# Continuities and Discontinuities in Covert Operations to Interfere in Democratic Votes of Succession

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DPhil in International Relations in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford

Hilary Term 2021

Word Count: 85,651

# Abstract

In the international system, states have historically carried out covert operations to interfere in the votes of succession of foreign democracies. In the 20th century, such operations relied upon physical tools; more recently, they have relied upon digital ones. This thesis asks, why and how has the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession evolved in the digital age? In investigating this question, this thesis examines three cases of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession, in Italy in 1948, in West Germany in 1972, and in the United States in 2016. This thesis then structures its cross-case analysis around identifying continuities and discontinuities across these operations. Based on this three-pronged small-N study, I argue that core features of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have remained constant over time, but that the reach and the penetrability of the internet have enabled states to engage in such operations with greater efficiency than was possible in the pre-digital era. The findings of this thesis hold significance for any democracy seeking to defend its electoral processes in the digital age. The continuities identified herein reveal the timeless methods of interfering actors, while the discontinuities reveal what about these operations have changed amid the spread of the internet and why democracies have become more exposed to external penetration in the process. More fundamentally, this thesis offers a roadmap for understanding covert interference in democratic votes of succession as a distinct and evolving phenomenon in international relations with which democracies will continue to grapple.

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# Introduction

## 0.1 Overview

The United States was under attack, and its president, Barack Obama, was unsure how to respond. It was August 2016, and the Russian government was in the midst of covertly interfering in America's election. The threat felt unfamiliar. So Avril Haines, the deputy national security advisor, and other senior Obama administration officials turned to history. They requested a report on Moscow's previous attempts to covertly influence U.S. elections. Before responding to Russia's ongoing operation, America's most senior foreign policymakers thought to study past instances of covert operations to interfere in democratic processes.[1]

Since then, Russian interference in America's 2016 election has received ceaseless attention. Analysts have treated Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, as if he were the first leader to interfere in a foreign election.[2] But he did not create this practice. Of Russia's 2016

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***Introduction***

[1] Avril Haines, interview by author, New York, February 23, 2019; Avril Haines, "Trump's 'Ridiculous' Spy Claim," interview by Michael Isikoff and Dan Klaidman, Skullduggery, Yahoo News, May 25, 2018, https://play.acast.com/s/skullduggery/fde1e146-e0a5-4a7a-b580-73a1bb048840.

[2] Molly McKew, an expert on information warfare, described Putin's operation as "unprecedented" in a long-form article about his foreign policy. See Molly McKew, "Putin's Real Long Game," *Politico*, January 1, 2017, https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-trump-sanctions-news-hacking-analysis/. In June 2018, the then U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats said, "Russia conducted an unprecedented influence campaign to interfere in the U.S. electoral and political process." See Karen Yourish and Troy Giggs, "8 U.S. Intelligence Groups Blame Russia for Meddling, but Trump Keeps Clouding the Picture," *New York Times*, August 2, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/07/16/us/elections/russian-interference-statements-comments.html. And in a September 2018 retrospective, *New York Times* reporters Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti portrayed Putin's operation as tactically novel and strategically genius, writing, "To many Americans, the intervention seemed to be a surprise attack, a stealth cyberage Pearl Harbor, carried out by an inexplicably sinister Russia. For Mr. Putin, however, it was long-overdue payback, a justified response to years of 'provocations' from the United States." See Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, "The Plot to Subvert an Election," *New York*

operation, John Brennan, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from 2013 to 2017, told me, "People who don't know what they're talking about refer to it as unprecedented."[3] From Washington to Moscow, foreign policymakers have long sought to manipulate democratic votes of succession, whether a presidential election, a national referendum, or a parliamentary vote of no confidence. In these operations, the hand of the interfering actor is hidden by design, and the goal is to influence a vote that will determine another country's leader.

Russia's operation was only the latest chapter in the extensive and intricate history of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. The report submitted to Haines captured part of this story: past examples of Russian interference in U.S. elections. Various countries, though, have engaged in such operations, and they have targeted votes around the world. What changed in 2016 was the relative exposure of the United States, which once frequently interfered in electoral processes abroad but is now unable to safeguard its own electoral processes. Examining why, a clear turning point emerges: the spread of the internet—and the connectivity, vulnerabilities, and complexities that have accompanied it.

This thesis analyzes the arc of covert interference in democratic votes of succession in the post-World War II period, questioning what about Russia's meddling abroad is new and what is not. It identifies continuities and discontinuities in these operations—involving their makeup, design, scope, and accessibility—as the world has become more interconnected. Above all, it seeks to answer the question: why and how has the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession evolved in the digital age? This thesis argues, in summary, that core features of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have remained constant over

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*Times*, September 20, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/20/us/politics/russia-interference-election-trump-clinton.html.

[3] John Brennan, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 10, 2018.

time, but that the reach and the penetrability of the internet have enabled states to engage in such operations with greater efficiency than was possible in the pre-digital era.[4]

## 0.2 Method and Significance

This thesis examines three formal cases as part of a three-pronged small-N study. The cases under analysis are (1) American interference in Italy's 1948 election; (2) East German and Soviet interference in a 1972 West German vote of no confidence; and (3) Russian interference in America's 2016 election. All of these cases are instances of one phenomenon: covert interference in a democratic vote of succession, the primary unit of analysis and defined as *a concealed foreign effort to influence a democratic vote of succession.* Together, these cases empower me to examine how the independent variable—the digital age—has affected the dependent variable, the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession.

A small-N case-based approach best fits the complex nature of the research question under examination, because:

(1) this thesis includes a "how" question, and, compared to quantitative methods, "case studies remain much stronger at assessing whether and how" questions;[5]

(2) small-N case studies are typically used for exploratory research, while statistics is often used for confirmatory research. No academic has yet explored the evolution of covert

[4] For more on efficiency and covert interference in democratic votes of succession, see page 15 of this thesis.
[5] Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 25.

interference in democratic votes of succession amid the spread of the internet, justifying an exploratory, small-N approach;[6]

(3) the examination of a small-N rather than large-N set of cases allows for a "detailed consideration of contextual factors."[7] This thesis devotes significant attention to contextualizing each of its cases, given the many decades that separate them;

(4) a small-N model is generally used to obtain "useful generic knowledge of important foreign policy problems" from historical episodes, a central aim of this thesis;[8] and

(5) compared to a large-N statistical model, a small-N analysis is better suited to studying cases with useful variance between them, as these cases have.[9]

I purposefully restricted my cases to operations ordered or executed by either the United States or the Soviet Union/Russia. While other countries have meddled in democratic processes abroad, Washington and Moscow—the great powers for most of the postwar period—are the pioneers and lead executors of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession.[10]

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[6] John Gerring, "What Is A Case Study and What Is It Good For," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2, (2004): 352. See also Dan Slater and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Enduring Indispensability of The Controlled Comparison," *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 10 (2013): 1313.
[7] Bennett and George, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 19.
[8] Ibid, 58.
[9] Gerring, "What Is A Case Study and What Is It Good For," 352.
[10] For example, China has targeted elections in Taiwan and Australia in recent years. See Joshua Kurlantzick, "How China Is Interfering in Taiwan's Election," Council on Foreign Relations, November 7, 2019, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-china-interfering-taiwans-election; Ben Blanchard, "Taiwan President Says China Interfering in Election 'Every Day,'" Reuters, November 19, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-election/taiwan-president-says-china-interfering-in-election-every-day-idUSKBN1XT145; Colin Packham, "Exclusive: Australia Concluded China Was behind Hack on Parliament, Political Parties—Sources," Reuters, September 15, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-china-cyber-exclusive/exclusive-australia-concluded-china-was-behind-hack-on-parliament-political-parties-sources-idUSKBN1W00VF; John Garnaut, "How China Interferes in Australia," *Foreign*

And importantly, other researchers have begun assembling a universe of cases for U.S.- and Russia-led operations. Professor Don Levin has found that, between 1946 and 2000, the United States and Russia interfered in 81 and 36 foreign electoral processes, respectively.[11] Levin classifies nearly two thirds of these operations as covert.[12] For twenty-first century operations, the U.S. Congress and nonpartisan organizations like the Alliance for Securing Democracy have published reports on Russian interference abroad.[13] These datasets served as a foundational resource from which I drew as I examined the following covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession before selecting my three case studies.

*Figure One: American and Soviet/Russian operations to interfere covertly in democratic votes of succession examined preliminarily by the author*

| Targeted Country | Interfering Actor | Year |
|---|---|---|
| Italy | Washington | 1948 |
| Japan | Washington | 1950s – 1960s |
| The United States | Moscow | 1960 |
| Chile | Washington and Moscow | 1964 |
| Guyana | Washington | 1964 |
| Guyana | Washington | 1968 |
| Chile | Washington and Moscow | 1970 |
| West Germany | Moscow | 1972 |
| France | Moscow | 1974 |
| The United States | Moscow | 1976 |
| El Salvador | Washington | 1984 |
| France | Moscow | 1988 |
| Nicaragua | Washington | 1990 |

*Affairs*, March 9, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-09/how-china-interferes-australia.

[11] Don H. Levin, "Partisan Electoral Interventions by the Great Powers: Introducing the PEIG Dataset," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 36, no. 1 (2016): 94.

[12] Ibid, 95.

[13] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,* 115th Congress, 2nd session, 2018, S. Report 115-21, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf; Oren Dorell, "Alleged Russian political meddling documented in 27 countries since 2004," *USA Today*, September 7, 2017, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/09/07/alleged-russian-political-meddling-documented-27-countries-since-2004/619056001/.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Serbia | Washington | 2000 |
| Ukraine | Moscow | 2014 |
| The United Kingdom | Moscow | 2016 |
| The United States | Moscow | 2016 |
| Montenegro | Moscow | 2016 |
| France | Moscow | 2017 |
| Colombia | Moscow | 2018 |
| The United Kingdom | Moscow | 2019 |

Several factors influenced my selection of cases from within this larger pool of operations. First and foremost, each of my cases can be studied through oral and archival sources.[14] But I did not choose my three cases merely because they are researchable, a common pitfall of case-based projects. A small-N study of diverse cases involves "the intensive study of a single unit or a small number of units (the cases), for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units (a population of cases)."[15] To that end, I selected cases that capture two relevant subsets of covert interference in democratic votes of succession: operations that took place prior to the spread of the internet, and those that took place after it. It would be impossible to answer my research question without studying operations that occurred before and since the advent of the *digital age*, defined as a shift that took place during the first decade of the twenty-first century, when, David Levy and Rasmus Nielsen write, there was a "rapid spread of increasingly sophisticated forms of internet access and use throughout the developed world and in many

[14] On the process of case selection, John Gerring and Lee Cojocaru write, "If sources are unreliable, scarce, or for one reason or another inaccessible, the case is of little value." See John Gerring and Lee Cojocaru, "Selecting Cases for Intensive Analysis: A Diversity of Goals and Methods," *Sociological Methods and Research* 45, no. 3 (2016): 410.
[15] John Gerring, "The Case Study: What It Is and What It Does," *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, September 2009, https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604456.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199604456-e-051.

emerging economies."[16] This thesis is structured around cases that encompass these two subsets. The first two cases under examination involved no digital tools, while the third relied entirely on such tools. Further, while each case is an example of covert interference in a democratic vote of succession, each is distinct in its participants, makeup, and design, allowing me to generate more robust comparative conclusions.[17]

As for my specific cases, I chose operations that were extensive in their scope and ambition, and therefore offered more insights than comparatively limited operations. Before picking my first case study, in Italy, I examined other Cold War-era operations to interfere in national elections, one type of democratic vote of succession, in countries like Japan, El Salvador, and France. I found that the CIA's operation in Italy was the most substantial in its budget and complexity, and that it subsequently became a model for CIA officers across the world. By examining the Italian operation, this thesis therefore illuminates how intelligence services could influence foreign electorates at scale without digital tools.

My second case study, in West Germany, demonstrates how interfering actors once targeted voters on an individual basis and sought to manipulate ballots directly. Democratic processes of succession involve more than just national elections. For a complete picture of the pre-digital capabilities of interfering actors, I examined covert operations targeting parliamentary

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[16] David Levy and Rasmus Nielsen, *The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy* (Oxford, Eng.: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2010), 7. In the year 2004 alone, Facebook was founded, Google launched Gmail, and Amazon announced its first-ever full-year profit. See Harry McCracken, "How Gmail Happened: The Inside Story of Its Launch 10 Years Ago," *Time*, April 1, 2014, https://time.com/43263/gmail-10th-anniversary/; Ellen Rosen, "Student's Start-Up Draws Attention and $13 Million," *New York Times*, May 26, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/26/business/students-startup-draws-attention-and-13-million.html; Saul Hansell, "Amazon Reports First Full-Year Profit," *New York Times*, January 28, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/28/business/technology-amazon-reports-first-full-year-profit.html.

[17] Slater and Ziblatt, "The Enduring Indispensability of The Controlled Comparison," 1312.

motions that determined a country's leader, another type of democratic vote of succession. I investigated several of such operations, including CIA interference in Chile in 1970, and found that the operation against the 1972 West German vote of no confidence was comparatively ambitious in its objectives and sophisticated in its design. The West German case sheds essential light on how, prior to the spread of the internet, interfering actors could study and manipulate specific voters ahead of pivotal democratic votes of succession.

The third case, in the United States, reveals how Russia used the internet to achieve the aims of both the Italian and West German operations: to influence a foreign population and to do so in a targeted manner, while also accessing the ballots of actual U.S. voters. Before selecting the American operation, I researched Russian interference in recent democratic votes of succession around the world, from Ukraine and the United Kingdom to Germany and Montenegro. But uniquely, Russia's operation against the United States included the full spectrum of its modern interference toolkit: social media manipulation, the theft and release of private documents, and the direct infiltration of voting systems. The American case, more than any other, captures the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession in the digital age, and therefore serves as the natural point of comparison to the Italian and West German cases in attempting to analyze continuities and discontinuities in this practice amid the spread of the internet.

The significance of the topic underlying this thesis is considerable. There currently exists no piece of academic literature that studies why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age. The very practice of interfering in foreign electoral processes received little attention until 2016, when Russia targeted America's election. Then Putin struck, and the vulnerabilities of democracy were laid bare. "The American

populace understands now—to a much greater level than the past—what hybrid warfare is, what political warfare is," Nadia Schadlow, a former deputy national security adviser to Donald Trump, told me. "In a sense, that is a good thing; that is a silver lining to this: We're a bit less naïve."[18] The challenge now is to treat Putin's operation as the evolution of a concept rather than its creation. The stakes for democracies could hardly be greater. Denis McDonough, the White House chief of staff in 2016, commented that the threat of Russian interference is "not just a question of whether you're getting a piece of information on your Facebook feed," but of whether democracies can choose their leaders free of foreign influence in the digital age. "It's an open question," he added—one that this thesis examines closely.[19]

### 0.3 International Relations and Covert Interference in Democratic Votes of Succession

The core concept of this thesis is *covert interference in democratic votes of succession*. Together, its three components—covert, interference, and democratic votes of succession—determine the scope of this study.

By focusing on *covert* operations, this thesis excludes efforts where the hand of the interfering actor is meant to be attributable, such as election monitoring efforts or public endorsements, like Barack Obama's overt support for Britain's Remain campaign in 2016.[20] Instead, this thesis examines covert operations, defined as efforts "to influence political, economic or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the… government

[18] Nadia Schadlow, interview by author conducted by phone, November 9, 2018.
[19] Denis McDonough, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2018.
[20] In a column, Obama urged the British people to vote to remain in the European Union. He wrote, "The European Union doesn't moderate British influence – it magnifies it." See Barack Obama, "Barack Obama: As Your Friend, Let Me Say that the EU Makes Britain Even Greater," *Telegraph*, April 23, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/21/as-your-friend-let-me-tell-you-that-the-eu-makes-britain-even-gr/.

will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly."[21] Critically, the consequences of covert action can and often must be visible. "[Covert] does not mean 'secret,' in the sense that the activities are hidden, but rather 'non-attributable,' in that the government's responsibility for these activities is not disclosed."[22]

Second, by focusing on *interference* operations, this thesis only examines operations in which a foreign actor deploys *active measures*, defined as "activities intended to influence a person or government that are carried out in coordination with, or at the behest of, political leaders," including through the "establishment or funding of a front group… covert broadcasting… media manipulation… disinformation and forgeries… funding agents of influence… [and] assassinations."[23] In an interview, Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB general, told me that Soviet intelligence used active measures to "influence public opinion" and manipulate "the direction" of other countries.[24] In fact, as this thesis demonstrates, the CIA, the KGB, and Putin's Russia have all deployed active measures against democratic processes overseas.

Third, by focusing on democratic votes of succession, this thesis concerns itself only with *votes* that determine another country's leader. Staged protests or coups, while historically significant in regions like Latin America, do not involve democratic votes of succession and therefore fall outside the bounds of this study. As a result, this thesis revolves around the vulnerabilities of *democracies,* defined by John Dryzek and Patrick Dunleavy as states in which

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[21] Sec. 503 (e) of the National Security Act of 1947 [50 U.S.C. 413b], accessed through https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ic-legal-reference-book/national-security-act-of-1947.
[22] Martin Bimfort, "A Definition of Intelligence," *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall 1958 (declassified: September 1995), https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol2no4/html/v02i4a08p_0001.htm.
[23] U.S. Congress, Senate, Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, S. 133, 115th Congress, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/133/text.
[24] Oleg Kalugin, interview by author, Rockville, MD, August 7, 2019.

"periodic elections determine how the legislature is constituted and who shall hold the executive power of government" and where there exists "free and fair competition among candidates and political parties."[25] No vote is ever entirely free and fair, but this thesis is concerned with *foreign* disruptions to democratic votes of succession, and on the power those operations have to corrupt and undermine democratic governments.[26]

Some further bounds are needed to keep my analysis precise. The focus of this thesis is on the evolving practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession, which includes the scope, design, reach, accessibility, purpose, and costs of the cases under examination. Additionally, this thesis places particular emphasis on analyzing each case's efficiency, defined as *the ratio of the work done to the effort and resources used by the interfering actor*.[27] The characteristic of efficiency is distinct from that of effectiveness; the former focuses on the process of covert action, whereas the latter focuses on the degree to which covert action helped to achieve a desired result. As part of my analysis, I elaborate upon, when possible, the effectiveness, or impact, of the Italian, West German, and American cases, but measuring effectiveness is not the purpose of this thesis, as the precise impact of covert interference

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[25] Patrick Dunleavy and John Dryzek, *Theories of the Democratic State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 18.

[26] A country can hold elections, of course, but not be a democracy, as captured by Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas's *How to Rig an Election* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018). Larry Diamond of Stanford describes the democratic model as including four basic elements: not just 1) a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections, but also 2) the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; 3) protection of the human rights of all citizens; and 4) a rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens. See Larry Diamond, "What Is Democracy," lecture at Hilla University for Humanistic Studies, Hilla, Iraq, January 21, 2004, https://diamond-democracy.stanford.edu/speaking/lectures/what-democracy.

[27] This definition builds on that of the Oxford Reference, which defines efficiency as "the ratio of the work done to the effort used." See https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199231805.001.0001/acref-9780199231805-e-1040.

operations often cannot be ascertained. Rather, my aim is to examine why and how the aforementioned aspects of these operations have changed in the digital age and, after examining each case in isolation, to structure my cross-case analysis around continuities and discontinuities in covert interference in democratic votes of succession as the internet has taken hold.

This endeavor is a matter of International Relations, which as an academic discipline aims, in part, to explain how states operate in the international system. Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil write that "attention to problem solving is necessary… for progress in International Relations research," including works that "can make us understand problems of strategic interactions among actors."[28] This thesis is such an undertaking. It analyzes how states have interfered in democratic votes of successions, across generations, to influence the trajectories of other states, and why the digital age has affected the efficiency of these operations. Examining this topic contributes to our understanding of interventionism, asymmetric warfare, and hybrid warfare, all of which feature prominently in International Relations literature.

