



Episode 9: Winning

Producer:

Previously on The Asset

Max Bergmann:

The Republican convention had concluded the day before and it had been a mess.

[Ted Cruz:](#)

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 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.

Max Bergmann:

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.

Max Bergmann:

Episode Nine: Winning. Early on Tuesday morning, October 11, 2016, WikiLeaks released its third batch of emails stolen by the Russians from Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta. It came four days after the initial release from WikiLeaks on Friday, October 7. This 8:30 AM release contained nearly 1,200 emails, and it came on top of the 4,000 that had been made public in the first two releases. That's a lot of emails to go through in four days, and by mid-day on October 11, one particular email exchange had been featured in the first two stories published on this batch: one on the US-based conservative website, the



Daily Caller. The other was Russia's state-owned propaganda machine, RT. The email exchange itself was brief, innocuous, five years old, and Podesta himself did not even say anything on the chain. The exchange occurred in 2011. Podesta and the two participants in the exchange, Jen Palmieri and John Halpin were all employees of a think tank, the Center for American Progress, which, full disclosure, is also where I work. Now, the email exchange was three emails, nine total sentences. That was it. The messages offered a critique of the disproportionate number of leaders of the conservative movement that are Catholic. Halpin and Palmieri, both Catholics themselves, as is Podesta, decried conservatives who exploited Catholicism for political purposes while ignoring the rest of its more progressive teachings. And one of the emails noted, "it was an amazing bastardization of the faith." The website *Vox* wrote that "nothing about the email exchange was particularly remarkable, except for the third person copied in: John Podesta." With these emails in the open, the Trump campaign quickly swung into action. At a campaign rally that evening, Trump picked up on the email exchange.

Donald Trump:

Not only have the Clintons ripped off Haiti, but the new emails show members of the Clinton team attacking Catholics. While this is offensive, it's just the latest evidence of the hatred that the Clinton campaign has, really for everyday Americans, and you see it and you see so much from these WikiLeaks, you see so much. There's so much.

Max Bergmann:

It took only 11 hours for this one email exchange on Catholics, a needle in a haystack of a massive batch of 1,200 emails, for the Trump campaign to miraculously insert it into a prepared speech by Donald Trump. This became the start of a full-fledged campaign around that one innocuous exchange. The next morning, they organized a press call with key Catholic surrogates like twice-divorced Newt Gingrich. Gingrich said on the call that both he and his third wife, who is now the US ambassador to the Vatican, "both feel assaulted not just on Catholicism but on people of faith. The callousness, the contempt. Now we know what Hillary meant by deplorables. It's people of faith." Why would the Trump campaign care so much about this five-year-old email exchange between people no voters had heard of? Simply put, the Catholic vote. The Public Religion Research Institute released a poll the same day the Catholic email exchange in WikiLeaks came out. That poll gave Clinton a massive 55% to 34% lead over Donald Trump among Catholics. That's a huge margin, given that Obama had only won Catholic voters by 2% in 2012. The Catholic vote mattered a great deal because the Trump campaign's strategy to win ran through the upper Midwest: Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin all have large Catholic populations. An estimated 3.5 million Catholics live in Pennsylvania, 2.3 million in Michigan, and 1.8 million in Wisconsin. That explains why they would care. But how did they find this



particular email exchange so quickly? We know the first legs of the email's, journey when it was stolen from John Podesta's inbox by the Russians, and then handed over to WikiLeaks. So how did this email get plucked out of the morass of John Podesta's more than 50,000 emails, land in the 1,200 emails released on October 11, and then, in just a matter of hours, go from WikiLeaks to RT to a Trump campaign speech? Here's Brian Fallon, who was the press secretary for the Hillary Clinton campaign.

Brian Fallon:

When the daily releases would come out from WikiLeaks of John's emails, this was not our first rodeo in terms of dealing with rounds of disclosures of emails, because earlier in the election cycle, you know, through a court-ordered FOIA schedule that arose out of a FOIA lawsuit for Secretary Clinton's emails, we were dealing with monthly dumps of her emails from her time at the State Department. And in preparation for the end of the month when, you know, a tranche of her State Department emails would come out, we would similarly do a vet and scrub all the contents that we expected to come out at the end of that month, because they more or less went chronologically, so we could predict which chunk of emails would be coming out. We would, sort of, make a list of, you know, "these are the ones that represent, you know, somewhat vulnerable storylines that could put us on defense and that we'll need to have answers for." And then the documents would come out, and for like two or three hours, you could just, sort of, watch the process play out on Twitter, where reporters would be finding stuff, but they'd have to dig for it. And sometimes we'd be pleasantly surprised because the stuff that we had flagged as potentially, you know, something that was sensitive would never actually even rise on the radar of the reporters, either because they missed it all together because they were looking for needles in haystacks when these huge document dumps would happen, or just because in the hurly-burly, like the, there wasn't a coordinated effort to lift something up. And then when we had the document dumps with Podesta, it had a completely different character to it, which is that almost within moments it seemed of the documents being posted, the most weaponizable materials would be highlighted, and not just, you know, in a way that was not organic. It was not somebody, it was not somebody finding it on their own, lifting it up, and then the press sort of decides to coalesce around that as the thing that they're going to focus on. There would be stories in the can already from RT and other outlets that would already have headlines and everything that were framing up this as the most salient piece of information to come out of this document dump. And so, the storylines would form almost instantaneously. There would be no organic hours-long process, where the media would sort of come to grips with what they wanted to treat as the most newsworthy nugget. And it was almost prepackaged. And so yes, there was a running theory that the thing was coordinated, and that on any given day, not only was WikiLeaks being strategic in trickling out the most provocative materials, but that certain outlets were being tipped off to those provocative materials so that they set the narrative for the whole 24 hours



to come. And there's no question in my mind that that happened.

