



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

## CIA NOTE

26 June 2025

(U) **Memo To:** Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

(U) **From:** Deputy Director of CIA for Analysis

(U) **Subject:** Tradecraft Review of the 2016 Intelligence Community Assessment on Russian Election Interference

(U) **Reference:** *Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), Russia's Influence Campaign Targeting the 2016 US Presidential Election, 30 December 2016*

(U) In May 2025, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCIA) John Ratcliffe tasked CIA's Directorate of Analysis (DA) to conduct a lessons-learned review of the procedures and analytic tradecraft employed in the highest classified version of the Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) *Russia's Influence Campaign Targeting the 2016 US Presidential Election*, dated 30 December 2016. The review focused particular attention on the ICA's most debated judgment—that Russian President Vladimir Putin "aspired" to help then-candidate Donald Trump win the election. Drawing on CIA materials provided to congressional oversight investigations, the DA examined whether any procedural anomalies or tradecraft weaknesses may have affected the soundness and objectivity of this key judgment and the overall assessment.

### (U) ICA Origins and Context

(U) To understand the procedural and tradecraft issues identified in this review, it is essential to examine the politically charged environment and unique circumstances that led to the ICA's development in late 2016. During this period, conflicting public and private statements by Intelligence Community (IC) officials about Russia's

role in the US presidential election created confusion about the IC's actual assessment. These contradictory messages prompted President Obama on 6 December to direct then-Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper to conduct a comprehensive review of all available intelligence and provide the IC's best assessment of Russian activities related to the election.

- (U) However, before work on the assessment even began, media leaks suggesting that the IC had already reached definitive conclusions risked creating an anchoring bias.
- (U) On 9 December, both the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* reported the IC had concluded with high confidence that Russia had intervened specifically to help Trump win the election. The *Post* cited an unnamed US official describing this as the IC's "consensus view."

### (U) Procedural Concerns

(U) The DA Review identified multiple procedural anomalies in the preparation of the ICA. These included a highly compressed production timeline, stringent compartmentation, and excessive involvement of agency heads, all of which led to

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departures from standard practices in the drafting, coordination, and reviewing of the ICA. These departures impeded efforts to apply rigorous tradecraft, particularly to the assessment's most contentious judgment.

(U) **Timeline Impact:** The highly compressed timeline was atypical for a formal IC assessment, which ordinarily can take months to prepare, especially for assessments of such length, complexity, and political sensitivity. CIA's primary authors had less than a week to draft the assessment and less than two days to formally coordinate it with IC peers before it entered the formal review process at CIA on 20 December.

- (U) Multiple IC stakeholders said they felt "jammed" by the compressed timeline. Most got their first look at the hardcopy draft and underlying sensitive reporting just before or at the only in-person coordination meeting that was held on 19 December to conduct a line-by-line review.
- (S//NF) Following the coordination meeting, then-Director of the National Security Agency Mike Rogers wrote to then-DCIA John Brennan to say that his analysts were not "fully comfortable" with the time they had been given to "review all of the intelligence" and "be absolutely confident in their assessments."

(U) Compressing review of the draft by multiple stakeholders to just a handful of days during a holiday week also created numerous challenges. This was further complicated by the need to conduct the review in hardcopy, with drafts having to be hand-carried between various IC offices and buildings. The pressing timeline and limitations of hardcopy review likely biased the overall review process to focus more on precision of language and sourcing rather than on more substantial, time-consuming edits to refine the overall presentation of the draft—which, with the benefit

of hindsight, might have improved the argumentation in some areas.

- (S//NF) One of CIA's lead authors expressed surprise that the review process had resulted in so few changes, which was "unusual" for such a lengthy, complex, and high-profile assessment.
- (S//NF) The NIO for Russia, who only received the final draft for review hours before it was published, noted that with more time, "they could have done more" to bolster the judgments and "make the presentation more elegant."

