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Close Associate: The Integrity Initiative's Intimate Connections to 'RussiaGate'

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Hacked Institute for Statecraft files raise serious questions about what role the organization and its staff - if not the British state itself - has played in the 'RussiaGate' scandal.

In November 2016, in the wake of Donald Trump's shock election victory, the eighth annual Halifax International Security Forum was convened in Canada. Among the delegates were Senator John McCain, and Andrew Wood, UK ambassador to Russia 1995 — 2000. The pair spoke privately at the event, contact which ultimately resulted in the dissemination of former MI6 operative Christopher Steele's 'Trump-Russia' dossier among the highest echelons of the American state, and in turn the public.

In the years since, Wood has been a prominent advocate for the credibility of Steele and his increasingly dubious dossier — although his close and long-running personal relationship with the former MI6 operative, and unclear professional connection to Steele's firm Orbis Intelligence, is rarely declared, let alone discussed or questioned.

Troublingly, his employment at the Institute for Statecraft, the shadowy Ministry of Defense and Foreign Office-funded parent organization of anti-Russian information warfare effort the Integrity Initiative, which is primarily staffed by military intelligence veterans, has literally never been acknowledged by the mainstream media. Leaked internal files refer to him as part of the Institute's 'expert team', a brief profile boasting of Wood's "excellent current contacts with relevant departments of European Ministries of Foreign Affairs".

Andrew Wood: sir Andrew was formerly HM Ambassador in Moscow. Deep expertise in understanding the current Russian strategy and modus operandi, influence and information operations. Excellent current contacts with relevant departments of European Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

Russian Linguist

Andrew Wood's Institute for Statecraft Staff Profile

Conflicting Narratives

How and why McCain and Wood came to meet and precisely what they discussed isn't clear, not least because the former diplomat has offered several wildly divergent accounts of the event since. The rendezvous was first confirmed [12 January 2017](#) by The Independent, in an article which not only strongly suggested their discussion was serendipitous, but initiated by McCain, who's said to have specifically sought the advice of Wood — "a highly respected retired diplomat" — on the Steele dossier.

"The issue of Donald Trump and Russia was very much in the news and it was natural to talk about it. We spoke about the kind of activities the Russians can be engaged in. We also spoke about how Trump may find himself in a position where there could be an attempt to blackmail him with Kompromat and claims there were audio and video tapes in existence. [We] talked about Russian hacking in the US election as well. I find it difficult to believe Donald Trump could not have known something about the hacking. He had basically asked people to prove it, he has never said this is something that should be investigated. My view is these are serious matters and they should be investigated. I don't think I have done anything wrong at all in what I have done," Wood told the paper.

The former ambassador is nonetheless keen to stress he didn't "pass on any dossier to McCain", and hadn't himself seen the dossier "at the time" — although he conceded he knew Steele personally, describing him as "very professional and thorough in what he does".

[The next day](#), Wood reiterated his comments on BBC Radio 4's Today program, stating he knew Steele "as a very competent, professional operator who left the secret service and is now operating his own private company", and "I do not think he would make things up". [Speaking to Guardian writer Luke Harding hours later](#), Wood was even more generous in his endorsement, saying he "rated [Steele's] judgment", and took the dossier "seriously".

"I don't think it's totally implausible. It's conceivable he has been duped or has exaggerated what his sources have been telling him, but I can't really believe the dupe argument," he continued, adding he found the dossier's allegation that Trump's team and the Russian government had conducted secret discussions via back channels before and during the Presidential campaign highly compelling, to the extent it "has to be disproved, rather than anything else". The article goes on to suggest Steele and Wood had crossed paths privately, rather than via their mutual state employment, and Wood also denies having worked with Steele "in a professional capacity".

