

The Truth About the Russia-Trump Collusion Conspiracy

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A big reason so many observers are reluctant to assume Donald Trump loyalists and Kremlin loyalists ever connived in secret to sabotage Hillary Clinton's campaign is that so much of what they had to offer one another, they offered out in the open. Trump asked on live television for Russia to hack Clinton's emails. Russian state media propagandized for Trump and against Clinton every day. Trump returned the favor with Russia-friendly policy proposals opposed by almost everyone in his party.

The most compelling version of this argument, by the Cato Institute's Julian Sanchez, includes the additional caveat that the competent half of the Trump-Russia conspiracy would see fewer upsides than downsides in forging an explicit, secret arrangement with the likes of Donald Trump and his assemblage of low-character incompetents. "The primary reason I doubt we're going to see that smoking gun, is that it's hard to see why it would be in Russia's interest to loop the Trump campaign in on their interference campaign," he wrote in May. "The risks would be significant, and the benefits hard to discern."

But *The New York Times*' recent bombshells about an undisclosed 2016 meeting between Donald Trump Jr., campaign chair Paul Manafort, Jared Kushner, and a Kremlin-linked lawyer shopping dirt about Hillary Clinton, points to the possibility that the upper echelons of the Trump organization were so thirsty and reckless that they made the prospect of direct, covert collusion too tantalizing for Russian agents to resist. The difference is that Trump's counterparts were smart enough to use intermediaries. They had Trump's cake and ate it, too.

Consider the following timeline of events surrounding the meeting, as compiled by NBC's political tipsheet First Read.

June 7: The 2016 primary season essentially concludes, with both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as the presumptive party nominees

June 9: Donald Trump Jr. — along with Jared Kushner and former campaign chair Paul Manafort — meets with Kremlin-connected lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya.

June 9: Trump tweets about Clinton's missing 33,000 emails

July 18: Washington Post reports, on the first day of the GOP convention, that the Trump campaign changed the Republican platform to ensure that it didn't call for giving weapons to Ukraine to fight Russian and rebel forces

July 21: GOP convention concludes with Trump giving his speech accepting the Republican nomination

July 22: WikiLeaks releases stolen emails from the Democratic National Committee

July 25: Democratic convention begins

July 27: In final news conference of his 2016 campaign, Trump asks Russia: "If you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing"

The backdrop for this list is that by the time of the June 9 meeting, the thought that hacked Clinton emails might be ripe for the plucking had been in the air for weeks. The supposed vulnerability of Clinton's private server was a crucial plot element in the right's email-scandal mythology. The insinuation was that she'd left state secrets opposed to hackers, but also that her deleted emails were sitting at the end of a treasure hunt.

Trump Jr. now admits that he agreed to the meeting in the hope that this lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya, would have compromising information on Clinton. On Monday night, the *Times* reported that Trump Jr. was explicitly "informed in an email that the material was part of a Russian government effort to aid his father's candidacy, according to three people with knowledge of the email." By accepting the meeting and looping top campaign staff in on it, rather than reporting the solicitation to the FBI, he established the demand side of a secret collusion narrative. Trump's interest in Clinton's missing emails wasn't a secret, but the fact that his most senior campaign aides would hastily convene secret, inappropriate meetings in hopes of obtaining the goods on Clinton points to the lengths the campaign was willing to go, and the signals they were willing to emit, to get them.

The supply side is, of course, well known. Whatever became of Clinton's missing server emails, we know that Russia stole and laundered emails from Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta and the Democratic National Committee. On June 12, three days after the potentially fateful Trump Jr. meeting, and three days after Trump's tweet about Clinton's emails, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange announced that he was sitting on a cache of "leaks in relation to Hillary Clinton ... pending publication." (He would eventually release more than 20,000 pages of emails in the weeks leading up to the election.)

In an insightful thread on Twitter on Sunday, MSNBC's Joy Reid connected this pattern of behavior to conduct that has defined Trump throughout his career—a willingness to skate outside the lines (or to deputize others to skate outside the lines) for personal gain. If only by accepting this June 9 meeting, but more likely through actions taken before then, the Trump team communicated its desire for Clinton dirt, and their counterparts communicated the concessions they'd like in return—including sanctions relief. They turned to whomever could help them gain advantage in a daunting election, and in the process made themselves marks.

By late July, a veteran GOP opposition researcher named Peter Smith, who claimed to be working with Trump's national security adviser Michael Flynn, was all but advertising to cybersecurity experts his desire to obtain stolen Clinton emails, whether from Russia or any other party.

Presumably pursuant to this fishing expedition, U.S. intelligence surveilled Russian hackers “discussing how to obtain emails from Mrs. Clinton’s server and then transmit them to Mr. Flynn via an intermediary,” according to *The Wall Street Journal*.

With this much established, Occam’s razor is now on the side of those who posit direct-collusion theories rather than indirect ones. The sorts of channels the Trump campaign would have used to signal to U.S. adversaries when to release stolen emails and where to direct propaganda are suddenly quite clear. For months the “quid” and “quo” of the Trump-Russia collusion scandal have been plain for all to see. We are in the midst of establishing the “pro.”