



# FBI Is Still Hiding Details of Russiagate, Newly Released Document Shows

By Aaron Maté, RealClearInvestigations  
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AP

As Donald Trump re-enters the White House on a pledge to end national security state overreach, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is still hiding critical details on the Russia conspiracy investigation that engulfed his first term.

In response to a Freedom of Information request filed by RealClearInvestigations in August 2022, the FBI on Dec. 31, more than two years later, released a heavily redacted copy of the document that opened an explosive and unprecedented counterintelligence probe of the sitting president as an agent of the Russian government.

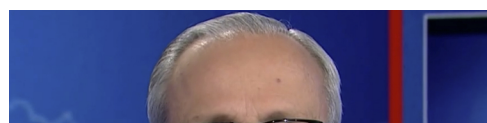


The newly disclosed Trump probe came at the behest of then-acting FBI director Andrew McCabe, top photo, and was approved by FBI Assistant Director Bill Priestap, above ...

AP

The Electronic Communication, dated May 16, 2017, claimed to have an “articulable factual basis” to suspect that Trump “wittingly or unwittingly” was illegally acting on behalf of Russia, and accordingly posing “threats to the national security of the United States.” The FBI’s “goal,” it added, was “to determine if President Trump is or was directed by, controlled by, and/or coordinated activities with, the Russian Federation.” It additionally sought to uncover whether Trump and unnamed “others” obstructed “any associated FBI investigation” – a reference to Crossfire Hurricane, the initial FBI inquiry into the Trump campaign’s suspected cooperation with an alleged Russian interference plot in the 2016 election.

While



Crossfire Hurricane, which was formally opened on July 31, 2016, had by that point focused on members of Trump's orbit, the May 2017 probe was specifically targeted at the president himself during his fourth month in office. The investigation of Trump was undertaken at the behest of then-acting FBI director Andrew McCabe, one week after Trump had fired his former boss and mentor, James B. Comey.



... and by Jim Baker, the FBI general counsel.

CNN

According to the declassified document, McCabe's decision was approved by FBI Assistant Director Bill Priestap, who had also signed off on the opening of Crossfire Hurricane; and Jim Baker, the FBI general counsel. Baker was a longtime friend of Michael Sussmann, a lawyer for the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton, and a key figure in the dissemination of Clinton-funded disinformation to the FBI that falsely tied Trump to Russia. In his FBI role, Baker personally circulated the conspiracy theory, **manufactured by "researchers" working with the Clinton campaign**, that the Trump campaign and Russia were communicating via a secret server. After leaving the FBI, Baker served as deputy general counsel at Twitter, where he backed the company's censorship of reporting on the contents of Hunter Biden's laptop, based on yet another conspiracy theory that the laptop files were Russian disinformation.

DECLASSIFIED BY: NSICG [redacted]  
ON 12-11-2023

FD-1057 (Rev. 5-8-10)

~~SECRET//ORCON/NOFORN~~

**FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION**  
Electronic Communication

**Title:** ~~SECRET//NF~~ Opening EC **Date:** 05/16/2017 **b3**  
**b6**  
**b7C**  
**b7E**

**From:** COUNTERINTELLIGENCE  
D5-REIT  
**Contact:** [redacted]

**Approved By:** BAKER JAMES A  
PRIESTAP E W

**Drafted By:** [redacted]

**Case ID #:** [redacted] ~~SECRET//NF~~ [redacted]  
FOREIGN AGENTS REGISTRATION ACT -  
RUSSIA;  
SENSITIVE INVESTIGATIVE MATTER

**Synopsis:** ~~SECRET//NF~~ To open and assign captioned matter.

~~Reason: 1.4(b)~~  
~~Derived From: FBI NSISC-~~  
~~20090615~~  
~~Declassify On: 20421231~~

[redacted] **Initiated:** 05/16/2017

**Reference:** [redacted]

**Details:**

~~(U)~~ ~~SECRET//ORCON/NOFORN~~ At the direction of the Assistant Director of the FBI's Counterintelligence Division, following consultation with the Office of the General Counsel, the FBI is opening [REDACTED] based on an articulable factual basis that reasonably indicates that President Donald J. Trump may be or has been, wittingly or unwittingly, involved in activities for or on behalf of the Government of the Russian Federation which may constitute violations of federal

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b7E

~~SECRET//ORCON/NOFORN~~

Shown, the first two pages of a newly released document that opened an FBI probe of Donald Trump in May 2017. The remaining four pages are completely redacted, leaving unstated the FBI's "articulable factual basis" on Page 1.

FBI via RealClearInvestigations

~~(U)~~ ~~SECRET//ORCON/NOFORN~~  
Title: ~~SECRET//ORCON/NOFORN~~ Opening EC  
Re: [REDACTED] 05/16/2017

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criminal law or threats to the national security of the United States. The goal of the investigation is to determine if President Trump is or was directed by, controlled by, and/or coordinated activities with, the Russian Federation in a manner constituting a threat to the national security of the United States and/or a violation of federal criminal statutes. In addition, this investigation will also seek to determine whether President Trump and others yet to be named obstructed and/or conspired to obstruct any associated FBI investigation.

~~(U)~~ ~~SECRET//ORCON/NOFORN~~ [REDACTED]

b7E

~~(U)~~ ~~SECRET//ORCON/NOFORN~~ [REDACTED]

b7E

~~SECRET//ORCON//NOFORN~~

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FBI via RealClearInvestigations

As with Crossfire Hurricane, the May 2017 case was opened as a Foreign Agents Registration Act investigation, and also deemed a “Sensitive Investigative Matter” to reflect Trump’s status as the nation’s top public official. The FBI document indicates that it was launched as a full investigation, which would have granted investigators targeting Trump with sweeping surveillance powers.

