

Center for Strategic and International Studies

CSIS-Schieffer Series Dialogues

“The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence”

**Hosted by:
Bob Schieffer,
CSIS Trustee and Veteran Journalist**

**Introduction:
H. Andrew Schwartz,
Senior Vice President for External Relations,
CSIS**

**Panelists:
Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI),
Ranking Member,
Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism**

**Heather A. Conley,
Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic; and Director, Europe
Program, CSIS; Author, “The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian
Influence in Central and Eastern Europe”**

**David Sanger,
National Security Correspondent,
The New York Times**

Location: 2nd Floor Conference Center, CSIS Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

**Time: 5:30 p.m. EDT
Date: Thursday, June 8, 2017**

*Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com*

H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: I'd like to welcome everybody to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. If our friends in the lobby could come in and take their seats, we're about to start.

Thank you all very much for being here. I'm Andrew Schwartz at CSIS, and it's my pleasure to welcome you here to CSIS on another quiet afternoon in Washington. (Laughter.)

We've got some great, great people here. I saw Congressman Tanner was here a few minutes ago. My boss, Sam Nunn, is going to be here. I see Ambassador Tom Schieffer in the audience. Mr. Schieffer is right back here. There we go. It is really a pleasure to have all of you here with us.

We at CSIS lost our dear colleague Dr. Brzezinski last week, and I'd like to just have a moment of silence for Dr. Brzezinski.

(A moment of silence is observed.)

Thank you.

It's my pleasure to introduce my partner in crime. If you haven't heard our podcast, it's called "About the News." I get to be Ed McMahon to Bob Schieffer every week. It's on iTunes. It's on Stitcher. It's also on the CSIS website. And this week we've got Maggie Haberman of the Times talking about what's going on in the White House. We have Annie Karni from Politico also talking about the White House. She calls it the "freewheeling White House." Those are her words.

In any case, I want to thank our sponsor, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, for their gracious support.

Here's Senator Nunn. I knew he was here. Let's give Senator Nunn a hand. (Applause.) I'm not just doing that because he's my boss. He's one of my favorite people of all time, and I'm glad you're here, Senator.

I'd also like to thank the TCU Schieffer College of Communication, who's been our partner in this for many years.

And, with that, I'd like to introduce Bob Schieffer.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Thank you. Thanks, Andrew. (Applause.)

You know, under the heading of it's better to be lucky than smart, we put this discussion together because there have been so many questions about what the new administration's aim is in regard to Russia. Why would they find the need for private meetings and backchannels and all that kind of thing? So I wanted to look at this whole situation kind of from the other end of the tunnel. We know what's going on on this end of it, but what are the Russians doing at the other end? And that was why we decided to put that out. But then along came today – (laughter) – one of the – I must say one – history decides if things are historic, but I will say – I won't use that word, but I would say this is one of the most remarkable days that I – most extraordinary days I can remember in my 48 years here in Washington. We had no idea that we'd be having this on the day that the FBI director would be coming to the Capitol, which it turned out to be what we all saw unfold today.

So I think, as my usual habit, I want to start with the news. And we have an extraordinary panel to discuss and try to put into context today's events.

Sheldon Whitehouse, the Democratic senator from Rhode Island, ranking minority member on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism. They have been investigating Russia's role in the 2016 campaign.

Heather Conley down here, CSIS senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic. She was the deputy assistant secretary of state dealing with European affairs; and before that in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, where she was one of the coordinators – what administration would this have been, the first George Bush?

HEATHER A. CONLEY: Yes, sir.

MR. SCHIEFFER: One of the coordinators for assistance to the then-newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. Most importantly to me, she is the author of this book, "The Kremlin Playbook," which I have found one of the most helpful publications in trying to understand what's going on today. I mean, she has got it all in here, and we'll – you'll hear more about that as we talk today.

And finally, my good friend David Sanger, the crackerjack foreign affairs and national security correspondent for The New York Times, many times nominated for Pulitzers and twice a member of Times teams that won the Pulitzer, including just last year.

DAVID SANGER: This year.

MR. SCHIEFFER: This year it was, on the Russian hacking into the system. So we got the folks to talk about all this.

So let me just start with David. You're the – you're the reporter here. What's the lede on Jim Comey going up to talk to the Senate Intelligence Committee today?

MR. SANGER: Well, thanks, Bob, and it's great to be here with you and with Senator Whitehouse and with Heather.