Several foundational concepts in International Relations are relevant to this study. The first is the concept of *power*. Many International Relations scholars have written about and

[28] Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, "Rethinking Asian Security: A Case for Analytical Eclecticism," in Allen Carlson, Peter Katzenstein, and J.J. Suh, *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004), chap. 1. Furthermore, as Stephen Van Evera writes, there are seven types of dissertations in political science: 1) a theory-proposing dissertation; 2) a theory-testing dissertation; 3) a literature-assessing dissertation; 4) a policy-evaluative or policy-prescriptive dissertation; 5) a historical explanatory dissertation; 6) a historical evaluative dissertation; and 7) a predictive dissertation. This thesis encompasses the fifth and sixth types, as it seeks "to explain the causes, pattern, or consequences of historical cases," as Van Evera writes of historical explanatory dissertations, as well as to analyze what "guided official or unofficial policy actors" within those cases, as Van Evera writes of historical evaluative dissertations. See Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), chap. 3.

defined power.[29] From the existing literature, this thesis adopts Robert Dahl's definition of power: *A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do*.[30] For the purposes of this thesis, power comes from the influence one state ("A") holds over another state ("B"). A state can use covert action to increase its power in the international system, whether by establishing influence over another state, undermining a rival's influence over another state, or undermining a rival directly and, in doing so, disrupting that rival's influence over other states. Alternatively, a state can use covert action to guard its power in the international system, often by maintaining its influence over another state. In either scenario, power is vital to understanding the basis for covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession.

Linked to power is the concept of *security*, which helps explain why states target democratic votes of succession. This thesis treats security as a value, per Arnold Wolfers, "of which a nation can have more or less and which it can aspire to have in greater or lesser measure."[31] Much has been written about the sprawling nature of the concept of security.[32] This thesis builds on the work of Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong and defines the pursuit of security as *a state seeking to minimize threats to its survival, welfare, and identity*.[33] Under these parameters, security-based concerns can include ideological, economic, or military factors, or a

[29] For alternative definitions of power, see Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 39–75; David A. Baldwin, *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[30] Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 202–203.
[31] Arnold Wolfers, "'National Security' as an Ambiguous Symbol," *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1952): 481–502.
[32] Ibid, 484.
[33] Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong, *Human Security and the UN: A Critical History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2.

combination thereof, since each of these factors can impact the welfare, identity, or survival of a state.[34] A desire for security, in one form or another, clarifies the motivations behind operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession.

When targeting such votes, interfering actors seek to *achieve change* or to *maintain the status quo*, a distinction that serves as an important point of reference throughout this thesis. The writings of John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz elaborate upon each of these approaches. Mearsheimer posits that states "look for opportunities to increase their own power" in the international system by catalyzing change, whereas Waltz posits that states seek to "maintain their position in the system" by preserving the status quo.[35] Whether a state is working to achieve the former or the latter outcome is a difference that helps illuminate the purpose of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession.

Regardless of its purpose, any covert operation against a democratic vote of succession necessarily violates the *sovereignty* of the targeted country. Hans Morgenthau defined sovereignty as the "impenetrability" of the nation; others have argued that sovereignty means being "free from all foreign authority" and is "violated when external actors influence or determine domestic authority structures."[36] Covert interference in a democracy's process of succession targets the precise moment when that democracy's authority figures are chosen and therefore targets the *electoral sovereignty* of that democracy. When such activity is discovered,

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[34] David A. Baldwin, "The Concept of Security," *Review of International Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 15.
[35] John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 329; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 126.
[36] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 301; Robert Jackson, *Sovereignty: The Evolution of an Idea* (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity, 2007), 10; Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 20.

the benefiting candidate fears losing his *electoral legitimacy*, without which citizens will consider him illegitimate and indebted to a foreign actor.

And finally, the tension between liberal ideals and realist considerations in American foreign policy is pertinent to aspects of this thesis. As Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow write, understanding a state's foreign policy requires taking into account "the government machine—the organizations and political actors involved in the policy process."[37] Realists would take no issue with a democracy interfering in another democracy's process of succession, since, per Waltz, a state's pursuit of its security "is neither moral nor immoral but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us."[38] Liberals, however, would oppose this practice; thinkers like Michael Doyle have argued that "states have the right to be free from foreign intervention" and that there is a "cooperative foundation for relations among liberal democracies."[39] In Washington, the balance of influence between these dueling perspectives has evolved over time, in part based on the threat environments of the moment. As Michael Walzer argues, at times of supreme emergency—when a state perceives its survival to be under threat—standard "rules can be and perhaps have to be overridden."[40] While American officials have often described covert interference in democratic votes of succession as wrong, during moments of perceived emergency, they have nevertheless acted as realists and authorized such operations. Understanding why and when they have done so elucidates the relationship between democracies and a policy of covert interference in the processes of succession of peer democracies.

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[37] Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (London: Pearson, 1999), 5.
[38] Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 238.
[39] Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1983): 213.
[40] Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 33–34.

## 0.4 Core Arguments

The core argument of this thesis is that core features of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have remained constant over time, but that the reach and the penetrability of the internet have enabled states to engage in such operations with greater efficiency than was possible in the pre-digital era.

This argument can be broken down into various subcomponents. The first is that core features of covert interference in democratic votes of succession have *not* changed in the digital age. This practice has always taken two forms: changing actual ballots and changing voters' minds. The former can range from falsifying vote counts and buying votes to blackmailing voters and hacking into voting systems; the latter, from influencing foreign media and spreading propaganda to leaking salacious information and funding political campaigns. The purpose of twenty-first century operations is not new, either: for the interfering actor to assist a friendly candidate and undermine a threatening one, in service of its security interests and power in the international system. Voters, once aware of a covert campaign to influence them, have always struggled to accept that they may have been played. And across history, the mere discovery of such an operation can divide a nation. From Italy, to West Germany, to the United States, this thesis recognizes and learns from these patterns.

Still, this thesis argues that the digital age has enabled states to interfere in democratic votes of succession with increased efficiency. Regarding operations to alter actual votes, digital connectivity has enabled hostile actors to penetrate the ballot box in wide-reaching and accessible ways that require less effort than pre-digital practices. During the Cold War, interfering actors needed some combination of personal relationships, physical access, and bribes to change actual ballots. This is no longer the case. Today, an interfering actor can alter votes,

add artificial votes, or manipulate voter registration databases, so as to disqualify citizens from voting, all without being physically present in the impacted country. In 2016, for example, Russian hackers targeted the voting systems of at least 21 U.S. states.[41] That summer, the White House received ceaseless reports of Russian intrusions into electoral systems. "Every single day, we were getting reports that this system had been scanned, this system had been penetrated," Michael Daniel, the White House cybersecurity coordinator in 2016, told me.[42] Based on all available evidence, Russia did not manipulate America's voting systems, but the prospect of such an attack played a key role in convincing President Obama not to retaliate against Russia for its other forms of electoral interference. Instead, Obama settled for a policy of *managed interference,* defined as *whatever a targeted democracy perceives to be an acceptable level of foreign interference in its electoral processes,* rather than push back prior to Election Day and risk provoking Russia into directly altering the vote count.[43]

The reach and penetrability of the internet have likewise caused the second type of covert interference in democratic votes of succession—efforts to influence voters—to become a more efficient exercise. For much of the twentieth century, the CIA and the KGB poured time and resources into foreign countries, funding political parties, supporting news outlets, and building

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[41] Callum Borchers, "What we know about the 21 states targeted by Russian hackers," *Washington Post,* September 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/09/23/what-we-know-about-the-21-states-targeted-by-russian-hackers/.

[42] Michael Daniel, interview by author conducted by phone, July 19, 2019.

[43] Within the Obama White House, a fear of provoking Russia into altering votes and voter data was one of several concerns that dominated internal debates over when to retaliate against Putin for interfering in the 2016 election, based on my interviews with twenty-six former advisors to Obama. Other factors that convinced the Obama administration not to impose costs on Putin prior to Election Day—all of which are detailed in chapter three of this thesis—included the near universal expectation that Hillary Clinton would win, a reluctance on the part of Obama to be seen as using national security to advantage her candidacy, and an incomplete understanding of the scope of Russia's operations across social media.

relationships with influential figures. These laborious tactics also came with limitations. Sometimes, foreign intelligence services supported propaganda organs that sought to reach and influence citizens broadly. Another common tactic was to manipulate key political players before an election. The former approach involved reaching the masses with varying degrees of precision, while the latter involved targeting powerful individuals. Both required substantial effort. Today, interfering actors can combine these two methods with remarkable efficiency. Operating online and from their home countries, interfering actors can use the internet to play to the personal prejudices of individual voters, based on the groups to which users belong and the data stored—but insufficiently guarded—by big tech companies. Online advertisements attacking a candidate for weak immigration policies, for example, can be tailored to reach individuals known to favor more hardline positions.

A new battlefield has emerged in social media, where foreigners can suppress, turn out, and frighten voters while avoiding real time detection and sidelining traditional news outlets. Of foreign interference across social media, Nikki Haley, the former ambassador to the United Nations, told me, "It's the new cheap warfare. Countries regardless of their wealth can now use this power to fight and infiltrate a country."[44] Across social media platforms, interfering actors can reach millions of voters at minimal cost, enhancing the efficiency of such operations still further. Fewer and fewer means are required to reach more and more people—all because of the internet. The influence of online platforms is considerable; in the United States, more than two thirds of adults get news from social media.[45] Competing with online-only outlets, the

[44] Nikki Haley, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 23, 2018.
[45] Elisa Shearer, "News use across social media platforms 2017," Pew Research Center, September 7, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/.

mainstream press has less influence over what information—and, importantly, disinformation—reaches citizens. "We're no longer the filter we once were," Peter Baker, the chief White House correspondent for the *New York Times*, told me.[46]

Interference across social media—an accessible and inexpensive practice—can also influence voters in subtle ways. Rather than promote one candidate over another, interfering actors can traffic information designed to dissuade citizens from voting or to motivate them to vote. Users on these platforms have no way to know whether the information before them is foreign propaganda. Likewise, it is nearly impossible for governments to detect the extent of such interference in real time. Companies like Facebook and Twitter don't just enhance modern interference operations—they enable them.

Whether by altering votes or manipulating voters, interfering actors can use the chaotic, decentralized nature of the internet to sow chaos in foreign democracies—an objective that aligns with the geopolitics of this moment. Today, Moscow is working to corrupt democracies by assisting illiberal and divisive candidates of any political leaning. This campaign is unfolding not by land, sea, or air—but across the internet.[47] It suits the interests of authoritarian actors to tarnish the viability of the democratic process of succession; the internet has made it easier to do so. "What is most alarming" about Russian interference in America's 2016 election, H.R. McMaster, Donald Trump's former national security advisor, told me, "is the degree to which Russia was able to take advantage of divisions within our own polity and exacerbate those

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[46] Peter Baker, interview by author conducted by phone, October 17, 2018.
[47] Robert Kagan, "The strongmen strike back," *Washington Post,* March 14, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2019/03/14/feature/the-strongmen-strike-back/. See also Olivia Beavers, "National security experts warn of rise in authoritarianism," The Hill, February 26, 2019, https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/431646-national-security-experts-warn-of-rise-in-authoritarianism-efforts.

divisions in a way that pit communities against each other while diminishing confidence in our democratic principles, institutions, and processes."[48]

Because of innovations like social media, covert interference in democratic votes of succession has become an increasingly transnational tool, defined as a "cross-border interaction in which nonstate actors play a significant role."[49] Today, states still "dominate the transnational arena," but the construct of that arena is shifting rapidly.[50] "There is something about the cross international nature of social media that just disempowers sovereign parliaments," Robert Hannigan, the director of GCHQ from 2014 to 2017, told me.[51] Prior to the spread of the internet, only state actors had the resources to manipulate foreign elections regularly and at scale. Now, various nonstate entities, from oligarchs to private hacking groups, could conceivably interfere in democratic votes of succession, in part as a consequence of the increased efficiency of this practice.

Newer democracies were once more vulnerable to foreign manipulation than their more established counterparts. The reach and penetrability of the internet have leveled the playing field. All democracies are exposed. The internet provides interfering actors with an anonymous, accessible, and above all efficient way to manipulate *any* democracy, regardless of its size or influence. Core features of open societies—such as the free press, freedom of speech, and competitive campaigning—are exploitable in the digital domain.

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[48] H.R. McMaster, interview by author conducted by phone, October 17, 2018.
[49] Peter Hägel, *Transnational Actors*, Oxford Bibliographies, March 2011, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0016.xml.
[50] Thomas Heller and Abraham Sofaer, "Sovereignty, The Practitioners' Perspective," in Stephen Krasner, *Problematic Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 25.
[51] Robert Hannigan, interview by author, London, England, March 22, 2019.

In this environment, interfering covertly in democratic votes of succession has become an increasingly unappealing policy option for the United States. In the pre-digital age, the CIA manipulated electoral processes aggressively and frequently. The internet has changed the calculus of American policymakers. U.S. elections are now vulnerable: to digital hacks, to disinformation across social media, and to cyber intrusions into voting systems. Officials in Washington are reluctant to authorize the type of operation to which their country has become so exposed. "If you're in a glass house, don't throw stones," David Petraeus, a former CIA director, told me. "We're the biggest glass house when it comes to internet connectivity."[52] The internet has also made it harder to maintain the secrecy of covert operations to influence voters. Petraeus explained, "It's very difficult to keep that kind of activity from ultimately getting out."[53] If the CIA were caught interfering in another democracy's process of succession, American hypocrisy would be broadcast before the world. Washington cannot manipulate democratic votes abroad without violating core liberal ideals, leaving its leaders constrained by the values they promote.

Putin's Russia, by contrast, has found new use for interfering covertly in democratic votes of succession in the digital age. For him, the benefits of this weapon are many, while the costs are increasingly minimal. Using online tools, Russia can weaken foreign democracies without declaring war, putting soldiers at risk, or spending much money. Doing so serves a multitude of Russia's interests: undermining U.S.-led international institutions, exposing the penetrability of the democratic process of succession, and weakening the United States, an economically and militarily superior state.[54] For Russia, covert action is a form of asymmetric

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[52] David Petraeus, interview by author conducted by phone, October 8, 2018.
[53] Ibid.
[54] In 2017, the United States had a military budget of $610 billion, while Russia had a military budget of just $66.3 billion. See Nan Tian et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2017," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, May 2018,

warfare: using unconventional means to undercut a more powerful rival.[55] Valery Gerasimov, a top Russian general, has commented that "the information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy."[56]

Gerasimov and his colleagues have weaponized the digital sphere to strike at the heart of democracies: their processes of succession.

### 0.5 Structure

This thesis includes four chapters and a conclusion. The first and second chapters analyze covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession that involved no digital tools; the third and fourth chapters examine another such operation that relied entirely on digital tools; and the conclusion uses these cases to analyze why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age.

The first chapter examines American interference in Italy's 1948 election, which was designed to manipulate an entire electorate. The chapter begins by analyzing the motives behind the CIA's operation. At the time, Italy's economy was struggling, and its Communist Party was surging. To maintain its power over Italy and guard its security interests, the United States sought to advantage the centrist Christian Democratic Party, which was already in power. Next,

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https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/sipri_fs_1805_milex_2017.pdf. Also, in 2017, the United States had a GDP (nominal) of 19,390,604 million, while Russia had a GDP (nominal) of just 1,577,524.15 million. See The World Bank, "GDP (current US$)," https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?year_high_desc=true.

[55] The Meriam Webster dictionary defines asymmetric warfare as "warfare that is between opposing forces which differ greatly in military power and that typically involves the use of unconventional weapons and tactics." See https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/asymmetric%20warfare.

[56] Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," translated from Russian by Robert Coalson, published originally in *Military-Industrial Kurier*, February 27, 2013.

the chapter documents the tactics the CIA used to influence the Italian masses, as well as the aftermath of this operation. The chapter concludes with a series of insights into covert interference in democratic votes of succession in the pre-digital era, focusing on the early potential—and limitations—of operations to influence foreign populations.

The second chapter analyzes interference in a West German vote of no confidence, which entailed a covert operation to target and manipulate specific voters. In April 1972, the West German parliament held a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Willy Brandt. The Stasi, on Moscow's orders, decisively tilted the vote in Brandt's favor. The chapter begins by examining the motives behind this operation: why the Soviet Union and East Germany associated Brandt's chancellorship with their security interests and, as a result, sought to preserve his government. The chapter then explores the mechanics of the operation: how the Stasi studied, targeted, and turned two parliamentary voters, in order to alter their ballots. Next, the chapter examines the aftermath of the Stasi's operation. Finally, this chapter uses the West German case to draw additional lessons about the pre-digital capabilities of interfering actors, especially regarding efforts to target voters on an individual basis.

This thesis devotes the next two chapters to Russian interference in America's 2016 election, a sprawling operation that took place across the internet. In Italy, the CIA manipulated the masses; in West Germany, the Stasi targeted specific voters and manipulated actual ballots. In the United States, Russian intelligence used the internet both to reach the American electorate and to do so in a tailored way, as well as to access the ballots of millions of U.S. citizens.

The focus of the third chapter is America's understanding of and response to Russia's operation as it was unfolding. The chapter begins by analyzing Russia's motives ahead of the 2016 election—namely, to shift the status quo in its favor—as well as America's vulnerabilities

to foreign subversion. Distracted by the War on Terror, Washington neglected its cyber defenses and the threat posed by Russia. "We took the eye off the Russia ball," Michael Hayden, the CIA's director from 2006 to 2009, told me. "We were consumed with counterterrorism, counterproliferation. I went to more than fifty countries as director and not one of them was Russia."[57] Next, this chapter assesses the vectors of Russia's operation that the U.S. detected in real time: the theft and release of Democratic Party emails—which influenced the U.S. electorate at scale—and the targeting of state electoral systems, which enabled Russia to alter ballots directly. The chapter then reveals why the exposure of America's electoral infrastructure deterred the White House from retaliating against Russia for leaking sensitive emails. Finally, this chapter draws a series of conclusions about the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession in the digital age, focusing on the accessibility, reach, and efficiency of such operations.

The fourth chapter analyzes the vector of Russia's operation that the U.S. intelligence community overlooked in 2016: the manipulation of social media platforms. By November 2016, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), an information warfare center based in Russia, had reached tens of millions of Americans online, based on their individual profiles and interests. This chapter elucidates what about the IRA's tactics was pioneering and what about them was a furtherance of historic ideas. It begins by revealing why the U.S. intelligence community and Facebook struggled to detect the IRA's operation. Next, this chapter details how core functions of the IRA—including its mandate, purpose, and methods—marked a continuation of decades-old practices. Finally, this chapter clarifies what about the IRA was groundbreaking, as well

[57] Michael Hayden, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 5, 2018. For Hayden's personal recollections, see Michael Hayden, *The Assault on Intelligence: American National Security in an Age of Lies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

what its operation reveals about how interfering actors, using digital tools, can target voters on a personal basis.

In the conclusion, this thesis uses the preceding chapters to analyze why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age, focusing on continuities and discontinuities in this practice and its efficiency based on the Italian, West German, and American cases. Further, the conclusion assesses the shifting appeal of executing covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession from the perspectives of the United States and Russia, as well as why and whether other state and nonstate actors could launch similar operations in the future.

## 0.6 The Literature

This thesis makes novel contributions to the literature in the areas of espionage, cyber, and interventionism by examining a subject at their intersection: the evolution of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession in the digital age. Currently, there exists no scholarly work on the topic. There are several reasons why. First, these operations are definitionally covert, which means they are designed to be shielded from public scrutiny. Second, in the age of social media, current events can feel entirely without precedent, constraining analysis of the present moment to the present moment. Third, the history of covert interference in democratic votes of succession reveals discomforting truths about American foreign policy, incentivizing silence among retired officials and the continued classification of sensitive documents.

Prior to November 2016, few researchers studied this type of interference at all. Don Levin's article "Partisan electoral interventions by the great powers," cited previously, assembles a universe of cases of operations to interfere in national elections executed by Moscow or Washington from 1946 to 2000. He does not, however, examine how these operations have

changed over time, nor does he incorporate interference in other types of democratic votes of succession into his dataset. A handful of other scholars have examined voter reactions to overt interference in electoral processes.[58] But none of these projects focuses solely on covert interference in democratic votes of succession, let alone its changing nature amid the spread of the internet.

