



Episode 7: Running

Producer:

Previously on The Asset,

Max Bergmann:

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.

Calder Walton:

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

Max Bergmann:

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.

[Newscast:](#)

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

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

Hayes: Congratulations for not being indicted.

Max Bergmann:

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.

[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.

Max Bergmann:

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.



-Break-

Max Bergmann:

Episode Seven: Running. On December 10, 2015, Russia's state news channel RT had a gala to celebrate its 10th anniversary. RT had been created ten years ago to be the Russian CNN, but this wasn't just a news network. When the intelligence community released its report on Russian interference just a year after this gala, it would label RT as a key pillar in Russian influence efforts. And shortly thereafter the US government would take the unusual step of requiring RT employees to register with the Department of Justice. See, to the US government they weren't journalists, they were foreign agents and at its 10th anniversary gala in 2015 there were lots of important Russian figures in attendance. It was a who's who crowd: Mikhail Prokhorov, who owns the Brooklyn Nets, Viktor Vekselsberg, and, of course, Vladimir Putin himself. One person not able to attend was Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, who used to have his own show on RT. He was holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy, but he was able to appear via satellite and even hosted one of the event's panels. But, as Russia's elite sat at the outer tables, the central table, the table where Vladimir Putin was sitting, had a bizarre hodgepodge of foreigners, mostly politicians. There was a Deputy Prime Minister of the Czech Republic who had once claimed that Ukraine didn't want to be part of the EU. There was a former member of the German parliament known for his outspoken criticism of American foreign policy. There was a Bosnian film director and his wife who were big supporters of the Kremlin. There were also Putin's top aides at the table: his chief of staff, his deputy chief of staff—who, according to the January 6, 2017, intelligence community report, oversaw the Russian government's propaganda—and there was Putin's top aid, Demitri Peskov. But also at the table were two Americans. Sitting next to Peskov was Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate for president and frequent commentator on RT. And across the table from her, sitting right next to Vladimir Putin himself, was retired general and Trump's future national security advisor, Michael Flynn. The story of how Michael Flynn got to that gala in Moscow is important. Michael Flynn excelled serving in Iraq and Afghanistan as an intelligence officer. He specialized in finding and fixing targets. He was also a bit of a contrarian, willing to go to blows with the rest of the intelligence community when he felt like they were getting things wrong. His service in Iraq and Afghanistan got him promoted in the Obama administration to lieutenant general, and a job as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the DIA, which is the Pentagon's intelligence service. For all his talents in the field, though, Flynn was at sea in Washington. It was a Pentagon job. It was a Washington job. It wasn't just about finding and fixing targets. It wasn't operational, it was analytical, and Flynn's tenure was chaotic. His contrarian nature and often loose relationship with data led his staff to develop the derisive phrase "Flynn facts." And Flynn's contrarians streak continued. As a military officer coming into his own after 9/11, counterterrorism was Flynn's focus, and as DIA head he seemed to see Russia as a potential ally. So in 2013, just as the reset with Russia was



fraying, Flynn went to Moscow and visited GRU headquarters, the headquarters of Russian military intelligence. He became the first US officer to be allowed inside the building, and he was greeted very warmly. Steven Hall, the CIA's former chief of Russia operations, told *The New Yorker* that trying to build inroads with the GRU seemed “at best quaint and naive because every time we have tried to have some sort of meaningful cooperation with the Russians, it's almost always been manipulated and turn back against us.” Yet, just a few months after Flynn returned from Moscow, he tried to return the favor and invite several senior GRU officers to the United States. But Russia had just annex Crimea, and the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, stopped the trip. By April of 2014, the DIA was in a fairly chaotic state and Flynn was told he wouldn't be extended. He was effectively fired, and he didn't take it well. Flynn was bitter at getting pushed out. A senior military official at his retirement ceremony, told that it was clear he was “loading up and he was not going to go quietly.” Now, Flynn had been in the military since 1981, when he was 23 years old, and for many military officers the transitioned to an unstructured civilian life is difficult. But Flynn went a pretty typical route: He started a national security consulting agency with his son. And so Flynn was looking for clients, looking for people, companies, governments interested in his expertise. Flynn had a lot of money coming in from places like Turkey, more than \$500,000. In fact, he was acting as an unregistered foreign agent of Turkey. He was also hired by a firm seeking to push something it called the Mideast Marshall Plan, which would involve US-Russian nuclear-power cooperation in the Middle East. Flynn would later push this plan when he became national security advisor, raising huge alarms throughout the National Security Council staff. But Flynn was also clearly on Russia's radar. He had been to one of their intelligence agencies headquarters. And so by December 2014, Flynn was making semi-regular appearances on RT.

[Michael Flynn:](#)

I do think that Russia and the United States have to work together on this. And I think that there is an international coalition that needs to be brought together. But I do believe, I'm adamant about this, that I think that from not only diplomatically, but also militarily, Russia and the United States, working together and trying to work with the other partners that we all have in this region, can come up with some other solutions.

Max Bergmann:

He was even getting paid by Russia, at least \$5,000 per year between the RT gig and speaking fees from other Kremlin-backed companies. He also received \$45,000 to attend the RT gala. Now, for a former general, head of an intelligence agency, you are supposed to report this funding and in fact get permission to take foreign money. But Flynn did not. And so here, in December 2015, Michael Flynn, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was celebrating the 10th anniversary of Russia's propaganda network and looking like Vladimir Putin's trophy. As Putin finished his speech, Flynn leaped up and gave a standing ovation.



Vladimir Putin:
[Untranslated Russian].

Max Bergmann:

Three months later, in late February 2016, as Donald Trump was suddenly winning primaries and needing to build out a foreign policy team, Michael Flynn started advising the Trump campaign. Reuters, at the time, described Flynn as “wanting the United States to work more closely with Russia.” I'm Max Bergman and this is The Asset.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump came down the escalator in Trump Tower to make an announcement.