However, another Guardian article — strangely also written by Harding — [published in November](#) that year tells a very different tale. Wood — described as a "friend of Steele's" and "Orbis associate" — recounts how Steele showed him the dossier he'd compiled on Trump at some point prior to the November Presidential election, and asked for advice on what to do with the material. The former ambassador says he "took [the contents] seriously", and seized the opportunity to "brief" McCain on the dossier at the Halifax International Security Forum due to his extreme concern.

RussiaGate Erupts

Whatever the truth of the matter, very soon after they spoke, the Senator dispatched David Kramer, former assistant secretary of state in the Bush administration, to meet with Steele in London and discuss the former MI6 operative's lurid allegations, and arrange for the dossier to be sent to Washington.

Curiously, [a March 2018](#) New Yorker profile on Steele — which refers to Wood as an "unpaid informal advisor" to Orbis Intelligence — quotes an anonymous "former national-security official" as saying Kramer planned for McCain to confront Trump with the dossier, in the hope the President-elect would resign in response. "He would tell Trump, 'the Russians have got you'" the official alleged — although Kramer claims this isn't true.

In any event, less than 24-hours after arriving at Heathrow airport, Kramer was back in the US, and McCain had the dossier in his possession. On December 9, the Senator met FBI Director James Comey and provided him with a copy, which Comey then circulated across all US intelligence agencies. It would reach the desk of outgoing President Barack Obama and several senior members of Congress in the first week of January 2017, a development announced by CNN on [January 10](#) - while the outlet's report indicated the dossier suggested Russian operatives possessed "compromising personal and financial information" about Trump, it refrained from publishing specific details of the dossier as it had not "independently corroborated" them as yet.



MSNBC

Mainstream Media's Top Russiagate Expert Says Key Steele Dossier Allegations 'Likely False'



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Mueller's Farce Rages On: Flynn Colluded With Foreign Power, but Not Russia

CNN was far from the first news organization to decline to report on the dossier's contents due to an inability to confirm its lurid allegations — [by most accounts](#), its existence was an "open secret" among US journalists by the second half of 2016 — but it *was* the first major news organization to break cover and publicly acknowledge the document and the nature of its contents. This turn of events was highly significant, as it provided BuzzFeed News with the 'public interest' defense it needed to justify publishing the dossier, [which it did the next day](#), despite openly stating its contents were "unverified, and potentially unverifiable", and contained "clear" factual errors.

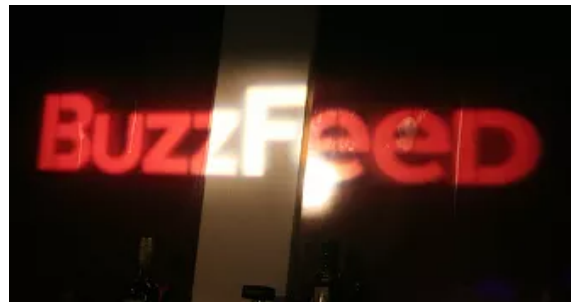
In the days afterward, the publication was severely criticized by several media outlets — Washington Post columnist Margaret Sullivan [dubbed the dossier](#) "scurrilous allegations dressed up as an intelligence report meant to damage Donald Trump" — and there was some debate about the ethics of publishing unsubstantiated information offered by entirely anonymous sources.

However, such misgivings were quickly silenced, thanks in no small part to the number of esteemed 'experts' who ardently vouched for Steele's credibility in the media — the earliest, most enthusiastic and prominent being Andrew Wood, of course. That he didn't disclose his personal and professional connections to Steele and Orbis Intelligence until many months after his initial statements — and has never publicized his links to an organization that seeks to secure a "tougher government stance on Russia" internationally — is suspicious in the extreme.

Moreover, the August 2017 [testimony of Glenn Simpson](#) — cofounder of FusionGPS, the firm which commissioned Steele's dossier — to the US Senate Judiciary Committee raises yet further questions about how and why Wood came to relay his 'concerns' to Senator McCain, and whether this was, in fact a coordinated strategy agreed in advance with, or even directed by, Steele.