Since Donald Trump's election, journalists and political analysts have turned their attention to this type of covert operation. But much of the available literature on Russia's 2016 campaign ignores the precedent behind it—the patterns, trends, and decisions that brought the international system to this moment. As the threat of future interference operations hangs overhead, the value of studying this practice as a long-running phenomenon, rather than in a vacuum, is significant.

The topic of covert interference in democratic votes of succession, while ambitious in scope, is also highly focused. Researchers have long shown more interest in other forms of covert action: arms programs, assassinations, and staged coups. Peter Gourevitch, in a 1978 essay on the international sources of domestic politics, labels "meddling" as "obvious conceptually" and not "requir[ing] much investigation." His brief analysis focuses on orchestrated coups, including "Iran in 1954, Guatemala in the same year, Chile in 1973."[59] Gourevitch, like other academics, broaches the subject of covert interference without raising the far more specific subject of covert interference in democratic votes of succession.

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[58] Stephen Bloom and Stephen Shulman, "The Legitimacy of Foreign Intervention in Elections: the Ukrainian Response," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 445–471. See also Daniel Corstange and Nikolay Marinov, "Taking Sides in Other People's Elections: The Polarizing Effect of Foreign Intervention," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (2012): 655–670.

[59] Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (1978): 883.

Still, without secondary sources, this thesis would not be possible. Literature across various fields informed and instructed my work. I started with the major histories of the CIA and the KGB. These books familiarized me with the types of covert operations in which the world's superpowers engaged during the Cold War. They also confirmed for me that no other author has focused on the evolution of covert interference in democratic votes of succession. For instance, *The CIA and American Democracy* by Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones provides a clear-eyed and concise history of the CIA's covert operations abroad. Jeffreys-Jones mentions electoral meddling in countries like Italy and Chile only briefly.[60] He explores far more comprehensively CIA programs to topple governments, a separate category of covert interference.

Similarly, available works on the KGB do not focus on a particular type of covert action. Take Christopher Andrew's acclaimed two-part series on the KGB. His first volume, *The Sword and the Shield*, examines the evolution of the Soviet Union's intelligence apparatus from its inception to its dissolution. Drawing on an extraordinary set of archival materials, he does, every so often, mention a covert operation targeting a democratic vote of succession, including in France and the United States.[61] Likewise, Andrews' second volume, *The World Was Going Our Way*, references covert operations targeting democratic votes of succession across the third world—namely, in Chile and Japan.[62] But Andrews, like other academics, does not distinguish these operations as a specific type of interference.

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[60] Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 50–52, 144, 183.
[61] Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and The Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 239–241, 468–472.
[62] Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 70–80, 299–300.

Literature on the Soviet Union's Communist International ("Comintern") contextualizes the KGB's tactics. Moscow intensified its covert interference operations only after abandoning the Comintern and its overt mission of fomenting world revolution. "It would be in the interest of Russia itself to dissolve the Comintern and to prove, by scrupulous abstention from interference abroad, that it can be treated on an equal footing with those democratic powers," Franz Borkenau, an Austrian political theorist, urged in his 1939 book *World Communism*.[63] Joseph Stalin abolished the Comintern in 1943, in what Fernando Claudin's *The Communist Movement* describes as a concession to Washington amid peace talks.[64] Stalin told *Reuters* at the time that "the dissolution of the Communist International is proper because… it exposes the lie of the Hitlerites to the effect that Moscow allegedly intends to intervene in the life of other nations."[65] There was, in fact, no lie to expose: The Soviet Union had and would continue to support communist parties around the world. But books like these clarify that those efforts became increasingly covert in the postwar period.

For my first case study, CIA interference in Italy's 1948 election, I learned from several available literatures. I started with the preexisting works on Italy's postwar economic and political environments—such as Robert Ventresca's *From Fascism to Democracy*—from which I acquired a baseline understanding of the 1948 election and the atmosphere in which it took place.[66] As for the United States, I reviewed books about the formation of the CIA, learning from

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[63] Franz Borkenau, *World Communism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1939), 428.
[64] Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 45.
[65] Ibid.
[66] On Italy's postwar politics, economy, and culture, I studied Robert Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy: Culture and Politics in the Italian Election of 1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Donald Blackmer and Sidney Tarrow, *Communism in Italy and France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); James E. Miller, *The United States and Italy, 1940–1950: The Politics and Diplomacy of Stabilization* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North

authors like Trevor Barnes and Daniel Yergin, as well as books about the U.S. officials central to the Italy operation, including Harry Truman, Clark Clifford, George Marshall, Averell Harriman, Allen Dulles, George Kennan, and William Colby.[67] Finally, I studied various works on the overt

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Carolina Press, 1986); Alessandro Brogi, *Confronting America: The Cold War between the United States and the Communists in France and Italy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Kaeten Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War: Waging Political Warfare, 1945–1950* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2014); James E. Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves: The United States and the Italian Elections of 1948," *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 1 (1983): 35–55; Stephen Gundle, "Hollywood Glamour and Mass Consumption in Postwar Italy," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4*,* no. 3 (2002): 95–118. Two unpublished studies on the 1948 election, by Ernest E. Rossi (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1964) and Ronald Landa (1972), are listed in the bibliography but were inaccessible due to pandemic conditions. Separately, I examined the various histories that mention, in brief, aspects of the CIA's interference operation in Italy, including Sarah-Jane Corke, *U.S. Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare and the CIA, 1945–53* (Abingdon, Eng.: Routledge, 2007); Robin Winks, *Cloak and Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939–1961* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2006). Still, within the literature on American-Italian relations, the historian Kaeten Mistry writes, "none have analysed the CIA effort" to interfere in Italy's 1948 election. See Kaeten Mistry, "Approaches to Understanding the Inaugural CIA Covert Operation in Italy: Exploding Useful Myths," *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no. 2–3 (2011): 251.

[67] On the establishment of the CIA, I relied especially on Trevor Barnes, "The Secret Cold War: The C.I.A. and American Foreign Policy in Europe, 1946-1956. Part I," *Historical Journal* 24, no. 2 (1981): 399–415; Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace. The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977); David F. Rudgers, *Creating the Secret State: The Origins of the Central Intelligence Agency, 1943–1947* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000). For general overviews of the CIA's Cold War-era covert operations, I studied Gregory F. Treverton, *Covert Action: The CIA and the Limits of American Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations since World War II* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); David F. Rudgers, "The Origins of Covert Action," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 249–262; James Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War: US Policy, Intelligence and CIA Operations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009). To learn more about Truman, Clifford, Marshall, Harriman, Dulles, Colby, and Kennan, I read closely David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991); Ed Cray, *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); George Marshall, *Memoirs of My Services in the World War, 1917–1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976); Rudy Abramson*, Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891–1986* (New York: William Morrow, 1992); Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the*

aspects of American interference in Italy's election.[68] All of these resources provided essential context for my research into Italy.

Literature on my second case, the West German vote of no confidence, is virtually nonexistent. Eastern European historians, while aware of the scheme, have neglected it. "There is no in-depth look at the episode," Mark Kramer, director of Harvard's Project on Cold War studies, told me.[69] A few books mention that the Stasi interfered in the vote of no confidence, but they devote no more than a page to how or why.[70] This lack of depth can perhaps be attributed to source availability; the German government opened the relevant Stasi files only at the turn of the 21st century.

Still, books about Brandt, the Stasi, and détente helped me capture the environment in which this operation took place. They include Jens Gieseke's insights into the Stasi as an institution in *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police, 1945-1990*; Tony Judt's analysis of Brandt's chancellorship in *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*; Hélène Miard-

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*World They Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986); Peter Grose, *Gentleman Spy: The Life of Allen Dulles* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994); Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War* (New York: Times Books, 2013); John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); Walter L. Hixson, *George F. Kennan, Cold War Iconoclast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

[68] In addition to works cited in footnote #66 of the introduction of this thesis, others pertinent to America's overt interference in the Italian election include David Ellwood, "The propaganda of the Marshall Plan in Italy in a Cold War context," *Intelligence and National Security* 18, no. 2 (2003): 225–236; C. Edda Martinez and Edward A. Suchman, "Letters from America and the 1948 Elections in Italy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1950): 111–125; Alessandro Brogi, "Ike and Italy: The Eisenhower Administration and Italy's 'Neo-Atlanticist Agenda,'" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 5–35.

[69] Mark Kramer, personal correspondence with author, July 17, 2017.

[70] See Hélène Miard-Delacroix, *Willy Brandt: Life of a Statesman* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 131; M. E. Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente, and Ostpolitik, 1969-1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 133; Jefferson Adams, *Historical Dictionary of German Intelligence* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), 443.

Delacroix's personal history of Brandt in *Willy Brandt: Life of a Statesman*; and M. E. Sarotte's account of Brandt's foreign policy in *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente, and Ostpolitik, 1969-1973*. In addition to these books, I examined works about other subjects pertinent to this case, such as the Prague Spring and the Brezhnev Doctrine;[71] the Stasi as an institution;[72] Berlin as a Cold War hotspot;[73] Brandt's foreign policy of Ostpolitik;[74] the pursuit of détente;[75] and the individual actors central to this operation.[76] All of these sources provided invaluable background information for my research into West Germany.

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[71] On the Prague Spring and its aftermath, I learned from Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and John G. McGinn, "The Politics of Collective Inaction: NATO's Response to the Prague Spring," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, no. 3 (1999): 111–138. On the conception and evolution of the Brezhnev Doctrine, I relied on Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[72] On the Stasi, I examined John O. Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010); David Childs and Richard Popplewell, *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Gary Bruce, "The Prelude to Nationwide Surveillance in East Germany: Stasi Operations and Threat Perceptions, 1945-1953," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 2 (2003): 3–31.

[73] On Berlin's place in Cold War politics, I studied Deborah Welch Larson, "The Origins of Commitment: Truman and West Berlin," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 1 (2011): 180–212; David Coleman, "Eisenhower and the Berlin Problem, 1953–1954," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000): 3–34; David E. Murphy, Sergei A. Kondrashev, and George Bailey, *Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

[74] On Ostpolitik, I learned from Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (London: Vintage, 1994); Julia Von Dannenberg, *The Foundations of Ostpolitik: The Making of the Moscow Treaty between West Germany and the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Gottfried Niedhart, "Ostpolitik: Transformation through Communication and the Quest for Peaceful Change," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 14–59.

[75] On détente, I studied Jussi Hanhimaki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013) and Keith L. Nelson, *The Making of Détente: Soviet-American Relations in the Shadow of Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1995).

[76] These figures included Markus Wolf, Rainer Barzel, Willy Brandt, and Leonid Brezhnev. As a starting point for my research, I studied their personal works, including Markus Wolf, *Man without a Face: The Autobiography of Communism's Greatest Spymaster* (New York:

Last is Russia's operation against the United States. Since November 2016, perhaps no subject in foreign affairs has received more attention. Daily reporters have uncovered much of what the public knows about the operation. Journalists like Greg Miller have published books on the subject. Retired practitioners have also weighed in. Michael Hayden's *Assault on Intelligence*, for instance, analyzes Russia's operation in the backdrop of his own career. Also of note is Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President,* which makes a compelling case that Russia swung the election to Trump. None of them, however, ventures beyond 2016 and considers the broader practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession or how it has evolved as the internet has spread.[77]

Just as histories of the KGB and CIA contextualize Cold War operations, works about Putin's Russia and the cyber sphere do the same for 2016. Understanding the modern Russian state is a prerequisite to analyzing its covert operations abroad. *All the Kremlin's Men* by Mikhail Zygar, which draws on original interviews with Putin's advisors, chronicles the complex, competitive, and decentralized nature of his court. Similarly enabled by insider access, Peter Pomerantsev's *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* brings to life the features of Russian society that Putin has been exporting overseas: the benefits of "never let[ting] TV become dull" and of making "politics… feel… like a movie", as well as the notion that there is "no such thing

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PublicAffairs, 1997); Rainer Barzel, *Die Tür blieb offen: Mein persönlicher Bericht über Ostverträge, Misstrauensvotum, Kanzlersturz* (Berlin: Bouvier Verlag, 1998); Willy Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten* (Hamburg: Hoffman & Campe Verlag, 1976); Leonid Brezhnev, *On the Policy of the Soviet Union and the International Situation* (New York: Doubleday, 1973).

[77] See David Corn and Michael Isikoff, *Russian Roulette: The Inside Story of Putin's War on America and the Election of Donald Trump* (New York: Twelve, 2017); Greg Miller, *The Apprentice: Trump, Russia and the Subversion of American Democracy* (New York: Custom House, 2018); Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michael Hayden, *The Assault on Intelligence: American National Security in an Age of Lies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

as objective reporting."[78] To aid in my research, I studied additional works on Putin as a leader, Russia's kleptocratic model, the legacy of the KGB, the transition from Boris Yeltsin's regime to Putin's, and the sustained influence of Russia's security services. These resources, in their totality, clarified for me the origins of Putin's interference toolkit: disinformation, strong-man politics, and media manipulation.

Finally, a range of sources exists at the intersection of cyber, disinformation, and covert action. Harold Koh's *The Trump Administration and International Law* weighs the legal dimensions of the topic.[79] Researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute continue to issue reports on disinformation across social media.[80] At Harvard, two academics recently published a report on the digital vulnerabilities of America's electoral systems.[81] Journalists, too, have contributed to the conversation. Books like David Sanger's *The Perfect Weapon* and Fred Kaplan's *Dark Territory* detail the simultaneous development of America's cyber weapons and cyber vulnerabilities.[82] This literature informed my analysis of the tools underlying twenty-first century covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession.

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[78] Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 6, 47.

[79] Koh writes, "Coercive interference in another country's electoral politics—including the deliberate spreading of false news—constitutes an intervention that violates international law." Harold Koh, *The Trump Administration and International Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 83.

[80] For example, see Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, "Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," Computational Propaganda Research Project, the Oxford Internet Institute, July 20, 2018, http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/07/ct2018.pdf.

[81] Ben Buchanan and Michael Sulmeyer, "Hacking Chads: The Motivations, Threats, and Effects of Electoral Insecurity," Cybersecurity Project, Harvard Kennedy School, October 2016, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/hacking-chads.pdf.

[82] David Sanger, *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age* (New York: Crown, 2018); Fred Kaplan, *Dark Territory: The Secret History of Cyber War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

## 0.7 Originality

Within the existing literature, which is varied and helpful, is a gap that this thesis aims to fill. Broadly speaking, I provide the first-ever examination of covert interference in democratic votes of succession as a distinct and evolving form of covert action in which states engage.

This thesis is unique not only regarding its general focus but also its core pillars: the cases under study. My analysis of each is based on a diverse set of archival and oral materials, some of which are, of course, biased in nature, and whose biases I attempt to resolve by consulting a vast array of sources and distinguishing between opinion and fact whenever possible. Regarding the Italy case, of which there has been minimal in-depth analysis, I draw on an array of sources to recreate this operation, including (1) thousands of pages of declassified CIA, State Department, and National Security Council files; (2) my interview with the CIA's chief internal historian, who agreed to discuss the agency's operations in Italy in detail; (3) my interviews with a former KGB general, former CIA operations officers, and the widow of a puppeteer of the Italy operation; (4) publicly available memoirs and testimonies; and (5) Italian and American news articles published in 1948 about the Italian election, as well as an archive of Italian newsreels from 1948.

My research into the West German case is almost entirely original. It includes (1) hundreds of pages of Stasi archives, which I accessed through the Stasi Records Agency in Berlin; (2) my interview with Horst Kopp, a former Stasi officer who helped orchestrate this operation; (3) my interviews with relatives of the lawmakers who assisted the Stasi, as well as CIA officers who served during this period; (4) local news coverage about the vote of no confidence; (5) contemporary German government documents about the vote; and (6) memoirs published by relevant historical figures.

Finally, my research into Russia's 2016 operation is unique on several counts. It is based on thousands of pages of new materials, including the transcripts of more than 100 elite interviews that I have conducted with, among others, twenty-six former senior advisers to Barack Obama, eleven former senior advisers to Donald Trump, foreign heads of state threatened by Russia, leading journalists, and technology experts. I also draw from congressional testimonies, news articles, and the declassified findings of U.S. government investigators. For insights into the evolution of U.S.-Russian relations, I interviewed Bill Clinton and his top Russia advisers. And for further background on Moscow's methods, I reviewed the KGB's archives at Cambridge University. Still, this thesis lacks access to confidential sources within Putin's government, which is why I rely heavily on public comments made by him and his leading advisors.

This thesis also draws connections, contrasts, and themes across its cases in the concluding section, an original undertaking in itself. While much has been published on Russia's 2016 operation in isolation, there exists no broader examination of the evolution of covert interference in democratic votes of succession, how Russia's activities fit into that evolution, and in what ways the internet is changing the practice and purpose of these operations. The cases underlying this thesis enable such a study, the findings of which hold significance for democracies everywhere.

Votes are by nature penetrable; in any electoral process, individuals can be targeted, manipulated, and even turned. Covert operations against such processes, as demonstrated by this study, can alter the trajectories of democracies and destabilize their governments. The practice of covertly interfering in democratic votes of succession has also been enhanced by the spread of the internet. Understanding those changes across time and space, rather than only in the here and now, is the central aim of this thesis.

# Chapter 1: The CIA Interferes in Italy's 1948 Election

## 1.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age. The first step in doing so—and the purpose of this chapter—is to learn from a covert operation to influence an electorate prior to the spread of the internet. The case under examination is American interference in Italy's 1948 election, a foundational moment in the history of covert interference in democratic votes of succession that, in its totality, provides a foundational understanding of the pre-digital capabilities of interfering actors.

The immediate aftermath of World War II marked a turning point in American foreign policy. Initially, Washington had expected to withdraw its forces from Western Europe and to revert to an isolationist posture. But as the Soviet Union established control over the countries of Eastern Europe, President Harry Truman's outlook shifted dramatically. By January 1947, Winston Churchill had proclaimed that an Iron Curtain had descended across continental Europe; Mao Zedong's Communists were poised to win China's Civil War; and George Kennan had proposed that America construct its foreign policy around preventing the Soviet Union from spreading its reach further.[1]

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***Chapter 1: The CIA Interferes in Italy's 1948 Election***

[1] In February 1946, Kennan had submitted an unusually lengthy cable, known as the Long Telegram, advocating a strategy of containment. John Lewis Gaddis explains, "If the task at hand was to shift Washington's policy from afar—and Kennan had been trying to do that since the summer of 1944—then… the 'long telegram' expressed what Kennan knew, in a form suited for policy makers who needed to know, better than anything else he ever wrote. No other document, whether written by him or anyone else, had the instantaneous influence that this one did." See John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 222. For further reading on containment, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York:

Policymakers in Washington coalesced around this mission of containment, which necessarily involved influencing countries around the world. Some of the initiatives that followed were well-known, from massive aid programs to a sustained military presence in Western Europe. Others were meant to be hidden. In December 1947, Truman authorized the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to engage in covert action, just as advocates of containment turned their attention to Italy's upcoming election, scheduled for April 1948. Italy's economy was failing, and its Communist Party was surging.[2] In Washington, the Truman administration hoped to preserve Italy's Christian Democratic government. What followed was a novel idea: a CIA operation to interfere in Italy's national election.

The chapter begins by analyzing Truman's decision to use the CIA to manipulate Italy's 1948 election, a pivotal democratic vote of succession. As the contest approached, it appeared as though a Communist-led coalition might win, prompting alarm inside Washington. CIA and White House memoranda reveal that realist concerns drove decision-making: namely, that undermining the Communist Party would maintain America's power over Italy and protect America's security interests in Western Europe.

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Oxford University Press, 2005); John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Dean Acheson, the famed secretary of state, details foreign policymaking during the Truman years in *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969). See also James Chase, *Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

[2] The economic ruin of Europe presented both Moscow and Washington with new opportunities for influence in the international system. Odd Arne Westad explains, "The Cold War between capitalism and Communism, and between the United States and the Soviet Union, fit the European disaster to a T. Not only had the military outcome of the war left the Americans and the Soviets in command of the continent, but Europeans, hungry for a miracle, or just plain hungry, looked to Washington or Moscow for answers…. The disasters that had befallen Europe put the prestige of the new masters of the continent—the Americans and the Soviets, or the Superpowers as Europeans had started calling them—into sharp relief." See Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 72–73.