Donald Trump:

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

Jon Stewart:

A billionaire vanity candidate taking the escalator to the White House. “Hey, only losers walk, presidents take Stair Force One.”

Max Bergmann:

Donald Trump had talked again and again and again about running for president. In 1988, after he came back from his trip from the Soviet Union, he contemplated running. Again in 2000, he even contemplated running as an independent presidential candidate. And in 2012, Trump again was thinking about it. McKay Coppins wrote a profile of Trump's haphazard dalliance through New Hampshire for *Buzzfeed*. But, for some reason, now, in 2015, at 69 years of age, Trump actually decided to run. At the time, nobody took it seriously. He had no political experience. He seemed kind of out there from the birtherism thing and his announcement speech was really extreme. He railed against immigrants and Muslims, and it led to many of his sponsors for *The Apprentice* abandoning him. Trump's entrance into the race was seen as a stunt by an attention seeker, perhaps to boost *The Apprentice*'s ratings, and maybe boost his own brand. In fact, according to his lawyer, Michael Cohen, that's exactly what Trump was doing.

Michael Cohen:



Mr. Trump would often say this campaign was going to be the greatest infomercial in political history. He never expected to win the primary. He never expected to win the general election. The campaign, for him, was always a marketing opportunity.

Max Bergmann:

Trump may have also seen an opportunity to tap into the broader discontent within the Republican Party. Part of it was his willingness to take extreme positions and embrace bigotry, but part of it was also his willingness to go after his opponents and take up decidedly un-republican stances. He said he was anti-trade. He said he was anti-war. He said he was even pro-healthcare. And those stances all make sense if you're trying to win over voters who are disaffected with the Republican Party. But there was one stance he came back to over and over and over again that just didn't make any strategic political sense: He was pro-Putin. The night he announced his candidacy, he went on Fox News and said so to Bill O'Reilly.

[Newscast:](#)

Trump: Well Putin has no respect for our president whatsoever. He's got a tremendous popularity in Russia. They love what he's doing. They love what he represents. So, we have a president who is absolutely—you look at them, that chemistry is so bad between those two people. I was over in Moscow two years ago and I will tell you, you can get along with those people and get along with them well. You can make deals with those people. Obama can't, he's not...

O'Reilly: So you could make a deal with Putin to stop his expansion?

Trump: I would be willing to bet, I would have a great relationship with Putin.

Max Bergmann:

In July, Trump even guaranteed that Putin would turnover Edward Snowden to the US if Trump won the presidency.

[Donald Trump:](#)

Snowden is living the life. Look, if that, if I'm president, Putin says, "Hey, boom, you're gone." I guarantee you that.

Max Bergmann:

Spoiler alert, Trump is president and Snowden is still in Russia. Trump didn't try to conceal his position on Russia. He brought it up again and again. He would raise his ability to build relations with Putin more than 20 times as the Republican presidential primary heated up. His odd affinity for Russia would prompt a question to him at a Republican primary debate in November about



how he would deal with Russian aggression. And Trump gave an answer we would learn to expect.

[Donald Trump:](#)

But as far as the Ukraine is concerned, and you could say Syria, as far as Syria, I like, if Putin wants to go in, and I got to know him very well because we were both on 60 minutes, we were stable mates and we did very well that night. But, you know that. But, if Putin wants to go and knock the hell out of ISIS, I am all for it, 100%, and I can't understand how anybody would be against...

Max Bergmann:

Trump's praise of Putin didn't make any sense from a policy perspective. It didn't make any sense from a political perspective either. In 2015 Putin was extremely unpopular with Americans. Only 12% viewed him favorably and 70% unfavorably. So, little more than a year after Russia invaded Ukraine and the U S and Europe put on major sanctions against Russia, Trump decided to run for president on a pro-Putin platform. The shocking thing, and truly shocking, is that it didn't seem to hurt him. Trump was the change candidate, breaking all the rules, and Republican voters ate it up, even if it meant Trump betraying 70 years of republican foreign policy tradition of being hawkish on Russia.

[Newscast:](#)

New CNN/ORC polls, very much about Donald Trump's huge lead as the choice of Republicans for the presidential nomination. If you look at the numbers, we've got Trump at 39% then if you look at the next three candidates, Ted Cruz now firmly in second place at 18%, Ben Carson at 10%, Marco Rubio at 10. That's right, Donald Trump's number is bigger than the number two, three and four candidates combined.

Max Bergmann:

When Joe Scarborough, pressed Trump on why he continued to say good things about Putin when “he kills journalists that disagree with him,” Trump responded,

[Donald Trump:](#)

Our country does plenty of killing also Joe, so you know.

Max Bergmann:

Two days later, Trump went even further to defend Putin from charges that he had opposition journalists murdered, saying,

[Donald Trump:](#)



In all fairness to Putin, you're saying he killed people. I haven't seen that. I don't know that he has. Have you been able to prove that you know the names of the reporters that he's killed?

Max Bergmann:

And so Putin returned the favor. He even praised Trump at his end-of-the-year news conference in 2015 saying, “There is no doubt he is a very bright and talented man and he is absolute leader of the presidential race.” It was also at this time, in late 2015 and into 2016, when allied intelligence agencies began coming across suspicious contacts between people associated with Trump and the Kremlin. The first was the UK’s GCHQ, equivalent to our National Security Agency. According to a report in *The Guardian*, in December 2015, GCHQ became aware of “suspicious interactions between figures connected to Trump and known or suspected Russian agents.” Over the next several months, spy agencies in Germany, Poland, Austria, Estonia, the Netherlands, France, and Australia all relayed information regarding contacts between Trump associates and Kremlin linked figures. One source told *The Guardian*, “it looks like the US agencies were asleep.” The European agencies were saying, “there are contacts going on between people close to Mr. Trump and people we believe are Russian intelligence agents. You should be wary of this.” The message was, “Watch out, there's something not right here.”

