



Episode 10: Conspiring

Producer:

Previously on The Asset:

Max Bergmann:

Early on Tuesday morning, October 11, 2016, WikiLeaks released its third batch of emails stolen by the Russians from Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta.

Donald Trump:

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

Max Bergmann:

In the middle of the Democratic convention, Trump held a press conference; an unusual move during the opposing party's convention and in the press conference Donald Trump tried to focus attention on the emails released from WikiLeaks, shift blame away from Russia, and to encourage the Russians to do more.

Donald Trump:

It's just a total deflection, this whole thing with Russia.

Max Bergmann:

Now, Roger Stone is a critical character in this whole affair.

Newscast:

John Heilemann: You, Roger Stone, have said, I believe on multiple occasions, publicly that you have a back channel to Assange, correct?

Roger Stone: Well, we just happen to have a mutual friend, who..

John Heilemann: You happen to have a mutual friend?

Roger Stone: Yes, whom supported Assange and has some connection to him.

Donald Trump:

This WikiLeaks is like a treasure trove.



[Newsast:](#)

Ed Henry: And we've just confirmed this at Fox News. We have a copy of the letter. I have it right here from James Comey, the FBI director, sending this to Congress, that the criminal investigation of Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state is back on.

Max Bergmann:

Donald Trump's campaign was often mocked throughout the election for its lack of professionalism, but what the campaign did have was an opposition research team that was likely better and more capable than any in the history of democratic politics. That's because his opposition research team was Russian military intelligence.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

Episode 10: Conspiring. On August 2, 2016, in New York City, Trump's campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, and deputy campaign chairman, Rick Gates, had dinner with Konstantin Kilimnik, Manafort's Russian brain and who the FBI believes to be a Russian intelligence operative. Mueller, on page 133 of his report, even outlines in five bullet points evidence from his investigation to support that assessment. The August 2 meeting in New York was actually the second meeting between Manafort and Kilimnik during the campaign. They had met for breakfast in New York on May 7. As we noted in Episode 8, Manafort owed feared Russian Oligarch Oleg Deripaska millions of dollars and Manafort was trying to get whole by offering Deripaska private briefings on the campaign.

[Newscast:](#)

Interviewer: Did he offer you those private briefings to try and repay some of that debt to you? Is that why he offered them?

Oleg Deripaska: Get lost, please. Thank you.

Max Bergmann:

On July 8, Kilimnik wrote to Manafort that he had talked to Deripaska's aid and that there was "significantly more attention to the campaign in Deripaska's mind and he will be most likely looking for ways to reach out. I am more than sure that it will be resolved and that we will get back to the original relationship with Deripaska." So what Kilimnik is saying here is that Deripaska is interested in the election and Manafort's efforts to get whole by briefing him about the election are going to work. A few weeks later, on July 28, Kilimnik flew from Kiev to



Moscow. He then emailed Manafort that “I met today with a guy who gave you your biggest black caviar jar several years ago,” which was a clear reference to Viktor Yanukovich, the former president of Ukraine, and that he had “several important messages from him to you,” and that Manafort needed to be briefed in person by Kilimnik, who expressed a willingness to travel. In other words, Kilimnik knew traveling to the United States was somewhat risky. Manafort quickly agreed, and Kilimnik flew in on the night of August 2 and immediately went to the Grand Havana Club on Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, just a few blocks from Trump Tower, and that's where he met Manafort and Gates for dinner. At the dinner, Kilimnik raised the plan to carve up Ukraine and to create a pro-Russian region, thus enabling Yanukovich to return as the leader of the pro-Russian part of Ukraine, which would serve as a backdoor for Russian control. Yanukovich and the Kremlin seem to be looking for Trump’s support. This is a plan that would later be revived after the election, but during this meeting, they didn't just discuss a peace plan for Ukraine. Manafort also provided a briefing to Kilimnik that “encompassed campaign messaging and its internal polling data.” This wasn't just chit-chat. It was described as a briefing in the Mueller report. And according to Gates, Manafort described to Kilimnik the Trump campaign's plan to win the election for Trump by carrying the Democratic stronghold states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. But, when Manafort talked to Mueller, he left out the discussion of the battleground states. And just when we thought it couldn't get any sketchier, it does. Gates and Manafort, knowing that it was not a good look to be meeting with an alleged Russian intelligence agent, actually left the Havana Club through separate doors. Just days after Kilimnik left New York, Oleg Deripaska was on his yacht off the coast of Norway with Sergei Prikhodko, a senior Kremlin official heavily involved in Russian foreign policy, and there with them was a number of Russian escorts, one of whom, Nastya Rybka, recorded some of the conversations between Deripaska and Prikhodko—one in which where they talk about the collapse of US-Russia relations. And she posted it on her Instagram.

[Video:](#)

[Deripaska and Prikhodko Russian dialog.]

Max Bergmann:

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who thrives on exposing corruption, discovered the video and posted a breakdown of it on his YouTube channel. The video resulted in a totally bizarre turn of events. After the video was publicized, Rybka was arrested in Thailand for prostitution.

[Newscast:](#)



A jailed model, who claimed last year that she had proof of Russian involvement in helping Donald Trump become president, is speaking out. The woman originally from Belarus and claimed that she had provided escort services to a Russian oligarch and that she has recordings of him talking about interference in the 2016 election. That model has been in a Thai prison since February on soliciting and conspiracy charges. She pleaded guilty yesterday and is expected to be deported soon. She told Russian media she can't wait to get out.

Max Bergmann:

As she sat in the Thai prison, she feared being deported to Russia, even though she's actually from Belarus. And she said she had other videos exposing Russian involvement in the US election. Earlier this year she was released from a Thai prison and deported, but instead of being sent direct to Belarus, she was routed through Moscow where she was physically arrested by a swarm of police officers who manhandled her.

[Newscast:](#)

[Russian dialog.]

Max Bergmann:

The important part of this for our purposes is that the link from the Trump campaign chairman to Deripaska to the Kremlin, like the links from the GRU to WikiLeaks to Trump, was an incredibly short chain. And so it's worth asking: If you were going to run a campaign of collusion, and you were all in, wouldn't you want to directly coordinate your efforts and actually share information with each other, just as Paul Manafort was doing with the polling data? Because to get the most out of the Russian campaign, you would actually need to coordinate with it. I'm Max Bergmann and this is The Asset.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

We've previously outlined the difference between collusion and conspiracy. The Mueller report has lots of examples of collusion, but conspiracy, unlike collusion, is a legal term and the Mueller report said it found "insufficient evidence" to prove that there was a conspiracy—or, as Mueller defined it, an agreement, tacit or expressed, between the Trump campaign and the Russian government. Not that there was no evidence of a conspiracy or an agreement, just Mueller didn't have enough to prove it in court. We expected Mueller to answer every question, to resolve all doubt. That was always a fantasy. And one of the challenges that Mueller faced is that, again and again, his investigation was obstructed, encountered lies by key



witnesses, and couldn't recover deleted information. There were also questions about how aggressively the FBI pursued this investigation during the actual election, since, you know, it's much harder to catch someone in the act when you begin your investigation after the fact. But this is something we'll talk about when we close out this series.

