

MEDIA

# The Media Stopped Reporting The Russia Collusion Story Because They Helped Create It

*The press has played an active role in the Trump-Russia collusion story since its inception. It helped birth it.*

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 Lee Smith

Half the country wants to know why the press won't cover the growing scandal now implicating the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Justice, and threatening to reach the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and perhaps even the Obama White House.

By [Lee Smith](#)  
FEBRUARY 15, 2018

After all, the release last week of a less-redacted version of Sens. Charles Grassley and Lindsey Graham's [January 4 letter](#) showed that the FBI secured a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act warrant to search the communications of a Trump campaign adviser based on a piece of opposition research paid for by the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee. The Fourth Amendment rights of an American citizen were violated to allow one political party to spy on another.

If the press did its job and reported the facts, the argument goes, then it wouldn't just be Republicans and Trump supporters demanding accountability and justice. Americans across the political spectrum would understand the nature and extent of the abuses and crimes touching not just on one political party and its presidential candidate but the rights of every American.

That's all true, but irrelevant. The reasons the press won't cover the story are suggested in the Graham-Grassley letter itself.

## Steele Was a Media Informant

The letter details how Christopher Steele, the former British spy who allegedly authored the documents claiming ties between the Trump campaign and Russia, told the FBI he wasn't talking to the press about his investigation. In a British court, however, **Steele acknowledged** briefing several media organizations on the material in his dossier.

According to the British court documents, Steele briefed the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Yahoo! News, *The New Yorker*, and CNN. In October, he talked to *Mother Jones* reporter David Corn by Skype. It was Corn's October 31 article anonymously sourced to Steele that alerted the FBI their informant was speaking to the press. Grassley and Graham referred Steele to the Department of Justice for a criminal investigation because he lied to the FBI.

The list of media outfits and journalists made aware of Steele's investigations is extensive. Reuters reported that it, too, **was briefed** on the dossier, and while it refrained from reporting on it before the election, its national security reporter Mark Hosenball became an advocate of the dossier's findings after November 2016.

BBC's Paul Wood wrote in January 2017 that he was **briefed on the dossier** a week before the election. *Newsweek*'s Kurt Eichenwald likely saw Steele's work around the same time, because he published an **article** days before the election based on a "Western intelligence" source (i.e., Steele) who cited names and data points that could only come from the DNC- and Clinton-funded opposition research.

A line from the Grassley-Graham letter points to an even larger circle of media outfits that appear to have been in contact with either Steele or Fusion GPS, the Washington DC firm that contracted him for the opposition research the Clinton campaign and Democratic National Committee commissioned. "During the summer of 2016," the Grassley-Graham letter reads, "reports of some of the dossier allegations began circulating among reporters and people involved in Russian issues."

## Planting the Carter Page Story

Indeed, it looks like Steele and Fusion GPS founder Glenn Simpson may have persuaded a number of major foreign policy and national security writers in Washington and New York that Trump and his team were in league with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Those journalists include *New Yorker* editor David Remnick, *Atlantic* editor Jeffrey Goldberg, former *New Republic* editor Franklin Foer, and *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum.

A Foer story [published in Slate on July 4, 2016](#) appears to be central. Titled “Putin’s Puppet,” Foer’s piece argues the Trump campaign was overly Russia-friendly. Foer discusses Trump’s team, including campaign convention manager Paul Manafort, who worked with former Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich, a Putin ally; and Carter Page, who, Foer wrote, “advised the state-controlled natural gas giant Gazprom and helped it attract Western investors.”

That’s how Page described himself in a March 2016 *Bloomberg* interview. But as Julia Ioffe reported in [a September 23, 2016 Politico article](#), Page was a mid-level executive at Merrill Lynch in Moscow who played no role in any of the big deals he boasted about. As Ioffe shows, almost no one in Moscow remembered Page. Until Trump read his name off a piece of paper handed to him during a March interview with the *Washington Post*, almost no one in the Washington foreign policy world had heard of Page either.

