



## **The Asset Episode 8: Hack and Collude**

### **Producer:**

Previously on The Asset.

### **Max Bergmann:**

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

#### *Donald Trump:*

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

### **Max Bergmann:**

It was a mystery at the time just why Trump would be going to such lengths to defend Putin.

#### *Donald Trump:*

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

#### *Donald Trump:*

*Donald Trump: I think our relationship with Russia will be very good. Vladimir Putin was on 60 minutes with me three, three weeks ago. Right? Putin. And they have one of the highest ratings they've had in a long time.*

### **Max Bergmann:**

Suddenly, Trump looked like he would win this thing and now people were starting to notice that he didn't seem to have a real campaign.

#### *Newscast:*

*Male Reporter: Donald Trump has won, is our projected winner, in the Commonwealth of Virginia.*

*Newscast:*



*Developing news tonight: Party panic as Donald Trump wins big on Super Tuesday.*

**Max Bergmann:**

A Russian military intelligence unit based out of Moscow had set its sights on hacking the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign, and, in doing so, unequivocally changed the course of history.

**-Break-**

**Max Bergmann:**

Episode Eight: Hack and Collude. Friday, July 22, 2016 was the day it became clear that the 2016 presidential election would be like no other ever experienced in the United States. The Republican convention had concluded the day before, and it had been a mess. What was supposed to be a celebration of Donald Trump's takeover of the Republican Party was a spectacle of incompetence and disunity. Trump's wife Melania had delivered a speech that had plagiarized many lines exactly from First Lady Michelle Obama's speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Trump's last opponent for the nomination, Ted Cruz, even refused to endorse Trump for president during his speech, prompting boos from the crowd and concerns about Trump's ability to unite the party behind his candidacy.

[Newscast:](#)

*Ted Cruz: I appreciate the enthusiasm of the New York delegation.*

*Crowd: We want Trump. We want Trump.*

*Ted Cruz: We will unite the country by standing together for shared values, by standing for liberty. God bless each and every one of you and God bless the United States of America.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Polling after the convention showed that Trump failed to get any bounce out of it. Then, the next morning, the website Wikileaks, which had largely been thought of as a lefty transparency group most known for releasing tens of thousands of State Department cables and other classified US government materials, released a massive trove of 20,000 emails and documents from the Democratic National



Committee, from the Democratic Party.

*Newscast:*

*That sent a lot of Bernie Sanders supporters into the streets here in Philadelphia over the weekend. We saw significant protests here in Philadelphia from those Bernie Sanders supporters who felt that the Democratic Party was rigged against them all through the primary process, and now we see a Democratic Party going into its convention with the resignation of the Democratic National Committee Chairman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Now, *The Washington Post* had reported on June 14 earlier that summer that the DNC and its cybersecurity firm found that two Russian hacking groups, called Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear, had penetrated its computer network. But you know, campaigns had been hacked before by foreign countries. In 2008, China hacked the Obama campaign. But the Chinese were hacking to find out what the Obama campaign was thinking in terms of policy issues, what they were planning about China. This was your run-of-the-mill intelligence-gathering operation, seeking to gain information to help political leaders better understand what's going on. They weren't trying to use that information to actively influence outcomes, they were using it just to learn about what was going on. So, news of Russia's hacking drew attention, but it also seemed kind of routine. And then, suddenly, it didn't. When DNC emails stolen by Russia were being released by WikiLeaks, Russia had crossed a Rubicon. It wasn't just seeking to learn information about the DNC; it was seeking to actively influence outcomes. This was active measures, and the impact was damaging. The DNC chairwoman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, even announced her resignation less than a day before the convention started. And the rift in the Democratic ranks became one of the defining messages of the Democratic convention. The Clinton campaign tried to focus people's attention, tried to focus the reporters' attention, on the emails that were stolen by Russia. At the convention, Clinton campaign officials Jen Palmieri and Jake Sullivan went around briefing this to the press. But to political reporters, the whole thing was bizarre. To them, the story wasn't Russia crossing a Rubicon, conducting some active-measures campaign. And what did that mean anyway? The story was the impact on the campaign, on the horse race. This was just Clinton trying to down-play bad information. And so, all the material was treated just like any other leak. I talked Brian Fallon, the press secretary for the Clinton campaign.



**Brian Fallon:**

*The reaction to the leaks was deep frustration. This was sort of our first incident where we were putting to the test whether the media would cover, whether they would find the materials so intriguing and provocative that they just couldn't take their eyes off of the underlying material, while we were trying to get them to pay attention to the illicit means through which this material was obtained and try to impose some shame over them for just reporting it at face value without feeling any sort of sense of, you know, the need to talk about how the materials were acquired.*

**Max Bergmann:**

And so on Sunday, the day before the convention, Robbie Mook went on Jake Tapper's Sunday show on CNN, and was immediately followed by Donald Trump Jr.

[Newscast:](#)

*Jake Tapper: I don't know if you were hearing earlier, but uh, Robby Mook, the campaign manager for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, I asked him about the DNC leak and he suggested, uh, that experts are saying that Russians were behind both the leak, the hacking of the DNC emails, and their release. He seemed to be suggesting, uh, that this is part of a plot to help Donald Trump and hurt Hillary Clinton. Your response?*

*Donald Trump Jr.: Well, it just goes to show you their exact moral compass. I mean, they'll say anything to be able to win this. I mean, this is time and time again, lie after lie. You know, just, he won't say, "Well, I say this," we hear "experts," you know, his house cat at home once said that this is what's happening with the Russians. It's disgusting. It's so phony. I watched him bumble through the interview. I was able to hear it on audio a little bit. I mean, I can't think of bigger lies. But that exactly goes to show you what the DNC and what the Clinton camp will do. They will lie and do anything to win. You hear it with the DNC where they're leaking emails about Bernie Sanders and his Jewish heritage to be able to try to destroy him in the South. It's a rigged system. It's disgusting and the people should be fed up because when I heard it, I certainly was.*

**Max Bergmann:**



This was a brazen lie by Donald Trump Jr. But Donald Trump Jr. didn't just lie, he lied with conviction, with feeling. Just six weeks before, he was in Trump Tower, meeting with a Russian government representative with the expressed purpose to get dirt on Hillary Clinton as part of the Russian government's "support from Mr. Trump." The Trump campaign knew all of this was true. They knew if their meetings and contacts with the Russians were revealed, it would be extremely damaging to them. So, they were lying about it. And the Russians knew they were lying about it, and that is called leverage. It is impossible to overstate the damage to the Trump campaign if the June 9 meeting had come out and Donald Trump Jr.'s lie had been exposed during the campaign. But here's the thing: The lying worked. Here's Brian Fallon.

