



## **The Asset Episode 11: Payoff**

### **Producer:**

Previously on The Asset.

### **Hillary Clinton:**

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

### **Max Bergmann:**

One principle question that Mueller doesn't answer is: why the Trump campaign was sharing polling data with someone who they believed was the Russian intelligence asset?

#### *Newscast:*

*A jailed model, who claimed last year that she had proof of Russian involvement in helping Donald Trump become president, is speaking out.*

### **Max Bergmann:**

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.

### **Sen. Richard Burr:**

*There's no question that Russia carried out attacks on state election systems.*

### **Max Bergmann:**

So like everyone else, Russia was preparing for Trump's defeat and then he didn't lose.

### **Donald Trump:**

*Thank you. I have just concluded a meeting with President Putin on a wide range of critical issues for both of our countries. We had direct, open, deeply productive dialogue. It went very well.*

### **Max Bergmann:**

Episode 11: Payoff.

There have been a lot of shockingly visceral moments in Trump's presidency, but his meeting with Vladimir Putin on Monday, July 16th, 2018 in Helsinki, Finland may take the cake. The country had tuned in with bated breath to see if their president, the President of the United States of America, the most powerful country on earth, would act like a Russian asset. And he did.



[Newscast:](#)

*Just now President Putin denied having anything to do with the election interference in 2016. Every US intelligence agency has concluded that Russia did. What... who... my first question for you sir is, who do you believe? My second question is, would you now, with the whole world watching, tell President Putin, would you denounce what happened in 2016 and would you want him to never do it again?*

**Donald Trump:**

*My people came to me, Dan Coats came to me and some others, they said they think it's Russia. I have... President Putin, he just said it's not Russia. I will say this, I don't see any reason why it would be.*

**Max Bergmann:**

The entire week leading up to that visit was crazy. On Monday night, July 9<sup>th</sup>, Trump announced Brett Kavanaugh as his nominee to the Supreme Court.

[Donald Trump:](#)

*Can I, it is my honor and privilege to announce that I will nominate judge Brett Kavanaugh to the United States Supreme Court.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Yet, earlier that day, Trump had another surprise meeting. It was with Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who just hours before Trump was wheels up to leave for Europe and preparing for his big announcement, Rosenstein told Trump that the Department of Justice was going to indict twelve Russian intelligence officers for participating in a conspiracy against the United States for hacking the Democratic Party and John Podesta. And Rosenstein gave Trump a fait accompli. He asked him if he wanted that to come out before or after his meeting with Putin. As someone who has observed the preparation behind big diplomatic meetings from inside the State Department, this struck me as really odd. Normally, nothing gets in the way of a massive presidential summit. Issues get pushed to create a safe distance either before or after. After all, the Department of Justice didn't seem to need to announce the indictment of twelve Russian intelligence officers right before Trump's trip. It's not like they were going to arrest one of them at the airport or in a foreign country. All of these people remain in Russia to this day. But you know, maybe they did need to. After all, an asset was about to meet with his handler. The next morning, Trump left before sunrise, but as he left the White House to board the helicopter to take him to Air Force One, Trump said this:

[Donald Trump:](#)



*So, I have NATO, I have the UK, which is in somewhat turmoil and I have Putin. Frankly Putin may be the easiest stuff of all. Who would think, who would think?*

**Max Bergmann:**

Trump's visit to Brussels went south quickly. He began the NATO summit with a rant against Germany at a breakfast with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

*Newscast:*

*It was uncomfortable to say the least. A lot of people noticed Chief of Staff John Kelly looked especially antsy; fidgeting in his seat, looking away from Trump, pursing his lips and that was understandable, but it was the White House statement in response that was especially weird. They could have just said, 'Don't be silly none of that had anything to do with what Trump was saying at the time,' but what they did say was quote, 'Kelly was displeased because he was expecting a full breakfast and there were only pastries and cheese.'*

**Max Bergmann:**

Here's a report from CNN on the NATO summit.

*Newscast:*

*President Trump, standing alongside some of America's most loyal allies at the NATO summit tonight, but standing alone in his remarkable confrontation with Germany. It's the latest example of how the Trump doctrine includes driving a wedge in the world order by upending democratic-led institutions in place since after World War II. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who grew up in Soviet-era communist eastern Germany, said she didn't need a lecture on being captive to Russia. So, coming together later for a face-to-face meeting, their tensions were clear after a day of projection, deflection, or misdirection, considering it's Trump's warm embrace of Russian President Vladimir Putin that worries allies*

**Max Bergmann:**

After thoroughly pissing off our most important allies in Europe, Trump then left for the UK where he was met with a huge protests and attacked Prime Minister Theresa May's handling of Brexit.

*Newscast:*

*It's been a roller coaster 24 hours for the President here in the UK, particularly late last night when that bombshell interview he gave to The Sun interview hit and lowered the tone between him and the Prime Minister, particularly in the part where he apparently suggested he would rather have the former foreign secretary who resigned this week, Boris Johnson as prime minister over Theresa May.*



**Max Bergmann:**

And then, at 10:30 AM on Friday morning in Washington DC (Friday afternoon in the UK) Rod Rosenstein took to the podium at the Department of Justice.

**Rod Rosenstein:**

*Good afternoon. Today a grand jury in the District of Columbia returned an indictment presented by the special counsel's office. The indictment charges twelve Russian military officers by name for conspiring to interfere with the 2016 presidential election. Eleven of the defendants are charged with conspiring to hack into computers, steal documents, and release those documents with the intent to interfere in the election. One of those defendants and a 12th Russian military officer are charged with conspiring to infiltrate computers of organizations involved in administering elections, including state boards of election, secretaries of state, and companies that supply software used to administer elections. According to the allegations in the indictment, the defendants worked for two units of the main intelligence directorate of the Russian General Staff, known as the GRU. The units engaged in active cyber operations to interfere in the 2016 presidential election.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Previous indictments were just posted online but Rosenstein and the Department of Justice decided to take the podium and send a message. The indictment was unprecedented in its details; not only laying out how Russia had pulled off its attack on American democracy, but it also provided some of the most damning connections yet to the Trump campaign. For example, the public learned that within hours of Trump's famous call for Russia to hack Hillary Clinton's private email server, Russian hackers tried to do exactly that.

*Newscast:*

*The president has said, 'I'm going to ask him, Vladimir Putin. I don't know if he's going to say anything.' I mean, what Rod Rosenstein, his own deputy attorney general, was effectively saying is, 'That's not good enough.' And that's what we've heard from Republicans and Democrats. You can't just say, 'Please don't do it.' This is a major crime perpetuated by the man that the president is going to go and meet with. So, to just say, 'Did you hack? No. Okay then, or did you meddle? No. Okay. Well if you did, don't do it again.' No, I mean this is a very detailed account of twelve members of Vladimir Putin's very own government. Proof, according to his own Justice Department, that they went in a very strategic way into the American political system, into key political committees and that is something that should be and would be under any other administration, until Trump, a diplomatic explosion.*

**Max Bergmann:**



This all set the stage for Helsinki. The press and the country were watching to see what Trump would do. Would he act like Putin's puppet? Would our pugnacious leader who always wants to appear as the alpha male in the room, who attacks literally anyone who says something mildly critical of him, stand up for the country, finally stand up to Putin? Or, would he show fealty, look like he was in Putin's pocket? And by the end of it, it became shockingly clear that Donald Trump was a Russian asset. America was in shock.

