



Episode 6: Cultivating an Asset

Producer:

Previously on The Asset.

Max Bergmann:

Key to this story, the Trump Russia story, is the fight over Ukraine's future.

Franklin Foer:

Ukraine is a country divided into two halves. There's a Russian-speaking half and a Ukrainian-speaking half.

Newscast:

And then yesterday, Yanukovich himself, whose whereabouts we're not sure of, hopped up on television and said that he is still the president.

Angela Stent:

Most Russians, I think, have never really accepted that Ukrainians are a separate nation, um, really or Ukraine is a separate country.

Newscast:

The Russian people reacted to that by going out into the streets with signs that said literally "President Putin must go."

Max Bergmann:

Putin brushed off the old KGB playbook, which had for decades sought to exploit the openness of the West to turn the West against itself.

Angela Stent:

So, then he meets President Putin, and President Putin you know, was a KGB agent. He'd obviously done his work.

George W. Bush:

I wouldn't have invited him to my ranch if I didn't trust him.

Newscast:



The situation in eastern Ukraine is getting closer and closer to open warfare. NATO says pictures like these show Russia is to blame.

Max Bergmann:

Putin was about to unleash a modernized, 21st-century version of a Soviet-style active-measures campaign. This was political warfare against the West and especially the United States, and we didn't know what was about to hit us.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

Episode Six: Cultivating an Asset. The intelligence community was frozen. Here was a candidate on the verge of winning the most powerful office in the country at a time when tensions between the Kremlin and the West were as high as they'd been in decades. What the intelligence community knew, but the public didn't, is that the candidate also had longstanding unreported ties to the Kremlin. There were concerns over his past financial dealings with their intelligence service. There were fears that if he won, the Kremlin might have an asset in charge of the country, or, at the very least, a leader who was vulnerable to blackmail. But going public with what they knew carried its own risks. If they came forward, they could accidentally out their sources and methods. Not only that, such an explosive allegation could throw the whole democratic process into chaos. So, the intelligence community stood pat and they waited. They hoped that the election wouldn't go his way, that she would win, that their worst fears of a suspected Kremlin asset running the country wouldn't come to pass. And then, he lost.

[Newscast:](#)

Now, she's just coming into Downing Street now. Here comes the prime ministerial rover bearing now Mrs. Thatcher as Prime Minister. A huge crowd and a huge cheer. Plain-clothes police out of a car behind her and Mrs. Thatcher out onto the, onto the doorstep.

Max Bergmann:

This wasn't Donald Trump. This was Michael Foot. He was a longtime member of British parliament, the leader of the Labour Party, when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister. In the early 1980s the British economy was in recession and the Labour Party was polling well against Thatcher's Conservative Party. If Labour had won, Foot would have been prime minister, which might have changed the course of history because he wasn't just Michael Foot. To the KGB, his code name was "Boot." Here's Calder Walton, the Assistant



Director of Harvard's Applied History Project and General Editor of the Cambridge History of Espionage and Intelligence.

Calder Walton:

The KGB strategy in the Cold War was to recruit or have contact with political activists that looked like they were going places. And this was primarily first of all to get information. But then hopefully the plan was that they might actually rise up the corridors of power. Now of course we don't have any real figures, but it seems certain that the overwhelming outcome of their efforts didn't lead them anywhere. And that's just the nature of the intelligence world. But every once in a while, one of their contacts from a sort of youngish age would carry on rising up through the corridors of power and get an influential position in their government. And this is exactly what happened, we now know, with Michael Foot, who became in the early 1980s the leader of Britain's Labour Party. This information and this story comes from a senior high-ranking KGB officer, Oleg Gordievsky, who was in fact a double agent working for Britain's MI6. And Gordievsky in the early 1980s got appointed to be the KGB Resident Head of Station in London. So that's to say the KGB Head of Station in London was in fact a British double agent working for MI6. Now Gordievsky passed over to British intelligence all the important information he could find on influence operations in British domestic politics, and this included a thick file on Agent Boot and Agent Boot was Michael Foot. From the 1940s onwards, he met with KGB officers and received money from them. It's estimated that Gordievsky, looking at Agent Boot's, Michael Foot's, file in the KGB station in London, estimated that he received, in today's money, about 37,000 pounds over in the 1960s. And British intelligence was therefore placed in the extraordinary position of what to do about this information that it had. They told the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher's, private secretary about this and he took the decision not to tell Thatcher. He said that this was too politically explosive. Essentially, British intelligence, aware of this information, aware of the dynamite that this would cause domestically if it got out in the political landscape, simply put this grenade in their back pocket and decided, hoped, prayed that he wouldn't become Prime Minister. Now, it's really important for us to also say that when the story of Michael Foot from Oleg Gordievsky, the MI6 double agent, when this story was broken in the early 1990s, Michael Foot successfully sued, I believe it was some of the, several of the British newspapers that broke the story. Um, and uh, they settled out of court and he said that he was never knowingly a Soviet agent. And I think that the word "knowingly" is important here. Michael Foot seemed to be leveraging a lot out of the word "knowingly." I think it's a fair thing to say when you're meeting with a Russian diplomat in various places in London over a period of decades and receiving cash from that person, I think a reasonable observer would go, "Well, what the hell do you think is going on?" So, whether he was an agent, I think is not in the strict sense that we understand that to be a paid, recruited agent as such, but certainly an asset. Um, as I said, the KGB, um, within their own file that Gordievsky, saw Michael Foot as an agent of influence,



someone that could be trusted. The KGB could give talking points to him about pro-Soviet points and he would then dutifully raise them in the press.

Max Bergmann:

A Russian asset leading a western country. It was unthinkable ... until 2016. I'm Max Bergmann, director of The Moscow Project, and this is The Asset.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

The KGB played a critical role in shaping Vladimir Putin. As a boy, he wanted to join the spy service, and he spent his formative professional years in the KGB. So when he came to power, the KGB wasn't going to be neglected or deprived of resources. It was going to be empowered. No more squeamish diplomats or politicians forcing them to keep the gloves on. The gloves were going to come off. One of their own was running the country, and Russia's intelligence services were going to get busy. And their focus was going to remain, just as it was during the Cold War, on the United States. Here's Calder Walton.

Calder Walton:

I think a useful way of, of thinking about Russian active measures, Soviet active measures, then Russian active measures today, is to think of them on a spectrum of influence operations. So, on one end you've got, uh, perhaps propaganda, disinformation, leaking stories favorable to the Soviet Union or Russia today in the press. Nowadays in the digital domain that would be creating false, um, internet accounts on Twitter and so on. So, there's propaganda, media manipulation on one end. I think somewhere in the middle there would be bribery operations, influence operations over foreign dignitaries or politicians. And again, this is really as old as intelligence itself. Blackmailing them, you know, either with money or the KGB infamously or famously deployed honey traps—so, sending in, um, often beautiful women to seduce Western politicians. And then at the other extreme on the spectrum, the way I think about it, would be at the most extreme assassinations or “wet work,” “wet operations,” as the KGB called it.