**Brian Fallon:**

*Donald Trump Jr. put out, uh, he was on a Sunday show later in the morning and he lashed out at Robby for sort of inventing conspiracy theories about Russian involvement. And Don Jr.'s take on it was sort of supported by, by a lot of the mainstream press that thought that Robby was shooting from the hip without having any basis for assuming that there was foreign involvement in the breach. And what Robby was saying, you know, was what CrowdStrike had been saying back, dating to the June Washington Post report. We were probably barking up the wrong tree the whole time. By which I mean, asking political reporters to explore the possibility that the hacks was the sort of tip of the spear of a larger conspiracy being waged by a foreign government. Like this, this is the work of national security and intelligence and investigative reporters. All of the people that we dealt with everyday only wanted to talk about, you know, the fact that they were finally getting to see Hillary Clinton's speeches. So, trying to get the, the campaign beat reporters to delve into the prospect that this was, you know, truly the work of Vladimir Putin and that there was a motive here to help Donald Trump, like, that seemed, that forever was too spy novel-y for these reporters to sort of get their heads around.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Now, we often think of Putin's Russia as reckless and bold. But in fact, Putin's decision-making is often very deliberate, thought through, and often very tactical. To so brazenly interfere in a US presidential election could have brought immense blowback against Russia: massive sanctions, bipartisan rebuke from Congress and both candidates. Which is exactly what happened in 2008 when



Russia invaded Georgia during the election. Perhaps Putin was just banking on a timid response from the Obama administration, and was just intervening to support Trump because it was too good an opportunity to pass up. But perhaps Putin also knew and was aware that Trump, the standard bearer for the Republican Party, wasn't going to criticize Russia, was going to deflect attention. And if you knew that, if you could count on that, that Russia interfering in the election was going to be treated in a partisan way, with Republicans, the Russia hawks, refusing to act—well then, what do you have to lose? And how did Putin know that Trump would react that way? Well, because the Trump campaign told them. They would love it. I'm Max Bergmann and this is The Asset.

**-Break-**

**Max Bergmann:**

We've talked about there being two campaigns to elect Donald Trump. Well, what's clear is that these two campaigns were working in tandem. There was no bright line separating them. They were in constant contact. They were meeting. And yes, they were colluding. But what is collusion? What does this even mean? Well, I think one way to think about collusion is how American politicians collude with their super PACs. Now super PACs are outside political-action groups that aren't supposed to have any interaction with the candidates they were set up to support. They're supposed to be independent, even though the whole goal is to elect that candidate they aren't supposed to talk to. And in 2014, Mitch McConnell was running for re-election, and a fairly weird video surfaced on YouTube of him just doing stuff. NPR explained what was going on.

[Newscast:](#)

*Female Reporter: So recently his campaign's YouTube channel released two minutes and 22 seconds of footage of McConnell just doing stuff. There is music, but no narration, no message, just McConnell, sitting with his wife, shaking hands with voters, writing something on his desk. It's called B-Roll and it turns out a lot of Senate campaigns have put out similar footage, both Republicans and Democrats, and they let anyone download it for free.*

*Sheila Krumholz: They're putting it out there because they can, because it's legal, because it's what all of their competitors are going to be doing and it's valuable.*



**Max Bergmann:**

Now, why was the video posted? Because McConnell was colluding with his super PAC. McConnell couldn't directly send the video file to a super PAC to use in ads; that would be illegal. But election lawyers determined that it wasn't illegal if a politician just posted the content publicly. So instead, McConnell just posted this video online. Now, there's no way McConnell would have done that if he didn't know his super PAC was going to use it. He knew they were going to use it. That was the whole point. That was why the video was created. He was colluding. But was he conspiring? Well, that's a legal term, because conspiracy is a crime, and as Robert Mueller so narrowly defined it in his report, it involves two or more people agreeing to commit a crime. And so to prove conspiracy, you need proof of an agreement. So, to show that McConnell was conspiring with a super PAC or breaking election law, you would need to get an email, an audio recording, of someone admitting that they were knowingly working with others to commit a crime. But we all know that McConnell was doing this to help his super PAC.

[Newscast:](#)

*NPR Reporter: So they're just saying, we just put that video out there and you do whatever you want with it.*

*Sheila Krumholz: Yeah, and of course, somewhat with a wink and a nod because they know very well that it's going to be used. They probably know exactly which organizations are going to use it. So, they don't need to coordinate. They don't need to break the law.*

**Max Bergmann:**

In the Russia investigation, Mueller found a lot of evidence of conspiracy. In fact, Mueller brought indictments against 13 Russian intelligence officers, identifying a Russian conspiracy against the United States. But in his report, he essentially said that “our evidence was not sufficient to obtain and sustain a criminal conviction of Trump in his campaign for conspiracy.” He wasn't sure he could win in court against the Trump campaign. Now, Mueller found a lot of smoking guns, but he didn't find the video or audio of the Trump campaign actually pulling the trigger. Listen to Mueller describe it.



[Robert Mueller:](#)

*The first volume of the report details numerous efforts emanating from Russia to influence the election. This volume includes a discussion of the Trump campaign's response to this activity, as well as our conclusion that there was insufficient evidence to charge a broader conspiracy.*

**Max Bergmann:**

So as far as collusion in the 2016 election, which is not a legal term, Mueller found a whole lot of that. As Mueller described in his report, collusion is “two parties taking actions that were informed by or responsive to the others' actions or interests”—in other words, two campaigns working in tandem. And in the 2016 election Russia was acting as Trump's de-facto super PAC. So if you could get Russia, with one of the largest, if not the largest, intelligence services in the world and possessing a network of rich oligarchs, to influence an election on your behalf—if you were willing, how would you collude? Well, one way, which we talked about last week, is that Russia could create an online campaign operation to influence social media. This was essentially providing communications and messaging support, just like a super PAC would do. Another way would be to get their intelligence services to get you some damaging information on your opponents, so you could campaign on it. Here's Republican Senator Marco Rubio, perhaps summing it up best at a Senate Intelligence hearing in the summer of 2017.

[Marco Rubio:](#)

*We have something in American politics that's legitimate, both sides do it, it's called opposition research. You find out about your opponent. Hopefully it's embarrassing or disqualifying information. If you're the opposition research person, you package it, you leak it to a media outlet, they report it, you run ads on it. Now imagine being able to do that with the power of a nation state, illegally acquiring things like emails and being able to weaponize that by leaking it to somebody who will post that and create all sorts of noise. I think that's certainly one of the capabilities.*

**Max Bergmann:**

The coordination surrounding Russia's hack and release was the clearest example of collusion and it had the most impact on the election. Let's break this down into five easy steps. One: Hack. The Russians hack the DNC and the Clinton campaign. Two: Inform. The Russians tell the Trump campaign. Three: Collude.



The Russians meet with the Trump campaign, Four: Release. The Russians release the emails. Five: Campaign. Trump campaigns on the emails. And we'll go through each of these five steps and we'll also note how in each of these steps the Russians were looking for feedback. They were looking for access and looking for assurance that they wouldn't be left high and dry, and at every turn they got that from the Trump campaign again and again. So, let's break this down. Step one: Hack. Thanks to the Mueller Investigation, we have a very detailed understanding of how the Russians penetrated the computer networks of Democratic organizations and the email accounts of Clinton campaign officials and other Democrats. By March 2016, once it looked like Trump was going to win, the Russians took the very bold and risky step of hacking the Democratic Party. Beginning in mid-March, a unit of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence service, began a massive hacking operation targeting more than 300 Democrats affiliated with the Clinton campaign and other Democratic campaign organizations. The operation sent hundreds of spear-phishing emails and successfully obtained the credentials of a number of these Democratic campaign officials. They then used those credentials to gain access to email accounts and Democratic computer networks, and stole thousands of emails and documents. Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta was one target of the hacking operation. And full disclosure, I work at the Center for American Progress Action Fund and John Podesta co-founded the Center for American Progress Action Fund and sits on its board. But on March 19, 2016, Podesta got one of those security-alert emails saying, "Someone's trying to access your email account and you need to change your password." And it looked like an official email from Google, but it wasn't. It was actually from a guy named Aleksey Lukashev, who was a Russian intelligence officer who had sent John Podesta a spear-phishing email trying to get him to change his password, to change his credentials, so that it would give Lukashev access. Now, Podesta actually flagged the email for the campaign security, but the IT staffer who responded mistakenly told him that it was "legitimate" rather than "illegitimate." Thanks to the typo, Podesta followed the email's instructions and changed his password, giving Russian intelligence access to his email account. And in the coming days, the Russian intelligence unit used those credentials to steal more than 50,000 emails from Podesta's personal account. I talked with Marc Groman, who was a senior advisor at the White House and worked on President Obama's Cybersecurity National Action Plan. He's now a professor at Georgetown Law where he teaches about privacy and technology policy.



