say that August meeting “was the heart” of the investigation. Steele, in response to my questions, cites the Manafort-Kilimnik relationship as confirming and/or corroborating the “Russian collusion efforts with the Trump campaign.”

The fifth and final report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, released in August 2020, highlighted the connection as the “single most important direct tie between senior Trump Campaign officials and the Russian intelligence services” and labeled it “a grave counterintelligence threat” to the United States. Some of the Democratic members of the panel, in an addendum, wrote that Manafort’s sharing of campaign data “is what collusion looks like.”

But the evidence of Kilimnik’s Kremlin ties is far from certain, and the question of whether Manafort’s dealings with him were personal or campaign-related are even murkier.

As for Kilimnik possibly being a Russian spy, the only known official inquiry, by Ukraine in 2016, didn’t result in charges. More recent claims that he worked for the Russians, by the Senate intelligence panel in 2020 and the Treasury Department in 2021, offered no evidence. Conversely, there are FBI and State Department documents showing Kilimnik was a “sensitive source” for the latter. (The documents were disclosed a few years ago by John Solomon, founder of the Just the News website. Kilimnik, in an email to me, confirmed his ties with State.)

With regard to the motivation for sharing the polling data, Mueller’s report said it “could not reliably determine” why the data was shared or what happened with it. The two Americans involved in the arrangement, Manafort and his deputy, both told Mueller’s team that the data was passed on to help Manafort’s personal finances, including a business dispute with Oleg Deripaska, a Russian oligarch, who has had ties to Moscow as well as the FBI. Kilimnik told a similar version to Mate. But Treasury, without any supporting evidence, went further in 2021, saying the data was shared with Russian intelligence.

## Chapter 5: The scandal that never ends

The *Times*, for many years, has cited the Kilimnik-Manafort relationship to defend its controversial story of February 2017 about Trump-Russia ties, noting, as recently as 2021, that the Senate and Treasury statements “confirm the article’s findings.” Kilimnik was not quoted in the article, one of several *Times* articles in recent years mentioning his possible Russian intelligence ties but failing to report his denials. (The *Times*’ guidelines call for reporters to “seek and publish a response from anyone criticized in our pages.”) The *Times*, in response to my questions, said it “reached out to Kilimnik for comment on multiple occasions since 2017.”

The Mueller report’s implication that the IRA was part of a “sweeping” Russian government meddling campaign in 2016 was later rebuked by a federal Judge handling an IRA-related case. The indictment of the IRA, the judge found, alleged “only private conduct by private actors” and “does not link the [IRA] to the Russian government.” The prosecutors made clear they were not prepared to show that the IRA efforts were a government operation. Mueller’s report does refer to “ties” between Putin and the owner of the IRA—he is sometimes referred to as “Putin’s Cook”—and the fact that “the two have appeared together in public photographs.” Mueller’s source for that was an article in the *Times*.

As for the extent of the troll farm’s activity, Mueller’s report cites a review by Twitter of tweets from accounts “associated with the IRA,” in the ten weeks before the 2016 election, which found that “approximately 8.4%” were “election related.” Only the St. Louis *Post Dispatch* covered that part of the report, according to a Nexis search.

(One criminal case involving Russian trolling that was prosecuted was dropped by the Justice Department in March 2020. The *Times*, in its story about the decision, only quoted the prosecutor, while the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post* also included quotes from the Russian company’s American lawyer.)

While some critics, on both the right and the left, felt the Russia coverage was overblown and reminiscent of earlier media failures, others did not.

Margaret Sullivan, then the media columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote that the reporting “was not invalidated” by the report, and “this is no time to retreat.”

Trump’s Democratic opponents in Congress were in no mood to retreat either, and many Americans, mostly Democrats, agreed. An Ipsos/Reuters poll showed 48 percent of Americans—84 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of Republicans—still believed Trump or his campaign “worked with Russia to influence the 2016 election.” Congressional Democrats saw Mueller’s report, specifically the second volume on possible obstruction of justice, as a template to impeach the president. Their star witness would be McGahn, the former White House counsel who became the most-cited witness in Mueller’s final report.