America then interfered in Italy's election with overt and covert tactics, all designed to reach the Italian population writ large. Since certain CIA files remain classified, this chapter weaves together an array of sources to recreate this operation. Overtly, the State Department, the Italian American community, and the Catholic Church sought to turn voters against the Communist Party. Additionally, the CIA covertly funded the Christian Democratic Party and orchestrated popular initiatives in its favor. Come Election Day, the Christian Democrats won by a substantial margin. As ever with efforts to influence voters, it was impossible to judge whether America had changed many minds or no minds at all. But in Washington, the perception was that the CIA had altered the outcome of Italy's election; the agency was credited with defeating the Communist Party.

Next, this chapter examines the aftermath of American interference in Italy's 1948 election. Motivated by the apparent success of its initial operation, the CIA spent more than $500 million, adjusted for inflation, influencing Italy's elections over the next two decades. The CIA's mission was defensive in nature: its objective was to advantage the Christian Democratic Party, which was already in power, and therefore to prevent change from taking place. Like clockwork, whenever the Christian Democrats won an election, policymakers in Washington became concerned that the Communists would triumph in the *next* election. Influencing a single electoral contest thus amounted to little more than a temporary solution. To preserve the status quo, continuous intervention was required.

Finally, this chapter uses the Italy case to draw a series of conclusions about the pre-digital practice and efficiency of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. It also examines the wider ramifications of the 1948 operation: Because American policymakers believed the CIA had rescued Italy's democracy, covert action earned an outsized reputation.

Italy became "a template," explained David Robarge, the CIA's chief internal historian, for what the agency then did "in many, many countries." CIA officers—believing in the morality and effectiveness of their work—interfered in elections around the world. John Brennan, a Cold War-era CIA officer who went on to direct the agency, explained, "It's a matter of public record and history that the United States did try to shape the outcome of a number of elections in the post-World War II period—Italy is a good example—and over the course of decades, several decades, the United States did influence outcomes… to prevent some of these democratic elections from tilting to the Communist side."[3]

Through Italy, this thesis illuminates the origins of covert interference in democratic votes of succession. In the process, it provides a basis for analyzing what about this practice has changed in the digital age and, critically, what about it has not.

### 1.2 The Motivation: To Defeat the Italian Left

For the United States, interfering in Italy's 1948 election was a pioneering step. The CIA had never before engaged in covert action.[4] Perceived threats to America's power and security, which dominated government memoranda, explain why Truman and his advisers pursued this unprecedented operation.

On matters of covert interference, power comes from the influence one country holds over another. America held influence over the Christian Democratic Party and, through it, over Italy. In January 1947, Alcide De Gasperi, the Christian Democratic leader, met with Truman in

[3] John Brennan, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 10, 2018.
[4] Trevor Barnes, "The Secret Cold War: The C.I.A. and American Foreign Policy in Europe, 1946-1956. Part I," *Historical Journal* 24, no. 2 (1981): 399–415.

Washington.[5] During his visit, De Gasperi told reporters that America and Italy were "bound by so many ties of history and civilization."[6] At the time, De Gasperi was at the helm of an anti-fascist governing coalition that included his Christian Democrats, the Communists, and the Socialists. But this arrangement proved dysfunctional. In May, De Gasperi dissolved this coalition and established a new one that excluded the left.[7] Through this decision, De Gasperi put the stakes of the 1948 election into stark relief: Italian voters could choose between his centrist government and a leftist one. For Washington, the former outcome—a Christian Democratic victory—would maintain the status quo of a U.S.-aligned government in Rome. "In the Italian election, it was well we want the Christian Democrats to win," explained Michael Hayden, a former CIA director.[8] Jack Devine, who was stationed in Italy as a CIA officer toward the end of the Cold War, likewise recalled, "There was real belief that Italy could have gone Communist in that election… It was a battle to keep the Communists out."[9]

While the United States aligned with the Christian Democrats, the Soviet Union aligned with the Communists. Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB general, told me that the Kremlin favored Italy's Communist leaders, whom he described as "strongly pro-Soviet" and as "one of the main sources of the Soviet regime's influence" in Western Europe. The KGB had an "easy time" supporting Italy's Communists, Kalugin explained, because of the closeness between the two

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[5] "Crisis in Italy," *New York Times*, January 22, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/01/22/88740285.html?pageNumber=22; James E. Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves: The United States and the Italian Elections of 1948," *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 1 (1983): 37.
[6] Kaeten Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War: Waging Political Warfare, 1945–1950* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 48.
[7] Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 43–47.
[8] Michael Hayden, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 5, 2018.
[9] Jack Devine, interview by author, New York, February 21, 2019.

sides.[10] In public, Italy's Communist Party did not hide its affinity for Moscow. During the 1948 campaign, for instance, a Communist campaign poster contrasted images of American imperialists and Soviet friendship.[11]

In this context, the CIA concluded that a Communist victory would increase Moscow's influence over Italy, and that this shift in power would threaten America's security. As established previously, a country pursues its security by minimizing threats to its survival, welfare, and identity. The CIA anticipated that a Communist Italy would undercut America in all three areas. In a sweeping memorandum, the agency explained its reasoning. In the Cold War's emerging battle of ideas, a Communist victory would mark the "first instance in history of a communist accession to power by popular suffrage and legal procedure" (discounting, presumably, recent elections across Eastern Europe as illegitimate). After the Communists won, the memorandum continued, civil war might ensue. Matters would only worsen after the Communists took office, since the Soviet Union would establish control over Italy's foreign

[10] Oleg Kalugin, interview by author, Rockville, MD, August 7, 2019. The Soviet Union financed the Italian Communist Party throughout the Cold War; for instance, the KGB provided the party with $6.2 million in 1972 and $6.5 million in 1976, as documented by Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin's *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 293–297. Andrew and Mitrokhin further explain that Soviet leadership coordinated directly with the very top of the Italian Communist Party. In early 1972, Luigi Longo, Italy's Communist leader, requested increasingly more money as an election approached. In a personal reply, Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, granted Longo another $500,000 while emphasizing "at the present time, there is no more that we can do." In Italy and elsewhere, officials in Moscow valued the influence they held over foreign parties they funded. Silvio Pons explains, "The tight link between Moscow and the West European Communist parties required the parties to subordinate their interests to those of the Soviet Union." See Silvio Pons, "Stalin, Togliatti, and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 2 (2001): 5.

[11] Pons, "Stalin, Togliatti, and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe," 3–27; James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," March 10, 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter cited as *FRUS*), 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 521, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d521.

policy, economy, and military bases, from which Moscow could then threaten shipping across the Mediterranean. Ultimately, the CIA portended, Italian democracy would collapse, replaced by "a fully developed police state under open and exclusive Communist control."[12]

These security-based concerns were central to White House decision-making. The Truman administration's objective in Italy, read a National Security Council (NSC) directive from February 1948, was "to establish and maintain in that key country conditions favorable to our national security."[13] The following month, in another directive, the NSC resolved that America's "security interests… are immediately and gravely threatened" by the prospect of a Communist victory in Italy.[14]

America's motivations for interfering in Italy's election were straightforward: A Communist victory would increase the Soviet Union's power over Italy, and Moscow would use this newfound influence to undermine America's security. Still, these factors did not alone merit covert action. Truman and his advisers first had to *believe* that the status quo—a Christian Democratic government—was in jeopardy. Only then would they intervene in favor of the Christian Democrats.

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[12] Central Intelligence Agency, "Consequences of Communist Accession to Power in Italy by Legal Means," March 5, 1948 (declassified: August 1993), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0000258367.

[13] "NSC 1/2: The Position of the United States with Respect to Italy," February 10, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948*,* vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 469, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d469.

[14] "NSC 1/3: Position of the United States With Respect to Italy in the Light of the Possibility of Communist Participation in the Government by Legal Means," March 8, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948*,* vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 475, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d475.

### 1.2.1 "We are all Communists here"

In this sense, America targeted Italy's 1948 election precisely because the worst-case scenario—a Communist victory—seemed so plausible. Italy's Communist Party, with some two million members, was the largest in Western Europe. By 1948, its popularity was surging, especially in impoverished areas. Early that year, Huntington Smith, a *New York Times* correspondent, traveled to Gravina, a small town in southern Italy. He found a village in disarray. Residents had stable jobs only three months each year, during the olive harvest. Families lived in cramped, filthy quarters. Tuberculosis was common. Smith visited a bedroom in which ten people, including a baby, lived with a man dying of the disease; two shared his bed. "We are all Communists here," one woman told Smith, gesturing to the deteriorating walls around her.[15]

These poor conditions were an aftereffect of the Second World War, when the Allied powers had occupied fascist Italy. The War was over, but low incomes, inflation, and basic supply shortages still ravaged the country. Working-class families spent more than 90 percent of their monthly paychecks on food alone.[16] In villages like Gravina, widespread impoverishment empowered left-wing politicians. They also inspired protests against De Gasperi's government. In 1947, more than 1,100 strikes took place across Italy.[17] Communist politicians encouraged these demonstrations. That November, Palmiro Togliatti, the Communist leader, called for an "intensification of agitation against the Government." A series of protests followed, as

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[15] Huntington Smith, "Unemployment, Overcrowding Seen Bolstering Reds in Southern Italy," *New York Times*, April 17, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/17/86897285.html?pageNumber=6; John Foot, *The Archipelago: Italy Since 1945* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 17.
[16] Robert Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy: Culture and Politics in the Italian Election of 1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 25, 52.
[17] Carlo Sforza, "Italy, the Marshall Plan, and the 'Third Force'," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1948, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/italy/1948-04-01/italy-marshall-plan-and-third-force.

"lawlessness and violence" enveloped cities like Milan.[18] More than 20 people died in the ensuing chaos.[19] In response to this instability, Truman lobbied Congress to approve an emergency aid package for Italy, which he signed into law that December.[20]

The Communist Party, already popular, announced at the start of 1948 that it would stand with the Socialist Party in the April election as a Popular Front.[21] Togliatti aimed to take control of the government through coalition building. His allies were confident in the Front's prospects. So was the American media. "It is not outside the bounds of possibility that the Communists and left-wing Socialists plus a few minor left-wing parties and groups may succeed in obtaining 51 percent or more of the votes at the next general election," the *New York Times* reported. "It must be admitted that at present the Communists are riding high, wide and handsome."[22]

This assessment was based on more than just forecasting; Italy's leftist parties had a formidable track record at the ballot box. In an election in 1946, the Christian Democratic Party had received 35 percent of the vote, compared to a combined 40 percent for the Communist Party (which received 19 percent) and the Socialist Party (which received 21 percent).[23] Were those results repeated, the Front would win the 1948 election.

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[18] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Communists Widen Riots in Italy," *New York Times*, November 12, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/11/13/104371910.html?pageNumber=1.
[19] Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy*, 62, 75.
[20] Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 37–43.
[21] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Italian Socialists Vote Unity with Communists for Elections," *New York Times*, January 24, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/01/24/87480057.html?pageNumber=8; Arnaldo Cortesi, "Leftist Campaign Is Begun in Italy," *New York Times*, February 2, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/02/02/93790274.html?pageNumber=6.
[22] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Italian Communist Aim Is to Win 1948 Election," *New York Times*, December 14, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/14/87565893.html?pageNumber=115; Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy*, 6.
[23] Also in 1946, the Italian people voted to replace their monarchic system with that of a republic, further breaking with their political past. Foot, *The Archipelago*, 22, 72; Ventresca,

The Front was also well-organized and well-funded. In one memorandum, the CIA warned that the Communists were planning an "all-out" election effort involving "legal and semi-legal methods."[24] At the start of 1948, Dunn cabled Marshall that "many new Communist propaganda publications have appeared," and that "money, newsprint and energy is not lacking."[25] De Gasperi himself complained that the Communists had "unlimited funds" and were spending "a fantastic amount" campaigning in Italy's northern provinces.[26] The Front's strategy, Dunn explained, was to unite various constituencies—"labor, agricultural, veteran, feminine, youth, cultural, and social organizations"—while inspiring voters, especially women, to turn out on Election Day.[27]

In Washington, internal intelligence indicated that the Soviet Union was interfering in the election on behalf of the Communists. In early 1948, James Clement Dunn, the U.S. ambassador in Italy, told Secretary of State George Marshall, "The Soviet Union in its policy in Italy has quite obviously concentrated entirely on direct support of [the] Communist Party in Italy and the

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*From Fascism to Democracy*, 49. See also Rosario Forlenza, *On the Edge of Democracy: Italy, 1943–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chaps. 2 and 4. Westad explains that the communist parties of Western Europe attracted major followings in the immediate postwar period, not only because they "had a model ready for Europe's transformation," but also because they "were genuinely admired by many for their role in the resistance to German occupation, including by people who regretted their own failure at taking up weapons." He continues, "In the first postwar western European elections, the Communists made inroads everywhere. In Norway they got 12 percent of the vote, in Belgium 13 percent, in Italy 19 percent, in Finland 23.5 percent, and in France almost 29 percent." See Westad, *The Cold War,* 54, 74.

[24] Central Intelligence Agency, "Communist Party plans all-out election effort," January 28, 1948 (declassified: July 2005), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0001380943.

[25] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," January 21, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948*,* vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 506, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d506.

[26] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," February 21, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 513, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d513.

[27] James Clement Dunn, doc. 506.

unlimited funds now being spent by the Communists for electoral purposes are the result of Soviet support."[28] The CIA likewise reported that Moscow was financing the Italian Communist Party.[29] CIA officers on the ground reached the same conclusion. "The Communist Party of Italy was funded, in the first place, by black bags of money directly out of the Soviet compound in Rome," F. Mark Wyatt, a CIA officer based in Italy in 1948, said decades later.[30]

In this environment, Dunn emphasized that the Christian Democrats could lose the election. A consummate insider and Navy veteran, Dunn had advised several secretaries of state before assuming the ambassadorship.[31] He used his position to draw attention to Italy. In January 1948, Dunn told Marshall that the Front could win a plurality of support, citing its "strength and popularity," as well as "the feverish activity in their present pre-electoral campaign, using the momentum gained from the Communists allying with the Socialists."[32] A few weeks later, Dunn reported that "the present electoral situation justifies grave concern and calls for serious consideration."[33] He further forecast that the Front would receive about 40 percent of the vote compared to the Christian Democrats' 35 percent—an "extremely dangerous" result.[34] The

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[28] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," March 1, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 515, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d515.
[29] Central Intelligence Agency, "Possible Soviet Moves to Influence Elections," April 1948 (declassified: September 2006), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0001380853.
[30] F. Mark Wyatt, interview by CNN, November and December 1995, https://web.archive.org/web/20010831150516/http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/03/interviews/wyatt/.
[31] Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War*, 57.
[32] James Clement Dunn, doc. 506.
[33] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," February 7, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948*,* vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 511, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d511.
[34] James Clement Dunn, docs. 511 and 513.

Front's strength alarmed U.S. Embassy officials in France as well.[35] If the Communists triumphed, Truman's strategy of containment would suffer a major defeat in its infancy.

### 1.2.2 Truman's Decision

For Truman, the call to action was evident; the question was how to respond. Policymakers in Washington believed that a Communist victory in Italy would damage America's security interests, and U.S. diplomats, analysts, and journalists judged that such an outcome wasn't just possible—it was likely.

On December 14, 1947, Major General Lawrence C. Jaynes and America's other remaining soldiers in Italy—some 1,600 in all—completed their scheduled withdrawal from the country. The troops set sail from Livorno for Brooklyn, following a ceremony in which an American flag was lowered and replaced with an Italian one. General Mark W. Clark, formerly the U.S. commander in Italy, transmitted a farewell message that read, in part, "I decry, as do my countrymen, the evil influences at work both from outside and from within Italy to foist upon her yet another 'ism'—communism." As America's forces departed, Truman issued a statement renewing his commitment to "the preservation of a free and independent Italy."[36]

In his statement, Truman had said that, if necessary, he would "consider what measures" to take in Italy's defense.[37] Secret plans were, in fact, already in motion. The NSC, in a directive

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[35] Jefferson Caffery, "Ambassador in France (Caffery) to the Secretary of State," March 3, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948*,* vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 517, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d517.

[36] Camille Cianfarra, "Last U.S. Troops Quit Italy; Rome Hails Truman Pledge," *New York Times*, December 15, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/15/104390138.html?pageNumber=1; Bertram Hulen, "Truman Promises Watch to Uphold Italian Freedom," *New York Times*, December 14, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/14/87565210.html?pageNumber=1.

[37] Hulen, "Truman Promises Watch to Uphold Italian Freedom."

dated November 14, 1947, had concluded that America "has security interests of primary importance in Italy" and that "measures… to safeguard those interests should be strengthened without delay," including to "combat Communist propaganda in Italy by an effective US information program and by all other practicable means."[38] For this mission, U.S. officials recommended covert action. Dwight D. Eisenhower, then the army chief of staff, suggested assembling a list of potential Italian assets for future operations.[39]

But who would oversee those assets? Until this moment, America had possessed no formal mechanism for covert action during peacetime. The Italian election inspired change. Initially, the State Department was to carry out covert operations, but Marshall refused the mandate. He believed such programs would be uncovered and undermine his work elsewhere.[40]

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[38] "NSC 1/1: The Position of the United States with Respect to Italy," November 14, 1947, *FRUS,* 1948*,* vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 440, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d440.

[39] Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 43. The U.S. Congress, in 1976, found, "As the elections in 1948 and 1949 in Italy and France approached, the democratic parties were in disarray and the possibility of a Communist takeover was real. Coordinated Communist political unrest in western countries combined with extremist pressure from the Soviet Union, confirmed the fears of many that America faced an expansionist Communist monolith. The United States responded with overt economic aid—the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan—and covert political assistance. This latter task was assigned to the Office of Special Projects, later renamed the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC). The Office was housed in the CIA but was directly responsible to the Departments of State and Defense. Clandestine support from the United States for European democratic parties was regarded as an essential response to the threat of 'international communism.' OPC became the fastest growing element in the CIA." See U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Foreign and Military Intelligence,* Book 1, Final Report, 94th Congress, 2nd session, 1976, S. Report 94-755, 22.

[40] Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 50. See also Sarah-Jane Corke, *U.S. Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare and the CIA, 1945–53* (Abingdon, Eng.: Routledge, 2007), 48; Robin Winks, *Cloak and Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939–1961* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 380.

Marshall, at least, understood the risks of manipulating a foreign election covertly while advocating liberal ideals publicly.

Truman next turned to the CIA. During the Second World War, the Psychological Warfare Branch of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) had spread propaganda across Italy. As the ultimate successor to the OSS, the CIA would now do the same. In December 1947, as America's troops left Italy, the White House issued directive NSC 4/A, which authorized the CIA to "initiate and conduct… covert psychological operations" abroad.[41] Truman also sanctioned secret shipments of arms to Italy.[42] A generation later, the U.S. Congress would conclude that NSC 4/A "was the President's first formal authorization for covert operations in the postwar period," and that "it was used to undertake covert attempts to influence the outcome of the 1948 Italian national elections."[43]

### 1.3 The 1948 Operation and its Aftermath

In Italy, America's aim was to reach and manipulate the masses. This effort required extensive funding, ingenuity, and initiative, as well as a degree of visibility. The CIA's operation represented just one part of America's broader campaign to influence Italian voters. And at the time, the U.S. government could only reach those voters with a uniform line of messaging.

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[41] Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA*, 50; John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 39; Forlenza, *On the Edge of Democracy*, chap. 3. Winks explains, "On December 19 the National Security Council, by its directive NSC 4/A, ordered the director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, to do what he could, including the use of covert activities, to prevent a Communist victory…. Hillenkoetter assigned the Italian puzzle to the Office of Special Operations…. The OSO promptly established a Special Procedures Group, or SPG, and on December 22 it began to shape its plans." See Winks, *Cloak and Gown,* 381. See also Robert J. Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S Truman, 1945–1948* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), chap. 33.
[42] Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 48.
[43] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Foreign and Military Intelligence*, 49.

