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# The press versus the president, part one

## 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.”

***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.

*Correction: An earlier version of this story misnamed Michael Sussmann.*

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Jeff Gerth is a freelance journalist who spent three decades as an investigative reporter at the *New York Times*.

TOP IMAGE: US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP SPEAKS TO THE PRESS AS HE DEPARTS THE WHITE HOUSE IN WASHINGTON, DC, ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2019. (PHOTO BY ALASTAIR PIKE / AFP) (PHOTO CREDIT SHOULD READ ALASTAIR PIKE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)