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

It was a mystery at the time just why Trump would be going to such lengths to defend Putin. We now know, in late October 2015, Trump had secretly signed a letter of intent on a project called the Trump World Tower Moscow. A Trump Tower in Moscow had been a dream of Trump for decades. Now, with his brand riding high because of his presidential campaign, it might finally get built. They even proposed giving Putin the penthouse condo valued at \$50 million in order to get the deal done. And all of it happened in secret. Here's Michael Cohen again, testifying before Congress about Trump Tower Moscow.

[Michael Cohen:](#)

Mr. Trump knew of and directed the Trump Moscow negotiations throughout the campaign and lied about it. He lied about it because he never expected to win. He also lied about it because he stood to make hundreds of millions of dollars on the Moscow real estate project.

Max Bergmann:

Now, Trump had shifted his real-estate business away from developing projects on his own towards licensing his brand for a fee. That carried much less risks than building the skyscrapers himself, but it also brought much lower potential returns. The Moscow Project, though, appeared different. According to a court filing by the Southern District of New York, the project “could



have received hundreds of millions of dollars from Russian sources in licensing fees and other revenues.”

We've talked about Trump's longtime dream of building a skyscraper in Moscow before. He'd been pursuing it for decades, and he even wrote in his 1987 book, *The Art of the Deal*, that he wanted “a large luxury hotel across the street from the Kremlin in partnership with the Soviet government.” But by the start of his presidential campaign, Trump had unsuccessfully tried to get his Moscow tower built at least two other times.

There was 2005, when he was trying to get back on his feet after selling off his father's empire. Felix Sater—who we talked about a lot back in episode four—found them a site, an old pencil factory, and even brought Ivanka and Don Jr. to Russia to scope it out. While they were there, Sater claims he got them into Putin's personal office where Ivanka took a spin in Putin's personal chair. And in 2013, they tried to build up the momentum from the Moscow Miss Universe Pageant with the Agalarovs, who had paid to bring the pageant to Moscow. And so, in February 2014, as Russia was about to seize Crimea, Ivanka Trump was in Moscow and was meeting with Emin Agalarov about building a Trump Tower. They talked throughout 2014, but that fell through, and perhaps it was the imposition of US sanctions that caused it to stall.

But then, in September 2015, months after Trump had already begun his presidential campaign, the Trump Organization received, according to the Mueller Report, a “new inquiry about pursuing a Trump tower in Moscow,” and it went to Felix Sater, who the Mueller Report described as “an informal agent of the Trump organization in Moscow.” Sater went to Cohen and Cohen went to Trump, assuring him the project was continuing.

By October 2015, as Trump was crushing it in Republican debates, he had also signed a letter of intent on the project. The building was to have 250 first-class luxury residential condominiums and a high-end hotel with at least 150 hotel rooms. Trump's stood to reap a huge windfall without, according to the Mueller Report, “assuming significant liability or financing commitments.” Looking at the timeline, it's hard not to see a connection between the Trump Tower Moscow and Trump's praise for Putin. They line up almost perfectly. On November 3, the day after the letter of intent was sent to Moscow, Felix Sater wrote to Michael Cohen, “Buddy, our boy can become president of the USA and we can engineer it. Two boys from Brooklyn getting a USA president elected.” And that same day, Trump gave a press conference where he yet again brought up Russia.

[Donald Trump:](#)

Are you from Russia? All right. I think our relationship with Russia will be very good. Vladimir Putin was on 60 Minutes with me three weeks ago, right? Putin, and they have one of the highest ratings they've had in a long time. So, I'm going to give him total credit, but we will have a very good relationship, I think with Russia. Now, maybe we won't, but I believe we will have a very good relationship with Russia. I believe that I will have a very good relationship with Putin. Go ahead.



Max Bergmann:

And later, that same day, Sater emailed Cohen, “I just watched the Trump press conference. Love the Putin Russia reference. I need that part of the press conference cut into a shorter clip to be played for Putin. Get me the clip and I will get it to Putin and his people and it will help our cause and our process.” It’s no mystery what’s happening here. Felix Sater just said it. They are using Donald Trump’s pro-Russia positions to try to get the Trump Tower Moscow built. In November, Ivanka Trump was contacted by a Russian woman who said she was connected to a guy named Dmitry Klokov who was described to Ivanka as being close to Putin and that “he has done Putin’s campaigns.” Now remember, Trump is running for president and so Ivanka Trump passed this on to the FBI immediate... Oh. No, I’m sorry. It says here that she forwarded the message to Michael Cohen. Cohen then exchanged calls and emails with Klokov who described himself as a “trusted person” who could offer the campaign “political synergy.” And he sought to arrange a meeting between Trump and Vladimir Putin. Klokov said that a meeting could have a phenomenal impact in a business dimension. Cohen didn’t need these contacts and decided that it wasn’t worth his time, because he had Felix Sater, who was on the ground, currently talking to the Kremlin, and would arrange for a formal invite for Trump to go to Moscow. But Cohen also grew frustrated with the slow pace of Sater’s negotiations. And so, in January 2016, Cohen reached out directly to top Putin aid, Dmitry Peskov, who just a month earlier with sitting next to Jill Stein at the RT gala, and requested Peskov’s assistance in getting the project moving. A few days later, Cohen received an email from Peskov’s personal assistant and they spoke on the phone for roughly 20 minutes. It was on this call that Cohen discussed giving Putin the penthouse condo, valued at \$50 million.

This, right here, this is how we know the Russians have compromised president Trump. He is pursuing a very lucrative deal with the Russians and he’s lying about it and the Russians know that he’s lying about it. Trump is promising better relations with Russia and praising Putin, and at the same time, Trump’s staff is working secretly behind the scenes to get a deal done and are using Trump’s words to seal it, and the Russians know it. And Trump has even offered to give Putin a \$50 million penthouse. This could also be called a bribe. That could violate something called the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, and the Russians know that as well. So, whatever leverage the Russians had over Trump before the campaign, they now have this. Here’s Stephanie Douglas, a former FBI official, testifying before the House Intelligence committee in June.