Operating with these pre-digital limitations, America executed a series of overt initiatives that, in secret, the CIA supported and enhanced. To understand the scope and efficiency of the CIA's operation, it is therefore necessary to analyze how America overtly interfered in Italy's election, and then to examine the CIA's covert methods.

### 1.3.1 America's Overt Tactics

While the CIA manipulated Italy's election in secret, the State Department did the same in the light. Overt interference inevitably prompts a backlash: Since it is visible and attributable, the benefiting party can be portrayed as a foreign puppet. But ahead of Italy's 1948 election, Dunn, the U.S. ambassador, still felt that such action was worthwhile. In February, he told Marshall that the "full implementation of US policy is essential to an electoral decision by the Italian people for democratic as against totalitarian government." Italians valued America's economic aid, Dunn explained, and wanted it to persist. "The issue of friendship with the US will in Italy play fully as great a role in the forthcoming elections as will the internal domestic situation," Dunn wrote. "Every action of the US will have a direct bearing on the outcome."[44] Marshall agreed, cabling that he "concur[s] US actions will have direct bearing on elections, and will take all feasible steps to evince firm US friendship toward Italy."[45]

Much of America's leverage came from the European Recovery Plan, a massive economic program for Western Europe. Marshall had announced the policy, today known as the Marshall Plan, in June 1947. The Front's leaders claimed that if they won, Italy could still take part in the initiative, even though the Soviet Union had declined to participate and ordered its

[44] James Clement Dunn, doc. 511.
[45] George Marshall, "The Secretary of State to the Embassy in London," March 2, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 516, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d516.

Eastern European satellites to do the same. In early 1948, Dunn urged Marshall to rebut the Front's claims publicly and loudly—and, in the process, to use the Marshall Plan to influence Italy's electorate.[46]

Marshall obliged. In a March speech at the University of California, Berkeley, he declared that a Communist-led Italy would *not* receive Marshall Plan aid. "If [the Italian people] choose to vote into power a Government in which the dominant political force would be a party whose hostility to this program has been frequently, publicly and emphatically proclaimed," Marshall said, "this Government would have to conclude that Italy had removed itself from the benefits of the European Recovery Program."[47] (A few days later, William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, said on a radio broadcast in Italy that he was in "full agreement with Secretary of State's Marshall's clear and forthright declaration that no one

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[46] James Clement Dunn, docs. 511 and 513. Just three days before Marshall's speech, Dunn had transmitted a cable marked "urgent" in which he reiterated that Front officials were "becloud[ing] this most damaging argument" that U.S. aid would cease, were the Front to win the election. See James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," March 16, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 525, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d525. On the Soviet Union and the Marshall Plan, see Westad, *The Cold War,* 92–94. On the broader impact of the Marshall Plan on international politics, Charles Maier concludes, "The Marshall Plan, in effect, was the single most important policy in confirming, but not initiating, the division of Europe," in "The Marshall Plan and the Division of Europe," as part of a spirited dialogue between Michael Cox, Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Marc Trachtenberg, John Bledsoe Bonds, László Borhi, and Günter Bischof in *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005). For further reading, see Nicolaus Mills, *Winning the Peace: The Marshall Plan and America's Coming of Age as a Superpower* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008); Greg Behrman, *The Most Noble Adventure: The Marshall Plan and the Time When America Helped Save Europe* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Gregory A. Fossedal, *Our Finest Hour: Will Clayton, the Marshall Plan, and the Triumph of Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1993).

[47] George Marshall, "World-Wide Struggle between Freedom and Tyranny," (speech, University of California, Berkeley, March 19, 1948) *New York Times*, March 20, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/20/issue.html.

should expect America to give European recovery aid to governments which have declared their opposition to the [Marshall Plan]."[48])

Marshall's message reverberated across Italy, reaching impoverished voters who believed a better future was contingent upon American assistance. "His language is crystal clear," observed Italy's *Tempo* newspaper, which reported that a Front victory would result in the "suspension of American aid with resulting economic catastrophe in Italy."[49] Italy's left-leaning publications saw Marshall's speech for what it was: "Marshall's language clearly shows how US intends to use aid as electoral weapon of blackmail against [the] Italian people," read the Communist-affiliated *l'Unità* paper.[50] For the Italian government, Marshall's declaration was a political gift. Carlo Sforza, the foreign minister, commented that the Italian people were "deeply grateful" for the Marshall Plan.[51] To bolster domestic support for De Gasperi's policies, his team worked with U.S. officials to produce six million posters and, with the Vatican's approval, ten million prayer cards about the benefits of U.S. assistance.[52]

Italian voters had a choice: America's open hand or closed fist. Back in Washington, other parts of the government sought to influence voters still further. In conjunction with Marshall's announcement, the Department of Justice, citing a decades-old law, announced that Italians who supported the Communist Party would not be allowed to enter the United States.

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[48] "Green Tells Italy ERP is not for Reds," *New York Times*, March 31, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/31/85202385.html?pageNumber=11.
[49] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," March 20, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 528, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d528.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Sforza, "Italy, the Marshall Plan, and the Third Force."
[52] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," June 16, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 543, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d543.

"There sh[oul]d be no doubt left [in] minds [of] Ital[ian]s that policy [in] this regard [is] unchanged," Marshall wrote the U.S. Embassy.[53] In early April, John Lamula, a Republican politician, announced that the State Department had sent him a letter confirming that Italians who voted Communist would "require exclusion from the United States."[54] This rule had the potential to affect millions of voters—the State Department estimated that as many as fourteen million Italians wanted to move to the United States.[55]

With these sticks came carrots, all designed to induce Italians into valuing America's friendship and, therefore, the U.S.-aligned Christian Democratic Party. Just before Marshall's speech, Truman transferred twenty-nine merchant ships to De Gasperi's government. Flanked by Marshall and the Italian ambassador, Truman said that he was returning the vessels "to work again for the rebuilding of peace and the restoration of a prosperous Italy," and to "express again the feeling of friendship and admiration of the American people for the Italian people."[56] All the while, Washington flooded Italy with supplies. In February, Dunn urged Marshall to ensure the U.S. continued to provide Italy with wheat; otherwise, De Gasperi would have to reduce bread

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[53] George Marshall, "The Secretary of State to the Embassy in Italy," March 24, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 531, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d531; Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 48–49.

[54] "Pleas to Italy Ask Vote Against Reds," *New York Times*, April 8, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/08/issue.html.

[55] Eric Martone, *Italian Americans: The History and Culture of a People* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 41. Decades later, Jimmy Carter, the U.S. president from 1977 to 1981, sought to turn the page. Olav Njølstad explains, "Carter took steps to change the policy of not granting visas to Communist Party members, a practice established before the 1948 election to discourage Italian voters with relatives in the United States from voting for the PCI." See Olav Njølstad, "The Carter Administration and Italy: Keeping the Communists Out of Power Without Interfering," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 65.

[56] "Italy Gets 29 Ships in U.S. Amity Move," *New York Times*, March 17, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/17/85195322.html?pageNumber=3.

rations just before the election.[57] Congress approved millions of dollars in additional aid for Italy.[58] As more and more assistance arrived, Dunn, recognizing its psychological power, personally welcomed every hundredth delivery.[59] Newsreels like those produced by the Italian government funded, Christian Democratic Party-aligned La Settimana INCOM played in cinemas across Italy and advertised the benefits of Washington's support. One such La Settimana INCOM clip aired in March 1948 and displayed the arrival of tons of grain alongside an American flag. In the clip, Vittorio Ronchi, Italy's High Commissioner for Food, explained that "this grain represents only a small proportion of the grain given to Italy by the United States" and "is in short a representation of what the Marshall Plan's aid will be."[60]

Still, America's overt interference had costs, which Marshall recognized. In a cable to Dunn's Embassy, he emphasized the importance of "offset[ting] possible communist attacks against US 'interference.'"[61] De Gasperi often had to rebut accusations that he was a tool of the United States. On one occasion, he told Italian lawmakers that "there is nothing servile in accepting American aid," which he described as a "free gift." Directing his comments at Communist leaders, De Gasperi said, "You should explain this to the working masses. If, after giving them the facts, you should decide to do without American help, you should say so and

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[57] James Clement Dunn, doc. 511.
[58] Samuel A. Tower, "Interim Aid Steps Rushed by Committees in Congress," *New York Times*, March 21, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/21/96588391.html?pageNumber=1.
[59] Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 49.
[60] For the entirety of the clip, see La Settimana Incom 00130, "Solidarietá americana arriva la 400 nave AUSA," March 12, 1948, Archivo Luce, https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000011445/2/solidarieta-americana-arriva-400-nave-ausa.html&jsonVal=.
[61] George Marshall, "The Secretary of State to the Embassy in Italy," February 4, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 510, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d510.

assume full responsibility for your attitude."[62] Italy's struggling economy offered De Gasperi much-needed cover.

But there were limits to what Washington could accomplish overtly. All of its tactics had a common weakness: None targeted voters personally, based on their individual views and biases. In a pre-digital world, the State Department lacked the resources to engage in such behavior.

### 1.3.2 Nonstate Support: Mass Letter-writing

Italian Americans picked up the slack. Between 1876 and 1930, five million Italians had come to the United States.[63] Many of these immigrants and their families retained connections to their native country. As April approached, the Italian American community participated in a political project that at the time seemed spontaneous—but, as detailed later, the CIA orchestrated.

The public face of this effort was Generoso Pope, the owner of the largest Italian-language newspaper in the United States. Ahead of Italy's election, Pope executed a clever idea: He urged readers to mail anti-Communist letters back home, into the mailboxes of friends and relatives. "I knew that the only way to beat the Communists was to have the people of Italy know the truth," Pope explained at the time. "I started the campaign, realizing that the people of Italy would believe the truth when it was told by a brother, or a friend, or a blood relation."[64]

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[62] Arnaldo Cortesi, "De Gasperi Wins A Record Vote After Denying U.S. Rules Italy," *New York Times*, December 19, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/20/issue.html. See also "Italy Signs Pact With U.S. On Aid," *New York Times*, January 3, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/01/04/86892260.html?pageNumber=7.

[63] Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 50.

[64] C. Edda Martinez and Edward A. Suchman, "Letters from America and the 1948 Elections in Italy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1950): 112.

Executing this idea necessitated sustained and widespread effort. Other nonstate actors, from the Catholic Church to more Italian-language newspapers, pressed their followers to take part in what became known as the "Letters to Italy" initiative. Victor Anfuso, a New York-based lawyer and OSS veteran, distributed 250,000 pre-written form letters for Italian Americans to sign and mail home. Anfuso's letter read, in part, "We implore you not to throw our beautiful Italy into the arms of that cruel despot Communism." Another form letter, distributed in New Jersey, warned, "If you should vote for the Communists or the Left-wing Socialists you will become the slaves of Russia."[65]

As letters flooded Italy, American officials grew euphoric. Even the typically pessimistic Dunn was uplifted. "Surge of letters and packages mainly to southern Italy from America definitely is harming Front vote prospects to extent that loud protests have been made," he told Marshall in early April. The State Department encouraged Italian Americans to keep writing letters, and, just before the election, the U.S. government expedited mail deliveries to Italy.[66]

In all, Italian Americans sent an estimated *ten million* messages to Italy. In one New York town, more than 40 percent of Italian American residents took part in the campaign. John Ellis, a Republican politician who traveled to Italy in April, found that the letter-writing was "heard all over" the country, in what can best be understood as a primitive form of micro-

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[65] Ibid, 112–115. About a decade later, Anfuso, by then a congressman, secretly approved of Christian Democrats reselling American aid in order to raise campaign funds. See Leopoldo Nuti, "The United States, Italy, and the Opening to the Left, 1953–1963," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 50.

[66] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," April 7, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 535, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d535; Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War*, 142; Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy*, 63.

targeting.[67] The major cost of the initiative, as with Marshall's speech, was that it was not a secret. Italy's Communist leaders swiftly denounced the letter-writing as foreign interference.[68]

The letter-writers were not the only private Americans who targeted Italian voters. In an open statement, luminaries such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Henry Stimson expressed solidarity with Italians struggling against "the threat of oppression and slavery."[69] Famous Italian Americans like Frank Sinatra, Rocky Graziano, and Joe DiMaggio broadcast similar messages across Italy.[70] One Christian Democratic campaign poster read: "Even Hollywood stars are against Communism."[71] Private American companies, meanwhile, sent anti-Communist films to cinemas across Italy. Just before the election, an estimated five million Italians were watching them each week.[72]

Italians' psyches were under assault from all angles, as a result of American efforts to influence their views ahead of the election. In their mailboxes were letters begging them to vote against the Front; in their theaters were anti-Communist productions; on their radios were celebrities urging them to back De Gasperi; and in their newspapers was a clear warning: voting Communist meant sacrificing Marshall Plan aid and the right to enter the United States.

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[67] Martinez and Suchman, "Letters from America," 111, 119; D.W. Ellwood, "The 1948 elections in Italy: a Cold War propaganda battle," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13, no. 1 (1993): 21.
[68] "Letter Campaign Denounced," *New York Times*, April 9, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/09/94645009.html?pageNumber=17.
[69] "Pleas to Italy Ask Vote against Reds," *New York Times*, April 8, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/08/issue.html.
[70] Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War*, 141.
[71] Stephen Gundle, "Hollywood Glamour and Mass Consumption in Postwar Italy," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002), 102.
[72] Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 49–51, in which he also details how the U.S. government rejected a proposed get-out-the-vote tour by Sinatra as too brazen. For further reading on the Italian Communist Party's struggles with modernity, see Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943–1991* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

### 1.3.3 An Unexpected Coup, and the Vatican's Meddling

But America was not all-powerful. Events beyond Washington's control shaped aspects of foreign interference in Italy's election. The most important unfolded in February 1948, when, two months before the contest, communists staged a coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, to the alarm of Washington, the Vatican, and De Gasperi's inner circle. Sforza, the foreign minister, warned Marshall that Moscow was embarking upon a period of expansionism not unlike Adolf Hitler's a decade earlier.[73] After the Czechoslovak coup, the value of the Italian lira plummeted, in reaction to fears that Italy's Communist Party would similarly seize power.[74] The Christian Democrats used these concerns to highlight the stakes of the coming election: freedom or subjugation. The party's manifesto stated, in part, that the "recent tragic experiences" of Eastern European countries had elucidated the treachery of communism, and that Italians had to decide between "Bolshevik totalitarianism and sincerely democratic parties.[75]

In the United States, the Czechoslovak coup assured the passage of the Marshall Plan. Truman urged a joint session of Congress to approve the plan, citing "the tragic death of the republic of Czechoslovakia" as well as the ongoing effort of a "Communist minority to take

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[73] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," March 1, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 514, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d514.
[74] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Fear of Red Coup Drives Lira Down," *New York Times*, March 6, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/06/86895121.html?pageNumber=5. See also Drew Middleton, "Britons Are Fearful That Italy May Be Next Victim of Red Coup," *New York Times*, March 11, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/11/96420470.html?pageNumber=9.
[75] Cortesi, "Fear of Red Coup Drives Lira Down."

control" of Italy.[76] Lawmakers voted in favor of the bill, and, on April 3, Truman signed it into law at a high-profile ceremony, just fifteen days before Italy's election.[77]

The Czechoslovak coup also influenced the attitude of the Catholic Church, which, alongside the United States, had been interfering in Italy's election. Not only did the Vatican instruct its clergy to vote, but Church leaders also encouraged their followers, especially women and nuns, to turn out on Election Day, in opposition to the Front.[78] On March 10, Pope Pius XII issued a directive to priests. "In this grave moment," he said, "it is your right and duty to draw the attention of the faithful to the extraordinary importance of the forthcoming elections." All citizens who could vote, he stressed, must do so. "Anybody who abstains, especially because of laziness or cowardice, commits a grave sin—a mortal transgression."[79] The pope had "placed the whole weight and influence of the Catholic Church behind the Christian Democratic party," the *New York Times* reported.[80] On March 28, in his Easter address, the pope gave what the U.S. media described as "one of the most political speeches he has ever uttered." Appearing in St.

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[76] "The Text of President Truman's Address to the Joint Session of Congress," *New York Times*, March 18, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/18/issue.html; Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 46–48. For elaboration on western reactions to the Czechoslovak coup, see Peter Svik, "The Czechoslovak Factor in Western Alliance Building, 1945–1948," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 1 (2016): 133–160.
[77] Miller, "Taking Off the Gloves," 46–48.
[78] Camille Cianfarra, "Clergy Ordered to Vote in Italy," *New York Times*, February 25, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/02/25/94643817.html?pageNumber=10; Camille Cianfarra, "Vatican Will Back Regime in Election," *New York Times*, February 13, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/02/13/85211943.html?pageNumber=10.
[79] Camille Cianfarra, "Pope Tells Clergy to Combat Reds," *New York Times*, March 11, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/11/issue.html; James Clement Dunn, doc. 521.
[80] Cianfarra, "Pope Tells Clergy to Combat Reds."

Peter's Square, he told more than 150,000 worshippers that "the great hour of Christian conscience has struck."[81]

The interests of Washington and the Vatican were aligned. Moscow saw only conspiracy. A leading Soviet newspaper reported that "the subversive activity of the Vatican is inspired in every way by American military authorities in Italy."[82] Knowing the Catholic Church held immense influence in Italy, the Christian Democrats took advantage of its support. One of the party's slogans was: "God can see you in the secrecy of the election booth, but not Stalin."[83]

The CIA, meanwhile, tracked this confluence of overt interference. The agency recorded how the Vatican and the State Department were seeking to influence Italian voters. One CIA memorandum read that "to assure the defeat of the Communists," Dunn advocated continuing to support "the present Government" through the "sending of sufficient wheat to prevent a reduction in the bread rations prior to the elections; the prompt dispatch of military equipment to Italy; and a further statement of US policy toward Italy designed to convince the Italians that they cannot 'combine the advantages of aid from the west with that of political safety and benefits from the Soviet Union.'"[84] Another CIA memorandum explained that the State Department had recommended taking "every opportunity" to illustrate the "close support being

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[81] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Pope Sees World Facing Critical Danger This Year," *New York Times*, March 29, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/29/issue.html; "Text of the Easter Address by Pope Pius to Romans," *New York Times*, March 29, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/03/29/issue.html.
[82] "Pravda Sees Plots By U.S. and Vatican," *New York Times*, December 25, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/25/87567056.html?pageNumber=2.
[83] Foot, *The Archipelago,* 46.
[84] Central Intelligence Agency, "Measures proposed to defeat Communism in Italy," February 9, 1948 (declassified: September 2006), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0001380847. (However, in this memorandum, one of the steps Dunn recommended remains classified.)

given to the Italian people by the western powers."[85] When overt and covert mechanisms are deployed jointly, intelligence officers often study the former to enhance the latter.

### 1.3.4 The CIA's Hidden Hand

Behind the scenes, CIA officers—with limited time, experience, and tradecraft—were interfering in Italy's election, alongside the State Department, the Catholic Church, and private American citizens. By the end of 1947, the CIA had dispatched a special operations team to Italy. "We very hastily moved to support the Christian Democrats," F. Mark Wyatt, who participated in this operation, has said.[86] In January 1948, Defense Secretary James Forrestal pushed Roscoe Hillenkoetter, the CIA director, to expand operations in Italy.[87] The CIA's methods had to be un-attributable; otherwise, they would backfire. "The United States saw fit to conduct a covert operation in Italy," Clark Clifford, then the White House counsel, later testified. "Had they done so openly, it not only would have been counterproductive, but I think it would have assured a Communist victory."[88]

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[85] Central Intelligence Agency, "US plans support of Italy," March 8, 1948 (declassified: September 2006), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/0001380850.
[86] Wyatt, interview by CNN.
[87] Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA*, 51; Corke, *U.S. Covert Operations,* 48.
[88] U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Hearings before the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities: Covert Action*, 94th Congress, 1st session, December 4 and 5, 1975, 66, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/94intelligence_activities_VII.pdf. Clifford was a close adviser to Presidents Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. For more on the circumstances surrounding his testimony, see Loch K. Johnson, "Witness Testimony from the Church Committee Hearings on Covert Action, 1975," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 6 (2019): 899–913. For further reading on voter reactions to overt interference in foreign elections—the issue to which Clifford alluded—see footnote #58 of the introduction of this thesis.