Max Bergmann:

However it happened, it had a big impact. Polls showed that Catholic voters and organizations had not warmed to the twice-divorced Trump. The “Access Hollywood” tape, released just a few days earlier, had even prompted some Catholic groups to call on Trump to withdraw from the race. But now, this innocuous WikiLeaks email gave Trump a lifeline to win back Catholics. Case in point: When the “Access Hollywood” tape came out, the political advocacy group Catholic Vote called on Trump to step aside saying, “if Donald Trump is unwilling to step aside, the Republican National Committee must act soon out of basic decency and self-preservation.” But just two weeks later, they cut this ad:

Campaign Ad:

Stunning revelation: key Hillary Clinton staffers now taking heat over an email exchange dismissing the entire Catholic belief system as severely backwards.

I was surprised with all the things going on in the world; we've got ISIS, we have international unrest. I wanted to check out of this election like most people, but then with the Clinton campaign mocking us as Catholics, I'm back in.

Paid for by CatholicVote.org. Not coordinated by any candidate or candidates committee.

Max Bergmann:

Trump surged among Catholics in the final weeks of the campaign. According to Pew, that 21% deficit flipped into a shocking 7% win for Trump among Catholics on Election Day. Here are some rough calculations applying this swing to Pennsylvania to indicate how significant that was. This meant going from Trump losing Catholics by roughly 450,000 on the day the WikiLeaks email was released to winning them by about 150,000 on election day. A swing of nearly 600,000 votes in Trump's favor in Pennsylvania alone. And Trump won Pennsylvania by just 44,000 votes. And the same trend played out in Michigan and Wisconsin. If you remember from the last episode, we outlined five easy steps to collusion: One—hack; two—inform; three—meet and collude; four—release; and five—campaign on them. We didn't talk about the fifth one last time, but we will today. Here's Brian Fallon again.

Brian Fallon:

There was a whole faux controversy ginned up about the Clinton team being anti-Catholic, where all perspective was lost about the fact that this was not an email chain that involved Hillary Clinton, but two staffers and two staffers from five years earlier in an email exchange.

Max Bergmann:



That's how you run on emails. That's how you run a campaign of collusion. Russia breaks into the Inbox of Clinton's campaign chairman in March, provides the email to WikiLeaks in September, they release it in October, and Trump runs on it through November. And this campaign of collusion would bring Donald Trump all the way to the White House. I'm Max Bergman and this is The Asset.

Max Bergmann:

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

Donald Trump:

It's just a total deflection, this whole thing with Russia. In fact, I saw her campaign manager, I don't know his title, Mook. I saw him on television, and they asked him about Russia and the hacking. By the way, if they hacked, they probably have her 33,000 emails. I hope they do. They probably have her 33,000 emails that she lost and deleted, because you'd see some beauties there. So, let's see. But I watched this guy Mook and he talked about, "We think it was Russia that hacked." Now, first of all, it was what was said on those that's so bad, but he said, I watched it, I think it was live. He said, "We think it was Russia that hacked." And then he said, and I'm just an innocent person sitting and watching television, as I've been doing. And then he said, "Uh, could be Trump. Yeah, yeah. Trump. Trump. Oh yeah. Trump." He reminded me of Jon Lovitz for Saturday Night Live in The Liar where he'd go, "Yeah, yeah. I went to Harvard. Harvard. Yeah. Yeah." This is the guy. You have to see it, "Yeah. It could be Trump. Yeah. Yeah." So, it is so farfetched. It's so ridiculous. Honestly, I wish I had that power. I'd love to have that power. But Russia has no respect for our country, and that's why if it is Russia, nobody even knows it's probably China, or it could be somebody sitting in his bed. But, it shows how weak we are. It shows how disrespected we are. It's a total sign, assuming it's Russia or China or one of the major countries and competitors, it's a, a total sign of disrespect for our country. Putin and the leaders throughout the world have no respect for our country anymore, and they certainly have no respect for our leader, so I know nothing about it. It's one of the most farfetched I've ever heard.

Max Bergmann:

Once again, just like the clips we heard of Donald Trump Jr. and Paul Manafort in the last episode, Trump used the fruits of the Russian theft of emails from the DNC to distract from accurate accusations that Russia was responsible for the theft. And not only that, Trump deflected blame away from Russia. He almost forgets to do it a couple times, but he always comes back to insist it might be someone else who's responsible, but Trump knew Russia



had done the hacking, but for all the impact of the DNC, hack, Trump wanted Russia to do more, to interfere more to help him.

[Donald Trump:](#)

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

Max Bergmann:

Trump didn't in say, "Russia, or China, or some guy in his bed," if you're listening. He said, "Russia, if you're listening," and they were. Just hours after Trump suggested that Russia would be rewarded for hacking Clinton's personal emails they tried to do just that. The Mueller report described what happened next: "Within approximately five hours of Trump's statement, GRU officers targeted, for the first time, Clinton's personal office. After candidate Trump's remarks, Unit 26165 created and sent malicious links targeting 15 email accounts at the domain [redacted], including an email account belonging to Clinton aide, [redacted]. The investigation did not find evidence of earlier GRU attempts to compromise account's hosted on this domain. It is unclear how the GRU was able to identify these email accounts, which were not public." Here we have two campaigns, working together in tandem. The Trump campaign, knowing Russia was working on its behalf, communicating directly with the Russian campaign to elect Trump, and the Russians responding to their request. If this sounds like the definition of collusion, that's because it is. After the DNC release, the Trump campaign also sought to develop a back channel to WikiLeaks. Michael Cohen revealed as much when he testified in Congress in February.

[Michael Cohen:](#)

A lot of people have asked me about whether Mr. Trump knew about the release of the hacked documents, Democratic National Committee emails, ahead of time and the answer is yes. As I earlier stated, Mr. Trump, knew from Roger Stone in advance about the WikiLeaks drop of emails. In July of 2016, days before the Democratic convention, I was in Mr. Trump's office when his secretary announced that Roger Stone was on the phone. Mr. Trump put Mr. Stone on the speaker phone. Mr. Stone told Mr. Trump that he had just gotten off the phone with Julian Assange, and that Mr. Assange told Mr. Stone that within a couple of days there would be a massive dump of emails that would damage Hillary Clinton's campaign. Mr. Trump responded by stating to the effect, "Wouldn't that be great?"