Referring to Wood as an "associate" of Orbis and someone Steele had "worked with in past", Simpson reveals he and Steele wished for the dossier to reach the "leadership level" of the FBI, as they believed Director Comey would "treat [the information] very seriously", and McCain would be an ideal conduit for achieving that end.

If indeed Wood's intervention was strategic subterfuge, it wasn't the only ploy devised by Steele and Simpson designed to get the dossier into the public domain — later on in his testimony, he references how the pair briefed the FBI on the allegations, then "encouraged" journalists to ask the FBI whether they were investigating Trump's potential ties to Russia.



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BuzzFail: BuzzFeed Can't Dodge Libel Liability for Dodgy Dossier, DOJ Finds

1 Q. Now, with regard to -- just to finish up
2 on the interactions with FBI, do you know were
3 there any additional interactions between
4 Mr. Steele and the FBI?

5 A. There was some sort of interaction, I
6 think it was probably telephonic that occurred
7 after Director Comey sent his letter to Congress
8 reopening the investigation into Hillary Clinton's
9 e-mails. That episode, you know, obviously created
10 some concern that the FBI was intervening in a
11 political campaign in contravention of
12 long-standing Justice Department regulation.

13 So it made a lot of people, including us,
14 concerned about what the heck was going on at the
15 FBI. So, you know, we began getting questions from
16 the press about, you know, whether they were also
17 investigating Trump and, you know, we encouraged
18 them to ask the FBI that question. You know, I
19 think -- I'm not sure we've covered this fully,
20 but, you know, we just encouraged them to ask the
21 FBI that question.

Glenn Simpson Reveals His Plans for Circulating the Steele Dossier in the Mainstream Media

Intriguingly, BuzzFeed is listed in Integrity Initiative files as a 'friendly' publication, to which information can be "fed anonymously" by its operatives. Still, whether the news site was knowingly or unknowingly a pawn in a scheme concocted by Steele, or simply fulfilled the former MI6 operative's objectives of its own accord, its action firmly planted 'RussiaGate' on the public radar not merely in the US, but internationally. Ever since, allegations of a long-running clandestine relationship between Trump and the Kremlin, and Russian hacking in the election, have relentlessly reverberated in the mainstream media the world over.

'Special Study'

The Institute for Statecraft's suspicious connections to 'RussiaGate' don't end there. [On 11 December 2018](#), I visited the organization's offices in Two Temple Place, London — shortly after entering, I was aggressively turfed by Institute 'research fellow' Simon Bracey-Lane.

I began investigating Bracey-Lane, and found he'd been in the media spotlight before, appearing in several US media reports which tracked Bernie Sanders' presidential campaigning efforts. The first instance was seemingly a 27 January 2016 AFP clip — *The Brit for Bernie* - which documented his work on the campaign.

He claimed he spent a year working and saving up for a two-month road trip across the US, but decided to stay in the country and work for Sanders. While he claimed to "wake up each and every morning with a fire" he'd "not felt ever" as a result of working on the campaign, he also acknowledged he'd "never been struck by an urge to work in [the British] political system", and didn't feel there "much of a place" for him there.

US 'Voices of the Campaign': The Brit for Bernie



Puzzlingly, a mere four days later he was [profiled by BuzzFeed](#) — he would contradict his statements to AFP significantly, saying he'd been "inspired" to join the UK Labour party in September 2015 after Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader — and as at that point he was holidaying in the US, "he joined the Sanders campaign, and never left".

"I had two weeks left and some money left, so I thought f*** it, I'll make some calls for Bernie Sanders. I just sort of knew Des Moines was the place, so I turned up at their HQ, started making phone calls, and then became a fully-fledged field organizer," he said.