What the CIA did in Italy during those crucial months has long been kept secret. More than seven decades later, many files relating to the operation remain classified. Inside the CIA, however, the History Staff has full access to these documents. The head of this department is David Robarge, who became the CIA's Chief Historian in 2005. Robarge spends much of his time writing classified histories based on classified sources. One summer morning in 2019, he met me at a coffee shop near Langley, Virginia, where we spent several hours discussing the CIA's history of interfering in democratic votes of succession, including and especially in Italy's national elections.

As our conversation progressed, it became clear that the CIA had been intimately involved with many of the overt mechanisms detailed previously. When asked about the makeup of the CIA's operation, Robarge cited initiatives that ostensibly had nothing to do with the agency: "the letter-writing campaign from the U.S." and "working with the Church."[89] In March 1948, an NSC directive had said to "immediately initiate in this country…. A letter-writing campaign by private citizens, regarding the political issues in Italy."[90] But still, wouldn't the letter-writing have happened without the CIA? "I can't say whether anybody would have either come up with the idea or reinforced it the way we did," Robarge responded, since the CIA was "facilitating [it] through American contacts, principally the Church, but also the ethnic communities in New York and Boston and elsewhere."[91]

The CIA also supported the Catholic Church's propaganda campaign. The Church opposed the Communist Party on its own initiative, Robarge explained, but the CIA "piggybacked" on its

[89] David Robarge, interview by author, McLean, VA, July 19, 2019.
[90] "NSC 1/3: Position of the United States with Respect to Italy in the Light of the Possibility of Communist Participation in the Government by Legal Means," March 8, 1948.
[91] Robarge, interview by author.

efforts by "making them more expansive [and] more robust." To Robarge, it was this synergy between the overt and the covert that made the CIA's operation more effective than any funding from the Soviet Union. "Ours is much more tactically savvy because of the tradecraft," he explained. "The Communists did not have a letter-writing campaign, the Communists did not work with the Catholic Church, etc. etc. You can just baldly see the differences."[92]

And then, of course, there was cash—lots of it. Secret funding is perhaps the oldest form of covert interference in democratic votes of succession. It enables political actors to better target, turn out, and manipulate voters. Such was the case in Italy. "We had bags of money that we delivered to selected politicians, to defray their political expenses, their campaign expenses, for posters, for pamphlets," F. Mark Wyatt, the former CIA officer, has said.[93] With these funds, Christian Democrats and other anti-Front politicians could better reach and influence the masses. "We bought that election," Donald Gregg, who worked for the CIA from 1951 to 1982, told me. "It is a classic example of how really interfering in another country's political system can pay off, if you're convinced that it needs to be done, as we were."[94]

Historians like Robert Ventresca have claimed that the CIA expended as much as $10 million interfering in the 1948 election (roughly $107 million in 2020 values), although no known source corroborates this figure. One report by the U.S. Congress in the mid-1970s pegged spending at just $1 million, far less. The truth, Robarge told me, is in the middle: "It was several million," he maintained. "It was a very high priority operation and one that the U.S. was

[92] Ibid.
[93] Wyatt, interview by CNN.
[94] Donald Gregg, interview by author, Armonk, NY, March 17, 2018. Gregg worked for the CIA from 1951 to 1982, and then as national security advisor to Vice President George H.W. Bush and as U.S. ambassador to South Korea.

committed to seeing through."[95] The importance of this operation and the resources required to execute it were apparent in Washington. In 1948, Hillenkoetter, the CIA director, told congressional lawmakers that some challenges abroad required an immediate operational response. Citing an example, he said, "Any possible action in connection with the Italian election."[96]

Much of the propaganda that the CIA funded had a specific purpose: to frighten. "Mainly it was to scare the Italians into not voting for the Communists," Robarge said, including by spreading disinformation. Some pieces of propaganda warned that the Communists would stage a coup d'état in Italy, as they had in Czechoslovakia. Others raised the specter of the Soviet military occupying the country. "The point here was to get out the vote, in part by scaring people," Robarge explained. "It was spending a lot of money, sending people to do the work to get people to vote: knock on doors, organize rallies to stir up pro-western voter centers, and scare people against the Communists."[97]

For this operation, Wyatt claimed that the CIA worked directly with De Gasperi, the U.S.-aligned prime minister.[98] "Certainly, De Gasperi was witting and engaged with us," Robarge confirmed. "He's certainly aware the funding is coming in, he knows where it's going, he's approving its use and its distribution… We haven't recruited him, we don't control him, but [there's] a relationship."[99] The agency also collaborated with lower-ranking Christian Democratic officials. "You have an effective party with a ground structure, why not use it?"

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[95] Robarge, interview by author; Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy*, 94; Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War*, 135. Conversion to 2020 values executed by "U.S. Inflation Calculator," https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/, accessed January 19, 2021.
[96] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Foreign and Military Intelligence*, 494.
[97] Robarge, interview by author.
[98] Wyatt, interview by CNN.
[99] Robarge, interview by author.

Robarge asked. The CIA relied on its party contacts, he explained, for "passing the money around, making sure it got into the right hands, letting us know about upcoming rallies, letting us now that they were in touch with certain media individuals, that kind of synchronization of activities."[100] The U.S. Embassy worked alongside the CIA. In the weeks preceding the vote, Dunn's team functioned, by his own account, as an anti-Front "political action committee."[101]

The CIA's focus was on manipulating the psyches of Italian voters. Today, billions of people have uploaded their psyches onto the internet, exposing them to targeted manipulation. The platform is new, but the goal of shaping voters' views is not. For renowned diplomats like George Kennan, whose writings had provided a foundation for the strategy of containment, psychological tactics held immense promise.[102] At a public lecture prior to Italy's election, he said, "It would be a mistake to consider psychological measures as anything separate from the rest of diplomacy."[103]

The CIA did have limits, though: Its officers focused on changing minds rather than changing actual ballots. The CIA has "hardly ever" altered votes directly, Robarge said, and the agency did not stuff ballot boxes or bribe election officials in Italy.[104] With the CIA's operational files still closed, some of the agency's work has undoubtedly escaped the historical record. What is certain, though, is that to manipulate Italy's 1948 election, the CIA enhanced overt initiatives, spread misleading and incendiary propaganda, and funneled millions of dollars into De Gasperi's

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[100] Ibid.
[101] James Clement Dunn, doc. 543.
[102] John Lewis Gaddis captures Kennan as a man of "authority," "eloquence," and "grand strategic" instincts in *George F. Kennan*, 694.
[103] George Kennan, "Measures Short of War," The George F. Kennan Lectures, National War College, Washington, DC, September 16, 1946.
[104] Robarge, interview by author.

campaign.

### 1.3.5 "We Were Euphoric"

But would it be enough? Because the United States was influencing Italian voters rather than altering actual votes, its interference operation brought no guarantees. This uncertainty unnerved George Kennan, who, during the campaign, was serving as the State Department's first-ever director of policy planning. On March 15, 1948, he sent George Marshall, his boss, a top-secret cable proposing even bolder action. "It would clearly be better that elections not take place at all than that Communists win in these circumstances," he wrote. The message continued:

> I question whether it would not be preferable for Italian Government to outlaw Communist Party and take strong action against it before elections. Communists would presumably reply with civil war… This would admittedly result in much violence and probably a military division of Italy; but we are getting close to the deadline and I think it might well be preferable to a bloodless election victory, unopposed by ourselves, which would give the Communists the entire peninsula at one coup and send waves of panic to all surrounding areas.[105]

For Kennan, the question was how, not whether, to manipulate Italy's democracy. His proposal—basically, to cancel the election—lacked the subtlety of interfering in that election. His colleagues felt that such a step would prove self-defeating. John Hickerson, a senior State Department official, scribbled onto Kennan's memorandum the many reasons why he opposed this "drastic" and "unwise" recommendation. "Instead, U.S. Govt, should do everything it properly can to strengthen non-communist forces and parties," Hickerson wrote.[106] Kennan's

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[105] George Kennan, "The Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Kennan) to the Secretary of State," March 15, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 523, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d523. On Kennan's mindset when he sent this cable, see Gaddis, *George F. Kennan,* 305–307.
[106] Ibid.

idea was a nonstarter, but it reflected Washington's priority at the time: to maintain its influence and power over Italy, even if that meant violating the country's electoral sovereignty.

Kennan's letter points to a broader issue for interfering actors: the need for contingency planning. In any democratic vote of succession that attracts foreign attention, the question lingers of what will come after it takes place. In this case, American officials feared that Italy's Communists would claim in defeat that the race was "not free," stage riots, and mount a coup d'état.[107] Italian journalists similarly warned of impending chaos. "There is no doubt that the Communists intend in the more or less distant future to plunge Italy into a frightful civil war," the *Tempo* newspaper reported before the election.[108]

There was also the possibility that the United States would stage a coup d'état, were the Front to prevail. Kennan had already proposed scrapping Italy's election. In February, the left-wing *l'Unità* and *Avanti* newspapers alleged that the Italian government would call off the contest.[109] A CIA memorandum from March 1948 ominously read that, if the Front won, its "actual accession to power might be prevented by falsification of the returns or by force."[110] On Truman's orders, the United States had been smuggling arms and supplies to the Italian

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[107] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," January 12, 1948, January 21, 1948, and February 7, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, docs. 505, 506, and 511, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d505, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d506, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d511.

[108] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Fear of a Red Coup Rises in Italy; Adriatic Arms Smugglers Hunted," *New York Times*, February 5, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/02/05/issue.html.

[109] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Rome Denies Plan To Delay Election," *New York Times*, February 15, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/02/15/96586935.html?pageNumber=31.

[110] Central Intelligence Agency, "Consequences of Communist Accession to Power in Italy by Legal Means."

military.[111] "The CIA has its emergency plans," Victor Marchetti, a Cold War-era CIA officer turned critic, later said, for if Italy's leftist parties won a national election. "Support to Italian colonels would not be lacking."[112]

Italy's election had become a dual contest: one between the Front and the Christian Democrats, and the other between Moscow and Washington. *Tass*, the Soviet news agency, emphasized American "interference" in the election.[113] From the other side of the world, the *New York Times* summed up the dynamic: "The Great Issue in Italy: Russia or the U.S."[114] Inside Italy, this superpower competition had become a key campaign issue. Communist politicians warned that "every vote for De Gasperi is a vote for Truman," while Christian Democrats retorted that "every vote for Togliatti is a vote for Stalin."[115] On the eve of the election, more than 100,000 Italians gathered in the Piazza del Duomo in Milan to hear De Gasperi's final campaign speech, while Togliatti spoke before 50,000 in the Piazza of St. John the Lateran in Rome.[116]

America had spent months manipulating Italian voters. Still, the outcome of the election remained uncertain. To increase turnout, the Vatican rescheduled Church services so that its

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[111] Winks, *Cloak and Gown*, 385.
[112] "Le mani sull'Italia," *Panorama,* May 2, 1974, in Philip Agee and Louis Wolf, *Dirty Work: The CIA in Western Europe* (Secaucus, NJ: L. Stuart, 1978), 171.
[113] "Soviet Press Plays Up Italy," *New York Times*, April 18, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/18/86899137.html?pageNumber=30.
[114] Arnaldo Cortesi, "The Great Issue in Italy: Russia or the U.S.," *New York Times*, April 18, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/18/86899553.html?pageNumber=109.
[115] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Millions in Italy at Party Rallies," *New York Times*, April 12, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/12/93794737.html?pageNumber=4.
[116] "Throng Listening to Appeal of Italian Premier," *New York Times*, April 18, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/18/86899012.html?pageNumber=1; Arnaldo Cortesi, "Italian Campaign is Ended with Oratory, No Violence," *New York Times*, April 17, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/17/86897218.html?pageNumber=1.

followers could get to the polls.[117] Come Election Day on April 18, a remarkable 92 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots.[118]

In the end, it wasn't even close. The Christian Democrats triumphed with 48.5 percent of the vote, compared to just 31 percent for the Front. "Most interpret results primarily as striking defeat for communism," Dunn reported.[119] And critically, the Front's leaders announced that they would respect the results. The day of the election, Luigi Longo, a high-ranking Italian Communist, said no coup or violent insurrection would take place.[120] (Soviet officials had, behind the scenes, discouraged Togliatti from resorting to violence.[121]) The right-wing *L'Ora* newspaper ran the headline: "No to Stalin!" while the *New York Times* declared that the "U.S. Has Scored Over Russia in World-wide Battle."[122]

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[117] "Italy To Hold Mass Early On Voting Day," *New York Times*, April 16, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/16/85206669.html?pageNumber=10.
[118] Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of Cold War,* 150.
[119] James Clement Dunn, "The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State," April 20, 1948, *FRUS,* 1948, vol. III, Western Europe, doc. 541, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v03/d541.
[120] C. L. Sulzberger, "Italian Reds Rule out Coup; Two Arms Depots Attacked," *New York Times*, April 19, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/19/94942707.html?pageNumber=1.
[121] In a letter dated March 26, 1948, Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, had instructed the Soviet ambassador in Italy to warn Togliatti against launching an armed insurrection. Silvio Pons, in his analysis of this letter, explains, "Stalin had concluded that any significant involvement by either the Soviet Union or the newly solidified 'socialist camp' in a conflict in a Western country would be a grave mistake." See Silvio Pons, "Stalin, Togliatti, and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 2 (2001): 20–21.
[122] Arnaldo Cortesi, "Communists Lose in Italy; De Gasperi Leads By 3 To 2 And May Hold A Majority," *New York Times*, April 20, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/20/85210712.html?pageNumber=1; Dunn, doc. 541.

Reactions were swift and emotional. Pope Pius XII announced his "profound joy."[123] Truman celebrated publicly. At a news conference, he said, "I know that free peoples everywhere will be encouraged by the outcome of the recent Italian elections."[124] Thomas Dewey, Truman's domestic political rival, telegraphed De Gasperi that "our hopes and prayers have been answered by the smashing triumph of free men over totalitarian communism."[125] A few weeks later, Italy received its first Marshall Plan delivery.[126] Towns like Gravina reaped the benefits.

Members of the Italian left fumed. Togliatti attributed his defeat to "the intervention of foreign powers and the Vatican," while *l'Unità* accused the Catholic Church of manipulating its followers.[127] Pivotal elections can divide a country, especially when a foreign actor involves itself in the contest. Much of America's operation had been overt, exposing its hand and, in the process, polarizing Italy's electorate. Many Front voters felt they had been tricked into participating in an unfair election.[128]

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[123] Camille Cianfarra, "Pope Expresses Joy Over Vote; 3 Nations Offered Him A Haven," *New York Times*, April 20, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/20/85210733.html?pageNumber=4.
[124] "Truman Hails Outcome Of Elections in Italy," *New York Times*, April 23, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/23/88117747.html?pageNumber=8.
[125] "Dewey Hails Italy's Vote," *New York Times*, April 21, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/21/86742979.html?pageNumber=7.
[126] "First ERP Ship Reaches Italy," *New York Times*, June 1, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/06/01/85267602.html?pageNumber=15.
[127] "Tagliatti Admits Reds Lost 1,000,000 Votes," *New York Times*, May 6, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/05/06/85217816.html?pageNumber=13; "Italian Reds Accuse Clergy on Election," *New York Times*, June 9, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/06/09/85240512.html?pageNumber=17.
[128] Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy*, 20.

In the halls of the CIA, meanwhile, America's intelligence officers rejoiced. "It was very, very exciting," Wyatt recalled. "I mean, we were euphoric: 'We've won this one, and we'll win others.'"[129]

### 1.3.6 Finishing the Job: After 1948

Electoral victories are by nature fleeting; in any democracy, periodic votes bring with them opportunities for change. In 1948, the Christian Democrats won. But the prospect of a Communist victory persisted, as did the security-based concerns that inspired the United States to interfere in Italy's affairs in the first place. Over the next two decades, the CIA continued to manipulate Italy's elections in support of the Christian Democratic Party. The 1948 election was not an end point, then, but rather the starting point of a long-running campaign to direct Italy's democracy.

Concerns about Italy's future increased after its 1951 local elections, when, CIA analysts lamented, the Christian Democratic Party lost the "substantial popular majority" it had secured in 1948.[130] Officials from the CIA, the State Department, and the Defense Department promptly gathered in the office of Averell Harriman, a close advisor to Truman, to discuss how to cripple Italy's Communist Party.[131] Similar alarm about the Italian left persisted for years within the U.S. government. In 1953, the CIA compiled reports on "the continuing strength of the Italian

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[129] Wyatt, interview by CNN.
[130] Central Intelligence Agency, "The Italian Political Outlook through the National Elections," exact date of issuance unclear (declassified: June 2005), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00904A000100030045-1.pdf.
[131] Central Intelligence Agency, "Analysis of the power of the Communist Parties of France and Italy and of measures to counter them," September 15, 1951 (declassified: December 2006), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp80r01731r003200020013-5.

Communist Party" and analyzed the "uncertain future" of De Gasperi's government.[132] Another CIA memorandum, written a few years later, examined the various sources of the Italian Communist Party's strength, including its "massive propaganda campaigns" and well-funded party infrastructure.[133]

The declassified writings of Allen Dulles, in particular, provide a window into Washington's evolving posture toward Italy. Dulles is perhaps America's most well-known spy. Between 1953 and 1961, he served as the director of Central Intelligence, overseeing some of the CIA's most famous—and infamous—operations: a staged coup in Iran, another staged coup in Guatemala, and the ill-fated Bay of Pigs scheme in Cuba. But first, as the CIA's deputy director between 1951 and 1953, he advocated that the United States interfere in Italy's elections.[134]

On July 25, 1951, Dulles met with senior U.S. officials in Rome. The topic of conversation: how to undercut Italy's Communists. "In general it was the majority view that… the government should be urged to move to eliminate Communist Party members who held significant government payroll positions," Dulles told Walter Smith, his boss. Dulles wanted to remove Communist officials from all positions of authority, but he suspected that the Italian

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[132] Central Intelligence Agency, "The continuing strength of the Italian Communist Party," May 28, 1953 (declassified: January 2002), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP91T01172R000200300041-3.pdf; Central Intelligence Agency, "The Italian Elections," June 9, 1953 (declassified: August 2000), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00890A000100050005-6.pdf.

[133] Central Intelligence Agency, "Status and Strength of the Italian Communist Party (PCI)," exact date of issuance unclear (declassified: July 2001), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-00915R000900030093-7.pdf.

[134] For further reading on Dulles, see Peter Grose, *Gentleman Spy: The Life of Allen Dulles* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994); Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War* (New York: Times Books, 2013).

government would not agree to that. So Dulles proposed more palatable measures, such as sabotaging the printing presses of pro-Communist newspapers.[135]

That September, Dulles pushed further for interference in Italy's elections, citing security concerns similar to those of 1948. He wrote that Italy's Communists "constituted a continuing threat to democratic government and even to the security of the NATO forces in Western Europe." Dulles did not believe that the Christian Democrats—whom he described as "complacent and somewhat feeble"—would prevail without America's help. "They may be prepared, however, with some backing from us and if persuaded by our seriousness, to take on, one by one, a series of measures to cripple the Communist Party."[136] Psychological warfare does not just apply to the masses: oftentimes, an interfering actor must manipulate the officials with whom they are coordinating.

Dulles proposed a range of aggressive tactics. He called for the covert support of "patriotic citizens" in the "press, radio, motion pictures and like media," as well as efforts to "break the strength" of Communist-aligned labor unions. At the end of his cable, Dulles concluded that it should be "a major point of American and of NATO policy to cripple these Communist Parties, to uncover their true intentions, to sow discord in their ranks and promote defection, to deprive them of privilege and respectability, and to drive them underground."[137]

The CIA went to work. After 1948, the agency spent $65.2 million (roughly $584 million in 2020 values) interfering in Italy's elections across two decades. Nearly 84 percent of those funds, or $54.6 million, went to the Christian Democrats and related organizations, while the rest

[135] Central Intelligence Agency, "Analysis of the power of the Communist Parties of France and Italy and of measures to counter them."
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

went to "other non-Communist parties and affiliates."[138] Dunn, the ambassador, reported in July 1951 that "vast sums of money are being expended in Italy under the authority of the U.S. government in various ways for propaganda and information."[139]

Even with this funding stream, the CIA was operating with newfound limitations. Dunn suggested, in 1951, that "a most effective way of combating Communism is… in such a way that the workers are approached on a personal basis."[140] But by then, targeted forms of interference had become near impossible to execute. No future election elicited as much emotion as that of 1948, making another letter-writing campaign unfeasible. America needed a new playbook for a new moment.

