

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Bob Schieffer's "About the News" with H. Andrew Schwartz Podcast

Subject: "Ezra Klein: Collusion is Likely"

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(Music plays.)

BOB SCHIEFFER: I'm Bob Schieffer.

H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: And I'm Andrew Schwartz.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And these are conversations about the news. We're in the midst of a communications revolution. We have access to more information than any people in history. But are we more informed, or just overwhelmed by so much information we can't process it?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Our podcast is a collaboration of the Bob Schieffer College of Communication at TCU and CSIS in Washington.

MR. SCHIEFFER: In this first year of Donald Trump's presidency, we're talking to the reporters who are covering the president the closest.

(Music plays.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: Our guest this time is Ezra Klein, the founder and editor in chief of Vox.com, a groundbreaking website dedicated to examining the news. They had 54.1 million visitors in 2015, and 41 percent of those were between the ages of 18 and 34.

I must say, Ezra, all of the networks and the cable companies are jealous of numbers like that.

You began at The Washington Post. You started and oversaw the Wonkblog, which was the Post's most successful blog. Since then you've made a career of explaining complicated policy issues in concise and appealing and palatable ways.

So why don't we just start right there? You said in a post this week that the unfolding story of Donald Trump and the Russians reminded you of what the author Elizabeth Drew once said of Watergate, that it was a time of low comedy and high fear. Tell us about that.

EZRA KLEIN: So thank you for having me.

This is a hard time to be doing this kind of work. If what you are telling people you're going to do is you're going to explain to them these complex topics, you're going to explain to them how this bill works or what the story is really about, being trapped for an extended period of time in a story that nobody understands and nobody has full information towards, that maybe the people who are involved in it don't even really understand what story they have created, is disorienting.

So I've been spending a lot of time reading about other abnormal periods in politics, one of them being Watergate. And Elizabeth Drew, who's on my podcast as well, wrote a book that I think is really essential for understanding it, which is called Washington Journal. And what's great about her book is it is a contemporaneous journalistic diary of that era. So rather than the other books, which are histories, so they are linear – they point towards a conclusion; they tell one story that, you know, has a beginning and a middle and an end – hers is an experiential explanation of what it felt like. And you read it and you realize how much was wrong, how much people didn't understand, how the story dipped and turned back on itself and went sideways.

And one of the things that she makes clear in the book and that she's made clear in an interview with me – and that was a political piece I'd quoted her from – is one of the strange things about at least Watergate was that it had a lot of comedy to it. It was farcical – these idiot plumbers, these profane, you know, tapes. Like, the whole thing – you look back and there's something darkly funny. And that humor both eases and also hides the severity of what wasn't just a constitutional crisis, but a genuine assault on how elections work, on how the press works, and more besides.

We are watching a story unfold that we still don't know what it really is. But if it's what it looks like it is – and I will say that I believe at this point collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign is likely. We know for a fact that Russia hacked into the Democratic National Committee files and released them in ways built – designed to hurt Hillary Clinton. So we know that a foreign government was influential in our election. Given how razor-thin the final margin was for Trump, we know they might have literally decided the election. We can't know for sure, but it's plausible.

And there is now – at least we know the Trump campaign wanted, was interested in working with Russia. We don't know if that partnership ever came to fruition or if they just sort of worked toward similar goals in different ways.

But if it's true, if that is where the story goes, then, on the one hand, yeah, we have a lot of comedy. We have Donald Trump Jr., who is just a genuinely comic figure. (Laughs.) We have people making dumb mistakes, putting things in emails they shouldn't have put in. We have the fact that this particular meeting began – had its genesis in the 2013 Miss Universe pageant in Moscow. I mean, it is funny.

And it is also deeply corrosive. It is also an election in which a certain amount of agency was taken away from the American people. It's also potentially a foreign policy that has now been called into doubt. How much of the Trump administration's strange policies and attitudes towards Russia is because the Russians know what the level of involvement was, and they could leak anything they wanted at any time? Maybe none of it. Maybe lots of it.