McGahn’s account of Trump directing him to fire Mueller was featured in the report. So were two high-profile examples that Mueller, according to Barr, “relied on” to launch his obstruction probe: the president’s firing of Comey in May 2017 and Trump’s remarks to Comey in February 2017, the day after Flynn resigned, that “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go.”

From a criminal perspective, the cases had complications, especially proving Trump acted with “corrupt intent,” according to Barr, who, with other senior attorneys at Justice, reviewed the evidence and found it insufficient.

In the case of McGahn, Barr, in an interview, said that “a lot of witnesses, including McGahn and others, tried to convey that no one took a lot of Trump’s bloviating seriously. They thought that he was letting off steam.” McGahn himself had told Mueller’s investigators “he believed the president never obstructed justice,” the *Times* would later report.

Schmidt, perhaps the reporter with the best insight into Mueller’s operation, found the report’s section on possible obstruction to be hard to decipher; “they took everything and threw it out on the sidewalk,” he told the Virginia Bar Association in early 2020, according to a video recording.

The Democrat-controlled Congress, however, thought it might be able to pick up those disparate pieces and fashion an impeachment case. They decided to push a reluctant Mueller to come testify himself, hoping he might help make their case.

Mueller appeared in late July before the House Judiciary Committee. Schmidt was contemporaneously posting analysis on the *Times* website about Mueller’s testimony. At just past eight in the morning, he signed in: “Can’t wait to hear Mueller talk about Volume II on obstruction.” As Mueller began answering questions, Schmidt noted how he kept asking for them to be repeated. Then a few hours later, he posted this: “the Democrats say it was indeed obstruction and Mueller declines to back them up.”

Mueller’s “halting” testimony, as noted by the *Times* and many other outlets, was likely the final chapter in his lengthy public life.

Woodward told me the Mueller report was a “fizzle” but reporters were “never going to declare it’s going to end up dry.”

The following morning, less than eighteen hours after Mueller left the congressional hearing, a more confident Trump had his phone call with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in which he asked him for help in digging up dirt on Joe and Hunter Biden.

What Trump thought was a “perfect” phone chat turned out to be the impeachment vehicle Democrats so desperately wanted after Mueller’s far-from-perfect performance. A new media frenzy was about to begin.

## Chapter 6: The two January 6ths

Even with Mueller finished, the ongoing probes into Trump’s activities were giving the press the fodder to keep the drumbeat going.

First was the appointment in May 2019 of John Durham, a career prosecutor, once praised by his home-state Democratic senators in Connecticut, to examine the origins of the various Trump inquiries. Then came a lengthy, and critical, report, released in December 2019 by Inspector General Michael Horowitz, into the secret surveillance of former Trump adviser Carter Page. And in early 2020 Barr asked Jeffrey Jensen, a former FBI agent and the US Attorney in Missouri, to review the Flynn inquiry.

Durham, stalled by the pandemic, has brought three cases: a guilty plea by an FBI lawyer, an indictment (and eventual acquittal) of Democratic lawyer Michael Sussmann for lying to the FBI, and an indictment (and eventual acquittal), on multiple charges of lying to the FBI, of the main information collector for the dossier authored by Steele.

The few cases, however, yielded a trove of new information. Durham's filings last February described monitoring done at Trump Tower, a Trump apartment building in Manhattan, and the Executive Office of the Presidency by private researchers, who were working with a technology executive. The executive, according to the filing, tasked them "to mine internet data to establish 'an inference' and 'narrative' tying then candidate Trump to Russia." The businessman did not work for any campaign, but his lawyer, Sussmann, was a well-known Democratic attorney who billed both the DNC and the Clinton campaign in 2016, according to court filings.

Fox News was the first to pick up the filing, and its headline—"Clinton campaign paid to 'infiltrate' Trump Tower, White House servers to link Trump to Russia, Durham Finds"—conflated Durham's disclosure with a quote by someone who used the word "infiltrate" to characterize the activities. Before long, Trump claimed the filing vindicated his 2017 claim of spying—the tweet about Obama having his "wires tapped" at Trump Tower—also drawn from a Fox News report. And he criticized the press for refusing to "even mention the major crime that took place."