[Stephanie Douglas:](#)

Any kind of information that you’re not being truly honest with, if you can be compromised based on your dishonesty about something, that’s something a foreign intelligence agency can take advantage of.



Max Bergmann:

The Moscow Project conversations kept going through June 2016. The day after Cohen's January call with Peskov's office, Sater texted Cohen asking to have a call: "It's about Putin. They called today." In May 2016, Sater passes along an invitation from Peskov to Cohen to attend the St. Petersburg Forum on June 16, and said Cohen may even meet Vladimir Putin. Sater asked Cohen to confirm those dates. Cohen responds, "Works for me," and on June 9, the same day a Russian government representative was meeting in Trump Tower offering dirt on Hillary Clinton, Sater sent Cohen a visa application and badges, noting it's likely he's going to meet with Putin. But then, on June 14, Cohen meets with Sater in the lobby of Trump Tower and tells him he's not going to go to Russia at this time. Also on June 14, *The Washington Post* published a story with a headline that screamed, "Russian Government Hackers Penetrated DNC, Stole Opposition Research on Trump."

So, despite their desperation for a tower, there's a clear reason for Cohen not to go and for Trump not to go: Trump's got a shot at winning.

-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:

The buildup to the Iowa caucus, set for February 1, was intense. Trump was embroiled in a feud with Fox News, complaining that he wasn't being treated fairly, and he even boycotted the final debate before voting began. And that seemed to hurt him, as he finished a close second to Ted Cruz. But eight days later, Trump stormed back in the New Hampshire primary, lapping the field, winning by a margin of 20 points. Trump again dominated the South Carolina primary on February 20, and then on March 1, Trump had a banner day.

Newscasts:

[Reporter:](#) Donald Trump has won, is our projected winner in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Reporter: Developing news tonight: Parties panic as Donald Trump wins big on Super Tuesday: Republican leaders Revolt.



[Stephen Colbert](#): Americans in 13 states voted in Super Tuesday making today, “My God, what have we done? Wednesday.” Donald Trump dominated Super Tuesday with a seven state win-boree, and it looks like Trump might have the nomination in the palm of his tiny, wet, pink hand.

Max Bergmann:

Suddenly, Trump looked like he would win this thing, and now people were starting to notice that he didn't seem to have a real campaign. Trump ran basically as a one-man show, and the press couldn't get enough of it. He would go on TV constantly and, sure he had a campaign manager and some staff but, unlike other campaigns, he had almost no one working on policy, especially foreign policy. But questions were being raised: What would a Trump foreign policy look like? And so, Trump needed a team, but he had a problem. His pro-Russian sentiments were anathema to the Republican foreign policy establishment. In fact, more than a hundred conservatives, including officials from both Bush administrations, signed onto a letter in early March opposing Trump's candidacy, saying he would “use the authority of his office to act in ways that make America less safe.” One of the problems they singled out: “his admiration for foreign dictators such as Vladimir Putin, is unacceptable for the leader of the world's greatest democracy.” The campaign instructed Sam Clovis, the Trump campaign's national co-chair, to put a foreign policy team together in early March, and did so on really short notice. And the team he put together had some issues. In mid-March, Donald Trump sat down with *The Washington Post* editorial team where he revealed his five member foreign policy team.

[Newscast](#):

Interviewer: We heard you might be announcing in your foreign policy advisory team soon if there's anything you're willing to say on that.

Donald Trump: We are going to be doing that if in fact: Carter Page, PhD, George Papadopoulos, he's an oil and energy consultant. Excellent guy.

Max Bergmann:

The national security establishment was bewildered. There were some people named that no one had ever heard of. Two in particular would become central players in this story: Carter Page and George Papadopoulos. Page, as we mentioned in the last episode, had the year before been listed as “Male 1” in an indictment of a Russian spy ring, and the FBI interviewed him again in March 2016 about his ties to Russian intelligence.

George Papadopoulos was perhaps even more of a curious case. Basically, the only thing that stood out about him was how inexperienced he was: He was only 28 years old. His LinkedIn account literally listed his Model UN experience. He apparently knew about eastern Mediterranean gas issues and had worked for a brief stint at a DC think tank. And so, in



September 2015, he tried to work for the Trump campaign, but was turned down. They weren't hiring policy advisers. So instead he volunteered for the campaign of Ben Carson. But by February 2016, Papadopoulos had left the Carson campaign and, despite not being a lawyer, got a job at a mysterious place called the London Center of International Law Practice, where a certain Maltese professor that we'll talk about later also worked. So, on March 2, just a few weeks after starting his new job, Papadopoulos reached out over LinkedIn to Trump campaign officials. His name was passed around and ended up with Sam Clovis. Clovis and Papadopoulos had a call and at the end of the call, Clovis said, "Would you like to join the campaign?" And so just a few weeks later, Papadopoulos was being named by the next president of the United States as one of his five foreign policy advisers.

Now, one major line of defense made of the Trump campaign was maybe that they were just too incompetent to actively collude—that this wasn't super nefarious, that they weren't actively seeking to coordinate with the Russians or do anything illegal. It just happened that they had all these meetings and contacts and that, in fact, they were just incompetent. Now, if you were looking for an example of them being incompetent, this would probably be that. Sam Clovis and later Jeff Sessions, who would head the foreign policy team, would insist they knew nothing and they did little due diligence. And frankly, this does seem quite plausible, but a lack of due diligence is also negligence. And so, if you were an outside foreign power looking to infiltrate a campaign—well, the door was pretty wide open. In fact, the Mueller report stated that they investigated whether Papadopoulos acted as an agent of the Israeli government. The Mueller report even says, "the investigation revealed significant ties between Papadopoulos and Israel." It ultimately decided, though, that the evidence was not sufficient to convict him of being a foreign agent of Israel. Papadopoulos's wife, Simona Mangiante, even told *The Daily Caller* that George Papadopoulos pled guilty "because Robert Mueller's prosecutors threatened to charge him with being an Israeli agent."

