

Introduction

President Trump wasted no time in sprinting to his twitter account on February 16, 2018 to tweet, “The Trump campaign did nothing wrong—no collusion.” These two words, “no collusion,” had become Trump’s kind of unofficial anthem any and every time someone had the temerity to ask him about the Russia 2016 presidential election meddling probe. But this time, Trump had a particularly good reason to shout out the two words.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller III had just made public his indictment of 13 Russian nationals on a variety of charges for tampering with the presidential election. While the indictment was long on details about just how the Russians stuck their fraudulent finger in the presidential elections, it stopped short of hinting, inferring, or even breathing any word that Trump, or anyone connected with him and his campaign had any involvement in the election meddling scam. This was enough for Trump to declare victory and demand that Mueller and Congress shut down the investigation.

Trump doubled down on this two weeks later when he got a puffball question about the investigation from a *Fox News* interviewer, He blathered, “You have all these committees, everybody’s looking. There is no collusion. No phone calls — I had no phone calls, no meetings, no nothing. There is no collusion. I say it all the time. Anybody that asks. There is no collusion.”

While the indictment did not implicate Trump, it didn’t absolve him either, and his shout of “no collusion” didn’t either. There was absolutely no way that Mueller would stop with the indictment of the Russians. In September 2017, Mueller notified the White House that he would look at 13 areas that pertained to the Russian election involvement. He wanted all documents, memos, emails, and anything else that the White House had on the election and on campaign officials involved in election planning.

The areas of interest included meetings Trump had with Russian officials, the circumstances surrounding the firing of his National Security Advisor, Michael T. Flynn, and conversations Trump had about FBI Director James Comey. Mueller was especially interested in the June 9, 2016 meeting that Trump Jr., son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and then Trump campaign manager,

Paul Manafort had with a parade of Russian operatives at Trump Tower just 4 months before the election. Emails and documents had already surfaced from principals at the meeting, especially the Russians, that the meeting was about more than what Trump claimed to discuss Russian adoption policy, but how to batter Trump's presidential rival, Hillary Clinton.

There was also the small matter of the indictments of, and plea deals with, Trump's one-time deputy campaign manager, Rick Gates, and Manafort. They weren't bit players in the Trump campaign and his operations. They were in a position to make a lot of decisions about the campaign. If they had something to say that could point a finger at someone near Trump in illicit dealings with the Russians on the campaign, then Mueller would want to know that. This could potentially plunge the investigation into even deeper Trump waters.

Mueller upped the ante in March 2018, when he made public that he was considering possible indictments of more Russians. This time specifically for their role in to hacking into computer networks and stealing the emails of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta. At the same time, he dropped a public hint that he would talk with those who might be in the know about whether Trump knew that the Democratic emails had been stolen before the public knew it and if he had anything to do with their release. Trump's boast the Russians should release thousands of Clinton emails did seem to be more than just a case of prescient soothsaying.

While the indictment of the Russians made no mention of Trump, it did make an irrefutable case that the whole point of the Russian's dirty election dealing was to torpedo the Clinton campaign and tilt the Oval Office to Trump. In the days and weeks after the election, Trump continued to scream that there was no Russian election meddling and that the investigation was take your pick: "a hoax", "sore loser Clinton talk," or a "witch-hunt" by the Democrats to wreck his administration. He took the softest of soft lines on the Russians and continued his seeming lovefest with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This didn't prove that Trump was in bed with the Russians in any way. But it did look suspicious given his past cloudy business dealings with the Russians. Putin played his role to perfection in the tag team with Trump when he demanded in an *NBC* interview on March 2, 2018, "Show us the proof, show us the documents" on Russian election tampering. Putin labeled it just "a lot of hollering and yelling in Congress."

This gave even more pause to wonder what else there was to Trump's chronic soft-pedal of Russia. At the very least, the indictment demanded that Trump shout loud with outrage and disgust that America's number one world rival for power could butt into another nation's most important election and get away with it. That loud and long squeal of outrage wasn't forthcoming from the White House. Trump was mute about any proposed new initiatives or safeguards that the White House would propose to make sure that nothing like this happened again.

This meant one thing. The Russia probe was far from dead and there were still a lot of unanswered questions about Trump, Russia and the 2016 presidential election. *The Russia Probe: What Did Trump Know, And When Did He Know It?* takes a hard, wide ranging look at what's known and what still remains to be answered about Trump, the Russians, how America's most important election could be subverted, and what the consequences of that are for American politics present and future.