#### (U) Rushed Timeline Justified?

(U) ICD 203 stipulates that analysis be "independent of political consideration" and "must not be distorted by, nor shaped for, advocacy of a particular audience, agenda, or policy viewpoint." The election had concluded, and the ICA was essentially a post-mortem analysis. Therefore, the rushed timeline to publish both classified *and* unclassified versions before the presidential transition raised questions about a potential political motive behind the White House tasking and timeline.

- (U) Without a clear operational need for urgency, this accelerated process created vulnerabilities and opened lines of inquiry about potential bias.
- (U) A more measured approach with expanded time for review and wider input would have better adhered to standard intelligence tradecraft practices and potentially deflected questions about White House motivations.

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(U) **Compartmentation Challenges:** Uneven access to highly compartmented information further complicated coordination and review and contributed to analytic differences on the ICA's most contentious point. The product spanned multiple CIA and NSA compartments, and included restricted access FBI information, with some reporting touching on US Persons. Multiple ICA participants had access to intelligence that others did not. This restricted authors' ability to collaborate with a large pool of colleagues.

- (S//NF) Central to the judgment that Putin "aspired" to help Trump win was one highly classified CIA report. Brennan had tightly restricted access to this information within CIA; it had been collected in July but not disseminated in CIA serialized reporting until the week of 19 December.
- (S//NF) The CIA drafters had enjoyed privileged access to this information through participation in a highly compartmented analytic effort—known as the "Fusion Cell"—which Brennan had created in July to focus on the IC's growing concern about Russian election interference. However, most ICA contributors, coordinators, and reviewers were only "read-in" to the sensitive reporting at the 19 December coordination meeting.
- (S//NF) One CIA manager stated that uneven access to compartmented information among ICA coordinators and reviewers contributed to an already "chaotic" process. He said some key analysts and managers were not cleared to review the ICA's most controversial aspects, and were only able to see portions of the draft out of context.

(U) Broader access to reporting—both prior to and throughout the preparation of the ICA—almost certainly would have led to more robust analytic debate. Even within the small circle of

collaborators cleared for the most sensitive information, the judgment that Putin "aspired" to help Trump win prompted healthy and protracted debate. Including more voices with more time to weigh in undoubtedly would have refined, challenged, or surfaced analytic differences on that question or on other aspects of the ICA.

- (S//NF) A DNI report in 2017 indicated that the highest classified version of the ICA had been shared with more than 200 US officials. This is unusually high for such a highly compartmented product and calls into question whether the extreme limitations on access to underlying intelligence within the IC during the ICA's preparation was justifiable.

(S//NF) **Agency Head Involvement:** While agency heads sometimes review controversial analytic assessments before publication, their direct engagement in the ICA's development was highly unusual in both scope and intensity. This exceptional level of senior involvement likely influenced participants, altered normal review processes, and ultimately compromised analytic rigor. One CIA analytic manager involved in the process said other analytic managers—who would typically have been part of the review chain—opted out due to the politically charged environment and the atypical prominence of agency leadership in the process.

- (U) From the outset, agency heads chose to marginalize the National Intelligence Council (NIC), departing significantly from standard procedures for formal IC assessments. Typically, the NIC maintains control over drafting assignments, coordination, and review processes. In his book *Undaunted*, Brennan reveals that he established crucial elements of the process with the White House before NIC involvement, stating he informed them that CIA would "take the lead drafting the report"

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and that coordination would be limited to “ODNI, CIA, FBI, and NSA.”

- (U) These departures from standard procedure not only limited opportunities for coordination and thorough tradecraft review, but also resulted in the complete exclusion of key intelligence agencies from the process. While sensitive counterintelligence information in community assessments often requires restricted access, the decision to entirely shut out the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research from any participation in such a high-profile assessment about an adversary’s plans and intentions was a significant deviation from typical IC practices.

(U) It also was markedly unconventional to have Agency heads review and sign off on a draft before it was submitted to the NIC for review. The NIC did not receive or even see the final draft until just hours before the ICA was due to be published.

