

A Fresh Reminder of Russiagate's Failed Integrity

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For more than four years, Western media outlets have exhaustively claimed that President Vladimir Putin of Russia waged a sweeping influence campaign to install Donald Trump in the White House and undermine U.S. democracy.

According to The Guardian, the long elusive smoking-gun evidence has been found. On July 15, the British newspaper published an article by one of the leading media promoters of the Trump-Russia narrative, Luke Harding, and two colleagues. Harding and company report that they have obtained [secret "Kremlin papers"](#) – bearing Putin's signature – that authorized the malicious Russian plot. The documents call for using "all possible force" to support Russia's preferred candidate, and thus trigger "the destabilization of the U.S.'s sociopolitical system."

Yet remarkably, this supposed earth-shattering scoop has been greeted with [resounding silence](#) from The Guardian's U.S. media counterparts. Two weeks later, the New York Times, CNN, MSNBC, ABC, NBC and CBS have ignored it. The lone exception was Washington Post columnist Philip Bump who, rather than parrot Harding's story, [laid out multiple reasons](#) why it is "hard not to be skeptical" of it.

For Harding, the media shutout stands in sharp contrast to the warm embrace of his 2017 book "Collusion," which rode the once-towering Trump-Russia conspiracy wave to become a No. 1 New York Times bestseller. Times columnist Michelle Goldberg called it "essential" and wished that ["everyone who is skeptical that Russia has leverage over Trump would read it."](#)

The release of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report in April 2019 undermined Harding's collusion narrative, and discredited his primary source, ex-British spy Christopher Steele. It also included nothing to support Harding's evidence-free [November 2018 report in the Guardian](#), which claimed that one-time Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort and Julian Assange held three secret meetings in Ecuador's London embassy – one of the most surveilled locations on the planet.

The cold reception to Harding's latest "bombshell" suggests that he may have worn out his welcome with fellow collusion chasers across the pond. But if this story is a bridge too far, what does that say about the others that preceded it?

Content-wise, Harding's article is not much different than the sloppy coverage that, for example, [won a 2018 Pulitzer Prize for the New York Times and Washington Post](#). Just like Harding, these prominent outlets also used anonymous sources, evidence-free claims and hedged language to advance the narrative that Trump's presidency was all one dastardly Russian operation.

What appears to have changed is not a newfound embrace of journalism standards, but instead a shifting of narrative priorities. With Joe Biden now in office, the Russiagate fixation no longer suits a political and media establishment that relied on it as a means to undermine his predecessor.

In response to emailed queries from RealClearInvestigations, a Guardian spokesperson said, "We stand by our story and our reporting."

'Apparently' a Bombshell

According to Harding and his co-authors, Julian Borger and Dan Sabbagh, leaked Kremlin papers show that Putin convened a meeting in January 2016 where he "personally authorised a secret spy agency operation to support" Trump in that year's U.S. presidential election. Trump's Russian backers viewed him as "mentally unstable" and accordingly saw his candidacy as a vehicle for creating "social turmoil" in their U.S. adversary. The papers even provide "apparent confirmation that the Kremlin possesses kompromat, or potentially compromising material, on the future president."

Although it published the story, the Guardian hedged its bets regarding the authenticity of the article's explosive claims with an abundance of qualified language long characteristic of Russiagate coverage, starting with the headline: "Kremlin papers *appear to show* Putin's plot to put Trump in White House" (*emphasis added*).

Along with the qualifiers, Harding and company deploy the passive voice to try to disingenuously lend their "Kremlin papers" the *appearance* of credibility. They "are assessed to be leaked Kremlin documents," Harding and company write – although details such as which person or persons actually "assessed" the material, how they did it, and why we should trust them, are left unstated. The documents contain "a decree appearing to bear Putin's signature" – in the same way that forged autographs can often appear to bear Michael Jordan's signature too (although, in fairness, at least fake memorabilia can be seen; The Guardian conspicuously fails to show us this "apparent" Putin "signature"). The papers "seem to represent a serious and highly unusual leak from within the Kremlin" — just as The Guardian seems to represent Luke Harding as a serious journalist.

Suggesting an explosive conclusion while tacitly acknowledging the absence of verified evidence to support it was also [a hallmark of the Mueller](#) and the Senate Intelligence Committee reports on Russiagate, which used long-winded innuendo and words like "appear," "likely" and "suggest" to [insinuate damning conclusions](#) without [having to substantiate them](#).

Fittingly, even Harding's own attempt to promote the documents' authenticity has to be qualified: "The Guardian has shown the documents to independent experts who say they *appear* to be genuine." Other observers [have cast doubt](#) on multiple strands of the story.

Harding can't even muster a stamp of approval from his usual sources in the U.K. spy

services and their cutouts: “Western intelligence agencies *are understood* to have been aware of the documents for some months and to have carefully examined them.” How exactly it’s “understood” that Western spies are “aware of the documents” and “carefully examined them,” Harding does not say. Nor, conspicuously, does he say what they concluded from their purportedly “careful” “examinations.”

A Convenient ‘Route Map’ for Russiagate Propaganda

Harding’s story follows the Russiagate playbook in another important sense: comporting with the propaganda aims of the anonymous intelligence officials and political operatives behind it.

With the “collusion” conspiracy theory now shattered, Harding’s story amounts to a renewed effort to preserve the credibility of the leftovers. If the qualified language for every outlandish assertion isn’t enough of a tell, Harding and his co-authors even make their propaganda aim explicit: “The papers appear to set out a route map for what actually happened in 2016,” they write.

How convenient. After years of writing a largely evidence-free, explosive narrative – in his case, a Russian campaign to destroy Western democracy via their Oval Office asset, conspirator, or dupe – Harding says he has come into possession of a set of “documents” that just happen to confirm the dastardly plot in writing, right down to the signature of the alleged Kremlin mastermind.

