

The Great Inoculation Campaign  
Michael Smerconish  
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On the eve of the release of the report of Special Counsel Robert Mueller, one question looms: Has President Trump's inoculation effort been a success?

After all, we've just witnessed the greatest inoculation campaign since the eradication of polio.

The President has aggressively attempted to conflate both the findings of Mueller's report and the origin of the underlying Russian investigation so as to stifle the impact of the public release of the report. We know from Attorney General William Barr's original, four-page letter to Congressional leadership that Mueller found no collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian government. That's a clear and legitimate win for the President.

But Mueller reached no conclusion on the issue of obstruction of justice and it was Barr, along with Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who then said they found:

"the evidence developed during the Special Counsel's investigation is not sufficient to establish that the President committed an obstruction-of-justice offense."

That's not an exoneration but the President has been treating it as such. At his first rally after Mueller delivered the report to Barr, the president spoke in Grand Rapids, Michigan and said this:

“After three years of lies and smears and slander, the Russia hoax is finally dead,” Mr. Trump declared. “The collusion delusion is over.”

On the same day that the President spoke in Michigan, the New York Times reported that the Mueller report itself exceeds 300 pages. (The length of the report is something that AG Barr had not told Congress in his 4-page letter.) As the Times pointed out, that length suggests that Mueller went well beyond the bare-bones summary required of him. And Barr's letter told the public that Mueller “sets out evidence” on both sides of the question of obstruction. Barr said:

"The Special Counsel states that “while this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him.”

That all suggests that if and when the public ever gets a look at the full Mueller report, it won't be pleasant for the President, regardless of the conclusion of no collusion. But by then, he's hoping to have protected himself with his declarations that this is all about partisanship, not facts. In Grand Rapids, the President said this:

“The Democrats need to decide whether they will continue to defraud the public with ridiculous bullshit.”

It’s not just the impact of the outcome of the Mueller probe which the President has sought to poison, it’s also the origin of the Russian investigation itself. Days after Mueller delivered his report to Barr, on March 27, the President granted a 45- minute interview to Sean Hannity on Fox News. The President said this:

“How did this start? How did it start?” Trump asked at one point during the interview Wednesday night. “You had dirty cops. . . . [A]t the top, they were not clean, to put it mildly. And what they did to our country was a terrible, terrible thing.”

Who is “they”? He later pointed to former FBI deputy director Andrew McCabe.

“I mean, McCabe: His wife got hundreds of thousands of dollars,” Trump said. “He was running the FBI and running all sorts of cases, and his wife got hundreds of thousands of dollars from essentially Clintons, from Clinton’s closest friend. Then he ruled so favorably.”

The President and Hannity have both consistently sought to spin the beginning of the Russian investigation as the stuff of deep state conspiracy, and by this logic, anything that follows is fruit of a poisonous tree. But as Philip Bump pointed out in the Washington Post on March 28th:

“We’ve been through this before - frequently. McCabe’s wife ran for the Virginia Senate in 2015 and lost. She received money from a political action committee controlled by former Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe, as did a number of other candidates. That election was over well before McCabe had any oversight of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s emails, much less the investigation into Trump and Russia.”

Of course, Hannity has a different take than Bump:

“This is what we know,” Hannity said, “that in August of 2016, we know Bruce Ohr warned everybody at the DOJ and the FBI that Christopher Steele hated you, that Hillary Clinton paid for the dossier, that it was not verified. But still in October, and then three renewal application warrants approved, they were told by the Grassley-Graham memo, the bulk of information came from that phony dossier. Andrew McCabe said, no dossier, no FISA warrant.”

Philip Bump further explained:

“Hannity is referring to a FISA warrant obtained against Carter Page, who in March 2016 was identified as an adviser to Trump’s campaign. In July, Page traveled to Moscow, where he spoke with a Russian deputy prime minister. His trip was mentioned in a dossier of reports compiled by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele.

“But that October 2016 warrant also had nothing to do with the launch of the investigation into possible collusion between Trump’s campaign and Russia. That investigation is believed to have begun on July 31, 2016, after the FBI was tipped off by a foreign diplomat that another Trump campaign adviser, George Papadopoulos, had discussed incriminating emails in Russia’s possession.”

This scrum over the origin of the Russia probe is why Barr’s testimony to Congress on April 10 was monumental and so well received by the President:

"I think spying on a political campaign is a big deal," Barr said, echoing some of the more inflammatory claims lobbed by the President for months, but declining to elaborate on his concerns. "I think spying did occur."

Barr acknowledged that he was using the word “spying” as a synonym for “surveillance”, although the former has a much more sinister connotation. Either way, the reference is to intelligence gathered from Carter Page, a former member of Trump’s campaign foreign policy team. In September of 2016, Page left the campaign after his communications with Russians came to light. Then in October, the FBI applied for a (FISA) foreign surveillance warrant because the agency believed "Page has been the subject of targeted recruitment by the Russian government." That warrant for surveillance on Page was

approved and then renewed three times, each time meeting a probable cause threshold. Page maintains he was “never” an agent of a foreign power -- calling the accusations "ridiculous." But the President and Republicans continually claim that because the FISA warrant helped launch the Russia probe, the whole investigation is tainted and Barr's use of the word "spying" bolsters that charge, at least politically speaking. The FBI counters that it was actually the words of George Papadopolous, a former Trump adviser who discussed with an Australian diplomat that the Russians held dirt on Hillary Clinton, that actually launched the probe. And Democrats note the FBI followed proper procedures and that Carter Page is a very small part of the big picture in a massive investigation that resulted in the indictment of 37 individuals and entities.

This is complicated stuff. It requires a much higher level of attentiveness than most Americans have time or inclination to offer. And that is exactly what the President hopes. Hence, the initial Barr summary was the vaccine. The Trump/Hannity response was the building of the immunity in the body, and therefore the public, particularly the base, so that it not be infected by the bad news to come. They hope to make the bad stuff in the report seem like spin. Rather genius, politically speaking! But it's a bet with no margin for error. No doubt when the President spoke in Grand Rapids, he was mindful of the fact that he won Michigan in 2016 by fewer than 11,000 votes, which is just 2/10's of 1 %.

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