

Hillary Clinton's Terrible 2016 Campaign Has Made It Even Harder to Deal With Russia

BY

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Recent revelations prove that Hillary Clinton had a direct role in spreading now-discredited allegations that stoked the Russiagate frenzy — an episode that has made the already challenging task of pursuing a rational policy toward Russia even more difficult.

In today's bifurcated US media system, the press outlets more friendly to Democrats and Republicans, respectively, tend to focus on the scandals of the opposite party, meaning one or more parts of the public are constantly missing out on major news.

Take some of the revelations that have come out of the John Durham special counsel investigation, created by former attorney general William Barr in the Donald Trump administration's waning days to probe the origins of the Trump-Russia investigation that obsessed the establishment for years. Covered extensively in the right-wing media sphere, comparatively fewer left-leaning news consumers are probably even aware of their existence — which means they're also unaware of new information about Hillary Clinton's direct role in fomenting the god-awful US-Russia relations that have now brought us alarmingly close to nuclear peril.

The revelations that have made the most recent, sensational headlines have to do with the Trump-Alfa Bank story, which you might remember as one of the key, early scandals establishing the idea of a Trump-Russia connection in the public imagination during the 2016 election, and helping lay the groundwork for what we know as "Russiagate."

The charge was that communication, or "pinging," between a server that hosted a Trump Organization domain address and a server owned by the Russian Alfa Bank hinted at a "backchannel" — or in the Clinton campaign's words, a "secret hotline" — between Trump and Moscow. Several inquiries that followed didn't turn up anything and a range of news outlets declined to take up the story. Both then and since, observers have offered more innocuous explanations for the activity.

In any case, the bombshell that's obsessed conservative media in recent weeks is that Clinton herself was personally involved in disseminating the, charitably speaking, unproven story. Longtime Clinton acolyte and 2016 campaign manager Robby Mook testified that after he and other senior campaign officials agreed to feed the Alfa Bank story to the press, they "discussed it with Hillary," who "agreed with the decision." Both Mook and former Clinton campaign general counsel Marc Elias testified that they specifically wanted to push the story out through the press, rather than going to the authorities.

"Going to the FBI does not seem like an effective way to get information out to the public," Mook said. "You do that through the media."

The rest is in the public record. Once the story was out, the campaign promoted and hyped the story as "the most direct link yet between Donald Trump and Moscow," without, of course, acknowledging its own role in getting it out into the public. The report, combined with a host of other pieces of dubious reporting that followed, helped establish the Russiagate scandal that all but dominated politics for the next three years.

What's worse is that, according to the indictment handed down by prosecutors in the particular case this testimony came from, one of the researchers who worked on the story was very explicit about his doubts about it. "Let's assume again that they are not smart enough to refute our 'best case' scenario," he wrote. "You do realize that we will have to expose every trick we have in our bag to even make a very weak association? [. . .] The only thing that drive[s] us at this point is that we just do not like [Trump]. This will not fly in eyes of public scrutiny. Folks, I am afraid we have tunnel vision. Time to regroup?"

This is bad enough. But these latest revelations come on top of several others we learned about previously. In October 2020, then-director of national intelligence John Ratcliffe declassified the redacted handwritten notes of former CIA director John Brennan's briefing of President Barack Obama, in which he warned of the "alleged approval by Hillary Clinton on 28 July of a proposal from one of her foreign policy advisors to vilify Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference by the Russian security services."

Other declassifications showed that in September 2016, intelligence officials sent the FBI an investigative referral of "Hillary Clinton's approval of a plan concerning U.S. Presidential candidate Donald Trump and Russian hackers hampering U.S. elections as a means of distracting the public from her use of a private mail server." All of this sits even more awkwardly on top of all the revelations about the Clinton campaign's deep involvement in the now-discredited, bullshit-riddled Steele dossier, probably the most foundational piece of the entire Russiagate scandal.

As a side note, there's some speculation that the foreign policy advisor who allegedly proposed stoking the Russiagate scandal was loyalist Jake Sullivan, who pushed the Alfa Bank story at the time. Sullivan is now President Biden's national security advisor, meaning he's knee-deep in the administration's current policy choices over Russia and the war in Ukraine.

For the Right, the story is significant for revealing the anatomy of a Democratic campaign of dirty tricks, an attempt to use anonymous press leaks and shadowy intelligence gathering to undermine an elected president and cast doubt on the legitimacy of an election — though it's a bit rich that these complaints are coming from the *Republican Party*, which has a colorful history of using exactly the same kinds of techniques (including in both 2020 and this year's upcoming midterms).

The larger significance of the episode, I think, lies elsewhere. The most serious and lasting consequence of the Russiagate fiasco was that by tying public perceptions of Russia to America's poisonous domestic partisan warfare, it helped to send already bad US-Russia relations to new lows, with perilous potential consequences for international relations generally and the risk of nuclear confrontation in particular. Even now, the United States is unique in the world for the way "negotiation" is a dirty word — an attitude that, in a marked reversal from the Cold War years, is overwhelmingly concentrated in liberal

circles.

Trump, who had hinted he might be open to friendlier relations with the country, quickly became probably the most aggressive anti-Russian president since the end of the Cold War, ripping up arms control treaties and ratcheting up tensions with the country by taking steps considered previously unthinkable and too provocative to take — a fact that is still not really recognized by most well-meaning liberals, because the media chose to fixate exclusively on what Trump said, not on what he actually did.

Clinton and her team don't deserve all the blame for this. Plenty of politicians and media outlets stoked the Trump-Russia hysteria that led us to this moment for ratings and attention, and they did it over a matter of years. But Clinton did get the ball rolling, and the most depressing part is that if she had just run a half-competent campaign — or if she'd just bothered to campaign in the Rust Belt — all of it might have been avoided. And here we all thought losing to Trump was the worst thing that came of that dreadful 2016 run.

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