So what got Foer interested in Page? Were Steele and Simpson already briefing reporters on their opposition research into the Trump campaign? (Another [Foer story for Slate](#), an October 31, 2016 article about the Trump organization’s computer servers “pinging” a Russian bank, was [reportedly “pushed” to him by Fusion GPS](#).) Page and Manafort are the protagonists of the Steele dossier, the former one of the latter’s intermediaries with Russian officials and associates of Putin. Page’s July 7 speech in Moscow attracted wide U.S. media coverage, but Foer’s article published several days earlier.

The Slate article, then, looks like the predicate for allegations against Page made in the dossier after his July Russia trip. For instance, according to Steele’s investigations, Page was offered a 19 percent stake in Rosneft, one of the world’s energy giants, in exchange for help repealing sanctions related to Russia’s 2014 incursion into Ukraine.

## Building an Echo Chamber of Opposition Research

Many have noted the absurdity that the FISA warrant on Page was chiefly based, according to a House intelligence committee memo, on the dossier and Michael Isikoff's September 23, 2016 news story also based on the dossier. But much of the Russiagate campaign was conducted in this circular manner. Steele and Simpson built an echo chamber with their opposition research, parts of the law enforcement and intelligence communities, and the press all reinforcing one another. Plant an item in the open air and watch it grow—like Page's role in the Trump campaign.

Why else was Foer or anyone so interested in Page? Why was Page's Moscow speech so closely watched and widely covered? According to [the \*Washington Post\*](#), Page "chided" American policymakers for an "often-hypocritical focus on democratization, inequality, corruption and regime change" in its dealings with Russia, China, and Central Asia.

As peculiar as it may have sounded for a graduate of the Naval Academy to cast a skeptical eye on American exceptionalism, Page's speech could hardly have struck the policy establishment as shocking, or even novel. They'd been hearing versions of it for the last eight years from the president of the United States.

In President Obama's [first speech before the United Nations General Assembly](#) (UNGA), on September 23, 2009, he insisted that no country, least of all America, has the right to tell other countries how to organize their political lives. "Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside," said Obama. "Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect. Each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people and in its past traditions."

Obama sounded even more wary of American leadership on his way out of office eight years later. In his [2016 UNGA speech](#), the 2009 Nobel laureate

said: “I do not think that America can — or should — impose our system of government on other countries.” Obama was addressing not just foreign nations but perhaps more pointedly his domestic political rivals.

In 2008 Obama campaigned against the Iraq War and the Republican policymakers who toppled Saddam Hussein to remake Iraq as a democracy. All during his presidency, Obama rebuffed critics who petitioned the administration to send arms or troops to advance U.S. interests and values abroad, most notably in Ukraine and Syria.

In 2016, it was Trump who ran against the Republican foreign policy establishment—which is why hundreds of GOP policymakers and foreign policy intellectuals signed two letters distancing themselves from the party’s candidate. The thin Republican bench of foreign policy experts available to Trump is a big reason why he named the virtually unknown Page to his team. So why was it any surprise that Page sounded like the Republican candidate, who sounded like the Democratic president?

## Why Didn't the Left Like Obama's Ideas from a Republican?

On the Right, many national security and foreign policy writers like me heard and were worried by the clear echoes of Obama's policies in the Trump campaign's proposals. Did those writing from the left side of the political spectrum not see the continuities?

Writing in the *Washington Post* July 21, 2016, [Applebaum explained](#) how a "Trump presidency could destabilize Europe." The issue, she explained, was Trump's positive attitude toward Putin. "The extent of the Trump-Russia business connection has already been laid out, by [Franklin Foer](#) at *Slate*," wrote Applebaum. She named Page and his "long-standing connections to Russian companies."

Even more suggestive to Applebaum is that just a few days before her article was published, "Trump's campaign team helped alter the Republican party platform to remove support for Ukraine" from the Republican National Committee's platform. Maybe, she hinted, that was because of Trump aide Manafort's ties to Yanukovich.

