

COGNITIVE ROT AND THE STEELE DOSSIER

One reason I write so much on the Steele dossier is because the cognitive rot it has fostered among Democrats is really dangerous. Often, they'll point to a confirmed event – such as that Carter Page met Arkadiy Dvorkovich and Andrey Baranov on a Russian trip that was otherwise publicly reported contemporaneously – and claim it “proves” a dossier claim claiming something else – in this case that he met Igor Sechin and Igor Diveykin. Out of some need to see the larger dossier “confirmed,” its fans claim over and over again that Not-A = A. As a result, rather than asking why the dossier is so full of narrow misses and why it doesn't report any of the big known events – starting with the Trump Tower meeting attended by Fusion GPS researcher Rinat Akhmetshin – Democrats instead keep seeing “truth” in the dossier in the tea leaves that, in actuality, are really just dregs. And, in the process, they become willing to argue that Not-A = A, arguing that claims that don't match known reality actually are reality, just like the Trump boosters we claim to abhor.

Josh Marshall engages in a bit of the same today, then Jonathan Chait piggy backs on Marshall and (as is his wont) exacerbates the error.

Marshall starts by laying out the claim from the dossier – that Trump lawyer Michael Cohen had a meeting 1) in Prague 2) in August to clean up the Manafort scandal (and the burgeoning Russia scandal generally).

I wanted to focus specifically on what the Steele Dossier alleges was a meeting with Russian intelligence agents in Prague in August 2016.

He spends the rest of the paragraph correctly noting that this is raw intelligence, so if the

Cohen detail is wrong, it doesn't mean the rest of the dossier is.

Marshall then lays out what had been known before today: that Cohen's known travel to the EU was (like so much else in the dossier) close, but no cigar.

Cohen's passport did show a trip to Italy in July. July isn't August. But that's the kind of dating issue that might get mixed up in the chain of information transition.

In any case, point being: Cohen was in the EU zone, relatively close to the Czech Republic only a couple weeks before August. So his passport by no means rules out a visit to Prague. Since most press coverage has seemed to take Cohen's denial at face value, I had assumed or left open the possibility that he'd provided investigators with other evidence we're not aware of.

Note, it is true that someone might mistake a July meeting for an August one. Except if you consider the actual claims about the Cohen meeting: that he was cleaning up after events that occurred in July and even (Manafort's resignation) August.

According to the Kremlin insider, COHEN now was heavily engaged in a cover up and damage limitation operation in the attempt to prevent the full details of TRUMP's relationship with Russia being exposed. In pursuit of this aim, COHEN had met secretly with several Russian Presidential Administration (PA) Legal Department officials in an EU country in August 2016. The immediate issues had been to contain further scandals involving MANNAFORT's commercial and political role in Russia/Ukraine and to limit the damage arising from exposure of former TRUMP foreign policy advisor, Carter PAGE's secret meetings with Russian leadership figures in Moscow the previous month. The

That is, it would be darn near impossible for Cohen to clean up the scandal created by – for example – Page's Moscow speech on July 7 and the platform change made on July 11 and 12 and first reported on July 18 on a trip to Europe from July 9 through 17. The mess hadn't started yet! Manafort's troubles, especially, were only just

beginning to break out publicly.

Marshall then links to this story and argues that it is still an open question whether Cohen had “this meeting” described in the dossier.

Politico has this passage ...

Cohen’s passport would not show any record of a visit to Prague if he entered the EU through Italy, traveled to the Czech Republic, and then returned to his point of EU entry. A congressional official said the issue is “still active” for investigators.

Reading the article it seems clear that Cohen simply denied ever being in Prague and majority Republicans saw no basis to disbelieve him and thus would not require him to provide items like credit card records and other documents which might confirm his account.

This seems very much an open question whether Cohen did in fact have this meeting.

The article – on top of making it clear it is reporting on the dysfunctional HPSCI investigation which (among other things) has shown members not asking about discussions that might be related to the larger Middle East aspect of this operation and is clearly inadequate for other reasons – includes this language before the passage Marshall quotes.

Cohen has come under close scrutiny for several Trump-Russia controversies, including emailing Putin’s spokesman two weeks before the first GOP primary to ask for his help in advancing a proposal to build a Trump Tower development project in Moscow. He also was linked to a proposed pro-Russian peace plan for

Ukraine involving Felix Sater, a former Trump business associate with Russian government connections.

Cohen has strenuously denied that a Prague meeting occurred, and he provided a copy of his passport to BuzzFeed in May. The passport was stamped for entry and exit to the United Kingdom and Italy – but not the Czech Republic, whose capital is Prague. “I have never been to Prague in my life. #fakenews,” Cohen tweeted on Jan. 10.

His passport stamps show that he traveled twice to London in 2016 and once to Italy, from July 9 to July 17.

Yes, the article supports Marshall’s point: HPSCI (both Democrats and Republicans have shown to be ineffective, but he blames just the Republicans) did not demand more information from Cohen to disprove a meeting (though it’s not clear how they’d refute the only possibility that “this meeting” is “this meeting” – that Cohen, like Manafort and Rick Davis, has more than one passport).

But the theory posed is not that he has a second passport he might have used to travel to Prague, but that “this meeting” would instead be a July meeting, not an August one. That is, it couldn’t be “this meeting” because it couldn’t accomplish what the meeting reportedly accomplished. It might be another meeting, in which case the report of it as “this meeting” would be wrong or disinformation, not truth.