While the Mueller report is incredibly comprehensive, there are also some glaring omissions from the report that point to a larger conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Russia and we will talk about those in this episode. One principle question that Mueller doesn't answer is why the Trump campaign was sharing polling data with someone who they believed was a Russian intelligence asset. Throughout the campaign, Manafort and Gates were sharing internal polling data, which is probably among the most sensitive and confidential data a campaign possesses, with Kilimnik, someone who Gates even once joked had a KGB handler. Gates told Mueller that, from April onward—so as soon as Manafort was on the Trump campaign—he was told to send “internal polling data and other updates.” Gates also understood that this would be shared with that oligarch, Oleg Deripaska.

Gates, according to the Mueller report, “periodically sent Kilimnik polling data via WhatsApp. Gates then deleted the communications on a daily basis.” Gates continued sending Kilimnik updates even after Manafort left the campaign. So, while Steve Bannon was chairman of the Trump campaign, Gates was still sending information to an alleged Russian intelligence operative. Now, if you think this all sounds pretty damn conspiratorial, you would be right. They were knowingly passing internal Trump campaign messaging, polling data, and strategy to a guy they thought was a Russian agent, who was passing this on to one of Putin's closest oligarchs. This was going to get back to the Kremlin, and they knew it. But here's the thing: Mueller was unable to find out for sure why Manafort gave Kilimnik internal polling data and messaging. Although he did determine that Manafort expected Kilimnik to pass it onto multiple Russian oligarchs known for doing the Kremlin's bidding, Kilimnik remained out of the United States and was never interviewed by the Special Counsel's office, and Manafort lied to Mueller about his communications with Kilimnik, even after Manafort reached a plea agreement to cooperate with the Mueller investigation. This is largely why a Manafort's agreement with Mueller fell apart, why he's rotting in jail and sentences so long that he could die in jail.

[News Cast:](#)

Judy Woodruff: President Trump's former campaign chairman is in legal hot water again. In a court filing late Monday, prosecutors for Special Counsel Robert Mueller accused Paul Manafort of lying to them and to the FBI on a variety of subject matters. Tell us how unusual is this for a special counsel in a situation like this to have worked out a plea deal, but then to turn around



and say the defendant, the person we're working with, has lied and we think the plea deal is worthless now.

Renato Mariotti: It is extremely unusual, Judy. In my almost decade as a former federal prosecutor, when I was in that job, I had never gone to the step of having a cooperation deal fall apart and having to go to the judge and make a statement like this.

Max Bergmann:

He did that to hide his dealings with Kilimnik. He had something to hide there.

[Newscast:](#)

Number one, the judge finding that they did prove Mueller's office did prove that Manafort was lying about his interactions and communications with this individual, Kilimnik, that Mueller alleges is tied to Russian intelligence.

Max Bergmann:

What could possibly be so important that it would be worth keeping it a secret that you would blow up your own plea deal after you pled guilty. Here's Brian Fallon.

Brian Fallon:

Why would you ever be sharing internal polling data? That is like a level of coordination that goes beyond just trying to extend simple courtesies to somebody to avoid insulting them. Unless there was some kind of practical application of that information, it's very hard to understand why you would share anything that's sensitive. Yeah, sure, I could see Paul Manafort if he's just on the phone trying to like appease some Russian national that he knows is close to Putin, you just anecdotally or verbally sort of convey the top line of a poll to make it look like you're pulling the curtain back a little bit. But when you're sharing cross tabs and when you're, when you're sharing the guts of internal polling, the only purpose there is to sort of share the finer points of your internal strategy and to offer insights that really only have application if you're planning to do things like wage targeted digital advertising campaigns.

Max Bergmann:

We do have to remember that the Russian campaign with its Internet Research Agency and Russian hackers was ultimately run by Russians. These guys are pretty sophisticated about American politics, but it is not like they're quitting their day jobs and creating political consultant companies in the United States. With the Russian online-communications efforts, they could have simply mimicked the Trump campaign's messaging, observed and followed



what the Trump campaign was saying. But better than just mimicking would be to know, to know what the plan was, to know what the Trump campaign was trying to achieve, what voters they were going after, what demographic groups they were trying to reach or to turn off. The Trump campaign providing guidance to them would be incredibly helpful so that they could target their efforts, and that's what the Trump campaign chairman and deputy were essentially providing a Russian agent. That's what was in the polling data.

One of the biggest mysteries of this whole affair, and which is conspicuously absent from the Mueller report, is that mysterious server linking Trump Tower to a Russian bank. On October 31, just three days after Comey released his letter to Congress seeming to reopen the Clinton email investigation, Franklin Foer published a story in *Slate*. It was based on something the online computer science community—they call themselves “The Union of Concerned Nerds”—had been talking about for a while, but that hadn't fully broken through into the mainstream media yet. Basically, there was a circle of communication, of activity, of messages between web servers from three otherwise unrelated companies: Alfa Bank, a Russian bank with ties to the Russian government—and we actually mentioned Alfa Bank's head, Peter Oven, briefly back in Episode 3 when he attended an all-hands oligarch meeting with Putin; the other two companies were Spectrum Health, a Michigan based healthcare company run by Dick DeVos, the husband of Trump's eventual secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, and the brother of Eric Prince who we will talk about more in later episodes; and the last organization, the Trump Organization. These three servers communicated more and more over the election.

The servers started communicating with each other in May and we see a big spike in activity in mid-June, after that June 9 meeting where Donald Trump Jr. said he would love the dirt, especially later in the summer. And after that the traffic starts to tick up. And then there's another big spike during the DNC convention, after WikiLeaks released the DNC emails. And then in early August, right after Manafort meets with Kilimnik in the Havana Club, there's a massive spike up, almost like they were exchanging a lot of data at that time. The activity remains high until it all goes down in late September. And then suddenly, right when a journalist from *The New York Times* asked about the server, the server stopped and was taken down. Here's Franklin Foer on what the story showed.

Franklin Foer:

They showed that there were records, it's called DNS records, that the very, somewhat esoteric part of computer science, where you can see, you can look at it, and you could see evidence of servers communicating with one another, looking up addresses. It has to do with the way that the web, the underlying architecture of the web. And, the computer scientists had started to see



this dodgy stuff happening earlier in the year and they saw a pattern of it and they were trying, they went through and they were able to dismiss a lot of the obvious explanations for why that might've happened. Was it spam? No. And it was also, the server was configured in such a way that there were only a small handful of parties that were seen communicating through it, which made it look like the setup was obscuring something.