The CIA picked William Colby, a young and ambitious intelligence officer, for the job. In 1953, Colby moved to Rome, where he spent the next five years interfering in Italy's elections. Once there, he established an unrelenting operation. In his memoirs, he described the effort as "by far the CIA's largest covert political action program undertaken until then or, indeed, since—an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate that secret aid could help our friends and frustrate our foes without the use of force or violence." America's preferred parties used the CIA's money to execute newsletter, leaflet, and poster campaigns, as well as to organize rallies, membership events, and voter registration drives—all to reach and influence the masses. "More

[138] These figures and dates are from a memorandum that emerged while the U.S. Congress was investigating the CIA in the mid-1970s, taken from *CIA: The Pike Report* (Nottingham, Eng.: Spokesman, 1977), 204–206. Conversion information from "U.S. Inflation Calculator," https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/, accessed January 19, 2021, using a baseline of 1958.
[139] Central Intelligence Agency, "Analysis of the power of the Communist Parties of France and Italy and of measures to counter them."
[140] Ibid.

was needed than the sporadic election-year support," Colby explained, "especially since Moscow was covertly pouring in massive support to the Italian Communists."[141]

Colby was especially passionate about manipulating the media. While in Italy, he recruited newspaper editors to whom he could feed anti-Communist stories, which other outlets then unwittingly reproduced. "Washington wanted the ability," Colby wrote, "to place stories in non-American media around the world and then cause its other 'outlets' to pick up and publicize it."[142] Colby's objective was to insert propaganda into Italy's information environment. In this pre-digital period, he and his team did so by recruiting and communicating through Italian journalists. Only rarely did Colby establish direct contact with recipients of CIA funds. Most of the time, he worked through third-parties, or "cutouts," which protected both the agency and its assets.[143] Thomas Fina, an Embassy official in Rome, later explained that the United States had "the tilting power to shift decisions marginally one way or another" in Italy, including by "subsidizing the publication of books, the content of radio programs, subsidizing newspapers, [and] subsidizing journalists."[144]

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[141] William Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 109, 110, 116. Bobby Inman, a former CIA deputy director, told me that "Colby made his reputation in the Italian elections." While in Italy, Colby worked closely with Clare Boothe Luce, who became the U.S. ambassador there in 1953. See Alessandro Brogi, "Ike and Italy: The Eisenhower Administration and Italy's 'Neo-Atlanticist Agenda,'" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 5–35; Bobby Inman, interview by author, Austin, TX, November 2, 2018.
[142] Colby, *Honorable Men*, 119.
[143] Ibid, 120. Stansfield Turner, CIA director from 1977 to 1981, explained in his memoirs that cutouts enabled the agency to pass "funds to foreign groups that needed help without those groups knowing their source was the CIA." During his tenure, he continued, the CIA used cutouts to direct more than $10 million annually to "useful and friendly groups" overseas. See Stansfield Turner, *Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 77.
[144] Thomas Fina, interview by Charles Kennedy, May 21, 1992, https://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Fina,%20Thomas%20W.toc.pdf.

America was intent on keeping its hand hidden. Dulles wanted measures deployed against Italy's Communists to "be covert not overt" and "presented to the people as independent" developments.[145] Dunn, the ambassador, likewise concluded that "the most effective action in influencing the Italian people away from Communism would be that taken… without too much evidence of American participation."[146] (His attitude had evolved since 1948, when much of America's operation had been visible and attributable.) The second-term Truman administration, convinced that overt tactics would backfire, informed as few people as possible about the CIA's work. This secrecy stretched across presidencies. In January 1953, CIA Director Walter Smith briefed Dwight D. Eisenhower, Truman's successor, on world affairs. During the briefing, one of Eisenhower's advisers said the "remarks of our aiding the Italian elections" should not be shared with members of Congress—a suggestion promptly "agreed upon" by the room.[147]

Over time, the threat of a Communist victory in Italy declined, as did the appetite inside Washington for covert interference in its democratic processes. For reasons unrelated to Italy, in early 1975, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives established select committees to investigate the U.S. intelligence community. The Church and Pike Committees, as they were called, brought many of the CIA's activities into the light, including certain details of its work in Italy.[148] Politicians like Jimmy Carter, then a presidential candidate, turned their backs on this

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[145] Central Intelligence Agency, "Analysis of the power of the Communist Parties of France and Italy and of measures to counter them." See also Mario Del Pero, "The United States and Psychological Warfare in Italy, 1948–1955," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 4 (2001): 1304–1334.
[146] Central Intelligence Agency, "Analysis of the power of the Communist Parties of France and Italy and of measures to counter them."
[147] Central Intelligence Agency, "Memorandum for the Record," January 29, 1953 (declassified: August 2000), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000100010006-5.pdf.
[148] Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA,* 194.

long-running operation. "I would certainly hate to see Italy go Communist," Carter said in November 1975, but "I don't think we ought to intervene militarily or by any sort of covert means… I don't think that would be right."[149] An internal U.S. government memorandum, issued when Carter was president, said that his administration would reject "such actions as dictating to Italians how they should vote, seeking to manipulate political events in Italy, or financing Italian political parties or personalities."[150] A decades-long operation to interfere covertly in Italy's elections had come to an end.

### 1.4 Lessons

In 1976, William Colby sat down for an interview with Oriana Fallaci, an Italian journalist. It was an explosive pairing. Colby had spent years manipulating Italy's democratic process of succession; Fallaci was a fierce defender of Italy's sovereignty. Fallaci demanded "the names of those bastards who took CIA money in my country."[151] Colby refused, insisting that the CIA had to keep the identities of its assets secret. An era of oversight did not mean total transparency; much of the agency's operational records remained classified.[152]

Today, it is indisputable that America, inspired by a set of security-based concerns, interfered in Italy's election in 1948 and for decades thereafter. And yet, the U.S. government

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[149] Njølstad, "The Carter Administration and Italy," 56. For further reading on foreign policymaking during the Carter years, see Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986); Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam, 1982); Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).
[150] Njølstad, "The Carter Administration and Italy," 69.
[151] Oriana Fallaci, "What Did You Do to My Italy, Mr. Spy," *Washington Star*, March 7, 1976, taken from CIA General Records (declassified: May 2012), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp99-00418r000100100007-4.
[152] Ibid.

has avoided grappling with this history. Unlike the Soviet Union, the American state has not collapsed, so its archives remain under state control. To this day, many of the CIA's files related to Italy are under seal.

Lacking access to these documents, this thesis draws on various sources to recreate the CIA's operation in Italy: CIA, State Department, and National Security Council archives, oral recollections, an interview with the CIA's chief internal historian, congressional reports, memoirs, Italian news articles, and an Italian film archive. Together, these sources capture the practice and purpose of the CIA's work. Casting liberal values aside, Harry Truman ordered the agency to manipulate Italy's 1948 election. What followed was an ad-hoc but well-funded operation. Not only did the CIA bankroll the Christian Democratic Party, but its officers also masterminded a sprawling letter-writing campaign and enhanced the Vatican's anti-Front campaign. After the Christian Democrats triumphed, the CIA continued to interfere in Italy's elections. American intelligence officers bribed journalists, spread disinformation, and colluded with prominent politicians—all to direct Italy's democracy.

The agency's work revolved around manipulating the minds of Italian voters. "Italy was psychological warfare, psy war, as we call it. It used to be covered under covert action. It was always very, very closely guarded. It still is," explained Porter Goss, a Cold War-era CIA officer who later served as the CIA's director.[153] Much can be learned from the CIA's tactics. Individual actors held immense influence. Dunn's many cables to Washington catalyzed action, as did the many high-level meetings held in the U.S. embassy. The CIA's officers tellingly focused on the media. By working through journalists, Colby and his colleagues sought to shape Italy's information environment. And in all areas, the CIA's hand remained hidden. Whereas America's

[153] Porter Goss, interview by author, Florida Keys, FL, December 26, 2018.

overt interference prompted a public backlash, the Christian Democrats benefited from the CIA's assistance without enduring outside criticism, since the Communists did not know about the agency's operation. "For all these activities the essential ingredient was secrecy; there simply couldn't be any evidence that the support was coming from the United States government," Colby wrote.[154]

The Italian operation, while extensive, was also limited in its efficiency. This thesis defines efficiency as *the ratio of the work done to the effort and resources used by the interfering actor.* The work done by the CIA, as detailed throughout this chapter, was considerable. But to achieve this reach, the CIA had to input extraordinary effort and resources into its operation: at least tens of millions of dollars (adjusted for inflation), the assistance of many thousands of American citizens, a sustained on-the-ground presence in Italy, and the development of relationships with Italian politicians, journalists, and other potential assets.

In the pre-digital era, it was difficult to inject propaganda into Italy's information environment directly and covertly. Instead, U.S. officials typically either influenced Italians overtly through, say, speeches, or spread their messaging through Italian politicians and journalists. The latter option necessitated collusion, a costly and comparatively inefficient exercise that came with its own set of risks. On one occasion, a CIA contact in Italy was jailed, Colby recalled, "thereby creating some fairly anxious moments for me about what he would reveal concerning his real work during his trial."[155] In an even more dramatic moment, another CIA asset stole the agency's money and fled to Mexico, where he was apprehended. But the CIA could not try him without jeopardizing its broader operation. Of this incident, Colby wrote,

[154] Colby, *Honorable Men*, 120.
[155] Ibid, 121.

"Allen Dulles had warned that the CIA's power to dispense secret funds would undoubtedly be cut off if the Congress ever suspected that the power was being abused."[156]

An especially instructive aspect of the CIA's operation was the letter-writing initiative. With the CIA playing the role of puppeteer, Italian Americans sent millions of messages back home, to friends and loved ones whom they knew in real life. One Italian voter, speaking to the impact of this campaign, said, "Why should we vote for Russia: where are our packages, our food coming from, and where are our families and friends?"[157] This exercise, while far-reaching, proved inefficient: The CIA needed the help of many thousands of citizens to reach voters at the individual level and at scale. This lack of efficiency made mass letter-writing the exception rather than the norm. In later years, it proved impossible to input the same level of effort needed to execute such a sprawling yet targeted initiative.

Even still, the CIA's interference persisted, as the United States directed more than half a billion dollars, adjusted for inflation, into its covert operations in Italy. Much of what made Italy vulnerable to foreign interference in the 1950s and 1960s was the instability and newness of its democratic institutions. And for U.S. presidents, the success of Italy's Christian Democrats came with political benefits. Truman, for example, acquired a talking point after De Gasperi's victory, as he worked to defend the merits of the Marshall Plan and containment.

Italy also offers lessons on the perceived effectiveness of covert interference in democratic votes of succession. For the CIA, it was impossible to determine the exact impact of an operation to influence voters. Colby himself wondered whether the agency made much of a difference. "Our accomplishments could not be measured in short-term ways," he wrote. "The

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[156] Ibid, 121–122.
[157] "U.S. Letters Held Aid in Italian Vote," *New York Times*, May 5, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/05/05/85249987.html?pageNumber=12.

real value of the project could be understood only in the light of a long-term strategy: gradually to strengthen center democracy, stop the move of voters toward the Communists, and split the Socialists from their unity of action with the Communists. From this viewpoint the program did succeed."[158]

The CIA equated its effectiveness with which party led Italy. By this measure, every election was encouraging. The Christian Democrats governed through 1994, by which point the Cold War had ended. With these results as his evidence, Colby concluded that covert action could be used to prevent authoritarians from capturing "democratic voters for a nondemocratic cause," and that the CIA's work demonstrated the utility of such assistance.[159] He then launched into a passionate defense of covert interference in the democratic votes of succession of other countries:

> The charge has been leveled that the United States and, most certainly, the CIA have no business 'interfering' in the domestic political affairs of another sovereign nation, that their assistance to one side or another in an election there is not only illegal but immoral…. [If] military 'interference' is accepted, then surely lesser forms of interference can be justified under the same conditions. The test involves both ends and means. The end sought must be in defense of the security of the state acting, not for aggression or aggrandizement, and the means used must be only those needed to accomplish that end, not excessive ones. In this moral and philosophical framework, assistance to democratic groups in Italy to enable them to meet the Soviet-supported subversive campaign there can certainly be accepted as a moral act. It was clearly for the defense of the United States and its NATO allies against the danger of Soviet expansion, and the financial and political support given was plainly a low key and nonviolent means of acting for that end. This framework cannot justify every act of political interference by CIA since 1947, but it certainly does in the case of Italy.[160]

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[158] Colby, *Honorable Men*, 130.
[159] Ibid, 139.
[160] Ibid, 114, 130. Indeed, Richard Drake writes, "For decades the Soviet Union gave more money to the [Italian Communist Party] than to any other non-ruling Communist party." See Richard Drake, "The Soviet Dimension of Italian Communism," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 3 (2004): 116.

But Colby never asked Italians what they thought of the CIA's operations. When the agency's work there was outed in the mid-1970s, debate raged among Italians about the impact of its covert operations. The CIA had released almost no details about its operational history there, other than its existence, which gave rise to much speculation and paranoia. Italy's Communist leaders, eager to distract from their own missteps, blamed the CIA for their many defeats. In this environment, everyday Italians came to fear and resent the CIA.[161] "If you're in Italy, the importance of America, of the ambassador, of the CIA is enormous, it seems as though the CIA has magical powers," recalled Jack Devine, the retired CIA officer formerly stationed in Italy. "I used to hate movies like James Bond, which I thought trivialized the business," he said. "Then I realized, 'If the world thinks that is how we are, it is in our interests for them to think we're omnipotent.'"[162]

Among Devine and his contemporaries, the CIA's interference in Italy's 1948 election became legend and inspiration. "Italy was always raised as one of the successes that we had staged," said Bobby Inman, the CIA's deputy director in 1981 and 1982.[163] John Negroponte, the U.S. deputy national security advisor toward the end of the Cold War, likewise said, "The policymakers of the next generation, they all remembered Italy, and the threat of communists taking over, and the huge effort we made to prevent that from happening, when we went in big time to influence things."[164] And Porter Goss explained that "the legacy" of the 1948 operation became "very important" inside the CIA. "There was a general feeling that this was a good

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[161] Ventresca, *From Fascism to Democracy*, 20; Mistry, "Approaches to Understanding the Inaugural CIA Covert Operation in Italy: Exploding Useful Myths," *Intelligence and National Security* 26, nos. 2–3 (2011): 249–250.
[162] Devine, interview by author.
[163] Bobby Inman, interview by author, Austin, TX, November 2, 2018.
[164] John Negroponte, interview by author conducted by phone, May 21, 2019.

approach," he said. "The Christian Democrats were extremely important, our support did I think make a difference, and it was part of the roll back of the red ink."[165]

These former intelligence officers were convinced that the CIA had changed the outcome of Italy's election; the historical record, however, paints a more uncertain picture. The CIA was in its infancy in 1948. It lacked not only a playbook but also experience. After the Christian Democrats won, proud CIA officers had no evidence that their tactics—which were just part of a broader operation—had made the difference. Maybe Marshall's speech was the decisive factor; or maybe De Gasperi would have won unassisted. "We still argue about it," David Robarge said. "The best we can say, even at this late date, is that we probably gave the [Christian Democrats] enough of a margin [of victory]—a big margin—to be able to say the election was honest, the Communist lost fair and square, and there's no reason for them to take to the streets."[166]

Robarge's assessment is entirely plausible but, in tracking the development of American foreign policy, largely irrelevant. When an interfering actor's preferred electoral outcome is achieved, it is tempting to attribute the result to covert action. And in Washington's collective imagination, the CIA had rescued Italy's democracy. The CIA's work "resulted in the Christian Democrats essentially dominating Italy for the next 50 years," commented Joe Wippl, a Cold War-era CIA officer, "and certainly it was in our interests to support them." When I pressed Wippl, though, he recognized that he did not know if the agency had accomplished what he had just claimed it did. "If you were to ask me: 'Joe, can you prove that that 10 million dollars we spent in that election actually resulted in the election result?' I can't. It maybe would have happened anyway."[167]

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[165] Goss, interview by author.
[166] Robarge, interview by author.
[167] Joseph Wippl, interview by author conducted by phone, November 8, 2018.

No proof was needed. Influential voices, from Allen Dulles to Averell Harriman, had come to believe in covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession, just as the Cold War expanded in scope and intensity. In 1950, Truman's foreign policy team filed NSC 68, a top-secret document advocating, in part, the need for "operations by covert means in the fields of… political and psychological warfare."[168] Covert action, initially limited in use, became central to American foreign policy. A congressional committee later found that the agency's 1948 operation marked an era in which "covert action projects were first designed to counter the Soviet threat in Europe and were, at least initially, a limited and ad-hoc response to an exceptional threat to American security." But in subsequent years, "Covert action soon became a routine program of influencing governments and covertly exercising power-involving literally hundreds of projects each year." By 1953, the CIA was conducting "major covert operations" in 48 countries."[169]

Covert interference in democratic votes of succession was central to this web of activity. While the CIA escalated its operations, the KGB did the same, targeting democracies everywhere. After 1948, both Soviet and American intelligence had entered "the game," as various CIA officers put it. "This issue of intervening in elections was part of a comprehensive strategy, which both sides were doing," said Arturo Muñoz, who joined the CIA in 1980. "We were a mirror image of each other."[170] Colby and Wyatt, while in Italy, had concluded that

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[168] "NSC 68," April 14, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. I, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, doc. 85, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v01/d85. For elaboration on NSC 68 and its significance, see Ken Young, "Revisiting NSC 68," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 3–33; Curt Caldwell, *NSC 68 And The Political Economy of the Early Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Ernest May, *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: St Martin's, 1993).
[169] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Foreign and Military Intelligence,* 153. For further reading on the CIA's Cold War operations, see footnote #67 of the introduction of this thesis.
[170] Arturo Muñoz, interview by author conducted by phone, July 20, 2019.

Moscow was funding the Front's campaign, but lacked direct evidence. Now it seems all too clear. By the 1980s, the Soviet Union, struggling financially, used the KGB to distribute $200 million (roughly $481 million in 2020 values) to the communist parties of some 80 countries.[171]

Sometimes, the CIA's operations helped to maintain democratic governments; in other cases, they achieved the opposite result. American policymakers cared, above all, about defeating the Soviet Union's preferred candidates. Miles Copeland, who joined the CIA in 1947, best summarized this dynamic: "In an election in such-and-such a country, the Soviet KGB backs a candidate, the CIA backs a candidate, and the CIA candidate wins."[172]

The CIA's operations, in Italy and elsewhere, underscore a long-running tension in American foreign policy: whether covert interference in another democracy's process of succession is ever justifiable. In manipulating Italy's elections at a moment of perceived emergency, the United States disregarded its liberal ideals in violating the electoral sovereignty of another democracy. For spies like Colby, the realist benefits of such action proved irresistible. In his interview with Fallaci, Colby said that any realist would recognize that interference in a national election is "an activity that is necessary in the world we live in because a little help in some countries to some friends can avoid a serious crisis later." As a matter of proportionality, he continued, the United States had to counter the KGB. "Why don't you ask the Soviet government for the names of the Communists who take Moscow's money in Italy?" Most of all,

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[171] This figure became part of the public record after the Soviet Union collapsed, as Russian prosecutors investigated where the Soviet Politburo had directed state funds. See Celestine Bohlen, "Gorbachev Enabled Party Money to Be Invested, a Hearing Is Told," *New York Times,* February 11, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/11/world/gorbachev-enabled-party-money-to-be-invested-a-hearing-is-told.html. Conversion information from "U.S. Inflation Calculator," https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/, accessed January 19, 2021, using a baseline of 1985.