In addition to Page and Papadopoulos, and Michael Flynn joining the campaign at this time, so did a big name from a previous generation of Republican politics: Paul Manafort.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

You know, if you are going to run a campaign of collusion with Russia, you might want to bring someone on board who's done it before, and who better than Paul Manafort? By 2016, Paul Manafort was desperate, because two years ago he had lost his patron Viktor Yanukovich, the notoriously corrupt president of Ukraine who was kicked out of office and fled to Russia. For Manafort, Yanukovich had been more than a client. For the better part of a decade, the two men's success had been pretty much inextricable. As we talked about in Episode Five, Manafort had groomed Yanukovich, and in the process he had gotten rich. Millions of dollars flowed into offshore bank accounts held by Manafort. Not only that, the close partnership gave Manafort an



opportunity to do what he did best: leverage his connections to government officials to bilk millions of dollars out of oligarchs looking for access. And Manafort was living large. Yanukovich became basically his only client. And then, he was gone. When Yanukovich abruptly fled Ukraine, Manafort was left high and dry, and Manafort had a problem. He owed at least one of those oligarchs he had done business with, the Russian aluminum magnate Oleg Deripaska, who we talked about in Episode Rhree, tens of millions of dollars. And Deripaska was irate. According to Franklin Foer, who wrote the definitive profile of Manafort for *The Atlantic* last year, things got so bad financially that Manafort had to start line-item vetoing things from his daughter's wedding, including ice. Here's Franklin Foer.

Franklin Foer:

So, Manafort is in bad financial straits after that. He tries to maintain a relationship with, kind of, the rump remnant of the Yanukovich coalition, but they didn't really have the same sort of money that they had before. And they're not really paying their bills well, and he's going around the world looking for clients. And he's stuck and his finances are a mess because his money is stranded in these tax havens in Cyprus and the Grenadines where it's very hard to move into the United States because he never paid tax on that money. And so, his whole finances are kind of a Ponzi scheme where he's getting bad loans to cover other loans, and Manafort refuses to admit to himself that he can't afford anything. And so he keeps on spending and keeps on acquiring property and keeps on taking himself a deeper financial hole. And then his personal life is a mess because he had had an affair and he got caught and then resumed the affair and got caught again. And his family insisted that he go to a clinic to try to, kind of, deal with his psychic issues. And so, he's really in a bad place.

Max Bergmann:

Compounding the problem for Manafort was that after the collapse of the Yanukovich government, the US started to look into the Yanukovich regime's money laundering, and that led them to Manafort. Maybe it was the shell companies he had registered, or the rapidly accumulating bank accounts in the Cayman Islands. Maybe it was his sudden interest in antique rugs and ostrich-skin jackets. Either way, authorities were monitoring his offshore bank accounts, suddenly cutting him off from all his cash. For Manafort, it was a double bind. His biggest patron was out of commission and he had massive debts to pay. But with his personal life and such a mess in his finances under scrutiny, the last thing Manafort needed to do was draw attention to himself. And yet, in early 2016, that's exactly what Paul Manafort sought to do. Here's Franklin Foer.

Franklin Foer:

So, he launched a sustained campaign to try to get in with Trump. I mean, he sees Trump's rise, it's kind of interesting to him from afar. He's got this relationship with Trump because his firm



had lobbied for Trump. Roger Stone, his original partner, was chums with Trump and was advising the campaign. One of his other long-term pals was this guy Tom Barrack, who was a real-estate mogul who was very much on the inside of the Trump campaign, one of the few people in the world that Trump actually confides in and talks to. And so, both Barrack and Stone are lobbying for Manafort to come back into politics, to come work at the campaign. It's good for both of them to have their guy deep in the campaign. Remember, this is also a period where Trump had no establishment support. He couldn't find mainstream people to embrace him. And you know, Manafort is a great facsimile for a mainstream figure. Everybody refers to him as kind of having this anchorman-like demeanor, everything about his suits and his haircut were central casting, and Trump kind of fell for it. And so, as soon as he came into the campaign, I think people understood that he was ultimately going to be its chair. He said he was coming in to work on this delegate fight. But everybody knew that he was going to be moving up really quickly.

Max Bergmann:

One of the strangest aspects of Manafort joining the campaign was that he did it for free. He was broke, yet he was volunteering. It made absolutely no sense, until you read his emails. And Franklin Foer and Julia Ioffe of *The Atlantic* got their hands on some emails Manafort sent to his business partner, a guy we talked about in episode five, Konstantin Kilimnik, otherwise known as his Russian brain—and to the FBI, he was a Russian intelligence agent. The emails are coded but are not especially subtle. Manafort asked Kilimnik if he'd shown “our friends” the media coverage of his joining the campaign, and “How do we use this to get whole?” he asked. By early July, with Trump set to clinch the Republican nomination, Manafort emailed Kilimnik to offer Deripaska private briefings. Again, this is all the while Manafort is working for Trump, eventually becoming Trump's campaign chairman. He's basically saying that he'll trade inside access to the campaign for a chance to get whole—for a chance to pay off his debts.

Franklin Foer:

As soon as Manafort is ensconced in the campaign, he's using Kilimnik to reach out to Oleg Deripaska and to his old Ukrainian patrons. And basically, he's trying to leverage his relationship with the campaign to try to improve his balance sheet. He owes Oleg Deripaska massive amounts of money and he promises him private briefings in order to try to “get whole.” And with Yanukovich and the other patrons in Ukraine, he's trying to get them to pay money that they owe to him. And so, they're looking to get access to Trump via Manafort and he's thinking that he can make a deal with them.

Max Bergmann:

So Manafort, a guy indebted to a notorious Russian oligarch, whose right hand man is a Russian agent according to the FBI, who had been working on the Kremlin's behalf for a decade both in Ukraine and elsewhere, volunteered to join the campaign and then used his access on the



campaign to go reconnect with those Russian oligarchs and the Kremlin. However all these figures came to join the campaign, Flynn, Page, Papadopoulos, and Manafort, what's clear is that, by the end of March, this amounted to a collusion dream team.