Max Bergmann:

And so, on a June evening in 2010, a decade after Putin took power, a van pulled up to a suburban house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was the home of Donald Heathfield and Tracey Foley. They seemed your typical American middle-class family. Donald was a consultant, Tracey was a real-estate agent, and they had two boys. But as the van stopped and the doors opened, it was FBI agents that poured out. They were there to arrest Donald and Tracey. As their sons would soon learn from the FBI agents arresting their mom and dad, Donald and Tracey were really Andrey and Elena, and they were part of a deep cover



spy ring known as “the Illegals.” They would soon become the inspiration for the hit television series *The Americans*. Here's Calder Walton.

Calder Walton:

Now what's different about the Illegals is that they are deep cover without any diplomatic cover in that foreign country. The reason why most countries favor having intelligence officers under diplomatic cover attached to an embassy is that, if they're arrested, they can claim diplomatic immunity and they will not be imprisoned, they will just be deported. I say just, but you know, it's a serious scandal, but they're not gonna end up in a, in a local jail. Illegals are completely different. There's no legal cover. So, they're illegal in that sense. There is not a legal diplomatic cover. They are embedded in the local population living under false names, aliases with a, what the KGB in its trade craft calls a “legend,” which is the cover story of their lives.

Max Bergmann:

Donald and Tracey had received the stolen identities of two dead Canadians. They were sent to Canada in the 1980s, where they could perfect their English and learn about the West. They settled in the US in the early 2000s, and as Illegals, they were seeking to develop sources and contacts who might have valuable information to report back to Moscow, sources like a nuclear researcher and a New York financier. Their arrest was part of an FBI roundup of ten Illegals who had been working for the Russian foreign-intelligence service, the SVR, one of the successor agencies to the Russian KGB. News of the arrest was greeted in the United States as if it were a joke.

[Daily Show Clip:](#)

Newscast:

It seems like something out of a fictional thriller.

Newscast:

It reads like a Robert Ludlum novel.

Newscast:

Something out of James Bond.

Newscast:

Like a Jason Bourne novel.



Newscast:

Spies Like Us.

Newscast:

Thomas Crown Affair.

Newscast:

Manchurian Candidate.

Newscast:

It's a John Le Carré novel.

Newscast:

A Tom Clancy novel.

Newscast:

Meets Inspector Clouseau.

Newscast:

This was a long-term project. These people were sent here and told to become Americanized: buy homes, get jobs, get rooted in the community. And they were told kind of loosely to get information from policy leaders, opinion leaders, things about arm control. That was interesting, uh, to the Russians. They wanted to know about the Obama election. For example.

Jon Stewart:

Really, you want to know about the Obama election? So, your choice basically was a 10-year infiltration of the American system, or I don't know, home delivery of The New York Times.

Newscast:

You know, these are typical people.

Newscast:

Married couples living in Suburbia.

Newscast:

Like Montclair, New Jersey, and Yonkers, New York.



Newscast:

13-year-old Blake Lapin played with their kids.

Newscast:

Check this out. This is a quote from one of the Russian's neighbors: "They couldn't have been spies. Look what she did with the hydrangeas."

Max Bergmann:

But that woman with the hydrangeas went to NYU, got an MBA at Columbia University, and was a vice president at a financial-services firm in New York City, where she was developing contacts and insight into the New York business and financial world. The arrest of the Illegals made it clear that there were still deep-cover Russian spies living and working in the US. Some of them had been in America since the 1990s, living undercover as Americans and constantly reporting back to their Russian handlers. Here's John Sipher, the former Deputy Bureau Chief for the CIA in Moscow:

John Sipher:

In 2010, when they were arrested I think the US government did a very, very poor job of messaging that because it became sort of a laughing stock. Like you said, "Oh, what are these people doing? It's so silly." Uh, but for the Russians, it's not silly. Um, these people are meant to be long-term strategic reserves.

Max Bergmann:

The Illegals lived in Virginia, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Washington state. One of the Illegals, Anna Chapman, became famous. She had been living a glamorous high-society life in New York City before her arrest. The ten Illegals eventually pleaded guilty to being Russian agents and were swapped back to Russia in return for four Russian double agents. This included a man named Sergei Skripal, who would later end up in the UK and would barely survive an assassination attempt ordered by Vladimir Putin and carried out by Russian military-intelligence officers using a Cold War-era nerve agent. They used a chemical weapon in the UK on British soil in 2018. Skripal was found close to death on a park bench with his daughter. But while the use of Illegals in 2010 seemed of a bygone era, it was not. Here's Calder Walton.

Calder Walton:



Russia does use illegal, deep-cover illegal networks, today. In fact, Putin has recently issued a call to arms for all, as he sees it, patriotic Russians or people that want to work for Russia's interests abroad to become Illegals. So, this is something that is not an aberration for Putin today. It is a long, very, very long and powerful history of intelligence, deep-cover illegals.

Max Bergmann:

So, while we shifted our gaze after 9/11 to counter terrorism, to Iraq, to Afghanistan, Russia never shifted its focus from us. The Illegals ring showed that they never pulled back their aggressive espionage tactics targeting the United States after the end of the Cold War. Oleg Kalugin, a retired KGB general, commented at the time of the arrest of the spy ring that “The magnitude that so many Illegals were involved was a shock to me. It's a return to the old days of the Cold War.” One focus of these agents was businessmen or people they thought may rise into important positions. And that brings us to a guy named Carter Page. If you've been following the Russia scandal closely, you've probably heard his name. He's got a shaved head and a penchant for wearing floppy bucket hats and appearing awkwardly on TV for some reason.

[Newscast:](#)

Chris Hayes: Former foreign policy adviser to Donald Trump's presidential campaign Carter Page joins me now. How are you, Carter?

Carter Page: Great to see you I'm doing great.

Chris Hayes: Congratulations for not being indicted. You're a free man.

Carter Page: Chris, in the grand scheme of things, the biggest thing I ended up doing is responding to all these fake reports that kept coming out against me.

Max Bergmann:

But in 2013, Carter Page was recruited by Russian intelligence. We know that because the FBI has the spies on tape saying it. In 2013, the FBI managed to plant a bug in a binder that was carried by a Russian operative named Victor Podobnyy. He brought the binder into the Rezydentura, the Russian consulate in New York, into a secure room, where he started chatting freely with one of his intelligence colleagues. When Podobnyy was arrested, the DOJ published the transcripts of his conversations in the indictment. And Podobnyy talks about his efforts to recruit Carter Page, who is listed as “Male-1.” Podobnyy even calls him an idiot, but also says, “I liked that he takes on everything. For now. His enthusiasm works for me. I also promised him a lot.” The FBI didn't bring down the spy ring until 2015, so



Podobnyy had been cultivating Page for years. According to the Mueller report, when Podobnyy, Carter Page's handler, was charged in 2015, Page quickly understood that Male-1 in the indictment was him. Here's Asha Rangappa, a former FBI agent who worked on counterintelligence investigations, on how the FBI would treat an American like Page who was being recruited.