[Newscast:](#)

**James Clapper:** *This past weekend is illustrative of a what a great case officer Vladimir Putin is. He knows how to handle an asset and that's what he's doing with the present.*

**Interviewer:** *You're saying that Russia is handling President Trump as an asset?*

**James Clapper:** *That seems to be the... that's the appearance to me.*

*Audio drop:*

*One doesn't like to say it, but there is a Russian asset in the White House.*

[Rep. Hakeem Jeffries:](#)

*The American people deserve to know whether Donald Trump is either A) a legitimate president, B) a Russian asset, C) the functional equivalent of an organized crime boss, or D) just a useful idiot who happens to have been victimized by the greatest collection of coincidences in the history of the Republic.*

[Rep. Bob Menendez:](#)

*The American people deserve to know who they elected to be their president. They deserve to know if he's in fact putting America's interests first. They deserve to know if Donald Trump is wittingly or unwittingly an agent for the Russian Federation.*

**Max Bergmann:**

During the Helsinki press conference, when asked if he believed his own intelligence services or Putin about the election interference in 2016, he refused to side with his own intelligence community. When asked if he held Russia accountable for its aggressive actions, he said, 'Basically no.'

[Newscast:](#)

**Interviewer:** *Mr. President, you tweeted this morning that it's US foolishness, stupidity, and the Mueller probe that is responsible for the decline in US relations with Russia. Do you hold Russia at all accountable for anything in particular, and if so, what would you consider them that they are responsible for?*



**Donald Trump:** *Yes, I do. I hold both countries responsible. I think that the United States has been foolish. I think we've all been foolish. We should've had this dialogue a long time ago, a long time, frankly, before I got to office, and I think we're all to blame.*

**Max Bergmann:**

When Putin suggested that Russia be allowed to interrogate American officials for unspecified crimes, instead of standing up for his own citizens, Trump called it a quote, 'incredible offer.'

**Donald Trump:**

*I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today, and what he did is an incredible offer; he offered to have the people working on the case come and work with their investigators with respect to the twelve people. I think that's an incredible offer.*

**Max Bergmann:**

And when given a second chance to categorically refuse it, Sarah Huckabee Sanders refused to rule it out. The White House only reversed their position to denounce the idea just immediately before the Senate voted 98 to 0 to approve a resolution stating that no US officials should be interrogated by the Russian government. Finally, standing next to Putin, he called the Russia probe a disaster.

**Max Bergmann:**

*The probe is a disaster for our country. I think it's kept us apart. It's kept us separated. There was no collusion at all.*

**Max Bergmann:**

And to top it all off, this all took place at the same press conference where Putin explicitly acknowledged that he had wanted Trump to win in 2016.

**Newscast:**

**Interviewer:** *Did you want President Trump to win the election and did you direct any of your officials to help him do that?*

**Vladimir Putin:** *Yes, I did. Yes, I did, because he talked about bringing the US-Russia relationship back to normal.*

**Max Bergmann:**

I talked with Angela Stent, the director of Georgetown University's Center for Eurasian, Russian and Eastern European studies, on the summit.

**Angela Stent:**



*The relationship between, or what president Trump sees of president Putin is somewhat mysterious in as much, this is the only major world leader whom he's never criticized. He's criticized all of our allies. He's never said anything negative about President Putin and the same is true of President Putin. He criticizes the United States all the time. He has never said a negative word really about President Trump. But, I think what was remarkable about this Helsinki summit was first of all, the fact that there were no note takers in the meeting that he had with Putin, which is not normal. There was just the US interpreter and obviously the Russian interpreter, but an interpreter doesn't focus on the substance. They focus on the interpretation. And so, we have no record of what went on there. And so, you know, in future years and future decades, there'll be none of these memcons as they're called, memoranda of conversations, that people will be able to look at. And then, I think the other thing was that he stood next to President Putin and said that he believed President Putin when President Putin said that Russia didn't interfere in the US elections - completely contradicting,, obviously, the conclusions of his own intelligence agencies.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Here's the thing, throughout the Trump presidency, it would make all the political sense in the world for Trump to just blast Putin to look tough on Russia, at least verbally, to show solidarity with NATO allies, to show that he thought a foreign country interfering in our elections was bad. Anything, if he did any of that, the press would have said, 'See, there's no there there. There's no collusion. There's nothing to this Russia story.' But literally at every turn, Trump has gone out of his way to praise Putin and to try to stay on his good side.

*Newscast:*

*You put it all together, you think, why is it that he is so, so willing to step over himself to lavish praise on Vladimir Putin?*

**Max Bergmann:**

It has made no sense. It has seemed inexplicable, except when you realized he is compromised. He is complicit. He is a Russian asset. I'm Max Bergmann and this is *The Asset*.

**-BREAK-**

*Newscast:*

*Hillary Clinton has called Donald Trump to concede the race.*

**Donald Trump:**

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



**Max Bergmann:**

At 2:30 AM on November 9th, 2016 the election was called for Donald J. Trump. He would be the next president of the United States. Vladimir Putin had rolled the dice on the most incredible intelligence operation in the history of espionage, and he won. The two campaigns working to elect Donald Trump had, against what seemed like impossible odds, actually succeeded in putting Trump in the White House. It had seemed like Trump had been preparing to lose. Even if Trump had lost, as the Russians were expecting, this would have still been a really successful operation. Trump got the Republican party to shift from his decades of anti-Soviet and anti-Russian policies to be more receptive to better relations between Russia and the US but ‘OMG, that guy actually won.’ The champagne started flowing in Moscow and that morning, when the news was announced in the Russian parliament, they burst into applause.

[Audio of Russian Parliament:](#)

[Russian dialogue]

**Max Bergmann:**

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, a seasoned diplomat not known for going off-script, publicly confirmed that there were contacts between the Trump campaign and Russia. He told Russian press quote, ‘There were contacts. We are doing this and have been doing this during the election campaign. Obviously, we know most of the people from his entourage. I cannot say that all of them, but quite a few have been staying in touch with Russian representatives.’ And Trump's victory set off a mad dash. Everybody who was preparing for a Clinton presidency was suddenly scrambling to get in contact with the incoming administration and influence what was seen as an empty vessel. This wasn't just the Russians. The Saudis and Emiratis and a number of other countries were seeking contact as well. Vladimir Putin even had an all hands meeting with Russia's top oligarchs after the election with the message: Make as many high-level connections as possible.