But if you remember, back when the Michael Flynn scandals began breaking, the concern that Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates had was that Flynn was subject to blackmail because he had lied about his contacts with the Russians. If you've lied about your contacts with the Russians because it would look bad in the press, you are – they have leverage over you. How much leverage do they have over the administration?

Everything I am saying here makes me feel like an insane person – everything. Like, I just feel like a lunatic right now. This is all conspiracy. And yet the world – all I've done is I flatly lay out the story we're in. We are in a very strange time. And trying to see our way through it, both appreciating its severity and making a little bit of space for its inanity, is important.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, you said at one point this is not a scandal, a political scandal, as we're used to thinking about what a political scandal is. So what is it?

MR. KLEIN: It's a security breach. So there are two things that I think, when you step back and say what is the harm here, right? What would make – let me frame the question a different way. Let's say the Trump campaign did, in some way, collude with Russia. What would make that different than colluding with the Chamber of Commerce or Hillary Clinton working with unions, right? There is

constantly alliances being formed between presidential campaigns and interest groups. And clearly foreign governments have interests in America.

So what is the problem here, right? What might we be upset about it? Is it just that there was a norm? OK, let's put that to the side. You can decide how you feel about the norm that foreign governments shouldn't be involved. I'll leave that over here.

I think there are two things. And they're why I say there's a security dimension to this. One is there really was a Russian what you'd call cyber-espionage campaign conducted against American targets that was used to influence the election. There really were break-ins to political documents within the two political parties. We believe actually in the Republican Party too, although those documents were not released.

But so they broke in. They stole documents. They used them to influence the trajectory of an American election. That's one piece of it. Another piece of it, which goes to the blackmail side, is we do not know, but going back to the dossier and then the Sally Yates stuff, we know that the intelligence agencies are concerned that there has been blackmail potential against key members of the Trump administration by Russia.

There have been a lot of different sources for blackmail leverage that have been posited. If you go back – so the Steele dossier, which was released a number of months ago, and is a complicated document because you really don't know what, if anything, in it is true, it got a lot of attention for its most salacious part, which was a rumored pee tape – (laughs) – showing sex acts in Moscow. I do not see any reason to believe that exists, although who knows?

But it had a lot more just completely normal points in it. So there was an argument that when the Trump corporation – when Trump's businesses were exploring doing work in Russia, there were bribes paid to Russian businessmen. That's not an incredibly surprising thing. I think that probably happens quite a bit. But it would be illegal.

There is, again, from Sally Yates, the knowledge that these contacts with the Russians, which you don't even quite know what they were, because the Trump administration had begun to believe they'd be too damaged to divulge, that was blackmail opportunity for the Russians.

When you begin putting these things together, what you have is, on the one hand, a form of attack against our electoral institutions, and, on the other hand, a form of potentially corrosion or influence over our foreign-policy institutions. So a lot of scandals we think of as being about embarrassment. Somebody says something dumb. Or, you know, I would say, actually, in my view, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was genuinely serious. It was a genuine ethical breach and a misuse of power. So I take a somewhat hardline view on it. But even there, the consequences for our national security were not evident.

Here the consequences for our national security are evident. I mean, even if you take a very simple version of it – let's say Russia did successfully hack in; they were successful in influencing the election; they did so potentially with at least the tacit acknowledgement of the Trump campaign, or even they didn't get that acknowledgement, but the Trump camp – administration – decided, because it helped them, to not retaliate, which is where we are.

Does that mean that the lesson Russia learned and the lesson any adversary of the U.S. learned is that

you should try to influence our elections, just you should make sure to do it hard enough that your candidate wins, so you're protected from retaliation and you get a friendly face in office? This is dangerous stuff. This is the heart of our political process. And it's bad that we're here. It's bad that we're having this conversation. It's bad that we are talking about this and not opioids, bad that we're talking about this and not infrastructure. This is a dark time.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you this. As I've looked over that email chain, to me it almost looked like somebody was trying to set up Donald Trump. I mean, all the ingredients were there. You know, we know all this stuff. We want to tell you about it. You know, and it prompts the answer from him, oh, I love it, and all of that.

I mean, I don't think that the Trump people are saboteurs, I mean, but what I'm wondering is were they duped? Were they so – and the best word I can think of, the kindest word I can say, were they so naïve that they didn't understand that they were being manipulated?