**Marc Groman:**

*What they then engaged in are what we call spear-phishing. With spear-phishing, what the name kinda suggests, is that it is a highly targeted form of phishing that is directed at a particular individual or very small group. And so here, what they did was identified the individuals they wanted to target. They had their email addresses and contact information, and then sent them emails that were fake emails. So, this is where we have a practice we call spoofing. In some cases, these emails looked like they were coming from Google and they appeared to suggest that Google had found a possible problem, or vulnerability, or compromise within your Gmail account, which Google does send emails just like that. But these were not, these were faked, and if you clicked on the link believing you were going to Google, it asks you to then enter what? Your name and your password. It looks real. I mean these guys knew what they were doing. Um, you can look at the URL and see they changed very small things. I think it was a forward slash they changed to a dash, and so it looked, it looked authentic.*

**Max Bergmann:**

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, or DCCC, which works to elect Democrats to Congress, was another target. On March 15, 2016, a Russian military intelligence officer began researching potential targets at the DCCC. On April 6, he sent a spear-phishing email to a DCCC staffer, similar to the one that was sent to Podesta, and also obtained the staffer's true login credentials. By mid-April, they had infiltrated the DCCC. And once inside both the DCCC and the DNC, they installed malware giving them persistent access to both networks. Here's Marc Groman.

**Marc Groman:**

*The malware that we found at the DNC, DCCC, had a number of functions. One, it had a key logger, which meant that it could record everything an individual typed, including passwords and um, and other ways of accessing the network. It also had screen-capture technology so that it would actually take a photograph or screen capture and send it back to Russia. Um, and then it was able to actually grab files and also files could go back. Beyond that, it had signatures that were designed to prevent it from being detected. So, once it's in, it had really sophisticated ways of avoiding detection, and also sophisticated ways to try and delete itself to avoid*



*analysis and further detection down the road. This is not run-of-the-mill. This was developed by a highly sophisticated, probably, you know, state-run adversary.*

**Max Bergmann:**

So for weeks the Russians were inside the Democratic Party. But by late May 2016, both organizations discovered they had been penetrated and hired a private cybersecurity company to try to kick the Russians out. But despite these efforts, the GRU maintained at least some access to the DNC network into October 2016. Here again is Marc Groman.

**Marc Groman:**

*When the DNC first caught wind that there was a potential issue, they brought in a company called CrowdSource and they were able compare that code to code that was used in other hacks, other attacks that were previously linked to GRU and to, you know, Russian military-intelligence gathering operations. And the data lined up and there was a very close match.*

**Max Bergmann:**

So, in April and May, the GRU hackers had stolen thousands of emails and documents from the DNC and the DCCC. Those documents and emails focused on the 2016 campaign, including opposition research on specific candidates, Democratic messaging, get-out-the-vote plans, and other donor and voter information. They had hacked the crown jewels of the Democratic Party. This was like taking all the gold out of Fort Knox. On April 19, just a week after penetrating the DCCC and the day after getting into the DNC network, the Russians registered the DCleaks.com website. When the Russian penetration of the DNC computer system was publicly revealed on June 14 in *The Washington Post*, just five days after the Trump Tower meeting, the initial report focused on the stealing of opposition research, presumably about Trump. The Russian government immediately denied any involvement in the hack, with Kremlin spokesperson to Dmitry Peskov, who we've talked a lot about, telling Reuters, "I completely rule out a possibility that the government or government bodies have been involved in this." It was clear at the time that the Russian denial was a lie, but the reaction here at home was still fairly muted. People just sort of perceived this as another intelligence gathering operation by the Russians. Here's Laura Rosenberger who runs the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund and was the top foreign policy advisor on the Clinton campaign.



**Laura Rosenberger:**

*If you think about the hacks of the DNC and then John Podesta's email, and then the way that that was weaponized, even once the US government knew about those hacks, they believed that they were basically traditional cyberattacks, more for espionage purposes, and didn't really imagine that that information would be weaponized in a release publicly in order to basically undermine faith in the credibility of the campaign and of Hillary.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Perhaps the most revealing reaction to the news the Russians hacked the DNC actually came during a private meeting of senior House Republicans the day after. They had also just met with the Ukrainian prime minister, who was telling them all about Russian interference in Ukrainian politics. A year later, *The Washington Post* actually got the audio from that meeting. Here's *Washington Post* reporter Adam Entous, who broke the story, explaining it on the *Washington Post* website.

[Adam Entous:](#)

*So McCarthy, uh, basically takes the conversation and turns it to what is happening in the United States. He begins by saying, "I'll guarantee you that's what it is. The Russians hacked the DNC and got the op research that they had on Trump." And then McCarthy laughs. McCarthy then adds, "There's two people I think Putin pays: Rohrabacher and Trump." There's then laughter by some of the lawmakers in the room and then McCarthy adds, "swear to God." Ryan then interjects and says, "This is an off the record. No leaks. Alright?" Ryan then adds, "This is how we know we're a real family here."*

**Max Bergmann:**

At this moment, the House Republicans knew what Russia did around the world and they were about to see it come home. Step two: Inform. We had just gotten to know George Papadopoulos during the last episode. He was the young energy-sector analyst who had been plucked out of total obscurity in March 2016 to be one of Trump's first five foreign policy advisors. With his new-found notoriety, many people were now seeking him out to discuss foreign policy issues related to the Trump campaign. One of those people was a mysterious Maltese professor named Joseph Mifsud. When he crossed paths with Papadopoulos in the spring of



2016, Mifsud was working out of the London Academy of Diplomacy. Interestingly enough, Mifsud was also working at the London Center of International Law Practice, the same place that Papadopoulos was working. It just so happened that Mifsud even hired Simona Mangiante, who eventually became Papadopoulos' girlfriend and is now his wife. When *The Guardian* tried to contact the London Academy of Diplomacy, they found that there was no sign of it on Middlesex Street in London. The phone numbers didn't work, and the websites led to error messages. *The Guardian* reported that a receptionist said the organization left in early 2017: "Any stuff we get, we send back." As for the London Center for International Law Practice, Simona Mangiante, who worked there said she never really understood what it did. This is where she worked. Mifsud often went by the title of ambassador, even though he had never been a diplomat for his native Malta or any of his adopted countries. Yet with a ton of affiliations with smart-sounding institutions, Mifsud could traffic in all sorts of circles. He fit the profile of a Russian intelligence cutout so perfectly that one commentator on the intelligence world wrote, "John Le Carré could have hardly invented a better go-between than the Maltese professor." Papadopoulos claims to have first encountered Mifsud in Rome in March 2016, at an event for a for-profit university. Papadopoulos told the FBI that Mifsud was initially uninterested in him until Papadopoulos told him that he was part of the Trump foreign policy team. That led to a follow-up meeting in London, and this time Mifsud brought a Russian woman he identified as Putin's niece. She was not Putin's niece, but she did encourage Papadopoulos to pursue contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian government officials. Papadopoulos eagerly emailed the Trump campaign, writing that he just had a "productive lunch with a good friend of mine." But he added that "he introduced me to Putin's niece and the Russian ambassador in London." He explained that the Russian leadership wanted to meet with the Trump team, that Putin was "ready to meet with Mr. Trump." Now, Sam Clovis, who we talked about last episode, who was in charge of putting the foreign policy team together, told Mueller that this message came at a time when he "perceived a shift in the Trump campaign's approach to Russia," which to Clovis appeared to be a shift from "engaging Russia through the NATO framework" to—oh, oh, I'm sorry. The rest is redacted in the Mueller report. But it's clear what it was going to say. The Trump campaign was shifting to an even softer, more pro-Russian line, and this is right at the time that the Russian campaign is kicking into gear, with the Internet Research Agency and with their hackers. It is also right at the time when people like Mike Flynn, Paul