While the declassified document records the FBI’s theory that then-President Trump might be involved in illegal – and potentially treasonous – behavior, the “articulable factual basis” for this suspicion is redacted. Only a few paragraphs of the six-page document have not been withheld.

Along with Crossfire Hurricane, the May 2017 counterintelligence probe was folded into the Special Counsel investigation led by Robert Mueller, who was appointed just one day after the FBI began portraying Trump internally as a possible Russian agent or conspirator. Mueller’s final report “did not establish that members of the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities.”

Asked about his reasoning for opening the probe and related matters, McCabe, who now works as an on-air commentator at CNN, did not respond to RCI’s emailed questions by the time of publication.

Details about the FBI’s motivation can be gleaned, however, from other public disclosures.

According to a [January 2019 account in the New York Times](#), which first revealed the FBI’s decision to investigate Trump, the Steele dossier – a collection of conspiracy theories funded by Trump’s rival, Hillary Clinton – was among the “factors” that “fueled the F.B.I.’s concerns.”

Just two days before McCabe opened the May 2017 probe, the FBI, via Justice Department official Bruce Ohr, renewed contact with dossier author Christopher Steele despite having terminated him as a source back in November 2016. As [RCI’s Paul Sperry has previously reported](#), this sudden outreach to Steele right before the opening of a new Trump-Russia conspiracy investigation indicated that the **FBI was seeking to re-engage** the Clinton-funded British operative to help it build a case against the president for espionage and obstruction of justice. At the time, the FBI was **still relying** on Steele’s fabrications for its surveillance warrants against Trump campaign volunteer Carter Page. The following month, the FBI filed the last of its four FISA court warrants based on Steele’s material. The Justice Department has since invalidated two of those warrants on the grounds that they were based on “material misstatements.”

The FBI re-enlisted Steele despite possessing information that thoroughly discredited him. Five months before it newly sought Steele’s help to investigate the sitting president, the FBI interviewed Igor Danchenko, whom Steele had used as his dossier’s key **“sub-source.”** In that January 2017 meeting, Danchenko told FBI agents that corroboration for the dossier’s claims was “zero”; that he had “no idea” where claims sourced to him came from; and that the Russia-Trump rumors he passed along to Steele came from alcohol-fueled “word of mouth and hearsay.” The FBI had also been unable to corroborate any of Steele’s incendiary claims.

A previously disclosed document also shows that former CIA Director John Brennan – who insistently advanced the Trump/Russia conspiracy theory – informed then-president Barack Obama in July 2016 that the Clinton campaign was planning to tie Trump to Russia in order to **distract attention** from the controversy over Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while serving as secretary of state. By that point, the Clinton campaign was already paying for the fabricated reports produced by Steele, who made contact with the FBI **as early as July 5**.

Although the newly declassified document attempts to suggest that the FBI had actionable intelligence to suspect Trump of being a Russian agent, McCabe's subsequent comments indicate that there was no such evidence on offer. Instead, McCabe has said his counterintelligence probe of Trump was primarily motivated by the president's firing of Comey. In a February 2019 interview with CBS News, McCabe explained his thinking as follows: "[T]he idea is, if the president committed obstruction of justice, fired the director of the of the FBI to negatively impact or to shut down our investigation of Russia's malign activity and possibly in support of his campaign, as a counter intelligence investigator you have to ask yourself, 'Why would a president of the United States do that?' So all those same sorts of facts cause us to wonder is there an inappropriate relationship, a connection between this president and our most fearsome enemy, the government of Russia."

McCabe therefore had no evidence that Trump had a "connection" to Russia, and in fact could only "wonder" if there was one. Yet because Trump had fired Comey, whose FBI was already investigating Trump's campaign for Russia ties and relying on the Clinton-funded Steele dossier in the process, McCabe decided that he had grounds to order an espionage investigation of the commander in chief.

With the official predicate for that May 2017 investigation still redacted by the FBI, McCabe's public statements offer the only insider window into why it was opened. In all of the investigations related to alleged Russian interference to date, the Justice Department has pointedly avoided the question.

Despite inheriting McCabe's probe – and debunking claims of a Trump-Russia conspiracy related to the 2016 election – Special Counsel Mueller made no mention of the Trump as Russian agent theory in his final report of March 2019. Without informing the public, the FBI closed down the Trump counterintelligence investigation the following month. The case's closing Electronic Communication, which has previously been declassified in **redacted form**, states that the McCabe probe "was transferred to FBI personnel assisting" the Mueller team, and entailed the use of "a variety of investigative techniques."

An inquiry led by Department of Justice Inspector General Michael Horowitz of the FBI's conduct during Crossfire Hurricane also ignored McCabe's decision to investigate Trump as an agent of Russia. And in a footnote in his final report of May 2023, John Durham – the Special Counsel appointed to launch a sweeping review of the Russia investigation – claimed that McCabe's May 2017 probe was outside of his purview.

By contrast, when it comes to Crossfire Hurricane, Durham's report concluded that the FBI did not have a legitimate basis to launch that investigation, repeatedly ignored exculpatory evidence, and buried warnings that Clinton's campaign was trying to frame Trump as a Russian conspirator.

While the original Trump-Russia investigation has been discredited, the public remains in the dark about why the FBI launched a follow-up counterintelligence probe that targeted Trump while he was newly in the White House – and what ends it took to pursue it.

With Trump set to be inaugurated this month after vowing to clean up the nation's premier law enforcement agency, the FBI will have a fresh opportunity to break its longstanding secrecy on the decision to investigate the sitting, and newly returning, president as an agent of Russia.

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