Peter Aven, the head of Alfa Bank, who we talked about in the previous episode about that server, even told Mueller about the meeting. Now, a skeptic would rightly ask, why would Putin need more links to the Trump team if he's got Donald Trump? But as we will show, it's one thing to be connected to the inner circle, but quite another to be connected to the people who actually have to get the work done. There were at least 67 contacts and meetings between the Trump team and Russia during the transition, just less than one per day. That includes at least eight in just the first 24 hours after the election. All of these meetings and contacts were kept secret. So, at this point on the transition, the Trump campaign really kind of knew that contacts with Russia were a thing, but they kept meeting and it was three members of Trump's team that were especially busy: Jared Kushner, Michael Flynn, and Steve Bannon. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, Kushner and Flynn



met with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak in Trump Tower. In the meeting they discussed US-Russian cooperation in Syria and Kislyak suggested that they be briefed by Russian generals about the conflict. And then Kushner actually suggested that they should use the secret communications facilities at the Russian embassy for the briefing. Kislyak taken aback reportedly rejected this off hand. According to Mueller, Kushner also asked Kislyak quote, ‘with whom to direct future discussions, someone who had had contact with Putin and an ability to speak for him.’ Now, this is a pretty bizarre thing to say to the ambassador, i.e. Russia's designated representative to the United States, but Kushner doesn't seem to just want your typical diplomatic channel; he wants a back channel, something out of the public eye that is narrow and which goes direct to Vladimir Putin. After this, Kushner actually turned down another meeting with Kislyak in early December because, as the Mueller report states, Kushner assessed that Kislyak was quote, ‘not the right channel for him to communicate with the Kremlin.’ So, one of Kushner's assistants took the meeting instead, and at that meeting that took place on December 12<sup>th</sup>, Kislyak apparently said that Kushner can meet with someone with quote, ‘a direct line to Putin.’ And that man was another Sergei, Sergei Gorkov, the head of one of Russia's sanctioned state-owned banks. Kushner took that meeting despite the fact just a few days before, *The Washington Post* had come out with another story.

*Newscast:*

*A secret CIA report concluded quote, ‘that Russia intervened in the 2016 election to help Donald Trump win the presidency rather than just to undermine confidence in the US electoral system.’*

### **Max Bergmann:**

The Kremlin hadn't just been trying to undermine American democracy. They were doing it specifically to help Trump. But apparently that wasn't enough to deter Jared and on December 13<sup>th</sup>, the same day they announced Rex Tillerson was going to be Secretary of State, Jared Kushner met with Sergei Gorkov. But they didn't meet in Trump Tower, where cameras were staked out. It took place elsewhere in Manhattan. Kushner claims he did no prep for the meeting and that no one even did a Google search for Gorkov's name, but his assistant told Mueller that he did indeed Google Gorkov and told Kushner about him.

*Newscast:*

*He is Sergei Gorkov, handpicked by Russian President Vladimir Putin to run Russia's state bank, the Vnesheconombank, nicknamed the VEB. This Russian banker was trained by Russia's spy agency, the FSB. Gorkov's bank, VEB, was embroiled in an FBI spying investigation. One of its own employees here in the US, accused of illegally gathering intelligence for the Russian government and the bank paid for that person's defense. It is the same bank that has bailed out Russian oligarchs and has been under US sanctions for nearly three years - punishment for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is the bank and the banker Jared Kushner met with in*



*December and then errantly forgot to mention when disclosing his personal contacts with foreign officials.*

**Max Bergmann:**

But let's get this straight: Jared, just a few days earlier is turning down meetings because he wants a direct line to Putin and then he gets one and he takes the meeting outside of camera shot and then he claims to have no idea about who he was meeting with and about what it was about. What also makes this whole timeline sort of weird is that Gorkov came with gifts. Now, the meeting was supposedly set up the day before it happened, but at the start of the meeting, Gorkov gave Kushner two gifts, a painting and a bag of soil from the town in Belarus where Kushner's family originated. Now, who knows, maybe this was just a bag of dirt from Central Park, but by bringing gifts, this implies a degree of foresight went into the meeting. In fact, just before Gorkov left for New York, he met with an American banker named Bob Foresman in Moscow and Forsman went to Moscow after talking Michael Flynn about creating a direct channel between the Kremlin and the Trump team. And according to Mueller, Gorkov's trip was quote, 'sanctioned by Putin.' This doesn't appear to be a spur of the moment meeting. And after the meeting, Gorkov got on a plane and flew to Japan where Vladimir Putin was visiting. That seems like a back channel to me. Gorkov's assistant later texted Kushner's assistant writing quote, 'The information about the meeting had a very positive response!' There are also conflicting accounts from the parties involved about what happened at the meeting. Kushner said the meeting was about foreign policy, it was about diplomacy, but Gorkov's bank disagreed. They claimed that Kushner took the meeting as quote, 'the head of his family's real estate company. It was about business.'

So, what to make of this? Well, it clearly looks like an effort to set up a secret back channel to Putin. Kushner is almost certainly lying. The only other plausible explanation is that he's such an idiot that he's a danger to national security and should be removed from the White House immediately. In an interview with Axios, Jared went with the dimwit defense over the June 9<sup>th</sup> meeting, saying he was just oblivious to what the meeting was about.

[Axios Interview:](#)

**Jared Kushner:** *Let me put you in my shoes at that time, okay? I'm running three companies, I'm helping run the campaign, I get an email that says, 'Show up at four instead of three,' to a meeting that I've been told about earlier that I didn't know what the hell it was about. Okay? I show up at the meeting. I stay for 15 minutes. It's a clown show. One second now, let me finish this. I text my assistant and say, you know, 'Can you give me a call and get me the hell out of here? This is a waste of time.' I leave. I never would have thought about that meeting again. Okay? Had there been something that actually was nefarious at that meeting that came up,*



*maybe we would've done something different, but the reality is that the meeting was a total waste of time.*

**Interviewer:** *I need to stop you there. This is... we're talking about Russia here. They are a long term adversary of the United States - decades of hostility, including spying. Does it not set off at least some alarm bell when you see an email saying that the Russian government wants to help?*

**Jared Kushner:** *Like I said, the email that I got on my iPhone at the time basically said, 'Show up at four.' I didn't scroll down. I never would have thought about that.*

**Interviewer:** *It had Russia in the subject line.*

**Jared Kushner:** *Again, I would get about 250 emails a day and so I literally saw, 'Show up at four,' I showed up at four.*

**Interviewer:** *But would you call the FBI if it happened again?*

**Jared Kushner:** *I don't know. It's hard to do hypotheticals.*

### **Max Bergmann:**

But even if you give Jared the benefit of the doubt about the June 9th meeting, which you definitely should not since the email for the June 9th meeting had the subject line quote, 'Russia - Clinton - private and confidential,' by December, Russia was definitely a huge thing. There was no way even a moron like Jared didn't know these meetings were extremely sketchy. Just four days before Jared's meeting with Gorkov that *Washington Post* story came out. The transition team even put out a statement about it. One point also complicating Jared's claim of not knowing what was going on is that he knew enough to lie about the meeting. He knew enough to cover it up, to leave it off his security clearance form.

With the Trump administration staffing up, people like Jared Kushner who Trump would soon officially name as one of his senior advisers, were filling out their SF86s - their security clearance form. These forms are a huge pain, as is the whole security clearance process and that's the point. It's not supposed to be easy. An investigator literally rummages through everything in your life, what you did while you were in college, your social life, your family life, what you do in your spare time. Do you gamble? Do you drink? Do you use drugs? But the two most important parts are your finances and your foreign contacts. This form asks you to list all the foreign contacts you had in the last seven years. That's a pretty straightforward question, but it's one that Kushner somehow failed to fully answer. When he first submitted his SF86, Kushner didn't list any foreign contacts. He eventually had to resubmit the forms at least three times, likely after some of his Russian contacts were exposed. He claimed that these omissions were just mistakes, that he'd forgotten some of them, that the form had been submitted prematurely, but really? You've somehow forgotten about the secret meetings that you had just a few weeks earlier? And it's not just Russia contacts. Kushner's contacts with Saudi Arabia, with China, all raise a ton of suspicions and these contacts and his business dealings are why he couldn't get a top-secret security clearance.