Max Bergmann:

Much of the information in the Mueller Report around WikiLeaks remains redacted. The reason provided for these redactions was that it could be harmful to an ongoing matter, and it is virtually certain that the ongoing matter at issue is both the potential extradition of



Julian Assange from the United Kingdom and the prosecution of Roger Stone for allegedly making false statements about his contacts with WikiLeaks during 2016. Now, Roger Stone is a critical character in this whole affair. He cut his teeth in politics working on the Richard Nixon 1972 re-election campaign, even though he was still then just a teenager. Stone engaged in some of the most aggressive dirty tricks of the Nixon campaign, like when he faked a donation from the Young Socialist Alliance to a liberal Republican considering challenging Nixon in the New Hampshire primary, or when he literally ran a spy inside numerous Democratic presidential campaigns, complete with dead drops and coded messages. Stone even has a huge tattoo of Nixon's face on his back. Here's the trailer of the Netflix documentary about Roger Stone called, *Get Me Roger Stone*.

[Trailer:](#)

Donald Trump: He loves the game. He has fun with it and he's very good at it.

Roger Stone: I'm an agent provocateur.

Commentators: Political strategist. Controversial as you can get. An incredible capacity for treachery. Win-at-all-costs mentality. When people think of Washington corruption, they think of Roger Stone.

Max Bergmann:

Stone created his first consulting firm in 1980 with none other than Paul Manafort. They pioneered a particularly shady business practice: The firm would help politicians get elected, and then the same firm would lobby those politicians on behalf of corporate clients. It's fair to say that Stone and Manafort were innovators in the field of Washington corruption. And, because everything in this saga comes full circle, one of their clients in the 1980s was of course Donald Trump, having been introduced to Stone by their mutual friend and mentor, Roy Cohn, who was a top aide to Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy, and helped fuel McCarthyism. He was also Donald Trump's personal lawyer. Stone stayed close to Trump throughout the years, advising him on his political ambitions all the way through Trump's entrance into the race for the Republican nomination in the summer of 2015. But the two had a much-publicized split in August 2015, with both men claiming that they ended the relationship. But frankly, this split seemed like a charade, one that they didn't even really try to keep up. Stone stayed in regular contact with Trump and his team throughout 2016. But perhaps Stone not being officially on the campaign gave Stone greater license and Trump some deniability. According to Roger Stone's indictment, it says that in June and July of 2016 prior to the DNC WikiLeaks release, "Stone informed senior Trump campaign officials that he had information indicating Organization 1"—which is WikiLeaks—"had documents whose released would be damaging to the Clinton campaign." Here's Luke Harding, the former Moscow correspondent for *The Guardian* and the author of the book, *Collusion*



Luke Harding:

The big question now, and Michael Cohen has been speaking to this in his testimony before Congress, talking about Roger Stone speaking to Assange and then briefing Donald Trump. So, Donald Trump knew about the impending release of DNC emails. What's clear is if you're drawing a little diagram, connecting the dots, you go from the GRU in Moscow to WikiLeaks and in London to the release of these emails having a massive effect in America. It's a relatively short chain.

Max Bergmann:

After the July 22 WikiLeaks release of DNC emails, the Trump campaign launched a plan to coordinate with WikiLeaks on any future releases and to get more Clinton emails. Not only did they try to set up a back channel, they also try to actually get the mythical 30,000 deleted emails that Clinton's lawyers determined were not work-related. Trump instructed Michael Flynn, who would later become his National Security Advisor, to set up a team to find the emails. Flynn got to work and contacted a Senate staffer, Barbara Ledeen, and a Republican donor named Peter Smith. They developed plans and set out on a unicorn-like quest, even receiving funding from Blackwater founder Erik Prince. Smith even created a company, KLS Research LLC, to manage the money in support of this effort. Ledeen even claimed to have gotten emails from the "dark web," but an IT expert later determined that they were bogus.

The story of Peter Smith takes a tragic turn. In May 2017, Smith gave an interview to *The Wall Street Journal* and 10 days later he was dead. The *Chicago Tribune* obtained the Minnesota State death record saying Smith committed suicide in a hotel near the Mayo Clinic. In a suicide note recovered by a police. Smith wrote in all caps that there was "NO FOUL PLAY WHATSOEVER" in his death. While the effort to get these deleted emails came to naught, another more fruitful effort was also underway. Roger Stone was tapped by the Trump campaign to get to WikiLeaks and obtain more emails. Looking at the Mueller report and the Stone indictment together, we can piece together a chain of events, even though some of it's redacted. After discussing the DNC emails with Trump, Manafort told Trump's deputy campaign chairman, Rick Gates, that Trump wanted to be kept apprised of any new WikiLeaks developments. In the Stone indictment, it also says a "senior campaign official was directed to contact Stone about additional releases." So, someone senior to a senior campaign official issued the order to Stone to get to WikiLeaks. Stone reported back to the Trump campaign and to Trump himself throughout the summer and fall about forthcoming WikiLeaks releases and likely their contents. Stone was communicating directly with WikiLeaks. It's not just Michael Cohen's testimony saying this, it's actually Roger Stone himself. Here's Roger Stone on August 10, 2016, telling a group in Florida that he has



“actually communicated with Assange.”

[Audio Drop:](#)

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

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

Interviewer: You happen to have a mutual friend?