I would say a couple of big things. The first is we had the extraordinary sight of seeing a recent FBI director lay out a case – even though he didn't use the phrase "obstruction of justice," but lay out a case for why he believes the president was stepping in the midst of an investigation. And he said – and I think it was sort of the most important line of the – of the hearing – that he heard President Trump's request that he go easy on General Flynn as an instruction to drop the investigation. Now, the president's – one of the president's sons immediately tweeted out I've known him for 39 years, and when he's issuing an instruction I know what it sounds like, and that's not what it was. But this is really the critical issue that in the end the special counsel, Bob Mueller, is going to have to go sort out.

The second big piece of news, I think we learned, again, Bob, something that you've taught me over the years, which is it's very risky to go fire your FBI director, OK? (Laughter.) So we got to a point about halfway into the thing where Director Comey, with very little prompting, said, yeah, I can tell you how The New York Times got the fact that I took these notes and what they said, because I

handed them to a friend at Columbia University – somebody who used to be, I think, his chief of staff – asked him to pass them on so that they would be reported. And then he said – and this was, I thought, the most sort of remarkable admission in the whole thing – I did it to force the selection of a special counsel. So here was the president firing Jim Comey presumably – we don't know entirely what his motives are – but presumably to get past this issue, as he said in an interview at one point with Lester Holt, put this issue behind him. Instead, Comey comes back with a technique that brings on a special counsel who's going to keep this issue alive for a year, two years, who knows how long this is going to go on. So I guess the answer with that is don't mess with somebody who knows how to go work the system. (Laughter.)

The third thing that struck me, he was extremely organized, as he always is in front of these committees, and presented this stuff in very orderly, well-put-out, you know, just-the-facts kind of an approach. And compared to listening to the president and the president's spokespeople on this, whose stories have changed and so forth, I think at least in presentation you found Mr. Comey more compelling, or at least I did.

And, fourthly – and this goes to the question of that leak – one of the things you heard from the president's lawyer this afternoon, after he said that he thought that the testimony indicated the president was totally vindicated, was that he said that the director – the former director had admitted to a leak. Well, frankly, if it's your notes and it's not a classified document, I don't call that a leak. I call that sharing your notes. You know, that's –

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, if it's not classified.

MR. SANGER: It's not classified. And, you know, it was his thing, that he said this was a privileged conversation. Well, you know, we write every day in The New York Times, and our competitors elsewhere do, about conversations that the president of the United States engages in, some in the Situation Room, that I'm sure people would call privileged. But if they're not classified, they're not classified.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, let me just add one thing to this. You're talking about Mr. Kasowitz. The statement he gave, basically it boils down to they deny everything, that it never happened, and –

MR. SANGER: That's right. He said that those two pieces of conversation didn't happen, that the president never asked him to go easy on General Flynn and –

MR. SCHIEFFER: That's what he said.

MR. SANGER: Yeah.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Mr. Comey – he says: consistent with that statement, the president never in form or substance directed or suggested that Mr. Comey stop investigating anyone, including the president, and he never suggested that Mr. Comey, quote, “let Flynn go.” Close quote. So it appears that the – that their defense here or their response here is just say none of this ever happened.

So let me –

MR. SANGER: I don't think that was a surprise. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let's go to Heather. Heather, you have spent a long, long time trying to understand Russia and what they're up to. From your point of view today, what is the significance of today?

MS. CONLEY: For me, today was a distraction.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Distraction?

MS. CONLEY: A distraction from having us focus on preparing for our next election, 2018, 2020; preparing to resist Russian active measures that continue to be vibrantly used today, whether that's disinformation. We can't – we have to let this investigation go forward.

I applaud, and I think the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Whitehouse, what they've been doing on bipartisanship and publicly discussing what is happening. This investigation has to be used as an educational tool that we can understand very transparently what happened. But we have to start today – yesterday – start building in the resistance so these active measures aren't successful in the future, and I think that's the conversation that we're not having. We have to start looking forward, not necessarily backwards.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So, Senator, your subcommittee has done a lot of work on this, looking into some of the Russian meddling. What's your takeaway from today?

SENATOR SHELDON WHITEHOUSE (D-RI): I think both David and Heather are right. There are two big threads here. One is that we need to understand what took place looking backwards. It is important that the truth come out, and today was probably a good day for the truth, and not a good day for President Trump or Attorney General Sessions. And I have a lot of confidence that, between the congressional attention to this and Bob Mueller's special counsel investigation, we are going to get to the truth, and I suspect in fairly short order.

I mean, at the moment you basically have – an obstruction of justice case has two elements. One, you've got to endeavor to obstruct or impede, to try to stop or interfere with it. Well, if he said let Flynn go, that meets that part of the test. The next is, did you do it corruptly? What's your intention? And we haven't had particularly good evidence on the intention part until today, when Comey said I'm the guy, I was in the room with him, he said it to me, and his intent as I understood it was to impede. So you're really at the cusp of having a chargeable obstruction of justice case.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Not there yet, but close.

