

Gaslit Nation Transcript
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“Rigged: The David Shimer Interview”

Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestselling books, *The View From Flyover Country* and *Hiding In Plain Sight*.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*.

Sarah Kendzior & Andrea Chalupa:

And this is—

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm sorry, go on. What is this, Sarah? Go ahead.

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh, and this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the Trump administration and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

And today we have a very special guest, author and historian David Shimer. We're going to be discussing his new book, *Rigged: America, Russia and 100 Years of Covert Electoral Interference*. David is a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center For Scholars, and an associate fellow at Yale University. His reporting and analysis have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post* and *Foreign Affairs*. He is pursuing a doctorate in international relations at the University of Oxford as a Marshall Scholar, and he received his undergraduate and master's degree in history from Yale University. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*, David.

David Shimer:

Thank you guys very much for having me.

Andrea Chalupa:

So your book is absolutely fascinating. I read *Rigged* in two days. I just devoured it. What's really satisfying about *Rigged* is having gone through 2016—which felt like the mean, bigger sequel to Ukraine's revolution, which was Ukraine's long history of Kremlin election interference—we saw Putin throughout 2016. And it was very frustrating because it took a very long time for what was happening to come out into the open. So, reading *Rigged* and seeing the play by play of how 2016 was unfolding inside the White House, answered so many questions for me and also raised so many questions. So I'm really excited to have this discussion with you today.

David Shimer:

Yeah, that's very nice of you to say and I agree completely. I think that a big problem in our current discourse is that everything's dominated only by the latest breaking news, that we focus on one thing one day and move on completely to the next thing in subsequent days. Whereas, if we draw patterns, if we restore history to these subjects through not only 2016, but also as you said, what came before, in my opinion, everything starts to make a lot more sense and we could prepare for what's ahead in a much more comprehensive and effective way.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. And what your book does really well, so it's two parts. The first part of *Rigged* is all about the history of election interference between these two powers, these two different spheres of influence. And that's the rise of the Soviet Union versus the reaction to that of United States, the US response and the long history of that. And then the second part is about the case study. You slow down with the case study of 2016 and the Kremlin's attack on our democracy. And I think that's so fascinating just to open up with that history.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm just going to summarize. This is what it all seems like from reading what you wrote. According to your book, it seems like political warfare to invade another country by hijacking its election began, in terms of this big contest with Lenin and then Stalin. And the US started doing it to counter the growing Iron Curtain. And the US really gets into this, they believe, with purpose. There was always guys on the team in Washington that wanted to push things a bit too far, but largely in the beginning, the US and the CIA was trying to hold itself to a higher standard. But they were still doing this nonetheless.

Andrea Chalupa:

And then things seemed to take a really ugly, vicious turn under Nixon—as they did in a lot of areas—with the US becoming what it was trying to fight from the very beginning. And that is of course, with the coup in Chile. How would you sort of shape up that summary of this history?

David Shimer:

I think that's spot on. I think that this history started, as you said, with the idea of spreading communism, first by Lenin and then by Stalin, through an organization known as the Communist International in the interwar period, but then in the immediate post World War II period. As I detail in the book, Joseph Stalin's forces executed extraordinarily ambitious election interference operations across Eastern Europe with tactics that, in many ways, foreshadowed what Putin's doing today.

David Shimer:

It was after that, as you mentioned, that the US responded with its own form of covert action to interfere in elections in Italy in 1948. And we then saw in the Cold War a real symmetry in the KGB and the CIA going toe to toe in order to either support or defeat leftist candidates as part of this global battle for influence. And there were moments, as in Chile, where the US, which purported to be seeking to shore up democratic forces, actually ended up tearing down a democracy in the pursuit of its objectives in the downfall of Salvador Allende, which the CIA was very actively engaged in.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's just fascinating, the whole culture of it and how initially, the CIA, they saw themselves as the good guys preventing Italy from being swallowed up by the Iron Curtain which was growing across Europe at that time. They really saw themselves as the saviors of Italy.

David Shimer:

Exactly. I think there's a misconception that, if you ask folks who served in the CIA about operations to interfere in elections, that it would be sort of a gotcha question, or that they might be caught off guard or defensive. I found that to be anything but the case. I interviewed more than 130 people for my book, including eight former CIA directors and many more CIA officers, and whenever I brought up electoral operations, operations to interfere in elections in countries like Italy, or later, as I detail in countries like Serbia, as recently as in 2000, there was an unmistakable sense of pride actually. They thought this was the CIA at its best.

David Shimer:

Where the CIA was supporting parties that they associated with democracy, with money, with advice, with propaganda in order to steer countries in the direction of "the good guys," as you said. I think that for them, this history is not something to be ashamed of. And my argument, rather than issuing some sort of judgment about this history, is that we just have to recognize that the history exists. We can't pretend that it doesn't, and we should be learning from it because there are so many lessons to draw from CIA operations, as there are from KGB operations and Putin's operations all over the world, in seeking to figure out how to defend our democracy right now.

Sarah Kendzior:

This is jumping ahead a little bit because, of course, we're going to discuss the 2016 election and the assertion that the Kremlin changed vote tallies, but given that you saw this openness with CIA officials and former CIA officials that you interviewed about prior elections, what explains the refusal to be forthright with the American public when our own elections were under attack from a combination of domestic actors within the Trump campaign, but also foreign backers, most notably Russia, but with the participation of other foreign agencies?

Sarah Kendzior:

Andrea and I at the time, in 2016, saw this as a severe national security threat, a non partisan national security threat on the sovereignty of the United States. Yet overall, the intelligence community was very quiet. And I know there's protocol about these things, but this has always seemed like a moment where if you just blindly follow protocol without thinking about the repercussions, you're dooming this country to its demise. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Andrea Chalupa:

Well, that's part two of the book.

Sarah Kendzior:

Okay. [laughs] Nevermind.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. Go on, David.

David Shimer:

I think that something that's important to remember about 2016, is it really was a historical watershed in that prior to '16, from America's perspective, the American experience was that no previous American election had been manipulated in a meaningful way. As I detail in the book, the KGB did target US elections in 1960, '68, '76 and '84 in order to actually damage Republican candidates—Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan—who the Soviets associated with being contrary or damaging to its own interests and security.