Max Bergmann:

*The New York Times ended up passing on the story. So, the scientists turned to Foer and published it in *Slate*. So, on October 31, when Franklin Foer's story came out, the Clinton campaign was ecstatic. They had been trying to highlight the Russia story, Trump's Russia connection. Here's a video Brian Fallon did for the campaign in October.*

[Campaign video:](#)

Brian Fallon: We know that Russia is trying to meddle in our election. The Department of Homeland Security and the director of national intelligence are confident that the Russian government directed recent hacks with the intention of interfering with our election process. Donald Trump was reportedly briefed on Russia's efforts in mid-August, but has continued to deflect blame from Russia by trying to blame China or even a 400 pound hacker.

Donald Trump: Maybe there is no hacking. It could also be China. It also could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds, okay?

Brian Fallon: So why would Russia and Putin have an interest in seeing Donald Trump win the election in November? It's because it's frightening how closely the foreign policy of Trump aligns with Putin's preferences and concerning enough that the former acting director of the CIA said that Putin had recruited Trump as quote, "an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation."

Max Bergmann:

And then here was Clinton going after Trump at the October 19 debate.

[Debate:](#)

Donald Trump: I don't know Putin. He said nice things about me. If we got along well, that would be good. If Russia and the United States got along well and went after ISIS, that would be good. He has no respect for her. He has no respect for our president, and I'll tell you what, we're in very serious trouble because we have a country with tremendous numbers of nuclear warheads—1,800 by the way. Where they expanded and we didn't. 1,800 nuclear warheads and she's playing chicken. Look, Putin, from everything I see, has no respect for this person.



Hillary Clinton: Well, that's because he'd rather have a puppet as president.

Donald Trump: No puppet, no puppet. You're the puppet.

Hillary Clinton: It's pretty clear. It's pretty clear you won't admit—

Donald Trump: No, you're the puppet.

Hillary Clinton:—that the Russians have engaged in cyber-attacks against the United States of America, that you encouraged espionage against our people, that you are willing to spout the Putin line, sign up for his wish list, break up NATO, do whatever he wants to do, and that you continue to get help from him because he has a very clear favorite in this race.

Brian Fallon:

We finally got somebody that was able to hunt down the facts and report out the fact of this really disconcerting link between the Trump organization and this Russian bank and Franklin Foer wrote a whole story, like a 3,000, 4,000-word, it was not, you know, anything minor or casually reported on it. It was in depth of product of multiple weeks of work. And we were like, "hot damn." You know, we finally have a legit outlet delving into this, giving credence to a very disturbing apparent linkage between Trump and the Russians. This, now we've got to be off to the races and we have got to encourage everybody to look into this. And, literally, were on a call planning our response to try to lift up the Franklin Foer story and to try to encourage all these other outlets, all of whom, by the way, including the New York Times, we knew had been presented with the same information and given the same tip and encouraged to explore this exact, you know, theory. And now we were like, "Alright, now we have the opportunity to get over the hump with all these other outlets and have this be a real thing that Trump has to respond to and answer questions about." And then that, literally, was when the New York Times story hit.

Max Bergmann:

Just hours after Franklin Foer published his story in *Slate*, *The New York Times* came out with its own story with the headline screaming, "Investigating Donald Trump, FBI Sees No Clear Link to Russia." Basically, there's nothing to this Russia thing.

Franklin Foer:



It was the most profound whiplash that I've ever experienced as a journalist because, for a couple hours it kind of, it seemed like this was a massive story that was going to shape the election. And then a couple hours later, New York Times publishes this infamous story that says the FBI is investigated and that there are no ties between the Trump campaign and the Russians. And the story mentions that they'd looked into the server story and they couldn't figure it out themselves, but they thought it was probably nothing. That story didn't make sense because it read in such a definitive sort of way. And we, you were hearing over the course of that summer that there were FISA warrants that were out on multiple people connected to the campaign, that the FBI was really concerned about these ties between people in the Trump campaign and the Russians. Then, to have it kind of swept away so cleanly in that piece, it felt like there was an ulterior motive being pursued, that there was, that somebody was trying to just quiet the whole thing in one clean way.

Max Bergmann:

Here's Brian Fallon.

Brian Fallon:

So that was a demoralizing day in the life of the campaign. The New York Times, in my mind, was prompted by Franklin's piece. The Times decided to do its Times thing, which is if they're not first to a story, they like to be first and shooting down a story that wasn't their exclusive. And so they come in as the authoritative New York Times and immediately smother and any sort of any sort of attention that Franklin's piece may have garnered by saying, "Not only is Franklin way off, but the FBI's decided that Trump has no connection whatsoever to the Russians." And they totally get out over their skis. And the Times to this day is never properly accounted for how they got that so wrong, but I spoke that day, I had previously worked at the Justice Department before joining the campaign so I had deep relationships with national security and Justice Department reporters, and in that moment that day, many of Eric's colleagues at the Times would not stand by that story and did not want to be the third or fourth byline on it. But, I think that the Times totally has egg on its face for that story. The sources within the FBI at that time definitely were shooting down the Alfa Bank theory as being anything. But the reality is, we now know that they launched a counterintelligence investigation back in July. So, it was disingenuous at best for anybody within the FBI to have been sort of coaching an angle like The New York Times took in that report in late October, because they had an active investigation that was directly contemplating the potential of Trump direct involvement with the Russians.

Franklin Foer:

When I had written the story at first, I kind of thought, did I miss something? Was I used? Was I



suffering from severe confirmation bias when I had done it? And I kind of was spent, my mind, like...reporting on Russia is really hard, because misinformation is part of the game. You know, some people have suggested on Twitter that the Alfa Bank story was misinformation that was spread by the Russians.

Max Bergmann:

Alfa Bank denies all of this, even saying they think they've been set up and that this is a conspiracy against them. But as one of the computer scientists noted, this doesn't really make any sense. No one knew that this server would be randomly uncovered by these computer scientists. And to keep it going for so many months? CNN reported on March 10 that the corporations involved with the server have “different theories to explain the server activity. But they haven't provided proof—and they don't agree. Alfa Bank and Mandiant could not point to marketing emails from the time period in question,” and neither could Spectrum Health. A computer scientist at Indiana University even assessed, “The more confusing this is, the more I think we need an investigation.” CNN also reported in March 2017 that the FBI was investigating the server. But what's the deal with the server? There was a ton of sketchiness. For example, when the server was taken down. The Trump server got shut down after the *Times* contacted Alfa Bank's representatives, but before the newspaper contacted Trump. As one of the computer scientists assessed, that “shows a human interaction. Certain actions leave fingerprints.”

