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Intercept\_**

# **CIA DIRECTOR MET ADVOCATE OF DISPUTED DNC HACK THEORY — AT TRUMP'S REQUEST**

Duncan Campbell, James Risen

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Photo: Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP

CIA Director Mike Pompeo met late last month with a former U.S. intelligence official who has become an advocate for a disputed theory that the theft of the Democratic National Committee's emails during

the 2016 presidential campaign was an inside job, rather than a hack by Russian intelligence.

Pompeo met on October 24 with William Binney, a former National Security Agency official-turned-whistleblower who co-authored [an analysis](#) published by a group of former intelligence officials that challenges the U.S. intelligence community's official assessment that Russian intelligence was behind last year's theft of data from DNC computers. Binney and the other former officials argue that the DNC data was "leaked," not hacked, "by a person with physical access" to the DNC's computer system.

In an interview with The Intercept, Binney said Pompeo told him that President Donald Trump had urged the CIA director to meet with Binney to discuss his assessment that the DNC data theft was an inside job. During their hour-long meeting at CIA headquarters, Pompeo said Trump told him that if Pompeo "want[ed] to know the facts, he should talk to me," Binney said.

A senior intelligence source confirmed that Pompeo met with Binney to discuss his analysis, and that the CIA director held the meeting at Trump's urging. The Intercept's account of the meeting is based on interviews with Binney, the senior intelligence source, a colleague who accompanied Binney to CIA headquarters, and others who Binney told about the meeting. A CIA spokesperson declined to comment. "As a general matter, we do not comment on the Director's schedule," said Dean Boyd, director of the CIA's Office of Public Affairs.

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Binney said that Pompeo asked whether he would be willing to meet with NSA and FBI officials to further discuss his analysis of the DNC data theft. Binney agreed and said Pompeo said he would contact him when he had arranged the meetings.

It is highly unorthodox for the CIA director to reach out to someone like Binney, a 74-year-old ex-government employee who rose to prominence as an NSA whistleblower wrongfully persecuted by the government, for help with fact-finding related to the theft of the DNC emails. It is particularly stunning that Pompeo would meet with Binney at Trump's apparent urging, in what could be seen as an effort to discredit the U.S. intelligence community's own assessment that an alleged Russian hack of the DNC servers was part of an effort to help Trump win the presidency.

It is possible Trump learned about Binney and his analysis by watching Fox News, where Binney has been a frequent guest, appearing at least 10 times since September 2016. In August, [Binney appeared on Tucker Carlson's Fox show](#) to discuss his assessment that the narrative of Russia hacking the DNC during the 2016 campaign is untrue, stating that "many people are emotionally tied to this agenda, to tie the Russians to President Trump." Binney said he is not sure how Trump found out about his analysis.

However the meeting came about, the fact that Pompeo was apparently willing to follow Trump's direction and invite Binney to discuss his analysis has alarmed some current and former intelligence officials.

“This is crazy. You’ve got all these intelligence agencies saying the Russians did the hack. To deny that is like coming out with the theory that the Japanese didn’t bomb Pearl Harbor,” said one former CIA officer.

Binney, for his part, is happy that the meeting occurred and eager to help Pompeo and Trump get to the bottom of the DNC email theft because he believes the intelligence community has not told the truth about what happened.

“I was willing to meet Pompeo simply because it was clear to me the intelligence community wasn’t being honest here,” Binney said, referring to their assessment of the DNC email theft. “I am quite willing to help people who need the truth to find the truth and not simply have deceptive statements from the intelligence community.”



William Binney, former National Security Agency intelligence official-turned-whistleblower, arrives to testify at the Bundestag commission investigating the role of the NSA in Germany on July 3, 2014 in Berlin. Photo: Adam Berry/Getty Images

The analysis by Binney and his colleagues aligns neatly with Trump’s frequent public skepticism of the intelligence community’s assessment that Russia intervened in the 2016 campaign to damage Hillary Clinton’s candidacy and help elect Trump. The declassified summary of a U.S. intelligence community [report](#), based on the work of the CIA, the FBI, and the NSA and made public in early January before Trump’s inauguration, stated that “Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election. Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her

electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.” Trump has frequently raged against the accusation that he won the presidency thanks to help from the Russians, labeling the charge “fake news.”

“The Director stands by, and has always stood by, the January 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment,” Boyd, the CIA spokesperson, said.

Binney’s claim that the email theft was committed by an insider at the DNC also helps fuel one of the more bizarre conspiracy theories that has gained traction on the right: that the murder of a young DNC staffer last year was somehow connected to the data theft. Binney said he mentioned the case of Seth Rich to Pompeo during their meeting.

The meeting raises questions about Pompeo’s willingness to act as an honest broker between the intelligence community and the White House, and his apparent refusal to push back against efforts by the president to bend the intelligence process to suit his political purposes. Instead of acting as a filter between Trump and the intelligence community, Pompeo’s decision to meet with Binney raises the possibility that right-wing theories aired on Fox News and in other conservative media can now move not just from conservative pundits to Trump, but also from Trump to Pompeo and into the bloodstream of the intelligence community.

