

EXECUTIVE SESSION
PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
WASHINGTON, D.C.

INTERVIEW OF: BENJAMIN RHODES

Wednesday, October 25, 2017

Washington, D.C.

The interview in the above matter was held in Room HVC-304, the Capitol,
commencing at: 9:58 a.m.

Present: Representatives Conaway, Rooney, Gowdy, Stefanik, Schiff,
Himes, Sewell, Carson, Speier, Quigley, Swalwell, Castro, and Heck.

[REDACTED]

Appearances:

For the PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

For BENJAMIN RHODES:

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Good morning, all. This is a transcribed interview of Ben Rhodes. Thank you for speaking to us today. For the record, I am [REDACTED], [REDACTED] for the majority here at the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

There are many other individuals present who will identify themselves during the course of these proceedings.

Before we begin, I wanted to state a few things for the record. The questioning will be conducted by members and staff. During the course of this interview, members and staff may ask questions during their allotted time period. Some questions may seem basic, but that is because we need to clearly establish facts and understand the situation.

Please do not assume we know any facts you have previously disclosed as part of any other investigation or review.

This interview will be conducted at the Top Secret/SCI level.

During the course of the interview, we will take any breaks that you desire.

We ask that you give complete and fulsome replies to questions based on your best recollection. If a question is unclear or you are uncertain in your response, please let us know. And if you do not know the answer to a question, cannot remember, simply say so.

You are entitled to have counsel with you today, and I see that you have brought counsel. If you could please identify yourself for the record.

MR. GOTTLIEB: Mike Gottlieb from Boies Schiller Flexner.

[REDACTED] Thank you.

There's a reporter making a record of these proceedings so we can easily

[REDACTED]

consult written compilations of your answers. Because the reporter cannot record gestures, we ask that you answer all questions verbally. If you forget to do this, you might be reminded to do so. You may also be asked to spell certain terms or unusual phrases.

Consistent with the committee's rules of procedure, you and your counsel upon request will have a reasonable opportunity to inspect the transcript of this interview in order to determine whether your answers were correctly transcribed. The transcript will remain in the committee's custody, and the committee also reserves the right to request your return for additional questions should the need arise.

The process for the interview is as follows: The majority will be given 45 minutes to ask questions, then the majority will be given 45 minutes to ask questions. Immediately thereafter, we will take a 5-minute break if you desire; after which time, the majority will be given 15 minutes to ask questions, and the minority will be given 15 minutes to ask questions. Those 15-minute rounds of questioning will continue until all questioning has been exhausted.

The time limits for the rounds will be strictly adhered to by all sides. Time will be kept for each round with warnings given at the 5 and 1-minute marks respectively.

To ensure confidentiality, we ask that you do not discuss this interview with anyone other than your attorney. You are reminded that it is unlawful to deliberately provide false information to Members of Congress or staff.

And, lastly, the record will reflect that you are voluntarily participating in this interview, which will be under oath.

Mr. Rhodes, if you could raise your right hand.

[REDACTED]

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you're about to give is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

MR. RHODES: I do.

[REDACTED] Thank you, sir. The witness has been sworn. Over to you, Mr. Chairman, for opening comments.

MR. CONAWAY: Mr. Rhodes, thank you for coming this morning, and we'll get started.

MR. GOTTLIEB: Congressman, before we begin, I just want to clarify one point. Before we began today, Mr. Rhodes and I were asked to sign standard form 312 and form 4414 from ODNI relating to nondisclosure obligations for classified information.

Our understanding of those forms is that they apply only to the classified information at certain levels and that they have no application to information that is not classified. If anyone in this room has a different understanding of that, we would certainly be open to hearing it. But that's the understanding that we operate on today.

[REDACTED] That's correct.

MR. GOTTLIEB: And then -- thank you, [REDACTED]

And then I would also just like to have on the record the level of classification at which this interview is being conducted, and an acknowledgment that -- on the record that both Mr. Rhodes and I have been authorized to receive and discuss information that is at that level of classification, whatever it may be.

[REDACTED] Sure. As we stated in the openings remarks, the interview will be conducted at the Top Secret/SCI level, and all the folks in this room, including yourself and Mr. Rhodes, have been appropriately read into those

[REDACTED]

programs. So the questioning will be based -- and you are permitted to answer all questions that you are posed.

MR. GOTTLIEB: Thank you, [REDACTED]

THE CHAIRMAN: Again. Thank you for being here, and Trey, start us off.

MR. GOWDY: Welcome, Mr. Rhodes, and your attorney, thank you for being here this morning.

The committee has been asked to look at four things: What did Russia do with respect to our 2016 election cycle, both the primary and general election stage; with whom, if anyone, did they do it; what was the U.S. Government's response during the pendency of those Russian active measures; and then, generally, the issue of masking, unmasking, dissemination of classified information.

The order in which any member asks these questions is not reflective of us thinking one is more important than the other, I mean, necessarily. You have to start somewhere. So I would -- and I'm sure you will -- I would just counsel you not to read into where we start as one side or the other being more interested in it.

With respect to that, other than your attorney -- and I'm not interested in any conversation you've ever had with your attorney -- have you discussed today's testimony with anyone in preparation of your appearance?

MR. RHODES: Today's testimony, I have discussed just with my attorney and his associate.

MR. GOWDY: All right. No Member of Congress on the Republican or Democrat side?

MR. RHODES: With respect to this appearance, no, I have not had

discussions.

MR. GOWDY: No committee staff, either Republican, Democrat?

MR. RHODES: No.

MR. GOWDY: Okay. Where are you currently employed?

MR. RHODES: I'm employed by the office of the former President, Barack Obama.

MR. GOWDY: All right. And prior to January of 2017, where did you work?

MR. RHODES: I worked at the White House from January of 2009 to January of 2017.

MR. GOWDY: All right. And before January 2009, where did you work?

MR. RHODES: I worked from the summer of 2007 -- well, I worked for the transition, so the presidential transition from November of 2008 till January 2009.

MR. GOWDY: During the pendency of your time working for President Obama, can you tell us what your job description was or were, plural, and what your titles were?

MR. RHODES: So for the first 8 months of the administration, I was the senior director for speech writing at the NSC and the deputy director of White House speech writing. In that context, I oversaw all the national security speech writing for President Obama and contributed to other speeches.

Beginning in September of 2009, I was a deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, which meant that I oversaw all of the communications on national security for the White House. I coordinated the communications on national security for the U.S. Government, so working with relevant agencies to coordinate our public messaging on national security.

[REDACTED]

I also coordinated our global engagement and public diplomacy programming, so working with the State Department and others on anything related to public diplomacy and international broadcasting overseas.

As a deputy national security adviser, I also was a participant in the Deputies Committee process and the Principals Committee process, so I advised on policy through that portfolio, and also advised President Obama, was a participant in his presidential daily briefing.

MR. GOWDY: I want to go back to 2016, or 2015, as the facts may be, whatever -- it's dependent on your answer. How did you become aware and when did you become aware of Russia's efforts to interfere with/influence the 2016 election cycle?

MR. RHODES: Well, I -- you know, I became aware of, I think, specific efforts to influence the 2016 election cycle in [REDACTED] 2016, is my recollection.

MR. GOWDY: Do you recall how you learned of it?

MR. RHODES: You know, I recall that there had been the hack of the Democratic National Committee. And, you know, we had been accustomed to, frankly, Russian cyber intrusions of U.S. Government systems. I think it was around the time that those documents started to be released that, you know, my recollection is, people realized and there was discussion in the White House about the fact that Russia may have been undertaking efforts that went beyond just the collection of information and were attempting instead to influence our election cycle.

MR. GOWDY: Those may be two different pivot points or they may be the same one, but I'll ask you specifically. There's a difference between when the intrusion took place --

[REDACTED]

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: -- and then the dissemination of the information gathered during the intrusion. Do you recall whether you learned of Russia's measures when the information was disseminated or prior to that?

MR. RHODES: I think I recall learning about the intrusion, you know, shortly before the dissemination of the information as just a consumer of intelligence. I was not particularly engaged in the kind of cybersecurity portfolio. But as a regular consumer of intelligence, I recall becoming aware of Russian cyber intrusions of U.S., you know, political institutions. And then when the information began to be disseminated, you know, is when it became apparent that this might be an effort to influence our election cycle.

MR. GOWDY: Is it fair to say the administration was generally aware of Russia's efforts in the past to interfere with our culture, our infrastructure, and specifically the hack of the DNC server, you may have learned about before the information became public, but may not have?

MR. RHODES: Yeah, I may not have. Again, I didn't focus on cybersecurity, so it wasn't something I was regularly engaged in. I did have longstanding awareness of Russian efforts to penetrate our systems. My own email was one of the accounts that the Russians had penetrated when they hacked both the NSC and the State Department.

So I was familiar with a pattern of Russian cyber intrusions and efforts to influence a variety of political issues around the world. But, again, my recollection is that, you know, I basically became aware of an effort to potentially interfere in our election in [REDACTED] 2016.

MR. GOWDY: You mentioned that you were a consumer of intelligence

[REDACTED]

products. Were there any limits on what you had access to or --

MR. RHODES: I was, you know, a high-level consumer. I was in the presidential daily briefing. But, you know, we certainly -- first of all, I would not have been able to access anything related to, you know, criminal or counterintelligence investigations.

And also I, you know, frankly think that there were certain issues that were limited to the national security adviser and the principal deputy national security adviser. So I was kind of the next level down, I think, from people like Susan Rice and Admiral Hanes.

MR. GOWDY: Would you have been part of the administration's response to -- well, before we get to that, do you recall at what point the administration concluded or suspected that the hack of the DNC server was, in fact, Russia?

MR. RHODES: So in terms of a formal determination, there was a -- I mean, my recollection of this is that while there were intelligence reports [REDACTED] [REDACTED] about Russian activities, there was a process within the U.S. Government that I was not a part of [REDACTED] -- over the course of the [REDACTED] that was focused on this issue.

I became aware of that process [REDACTED]. And at the point that I became aware and was essentially read into that process, I learned that, you know, the Intelligence Community had worked to prepare essentially an assessment that could be made public about Russia's efforts in the election.

So I don't know at exactly what point [REDACTED] the Intelligence Community arrived at different levels of confidence about Russia's actions.

MR. GOWDY: I'm not telling you anything that hasn't been in public

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

hearings, but there's been -- I think it's fair to characterize it as some criticism for former Secretary Johnson, some criticism of former Director Comey, and others, the administration's response. Curiously, some of that criticism has come from unlikely sources as opposed to the usual sources.

To the extent you can, what was the administration's thought process on how to respond, when to respond, and what were the competing factors that went into that analysis?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. So my recollection is that [REDACTED] around the time that notifications were being made to a limited number of Members of Congress, that is when Susan Rice essentially read me into the ongoing process that had been taking place to determine how to respond to Russian intervention in our election.