- (S//NF) In an email exchange on 20 December, then-DDCIA David Cohen informed Brennan that the Principal Deputy Director for National Intelligence (PDDNI) had called to register a concern with the process. According to Cohen, the PDDNI characterized CIA’s plan to deliver a final draft to the NIC on the day it was to be published as a “*fait accompli*” that would jam them, both substantively and temporally.”
- (S//NF) Brennan downplayed the concern, responding to Cohen that the “big three”—referring to CIA, FBI, and NSA—“have every right to agree on language that will be included verbatim in the final version of the paper.” Acknowledging that the NIC would still have a “right to differ,” he stated, “I very much hope that doesn’t happen.”

#### (U) Prejudicial Workforce Message

(S//NF) One business day before IC analysts convened for the only coordination session on the ICA, Brennan sent a note to the CIA workforce stating he had met with the DNI and FBI Director and that “there is strong consensus among us on the scope, nature, and intent of Russian interference in our recent Presidential election.” While officers involved in drafting the ICA consistently said they did not feel pressured to reach specific conclusions, Brennan’s premature signaling that agency heads had already reached consensus before the ICA was even coordinated risked stifling analytic debate.

(S//NF) The decision by agency heads to include the Steele Dossier in the ICA ran counter to fundamental tradecraft principles and ultimately undermined the credibility of a key judgment. The ICA authors first learned of the Dossier, and FBI leadership’s insistence on its inclusion, on 20 December—the same day the largely coordinated draft was entering the review process at CIA. FBI leadership made it clear that their participation in the ICA hinged on the Dossier’s inclusion and, over the next few days, repeatedly pushed to weave references to it throughout the main body of the ICA.

- (S//NF) The ICA authors and multiple senior CIA managers—including the two senior leaders of the CIA mission center responsible for Russia—strongly opposed including the Dossier, asserting that it did not meet even the most basic tradecraft standards. CIA’s Deputy Director for Analysis (DDA) warned in an email to Brennan on 29 December that including it in

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any form risked “the credibility of the entire paper.”

- (S//NF) Despite these objections, Brennan showed a preference for narrative consistency over analytical soundness. When confronted with specific flaws in the Dossier by the two mission center leaders—one with extensive operational experience and the other with a strong analytic background—he appeared more swayed by the Dossier's general conformity with existing theories than by legitimate tradecraft concerns. Brennan ultimately formalized his position in writing, stating that “my bottomline is that I believe that the information warrants inclusion in the report.”
- (S//NF) Ultimately, agency heads decided to include a two-page summary of the Dossier as an annex to the ICA, with a disclaimer that the material was not used “to reach the analytic conclusions.” However, by placing a reference to the annex material in the main body of the ICA as the fourth supporting bullet for the judgment that Putin “aspired” to help Trump win, the ICA implicitly elevated unsubstantiated claims to the status of credible supporting evidence, compromising the analytical integrity of the judgment.

### (U) Tradecraft Concerns

(U) The procedural anomalies that characterized the ICA's development had a direct impact on the tradecraft applied to its most contentious finding. With analysts operating under severe time constraints, limited information sharing, and heightened senior-level scrutiny, several aspects of tradecraft rigor were compromised—particularly in supporting the judgment that Putin “aspired” to help Trump win.

### (U) Strong Tradecraft Examples

(U) Even with the benefit of hindsight, the DA Review found much of the ICA's tradecraft to be robust and consistent with *Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203, “Analytic Standards,”* the primary guiding document for evaluation of analytic products for the IC. The assessment's analytic rigor was evident in its extensive sourcing: 173 separate reports from CIA, NSA, and FBI, supplemented by 74 citations from open sources.

- (U) The ICA also demonstrated strong adherence to tradecraft standards through frequent use of attributive language, explicit identification of intelligence gaps, and clear statements of confidence levels. This level of analytic rigor exceeded that of most IC assessments.
- (U) While the DA Review identified specific procedural and tradecraft issues with the one judgment, these issues should not be interpreted as indicative of broader systemic problems in the IC's analytic processes or standards.
- (U) The DA Review identified multiple specific concerns, including: a higher confidence level than was justified; insufficient exploration of alternative scenarios; lack of transparency on source uncertainty; uneven argumentation; and the inclusion of unsubstantiated Steele Dossier material.