Manafort, and Carter Page join the Trump campaign. And so, on March 31, Papadopoulos went to Washington for a meeting of the foreign policy team, which Trump was chairing along with Senator Jeff Sessions. And there Papadopoulos brought up a potential meeting with Russian officials, including a meeting between Trump and Putin. And Trump was all about it. According to one of the advisors in the room, J.D. Gordon, who told investigators he had a “crystal clear recollection of the meeting,” Trump was interested in and receptive to the idea of meeting with Putin.

[Newscast:](#)

*Reporter: Did anyone discourage you from pursuing that possible summit between Trump and Putin?*

*Papadopoulos: Um, as far as I remember after that meeting on March 31, I actively sought to, uh, leverage my contacts with the professor to host this meeting. The campaign was fully aware of what I was doing, um, including, uh, Corey Lewandowski, Sam Clovis. Um, I think, uh, even during, actually preceding the meeting on the 31st of March I think Sam Clovis was telling me “excellent work” while I was actively discussing with the group and Sam that, uh, I was talking with Mifsud and that this person could potentially organize a meeting for us with Putin.*

**Max Bergmann:**

And so Papadopoulos went forth, and it led to at least 30 more contacts with Mifsud and his Russian associates, including someone who apparently worked at the Russian Foreign Ministry. In mid-April 2016, Mifsud actually traveled to Russia, and while there, he continued to correspond with Papadopoulos and arranged a meeting with him the day after he returned to London. On April 26, a week after the Russian hackers had gained access to the DNC computer network and a month after they had stolen tens of thousands of emails from John Podesta, Mifsud had breakfast with Papadopoulos at the Andaz Hotel on Liverpool Street in London. There, Papadopoulos said that Mifsud had told him that the Russians had “dirt” on Clinton in the form of “thousands of emails,” and that they intended to help the Trump campaign by publicly releasing them. Ten days later, on May 6, Papadopoulos was drinking wine with the Australian ambassador to the UK when he told him about the dirt and that the Russian government, according to the Mueller report, could “assist the campaign through the anonymous release of information that would be damaging to Hillary Clinton.” This would eventually



launch the FBI investigation, but this information wasn't passed by the Australians to the FBI until much later in the summer—in fact, on July 26, 2016. At the time, the Australian ambassador just thought it was an odd comment. Now, this has also led to the question of whether Papadopoulos actually told the Trump campaign about the “dirt,” about the hacking, and about the plan to release. Papadopoulos was keeping the Trump campaign regularly apprised of his efforts, according to Mueller. He sent emails regularly to Stephen Miller, the senior policy advisor, and Corey Lewandowski, then the campaign chairman. He separately emailed both Miller and Lewandowski the day after the meeting with Mifsud. Those emails were about setting up a Trump-Putin meeting and apparently don't contain information about the Russian hacking. But that's maybe because it'd be pretty stupid to put that in an email. When asked whether he informed the rest of the campaign, Mueller says that Papadopoulos could not “clearly recall.” Campaign officials like Lewandowski and Stephen Miller also claimed to “not remember” or “not recall” being informed that the Russians had hacked Hillary Clinton. This is absurd. Of course Papadopoulos told the campaign. There is just no doubt, zero, zip, nil, that a guy sending emails with the subject line “Russia updates” doesn't inform the campaign. Now maybe he picked up the phone. Maybe he sent it over secure messaging app. Maybe he sent a carrier pigeon. But there is no way that Papadopoulos didn't tell the campaign. And we can say this because Papadopoulos told at least two foreign government officials. He not only told the Australian ambassador, something Papadopoulos initially lied about to the FBI, but he also told the Greek Foreign Minister. It's impossible to believe that Papadopoulos was telling random foreign officials, but not his colleagues on the Trump campaign. But with no one recalling or remembering and with Papadopoulos perhaps using a degree of operation and security, Mueller can't prove it. However, at the very least we can say that in late April the Trump campaign knew about the hack. One of its five foreign policy advisors was informed about it. And one other thing is clear: He didn't tell the FBI.

**-Break-**

**Max Bergmann:**

Protect the Investigation is a nonpartisan initiative to educate the American people about the importance of the Special Counsel Investigation and its findings. You too can join Protect the Investigation in demanding that the Justice



Department release the full report of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation. Go to [www.protecttheinvestigation.org](http://www.protecttheinvestigation.org) to sign up now.

**-Break-**

**Max Bergmann:**

Now, we talked about on the last episode what Trump was potentially getting in return by being pro-Russian: potentially an extremely lucrative tower in Moscow. But what was Russia getting in Trump? Well, they were getting a guy changing Republican foreign policy. While foreign policy often plays a negligible role in most presidential campaigns, US foreign policy is what most of the world cares about. This was a huge coup for Moscow. While Trump had a foreign policy team, he now needed to give a foreign policy speech. And Trump, through Jared Kushner, tapped Dimitri Simes for help. Simes was born in the Soviet Union. He had been a fixture in Washington for a long time as he ran the Center for National Interest, a Washington think tank, that had a magazine, *The National Interest*. This was a mainstream think tank and outlet. I've been published in *The National Interest*. The think tank and magazine generally espoused a realist foreign policy vision, which is quite a standard perspective in foreign policy, particularly in the US government. The view basically holds that concerns over values, democracy, human rights, should take a backseat to cold, hard, national interests and geopolitics. This is also very much in line with the Kremlin's outlook, which views a US foreign policy advocating for democracy and human rights as a real threat, as potentially stoking those liberal color revolutions that we talked about in previous episodes. Simes portrayed himself as an insider, both in Washington and in Moscow. As the Mueller report says, "Simes personally has many contacts with current and former Russian government officials," and Simes' organization even said they had "unparalleled access to Russian officials and politicians." One odd link was Dimitri Simes' connection to Maria Butina, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy to act as a Russian agent by infiltrating groups like the NRA and the American Right. Butina even published a piece in *The National Interest* in 2015 called "The Bear and The Elephant," and the piece argued that "it may take the election of a Republican to the White House in 2016 to improve relations between the Russian Federation and the United States." Since late 2018, Simes has even hosted a political talk show on one of Russia's many state-run news networks, meaning he is currently being paid by the Kremlin. On March 24, 2016, the same day Papadopoulos was meeting with Mifsud in London, Simes had a call



with Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law. And a week later on March 31, the same day Papadopoulos told Trump that Putin wanted to meet, Kushner was meeting with Simes in New York. There, Simes offered to host Trump's foreign policy speech at the Mayflower Hotel. Simes and one of his board members, Richard Burt, started working with Stephen Miller on drafts of the speech. Now Richard Burt, unlike Paul Manafort or Trump himself, was deeply entangled with Russian money. Burt was an advisor to Alfa Bank, a state-owned Russian bank that we will talk a lot more about later. He was also a registered lobbyist for one of Russia's largest energy company's top priority projects, Gazprom's Nord Stream 2. He also had ties to that oligarch, Oleg Deripaska, who was super close to Putin. Burt was even part of the effort to get the US government to rescind Deripaska's visa ban. So, Simes and Burt started working on the speech. And of course, Trump's speech called for better relations with Russia.