I think -- so in the context of me being brought into that was that a public statement was being prepared. The statement was ultimately released in early October on this matter.

As it was represented to me, the decision was that, number one, it'd be, in terms of the public statement, that this emanate from the Intelligence Community so that it not look like a statement that was coming from the White House but rather it be a product of the Intelligence Community.

Normally, frankly, I would be more involved in drafting of statements coming from the U.S. Government, but in this case, the determination was that given the political season and the potential for any statement to be seen through a partisan lens, that the priority on the issuance of the public statement would be that it be drafted and issued by the Intelligence Community as a judgment of the Intelligence Community.

[REDACTED]

So the first point I make is there was a desire to the maximum extent possible depoliticize that public statement because it was a highly charged political environment, and we wanted the statement -- you know, my recollection is that the desire was that the statement appear to be apolitical in nature.

I think a second concern was that the security of the election itself, the infrastructure of the election itself was a priority, and that's why Secretary Johnson was a part of that public statement.

And it's why a lot of the efforts leading up to the election were also -- prioritized the security of the election infrastructure more than taking punitive action against Russia before the election.

There was a concern that punitive action against Russia before the election might lead to an escalatory cycle in which they were more likely to try to harm our election infrastructure.

So I think the basic response to the line of criticism that you reference, Congressman, was that our response was aimed at trying to issue statements that sufficiently warned the public of this effort without those statements being perceived as political in nature and trying to prioritize the security of the election infrastructure even as there was an understanding that there would have to be some response to Russia for its meddling.

MR. GOWDY: To be fair to the administration, there was discussion of -- around a rigged election during the campaign. Did discussion of a rigged election influence your response?

MR. RHODES: Yes, it did. I think our -- my recollection of our discussion was that if, again, the White House was seen as going out of its way to be the principle voice on the issue of Russian interference, that it could be

mischaracterized by certain political actors or candidates as contributing to a, quote/unquote, rigged election.

MR. GOWDY: All right. The White House or our law enforcement Intelligence Community's response is one part of government's response. There -- to the extent that there was a counterintelligence investigation launched in the summer of 2016, when did you know that there was a law enforcement angle to the U.S. Government's response?

MR. RHODES: Just so I make sure -- the law enforcement investigation into the Russian hacking specifically or other issues?

MR. GOWDY: Well, any of them.

MR. RHODES: Okay.

MR. GOWDY: The hacking of Mr. Podesta's email account, the hacking of the DNC server, and/or any other potential criminality on behalf of either of the campaigns.

MR. RHODES: So I was not -- I don't recall being briefed on any specific investigations. It was my understanding that the hack itself of the DNC and whatever other penetrations took place, that, as a matter of course, there's FBI investigations of those types of cyber intrusions.

And, frankly, our public comment -- because we were being asked about this a lot -- was, by definition, limited in some extent because we would refer to the fact of, you know, ongoing investigations.

So in terms of the hacking, I had a basic understanding that that type of activity is investigated not dissimilar from previous cyber intrusions that had taken place, frankly, that informed some of our public comment before the October statement because we could not get out in front of that type of investigation.

I will say, with respect to investigations of the campaigns, I did not know of any FBI investigation of the Trump campaign until I learned about it in the press after I had left government. Those types of criminal investigations are -- would not have been briefed to me as part of my job.

MR. GOWDY: To the extent the dossier may be part of the government's response and that it may or may not have been relied upon in court filings or anything else, when would you have learned about the existence of the dossier?

MR. RHODES: I did not learn about -- I don't recall learning about the existence of the dossier until very late in the process of the preparation of the U.S. Government's report to Congress and the American people about Russian interference in the election that was released in early January.

And I didn't know about the contents of that dossier until I was briefed on them with President Obama and his senior team by the senior leadership of the Intelligence Community right before the issuance of that report.

MR. GOWDY: All right. I'm going to use three words, and some people consider them synonyms, some people do not. So I'm primarily interested in whether you consider them to be synonyms or not. The words are "collusion, conspiracy," and "coordination." Do they have appreciably different meanings to you?

MR. RHODES: Again, I'm not a lawyer, Congressman, but --

MR. GOWDY: You are an English major.

MR. RHODES: Yeah, and political science. Yeah, I would draw distinctions between those words.

MR. GOWDY: All right. Then I'm going to do them one at a time.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: Now, when I use the word "evidence," some people don't like that word. I don't know any other word to use. Some people like the word "intelligence." I'm not really sure what the difference is. Evidence can be vetted and unvetted. It can be corroborated and uncorroborated. So if you'd rather me use the word "intelligence," I will. "Evidence" is just a word I'm more familiar with.

So do you or have you seen evidence of collusion between Donald J. Trump himself and the Russian Government, had evidence from any source, regardless of whether it's been corroborated or not corroborated, of collusion to impact or interfere with the 2016 election cycle at either the primary or general election stage?

MR. RHODES: Again, I wouldn't have received any information of any criminal or counterintelligence investigations into what the Trump campaign was doing, so I would not have seen that information.

MR. GOWDY: You say you would not have seen that. To the layperson, given your title and given the responsibilities you had in the White House, they might be surprised that those intelligence products would not have crossed your desk. Why would they not have?

MR. RHODES: Because if -- again, if the information involved a criminal investigation or a counterintelligence investigation of a U.S. person, that information would not have been briefed to me as a White House official. That was put in a different category than the routine intelligence briefings I received on a day-to-day basis.

MR. GOWDY: All right. I am going to interrupt myself, but I'm going to try not to confuse either one of us in the process. We've done collusion. Before we do the next two, I want to -- back to the DNC server.

There's been, frankly, some testimony that the server was not produced to the U.S. Government during the course of the investigation, and there's been some insinuation that that is not the case. Do you have any information about whether or not the server was produced, whether it would've been helpful during the course of the investigation?

MR. RHODES: I don't know. I don't have any information. I wasn't a participant in any discussion about the server.

MR. GOWDY: All right. So if Jeh Johnson or Director Comey said that the server was not made available to the U.S. Government, you had have nothing to contradict that?

MR. RHODES: I would have nothing to contradict that.

MR. GOWDY: All right. And by the same token, if the DNC said we did offer it, you would have nothing to contradict that?

MR. RHODES: I have nothing to contradict that. I've seen the public back and forth on this, but I have no personal knowledge of how that transpired.

MR. GOWDY: All right. I asked about collusion. Same question: Coordination, coordination between the candidate himself and the Russian Government to impact or interfere or influence in any way the 2016 election cycle.

MR. RHODES: Again, what I saw from my position is, frankly, a -- I had become aware over the years of Russian information operations, most specifically in the context of Ukraine where I saw Russia develop a very significant capability to produce and disseminate content on social media and traditional media platform to push a certain narrative.

And what I saw in the context of our election was the simultaneous production of content on similar themes by, you know, what I saw as Russian

efforts that were at least coincident. I don't -- I didn't, you know, again, see -- well, let me give you an example.

You know, I did, for instance --

That was coincidence to that line of argument being disseminated by the Trump campaign.

I don't know, and I'm glad that, you know, this committee and others are investigating whether that was coincident or whether that was coordinated. So, you know, to the extent to which -- and you know, I look at your formulations and did have questions even at the time about whether or not there was potential coordination.

For me, it was in this information space where I was seeing very coincident narratives being disseminated on similar issues.

But, again, I leave it to this investigation and others to make the determination about whether that was coincident or whether that was a coordinated effort.

MR. GOWDY: And we, in turn, are going to have to rely on people like yourself that had access to realtime information, because no member of this committee would have been part of any of that. So that's why we have to ask witnesses like yourself.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: You introduced a fourth word that starts with C, which is "coincidence." And it's an important word; it's just not one that has any element of intent. Almost by definition, coincidence doesn't allow for intent on behalf of either

actor. It is just that; it is just a coincidence.

So trying to determine the distinction between a mere coincidence and coordination, collusion, or conspiracy may be a thin line, but it's a super important line.

MR. RHODES: Congressman, I agree. I will say that, again, I would not have been in a position to receive information that would establish coordination or that would point to the actions of Trump campaign officials given my role.

So the only -- you know, I did not have a position that would have allowed me to access that information. And I have great confidence in the U.S. law enforcement community and the FBI in their capacity to make those judgments along with oversight committees that are conducting these investigations.

MR. GOWDY: I can appreciate that you would not have been in a position to make -- perhaps to know about that yourself. But you were in the administration, and you were, at least to an outside, casual observer, highly regarded, in a position of authority within that administration. You may have a different perspective on it, but that's my perspective.

So who would we go ask? What are those witnesses that you would direct us to so we can determine whether something that appeared to be a coincidence was something more nefarious?

MR. RHODES: Again, given the nature of the division of responsibilities in our government, we, or people like me, would not have been briefed on criminal investigations or counterintelligence investigations.

So the FBI and the U.S. law enforcement community, counterintelligence community would be in a far better position than someone like me to know whether there was any degree of conspiracy or coordination.




And, frankly, the fact that I learned in the press about an FBI investigation, you know, this year when I left government, I think speaks to the extent to which that line was respected during the course of our administration.

And by the way, the credit for that falls on the FBI, not on us. The FBI does not bring those types of issues to us.

MR. GOWDY: All right. With respect to the -- to heading of coincidence, you cited questions surrounding Secretary Clinton's health. I have to confess, I didn't follow the election as closely as some people did.

I don't know where some of this originated, whether it was a headline on an aggregator, whether it was Russian social media, whether it was a Trump campaign or -- I do recall there was a video. I don't even recall at what point in the election that video surfaced of Secretary Clinton perhaps taking a misstep towards a car.

So do you have any information on -- under the heading of coincidence with specific reference to her health where the -- what the origination point was for let's just call that her health issue? Was it an aggregator? Was it FOX News? Was it the Trump campaign? Or was it the Russians?

MR. RHODES: I could not determine the point of origin of the decision to focus on issues related to her health, Congressman. 









So in this particular instance, what I'm referring to is not simply her public demeanor and the incident where she fell ill in New York, but rather a concerted



[REDACTED]

effort to, on Russia's part, to create and disseminate news about her health condition that aimed to paint her as, you know, a deeply unwell person.

And, again, that was one of the many narratives that were being disseminated against her by her political opposition in the United States. So I observed that as an example of where there was both a, you know, a public facing strategy and, as I saw it, a more subterranean effort to cast her as unwell.

MR. GOWDY: So if I understand your testimony, there may be a line of distinction between something happening and a political opponent seizing on something happening as opposed to a coordination to release that happening in the first place?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. Look, whoever is making the decisions, Congressman, I don't -- again, can't establish a good point of origin of the decision. What I saw was a strategy that was a mirror image in the sense that you had political opponents in the United States making allegations or arguments about her health and Russian efforts to make similar arguments in the U.S. public domain.

MR. GOWDY: The Russian efforts with respect to her health, where did they manifest themselves in the U.S.?