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: It's not my judgment, but I'd want to nail it down – I'd want to nail down a few more things if I were running that investigation right now. But I'd be assuming at this point that I would end with charges if I were running this investigation. You're over the hump of you're looking for something bad. Now you're trying to nail down your case.

So the other point, though, is that we really do have to worry about this, because what Director Comey said today was they are not going away, they are absolutely going to continue in the 2018 and 2020 elections. He said before they don't really mind being caught because that just adds to the disruption and the uproar, so they're not going to be shamed out of doing this. We don't have the defenses in place against this stuff.

Indeed, some of the ways in which we run our elections that have been set up for the benefit of huge American special interests actually are immensely transferrable to abuse by the Russians. Virtually every report, to give one example, has said if you're going to take care of this, you've got to have transparency about the funding of elections. You've got to do that. So the fact that our elections are now just bedeviled, swarmed with dark money, the people behind the dark money obviously want that to continue because they don't want their dirty hands on – you know, exposed. But if it's dark, it's dark. And if you're hiding the hand of Charles or David Koch and nobody can see their hand in this, then guess what? You can also hide the hand of Vladimir Putin. So we're going to have to have a real kind of come-to-Jesus moment with ourselves about are we finally now going to be serious about campaign finance transparency and corporation transparency and trying to run things in a responsible fashion now that we have this added pressure that we're actually at risk from Russia through these same vectors?

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you just one thing. You mentioned – you said a bad day for Jeff Sessions. Why?

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: Well, he kind of skated through, you know, the conversations with Kislyak. He'd recused himself. Everything was squared away in his world, more or less, other than Trump being mad at him, I gather. But when Comey said that he had other information related to Sessions that separately and independently was a cause for Sessions to recuse himself from the Russia investigation, and that's why he presumed that he was going to recuse himself, that's an additional nugget that the public does not know about and that now puts another great big question mark over Attorney General Sessions.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Heather, I want to talk to you a little bit to help us understand and get a broader view of what's happening here in this country. This book that you have put together is just remarkable. And tell us, you – as I understand it, you made case studies of five European countries and just tried to understand what it was the Russians were doing there. And basically, what you are saying here – what is going on – that they don't have to drive their tanks in anymore; it's a whole lot cheaper to go about it in a different way. Tell us what you found out in this study.

MS. CONLEY: Yeah, I wish I could take credit for our timing, but we started this almost two-and-a-half years ago, and it was after Ukraine's illegal – after Russia's illegal annexation of Crime and incursion into eastern Ukraine. And we were – we were observing how difficult it was for some European governments to address that, even to address sanctioning that behavior. And we recalled – our analytical team recalled a letter that a group of Central European leaders wrote to President Obama back in the summer of 2009, and said that Russia was using overt and covert means of economic warfare, through media manipulation and bribery and energy, to change the transatlantic orientation of these countries. And we said, well, can we prove that? Is that true?

And so what our thesis was is to look at Russia's economic presence in five European countries. We selected the Central European countries, again, because of both the warning, but it's easier in some ways to see Russia's economic presence in smaller countries that have very strong economic, historical and cultural links to Russia. And we wanted to quantify the economics and see if the policies in the country were changing, if that economic influence translated into political influence.

What I want to make sure you understand is that Russia's policy is military doctrine. It is called New Generation Warfare. And the doctrine describes a policy – a strategy of influence, not of brute

force. It is better to collapse the country from within than the necessity to cross its borders. And so we wanted to explore what that New Generation Warfare looked like.

And we found a variety of differences. And the case study model is so important. The five countries were Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and then Serbia. It's so important to go into the case-study model because it adapts itself in different ways – a country's cultural links to Russia, economic links.

And what we found, just to do a quick bottom line, that if Russia's economic presence – as best we could quantify, and it's designed not to be really seen and understood in a transparent manner – if a country had over 12 percent of its gross domestic product that we knew was Russian economic presence, there was a really high chance that that country would be under significant political influence by Russia. And what do I mean by political influence? The real playbook here, the essence is we were demonstrating the methodology.

So Russia's economic presence in a country – usually in strategic sectors like energy, finance, media, real estate, infrastructure – as that economic presence starts to blossom, it brings in local patronage, local influence. It buys the political influence, if you will, through corruption. And that political influence then, suddenly – it could be a member of parliament that's very important to anti-corruption efforts; well, then the anti-corruption efforts don't work very well because they're protecting Russia's investment. It can be political party financing to support Russia's interest. It can be local created NGOs that will work against any diversification of that business to protect Russian interest.