Asha Rangappa:

The fact that the FBI went and interviewed Page suggests to me that they might have believed at that time that he was being unwittingly targeted and either that by letting him know, as I think most Americans would if they were told by the FBI you're being targeted for development recruitment by Russian intelligence, you know, you might say, "Ok, I guess I'm not going to talk to those people anymore." And that effectively burns the Russian's operation. Or, if they believed that he was amenable to it, it gives them a chance to overtly make clear in the investigative record that they let him know. And then if he continued to work with them and stay in contact with them and continue that relationship, he is then doing it knowingly. You can no longer say that he is unwitting at that point. He's volunteering to go down this path.

Max Bergmann:

And that's exactly what Page did. When the indictment came down in 2015, and Page realized he was in it, he went out of his way to clear his name. But not with the FBI—with Russia. According to the Mueller report, after the indictment was released, Page sought out and "spoke with a Russian government official at the United Nations General Assembly and identified himself so the official would understand that he was Male-1 from the Podobnyy complaint" and told the official that he "didn't do anything." But what did he mean, "didn't do anything?" Didn't do anything for whom? Did he not tell the FBI everything he knew? Carter Page has largely been dismissed by the press in this whole affair as an idiot, and his public appearances have done little to show himself otherwise. So why would the Russians recruit this no-name guy that kind of seems like an idiot? Well, he was an idiot, but with a résumé. Page graduated from the US Naval Academy, had higher degrees from Georgetown and NYU, and he even served as a lieutenant in the US Navy. And he had worked for Merrill Lynch in Moscow. He had a résumé, and he was willing. He was fervently pro-Putin and pro-Russia. And who knows, maybe one day this guy could even land on a campaign or get a job in an administration. Page said he never gave the Russians anything useful. According to him, it was all publicly-available information that the spies could have gotten on their own. But that's how recruitment works. You don't ask your prospective assets to sign away their allegiances or even necessarily ask them for something that might tip them off that they're helping a foreign government. Instead, you start with the little things, the easy things. That kind of builds goodwill and a relationship that might help pave the way for



bigger asks at a later date. And once that relationship is established, that very relationship, the existence of it, is compromising. It is something that can be leveraged. Which is why UK intelligence more than 30 years ago was so worried about Michael Foot becoming prime minister. And it turns out recruiting Carter Page worked out better than Russian intelligence could have possibly hoped because less than a year later, in March 2016, Donald Trump named Carter Page as one of his five foreign policy advisors. A guy who had just been recruited by Russian intelligence was advising the next president of the United States. Here again is Asha Rangappa.

Asha Rangappa:

In my experience, an asset, the kind of source that I would recruit, who would explicitly agree to assist the United States government and provide information on whatever thing that they were able to provide information on or had access to, that was a formal relationship. You had a confidential case file. You met with this source. You made sure that the information that they gave you was officially vetted and validated. You documented everything that they said. You might pay them. Those payments were recorded. All of this is very formal. It's part of our bureaucratic structure in the United States. And you know, this is for accountability if later things need to be checked out. And it's also because, you know, we're really not in the practice of getting people on board who don't really realize that they're working for the FBI. I mean, that's not how you want, you know, in our country, our government to operate. So that is when, when we used the term asset, it is about that formal, explicit relationship that involves some kind of exchange of information for perhaps, you know, whatever, goodwill, money, something else. You know, countries like Russia don't necessarily operate in that way. They may have formal assets, people who are totally on board, know who they're working for. But with Carter Page, you know, they kind of refer to him as an idiot. They are perfectly happy to manipulate and pull people's strings so that they are working in Russia's interests and perhaps not even realizing that they're doing it, or not realizing that the person that they are with is even connected to Russian intelligence.

Max Bergmann:

If the Kremlin was willing to put the time in to get Carter Page on their side with the hope that at some point he could be helpful and he could rise up, then there's no question they'd also be willing to invest a whole lot more to back a bigger potential asset. Putin had instructed his intelligence services to go forth and recruit aggressively. And I can think of another New Yorker, also not the sharpest knife in the drawer, who like Page was, to use the word of Page's recruiter, "hooked" on Russian money, was pro-Putin, and who at the same time was thinking of running for higher office—for president of the United States.

-Break-



Max Bergmann:

Protect the Investigation is a nonpartisan initiative to educate the American people about the importance of the Special Counsel investigation and its findings. You too can join Protect the Investigation in demanding that the Justice Department release the full report of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation. Go to www.protecttheinvestigation.org to sign up now.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

Russian intelligence does not simply try to collect intelligence. Part of their training, part of their mission, is not simply to collect, but to shape, to influence events, to try to create outcomes. And following the breakdown of the reset with Russia and the imposition of US and European sanctions, Putin brushed off his KGB playbook and he turned to the page that read "active measures." His objective this time around: build ties to the American Right and shift the Republican Party, which for 70 years have been hawkish toward Russia, and to get them to see Russia and Putin as a potential ideological ally. To do this, Putin would have to make Russia seem to stand for something. The FBI has an acronym they use to assess how people are recruited. It's called MICE, which stands for Money, Ideology, Compromise, and Ego. Now throughout this podcast we've talked a lot about money and how Putin in the Kremlin uses Russia's businessmen, his oligarchs, as tools of the state to gain influence. But we haven't talked a lot about ideology. Yet ideology for Soviet intelligence was kind of a big deal. The Cold War, after all, was an ideological struggle, and the egalitarian appeal of communism compared to the greedy, decadent West was very useful to the Soviet Union as it sought to recruit agents and compete with the US for influence abroad in the developing world. But as we mentioned in the last episode, Putin's Russia is corrupt and autocratic, and it was getting ideologically pummeled. Those color revolutions and popular protests were undermining his regime and those of his autocratic allies like Yanukovich in Ukraine and Assad in Syria. So, to hit back at democracy, it would help to seem to stand for something, to have a counter narrative. And so that's how we get Putin shirtless on a horse, Putin piloting a submarine, Putin fly fishing shirtless again, hugging tigers, carrying a rifle, scoring like eight goals playing hockey with professionals. What you were seeing was propaganda. He was trying to build himself up as the personification of a strongman leader. And the Right eat it up, especially here in the United States,

[Newscast:](#)



Male Reporter 1: Enter Vladimir Putin who brings them back. Meanwhile, we get President Obama who puts us in a wussification, redistribution economy.

Male Reporter 2: You like the shirtless guy?

Male Reporter 1: I like the shirtless guy holding the rifle.