In my resultant report, I noted the apparent incongruity of a seemingly impassioned Corbyn and Sanders supporter of avowedly progressive ideological sympathies ending up working for a state-funded military intelligence operation that has disseminated anti-Corbyn material, sought to enlist harsh critics of Corbyn to its efforts, and worked to discredit left-leaning political figures abroad.

Subsequent digging into leaked Institute files has given me further cause for concern. The organization's internal '[Expert Team](#)' document, which sets out "roles and relevant experience" of its staff — including Wood — refers to Bracey-Lane having conducted a "special study of Russian interference in the US electoral process". It's not clear what this "special study" consisted of and when it was conducted, but this "experience" is listed directly next to his work with the Sanders campaign.

Internal Institute for Statecraft Biography of Simon Bracey-Lane's Professional Experience

Given Bracey-Lane worked for Sanders September 2015 — May 2016, long-before accusations of Trump's collusion with Russia gained any currency and there was any suggestion of Russian 'interference' in the US electoral process, if it *was* conducted while he worked for Sanders, whoever or whatever commissioned it was clearly blessed with spooky foresight, or advance intelligence of the most sensitive kind.

More sinisterly though, it's been suggested by several sources, including independent US journalist Max Blumenthal, this "study" could've in fact been an [spying operation](#) of some kind.

"In the same way Russia, along with the bogus antisemitism charge, has been used against Corbyn, I always said if Sanders had gotten the nomination — we've got a socialist here, he doesn't have a record of being a cold warrior — they would've used the Russia issue against him. He's given interviews to RT, just as Corbyn has. Who's to say they won't do it if he runs in 2020?" Blumenthal ruminated in late December 2018.

I've repeatedly asked the Institute/Initiative for clarity on these questions, but received no response as of 18 January — in fact, the organization has only interacted with me once, when on 9 January [whoever runs its Twitter account](#) compared me to Anglo-Irish fascist William Joyce, who under the name 'Lord Haw-Haw' broadcast Nazi propaganda to the UK from Germany during World War II, and was hanged for high treason in January 1946.

© AP PHOTO / MICHAEL SOHN

Nonetheless, Bracey-Lane was certainly made aware of the questions being asked about his prior activities, for within hours of the article's publication on 13 December he cleansed his online footprint, changing his display name and profile link on professional networking site LinkedIn — he's now merely '[Simon B](#)' — and outright deleting his Medium blog (@Hewell), although despite his airbrushing efforts, the latter profile is still viewable via web archives. It consists of a single post — [Eyes On Mitt Romney](#) - rife with praise for the former Governor of Massachusetts and criticism of Trump and 'Trumpian' Republicans, and speculation on whether Romney will run against Trump in 2020, or at least attempt to "reconstruct the Republican voter".

How Integrity Initiative's German Cluster Aims to End Berlin's Ties with Moscow

"In time, many may view Mitt Romney with dewy eyes as a potentially unbridled critical voice of a President who demands personal loyalty and punishes betrayal with vitriol. The arena in which this may manifest itself in most critically may be in defence of Robert Mueller's Special Investigation. If the current implacable nature of Mueller's investigation continues, Trump's finger may creep ever closer to the trap door. Will to shield the investigation is at it's lowest in the Senate. Support for a bill protecting Mueller was dashed

by Mitch McConnell and the recent influx of pro-Trump Senators, who will feel a indebted to Trump's paints a Senate not committed to protecting Mueller's investigation. This further clarifies the potentially vital role Romney could play in protecting the sanctity of checks and balances in American governance," Bracey-Lane wrote in his deleted post.

Simon Bracey-Lane's Now-Deleted Medium Blog Post on Mitt Romney

It's not clear why he opted to delete his Medium blog but retain his LinkedIn profile, although knowing of the "special study" makes some of his comments to AFP take on a somewhat chilling quality. In the brief clip, he recalls how at Thanksgiving, someone asked why he was "meddling" in the US political system.

"Which is an interesting way to phrase it, but I was happy to answer — it needs meddling with," he explained.

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