And in the case study country of Bulgaria, which, Bulgaria – 22 percent of Bulgaria's gross domestic product is Russian economic presence. What we found is near state capture. So the government can't take an independent action because the economic stranglehold, which then grows into strong political influence where political parties in parliament are more supportive of Russia's interests than Bulgarian interests, it forms state capture.

And Russia's New Generation Warfare exploits weaknesses. It finds them, and it uses them to their great advantage.

And I think what this report did – I think why it's a – it's a bestseller – and I have to tell you, as a think-tanker, this is – we don't know what to do with ourselves if people go – (laughter) – I read your report and it's great. And I also have to say, because my colleague James Mina is in the audience, the analytical team – I'm delighted to be the spokesperson, but this is an incredible analytical team. Our colleagues at the Center for the Study of Democracy in Bulgaria, it was a real partnership.

What we found was that Russia –

AUDIENCE MEMBER: (Sneezes.)

MS. CONLEY: God bless you.

Russia was using its economics to then create an interest base where it was changing policies, changing national policies of countries – NATO members that we have an obligation to protect.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So, Senator Whitehouse, do you see any relationship to what Heather's talking about here to what's happening here?

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, one of the techniques that she describes and that the Atlantic Council “Kremlin Trojan Horses” report describes, and that Ken Wainstein, the former national security director, has described is that, as they’re infiltrating another country, they will find a big business operator with sufficiently unscrupulous business practices that they can more or less put him on the payroll through sleazy deals in which he gets lots – money beyond what the market would justify. And at that point they own him with a carrot and a stick, with the carrot being we continue to overfund you or continue to subsidize property that are failing or whatever it is, and the stick is we blow this thing up and take it public and our cutout on the other side of the deal with you comes home to his dacha and you are disgraced and shown to be a Russian tool. And if any of that sounds familiar to what we’re going through right now, it’s no surprise.

So, you know, it’s – the underlying story of whether President Trump and his campaign were influenced or had become agents of Russia through any of this is exactly consistent with the predicate tactic that they have established over and over again, first in the old Soviet Union countries and then more broadly through the European Union, and then in the last election they jumped the Atlantic and now they’re here. But you can look at the tactic and you can pick it out over and over again, and the similarities are very apparent.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So what would you add to that, David?

MR. SANGER: Well, all – first of all, Heather and her team did an astounding job. And I’ve cribbed from this, Heather, more times than I should probably admit to.

MS. CONLEY: (Chuckles.) Thank you.

MR. SANGER: Always with – always with complete credit, of course. (Laughter.) But –

MR. SCHIEFFER: Almost always.

MR. SANGER: Almost always, right. (Laughter.)

But the – what’s added to this dramatically has been the cyber element of it, which doesn’t play quite as large in the five countries that you looked at, but which has played – first, when the Russians were trying to affect events in Estonia exactly 10 years ago, and that’s when they did a big denial-of-service attack; then in Georgia during the invasion of Georgia. And then, of course, we’ve seen this in the way they have combined the old skills of information warfare with the cyber tactics that basically broadcast out what they’ve been attempting to do on a scale that they couldn’t imagine back in the ’40s and ’50s and ’60s when they’d go plant, you know, newspaper articles in – someplace in Montana or Iowa or something like that and maybe, you know, buy off a reporter or two or something and try to get a few individual stories in. Now not only can they do this across Twitter and Facebook, but they can also design bots that are extremely targeted to specific areas.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Explain what a bot is.

MR. SANGER: A bot is a way to go – have a sort of self-replicating avatar, something that looks like it’s an individual. You’ll see a little picture of somebody. That person does not exist under at least that name. But they may design it so that you think that you’re getting this message – this

Twitter message, this Facebook message – from somebody who looks and sounds and seems to have beliefs similar to your own.

The only other thing I'd add – and this goes to Senator Whitehouse's point – is that while they did jump the Atlantic, I think that the U.S. and the Obama administration bear a fair bit of responsibility for a failure of imagination, that the techniques that were used in Europe – in Central Europe, in the Baltics – could be used here. I'll give you just two easy examples.

When we did our reconstruction of the Russian hack, which was published in mid-December under the name "The Perfect Weapon" – it was a 7,(000)- or 8,000-word look at what had happened here – we discovered some surprising things. First, U.S. intelligence and British intelligence had had early warning of what was happening, and they were seeing DNC files and so forth. And an overworked FBI agent contacts a young and not especially competent IT worker at the DNC by calling the helpline at the DNC, OK, getting connected to this guy. This person does not believe he's talking to a special agent of the FBI, so he ignores the call. He thinks it's a prank call. The FBI agent calls back periodically, never walks over to the DNC – it's a 12 – I did it in 12 or 13 minutes from the FBI headquarters one day, with a stop at Starbucks in between. So it wouldn't have been terribly hard for them to sort of get over there. This dance goes on for nine months – a little more, actually. There were babies who were conceived and born in the time period – (laughter) – that the United States became aware of what was going on.