MR. KLEIN: So I certainly think the possibility of naivete being a central contributor to this is very real. One thing I should say is that my view of how collusion would have worked, if it happened, is that, even as it was happening, the Trump people didn't quite know what they were doing, that nobody got up and wrote in their day planner that morning, today collude with semi-hostile foreign government to undermine the very foundations of American elections; that it felt to people normal. It felt to people just like bargaining and working with an interest group.

But to your other point, so I just came – I was taping – my podcast I do called The Weeds with Matt Yglesias and Sara Kliff, and I'm going to steal something he said, Matt said on that podcast, because it's pretty directly responsive. And he made the point that, OK, take Donald Trump Jr.'s explanation of what happened. Don't look at anything else. Just say what he said happened. He got an email which was bizarrely, bizarrely explicit.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yes.

MR. KLEIN: Right? Hello. I'm a – I am working with a Russian government attorney. We want to give you secret official incriminating documents that look bad for Hillary Clinton.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Precisely.

MR. KLEIN: We want to do that as part of the Russian government's effort to help your father's campaign. Like, it was – it was like when a villain monologues in a James Bond movie. It's like I have built a volcano. The volcano will go off and destroy the world if you don't give me all of the gold. And then Donald Trump says, that sounds great. I'd love to take that meeting. (Laughs.) I hope you have all these documents.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And he gathers up all the top people in the campaign –

MR. KLEIN: That's Manafort. That's Kushner. And then – but this is what Matt says, and I think it's an important point. If you listen to what Trump Jr. says, he then goes to this meeting and they don't have any of these documents. The meeting is a total bust. As explicit as they were, he gets to that meeting and this person, who is a serious – the Russian lawyer, who is a serious player within the Kremlin, is there. And she wants to talk to them. He keeps saying they wanted to talk about

adoption. He didn't seem to understand, as far as I can tell, what that meeting was about, which was sanctions. The adoption issue is being used as part of a debate on the Russia sanctions policy.

So they were there. He was in – to give – he was talked into a very damaging meeting, right; superficially a very damaging meeting, if the news of it came out, in which, rather than getting what he was told he was going to get, she then tried to push him on something of importance to the Russian government. That would be completely consistent with Russia just trying to get leverage and blackmail material. You get somebody to sign up for a meeting they shouldn't sign up for because they're not that aware of what's going on. And then the meeting is a bust. Nothing happens. But now you have this leverage over them.

And then Donald Trump Jr., it should be said, does not do what he was supposed to do and go to the FBI and say, hey, something really weird just happened. And actually, I just want to make sure you guys know about it, because I'm not sure I feel comfortable with it. So he keeps it to himself. Now it's like this festering problem, right, that they can release any time, and that's how you get leverage over Trump Jr. and maybe over Kushner and maybe over Manafort. We don't know how many things like this there were.

That's one problem. I'm not saying campaigns cannot be run or managed by people who don't have a lot of experience in American politics. But one issue here is that you do run into problems when you are not at least asking for help to try to understand the waters in which you're now swimming.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, I would just add one thing to that. There hasn't been much talk about this. Before he set up the meeting, he said, well, why don't I just give him a call? And he was going to discuss this on an open line, this kind of very sensitive information that they wanted to give to him. I mean, who would do that?

MR. KLEIN: The thing that I think is funny about all this is this was all happening in the context of an election where the most frequently talked-about story, the single story that got the most coverage during the election, was what did Hillary Clinton write in her emails. So every single day in the election, everybody involved was getting it pounded into their heads, you know what could get you in trouble? Dumb emails. And then he gets this email and he says, great; would love it; be there as soon as I possibly can.

MR. SCHIEFFER: (Laughs.)

MR. KLEIN: Forwards it to Kushner and Manafort. There is a lot of breathtaking incompetence here.

MR. SCHIEFFER: How about stupidity? Is that too strong a word?

MR. KLEIN: I'm not as rude as you are, Bob.

MR. SCHIEFFER: (Laughs.)

MR. KLEIN: (Laughs.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: Breathtaking incompetence.