David Shimer:

But those operations were quite limited. They never really got off the ground. Although again, the tactics behind them did serve as a precursor to what Putin then did. But my broader point here is that in 2016, I think there was a lot of time spent trying to get people's heads wrapped around—inside the government—around an unexpected threat. People say very openly in my book, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Deputy Secretary of State, the Deputy CIA Director, they all say that no one really saw this coming, Russia attacking our election at scale.

David Shimer:

And as I detail in the second part of my book, there were many factors at play that I'm sure we'll talk about as to how to respond to Russia's operation. I would say that I interviewed 26 of President Obama's former advisors. Very clearly, everyone was acting in the best of faith. Everyone was trying to figure out how to respond to this operation in the most effective way, but I do think there was also a degree of unfamiliarity with that process, with how to defend a nation's electoral sovereignty in our experience, which as you said is somewhat ironic, because not only the KGB, but also at times in history, American intelligence have actually manipulated the electoral sovereignty of other nations at scale.

David Shimer:

So there are a lot of aspects to this history that really overlap and intersect. But I think in 2016, first and foremost, our government was caught off guard.

Andrea Chalupa:

I think a great companion to *Rigged* is the first three episodes of *Gaslit Nation*, where we go into 2016 like a crime scene. Because when we talk about how caught off guard the Obama White House was, and for somebody that was following Ukraine so closely for years, and what Putin was doing there against Ukraine's democracy, for me, we all knew who Paul Manafort was. He was Putin's Darth Vader. So for us, we were not caught off guard. Ukrainians were not caught off guard.

Andrea Chalupa:

And that's what made it sort of so shocking that Obama's White House would be caught off guard. And you open up part two of your book of the 2016 crime scene through the voices of Obama's Russia desk, the Russian experts, Victoria Nuland and [Celeste] Wallander. And it's so chilling to open up 2016 through these two women, who played the role of the "hysterical women," "the paranoid women" who were trying to warn everyone and came right away with a solution, saying they know Putin psychology, you've got to be tough, you've got to deter him, or he's going to keep on pushing. And they were largely dismissed.

Andrea Chalupa:

And by the time Obama's team, his core team, Susan Rice and others, had taken this very seriously, it gets lost into this Veep TV show of debating, "Do we do this? Do we do that?" And you're wondering what happened to the two women on the Russia desk that were right from the very beginning that everyone should have been listening to? And they were dismissed initially, as you point out in your book that somebody has a comment saying, "Oh, it's the paranoia of the Russia desk again." So could you talk a little bit about that?

David Shimer:

Absolutely. I think that, as you said, folks who had been tracking what Russia had been doing in Ukraine and it's near abroad and in various other countries in seeking to interfere in their electoral processes sensed what was happening earlier than folks who had perhaps a broader portfolio did. And in the spring of 2016 and the early summer, Victoria Nuland and Celeste Wallander, who were the most senior Russia experts in the White House and in the State Department were worried and warning that Russia was targeting the American election.

David Shimer:

Nuland explained to me that at first, she thought it was just to discredit the legitimacy of our election, not necessarily to help one side or the other. But after the DNC emails were released, the fact that Russia was seeking to advantage one side became much clearer. But that sort of kicked off a process where, in July, as I reveal in the book, Nuland, Wallander and a couple other senior government officials were running a committee in which they were developing retaliatory options that could be imposed on Russia that summer by president Obama in order to respond to the forms of interference they'd seen already and deter further interference in the 2016 election.

David Shimer:

These included things like revealing private information about Vladimir Putin and his associates, about his dealings, about his background, that he might not want released in order to signal that he's vulnerable too, perhaps. And that was the top recommendation in a classified memorandum that Celeste Wallander submitted to her superiors in August. But the message that Victoria Nuland got back, as she recalled to me, from her superior, John Kerry, the response that Celeste Wallander got back from her superiors was, "Either we got this, or we're going to wait until after the election to impose costs on Russia."

David Shimer:

And so that committee, their retaliatory options were sidelined. And there was a higher level debate amongst the deputy secretaries and secretaries—so deputy level committee and the principals committee—over what to do about the Russia threat, in conjunction with that committee's work. And they considered many options. They discarded things like spreading disinformation. John Brennan explained to me that he would have been adamantly opposed to that step, but they considered very similar things to what that committee with Nuland and Wallander had discussed. Things like imposing economic penalties.

David Shimer:

The Deputy Secretary of State told me they considered whether to "suffocate" the Russian economy. That would have amounted to more or less political or economic warfare. They considered diplomatic penalties, they considered cyber penalties. They came out thinking economic penalties would be the

most advantageous to deploy, but as it turned out for reasons that we can discuss as well, the Obama team decided that in fact, it was better to wait to impose costs on Russia until after the election because the risks of punishing Russia outweighed the potential benefits and it was better to pursue a different line of response.

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Sarah Kendzior:

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Andrea Chalupa:

It's clear from your book, the experts on Russia inside his administration said, "You have to hold him accountable now, or he's going to keep going." You have to hold the line. And that's how Ukraine has been really good at catching Russia and deterring Russia and exposing Russia. You've got to be strong. They only understand strength in Moscow. And here, it's just clear quicksand of deliberations. Obama and his core team just went head first into quicksand, instead. That's what plays out later, which is so infuriating.

Andrea Chalupa:

And clearly, the pressures that they felt under, the pressures that, frankly, they succumbed to, were that they were afraid of—obviously by punishing Russia outright with these sanctions and so forth—they were afraid that they were going to burn their sources. Which was a valid fear, because they invested all this time, money, resources, in developing extremely valuable sources across the Russian government.

Andrea Chalupa:

So that's fair. Innocent lives that were helping our country, helping Russia, quite frankly, trying to free Russia from Putinism, that's valid. Innocent lives hung in the balance there. And then the other fear was that if they came out and did something like holding Putin accountable as that crime was being committed by Moscow, that maybe that would infuriate Moscow so much that they would just go ahead and change the vote tallies. And that was the big, big red line that Obama said. He wanted to protect the actual tampering of the vote itself.