MR. RHODES: Again, so my -- I'm going to be very, you know, straightforward about what I saw [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

As an observer of how information is used, you know, I saw lots of extreme stories about her health disseminated on social media platforms in particular where I wouldn't candidly know exactly where the point of origin was, but it was -- bared similarity to, you know, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The difficult task, and I think this is a task -- a bipartisan task on all of us, in a social media age, it's hard to establish with certainty the point of origin where a story begins and where it goes.

Again, as someone who's seen Russian information operations in the context of Ukraine, in the context of meddling in other European elections, I was familiar with a tactic wherein, you know, they would try to create a volume of, let's call them bots, or a volume of disseminators of certain narratives that, you know, essentially overwhelm the circuits and ensured that there would be high visibility on their chosen stories.

But, again, I did not see the Venn diagram of where those began, and I think that's why investigations like this and the other ones are so important.

MR. GOWDY: Which, I guess, is kind of why I wanted to start with that seminal question. I don't think anybody in this room does not believe Russia had malevolent intentions, sought to interfere with, influence. I can only speak for myself. I'm not even in the camp that they didn't like her, but that doesn't mean they liked him. I'm not even in that camp. I think they wanted him to win.

Where I am is what evidence exists of collusion, coordination, conspiracy between the campaign. There are lots of campaigns that take advantage of other

[REDACTED]

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candidates' misfortunes. I'm looking for something maybe a little more intentional, if it exists, if you saw it.

MR. RHODES: Yeah. Yeah, and, again, I did not -- this is why, frankly, I feel like these investigations are so important. I was not in a position to see what the intent of the Trump campaign was, given my role.

The Russian intent, you know, I was in a slightly better position to -- it's interesting that -- and I say this respecting this. I think it's good and important that, in my role, I actually could see and understand a lot more about the Russian intent than the Trump campaign's intent. Because there are important guardrails against, you know, people in my position being, you know, familiar with criminal or counterintelligence investigations.

I feel very confident based on the information that I was briefed on in the Russian intent to support the election of Donald Trump and to just generally undermine American democracy.

Again, I wasn't in a position to know what the Trump campaign's interaction with that was beyond the type of outward facing manifestations that I described in the information space or what types of information the U.S. law enforcement or Intelligence Community may have had about that.

MR. GOWDY: All right. You mentioned the word "intent." I know you're not a lawyer. You don't ever have to prove motive, but sometimes you do have to prove intent. It's kind of hard to distinguish between the two, sometimes. I think your testimony, a fair characterization of it is that you felt like you had a better understanding of Russia's intent.

MR. RHODES: Uh-huh.

MR. GOWDY: I don't disagree with that. The only thing that gives me any

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pause at all in trying to understand what they were doing was if you have information that is also incendiary towards someone that you do not wish to do well politically and do not release that information, that also requires some explanation.

Are you aware of any information Russian had that would have been perceived as negative towards Candidate Clinton that they did not disseminate publicly?

MR. RHODES: Not that I recall. It's an interesting question, but, you know, not that I recall. I mean, they -- again, I wasn't -- I don't know the totality of what information they may have had about her.

So I saw reflections of certain things that they were pursuing with regard to her, but I don't recall being familiar with information that they had that they didn't in some manner disseminate.

MR. GOWDY: In the interest of your time and in fairness to my colleagues, rather than go through collusion, coordination, conspiracy, now that you see where I'm headed --

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: -- with the questions, would the answer be different for any of those three with respect to Candidate Trump and evidence or intelligence related to a working in concert with the Russian Government?

MR. RHODES: No. I think -- again, I think, I mean, basically, as I answered it, I saw indications of potential coordination, but I did not see, you know, the specific evidence of the actions of the Trump campaign.

MR. GOWDY: And when you say evidence of potential coordination, is that synonymous with coincidence, or is it something more intentional than that?

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MR. RHODES: I mean, I don't know the answer to that. I mean, you know, I think that's why these investigations have to get to the bottom of it.

MR. GOWDY: I'm not trying to be a lawyer, but evidence, potential could lead the reader to the wrong conclusion, so -- which is why I'm trying to be as definitive as possible. If you had something other than -- I'm not minimizing your educated opinion. I'm not minimizing that, but I'm looking for something concrete --

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: -- something intentional --

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: -- something that you could say, here is exhibit A on the issue of intent.

MR. RHODES: Yeah. I would not have had that information.

MR. GOWDY: All right. That's Candidate Trump. The campaign for Donald Trump, leave him out of it, just his official campaign, would the answer be different?

MR. RHODES: No.

MR. GOWDY: Third category: I assume you've been around campaigns before. There's the official campaign and then there are the hangers-on, the people who represent themselves as being super close to the candidate although the candidate has never met them, kind of the wannabes.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: Any evidence, intelligence, collusion, coordination with that category?

MR. RHODES: No. I saw, you know -- not dissimilar from our discussion

[REDACTED]

of information -- I saw the, you know, actions, for instance, around the treatment of Ukraine and the Republican platform that were coincident to positions that the Russian Government would want to pursue.

But I didn't see the -- you know, I saw the outward-facing manifestation of that. I didn't see evidence in my position, nor -- again, nor would I have seen that evidence.

MR. GOWDY: It could have been the Republicans just had the wrong policy in their platform?

MR. RHODES: I -- actually, Congressman, I have great confidence in the Republican -- the positions the Republican Party has taken on Ukraine over the years, so that's why it was so surprising for me. But, yes, I mean, I didn't see --

MR. GOWDY: We don't know why the change?

MR. RHODES: Yes. Yeah.

[REDACTED] Five minutes, Mr. Gowdy.

MR. GOWDY: What is your understanding of why U.S. persons' names are masked in intelligence products?

MR. RHODES: You know, my understanding is that there is a different standard as it relates to the privacy of U.S. persons or U.S. entities; and so, therefore, names of persons or entities are not provided in the initial intelligence briefing in the same way that foreigners would be treated, you know, out of, again, privacy concerns.

MR. GOWDY: What would be a justification, explanation, rationale for requesting that a name that was masked be unmasked?

MR. RHODES: So, you know, the rhythm which, you know, White House and Executive Branch officials received intelligence is the Intelligence Community

[REDACTED]

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makes a selection of products that they believe are important for us to see to understand the issues that we're working on.

To me, there was a fairly high threshold for requesting to unmask the name of an individual or institution. The threshold that I understood was, if it is necessary for you to understand the information that you're being briefed on, or if your job requires you to understand fully that information, to include unmasking the U.S. person or institution, that would be the threshold to make that request to the Intelligence Community.

MR. GOWDY: Do you know whether there's a legal requirement that the name be masked in the first instance?

MR. RHODES: My presumption was that there was a legal requirement, yes.

MR. GOWDY: If there were not a legal requirement that the name be masked in the first instance, is it fair to say that someone at some level in the Intelligence Community made a threshold decision to mask a name that did not have to be masked in the first instance?

MR. RHODES: That would be -- yeah. I mean, that would be a logical presumption, yeah.

MR. GOWDY: All right. And then your threshold, I think you used the word "necessary" --

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: -- necessary to understand whatever product you're looking at?

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: Did you make unmasking requests during your time at the

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[REDACTED]

White House?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. I recall making a very limited number of unmasking requests.

MR. GOWDY: I'm not going to ask you the number, unless you remember it. Percentage of total products reviewed versus unmasking requests?

MR. RHODES: A very -- I mean, again -- it's always difficult -- an incredibly low percentage.

MR. GOWDY: Do you recall any of your specific requests and what the necessity would have been for them?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. I thought about this in the context of the public discussion of this. You know, I think what may be the last request I remember making, but it's certainly an example of a request, I was briefed on -- you know, as part of my job, I worked a lot around civil society related issues.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

So I would request -- I requested that that be unmasked. That gave me an understanding of what [REDACTED] was trying to do, who they were trying to target in a way that, if I didn't ask, I wouldn't have been able to do anything about that information.

[REDACTED] One minute, Mr. Gowdy.

MR. GOWDY: Do you recall making any unmasking requests during the period known as the transition from President Obama to the inauguration of

[REDACTED]

President Trump?

MR. RHODES: I don't recall making any.

MR. GOWDY: Do you recall making any unmasking requests with respect to, let's just call it the Russia investigation, into their efforts to influence the 2016 election?

MR. RHODES: I don't recall making any.

MR. GOWDY: All right. The next line of question that I think we would have on our side, it wouldn't be fair to you to start with less than a minute, so I will do something I rarely do, which is cede back the 30 seconds that I have.

Mr. Quigley, if I just may, real quick.

Mr. Gottlieb, you had asked me for the specific compartments, which my colleague reminded me that I didn't give you the specific compartments. So I would just like to supplement the record. It will be SI, TKG, and HCSP.

MR. GOTTLIEB: Thank you.

MR. QUIGLEY: I just want to use the 30 seconds for a dramatic pause.

Good morning. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Rhodes, you talked about when you first learned of Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Is it your understanding that's about when most people in the administration first learned of this was [REDACTED]?

MR. RHODES: Yes. That's the first time, again, that I think it was clear that what might have been adversarial, be it not unusual Russian cyber activity, was -- had the appearance of an influence campaign.

MR. QUIGLEY: And there were discussions, meetings, on which these things -- [REDACTED] that talked about what the Russians were doing?

MR. RHODES: There were. As I noted, I was not an active participant in

essentially the deputies and principals level working group that dealt with this over the [REDACTED]. I reentered the discussion in [REDACTED]

MR. QUIGLEY: Do you have a guesstimate as to when you and when the administration started to take this as -- I think you used the word not unusual. When did they start to take this as an unusual aspect of what the Russians were doing? About what time was that?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. I would say around the [REDACTED], around the DNC, the leaking of the DNC information.

MR. QUIGLEY: And it was, I think, June 14, 2016, that the Washington Post reported that the hackers had gained access to the DNC servers. Is that about when you're talking about, or was there a previous understanding?

MR. RHODES: No, that's about when I'm talking about, yeah.

MR. QUIGLEY: All right. And you're talking about not having access to all of this and regaining back in [REDACTED] but when did you become aware of what might have been at that time -- well, certainly at that time classified information about exactly what the Russians did and when they first hacked the DNC?

MR. RHODES: So I was -- you know, as a consumer of intelligence, you know, I'd been receiving a variety of reports about Russian cyber intrusions of U.S. institutions for a long time.

So it's hard for me to say exactly when, you know, I might have as a consumer of intelligence become aware of, you know -- of Russian hacking. Again, it was really the convergence of the events around June with the release of information that this took on a different tone for me.

MR. QUIGLEY: I mean, when did you learn that the actual hacking had taken place some --

MR. RHODES: Earlier. Yeah, I learned that in June. I mean, so I think -- I remember being in some initial discussions where we were determining what to do about this, and I learned then that there had been prior intrusions of the DNC.