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

Max Bergmann:

And then, on August 21, 2016, Stone tweeted, “Trust me, it will soon [be] Podesta's time in the barrel. #CrookedHillary.” Now, Podesta, at this point, wasn't even sure he'd been hacked. So how did Stone know? Well, Stone had set up a back channel to WikiLeaks. He's communicating with Assange. But that wasn't good enough for Stone in the campaign. Stone needed a direct physical back channel. The question of why, and this has largely been overlooked, is that Stone was actually trying to get the emails. Here's what it says in Stone's indictment: “Stone also corresponded with associates about contacting Organization 1” — WikiLeaks—“in order to *obtain* additional emails damaging to the Clinton campaign.” He was trying to *obtain* the emails. So, on July 25, just three days after the DNC release, Stone emails Jerome Corsi. We talked about Jerome Corsi back in Episode Six. He's the conspiracy theorist of former birther fame, who now somehow becomes part of a back channel to a Russian front.

So in late July, Stone wrote to Corsi, telling him to get to Julian Assange in London and “get the pending emails.” Corsi then dutifully obliged. He contacted an associate in London who supported Trump named Ted Malloch. And Corsi suggested to Malloch that people in the orbit of UK politician Nigel Farage, who's a leading proponent of Brexit, get in touch with Julian Assange. Malloch told Mueller that he never made a connection to WikiLeaks, but in the Mueller report it says that he had multiple Facetime conversations with Corsi in August and September, and that someone, whose name is redacted in the report, had actually made contact with Assange. Who Malloch was referring to remains hidden from the public. But to add to the suspicion of Farage, in March of 2017, a *BuzzFeed* photographer captured Nigel Farage coming out of the Ecuadorian Embassy with a deer-in-headlights look on his face, and when asked what he was doing there, he claimed he couldn't remember. Farage popped up at Trump Tower throughout the campaign. He was even at a rally in August in Mississippi for Trump.

[Audio Drop:](#)



Donald Trump: Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Nigel Farage.

Nigel Farage: Thank you very much. Well, thank you and good evening Mississippi.

Max Bergmann:

And he was the first foreign politician that Trump met with in Trump Tower after the election. But as Stone was tapping into some of his far-right allies, he also got in touch with some of his left-wing associates, in particular a radio host named Randy Credico, who is a supporter of Assange and WikiLeaks and even had Assange on his radio show. On September 30, Credico even sent Stone a photo of him standing in front of the Ecuadorian embassy in the UK. Credico even texted Stone on October 1 telling him big news was coming: “now pretend you don't know me. Hillary's campaign will die this week.” Stone wasn't the only one in the Trump campaign trying to get the emails. In late August, major Trump donor Rebecca Mercer, who had also helped fund a few years earlier a data digital firm called Cambridge Analytica, which we will talk much more about later, reached out to the head of that firm, Alexander Nix, saying he should get the emails from WikiLeaks and offer to help collate them. Nix responded that yes, he had tried that. He had actually reached out to Mr. Assange two months earlier in June 2016 to ask Assange to share emails with him. Not only was this before the emails were publicly released, but it's also before Cambridge was even hired by the Trump campaign, and also likely before Assange was even in possession of the emails that he would later release. Nix told Mercer that when he reached out Assange had turned him down. Donald Trump Jr. was also having regular direct-message exchanges with WikiLeaks in September and October, where Assange would flag stories for Donald Trump Jr. to push and to retweet and would send him ideas for the campaign. By late summer, Trump's deputy campaign manager even told Mueller, “the Trump campaign was planning a press strategy, a communications plan and messaging based on the possible release of Clinton emails by WikiLeaks.” In a heavily-redacted section of the report, Trump and his deputy campaign manager, Rick Gates, were driving to LaGuardia Airport and after taking a call Trump told Gates “that more releases of damaging information would be coming.” So, Donald Trump more than a month before WikiLeaks released more emails, and after he had received a briefing from the FBI about Russian interference, knew that more WikiLeaks releases were coming, and he didn't call the FBI. No, he developed a campaign strategy around those releases. That is collusion. But for all this back channeling, it probably wasn't until late summer when WikiLeaks actually physically got the Podesta emails. It was at this time that the Mueller investigation identified the same pattern of interaction between WikiLeaks and Russian intelligence and that came prior to the DNC releases back in July. It found on September 15, DCLeaks, the website operated by Russian military intelligence, direct-messaged WikiLeaks about a submission. The Mueller investigation, in analyzing the metadata from the WikiLeaks releases, found that September 19 may be when the GRU staged the stolen Podesta emails



for transfer to WikiLeaks. In other words, it wouldn't have been until after September 20 that WikiLeaks could have actually shared the emails with the Trump campaign, because they didn't have them until then. But it seems clear the Trump campaign knew Russia was going to deliver additional emails to WikiLeaks. Trump was informed about it. Now, the Trump campaign knew that these emails came from Russia. Not only had the Trump campaign been told by Russian operatives that they had done the hacking, not only had the press widely reported on the Russians doing this, but Trump himself on August 17 received intelligence briefings that Russia was interfering and was behind the releases.

Newscastr:

Tomorrow, intelligence officials will brief Donald Trump inside of a secret room at the FBI's headquarters in New York City. The classified briefings will cover major threats to the US and emerging concerns around the world. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn will be with Trump.

Max Bergmann:

Trump in effect knew about this Russian conspiracy against the United States of America, and Mueller would later charge more than 30 Russians with conspiring against the United States. Instead of calling the FBI or just staying away from the Russians, Trump ran toward the crime. And let's be clear, and this has sort of been overlooked, Trump had the ability to stop Russian interference. After the DNC release, Trump could've easily kneecapped the Russian effort. All he had to do was say that Russia interfering in our election was unacceptable, and to pledge not to use emails for the campaign and to call on the press not to peddle any material stolen by Russia. I know, it's kind of unimaginable that Trump would do this, would do the right thing. But you know, in 2000 when Al Gore got tapes of George W. Bush's debate prep, they contacted the FBI.

The Late Show:

Stephen Colbert: In 2000, you were prepping for the debates against George W. Bush.

Al Gore: Yeah.

Stephen Colbert: And I understand you got the debate prep book or somebody in your campaign did?