The president wasn't told until June of 2016, OK? So they go from September of 2015 to June of 2016, and in that time period is when John Podesta's emails were taken, when a number of other incidents took place. And, of course, the Russians had previously been inside the State Department unclassified emails, the White House unclassified emails, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And in each of those cases, the Obama administration made the decision not to publicly name the Russians. They may have told Senator Whitehouse and his colleagues in closed session, but – and we, of course, you know, published that it was the Russians, but they never called them out. So you never had some deterrence that you really needed.

MR. SCHIEFFER: So what do we need to do now, Heather and Senator?

MS. CONLEY: Senator, I'll let you start and then I'll –

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: Well, I think we've got to close some holes in our system. In response to – I think it's pretty well documentable – in response to, among other things, this Russian pressure, throughout the European Union they are opening up incorporation to much more transparency. And the European Union, all of the countries are becoming much less vulnerable to shell corporations and corporations where you can hide the identity of the beneficial owner. They've lived with the misuse that those shell corporations can be put to, and so they're cleaning up their act. Which means that the kleptocrats and the thieves and the crooks and the manipulators who want to use shell corporations are going to start coming to America, where we have terrible incorporation transparency. So we've got to up our game on incorporation transparency.

And then there is absolutely no excuse in this modern world with this Russian targeting of us, with our entire intelligence community universally telling us this is a really big deal and they are not going away, to leave dark money out there as an obvious invitation and track for Russia influence to be peddled through here.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Are they moving money into the United States still?

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: It's hard to tell. I'm sure that they are in some ways, but it's hard to track it and it's hard to trace it, and it's been a weakness of ours. We've had the Atlantic to protect us and we just haven't looked at this before. I think that's one of the reasons the Obama administration didn't really pay more attention to this. This was kind of a one-off. And it's even now kind of hard for people to wrap their arms around the fact – I mean, you heard Comey today. If there was one point that he was really passionate about it was can you just wait for a minute? These are foreigners who are controlling our American elections. And Americans may have helped them do that. And it damages the thing that is most fundamental to our democracy, which is our American choice to fight with each other and make our own decisions and not have it piped in by the Kremlin. And that's a message that I think a message that I think we need to get out.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yeah, it's pretty clear they were meddling. Do we have any evidence yet that they actually changed anything or that any vote was changed?

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: We don't have any evidence that a person went to a voting machine, clicked Hillary, and by the time that thing turned up to be a vote it had magically flipped to be Trump. We don't know yet to what extent they might have interfered with the voting process in such a way that lines were longer in a certain area or there weren't enough machines to go around. I think that's a little bit vague right now. And we are absolutely certain that this information warfare operation that they ran was extremely effective and flooded America with negative information about Secretary Clinton and that that was a very professional, from the top of the Kremlin, hugely resourced, full-on piece of this new information warfare military strategy of Russia.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Heather, if I understand this latest leak, which is – I think we all agree, that's not the greatest way to get information – but that is what they were trying to do, was to get into that actual voting booth.

MS. CONLEY: Right, and I can't underscore more, that is not the way we get information, through a top-secret coded document leak. But that gives us a window into suggesting that we were well-aware of a direct Russian government – the GRU, the military arm, was looking at our election systems, according to this document. And I think in some ways President Putin was suggesting in his earlier speech this week at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum that, well, there could be – you know, the patriotic hacking – I mean, I think he understands that these – this information will come out. I agree with you, it's – that's sort of a win-win in that category.

But to pull on David's point, I think that the – for me, the frustration is that we did not take this seriously. This is national security at its top. And we were distracted or we didn't think they could do it or we didn't think it mattered. So that, to me, is the lost opportunity. What we've seen usually – and, David, to your point on cyber – in that we're watching the German elections quite closely. The hack of the German parliament and the Christian Democratic Union, Angela Merkel's party, happened two years ago. So they start a year or two before with the hacking. That's the – where's the material, where is the information.

But what the German government did was they made it very clear this has happened. You will get false information. The government made it a priority – a public awareness, public education. This is going to be happening. You have to be a discerning reader and voter are be aware of it. And there was just no government warnings to say this is going to happen, we need you to be aware of it. That, to

me – and the French election was the same thing. They were proactive at saying this will happen. And then you have to educate your citizens and say: You know, look, we know this is going to happen. You have to be aware of it.

