

The Scheme to Take Down Trump

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Global Research, January 15, 2017

[Consortium News](#) 14 January 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

The U.S. intelligence community's unprecedented assault on an incoming U.S. president - now including spreading salacious rumors - raises questions about how long Donald Trump can hold the White House, says Daniel Lazare.

Is a military coup in the works? Or are U.S. intelligence agencies laying the political groundwork for forcing Donald Trump from the presidency because they can't abide his rejection of a new cold war with Russia? Not long ago, even asking such questions would have marked one as the sort of paranoid nut who believes that [lizard people run the government](#). But no longer.



Donald Trump speaking with supporters at a campaign rally at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona. October 29, 2016. (Flickr Gage Skidmore)

Thanks to the now-notorious 35-page dossier concerning Donald Trump's alleged sexual improprieties in a Moscow luxury hotel, it's clear that strange maneuverings are underway in Washington and that no one is quite sure how they will end.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper added to the mystery Wednesday evening by releasing [a 200-word statement](#) to the effect that he was shocked, shocked, that the dossier had found its way into the press. Such leaks, the statement said, "are extremely corrosive and damaging to our national security."

Clapper added: "that this document is not a US Intelligence Community product and that I do not believe the leaks came from within the IC. The IC has not made any judgment that the information in this document is reliable, and we did not rely upon it in any way for our conclusions. However, part of our obligation is to ensure that policymakers are provided with the fullest possible picture of any matters that might affect national security."

Rather than vouching for the dossier's contents, in other words, all Clapper says he did was inform Trump that it was making the rounds in Washington and that he should know what it said – and that he thus couldn't have been more horrified than when *Buzzfeed* posted all 35 pages on its website.

But it doesn't make sense. As *The New York Times* [noted](#), “putting the summary in a report that went to multiple people in Congress and the executive branch made it *very likely that it would be leaked*” (emphasis in the original). So even if the “intelligence community” didn't leak the dossier itself, it distributed it knowing that someone else would.

Then there is the *Guardian*, second to none in its loathing for Trump and Vladimir Putin and hence intent on giving the dossier the best possible spin. It printed a quasi-defense not of the memo itself but of the man who wrote it: Christopher Steele, an ex-MI6 officer who now heads his own private intelligence firm. “A sober, cautious and meticulous professional with a formidable record” is how the *Guardian* [described](#) him. Then it quoted an unnamed ex-Foreign Office official on the subject of Steele's credibility:

The idea his work is fake or a cowboy operation is false, completely untrue. Chris is an experienced and highly regarded professional. He's not the sort of person who will simply pass on gossip. ... If he puts something in a report, he believes there's sufficient credibility in it for it to be worth considering. Chris is a very straight guy. He could not have survived in the job he was in if he had been prone to flights of fancy or doing things in an ill-considered way.

In other words, Steele is a straight-shooter, so it's worth paying attention to what he has to say. Or so the *Guardian* assures us. “That is the way the CIA and the FBI, not to mention the British government, regarded him, too,” it adds, so presumably Clapper felt the same way.

What is Afoot?

So what does it all mean? Simply that U.S. intelligence agencies believed that the dossier came from a reliable source and that, as a consequence, there was a significant possibility that Trump was a “Siberian candidate,” as *Times* columnist Paul Krugman [once described him](#). They therefore sent out multiple copies of a two-page summary on the assumption that at least one would find its way to the press.



Director of National Intelligence James Clapper (right) talks with President Barack Obama in the Oval Office, with John Brennan and other national security aides present.

(Photo credit: Office of Director of National Intelligence)

Even if Clapper & Co. took no position concerning the dossier's contents, they knew that preparing and distributing such a summary amounted to a tacit endorsement. They also knew, presumably, that it would provide editors with an excuse to go public. If the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency feel that Steele's findings are worthy of attention, then why shouldn't the average reader have an opportunity to examine them as well?

How did Clapper expect Trump to respond when presented with allegations that he was vulnerable to Russian blackmail and potentially under the Kremlin's thumb? Did he expect him to hang his head in shame, break into great racking sobs, and admit that it was all true? If so, did Clapper then plan to place a comforting hand on Trump's shoulder and suggest, gently but firmly, that it was time to step aside and allow a trusted insider like Mike Pence to take the reins?

Based on the *sturm und drang* of the last few days, the answer is very possibly yes. If so, the gambit failed when Trump, in his usual high-voltage manner, [denounced](#) the dossier as "fake news" and sailed into the intelligence agencies for behaving like something out of "Nazi Germany." The intelligence community's hopes, if that's what they were, were dashed.

All of which is thoroughly unprecedented by American political standards. After all, this is a country that takes endless pride in the peaceful transfer of power every four years or so. Yet here was the intelligence community attempting to short-circuit the process by engineering Trump's removal before he even took office.

But the *Guardian* then upped the ante even more by suggesting that the CIA continue with the struggle. Plainly, the Republican congressional leadership has "no appetite" for an inquiry into Steele's findings, the paper's New York correspondent, Ed Pilkington, [wrote](#), adding:

That leaves the intelligence agencies. The danger for Trump here is that he has so alienated senior officials, not least by likening them to Nazis, that he has hardly earned their loyalty.

What was the *Guardian* suggesting – that *disloyal* intelligence agents keep on searching regardless? And what if they come up with what they claim is a smoking gun?