David Shimer:

Precisely. And I was somewhat caught off guard by that. I didn't fully understand that at the outset of my research, but it became very evident to me over the course of my interviews with many of his

cabinet secretaries and deputy secretaries and senior advisors, that that fear, that that possibility of Russian tampering with the actual vote was what captivated the Obama team's response and focus in the summer and fall of '16. And it's essential to understanding what actually happened in our government.

David Shimer:

In the history of covert election interference, there are always two ways to interfere in an election, always. Either to change actual minds with propaganda or otherwise—

Andrea Chalupa:

Money. Money is a big one.

David Shimer:

Money, propaganda by funding campaigns, by spreading disinformation, by hacking and dumping, by spreading materials across social media, all the things we're familiar with. Exactly. But the second way to interfere in an election is to change actual ballots, to manipulate actual election systems. Both have a history to them. Typically, changing minds is both more common and easier.

David Shimer:

But in the summer of 2016, president Obama knew that Russia was seeking to manipulate minds by releasing emails. But he also knew that Russian intelligence was systemically targeting, probing and penetrating our election systems. And the calculation was made inside the White House that while things were already bad because of that first Avenue of efforts to manipulate people, they could be a whole lot worse if Russia sought to actually sabotage our voting process. And so the focus was on preventing that escalation and every move that they made.

David Shimer:

Whether it be considering a critical infrastructure designation, trying to get the congressional leaders to issue a robust statement about election security, and reaching out with DHS to state officials to try to shore up their systems. It was all about election, the actual voting systems. And something that his advisors made very clear, senior most advisors, was that his foremost priority above all, “profoundly”, in the words of one of those advisors, was to make sure the actual conduct of the election was stable.

David Shimer:

And so the emails were considered something that perhaps could be responded to later after the election. And by the way, there was a very limited understanding at the time inside the administration, as to what Russia through the Internet Research Agency was doing across social media.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. They were focused on the vote tally itself. There wasn't an understanding or priority of the sweeping social media campaign and the bot and how that was hacking minds and tipping the scale. And what was really infuriating about part two of your book, is the realization—as obvious as it is—but just the reminder that throughout 2016, as they were debating this internally, they knew that Putin ordered this attack on our democracy. They knew this went all the way up to Putin. And that was not known during the election itself.

Andrea Chalupa:

And when all of us that were ringing the alarm on this, independently, through public domain research and having studied history, we of course looked crazy. And a lot of what comes out in the book is how people like us, and of course, Hillary Clinton—who was pointing out what was going on—we were basically, people like us and namely Hillary Clinton, we were sort of hung out to dry, essentially. Because we didn't have the cover of the authority of the President of the United States to say, "Our election is being attacked by Vladimir Putin." To me, that's one of the big mistakes they made with not pointing that out in the middle of that crime.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah. And I just want to add one thing to what you say before David responds. Even if you were just a casual observer of what was happening during the summer of 2016, we did have sources of authority that showed that this was not some sort of spurious claim or conspiracy theory. We had Harry Reid writing his letter to James Comey, asking him to tell the public that the Kremlin had the capacity to potentially change the election results, and then wrote him again in October.

Sarah Kendzior:

We had Hillary's speeches of it, which okay, fine, you dismiss those as partisan. But then you had Trump at the July 27th press conference, openly asking Russia for Hillary's emails. And I know that this is covered in the book, but can you explain to our audience, when there is this amount of public coverage, to give these statements credibility, if Obama were to tell the public, "Yes, the Kremlin is trying to interfere in the election and yes, the actual vote tallies are at risk." Why did he not use all those examples of public domain information to make his case?

David Shimer:

In hindsight, I think it's very clear to many of President Obama's advisors that they should've hit Russia harder and sooner—they say so in the book—and that they should have been perhaps a bit louder in raising awareness around Russia's operation and done so again, sooner. I think at the time, because it's very important and I really try to put my head inside what their perspective was then, not how it appears now because things are so much clearer now is how everything played out.

David Shimer:

And I think there are two things to keep in mind as to how things looked then. One, as you mentioned, is it had to do with sources and methods. It had to do with the idea that if they moved against Russia too soon, that they would have limited insight into what Russia was going to do next, which could have included affecting the actual voting process, manipulating vote tallies, manipulating voter data, sabotaging our election process itself.

David Shimer:

The second was keeping in mind, to that point, that the Russian objective above all, was to degrade our democracy, to sow discord, to undermine confidence in the democratic process. And there was the argument presented by Jim Comey and others, that if you were to say that Russia is executing this operation, if you were to draw attention to Russia's operation, that that would actually undermine confidence in the election, that the American people would say, "Wait, is our election compromised? Is therefore our process of succession no longer legitimate?"

David Shimer:

And in the backdrop of that, having one of the two major party candidates saying, "The election is rigged, the election is rigged," that put the Obama team in a very difficult position because their goal was to make the election appear as unriggered as possible. The underlying assumption being that...Jim Clapper and Jay Johnson recognized in the book, they say the underlying assumption though, was unsaid, was that Donald Trump was going to lose.

David Shimer:

So the idea was, how do you hold a stable election in which the people have confidence and in which the outcome is respected? And from that vantage point, I think drawing too much attention to Russia's operation was seen as perhaps the wrong thing to do, whereas managing the Russia threat, seeking to prevent Russia from escalating towards sabotaging our voting process—which would hypothetically have provided Donald Trump with fodder to say that the election was in fact rigged, if there was some anonymous disruptions in polling places, irregularities in the vote—to prevent that from happening was seen as the imperative.

David Shimer:

In hindsight now, it's much clearer that the influence campaign was more wide reaching than it was understood at the time, that it had the potential to be more effective than it was given credit for at the time, and that the outcome or perceived outcome or likely outcome of an election should not be incorporated into policy making when you're trying to defend against the electoral operation, because that is, as you said, a national security threat that demands a national response.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. And we're going to try not to take our anger out on you [laughs] because you wrote the book. But there's so much frustration about this, because again, it goes back to the two Russia experts, the two women, Wallander and Nuland, who were like, "This is how Putin works. This is the only language he understands, is strength. This is how you've gotta hit him back now, or he's going to keep going." And it just got bogged down in the calculating quicksand.