MR. QUIGLEY: When Mr. Gowdy talked to you about the reaction from the White House and that there was and still is some criticism as to the manner in which they responded and the timeframe in which they responded, you referenced concerns because there were Trump campaign accusations that the election would be rigged and that that had played a role.

As you look back at this now, in knowing what we know now, you know, what would we have -- what should we have done differently, if not sooner?

MR. RHODES: You know, I understand that the decisionmaking process that took place over the course of this summer and early fall to, number one, try to present this information first to Congress so that there's, you know, a bipartisan approach that could be established to it.

Looking back, you know, I think that what -- where I feel like we could have done more is with respect to the comprehensive nature of Russian intervention. I feel like in the U.S. Government this was put into a cyber compartment, you know, that there's a cyber intrusion. The cyber team is going to get together and talk about this. We're going to secure our infrastructure.

The statement kind of seemed to focus principally on hacking. Even the term "hacking", you know, is often used. They hacked the election, when I think that's, like, one very small piece of what Russia was doing; and that the more, you know, profound interventions in our election cycle had to do with the creation and dissemination of information.

[REDACTED]

And the hacking was one piece of that broader strategy. So the release of hacked materials was a part of a much broader information operation that I feel like I did have familiarity with because, as I said, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

So I feel like where we could have provided more context would have been around the fact that this was not, you know, limited to hacking and releasing information, but rather, there was a much broader intervention in the way in which Americans received information related to our election.

MR. QUIGLEY: And you just explained what concerns some of us now, is that you had a pretty good idea of the Russian playbook.

MR. RHODES: Uh-huh.

MR. QUIGLEY: You'd seen it play out in Ukraine and in Europe, obviously in Eastern Europe as well.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. QUIGLEY: When did it, I guess, hit folks there in the White House that if they're dumping and hacking or at least at this time hacking, that the rest of what they've done is, you know, why should the United States be immune from that sort of -- the rest of the playbook as well?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. A word on the playbook and then a word on the U.S. Government's response. I'll give you two quick examples. I met with the Germans and, you know, they would have a bi-election upcoming, and there would be a scandal that would emerge that a Syrian refugee had raped a German woman, and there would be protest and outrage about this, and obviously this is a political vulnerability for Chancellor Merkel.

[REDACTED]

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And after several days after uproar, they would establish that the event never happened, and they would trace the origin of the story to a social media account. And that social media account would have a German name, but the server from which it originated would be from Moldova or eastern Ukraine. And we heard anecdotes like this in different places.

And where I saw the volume interact with this is -- and I'll give you an example. When they shot down the -- the Russians shot down MH-17, the civilian aircraft flying over Ukraine, they created such a volume of conspiracy theory that the Ukrainians shot it down, a Ukrainian plane shot it down, that if you were a Dutch internet user and you were Googling what happened with this plane, what would come up is a bunch of Russian theories about what happened, or not theories, disinformation about what happened.

And so I saw them develop this capability. I think the challenge, to get to the U.S. Government piece is, number one, we made a decision to handle this as kind of a cybersecurity issue when I think this was much broader than that and was information warfare. And so the people in the room were, you know, principally people focused on cybersecurity.

Secondly though, we had limited tools to deal with. And I think as a country we still have limited tools. It would've been hard for the U.S. Government -- and here is where I'll defend us -- to become the arbiter of what's on everybody's Facebook feed.

So, frankly, we dealt with the portion of Russian actions that we could, right, you know. We can blow the whistle on a cyber intrusion. We're responsible for the security and integrity of the election. We, the U.S. Government, you know, no longer we, but we the Obama administration didn't really have a way of effecting

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the manipulation of American news consumption.



[10:58 a.m.]

MR. RHODES: And I think that continues to be the case. We could have raised more attention to the issue of, you know, what's on your Facebook news feed. But, again, I think that would have been politicized too. And, you know, in a way, it was a lose-lose proposition. Either we are doing more to raise attention on Russian interference in the election or -- and we're accused of rigging the election, or we're providing more minimal information as we did.

I will say that some of this too became more and more apparent to us after the election. When President Obama ordered that review, you know, a lot of different pieces of this were connected in a way that they hadn't necessarily been before the election.

MR. QUIGLEY: I guess to summarize, it was, to an extent, put into a silo.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. QUIGLEY: And all the other tools or at least understandings of how the Russians operate weren't able to play in that --

MR. RHODES: I feel like they weren't fully leveraged in the way that they might have been.

MR. QUIGLEY: So when the administration decided to issue a statement on this was October 7, 2016, were you involved with how that was constructed?

MR. RHODES: So the statement itself was going to be drafted by the Intelligence Community. And as I was discussing, the premium was put on the fact that this would be an Intelligence Community statement so that, you know, someone like me wasn't drafting it.

I was involved, however, because I had to anticipate we were going to then get a deluge of questions about that statement. So I was involved in working with

[REDACTED]

the interagency communicators to prepare essentially the Q&A that we have to utilize after the issuance of the statement.

MR. QUIGLEY: And so you must have noticed within 2 hours after this, Access Hollywood releases the first batch of the Podesta emails?

MR. RHODES: Well, what I recall is that I thought that the statement was going to be a huge deal. Frankly, in retrospect, you know, I was wrong in thinking that this would be kind of an earthquake, you know, that here's the U.S. Intelligence Community saying Russia's interfering.

I remember that afternoon there was kind of the double earthquake of the release of the Access Hollywood tape and the first batch of the Podesta emails. And all of these Q&As that we had prepared, thinking that this was going to be the dominant story for at least a few days, that we'd have to respond to were overtaken by other events.

MR. QUIGLEY: Looking at that time and looking now, earlier questioning focused on coincidence or not. Then did you see it as a coincidence? Then did you see it or now do you see it as a deliberate effort to distract?

MR. RHODES: I saw it as a deliberate effort. And, you know, another thing that frustrated me deeply is the role of WikiLeaks. I had dealt for years with all of the damage that WikiLeaks had done to U.S. national interests, you know, significantly hurting some of our foreign relations, particularly around the Edward Snowden releases.

You know, I was the guy who had to oversee the response all around the world to huge harm done to U.S. interests by WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, and the constellation of actors who disseminated that information.

I always, frankly, harbored deep suspicions about WikiLeaks' connections

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

to Russia. How did Edward Snowden get on a plane from Hong Kong to Moscow without a passport? How was WikiLeaks able to operate so freely in associating with Edward Snowden while he was in Russia?

So, to me, as soon as I saw WikiLeaks providing this information, you know, it frustrated me both because it appeared a deliberate effort to change the conversation; and also, it, frankly, spoke to what I saw as a longstanding association between WikiLeaks and the Russian intelligence services.

MR. QUIGLEY: But, given that, sir, you said you got back into it, to an extent, in September, but in August, it was Mr. Stone tweeting: "Trust me, it will soon be Podesta's time in the barrel, #Crooked Hillary." And then later in August, he predicts his emails will soon be published. In the weeks that follow, he shows remarkable ability to predict the future. Quote, "I have total confidence that WikiLeaks and my hero Julian Assange will educate the American people soon #LockHerUp, payload coming." He predicts, and 2 days later it does. WikiLeaks releases its first batch of these emails. The release of these emails will continue on a daily basis up to the election.

Given everything you just said, I'm just curious, I'm just wondering why that wouldn't have -- I mean, that amazing coincidence and knowing so much of what you just described about with Mr. Snowden --

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. QUIGLEY: Looking back now, what is your conclusion, this is a coincidence?

MR. RHODES: My conclusion is, look, I saw, for many years, the development of different Russian capabilities that all converged in our election. So I saw the development of this relationship with WikiLeaks that, you know,

[REDACTED]

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particularly around Snowden's taking safe haven in Russia, you know, clearly was a significant challenge to U.S. national interest.

So here they have established a relationship and a mechanism to disseminate information that has the sole purpose of harming U.S. influence, U.S. leadership in the world, and they've established that in 2013, 2014. They've got Edward Snowden living there. They have cutouts to deal with WikiLeaks, at the same time that they're developing a massive capability to produce and disseminate information that can overwhelm the circuits in Western democracies, at the same time that they're developing significant offensive cyber weapons.

And what I see as having happened in our election is they married all of these different capabilities: The ability to extract information through cyber intrusions, the ability to disseminate that information through WikiLeaks, and the ability to amplify that information through the production of an enormous volume of social media.

As I saw this over the course of the last several years of our administration, this is not something that they made a decision about in 2015 or 2016. I think that Vladimir Putin made a decision when he reassumed the office of the presidency to significantly go on offense to undermine U.S. leadership and U.S. credibility.

After the fall of the Yanukovytsch government in Ukraine, he started to cross all kinds of lines that they had not crossed before, releasing audio of intercepted phone calls involving U.S. officials, the dissemination of this degree of false information. And, again, so what I see in the context of our election, in the context of the quotes you read from Mr. Stone, is that Russia had established a massive constellation of capabilities to steal information, to disseminate that stolen information, and to amplify that stolen information through the creation and

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[REDACTED]

dissemination of their own content in a manner that allowed them to manipulate significantly American politics and society.

MR. QUIGLEY: How would you describe, knowing what you knew in the White House, the relationship between WikiLeaks and Russia, particularly Julian Assange?

MR. RHODES: I have to tell you that was always a source of frustration to me. I feel like -- and your committee is in a good position to pursue this. I feel like we could establish how certain information was provided to WikiLeaks. So, for instance, you know, in the context of some of the hacked materials in our election, we could establish, you know, Russian actors who passed that information.

I think in terms of the broader nature of Russia's relationship to WikiLeaks, I feel like we didn't have as good an understanding of that as, frankly, we should have, given the harm that WikiLeaks did to U.S. interests over many years, and given the Edward Snowden dynamic.

MR. QUIGLEY: My final question: Once August, when you saw what Roger Stone's tweets and the timing afterwards that you said was not, in your mind, a coincidence, what was the reaction in the White House to that?

MR. RHODES: I'm seeing, you know, people like Roger Stone saying things like that. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] that are also coincident to huge volumes of fake news that is being created, that the timing of those releases, WikiLeaks releases, you know, not only were those timed after our statement went out and that tape was released, but the drip, drip, drip was on the very themes that the Trump campaign was closing on. It was on corruption. It was on health. It

[REDACTED]

was on associations.

And so what I was watching in October was an incredibly sophisticated effort to flood the zone with negative information about Hillary Clinton, some of which was in hacked emails and some of which was in invented information, in which case, the Russian efforts were mirror images of what the Trump campaign was saying.

So it was frustrating, but, frankly, I felt like we had limited levers to pull. We notified the public and Congress about the Russian actions and intent. And so our sense was that the WikiLeaks releases would be seen in that context, but, frankly, they weren't, because there's an insatiable appetite for gossip and leaked emails among the U.S. news media, and there's -- and no capacity for major social media platforms like Facebook to guard against their platforms being manipulated by the dissemination of mass amounts of disinformation. And so, frankly, we didn't have the tools to respond to what was happening. Putting aside the political difficulty of inserting ourselves into the middle of the closing weeks of a campaign.