Franklin Foer:

The New York Times reporter who's investigating it goes to Alfa Bank's representatives in Washington and tells them about the story he's working on. And a couple of days later, the Trump campaign shuts down its server in response. There was a quote somebody gave me, that “the knee was tapped in Moscow and the leg kicked in New York.”

Max Bergmann:

And it's not just what Foer found: two years later, Dexter Filkins, a national security reporter for *The New Yorker*, decided to do a deep dive. In the national security world, we would call this “red teaming.” Basically, he took fresh eyes and tried to poke holes in Foer's story. And Filkins ended up exactly where Franklin Foer did: This is sketchy as hell. One of the computer scientists told Dexter Filkins of *The New Yorker*, “We decided this was a covert communication channel.”

Franklin Foer:

It remained kind of a mystery, and I was hoping that the Muller report would put it to bed and it's clear they were interested in it because Petr Aven, who is the CEO, founder and CEO of Alfa



Bank, was interviewed by Mueller's team or by the FBI agents, and so we have quotes from his affidavits. And yet, I'm not sure that that is definitive evidence. It's very easy to destroy the actual physical evidence or to erase servers to make things disappear forever. And you go to ask this guy what he thinks, he's not an American citizen. He's like, he's very, very close to Vladimir Putin. He doesn't have a strong incentive for coming clean. Is that server story the center of some grand conspiracy? I'm inclined to believe not, because I think we would have found some evidence of that by now. But, if you asked me that we definitively know what happened with that server, I would also say no. It was dodgy as hell and it's entirely possible that all the evidence could have been disappeared.

Max Bergmann:

So, my view is that there is almost without a doubt a there there. Let's put it this way; this server existed for a reason. Someone created it. Someone made this link for a purpose. Its activity spiked during the election and then goes dead right when a reporter comes calling and is immediately taken down, and none of the exculpatory rationales for the server make any sense and have any proof behind them. In other words, there's no proof that this wasn't nefarious, but here's where lawyers would differ from intelligence analysts. Lawyers would say, "We don't have any evidence affirming it was nefarious." They would need to actually see the content of the data that was exchanged, what was in the emails, to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it was criminal. But intel analysts would look at this in the broader context. All the contacts between Trump and Russia, the fact Russians were interfering and had a campaign style operation, and would likely make an assessment, my guess with high confidence, that the server was, indeed, nefarious. You don't just create a secret server connection, have a ton of activity during the election, and abruptly take it down when confronted if there's no there there.

It's not hard to think of what the Trump campaign and Russia might have been sharing over that kind of connection. Perhaps the Russians were sending the emails that would be published over WikiLeaks. Perhaps the Trump campaign was sending the Russians data to help them micro-target their ads or their messaging just like the Trump team was doing. Or perhaps the Russians were sending the data they stole but never published. There's been a ton of attention on emails that went out through WikiLeaks, but missed is that there's other information that the Russian stole that has never seen the light of day. According to Mueller, when the Russians were rooting around in the Democratic National Committee servers, they also stole analytics data, and nobody knows what they did with it.

For example, on September 20, the GRU hackers hacked back into the DNC and they copied and



exfiltrated about 330 gigabytes of DNC data, and did what with it? We don't know, and neither does Robert Mueller. He doesn't say anything more about this in his report. But what we know is they didn't release this content to WikiLeaks. But to hack back into the DNC in September, when the Russians knew they were being watched, was extremely bold and reckless. If that had been discovered and exposed at the time by the intelligence community, that Russia was hacking again, it could have undermined their future releases through WikiLeaks. But the Russians decided to break back in. So, what was in that data that was so valuable? Mueller points to DNC field data and analytics being stolen. These were essentially the DNC's—the Democratic party's—battle plan for the election. Here's Brian Fallon to break this down.

Brian Fallon:

Any campaign has a voter file that it submits information to all the time to keep it updated and have it most properly reflect the electorate so that you can then model off of that voter file to determine who are the voters that are likely to support me that I want to make a point of turning out, and within that universe of people that are likely to support me, who are the ones that need extra attention because they've got demonstrated lack of propensity to vote? And who are the people, to make my field activities more efficient, who are the people I shouldn't just not even bother with? All that data sits in your voter file and the inputs that go into that are varied. You have demographic information, you have voting history, you have consumer information that gets bought from, you know, third-party vendors that will sell that stuff based on magazine subscriptions in the like.

But then you also have the hard-earned data that you only come by based on your own sweat equity based on knocking on doors and then having volunteers report back that somebody was a one or a two, or a four or five in terms of the scale of likelihood to support your candidate. A lot of that information is, like, priceless in terms of the amount of volunteer work that goes into accumulating that. And then, like I said, you will perform analytics on that data so that you will, you know, you can't have, you don't have, you can't knock on every door and so you can't, literally, for the 64 million people that you're going to turn out, you can't assign everybody a number. So you model to extrapolate and you say that this person has a similar, they're similar demographically and they're similar in terms of household income and based on the consumer data, and they're similar to these people so these people are probably likely Hillary voters and we should try to turn them out too. And you arrive at sort of your model of the electorate. The Russians didn't succeed in penetrating the voter file itself, but they gained access to the DNC cloud that was hosted by Amazon. And in that cloud, they had stored sort of files related to some of the modeling exercises that had been done on that voter file. So, you could, that information while not as valuable as the voter file itself, you could discern from some of the



material that would have been in the cloud some of the assumptions based on the modeling that was conducted, some of the some of the variables that we were toggling with. And you could infer a lot even without seeing the raw voter file itself about what the campaigns perceived vulnerabilities were in terms of which slices of the electorate we had to worry about, as I was just discussing. And so, I think that, you know, the fact that they did in a very sophisticated way target some of the slices of the electorate that we ourselves believed would be problematic for us, I think that the lesson to be taken from that is that they did have, you know, some insight that they came to through illicit means about what our strategy was, what our own perceived vulnerabilities were, and then they went about exploiting that.

Max Bergmann:

Basically, they had access to potential battle, your potential battle plan.

Brian Fallon:

Yeah. It's like if you, it's like, in the Super Bowl if, you know, if you stumbled upon the opposing team's playbook, and then when you go to line up at the line of scrimmage, you can see that they're in a particular formation and you know from the playbook that when they're in that formation their first play call is going to be X, and then if he audibles out of it, then the next play is going to be Y, and you can prepare your defense accordingly to exploit that foreknowledge that you have about what plays they're running.

Max Bergmann:

When the Russians hacked and stole this information it wasn't released through WikiLeaks. So, what did they do with it? We know the Russians were willing to give this information to Republicans. They gave some of the stolen Democratic documents to a Republican operative in Florida and, according to the Mueller Indictment of the 12 GRU agents, a congressional candidate even reached out to Guccifer 2.0 asking for dirt and Guccifer 2.0 responded and gave them the dirt. This set the press off on a hunt to find out which congressional candidate Mueller was referring to, but we still don't know who this is. If the Russians were willing to share with some congressional candidate, they sure as hell would be willing to share information with the Trump campaign.

