He Confirmed Russia Meddled in 2016 to Help Trump. Now, He's Speaking Out

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EXCLUSIVE

Trump viewed the 2017 intel report as his "Achilles heel." The analyst who wrote it opens up about Trump, Russia and what really happened in 2016

Michael van Landingham *Caleb Santiago Alvarado for Rolling Stone*

It was the summer of 2016 when a manager at the Central Intelligence Agency pulled him into a conference room, sat him down at a table, and asked him to read the intelligence they had brought.

Michael van Landingham wasn't naive about what the Kremlin was capable of. His work as an intelligence analyst for the CIA had given him a front-row seat to the destruction that Russia's spy services had wrought in places like Syria and Ukraine.

But this wasn't about what Russia was doing in some far away country.

Inside a room wrapped in a vault in the bowels of the Central Intelligence Agency's headquarters, he read the intelligence showing that Moscow was trying to disrupt the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

"I think for the first time in my professional life, I felt physically ill reading something," he says.

That was only the beginning of a long, strange journey that would place van Landingham right at the center of the 2016 campaign's biggest story. Months later, the agency assigned him the job of writing the first draft of the intelligence community's 2017 assessment about Russian election meddling that concluded what many had suspected: Vladimir Putin did it. And he did it to help Donald Trump.

The 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), dubbed "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections," was one of the most consequential documents in modern American history. It helped trigger investigations by the House and Senate intelligence committees and a special counsel investigation, and it fueled an eight-year-long grudge that Trump has nursed against the intelligence community. A Trump aide would later testify that the then-president-elect viewed the report as his "Achilles heel," because it threatened to diminish his surprise electoral victory over Hillary Clinton.

Over the course of three administrations, the authors of the report have remained mostly unknown outside the intelligence community. But now, with his government career behind him and the prospect of a second Trump administration looming on the horizon, van Landginham opened up about the story behind the document, the myths that still follow it, and what he thinks we can expect from Russian intelligence going forward.

If Trump wins, many observers are bracing for his revisionist history of the Russia investigations to become an official Washington party line, with stiff professional consequences for those who dare to cross it.

Trump acolytes, giddy at the whiff of power, are preparing to gut the federal civil service and the so-called "deep state," on the belief that they're dens of partisan resistance bent on undermining their leader.

The idea of a Russia "hoax" born with the 2017 report, and the vengeance it supposedly demands, is now a throughline animating plans for a second Trump administration.

On the campaign trail, Trump has pledged “retribution,” the prosecution of his enemies, and a crusade to “clean out all of the corrupt actors in our National Security and Intelligence apparatus.” It has also inspired calls by Trump and his campaign advisers to abandon Ukraine to Moscow’s invasion, which the former president has said was caused by the so-called Russia “hoax.”

Gavin Wilde, a National Security Agency senior analyst, worked on the intelligence report alongside van Landingham, and later rose to become a Russia director on the National Security Council under Trump. He says he’s concerned that the MAGA conspiracy theories and the policies they inspire could have a chilling effect on American intelligence and foreign policy going forward.

“I see Russian President Vladimir Putin’s incursion into Ukraine as a byproduct of a government that’s replete with partisan loyalists,” says Wilde, referencing how Moscow’s spies were too scared to tell their boss his Ukraine war plans were wildly optimistic. “That’s what happens to a system where loyalty gets prized over competence over time.”

The lead author of the CIA report who would haunt Trump’s presidency wasn’t a Hillary Clinton partisan or a ringer for the CIA leadership’s personal preferences, as MAGA conspiracy theorists have claimed. He doesn’t have a book to sell, he’s not running for office, and you won’t find him in a cable news greenroom.

Van Landingham is a man whose brush with history came about almost by coincidence. He’s just an analyst who one day in 2014 found himself really pissed off.

A dour cartoon portrait of Vladimir Putin in an Ushanka fur hat scowls down at a living room full of bright children’s toys and children’s books. At the suburban Madison, Wisconsin, house where van Landingham lives, Putin’s fish-faced gaze is the only hint of the analyst’s former classified career.

Nowadays, he’s a dad to three children. The sound of *Wild Kratts* episodes bubble up from the TV in the basement as he sits at a kitchen table and recounts how he found himself at the crossroads of 2016 and Russia. “Raptor noises,” he quips as his youngest daughter tiptoes out from behind a door and scampers downstairs like a small dinosaur.

