



Glenn Greenwald & Aaron Maté Revisit the Russiagate Scandal

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Now to help us explore and understand more about the origins of this story, about some of these prongs of the Russiagate scandal that were completely false and to understand the ongoing implications and why American elites are so desperate to just forget this ever happened – if you bring up the Hunter Biden laptop, if you bring up Russiagate, they'll act like you're talking about something trivial in the past that everyone should just forget about, move on, precisely because it reveals the truth about it – we are going to speak with Aaron Maté, who, as I said, was one of the very few journalists willing from the start to put his career on the line to state that so much of this not only was without evidence, but made no sense. And he was particularly in a risky situation because he had long worked in progressive media and it was heresy to do what they decided to view as defending Donald Trump, when in fact he was just doing his job as a journalist. He became, in my view, one of the two or three people who became most expertised, had most expertise in the details and the granular facts of Russiagate. And so we were not going to do this retrospective without talking to Aaron, given what an important journalistic role he played. And I think the interview that we did with him, we taped it yesterday, sheds a lot more light on some of the key issues and the reason why this deserves ongoing and systemic attention. Here's our interview.

GG: Aaron, thank you so much for joining us tonight. There's nobody with whom I would rather do this show than you, and I really appreciate your taking the time to talk to us.

Aaron Maté (AM): Good to be here.

GG: Absolutely. So let's go back to the very beginning, the kind of origin of this entire debacle that came to be known as Russiagate. I think there's been a lot of confusion, deliberately stoked by Democrats who now want to distance themselves from what had been their primary political weapon by saying, Oh, it wasn't the Hillary Clinton campaign or the Democratic Party that created this narrative. Instead, it was actually anti-Trump media outlets and operatives who did it and we just kind of, the Hillary Clinton campaign, just inherited it

when those other candidates dropped out. How do you – and obviously, there was a lot of involvement of the US security state and the corporate media, when you look back on all of this and you look to the origins of where this scandal began, how do you assign the blame?

AM: The origins are with the Democratic Party, specifically the Hillary Clinton campaign, which hired the opposition research firm Fusion GPS in the spring of 2016. I believe the exact month is May and immediately got them to start looking into what they imagine were Trump's ties to Russia. And why they chose Russia, I'm not sure. One rumoured reason is that Hillary Clinton was at that point under scrutiny for her suspected ties to Russia over her tenure as secretary of state, and some money that her husband, Bill Clinton, had gotten from a Russian bank. And so possibly this idea of looking into Trump's fictional ties to Russia was a way to simply deflect. Regardless, Fusion GPS was hired, they immediately hired Christopher Steele to write up this phoney dossier of elaborate conspiracy theories involving Trump and Russia. And meanwhile, the Hillary Clinton campaign also hired a firm called CrowdStrike, which, upon realising in April and May of 2016 that their emails had been stolen, quickly pointed the blame at Russia in a really dubious sequence of events that I can get into. But that's the origin. And also simultaneously, funnily enough, there's also a Ukraine tie because you had people inside of Ukraine who once it was clear that Trump was getting the nomination, we're not happy about it because he was openly talking about cooperating with Russia and not getting into a World War three over Ukraine. So now it's documented, and this was in Politico and a few other outlets that officials at the Ukrainian embassy started cooperating with the DNC to try to feed them dirt about Trump's then campaign manager, Paul Manafort. So the Clinton campaign really is at the heart of this. Ukraine plays a role, too. And then very quickly after the Steele dossier gets underway in June, July 2016, Steele starts passing his conspiracy theories to his contacts at the FBI. And one of the people who's involved in this happens to be Victoria Nuland, because in early July 2016, it's Victoria Nuland who's then serving in the State Department, who authorises that FBI agent to go and meet with Christopher Steele to receive his dossier.