Another loose thread involves Cambridge Analytica. That's the name of the now-defunct digital company Jared Kushner brought in to run the Trump campaign social-media operation. The company specializes in social-media microtargeting, using data largely gathered from people's social-media profiles to plan out exactly where and how to target them with ads. Cambridge Analytica was the brainchild of Steve Bannon and was funded by Robert and Rebekah Mercer



and, as with everything in the Russia investigation, we didn't know a whole lot about it at the time, but what's come out since is fairly staggering. In fact, in March 2018, so much damning information came out about Cambridge Analytica in one week that the company fired its chief executive and promptly shut down. What ultimately killed Cambridge Analytica was a sting investigation into its parent company by the UK's Channel 4. Posing as political operatives from Sri Lanka, they got Cambridge Analytica to not just admit but actively brag about the dirty tricks they would pull in elections around the world. The tricks weren't just dirty, they were illegal. They boasted about buying and entrapping politicians about setting up the opposition with prostitutes so they'd be vulnerable to blackmail.

[Newscast:](#)

Reporter: Last night, in the first part of our four-month investigation, we've revealed how CA works in elections around the world: honey traps and bribes targeted at politicians.

Interviewee: We'd send some girls around to the candidate's house.

Reporter: Hiring ex-spies to dig dirt,

Interviewee: I know people who used to work for MI5, MI6.

Reporter: Spreading misinformation online,

Interviewee: These are things that don't necessarily need to be true as long as they're believable.

Reporter: And secretly intervening in the democratic process.

Interviewee: No record exists with our name attached to this at all.

Interviewer: Have you met Mr. Trump?

Alexander Nix: Many times.

Interviewer: You have?

Alexander Nix: We did all the research, all the data, all the analytics, all the targeting, we run all of digital campaign, the television campaign, and our data informed all the strategy.



Interviewer: CA explained a twin-track approach: positive messages went through the candidate's official campaign, but the nasty stuff was pushed through outside organizations.

Interviewee: It's part of it. Sometimes you want to separate it from the political campaign itself so in America, you know, they're independent expenditure groups running behind the campaign.

Interviewer: What do you think?

Alex Tayler: There are super PACs, political-action committees. So, campaigns are normally subject to limits about how much money they can raise, whereas outside groups can raise an unlimited amount. So, the campaign will use their finite resources for things like persuasion and mobilization. And then they leave the air war, they call it, like the negative attack ads, to other affiliated groups.

Max Bergmann:

That was far from the only damning revelation. *Guardian* and *Observer* reporter Carole Cadwalladr found a whistleblower who revealed that Cambridge Analytica had spent years violating Facebook's rules to mine data on Facebook's users. This is the kind of data that might've been incredibly helpful for, say, a presidential campaign that didn't really care about whether or not it was following the law. And as always, there's a Russia connection—multiple, in fact. The first one dates back to 2014 when Cambridge Analytica consulted with the head of a Russian state-owned company about—you guessed it—how to target American voters. Here's Cambridge Analytica whistleblower, Christopher Wiley, testifying before Congress.

[Christopher Wiley:](#)

One of my concerns is the level of engagement that the company had with, the company being Cambridge Analytica, with Lukoil and executives from Lukoil, which is Russia's second largest oil company. The firm Cambridge Analytica made presentations and sent documents to Lukoil that made reference to its experience in disinformation, that made reference to its experience in rumor campaigns, attitudinal inoculation.

Max Bergmann:

But there's more. The company was able to circumvent Facebook's rules to harvest all that data because they had what they claimed was an academic partner, a Russian professor at Cambridge University. And it turned out he also had ties to another school, the University of St. Petersburg, where his work was financed in part by grants from the Russian government. And one more thing: It sure looks like Cambridge Analytica was in on the Trump campaign's efforts



to build a backchannel to WikiLeaks. And as I'd mentioned previously, Alexander Nix, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica, even had reached out to Julian Assange during the campaign, asking if he could obtain the Clinton emails in sort through them and collate them. Again, this is getting in speculative territory, but it's not some big stretch to wonder what a micro targeting data company like Cambridge Analytica, who's totally willing to flout the law would be able to do by coordinating with the Russian campaign. Perhaps it would be searching through the trove of emails to pull out one email that could be used to target a certain segment of the voting populations, such as Catholics. Or perhaps they could coordinate their message strategy so that the Trump campaign could focus on one voter set while the Russians could focus on another. That may sound super speculative, and it is, but we are literally dealing with a company that doesn't exist anymore because they were busted on camera saying that they'd be willing to sexually compromise an opposition politician. One argument put out by the Trump campaign was, "Well, Cambridge Analytica was just one company. It wasn't the company." But it's worth taking a tour of Project Alamo, which is the digital operation that Jared Kushner set up in San Antonio. And here, a former Trump staffer gave the BBC a tour.

[Newscast:](#)

Theresa Hong: This was our Project Alamo. So, this was where the digital arm of the Trump campaign operation was held.

Jamie Bartlett: So, why is it called Project Alamo?

Theresa Hong: It was called Project Alamo based on the data actually, and that was Cambridge Analytica. They came out with the Alamo Data Set, right? So, we just, kind of, adopted the name project element.

Jamie Bartlett: It does conjure up, sort of, images of a battle of some sort.

Theresa Hong: Yeah. It kind of was in a sense, you know? Yeah, yeah. Cambridge Analytica was here, so it was just a line of computers, right? This is where their operation was and this is kind of the brain of the data. This was the data center.

Jamie Bartlett: This is the data center. This is the center of the data center.

Theresa Hong: Yeah, that's exactly right. Yes, it was. Yes, it was.

Max Bergmann:



So, we've got a shady data company, one that has no problem breaking the law to win elections, working for the Trump campaign. They'd pitched the head of a Russian state-owned company about winning over American voters and even offered to help a Russian cutout distribute the emails Russia had stolen from Trump's political opponents. Now, the Russian social-media campaign varied in its sophistication. Some accounts were obviously Russian with very poor English, but man, would it have been helpful for this Russian troll farm with its 80 person staff, millions of dollars in budget, chugging away at all hours of the day, to get some messaging guidance to them with specific population targets of where to direct their energy and focus. In other words, Trump pushes one message. Russia pushes another, perhaps to rile up Trump's base or to depress Clintons. That's how you could run a campaign of collusion if you were willing to do it, and the Trump campaign was willing.