#### [Donald Trump:](#)

*Russia, for instance, has also seen the horror of Islamic terrorism. I believe an easing of tensions and improved relations with Russia, from a position of strength only, is possible. Absolutely possible. Common sense says this cycle, this horrible cycle of hostility, must end, and ideally will end soon. Good for both countries. Some say the Russians won't be reasonable. I intend to find out. If we can't make a deal under my administration, a deal that's great—not good, great—for America, but also good for Russia, then we will quickly walk from the table. It's as simple as that. We're going to find out.*

#### **Max Bergmann:**

The speech might as well have been written by the Kremlin, and perhaps it was. In this speech was exactly what the Russians would have wanted an American, a Republican candidate, to say. Here was Trump advocating an isolationist, restrained American foreign policy that doesn't care about values, isn't going to try to advance democracy or human rights. And in attendance was Russian ambassador Sergei Kislyak, who, while he was there, met not just with Trump, but also with Jared Kushner and Jeff Sessions who was running Trump's foreign policy team. Now Trump's pro-Russian position and desire to establish better relations with Russia also gave the Russians carte blanche to establish contacts with the Trump campaign. Russian efforts to reach out to the Trump campaign, therefore, came fast and furious. Between April 27 and Election Day, there were another 119 contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian linked



individuals. That's more than one contact every two days. That includes phone calls, emails, Skype calls, and meetings. What seems clear is that Putin had given the green light to make contact. So Russian intelligence agencies, many of whom compete with each other, the SVR, the GRU, Russian diplomats and officials, and the other arm of the Russian state that we talked about in Episode Three, Russian oligarchs and its businessmen, reached out to the Trump campaign. It was like throwing spaghetti at the wall and trying to see what stuck. And that May, Aleksandr Torshin, a deputy in the Russian central bank and the apparent handler for that woman Maria Butina, sat next to Donald Trump Jr. at the annual NRA conference. Carter Page had agreed to go to Russia in July. Michael Cohen, through Felix Sater, had also agreed to go to Russia in June. Now, you might say, if by this point Trump had had a relationship with Russian intelligence as the Steele Dossier suggested, why would the Russians have all these meetings and contacts? They have the guy at the top. Well, it's one thing to be connected to Trump. But this is an opportunity to be connected to people throughout the campaign and the Republican Party. Trump's essentially opening the door, and governments are large and complex. The more links and connections the better. Another facet here is that everyone, and it does seem like everyone, was trying to get Trump to go to Russia. Papadopoulos, Carter Page, Felix Sater, and Michael Cohen were all angling for Trump to go to Russia. Why would Putin want this? In 2017, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right party in France, shortly before the first round of the French election, went to Moscow to kiss the ring of Vladimir Putin.

[Newscast:](#)

*Reporter: Vladimir Putin's latest attempt to manipulate another country's levers of power. He meets in Moscow with France's far right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen. A woman who, if she wins, could turn a key US ally upside down. Le Pen says she'd like to lift sanctions on Russia, to recognize Putin's annexation of Crimea, and she makes another bold declaration.*

*Marine Le Pen: It's the world of Vladimir Putin. It's the world of Donald Trump in the United States.*

*Reporter: Analysts say it's a stunning image for a top candidate in a western democracy to unabashedly embrace Moscow.*



**Max Bergmann:**

It was later revealed that Le Pen's party was bankrolled by a Russian bank. And just a few days before the French election, Russia released stolen emails from her opponent, Emmanuel Macron.

*Newscast:*

*Reporter: An attempt by Russian hackers to get inside the confidential emails of the presidential campaign of Emmanuel Macron here in France. He's headed into the runoffs in a couple of weeks' time, and on the surface of it, it does look as if this hacking, this phishing attempt, is very similar to the one that succeeded in penetrating the Democratic National Committee's emails before the US election last summer.*

**Max Bergmann:**

So what I think Putin really wanted here was for Trump to come to Russia during the campaign in order to make the covert overt. Russia's goal was for the Republican Party to become pro-Russian, and what better way than Trump coming to Moscow? Also, let's remember, what the Russians were about to do in making the emails they stole public was extremely risky. They were going to intervene on Trump's behalf in a presidential election, and they were going to do it in a pretty overt way. And so they wanted some assurance that doing so would be worth it. Trump's consistent foreign policy stances toward Russia were likely a key indicator. In fact, instead of Trump moderating his Russia position and bringing it into line with standard GOP policies, as he did on countless other issues such as healthcare, such as taxes, Trump went the other way. He affirmed his pro-Russia position, as Sam Clovis observed on page 85 of the Mueller report. But this flurry of outreach and contacts also brought a warning. At the foreign policy speech in April Dimitri Simes took Jared Kushner aside and said, "be wary about Russian contacts." And Kushner seemed to take his advice. On May 15, a few weeks after the foreign policy speech, an email came in from an official with a Russian state-owned bank, purportedly with another offer for Putin to meet with Trump. The email was forwarded to Kushner and he responded, copying Paul Manafort, "Pass on this. A lot of people come claiming to carry messages. For now I think we decline. Be careful." This was good advice from Jared. But then, just a few weeks later, another email would come into the Trump campaign on June 3. This one would promise dirt on Hillary Clinton, and Jared Kushner



wouldn't pass on attending this meeting.

**-Break-**

**Max Bergmann:**

Step three: Collude. On June 3, Donald Trump Jr. received an email from Rob Goldstone, who, if you remember, was a representative for the Russian oligarch Aras Agalarov, who is the Russian real-estate mogul who worked with the Trump family on the Miss Universe pageant in Moscow in 2013. Goldstone wrote to Trump Jr., Emin, Aras Agalarov's son "just called and asked me to contact you with something very interesting. The Crown Prosecutor of Russia met with his father Aras this morning and in their meeting offered to provide the Trump campaign with some official documents and information that would incriminate Hillary and her dealings with Russia and would be very useful to your father. This is obviously very high level and sensitive information, but is part of Russia and its government's support for Mr. Trump helped along by Aras and Emin." What this says is that Russia's Attorney General equivalent, a guy the New York Times described as "the master of kompromat," met with Aras Agalarov, the former business partner of Donald Trump, and had damaging information about Hilary to pass on. Goldstone also added that this was "ultra-sensitive" and suggested a call between Emin and Donald Trump Jr. Seventeen minutes later, Donald Trump Jr. responded, "Thanks Rob. I appreciate that. I am on the road at the moment, but perhaps I just speak to Emin first. Seems we have some time and if it's what you say I love it especially later in the summer. Could we do a call first thing next week when I am back?" Donald Trump Jr. and Emin then had several calls and a meeting was quickly arranged, as the "Russian government attorney was flying in to New York." Donald Trump Jr. tells Goldstone that he, Manafort, and Kushner will attend. So just six days after getting this email, they meet in Trump Tower on June 9. Donald Trump Jr. forwarded that message on to Paul Manafort and Jared Kushner with the subject line, "Russia - Clinton - Private and Confidential." But Kushner had actually emailed his assistant that week asking to discuss the meeting, and when the time got shifted, he emailed his assistant again. Kushner wasn't just a prisoner to his schedule; he was actively shaping his schedule. And when Manafort got the email of the time change, he said, "See you there." Now, Manafort's deputy Rick Gates told Mueller that Trump Jr. in the days before the meeting, "announced at a regular morning meeting of senior campaign staff and Trump family members that he had a lead on negative