Male Reporter 2: Oh my God.

Max Bergmann:

Putin also began to actively champion traditional values. He had elevated the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church, seeking to position Russia as a traditionalist, Christian counter to the West's increasingly progressive ideals. And as the rest of the world was making progress on LGBTQ rights, Putin went the other way. Famously, he passed a draconian anti-gay law in June 2013, which led to massive protests and calls for Western countries to even boycott the 2014 Olympics in Sochi. Putin also made Russia a safe haven for far-right white nationalists and racists and looked to support groups sowing discord and division. He hosted conferences for secessionist groups looking to break up European countries and the United States. Yet the founder of the "Yes, California Group," which was trying to get California to secede, actually lived in Russia. This was not new. For decades the KGB sought to influence the left in NATO countries by targeting lefty civil-society groups. Former KGB officer and defector Oleg Gordievsky exposed the KGB efforts in the UK, which sought to build ties and infiltrate labor movements, civil-rights organizations, and non-proliferation groups. And to connect with the American right, there is no better way to do it than through guns. And this leads us to another type of Russian agent, someone operating in plain sight. Her name was Maria Butina. She came to the US around the same time as Carter Page was being recruited, eventually enrolling as a grad student at American University here in Washington, D.C. Maria Butina on July 16th, 2018, was arrested and indicted for her involvement in the alleged conspiracy to "infiltrate organizations active in US politics in an effort to advance the interests of the Russian Federation." She ultimately pled guilty to conspiracy to act as a foreign agent. And what's interesting about Butina is that she was operating out in the open. Butina created a Russian gun-rights group called "The Right to Bear Arms" in 2011. She portrayed herself as a gun fanatic. She posed in scantily-clad photo shoots while armed to the teeth. Only here's the thing: There are no gun rights in Russia. Guns are highly regulated and highly restricted. But she created this group that bizarrely had backing from the Kremlin, including a former deputy governor in the Russian central bank, Aleksandr Torshin, a guy wanted in Spain for money laundering and who also happens to be a lifetime member of the National Rifle Association. But in March 2015, as US sanctions were punishing Russia, Butina developed a plan titled "Diplomacy" to move to the US and use her gun rights group to influence the Republican Party. She sent the



plan to the Kremlin and to a US political operative who would become her boyfriend. She writes that the Republican Party is “traditionally associated with negative and aggressive foreign policy, particularly with regards to Russia.” But the time was right, she explained, to build a relationship with the GOP. And to do so they should use the “central place and influence of the NRA in the Republican Party.” She went on to say the NRA is “the largest sponsor of US elections to the US Congress as well as the sponsor of the CPAC conference and other events.” She asked for a six-figure budget to get started. And so, this young, gun-loving Russian was coming to America. A month later, in April 2015, she and Torshin met with perspective Republican presidential candidate, then-Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin. And in July, she was at a Trump campaign event where she even asked Donald Trump a question.

[Campaign Rally:](#)

Donald Trump: Yes ma'am.

Maria Butina: I am visiting from Russia.

Donald Trump: Ah Putin. Good friend of Obama, Putin. He likes Obama a lot.

Maria Butina: My question will be about foreign politics. If you would be elected as president what will be your foreign politics? Especially in your relationship with my country and do you want to continue the politics of sanctions that are damaging to both economies or you have any other ideas?

Donald Trump: Okay. Obama gets along with nobody.

Max Bergmann:

In December 2015, Butina’s group, Right to Bear Arms, helped pay for an NRA delegation to come to Moscow. The group met with Russian government officials, including the head of the Russian defense industry, and included in the group was former Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke. And during the campaign, Torshin and Butina even attended the NRA convention that took place in May 2016. Torshin was even allegedly seated at the table with Donald Trump Jr. And Butina that month even spoke at a fundraising dinner for the Republican governor of Kentucky. The FBI later got hold of direct messages Butina sent on Twitter to Torshin in October 2016, just a few weeks before the 2016 presidential election. Butina wrote, “Time will tell. We made our bet. I am following our game.” Torsion responded, “Of course we will win. It's not about winning today's fight, although we are striving for it, but to win the entire battle. This is the battle for the future. It cannot be lost, or everyone will lose. Your political star has risen in the sky. Now it is important to rise to the zenith.” Butina responded, “I am just starting in this field. I still have to learn and learn



from you.” And then on election night, after Trump won, Butina wrote to Torshin, “I am ready for further orders.” And so, after the election, she tried to set up a back channel using the National Prayer Breakfast as cover to “establish a back channel of communication to the new administration.” She apparently even attended an inaugural ball. There remain a lot of questions surrounding Butina and Torshin and their links to the NRA. The NRA spent \$30 million to help elect Donald Trump in 2016, nearly three times the amount they spent in 2012. And McClatchy even reported that the FBI was investigating whether Russian money went to the NRA to help Donald Trump. I talked with Molly Claflin, who's now Chief Oversight Council at American Oversight. She was formerly counsel to the ranking member on the Senate Judiciary Committee from 2015 to 2018, where she had the responsibility of looking into Russian interference.

Molly Claflin:

I got a tip way early, I will say probably April, May of 2017, that there may be an NRA connection to this Russia investigation. And so, we just started poking around and what we found was that there were a lot of interesting NRA connections to the Russia investigation. It wasn't just Maria Butina, but there were a number of contacts between people connected with the NRA and people connected with the Trump campaign. There was just so many links. It wasn't just the Maria Butina thing. There were so many people that were trying to make the same connection. We did not talk to her. We did speak to a number of individuals who we also had evidence that they connected the Trump campaign to Russians. So, these are people that are connected to the NRA that tried to make the connection on behalf of Russian persons. And we found some interesting information there and that unfortunately isn't yet public.

Max Bergmann:

The Moscow Project is an initiative of the Center for American Progress Action Fund dedicated to analyzing the facts behind Trump's connections with Russia. Our work at The Moscow Project is made possible through the generous support of people like you. If you would like to support our work, and this podcast, please go to www.themoscowproject.org and click on the donate tab. That's themoscowproject.org. Thank you.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:



Another key tool in Putin's Kremlin playbook: disinformation. And this is a topic we're gonna cover extensively in later episodes when we discuss the election. But this was a tactic that Russia had been using for a long, long time. Case in point: Operation Infektion. The Kremlin used fake news, phony scientific papers, to push a conspiracy theory that the US government had invented AIDS to use as a biological weapon against the African-American community. Here's Calder Walton on this particular hoax.