Andrea Chalupa:

And it's so crazy to see all these different characters play out. You had Comey, who was sort of like the deadbeat intel leader, who was like, kind of shrugging it off and really triggering Harry Reid to go public like a firebrand and put in that public letter what was going on, saying, "The election itself is at stake." And thank God he did that. And then you have Mitch McConnell, ugh, who is just so repulsive in any book that he's featured in, but his gross defiance of refusing to come together as a nation to confront this national security threat, this threat against our sovereignty. And even Paul Ryan comes out looking good as the Republican House leader. You've got to be pretty disgusting as a human being when you, Mitch McConnell, have the ability to make Paul Ryan look good and decent.

David Shimer:

I mean, I have a very particular perspective here, which is that the politicization of this issue is both damaging and self defeating, but it's also ahistorical. Because as I mentioned, the Russians, back in the Cold War, targeted Republican campaigns. They went after Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. It just so happens that today they're trying to help a Republican. But the objective of Russia is to sabotage our democracy, to choose our leaders for us and to undermine the democratic process as a viable form of

governance. And that should offend all Americans—Mitch McConnell, and Paul Ryan, as well as Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer—regardless of the party loyalties of those Americans.

David Shimer:

Because what this is really about is trying to corrupt and transform our democratic system. And in terms of understanding the context in '16, again, the perception of the American public, I think, is that Russia's operation was just the emails and social media. But it's that third component, the exposure of our voting systems, that in my opinion, really is essential to understanding what happened in our government and also to understanding the threat landscape we face today.

David Shimer:

Because if Vladimir Putin achieved anything, high on that list is his interplay of two types of electoral interference. To be running that influence campaign with social media propaganda and with the stolen emails while also showing our government that he had the capability to manipulate our actual election systems. And that threat—that second threat—froze our government, captivated our government to the point where on election day itself, as I reveal in the book, the White House and the Department of Homeland Security were running secret crisis teams, bracing for a Russian cyber attack against our election systems. That attack never manifested itself. But again, all the while, millions of Americans were being manipulated by Russian propaganda.

Andrea Chalupa:

Absolutely. And just to summarize what Obama's response ultimately was, Jay Johnson, who was the head of Homeland Security at the time, he was walking a tightrope, politically. In America, we have this whole tension between...the states have state's rights. So as the federal government, he didn't want to come in saying, "Okay, all you states, we're now going to control how you vote and make sure your systems are secure." He had to gingerly come in, and that was so out of the TV show *Veep*, how he was trying to, like, couch what he was saying and come in non-threatening.

Andrea Chalupa:

And meanwhile, you had Brian Kemp, who was Secretary of State of Georgia, writing some horrific op-ed saying, "Oh, the federal government is trying to seize how we vote," and rallying up a backlash against the Department of Homeland Security's attempts to secure our elections.

Andrea Chalupa:

Because really the elections are determined by the states and that's why we have this hodgepodge of a system. And so here you had that reality crashing on the shores of the Obama White House, where they had to address, "Okay. So our big vulnerability is Putin can come in and all he needs to do is tweak the vote in a couple of key precincts in a couple of key swing states, and that can tip the scales."

Andrea Chalupa:

So the only solution they saw to address that, to get in front of that, wasn't to seize control of the entire country's voting systems—which would be extremely difficult to do—they instead put on their little velvet gloves and watched their language and everybody was all hands on deck trying to edit a statement that they were going to make public and it watered down the statement and it was barely...no one really paid attention to the statement anyway, because the Access Hollywood tape dropped which overshadowed everything. And then the Podesta emails leaked through the Kremlin cutout of WikiLeaks.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so it just took on this tragic comedy. It was just so surreal, all the sort of caution, the caution that ultimately did them in, I would say.

David Shimer:

I think caution is a very spot on word as to the approach that was taken at the time. And then I think there was frustration thereafter where, as you mentioned, the two Russia experts—Victoria Nuland and Celeste Wallander—they expressed very clearly their frustration that there was so much focus on our election systems and so little focus on Russian efforts to influence voters when in fact the history of Russian interference shows us that the Russian tradition is to influence voters, to manipulate people, whether it be in Ukraine, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, I mean all over in certain places in Latin America across, really, as I say, the last 100 years, but including in our present moment, let's say over the last 10, there's a wider story here. And the Russia experts were aware of that and we're trying to sound the alarm regarding it.

David Shimer:

But on a broader level, there was this idea that a couple email dumps isn't enough to really dupe the American people. And I think it wasn't until after the election that you started to hear President Obama publicly say that he had underestimated the opportunity the internet had afforded to manipulate the American people in a much more wide ranging and potentially effective way.

Sarah Kendzior:

In addition to just the caution, the hesitancy, and having to balance hyper partisanship and national security, there's also the issue of threats. And we've seen this all throughout the Trump administration, officials saying, "Yes, I was personally threatened" by Trump or his goon squad—Marie Yovanovitch, Fiona Hill, Alexander Vindman and so forth—so you have this mafia culture of personal threat. And in addition to that, you have national security threats. You have the saber rattling of nuclear war. You have the fact that the Russians have been nosing around our power grids, and according to John McCain, have the ability to hack our power grids and bring them down. We had prior hacks on the DOD, the State Department, the DNC, the RNC, numerous private companies, obviously, people's private emails, where Hillary Clinton's email ironically was the one that could not be hacked.

Sarah Kendzior:

It's so difficult for me to see the naivete on display here, even as it's documented, when these threats and successful hacks were carried out while Obama and his team were in office. So if I were them, I'd be hyper aware of these threats because they hadn't just happened to other countries around the world. They had already been happening to the United States and an election is a natural evolution of that. Did they comment on that culture of threat at all, either on a personal level or a national security level?

David Shimer:

Yeah. And I would say, I think there is a degree of candor that I think is important, in the book, by President Obama's chief advisors, especially on pages, I think 154 and 155 of my book, where they say, "We were wrong. We were naive. We thought that Russia's game plan was to manipulate elections in other countries, but we didn't think they were going to target our own elections." So I don't think you would meet much pushback, particularly from a certain circle of his inner advisors, regarding sort of the failure to anticipate that Russia would apply this global playbook to US elections.