In yet another convenient development, Harding reports that the papers “appear” to confirm the long-speculated, Steele-originating claim “that the Kremlin possesses *kompromat*” on Trump. The damning “details,” his article reports with impressive specificity, are apparently included in “appendix five, at paragraph five.” There’s just one snag: The Guardian can’t show it to us. “It is unclear what the appendix contains,” Harding writes.

According to Harding’s “experts,” the “overall tone and thrust” of the documents “is said to be consistent with Kremlin security thinking.” Their thinking echoes the former national security officials who declared right before the November 2020 election that Hunter Biden’s laptop [“has all the classic earmarks of a Russian information operation.”](#) Just as with that attempt to censor the Biden story, the overall tone and thrust of Harding’s article and the “leaks” it’s supposedly based on is entirely consistent with those who have used fearmongering around Russia and a credulous Western media to advance a political agenda.

In reality, the notion that Russia waged a sweeping interference campaign to install Trump is [unsupported by all of the available evidence](#). The social media memes that supposedly brainwashed millions of Americans into rejecting Hillary Clinton were juvenile in nature, minor in reach, and mostly devoid of any mention of the election. The allegation that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee and then gave the stolen emails to WikiLeaks [remains](#) full of [glaring holes](#).

Meanwhile, as Democratic leaders and media allies denounced him as a Kremlin puppet, Trump in fact presided over a far more hawkish posture toward Russia than his Democratic predecessor, Barack Obama, whom Biden served as vice president. “The dirty little secret about the Trump administration,” CNN host Fareed Zakaria admitted in the last weeks of Trump’s presidency, “was that while Donald Trump clearly had a kind of soft spot for Putin, the Trump administration was pretty tough on the Russians. They armed Ukraine. They

armed the Poles. They extended NATO operations and exercises in ways that even the Obama administration had not done. They maintained the sanctions.” If Putin’s plan was to install a puppet in the White House, it clearly backfired.

The Other Hardings

Given the predominance of the Russiagate narrative for four years, it might seem surprising that Harding’s story did not trigger the same kind of frenzied “bombshell”-based news cycle of years past. If taken at face value – as were countless Russiagate-serving stories before it – then Harding’s “scoop” that Putin ordered a pro-Trump influence campaign in January 2016 would instantaneously justify so much of the breathless innuendo that has flooded U.S. media since.

As Bump of the Washington Post noted, a major reason to doubt the story is the fact that it is authored by Harding, whose last Guardian “bombshell” is just as dubious. In November 2018, he [wrote an article claiming](#) that former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort held three secret meetings with WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange at London’s Ecuadorian embassy. Both WikiLeaks and Manafort vehemently denied the story, and no evidence has emerged to substantiate it. The story was so patently ridiculous that one anonymous CIA officer resorted to a pseudonym to [speculate in Politico](#) that the Russian government “planted” the Manafort-Assange claim in an effort to discredit Harding’s reporting.

The fact that U.S. media outlets have widely shunned Harding’s story does not mean that they are prepared for a long overdue Russiagate reckoning. Quite the contrary. Months before giving Harding the cold shoulder, a similarly evidence-free bombshell assertion was given a warm embrace. In April, the Treasury Department declared that former Paul Manafort aide Konstantin Kilimnik is a Russian spy who shared Trump polling data with Russian intelligence. Despite the absence of any evidence – and [ample](#) countervailing [facts](#) — political and media voices immediately portrayed the Treasury press release as a significant vindication.

Aaron Maté’s [2017 interview](#) with Luke Harding.

“That one sentence,” [Bump wrote](#) of the Treasury statement, “appears to finally complete the long-speculated line from Trump’s campaign to Russian intelligence.”

In the New York Times, [reporters Mark Mazzetti and Michael S. Schmidt described](#) the Treasury’s evidence-free claims as “the strongest evidence to date that Russian spies had penetrated the inner workings of the Trump campaign.” Mazzetti and Schmidt were so confident in the “Treasury document” that they even declared that it, coupled with the [Senate Intelligence report](#) of last year, now “confirm[s]” the Times’s own [highly contested report from February 2017](#) that “there had been numerous interactions between the Trump campaign and Russian intelligence during the year before the election.” FBI Director James Comey publicly [denied the story](#), calling it “not true,” and the Mueller report provided no evidence to support it. (In attempting to portray the Treasury press release as vindication, Mazzetti and Schmidt also mischaracterized their original claim, which was that Trump campaign aides “had repeated contacts with *senior* Russian intelligence officials” (*emphasis added*).

Re-inserting the Russiagate ‘Media Virus’

The rush to promote unsupported allegations and ignore countervailing facts shows that U.S. officials and their media allies have obsessively accused Russia of what they have in fact carried out themselves: a massive, divisive disinformation campaign aimed squarely at the Western public. Accordingly, every piece of content that advances the Russiagate narrative is an iteration of the “propaganda” and “disinformation” that it purports to document or challenge. Harding’s article is certainly no exception. He writes:

There are paragraphs on how Russia might insert “media viruses” into American public life, which could become self-sustaining and self-replicating. These would alter mass consciousness, especially in certain groups, it says.

There is no “media virus” inserted into American public life that has done more to alter the consciousness of certain groups than Russiagate, which has enlisted millions of malleable liberals into a fantasy that the Kremlin is brainwashing their country with social media ads and that Donald Trump was a Manchurian president.

Accordingly, if Harding’s story is evidence of anything, it is of the absurdity of a Russiagate narrative that was once treated as gospel when establishment media deemed it politically and financially expedient. The fact that it has now been shunned by the same outlets that would have previously treated it as a “bombshell” suggests that it may have finally outlived its utility.

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