Calder Walton:

There's a clear method here and we should say at the outset that obviously not all of the KGB's disinformation stories or campaigns were successful. Some of them simply never got traction. But those that did gain traction, like the AIDS virus conspiracy theory or the body-parts scandal, you can see how it was created and it's quite simple. The KGB's forgery department or disinformation department, called Service A, and there were Service A officers attached to the three, four I think, main residencies in the US and in Europe, they would get instructions from Moscow Center on what the strategy would be for a particular bogus story. They would then leak a forged document to Soviet-friendly press in the hope then that more mainstream media, to use a modern phrase, mainstream newspapers would pick it up as reported fact. And it was simply this, you can see this absolutely clearly happened with the AIDS virus. It was first reported in an Indian, Soviet-friendly, Indian newspaper. It then was reported by Soviet press themselves, omitting the fact that the original reporting was Soviet-friendly. The story was then picked up by European press, and then it was picked up by US press itself. So, this was a way of a story going viral, if you'd like. It was to plant it and then to camouflage its origins.

Max Bergmann:

Russian disinformation feeds off conspiracy theories. They are its lifeblood. For instance, according to the American Public Health Association, from 2014 to 2017, Russia had been helping to amplify and push anti-vaccine content online. The Russians, though, in particular gravitated to conspiracies that were racially divisive and that cast doubt on the image of America or American democracy. And so, it's worth talking a bit about how Donald Trump reemerged on the American political scene. It wasn't because of Donald Trump's immigration stance or his presidential run. No, it was because Donald Trump became the leading voice of the birther conspiracy, perhaps one of the biggest disinformation campaigns in recent American history. Over the last decade or so, it's gotten difficult to separate Donald Trump from birtherism. But birtherism didn't start with Donald Trump. The first time birtherism appeared was in 2004 when Barack Obama ran for Senate in Illinois and one of his opponents speculated that he wasn't born in America. By the time Obama became the Democratic front runner in 2008 the conspiracy theory was pretty



much everywhere. It made for one of the campaign's most iconic moments when Republican nominee John McCain shot down a townhall attendee who brought it up.

[Newscast:](#)

Female Citizen: I gotta ask you a question. I don't, or even I can't, trust Obama. I have read about him and he's not, he's not. He's an Arab.

John McCain: No, no ma'am. No ma'am. He's a decent family man and citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on, on fundamental issues and that's what this campaign is all about. He's not. Thank you.

Max Bergmann:

But birtherism didn't die after Obama was elected. And here's Calder Walton on how Russia uses disinformation.

Calder Walton:

They realized from the lessons of the Second World War that just inventing something out of nothing probably wouldn't work. Instead, find a weakness in society and exploit it.

Max Bergmann:

After Obama was elected, birtherism took off and took hold amongst conservative critics of Obama and that was due in large part to a woman named Orly Taitz. Remember her? She was born in the former Soviet Union. She was a dentist, a lawyer, and a real-estate agent, and she was pretty much a total nobody. But then suddenly she was everywhere. She was filing frivolous lawsuits and becoming a constant presence on TV, especially Fox.

[Orly Taitz:](#)

Uh, in Hawaii, the way, uh, announcements were made in the newspapers, they had two types of birth certificates and that's why we are demanding to see the original. One was a proper birth certificate from the hospital. Another was a birth certificate issued based on a statement of one relative.

Max Bergmann:

She always claimed to have something nobody else did: evidence. In 2009, in one of nine lawsuits she filed saying that Obama was an illegitimate president, Taitz claimed to have gotten her hands on Obama's real birth certificate. It said clear as day that Obama was born on August 4, 1964, in the Republic of Kenya. It was also clearly a fake. The Republic of



Kenya didn't exist back in 1964, and even if it had, Obama was born in 1961. So where did that forged birth certificate come from? It's unclear. But propagandists have been forging documents for decades, if not centuries, and Russia has made an art out of it. Here's John Sipher on Russia's history of stoking conspiracy theories.

John Sipher:

This is the stuff that Russians do and have done forever. They promote forgeries. Oleg Kalugin, who was the youngest KGB general, worked undercover as a journalist in New York City, and he would talk about routinely, they would do things at night. They would put on plastic gloves and they would go out and they would desecrate Jewish cemeteries, and they would place swastikas on synagogues, and they would send racist notes to African diplomats in the UN, all these other kinds of things, and then they would report, he was an undercover as a reporter for a Russian newspaper. Then they would report back into their things how horrible the United States was, and racist, and all these other kinds of things.

Max Bergmann:

There was also another prominent birther and conspiracy theorist, Jerome Corsi, who is mentioned dozens of times in the Mueller report for his role in helping to create a back channel between the Trump campaign and Wikileaks. Corsi also claimed to have evidence that the birth certificate was a fake. In 2011, he wrote a whole book about birtherism creatively titled *Where's the Birth Certificate?* But birtherism by early 2011 had sort of faded. It had been debunked and dismissed time and time again, and the press were tired of it. But then Trump went on *The View*.

[The View:](#)

Joy Behar: You recently said about President Obama, I'm going to quote you, 'He grew up and nobody knew him. Nobody knows who he is until later in his life. The whole thing is very strange.' What are you driving at there? Are you a birther Donald?

Donald Trump: Let, let, let me just say that I was a really good student at the best school. I'm like a smart guy. Okay. They make these birthers into the worst it is. Why doesn't he show his birth certificate?

Whoopi Goldberg: Why should he have to?

Donald Trump: Because I have to and everybody else has to, Whoopi. Excuse me. No, excuse me. I really believe there's a birth certificate. Why? Look, she's smiling. Why doesn't he show his birth certificate?



Max Bergmann:

The next six weeks were fairly insane, and Donald Trump was everywhere. Ben Smith, who was at *Politico* at the time, wrote in April 2011, “Just when it appeared that public interest was fading, celebrity developer Donald Trump has revived the theory that Barack Obama was born overseas and helped expose the depth to which the notion has taken root.” A colleague of Jerome Corsi at WorldNet Daily told *The New York Times* that Donald Trump “was a busy guy. This was a multibillionaire and I was surprised that he was willing to spend that kind of time on it.” What's weird about Trump's conversion to birtherism is that it came kind of abruptly. He actually spent the first year or so of Obama's presidency actively praising Obama, including in his 2010 book, *Think Like a Champion*. Now, a lot of Republicans at least claimed to like and respect Obama early on, only to turn on him a year or two into his administration. But you know, to go from calling Obama “totally a champion” in 2010 to then leading the racist backlash against him in March 2011 is a little odd. Trump gave interview after interview demanding to see Obama's birth certificate. He accused Obama of spending \$2 million to “get away from this issue.” Trump even claimed to have “sources” that were providing him information. A New York Times poll found in April 2011 that a plurality of Republicans believed it. The pressure became so great on the White House that Obama even sent a lawyer to go to Hawaii to get the damn birth certificate. He even held a White House press conference to unveil the birth certificate.

[Barack Obama:](#)

We've had every official in Hawaii, Democrat and Republican, every news outlet that has investigated this, confirm that yes, in fact, I was born in Hawaii, August 4, 1961, in Kapiolani Hospital. We've posted the certification that is given by the state of Hawaii on the Internet for everybody to see. People have provided affidavits that may in fact have seen this birth certificate. And yet this thing just keeps on going.