[Did Applebaum's talking points come from Steele's opposition research?](#)

Did those talking points come from Steele's opposition research? Manafort's relationship with Yanukovich had been widely reported in the U.S. press long before he signed on with the Trump campaign. In fact, in 2007 Glenn Simpson was [one of the first to write about](#) their shady dealings while he was still working at the *Wall Street Journal*. The corrupt nature of the Manafort-Yanukovich relationship is an important part of the dossier. So is the claim that in exchange for Russia releasing the DNC emails, "the TRUMP team had agreed to sideline Russian intervention in Ukraine as a campaign issue."

The reality, however, is that the Trump campaign team never removed support for Ukraine from the party platform. In a March 18, 2017 [Washington Examiner article](#), Byron York interviewed the convention delegate who pushed for tougher language on Russia, and got it.

"In the end, the platform, already fairly strong on the Russia-Ukraine issue," wrote York, "was strengthened, not weakened." Maybe Applebaum just picked it up from [her own paper's mis-reporting](#).

For Applebaum, it was hard to understand why Trump would express skepticism about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, except to appease Putin. She referred to a recent interview in which Trump "cast doubt on the

fundamental basis of transatlantic stability, NATO's Article 5 guarantee: If Russia invades, he said, he'd have to think first before defending U.S. allies."

## The Echoes Pick Up

In an article published the very same day in the *Atlantic*, Jeffrey Goldberg made many of the very same observations. Titled “[It’s Official: Hillary Clinton is Running Against Vladimir Putin](#),” the article opens: “The Republican nominee for president, Donald J. Trump, has chosen this week to unmask himself as a de facto agent of Russian President Vladimir Putin.” What was the evidence? Well, for one, Page’s business interests.

Trump’s expressed admiration for Putin and other “equivocating, mercenary statements,” wrote Goldberg, are “unprecedented in the history of Republican foreign policymaking.” However, insofar as Trump’s fundamental aim was to find some common ground with Putin, it’s a goal that, for better or worse, has been a 25-year U.S. policy constant, across party lines. Starting with George W.H. Bush, [every American commander-in-chief](#) since the end of the Cold War sought to “reset” relations with Russia.

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But Trump, according to Goldberg, was different. “Trump’s understanding of America’s role in the world aligns with Russia’s geostrategic interests.” Here Goldberg rang the same bells as Applebaum—the Trump campaign “watered down” the RNC’s platform on Ukraine; the GOP nominee “questioned whether the U.S., under his leadership, would keep its [NATO] commitments,” including Article 5. Thus, Goldberg concluded: “Donald Trump, should he be elected president, would bring an end to the postwar

international order.”

That last bit sounds very bad. Coincidentally, it’s [similar to a claim made](#) in the very first paragraph of the Steele dossier — the “Russian regime,” claims one of Steele’s unnamed sources, has been cultivating Trump to “encourage splits and divisions in the western alliance.”

The West won the Cold War because the United States kept it unified. David Remnick saw it up close. Assigned to the *Washington Post*’s Moscow bureau in 1988, Remnick witnessed the end of the Soviet Union, which he documented in his award-winning book, “Lenin’s Tomb.” So it’s hardly surprising that in his [August 3, 2016 New Yorker article](#), “Trump and Putin: A Love Story,” Remnick sounded alarms concerning the Republican presidential candidate’s manifest affection for the Russian president.

Citing the “original reporting” of Foer’s seminal Slate article, the *New Yorker* editor contended “that one reason for Trump’s attitude has to do with his business ambitions.” As Remnick elaborated, “one of Trump’s foreign-



policy advisers, has longstanding ties to Gazprom, a pillar of Russia’s energy industry.” Who could that be? Right—Carter Page. With Applebaum and Goldberg, Remnick was worried about Trump’s lack of support for Ukraine and the fact that Trump “has declared *NATO* ‘obsolete’ and has suggested that he might do away with Article 5.”