GG: Obviously, any time there's Ukraine involved there, you're going to find the fingerprints of Victoria Nuland. And yeah, there was a Politico article that has been memory holed right after Donald Trump won the 2016 election that basically said Ukraine made the wrong bet, that Ukrainians were doing all sorts of things to try and help the Clinton campaign by passing dirt about Paul Manafort, about other Trump associates, because they expected Hillary Clinton to win. They wanted Hillary Clinton to win because obviously they perceived that the Clinton circle was so fanatically supportive of Ukraine. Just, I want to get to the Steele dossier, because I do think that's where so much of the most extreme revisionism is now coming from. But before we get there, you mentioned this question of why they chose Russia. I mean, my view and of course, you can only speculate to an extent, but I think there's some things we can know is that if you look back at the part of the Obama years that was dominated when Hillary Clinton was at the State Department, there was a fixation she had even back then on confronting Russia when she wrote her book – one of the areas where she was most harshly critical of Obama was his, quote, unquote, "failure to confront Russia", both in Syria and Ukraine. She, of course, wanted him to do far more than he, in fact, did to

remove Bashar al Assad. And she wanted Ukraine flooded with lethal arms. So she was always kind of fixated on Russia. She actually financed, as part of the National Endowment for Democracy and other groups, the opposition in Russia, and helped stimulate a lot of these riots that took place in Russia. That's one of the reasons Putin hated Hillary was because she had been doing the kind of interference they accused Russia of doing. But I also wonder whether you think that one of the reasons why Russia worked so well here is because Russia has always played this role in American political life for decades, which, you know, obviously during the Cold War, which was this was the big evil country that we're supposed to fear, they're doing everything possible to subvert our institutions and undermine, our sacred values, do you think that part of the appeal of Russiagate was that so many Americans over generations had been trained to view Russia as this existential threat? That that kind of fear was already built in?

AM: Oh, absolutely. And if you read the accounts of the central figures in Russiagate, including Jim Clapper, who is the former director of national intelligence, he would talk about how he'd take the Russians, how they're genetically driven to lie and cheat. Many other top officials, like Lisa Page, who was with the FBI during the Trump-Russia investigation, or Peter Strzok, they all talked in really derisive terms about Russia. So, absolutely. I think it was that Cold War influence that definitely played into all this. Absolutely.

GG: This revisionism actually infuriates me because, of course, the attempt by Democrats is that they know that this has become a huge embarrassment. The core conspiracy theories that gave rise to this scandal in the first place were disproven by the person they deputise to be the supreme authority, Robert Mueller. And one of the most embarrassing parts of all was the Steele dossier, because essentially it turned out to be a gigantic hoax. And there were a couple of attempts, very few, but one journalistic attempt to hold other journalists accountable for the frauds that they helped spread was when Erik Wemple did a series on the journalist who most spread the Steele dossier and identified MSNBC's Rachel Maddow and Natasha Bertrand, now at CNN. And Rachel Maddow said in response, Oh, I was never really a big booster of the Steele dossier that really didn't play a big role in this scandal. That's what they all say now. You cannot find anybody anymore who is willing to say they ever were pushing those allegations, the core allegation of the Steele dossier. Talk about the role that the Steele dossier actually played in this scandal called Russiagate, because I think this is the thing that has been most deliberately rewritten.

AM: People forget that when the Steele dossier was released in January 2017, shortly before Trump took office, this was huge news, when BuzzFeed News released the entire dossier. Everybody ran with this. And that set off a series of articles in every single outlet. And in fairness to Rachel Maddow, she was far from alone. This is everybody. This was Jane Mayer of The New Yorker; wrote a glowing profile of Christopher Steele, of this intrepid British spy who came across this damning information about a presidential candidate turned president and just wanted to alert the world to protect democracy. I mean, everybody did this, the New York Times portray them as credible. Anonymous FBI officials laundered claims to reliable stenographers in the media that they've been looking at the Steele's claims, and they're all

checking out, when meanwhile, they knew that from the start this was a fraud. They had spoken very early on to Igor Danchenko, who was Steele's supposed main source, who was Russian. But at the time, he wasn't even in Russia. He was in Washington, D.C. and in his telling the tales that made it into the Steele dossier came from him having drinks with his friends and just basically making stuff up. The FBI knew all this, but gave their media contacts a completely false picture. And these media staffers, rather than doing their jobs and subjecting these claims to minimal scrutiny, printed all this and treated Steele as if he was credible. So this was an across the board failure. And, yes, for Rachel Maddow to claim that she never took Steele seriously – she did an entire special of the Steele dossier. It was called "The Dossier", I believe, and she interviewed all these people, you know, Michael Isikoff, David Corn of Mother Jones, all of them who took the dossier seriously. In fact, David Corn and Isikoff's book, Russian Roulette, was pretty much entirely based on the Steele dossier. Same with Luke Harding, who I famously interviewed, early on in all this, his work was also based on Steele. So, yeah, this was an across the board failure.