The article also notes HPSCI is investigating Cohen’s other European travel, to London (one trip in October and one at Thanksgiving), which for the reasons I note here, might be more promising. If any meetings of interest happened there, they’d be interesting. But they’d also be other meetings, occurring just before the flurry of Cohen reporting as journalists were beginning to chase down this story or after all but the

last dossier report.

But there is no evidence presented in the article that supports a claim that “this meeting” took place, nothing to change the conclusion that public evidence does not support the claim that any possible meeting is “this meeting.” Not A might = A, Marshall argues.

When I tweeted to him about this, he observed that he thinks the dossier “has been borne out in a broad sense,” which is a great way to claim that Not-A = A without getting your PhD pulled.



Josh Marshall ✓
@joshtpm

Following

fwiw, i don't have strong views abt the dossier either way. seems to me a lot has been borne out in a broad sense, lots is unconfirmed, probably can never be confirmed or invalidated.

12:57 AM - 8 Dec 2017

Then, along comes Chait.

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The Steele Dossier on Trump and Russia Is Looking More and More Real

By Jonathan Chait | [@jonathanchait](#)

Ah, Chait.

He starts by hanging previous doubts about the dossier on the pee tape and Cohen’s strong denials.

Two details in particular made the dossier seem suspect. First, its report that Trump had paid Russian prostitutes to urinate on a bed that had been used by Barack Obama. And second, the report alleged that Michael Cohen, a Trump crony with Russian contacts, had met in Prague with Russian intelligence officials. The golden-showers detail, while unconfirmed, seemed too bizarre to be plausible. And Cohen shot down the Prague allegation forcefully. The report

of his meeting was “totally fake, totally inaccurate,” Cohen said, “I’m telling you emphatically that I’ve not been to Prague, I’ve never been to Czech [Republic], I’ve not been to Russia.”

Cohen’s denials helped shape skeptical coverage of the dossier.

That is, before, because these two details were doubtful, the entire dossier might be doubtful.

He then points to the same Politico report on the dysfunctional HPSCI investigation considering the Prague question “still active” (without doing the math to figure out that a July Prague meeting could not be the meeting reported in the dossier) to argue that Cohen should not be trusted more than Steele.

[T]his hardly settles the question. A congressional investigation is digging into whether Cohen is telling the truth about the alleged visit to Prague. “Cohen’s passport would not show any record of a visit to Prague if he entered the EU through Italy, traveled to the Czech Republic, and then returned to his point of EU entry,” reports *Politico*, in a passage that’s received less attention than merited. “A congressional official said the issue is ‘still active’ for investigators.”

Most reporters have treated the say-so of Cohen, a Trump hanger-on laden with extremely shady associations, as implicitly more credible than the reporting of a British intelligence agent with years of expertise. That is probably a mistake.

I’m fine with assuming Cohen is a liar, especially given how carefully he parsed his denial, not to mention the way he orchestrated turning over documents to distract attention from the previously undisclosed and far more

inflammatory details of earlier negotiations with Russians tied to the getting Trump elected. But that doesn't mean Steele is correct either. They could both be telling non-truths.

Chait then says "we don't have any idea whether" the pee tape is real, but says that because Brian Beutler has argued Trump has a pathological jealousy of Obama, then ... I'm not sure what he's arguing here.

And what about the bit about the prostitutes? The detail has been endlessly described as "salacious," placing it in the category of *National Enquirer*-type gossip of dubious veracity. We don't have any idea whether that detail is true. However, Brian Beutler made a fairly persuasive case that Trump has displayed during his presidency the exact same kind of pathological, self-destructive jealousy of Barack Obama (who had publicly humiliated Trump two years before the alleged incident).

I mean, sure, Trump hates that a black man was more competent as President than he has been. But does that affect the specifics of how the Russians might compromise him?

Finally, Chait points to one more article that argues Not-A = A, then links to the shitty Sipher defense of the dossier.

As time goes by, more and more of the claims first reported by Steele have been borne out. In general, there is a split between the credibility afforded the dossier by the mainstream media and by intelligence professionals. The former treat it as gossip; the latter take it seriously.

We can't expect Chait, a paid pundit, to actually test such claims on his own because he's not paid to be smart but instead to repeat

warmed over conventional wisdom, so I guess I'll have to forgive Chait for not noticing the glaring holes in Sipher's piece.

Which brings us to the best example of the cognitive rot the dossier creates. In the same breath where Chait admits he should not take the dossier as gospel truth and parts of it (he's not going to do the work, mind you, because he's not paid for that kind of actual labor) are "no doubt" false.

Unverified private reporting should not be taken as gospel truth, and no doubt some of the tips Steele picked up are false. But we should probably be giving far more weight to the possibility that the darkest interpretation of Trump's relations with Russia is actually true.

But from that, he assumes (wrongly, in my opinion) that the "darkest interpretation of Trump's relations" are what the dossier reports, and that those are possibly true.

Chait has abdicated any need to verify individual claims out of which he builds his larger truths.

As I've said repeatedly, we don't need the dossier to believe dark things about Trump's relations with Russians; public reports substantiate that darkness, and darker things are to come.

The desire to find tea leaves that prove the worst about Trump – rather than to do the work to look at the actual evidence and/or wait for Robert Mueller to do his work – has led Democrats to excuse themselves of insisting on tying claims to actual reality, in varying degrees of the same kind of thing that makes Trump so dangerous. It's okay if claims are "borne out in a general sense," rather than being proven true piece by piece.

We used to believe that justice was not about truth being "borne out in a general sense" but

about discrete evidence. Too many seem to believe we can skip that step with Trump. That's true, even though we have facts and evidence and they're accumulating to be even more damning than anything in the Steele dossier. Just as important, we need to retain the habit *of* facts and evidence.