At that point the *Times* weighed in, headlining the "Furor in Right-Wing Outlets" whose "Narrative Is Off Track." It accurately noted that neither "infiltrate" nor evidence of the Clinton campaign paying the tech executive appeared in the court filing. The Fox News journalist who wrote the story, Brooke Singman, and a spokesperson for the network did not respond to an email. (Singman was the first journalist Trump spoke to after the unannounced search of his Mar-a-Lago residence by the FBI in August.)

One result of Durham's investigation has been to further discredit the dossier in the eyes of many in the media. It prompted the *Washington Post* to retract large chunks of a 2017 article in November 2021, and to follow with a long review of Steele's sources and methods. The *Wall Street Journal* and CNN did similar looks back.

The *Times* has offered no such retraction, though the paper and other news organizations were quick to highlight the lack of firsthand evidence for many of the dossier's substantive allegations; "third hand stuff" is what Isikoff now calls them. But they rarely, if ever, pointed out that the origin of the FBI inquiry was itself third hand information, at best. The supposed original source of the information, Mifsud, the Maltese academic, disappeared, leaving behind many questions. So, in the fall of 2019, Barr and Durham went to Italy to look into Mifsud after Barr told Congress he wanted to know whether the FBI inquiry was "properly predicated."

The *Times* story called the trip "unusual" and a possible attempt to bolster a Trump "conspiracy theory." The Daily Beast reported that the two men were given access to evidence gathered by the Italian authorities, including a taped deposition made by Mifsud when he sought police protection after disappearing from the university where he worked.

By the end of the year Barr answered his own question: no, the FBI inquiry was not properly predicated. He and Durham wound up in an unusual public spat that December with Horowitz, as he released his long-awaited report on the FBI's handling of its Russia investigation. Horowitz found the tip from Australia was enough to trigger an inquiry—"given the low threshold for predication" in department guidelines—and that the opening was not influenced by "political bias," countering Trump's frequent cries that he was the victim of a political "witch hunt."

But the IG also found seventeen significant errors and omissions by the FBI in its four applications to a secret court to monitor Page, who the bureau believed was spying for Russia; the *Times* called the IG's finding "scathing."

Eventually the FBI declared that at least two of the four applications were no longer valid. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) found that all four applications had "violations of the government's duty of candor." Horowitz also referred an FBI attorney, Kevin Clinesmith, to Durham for possibly falsifying evidence in one of the court applications. Clinesmith later pleaded guilty to failing to disclose Page's previous work with the CIA in the FBI's application to the FISC; he received probation.

Barr and Durham put out statements disagreeing with the IG's finding of there being sufficient evidence to open the inquiry. Strzok, in an interview last July, called Durham's remarks "wildly irresponsible and wrong." Durham did not respond to an email seeking comment, but in arguments before a jury last October, speaking about the Trump-Russia investigation, he said, "The FBI failed here."

Strzok also said he was only involved in the first FISA warrant against Page, having "supervisory responsibility," but the "drafting and approval process was below my level of responsibility." (In an October 2016 text message, he wrote that he was "fighting" with the Justice Department over the warrant.)

In the years that followed, some in the media would wonder why more questions weren't asked about Durham's evidence, while others continued to dismiss the notion that the FBI acted improperly when it opened an investigation that involved a presidential campaign.

On his way out the door as attorney general, Barr told a *Wall Street Journal* columnist that the inquiry shouldn't have been opened because "there wasn't any evidence." The *Times* dismissed those remarks. After quoting Barr, the paper wrote that the FBI inquiry has "fueled similar unfounded accusations that a so-called deep state of government officials were working together to hobble Mr. Trump's campaign and the administration." A few months later, the *Times* wrote that Durham "appears to be retreading ground" explored by Horowitz or pursuing "Trumpian conspiracy theories and grievances," citing unnamed "people familiar with the investigation."

Wemple focused on the IG's dossier-related revelations and the reluctance of some in the media to look back. In an interview, he said he was "horrified" over its "devastating" portrayal of the dossier. He wound up writing more than a dozen columns on the subject, praising Adam Goldman of the *New York Times* but taking aim at McClatchy, CNN, and MSNBC, among others. "What most dismayed me," he went on, "was the failure of MSNBC and CNN to counter and properly address the questions I was

asking them.” CNN, in November 2021, did a long examination—what it called a “reckoning”—of the dossier. A spokesman for NBC declined to comment.