Max Bergmann:

Orly Taitz after the birth certificate was released, was even brought on MSNBC by Lawrence O'Donnell, who confronted her.

[Newscast:](#)

Orly Taitz: Barack Obama is a liar. He is committing a serious crime. He is committing social-security fraud.



Lawrence O'Donnell: Was he born in Hawaii? Do you believe he was born in Hawaii according to the truth of that birth certificate?

Orly Taitz: Stop yelling. Behave like a human being.

Lawrence O'Donnell: Will you talk about his birth certificate?

Orly Taitz: Can you behave like a human being?

Lawrence O'Donnell: Will you talk about his birth certificate?

Orly Taitz: I can't believe Harvard is not preparing human beings. This is Barack Obama's social-security verification.

Lawrence O'Donnell: So, let me get this straight. You are coming on this show and you're not going to talk about his birth certificate?

Orly Taitz: Saying Barack Obama is committing social security fraud.

Lawrence O'Donnell: Orly Taitz, are you going to talk about his birth certificate? Alright, that's it. Get her out of here. Get her off the show.

Max Bergmann:

But here's the thing: She didn't sound crazy. She actually sounded calm, almost like it was her job to lie. At the White House Correspondents' Dinner a few days later on April 30, 2011, the night of that raid that killed Osama bin Laden, this happened.

[Barack Obama:](#)

Donald Trump is here tonight. Now I know that he's taken some flak lately, but no one is happier, no one is prouder, to put this birth-certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that's because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter, like, did we fake the moon landing? What really happened in Roswell? And where are Biggie and Tupac?

Max Bergmann:

As the crowd erupted in laughter, the cameras zoomed in on Donald Trump, who sat stone-faced. But Trump didn't stop going on and on about birtherism. In 2012 alone, Trump tweeted about birtherism 73 times. He even reportedly reached out to Corsi several times to discuss the "evidence" that the birth certificate was a fake and get advice on how to keep pushing the birther conspiracy. The thing about birtherism is that it's a perfect conspiracy if the objective is to undermine democracy in the United States. It weaponizes racism to say that Americans were duped into electing an illegitimate president. It implies a massive



coverup by the government and the media. And now, here was a big-name businessman, the host of a popular reality TV show, somebody with enough political clout that Mitt Romney was willing to grovel for his endorsement in 2012, pushing birtherism day after day, even after it had been totally discredited. Now let's be clear: No evidence has emerged to show a Russian hand in birtherism, but it bears all the hallmarks of a Russian active-measures operation. Here's John Sipher.

John Sipher:

Birtherism is just almost like it fits again that pattern. It's just one of these kind of active measures, smear campaign, disinformation campaigns, that the Russians are the best in the world at.

Max Bergmann:

Look, I've been beating around the bush. So, do I think birtherism is a Russian conspiracy? The answer is no. I think it came from the American right, desperate to discredit a popular Democratic president. But I also think it is naïve of us to think that Russian disinformation and influence efforts just began in 2016 when we started paying attention. The Russians seize on conspiracy theories and they amplify them, and birtherism has all the hallmarks of exactly the type of conspiracy theory they would have loved to push. And we know in 2011, they were making moves to hit back at the United States. So, then do I think Donald Trump got birtherism from Russia? Probably not. But we've talked about this. The bombshell in the Steele dossier is the claim from four different sources that Trump between 2008 and 2011 began a relationship with Russian intelligence. That "Russian regime has been cultivating, and supporting, and assisting Trump for at least five years." This is right at the time that Trump went from praising Obama to claiming he was illegitimate. And remember, back in Episode Four, this was the period after the financial crisis, the real-estate crisis, right when Trump was financially desperate and also financially dependent on Russian money. And what a massive impact an American celebrity with a television show and a mass online following could have. But who knows? I think at the very least, if Donald Trump didn't pick up on birtherism from Russia, Russia almost certainly picked up on Donald Trump's birtherism. It is what brought Trump into modern American politics. Birtherism was not some sideshow for Donald Trump. It was instrumental to his political rise and his embrace by the American Right.

Calder Walton:

The KGB had a vast array of different names for agent. The word agent isn't actually that useful. I think that an asset is broader because it can encompass both a witting, knowing agent, if you like, or an unwitting agent. The KGB has, had throughout the Cold War, a term



called “useful idiots.” So, these are people that were useful for Moscow, but they didn't know that they were useful. So that would be, as we would think about it, probably as like an unwitting agent. They also had a category called “agents of influence.” So that's to say someone that is willing to take talking points and so on.

Max Bergmann:

The Kremlin also has another tool that it uses: kompromat. It has a long history of developing kompromat—basically, compromising material that might be useful down the road to make somebody do what they want. This can be financially compromising someone, which you can do by engaging in shady business dealings with them. But one classic KGB way is sex. What people in the business call a “honeypot” or a “honey trap.” Here again is Calder Walton

Calder Walton:

The KGB infamously or famously, uh, deployed honey traps. So, sending in often beautiful women to seduce Western politicians. But it doesn't necessarily need to be along those lines. It can be simply getting compromising material, kompromat, over a target.

Max Bergmann:

Kompromat may have actually been key to Putin's rise to the presidency of Russia. Yury Skuratov, Russia's Prosecutor General, was investigating Russian President Boris Yeltsin for corruption. Putin had recently been named head of the FSB, the primary successor to the KGB, and was angling to curry favor with Yeltsin and become his successor. In the spring of 1999, a video appeared on one of Russia's state-owned broadcasters. It was grainy, but it showed a man who looked an awful lot like Skuratov with two prostitutes. Skuratov strenuously denied that it was him in the tape, but Putin himself, the head of the FSB, went on TV to say it was him in the video. The Acting Prosecutor General at the time, Yury Chaika, would do the same. And four months later, Putin would be appointed prime minister and Yury Chaika, or as the New York Times called him, “the master of kompromat,” would become Russia's Prosecutor General. And it was in that position that Chaika in 2016 gave a Russian oligarch named Aras Agalarov some damaging information that could help the Trump campaign. And this became the basis for the Trump campaign's meeting with a Russian government representative in Trump Tower in June 2016. The use of kompromat is no doubt something in the Kremlin's locker. So, in November 2013, Trump brought the Miss Universe pageant to Moscow. He did so after meeting with Emin Agalarov, who was a middling Russian pop star earlier in 2013. Emin was also the son of Aras Agalarov, an oligarch developer in Russia known as the “Russian Donald Trump.” I talked with David Corn, legendary Washington journalist and also author of *Russian Roulette*, about how the Miss Universe pageant came to Moscow.