Explained Pilkington: "To take a flight of fancy, what if it [i.e. Steele's findings] were substantiated? That would again come down to a question of politics. No US president has ever been forced out of office by impeachment (Richard Nixon resigned before the vote; Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton were acquitted by the Senate). Any such procedure would have to be prepared and approved by a majority of the House of Representatives, and then passed to the Senate for a two-thirds majority vote. As the Republicans hold the reins in both chambers, it would take an almighty severing of ties between Trump and his own party to even get close to such a place."

It's a long shot, but the *Guardian's* recommendation is that rogue agents keep on digging

until they strike pay dirt, at which point they should go straight to Congress and persuade – if not pressure – the Republican leadership to initiate the process of throwing Trump out of office.

This is not the same as sending an armored column to attack Capitol Hill, but it's close. Essentially, the *Guardian* was calling on the intelligence agencies to assume ultimate responsibility regarding who can sit in the Oval Office and who cannot.

A Desperate Establishment

All of which demonstrates how desperate the military-intelligence complex has grown after Clapper's report on alleged Russian hacking of Democratic emails met with such a derisory reception following its publication on Jan. 6. Even the *Times* [admitted](#) that it provided "no new evidence to support assertions that Moscow meddled covertly through hacking and other actions" while the *Daily Beast* [said](#) it was "unlikely to convince a single skeptic" due to a notable absence of anything by way of back-up data.

The Steele dossier was supposed to take up the slack. Yet it has fallen short as well. It asserts, for example, that Trump attorney Michael Cohen traveled to Prague to discuss hacking with a Russian official named Oleg Solodukhin, a claim that both men have since [denied](#). It misspells the name of a major Russian bank and gets its Russian geography wrong too. As Owen Matthews points out in [a very smart article](#) in *Newsweek*, it "seems to be under the impression that the suburb of Barvikha on the tony Rublevskoe highway is a closed government compound, instead of just an expensive vacation home area favored by the new rich."

The dossier misspells the name of an Azeri real-estate mogul named Aras Agalarov and "reports his association with Trump as news in August 2016 – when Agalarov publicly organized Trump's visit to the Miss Universe pageant in 2013 and arranged a meeting with top Russian businessmen for Trump afterward, both of which were widely reported at the time."

Other aspects of the dossier don't add up either. It reports that the Russian government "has been cultivating, supporting and assisting Trump for at least five years" in order to "encourage splits and divisions in the Western alliance." But as Matthews points out, Trump wasn't in politics five years ago and was considered a long shot for months after entering the presidential race in mid-2015. So how could the Kremlin be sure that their man would ultimately prevail?

The dossier says that Trump "accepted a regular flow of intelligence from the Kremlin, including on Democratic and other political rivals." But Trump gave no hint of having inside information when he called for "Crooked Hillary" to be locked up for purging her email files; to the contrary, he did so on the basis of information available on every front page. The memo says that the Russians also had "compromising material" on Clinton. If so, then why wasn't it used?

Hearsay Evidence

The discrepancies go on. But this is what one would expect of a document based entirely of hearsay in which Source A claims to have gotten a juicy tidbit from Source B, who heard it from Source C deep inside the Kremlin.



Russian President Vladimir Putin during a state visit to Austria on June 24, 2014. (Official Russian government photo)

Grasping at straws, the *Guardian*'s Ed Pilkington conceded that no news agency has been able to verify the dossier's findings. But, he said, they are "unlikely to be discarded as quickly or as conclusively as Trump would like" for the simple reason that "the flip side of information that cannot be classed reliable is that neither can it be classed unreliable."

But the same could be said for information that someone got from a friend whose brother-in-law heard from a park ranger that Barack and Michelle like to while away their evenings snorting cocaine. It can't be classed as reliable because no one can verify that it's true. But it can't be classed as unreliable because no one can prove that it's wrong. So maybe the best thing to do is to impeach Obama in the few days he has remaining just to be sure.

This not to say that the so-called President-elect's legitimacy is not open to question. To the contrary, it is questionable in the extreme given that he lost the popular election [by more than 2.86 million votes](#). In a democratic country, this should count for something. But the intelligence community is not attacking him on democratic grounds, needless to say, but on imperial.

Trump is a rightwing blowhard whose [absurd babblings](#) about Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen reveal a man who is dangerously ignorant about how the world works. But he has managed to seize on one or two semi-good ideas over the years. One is that Obama administration's confrontational policies toward Russia are a recipe for disaster, while another is that toppling Syria's Bashar al-Assad with Al Qaeda and ISIS still up and about will only hasten their march on Damascus.

Both views are perfectly sensible. But because Washington's endlessly bellicose foreign-policy establishment is wedded to the opposite, it sees them as high treason.

This is very serious. U.S. foreign policy has been marked by a high degree of continuity since World War II as Republican and Democratic presidents alike pledged to uphold the imperial agenda. But Trump, as radical in his way as William Jennings Bryan was in 1896 or Henry A. Wallace in 1948, is bucking the consensus to an unprecedented degree.

Even though its policies have led to disaster after disaster, the foreign-policy establishment is aghast. Consequently, it is frantically searching for a way to prevent him from carrying his ideas out. The intelligence agencies appear to be running out of time with the inauguration only a few days away. But that doesn't mean they're giving up. All it means, rather, is that

they'll go deeper underground. Trump may enter the White House on Jan. 20. But the big question is how long he'll remain.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including [The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy](#) (Harcourt Brace).

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