MR. KLEIN: Breathtaking incompetence.

MR. SCHIEFFER: OK. (Laughs.) Let's bring in Andrew Schwartz.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, thanks, Bob.

MR. SCHIEFFER: He's even ruder than I am.

MR. SCHWARTZ: I am. And I've never had such a hard time sitting here quiet during this conversation. I wanted to pounce the whole time. I mean, we keep hearing the word collusion. This is where our producer Fran can even insert, you know, from various media channels, collusion, collusion, collusion, collusion. We use that word in Washington all the time.

Ezra, you're the guy who puts things into context, in box. What do we mean by collusion?

MR. KLEIN: So I think in this case – and there are possibly – there's a lot of question of the legal issues around this. And I want to stay away from that because I'm not a lawyer. I think the way people here mean it is did the Trump Organization, right – you can – there might be people who are part of the campaign but not officially working for the campaign – but did the Trump Organization work with people who were either within or representing the Russian government together to try to elect Donald Trump?

The question here is whether there was cooperation around actual electoral objectives. Something that's worth noting is oftentimes, when asked about these meetings, various people in Trump world first will say they didn't happen, right. Donald Trump Jr. initially said this meeting never happened.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. KLEIN: But the other thing they'll often say is, yeah, there were meetings, but they were about foreign-policy issues, right. We were talking about sanctions or we were talking about ISIS. And you can go back and forth about propriety of that. But it's reasonably, I think, within bounds, right. That was one of the arguments Michael Flynn made; that the problem is Michael Flynn lied about the meeting, but the meeting itself was not problematic. Now, that was a bit of a different thing. That was after the election itself, but nevertheless.

So I think in this case the idea is did the Trump Organization work with a foreign government to get information and possibly, if it involves a hacking, to commit a crime, that held – that influenced an American election? I think that is what people would mostly understand as collusion.

MR. SCHWARTZ: So why aren't we using the word conspiracy?

MR. KLEIN: You're welcome to. (Laughs.)

MR. SCHWARTZ: Well, yeah. Maybe we should.

MR. KLEIN: I don't – I know that there are legal valances to some of these different words, and I don't know them well enough to decide which. What's interesting here is both collusion and conspiracy can describe things that are completely normal –

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. KLEIN: – or completely abnormal. The thing here – I think that most of what they did – again, putting aside the question of the hacking, which is a big thing to put aside, but we don't currently have evidence that they were involved in it – it just seems suspicious, for reasons we can get into – but working with outside groups to get opposition research on another candidate, working with opposition – with outside groups to share information, to target advertisements, which is something that there's now currently an investigation, we know, from Bob Mueller into whether the digital operation Jared Kushner was running worked with Russian players to help target their fake-news operation, so it was getting at the swing voters more effectively.

A lot of these things, if they were done with another group, it would have been collusion. But collusion itself is not a problem, right, I mean, just like in its textbook definition.

MR. SCHWARTZ: It's working together.

MR. KLEIN: It's who, right. It's who and it's why and it's what.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Mm hmm.

MR. KLEIN: And so it's the ingredient of the Russian government, in part for the reasons I mentioned, that it gives them blackmail potential. It maybe means you owe them favors; that it is treated very differently in American politics. But also, because it doesn't happen that often, there isn't quite a playbook for how to treat it, right. The norms here, the what you can do and what you can't do, which laws apply, is a little informal.

And it's one reason why to take seriously, as Bob mentioned, the question of naivete. It's not like, when you start up a presidential campaign, somebody gives you a book and says, OK, like, here are the rules. Here's your presidential campaign guidebook. You can do this stuff with business groups. You can't do it with foreign governments. And so I think it's very possible that they thought some of the things they were doing were totally normal. And they weren't.

MR. SCHWARTZ: It's really interesting, because you wrote yesterday, I believe, before Donald Trump Jr. went on the air on Fox News with Hannity, that it's getting to a point where we can't explain away this stuff through bumbling idiocy or coincidence. And you point out that, you know, the emails were forwarded to the campaign manager, forwarded to the president's son-in-law. So the inner circle really knows about this and treated a really outrageous email like this as completely matter of fact.