None of that was there. And my frustration and our recommendations in the report – we talk about the Treasury Department and tracking Russian illicit financing and how it works. Our system is so geared for, importantly, counterterrorism and terrorism financing, which I completely appreciate. But we have to be able to follow this illicit financing – Russian or others – because that has as dramatic an impact on our society as does counterterrorism financing.

MR. SCHIEFFER: David.

MR. SANGER: These points are exactly right. I just wanted to add a point on the actual voting machines and so forth. First, we did not, until Jeh Johnson did in the last days of the Obama administration, designate our voting system, the underpinning of our democracy, to be part of critical infrastructure in the United States. Our electric grid is designated that way. Our telephone networks, our hospitals, the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial, movie studios – they're all on the DHS list. But no one wanted to do that with the election systems because the states were afraid that this would be used as an excuse by the federal government to take over the elections. We got to get our heads around that. And just yesterday, Secretary Kelly said he might have to go reconsider the designation and go back to the old way.

The second thing I think is important is President Obama decided not to make this a public issue, the way Heather had decided, for some understandable reasons. He was afraid the Russians would retaliate by going after the election voting systems. And he didn't want to appear to be partisan. Everybody knew he was supporting Secretary Clinton. He was afraid that if he got out and made this statement, it would just look like he was inventing something on her side. I think – in retrospect, I suspect there were a lot of people – I know there were a lot of people in the administration who wished they had that one back.

Third point, on the voting machines. We haven't seen any evidence of changed votes yet, or I haven't found anything particularly persuasive. But that's, in part, because our voting system is so cut up across the states, and sometimes across counties, so backward, and so non-electronic and disconnected from the internet that it's actually safe. (Laughter.) And you could say the same of the air traffic control system. (Laughter.) I don't know if that makes you feel better or worse. But you know, we've learned from this, there are some things you do not want connected to the internet – your voting machines, your refrigerator – (laughter) – the smart TV in your bedroom, and your nuclear weapons. You know, those are the four I'd put on my list, yeah. (Laughter.)

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: And another way of looking at this also is that there's a strong case to be made that it was not the Russians' intention to actually interfere with the voting machines. Their intention was to lay a trail of having had potentially access to the voting machines to support an information warfare operation against Hillary Clinton, who they thought was going to win, to be able to light up the whole campaign saying: Ah, she was the victor because of this perfidious scheme. And that it would be a way to undermine her presidency and undermine democracy. They can win two ways. They can either do it, or they can kind of get caught doing it and then blow that up. And both work for them. Both undermine democracy.

MS. CONLEY: And it's the undermining the credibility of democracy, our institutions and our leaders. And if you can discredit the United States, you discredit the alliance structures, you discredit the international system. And this is where you have to sort of understand the why. That's the question that I get, well, why are they doing this? Why would they assume to do this? If President Putin believes that in the 20th century the greatest geostrategic catastrophe was the collapse of the Soviet Union, could not in the 21st century – could we see the collapse of the American-led international system? And then we can come to the negotiating table as equals. And now we can renegotiate the international security architecture.

And it's also about the moral parity. You, democracy, are no better than we are. And once we reach parity – And I think that what was so devastating about President Trump's comment. I think it was in an interview, he talked about, you know, that we are equal in some ways. Mr. Putin kills his – or his political opposition leaders are in great peril. Certainly, Boris Nemtsov and others. And the president equated us. And that way, when you equal us and you downgrade our own system, you can be in an equal situation. And I think that's the dangerous path we're on.

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: And I don't think they just want to be equal. Minister Lavrov at the Munich Security Conference crowed about a new post-Western world order that they were going to establish. And guess who was going to be in charge of a post-Western world order, in their plan?

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, let me ask you this, kind of an obvious question. But where did this sort of bromance that President Trump has with Mr. Putin come from? I mean, when I see those two, I don't see them hanging out at the same place. They don't – they seem like two totally different kind of people. But maybe they're not. What is that about?

MS. CONLEY: Well, I would – I would suggest that in some ways we're seeing leaders grapple with globalization and the speech of change and control of that change. And so I think, just setting aside if there was influence or not influence, there is something right now that European groups, I would say there are even American organizations, who say we need to stop this. We need to take control. And that means take control of our borders and not let in immigration – which is a very potent symbol of globalization. We want to be nostalgic for the way things were in the past, because we are uncertain about things in the future.