David Shimer:

I also think that there was, in terms of the threat landscape by Russia, I think that the infrastructure threat that you mentioned—things like power grids—was much higher in people's minds than this effort to manipulate people, as I talked about. And I think that we should not dismiss the amount of focus that was given to the infrastructure piece of things before election day. I do think that that was the priority; that's why president Obama issued a warning to Vladimir Putin in person. It's why they were running the crisis teams that I mentioned. It's why even a few days before the election, Michael Daniel, the cyber security coordinator, sent a warning to his counterpart in Moscow saying to cease and desist the scans and penetrations of our voter registration databases.

David Shimer:

But the problem here is that, as I said, there are two ways to interfere in an election: by manipulating people and manipulating ballots. And to defend an election is to defend against both threats.

Andrea Chalupa:

So which of your sources that are on record, obviously, which of them did you find the most forthcoming where talking to you was like, "Finally I can come out and say everything."? I imagine Victoria Nuland was a lot of fun to interview.

David Shimer:

Yeah. I'll answer the question with specific people, but generally speaking, I was really surprised and grateful for how forthcoming almost everyone I interviewed was. These weren't five-ten minute interviews, or these weren't email interviews, these were hours and hours of talking, all with the recorder on, about really trying to get our heads around this threat. Not just around the play by play of 2016, but the real goal here—the reason I wrote this book—is to take 2016, to take all those historical operations that came before it that we've mentioned, to really draw from that storied and fascinating history lessons that we should be applying to our current moment, because history, in my opinion—facts, patterns—are the weapons we should be using to secure our democratic processes today. And it's really just willful blindness if we act as though the threat of Russian interference is brand new, because in doing so, we lose much of our advantage in seeking to defend against this threat.

David Shimer:

But in terms of the interviews that I really enjoyed, I spent about five hours with a former KGB general Oleg Kalugin and that was illuminating. He really was willing to get into the Soviet perspective, to talk about how he perceives Putin, to talk about the appeal of covert election interference from the perspective of Moscow, and to talk about our own vulnerabilities—America's vulnerabilities—and how Moscow seeks to exploit them along racial, religious, ethnic lines. I thought that, as you said, Victoria Nuland and Celeste Wallander were very willing to talk about their experiences in the administration and why they were pushing to hit Russia in the summer, and why those efforts ultimately did not bear fruit until after election day itself.

David Shimer:

And beyond that, I thought John Brennan, Jim Clapper, Tony Blinken, Avril Haines—all of whom were very senior advisors to President Obama in 2016—all spent with me very considerable amounts of time, really walking through these issues and seeking to help me get my head around, "Okay. Why was it so difficult to respond to Russia's operation at the time? And what should we learn from that experience as we seek

to defend against this threat in the future?" So I think, for me, the real heart of this book is the interviews that underlie it, which helped me to restore this hidden history of covert electoral interference that spans the past century and is, as we've seen, living and breathing today as Russia targets the 2020 election.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm glad that you put this chronology out there and that you captured this history before it gets erased, because I think there's going to be a concerted effort by the Trump administration and others to do that. I'm just curious, kind of looking to the future. Let's say by some miracle we have a free and fair election and Biden wins, do you think there's going to be new strategies in place to avoid all of this happening again?

David Shimer:

I would think so. I think there's been a noticeable shift in tone by the public statements made by Joe Biden regarding Russia's interference in this election where he's said if countries interfere in this election and he's elected, there will be consequences. There has been a big push by democratic lawmakers to get as much out there about Russia's operation as possible, to send letters, to call for more briefings. I think there's a broader understanding of the fact that the more facts available to people, the better. That this is really, again, a tradition of manipulating citizens, so we should be giving citizens the information they need to defend themselves.

David Shimer:

And then I think more broadly, there will be a more strategic response that won't be reactionary but rather proactive in seeking to shore up our defenses at home and deter aggression abroad. And I think if we do both of those things, we're not going to be able to resolve this threat completely, because this is a timeless threat. Democracy is by nature penetrable, that's something that just comes with holding an open election. But I think we can do a much better job in managing this threat and in seeking to make it as marginal in its impact as possible. And therefore to preserve our sovereignty in this new digital age in which it's so easy to either get inside systems or to spread propaganda in far reaching ways. And that's just a consequence of the world we now live in.

David Shimer:

But there are certainly things that I believe and as I map out that we can and should be doing to show that democratic governments can, in fact, still hold elections in which the people have confidence in the 21st century.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. And the same vulnerabilities exist today. So what Jay Johnson, the former head of Department of Homeland Security, was pointing out to you, that you only need to hack a couple of key precincts, either scrub people from the voter rolls by altering their voter registration so they show up to vote and they can't vote or they're forced to do some other way that might get discounted easily if they don't fill out some alternative form correctly, or the vote tallies. It doesn't take much, as Johnson pointed out in your book, to hack a US election and the system of the electoral college. The fact that we have an electoral college that trumps the popular vote makes it so much easier to do that because you only have to focus on a couple precincts in a few key states. So that vulnerability remains today.

David Shimer:

I think so. I'm sure, and I've read about and I've talked with Trump administration officials about how DHS is trying to respond to that exposure. But as you said, because of the decentralized nature of our election administration system, we're only as strong as our weakest link. If one state isn't doing what it should be in terms of securing its voting systems, its voter databases, that therefore leaves our country exposed because if the objective is just to undermine confidence in an election—let's say it's not to flip the election, but it's just to make people not believe that the election was legitimate and to provide fodder for that kind of confusion, which really gets at what Russia wants for America, to tear down its democratic environment—then just scrambling or messing with one state can have a really outsized impact.

David Shimer:

And that's why I think understanding the environment on election day 2016, which I get into in chapter 11 of my book, is really important. I had President Obama's Deputy Homeland Security Advisor say to me, "Everyone was prepared for the worst case scenario." They had a big crisis team—or a pretty big crisis team—running in the White House bracing for a cyber attack. They had a DHS team that Jay Johnson had ordered formed bracing for a Russian cyber attack on election day. I had John Brennan say to me that Russia did have the capability to alter the voter data and vote tallies of US citizens, that, again, that Homeland security officials said they were bracing for interference with the voting record with voting systems.