Some senior CIA officials have grown upset that Pompeo, a former Republican representative from Kansas, has become so close to Trump that the CIA director regularly expresses skepticism about intelligence that doesn’t line up with the president’s views. Pompeo has

also alienated some CIA managers by growing belligerent toward them in meetings, according to an intelligence official familiar with the matter.

The CIA, however, strongly objected to this characterization. “The Director has been adamant that CIA officers have the time, space and resources to make sound and unbiased assessments that are delivered to policy makers without fear or favor,” Boyd said in an email to *The Intercept*. “As he has stated repeatedly, when we deliver our assessments to policy makers, we must do so with complete candor. He has also pushed decision making down in the organization, giving officers greater ownership of their work and making them more accountable for the outcomes. These changes are designed to make CIA more agile, aggressive and responsive.”

Yet indications of Pompeo's willingness to support Trump at the risk of tainting the intelligence process have occasionally broken into the open in recent months. In August, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that Pompeo had taken the unusual step of having the CIA's Counterintelligence Mission Center, which would likely play a role in any inquiries by the agency into Russian election meddling, report directly to him. That move has raised concerns within the agency that Pompeo is seeking to personally control the CIA's efforts to investigate accusations of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia.

More recently, at a Washington event in October, Pompeo [said](#) that U.S. intelligence had determined that Moscow's intervention hadn't impacted the outcome of the election. He was quickly criticized for the comments, and the CIA had to issue a clarification saying that the intelligence assessment on Russia hadn't been altered.

While Pompeo seems to be actively taking Trump's side on con-



tentious issues like Russian collusion, Dan Coats, the former Republican senator who now serves as director of national intelligence, has been [largely missing in action](#). Coats has been reluctant to push for an aggressive Trump-Russia investigation, according to a source familiar with the matter.

By contrast, Coats's predecessor, James Clapper, saw himself as the public face of the intelligence community and its spokesperson. Now out of government, Clapper, who was appointed by former President Barack Obama, has become an ardent advocate for a thorough investigation of Trump and Russia. Clapper [told Politico](#) in late October that the Russian election hacking was designed to help Trump win. "The Russians have succeeded beyond their wildest expectations," he said.

With Coats largely out of the picture and Pompeo actively siding with Trump, the intelligence community is effectively leaderless as it struggles to come to grips with its role in the Trump-Russia inquiry. The lack of aggressive support from the intelligence community could hamper the ongoing investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into possible collusion between Trump and Russia. Eventually, that lack of support could make it more difficult for Mueller's team to glean information from inside Russia.

Pompeo's meeting with Binney came just days before the first charges from Mueller's investigation were made public on October 30. Former Trump campaign chair Paul Manafort and his business partner Rick Gates were charged in a 12-count indictment in connection with their work with a pro-Russian party in Ukraine. It was also disclosed that George Papadopoulos, a former Trump foreign policy adviser, pleaded guilty earlier in October to making a false statement

to the FBI in connection with his efforts to develop Russian ties during the campaign. Through a plea agreement, Papadopoulos is now cooperating with Mueller's investigators.

Clearly anxious as the Mueller investigation looms over his presidency, Trump has continued to promote alternative theories that would exonerate him and his campaign. Binney's analysis falls squarely into that category.



President Donald Trump speaks on April 19, 2017, in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington. Photo: Susan Walsh/AP

Binney's adherence to a widely disputed theory about the DNC email theft that is favorable to Trump marks a new twist for a retired government employee who has become an outspoken critic of the intelligence community to which he once belonged. Binney grew up in Pennsylvania, majored in math at Penn State, and joined the Army in 1965. He was assigned to the U.S. Army Security Agency, learning communications traffic analysis and, in 1967, was assigned to NSA headquarters. In 1970, he joined the NSA as a civilian and remained at the agency for the rest of his career. He rose through the ranks to become the agency's technical director for world geopolitical and military analysis and took over the NSA's Signals Intelligence Automation Research Center, a kind of skunkworks to test out new ideas.

Late in his career, he began to clash with NSA management, particularly over efforts to drag the hidebound agency into the internet age. He advocated for a sophisticated data search and analysis project called ThinThread that his team had developed in-house, which he believed would help the agency more effectively sift through the tor-



rent of digital information that was starting to appear on the internet. But Binney was outraged when the NSA's leaders went instead with a more expensive alternative called Trailblazer, offered by an outside contractor. Binney, who thought Trailblazer was deeply flawed and represented a massive sop to a powerful defense company, took his concerns to a congressional staffer involved with NSA oversight. By doing so, Binney angered top NSA officials who were pushing Trailblazer.

Binney retired in the fall of 2001, but not before he learned that the agency was beginning its massive post-9/11 domestic spying program. Binney did not go to the press to discuss the NSA's domestic spying program, but he did, along with others, complain to the Defense Department's Inspector General about the Trailblazer program.