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(S//NF) **Confidence Levels:** The “aspired” judgment did not merit the “high confidence” level that CIA and FBI attached to it. As explained in the ICA’s *Annex H – Estimative Language*, “high confidence generally indicates that judgments are based on high-quality information from multiple sources.” The ICA emphasized only the one highly classified CIA serialized report to support this judgment.

- (S//NF) In the ICA’s first draft that was reviewed at the 19 December meeting, the authors had included the “aspired” judgment in a broader finding on all three assessed goals of the Russian influence campaign. With respect to the first two goals—undermining public faith in the US democratic process and denigrating Secretary Clinton to harm her potential presidency—the finding was underpinned by multiple high-quality sources. All meeting participants were comfortable with attaching “high confidence” to these two goals.
- (S//NF) However, NSA and a few other participants were not comfortable with ascribing “high confidence” to the “aspired” judgment. They cited the limited source base, lack of corroborating intelligence, and “the possibility for an alternative judgment” as driving their discomfort.
- (S//NF) As a result, the authors agreed to separate out the “aspired” judgment, and NSA eventually settled on ascribing it a “moderate confidence” level—which the DA Review found more consistent with ICD 203 standards. As explained in *Annex H*, “moderate confidence generally means that the information is credibly sourced and plausible but not . . . corroborated sufficiently.”

(S//NF) **Alternative Analysis:** The ICA did not highlight outlier reporting or present alternative scenarios. Although NSA had cited “the possibility of an alternative judgment” as a reason for its

lower confidence level, no alternative scenarios were identified or explored in the ICA—due in part to the highly compressed timeline. When asked how additional time would have affected the quality of the ICA, the NIO for Russia responded that it would have allowed the opportunity to “explore alternative scenarios or disconfirming evidence in a more fulsome way.”

- (S//NF) In one instance, the authors cited part of a credibly sourced report that supported the “high confidence” assessment on the first two goals of the Putin-directed campaign—undermining the US democratic process and denigrating Clinton—but omitted information that conflicted with the “aspired” judgment. The omitted information, as well as a small body of other credibly sourced reporting that also was not cited in the ICA, suggested Putin was more ambivalent about which candidate won the election.
- (U) The ICA would have benefitted from including this reporting. Doing so would have shown that analysts were aware of it and that they had considered multiple scenarios. Even if analysts ultimately concluded the larger body of reporting was more compelling, analysts could have strengthened their argument by showing their analytic homework more methodically.

(S//NF) **Source Transparency:** The DA Review does not dispute the quality and credibility of the highly classified CIA serialized report that the ICA authors relied on to drive the “aspired” judgment. Consistent with ICD 203 standards, the *Scope and Sourcing* note attached to the ICA’s highest classified version provided a holistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses in the paper’s overall source base and explained which sources were most important to the paper’s key analytic judgments.

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- (S//NF) However, given the centrality of this singular report to the “aspired” judgment, the authors probably should have more clearly addressed the uncertainty with how the cited information on Putin’s intentions was acquired.
- (S//NF) The placement of a key clause in the serialized report also left room for differing interpretations, adding another element of ambiguity. Referring to the clause, a senior CIA operations officer observed, “We don’t know what was meant by that” and “five people read it five ways.”
- (S//NF) The DA Review examined the underlying raw intelligence and confirmed that the clause was accurately represented in the serialized report, and that the ICA authors’ interpretation of its meaning was most consistent with the raw intelligence.

(S//NF) **Argumentation:** In intelligence analysis, presenting a judgment effectively and logically requires clarity, structure, and a robust foundation of evidence and reasoning. Without the highly classified CIA report, the “aspired” judgment essentially rested on an assessment of the public behavior of senior Russian officials and state-controlled media, and on logic. Most analysts judged that denigrating Clinton equaled supporting Trump; they reasoned that in a two-person race the tradeoff was zero-sum. This logic train was plausible and sensible, but was an inference rather than fact sourced to multiple reporting streams.