David Corn:

They started talking to the director of Miss Universe, "Why don't you have Miss Universe one day in Baku, Azerbaijan?" And she goes, "Nah, I don't think so." And, "Why don't you then have it in Moscow?" And they started having conversations and then she goes to the fellow who owns the Miss Universe contest at the time, Donald J. Trump. And she says, "Huh, you know we have a possibility of doing Miss Universe in M—" "I love it." She barely gets out the word Moscow. He loves it. Make it happen. Let's do this thing. He had been trying for decades to do anything in Moscow, in Russia, for his various business entities. And here finally was someone coming and knocking on the door and saying, let's do this. And what's particularly noteworthy about this is that as soon as he announces we're going to have Miss Universe in a few months, in November 2013, in Moscow, he tweets out, "We're bringing Miss Universe to Moscow. Will Vladimir Putin come? Will he become my new best friend?" And Trump is saying, "I want to be best friends with this guy." You know, we don't have a lot on the record prior to this moment about Trump's feelings towards Putin. But this begins what Michael Isikoff and I called in our book Russian Roulette "a dark bromance" between the two men. At least, you know, this is at least the public beginning of this.

Max Bergmann:

Aras Agalarov paid \$20 million, provided the venue, and was co-host of the pageant in Moscow. Now, Aras was an up-and-coming oligarch. He helped build some of the Kremlin's top projects, and this earned him a spot at the table for Putin's annual meeting with Russian oligarchs. And so here we have Donald Trump joining forces with the Russian Donald Trump. And it will come as no surprise that before, during, and after the Miss Universe pageant, Trump was in talks with the Agalarovs about building a Trump Tower in Moscow. But Trump's trip to Moscow ended up being pretty rushed, because, before he left, he had to make a stop. He had to go to Reverend Billy Graham's birthday celebration. Now Reverend Graham was a pillar of the religious right, and he was extremely politically influential in Republican circles. Here's David Corn.

David Corn:

He came from Billy Graham's event. He was going to be there usually for two or three days, and that would have given more time for a possible meeting with Putin, to do other things while he was there. But he ended up going to a big gala celebration for Billy Graham's birthday with all the luminaries of the right-wing world, the evangelical world, the Republican cosmos. And this is in November 2013. And when he's in Moscow, he explains to people why he's cutting it so close to coming in before the event, he said, this is something that I just had to do. And it was interpreted as meaning, hey, he's probably going to be running for



president. And this is, you know, this was a mandatory appearance with Billy Graham. And so that was, that's somewhat interesting too, because if he's saying that when he's in Moscow, does that get back to anybody in the Kremlin and give them the idea that, you know, Trump is indeed going to run for president.

Max Bergmann:

So Donald Trump appears to be thinking about running for president and he gets on a plane to Moscow? Thanks to social media it's not hard to piece together a timeline of Donald Trump's trip to Moscow. He landed in Moscow on Saturday morning, November 9, 2013. He took a photo with Emin, who posted it on Instagram and Twitter. He then had lunch at Nobu with the Agalarovs. Both Aras and Emin were there, and so was Emin's publicist Rob Goldstone, as was another man named Ike Kaveladze, a Vice President in Aras Agalarov's company, the Crocus Group. Normally, detailing who Trump had lunch with would not be such an important detail, but all of these figures would play a key role in setting up that infamous June 9 meeting in 2016 in Trump Tower. It was Rob Goldstone who sent Donald Trump Jr. the email offering dirt as "part of Russia and its government's support for Mr. Trump." And Emin Agalarov is the one that Donald Trump Jr. called three times to make sure the meeting would be worth his time. And Kaveladze, who ended up attending the meeting, was even used as an example in a 2000 Government Accountability Office report. The subject: how Russians launder money. And so, all the same people that would be part of setting up that June 9 meeting are here having lunch with Donald Trump in Moscow in November 2013. There was also another attendee at this lunch, Herman [German] Gref, who heads up one of Russia's most important state-owned banks. And on this trip Donald Trump appears to be obsessed with meeting Vladimir Putin. Here's David Corn.

David Corn:

It's very striking because as he gets there he keeps asking the people around him, "Is Putin coming to the event? To the Miss Universe broadcast? Will I get to meet him? Will I see him? Is he coming to the event?" And he's told, "Well, we think you'll get to see him. We are trying to schedule this and, and you know, we're waiting to hear back, we're waiting her back." "Is he coming? Am I going to see him?" "We're waiting to hear back." And he just seems very fixated on the point of meeting Putin. Eventually, he's told that he's probably not coming and there may not be a meeting, but the phone rings and it's Dmitry Peskov, who is Putin's, one of his top advisors, he's called his spokesman. But, um, he speaks really good English and I think on matters relating to the United States in particular he really has Putin's ear. And he apologizes, uh, "Mr. Putin can't see Mr. Trump, but he will be sending an emissary to the event," and that he has a gift for Mr. Trump that will be forthcoming as well. And so, Trump's a little deflated



or disappointed, but he's told, hey, you get a call from Dmitry Peskov, it's just like getting a call from Vladimir Putin. It's really the same thing. So that perks him up.

Max Bergmann:

So, Trump seems to be thinking about running for president, is pursuing a Trump Tower deal in Moscow. He's hobnobbing with Russian oligarchs and the head of Kremlin-connected banks. He's desperate to meet Putin, and oh yeah, he has a pageant to host that night.

[Broadcast:](#)

Miss Universe Announcer: Russia is currently studying global economics in college. This 19-year-old hopes to either host her own TV show or become a professional piano player in the future. Russia!

Max Bergmann:

And it's the night which has been the source of a lot of speculation. It's allegedly the night where the most salacious allegation in the Steele dossier takes place: that Donald Trump engaged with Russian prostitutes and the Kremlin got the whole thing on film. Here's David Corn.

David Corn:

In the book Mike Isikoff and I do try to come up with as much of a timeline as we could. He was in Russia for really 36 hours. He only stayed in the hotel one night. And as we were able to reconstruct it by talking to people who were involved and there, he was out very late the night he got there, and he actually was asked that night to appear in a music video that Emin Agalarov was shooting with some of the Miss Universe contest. Would he be able to do a cameo appearance? And Trump said yes, but it has to be between 7:00 AM or 7:30. It was early in the morning and a very brief window. And it's a scene in which he just, you know, sits at a conference room in an office like setting and says to Emin Agalarov, who seems to awake from a dream, "You're fired," you know, the signature line. Ha, ha ha.

[Music video:](#)

Donald Trump: Emin, let's get with it. You're always late. You're just another pretty face. I'm really tired of you. You're fired.

David Corn:

So it seems as if he was in the hotel room that particular night for a very brief time after flying



over from the United States that day and being somewhat jet lagged. Uh, we do know that his own bodyguard said that when he arrived that afternoon, that first afternoon in the hotel, someone came up to them and asked basically, "Do you want me to bring girls by for Mr. Trump?" And he laughed and said, "No, we don't do that sort of thing." Uh, that's Keith Schiller's, testimony to the House Intelligence Committee. So, if that's really the timeline, if we didn't miss anything here, it seems a little bit less than likely. Maybe. I mean it's not impossible. Um, I think there are some, you know, if people are looking for kompromat, compromising material on Donald Trump, you know, there are other places to look.