*Newscast:*

*Now, there is also this being reported tonight from The New York Times. They are reporting that the president's son in law, Jared Kushner was granted top-secret security clearance because President Trump overruled top intelligence officials. According to the Times, that decision was so troubling to senior administration officials that former Chief of Staff John Kelly wrote a memo noting that he had been ordered to give Kushner clearance and former White House Counsel Don McGahn also documented his objections and concerns.*

**Max Bergmann:**

He needed Trump, the President, to overrule the security clearance office and issue one. He's that much of a concern to the intelligence community, to US national security, that they don't trust him and yet he's still there.

-BREAK-

**Max Bergmann:**

Another Trump figure in regular contact with Kremlin officials was Michael Flynn. Two days after the election when Trump came to the Oval Office, Obama himself personally warned Trump against hiring Flynn.

*Newscast:*

**Barack Obama:** *Well, I just had the opportunity to have an excellent conversation with President-elect Trump. It was wide-ranging. We talked about some of the organizational issues in setting up a White House.*

**Donald Trump:** *Well, thank you very much President Obama. This was a meeting that was going to last for maybe 10 or 15 minutes and... we were just going to get to know each other. We had never met each other. We really... we discussed a lot of different situations, some wonderful and some difficulties.*

**Max Bergmann:**

And we now know from the Muller report that Flynn was already being investigated by the FBI for his contacts with Russia. My guess is the intelligence community likely had an aneurysm back in December 2015 when they saw a former head of a US intelligence agency sitting next to Vladimir Putin at the RT gala, sitting there like his trophy. They wouldn't have been cool with that and probably start an investigation afterwards. Former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who was running Trump's transition team and not one with the cleanest record, even warned Trump about hiring Flynn, yet Trump hired him anyway and Christie was removed from the transition team. On December 29th, the Obama Administration announced it was sanctioning



nine Russian individuals and entities, evicting 35 Russians here in an official capacity in the United States, and seizing two Russian government-owned compounds in the US. This was done explicitly in response to Russia's interference in the election.

*Newscast:*

*Now, among those actions, that we've already been talking about are sanctions against nine entities and individuals, including officials from Russian intelligence services, also from the FSB, which is what replaced the KGB, two Russian intelligence services, four individual officers of Russian intelligence, three companies that provided material support to those cyber operations. Also, the Secretary of the Treasury is designating two Russian individuals for using cyber-enabled means to cause misappropriation of funds and personally identifying information.*

**Max Bergmann:**

After this announcement, the Russians frantically sought to get in touch with Flynn. Ambassador Kislyak texted him and Flynn missed the call from the Russian Embassy the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>. Flynn was on a beach in the Dominican Republic. The sanctions caused a flurry of activity amongst the transition team, many of whom were at Mar-a-Lago. K.T. McFarland, a former Fox News commentator and at this point was designated as deputy national security advisor - Flynn's number two, began shooting off emails to transition officials. Flynn wrote to a transition official quote, 'Tit for tat with Russia, not good. Russian ambassador reaching out to me today.'

McFarland and Steve Bannon discussed the sanctions and Bannon worried that if the Russians escalated it would make it harder for the Trump team to improve relations with Russia.

McFarland then called Flynn before she was set to brief Trump. McFarlan then briefed Trump with all the other senior members of the transition team on what Flynn was going to say. Flynn then had the call.

You know what's so odd about this process? Actually nothing. This looks like a fairly normal policy process. Flynn wasn't just shooting from the hip. Flynn had coordinated what he was going to say on sanctions with the transition team. Trump had been briefed. Flynn even told Mueller that he chose not to call Kislyak and talk sanctions until he heard back from Mar-a-Lago. This looks like pretty normal policy coordination. Something that has been kind of rare during the Trump administration. During the call, Flynn, according to Mueller, requested that Russia not escalate the situation and avoid getting into a quote, 'tit for tat.' He asked that Russia only respond in a reciprocal manner. The next day, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia would respond, but just two hours later, Vladimir Putin said Russia would not take action, that they would not retaliate.

*Newscast:*



*So, I want to get to this response from President Putin because he has just announced he's deciding not to expel US diplomats, and in fact, in the statement he released, he goes on to invite all American children of US diplomats in Russia to New Year and Christmas tree celebrations in the Kremlin.*

**Max Bergmann:**

In the State Department, we were stunned. Putin not retaliate? That's his M.O.! Trump even tweeted, quote, 'Great move on delay by V Putin.' On New Year's Eve, Kislyak wrote to Flynn telling him that his request that Russia not retaliate had been received at the highest levels and that his request was why Russia was not responding. Flynn and McFarland exchanged verbal high fives and Flynn believed his call had made the difference.

But on January 12th, The Washington Post's David Ignatius, well sourced in the intelligence world, wrote about Flynn's calls with Kislyak. Flynn then apparently told Vice President Pence and incoming Chief of Staff Reince Priebus that he didn't talk about sanctions. Pence then went on "Face the Nation" and said,

[Audio drop:](#)

**Interviewer:** *Just to button up one question, did any advisor or anybody in the Trump campaign have any contact with the Russians who were trying to meddle in the election?*

**Mike Pence:** *No, of course not. And I think, I think to suggest that is to give, give credence to some of these bizarre rumors that have swirled around the candidacy. And I talked to General Flynn about that conversation and actually was initiated when on Christmas Day, he had sent a text to the Russian ambassador to express not only Christmas wishes but sympathy for the loss of life in the airplane crash that took place. It was strictly coincidental that they had a conversation. They did not discuss anything having to do with the United State' decision to expel diplomats or impose a censure against Russia.*

**Max Bergmann:**

On January 24th, literally his second workday as national security advisor, Flynn was interviewed by the FBI, by Peter Struck, who Republicans would later try to tar for his text messages. And there, Flynn lied to the FBI. Flynn's conversation with the FBI raise concerns in the Justice Department. The acting Attorney General Sally Yates met the White House counsel, Don McGahn, to say that Flynn's statements were not true and that he could be compromised by the Russians. Here's Yates describing it at a Senate hearing in May 2017.