Al Gore: Yeah. They said somebody had stolen it, evidently from the Bush campaign, and mailed it to my close friend Tom Downey, who was going to be the Bush stand-in in debate prep. It didn't, it wasn't mailed from Moscow, but it was mailed from Texas. Somebody that was very unhappy with the Bush campaign.

Stephen Colbert: But you guys didn't keep it.

Al Gore: No, we immediately turned it over to the FBI, and Tom recused himself from the whole debate process ...



Max Bergman:

And in 2008, when the Republican base was pushing the claim that Obama wasn't born in America, his opponent, John McCain, tamped it down.

[Audio Drop:](#)

Audience member: We're scared of an Obama presidency.

John McCain: First of all, I want to be President of the United States and obviously I do not want Senator Obama to be, but I have to tell you, I have to tell you, he is a decent person and a person that you do not have to be scared as President of the United States.

Max Bergmann:

But Trump did the opposite. He encouraged Russia to interfere to help him. Trump made Russia's interference successful. Without Trump, it wouldn't have worked. On October 2, 2016, Roger Stone knew what was coming when he tweeted, “@HillaryClinton is done #WikiLeaks.”

Producer:

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

Max Bergmann:

October 7, 2016, was one of the most important days in American political history.

Laura Rosenberger:

I remember every single second of that day is seared into my memory.

Max Bergmann:

That was Laura Rosenberger, who was the top foreign policy advisor on the Clinton campaign describing October 7.

Max Bergmann:

The 2016 presidential campaign was long. It was crazy. It was a marathon. There were many important days, but there simply isn't another day like October 7. Here's David Corn, legendary journalist and co-author of the book *Russian Roulette*.



David Corn:

One of the most important days in the history of American politics, October 7, 2016. We're in the final weeks of the campaign. Sure, everyone thinks Hillary Clinton is going to win, but it ain't over 'til it's over. And that's the day that, finally, the Obama administration is willing to say officially and publicly that Russia has been intervening in the election by hacking Democratic targets and presumably releasing the material. And in the highest levels of the White House and the national security community, they'd spent weeks and weeks debating whether they should say this publicly or not, for all sorts of complicated reasons, whether this would, you know, make things worse and cause the Russians to do more meddling or whether it would give Trump a reason to say, "Hey, this election is rigged. It's not on the level. The Russians are involved," and, you know, because he had already started saying that if he lost, it would have to be because it was rigged. So, there was some concern about how to go about doing this. By this point though, the intelligence to them was clear, and it was also clear that Putin had ordered it, according to the intelligence. They put out a statement. They don't say Putin had ordered it. They said the highest levels of the Russian government, which you know, you could read to mean Putin, and they put it on Friday afternoon, and they didn't do it in the president's name. He didn't do a big press conference. It was signed by James Clapper, the director of the Office of National Intelligence, and Jeh Johnson, the head of the Department of Homeland Security. But, they did think it would be somewhat explosive. They expected to get a lot of calls from reporters and that they would, you know, that Jeh Johnson and James Clapper would be on the Sunday shows talking about it, that it was above-the-fold material that finally, I mean it's a big deal to say in another country has attacked your election. I mean this is historic.

Max Bergmann:

The statement Corn was referring to was a joint statement issued by the Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence. It landed around mid-day and October 7, which was a Friday, and its opening lines read, "The US intelligence community is confident that the Russian government directed the recent compromises of emails from US persons and institutions, including from US political organizations. The recent disclosures of alleged hacked emails on sites like DCLeaks.com and WikiLeaks by the Guccifer 2.0 online persona are consistent with the methods and motivations of Russian-directed efforts. These thefts and disclosures are intended to interfere with the US election process. We believe based on the scope and sensitivity of these efforts that only Russia's senior-most officials could have authorized these activities." This was a big deal. The US intelligence community was accusing Russia of interfering in a presidential election. Here's Laura Rosenberger.



Laura Rosenberger:

I remember I was on a conference call and I saw this and it was like, “Okay, wow. Finally, something,” because a lot of us had been jumping up and down a lot for several months at that point, trying to get the US government to do something, trying to get the media to cover these issues a little bit more, trying to convey that, like, something really, really troubling is a foot here. And so, when this came out it was like, “Okay. Finally something.”

Max Bergmann:

The Obama Administration's response to Russian interference had been incredibly cautious. It had mainly amounted to warnings to Russia. At the G-20 summit in September, Obama had even directly warned Vladimir Putin not to interfere. But the US government felt it needed to notify the public. And so here, finally, was a public pronouncement from the intelligence community that Russia had indeed been interfering, that they were behind these hacks and the release of emails. Here's David Corn again.

David Corn:

And so, they put that out and literally, a reporter from the network news shows, one of the network news shows, is talking to Jay Johnson on the phone about the statement. “Oh yeah, this is amazing that we were going to do like five minutes tonight on this on the network news broadcast. It's a big deal. Wow. I'm sure you'll get other calls from everybody else and, oh wait, wait, wait, oh, got to go.” Hangs up. And Jeh Johnson looks at Hagel, “What is that about?” And they turn on the TV and it's the “Access Hollywood” tape. This was just purely a timing coincidence. Administration put this out, that statement out, whenever it was, two, one, noon, in the afternoon. And then within an hour, The Washington Post put up the “Access Hollywood” tape, which they had received I think just a few hours earlier that day. And so, all of a sudden, you know, the American political-media universe goes into this spasm.

Max Bergmann:

I also talked with Brian Fallon, the Clinton campaign's press secretary, and here's him describing what happened in Clinton campaign headquarters in Brooklyn at this moment.