So we need that tough, strong leader that will be able to control what seems to be so out of control. And particularly for groups that are very concerned about the rapid speed of social change, Mr. Putin and the Kremlin have placed Mr. Putin as the leader and defender of the traditional conservative values, that he is to be admired. He's standing against this decadence of the West, even if they don't – you know, it's not an influence question. There is affinity with that message. And that's what we also have to get our arms wrapped around, because that doesn't have to do with – as we are talking about – economic influence or the Russians. There are people that are deeply questioning our system and are flirting with, well, maybe more of an authoritarian, an illiberalism is what we need. That's the answer to our problems.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Now, you're saying in this country there is that feeling, or you're saying that's just kind of the –

MS. CONLEY: There are some groups. And in fact, what we saw during the French election with some of the very last cyberattacks during the – right before the second round, some of the cyber stories that were going around about Macron were being funneled through U.S. organizations.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Senator, do you have any thoughts on that?

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: I'd go with the influence. We'll see, though. That's being looked at very carefully.

MR. SCHIEFFER: David, where do you see all of this going on? Will Trump be able to put this – put this behind him, as his lawyer said today? Or is this going to go on for a while.

MR. SANGER: I think it's going to go on for a while. First of all, the Mueller investigation. I don't know how long it's going to take. The senator thought we'd sort these issues out fairly quickly.

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: Not all of them, but we'll get to something before long.

MR. SANGER: You'll get to some of them. I think that's right. I think there will be elements of the Mueller investigation that will probably go on for some time. And as long as that is alive, it's going to be a distraction for a White House that right now seems fairly easily distracted. I mean, they do not – they have not figured out how to wall this off yet, the way President Clinton did during the Lewinsky investigation, for example, where they sort of kept a policy process going on one side, and they had a group that was dealing with that investigation and ultimately the impeachment. Whether this ends up in an impeachment I have my doubts, but I think a lot of that turns on a political rather than a legal question of where control of the House goes in the next election.

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: Or whether an incitement turns up.

MR. SANGER: Or whether an indictment –

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: You could easily get Mueller sending a draft indictment to Congress saying, before we go forward with this, because it's not clear you can indict a president, we're giving you, Congress, the opportunity to file articles of impeachment. And you made that decision. And depending on which decision you made, we'll decide whether we go forward with indictment or not. That really puts the pressure on Congress to make that decision. They can't just wait till another day once that letter from Special Counsel Mueller shows up, saying: Here's my draft indictment. We are ready to proceed. But under the Constitution, we want you to have the first shot at it, because the articles of impeachment are a clear way for addressing the situation.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, that's interesting. And it raises the question in my mind. I mean, because I hadn't really thought of it in quite that way. I always just assumed you can't indict a president. What if he did indict a president. What would happen after that? I guess they would take it to court, right, challenge the indictment, but –

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: They might. And it would also be highly provocative of Republicans to being to think seriously about impeachment. So you may not have to wait for the House to switch to Democratic control for this to happen, particularly if he's polling in the – to be political about this, if it's polling in the 30s – the low 30s, and Paul Ryan is looking at looking at losing his speakership because of a wave, and they're blaming it on this president, then the political calculus to turn and start seriously investigating, and having some actual subpoenas go out from, you know, real committees and be really going forward on this becomes in their interest. At that point, the momentum can become – I

guess, there's a way to think this through. There are a lot of ways to think this through. But they don't necessarily require a Democratic speaker in order for that to happen.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But do you think we're anywhere at this point today close to that?

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: I'm not privy to what Bob Mueller is looking at. I assume that they've been looking at this stuff for weeks. I assume that they have a cooperating witness – that's my personal view. And I think that they have a grand jury going, and that they're pretty far along. And an obstruction case is not that complicated to make.

MR. SCHIEFFER: What's your take on this, just the political side of this, because I think we all agree – impeachment is a political act.

MR. SANGER: Impeachment is a political act. And therefore, while we sit around and discuss obstruction of justice and all that, it may not necessarily have to meet the kind of legal tests in order to get an impeachable element. I did not notice today at the end of the hearing any Republicans on the Committee, including the most middle of the road members of the Committee, defecting from President Trump. So I think that for all of drama of the day, it looked to me like the Republicans who were backing him held pretty fast. And my guess is that that will probably be the case, unless there's another significant development or revelation. And we've certainly been surprised by many.

I've heard from some Democrats who say better not to go that route, and just let this administration be frozen for the next four years as they're dealing with this, and go to election on that. And that's a very complicated calculus for the Democrats, because it looks like they are – and they would be under that case – arguing for doing nothing and freezing in this country in this partisan bad place for the next few years.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Why don't we take a few questions? We're getting close to the end here. Way back on the back.

Q: Sir, my name is Paul Norman (sp). I'm a retired naval officer. I served for 28 years.