In May 2020, the Justice Department dropped the case against Flynn for lying to the FBI after a review by Jensen, the US Attorney in St. Louis. The department cited the FBI’s “frail and shifting justifications for its ongoing probe of Mr. Flynn” and said that the FBI interview of Flynn was “conducted without any legitimate investigative basis.”

Flynn was eventually pardoned by President Trump after the election. Trump also commuted the sentence of Roger Stone, a Trump associate, who was convicted on false-statement and obstruction charges related to his efforts in 2016 to serve as an intermediary between the campaign and WikiLeaks. Mueller “failed to resolve” the question of whether Stone had “directly communicated” with Julian Assange, the site’s founder, before the election, according to the *Times*.

In 2020, the 966-page report by the Senate intelligence panel went a little further. It said that WikiLeaks “very likely knew it was assisting a Russian intelligence influence effort” when it acquired and made public in 2016 emails from the DNC. A few months after the report was released, new information surfaced showing why the special counsel, with greater investigative powers than the Senate panel, couldn’t bring a case. The newly unredacted documents were obtained by *BuzzFeed*, via a Freedom of Information Act request. The Mueller team, the documents show, determined that while Russian hacking efforts were underway at the time of the releases by WikiLeaks in July 2016, “the Office did not develop sufficient admissible evidence that WikiLeaks knew of—or even was willfully blind to—that fact.” The Senate report also suggests Stone had greater involvement with the dissemination of hacked material released by WikiLeaks.

The Flynn release was part of a months-long effort by the Justice Department to declassify and release documents related to the Trump-Russia inquiries. One revelation concerned the dossier’s primary source: he himself had been the subject of an earlier counterintelligence investigation by the FBI into his ties to Russia. Nothing came of that inquiry, and the FBI documents, sent to Republicans in Congress, redacted his name.

But internet sleuths used the new documents and other clues to identify him as Danchenko. The *Times* was interested in the “unmasking.” Its headline in late July read “The FBI Pledged to Keep a Source Anonymous. Trump Allies Aided His Unmasking.” Then, in October, the paper got an exclusive interview with Danchenko, saying he “wants to clear his name.” The top of the story featured the salacious sex tape allegation—the item Comey told Trump about on January 6, 2017—and Danchenko’s supposed backup for it: “rumors from two sources” and “more nebulous information from two hotel employees he took as corroborative.”

The day after the *Times* article, Danchenko and his friends used the piece to help a GoFundMe campaign on his behalf. (Danchenko was found not guilty of lying to the FBI last October.) Then a mirror image of the Trump-Russia story surfaced, after the *New York Post* ran a series of stories disclosing “raunchy” details of Hunter Biden’s private life, as well as inside correspondence related to his business dealings in Ukraine and China. It came from the contents of his laptop, said to have been abandoned in 2019 at a

computer repair shop in Delaware. The first story included photos of a federal grand jury subpoena seeking production of the laptop and an external hard drive.

Reporters who ferreted out the details of the FBI inquiry into Trump's campaign couldn't, or wouldn't, confirm the Justice Department investigation into the future president's son. Whereas the specter of purported Russian ties to Trump spurred an explosion of social media and journalistic interest, this time Twitter and Facebook temporarily curbed the reach of the *Post* story.

The *Post* stories said the laptop "had been seized by the FBI," but "a copy of its contents" had been made by the owner of the computer repair shop where Biden had dropped it off but had "never retrieved" it. The material wound up with Rudy Giuliani, the former New York City mayor and Trump confidant, and he had "shared" it with the newspaper.

Hunter Biden's attorney, in a statement to the *Post*, didn't deny the contents of the laptop but attacked Giuliani, who had helped Trump in the Mueller inquiry and his impeachment over Ukraine. "He has been pushing widely discredited conspiracy theories about the Biden family, openly relying on actors tied to Russian intelligence," the lawyer, George Mesires, told the New York tabloid.

In short order, Clapper, Obama's former head of national intelligence, told CNN, where he is a national-security analyst, that the laptop saga "is just classic textbook Soviet Russian tradecraft at work."

