

Dossiers, Make Believe and Fantasy: The CIA, Trump and “Unverified News”

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Morning breakfast news on the BBC's Radio Four on Friday was a delightful affair filled with discussions on Russia (when do we not talk about that busy, stirring Bear these days?), Donald Trump, dossiers and the intelligence fraternity. Did it even matter that various sources have been unverified, subject matter lumped together in cumbersome conversations on fake news, sexual frolics and the like?

Discussants on the Beeb who kept listeners company over coffee included former, recently confessed spook Frederick Forsyth, for years the go-to creator of the spy narrative, and the official intelligence historian Sir Christopher Andrew.

For Forsyth, the allegations outlined by former British spy Christopher Steele that Trump found himself in prancing company with Russian hookers, dubious real estate deals targeted as bribes and a treasonous coordination with the Russian intelligence services to defeat Hillary Clinton, beggared belief. Trump was hardly that much of a buffoon, surely.

On Wednesday night, the US director of national intelligence, James R. Clapper Jr., issued a statement in the aftermath of a conversation with Trump on the Steele dossier, suggesting that the agencies had “not made any judgment that the information in this document is reliable.” Naturally, despite any claims about authenticity, the report had been circulated within the deepest recesses of spook central. Clapper would never want to deny his own officials the pleasure of that smut.

The New York Times conceded that much of the story remained “out of reach – most critically the basis question of how much, if anything, in the dossier is true.”[1] You would think that this point was most salient, rendering any other discussion empty and flatulent.

Nonetheless, the paper would go on to assert that it was “possible to piece together a rough narrative of what led to the current crisis, including lingering questions about the ties binding Mr. Trump and his team to Russia.”

With the US presidential inauguration fast approaching, the press jackals have been swarming. The tit bits offered by the Steele report are themselves shrouded, stemming from September 2015 when an anti-Trump Republican donor (naturally, we do not the name) commissioned Fusion GPS, a Washington-based research firm stacked by former journalists turned information hit-men, to do some digging. The mission was simple: find as much debilitating dirt as possible and sink the Trump ship.

Steele, considered at one point one of Britain's foremost Russian experts within MI6, was

considered ideal for the job of funnelling information to Glenn Simpson at Fusion GPS. The themes of those memos were stock standard: the old compromising (kompromat) material, with sex being central; and the hacking of the Democratic National Committee with discussion by Trump officials with Russian entities.

Trump has not done himself any favours, preferring to throw meagre carrion at the press corps, and hope that it miraculously dissipates. His polemical advisors would have been best served to tell him to shut it. News is not interesting. Allegations have become the gold dust of political debate.

This latest battle of spite and indignation reveals that internally, there is a war between claims and institutions within the United States. The intelligence community finds itself unsheathing its weapons. Trump has duly responded.

The point being missed here is the possibility that the servants of the elected commander-in-chief may actually be subverting the Republic, for all Trump's sullen, and childish authoritarianism. Sources garnered from the very foundry of deception have assumed an aura of reliability. The argument about fake news has been turned inside out.

While care should be taken in packaging the entire US intelligence community into a neat box of anti-Trump enthusiasts, a good number of former officials were very keen that Hillary Clinton take over the reins in the White House. Views were expressed throughout the election cycle: Trump had to be defeated at all costs.

Once it became clear that Trump was gaining electoral momentum at nerve racking pace, it was important to side with the Clinton electoral team on a revived Cold War mantra: the Russians were doing terrible things, with Trump operating in the shadow of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

For former CIA and NSA director under George W. Bush, Gen. Michael Hayden, Trump was "the useful fool, some naïf, manipulated by Moscow, secretly held in contempt, but whose blind support is happily accepted and exploited." [2]

Former CIA Director Michael J. Morell also took a step that can only be regarded as singular and institutionally troubling: coming out from the shadows to pick his preferred candidate while denigrating another.

In August, he bored readers with his resume in an opinion piece for the New York Times. ("In my 40 years of voting, I have pulled the lever for candidates of both parties.") He expressed a solemn view that Trump was "not only unqualified for the job, but he may well pose a threat to our national security." Russia's Putin "had recruited Mr. Trump as an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation." [3]

The Fourth Estate used to be the solemn interrogating power of the parliamentary galleries. Being unelected, it was given, as an accident of history, a certain influence. Like all power, it can be misdirected, even ill-informed. The questioners can become vessels and conduits.

Over time, that same estate has withered, becoming a faint echo of investigation and fact checking. Even in notionally democratic states, it can be co-opted. As Glenn Greenwald has argued, the most useful tool of the deep state has been the US media, "much of which reflexively reveres, serves, believes, and sides with hidden intelligence officials." [4]

Leakers are punished; facts are not cross-checked. The hack now floats in an ether of speculation, fed by the unverifiable, and pampered by the intelligence official. The battles now seemingly not over narratives of veracity but narratives of invention. Power, it would seem, to the creative in this new Republic of trouble that is the United States.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/us/politics/donald-trump-russia-intelligence.html?_r=0

[2]

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/former-cia-chief-trump-is-russias-useful-fool/2016/11/03/cda42ffe-a1d5-11e6-8d63-3e0a660f1f04_story.html?utm_term=.771eff2c3b02

[3]

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/opinion/campaign-stops/i-ran-the-cia-now-im-endorsing-hillary-clinton.html>

[4]

<https://theintercept.com/2017/01/11/the-deep-state-goes-to-war-with-president-elect-using-unverified-claims-as-dems-cheer/>

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