## Where Did All These Echoes Come From?

This brings us to the fundamental question: Is it possible that these top national security and foreign policy journalists were focused on something else during Obama's two terms in office, something that had nothing to do with foreign policy or national security? It seems we must even entertain the possibility they slept for eight years because nearly everything that frightened them about the prospects of a Trump presidency had already transpired under Obama.

The Trump team wanted to stop short of having the RNC platform promise lethal support to Ukraine—which was in keeping with official U.S. policy. Obama didn't want to arm the Ukrainians. He ignored numerous congressional efforts to get him to change his mind. "There has been a strong bipartisan well of support for quite some time for providing lethal support," said California Rep. Adam Schiff. But Obama refused.

As for the western alliance or international order or however you want to put it, it was under the Obama administration that Russia set up shop on NATO's southern border. With the Syrian conflict, Moscow re-established its foothold in the Middle East after 40 years of American policy designed to keep it from meddling in U.S. spheres of influence. Under Obama, Russia's enhanced regional position threatened three U.S. allies: Israel, Jordan, and NATO member Turkey.

In 2012, Moscow's Syrian client brought down a Turkish air force reconnaissance plane. According to a [2013 Wall Street Journal article](#), "Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan raised alarms in the U.S. by suggesting that Turkey might invoke NATO's Article V." However, according to the *Journal*, "neither the U.S. nor NATO was interested in rushing to Article V... NATO was so wary of getting pulled into Syria that top alliance officials balked at even contingency planning for an intervention force to protect Syrian civilians. 'For better or worse, [Syrian president Bashar al- Assad] feels he can count on NATO not to intervene right now,' a senior Western official said."

Whatever one thinks of Obama's foreign policy, it is hardly arguable that he—wisely, cautiously, in the most educated and creative ways, or unwisely, stupidly, cravenly, the choice of adjectives is yours—ceded American interests

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and those of key allies in Europe and the Middle East in an effort to avoid conflict with Russia.

When Russia occupied Crimea and the eastern portion of Ukraine, there was little pushback from the White House. The Obama administration blinked even when Putin's escalation of forces in Syria sent millions more refugees fleeing abroad, including Europe.

## Was Anyone Paying Attention When This Happened?

Surely it couldn't have escaped Applebaum's notice that Obama's posture toward Russia made Europe vulnerable. She's a specialist in Europe and Russia—she's written books on both. Her husband is the former foreign minister of Poland. So how, after eight years of Obama's appeasement of a Russia that **threatened to withhold natural gas supplies** from the continent, did the Trump team pose a unique threat to European stability?

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What about Goldberg? Is it possible that he'd never bothered to research the foreign policy priorities of a president he interviewed five times between 2008 and 2016? In the **last interview**, from March 2016, Obama told him he was "very proud" of the moment in 2013 when he declined to attack Assad for deploying chemical weapons. As Obama put it, that's when he broke with the "Washington playbook." He chose diplomacy instead. He made a deal with Russia over Assad's conventional arsenal—which Syria continued to use against civilians throughout

Obama's term.

Again, regardless of how you feel about Obama's decisions, the fact is that he struck an agreement with Moscow that ensured the continued reign of its Syrian ally, who gassed little children. Yet only four months later, Goldberg worried that a Trump presidency would "liberate dictators, first and foremost his ally Vladimir Putin, to advance their own interests."

Remnick wrote a 2010 biography of Obama, but did he, too, pay no attention to the policies of the man he interviewed frequently over nearly a decade? How is this possible? Did some of America's top journalists really sleepwalk through Obama's two terms in office, only to wake in 2016 and find Donald Trump and his campaign becoming dangerously cozy with a historical American adversary?

## All's Fair in War and Politics

Of course not. They enlisted their bylines in a political campaign on behalf of the Democratic candidate for president and rehearsed the talking points Steele later documented. But weren't the authors of these articles, big-name journalists, embarrassed to be seen reading from a single script and publishing the same article with similar titles within the space of two weeks? Weren't they worried it would look like they were taking opposition research, from the same source?