Here's what's odd about Mueller not mentioning the server or Cambridge Analytica in his report: He mentioned other stuff he didn't think happened. For instance, Michael Cohen's trip to Prague, which Christopher Steele described in his dossier and which McClatchy reported that a foreign intelligence agency had evidence that Cohen's cell phone pinged a cell tower outside Prague. And if we look at the Mueller report, he showed a pattern of disproving allegations that he felt he could dismiss when the evidence was there. In the report, Mueller says that Cohen didn't travel to Prague. He dismisses the claim. But Mueller didn't do that with the server or with Cambridge Analytica. And that's because he can't dismiss them as erroneous because they almost certainly are not. They are almost certainly sketchy and part of the Trump campaign's effort to collude with Russia. But to include them in the report, Mueller needed evidence either way, and it appears he couldn't get that evidence. Why? Because something people tend to do when they are committing a crime is to destroy the evidence. Evidence was likely deleted, servers were erased, people kept their stories straight. You don't make it easy on the investigators.

[Newscast:](#)

Reporter: Whatever the investigation, whether it's the FBI, Congress, or even the British authorities, CA appears to have a plan in place to avoid scrutiny. Nix says they use a secure secret email system, which destroys emails two hours after they're sent.

Alexander Nix: I'd like you to set up a ProtonMail account. Now it's getting quite sensitive.

Speaker: Yes, of course. So, if somebody asks for emails [Yeah] as evidence, ProtonMail you must not give, no?



Alexander Nix: Well, no one know we had it.

Speaker: Oh, I see.

Alexander Nix: And secondly, we set up ProtonMail emails because there's a self-destruct timer.

Speaker: Right, right, right, okay.

Alexander Nix: So, you send them and after they've been read, two hours later...

Speaker: They disappear, okay, okay.

Alexander Nix: And we can do the same.

Speaker: Yes, we can do the same. Yes, yes, we can do that, yeah?

Alexander Nix: There's no paper trail, there's nothing.

Speaker: Okay. okay. Alright.

Max Bergmann:

And while the FBI may have found some evidence, they can't magically conjure deleted emails. This is not a TV show. This is no *CSI*, *NCIS*, or *Law and Order*. Law enforcement doesn't just magically find the evidence so that this show can end with the bad guy going to jail and getting what he deserved at the end of the show.

-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:

I've asked the question again and again: If you are going to run a campaign of collusion with Russia, how would you do it? And we've talked about the communications campaign Russia ran in the form of its digital campaign and we've talked about the opposition research it could provide through its military intelligence services. And then we just went through how if you wanted to coordinate effectively, you would communicate regularly, exchange information and share data. But are there other ways campaigns could collude?

[Donald Trump:](#)

I think nobody knows more about campaign finance than I do.

Max Bergmann:

Well, one really obvious way is money. What do campaigns ask for incessantly? Money. It's what candidates spend a ton of time seeking. They spend half the time on the phone trying to raise money. And Trump was heavily out-raised by Clinton, but one of the ways he made up for it was supposedly by spending his money. Donald Trump spent \$66 million of his own money on the campaign—a campaign, according to Michael Cohen and others, he thought he was going to lose. That's a lot of money for a guy who doesn't appear to be that liquid. He doesn't seem like a guy that has a ton of cash on hand. It's locked away in real estate. And so, we are kind of in the dark about how Trump actually financed his campaign because he won't release his tax returns. But the most straightforward way for Russia to support the Trump campaign would be to, you know, fund it.

This is in fact a common line of effort that we have seen in past Russian interference efforts, particularly in Europe. For example, in France, Marine Le Pen's far right National Front Party, which also benefited from Russian hacking and social-media efforts in 2017, received millions of dollars from a Czech-Russian bank. In Italy, just this week, there was news about a scheme between the Russians and a far-right Italian party associated with Steve Bannon. The plan was for Russia to launder about \$65 million through an oil deal to this far-right party to help it in the European elections. We also know that one thing that the Russians are really, really adept at is laundering money, which is something we've talked about a lot in Episode 3, Episode 4. Basically, we've talked about it throughout this entire show. The Russians know how to launder money and we also know that Trump has all these properties, golf courses in Scotland, condos in Panama, that are basically ideal vehicles to launder money through

[Joaquin Castro:](#)



...this idea that you might have, for example, Russians who have somehow acquired money illegally and they're needing to cleanse that money and they're investing it in Trump properties.

Max Bergmann:

But here's the thing, Mueller did not investigate this. He didn't look at the money. *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius reported in February that Donald Trump threatened to fire Mueller if he subpoenaed his bank records from Deutsche Bank or looked into Trump's finances. And so, according to Ignatius, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein interceded and told Mueller that Trump's money was off-limits. But how do you not look into the financing of the campaign if you're looking for coordination or conspiracy? After all, it would have been pretty straightforward for Russia or the Saudis or anyone else to simply buy up a lot of Trump properties at inflated values to provide Trump with funds to use for his campaign. We also know that there were some weird sightings of Russian oligarchs around the campaign. For example, the plane belonging to Dmitry Rybolovlev, who we talked about in Episode 4 and who bought Trump's Palm Beach property at an inflated value when he was desperate for cash in 2008. He kept popping up near Trump during the campaign, such as at the Charlotte airport where Trump was holding a rally. Not looking into the money and whether the Russians help fund the Trump campaign is truly quite bizarre and something that Mueller should have looked into, and it's something he should be asked about by congressional investigators.

But there's also another way a campaign could work with a foreign intelligence actor, and that's to hack the vote. Here's Republican Senator and Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee Richard Burr at a hearing in June 2017.

[Richard Burr:](#)

There is no question that Russia carried out attacks on state election systems.

Max Bergmann:

While US government officials have repeatedly pointed out that there's no evidence that Russia changed any votes, it is also true that Russia was trying to penetrate our election system. *Bloomberg* reported on June 13, 2017, that "Russia's cyber-attack on the US electoral system before Donald Trump's election was far more widespread than has been publicly revealed, including incursions into voter databases and software systems in almost twice as many states as previously reported." In all, according to *Bloomberg* sources, Russian hackers hit systems in 39 states, and, according to the Department of Homeland Security, at least 21 states were targeted.



At the time, these waves of attacks were so concerning to the Obama administration that it used a modern-day, red phone to confront Moscow about its attacks in October. Essentially, John Brennan, the CIA director, picked up the phone that would be used to avert a nuclear war to contact the Russians and tell them to cut it out. Nevertheless, after the election, President Obama assured the nation.

President Obama:

And in fact, we did not see further tampering of the election process.

Max Bergmann:

But it is now apparent that Obama was wrong. This was not correct. Russian efforts continued until election day. Much of what the intelligence community learned about the Russian attacks on our election system was not caught at the time, but was being learned well after. On June 5, 2017, *The Intercept* got its hands on a top-secret, highly classified report from the National Security Agency that provided a window into Russia's efforts. The report was based on intelligence learned in April of 2017, well after the election and Obama statement. What drew more attention than the NSA document was the woman's name who leaked it: Reality Winner.