-Break-

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:

In January 2016, a senior advisor to Vladimir Putin on cyber issues, Andrey Krutskikh, appeared on a panel where he quite explicitly warned the west. He said, “You think we are living in 2016. No, we are living in 1948. And you want to know why? Because in 1949 the Soviet Union had its first atomic bomb test and until that moment, the Americans were not taking a seriously. But in 1949 everything changed, and they started talking to us on an equal footing. I'm warning you,” he concluded, “we are at the verge of having something in the information arena which will allow us to talk to the American as equals.” While he was probably being a little verbose, over the course of 2016, we would soon come to know what he meant. By early spring, what had begun as an infomercial for the Trump brand had improbably landed him on the precipice of winning the Republican presidential nomination. And as Trump won primaries and began to mobilize something resembling a real campaign, staffing up with Russian linked advisers, another campaign was revving up across the globe. As the Russian saw the Trump campaign winning in February, they suddenly realized, “holy crap, this guy might actually become the Republican nominee!” And so, in March 2016, the Russians begin three major lines of effort. First, they unleash an online social-media propaganda campaign. Second, they unleash their hackers and third, they unleash Kremlin linked figures to establish as many connections as possible to the Trump campaign. And we are going to break down each of these over the next few episodes. But let's start with the online social media campaign.

[Newscast:](#)

Tonight, Facebook, revealing that 80,000 posts from Russian backed Facebook accounts reached potentially a third of all Americans between 2015 and 2017. Facebook, saying that



approximately 126 million people may have been served one of their stories at some point during the two-year period.

[Newscast:](#)

This week, bowing to pressure, Facebook handed over to Mueller 3,000 ads bought by a Russian agency during the American campaign, and Facebook found \$100,000 worth of those ads linked to nearly 500 fake Facebook pages where fictional people posed as American activists, many of whom attacked Hillary Clinton and praised Donald Trump.

Mark Warner:

For months, I've been wondering, Facebook, Twitter, how much were they used by some of the Russian trolls? We've asked these questions. We got a preliminary answer today. I think maybe we saw the tip of the iceberg.

[Mark Zuckerberg:](#)

Our teams have found and shutdown thousands of fake accounts that could be attempting to influence elections in many other countries, including recently in the French elections. Now, I wish I could tell you that we're going to be able to stop all interference, but that just wouldn't be realistic.

Max Bergmann:

The intelligence community's January 2017 report on Russian interference in the election found that, “starting in March 2016, Russian government-linked actors began openly supporting Trump's candidacy in media aimed at English speaking audiences.” That was the opening of the campaign, but this effort didn't just start in 2016. Thanks to indictments from the Mueller investigation, we now know the Kremlin had been laying the groundwork for this attack in early 2014, just as Russia invaded Ukraine and Putin was looking to hit back at the West. That's when a Russian oligarch named Yevgeny Prigozhin, known as “Putin’s chef” since he was a former hotdog vendor and used to cater for Putin, created a new project for an organization he sponsored in St. Petersburg called the Internet Research Agency. It was called Project Lahkta and its target was the West. Most of the Internet Research Agency’s senior staff were hired between March and April of 2014, and by May they developed a strategy which apparently included sending at least three operatives to the United States to gather intel. They set up thousands of accounts on social media, posing as everything from regular people to news outlets to the Tennessee Republican Party. Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and top White House advisor, recently dismissed the significance of the Russian operation in this way.

[Jared Kushner:](#)

But now the media spends so much time focusing on it. And quite frankly, the whole thing's just a



big distraction for the country. And you look at, you know, what Russia did, you know, buying some Facebook ads to try to, so dissent and do it, and it's a terrible thing. But, I think the investigations and all of the speculation that's happened for the last two years just had a much harsher impact on our democracy than a couple of Facebook ads.

Max Bergmann:

But suffice it to say, the Russian social-media influence campaign was much, much larger than a couple of Facebook ads. So, in March 2016, this operation turned its sights on the US and worked in support of Donald Trump. Accounts that had been dormant or had been mainly tweeting about Russia for the last two years, suddenly became extremely interested in American politics. An investigative reporter got a job inside the Internet Research Agency and she talked with NPR.

[Newscast:](#)

Lyudmila Savchuk:

The factory worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There was a day shift, a night shift, and even shifts over the holidays. The factory worked every single second.

Max Bergmann:

Just like the Trump campaign itself, the Russian accounts didn't bother to stay within the normal boundaries of American politics. Here's Laura Rosenberger, the director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund.

Laura Rosenberger:

So, an enormous amount of the content is simply about generating outrage and polarizing debates on highly emotive or partisan issues, and it's often then about, sort of, trying to pull people further to extremes of these debates.

Max Bergmann:

One big thing they did during the election was amplify messages from the far right. They spread wild conspiracy theories and blatantly racist and Islamic phobic messages. They even organized in-person events including one where they got an actual American to dress up as Hillary Clinton and stand in a fake jail cell.

[Newscast:](#)

Russians pretending to be Trump organizers, also reached out to Harry Miller in Boynton Beach, Florida, paying him to build a cage large enough to hold an actress depicting Clinton in prison uniform. He did just that. Appearing at rallies on Friday, Miller, who now lives in Pennsylvania, tweeted, "This is the cage the Russians paid for." The Russians weren't just



recruiting unwitting Trump supporters. As CNN reported last October, a group calling itself “Black Fists” turned out to be Russians trying to infiltrate black communities and seed social unrest. Other groups were encouraged by Russian Internet trolls to hold protest against police, for and against immigrants, sometimes encouraging both at the same location to increase the possibility of violence. The indictment also reveals this post-election protest outside New York’s Trump Tower was organized by Russians on Facebook. It grew so large, even CNN covered it.