After the New York Times [disclosed](#) the domestic spying program's existence in 2005, Bush administration officials wrongly suspected Binney was part of a small group of NSA officials who were sources for the story. As part of a criminal leak investigation, Binney and others had their homes raided by the FBI.

They were never charged, but Thomas Drake, another NSA official who the government thought was part of the same group, was charged under the Espionage Act and accused of leaking information about the controversial Trailblazer program to the Baltimore Sun. The government's case against Drake eventually collapsed, ending with his agreement to plead guilty to one misdemeanor count of "exceeding the authorized use" of an NSA computer.

Drake and Binney both emerged from the government's draconian leak investigation as prominent whistleblowers. Their fame grew after former NSA contractor Edward Snowden went public in 2013 and

provided the press with access to a trove of NSA documents about the agency's mass surveillance programs. Binney was featured in "Citizenfour," the Oscar-winning 2014 documentary about Snowden directed by Laura Poitras; he was also the subject of a 2015 documentary titled "A Good American." (Poitras co-founded The Intercept following Snowden's 2013 disclosures.)

In the 2016 presidential election, Binney says he opposed Clinton and voted for Trump. This past summer, as the Mueller investigation was heating up, Binney co-authored [a memo](#), published by members of a group of former intelligence officials called Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), making the case that the DNC emails were not hacked by Russia, but stolen by an insider. The memo argued that the emails were likely downloaded directly from a DNC computer onto a thumb drive or some other external device.

"Forensic studies of 'Russian hacking' into Democratic National Committee computers last year reveal that on July 5, 2016, data was *leaked (not hacked)* by a person with physical access to DNC computer," the memo states. The memo's conclusions were based on analyses of metadata provided by the online persona Guccifer 2.0, who took credit for the alleged hack. "Key among the findings of the independent forensic investigations is the conclusion that the DNC data was copied onto a storage device *at a speed that far exceeds an Internet capability for a remote hack.*"

The memo garnered attention on the right, but its claims have been disputed. It cited timestamps embedded in the Guccifer files showing when they'd been copied, and used this data to extrapolate how quickly they'd been copied from one computer to another. The analysis on which the VIPS memo was based, conducted by a blogger

called “The Forensicator,” showed that the files were transferred at a speed roughly equivalent to the rate at which data can be downloaded to a USB thumb drive. VIPS claimed that speed was “much faster than what is physically possible with a hack,” and so the files had to have been stolen by an insider with direct access to the computer system.

But this argument led to a tense split within the VIPS group. Among others, Drake, who for so long had been closely associated with Binney, publicly opposed the memo, joining a group of dissenting VIPS members who have attacked it.

“A number of VIPS members did not sign this problematic memo because of troubling questions about its conclusions, and others who did sign it have raised key concerns since its publication,” [states a competing memo](#) written by Drake and other VIPS members and published September 1 on the website of The Nation magazine, which had earlier published a story about the Binney memo.

Drake and the dissenters complain that the original memo was deeply flawed and came to biased conclusions based only on a sketchy analysis of information that originated with Guccifer 2.0, which the U.S. intelligence community believes is a front for Russian intelligence. The dissenters also point out that it is indeed possible for a remote internet transfer to occur at the speeds identified in Binney’s memo. “The environment around Trump, Russia, et al. is hyperpolarized right now, and much disinformation is floating around, feeding confirmation bias, mirroring and even producing conspiracy theories,” the Drake memo says.

“In an ideal world, VIPS would at least retract its assertion of certainty. Absent real facts regarding proof of leaks or hacks (or both),

how many hypotheses can one copy onto the head of a digital pin?”

The controversy surrounding the July VIPS memo didn't seem to deter Pompeo from meeting with Binney. In late September, Binney was in Amsterdam, where he has been working to set up a new data analysis firm called Pretty Good Knowledge, when his wife called to tell him that he had received a call at home from the CIA director's office, asking to set up a meeting. Binney returned the call to Pompeo's assistant and scheduled the October 24 meeting.

Binney, who has serious medical problems and uses a wheelchair, asked a colleague from Pretty Good Knowledge, Chris Parker, to accompany him. Parker said in an interview that he helped Binney get into Pompeo's seventh-floor office at CIA headquarters, shook hands with the CIA director, and then waited outside the office during their meeting. Marco Visser, a Dutch employee of Pretty Good Knowledge who happened to be in Washington at the time, said in an interview that he wanted to accompany Binney and Parker because he had never been to CIA headquarters and was excited to see it, but was not allowed to go because he is a foreign national.

Binney said he was not told what the meeting was about until he sat down with Pompeo. He said that in addition to Pompeo, two other CIA staffers, who gave only their first names, attended the meeting and asked technical questions about Binney's analysis. When Pompeo asked Binney what evidence he had to support his analysis of the DNC email theft, Binney says he told him that it was based only on the online analyses of information published by Guccifer 2.0.

Binney said that since their meeting, he has not heard from Pompeo about scheduling follow-up meetings with the NSA and FBI.

Top photo: CIA Director Mike Pompeo speaks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington on April 13, 2017.



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Additional Reporting: [Sam Biddle](#).