Max Bergmann:

More than two years later, we still don't really have a definitive answer about that tape. But the Mueller Report actually included a reference to it in a footnote. The report includes a text exchange between a Georgian businessman, Giorgi Rtskhiladze, who'd worked with Trump before, and Trump's lawyer Michael Cohen. The exchange took place on October 30, 2016, just one week before the election. Rtskhiladze texts Cohen, "Stopped the flow of some tapes from Russia, but not sure if there's anything else. Just so you know." Cohen responded, "Tapes of what?" Rtskhiladze then responded, "Not sure of the content, but person in Moscow was bragging had tapes from Russia trip. Will try to dial you tomorrow but wanted to be aware. I'm sure it's not a big deal, but there are lots of stupid people." So, what to make of the tape? Look: We know Donald Trump is compromised by his sexual escapades. This is after all why Michael Cohen is going to jail. Michael Cohen has pled guilty to charges that on the orders of then-candidate Trump, who is listed in the indictment as "Individual One," that he was directed to make illegal payments to conceal a sex scandal involving Stormy Daniels. And this happened right before the election, which threatened Donald Trump's chances of winning the White House in 2016. Trump would have almost certainly been indicted if he wasn't president of the United States. And so, what I think is more telling is that when Donald Trump comes back to America after the Miss Universe pageant, he comes back thinking he's close to sealing the deal on that tower in Moscow. In speeches and in interviews, Trump would suddenly go on about how great his trip to Moscow had been and how great Vladimir Putin was. Here's Donald Trump doing an interview with MSNBC in Moscow during the pageant.

[Donald Trump:](#)

I do have a relationship and I can tell you that he's very interested in what we're doing here today. He's probably very interested in what you and I are saying today and I'm sure he's going to be seeing it in some form. But I do have a relationship with him and I think, uh, it's very interesting to see what's happened. I mean, look, he's done a very brilliant job in terms of what he represents and who he's representing. If you look at what he's done with Syria, if you



look at so many of the different things, he has really eaten our president's lunch. Let's not kid ourselves.

Max Bergmann:

And more than six months later, in May of 2014, here's Donald Trump at the National Press Club.

[Donald Trump:](#)

I was in Russia. I was in Moscow recently and I spoke indirectly and directly with President Putin who could not have been nicer. And we had a tremendous success. The show was live from Moscow and we had a tremendous success there and it was amazing.

Max Bergmann:

Here again is David Corn.

David Corn:

He goes back to New York and he says, "We, we're moving forward on this project." And there are stories in the real-estate trades and so on. A few months later, Ivanka Trump comes to Moscow and she tours around with Emin Agalarov, the pop star, looking at possible sites. And so, it looks like this thing is indeed moving ahead. And it's important to note at this stage that Trump has been saying great things about Putin leading up to the event and then after the event. "We had a great time. We had a great time in Russia. Moscow was great. Moscow is wonderful." And I think he's certainly smart enough to know that if he's dumping on Putin, or he's being overly critical of the repression of gay rights or events overseas with Russia, that he's not going to be able to get a billion-dollar deal in Moscow. You know, you can't dump on Putin and expect them to move forward.

Max Bergmann:

Donald Trump's relationship with Russia and his obsession with Vladimir Putin is constantly described as being inexplicable. But it's not. It's in fact quite explicable. Now, it seems highly probable that the Russians have a whole lot of compromising material on Donald Trump, and therefore the Russians likely have leverage over him. He's compromised. But frankly, I kind of doubt that Russia would even have to threaten to use it against Trump. So, it's probably not that Trump has had to make some terrible life choice where he backs Russia and betrays the country, all in order so the Russians don't reveal what they have, a sex tape or evidence of money laundering or fraud. I don't think they need to do that with Donald Trump, because Trump's totally incentivized to back Russia. He built a business model around Russian money. He's been captured by it and he will do



what it takes to keep it flowing. Here again is Asha Rangappa.

Asha Rangappa:

I recruited people who, essentially they were committing treason against their country, and it's a careful process because you really need to help them rationalize that choice as they're making it and let them believe that they are the one making it. Of course, it's, it's actually harder when people see it as a choice. When they really see that they are kind of crossing over, you know, that path is going to be longer. Whereas if that's not even a consideration, if that's not even part of their moral compass at all, then really all you have to do is just entice them or pull the puppet strings, because they are really just looking out for their own gain or whatever it is that motivates them. And that's why I said that the latter is actually scarier, because you're not, you're not dealing with someone who has buried guilt, or regret, or shame, or any, any of those kinds of emotions in some recesses of their mind. They actually just don't have those kinds of emotions.

Max Bergmann:

This has been a winding episode through the murky world of Russian intelligence. It is what James Angleton described as:

[James Angleton:](#)

A wilderness of mirrors.

Max Bergmann:

But I think what's clear is that, in Vladimir Putin's Russia, the old KGB tactics didn't go away. They aren't a thing of the past. The KGB playbook wasn't just sitting on a shelf collecting dust. No, under Putin, Russian intelligence has been empowered, it has been emboldened, and it has been told to get busy, to get to work. And soon, it will have an American presidential candidate to work for.

Producer:

Next time on The Asset.

Max Bergmann:

He's running. After all the buildup, it's election time. From Donald Trump going down that escalator.

[Donald Trump:](#)



I am officially running for president of the United States and we are going to make our country great again.

Max Bergmann:

To the back channel efforts to negotiate a Trump Tower in Moscow, to Donald Trump putting together the collusion dream team.

[Newscast:](#)

Male Reporter: We heard you might be announcing your foreign policy advisory team soon. If there's any answer on that.

Donald Trump: We are going to be doing that in fact, Carter Page PhD, George Papadopoulos.

Max Bergmann:

We will walk through the journey of Trump and his campaign going from laughingstock to front runner.

Producer:

The Asset is a production of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, Protect the Investigation, and District Productive. Paul Woody Woodhall, Max Bergmann and Andrea Purse, executive producers and Peter Ogburn, senior producer. The Asset is written by Max Bergmann and the good people at The Moscow Project: Jeremy Venook, Talia Dessel, and Siena Cicarelli. And the team at Protect the Investigation. And Paul Woody Woodhall and his cohort at District Productive. To learn more about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, go to themoscowproject.org and protecttheinvestigation.org. Please subscribe to the podcast on Apple podcasts or your favorite podcast app and please leave a rating and a review. Thank you.

[Seth Meyers:](#)

Donald Trump has been saying that he will run for president as a Republican. Which is surprising, since I just assumed he was running as a joke.