

A Guide to Jane Mayer's New Yorker Column on Christopher Steele and 'The Dossier'

By Steven Jonas

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Let me first say that, unlike many of my friends on the Left, some of them quite good friends, I fully believe that Trump and the Trumpites colluded with the Russians to help them win the election. Indeed I have believed that that could have been possible from the time the first rumors about the possible compact began to appear in the summer of 2016, and certainly when David Corn's first article on the matter, in the context of the "Steele Dossier," was published in October, 2016.

This does not mean that I think that the Russian maneuvers in support of Trump were the primary reason why he won and Clinton lost. In fact, shortly after the election I published a column on The Greenville Post entitled "Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Leadership Council, and How to Lose an Election." It happens that I also thought that the last-minute intervention of Jim Comey on the so-called "tapes issue" (which if anything indicated a tilt, at that time at least, of the "Deep State" towards Trump) was a major blow to her campaign. I said so in a column I published, also on The Greenville Post, in the week before the election. Nevertheless, in the post-election column I said that if she had run a decent campaign, she would have won anyway, despite Comey, and (as subsequently been revealed) despite the Russians too.

Thinking about why I was convinced right up front that Trump was involved with some dirty-dealing or other in relation to the 2016 election, I recalled my first awareness of what came to be known as "Watergate." As I said in an earlier column(2015) on the "Role of Chance in History" (which happened to be in part about how the "email issue" might come back to haunt Hillary, should she get the Democratic nomination):

On June 18, 1972, as I usually do to this day, I scanned the front page of The New York Times. I noticed a secondary lead about a break-in that had occurred at the Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate complex in Washington, DC. I had known of Richard Nixon and his political thuggery since he ran his first red-baiting campaign for Congress against the totally unsuspecting, mild-mannered, five-term Representative Jerry Voorhees in Southern California. 'Nixon's behind this,' I said to myself."

I'm a New Yorker. I've known about Donald Trump for a long time. I wrote a column and him and his racism back in 2011. So just like I said to myself "Nixon's behind this" when I saw the first "Watergate" article, when I first saw "Trump/Russia" I said "sounds just like him." Of course, the FBI had been quietly looking into the possibility of such a connection well before the "Dossier" appeared, through, among other things, a FISA tail on Carter Page, which they first obtained in 2013. But the "Steele Dossier" has certainly played a role in the later FBI probings and now in the full-throated Mueller Investigation. Last week, Jane Mayer of The New Yorker published an extensive (15,000 words[!]) article on the subject. The rest of this column is devoted to a highlighting of some of the points in it that I found to be most illuminating.

Steele, as you undoubtedly know, was a long-time British MI6 operative who specialized in the Soviet Union and then Russia, spending time in Moscow in the 90s after the overthrow of the Soviet Union, and then heading the MI6 Russia Desk in London from 2006 to 2009. He came to the assignment that produced the Dossier through his small private intelligence company called Orbis, which in the Spring of 2016 contracted with a U.S. opposition research firm called Fusion GPS to look into the Trump campaign. The original funding for the operation came from an anti-Trump Republican named Paul Singer.

After Trump clinched the nomination, Singer dropped out. But the effort was picked up by a law firm, Perkins Coie, that did oppo research work for both Hillary Clinton and the DNC. However, on this particular matter, since the stuff that

Steele had turned up was on the one hand highly complicated on the financial side, and salacious on the other, the lawyer at Perkins Coie, Marc Elias, essentially sat on the information. What he did forward on to the DNC seemed so difficult to prove, that they just sat on it too. So much for the claims of the Trumpites that the DNC/Clinton "weaponized the Steele Dossier." During the campaign they barely knew anything about it. Late in the campaign, they likely found out more about it from David Korn's article than from their own oppo research people.