Max Bergmann:

Online, the Internet Research Agency also figured out how to game the algorithms of the social media companies. They saw that content that was widely shared or retweeted gets promoted, gets amplified. And so, they sought to widely promote content that they wanted to get amplified. Here’s Laura Rosenberger on how the bot and troll farms work.

Laura Rosenberger:

So, I literally talk about it in terms of manipulating the information architecture of the Internet. Because you can take a piece of content that you might post that, like, any human’s going to be like, “Max, that’s really dumb and like nobody’s interested in that.” But, you get a whole bunch of bots like, you Max Bergman, go pay off, and by the way you can do this for commercial purposes, go and, like, pay off a whole bunch of bots to, like, amplify your really stupid comments and then a whole bunch of people were like, “Wow, I don’t really get that, but 8,000 people have retweeted that. And so, that must be something that’s really cool and interesting. And so, I’m going to retweet that also.” Or like, “I’m going to, kind of, maybe follow this guy Max over here because he seems like, I don’t know, he’s interesting even if what he said was dumb, because a lot of people are paying attention.” But most of what we actually saw from the Internet Research Agency was not bot activity. There certainly was some bot activity, but a lot of what we saw was the use of what we call “sock puppets.” This is creation of accounts under false pretenses. So, I’m going to create an account that’s going to pretend to be Max Bergmann and that account is going to tweet all kinds of pro-Trump content to manipulate public perception. I don’t think the real Max Bergmann is out there and tweeting a bunch of pro-Trump content.

Max Bergmann: *Not often.*

Laura Rosenberger: *But more often than not, they actually create personas that don’t actually exist. So, they’re not necessarily impersonating somebody. But, they’ll create something that’s going to pretend to be a voter in Ohio who just happens to have very passionate views on certain sets of issues. And then you begin to, like, literally bend the information architecture of the Internet through, sort of, computational means. Now those bots would work with the sock puppet accounts that I talked about that were operated much more as humans, right. And so, people were, they weren’t sort of operating on a programmatic level, on an automated level, necessarily. And I think it is important to bear in mind that it was not all bots. But certainly, when it comes to*



the computational aspect of really manipulating the information architecture in a way that, you know, I mean, it has whole effects on how you can game out the algorithms that way as well. Manipulating trending topics, right. All that kind of stuff that you can really actually drive debate or drive conversation in a direction that wouldn't have happened.

Max Bergmann:

The Russians ran the Internet Research Agency like a campaign operation. They had certain messages, certain themes they were pushing or advancing for that day or week. They were trying to divide America, tarnish Clinton, and promote Trump. And key to Russian efforts was also their supposedly reputable English language news outlets, such as RT on television and Sputnik, their online news outlet. We mentioned RT earlier, and it's important to note that the Russians weren't partisan. At the dinner table with Vladimir Putin at the RT Gala was both Michael Flynn and Jill Stein, right and left. In 2016, RT's hosts and commentators were from the right, the left, and the center. They paid well and gave shows to Larry King and former MSNBC host Ed Schultz. But this veneer of credibility also gave them an ability to launder information on their news programs. Most of their news content published or broadcast was legitimate news of the day, but then they might sneak in a story or two that was totally bogus. And so, Russia's official news organization would work in tandem with the online operatives at the Internet Research Agency. Sometimes RT would take the fake information coming online from the troll factory and give it the veneer of credibility by reproducing it in an RT or Sputnik story. These stories were then reinjected into social media and advanced and promoted by trolls and botnets as if it was real information. And occasionally, the volume of attention given to a fake story would prompt legitimate mainstream media to report on it as well. One telling example of this chain of information laundering came in August 2016 with the spread of a story about a terrorist attack on the US air base in Incirlik, Turkey. This false story was started on Twitter, migrated to RT and Sputnik's Twitter accounts, and then was picked up and promoted in an hours-long storm of activity from a small vocal circle of users online, many of whom were pro-Trump and pro-Russia. And a couple weeks later during an interview with CNN's Jake Tapper, Paul Manafort, then campaign chairman for Donald Trump, even called out the media for not covering what was in fact a fake attack.

[Paul Manafort:](#)

That's a major news story that, yeah. You had the NATO base in Turkey being under attack by terrorists. You had a number of things that were appropriate to this campaign.

Max Bergmann:

What Russia had figured out was that the new social media space was wide open and Americans were vulnerable. Daniel Kibblesmith, a writer from the Stephen Colbert show, captured it best when he tweeted after the election, "Your parents in 1996: Don't trust anyone on the Internet."



Your parents in 2016: FreedomEagle.Facebook says Hillary invented AIDS.” Now this tweet, I think in many ways, encapsulates how and why Russian active measures were able to have an impact in the 2016 election. In the last 20 years, there had been an amazing transformation in not just how we consume news and information, but how we interact with people. When the Internet first burst into American homes, it was seen as a dangerous place we didn't understand, filled with sketchy Internet chat rooms. But, gradually over time it became something that we not only grew accustomed to and began to trust, it became something we became dependent on. So we, as a society, went from not trusting the online space to trusting it deeply. We now used it to shop to talk with our loved ones and to connect with those that share our hobbies and our interests. We had so much trust in online interactions that we even share our homes with strangers and created the phrase “the sharing economy.” This was an amazing development in human history, but while the Internet age has been overwhelmingly positive and transformed the world in ways that were previously unimaginable, we now saw the darker side of the Internet age, which was captured in the tweet that I mentioned. As we gained trust in online mediums and became addicted to them for constant flows of information, we had also become vulnerable and the Russians knew how to exploit this. Here's the CIA's former Deputy Chief in Moscow, John Sipher.

