

# The Bomb That Did Not Detonate: Julian Assange, Manafort and The Guardian

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

*“This is going to be one of the most infamous news disasters since Stern published the ‘Hitler Diaries.’” — WikiLeaks, [Twitter](#), Nov 27, 2018*

*Those at The Guardian certainly felt they were onto something. It would be a scoop that would have consequences on a range of fronts featuring President Donald Trump’s former campaign chairman Paul Manafort, Julian Assange and the eponymous Russian connection with the 2016 US elections.*

If they could tie the ribbon of Manafort over the Assange package, one linked to the release of hacked Democratic National Committee emails in the summer of 2016, they could strike journalistic gold. At one stroke, they could achieve a trifecta: an exposé on WikiLeaks, Russian involvement, and the tie-in with the Trump campaign.

The [virally charged story](#), when run towards the leg end of November, claimed that Manafort had visited Assange in the embassy “in 2013, 2015 and in spring 2016.” Speculation happily followed in an account untroubled by heavy documentation.

“It is unclear why Manafort would have wanted to see Assange and what was discussed. But the last apparent meeting is likely to come under scrutiny and could interest Robert Mueller, the special prosecutor who is investigating alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia.”

It was a strikingly shoddy effort. An “internal document” supposedly garnered from the Ecuadorean intelligence agency named a certain “Paul Manafort [sic]” as a guest while also noting the presence of “Russians”. No document or individual names were supplied.

The enterprise was supposedly to come with an added satisfaction: getting one over the prickly Assange, a person with whom the paper has yet a frosty association with since things went pear shaped after Cablegate in 2010. Luke Harding, the lead behind this latest packaging effort, has received his fair share of pasting in the past, with Assange [accusing him](#) of “minimal additional research” and mere reiteration in the shabby cobbling *The Snowden Files: The Inside Story of the World’s Most Wanted Man*(2014). “The Guardian,” Assange [observed](#) in reviewing the work, “is a curiously inward-looking beast.” Harding, for his part, is whistling the promotional tune of his unmistakably titled book *Collusion: How Russia Helped Trump Win the White House*. The feud persists with much fuel.

Unfortunately for those coup seekers attempting a framed symmetry, the bomb has yet to detonate, an inert creature finding its ways into placid waters. WikiLeaks was, understandably, the first out of the stables with an irate [tweet](#).

“Remember this day when the Guardian permitted a serial fabricator to totally destroy the paper’s reputation. @WikiLeaks is willing to bet the Guardian a million dollars and its editor’s head that Manafort never met Assange.”

Manafort himself [denied](#) ever meeting Assange.

“I have never met Julian Assange or anyone connected to him. I have never been contacted by anyone connected to WikiLeaks, either directly or indirectly. I have never reached out to Assange or WikiLeaks on any matter.”

WikiLeaks has also pointed to a certain busy bee fabricator as a possible source for Harding et al, an Ecuadorean journalist by the name of Fernando Villavicencio. Villavicencio cut his milk teeth digging into the record of Moreno’s predecessor and somewhat Assange friendly, Rafael Correa.

Glenn Greenwald, himself having had a stint – and a fruitful one covering the Snowden revelations on the National Security Agency – had also been relentless on the inconsistencies. If Manafort did visit Assange, why the vagueness and absence of evidence? London, [he points out](#), “is one of the world’s most surveilled, if not the most surveilled, cities.” The Ecuadorean embassy is, in turn, “one of the most scrutinized, surveilled, monitored and filmed locations on the planet.” Yet no photographic or video evidence has been found linking Manafort to Assange.

The grey-haired establishment types are also wondering about the lack of fizz and bubble. Paul Farhi at [The Washington Post](#) furnishes an example:

“No other news organization has been able to corroborate the Guardian’s reporting to substantiate its central claim of a meeting. News organizations typically do such independent reporting to confirm important stories.”

Another distorting aspect to this squalid matter is the Manafort-Ecuadorean link, which does little to help Harding’s account. A debt ridden Manafort, [according](#) to the *New York Times*, ventured his way to Ecuador in mid-May last year to proffer his services to the newly elected president, Lenín Moreno. Moreno could not have been flattered: this was a man’s swansong and rescue bid, desperate to ingratiate himself with governments as varied as Iraqi Kurdistan and Puerto Rico.

In two [meetings](#) (the number might be more) between Manafort and his Ecuadorean interlocutor, various issues were canvassed. Eyes remained on China but there was also interest in finding some workable solution to debt relief from the United States. Then came that issue of a certain Australian, and now also Ecuadorean national, holed up in the Ecuadorean embassy in Knightsbridge, London.

Moreno has been courting several options, none of which seem to have grown wings. A possibility of getting a diplomatic post for Assange in Russia did not take off. (British authorities still threatened the prospect of arrest.) The issue of removing the thorniest dissident publisher in modern memory remains furiously alive.

As ever, accounts of the Moreno-Manafort tête-à-tête vary. A spokesman for Manafort, one Jason Maloni, [suggests](#) a different account. Manafort was not the instigator, but merely the

recipient, of a [query](#) from Moreno about “his desire to remove Julian Assange from Ecuador’s embassy.” Manafort listened impassively, “but made no promises as this was ancillary to the purpose of the meeting.” Russia, he sought to clarify, did not crop up.

Fraud might run through Manafort’s blood (convictions on eight counts of bank-and tax-fraud is fairly convincing proof of that), but the case assembled against Assange seems very much one of enthusiastic botch-up masquerading as a stitch-up. So far, the paper has batten down the hatches, and Harding has referred any queries through *The Guardian’s* spokesman, Brendan O’Grady. Zeal can be punishing. O’Grady will have to earn his keep.

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*Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)*

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Kampmark](#)

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