David Shimer:

And as you said, Jay Johnson was worried about data being manipulated in key precincts. So this was at the forefront of concern for the highest ranking national security officials in our government. And of course what's changed since 2016 is that the current president has solicited rather than sought to deter foreign interference. So, whereas president Obama sought to establish a red line—as his team put it to me—regarding the escalation toward vote tampering, there's been no response at the presidential level to this threat. In fact, the president has said he doesn't really believe it exists while also inviting countries to interfere in our politics, not just Russia, but also Ukraine and China. I think we should be clear eyed about our own vulnerabilities and how they have the potential to be exploited in the coming months.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah. I'm curious about what's in store for the future because Trump is clearly acting out of a culture of impunity. Nobody's sought to hold him accountable in real time, whether for crimes he committed before becoming the president or during his administration. We had a very weak and narrow impeachment. And one thing I am afraid of is that if, let's say again, Biden gets in, that there's going to be tremendous pressure on him to not have a new investigation about the hijacking of the 2016 election that involves all of this information that's in your book, for example, vote tallies being changed. These are things that were not previously investigated that much by Congress in a public forum.

Sarah Kendzior:

And instead it's just going to be like, "Oh, let's move on. Let's put the past behind us." I don't know how you put this past behind us, because as you've said, we need to have a historical record. We need to have the facts presented to the public. And while it's good that officials are being forthcoming to you and your book and more so in the public domain, I'm still very concerned about this and that we're going

to end up in the same place. What do you see in store in terms of thorough investigations into what happened in 2016?

David Shimer:

I feel increasingly confident that we have as much information as we really can regarding '16. I mean, I think not just the Mueller investigation but the great reports that the Senate put out, some of which are still classified, but the picture is coming into fuller review. And I also think that, while saying that, a lesson of this history is to be humble in terms of the fact that there's only so much a targeted democracy can know. Many of the operations I detail in my book only came to light decades after they took place because the government that actually executed them either opened up or officials in it started talking.

David Shimer:

So I agree with you that there are pieces still to learn, but also I am grateful for the fact that there have been official investigations that have been publicly released that have helped us to get a clearer sense of what Russia did, at least in '16. I would say on the issue of whether vote tallies were altered, something that President Obama's chief advisors—his Head of National Intelligence, his Chief of Staff, his National Security advisor—they all told me they saw no evidence while they were in government, that Russia actually manipulated our voting systems or the voting record. They didn't say that it couldn't have happened. They didn't say the possibility was 0%, they just said they saw no evidence of it.

David Shimer:

But Harry Reid did say to me on the record in my book as well, that he does believe, in fact, that Russia did alter the vote count in order to swing the election to Trump. But I would say that he, too, didn't have evidence of that other than the fact that we were vulnerable and that Jay Johnson expressed to him our vulnerabilities.

David Shimer:

In terms of what to expect now, I think it's very clear. I think Russia has two things that it can do moving forward. I think between now and the election day, Russia has to decide how far to push in seeking to manipulate voters with propaganda, that first track of electoral interference. And then on election day itself and its immediate aftermath, Russia has to decide whether to escalate toward disrupting our actual voting process, which is probably, I would expect, a more appealing proposition given how unstable our voting process already is as a result of the coronavirus. So it wouldn't take much to really throw us into chaos.

David Shimer:

And Russia has, for example, sabotaged voting systems in countries like Ukraine. This goes back historically to when Joseph Stalin's forces changed vote tallies and voter data in countries across Eastern Europe in the immediate postwar period. So, there is that possibility. And we've seen Russia escalated on election day in other countries, too, like in Montenegro where there was an attempted coup against the president of Montenegro, who I also was able to interview for the book and to talk through with me the threat that his country is facing from Russia.

David Shimer:

I think those are the two tracks that we need to watch out for. In terms of what's then to come, I would hope that there will be a determined effort by our government moving forward to figure out where

things actually stand with our election security and how to move forward in as well advised way as possible. But I think for now, the next few months are going to be so turbulent that it's almost difficult to say what investigations will be needed given that we have to see as well what issues are spawned as we move through this very unpredictable election cycle.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. And a big tool of attacking a nation's sovereignty is, of course, money. Money. That was a theme throughout the first half of your book where you go into the long history of this and all the different tools that were used. In 2016, it was the NRA that was funneling all that Kremlin dark money to the GOP. And so that could be going on today through some new conduits and we may not be aware until after the fact.

David Shimer:

I found the dark money point a bit less concrete—I agree—than these other forms of interference that I'm talking about. But I would say, however, that one point to keep in mind is that, I at least would argue the need to funnel money is much less present today than it was historically. Because historically, this was a very physical exercise, to interfere in an election. It was about spreading physical pieces of propaganda like posters, pamphlets, and leaflets. It was about bribing people to run articles in newspapers or to run, act as cutouts on television or radio. Very physical process.

David Shimer:

But with the internet, it makes it so that something that was once physical has become transnational, that rather than actually having to be in an affected country, you can basically run a shadow campaign from thousands of miles away that you're running on your own. For example, the IRA. It's monthly budget exceeded one and a quarter million dollars by the fall of 2016. It's project focused on the US had more than 80 full time employees. And that was just Russian money going into a Russian operation to target our election. There was no need to transmit those millions of dollars to the Trump campaign because Russia could basically run its own campaign from St. Petersburg or from Moscow that could penetrate not only the minds of American voters but also our own election systems.

David Shimer:

So if I'm in intelligence service today, I would argue that money leaves a trail. It's detectable. If you get caught, it can undermine the person you tried to help, whereas by just funneling money into your own operation and manipulating Americans directly—because of our connectivity that makes it possible, that leaves people's hands perhaps cleaner, and it makes it so that you're protecting the people you're trying to help, who in this case would be the Trump campaign, but in the future, it's hard to say who Russia will seek to support.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. Certainly. But there was obviously a big money trail from Russia in 2016 and that also went to Facebook. All the ad buying and the-

David Shimer:

Exactly.

