

Bill Kaplan: The NRA, Russia and Governor Walker

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Last week former Wisconsinite David Keene, editor at large for the conservative Washington Times, enthusiastically endorsed Wisconsin GOP Governor Scott Walker's reelection. Keene, "a stalwart on the right", was president of the National Rifle Association (NRA) from 2011 - 2013 (Washington Post). The "NRA reported spending a record \$55 million on the 2016 elections, including \$30 million to support Trump Most of that money was spent by an arm of the NRA that is not required to disclose its donors". If "internet ads" and "get-out-the-vote efforts" are included "total (NRA 2016) election spending actually approached or exceeded \$70 million" (McClatchy). Walker "received about \$3.5 million (from the NRA) for his 2010 election, the 2012 recall and his 2014 reelection" (Wisconsin Public Radio).

Keene helped lay the foundation for the NRA's massive, opaque campaign spending. More ominously, he helped facilitate Russian "links" to the NRA and Republicans, including presidential candidates Trump and Walker (Time). Moreover, the FBI and Federal Election Commission are investigating "whether NRA got illegal Russian donations" (Politico) "to help Trump" (McClatchy). In 2011, NRA President Keene met Alexander Torshin, a Russian "gun rights" legislator with ties to Putin. In 2015, Torshin and his aide Maria Butina toured the NRA headquarters. The Russian "gun rights" leaders later went to the NRA convention and met Walker, then running to be the GOP presidential nominee. Torshin and Butina also attended a Tennessee fundraiser for Walker. And, Butina went to Walker's July, 2015 "campaign kickoff" in Waukesha (Time).

"At the end of 2015, Butina welcomed a delegation to Moscow that included Keene, by then a member of the NRA board, as well as top NRA donors. The group also included a rising star in GOP politics (then) Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, who went on to be a campaign surrogate for Trump ..." (Washington Post). Keene and his group had a meeting with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin. Torshin and Butina continued their efforts to cultivate Republicans, including Trump,

hoping “that a Republican in the White House might improve U.S. – Russia relations” (Washington Post).

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Special Counsel Robert Mueller is leading an investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, possible collusion by Trump campaign officials and White House obstruction of justice. Mueller has indicted 19 individuals, including Trump National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, Trump campaign Chair Paul Manafort and Deputy Chair Rick Gates. Flynn and Gates have pleaded guilty and are cooperating. 13 Russians are among the indicted, facing charges for interfering in the 2016 election.

All along Walker has maintained his distance, with little to say. Trump won Wisconsin by only 22,748 votes. During the campaign “Russian-linked Facebook ads specifically targeted” Wisconsin (CNN). And, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (MJS) reported: “Russian Twitter trolls stoked racial tension in wake of Sherman Park rioting in Milwaukee before 2016 election”. Moreover, there were attempts by Russian “hackers” to “get into Wisconsin (election) computer systems” (MJS). Finally what about the NRA, Russia and Walker? Time for Keene and Walker to come clean.

— *Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.*