information about the Clinton Foundation.” Michael Cohen also recalled Trump Jr. telling his father that they had a meeting set up to get dirt on Clinton. Both father and son denied that Donald Trump was ever informed. But, you know, on Tuesday, June 7, just two days before the meeting took place, with Jared and Ivanka standing behind him at a campaign victory rally, Trump said something kind of fishy.

*Donald Trump:*

*I am going to give a major speech on probably Monday of next week and we're going to be discussing all of the things that have taken place with the Clintons. I think you're going to find it very informative and very, very interesting.*

**Max Bergmann:**

So on June 9, an “Ocean's 11”-style crew of Russian characters walks into Trump Tower, into the heart of the Trump campaign. The group was headed by Natalia Veselnitskaya, a former Russian government lawyer who maintained links to the Russian prosecutor's office. Also in attendance was Ike Kaveladze, who we talked about in Episode Six. He was a vice president in the Agalarov's company, and was allegedly involved in lots of Russian money laundering in the past. Aras Agalarov had contacted him earlier that week and told him to leave LA and get on a plane and get to New York. Another attendee was Rinat Akhmetshin, a Russian-American lobbyist based in Washington DC. He had previously served in the Soviet army and had ties to Soviet intelligence. He'd even worked with the former deputy head of the FSB. A former Bush administration official said Akhmetshin would “boast about ties and experience in Soviet intelligence and counterintelligence.” He also worked with two Russian companies involved in hacking the computer networks of their business rival and releasing the stolen materials publicly. And to round out the Russian side was Goldstone, a representative of a Russian oligarch, and the translator. So, the Russians sent a lawyer with ongoing ties to the Russian government, a guy with experience in money laundering, and a former Soviet intelligence officer who had experience with hack-and-release campaigns to Trump Tower on June 9. The general narrative of the meeting was that Donald Trump opened it up asking for dirt. According to the Senate Judiciary Committee, he asked, “So do you have some information for me?” And Veselnitskaya then claimed to have some information about some Democratic donors that had evaded taxes in Russia. This was clearly not the dirt the Trump campaign was hoping to get. But then, Trump Jr. pressed



and asked if this information could be tied to Clinton. And then Veselnitskaya sort of demurs and then shifts to droning on about adoptions, which, as we mentioned previously, is actually code for sanctions, since in retaliation to US sanctions Russia banned the US from adopting Russian orphans. And the Trump side now is apparently pissed. Kushner sent Manafort an iMessage during the meeting that said, “waste of time,” and then emailed his assistant to pull him out. The meeting apparently only lasts around 20 minutes with everyone sort of seemingly dissatisfied. Here's Molly Claflin, who as counsel for the Senate Judiciary Committee interviewed most of the participants that were in the room including Donald Trump Jr.

**Molly Claflin:**

*Those interviews are really interesting to do because you thought that there was going to be a general baseline we were working with and that didn't even line up. Two of the witnesses I believe also said someone else was in the room, but they couldn't remember who. So, none of the witnesses were able to fully identify all eight people correctly that were in the room. Some said fewer, some said there was somebody else. Um, which was interesting, and says a lot about how we remember things I think. But at the same time there's also an open question: Was there someone else in the room? We don't know. General things like how long was the meeting? Some of them said 20 minutes. Somebody said an hour. That's a big difference. Who spoke during the meeting? They couldn't get that on the same page. You know, some people said Natalia spoke the whole time. Um, her translator, uh, I thought would be the, probably the best source for that, but his story didn't even match everybody else. They weren't that far off, but there were just little pieces that were really interesting, um, bits that you wouldn't have expected to not necessarily match up. One or maybe two witnesses noted that, uh, Rob Goldstone was wearing a hot-pink outfit that day. Other witnesses when asked did not remember that, which seems notable. We had a really hard time understanding who called the meeting and for what purpose. You'd think that that's a pretty, that should also be a pretty easy, “Oh, Natalia wanted to meet on these issues.” And everybody had this, um, response of, “Well, I don't really know. I wasn't really there. You know, it was last minute. Somebody said, you want to come to this meeting? Nobody said what it was about.” Which is strange, especially when you've got people flying in from different places. These people aren't based in New York, and yet nobody had a clear sense of what they were meeting for and why. To me, it felt a little like Murder on the Orient Express, where everyone doesn't know anything and has a perfect alibi,*



*and then at the end of the day it turns out it was everyone. And that's kind of the takeaway I took from the meeting was that, okay, it's too clean that no one knows anything. So what's happening here?*

**Max Bergmann:**

So what gives? Is everyone just lying? Or did the Russians really not bring the goods to this meeting, which you know, they kind of promised that they were going to do? Here's John Sipher, former CIA officer who was based in Moscow, describing why this all kind of makes sense.

**John Sipher:**

*Well, I would tell you that as an intelligence officer, if you look at that meeting in Trump Tower as an intelligence part, parts of an intelligence operation, you wouldn't bring the dirt with you. What you're doing is you're testing the waters. What you do is, like we talked about before, you continue to sort of push to see if people are willing to step over the line to a point where you can manipulate them to sort of take the final step. And so, in this case, if you look at it like an intelligence operation, they're checking with Donald Trump Jr. to see if there's interest in this. The way he wrote back and the way that he set up an immediate meeting suggest absolutely you're interested in this. But you have to remember from the Russians' point of view, the United States is a hostile intelligence environment. They know the FBI is monitoring them. They know the FBI is watching these kinds of things. If they just send an email and Donald Trump Jr. said, "Hey, yes. This is great," and the Russians showed up at that meeting with the dirt, the one thing, if I'm a, if I'm an intelligence officer, I'm going to say, "Are you kidding me?" If I show up at that meeting and they got cold feet, or they decided to tell their security, or their lawyer or, they decided to call the FBI. If I step in there, I'm going to get myself arrested. This whole thing's going to spool and fall apart. What I need to know is I put the bait out there for them. They appeared to grab the bait. The fact that they showed up at that meeting and still showed interest and they didn't bring any security and they didn't call the FBI, that now tells me, "Oh, now I can take a next step." Or you know, cause this is a step-by-step process to move someone into espionage. Um, I would think if this was a Russian intelligence operation, you now know that they're willing and witting and willing to move forward. I would then try to set up another meeting probably overseas or somewhere to test further before I would move forward. Um, and I would also be intrigued by the sense that Paul Manafort showed up at that meeting, because whereas Don Jr. and might be sort of a moron and not*