[Sally Yates:](#)

*I had two in-person meetings and one phone call with the White House counsel about Mr. Flynn. The first meeting occurred on January 26. I called Don McGahn first thing that morning and*



*told him that I had a very sensitive matter, that I needed to discuss with him, that I couldn't talk about it on the phone and that I needed to come see him. We weren't the only ones that knew all of this, that the Russians also knew about what General Flynn had done. And the Russians also knew that General Flynn had misled the Vice President and others because in the media accounts it was clear from the Vice President and others that they were repeating what General Flynn had told them and that this was a problem because not only did we believe that the Russians knew this, but that they likely had proof of this information.*

**Max Bergmann:**

On January 27th, the day after Sally Yates called Don McGahn, Trump decided to call Comey and invited him over for dinner. Comey said, 'Sure,' and showed up. But when Comey showed up, he was shocked. It was just him and Trump, just him and the President, for dinner. And at this dinner, Trump pressed Comey for loyalty saying, quote, 'I need loyalty. I expect loyalty.' And Comey squirmed responding, 'You will always get honesty from me.' Eventually, Vice President Pence, Reince Priebus, and Don McGahn, according to Bob Woodward's book *Fear*, went to the situation room to read the transcripts of the call and there they saw that Flynn did indeed talk about sanctions and they determined that he had to go for lying to the Vice President, for lying about a conversation he coordinated with Mar-a-Lago. On February 9th the Washington Post reported that Flynn did indeed talk about sanctions and so, a few days later, on February 13th Flynn was told by Priebus that he had to resign.

*Newscast:*

*The President's national security advisor, General Michael Flynn, suddenly resigned late last night. This follows questions about his conversations with Russian officials during the presidential transition.*

*General Flynn admitted he didn't tell Vice President Mike Pence and other officials everything about those discussions. He is the shortest serving national security advisor now in modern history.*

**Max Bergmann:**

There's a lot to unpack here. Trump was clearly really nervous about Flynn being prosecuted and seems really nervous about what Flynn would tell Comey. And he seemed to think if Flynn stood strong and Comey took it easy, this would all go away. While that is clear, I have to say, over the last 2+ years I've thought a lot about this chain of events and I don't quite get it. I don't really understand why Flynn lied to the FBI. Why he didn't just say that, 'Yes. He talked about sanctions with the Russian ambassador and he tried to get Russia not to retaliate against the United States' and why he didn't just go back to the FBI right away when this became an issue and say, 'Yeah, I did talk about sanctions. What's the big deal?' Because here's the thing: Russia



not evicting our diplomats, not closing our facilities is good for the United States of America. Putin not responding is good for us. Well, yeah - Flynn's efforts are definitely underhanded and shady; the idea that Flynn was in violation of the Logan Act, some 1798 law that literally never seem to have ever been enforced, seems a real stretch. The only way this actually makes any sense to me is that the phone call with Kislyak is way more incriminating and sounds a lot more like a quid pro quo with Kislyak saying something like, 'Hey, you know what we did for you,' in Flynn responding with something akin to, 'Yeah, I know what you guys did and we appreciate it and don't worry, we're going to look at getting rid of sanctions when we get in, but you know, if you guys respond with sanctions and retaliate, it would make it really hard for us to do that.' If this is the case, it would probably fall short of a direct quid pro quo and therefore wouldn't directly establish that there was a conspiracy, and plus they got Flynn to plead guilty for lying so they don't need to bring additional charges against Flynn. When a judge at Flynn's sentencing saw the underlying materials in the transcript of the calls, he asked if Mueller's team contemplated charging Flynn with treason.

*Newscast:*

*It was a dramatic hearing today with judge Emmett Sullivan telling Flynn quote, 'I am not hiding my disgust for your criminal offense,' and even pressing the prosecutor representing the special counsel's office on whether they considered charging Flynn with treason.*

**Max Bergmann:**

There's also a pretty easy way for us to know: they should declassify and release the transcripts of the calls. Let's be clear, there is no national security reason to keep those calls classified. The Russians know the national security agency was monitoring Kislyak's calls. The whole world knows - the calls were leaked by the intelligence community to the Washington Post after all. So, why are those call transcripts still secret? Because someone actually has to take the step to declassify them. They're classified until someone says they're not, and no one's doing that. And my guess is that if we got to see the full transcripts the Flynn story would make a lot more sense.

-BREAK-

**Max Bergmann:**

On January 11<sup>th</sup>, just nine days before Trump would be inaugurated, he held a press conference where he dismissed Russian interference and the Steele dossier.

**Donald Trump:**

*I was in Russia years ago with the Miss Universe contest, which did very well in Moscow, the Moscow area - did very, very well and I told many people, 'Be careful because you don't want to see yourself on television,' cameras all over the place, and again, not just Russia, all over it.*



*Does anyone really believe that story? I'm also very much of a germaphobe by the way.*

**Max Bergmann:**

But on that same day, a half a world away on an island in the Seychelles, a tiny country in the Indian Ocean off the coast of East Africa, a Trump transition emissary was meeting with the head of the Russian sovereign wealth fund in a meeting arranged by a convicted pedophile. This is one of the strangest meetings of this entire affair. Kirill Dmitriev was the head of the sanctioned Russian Direct Investment Fund, which has a \$10 billion portfolio. He also reported directly to Putin and referred to him as quote, 'his boss.' After Trump was announced the winner on election night, it was Dmitriev of who got the text message that said, quote 'Putin had won.'

Dmitriev immediately reached out to George Nader, a convicted pedophile and a senior adviser to UAE's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed or MBZ and one of the most powerful people in the Middle East. According to Mueller, Dmitriev had been reportedly quote, 'tasked by Putin to develop and execute a reconciliation plan between the United States and Russia.' But Dimitriev have wasn't just working through Nader. He was also working with a good friend of Jared's, an American hedge fund manager named Rick Gerson who, like Prince, had no formal role with the transition. They exchanged ideas in December 2016 over a quote, 'reconciliation plan' between the US and Russia. On January 3rd Nader had lunch and dinner with Erik Prince. If you've heard of him before 2016 it was probably because he was the founder of a mercenary company called Blackwater. They were involved in so many scandals during the Iraq War that they had to change their name twice. Prince was never officially on the Trump team, but like Roger Stone, he was definitely on the Trump team. He is also brother of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, whose company was weirdly linked to the server between the Trump organization and Alfa Bank that we talked about in the last episode. And on January 7<sup>th</sup>, the day after the intelligence community report was released, Erik Prince booked a plane ticket leaving for the Seychelles just a few days later.

Now, Dmitriev was not thrilled with the idea of meeting with Prince and was unsure of his influence, but Nader assured him quote, 'this guy Prince is designated by Steve Bannon to meet you!' Prince, Dmitriev, and Nader met at the Four Seasons in the Seychelles. Nader would later become a cooperating witness in the Mueller investigation and much of the section of this report is redacted so we don't fully know what was discussed. Prince did say that he would inform Bannon to see if there was interest in continuing this discussion. Prince sent Bannon two text messages from the Seychelles, but Mueller wasn't able to get these messages because they both deleted them. Prince also says he briefed Bannon at Bannon's home when he got back to the states, but Bannon says he never discussed anything about Dmitriev with Prince and would have obviously objected to them meeting.



What's also weird is that NBC reported that Rick Gerson, the friend of Jared's, was also in the Seychelles at the time and was at the meeting. There were also questions of whether MBZ was there at the meeting, but the Mueller report doesn't say. When Congress asked Erik Prince about the trip, he also almost certainly lied to them, claiming that it was just a coincidence that he and Dmitriev just happened to be there at the same time and maybe they grabbed a beer, he couldn't quite remember. He said he wasn't there to represent the Trump team in any capacity, but you don't suddenly drop everything, fly halfway around the world to the Seychelles for no reason. So, what was he doing there? The purpose of this meeting, according to the Washington Post, was also about setting up a back channel. On January 26<sup>th</sup> Dmitriev would write to Kushner's friend Gerson that he talked with Putin and that quote, 'We need to build this communication channel to avoid bureaucracy.'