In 2014, van Landingham was a CIA analyst serving a rotation at another intelligence agency (he won’t say which) when Russian-backed operatives in Ukraine shot down a civilian Malaysian airline as it flew across the country Moscow had just invaded.

“I was really mad about [the airliner] getting shot down because there were a bunch of children on it. I think 80 children,” he says.

Russia falsely claimed that its troops weren’t fighting in Ukraine or sending weapons to proxy forces. The Kremlin denied any involvement in the incident.

“What I really didn’t like was that they were lying. You want to demonstrate that they’re lying, right? So I spent some of my time writing a paper about Russia lying and then using messaging to denigrate the United States,” he says.

At the time, *how Russia lies* was hardly the buzziest topic, even among Russia nerds. But van Landingham’s expertise would soon make him an in-demand analyst when Moscow’s covert propaganda operation set its sights on an American presidential election.

During the 2016 campaign, WikiLeaks and a handful of self-styled hacktivist personas began releasing tranches of hacked documents from the Democratic Party, raising concerns that the sites were executing part of Russia’s effort to undermine the election. The emails, stolen from the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the Clinton campaign, contained much that was mundane — campaign chairman John Podesta’s risotto recipe — but also led to the resignation of DNC chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz after the messages showed party officials secretly favoring the Clinton campaign against Sen. Bernie Sanders.

The intelligence community, anxious to figure out what was happening, formed an interagency task force and van Landingham was tapped to join it.

“We had a couple names for it that we were trying to come up with. Everyone wants to be on a team with a cool name,” he says. But CIA management opted instead to give the team a vaguer, more anodyne title: the “fusion cell.”

Members of the cell were asked to answer two questions: “Tell us what’s going on and what is going to happen next,” van Landingham recalls.
The latter question was harder. “There were just a lot of gaps in knowledge,” he says. “I don’t think that we had really the best insight into what was going to happen next until toward the end of the election.”

For example, “There wasn’t that much known about what was the political role of the [Russian hacking] units, not just the military or the operational role. But what do they do? Who are these people?” he says.

Other gaps in understanding about what was happening were more frustrating.

For months, the Clinton campaign and its surrogates played coy and shrugged their shoulders when asked in public whether the leaks from their campaign were genuine. Absent a more cooperative set of victims, van Landingham was left to parse the Clinton campaign’s public utterances to figure out whether Russian spies were leaking fake documents or real ones.

“At a certain point, come on, guys. These are Podesta’s emails, right? It’s his risotto recipe. Why not just say that they’re real?” he says. “I would have preferred to not spend that time looking for forgeries and planted documents.”

When WikiLeaks published a tranche of Podesta’s emails in late October, the link between the Russian hackers and the releases became undeniable. The dump contained the original spear phishing message that Russian hackers had used to trick Podesta into coughing up his password. News outlets quickly seized on the email, crediting it for what it was: proof that the Russians were behind the campaign.

Adding to the day-to-day difficulty within the fusion cell were the extraordinary security measures the Agency had assigned to its intelligence on the Russian campaign. The existence of a foreign effort to meddle in an American election was so potentially explosive that agency officials kept a tight rein on the intelligence.

Even van Landingham’s colleagues outside the team couldn’t know what he was working on. “I did not admit to any of my work colleagues at the time there was a fusion cell,” van Landingham says.

He also couldn’t tell his family what he was doing. That summer, his wife had just given birth to their newborn son, and van Landingham had to be away from home for long hours. He couldn’t explain why his schedule had suddenly changed so drastically at such an important time for his family.

As Election Day drew closer, analysts turned their attention toward what Russia might do after the votes were counted. “At that point it was like OK, Russia is kind of resigned to Clinton winning,” van Landingham. “They gave it their best shot. But here’s what they might try in the Clinton administration early on because we thought the problem wouldn’t go away.”

But on Election Day, he says, Trump won in a shock victory, leading to a disturbing question: “Oh fuck. Did the campaign succeed?”

