The Washington Post

Trump's conspiracy theory about 'the server' threatens election security

Julian Sanchez

November 25, 2019

Donald Trump is still searching for "The Server." On Friday morning, the president phoned in to his favorite cable news program, "Fox and Friends," to make a series of false claims about the cyberattack on the Democratic National Committee's computer systems perpetrated by Russian hackers, as part of their elaborate efforts to interfere with the 2016 presidential election. After the attack, Trump claimed, the DNC "gave the server to CrowdStrike, which is a company owned by a very wealthy Ukrainian. I still want to see that server. The FBI has never gotten that server. That's a big part of this whole thing."

Every part of what Trump said was false - including the claim that the California-based cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, hired by the DNC when it discovered the infiltration of its systems, is owned by a "wealthy Ukrainian."

Nevertheless, "the server" has been a long-running obsession of the president's. He has referenced it repeatedly on Twitter, in media interviews, while standing onstage next to Russian President Vladimir Putin and, more recently, in his now-notorious July 25 phone conversation with Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky.

That refrain is troubling, most of all because it shows that Trump is fixated on a conspiracy theory that his own national security advisers have denounced as "completely debunked." These theories allege that there is a "server" that the DNC refused to turn over to the FBI, purportedly to conceal evidence that would disprove the intelligence community's consensus that Russia was responsible for the hack. According to some versions of the theory, another country (perhaps Ukraine) was the true culprit; in others the theft of thousands of DNC emails later published by WikiLeaks was an "inside job." The unifying theme, however, is a desire to exonerate Russia of the crime.

Trump's obsession with the server suggests he is either unwilling to seek reliable information from the government's own intelligence and law enforcement agencies, or that he disbelieves what they tell him, even on questions where there is no ambiguity or doubt. This goes well beyond healthy skepticism and into the realm of dangerous dysfunction: A president who refuses to accept intelligence assessments he prefers not to believe cannot make sound decisions, and over time this creates pressure to politicize intelligence - with agencies flattering the president's preconceptions to remain relevant.

Even Trump's staunchest allies in Congress have been unwilling to follow their leader down this rabbit hole. In the course of House impeachment hearings, GOP legislators have sought to justify Trump's desire to investigate putative "election interference" by Ukraine - citing such "interventions" as a 2016 newspaper op-ed written by Ukraine's ambassador to the United States, which criticized some of Trump's foreign policy statements. None were prepared to acknowledge, let alone justify, the actual investigation Trump had requested: an inquiry into CrowdStrike and the supposedly missing DNC email server. Yet as the testimony of E.U. Ambassador Gordon Sondland made clear last week, the references to CrowdStrike and "the server" were not limited to a single call. In the weeks that followed the exchange between the two leaders, Sondland testified that he had continued pressuring Ukrainian officials to publicly announce the probes Trump had demanded, one of which he repeatedly described as an investigation of "the DNC server."

Republicans' reluctance to address this directly is unsurprising. When former National Security Council adviser Fiona Hill suggested in her testimony during Thursday's hearings that some Republicans had accepted a "false narrative" exonerating Russia of election meddling, those in the room reacted with uniform outrage, pointing to a bipartisan House Intelligence Committee report acknowledging Russian culpability. Though their umbrage was justified, none of them acknowledged that the president's obsession with "the server" is inextricably bound up with the very "false narrative" they had angrily rejected.

The "server" conspiracy theory is baseless for at least five reasons.

First, "the server" doesn't even exist. The DNC relies on a cloud-based email system consisting of some 140 physical servers. And as Robert Mueller's report on Russian interference explained, the military unit behind the cyberattacks "compromised more than 30 computers on the DNC network," as well as another 29 owned by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

Second, it is not unusual that the FBI did not cart off the physical machines affected by Russian attack. As a rule, law enforcement does not seize the property of crime victims unless it's necessary, and when it comes to digital evidence, it is often unnecessary. In this case, the company CrowdStrike provided the FBI with digital images of the hacked DNC computers. Asking why the FBI didn't take the physical computers is like wondering why someone has emailed you a file rather than shipping you their entire laptop.

Third, the information most useful to the FBI would be in the images created by CrowdStrike during their efforts to expel the foreign intruders. Examining the computers after the fact - after the dust had settled and the hackers' malware had been removed - would have provided far fewer insights than observing them in action.

Fourth, it is clear from both the Mueller report and the special counsel's indictment of Russian officials charged with the hack that forensic evidence from DNC computers was a relatively small piece of the puzzle. The evidence of Russian responsibility for the hack is both overwhelming and derived from many sources: It is not based merely on analysis of the DNC's servers.

Fifth and finally, one element of the theory seemingly original to Trump is the odd and inexplicable notion that CrowdStrike is a Ukrainian company. The firm - which was only hired by the DNC, but also the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee when its computer network was penetrated - is based in California. One of its co-founders was born in Russia, not Ukraine, and moved to the United States as a teenager nearly 25 years ago.

As all of that makes clear, Trump's conspiratorially minded ideas about the "server" aren't just "baseless" or "unfounded" - they're provably wrong. Indeed, his concerns are obviously and comically irrelevant to anyone who understands digital forensics. If Trump cared to ask, any one of hundreds of technical experts who work for the FBI or other government agencies could explain why the theory is nonsensical.

Despite all of that, Trump has still gone to bizarre lengths to ascertain the effectively fictional server's whereabouts. During his July 25 call with Zelensky, he asked the Ukrainian president to "find out what happened with this whole situation with Ukraine, they say CrowdStrike . . . The server, they say Ukraine has it." That request was, in effect, a declaration that he so distrusts American intelligence and law enforcement agencies that he would prefer to rely on Ukraine's. Like his more explosively troubling request for an investigation of Biden, it was an attempt to get a foreign power to publicly validate and lend credibility to a politically useful conspiracy theory, which American intelligence officials, and even his GOP allies, have refused to do.

Perhaps even more concerning, the obsession with the server is a sign that Trump continues to reject the unanimous conclusion - again, not only of the American intelligence community, but of Republicans in Congress - that Russia was responsible for the DNC attacks. This does not bode well for efforts to secure our elections against another attack in 2020 - a topic Homeland Security officials have apparently been warned not to raise in Trump's presence, lest it anger the president. Election security is a hard problem under the best of circumstances - and harder still when the boss refuses to acknowledge the problem exists.

Julian Sanchez is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and studies issues related to technology, privacy and civil liberties.