John Sipher:

Russian intelligence, now, I think has really focused on understanding our system, taking advantage of our openness, looking for our weaknesses, and then trying to exploit those weaknesses. And in 2016 our weakness was our tribal polarization. The fact that Republicans and Democrats are going against each other. So, it was quite easy for the Russians to stoke that

Max Bergmann:

The chaotic online media environment has also made it hard to distinguish between credible outlets, allowing for the easy spread of information, true or otherwise, throughout our politics. These factors help make US political discourse a ripe target for disinformation efforts. What Russia did in our election in 2016, as well as in elections in Europe, is to exploit our openness and take advantage of the negative aspect of this new online environment. Here's Laura Rosenberger.

Laura Rosenberger:

One of the things that the Russian operations have taken very clear advantage of is our openness, right? And what's so insidious about it is that it has essentially weaponized that openness in a very perverse way. I believe that speech is not free if it's manipulation, right? We deserve to have speech that is free from covert manipulation in order for it to truly be free and open debate and Americans should be able to disagree about anything that they want to be able to disagree about. But, that needs to be, you know, in a public square where you can call out and



know who it is that you're engaging with and know that they are who they say they are and not have something being injected from thousands of miles away into the middle of that conversation.

Max Bergmann:

But one thing I want to stress is Russia took advantage of this environment. They exploited our weakness. This is not a media environment and online culture that Russia created, but it is an environment that Russia has aggressively sought to exploit. And this has had a really corrosive impact. The numbers on Russian bots and trolls are pretty staggering, especially when you consider that we may have only scratched the surface on the Kremlin's online operations. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and one of the world's leading experts on how campaign messaging sways voters, wrote a book, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President*. And she runs down some of the stats on what we know about Russian accounts. On Twitter alone, there were at least 4,000 trolls being amplified by upward of 50,000 bots, and this accounted for more than 4% of the retweets of Donald Trump's account during the election. 1.4 million people followed at least one account believed to be run by the Russian government. Altogether, almost 300 million people likely saw at least one tweet from a Kremlin-based account, and that's not even getting into Facebook. Jonathan Albright, a researcher at Columbia University, looked at the IRA's six biggest Facebook pages and found that their messages had been shared 340 million times. The IRA created 129 event pages, which were seen by about 340,000 people. More than 62,000 users replied that they were planning to attend at least one of the IRA's events. Now, it's impossible to put an exact number on how many voters these operations swayed, but there are a few things we can say for certain. One is that the Russian operation was big. The IRA alone had almost as many people working on digital messaging for the 2016 campaign, at least 80 full time employees, as the Clinton campaign did. This was a presidential-campaign-sized operation that the Russians were running. It was a political campaign to elect Donald Trump, and by September 2016, they were spending more than \$1 million per month. Overall, they're believed to have reached 126 million Americans. With more than half of all Americans getting at least some of their news from social media. That's an enormous reach—and potentially an enormous impact in an election that was ultimately decided by fewer than 80,000 votes. So when commentators tried to dismiss the importance of this effort, when a Facebook executive called the possibility that their ads might have impacted the election “utter BS,” and when tech reporters and pundits threw cold water on the notion that Russian efforts might change how Americans would vote, remember those stats. And if those stats don't matter, then campaigns don't matter, then nothing matters. But here's the thing: Campaigns do matter. Here's Brian Fallon, who served as the Clinton campaign's national press secretary.

Brian Fallon:



It is definitely the case that we were aware of the level of vitriol and memes and unhelpful storylines that were being consistently lifted up online. And you know, we encountered anecdotal reporting from supporters and surrogates all the time about awful allegations about Hillary that they were encountering. We just thought it was like venomous, right-wing activity. And I don't think we appreciated the extent of the Russian involvement in pushing that stuff out. To your point, I think it definitely gets underplayed how impactful that can be. I mean, if you work in democratic politics right now, or in politics in general, there is a realization that setting in amongst the professional consulting class that more budgetary resources should be put into digital engagement and digital advertising and less so for television. So, there's sort of like a shift that's happening in terms of campaign managers putting more of their budgets into digital engagement. And the reason for that is because we are finding that the better venue to persuade people is online. And so, you can't be arguing for digital advertising budgets to command greater portions of campaign budgets and then turn around and act like what the Russians did wouldn't have mattered or amounted to anything. You either believe that persuasion works, and digital persuasion in particular is a good way to reach people, or you don't. And there is a reason why the Trump campaign spent so much money on it, with their official campaign resources, and there's a reason why we devoted so much resources to it. Because it's a way to reach people, especially in 2016 or even more so today. And so, the Russians engaging in that same space and spending money was also effective.

Max Bergmann:

The Russian campaign clearly mattered. So, as March turned to April, you had an American presidential campaign suddenly staffed with advisors with links to Russia. You had the candidate's company actively pursuing a business deal with the Russian government, and you had Russia ramping up its online propaganda efforts on behalf of Donald Trump. But that's not the only line of effort that the Russians accelerated when they flipped that switch in March of 2016. A Russian military-intelligence unit based out of Moscow had set its sights on hacking the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign, and in doing so unequivocally changed the course of history.

Max Bergmann:

Next time on The Asset: Hack and Collude.

[Donald Trump:](#)

Russia, if you're listening, I hope you are able to find the 30,000 emails.

[Newscast:](#)

Donald Trump, who is seeking to become our Commander in Chief, is now openly inviting Russia to engage in cyber-attacks against the United States.



Max Bergmann:

Russian military intelligence hacks the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign, and the contacts between Trump and Russia come fast and furious.

[Michael Cohen:](#)

A lot of people have asked me about whether Mr. Trump knew about the release of the hacked documents, Democratic National Committee emails, ahead of time, and the answer is yes.

Max Bergmann:

When the Trump campaign learned that Russia had dirt on Hillary Clinton, the response was, ‘I love it.’ We go deep into the collusion with Russia, breaking down the shady meetings with that Maltese professor in Italy and that meeting in Trump Tower in New York, revealing new details and providing new contexts that Robert Mueller left out.

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.

[Sally Yates:](#)

And the Russians also knew that General Flynn had misled the Vice President and others, and that created a compromise situation, a situation where the National Security Adviser essentially could be blackmailed by the Russians.