MR. QUIGLEY: Thank you. I yield to Mr. Heck.

MR. HECK: Mr. Rhodes, thanks for being here. I'm going to ask you some questions that get to what I find to be your unique blend of expertise, both with respect to national security and foreign relations and communications, derived from your 8 years in the Obama administration. And I'm going to ask your forbearance. Mr. Carson and I are the only nonlawyers on this side of the table. So bear with me, if you will.

I got a little bit lost in your description and characterization of Russian interference in the 2016 election vis-à-vis prior elections, so I want to ask you to clarify. I thought I heard you alternately say they've done this before, but also

[REDACTED]

characterize it as unusual.

So how would you characterize the difference between what you were informed of as to their interference in the 2016 election versus prior elections?

MR. RHODES: I think the scale of what took place in our election exceeded anything I was familiar with with respect to their engagement in other elections. However, two points I make here. One is that this was a capability. I think you can't understand what they did in our election without looking at what they did in Ukraine. This practice of having a mixture of the creation and dissemination of false information, coupled with Russian media platforms, coupled with the utilization of their own intelligence assets in Europe and other places, allowed them to significantly, at a minimum, shape perceptions of their actions in Ukraine, both inside of Ukraine, inside of Russian-speaking areas in Europe, and in Europe generally.

So, again, this capability that they had to weaponize information and this willingness to cross certain thresholds that had not previously been crossed by governments, like releasing, you know, transcripts and audio of intercepted phone calls, I saw that in Ukraine.

An example of an election that they interfered in, kind of at the same time as us, would be the Italian referendum. When we met with Prime Minister Renzi in the Italian Government, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

So they had clearly developed a sophisticated ability to weaponize

[REDACTED]

information. However, in our election, the scale of that, coupled with the cyber intrusions and the utilization of, you know, WikiLeaks, I think exceeded, you know, what we had seen in other countries.

MR. HECK: So, just to be clear, they did it here and elsewhere, in fact, several other places. They did it on a larger scale than before, and in a more sophisticated fashion than ever before?

MR. RHODES: Yes. And it's in a continuum, so they're going to keep doing it.

MR. HECK: Thank you for anticipating my next question.

Do you believe that they will continue to find it in their self-interest to do this?

MR. RHODES: Yes. They will continue to find it in their self-interest. I think their intent was not just to produce a certain result in this election. I think their intent was to destroy American influence and to fracture the Western alliance to suit their own interests.

MR. HECK: And would you assess that they have, at least, been partially effective in achieving -- or partially successful in achieving that goal?

MR. RHODES: I think they've probably succeeded far beyond their expectation. I will say that other European countries seem to have taken more effective defensive measures against this. If you looked in the last German election that just took place, you had essentially an agreement among the parties to work together to blunt Russian intervention.

MR. HECK: Would you go so far as to say that this activity represents the potential of an existential threat to the health of American democracy?

MR. RHODES: I would say that.

MR. HECK: So you've also indicated that they will continue to do this. Do you have any reason to believe that they will not, in fact, escalate their effort in this regard?

MR. RHODES: I think there's -- everything that Russia has done since Vladimir Putin reassumed the Presidency has been escalatory in nature. I think they would like every single individual running for office in the United States to have in the back of their head that Russia could come after me in the context of my election.

MR. HECK: So we seem to have a modicum of agreement here, if I interpreted my friend, Mr. Gowdy's comments accurately, that, in fact, the Russian efforts this time were directed at the elevation of then-Candidate Trump, now President Trump, at the expense of then-Candidate Clinton.

I want to ask you, now circling back to those combinations of expertise you have, looking forward, is there any reason to believe that the way in which Russia has interfered in our elections might not, at some point, be turned on Republicans, as it seemed to have been turned on a Democrat in 2016? Is there anything, as it were, innately partisan that you can determine in their motivation or in their intent as opposed to, for example, self-interest?

MR. RHODES: No. Vladimir Putin is serving his own interests. If that compels him to act against Republicans, he absolutely will.

MR. HECK: And can you imagine a plausible scenario in which that would be the case?

MR. RHODES: Absolutely, yes.

MR. HECK: Very good. I want to turn now to the question of unmasking, which we dealt with in a fairly abbreviated fashion. But, Mr. Rhodes, would you

say it's fair to say that the mechanism of being able to unmask is often vital to our national security, i.e., to learn the identity of a U.S. person, due to the seriousness of an issue at hand?

MR. RHODES: Yes.

MR. HECK: Did you ever request unmasking in your self-described rare instances out of curiosity?

MR. RHODES: No.

MR. HECK: Did you ever request unmasking for political reasons?

MR. RHODES: No.

MR. HECK: Are you aware of any other person with whom you worked that ever requested unmasking either out of curiosity or for political reasons, anyone whatsoever in the White House?

MR. RHODES: No.

MR. HECK: Is it fair to say that the authority to unmask is, frankly, not even widely held within the Intelligence Community?

MR. RHODES: Yes, it's fair. My understanding is it's not widely held in the Intelligence Community.

MR. HECK: Is it correct that only the intelligence agency that collected the information has the authority to unmask?

MR. RHODES: My understanding is that they have to be part of the approval, along with the DNI.

MR. HECK: Is it accurate that even as the Deputy National Security Adviser, you did not have the authority to compel the unmasking of a U.S. person's identity?

MR. RHODES: Yes, I did not have that authority.

MR. HECK: So you could request an unmasking from the NSA, and only one of, what I am told are 20 or so individuals with authority, could approve or deny that, but you could not compel it?

MR. RHODES: That's right.

MR. HECK: Who can request that U.S. person information in an intelligence report be unmasked?

MR. RHODES: You know, the recipient of -- you know, of an intelligence report. I don't know, frankly, at what level you have to be at in order to have that capacity.

MR. HECK: But they have to be the recipient of the intelligence briefing to begin with?

MR. RHODES: Yes. And that's an important context, because we don't select what intelligence comes to us. This is not the case where we go shop around for it. You get to work and someone brings you a package of intelligence that the Intelligence Community has determined is important for you to know.

MR. HECK: Would the National Security Adviser himself or herself, with respect to national security reasons, have legitimate reason to request the unmasking?

MR. RHODES: Yes.

MR. HECK: What about U.S. ambassadors, would they have legitimate reasons to request?

MR. RHODES: Yes.

MR. HECK: Is it fair to say that unmasking is a normal procedure used on a fairly restricted basis to more fully understand the intelligence report which you have been given?

MR. RHODES: Yes.

MR. HECK: When the name of a U.S. person is unmasked, that identity information is provided exclusively to the intelligence official who requested the unmasking. Is that correct?

MR. RHODES: Yes.

MR. HECK: Why would it be important to limit that?

MR. RHODES: To, I think, underscore the seriousness with which, you know, the privacy concerns are being respected. And so, you know, my recollection of how these matters worked is that I would not even be familiar with the fact of a colleague's unmasking request. This was something that, you know, you had to have an individual need to know in forming your request.

MR. HECK: I'm going to shift gears on you one more time, if I may, Mr. Rhodes, and get your perspective on a meeting that has been in the news quite a bit that apparently took place on June 9, 2016, at Trump Tower, between Donald Trump, Jr., Paul Manafort, Jared Kushner, a Russian lawyer, and several additional Russian or Russian-affiliated persons.

The meeting, as laid out in emails which were released by Don Jr. himself, provide evidence that the Russians actually reached out to Donald Trump, Jr. Do you recall how or when you learned about this meeting?

MR. RHODES: I learned about it from The New York Times.

MR. HECK: At what point in time?

MR. RHODES: When they published the story, you know, about -- about the meeting in the summer of 2017.

MR. HECK: What was your reaction?

MR. RHODES: I was absolutely shocked. I can tell you I worked on a

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Presidential campaign in 2007-2008. I was one of the principal foreign policy staffers on that campaign. I would have no reason to ever meet with any Russians. The notion of, you know, David Ploufe, David Axelrod, and Valerie Jarrett meeting with the Russian Government would have been literally unthinkable in the context of our campaign.

And the leadership of a campaign's time is their most precious commodity, and the fact that they felt it a worthy investment of time to sit down with representatives of the Russian Government was absolutely astonishing to me, and went far beyond, frankly, any degree of interaction that I would have even guessed at. I would have thought they would have done it at a lower level.

MR. HECK: Conversely, were you surprised that the Russians reached out in an attempt to do this?

MR. RHODES: No. I think the Russians try to find any manner of ways to influence. They are constantly pressing to get an advantage. They work through third parties who they have relationships with. They work through people who are loosely affiliated with their intelligence services, but aren't necessarily employed by their intelligence services.

So the notion that the Russians would be trying to find any line in to influence the direction of a major U.S. Presidential campaign, that didn't surprise me. What surprised me is the fact of the meeting.

MR. HECK: So are you saying that you think their objective was to establish a line of communication?

MR. RHODES: Absolutely. I mean, that's what Russia's -- you know, if you look at their practice, their practice is to have people in Europe and the United States who are building relationships and connections that they can utilize at the

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appropriate time and in the appropriate way. That's what they do.

MR. HECK: So the Russians bring up the Magnitsky -- I'm pretty sure I'm not pronouncing that correctly -- Act during the meeting, where they are responding to the campaign interest on dirt on Hillary. Why would they do that, again, calling back on your prior experience?

MR. RHODES: Again, my understanding of Russian practice, as an intelligence consumer of many years, is that they would want to establish relationships, and they would want to introduce their own interests in the context of establishing those relationships.

And Russia has had a longstanding interest in seeing the Magnitsky Act go away. And so, in the context of discussing support for their campaign, they may very well have wanted to introduce the concept of the Magnitsky Act going away.

MR. HECK: With an objective toward?

MR. RHODES: With an objective toward -- I will say that my overall analysis is that Russia has achieved what they wanted, in terms of the election of Donald Trump, and that was a far more important objective than any subsidiary policy objective.

But I think that in the list of things that they have subsidiary policy objectives on, making the Magnitsky Act go away or be blunted as an instrument of U.S. policy would be one of their objectives.

MR. HECK: Are you suggesting that it was a quid pro quo?

MR. RHODES: I don't know. I, frankly -- I think that I don't know that to be the case.

MR. HECK: Based on your experience, is that plausible?

MR. RHODES: Yeah, based on my experience is that they would want to

introduce their interest in the context of that conversation and that contact, so that it's understood this is something they we're interested in.

MR. HECK: You indicated earlier that it would be unthinkable I think, was your word, that either of the Davids or Valerie Jarrett would ever meet with the Russians. Thinking back to the time that you were on the transition team between November of 2008 and January of 2009, did you ever meet with any representatives of a foreign government?