The Intercept failed to scrub the NSA document and Reality Winner was eventually arrested for leaking classified information. The intelligence revealed that "Russian General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate actors—"so the GRU—"executed cyber espionage operations against a named US Company in August 2016, evidently to obtain information on elections-related software and hardware solutions." The actors likely used data obtained from that operation to launch a voter-registration-themed spear phishing campaign targeting US local government organizations. In October 2016, the actors also created a new email address that was potentially used to offer election-related products and services, presumably to US-based targets. The NSA concluded that, "based upon subsequent targeting, it was likely that at least one account was compromised." The Russians posing as employees of this company between October 27 and November 1, within two weeks of the election, sent emails to 122 local government officials. The NSA assessed that, "given the content of the malicious email it was likely that the threat actor was targeting officials involved in the management of voter-registration systems."

According to the NSA, the "trojanized documents" likely enabled the Russians to have "persistent access or survey the victim for items of interest." In other words, this could give the Russians access through election day. To put this more simply, what the Russians did is sent a bunch of local election officials a Word document, pretending to be a vendor from the software



company, telling the local election officials, “Hey, you need to open this and you need to install the software.” And then some of them did it. And when they did it, presumably the Russians then gained access. So here we have the Russians trying to access our voting systems, our election systems. Now, this was portrayed by DHS as the Russians simply probing or looking for our vulnerabilities. These DHS assessments made it seem that this was some sort of educational exercise undertaken by the Russians to just sort of figure us out more, but we have to remember the Russians weren't waiting to interfere at some future date. They were interfering right then and there. Putin had already pushed his chips in the middle. He was all in by October. They were trying to help Trump win. As Pamela Smith, president of Verified Voting, explained to *The Intercept*, “If someone has access the state voter database, they can take malicious action by modifying or removing information.” Mark Graft, the former chief cybersecurity officer at Lawrence Livermore National Lab, told *The Intercept* that this could be “effectively a denial of service attack against potential voters.” Furthermore, as *Vox*'s Timothy Lee concluded, “Gaining access to voter registration systems could be a first step to hacking the voting machines themselves.” One potential example in need of further investigation is in Durham, North Carolina, where there was chaos on election day.

Audio drop:

The Department of Homeland Security will be analyzing Durham County laptops used in that 2016 election investigating the problems at the polls. Early that November day, issues arose as voters checked in. The state board of elections quickly decided to switch to paper poll books from VR Systems's E-pollbook software.

[Newscast:](#)

Reporter: Federal officials are looking at a possible link between Russian hackers and the 2016 election in Durham County. WREL's Sarah Kruger reports from the legislative building where lawmakers question state board of elections officials today.

Sarah Kruger: This revelation was first reported this morning by The Washington Post: 21 laptops from Durham County polling sites now being investigated by federal officials. The state elections director answered questions about this investigation right here today.

Max Bergmann:

Registration systems malfunctioned causing chaos and long lines and some election officials even had to switch to paper ballots. As *The Washington Post* recently reported, “the software was showing that some voters had already cast ballots while the voters themselves said they had not.” It was also prompting poll workers to ask for some voters' picture IDs, even though a



North Carolina law that required those IDs had been struck down. But when they switched to paper, it also slowed things down. The lines grew longer and county officials had to ask for an extension to stay open. They asked for 90 minutes and got 20 to 60. This recent *Washington Post* article about the voting irregularities in Durham also pointed out that North Carolina used the same software company that was likely hacked by the Russians. Now, what followed was sort of an Abbott and Costello routine of “Who's on first, What's on second.” VR Systems, the software company, denied that there was any problem with their software. However, they did say that the first time they heard about the hacking attempt was in September of 2017, when they got a voicemail—literally, a voicemail—from DHS saying that they should “give Homeland Security a call.” Meanwhile, state election officials in North Carolina tried to get answers from DHS about what happened, but had been pretty unsuccessful, and it wasn't until *The Washington Post* report in June that the Department of Homeland Security finally said that they would conduct a forensic analysis of the laptops used in Durham County elections in 2016. This is 18 months after the state of North Carolina first asked for it. Experts have also long warned that our election system is extremely vulnerable to cyber-attack. As Alex Halderman, a professor of computer science and an election security expert at the University of Michigan, noted in his testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Alex Halderman:

Your highly computerized election infrastructure is vulnerable to sabotage and even to cyber-attacks that could change votes. These realities risk making our election results more difficult for the American people to trust. I know America's voting machines are vulnerable because my colleagues and I have hacked them repeatedly as part of a decade of research studying the technology that operates elections and learning how to make it stronger

Max Bergmann:

At hacking conferences, hackers have demonstrated that they can break into the voting systems within minutes. Yet, DHS had tried to sort of say, “Oh, this is all fine, because you know, the decentralized nature of our voting system makes this all okay, makes it really hard to impact the outcome of election, because in order to do it, you have to do it at scale. You would have to hack everywhere.” But this is a pretty naive way to understand American elections, particularly where voting populations become particularly concentrated, such as in urban areas and urban neighborhoods, where depressing the vote totals in one county could make a huge difference in the overall outcome of an election. You don't need to hack everywhere. You just need to know where to hack.



And so, what's clear is that the Russians had the capability of hacking. The question is, would they know where to target? And if you're going to run a campaign of collusion with the Russians, well, maybe you could use their intelligence capabilities, their hackers, to impact the vote. So, if the Trump campaign was all in, why not get the Russians to help you suppress the vote? It was widely known that the Trump campaign didn't have a get-out-the-vote strategy on Election Day, but they did have a suppress-the-vote strategy. In a *Bloomberg* story in October 2016 that slipped under the radar at the time, a senior official running the Trump team's digital operation bragged about how they planned to suppress the Clinton vote. They'd be using "dark posts that stayed hidden from everybody other than their intended audience" to target voters they hope wouldn't show up on November 9. In the story, *Bloomberg* quotes an anonymous Trump campaign official who says, "We have three major voter suppression operations underway." Their targets: idealistic white liberals, young women, and African-Americans—people they thought they might be able to peel away to Jill Stein or could just get to stay home altogether. And the Trump campaign could have assisted the Russians by sharing campaign data down to the precinct level, similar to what has been alleged in online targeting. And so, if the Russians had such data, it could have helped them target their efforts. So just hypothetically, what you could do is say, "Hey, we're going to target African American populations online, on social media, with negative messaging about Hillary Clinton for days and weeks. And then what we're going to do is cause a problem at the polling station to make the lines turn long, and have those people, who've been bombarded by negative messages about Hillary Clinton, have to stay in line. Will they? "

There is, however, no evidence of collusion along these lines. This is purely speculative and there are always cases of lots of voting irregularities: voting-machine malfunctions, long lines. We are, after all, a big country, and things go wrong on Election Day. A lot of that just happens and a lot of it is by design, by officials wanting to make it difficult for certain populations to vote. But in this election, we do know that Russia was actively attacking our electoral systems, and was also seeking to help Trump win. And we also know that the federal response, the US government response from the Department of Homeland Security and seemingly as well the FBI, seemed incredibly slow and inept.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

The 2016 election was full of failures. In 2016, the American media failed again and again—failed to ever get their heads around the Trump-Russia story and Russian interference. It was never really given any credence, and this is in part because they weren't focused on vetting



Trump. They were focused on Clinton, because she was going to be president, and Trump was a sideshow. And so, the American media became an unwitting tool of Russian interference, eagerly running with and talking about personal emails stolen by Russia as if this was your run-of-the-mill leak. It may now seem bizarre to say that the media didn't get the Russia story in 2016, because for the last two years, the media has been obsessed with the Russia story. But as we noted in Episode 1, that shift didn't happen until after the election, until, in January 2017, the US intelligence community released its report on Russian interference.