And on January 28<sup>th</sup>, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump had had their first phone call and Gerson wrote to Dmitriev saying that the call had gone well and a document that they had drafted together quote, 'played an important role.' Mind you, Gerson wasn't part of the administration, but he knew what happened on this call.

In March 2019, Erik Prince sat down with Mehdi Hasan of the Intercept.

[Newscast:](#)

**Erik Prince:** *I certainly disclosed any meetings. The very, very few I had.*

**Mehdi Hasan:** *Not in the congressional testimony you gave to the House. We went through it. You didn't mention anything about August 2016 meeting in Trump Tower. They specifically asked you what context you had and you didn't answer that.*

**Erik Prince:** *I don't believe I was asked that question.*

**Mehdi Hasan:** *You were asked, were there any fromal communications or contact with the campaign? You said, 'Apart from writing papers, putting up yard signs, no.' That's what you said. I've got the transcript of the conversation here.*

**Erik Prince:** *Sure. I might've been, I think I was at Trump headquarters or the campaign headquarters...*

**Mehdi Hasan:** *Trump Tower, August 3rd 2016: you, an Israeli dude, a back channel to the Emiratis and the Saudis, Don Jr., Stephen Miller.*

**Erik Prince:** *We were there to talk about Iran policy.*

**Max Bergmann:**

At Trump's inauguration, the Russians came to party. After all, they needed to celebrate their campaign's victory as well, and some of the names of the Russians who turned up in D.C. around that time may be familiar: Natalia Veselnitskaya, the Russian lawyer who attended the June 9th meeting; Maria Butina, the Russian agent who infiltrated the NRA; and a number of high-profile



Russian billionaires like Viktor Vekselberg and Alexander Mashkevitch, as well as Konstantin Kilimnik. Upon coming to office, the new Trump team went full speed ahead in trying to change America's approach to Russia and improve relations. The first three weeks of the Trump administration were crazy. Russia had two immediate tangible priorities: sanctions and Ukraine. Upon entering office, it seemed like a mad dash to appease the Russians. According to Mike Isikoff of Yahoo News, Trump's people pushed to get rid of sanctions. Trump administration officials were placed in the Secretary of State's office and tasked the Bureau of European Affairs to develop a proposal to lift sanctions and this caused a panic inside government.

*Audio drop:*

*In the very first few days of the Trump administration, top Trump administration officials were dispatched to the State Department to immediately tell State Department employees that Trump wanted to unilaterally drop US sanctions against Russia.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Indeed, by the time Trump was inaugurated, there was already a bipartisan bill in the Senate trying to put the sanctions into law. Trump's entrance into office was also a huge opportunity for Russia to turn the screws on Ukraine. This is ostensibly why Konstantin Kilimnik traveled to New York to dine with Manafort in August of 2016 and Kilimnik noted to Manafort in a December 8th email that quote, 'All that is required to start the process is a very minor wink or slight push from DT.' Manafort was even proposed as a Special Representative to Ukraine. Kilimnik even went to the inauguration to push this plan. The Russians also found another route to the White House through Michael Cohen. During Trump's first month in office, Michael Cohen hand delivered a sealed proposal to National Security Advisor Michael Flynn a week before he resigned. The proposal outlined a Kremlin peace plan for Ukraine. Cohen got the plan from, surprise, surprise, Felix Sater, who, with no Trump Tower deal to serve as go-between on, became an emissary for peace. Hmm.

Sater had gotten the proposal from opposition pro-Kremlin Ukrainian politician, a guy named Andrey Artemenko, who would also attend the inauguration and the woman's march in Washington. There were also other crazy ideas. The Daily Beast reported that a national security council official even floated pulling American troops out of Eastern Europe just to show Russia how serious Trump was about better relations with Moscow.

But just three weeks in, Michael Flynn was fired - the shortest tenure for any national security advisor in history. And the flurry of efforts to appease Russia subsided or lost steam. With Flynn gone, Russia lost the guy pushing for them. Skeptics often note, 'Well, if Trump is a Russian asset, Russia sure didn't get what they hoped for: sanctions remain in place, no Ukraine peace plan has happened.'



One of Trump's biggest problems was that almost no one, not Democrats nor Republicans, espoused his foreign policy views. So, in staffing his administration, he had real problems. There was no bench. People like Carter Page and George Papadopoulos had already been discredited. So, Trump was really slow to appoint people, making him dependent on the career people that were there. When there are no political appointees, you have acting officials, basically career officials filling that job and Trump has had a lot of actings. And many, if not most, of these acting officials are highly competent, but they are also products of the institutions. So, Trump with a small bench, having no plan, came into government with no people. But not only that, some of the people that Trump did appoint because he had no bench, were part of the generic Republican foreign policy establishment - people you would expect to see in any Republican administration. Trump also had a fondness for generals. He appointed Jim Mattis at Defense, John Kelly at DHS, and after Flynn was fired on February 20th, 2017, appointed General H.R. McMaster to be his national security advisor.

So, Trump didn't have a MAGA hat wearing foreign policy crew to implement his pro-Russian vision. Furthermore, Trump's MAGA hat wearing core team in the White House literally had no idea what they were doing - none, zero, zip. They thought they could come in and just ban Muslims from entering the United States. They couldn't. Trump thought government was like business. He could just issue orders, but it doesn't work that way. A president can't just say, 'I want to deal with Russia,' snap his fingers and have it happen. He needs his people to then make it happen. Develop proposals, engage in talks, exchange ideas, take those ideas back to the respective capitals, and then keep working on it. I think John Oliver probably summed up diplomacy best of all when he created a diplomacy video game, World of Peacecraft. And I should note this was a huge hit at the State Department at the time.

#### *John Oliver Clip:*

*You fought terrorists in Call of Duty and alien hordes in Gears of War. Well, now get ready for the opposite of that... Okay. First up on the agenda: paragraph three, subsection four - Retention of Previously Agreed Upon Language. World of Peacecraft: critics are already calling it uncomfortably boring and offputtingly complicated. World of Peacecraft features all the heart-pounding excitement of trilateral talks in a variety of international settings, from Russian conference rooms, to Pakistani conference rooms, to Israeli conference rooms, and back to Russian conference rooms.*

*Are you ready for nonstop sitting, incessant talking, and incremental progress all while trying to escape the creeping sense that your presence may be doing more harm than good? IGN says, 'Jesus, this is bleak,' and official Xbox magazine raves, 'I honestly would prefer war to this.' Madeline Albright says, 'Yeah, that's pretty much what it's like.'*



**Max Bergmann:**

Diplomacy is boring. It's tedious, it's exhausting, and Donald Trump doesn't have the attention span. So, Trump was reliant on government officials to improve relations with Russia. People who Donald Trump called the 'deep state,' who did not want to go down this crazy path. Our government, our civil servants, mitigated the fallout from Donald Trump. They kept the trains running as best they could, and they reassured our allies. They did what they could to serve the country the best way they could. One could say this was even the bureaucrats' finest hour and this is what the Russians feared when Kirill Dmitriev said they needed to quote, 'avoid the bureaucracy.' The Russians fear the US bureaucracy - the 'deep state.' They feared they would stand up and look out for America's interests and block their schemes. It's why they and the Trump team sought those back channels.