*understand what he is stepping into, Paul Manafort spent his entire career in Russia and in Ukraine. You can't make millions of dollars in that part of the world without dealing with organized crime, corruption, intelligence services. He understands the system. He understands that thing we talked about earlier, the Sistema. So that if he shows up at a meeting where the Russians are offering dirt, he knows what's going on there. If he didn't call the FBI, it means he totally knows what the next step is, that it's going to be somewhere else. Now that you've shown your willingness, let's move to the next level.*

**Max Bergmann:**

The purpose of the meeting for the Russians appears to not have been about sharing dirt. The purpose was to entrap and test the Trump campaign. The Russians had shown their cards to Donald Trump Jr. and the Trump campaign in setting up this meeting. They had disclosed to them that they had the dirt and were preparing to release emails. There were enormous risks involved for Russia in going forth and releasing the stolen information. They needed to know if they had a willing partner in the Trump campaign. They already knew a lot about Trump's openness to working with Russia. They knew that he had been secretly pursuing a deal to build a Trump Tower in Moscow. They had been tracking his repeated positive statements about Putin and his desire to have a better relationship with Russia. But Donald Trump was on the cusp of the Republican nomination. He could potentially become the leader of the most powerful country on earth. Trump was also smartly not going to Russia, which would have been politically insane for him to do. If you're the Kremlin, if you're Putin, you've got to be a little concerned about losing control of your asset. So when Donald Trump Jr. opened the meeting saying, "so you have some information for me," he was telling the Russians he wanted to collude, that the campaign wanted to collude. He's telling that directly to the Russian government, that they are all in. This meeting is collusion. And it was also legally compromising. Many lawyers say this meeting likely broke the law, because the Trump campaign did receive some dirt on Democratic donors, which is something of value from a foreign actor and is therefore illegal. But Mueller assessed that Donald Trump Jr. didn't know that this was illegal and therefore decided not to bring charges. But not only that, Trump Jr. also likely perjured himself in his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, just as Michael Cohen had when he testified before the Senate. But Donald Trump Jr. was never interviewed by Mueller. He declined a voluntary interview request, so no charges were brought. Now, why Donald



Trump Jr. was not forced to sit for an interview with the Special Counsel Investigation is a major question, and one that Robert Mueller should be asked. But what isn't a question is that on June 9, 2016, the Russians saw a campaign that was willing to collude, willing to work with them. They knew Trump and his team was all in. But before the email releases came later in the summer, as Donald Trump Jr. had also suggested, the Russians would get a few more tangible deliverables from the Trump campaign. By May, Carter Page, Trump's foreign policy advisor, had become a key player on the campaign. He provided an outline for a Trump speech on energy and even traveled to Bismarck, North Dakota, to watch Trump deliver it. And then in July, Page traveled to Moscow to give a speech at a prestigious university, one that had even hosted President Obama in the early days of the reset with Russia. An employee of the Russian university even told the Mueller team that the "excitement was palpable" when Russia learned Page was on the campaign. Page had asked permission from the campaign before traveling, asking the foreign policy team and Corey Lewandowski, then campaign chairman, who said, ok, but it would be on his personal capacity. Page's speech in Moscow on July 7 was another coup for the Kremlin.

#### [Carter Page:](#)

*While the prospectors, the perspectives of leaders in Russia and the CIS have fundamentally advanced in recent decades the West's combination of a nearly universal critical tone and continued proactive steps to encourage leadership change overseas may understandably advance a certain level of insecurity. Understandably so. Recent efforts by Western scholars and leaders to denigrate public leaders from the region have unnecessarily perpetuated many Cold War tendencies by deepening suspicions from that, that bygone era. Some of my related analysis has demonstrated a range of alternative perspectives and approaches that may help to illuminate further opportunities in the future.*

#### **Max Bergmann:**

Here was a named foreign policy advisor to the presumptive Republican nominee giving a speech that might as well have been written by the Russian Foreign Ministry. It hit all the Russian's major points, but it honed in on Washington's support for democratization and blamed the West, rather than Russia, for the increasingly strained relationship.



[Newscast:](#)

*Jake Tapper: When you went to Russia last summer, did you ever talk to any Russian about the Trump campaign or about the Clinton campaign or about the 2016 election in general?*

*Carter Page: No Russian official. I was speaking at a university and I spoke with many scholars, and students, and parents that were at the, uh, at the graduation celebrating their, their kids' achievements. Other than that, nothing.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Page was lying. When Page was in Moscow, as the Steele Dossier highlighted and was later confirmed, he met with the Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Arkady Dvorkovich, and a senior member of Rosneft, a Russian state-owned gas company. Page gave readouts back to the Trump campaign, noting his senior level meetings and the Deputy Prime Minister's "support for Mr. Trump." Now remember, it had already been reported that the Russians had hacked the DNC. It's unclear what else Page did in Moscow. After a huge redacted paragraph in the Mueller report, it concludes that "Page's activities in Russia were not fully explained." But immediately after his Russia trip, Page traveled to Cleveland for the Republican National Convention, where he met with the Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak just days before the DNC email release. And it was at the convention that the RNC Platform Committee proposed an anodyne amendment to the Republican platform calling for lethal assistance to Ukraine. The Republican attack against Obama on Ukraine for two years had been his unwillingness to provide lethal assistance to Ukraine, and I saw this firsthand in the State Department, as we were getting repeatedly blasted for the White House's reticence to provide lethal equipment. And yet, this was the only, repeat only, change the Trump team requested in the whole drafting process of the Republican platform, was to weaken its stance on Russia.

[Newscast:](#)

*Reporter: Why did you soften the GOP platform on Ukraine?*

*Donald Trump: I wasn't involved in that. Honestly, I was not involved.*

*Reporter: Your people were.*



*Donald Trump: Yeah, I was not involved in that. I'd like to, uh, I'd have to take a look at it, but I was not involved.*

*Reporter: Do you know what they did?*

*Donald Trump: They softened it, I heard. But I was not involved.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Now, the Mueller report wasn't able to determine whether Trump directed his campaign to block the amendment, but by this point, perhaps he didn't have to. His pro-Kremlin approach had seeped into the campaign. J.D. Gordon, the campaign staffer that led the charge against the amendment, said he opposed the amendment because he knew it was inconsistent with the campaign's approach to Russia and Ukraine. But what's so odd was to stick your neck out for something so unimportant. Language in a party platform doesn't really matter. But for diplomats, official statements, readouts, any official language written down, sends important signals. And here was a tangible sign, a firm deliverable. Trump had effectively weakened the Republican Party's stance on Russia, on Ukraine, and man, was Trump about to be rewarded.

**-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](http://www.themoscowproject.org) and click on the donate tab. That's [themoscowproject.org](http://themoscowproject.org). Thank you.

**-Break-**

**Max Bergmann:**

Step four: Release the Emails. Russia first tried to release the emails themselves. Once the breach of the DNC computer system had been exposed in *The Washington Post* on June 14, Russia actually posted material to the DCleaks.com website the same day the story broke. The next day, the Russian GRU hackers



created a blog under the persona of Guccifer 2.0, pretending to be a famed Romanian hacker. Everyone knew Russia was behind this. It was obvious. Guccifer 2.0 couldn't really speak Romanian, which, you know, is kind of a big problem if you're trying to impersonate a Romanian. And Guccifer 2.0 also had the syntax of a native Russian speaker who had learned English. Here's Brian Fallon, the press secretary for the Clinton campaign.

