



What We Know and Don't About Hunter Biden and a Laptop

President Trump's allies have promoted claims of corruption aimed at the former vice president's son in an effort to damage the Biden campaign.



By Adam Goldman

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President Trump's allies have long promoted claims of corruption about Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s son Hunter in a bid to damage Mr. Biden's presidential campaign. The accusations intensified in recent days when some of Mr. Trump's associates, including his personal lawyer Rudolph W. Giuliani, provided material for a New York Post article detailing some of the allegations. The Post reported that the F.B.I. had seized a computer that purportedly belonged to Hunter Biden.

The Biden campaign has rejected the accusations. Many questions remain about the origins of the allegations themselves, the laptop and what, if anything, agents are investigating.

What are the allegations Mr. Trump and his allies are making?

The Post article relied on documents purportedly taken from the computer to try to buttress an unsubstantiated argument peddled by Mr. Giuliani and other Trump supporters: that as vice president, Mr. Biden had shaped American foreign policy in Ukraine to benefit his son. The events are the latest chapter in a more than two-year effort by the president and his allies to uncover damning information about the Bidens, a pursuit that also helped prompt Mr. Trump's impeachment.

Mr. Biden has long said he knew nothing about his son's business activities in Ukraine. But the article suggested that the former vice president met with an adviser to a Ukrainian energy company whose board Hunter Biden sat on, Burisma Holdings. The article referred to an email that the adviser, Vadym Pozharskyi, sent to Hunter Biden thanking him for "giving an opportunity to meet your father" and to spend "some time together."

A Biden campaign spokesman said Mr. Biden's official schedules did not show a meeting between the two men. A lawyer for Hunter Biden, George Mesires, told The Washington Post that "this purported meeting never happened."

The New York Post reporter who wrote most of the article refused to put his name on it because of concerns about its credibility, two Post employees have said.

How did the laptop surface?

A computer repair shop owner in Wilmington, Del., named John Paul Mac Isaac has said Hunter Biden left a damaged Apple computer at his shop in April 2019 and asked to recover any data. Mr. Isaac said in an interview with The New York Times last week outside the shop that he is legally blind and could not be sure whether the man was Hunter Biden but asked his name to fill out a work order, and the man identified himself as Hunter Biden. Mr. Isaac said the man came to his shop twice but never returned to retrieve the computer or an external hard drive on which its contents had been stored.

At some point, he decided to examine the material, calling it “alarming” and “embarrassing” but declining to discuss specifics. Mr. Isaac also said he made a copy of the computer’s contents.

How did the F.B.I. learn about the laptop?

Mr. Isaac said he told the bureau. He said he eventually decided to contact the F.B.I. after he began fearing for his safety because he knew what was on the laptop, which The New York Post said included a graphic video. “If I was somebody important, I would want to keep some of this stuff private,” he said. “Nobody wants their dirty laundry aired.”

Mr. Isaac said he met with F.B.I. agents in late 2019 and provided them with a timeline of events. The agents returned about two weeks later in mid-December with a grand jury subpoena allowing them to seize the laptop and the external hard drive. The subpoena was signed by a federal prosecutor in the U.S. attorney’s office in Wilmington who handles criminal investigations such as fraud, and Mr. Isaac acknowledged receiving it.

The agents also gave him a receipt for what they took, according to a photograph of it published by Fox News. The receipt included an F.B.I. code, 272D, the bureau’s internal classification for money laundering investigations, and “BA” for its Baltimore field office. Officials separately confirmed that the F.B.I. seized the laptop and an external hard drive as part of an investigation, though they did not detail the inquiry or whether it involved money laundering or Hunter Biden. They also confirmed that the agent who signed the receipt works in Wilmington and is overseen by the Baltimore office.

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What happened after the F.B.I. took the equipment?

Mr. Isaac said he did not hear back from investigators. He said that he wondered why the laptop’s existence had not been disclosed during the impeachment proceedings against Mr. Trump, and that he began to fear that agents might be trying to bury the information he found on the laptop.

Mr. Trump's impeachment focused on his dealings with Ukraine, and in particular his attempts to press the president of Ukraine to announce investigations that could benefit Mr. Trump politically, including one into Burisma and the Bidens. In an effort to counter the accusations that Mr. Trump abused his power, some of his supporters, including Mr. Giuliani, also promoted allegations of corruption about Hunter Biden's work in the country while his father was vice president.

Mr. Isaac said "it just didn't feel right" that the existence of the laptop was not widely known. "Somebody besides me should have known about it," he said. Mr. Isaac said he called a couple of members of Congress, whom he did not identify, but did not hear back.

Mr. Isaac declined to discuss his next steps, but The New York Post reported that in September, he gave the copy of the hard drive to Mr. Giuliani's lawyer, Robert J. Costello. Mr. Giuliani later provided it to the tabloid, a handoff in which Stephen K. Bannon, a former adviser to Mr. Trump who was indicted in an unrelated fraud case, also played an unspecified role. Since the Post article was published, a clamorous Mr. Giuliani has pushed the allegations and said they prove the Bidens are corrupt. Mr. Giuliani also said in an interview that he alerted Mr. Trump that the tabloid would be publishing an article about the laptop in case he was asked about it.

What about concerns over Russian disinformation?

No concrete evidence has emerged that the laptop contains Russian disinformation.

With pressure mounting on the F.B.I. to respond to questions from Congress about the laptop, the bureau wrote to one of the president's staunchest allies in Congress, Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, suggesting that it had not found any Russian disinformation on the laptop.

John Ratcliffe, the director of national intelligence, also told Fox Business Network that the "laptop is not part of some Russian disinformation campaign." But Mr. Ratcliffe, who has been criticized for embracing the president's political agenda in a traditionally apolitical job, did not make clear whether the intelligence agencies or the F.B.I. authenticated the laptop's contents or whether he was simply saying that they had not gathered evidence that Russia altered any of the material.

The laptop prompted concerns about Russian disinformation because the intelligence community has warned for months about Russian attempts to influence the election, including by spreading disinformation about the Biden family. Russia has conducted a hacking campaign to find information damaging to the Biden campaign, most notably through a hack on Burisma.

Intelligence officials have also warned the White House that Russian intelligence officers were using Mr. Giuliani, who provided the hard drive copy to the tabloid, as a conduit for disinformation aimed at undermining Mr. Biden's presidential run.

What don't we know?

A lot. Mr. Isaac, who said he voted for Mr. Trump in 2016, declined to answer many questions about the laptop and his contacts with the F.B.I. He also would not talk about his communications with the Trump loyalists who orchestrated the plan to make the computer's contents public just before the election.

It is also not clear what the F.B.I. did with the laptop or what Justice Department officials knew about the sensitive F.B.I. investigation at the time. F.B.I. officials have declined to discuss the inquiry.

Julian E. Barnes, Katie Benner and Kenneth P. Vogel contributed reporting.