

Lawsuit Alleges the White House Helped Fox News Push the Seth Rich Conspiracy Theory

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A new lawsuit accuses Fox News and figures in the Trump White House, including the president, of dishonestly boosting a conspiracy theory about the murder of Democratic National Committee employee Seth Rich in an armed robbery, NPR reported Tuesday. According to the suit, filed by Fox News commentator and former police detective Rod Wheeler, the administration and the network used fabricated statements in pushing the Seth Rich story to distract from the ongoing Russia investigation. From [NPR](#):

The lawsuit focuses particular attention on the role of the Trump supporter, Ed Butowsky, in weaving the story. He is a wealthy Dallas investor and unpaid Fox commentator on financial matters, who has emerged as a reliable Republican surrogate in recent years. Butowsky offered to pay for Wheeler to investigate the death of the DNC aide, Seth Rich, on behalf of his grieving parents in Omaha.

On April 20, a month before the story ran, Butowsky and Wheeler—the investor and the investigator—met at the White House with then Press Secretary Sean Spicer to brief him on what they were uncovering. The first page of the lawsuit quotes a voicemail and text from Butowsky boasting that President Trump himself had reviewed drafts of the Fox News story just before it went to air and was published.

Butowsky told NPR that his comments about Trump reviewing the story were a joke. Spicer confirmed to NPR that he met with Butowski and Wheeler but did not know of contact between Butowsky and the president. This contradicts Spicer's claim that he had no knowledge of the Rich story during a May 16 press gaggle, excerpted here by Media Matters' Matthew Gertz.

Reporter: Sean, can we get a White House reaction or the president's reaction to the report that said Rich was emailing WikiLeaks before his murder?

Spicer: I don't—I'm not aware of—generally, I don't get updates on DNC—former DNC staffers. I'm not aware of that.

Reporter: It would certainly have a great influence on where the leaks came from, if they could potentially—I mean, there's a lot of implications in this story, of course. But ...

Spicer: I understand that. But for me to comment from here about an ongoing investigation—I believe it's still ongoing; I don't even know the status of it in terms of D.C.—but it would be highly inappropriate to do that.

Fox News' story, [published May 16](#), alleged that Rich had been involved in leaking DNC emails to WikiLeaks, contrary to the government's official conclusion that the emails were obtained by Russian hackers. "The network suggested Democrats might have been connected to Rich's death and that a cover-up had thwarted the official investigation," NPR's David Folkenflik writes. "The network cited an unnamed FBI official. And the report relied heavily on Rod Wheeler, a former police detective, hired months earlier on behalf of the Riches by Ed Butowsky." After a week of criticism from D.C. police, the Rich family, and others in the press, Fox retracted its story. Wheeler alleges in the lawsuit that Butowsky coached Fox hosts and producers on the framing of the story—"One of the big conclusions we need to draw from this is

that the Russians did not hack our computer systems," he reportedly wrote in an email—and that Butowsky, along with Fox News reporter Malia Zimmerman, fabricated quotes from him that were used in Fox's reporting and in a letter to the Rich family. NPR details the evidence:

Wheeler challenges Zimmerman over the letter in a three-way phone conversation that also included Butowsky. ... Butowsky [says to Wheeler]: "One day you're going to win an award for having said those things you didn't say." Later, according to the recordings transcribed in the suit, Butowsky acknowledges Wheeler hadn't made any claims of personal knowledge about emails between Rich and WikiLeaks. "I know that's not true," Butowsky says. "If I'm under oath, I would say I never heard him say that."

Both try to keep Wheeler on board, however.

Zimmerman issues instructions for Wheeler's appearance on Sean Hannity's show later that evening. "Reread the story we sent you last night [that contained the invented quotes] and stick to the script," she texts Wheeler.

Fox News has told NPR that it does not have evidence that Wheeler had been misquoted.