MR. KLEIN: Yeah. And I think Manafort is a very key player in this – Paul Manafort, the campaign manager – because, to go back to the point of naivete, Donald Trump Jr. had never worked in a presidential campaign before. Jared Kushner has not worked in politics before. Paul Manafort was a very experienced political consultant, not just in America but in the post-Soviet bloc. So he was very skilled in what he was doing. He had a lot of experience. He had a sense of what was OK and what wasn't OK.

So if Donald – I would actually have a very different view on this story if it had just been Donald Trump Jr. If it had just been him who went – family members of presidential candidates often

entertain themselves during campaigns in all kinds of suboptimal ways. And he might just have been doing that. You've got to keep busy during something that you maybe don't have an official role in but feel very emotionally passionate about.

It's Kushner who really has been Donald Trump's key adviser, and Manafort, who is actually running the campaign. These are busy guys.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. KLEIN: They were both coming to this meeting?

MR. SCHWARTZ: This isn't Billy Carter.

MR. KLEIN: Not Billy – not Billy, yeah. It's actually – I used the same example the other day. And, by the way, the subject line was Clinton-Russia, private or confidential; I don't remember. So it's not like – this was not hidden in any way. It's weird.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Where do you think this story came from? How did a story like this get out? I mean, my sense is it came from within the White House.

MR. KLEIN: So I've heard different theories on this. And I want to be very clear that I don't know.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Yeah. You're – well, both of us, but –

MR. KLEIN: Yeah. So I have heard a number of people speculate that it came through Congress somehow. I don't really know how they would have had it, but there are possibly some investigations running there that are useful. There's certainly something about Kushner had – there's something I don't fully understand, not because it can't be understood, just because I have not looked that deeply into it, where Kushner and his lawyers maybe recently discovered this and made people aware that it had happened because they're trying to get their security clearance forms back in order. I want to be careful, because I'm scared I'm going to mis-describe what happened there. It's a little bit, you know, one of these million news stories that have flitted past my sight recently.

So it could be coming from enemies of theirs within the campaign who had access or were somehow copied in a different way. Where it came from is very, very, very important, because another possibility is it could have come from Manafort. Maybe he's flipped, right, and we just don't know it. If that's true, then there might be a lot more coming out. Maybe it came from the Russians, right.

MR. SCHIEFFER: That's what I actually wondered.

MR. KLEIN: And it's – this is what I – this is what I mean. When talking about this, you end up sounding like a fevered conspiracy theorist. But these are all plausible possibilities. And it's the world we're now in.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And if the Russians are trying to really corrode our democracy and not just disrupt an election, they're doing a pretty good job of it –

MR. KLEIN: They –

MR. SCHWARTZ: – with this, if that’s what happened.

MR. KLEIN: Well, I imagine that every morning Vladimir Putin is brought a new batch of press clippings from America, and he just reads it and laughs and laughs and laughs and wrestles a bear and laughs and writes a horse naked and laughs.

MR. SCHWARTZ: (Laughs.) Right.

MR. KLEIN: I mean, this could not have worked better, right. So if you go back to right after the election, there was a dispute between the CIA and the FBI. Did Russia intervene to help Donald Trump win, or did they just intervene to sow chaos, right?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Right.

MR. KLEIN: That was actually a dispute. Everybody agreed they intervened. But what was their motivation? And the answer a little bit, if you look at it now, is it didn’t matter. They did both.

MR. SCHWARTZ: No.

MR. KLEIN: The amount of chaos, the amount – the doubts about the fundamental legitimacy of America’s president, of its electoral institutions, the ways in which our allies now doubt what is driving our foreign policy. Can we be trusted? Would we actually stand up to defend NATO, a NATO member, if it came to that? This has worked – it is – it must be one of the single most successful political operations in history. And it was so easy.

MR. SCHIEFFER: To buttress the point you have just made, if you go and look at what the Russians have done across Central Europe now, I mean, it’s – Heather Conley of CSIS has written this book, *The Kremlin Playbook*. And you look at what they have done in Hungary, in Bulgaria, and across the way. They don’t have to drive their tanks across the borders anymore. They go in. They bribe local officials. They make sweetheart loans to oligarchs in that country to come and do business in the Soviet Union. I mean, you can just check it one, two, three, four, five of what they have done in those countries, and you see exactly what is unfolding here.