Brian Fallon:

We had a conference call. Half the staff convened in Robby Mook's corner office in the Brooklyn headquarters. And so, there was a debate prep session going on in upstate New York with Hillary. And so, the rest of the brain trust convened via the phone, took a break, took a timeout from the debate prep session, and Podesta and Palmieri and Jake Sullivan dialed in. And that conversation went for like 45 to 60 minutes as we wordsmithed our statement to react to the IC's press release. And then literally, while we were still deliberating on the exact wording of the statement reacting to the IC, and Christina Reynolds had stepped out for some



reason and rushed in to say that we needed to step out, put this conversation on pause to listen to this MSNBC report. I remember, I can't remember if I said something out loud, but I remember thinking in my mind that whatever Christina was trying to interrupt us with was, it was, you know, there was a disclosure happening about something awful Trump said every day, like this was like the big thing that we needed to stay disciplined on and because this was going to be the prophylactic that was going to keep it bay any further Russian disclosures. And she was like, "No, no, no guys, you really need to watch this." And so, we, we continue to plow away in the statement and, but she opened the door. And so, the volume started to creep through, and you could hear what was being the audio from the tape as you're walking off the "Access Hollywood" bus. And I'll remember Laura Rosenberger gasping at what Trump said on the tape and covering her mouth. Laura Rosenberger doesn't spook easily.

Max Bergmann:

Here's Laura.

Laura Rosenberger:

I was sitting in a spot in the office where I had line of sight to the television. Somebody opened the door and I could see and I could hear the tape and I just gasped. Apparently very audibly gasped, which then, I think, focused the attention of some of my other colleagues in the room about, wait a second, what's happening over here?

[Donald Trump:](#)

Yes, I gotta use some Tic-Tac's just in case I start kissing her. You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful. I just started kissing them. It's like a magnet. Kiss, kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything.

Brian Fallon:

Once it had sunk in what the "Access Hollywood" tape was, I would say that nobody in that moment thought, "Oh no, this is going to take attention away from the IC statement," because this seemed like an even bigger gift. This seemed like something that was surely going to topple Donald Trump. Like this was an outrageous thing to be captured on tape and if you recall, in the first 24 to 36 hours, there were Republicans calling on him to drop out of the race. That's how much that conversation had moved in the direction of like, declaring Trump dead. And so in the immediate moment when that "Access Hollywood" tape came out, there was not a lot of, "Oh no, this is taking attention away from the IC statement." There was, there was a thinking that, "Oh, this is so horrible that even he's going to be, you know, done in by this."

Laura Rosenberger:



Then we sort of chunk off into two teams. One working on the “Access Hollywood” piece, one of us working on the statement about the DHS and the intelligence community’s statement on Russian interference, and it was about 30 minutes later that the first of John Podesta’s emails started be released.

Max Bergmann:

At 4:03 PM, the “Access Hollywood” tape was released. And just 29 minutes later, WikiLeaks, at 4:32 PM on a Friday, east-coast time, 9:32 PM in London, released their big October surprise. WikiLeaks is apparently a nonprofit organization, and as someone who works at a nonprofit organization, one thing you really try hard to not do is release reports or podcast episodes or anything you want maximum attention to late on a Friday afternoon, ever. The timing for this release made no sense—for WikiLeaks. But it did make a ton of sense for Donald Trump. It was a lifeline. Here’s David Corn again.

David Corn:

All of a sudden John Podesta emails are leaked, and this is now like, you know, late Friday afternoon, early Friday evening, and they come from WikiLeaks. And this is the tell, this is the tell: When WikiLeaks released the DNC emails, the Democratic Party emails, in July of 2016, you know, the Friday before the Democratic convention was to begin, they put all 22,000 pages out at once—“Here you go, blip.” Which was their method of operation. They’ve always argued, that when, “We don’t have a political agenda, we get information, we put it out, and we put it out all at once when we can, as soon as we can, and let the world go through it.” This time was different, and the first time I think they did it this way. They put out, I don’t know, the first day, two or three thousands emails, and then a day or two later, they put out another two or three, and then a day or two later, or another two, and then every day, you know, a thousand, two thousand, three thousand, whatever it was, and they had 60,000 pages total, 60,000 emails total. It took them four weeks to get them all out. So, this clearly was a change for a reason because the DNC dump, or the Democratic Party convention, came and went really fast. It burned bright for two, three days. It looked like it might blow up the convention, and then the Hillary Clinton’s people tamped it down and they moved on and had a good convention and got a bump in the polls. This time it seems clearly designed to make sure that didn’t happen again. So, I think there are two things going on. They clearly had it ready to go. Julian Assange had been talking about a big major October surprise. And usually you don’t do that on a Friday afternoon or Friday evening in a news cycle. You just, it’s just, you know, people are getting into the weekend. You don’t do it that way. So, but for some reason, right after you know, the “Access Hollywood” tape comes out, as if to change the channel, or at least try to, or throw up something else, or give Donald Trump something else to talk about in the upcoming debate, they put it out in this Friday and they didn’t do all the whole load at once. So, it seems clearly designed to try to stop the bleeding on Trump or at least throw something



into the mix, and then, but also do it in a way that, “We're not going to use all this ammunition up in one blow. We're going to trickle it out, drop, drop, drop, drop, drop and see if that's more effective and having an impact on the Clinton race and the Clinton campaign.” And I think in retrospect, it sure looks like that was a smart decision if you want to help Trump and hurt Hillary Clinton.

Max Bergmann:

After WikiLeaks released the emails, Trump campaign chairman Steve Bannon, texted Roger Stone, “Well done.” Now, so much is redacted in the Mueller report around WikiLeaks and Stone that we don't know if Stone prompted Assange to hit post when he did. But what we do know is that the Trump campaign knew that *The Washington Post* had the “Access Hollywood” tape. The *Post*, after all, had approached Trump for comment. Jerome Corsi also apparently knew ahead of time and convened a conference call to try to reach Assange. Corsi, according to the Mueller report, was “convinced his effort had caused WikiLeaks to release the emails when they did.” But like everything with Jerome Corsi, it all got confused and conspiratorial, and the Mueller team ultimately couldn't corroborate his claims and just seemed to have lost patience with him. By Sunday, the announcement from the US intelligence community that Russia was interfering had been completely lost in the news cycle. I mean, do you remember it? James Clapper and Jeh Johnson were preparing to be deployed on Sunday for a media blitz, but they weren't called. The Sunday shows were busy. They had the “Access Hollywood” tape and the Podesta emails to talk about. And these were actually treated as equivalent, as a pox on both houses.