In addition to the White House's incompetence, the Russia investigation had boxed Trump in on Russia policy. After Comey had announced the Russia investigation and made it public on March 20<sup>th</sup>, the President even told the Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats on March 25<sup>th</sup> that he quote, 'can't do anything with Russia. There's things I'd like to do with Russia.' On March 26<sup>th</sup>, Trump told the head of the director of the National Security Agency, Mike Rogers, that the Russia investigation made relations with Russia difficult, that quote, 'The thing with the Russians was messing up his ability to get things done with Russia.' And by May I could imagine Vladimir Putin's is growing frustration in the Kremlin. Putin was probably thinking, 'Look, I didn't respond with sanctions when you asked. Me, Putin, didn't hit back and it's now been four months. It's now May and you could get rid of sanctions and you haven't, and you haven't done anything on Ukraine. Come on man, what are you waiting for?'

And so, on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, Trump had a call with Putin, which was ostensibly about Syria. But on that call, a visit from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was proposed by Putin and Trump agreed and it was arranged for just eight days later. The next day, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, James Comey testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and refused to speak about the Russia investigation. But Trump was apparently incensed that Comey didn't explicitly say that he wasn't under investigation. Comey was then fired on Tuesday evening May 9<sup>th</sup> and the next morning the Russians came to the Oval Office. Now I'm not saying one had to do with the other. In fact, until putting this episode together, I hadn't even noticed the earlier overlap in timing. But man, it just seems like in almost every major significant event there's some weird Russian link. And again and again, it initially seems like just a coincidence, but after a while it stops being a coincidence and starts being a pattern.

During that meeting, Trump told Lavrov and Kislyak that quote, 'I just fired the head of the FBI. He was crazy, a real nut job. I face great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off. I'm not under investigation.' But that's not all. Trump also met that day with Pavlo Klimkin, the



Ukrainian foreign minister. Trump also tweeted, 'Let's make peace on May 10<sup>th</sup>,' noting that he had met with both the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers. It sure seems like Trump was trying to convey to the Russians, 'Look, I can make progress now.' But you know, one of the problems with cultivating useful idiots, as we talked about in Episode 6, is they often happen to be idiots. And instead of freeing his hand in firing Comey, it led to the establishment of a special counsel investigation and the FBI opened a counterintelligence investigation to determine whether Donald Trump was a Russian asset.

Firing James Comey also prompted Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to move on that sanctions legislation. For the previous five months, McConnell and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker were sitting on a bipartisan Russia sanctions bill that would turn the sanctions that Obama implemented into law, mandating that they should be enforced. The bill was passed in the summer of 2017 almost unanimously, a rare bipartisan act, and was passed with a veto-proof majority and Trump was not happy about it. In a signing statement on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, he said the bill was quote, 'significantly flawed' and had quote, 'unconstitutional provisions.'

*Newscast:*

*There was no Oval Office celebration, no ceremony as President Trump signed arguably the most significant piece of legislation in his young presidency and that's because the bill passed with overwhelming bipartisan support contains a limit on the President's power. In short, if the President wants to lift or modify sanctions on Russia, he has to run it by Congress first and Congress could say no.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Despite the sanctions bill, the Trump administration refused to implement the law. But H.R. McMaster, the national security advisor, like the US military generally, was not a big fan of the Kremlin, and he had had enough. In a 'drop the mic moment' on Friday, April 6<sup>th</sup>, McMaster's the last day in office, he pushed through an incredibly strong bout of sanctions that hit Oleg Deripaska's aluminum company and hit it hard.

*Newscast:*

*The United States hitting Russian oligarchs with new sanctions, like billionaire Oleg Deripaska. And now, shares of one of his companies, Rusal, dropping 50%.*

**Max Bergmann:**

The move actually fit a pattern of McMaster pushing through tough measures. In December 2017 he gave president Trump three options for providing lethal assistance to Ukraine and all of them entailed providing Ukraine with lethal weapons.



In March 2018, Trump called Putin after the Russian election.

*Newscast:*

*New reporting tonight in the Washington Post on President Trump's phone call today with Vladimir Putin in the wake of his re-election as Russia's president, in a vote that's widely believed to have been something of a sham. The same Vladimir Putin who interfered in our election. As it is before all important phone calls, especially with the leader of another nuclear superpower, the President is carefully briefed. This time, according to the Washington Post, the President's briefing materials contained a three-word warning on the election. The words all in capital letters: 'DO NOT CONGRATULATE,' meaning do not congratulate Vladimir Putin on winning the election, and then the president went ahead and did just that.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Also in March 2018, Russian military intelligence officers used a chemical weapon to assassinate former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom. And when deciding how many diplomats the United States would expel in response, Trump insisted quote, 'We're not taking the lead. We're matching.' But that's not what McMaster wanted to happen. McMaster got the President to approve the expulsion of 60 Russian officials from the United States, but when Trump found out that France and Germany were only expelling four Russians, he was furious.

Here's Luke Harding, the former head of The Guardian's Moscow bureau, and the author of the book *Collusion*.

**Luke Harding:**

*The other message of Skripal, which has perhaps been somewhat overlooked in America, was a message to people inside the Russian elite and particularly inside the spy agencies inside the FSB, inside the GRU. And that message went: If you cooperate with Western intelligence in any way, and in particular, if you talk to Robert Mueller about what happened in 2015, in 2016, you decide you're going to defect, start new life in California or whatever, we will find you and we will come for you at a time of our own choosing and we will settle with you.*

*And it's kind of, you know, poor d'carigers de l'autre, you know, to discourage others from going down that road. And it's quite a chilling message and I think what was also really striking about the Skripal episode; he was poisoned a year ago, March of 2018, is what happened subsequently and less than two weeks later: Donald Trump picked up the phone in the Oval Office and invited Vladimir Putin to a bilateral summit. Now, Trump is many things, but I think he is not entirely foolish. And he would have been briefed that. I know that the British government briefed the US very closely, that the Skripal case was, was another Russian state plot and that most probably*



*Putin was behind it. So, he is inviting the man who's dispatched murderers to run around the streets of a major ally. He's inviting him for a meeting*

**Max Bergmann:**

As H.R. McMaster left office, Mike Pompeo took over the State Department and John Bolton took over the NSC and since then the Trump administration has done nothing toward Russia despite hollow protestations of them being tough. Here's Eddie Fishman, a fellow at the Atlantic Council who formerly worked at the State Department on sanctions in Europe and Eurasia.