MR. KLEIN: Yeah. I mean, you guys have this book sitting in front of you, *The Kremlin Playbook*, and it is a playbook. They do this a lot. They do it to varying levels of capacity. There’s something – Masha Gessen, who’s a New York Review writer, has written a biography of Putin, has been, in general –

MR. SCHWARTZ: *Man Without a Face*.

MR. KLEIN: *Man Without a Face* – has been, in general, skeptical, I want to say for her, of some of the more fevered readings of what happened. But something she said that I thought was interesting – I believe it’s she who wrote it – was that one thing that has often stopped the Russians before from being able to do this very effectively, here and in many places, is that it’s hard for them to get leverage or influence over the kinds of key players who normally operate in national politics. They don’t need anything from the Russians. They don’t want all that much from the Russians.

So what the Russians often tend to do, and what their intelligence agencies do, is they focus on fringe actors. But the fringe actors don't tend to pay off into all that much. They end up being a waste of time. A very weird thing about the Trump campaign, because of how it evolved, because of how unexpected it was, is it is full of fringe actors. I'm blanking on the guy's name, but the guy who sent this email between Don Trump Jr. and set up this meeting, Goldman, he's a fringe actor. He's just a kind of weird liaison.

Roger Stone is a fringe actor. Carter Page is a fringe actor. Paul Manafort is – he's a member of the establishment, but he'd kind of fallen out of American politics and been working in the post-Soviet bloc for a long time. So he's an unusual actor from the perspective of taking over a big campaign here. He's not somebody who any of the normal Republican candidates would have gone to. You needed somebody who did not have access to the normal Republican top consultants. Paul Manafort happened to know Donald Trump because he lived in Trump Tower. I mean, there was a whole thing. But he was an unusual actor who had very unusual financial ties to Moscow, to Russia.

So there's a collection in the Trump campaign of fringe actors. In some ways Donald Trump himself has been, in politics, a bit of a fringe player – very susceptible to flattery, not taken seriously by people and angry about it, so very excited when people who have power take him seriously. You know, cultivating him would not have been the most obvious bet to pay off, but, you know, maybe do it on the side. Maybe when he's in town you help him get loans. I mean, he's clearly somebody with influence in America. He's famous.

It's a collection of fringe actors. That's who the Russians tend to be able to work with. And then they all come together in this startling presidential campaign that wins. So that's one piece of the vulnerability here. It's not just that they have a playbook. But to run the plays, they actually need players. Usually they're denied players in national American politics. Here it's at least plausible they were not.

MR. SCHWARTZ: I just want to go back to one thing you were talking about a second ago, Ezra. You said Russia had been previously denied players in their ability to corrode democracy, in an ability to mess with American elections. I mean, our foreign-policy experts here at CSIS would argue that's part of the root of Russia's anger at the United States is that Russia has been ignored. Russia has been treated as a second-class citizen and they've been ignored. So in order to deal with the United States, they've come up with new active measures.

MR. KLEIN: So I would not want – I'd want to hear more what your experts are saying there. That doesn't sound to me like a linkage that I would make. Russia has been quite belligerent in recent years around Ukraine and other things. So to the extent they feel that their relationships with the U.S. are not what they wish, it's not that the U.S. won't talk to them. They're not a pariah state. So the idea that they were forced to resort to these espionage measures and hacking and other things, that doesn't ring true to me.

Now, the idea that their anger comes from being treated as not that big of a world power – Barack Obama really, I think, keyed in on a central insecurity of Vladimir Putin's. And one thing that he really refused to do was treat Russian antagonism as a threat coming from an equal. He – I think it's fair to say that our foreign policy towards Russia was both correct but also somewhat condescending, and he really enraged Putin.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah. I mean, that's the point, isn't it?