MR. RHODES: My recollection is that the only -- the only -- the British ambassador, perhaps, but not any Russians and not any extensive foreign contacts.

MR. HECK: What is your understanding and definition of the oft-used phrase "one government at a time"?

MR. RHODES: That whoever is in place is responsible for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy until inauguration, and at which point the next administration becomes responsible.

MR. HECK: And do discussions about policy directions during transition periods by the incoming administration compromise the concept of "one government at a time"?

MR. RHODES: Absolutely. And just to very quickly give you two examples: During our transition, there was a Gaza war, and the Mumbai attacks. And we deferred 100 percent to the Bush administration in the response to those foreign policy matters. We spent our transition focused on building our own team, not on conducting any foreign policy or diplomacy.

MR. HECK: How does it compromise America's national security interest for the precept of one government at a time to be compromised?

MR. RHODES: Transitions are incredibly potentially destabilizing times. Foreign governments will seek to manipulate and take advantage of the uncertainty and fluidity in U.S. policy in between an election and inauguration and, frankly, even after the inauguration of an incoming President. And if there is any indication that existing U.S. foreign policy priorities can be undermined by actions in the transition, that is deeply destabilizing to U.S. foreign policy.

And, frankly, any incoming administration is also not dealing with the full amount of information, so they don't even know the context in which these discussions are happening. And so, any representations that are made on behalf of the United States by a transition team would lack the benefit of the fully functioning U.S. Government.

MR. HECK: Finally, Mr. Rhodes, I want to go back to the issue of Russian interference and the prospective look at this. To recap, again, what I think we've heard. They messed with us; they messed with others; they did so on a scale that was unforeseen and unprecedented; there's no reason to believe that they will not continue to do this. In fact, there's every reason to believe that they will continue to do this on an even larger and a potentially more sophisticated scale.

Part of our charge here, I think, has to get at the issue of what should we do about this going forward. Here's some of what I heard you say. We cannot continue to relegate this threat just to the cyber world; it's a much broader and more comprehensive undertaking than just hacking. I heard you allude to the importance of hardening our election IT structure, but I think this committee would be very interested in hearing anything else you might have in the way of recommendations about how America can arm itself, as it were, protect itself, insofar as you said earlier, that this represents an existential threat to the health of

our democracy.

What should we do going forward to best protect ourselves against this new form -- again, your term -- information warfare?

Four minutes, Mr. Heck.

MR. RHODES: So quickly, I'd say, number one, it does require a significant investment in cybersecurity, given that there will be an ongoing threat to our cyber systems.

Number two, I think there has to be -- you know, this government should have a much more aggressive investment in combating Russian information operations globally. We were beginning to do this towards the end of the Obama administration, through the creation of the Global Engagement Center at the State Department. The Russians spend a billion dollars on this. We spend in the tens of millions.

I would have the United States working in lockstep with the European Union in combating Russian disinformation, identifying it, labeling it, not just here but across the Western world, because this is going to be a continued capability that they deploy.

I think, frankly, across our society, there needs to be, you know, significant -- and this may not be the action of government, but, frankly, our media and technological sectors need to consider how their own platforms are being manipulated. Some of that is security, by the way. There are ways to crack the algorithm that Google has or Facebook has to ensure that a particular story is seen.

So some of that is security, but some of that is just how does our industry work to deal with this threat. But that involves working with the government,

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because government can alert industry to a threat, and industry can take action. We did this with ISIL. You know, we went to the technology companies, we said, here's how -- here's what they're doing. And they sat down and had an extensive dialogue with us. I think there needs to be a similar effort with respect to Russia.

However, the last thing I'd say, there's no substitute for locking arms across the political spectrum and saying that this is intolerable. The Russians, they took advantage of vulnerabilities in America. They took advantage of a political culture that is increasingly polarized. They took advantage of a media culture that would jump at the opportunity to cover gossipy emails. They took advantage of a technology sector that used the ideology of an open internet as a shield against any scrutiny of how their platforms are being manipulated. And we're not going to be able to steal ourselves against those vulnerabilities if we don't come together as Republicans and Democrats.

And the fact of the matter is what they're seeing today in our politics is what their preferred outcome was. I mean, I made the point -- a lot of people have been looking for what do they want? Do they want the sanctions to go away? No, they want what's happening right now. This is the return on their investment.

██████████ One minute.

MR. RHODES: And so, in terms of the kind of political instability in the United States, of the declining confidence in American leadership and American governance around the world. So, again, there's just no substitute for us being robust in saying what happened here and following all the information where it leads and coming together in ways to prevent it from happening.

And I'd, frankly, look at what the French and the Germans did, because they managed to get through elections where Russia was meddling without these

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problems, because they came together.

MR. HECK: Thank you.

Do you need a break?

MR. RHODES: No, I'm okay.

Mr. Rooney.

MR. ROONEY: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Rhodes, for your service.

Did you work in public service before working on the Obama campaign?

MR. RHODES: I worked for 6 years with the former chairman of this committee, Lee Hamilton, but he was at the Wilson Center, and I worked with him on the 9/11 --

MR. ROONEY: I just asked because I also got elected in 2008, so I think that we sort of have had the same experiences.

MR. RHODES: Parallel.

MR. ROONEY: Yeah. And I appreciate what you just said about, you know, we talked about even, you know, if we can, in the 1980s and 1990s, put disclaimers on certain, you know, albums that this is explicit material, if there's an advertisement that is coming from a foreign government, maybe people should know that.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. ROONEY: And how hard would that be? So I appreciate you saying your work with the tech companies in the prior administration was able to achieve some of that with ISIL. So hopefully, you know, maybe that's one of the good things that can come out of this.

I want to ask you about -- Mr. Heck and Mr. Gowdy covered most of the four tenets that the chairman and the ranking member have gone over as to what

the scope of this investigation is. The last one I'm just going to ask you briefly is with regard to leaking. And, again, this is not a criminal investigation or whatever. I just want to make sure that we cover all of our bases. And I will be brief.

But before I do that, I want to use something that you might be familiar with, since you were there for the full 8 years. It's a personal story for me, because it affected me with regard to RT. I had a bill, a bipartisan bill which basically -- it was called the Fence Jumper bill. You may remember this. But it basically said that the Secret Service could arrest people that jumped the fence at the White House.

Now, the RT made this huge propaganda campaign that this was restricting free speech, and that wherever President Obama went, he was basically shutting down the First Amendment. So, of course, I get the blow-back for this. All of these guys -- do you remember this?

MR. GOWDY: I supported the bill.

MR. ROONEY: Everybody did, but -- oh, you supported it. No, I think you voted for it. I think Ron Paul didn't, but that was it.

But anyway, my opponent in my primary used a campaign ad about how Tom Rooney was restricting free speech, and in his campaign ad it had at the bottom "RT." And I was just like does this guy realize that he's citing Russian television?

So the reason I bring this up, and sort of trying to loop in everything that Mr. Quigley, Mr. Heck, and Mr. Gowdy have been talking about, is the same question I asked, believe it or not, Mr. Stone, who was sitting in that seat -- and you guys could not be any more dissimilar -- but is it possible that there was, based on your testimony when Mr. Gowdy was asking you about collusion and

coordination and those things, but also with regard to your experience in the White House and what you have seen the tendencies of Russia to do, is it possible that both things happened at the same time, in that Russia was trying to influence our election and continue to do so, and that the Trump campaign was not coordinating or colluding with them, even if they were rooting for them to create havoc and make Hillary's life miserable. In your opinion, is it possible that those two things could have existed at the same time?

MR. RHODES: It's certainly possible. I saw a degree of sophistication in Russia's efforts that were -- went beyond what I'd seen before, but it's possible.

MR. ROONEY: Just like with my primary opponent, I don't think that he was colluding with the Russians, although he was certainly trying to make use of that for his campaign.

But with regard to -- Mr. Heck was asking you about and Mr. Gowdy about unmasking, one of the things that we have coming up, as you know, is some reauthorizations, which are not going to be easy. And one of the problems with that is with regard to, you know, leaking of classified material. So we have to button that up or we're going to be weaker, I think, as an Intelligence Community.

Mr. Heck asked you whether or not you ever unmasked for political reasons, to which you said no. The logical, in my opinion, follow-up question to that would be, are you aware of, or did you, in any way, whether it was for political reasons or not, leak classified information to members of the media while you were part of the White House?

MR. RHODES: No.

MR. ROONEY: Do you know of anybody in your shop that may have leaked classified information during the prior administration?

[REDACTED]

MR. RHODES: No. I mean, there were some high-profile leak investigations that led to prosecutions, but I didn't have firsthand knowledge of people leaking classified information.

MR. ROONEY: You are aware that it was going on, obviously. So, being in charge of communications in your capacity, what did you do in your shop to combat or to try to make sure that that didn't happen, from your purview?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. Well, so first of all, we had kind of a gallows humor point. Nobody hates leaks more than the people that have to deal with the press, because inevitably it comes back to us to have to develop ways to contain leaks. So WikiLeaks, for instance, or Snowden, we'd spent months having to deal with the damage done.

What -- I guess there are a couple of things that we did. One is, frankly, in any meeting in which we were discussing a public relations, or a public affairs strategy, you know, we'd be very clear about what the lines were, in terms of classification. And oftentimes, these were on complicated issues like drones or support to the Syrian opposition, where, frankly, there is a degree of public knowledge of our activities. And we'd have to work with the national security lawyers to figure out what the -- what we are allowed to say and what we aren't allowed to say, and then make sure that anybody who's commenting for the U.S. Government knows what the line is after which is classification.

I will also say that I was often the U.S. official who was asked to intervene with news organizations to try to prevent them from publishing information that had leaks to them that was classified. So on multiple, if not many occasions, you know, I would have to meet with an editor or a Bureau chief to try to dissuade them from publishing information that they had received through unauthorized

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disclosure.

MR. ROONEY: That's all I have.

Mr. Gowdy, do you have anything else?

MR. GOWDY: Just a couple. And if you already touched upon them, forgive me. I just stepped outside.

MR. ROONEY: No, I started right when you walked in.

MR. GOWDY: How would you define public unmasking, acknowledging it's difficult to know what's politics and what's not? But you gave me a reason for why you did unmask a name. Can you think of an instance where you were curious about an underlying U.S. person, but you didn't think it reached the threshold of necessary, so you made the decision not to do it?

MR. RHODES: Yes. I had many instances like that.

MR. GOWDY: What would be a politically motivated reason for unmasking a name as opposed to a necessary for your job?

MR. RHODES: So the way I describe that, Congressman, is that if I'm being briefed on intelligence, that to understand the importance of that intelligence or the intentions of the foreign actor involved in the intelligence, it's necessary for me to know the U.S. person or entity, that is necessary for my job.