Still, the election was over and what Russia had done and why were historical questions. The fusion cell appeared set to wind down, but President Obama wanted the unit’s work memorialized. He ordered the intelligence community to preserve the work it had completed in the run up to the election and include it in both classified and unclassified reports.

Van Landingham wasn’t pleased. He thought, ‘‘Why do we have to write this? It’s just antagonizing the next administration.’”

But it wasn’t just the CIA, the institution, that was on the hook to write the report. Van Landingham’s colleagues broke the news at a CIA holiday party. Managers had tapped him to write the first draft.

“I was two Old Fezziwig Christmas Ales in, and I had some friends come up to me and be like, ‘Hey, you’re it!’” he recalls.

Among the various conspiracy theories put forth by MAGA fever swamps about the CIA’s report is the notion that agency director John Brennan hand-picked the authors of the document in an attempt to predetermine its outcome.

The reality of van Langinham’s relationship to Brennan is less dramatic. He says the two only ever spoke to each other once in December 2016, and it took place well after van Landingham had already begun work on the draft Obama ordered.

Van Landingham says the meeting took place one night when the director and his aides got into the elevator with him as he was headed back to his office with some dinner while working late on the intelligence report. “Good evening,” the CIA director said, flashing no indication he knew whom he was talking to, van Landingham says.
Those two words represented the sum total of his conversations with Brennan throughout his CIA career.

The process of completing an intelligence report of that gravity and political significance can be taxing in normal circumstances. The expedited schedule handed down by the White House to finish it made the work tough but the underlying judgements were fairly straightforward.

“It wasn’t a difficult analytic call,” he says. “I viewed my role as mostly like cataloging a historical thing that had happened. None of my judgments should be controversial because they were all backed up by both comments and actions that Russia had performed.”

As the intelligence community tracked the Russian campaign through classified means, Moscow’s military intelligence hackers had left a trail of public clues behind them. The hackers had left their account on a link shortening service used to craft content for spear phishing emails exposed, and researchers at the cybersecurity firm Dell Secureworks found it.

The Russian military hacking unit that went after Clinton had targeted up to 4,000 different email addresses, and it wasn’t just American political operatives who had gotten the messages, according to a report released by the firm in June 2016. Journalists and former government and military officials in the U.S. and Europe had been targeted, too.
Van Landingham, who had been monitoring public reports about the hacking, asked a fellow analyst working on the report to check his personal email for a message with the same wording as the one leaked in the Podesta dump. To their shock, he says, the analyst found an identical message in a spam filter.

The same Russian spies who had breached the Clinton campaign appeared to have tried and failed to hack a CIA official who would later work on the intelligence community's assessment of their campaign, according to van Landingham. The analyst wasn't undercover, but their affiliation with the CIA wasn't public knowledge either. The Russians seemed to know who they were, where they worked, and had tried to learn a whole lot more.

One of the biggest frustrations van Landingham faced while working on the report came not from the Russians but from within the U.S. government.

The FBI threw him a curveball in the form of the Steele Dossier — a compilation of uncorroborated gossip about Trump and Russia. The dossier was compiled by former MI6 officer Christopher Steele, who had worked as an occasional paid source for the FBI.

The dossier's most notorious bit of gossip was a dubious claim that Trump had been filmed by Russian intelligence ordering sex workers to urinate on a Moscow hotel bed for him during a 2013 trip. (Trump has repeatedly denied the so-called "pee tape" claim.) Other tantalizing tales included a fake story that former Trump fixer Michael Cohen had secretly traveled to Prague in August 2016 to meet with Kremlin officials.

Rumors of the dossier had been swirling for a while, but one morning in December 2016, an FBI analyst sent over a copy of Steele's work to the CIA before the entirety of its contents had become public.
Van Landingham started reading and thought, "This is garbage."

"On the first read, the Steele Dossier was indefensibly trash. The worst possible information dressed up as clandestinely obtained intelligence. It was a joke," he says, disdain creeping into a furrowed brow as he recounts the encounter.

The bureau's decision to send it to the agency annoyed him. "Someone takes a dump on your front doorstep and you're like, 'What do I do with this?' Because you've got to touch shit or it's going to sit there."

What galled van Landingham even more was the FBI's request that the CIA use the dossier as evidence to support analytic judgments in the report he was working on. By that point, he'd been working long hours for weeks, and the strain of it led him to be blunt.