And now on to some other points made in the article:

1. Steele had run across Trump's name in an investigation well before he was hired by Fusion GPS. "Two of his earliest cases at Orbis involved investigating international crime rings whose leaders, coincidentally, were based in New York's Trump Tower." (But. Let us not get into guilt-by-association. The gangs just happened to pick a particular building in which to locate their offices.)
2. Further along this line, the FBI had previously hired Steele to assist in an investigation of a Russia-based international gambling and money-laundering ring, which also just happened to have had space in Trump Tower.
3. Steele, through his Russian connections, was also aware of possible Trump/Russia connections of, shall we say, various kinds, occurring around the Miss Universe Pageant that Trump put on in Moscow in 2013. (It was at that time that Carter Page's name first appeared on the FBI's radar.)
4. Investigating Trump on contract from Fusion GPS, at that time on behalf of a Republican payor, Steele became so worried that Trump might have exposure to attempted Russian blackmail that he took his information to the FBI. There was no connection with the Clinton campaign when he did this. In fact, in the summer of 2016 Clinton was unaware that the FBI had already launched an investigation into the Trump/Russia connection.
5. The "Papadopoulos revelation" to the Australian diplomat about the Clinton emails being hacked, which he eventually passed on to the FBI, took place in April, before Steele first talked to his contact at the FBI, in July.
6. According to Mayer, Carter Page is indeed a central figure in the whole affair, a matter on which I speculated in a recent column, and was already being monitored by the FBI well before Steele came into the picture.
7. Although the FBI had previously paid Steele for assignments on which he worked, they did not pay him for any of the information he turned up on Trump/Russia that he turned over to them. (Again, he did because he so concerned about both US and UK national security in terms of what he was finding out about.)
8. The FBI kept very quiet about what they were finding out from their own inquiries, the Steele Dossier, and follow-ups to it, on "Trump/Russia." But of course they, through Jim Comey, did not keep quiet about what they found out about the "Clinton emails," which at first, July 5, 2016, was "there's no there there, but nevertheless, she had terrible judgement" (hardly a judicial or, during a Presidential campaign, judicious statement). And so, Steele was shocked when Comey made the above-referenced second "Clinton emails" statement 11 days before the election (only to withdraw it a week later, with another "there's no there there" statement [after the damage had been done]).
9. The FBI did not "depend" on the Dossier for its own early internal report on Trump/Russia, gained from independent sources, but rather relegated it to an appendix.

10. Steele talked with the Mueller team last September. And of course, there have been no leaks about what they talked about.

11. Then there is that second "Steele memo," about how the Kremlin blocked the appointment of Mitt Romney as Trump's Secretary of State. (And now, who knows what role the Putin government might have played in the firing of Rex Tillerson, who has been taking an increasingly strong position against Russia on several fronts, while Trump has remained pretty quiet on those matters.)

12. The Dossier played a minor role in the application that led to the granting of the most recent FISA warrant on Page (after he left the campaign, and of course the first one had been obtained in 2013).

13. (Certainly an accident, here, but unlucky number for Trump) items. And finally, obtained by Mueller there are those guilty pleas by U.S. persons, the indictments of the 13 Russian nationals, and the two Manafort indictments. Oh my!

We will see what the Mueller investigation eventually comes up with. However, in terms of the Trumpites' efforts to undermine the Mueller investigation, carrying out its role as water-carrier for Trump, echoing what legislative bodies do in fascist regimes, that is crossing over the line to assist executive branches in non-legislative functions, the GOP majority on the House Intelligence Committee has closed down it's formal investigation. In the process, they have echoed Trump to the letter: "No collusions, NO collusion."

However, the Senate Intelligence Committee is continuing its work on the matter. And if the Democrats manage to take control of the House of Representatives in November, you can bet that Adam Schiff and his team will be hitting the ground running on January 3, 2019. (After I completed the writing of this column, Rep. Schiff, Ranking Member on the House Intelligence Committee, announced that the Democratic minority will release its own report and continue to do what it can do on its own, in the investigation, within the limits of the law.)

So, it ain't over yet, folks. And the "Steele Dossier," far from being fiction while also far from being the basis of the original FBI investigation and certainly just a sidebar to the Mueller investigation, has been shown to be accurate in major parts, by the FBI. I must say that it is likely that not too many of my friends on the Left will accept this conclusion. One can, of course, be absolutely sure that those folks on the Trump Channel and in the bulk of the Trump/Republican Party will never accept any of it, regardless of what is in the final Mueller report, and will continue to attack Mueller, Schiff, Steele, etc. with the loudest voices they can muster. But, if there were "nothing to see here" why are the Trumpites bellowing so loudly about the whole matter, over and over and over again?

Post-script: As long-time triathlete/duathlete myself (255 races, just now starting my 36th season in the sport) I was fascinated to find out that Steele was a sometime marathoner and triathlete (on a limited basis) himself.