Andrea Chalupa:

What's really funny throughout your book is how you present the easy mark for Kremlin election interference. The easy mark being a politician in a foreign country like Germany who is a bit of a louse, he's a drunkard, he cheats on his wife, he really loves women [laughs], he's got some debt. And it's just the easy mark the Kremlin looks for in order to pull the puppet strings. Even though you're using historical examples, it's such a foreshadowing of Trump being an easy mark for Kremlin interference and Kremlin engagement.

David Shimer:

Yeah. And I love that story, the 1972 story, which in brief is that, there was a vote of no confidence in the West German Chancellor at the time, Willy Brandt that would have ousted his government which was pursuing policies that Moscow liked, that the Soviets liked. So they decided, "We want to try to keep them in power." So they had the Stasi, and also on their own accord, the Stasi being East German intelligence, seek to target and turn parliamentary voters to get them to abstain from the vote and therefore protect Brandt.

David Shimer:

So they targeted these two guys, Julius Steiner and Leo Wagner, who were as you said, gamblers, debtors, womanizers, who were leading very exotic private lives that made them vulnerable to recruitment and to manipulation. So this was a very, again, physical process of targeting voters, figuring out who people are and how they could be manipulated.

David Shimer:

And I interviewed one of the intelligence officers from East Germany who now lives outside of Berlin who helped execute this operation. And as it turns out, they were able to draw those two men in to get them to abstain, and then Willy Brandt ended up surviving the vote of no confidence by two votes. So if those two men who were supposed to have voted against Brandt had done so, his government would have collapsed, and the trajectory of not only West German, but really Cold War history would have changed.

David Shimer:

So these operations can have a real effect and often be hidden from public view in the process. This operation didn't come to light for decades because of its clandestine nature and its targeted nature. And what the internet has done is made it so that it's so much easier to discover things about people. Whereas Wager and Steiner, they had to be studied, they had to be spied upon, intelligence on them had to be collected.

David Shimer:

Today, everyone's making things about themselves known based on what they do on the internet, which groups they belong to, what they say on social media. It's a lot easier to get to know people and when you know someone, it's a lot easier to manipulate that person. And that's a pattern of this history that the kind of interference that's most effective is the kind of interference that's targeted that plays upon people's pre existing biases and preferences and prejudices. And the internet makes all of that known in a much more accessible way than was the case, let's say, 40 years ago, when the private lives of every citizen was much more secure than it is right now.

Andrea Chalupa:

So reading your book, these light bulb moment memories were coming back to me from 2016. For instance, I remember, obviously as we've said a million times in this interview, we knew what was happening. The crime was happening in plain sight for us who were Russia watchers for so long. So when really bizarre things would happen, like in 2016, in September, Putin's favorite chauffeur is driving down a busy highway in Russia and suddenly the car explodes. You know? And then there's a Russian diplomat who is found dead in the Russian consulate in New York City on the US election day. And then you end 2016 with a string of mysterious deaths of Russian diplomats. In all your research, from all the conversations you have, do you see those mysterious occurrences as related at all in the spy craft of what was happening in this long history of spy versus spy?

David Shimer:

Well, the thing it makes me think about is that historical record. What can be told or uncovered in 20 years or 30 years? In the East German story I just talked about, Horace Kop—who was the officer I interviewed—he started talking, once the East German state had collapsed and he was comfortable publishing a memoir and I was able to get to him and interview him for half a day. So the question on my mind as a historian, as well as an analyst, is that let's say in 30 years, if Vladimir Putin's no longer in power, will there be paper records, will there be advisors, who are willing to talk about what it was like concocting and executing this operation from the Russian side?

David Shimer:

Only then will we really have a complete picture of what happened in 2016, because we can do everything we can as the attacked democracy to put the pieces together, to try to get a broad understanding of Russia's operation, but the people who know what Russia did are the people inside the Kremlin. And I worry that if those folks are no longer alive or that if those folks aren't willing to talk, or if archives aren't maintained, it will be perhaps impossible to get the kind of 100% clarity over what happened in 2016 that I, as a historian, of course, am itching to have.

Andrea Chalupa:

And I just thought of something, because Putin has been very good at weaponizing a lot of wonderful liberties we take for granted, like social media and the power of organizing online and all these things. I wouldn't put it past Putin, given how the opening of archives have been so invaluable to exposing the full atrocities of Stalin, who has been resurrected under Putinism as a great hero. I wouldn't put it past Putin to weaponize the archives, have his agents go in and sprinkle disinformation, knowing that inevitably archives are going to do what archives do. And they might put things in there to try to throw us off the trail. So heads up for that in 20 years.

David Shimer:

That's a really good point. I would say something that really is unique about him—and this is often thrown around as an aside—is that he was a KGB officer. But it really matters. I interviewed for the book Bill Clinton about his early interactions with Vladimir Putin, and he said, "The guy was really smart and he was really in some ways blunt. I couldn't get a full read on him, but that much was clear." And I think that, keeping in mind what Vladimir Putin's personal history is, that he learned in his early years, how to actually act as an intelligence officer, how to achieve large ends with limited means, how to target and manipulate people. These are skills that are central to covert election interference.

David Shimer:

So when you get to our current moment, when he's basically acting simultaneously as the head of the Russian state but also really as it's chief intelligence officer, he can do things like what you said—sprinkle disinformation in archives—that I don't think would be necessarily obvious to a leader who didn't have that lived experience.

David Shimer:

I also think that there's a degree of paranoia built into his worldview around what the CIA is doing because of his upbringing as the KGB officer in his formative years. Something that many of the CIA officials I interviewed emphasized—the folks who served in Moscow or the folks who were running the agency—is that Putin thinks that America is out to overthrow him, that America is trying to stage some sort of revolution in Moscow as it is in other parts of the world against leaders like him, and therefore, he actually views his response as a very defensive one. That he's seeking to defend himself, his way of life, and to push back against this idea that liberal democracy is the end of history and anyone who doesn't abide by that vision doesn't have the right to be leading a state.