**Edward Fishman:**

*The Trump administration has failed on a number of counts on Russia sanctions. I think probably most significantly, you know, I believe the Russian interference in the 2016 election and ongoing interference in American democracy merited much stronger new sanctions. But even in terms of maintaining existing sanctions the Trump Administration has fallen short. They've sort of lost this battle where the maintenance... sanctions maintenance packages.*

*And the one time that the Trump administration did try and, I think this was after, sort of, a lot of pressure about the Trump Administration's poor implementation of CATSA, which was the sanctions law passed in 2017, the Trump Administration did try in April of 2018 to put some new significant sanctions in place in which they targeted Oleg Deripaska and, and his business empire. But it was a catastrophe. I mean, effectively, you know, they hadn't thought out what the market response would be and within six months of those being in place, they lifted a significant portion of those sanctions.*

**Max Bergmann:**

But where Trump has been able to exert control over foreign policy, where the bureaucracy can't stop him, where it doesn't require a lot of tedious work, is in the bilateral meetings and in the summits.

**Justin Trudeau:**

*... Canadians. We're polite, we're reasonable, but we will also not be pushed around.*

*Newscast:*

*President Trump was quick to respond on Twitter. He called Trudeau 'dishonest and weak' and accused him of releasing false statements and that the US will put, pull back rather, from its endorsement of the G7 summit's communique. .*

*Newscast:*



*In March of 2017, Trump hosted Merkel at the White House and the two had what was portrayed as an awkward meeting in the Oval Office. The two didn't even shake hands for the press.*

*Newscast:*

*Trump was in Brussels for the NATO summit, as I was saying before, and when they were lining up for one of their photos, look at him getting kind of hands-y with the Prime Minister of Montenegro. 'Alright, out of my way.'*

**Max Bergmann:** (01:05:24)

And one major way for Trump to aid Russia is to weaken the United States' commitment to the transatlantic alliance and Russia's greatest strategic adversary for the last 70 years: NATO. In May 2017, just after Trump fired Comey, he was preparing for his big overseas trip. And just a few months into his term, everything was set for Trump to assume the mantle of American leadership and to affirm his commitment to NATO as President of the United States.

Trump's national security team, H.R. McMaster, had laid the groundwork for a strong statement from the new president, affirming America's commitment to article five and he had even told the *New York Times* he was going to say it in the speech. But what would a Russian asset do? Here's the late conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer on Fox News discussing Trump's speech with Bret Baier.

*Newscast:*

**Charles Krauthammer:** *I thought the European part was a disaster, the speech in NATO. And not because of the scolding and the paying the dues, that's okay. The Europeans deserve a scolding; this has been a 50-year complaint. But because the world was waiting for Trump to say, 'I support Article Five.' That was the purpose of the visit and he wouldn't say it. And that omission, I think, is going to have a lot of repercussions weakening NATO unity over time. And it's really hard to understand why he didn't say it.*

**Bret Baier:** *He was speaking at NATO in front of the Article Five memorial. He talked about 9/11. Do you think that it's not... that it's... that the US is not going to live up to Article Five?*

**Charles Krauthammer:** *The point is, what do the Russians think, what do the Estonians think? Every president since Truman has declared fealty to 'an attack on one is an attack on all' and precisely because he was standing in front of the wall, because 9/11 was the only time the article has been invoked and it was invoked in support of us by our European allies - that was the point of the ceremony. So, it is exactly the kind of place and time and occasion for a president who has been skeptical of NATO, called it obsolete, called into question our coming to the aid of the others, to have simply said, 'We support Article Five as we have ever since the late-1940s.' He didn't do it. The omission was a statement.*



**Max Bergmann:**

At summit after summit, with our closest allies and partners, Trump has been sowing discord and division. This kind of rupture in the western alliance structure is a dream scenario for the Kremlin and it's one of the main reasons why Secretary of Defense James Mattis resigned. In his resignation letter he wrote, quote, 'My views on treating allies with respect and also being clear eyed about both maligned actors and strategic competitors are strongly held. Because you have the right to have a secretary of defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my position.'

In the summer of 2017, Trump finally got to meet with Putin at the G20 summit in Hamburg. The session opened up fairly awkwardly with cameras rolling and Putin opened up the conversation saying, 'We need to meet more,' and then they joked about the press. After the meeting, which Rex Tillerson attended, Trump, according to *the New York Times*, took his interpreter's notes and ordered him not to tell anyone what he had heard. It was later revealed at the G20 dinner - Trump got up and went over to Putin and sat next to him, where they reportedly talked privately and animatedly, aided only by Putin's translator.

*Newscast:*

*The White House has confirmed that President Trump had a second conversation with Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Hamburg earlier this month, one that had not been previously disclosed. The administration confirmed that the two spoke via Putin's interpreter.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Later that fall, Trump met with Putin again in Vietnam and Trump took Putin at his word that he did not interfere in the 2016 election.

*Newscast:*

*Later aboard Air Force One, the President told reporters that he asked Putin once again about US election interference. 'He said he absolutely did not meddle in our election. He did not do what they're saying he did,' the President said. 'I really believe when he tells me that he means it.'*

**Max Bergmann:**

As Peter Baker of the New York Times assessed, 'Each of the five times he has met with Mr. Putin since taking office, he has fueled suspicions about their relationship. The unusually secretive way he has handled these meetings has left many in his own administration guessing what happened and piqued the interest of investigators,' unquote. Over and over, Trump has had the chance to dispel the rumors that surround his relationship with Russia and over and over and over and over again he's acted in ways that just reinforce the suspicions.



But, it's also Trump's rhetoric on domestic issues that plays right into Putin's hand. The Kremlin is always looking for ways to distract and weaken its adversaries and one of the best ways to do this is to sow chaos, stoking political, cultural, and social divisions within the United States, and there was no better vehicle to stoke divisions in the United States than Donald Trump. Trump loves attacking democratic institutions. He's attacked the US intelligence community. He's railed against the FBI. He calls the press 'the enemy of the people' and rails against quote, 'fake news.' If this language sounds familiar, that's because other dictators around the world say the same type of things to silence their critics. There's also a Russian tactic called, 'whataboutism' and Trump is a master of it, and Trump also loves amplifying divisive political and social issues. He's publicly defended Neo-Nazis. After the August 2017 white nationalist march in Charlottesville that resulted in the death of one of the counter protesters, Trump said the white nationalists includes some quote...

**Donald Trump:**

...'very fine people on both sides.'

**Max Bergmann:**

It has been treated as so inexplicable why Trump acts in this way. It's a big mystery! Except it's really not. You just have to accept the fact that our President is a Russian asset.

**Max Bergmann:**

Next week on The Asset: breaking down what actually happened with Mueller...

*Newscast:*

*As alleged by the Grand Jury in an indictment, Russian intelligence officers, who were part of the Russian military, launched a concerted attack on our political system.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Trump's obstruction, and we take a look back at the past two years and the fight over the Russia investigation.

*Newscaat:*

*But the special counsel found no evidence that any American, including anyone associated with the Trump campaign, conspired or coordinated with the Russian government or the IRA in this illegal scheme.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Donald Trump spent the past two years fighting impeachment.



**Donald Trump:**

*There is no collusion between, certainly, myself and my campaign, but I can always speak for myself and the Russians. Zero.*

**Max Bergmann:**

While Democrats put their faith in Robert Mueller...

**Washington Post Interview:**

*he's becoming self-impeachable.*

-BREAK-

**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](http://themoscowproject.org) and [protecttheinvestigation.org](http://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:**

*Robert Mueller, I know he's conflicted. He... there's a lot of conflicts that he's got, including the fact that his best friend is Comey.*