GG: Yeah. We're going to show clips of that interview that you did with Luke Harding because he had the number one bestselling book in the country purporting to have proven the existence of collusion. And you spent the interview pressing him on just some evidence on which he was relying to make that assertion, and he simply could not answer, and then finally hung up on you in shame, because you had exposed the entire book as a fraud. It's really a remarkable interview that I encourage people to watch, but we are going to include it, in part of what we're doing. So, one of the things, and I know there's going to be people who, when they hear that this show is about this topic, are going to say, Oh, this is old news, why are you still focussed on this? And the reason I find that just so enraging is because it was the issue that dominated our political discourse for three years. It was by far the number one story used throughout the 2016 campaign, and for at least the first two, two and a half years of the Trump presidency. And so to pretend that it was just some kind of trivial footnote that wasn't really important is such a form of deceit and historical revisionism that it drives me crazy. And one of the things about it is, you know, it's very hard, when I was thinking about what I want to talk to you about, there's so many different prongs of it that turned out to be a hoax, but one of the ones that got the most attention and again, this has been memory hold, is this allegation that the Clinton campaign pushed very aggressively, that a secret server had been discovered that permitted the Trump organisation to speak to a bank in Russia called Alfa Bank. Talk it out, kind of where that came from and how it is that, that that debunked it, the role that that played in perceptions being shaped.

AM: Yeah. This was ruled out, during the 2016 campaign, if I remember correctly. I'm forgetting some of the details now because it's been a while, but...

GG: Hillary Clinton's lawyer, went to the FBI. That's what he got prosecuted for, by hiding that he was there. And the FBI, after a couple of weeks of like, this is a joke. There's nothing to this. It never bothered to tell the public.

AM: Thank you for refreshing my memory. So just as Hillary Clinton's lawyer Michael Sussman is feeding this fake claim to the FBI because, again, the Clinton campaign's goal at

this point is to get the FBI to investigate anything to do with Trump and Russia to make their scam look credible. So, Sussman, this Clinton lawyer had already fed the FBI the claims of another Clinton contractor, CrowdStrike, that Russia had stolen the Democratic Party emails. The FBI was on that. And Sussman decides to double down by also giving him a bunch of so-called data that some researchers working for him had put together, showing that there is, as you said, a secret covert communications channel between the Trump campaign and a Russian bank. And the theory here is that the Trump campaign is using the secret channel to, like, transmit messages or get messages back from the Kremlin. And of course, the FBI looks at this and concludes that it's baseless, which we find out way after the fact. But meanwhile, the Clinton campaign via Fusion GPS, the firm working for them, who are involved in this, they're also pushing this on loyal media allies like Franklin Foer, who's now at the Atlantic, but then he was with, I think, Slate. And, Foer publishes this big story in Slate. And when it comes out, what does the Clinton campaign do? They put out a press release saying, Oh my God, there's evidence of a secret Trump channel, speaking to a Russian bank, what does this mean? Is this evidence of a covert operation between Trump and Russia? That needs to be investigated. This is put out before the election. And who signs that press release? It's Jake Sullivan, who's then a top Hillary adviser, who's now our national security advisor. Has there been any accountability at all for Jake Sullivan, who's supposedly in charge of US national security? A pretty big portfolio. Any accountability at all for him putting out a documented fraud to the public before the 2016 election? There's been none at all. So that's just one example of the scam for which there's been no accountability whatsoever. And the consequences go far beyond just lying to the public and embarrassing the media. I mean, we can talk about it.

GG: No, I want to get to that for sure. Not just the harm that it caused, but the ongoing harm that it's causing in terms of the US-Russian relations, the countries with the two biggest nuclear stockpiles.

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