- (S//NF) Once the “aspire” judgment was separated from the other two findings on Putin’s intentions, it struggled to stand on its own. As noted earlier, the subsequent decision to bolster this judgment by referencing the unsubstantiated Steele Dossier material only further weakened its analytic foundation. This raised the question of whether the “aspire”

judgment was even needed, as its inclusion risked distracting readers from the more well-documented findings on Putin’s strategic objectives.

- (U) The risks of including weakly supported judgments are well known to analysts, who are trained that readers—especially skeptical ones—may reject an entire analysis if a single judgment appears exaggerated, biased, or unsupported. This is particularly true in high-stakes contexts like election interference, where political sensitivities amplify scrutiny and where poorly supported judgments can muddle the overall narrative.
- (S//NF) The two senior leaders of the CIA mission center responsible for Russia argued jointly against including the “aspire” judgment. In an email to Brennan on 30 December, they stated the judgment should be removed because it was both weakly supported and unnecessary, given the strength and logic of the paper’s other findings on intent. They warned that including it would only “open up a line of very politicized inquiry.”

**(U) Lessons Learned**

(U) The review of the 2016 ICA revealed how departures from established processes and tradecraft standards can affect even fundamentally sound analysis. While the overall assessment was deemed defensible, the identified procedural anomalies and tradecraft issues highlight critical lessons for handling controversial or politically charged topics. Adhering to established analytic processes and rigorous tradecraft is essential to ensure credibility, objectivity, and accuracy—particularly when time pressures, sensitive information, and high-level attention create risks of compromising standard practices.

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- (U) **Timeline Impact:** Rapid assessments often are necessary, but sacrificing analytic rigor and tradecraft standards for speed can lead to long-term credibility issues. Sufficient time should be provided for thorough coordination, review, and debate of analytic judgments.
  - (U) **Compartmentation Challenges:** Uneven access to compartmented information can lead to conflicting assessments and hinder effective collaboration. When possible, ensuring all key stakeholders have access to the same information base enhances analytic rigor.
  - (U) **Agency Head Involvement:** Excessive involvement of agency heads in the analytic process can intimidate analysts and undermine analytic integrity. A more independent and transparent process allows for freer debate and consideration of alternatives.
  - (U) **Confidence Levels:** High confidence judgments should only be made when supported by multiple high-quality sources. Single-source judgments, even from credible sources, warrant lower confidence levels.
  - (U) **Alternative Analysis:** Exploring and presenting alternative scenarios or conflicting information strengthens the overall analysis. This demonstrates thorough consideration of all possibilities and potential biases.
  - (U) **Source Transparency:** Analysts should have access to the details they need to understand the limitations and uncertainties regarding sourcing. When relying heavily on a single source, analysts should clearly address such ambiguity to maintain credibility.
  - (U) **Argumentation:** Weak or poorly supported judgments can undermine the credibility of an entire assessment, especially on politically sensitive topics. Analysts should carefully consider whether including such judgments adds value.
- (U) The DA routinely conducts internal after-action reviews (AAR) of its work on controversial and high-profile intelligence topics. Such AARs are crucial tools for improving DA analytic processes and tradecraft, and are often used as case studies to support foundational training at the DA's Sherman Kent School (SKS).
- (U) No such AAR was conducted in the immediate wake of the ICA's publication because it was considered too politically sensitive, according to DA officers involved in the process at the time.
  - (U) The DA will incorporate this AAR and lessons learned into its SKS curriculum.
- (U) CIA also will apply these lessons learned to continue to drive improvements to its standard operating procedures for assessing foreign interference in US elections, providing greater transparency and rigor. CIA took multiple steps leading up to the 2024 presidential election to minimize or avoid the sorts of problems analysts faced in 2016. This included:
- (U) Communicating clear expectations and guidelines for conceptualizing, coordinating, and reviewing election security products, and for disseminating them to a standardized list of policymakers.
  - (U) Ensuring consistent access for designated analysts across the IC to highly compartmented election-related intelligence and products.
  - (U) Establishing appropriate parameters and clear protocols for the role of the DCIA and DDCA in the production of election-related assessments.