I love my family first, my country second. I contend that the Russians, if they're the perpetrators – if it's not the Chinese, if it's not North Korea – have won the first battle. I get very concerned about the last remarks that were made, that we gridlock the country for the next four years, because we will set ourselves up for the next two elections exactly where we are today. I would like to hear your comments on that.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, we're already gridlocked – (laughs) – I would say. But I hear you. And I think – I think one of the reasons we've gotten ourselves into this mess where we find ourselves today – and I'm not talking about the results of the election – but the Congress and the country has basically been gridlocked for how long, senator? The last eight years or so, wouldn't you say? I mean, generally speaking?

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: Since the decision to oppose everything the president did, it's been – Obama did, it's been, yeah, eight years.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And there was some gridlock before that. But I agree with you, I think that's a dangerous place for this country to be in right now.

SEN. WHITEHOUSE: And I would say, just as somebody who lives in that atmosphere. It's one thing to have there be partisan gridlock on big issues and people having big fights. But underneath that, a lot of stuff actually goes on, and the business of the Senate goes forward and the business of the country goes forward. And it's usually less bad than it looks. The danger with this is that the fixation on this absorbs all that other energy that would go into bipartisan things. And now you have a much more – it's not so much that there's gridlock, it's just that there's weakening of the underlying operation because of the distraction. And so you end up with a much-weakened democracy.

I think we all need to really have a moment of self-reflection as Americans about what the really fundamental principles are that we want to live, fight and die for, as you offered to do for all those 28 years. And kind of reboot ourselves as citizens.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Another one? Who's here – right here.

Q: John Czop, director of policy planning, Polish American Congress.

I have a question for Director Conley. What do you think the impact of this August's Zapad Maneuvers – war games will be played. The scenario of the war game is NATO invades Belarus, Russia repels the attack, and do you think that Russia will leave behind a significant number of forces to affect the balance in Europe?

MS. CONLEY: Thank you. I'll explain that a little bit. Every four years – well, Russia has four military districts. Its western military district and every year they rotate and have a majority military exercise. This year Zapad will be in the western military district. So that's going to be along the NATO border. We believe this exercise, which they're already having snap military exercises, will be approximately 100,000 Russian forces. And it will – and it's a joint exercise with Belarus and Russia. We are watching it with concern because at the same time Sweden is hosting a bilateral national exercise of about 20,000 in the Baltic Sea region, which will be something to watch.

The information operation or disinformation operation of our NATO forces on the eastern flank is something to watch. And I'll give you an example. We have German forces are leading a NATO battalion in Lithuania. There was a fake news report that a German soldier had raped a young Lithuanian. This was completely false. But it was to sow unrest with the Lithuanian population about the German forces. And I can tell you, historically, having German forces in Lithuania is significant, considering that history. I mean, this is – we are overcoming extraordinary history. And this is all designed to sow discord, uncertainty.

So as this exercise I was mentioning to you that Sweden will be hosting, there's going to be an enormous amount of disinformation. We have to be able to have a proactive, positive message and about what we stand for and who we are, because what we're playing right now is all defense. We're trying to knock down a false story. And we spend our days doing that. We have to, as we did during the Cold War, put – mobilize, and put a positive, proactive force of what we're doing to defend freedom, why this is important. And that's what's been, I think, missing in our policy for quite some time.

And this is an incredibly dangerous moment. And you're right, forces could remain in Belarus after this exercise. We sometimes don't know what an exercise is to a prelude to something else. We have to be extremely vigilant as we approach Zapad, for sure.

MR. SCHIEFFER: All right. I think we have time for one more. A lady.

Q: Yes. My name's Virginia Schubert (sp).

And my question –

MS. CONLEY: There's a microphone, ma'am. Thank you.

Q: Oh, sorry. I feel like I can do it without the microphone.

My question is to you, again, my husband is four-generation Czech. And we were in the Czech Republic two years ago with the American friends of the Czech Republic. We heard there that same things that you are saying now about Russia. How do we bring attention in our country to the serious threats that we are facing? Thank you.

MS. CONLEY: Well, thank you very much for your question. And all of you being in this audience is the first step. And having hearings, as the Senate Judiciary Committee has had. Our challenge is to educate Americans and the threat, what is at stake, and to build resilience against this influence. This is an absolute national security imperative. And what we see in our European allies – they're a laboratory. This has been happening for years. We can learn a lot. We can do best practices together, which is – which is why when the president went to Brussels and did not reaffirm the Article 5 commitment, that just weakens what we need to do.

But we're going to take the silver lining in that dark cloud, and we're going to have to redouble our efforts. But it's everyone in this room, talking to your friends, talking to your family, talking about why this is important. We have to reeducate the American people about this. And it's a task that we hope you will join us in pursuing.

MR. SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, thank you all very much. For TCU and CSIS, thanks for coming. (Applause.)

(END)