Most outlets wrote stories about the matter, but, unable to obtain or verify copies of the laptop data, eschewed deep dives into the underlying transactions and relationships. The *Times* did explore one proposed deal with a Chinese energy company that had been the focus of a *Times* report in 2018. But Tom Friedman, a *Times* columnist, told CNBC's Squawk Box last July that the paper believed it didn't do enough: "I know the NYT felt it didn't pursue it originally as much as it wanted to," he said, but "then it followed up, as I recall." The *Times* said in its statement, "Dating back years and more recently, the *Times* has reported consistently and fairly on Hunter Biden and his personal and financial entanglements."

In the wake of the *New York Post* story, Schiff went on CNN to claim "the origins of this whole smear are from the Kremlin." Around this time, a group of more than fifty former intelligence and national-security officials were preparing a statement linking the laptop story to Russia, saying it "has all the classic hallmarks of a Russian information operation."

In short order, the letter, was given to Natasha Bertrand, then a Politico reporter and now at CNN, by Nick Shapiro, a former aide to Brennan, Obama's last CIA director. (Brennan signed the letter. I left a message on Brennan's cellphone. Shapiro returned the call. Neither would comment on the record.) The headline on Bertrand's story read "Hunter Biden story is Russian disinfo, dozens of former intel officials say."

The letter, and Bertrand's story, made clear the signers were relying on their "experience," not evidence: "we do not have evidence of Russian involvement," they wrote. But it was good enough to be picked up in dozens of news reports, tweeted by Biden's campaign, and cited by Biden himself in his final debate with Trump, which

attracted sixty-three million television viewers. The two candidates sparred over Russia, with Trump comparing his “tougher” record on Russia, such as sanctions, to that of his predecessor, when Biden was vice president. Biden shot back, telling Trump “Russia is paying you a lot.” Trump brought up “the laptop from hell,” which prompted Biden to cite the letter from the former intelligence officials, saying they called his accusation “a Russian plan” and “a bunch of garbage.”

“You mean the laptop is now another Russia, Russia, Russia hoax?” Trump asked his opponent. Biden replied, “That’s exactly what—that is exactly what we’ve been told.” Trump ended the brouhaha by saying, “Here we go again with Russia.”

A majority of Americans told pollsters that the media did a poor job of covering the Hunter Biden affair, according to a December 2020 survey by Rasmussen Reports and a poll last year by the New Jersey-based Technometrica Institute of Policy and Politics.

After the election, Trump refused to acknowledge the results, seeing them as the latest chapter in the “hoax,” or “witch hunt,” that began with Russia. He also stopped listening to advisers, like Barr, who wrote in his book that “Trump thought I was to blame” for Biden’s “deception” at the debate about Hunter’s laptop. Barr, once the whipping boy for Democrats for what they thought was too much fealty to Trump, was a star witness against the former president in some of the hearings into January 6.

As Trump became more isolated and undeterred by court rulings and news accounts that shot down his claims the election was rigged, he listened to people who, like him, had been caught up in the Russia inquiry. One was Giuliani and another was Flynn.

The *Times* would soon provide its own take on Flynn’s journey. “It was the story of the Russia investigation as a malevolent plot that first began priming tens of millions of Americans to believe Mr. Trump’s conspiracy theories about the deep state,” the paper wrote shortly after Trump left office. “As one of the heroes of that narrative Mr. Flynn became an ideal messenger when it was refashioned into the demonstrably false claim that Democrats and their deep state allies had rigged the election.” (A message seeking an interview with Flynn, sent to America’s Future, the Florida-based group he chairs, went unanswered.)

On January 6, 2021, Trump’s legacy, in most of the media and elsewhere, was sealed. Some of Trump’s most devoted supporters—who also believed in his unsubstantiated claims of a rigged election—went wild, as Trump had predicted in a December tweet, leaving a dark stain on the Capitol, and the country.

A member of the Hawai’i Proud Boys group scratched “Murder the Media” on the Capitol’s Memorial Door, while others chanted “CNN sucks.” A photographer was thrown to the floor and had her camera ripped away after people in the crowd saw that she worked for the *New York Times*. Eleven protesters have been charged in connection with assaults on journalists or destruction of their equipment, according to the *Washington Post*. The *Times* photographer, Erin Schaff, feared for her life, describing her attackers as “really angry” in an account she wrote for the paper.