But during the election you had *The New York Times* spiking stories and the press running with emails of John Podesta's risotto recipe and missing the larger story that a foreign adversary was trying to elect one of the presidential candidates. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a professor of political science at University of Pennsylvania, concluded, "Too often the press served as a conveyor belt of stolen content instead of a gatekeeper." But what's also clear is that it wasn't just the media. The FBI also failed. This is something we're going to talk about more in a later episode, but while the FBI New York field office was leaking like a sieve about the Clinton email investigation to people like Rudy Giuliani, it stayed quiet about a much more serious investigation—and not only that, it deliberately spiked a story about Russian interference. Harry Reid, on October 30, sent James Comey a letter writing, "It is critical for the Federal Bureau of Investigation to use every resource available to investigate this matter thoroughly and in a timely fashion. The American people deserve to have a full understanding of the facts from a completed investigation before they vote this November." Needless to say, this didn't move James Comey.

But it wasn't just the media or the FBI. It was also Congress. In early September, the Gang of Eight, made up of eight members from congressional leadership and the heads of the Intel committees was briefed on Russian interference. The Obama White House, wanting to make a big public announcement, knew that it could backfire if this was seen as partisan. So, they sought to make a bipartisan announcement with the leadership of the Senate and the House. So they went to Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan, and they said nyet—they wouldn't do it.

But it wasn't just Congress that failed. It was also the White House. Being deprived of bipartisan backing from Congress made the White House super nervous about moving forward, about calling out Russian interference publicly. Not only did the Obama administration not effectively deter Russia during the election, the anemic response may have prompted the Russians to keep going further. They gave strong warnings, but there was little tangible response, and the warnings failed to deter. They eventually went public and decided to put out that statement on October 7 that, as we know, would be swallowed up by the news. But they failed to do more,



and why? In part because it was risky, and it would have been interpreted as partisan, because Donald Trump would have made that so. The other reason why they didn't act was because she was going to win, he was going to lose, and then they could take their time to respond to Russia after the election, at a time of their choosing. The theme here is that everybody failed: the media, Congress, Obama, law enforcement, the FBI, DHS. Why?

[Newscast:](#)

Matthew Dowd: I think she's got about a 95% chance in this election and I think she's going to have a higher margin than Barack Obama did in 2012.

George Stephanopoulos: A higher margin than Obama?

Matthew Dowd: She's going to win by more than 5 million votes. She's going to win by a higher percentage, and interestingly, she's going to have a more diverse coalition of voters than Barack Obama even had when you look at the final numbers in this race. Every piece of data points in that direction and my view is, you take the facts into account and that's what the data says.

[Newscast:](#)

Reporter: The Moody's model is predicting that Hillary Clinton will take the key swing states of Florida, Ohio, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. We showed you the value in the program and they've correctly predicted the winner of every presidential contest 1980.

Max Bergmann:

Everyone thought that she would win and now what's also clear is that the Clinton campaign probably failed most of all. Many have attacked the focus on Russia as just an excuse for the failings of the Clinton campaign. But two things can be true: Russia did have a huge impact on the election and the Clinton campaign blew it. It focused on the wrong places, needed a better economic message, mishandled her email investigation. Was Russia the definitive factor in the election? No, I don't think so, but it was definitely in the top five, and it definitely made a difference. This was a race that came down to a few thousand votes across the three states. But one area where I don't think the Clinton campaign failed was in their efforts to highlight the Russia story. They tried, and they tried hard, but it just didn't resonate. All of the critiques of the Clinton campaign are merited, and each of those contributed to why Hillary lost. Failure, after all, has a thousand fathers. But what is also clear is that Russian interference mattered. It mattered a lot. It was decisive because everything was decisive. As election day approached everyone, even Trump, thought he was going to lose, and there were questions throughout the month of October whether he would accept the results. The worry approaching Election Day is that Trump would make bogus allegations of fraud, and WikiLeaks even direct-messaged Donald Trump Jr. on election day pressing him to make the case that the system was rigged.



Russian social-media trolls had a rig system meme ready to roll after the results were announced. Remember: One of their chief goals was to make US democracy look bad, and having the Republican candidate say the system was rigged would be another coup for the Kremlin—and also, particularly enjoyable payback for Vladimir Putin since, as you remember back in Episode 5, Putin was irate at Hillary Clinton back in 2011 when she called the Russian elections fraudulent. This would be payback. So like everyone else, Russia was preparing for Trump's defeat. And then, he didn't lose.

[Donald Trump:](#)

I've just received a call from Secretary Clinton. She congratulated us, it's about us, on our victory.

Max Bergmann:

Immediately after election night was called for Trump, a senior Kremlin official texted one of his Kremlin colleagues, "Putin has won."

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

Next time on The Asset: Payoff.

[Hillary Clinton:](#)

Last night, I congratulated Donald Trump and offered to work with him on behalf of our country.

Max Bergmann:

We go through the crazy period after the election, where Russia is seeking to get what they're owed.

Audio drop:

Robert Muller has his hands on tens of thousands of private emails between Trump transition-team members.

Max Bergmann:

From secret meetings in Trump tower...

Audio drop:



A meeting during the transition on December 1, 2016, puts Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and General Michael Flynn, his soon to be national security advisor, together in a room at Trump Tower with a Russian ambassador who has long been considered a spy.

Max Bergmann:

From the island of the Seychelles and phone calls from a beach in the Dominican Republic, to disastrous summits in Europe and a meeting in Helsinki between an asset and his handler.

[Press Conference:](#)

Reporter: Would you now, with the whole world watching, tell President Putin, would you denounce what happened in 2016 and would you warn him to never do it again?

Donald Trump: President Putin, he just said it's not Russia. I will say this, I don't see any reason why it would be.

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.

[Donald Trump:](#)

President Putin is extremely strong and powerful. He offered to have the people working on the case come and work with their investigators with respect to the 12 people. I think that's an incredible offer.