**Brian Fallon:**

*At first it seemed like it was going to amount to a nothingburger, because there was a lot of like, documents there that were very dense, and the utility of them, or the sort of, the level of interest in them, it was not clear at all that they had sort of, you know, landed any big fish with the initial tranche of documents that they were dumping out there. There was some personal data that was compromised, because one of the first things that they published was, sort of, donor lists. Um, and so I remember there being concern about personal privacy of some DNC donors. But a lot of the materials that we knew initially that they, that they breached were ones that was unclear what the utility of them was going to be.*

**Max Bergmann:**

So, from the Russian perspective, they weren't getting the impact that they wanted and that needed to change. So they turned to another outlet: WikiLeaks. Wikileaks had contacted Guccifer 2.0 soon after it started releasing material stolen from the DNC and DCCC. The Mueller report has a message that Wikileaks actually sent to Guccifer 2.0 reading, "If you have anything Hilary related, we want it in the next two days preferably because the Democratic National Convention is approaching, and she will solidify Bernie supporters behind her. We think Trump has only a 25% chance of winning against Hillary so conflict between Bernie and Hillary is interesting." *The Guardian* got the visitor logs to the Ecuadorian embassy in the United Kingdom, where Julian Assange had exiled himself, and they found a "phrenetic period for the Wikileaks founder in the summer of 2016." They found that he had a lot of Russian-connected guests. One of his frequent visitors were senior members of the RT office in London. RT's London Bureau Chief stopped in on June 4 for just five minutes, and then again on June 8 for just 20 minutes. Shortly thereafter, on July 14, 2016, the GRU hackers used an email account associated with Guccifer 2.0 to send WikiLeaks a trove of DNC documents. WikiLeaks confirmed receipt of the materials on July 18 and that they would release them "this week." And so on July 22, 2016, just a few



days before the Democratic Convention, WikiLeaks did just that, releasing 20,000 documents and emails stolen by the Russians from the DNC.

*Newscast:*

*And we're heading into a convention where they're trying to bring this party together and pivot toward the general election. We're going to have to wait and see what Bernie Sanders does during the convention.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Here's Brian Fallon again on the impact this had on the Clinton campaign.

**Brian Fallon:**

*They were provoking days long controversies that sort of fed a narrative that had been a divisive one within the primary about the DNC taking sides against Bernie Sanders' campaign. Um, they were able to produce emails, email thread conversations of internal DNC officials that suggested that, you know, there were people that were not fans of Bernie Sanders within the DNC. And obviously that sparked a huge hullabaloo going into the convention. There was very much a sense that things were careening off the tracks. Um, you had on the first night of the convention, you had some of the Sanders delegates that were literally chanting during speeches that were being given in the hall in prime time. And um, you would have some of the more, um, other delegations would try to chant more favorable messages to try to drown out, um, the, some of the Sanders delegates that were trying to interrupt and make a scene. And it was just, if we had had four days of that, it really would have been painful. That first night was really bad, and I think a lot of the, there might've been some ill will regardless, cause the Sanders people felt very strongly, Bernie stayed in it 'til the end. But I really think that, you know, the, the leak of the DNC materials and the controversy that it, that then ensued with Debbie Wasserman Schultz sort of threw gasoline on that fire. And so yes, in the moment, on Monday night, it felt harrowing.*

**Max Bergmann:**

This release didn't just create problems for the Clinton campaign. It opened up an opportunity for the Trump campaign to deflect criticism of its own problems and go on the attack. Here's Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort on ABC's *This Week*, just two days after the Wikileaks release.



[Newscast:](#)

*George Stephanopoulos: We also heard Robby Mook, the Clinton campaign director, just this morning say that Russia was behind this, this release of these DNC emails suggesting that there are troubling signs of ties between the Putin regime and your campaign. And that's been echoed this morning in The Weekly Standard, Bill Kristol, of course, no fan of Mr. Trump. The conservative Weekly Standard suggesting that when you look at the GOP platform weakening language to support Ukraine, it provides some signs that, uh, there may be troubling ties between your campaign and the Putin regime. And he goes on to say this: "If Trump and Manafort don't act to allay these concerns by releasing their tax returns, wouldn't it be advisable for a Republican member of Congress to lead an urgent investigation into whether Putin is interfering in the current American election?" How do you respond to that?*

*Paul Manafort: Well, it's pure obfuscation on the part of the Clinton campaign. What they don't want to talk about is what's in those emails. And what's in those emails show that it was a clearly rigged system. Bernie Sanders never had a chance, and frankly, I think you're going to see some of that resentment boiling over this week in Philadelphia, because Wikileaks clearly uncovered what Sanders has been saying and what Donald Trump has been saying, which is that once again the establishment and the special interests picked their candidate Hillary Clinton and made sure that nothing the people were gonna do or say was going to interfere with her selection.*

*George Stephanopoulos: Well you're right. You are seeing those skirmishes on the floor here in Philadelphia this week. But let me follow up on that question from Bill Kristol who of course is not part of the Clinton campaign. Are there any ties between Mr. Trump, you, or your campaign and Putin and his regime?*

*Paul Manafort: No, there are not. That's absurd. There's no basis to it.*

**Max Bergmann:**

Did you see what he did there? Manafort uses the actual material stolen by the Russians and released by WikiLeaks to deflect from accurate accusations that the Russians were behind the leaks and that the Trump campaign had ties to Russia. Just like Donald Trump Jr., Manafort knows Russia is behind this because he was



part of the Trump Tower meeting just six weeks before. The three actors in this story—the Trump campaign, the Russians, and WikiLeaks—all wanted Trump to beat Hillary and they were all clearly taking actions, as Mueller described when outlining collusion, that “were informed by or responsive to the other’s actions or interests,” and they were clearly cooperating for a deceitful purpose. That is, they were colluding. But at the very least, no matter what, after the release of the DNC emails, it was clear that Russia was behind this. The political press may have been unable to wrap their heads around this story, but the Trump campaign knew without a doubt the emails came from Russia. People portraying themselves as foreign policy insiders, like Dimitri Simes, who would keep meeting with Kushner, would know, would know that Russia was behind this, would know that Russia was interfering in American democracy. So after the DNC hack, no one could now claim, especially Jared Kushner, to be oblivious, to not know. They knew and instead of contacting the FBI, or at least staying away from Russians, they ran toward the crime. They ran toward the Russians. Six days after the WikiLeaks release of DNC emails, the Trump campaign wanted more, and Donald Trump held a press conference. In it, he made this startling statement.

[Donald Trump:](#)

*Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press.*

**Max Bergmann:**

And it turns out, they were listening.

**-Break-**

**Max Bergmann:**

Next time on The Asset: Winning. We close out the election. The Russians hit the accelerator on their campaign and gift Donald Trump with a massive October surprise that becomes central to Donald Trump's closing arguments.

[Donald Trump:](#)

*They are reopening the case into her criminal and illegal conduct that threatens the security of the United States of America.*



**Max Bergmann:**

We break down the shady meeting in the Havana Club with a Russian operative, the back channel Trump established to Wikileaks.

[Donald Trump:](#)

*This Wikileaks is like a treasure trove.*

**Max Bergmann:**

And that mysterious server. Russian interference in the 2016 election was one of the most impactful intelligence operations in history, and we will show how it helped elect Donald Trump.

**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:](#)

*Politics is not the nicest business in the world but it's very standard where they have information and you take the information.*