Trump, in an interview in early August last year, said he “never wanted to see that happen,” referring to the violence that day, when I asked him if he had any regrets about January 6.

The attack came four years to the day after the fateful briefing by Comey, where he recounted the most salacious allegation in the now discredited dossier. I raised with Trump the coincidence of January 6 being bookends, of a sort, to his tenure. His face lit up: “That was a famous day,” he said. “The sixth seems to be a big thing.”

When I asked what mistakes he made, he paused before offering two examples: the first traces back to the Russia probe and the second to the 2020 election.

“Jeff Sessions was a mistake,” he said, referring to his first attorney general, who recused himself from the Russia inquiry. He explained he had been to Washington “only seventeen times in my life, and I never stayed over,” so “when I got there, I didn’t know any people in Washington.” As a result, he made some poor personnel decisions, such as Sessions.

“What I do regret,” he went on, “is that the Republicans didn’t have the apparatus to stop the crooked vote” in 2020.

As I left his office, Trump insisted I take an account of an audit of Arizona’s votes in 2020, which he told me was “finding all these ballots and phantom votes.”

On my way out he made a last-minute call to ensure he was getting french fries with his dinner. I headed to my car, past the Secret Service detail, along the beautiful, lush contours of his golf course, and watched the darkness begin to descend.

## AFTERWORD

I’ve avoided opining in my more than fifty years as a reporter. This time, however, I felt obligated to weigh in. Why? Because I am worried about journalism’s declining credibility and society’s increasing polarization. The two trends, I believe, are intertwined.

My main conclusion is that journalism’s primary missions, informing the public and holding powerful interests accountable, have been undermined by the erosion of journalistic norms and the media’s own lack of transparency about its work. This combination adds to people’s distrust about the media and exacerbates frayed political and social differences.

One traditional journalistic standard that wasn’t always followed in the Trump-Russia coverage is the need to report facts that run counter to the prevailing narrative. In January 2018, for example, the *New York Times* ignored a publicly available document showing that the FBI’s lead investigator didn’t think, after ten months of inquiry into possible Trump-Russia ties, that there was much there. This omission disserved *Times* readers. The paper says its reporting was thorough and “in line with our editorial standards.”

My last reporting project for the *Times*, in 2005, was an inquiry into US propaganda efforts abroad. I interviewed a former top CIA expert on behavior and propaganda, Jerrold Post, who told me that leaving important information out of a broadcast or story lowers public trust in the messenger because consumers inevitably find

the missing information somewhere else. (And *Post*, who died a few years ago, spoke before the arrival of social media.)

Another axiom of journalism that was sometimes neglected in the Trump-Russia coverage was the failure to seek and reflect comment from people who are the subject of serious criticism. The *Times* guidelines call it a “special obligation.” Yet in stories by the *Times* involving such disparate figures as Joseph Mifsud (the Maltese academic who supposedly started the whole FBI inquiry), Christopher Steele (the former British spy who authored the dossier), and Konstantin Kilimnik (the consultant cited by some as the best evidence of collusion between Russia and Trump), the paper’s reporters failed to include comment from the person being criticized. The *Times*, in a statement, says some of the subjects were approached on occasion, yet the paper’s guidelines also call for their comments to be published.

Another exhibit is a familiar target: anonymous sources. I’ve used them myself, including, sparsely, in this piece. What’s different in the Trump era, however, is both the volume of anonymous sources and the misleading way they’re often described.

One frequent and vague catchphrase—“people (or person) familiar with”—is widely used by many journalists: the *Times* used it over a thousand times in stories involving Trump and Russia between October 2016 and the end of his presidency, according to a Nexis search. The last executive editor I worked for, Bill Keller, frowned on its use. He told the staff repeatedly the phrase was “so vague it could even mean the reporter.” The *Times*, in a statement to *CJR*, said, “We have strong rules in place governing the use of anonymous sources.” Other outlets mentioned in this piece declined to discuss their anonymous-sourcing practices.