MR. KLEIN: Yeah. But they didn't – I think the distinction I would make from – and again, I don't know exactly how they would frame it – is they didn't have to do any of this. They could have had a less belligerent foreign policy. (Laughs.) They could have worked with us more cooperatively. I mean, I think in general that many of the asks we have made of Russia have been reasonable. I think what they did in Ukraine is not reasonable, for instance.

But I think, as an explanation for why they've become more hostile and why possibly it became a more central both emotional and strategic priority for Putin and Russia to either strike back during the election to show they still had power or, depending on which interpretation you take, to actually try to elect someone who would be more friendly to their interests, I think it's plausible.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Adam Entous, who's the investigative reporter for The Washington Post, has had a couple of these big stories over the last month, told us that he thinks the culture in Washington is changing. He said when I used to go to see somebody and I had a story that they weren't going to like, he said they would spin me hard and try to tell me a different version of what happened. He said I'm finding now, in the first go-round, when you make the first contact, that they just flat-out lie. And he said this is not just – he said I'm not talking just about the White House. I'm talking about on Capitol Hill now. And he cited a couple of examples. Do you see –

MR. KLEIN: Yes.

MR. SCHIEFFER: – that?

MR. KLEIN: I think a – what I call directional lying has become normalized. And I'll distinguish directional lying from what I think you normally see in American politics, which is exaggeration, omission. I think it is typical for politicians to overstate what they're doing, overstate what they will do. You know, my health-care bill will save everybody \$2,500, right. And, you know, they're – they get that estimate somehow. But it's a bit optimistic. There's a lot of that. There's always has been.

Now we're seeing something that you don't usually see, which is up is down. Donald Trump says I am not going to cut Medicaid. And then his health-care bill – both health-care bills he's now endorsed are built around massive Medicaid cuts. He says everybody will have insurance with lower deductibles than they have now; both health-care bills, fewer people with insurance, higher deductibles. But it's not just Trump, as you say.

So I cover health care as a reporter, right. I spend a lot of my time editing and managing now, but my background is in health-care policy. I am aghast at the amount of lying that has been done around the Republican bill – aghast. I cannot believe it. It has actually, like, caused a crisis for me in how to do my job. I cannot go and report the things people are saying in good faith as real arguments because they're not making them as real arguments.

When they come out and they say these are lower premiums, they're not. They're – for the same people, the premiums go up. When they go out and say, you know, we're coming up with a bill and, you know, we're going to fix these low deductibles, they're not. When they say they're going to stabilize these insurance markets, they're not.

And the bill – it’s – I’m not making an argument of interpretation here. It literally doesn’t do these things. It does the opposite of these things, which is fine. You’re allowed to have a bill that does the opposite of these things. It is OK to have a vision of high-deductible health care. Many people do. Many experts do. But to refuse to say that’s what you have, to go around and tell people – I mean, you have had, during this period, Tom Price and others saying nobody will lose Medicaid. That is indefensible. That is a directional lie. This bill is built to mean many fewer people on Medicaid. They will lose Medicaid.

And I think something Donald Trump has proven is that you can lie much more aggressively, much more flagrantly, than people thought. And if you do not react with shame and contrition, there’s no sanction.

I think one of the big lessons that we’ve learned in the last couple of years is how much of our political boundaries actually rely on shame, how much what we’re really doing is exposing the politicians’ sense of it feels bad when people think I’m a liar. It feels bad when fact checkers say this is false. It feels bad when people I respect say my policies are bad.

Donald Trump – I mean, I do think his central quality is a shamelessness, an ability to operate without that kind of internal boundary. And when he’s able to operate without that kind of internal boundary, what he has shown is that if he doesn’t back down, if the actor doesn’t back down, you can bulldoze through almost anything. You eventually just pull your people into your alternative-facts universe. And politics is much more tribal than many of us had hoped. And the lying is part of that. It turns out that it’s really not about having a good argument or having a truthful argument. It’s about having something to say that makes clear what side you’re on. True? Not true? Who cares?

MR. SCHIEFFER: Ezra Klein, it is very clear to me why your blog and your podcast is so popular. Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with us.

MR. KLEIN: Thank you for having me.

MR. SCHIEFFER: For Andrew Schwartz, this is Bob Schieffer. Thanks for listening.

(Music plays.)

(END)