

Public record contradicts spy chief's Russia-gate 'conspiracy' accusations
ODNI Gabbard says Obama-era officials said something they never said.

By Patrick Tucker

The head of U.S. intelligence made misleading claims about what Obama-administration officials said about Russian meddling in the 2016 election, while accusing them of a “conspiracy” to “politicize” intelligence and asking the Justice Department to launch a criminal investigation.

On Sunday, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard [said](#) her office would send a [memo](#), which was released on Friday with a [statement](#), and its supporting documents to the U.S. Justice Department for use in potential criminal prosecutions of unnamed Obama-era intelligence officials.

“We are referring all of the documents that we have uncovered to the Department of Justice and the FBI for a criminal referral,” Gabbard told a Fox interviewer. She did not say explicitly who she hoped might be prosecuted.

The memo accuses the former officials of a “conspiracy” to “politicize” intelligence about Russia’s 2016 election interference, in order to “subvert” Donald Trump’s election win. But neither the memo nor the report refute the volumes of public evidence of the interference, including a GOP-led Senate Intelligence Committee [investigation](#). And the documents advance a misleading description of what the intelligence community said about those efforts and their extent.

At the core of the new ODNI accusations is newly declassified internal correspondence that the agency says shows a contradiction between internal assessments and public statements about Russian interference. For example, an internal note from August 2016 shows intelligence officials telling then-DNI James Clapper that their analysis indicated that there was “no indication of a Russian threat to directly manipulate the actual vote count. Another, from November 2016, says Russia was “probably not trying...to influence the election by using cyber means.” And another, from that December, says that “Russian and criminal actors did not impact recent U.S. election results by conducting malicious cyber activities against election infrastructure.”

What the new report does not point out: this is what the intelligence community has said all along. Officials across the government were consistent in their public remarks—and sworn testimony—that Russia did not succeed in changing election outcomes or altering voting-machine tallies or functions, which would constitute “cyber” attacks against “election infrastructure.” In fact, intelligence and White House officials [stated clearly](#), [again](#), and [again](#), that Russia did not change any vote tallies or alter the actual vote count. In other words, no one named in the report actually made any claim that Russia had used “cyber” means to attack “election infrastructure,” which is the very heart of the accusation.

The new ODNI report does not address what the intelligence community actually concluded: that Russia used “cyber” means to [hack](#) the internal networks of the Democratic National Committee, exfiltrated email and other communications data, [laundered](#) them through WikiLeaks, and then [spread](#) them on social media in an attempt to undermine public support for Hillary Clinton’s campaign.

Speaking on *Face the Nation* on Sunday, Rep. Jim Himes, D-Conn., a member of the House Intelligence Committee, [described](#) Gabbard’s claims as “a little sleight of hand” intended to mischaracterize the intelligence community’s [statements and assessments](#). “She is saying that the intelligence community, early on, said that the Russians could not use cyber tools to mess with the voting infrastructure—the machines that tally our votes. And that was true then, and it is true now.”

Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, [said in a statement](#) Friday, “DNI Gabbard is not releasing new information—she is repackaging already-debunked conspiracy theories to sow distrust and damage public confidence in the intelligence community.”

The report offers a timeline of when intelligence officials discussed Russia’s actions internally. Tellingly, it does not refute or contradict the findings of the 2020 Senate Intelligence Committee investigation into Russia’s 2016 election interference, nor any of the public evidence supporting those findings:

- In September 2015, the FBI [contacted](#) the DNC after detecting a breach on its servers, which the FBI attributed to a Russian actor. That’s a matter of sworn public testimony from Yared Tamene Wolde-Yohannes, a DNC IT contractor.
- In April 2016, the DNC contacted [CrowdStrike](#) to investigate another detected intrusion. CrowdStrike, which was also under contract with the RNC, attributed the breach to known Russian actors. These attackers [were already familiar](#) to the broader cybersecurity community, having also targeted the State Department, White House and Pentagon.
- In July, a Russian-linked news site called DCLeaks and [WikiLeaks](#) published a series of exfiltrated communications from the DNC—some 20,000 emails—the same data taken by Russian actors from DNC networks.
- In October 2016, DHS and ODNI [issued a joint statement](#) attributing the DNC hack to Russia, confirming what many analysts had been reporting for months. The Senate Intelligence Committee report also documents a concerted effort by the Russian government to sway U.S. public opinion via social media networks, including through targeted ads.

To what extent did these efforts change voters’ minds? Personal voter motivation is notoriously difficult to quantify, [though some have tried](#).

The new ODNI report, in short, misrepresents a documented Russian influence campaign aimed at voter perception as a cyber campaign to manipulate vote totals. It also omits a subject of more current relevance: the [evidence](#) that Russia is continuing its efforts to reshape perceptions of truth to America's disadvantage.

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The new ODNI memo and Gabbard also don't address any of the

Claims

<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2025/4086-pr-15-25>

Internal communications

https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/DIG/DIG-Russia-Hoax-Memo-and-Timeline_revisited.pdf

Face the Nation

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jim-himes-house-intelligence-committee-connecticut-face-the-nation-transcript-07-20-2025/>

Findings

<https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/2020/08/18/publications-report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures/>

That in 2015

https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/yared_tamene_wolde_yohannes_testimony_aug_30_2017.pdf

Crowdstrike

<https://www.crowdstrike.com/en-us/blog/bears-midst-intrusion-democratic-national-committee/>

Were familiar to

<https://threatpost.com/white-house-state-department-counted-among-cozyduke-apt-victims/112382/>

Wikileaks

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-russians-hacked-the-dnc-and-passed-its-emails-to-wikileaks/2018/07/13/af19a828-86c3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html

ODNI 2016 statement

<https://www.dhs.gov/archive/news/2016/10/07/joint-statement-department-homeland-security-and-office-director-national>

Have tried

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump>

Continue.

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/primer-russian-cognitive-warfare>

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