Another anonymous-sourcing convention that was turbocharged in the Trump era was the use of more neutral descriptors like “government official” or “intelligence official” or “American official” to mask congressional leakers. A few reporters admitted that to me, but, of course, only anonymously. Here’s how it works. First, a federal agency like the CIA or FBI secretly briefs Congress. Then Democrats or Republicans selectively leak snippets. Finally, the story comes out, using vague attribution. “It was a problem for us,” Mike Kortan, the former FBI spokesman until 2018, told me. Kortan, who also worked in Congress, added: “We would brief Congress, try and give them a full picture with the negative stuff, and then a member of Congress can cherry-pick the information and the reporter doesn’t know they’ve been cherry-picked.” The typical reader or viewer is clueless.

My final concern, and frustration, was the lack of transparency by media organizations in responding to my questions. I reached out to more than sixty journalists; only about half responded. Of those who did, more than a dozen agreed to be interviewed on the record. However, not a single major news organization made available a newsroom leader to talk about their coverage.

My reporting has been criticized by journalists, from the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, in the 1980s, to Harper’s magazine in the 1990s and the *Daily Beast* in the 2000s. When I’ve had the opportunity to respond, which hasn’t always been the

case, I've tried to engage. On a few occasions, I concluded the inquiring reporter wasn't really open to what I had to say, so I let my story speak for itself.

But during this time, when the media is under extraordinary attack and widely distrusted, a transparent, unbiased, and accountable media is more needed than ever. It's one of a journalist's best tools to distinguish themselves from all the misinformation, gossip, and rumor that proliferates on the Web and then gets legitimized on occasion by politicians of all stripes, including Trump.

Most Americans (60 percent) say they want unbiased news sources. Yet 86 percent think the media is biased. The consequences of this mismatch are all too obvious: 83 percent of the audience for Fox News leans Republican while 91 percent of the readers of the *New York Times* lean Democratic.

Jennifer Kavanagh, senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me of her concerns about news silos.

"If you are only getting your news from one source, you are getting a skewed view," which, she said, "increases polarization" and "crowds out the room for compromise, because people base their views on these siloed news sources." She added: "People don't have time to deal with nuance, so they settle on a position and everything else tends to become unacceptable."

Walter Lippmann wrote about these dangers in his 1920 book *Liberty and the News*. Lippmann worried then that when journalists "arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable."

## A note on disclosure

In 2015–16, I was a senior reporter at *ProPublica*. There, I reported on Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Russian oligarchs, among other subjects. I helped *ProPublica* decide whether to collaborate with a book that was critical of the Clintons' involvement with Russia; the arrangement didn't happen. Another of the projects I worked on, also involving Clinton, was published in the *Washington Post* in 2016, where I shared a byline. Some of my other Clinton-related work was used in 2016 articles appearing in the *New York Times*, my employer between 1976 and 2005, but without my byline. Initially, the *Times* sought my assistance on a story about Hillary's handling of Bill Clinton's infidelity. Subsequently I approached the paper on my own about the Clinton family foundation. In both cases, I interacted with reporters and editors but was not involved in the writing or editing of the stories that used my reporting. During the second interaction, I expressed disappointment to one of the *Times* reporters about the final result.

I left *ProPublica* in December 2016. That month I was approached by one of the cofounders of Fusion GPS, who sounded me out about joining a Trump-related project the firm was contemplating. The discussion did not lead to any collaboration. I had previously interacted with Fusion related to my reporting on Russian oligarchs.

In the 2017–18 academic year I was a nonresident fellow at the Investigative Reporting Program, affiliated with the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of

California, Berkeley. There, one of my projects involved looking into the dossier as part of preliminary research for a 2020 film the Investigative Reporting Program helped produce for HBO on Russian meddling. I was not on the film's credits.

At *CJR*, these stories have been edited by Kyle Pope, its editor and publisher. Kyle's wife, Kate Kelly, is a reporter for the Washington bureau of the *New York Times*. *CJR*'s former board chair was Steve Adler, formerly the editor in chief of Reuters; its current board chair is Rebecca Blumenstein, a former deputy managing editor of the *Times* who recently became president of editorial for NBC News.