If there's a named U.S. person or -- and I'm just kind of wondering who that is out of curiosity of who's talking to so-and-so, you know, that would be curiosity. In other words, if it's not necessary for me to understand what the relevance of this intelligence is, what the foreign actor is doing, you know. If it doesn't have that necessity, then it would be political in nature.

MR. GOWDY: Well, just to be absolutely certain, no one is talking in the criminal realm. Nobody is even talking in the quasi-criminal realm. This is really

policy stuff.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: Tommy put his finger on it. It's going to be a heavy lift on reauthorizing programs, I think you would agree, are essential to our national security.

MR. RHODES: Yeah. I argued for the reauthorization.

MR. GOWDY: I think what some of the members are going to struggle with is the wide disparity in unmasking requests, even among a universe of people who would have arguably the same job description. So if you've got any insights, either now or in the future, on how to have a more uniform practice?

Five minutes, Mr. Gowdy.

MR. RHODES: I'd say that I think it is a very serious issue. I think that there is a clear necessity for U.S. officials to have the capacity unmask an individual or institution in intelligence. If there is a disparity, what that suggests to me is not that the law needs to necessarily be changed to remove that capability, but it does suggest that perhaps there needs to be an effort internally, Congress working with the administration, to provide clear guidelines about the practice. I mean, I think that's entirely appropriate. And if what you all have found is some disparity, that might inform a discussion about what those guidelines are going forward, how these things are recorded.

To me, I did this very rarely. So it's surprising to me if that's not uniformly the case, but it may be that, frankly, different people have different understandings of how -- of how and when to do this, because, you know, you're reading a report, and you may just want to understand the totality of that report. And if there are guidelines that can set -- you know, color in the line so that it's somewhat less

subjective, I think that's appropriate.

MR. GOWDY: Did you have a briefer or would you read intelligence products yourself?

MR. RHODES: I had a briefer. So I'd come in in the morning, and I'd have someone sit with me while I read my briefing. And I could ask them questions.

MR. GOWDY: Can you recall any instances where your briefer may have anticipated you asking about a U.S. person and made the request to unmask even before you did it?

MR. RHODES: Yes. There were -- I mean, and this speaks to, again, some of the challenges. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] So it does -- you know, there are complexities like that where you could be dealing with someone overseas who's got a green card or something and -- so there are certainly cases, and that's the most kind of obvious one of them, where I think there is an anticipation that, you know, you're going to need to know that identity. But, again, that's the nature of how I would recall that being done. If it's something like [REDACTED], you know, [REDACTED] [REDACTED], so we're going to anticipate that we can just, you know, do this.

MR. GOWDY: There's been something of a conflation, either intentional or unintentional, but nonetheless a conflation between masking, unmasking, and then the leaks; one of which is criminal, the other is a policy determination.

But it is not lost on at least some observers that there seemed to be an uptick in dissemination of classified information, certainly, and a couple of the country's major newspapers seem to have a lot, post election, even some post

[REDACTED]

inauguration, but certainly post election.

So it's really difficult for Congress, and frankly, it's difficult for law enforcement to track the source of leaks. It's even more difficult when there's been wide distribution of that information.

You worked in the highest echelons of government for 8 years. What is the answer? How do we stop the proliferation, or in some instances, the weaponizing of classified information? I get that journalists don't like us to discuss their role in it, but then, that forces you to go search for a lot of people who had access to it and not the one who reported it. So how do we do it?

MR. RHODES: I will say, you know, I completely share the frustration with leaks. You know, they made life much more difficult for anybody working in government. In terms of how do you -- you know, I think that on certain matters, it really is a question of executive branch compartmentalization of information.

You know, the bin Laden operation didn't leak. Not many people knew about the bin Laden operation. Those things probably correlate. And so, you know, there's no substitute for the nature in which certain information is handled in terms of limiting the potential for leaks. So I think you have to start there.

Beyond that, you know, I, frankly, don't -- it's hard for me to determine -- you know, in a way I would argue that this requires -- you know, congressional oversight can play an important role because, for instance, congressional oversight can help determine the manner in which information is -- you know, within the executive branch is extracted and released, so that there are official channels for the public airing of policies, or even difficult things that have happened that the executive branch, you know, may not be inclined to disclose. So the sense that congressional oversight is functioning well I think

[REDACTED]

helps mitigate against leaks as well.

But I don't have the precise formula here, because, you know, I think people -- my candid assessment, which is, again, honestly an assessment, is that a lot of leaks, they come from within intelligence and law enforcement, you know. Most of the, you know -- I've been as surprised as any citizen to read a lot of the things that have leaked, not just because they leaked, because I didn't know about them. You know, I didn't -- as we were discussing before, the issues related to contacts with the Trump campaign.

So I think, you know, internal practices at every agency about how information is shared, how widely it is shared, who has it, is the only strategy that I saw work in government. The less people who know something, the less likely it is to leak. Unfortunately, there are certain things where a lot of people know about things and, unfortunately, that usually leads to leaking.

I think investigations, I caught a lot of grief from my friends on the left because of the leak investigations that President Obama or his administration carried out, but they do have an -- you know, an effect, a deterrent effect that I think is important. And so I think there does need to be consequence. As -- you know, I think it's difficult if you start to criminalize reporters, because, you know, their job is to try to get information. But I think that sending a message to people in government that this is unacceptable and could carry grave consequences, you know, is important and does have an effect.

MR. GOWDY: Well, I found myself in the very lonely position of defending Robert Mueller this morning on television, which is not a place lots of Republicans want to be, but I believed it. I think he's a good man. I am disappointed in the leaks even coming out of something that for most former prosecutors -- and there

[REDACTED]

are a couple in this room -- are pretty sacrosanct, criminal investigation.

[REDACTED] Mr. Gowdy, your time is up.

MR. GOWDY: So I share your frustration. Narrowing down the number of people who have access to it, maybe that's the answer. I'm sure your lawyer will tell you at lunch if you don't already know it, the most powerful tool you have in our justice system is the ability to cross-examine. Nothing, nothing exposes bias and motive and opportunity to observe quite like cross-examination. It's the one thing you cannot do with an anonymous source.

So I get that reporters like to rely on sources. There's no serious investigation and no serious trial in any setting that could use an anonymous source to try to prove the truth. So it's frustrating, I guess, for all of us. I think that was you telling me my time was up, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Yes.

MR. GOWDY: All right. Sorry.

MR. QUIGLEY: Sir, you mentioned you were involved in the Obama, and Bush-to-Obama transition. Were you involved with the Obama-to-Trump transition?

MR. RHODES: I was involved in the sense that, you know, one of our lines of effort from the election to inauguration was ensuring an effective transition. I was not necessarily -- I wasn't someone who interfaced with the Trump transition team, though.

MR. QUIGLEY: But were you interfacing with Obama officials that were --

MR. RHODES: Yes. And I was at meetings where we were reviewing the progress of the transition. So I was involved with the Obama end of the transition. I wasn't one of the people who interacted.

[REDACTED]

MR. QUIGLEY: Well, given that, I mean, did anyone on the Obama team express concerns about Trump senior officials' contacts with senior Russian Government officials during that time?

MR. RHODES: Yes. But my recollection is that the Trump transition team, or individuals on the Trump transition team expressed some concern to our team about the extent of engagement with Ambassador Kislyak.

MR. QUIGLEY: Were there any specifics beyond that that they gave, who was meeting with the ambassador?

MR. RHODES: Sorry. That General Flynn was meeting with Ambassador Kislyak, and that what did we think about Ambassador Kislyak. So, my understanding of this was that someone on the Trump team was a little concerned about the meetings that were taking place and expressed that concern to our --

MR. QUIGLEY: Was that the extent of the concern, that it was between these two individuals, people?

MR. RHODES: Yeah, between these people, and should we be worried, you know, should we be worried about that? Should we be worried about Kislyak? You know, there was some -- there was -- I got this secondhand, but there was some unease expressed about those contacts, but just Flynn. I didn't -- I didn't hear it with respect to other Trump officials.

MR. QUIGLEY: Thank you. I yield to Mr. Schiff.

MR. SCHIFF: Thank you, Mr. Rhodes. Thanks for your service to the country and thanks for being here today.

I just had a couple of questions. You described your reaction to learning of the meeting at Trump Tower between intermediaries of the Russian Government and Trump campaign people. There have been public reports, without getting

[REDACTED]

into evidence before the committee, that at the same time emails were coming from the Russians to the campaign setting up the meeting, there were emails going from the campaign chairman, Mr. Manafort, to Oleg Deripaska, an oligarch close to Putin, offering information on the campaign as a potential effort to collect money he believed owed from his work in Ukraine.

What's your reaction to that allegation, should those emails prove to be accurate, that the campaign chairman was reaching out to a Russian oligarch? Are you familiar with Oleg Deripaska.

MR. RHODES: Yes, I am.

MR. SCHIFF: How do you interpret how the Russians -- well, first of all, would the overture by the Trump campaign to Oleg Deripaska, would that likely be shared with the Kremlin, and how would the Kremlin read that kind of an overture?

MR. RHODES: Congressman, I think it would absolutely have been shared with the Kremlin. The fact is, the way in which Russia operates is there are any number of individuals, oligarchs, business officials, who are one degree removed from the Kremlin, or the FSB, which, essentially, functions as a cartel, with Putin at the top and, you know, a government apparatus, but then these individuals report back, and they build relationships that connect back into the Kremlin.

So I think he would have certainly reported that back. And I think anybody who worked in the context of Ukraine and Yanukovytsch, who was essentially a Russian-backed corrupt figure, would know how Russians -- how the Russians operate.

MR. SCHIFF: And what do you think the Kremlin would likely do with that information, that the campaign manager for a U.S. Presidential candidate was

[REDACTED]

interested in collecting money and was offering information about the campaign?

MR. RHODES: I believe that they would interpret that as a signal of outreach. And, again, based on my understanding of Russian practice and, frankly, individuals who work in that orbit, the campaign chairman was experienced in that part of the world. He would know that that information would reach Russia and would be interpreted that way, in my -- based on my understanding of Russia and how they -- and the political environment in Ukraine.

[11:57 a.m.]

MR. SCHIFF: You talked a bit about Russian hacking and dumping in Europe, and information operations in Europe. One of the other tools the Russians used is financial entanglement. They've used it in Ukraine. They've used it in Moldova and elsewhere.

Can you talk about how the Russians, through oligarchs, use money to leverage political figures or business people?

MR. RHODES: Yeah. So what the Russians do, as a general matter, is they try to establish a relationship with people who are prominent. They may not know exactly how that relationship is going to benefit them in the long run, but they try to build contacts into Europe and the United States by establishing relationships with prominent people.

[REDACTED]

MR. SCHIFF: Are you familiar with an oligarch named Agalarov?

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. SCHIFF: He's one of the largest real estate people in Russia.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. SCHIFF: Some call him the Russian Donald Trump. Would there be an interest along the lines you described in establishing a relationship between

him and Mr. Trump?

