

# Leaks reveal important truths about Trump

By William H. Freivogel

## Opinion

One theme emerging from this historically chaotic week in the Trump White House is the president's continued insistence that leaks to mainstream media have created a phony scandal about Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

But President Trump's effort to downplay the Russia story by delegitimizing the mainstream press seems destined to fail because of three high hurdles.

1. In trying to persuade Americans the Russia story is fake news, the president contradicts the consensus conclusion of American and other Western intelligence agencies that Russian President Vladimir Putin personally directed the intelligence operation that hacked Democratic National Committee and Clinton campaign emails as part of an effort to defeat Hillary Clinton and elect Trump. The intelligence professionals making this assessment work for the president.
2. Special Counsel Robert Mueller is an unbiased, professional law-enforcement official. A White House disinformation campaign is not going to derail his investigation into whether the president obstructed justice or his campaign violated election laws by coordinating with the Russians. Mueller's job is to enforce standards embedded in law, standards immune from White House propaganda.
3. The New York Times and the Washington Post's track records for accuracy give great credibility to their disclosures. This is not Fox News, where there was

apparent coordination with the White House on its false story on the murder of DNC staffer Seth Rich. (The whole point of the Seth Rich story was to blame the DNC for the leak of the emails while clearing the Russians and thereby Trump.)

Consider what the American people know about the Russia story because of leaked stories published in the Times and Post as part of what media critic James Warren describes as “the last great newspaper war.” Here’s what we know but wouldn’t without the leaked stories:

– Former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn lied about his improper contacts with Russia during the last days of the presidential transition. Acting Attorney General Sally Q. Yates warned the White House about the lies and Flynn’s susceptibility to blackmail on Jan. 26, but the president waited 18 days to remove Flynn, acting only after the Post published the story based on multiple anonymous sources.

– Attorney General Jeff Sessions had failed to disclose to Congress that he had met top Russians officials during the presidential campaign. The information led to Sessions’ eventual recusal, the act that made Trump so angry because Sessions couldn’t protect him from the probe. (In a few days, Sessions will publicize an increase in the number of leak investigations, which may help get him out of Trump’s doghouse.)

– Trump asked FBI Director James B. Comey in an Oval Office meeting in February to “let go” of the criminal investigation of Flynn. The request came after the president had dismissed other witnesses, including Sessions. Comey, after Trump fired him, leaked his account of the meeting, expecting, correctly, it would lead to appointment of a special counsel.

– Trump told top Russian officials in an Oval Office meeting in May that Comey was “crazy, a nut job.” He added, according

to a leaked transcript of the encounter, that before firing Comey,“ I faced great pressure because of Russia. That’s taken off.”

– Trump asked top intelligence officials in March to help him push back against Comey and the FBI on the Russia investigation, an act reminiscent of President Nixon’s effort to use the CIA to block the FBI investigation of Watergate.

– Donald Trump Jr. met with a Russian lawyer at Trump Tower during the presidential campaign to get the dirt on Hillary Clinton. “I love it,” he said at the prospect of getting information.

– President Trump took charge of the drafting of Trump Jr.’s first statement on the meeting as the president flew back from the Group of 20 summit in early July. That statement misleadingly stated: “We primarily discussed a program about the adoption of Russian children that was active and popular with American families...” In ensuing days, Trump Jr. revised the statement several times and finally released emails just before the Times published them. The emails show Trump Jr. was promised “ultra-sensitive “ information on Clinton as “part of Russia and its government’s support for Mr. Trump.”

The Post’s story this week about Trump’s direct involvement in the misleading statement about the Trump Tower meeting contradicts the repeated claims by the president’s lawyer, Jay Sekulow, that Trump had nothing to do with drafting the statement. Sarah Huckabee Sanders admitted this week that Trump “weighed in just as any father would.” Hopefully, most fathers wouldn’t help their sons evade the truth.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/07/31/trump-ps-lawyer-repeatedly-denied-trump-was-involved-in-trump-jr-s-statement-but-he-was/?tid=a\\_inl&utm\\_term=.2a36be54815c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/07/31/trump-ps-lawyer-repeatedly-denied-trump-was-involved-in-trump-jr-s-statement-but-he-was/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.2a36be54815c)

The development also makes untenable Sekulow’s constant denial that Mueller is investigating the president for obstruction of

justice. The Post has reported that Mueller is looking into obstruction and the bare bones of an obstruction case are now in full view:

Ask Comey to drop the Flynn investigation. Fire Comey when he proceeds against Flynn. Ask the intelligence chiefs to push back against the Russia investigation. Direct the drafting of a misleading statement about a meeting confirming Russian's desire to help Trump by providing dirt on Clinton.

Much of last week's drama and chaos in the White House was itself connected to White House campaign against leaks. Anthony Scaramucci – whose meteoric rise and burnout set records for brevity as communications director – called New Yorker reporter Ryan Lizza last Wednesday night to find out who had leaked that the president and first lady were dining with Fox's Sean Hannity and former Fox executive Bill Shine. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/07/31/trumps-lawyer-repeatedly-denied-trump-was-involved-in-trump-jr-s-statement-but-he-was/?tid=a\\_inl&utm\\_term=.2a36be54815c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/07/31/trumps-lawyer-repeatedly-denied-trump-was-involved-in-trump-jr-s-statement-but-he-was/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.2a36be54815c)

Of course Lizza wouldn't disclose his source and that led to the vulgar rant against then Chief of Staff Reince Priebus and Chief Strategist Steven Bannon – a rant that Trump initially "loved," according to the New York Post, but used four days later to remove Scaramucci.

Scaramucci demonstrated his and the White House's hypocrisy about leaks by first threatening to subject Priebus to an FBI investigation for leaking and then defending his rant by saying he was talking to Lizza off the record – in other words, the man fighting a war against leaks was claiming to be leaking himself.

The truth is that much of the leaking has apparently come from the warring factions in the White House. These leaks generally are not illegal and often in the public interest.

Leaking classified information and information hacked from

email is illegal, although printing the information is not. But leaking unclassified information from government sources is legal for both leaker and reporter.

Not all leaks are equally just. WikiLeaks's publication of hacked DNC emails during the election campaign made it an arm of Russian intelligence agents who apparently had obtained them. Had American media known then what they know now about the extent of Putin's control of the hacks, respectable media outlets, it is hoped, would have provided more context for the stories they published on the DNC/Clinton emails.

But the leaks disclosing deception and wrongdoing in the Trump White House have provided the American people with important information they need to make a judgment about their president. This is the way in which the press serves as an important constitutional check on the president's power and abuse of power.