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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.

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.

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

TOP IMAGE: FORMER US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP, CENTER, DURING AN ANNOUNCEMENT AT THE MAR-A-LAGO CLUB IN PALM BEACH, FLORIDA, US, ON TUESDAY, NOV. 15, 2022. TRUMP FORMALLY ENTERED THE 2024 US PRESIDENTIAL RACE, MAKING OFFICIAL WHAT HE'S BEEN TEASING FOR MONTHS JUST AS MANY REPUBLICANS ARE PREPARING TO MOVE AWAY FROM THEIR LONGTIME STANDARD BEARER. PHOTOGRAPHER: EVA MARIE UZCATEGUI/BLOOMBERG