David Shimer:

So his perspective matters, and I do think it traces back to where he comes from and how he was brought up. That is in a very adversarial context from that of the American one and how we view the world, or at least as America has traditionally viewed the world in terms of what kind of government is a better kind of government.

Andrea Chalupa:

So recently, there was a letter produced by a group of Russia watchers, including Fiona Hill, which was calling for a reset with Russia in order to try to stabilize relations between the US and Russia during a time of heightened tension. And this letter was very shocking because Fiona Hill is considered a highly respected Russia expert and obviously we all saw how well the last reset with Russia went. There was a reset between the US and Russia, and then Ukraine gets invaded, and then civilians in Syria get slaughtered by the Russian military and so forth.

Andrea Chalupa:

And that letter by Fiona Hill and others got major pushback. David Kramer and another group of respected Russia watchers wrote their own letter saying, "Hell no, we're not going to do a reset with Russia. That's not the language that Vladimir Putin understands." So what are your thoughts on that, in terms of as we move forward, there's going to be this reset debate, dear God. What are your thoughts on a reset in general when it comes to relations with Russia under Putin?

David Shimer:

I would be very surprised if a full blown reset caught any momentum, especially given what's been happening in recent weeks around skirmishes between US troops and Russian troops in Syria. There are reports of Russian bounties on our troops, around Russia's renewed interference in the 2020 election. I think there are too many strands of Russian aggression to really justify just a writ large reset approach. I think, as is always the case with the US government, if there are opportunities to engage with Russia that advances America's interests, then I think America would take advantage of it.

David Shimer:

And by always a case with US governments, I mean, past, before this administration and also in a hypothetical Biden administration. I think this administration is a bit of an anomaly. But I think that if there was a chance to do, for example, work on nuclear arms, I think that's something that would be embraced. But for that to then be blown up into a full on reset, I don't think that makes much sense based on where things are. And I think that rather, there will be an effort to bring—or should be—the democracies of the world together to both detect and deter Russia's new forms of aggression.

David Shimer:

I think America should be investing in itself, in rebuilding and enhancing its domestic structures to make us more fortified against Russian subversion. And I think we should be helping other democracies do the same while also imposing costs on Russia if it violates our sovereignty or sovereignty of our peer allies. I think that you can have both of those things at once. You can have fortifying our nation and those of our peer democracies while also seeking to find opportunities to work with Russia in a constructive way. But I think to not do that first part, to not take steps at home and abroad to defend ourselves would be a grave mistake given that Russia has shown no signs of letting up on this type of political subversion that it's been executing with such regularity over the last decade.

Andrea Chalupa:

I mean, you can never trust the KGB. And a part of that is because they will never trust us. And so you cannot have a partnership with this war mentality between these two powers. I'm haunted by images of John Kerry as Secretary of State walking around with his counterpart Lavrov, trying to negotiate some peace deal with Syria and just getting pulled around by the nose, basically. There's no negotiating with terrorists. There's no negotiating with the KGB. And your solutions that you presented just make perfect sense. And I hope if we do get a Biden administration, I hope you'd have a seat at the table in helping them learn from this history.

Andrea Chalupa:

So between now and the election, what do you think Congress should do to help us protect our elections from another Russian attack?

David Shimer:

To your earlier point, one thing I would say too, quickly, is that we should be under no illusions, that the threat of Russian interference will cease if Donald Trump were to lose. Because something that I did uncover in my book is that Russia's operation in '16 started in 2014 before Donald Trump had even announced. John Brennan and Jim Clapper told me that Russia expected Donald Trump to lose and that Russia had plans to continue interfering in our politics after the election in order to undermine a Clinton administration.

David Shimer:

So this is not just about Donald Trump. Donald Trump, for Russia, is a means to an end, but the story of Russian interference precedes and will outlast his political career whenever his presidency were to end. And we should be clear eyed about that as we seek to formulate a sustained effective response to this threat of really corrupting our democratic processes from within.

David Shimer:

In terms of what the Congress can be doing, given how little time there is, I don't think it's realistic to see really groundbreaking legislation around election security or around social media companies that I would be in favor of. But what I do think the Congress can do is push as hard as possible for transparency from our intelligence agencies and from the White House, in terms of getting as much information as possible made available not just to our lawmakers, but to the American people, to raise awareness around this threat while also seeking to restore confidence in our election process.

David Shimer:

Because again, the Russian objective here is in part to make Americans believe that their election isn't real, that the result can't be trusted and that it's impossible to know who really won. And so I think lawmakers have a role to play in rebutting that line of argument and just pushing to get information to the public and writing letters, as has been done, saying that sanction should be imposed on Russia for its interference operation. Because even if the Treasury Secretary or the White House doesn't do that, it is sending a signal to Russia that this type of behavior will experience or bring about consequences in some form or another, in some future or another.

David Shimer:

And then I do think, beyond lawmakers, it really falls on the American people to be engaged, to care about efforts to violate their democratic sovereignty, to vote, to be discerning in the types of facts and information they're taking in between now and election day. Because if citizens don't care if their democracy is under attack or if their democracy is being corrupted, then the fight for election integrity is in many ways lost. So, I think that while lawmakers can be doing what they have been doing, I also hope that there is not apathy among the public as to the importance of being able to hold a stable, free and fair election, regardless of who wins. Because if we're not able to do that, that means that the American system is in real trouble.

Sarah Kendzior:

Well said.

Andrea Chalupa:

This was fantastic. Really, David, thank you so much for your book. Everybody check it out. *Rigged* is a must read book to understand how we got here and what we need to do about getting our sovereignty fully protected. So thanks for coming on Gaslit Nation. We hope to have you back again.

David Shimer:

Thank you so much for having me. This was a really great conversation and thanks for the kind words about the book.

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues, and you can get access to that by standing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

We want you to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand. We also encourage you to donate to Direct Relief, at [directrelief.org](https://www.directrelief.org), which is supplying much

needed protective gear to first responders working on the front lines in the US, China and other hard hit parts of the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

We encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization, helping refugees from Syria. Donate at rescue.org. And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans, already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.org. Gaslit Nation is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check out our Patreon, it keeps us going. And also subscribe to our new YouTube channel.

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