MR. RHODES: Yes. Yeah. And, again, I think it's important, when Protokovsky (ph) was prosecuted, right, the message was, there's no such thing as a non-Putin oligarch. These guys all tie back into the Kremlin.

MR. SCHIFF: So if the Kremlin asked Mr. Agalarov to do something, he wouldn't be in a position to say no?

MR. RHODES: It's the price of being rich in Putin's Russia.

MR. SCHIFF: Now, in the email chain regarding the meeting at Trump Tower, the email chain indicates that Mr. Agalarov had a conversation with the crown prosecutor in Moscow that resulted in the delivery of the message that they had information that they would -- derogatory information about Secretary Clinton that they wanted to share with the campaign.

Is it credible that the Kremlin would have gone to Agalarov knowing of his relationship with Trump and said, we want you to make this overture?

MR. RHODES: Yeah, that's certainly credible. That's the -- that would be totally consistent with how they operate.

MR. SCHIFF: And have you seen evidence that the Russians used money laundering as a way of entangling foreign business people or political leaders that they wish to have a relationship with?

MR. RHODES: Yes. And we -- you know, there are very few U.S. sanctions regimes that don't run into that kind of entanglement, but yes.

MR. SCHIFF: Would the Russians use oligarchs -- I mean, would the Kremlin instruct an oligarch, for example, to launder money through a certain businessperson or political party or whatnot as a way of entangling them financially and also having potential Kompromat over them?

[REDACTED]

MR. RHODES: Yeah. There are two potential interests: One is that you just establish a relationship; but the other is, yes, you have potential Kompromat that Russian can leverage at the appropriate time. And they may wait a long time to do that or they may, you know, do that opportunistically at any moment. But they have relationships like that, you know, all over the world.

MR. SCHIFF: Thank you. I yield back.

BY [REDACTED]

Q Just a few questions, Mr. Rhodes. Thank you.

Just confirm for me, you did work as an official on the Obama election campaign in 2008?

A Yeah, '7 and '8.

Q '7 and '8. What was your capacity or role?

A I was a senior speechwriter and foreign policy adviser.

Q Okay. Would you say you were intimately involved with day-to-day affairs of the campaign since you were in charge of publicizing, for lack of a better word, the message of the candidate?

A Yeah. I worked, yeah, in the headquarters in Chicago.

Q Okay. During the time on the campaign, in 2007 and 2008, which would have been Obama -- President Obama's first term, during either the election period or the transition period, did you or anyone in the campaign, to your knowledge, ever meet with Russian officials or Russian affiliates?

A I did not. I certainly did not. I'm not aware of anybody who did.

Q Are you aware of any communications between the Obama campaign during the election period or transition period between Obama officials, such as

[REDACTED]

yourself and others, and the Russian Government or Russian affiliates?

A I'm not aware of any. I certainly didn't have any.

Q You didn't, okay.

A No.

Q And instead of the country Russia for the same series of questions, would your answers be the same for if we asked you in reference to, say, well, any country? Iraq? Iran? Israel? Turkey?

A I recall meeting with the British and maybe -- we traveled during the campaign to Israel, Germany, France, and the U.K., so there was certainly interactions with foreign governments. They were basically -- my recollection is, you know, a very small number of friendly governments to the United States.

Q So it's fair to say that the election officials for Mr. Obama, such as yourself, did have contacts with foreign government officials during President Obama's then first election campaign period and transition period?

A Yeah. But I would say, my recollection is that would be limited to, you know, close U.S. allies, basically.

Q Okay. But it wasn't -- it's not then uncommon for an election campaign and its officials during the election campaign and transition period to meet with officials of foreign governments?

A I think it -- I would say it's uncommon in the sense that during the campaign the interactions that we had with foreign governments were generally handled through foreign policy advisers to the campaign and not the senior campaign officials themselves.

So that's the slight distinction I would make is that, you know, the senior political leadership of the campaign, you know, was not the -- was not engaged

[REDACTED]

with those foreign governments when we did our trip. It was more handled through foreign policy advisers to the campaign.

Q And just two more matters, real quick, on behalf of Chairman Conaway, who is not here. He had to step out. Do you know or suspect who leaked General Flynn's name to the press?

A I don't know. And, again, I don't know, and I frankly learned a lot about issues in the press. So I don't have a -- I can offer guesses, but they'd just be guesses.

Q Would you consider that leak a leak of classified information?

A Oh, yeah, I would consider it a leak of classified information.

Q And, lastly, sir, there was a claim -- and I underline "claim" -- in an article of May of 2017 that while you were working on the campaign, for some reason you were deny a security clearance. Is that accurate in any way?

A At the conclusion of the campaign, you can -- you basically submit your materials for security clearance, and upon receipt of those, you can either be granted an interim clearance pending your permanent clearance or not. I was not granted an interim security clearance at the conclusion of the process in the transition. I was granted a permanent security clearance. And --

Q Was there a reason for that?

MR. GOTTLIEB: [REDACTED] I have absolutely no understanding of what relevance this bears on any of the parameters in the letter that you sent my client on June 14. He's sat here for over 2 hours now, voluntarily answering these questions.

You're getting into matters that involve personal security clearance details that are from more than 8 years ago now. And I'd like -- if you're going to go

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

down this road, I'd really like to understand what advance it bears to the parameters of the investigation, and I'd like to understand what doors you're opening up here because --

[REDACTED] No, it's fair enough. For Mr. Conaway, if it's your representation that it has nothing to do with the parameters of the publicly announced investigation, that representation is accepted in full. So is that the case?

MR. GOTTLIEB: What's that?

[REDACTED] If it's your representation that it has nothing to do with the publicly announced parameters, then that's accepted in full.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOTTLIEB: Yes.

[REDACTED] Fair enough. Do you have any information while you were in the campaign about any meetings that the Erik Prince may have had in the Shaeshelles (ph) or otherwise in relation to these --

MR. RHODES: No. I was -- you know, again, I learned about that meeting in the press.

[REDACTED] Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Gowdy.

MR. GOWDY: I'll be mindful of your time. I do appreciate you staying. I've got four quick things, and you would be a subject matter expert perhaps, maybe not. I'm going to butcher the names so I won't try to pronounce it. The President before Putin, there is a video clip sometimes shown on certain cable shows of President Obama having, what I presume to be, an off-the-mic conversation, and the word "flexibility" was used. That clip is shown a lot.

[REDACTED]

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: Do you know anything about it, what they were talking about, what the President may have meant by more flexibility in a second term?

MR. RHODES: Oh. My recollection is that was a conversation in Seoul at the Nuclear Security Summit, and they were discussing missile defense -- issues related to missile defense and arms control. That's about the extent of my -- I mean, that was 2012, I think, so that's about what I remember.

MR. GOWDY: All right. Yeah, it would've been before the President's reelection.

MR. RHODES: Yeah. And, I mean, basically my recollection is we'd -- after new START and our announced deployment of our missile defense systems in Europe had not made any further progress with Russia on discussions around missile defense and arms control, and, frankly, we didn't in the second term either.

MR. GOWDY: And I can't date it. I think there's also an incident where maybe the Secretary of State presented a button. Some have described it as an awkward button.

MR. RHODES: Yeah.

MR. GOWDY: It may have been Russian for reset. It may have been American for reset. It may have been southern for reset. I don't know. Do you know anything about that, what the purpose of that was, and what we were resetting?

MR. RHODES: Well, I remember the -- President Obama had referenced a reset with Russia. And when Secretary Clinton made her first trip to Moscow, she had some button with her, because the Russians had suggested an interest in

retaining the reset button.

I didn't, you know, have anything to do with the selection of a button as a manifestation of this. But, you know, she -- it was an effort to exemplify what was a broader reset in U.S./Russian relations.

What I will say, again, which I think is relevant to the parameters here, is that we pursued a reset with Russia in 2009, and, frankly, a lot of positive things came out of it: the new START treaty, transit to our troops in Afghanistan through the northern distribution network, and, importantly, the cooperation of Russia on Iran's sanctions under President Medvedyev.

We'd presumed that given then-Prime Minister Putin's influence that that policy of Russia reflected his interests as well. What we found is that when he reclaimed the presidency, the shift in Russian policy was dramatic.

And so I think an interesting question for Russia watchers, historians, whomever that perhaps this committee is, there was a more significant change from Medvedyev to Putin than I think was anticipated.

And Medvedyev may have been pushing beyond the -- in the reset, Medvedyev may have been pushing beyond the wishes of Putin in ways that, you know, clearly manifest after Putin reclaimed the presence.

MR. GOWDY: Two quick questions: Would you say Russia's efforts to disrupt any facet of our country, culture, elections, finances, would you say it dates back as far as 2012?

MR. RHODES: I would. I put the kind of point of origin of Russian aggression escalating to Putin reclaiming the presidency.

MR. GOWDY: And that was when?

MR. RHODES: In 2012. And he was -- I think he both came back with an

[REDACTED]

agenda to do that. He was also upset by protests of that -- of those elections and a fear -- I will say too, the combination of the Arab Spring and Qadhafi being killed in a sewer pipe, I think, had a profound impact on Putin. And he came back to power determined to not let anything like that happen in Russia.

And we saw much more hostile posture from him on every foreign policy issue on our agenda from the outset of his second -- or his latest term in office.

MR. GOWDY: I'll make one observation and then close with a question. Hindsight is always really good. Sometimes the future makes somewhat a prophet. I do remember in the 2012 election cycle, one of the candidates citing Russia as a threat to the United States, and maybe I have my chronology wrong. I think he was chided a little bit for citing that, and it may look a little more like a prophet than we thought.

Last question, the source of Putin's animosity and disdain for Secretary Clinton, what --

MR. RHODES: You know, my personal view of that is that it can be overstated. I think that she is -- my basic assessment is that what he really wanted to do is undermine U.S. leadership. I think he saw that the conventional political leadership in the United States as hostile to Russia, and invested in the trans-Atlantic relationship.

I frankly think he probably would have been as hostile to Jeb Bush as Hillary Clinton. So, I think, you know, yes, he did -- she was critical of the Russian parliamentary elections. I think he's generally been more condescending towards female political leaders, but frankly, I think what he really loathes is a U.S.-led international order that benefits from a conventional U.S. President.

And so I actually don't think, you know, while he may have had some

[REDACTED]

particular dislike for Hillary Clinton, I think it was more just that she represented a strain of American and western leadership that he was seeking to undermine.

MR. GOWDY: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what I hear you saying is if the GOP had nominated someone else, someone more hawkish, you mentioned Bush. A Lindsey Graham, someone like that, that they may not have played in the general election to the extent that they did?

MR. RHODES: That's what I believe, yes.

MR. GOWDY: All right. That's all I've got.

MR. ROONEY: Thank you very much.



[Whereupon, at 12:14 p.m., the interview was concluded.]