Newscasts:

[Chris Wallace](#): *Explosive leaks, just before the second presidential debate: more hacked emails that show what Hillary Clinton really told those big bankers and Donald Trump apologizing after release of a tape of him making lewd remarks about women.*

[George Stephanopoulos](#): *You also have Rudy Giuliani say something that I think is true. Had this story not broken on Friday afternoon, today we'd be spending a lot more time on those emails that were released on Friday. John Podesta, the chairman of Hillary Clinton's campaign, emails talking about the speeches she gave to private groups.*

[Chuck Todd](#): *Let me ask you about something that came out in these leaks. Some leaks, some hacking of John Podesta was some speech excerpts and there was one speech excerpt from Hillary Clinton that implied, and let's take a look at it, it imply the idea that she says one thing, “but if everybody's watching, you know, all of the back room discussions and the deals, you know, then people get a little nervous to say the least. So, you need both a public and a private position.” It sounds like what she's saying is, “well, I'm going to tell you one thing here*



in this private speech that you and I'm going to have a public position another way." Trade for instance seems to be one topic where she seems to say one thing behind the scenes and one thing publicly, how do we trust her trade position, for instance?

Max Bergmann:

Leaks? The media treated the Podesta emails as if they were leaks, as if it was just like any other typical news story, but these weren't leaks. It wasn't someone with rightful access making information available to the public. This was theft committed by the Russians and, you know, just two days before, on that Friday, October 7, the US intelligence community told everybody that the Russians were the ones responsible. Yet on every Sunday show that weekend, the deans of American journalism from, Fox to NBC to ABC and CBS, were all treating the Podesta emails as if they were "leaks," as if this was information legitimately provided to them. The press were therefore complicit. They were playing the role of unwitting participants in Russia's campaign of interference. The Russian campaign wouldn't have worked without them. The release of John Podesta's emails was an incredible gift to the campaign of Donald Trump, not just because it gave him a lifeline after the "Access Hollywood" tape that by all normal standards of political gravity should have ended his candidacy then and there, but because these disclosures were emails, and Hillary Clinton's State Department emails had been such a driving feature of the Trump campaign. Here again is Brian Fallon.

Brian Fallon:

What we discovered during that month of October was, people thought that it was more Hillary Clinton emails that were coming out. Like, the distinction between it being John Podesta's personal emails and Hillary Clinton's Secretary of State emails that had been the subject of monthly releases, as I just mentioned, in 2015, that distinction was lost on people. So, everything that came out sort of lends credence to this narrative that Hillary, that the server was illegal and it brought the server issue and the email system back to life, even though this was a totally separate matter. And that, I think, is in what in part frustrated our ability to get any sustained focus on the provenance of these materials, because it was just too easy, rhetorically for people to conflate it with Hillary's server.

Max Bergmann:

Trump referred to WikiLeaks more than 150 times in the last weeks of the campaign, more than five times a day. That sounds like a big number, and it is, but the impact is far more clear when you're able to hear how he uses.

Donald Trump:



Did you see where on WikiLeaks there was announced that they were paying protestors to be violent? \$1,500.

[Warren, MI October 31, 2016](#): Now, another one came in today. This WikiLeaks, just like your treasure trove.

[Manchester, NH November 7, 2016](#): WikiLeaks just released another debate question, Hillary got another one just one hour ago.

WikiLeaks just came out with a new one.

[Wilmington, OH November 4, 2016](#): Boy, I love reading those WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks, it sounds like, is going to be dropping some more.

WikiLeaks.

And through WikiLeaks today.

That's WikiLeaks.

[Manchester, NH November 7, 2016](#): They got it all down, folks. WikiLeaks.

Max Bergmann:

And it wasn't just that. Again and again and again, Trump deflected attention from Russia. Here he was at a presidential debate.

[Donald Trump](#):

She's saying Russia, Russia, Russia, but I don't, maybe it was. I mean it could be Russia, but it could also be China. It could also be lots of other people. It also could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds, ok? You don't know who broke into DNC.

Max Bergmann:

October 2016 was dominated by discussion of emails. The emails had helped Trump mitigate the "Access Hollywood" fallout, and Republicans had basically unified behind him. Yet, by the end of the month, Clinton looked like she was on a glide path to victory, when, on October 28, just 11 days before the election, James Comey made his presence known.

Newscast:

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

[Newscast](#):

This is the CBS News Special Report. I'm Scott Pelley. Hillary Clinton is about to speak for the



first time about the news today that the FBI has reopened an investigation of her emails. Here she is now.

[Hillary Clinton:](#)

...are significant or not. I'm confident, whatever they are, will not change the conclusion reached in July. Therefore, it's imperative that the bureau explains this issue in question, whatever it is, without any delay.

Max Bergmann:

James Comey changed the course of history. Comey notified Congress that the FBI had potentially discovered additional Clinton emails and was essentially reopening the email investigation into Hillary Clinton to look through these emails. The emails were found on Anthony Weiner's laptop, who was then married to Clinton aide Huma Abedin. Now these emails were found weeks earlier, but it wasn't a high priority for the FBI at the time. They had closed the case, but the New York field office pressed for action, and so, Comey was notified and decided that he had to inform Congress. Now, Comey's letter to Congress was against protocol. Justice Department prosecutors are supposed to avoid actions that could swing the outcome of an election. But Comey had two big problems: One, he had promised Republicans in Congress that he would update them on developments in the email investigation. And the second problem was the FBI was leaking like a sieve in New York. Not only that, they were leaking to Rudy Giuliani.