"I told my bosses, 'I'm going to quit if you put this in there. I won't participate in this anymore because this is just obvious nonsense,'" he says.

The agency stood by its analysts. Brennan later told the Senate Intelligence Committee that the CIA's analytical branch "was very concerned about polluting the [report] with this material." In the face of their objections, the CIA and FBI struck a compromise that the agency would not include or use the dossier in the final ICA but "agreed to place the material in an annex," according to the committee's report.

“The circumstances may have been extraordinary — but the people and the process of putting the [report] together were remarkably ordinary and mundane,” recalls Gavin Wilde, van Landingham’s intelligence community counterpart. “That’s the best description of public service I can think of. It’s also the highest compliment.”

The unclassified version of the intelligence report concluded that Putin had “ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election,” had “developed a clear preference for [Trump]” and “aspired to help [Trump’s] election chances when possible.”

The report found broad agreement within the intelligence community except for one point: Had Putin ordered Russia’s spy services to meddle in the election merely to cause bipartisan chaos, or had he wanted Trump to win?

Van Landingham, his CIA colleagues, and the FBI concluded with high confidence that Putin had done it in order to help Trump. The NSA disagreed somewhat and assigned only moderate confidence to the judgment. The report spelled out both CIA and NSA’s confidence levels in the final unclassified report, allowing readers to see the scope of the narrow disagreement.

The Senate Intelligence Committee spent three years investigating the Russian influence operation and the U.S. response. The bipartisan investigation had only praise for the ICA.

Former Rep. Devin Nunes, a MAGA true believer and at the time the top Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, was not so enthusiastic about it. Van Landingham and his colleagues in the intelligence community, committee staff argued in a report released in April 2018, “did not employ proper analytic tradecraft” in concluding that Putin had been trying to help Trump.

In an awkward feat of timing, Putin himself appeared to settle the matter soon after, during a press conference with Trump on July 16, 2018, in Helsinki, Finland. Asked directly if he wanted Trump to win, Putin was blunt. “Yes, I wanted him to win.”

“Well, he just said it,” van Landingham recalls of his reaction to the press conference, throwing his arms up. “And everything that has come out subsequently proved it.”

As the 2024 election draws closer, the now-perennial question of whether Russia will try to meddle again comes up. Is van Landingham worried about a repeat performance with Trump back on the ballot? “No,” he laughs.

It’s not that he doesn’t expect Russian intelligence to try to cause a new mess. “The thing is that if it’s solidified in the Russian bureaucratic understanding that influence operations work, or at least they take up enemies’ time, they’re just going to keep happening,” he says.

The stakes for that, however, are small in his mind. “I think a popular concept took over in the U.S. understanding that influence operations work. There’s this idea that if you see

something, it'll influence you. It's unclear to me whether there are any real effects with a capital 'E' from these campaigns, that they've achieved anything, or that they've changed anybody's mind."

He bristles at how his work on Russian influence operations, once a narrow field discussed mostly by practicing intelligence professionals, got blown out of proportion by Clinton fans keen for a scapegoat after 2016.

"A lot of Democratic politicians used the Russian campaign as an excuse for the Clinton campaign's loss," says van Landingham. "There were trolls lurking behind everything and so for certain people, anyone they didn't want to agree with was a Russian troll or Russian co-optee."
But as far as the 2024 election goes, his concerns are more practical.

"What I worry about are the policy implications of a presidency that's friendly to Russia or at least friendly to Russia because of negative partisanship," he says.

At a Madison community pool on a warm June afternoon, van Landingham tends to his two little girls at their swim lessons. His youngest, three years old, beams her blue candy-stained lips in a smile underneath a bob haircut as she bounces around in the water.

Dad is clad in the classic suburban uniform of sandals, shorts, and a polo shirt as he reflects on his decision to leave the agency and start a very different and much quieter life far away from the the subject to which he had devoted his career.

"I miss it every day. It was a dream job," he says with a hint of nostalgia. "You could go into work and write about something that you thought was interesting and make an argument for why the United States government should pay attention to this with policy implications. It's an excellent mental exercise.

"I guess you just have to recognize when it's enough," he says. "You don't get anything for being right. The best you get for being right is to go out on top."