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POLITICS

Roger Stone's Claim of a 2016 Julian Assange Meeting Draws Scrutiny

Special counsel Robert Mueller's team has asked about an email during grand jury testimony



Roger Stone speaking to reporters after appearing before a closed House Intelligence Committee hearing last September.
PHOTO: KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

By *Shelby Holliday and Rob Barry*

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The special counsel investigating alleged links between Trump campaign associates and Russians is looking into longtime adviser Roger Stone's 2016 claim that he had met with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, according to a person familiar with the matter.

WikiLeaks, an antisecrecy website, later released a trove of material on Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton that U.S. officials say was hacked by Kremlin operatives.

In an email dated Aug. 4, 2016, Mr. Stone wrote: "I dined with Julian Assange last night," according to a copy of the message reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. Mr. Stone is a longtime informal adviser to President Donald Trump who at that point had no official campaign role.

The note, to former Trump adviser Sam Nunberg, adds to a growing number of times Mr. Stone claimed during the campaign to be in contact with WikiLeaks. The next day, Mr. Stone publicly praised Mr. Assange via Twitter .

In an interview, Mr. Stone said the email to Mr. Nunberg was a joke and that he never communicated with Mr. Assange in 2016.

"I never dined with Assange," he said. The email "doesn't have any significance because I probably didn't go...there was no such meeting. It's not what you say, it's what you do. This was said in jest."

Mr. Stone said he was flying out of Los Angeles the night before the email, putting him thousands of miles away from Ecuador's embassy in London, where Mr. Assange has been holed up since 2012 under asylum. Mr. Stone provided the Journal with screenshots showing a booking for a person named "Roger" on a Delta Air Lines flight departing Los Angeles for Miami on Aug. 3, 2016, at 9:30 p.m. The airline confirmed a flight matching Mr. Stone's screenshot but declined to say whether Mr. Stone was on board, citing customer privacy rules.

WikiLeaks didn't respond to a request for comment. The group has previously tweeted that Mr. Assange and Mr. Stone "never communicated."

The email underscores the complexities facing special counsel Robert Mueller's team as prosecutors seek to unravel the contacts—both claimed and actual—between people in Mr. Trump's orbit and the Russian government or those with alleged ties to Moscow, which U.S. officials say intervened during the 2016 election in an effort to harm Mrs. Clinton and boost Mr. Trump.

Mr. Mueller's team has asked about Mr. Stone's email during testimony before a grand jury, according to the person familiar with the matter.

In the months after Mr. Stone sent the email, WikiLeaks released caches of hacked emails from people close to the Clinton campaign, including campaign chairman John Podesta. U.S. officials have said the group received the material from operatives working on behalf of Russia's military intelligence group, which Mr. Assange has denied.

Mr. Stone has been inconsistent in his statements about WikiLeaks and Mr. Assange. During the 2016 campaign, he indicated that he was in direct contact with Mr. Assange. He has also said he communicated with him, but through an intermediary. In a text message with the Journal Friday, he said he never communicated with Mr. Assange.

On Aug. 5, 2016, the day after the email claiming to have dined with Mr. Assange, Mr. Stone tweeted: "Hillary lies about Russian Involvement in DNC hack -Julian Assange is a hero."

Three days later, Mr. Stone told a Republican group in Florida that he had communicated with the WikiLeaks founder and that he believed more damaging documents about Mrs. Clinton would be released in the months to come. "There's no telling what the October surprise may be," Mr. Stone told the crowd.

Then, on Aug. 21, Mr. Stone foreshadowed trouble for Mr. Podesta, whose emails would be dumped online weeks later. "Trust me," Mr. Stone tweeted, "it will soon [be] the Podesta's time in the barrel. #CrookedHillary."

On Oct. 3, Mr. Stone again claimed WikiLeaks had damaging material on Mrs. Clinton: "I have total confidence that @wikileaks and my hero Julian Assange will educate the American people soon #LockHerUp." On Oct. 5, he wrote: "Libs thinking Assange will stand down are wishful thinking. Payload coming #Lockthemup."

Two days later, WikiLeaks released the first batch of Mr. Podesta's hacked emails.

Mr. Stone told the Journal that his tweet referencing "the Podesta's" was about John Podesta and his brother, Tony, and their lobbying activities.

The question of cooperation between Trump associates and the Russians has been a focus of several government investigations, including Mr. Mueller's, which has yielded indictments and guilty pleas of several top Trump campaign aides. Mr. Trump has repeatedly said there was no coordination between his campaign and the Russians. The Kremlin has denied allegations of interference in the election. A spokesman for Mr. Mueller's group declined to comment.

Days before Mr. Stone's claim to have dined with Mr. Assange, Mr. Trump called upon Russia to make public Mrs. Clinton's emails: "Russia—if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing," Mr. Trump told reporters at his golf resort near Miami. The reference was to a batch of deleted emails Mrs. Clinton had sent using a private server while she was secretary of state, which Republicans raised during the campaign as a security concern.

Mr. Stone has said he didn't talk about the emails with Mr. Trump. "President Trump and I have never discussed the WikiLeaks disclosures before, during or after the election," he said in a television appearance last month.

Mr. Stone's email to Mr. Nunberg came in the midst of a chain of messages about a poll that showed Mr. Trump losing to Mrs. Clinton in the 2016 election. It adds to the list of potential contacts between Mr. Stone and groups alleged by U.S. intelligence to serve as Russian proxies.

Last year, Mr. Stone posted what he said were screenshots of private Twitter messages he exchanged with a Twitter persona called Guccifer 2.0. Mr. Stone has described the contacts as

“limited” and “benign.” U.S. intelligence has since said that Guccifer 2.0 was part of the Russian intelligence operation.

Mr. Stone left his official role with the Trump campaign shortly after it began in 2015. Mr. Trump has said he fired Mr. Stone; Mr. Stone has said he quit.

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