

DOW JONES, A NEWS CORP COMPANY

DJIA ▼ 26511.82 -0.39%

S&P 500 ▼ 2859.15 -0.48%

Nasdaq ▼ 7471.14 -0.46%

U.S. 10 Yr ▼ -13/32 Yield 2.708%

Crude Oil ▼ 65.34 -1.21%

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-steele-dossier-fits-the-kremlin-playbook-1517175564>

COMMENTARY

The Steele Dossier Fits the Kremlin Playbook

The likely objective was to undermine Republicans, Democrats—and American democracy.

By *Daniel Hoffman*

Jan. 28, 2018 4:39 p.m. ET

When the “Steele dossier” was first published a year ago, it looked like a bombshell. The document, drawn up by the British ex-spy Christopher Steele, contained salacious allegations against President Trump and suggested that Russia had helped him win the 2016 election. No one has been able to corroborate its charges, but Democrats continue to see the dossier as a road map for impeaching Mr. Trump. Republicans, on the other hand, point out that it was created as opposition research, leading them to see it as an elaborate partisan ploy.

There is a third possibility, namely that the dossier was part of a Russian espionage disinformation plot targeting both parties and America’s political process. This is what seems most likely to me, having spent much of my 30-year government career, including with the CIA, observing Soviet and then Russian intelligence operations. If there is one thing I have learned, it’s that Vladimir Putin continues in the Soviet tradition of using disinformation and espionage as foreign-policy tools.

There are three reasons the Kremlin would have detected Mr. Steele’s information gathering and seen an opportunity to intervene. First, Mr. Steele did not travel to Russia to acquire his information and instead relied on intermediaries. That is a weak link, since Russia’s internal police service, the FSB, devotes significant technical and human resources to blanket surveillance of Western private citizens and government officials, with a particular focus on uncovering their Russian contacts.

Second, Mr. Steele was an especially likely target for such surveillance given that he had retired from MI-6, the British spy agency, after serving in Moscow. Russians are fond of saying that there is no such thing as a “former” intelligence officer. The FSB would have had its eye on him.

Third, the Kremlin successfully hacked into the Democratic National Committee. Emails there could have tipped it off that the Clinton campaign was collecting information on Mr. Trump’s dealings in Russia.

If the FSB did discover that Mr. Steele was poking around for information, it hardly could have resisted using the gravitas of a retired MI-6 agent to plant false information. After hacking the DNC and senior Democratic officials, Russian intelligence chose to pass the information to WikiLeaks, most likely to capitalize on that group’s “self-proclaimed reputation for authenticity,” according to a 2017 report from the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Simultaneously the Kremlin was conducting influence operations on Facebook and other social-media sites.

The pattern of such Russian operations is to sprinkle false information, designed to degrade the enemy’s social and political infrastructure, among true statements that enhance the veracity of the overall report. In 2009 the FSB wanted to soil the reputation of a U.S. diplomat responsible for reporting on human rights. So it fabricated a video, in part using real surveillance footage of the diplomat, that purported to show him with a prostitute in Moscow.



ILLUSTRATION: DAVID KLEIN

Similarly, some of the information in the Steele dossier is true. Carter Page, a Trump campaign adviser, did travel to Moscow in the summer of 2016. But he insists that the secret meetings the dossier alleges never happened. This is exactly what you'd expect if the Kremlin followed its usual playbook: accurate basic facts provided as bait to convince Americans that the fake info is real.

Mr. Trump repeatedly criticized the “rigged system” working against his campaign, but his

victories in the primaries and the general election blunted this narrative. The FSB probably believed that Mrs. Clinton would win the election, and that once the dossier became public Mr. Trump would vociferously argue that she had played dirty. Thus the dossier would have had dual benefits: The salacious portions would undermine the Republican candidate, and then his attacks would delegitimize the eventual Democratic administration. The 2017 ODNI report says that pro-Russia bloggers even prepared an election-night Twitter campaign, #DemocracyRIP, designed to question the election's validity after a Clinton victory.

That is not how events unfolded, but Russia still appears to have enjoyed a major return on its 2016 election meddling. For more than a year, Democrats and Republicans have traded charges of collusion, obstruction and conspiracy. Rather than serve Russia's interests with increasingly intense partisan bickering, everyone should focus on the common enemy: Mr. Putin and his nefarious attempt to undermine America's political system.

One credible response would be to pass a bipartisan bill such as the one introduced by Sens. Marco Rubio and Chris Van Hollen that would punish Moscow if intelligence concludes Russia interferes in future elections. Meanwhile, the Trump administration should shine a brighter spotlight on the Kremlin's espionage and covert-influence operations against the U.S.

Special counsel Robert Mueller should be able to lift the veil on whether the Steele dossier was, as I suspect, a tool of Russia's espionage. Mr. Steele has reportedly revealed details about his sources to Mr. Mueller, who has also been conducting interviews to determine which parts of the dossier are true and which are false.

Russia considers the U.S. an existential threat to its national security, not because of a military threat—which Mr. Putin purposely exaggerates—but because Western ideals of liberty, freedom and democracy have the power to break his regime's grip on the country. Americans must enhance their understanding of Mr. Putin's strategy and tactics better to defend against the Kremlin's relentless propaganda. Otherwise the Steele dossier controversy will continue to be a victory for Mr. Putin and a loss for our democracy.

Mr. Hoffman, a retired chief of station with the Central Intelligence Agency who served in the former Soviet Union, is vice president of SPG, a political consulting group in Washington.