[Newscast:](#)

Rudy Giuliani: He's got a surprise or two, that you're going to hear about in the next two days. I mean, I'm talking about some pretty big surprises.

Interviewer: I heard you say that this morning. What do you mean?

Rudy Giuliani: You'll see.

Interviewer: You're lucky because we got to go, I'm out of time. Otherwise I'd keep pressing you.

Rudy Giuliani: We're not going to go down and we're certainly not going to stop fighting. We've got a couple things up our sleeve that should turn this around.

Max Bergmann:

So, Comey felt like he was in a vise: to sit on it, it could come out anyway and House Republicans would attack him. But Comey thought Hillary was going to win no matter what, and at least this way he could show his independence to House Republicans, which wouldn't be a bad thing for him with Hillary Clinton as president. But the impact on Clinton was devastating. The reaction was nuclear. *The New York Times's* front page the next day had become legendary, with top-to-bottom stories on Comey's revelation. Nate Silver at



FiveThirtyEight assessed that his intervention may have resulted in a three to four point swing against Clinton, more than enough to alter the outcome. But here's the thing about Comey's bombshell: It became inextricably linked to the other email releases from WikiLeaks, the John Podesta emails. While one had nothing to do with the other, in the public's mind they were all just emails. Comey's letter was a huge accelerant to the Russian interference campaign. Here's Brian Fallon.

Brian Fallon:

People were conflating the daily drip, drip, drip about John Podesta's emails. People were hearing it as stunning revelations about Hillary Clinton's emails. So, when Jim Comey announced the reopening of the investigation, a lot of, I think the way that it was received by many members of the public was that, "Oh, after all these damning facts came out, that's why they're reopening the investigation, because these are her emails, and they're learning of illegality and everything and that's why they're reopening it." Like, the two matters of the WikiLeaks hack of John Podesta's emails and the issue of her server that had been put to bed in July when Comey gave the initial press conference, they got conflated and it all became evidence that she was guilty and she was going to jail, and Jim Comey would not have done something, made some announcement like this with only 11 days to go unless the transgression was really serious and that an indictment was imminent. And these were all storylines that were being fanned online and with sponsored Facebook content by the Trump campaign proper and also promoted by the troll farms.

Max Bergmann:

As political scientist Kathleen Hall Jamieson would find, "the final month of the campaign not only reshaped the media agenda, but increase relative amount of anti-Clinton content in the communication stream. The conclusion that Russian trolls and hackers helped elect a US president draws support from decades of scholarly work probing the effects of agenda setting and framing." In other words, the Russian campaign mattered. It mattered a lot. Here's David Corn.

David Corn:

Well, there's never been anything like this. I really do believe, and it sounds hyperbolic, I know it sounds hyperbolic, that this is the biggest, most significant scandal in American history. Watergate, that was the break-in at the DNC headquarters, but Nixon was going to win that election one way or the other, right? And you know, people went to jail and other things came out and it was terrible. The Teapot Dome scandal, favoritism and contracting and the Interior Department, you know, it was unclear if the president knew about this, but certainly the Secretary of the Interior did. People made money; okay. You know, big scandal. But what we have here is a foreign power, you can call it an adversary or not, depending on your



perspective, attacked a US election. They attacked a US election and we don't know to what degree, if any, people close to Trump were intimately engaged in it. But, what we do know, what's known already, is that Trump aided and abetted the attack. I don't, I really don't care for the word collusion one way or the other and it doesn't really mean anything in a legal sense. But throughout the campaign, well into the fall, into the election day, Trump kept saying that this attack on America was not happening. He was gaslighting America, but he was echoing, bolstering, amplifying the disinformation of the Kremlin, that, while it was attacking us. And the analogy that I use is that a guy is walking past a bank. The bank's being robbed. He can see the bank is being robbed. He's told the bank is being robbed. In fact, in mid-August 2016, Trump gets an intelligence briefing saying that the US intelligence community believes Russia is attacking the election. So, the guy's told the bank's being robbed. He sees people there with guns and masks on. Yet, as people walk past him on the street and say, "what's happening?" He goes, "Nothing." "Bank being robbed?" "Nah." "You sure?" "Positive. Why would anyone rob a bank?" And they go, "Okay." And so, whether or not he's in on the caper, he is helping the bank robbers get away with it. And in this case, it's so happens that the bank robbers are robbing the bank for his own benefit. The money ends up going into his bank account, so to speak. And, it's to remember that the Russian intervention didn't determine the outcome of the of the election on its own, but in an election this close, 77,000 votes split over three states could have flipped everything the other way. You can identify 10, 15, 20 factors that each in their own way were decisive. That is, you flip any one of them and the whole outcome is the inverse. And it certainly seems to me that if you don't have four weeks of John Podesta emails coming out every single day, putting the words "Clinton" and "email" in the headline, and having the political media focusing on that more than any other aspect of her campaign, if you take that out of the equation, it's very easy to see, or imagine that she doesn't lose.

Max Bergmann:

Donald Trump's campaign was often mocked throughout the election for its lack of professionalism. It lacked a lot of the traditional features of a normal presidential campaign—a get-out-the-vote operation, sophisticated policy teams. But what the campaign did have was an opposition-research team that was likely better and more capable than any in the history of democratic politics. That's because his opposition-research team was Russian military intelligence.

-Break-

Max Bergmann:

Next time on The Asset, we close out the election and go down the rabbit holes, dissecting all the mysterious unknowns and unanswered questions that still plague the 2016 election.



Why did Paul Manafort share polling data with an alleged Russian agent? What was the deal with that server?

Franklin Foer:

It was the most profound whiplash that I've ever experienced as a journalist.

Max Bergmann:

And that sketchy data digital company, Cambridge Analytica, and what were the Russians doing when they hacked local-election officials?

James Clapper:

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

Producer:

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

Brian Fallon:

I've now set back my schedule from recovering from my PTSD, but thanks for having me.

Max Bergmann:

Sorry to walk you through that again.