The stories were vessels built only to launch thousands of 140-character salvos to then sink into the memory hole.

No, not really. In a sense, these stories weren't actually meant to be read. They existed for the purpose of validating the ensuing social media messaging. The stories were written around the headlines, which were written for Twitter: "Putin's Puppet"; "It's Official: Hillary Clinton is Running Against Vladimir Putin"; "Trump and Putin: A Love Story"; "The Kremlin's Candidate." The stories were vessels built only to launch thousands of 140-character salvos to then sink into the memory hole.

Since everyone took Clinton's victory for granted, journalists assumed extravagant claims alleging an American presidential candidate's illicit ties to an adversarial power would fade just as the fireworks punctuating Hillary's acceptance speech would vanish in the cool November evening. And the sooner the stories were forgotten the better, since they frankly sounded kooky, conspiratorial, as if the heirs to the Algonquin round table sported tin-foil hats while tossing back martinis and trading saucy limericks.

Yes, the Trump-Russia collusion media campaign really was delusional and deranged; it really **was a conspiracy theory**. So after the unexpected happened, after Trump won the election, the Russiagate campaign morphed into something more urgent, something twisted and delirious.

## Quick, Pin Our Garbage Story on Someone

When CNN broke **the story**—co-written by Evan Perez, a **former colleague and friend** of Fusion GPS principals—that the Obama administration’s intelligence chiefs had briefed Trump on the existence of the dossier, it not only cleared the way for **BuzzFeed to publish the document**, it also signaled the press that the intelligence community was on side. This completed the echo chamber, binding one American institution chartered to steal and keep secrets to another embodying our right to free speech. We know which ethic prevailed.

Now Russiagate was no longer part of a political campaign directed at Trump, it was a disinformation operation pointed at the American public, as the pre-election media offensive resonated more fully with the dossier now in the open. You see, said the press: everything we published about Trump and Putin is *really* true—there’s a document proving it. What the press corps neglected to add is that they’d been reporting talking points from the same opposition research since *before* the election, and were now showcasing “evidence” to prove it was all true.

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The reason the media will not report on the scandal now unfolding before the country, how the Obama administration and Clinton campaign used the resources of the federal government to spy on the party out of power, is not because the press is partisan. No, it is because the press has played an active role in the Trump-Russia collusion story since its inception. It helped birth it.

To report how the dossier was made and marketed, and how it was used to violate the privacy rights of an American citizen—Page—would require admitting complicity in manufacturing Russiagate. Against conventional Washington wisdom, the cover-up in this case is not worse than the crime: Both weigh equally in a scandal signaling that the institution where American citizens are supposed to discuss and debate the choices about how we live with each other has been turned against a large part of the public to delegitimize their political choices.

## This Isn't the 27-Year-Olds' Fault

I've argued over the last year that the phony collusion narrative is a symptom of the structural problems with the press. The rise of the Internet, then social media, and gross corporate mismanagement damaged traditional media institutions. As newspapers and magazines around the country went bankrupt when ownership couldn't figure out how to make money off the new digital advertising model, an entire generation of journalistic experience, expertise, and ethics was lost. It was replaced, as one Obama White House official famously explained, by 27-year-olds who "literally know nothing."

But the first vehicles of the Russiagate campaign were not bloggers or recent J-school grads lacking wisdom or guidance to wave off a piece of patent nonsense. They were journalists at the top of their profession—editors-in-chief, columnists, specialists in precisely the subjects that the dossier alleges to treat: foreign policy and national security. They didn't get fooled. They volunteered their reputations to perpetrate a hoax on the American public.

That's why, after a year of thousands of furious allegations, all of which concerning Trump are unsubstantiated, the press will not report the real scandal, in which it plays a leading role. When the reckoning comes, Russiagate is likely to be seen not as a symptom of the collapse of the American press, but as one of the causes for it.

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