[172] Miles Copeland, *Without Cloak or Dagger: The Truth About the New Espionage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 11.

the ends justified the means. "American assistance in Italy helped it from becoming an authoritarian [country] for 30 years," Colby said. "You live better today than you would have lived if you had had a Communist government in 1948.… So the American policies have not been a mistake in Italy. We did a good job."[173]

And yet, Washington never would have accepted foreign interference in its own process of succession. Some Americans recognized this hypocrisy. Just before Italy's 1948 election, eighty individuals, including a U.S. senator, sent a joint telegram to Truman requesting "an end to all outside interference with democratic electoral procedure" in Italy. "The Italians are not a savage people who need to be taught what to do," they wrote. "No American would tolerate Italian interference in American elections."[174] Later, in 1976, Fallaci asked Colby how he would react if she travelled to the United States and manipulated its electoral politics. Colby retorted that he "would report it to the FBI and have you arrested."[175] For Colby, covert interference in America's process of succession was illegal and wrong, but CIA interference in the democratic votes of succession of other states was moral and right.

Colby's perception of Italy sheds light on what drove CIA officers. In 1984, he married Sally Shelton, his second wife, eight years after retiring as the CIA's director. He suggested a destination wedding, with a specific location in mind: Venice, Italy. "I think he wanted somehow to reconnect with Italy through marrying me, given our respective backgrounds, [since] we both loved Italy and both spoke Italian," Shelton-Colby told me, reminiscing about her late husband.

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[173] Oriana Fallaci, "What Did You Do to My Italy, Mr. Spy."
[174] "Appeal To Voters In Italy Assailed," *New York Times*, April 15, 1948, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1948/04/15/96424146.html?pageNumber=8.
[175] Oriana Fallaci, "What Did You Do to My Italy, Mr. Spy."

"He had a thing for Italy, a certain fascination for the country," she recalled, as his time there "was one of the highlights of his career."[176]

Colby forever felt attached to the country he thought he had rescued. Not long after their wedding, he and Shelton-Colby traveled there again. While strolling on a side street, Colby noticed a poster for the Democratic Party of the Left, the successor to the Communist Party, which had disbanded. He asked his wife to photograph him next to it. "We did it," Colby told her, staring at the poster, tears in his eyes. "The U.S. did it."[177]

[176] Sally Shelton-Colby, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 18, 2019.
[177] Ibid.

# Chapter 2: The 1972 Operation to Preserve Willy Brandt's Government

## 2.1 Introduction

Across from me sits Horst Kopp, a former Stasi officer. Kopp worked for East Germany's security service from 1960 to 1985 as a member of Department X, a branch of its foreign intelligence division. His assignments typically consisted of spreading disinformation and propaganda abroad.[1] But in 1972, he helped execute a far bolder maneuver: a covert operation to preserve West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's government. The Stasi acted at the Soviet Union's behest. "We received a directive from Moscow… to do everything we could to keep Brandt in power," Kopp recalled, an account confirmed elsewhere by Vasili Mitrokhin, a KGB archivist turned defector, and Markus Wolf, the former head of the Stasi's foreign operations.[2]

This thesis aims to elucidate why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age. The Italy case illuminated how, in the pre-digital era, foreign actors could reach a foreign population at scale during a national election. This chapter, which focuses on the Stasi's interference in a West German vote of no confidence, another type of democratic vote of succession, offers insights into how foreign

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***Chapter 2: The 1972 Operation to Preserve Willy Brandt's Government***

[1] Jens Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police, 1945-1990* (Brooklyn: Berghahn, 2015), 155.

[2] Horst Kopp, interview by author, Berlin, Germany, July 26, 2017. M. E. Sarotte writes, based on an interview with Markus Wolf, that Wolf "remembered in 1996 that the instructions from Moscow at the time were clear: the SED was to do everything possible to protect Brandt." See M. E. Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente, and Ostpolitik, 1969-1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 130. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin write that the Stasi had the "blessing" of the KGB Centre in Moscow to interfere in the vote of no confidence. See Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and The Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 427.

intelligence services once studied, targeted, and manipulated individual voters and sought to alter actual ballots. Alongside the Italy case, the West German case therefore serves as a vital and instructive point of examination, because it uniquely demonstrates how, in the pre-digital period, it was possible to target specific voters and to affect ballots through a covert operation to interfere in a democratic vote of succession.

As illustrated by the Italy case, the purpose of Cold War-era covert operations targeting democratic votes of succession was to advantage specific political parties. Some operations aimed to alter the status quo by putting a party into power, while others aimed to maintain the status quo by preventing a party from falling from power. In all cases, the interfering actor—inspired by security-based concerns—sought to alter votes or to influence the minds of voters. Efforts to manipulate the masses, though, often proved costly, and citizens usually had to be targeted randomly. Only recently has the spread of the internet exposed entire populations to tailored foreign influence. Previously, it was far more practical to target influential players in electoral politics.

The second case study of this thesis is such an operation. Its goal, as per this thesis's definitional bounds, was to manipulate a vote that would determine another country's leader. In April 1972, the Bundestag, the West German parliament, held a vote of no confidence in Willy Brandt. He needed the support of a majority of lawmakers to remain in place. This concentrated electoral process, in which parliamentary voters held immense influence, was ripe for foreign subversion. Both Soviet and East German operatives deployed active measures to tilt the vote in Brandt's favor. The Soviets failed, while the Stasi, acting on Moscow's orders, succeeded

decisively.[3] Kopp and his colleagues paid two voters in the opposition —Leo Wagner and Julius Steiner—to abstain. Had they not, the motion would have passed, and Brandt would have been removed from office.

The outcome of the West German vote of no confidence took the world by surprise. Rainer Barzel, the opposition leader, seemed to have the support he needed to defeat Brandt. The morning of April 27, West German lawmakers took turns entering a private booth and marking voting cards with a "yes" or "no", or, to signify an abstention, leaving the card blank.[4] All votes were anonymous. The president of the Bundestag then announced the results: that Brandt had survived. Only 247 lawmakers had cast their ballots against him—two short of the 249 required for removal. Members of Brandt's coalition hugged. A few even attempted to hoist him into the air. Barzel, meanwhile, shook his head in disbelief.[5] The results reverberated across the globe. "Brandt Defeats Move To Oust Him," read the front page of the *New York Times*.[6]

Nearly everyone had expected Brandt to be ousted. When he wasn't, suspicions immediately arose that someone, somewhere had paid opposition lawmakers to abstain. When Joseph Wippl, a CIA officer, arrived in West Germany just after the vote, speculation about interference on Brandt's behalf was ceaseless. "I knew that a couple of people were bribed in the vote," Wippl told me. "But I didn't know where the money came from."[7] Not even the CIA knew that the Stasi had paid the two lawmakers, Steiner and Wagner, 50,000 deutschmarks each

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[3] Just before the vote of no confidence, Soviet operatives attempted to give Egon Bahr, Brandt's foreign policy advisor, money with which he could bribe opposition lawmakers. For additional details, see footnotes #77 and #78 of this chapter.
[4] David Binder, "Brandt Defeats Move to Oust Him," *New York Times*, April 28, 1972, http://www.nytimes.com/1972/04/28/archives/brandt-defeats-move-to-oust-him-bonn-opposition-falls-short-by-2.html.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Joseph Wippl, interview by author conducted by phone, November 8, 2018.

(roughly $97,000 in 2020 values) for their abstentions.[8] Both men belonged to Barzel's conservative coalition, which included the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU).

The first section of this chapter explores the motives behind the Stasi's covert operation. It begins by placing the vote of no confidence in the context of the Cold War: why the Soviet Union sought to reduce great power tensions and, therefore, to preserve Brandt's conciliatory government. After the elections of September 1969, Brandt's Social Democratic Party (SPD) assembled a coalition with a thin parliamentary majority.[9] He then pursued a foreign policy of Ostpolitik: a set of initiatives meant to bolster relations between West Germany and the Soviet Union's eastern bloc.[10] By April 1972, Brandt had negotiated normalization treaties with the Soviet Union and Poland, as well as a transit accord with East Germany. All three agreements awaited ratification in the Bundestag when lawmakers began defecting from Brandt's camp to Barzel's. "It was a polarizing time," Wippl recalled. "I give Barzel credit for rolling the dice on the no confidence vote."[11] The motion threatened to oust Brandt and nullify his accords, which Barzel's conservatives staunchly opposed. Such a shift would have altered the international

[8] Conversion information for deutschmark to dollars (1972) taken from "Germany / U.S. Foreign Exchange Rate," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/EXGEUS; conversion information for dollar values (1972 to 2020) taken from "U.S. Inflation Calculator," https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/; both accessed January 19, 2021.

[9] Brandt needed the support of 249 lawmakers to become chancellor. On October 21, 1969, 251 members of the Bundestag cast their ballots in his favor. Brandt thus assumed the chancellorship with only two votes to spare. Hélène Miard-Delacroix, *Willy Brandt: Life of a Statesman* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 110.

[10] Odd Arne Westad summarizes the vision behind Brandt's Ostpolitik as follows: "A careful building of trust among governments in the east and west of Europe, which would enable disarmament, increased trade, travel, and cultural contacts, and, eventually, German reunification and the full removal of Europe's Cold War divides." See Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 385.

[11] Wippl, interview by author.

landscape in a way that undermined the Soviet Union's global influence and security interests, justifying covert interference in this democratic vote of succession.[12]

The second section of this chapter reconstructs the Stasi's interference operation and its aftermath. It begins by examining the Stasi as an institution and the types of operations in which it typically engaged. The section then analyzes the Stasi's two-part operation: to target Wagner and Steiner, and then, once Brandt's electoral prospects became grave, to use both men to alter the vote tally. "The Stasi was a force to be reckoned with, certainly on their turf, and I would not have put anything past them. They were thugs with files on everybody," said Porter Goss, who worked as a CIA officer in Europe during the early Cold War and later served as the CIA's director.[13]

This chapter concludes with a series of insights into how interfering actors, in the pre-digital age, could target individual voters in seeking to manipulate democratic votes of succession. The core focuses include: (1) the limited accessibility and efficiency of the Stasi's operation, which relied on human relationships rather than widely available technology; (2) the historical significance of the Stasi's scheme; (3) the timeless power of personal information; (4) the ease with which West Germany could have hypothetically detected and prevented this operation; and (5) the importance of judgement on the part of the Stasi, so as to avoid getting caught and, in the process, to preserve Brandt's electoral legitimacy.

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[12] Moscow held more influence over Brandt's government than it would have held over a conservative government. Deploying active measures to protect him, then, maintained Moscow's relative power on the European continent in service of its security interests. Specifically, the concept of security includes economic welfare, and Brandt's treaties promised to improve economic conditions throughout the eastern bloc. For the definitions of power and security used for this thesis, see pages 16–18 of this thesis.

[13] Porter Goss, interview by author, Key West, FL, December 26, 2018.

Using original archival and oral sources, this thesis breaks new ground in reconstructing the Stasi's interference in the 1972 vote of no confidence. It's a story of active measures, collusion, and a decades-long coverup. "We were a very good team and could count on each other and did what was necessary," Kopp said. He was ready, even eager, to discuss the plot to assist Brandt. "There weren't many who would have dared attempting such an operation because it took years, cost a lot of money, and the level of risk was high. But we prevailed."[14]

The execution of this operation now stands before history as the moment at which a foreign actor determined the West German head of government.

### 2.2 The Motivation: Brandt, Détente, and the Status Quo

A prerequisite to covert interference in a democratic vote of succession is sufficient motivation. A foreign actor rarely, if ever, interferes in the affairs of a country about which it feels indifferent. Rather, foreign actors target the processes of succession of states when doing so aligns with their security interests. In Italy, the United States believed that containing communism, an ideology, would minimize threats to its welfare, identity and even survival. Behind the Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union manipulated elections in support of communist parties and, through those parties, established a security buffer across Eastern Europe.[15] These

[14] Kopp, interview by author.

[15] For further reading on Soviet interference in postwar elections in Hungary, Poland, and East Germany, see Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), chap. 9; Delbert Clark, "Soviet Grip Broken By Berlin Election," *New York Times*, October 22, 1946, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/10/22/93160468.html?pageNumber=1; "Leader Of Anti-Reds in Berlin Threatened," *New York Times*, December 10, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/10/87564115.html?pageNumber=15; Delbert Clark, "Soviet Forces Out Kaiser, German Opposition Leader," *New York Times*, December 21, 1947; "Kaiser Ouster Disliked," *New York Times*, December 23, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/23/87566453.html?pageNumber=3; "Kaiser Carries On As Exile In Berlin," *New York Times*, December 24,

operations varied in their objectives—some were used to preserve regimes, others were used to install new regimes—but they all reflected the instability and opportunities of the immediate postwar period.[16]

Still, what constitutes sufficient motivation has varied over time, as has the purpose of covert interference in democratic votes of succession. This section analyzes the motives behind foreign interference in West Germany's political processes: why the Soviet Union deployed active measures against the vote of no confidence and had the Stasi do the same, and how East Germany, like the Soviet Union, benefited from the preservation of Brandt's chancellorship. Interference in the vote of no confidence can best be understood as an attempt to maintain the status quo. Covert action, sometimes used to generate change, was therefore used in this instance to prevent change from taking place, since preserving Brandt's government would maintain Moscow's power in the international system and guard Moscow's security interests.[17]

The vote of no confidence took place at a turning point in the Cold War. At the time, Washington and Moscow were coalescing around détente, a set of initiatives meant to improve

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1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/12/24/88788769.html?pageNumber=6; Richard F. Staar, "Elections in Communist Poland," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 2, no. 2 (1958): 210; "Hungarian Leader Seized by Russians," *New York Times,* February 27, 1947, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/02/27/88761324.html?pageNumber=7; Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 551.

[16] Per the parameters established in the introduction, power as it relates to covert interference in democratic votes of succession comes from acquiring influence over other states, undermining a rival's influence over other states, or destabilizing a rival directly. For more information, see pages 16–17 of this thesis.

[17] Kenneth Waltz predicts that the goal of states is to "maintain their position in the system." See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 126. The Soviet Union sought to do just that by preserving Brandt's government. See footnote #12 of this chapter for more information on how, by protecting Brandt, Moscow could maintain its power in the international system and guard its security interests.

relations between east and west.[18] The divided state of Germany stood in the way. Tensions over its future had spawned some of the Cold War's most dangerous episodes, including the Berlin Airlift of 1948 and 1949, the Berlin Crisis of 1961, and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (when Washington was convinced that Moscow's *real* plan was to seize all of Berlin).[19] For the Soviet Union, reconciling with West Germany was a necessary step to engaging more deeply with America and its allies.

Brandt's ascent to the chancellorship in 1969 coincided with the Soviet Union's interest in détente. His objectives aligned with Moscow's: to remove Berlin as a Cold War flashpoint and open West Germany to trade with the eastern bloc. It was in this context—during one of the Cold War's most significant transition points, with Brandt playing a vital role in that transition—that Moscow moved to interfere in the vote of no confidence.

### 2.2.1 Moscow's Security Interests, Détente, and Ostpolitik

It is impossible to understand the 1972 interference operation without first understanding Moscow's commitment to détente and, therefore, to Brandt's chancellorship. Brandt's Ostpolitik furthered the goals of détente, which the Soviet Union believed would bolster its economic welfare, enhance its geopolitical influence, and guard its security interests.[20]

The events of 1968 had pushed Soviet policymakers toward a more conciliatory posture. On August 20 of that year, a Soviet-led coalition invaded Czechoslovakia to maintain control of

[18] Despite the pursuit of détente in Europe, the Cold War-era competition for influence persisted in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Odd Arne Westad writes, "The Soviets never intended détente with Washington to include an end to Moscow's support for movements and regimes in the Third World." See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 195.
[19] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945 (*New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 241.
[20] See footnote #12 of this chapter for elaboration on why Brandt's policies furthered Moscow's security interests.

the country's political system.[21] Shortly after, Leonid Brezhnev, the head of the Soviet Union, announced the Brezhnev Doctrine: A threat to socialism in one country, he said, would be treated as the "common problem" of "all socialist countries." Externally, this pronouncement signaled resolve; internally, it was meant to deter further dissent. Brezhnev, a lifelong Communist Party member, was a "cautious, reactive, formulaic, and technocratic" leader intent on maintaining a fragile sphere of influence.[22] Of the impact of the Czechoslovak movement on Moscow's foreign policy, Brandt later wrote, "The year 1968 brought upheavals whose effects were long-lasting even though the traces of change seemed to vanish swiftly."[23]

What Brezhnev needed was stability, which he hoped to achieve through détente. Engagement with the west promised to bolster economic growth throughout Eastern Europe, where wages remained low and food prices high. While meeting in August 1970, Brezhnev told Brandt that "the Soviet Union was ready to join in wide-raging economic ventures." The results of Ostpolitik, Brandt's foreign policy, did not disappoint. Between 1970 and 1975, trade between West Germany and the eastern bloc tripled.[24] "Brandt's agreements were all about the economic

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[21] Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 112.
[22] Westad, *The Cold War,* 365, 373–378; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 153; Harry Schwartz, "The Khrushchev/Brezhnev Doctrine at Helsinki," *New York Times*, August 5, 1975, https://www.nytimes.com/1975/08/05/archives/the-khrushchevbrezhnev-doctrine-at-helsinki.html. See also Jussi Hanhimaki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: American Foreign Policy and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013), chap. 2; Leonid Brezhnev, *On the Policy of the Soviet Union and the International Situation* (New York: Doubleday, 1973). On the similarities between Leonid Brezhnev and Vladimir Putin, see Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 46–48; Susan Glasser, "Putin the Great: Russia's Imperial Imposter," *Foreign Affairs,* September/October 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-08-12/putin-great.
[23] Willy Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten* (Hamburg: Hoffman & Campe Verlag, 1976), 198.
[24] Ibid, 343, 360.

ties," said Joseph Wippl, the former CIA officer. "The Soviet Union's whole policy was based on one thing: money. Hard currency. They desperately need[ed] it."[25]

Moscow was also fixated on securing international recognition of its postwar sphere of influence.[26] Détente positioned Brezhnev to do so. In August 1975, the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, and nearly every European state agreed to the Helsinki Final Act. Under the agreement, signatories promised to respect the current European order and to "refrain from any intervention, direct or indirect, individual or collective, in the internal or external affairs falling within the domestic jurisdiction of another participating State" (a commitment, of course, that both superpowers had been and would continue to violate through their covert interference operations). Participating countries also agreed to "respect the territorial integrity of each of the participating states," highlighting the sanctity of territorial rather than electoral sovereignty.[27] The message Moscow hoped to convey was clear: its hold over Eastern Europe would last.[28]

Brezhnev could further use détente to reaffirm the Soviet Union's leadership of the world communist movement, despite a break with China.[29] In February 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon visited Beijing in what he referred to as "the week that changed the world."[30] With Beijing engaging more directly with Washington, the Soviets felt pressure to follow suit. Brandt

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[25] Wippl, interview by author.
[26] Judt, *Postwar*, 501.
[27] Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (The Helsinki Final Act) of August 1, 1975, *United States Department of State, Documents on Germany, 1944-1985* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), 1285.
[28] William J. Tompson, *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev* (London: Routledge, 2003), 48.
[29] Moscow also jockeyed for influence with the more ambitious leaders of its Eastern European satellite states. When Walter Ulbricht, the head of East Germany, opened a dialogue with West Germany in early 1970, for instance, Brezhnev sidelined Ulbricht by concluding his normalization agreement with Brandt. See Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 246.
[30] Hanhimaki, *The Rise and Fall of Détente*, 44.

later assessed that "Brezhnev's policy seemed to be greatly influenced by the problem of China."[31] Similarly, Donald Gregg, who worked as a CIA officer from 1951 to 1982, said, "There's a practicality, a streak of practicality, in the really good Russians that I have met. Those in power in this period were drawn to the west partly in response to the China maneuver."[32]

For reasons both proactive and reactive in nature, Moscow associated various benefits with détente: improving eastern economic conditions, solidifying its dominion over Eastern Europe, and maintaining its stewardship of the global communist movement. Brezhnev aimed to usher in an era of cooperation for these reasons, but he first had to repair relations with West Germany. Since the end of World War II, tensions surrounding the future of Germany had divided Moscow from the western world. Brezhnev hoped to overcome those tensions and secure a foothold in Western Europe.

And this is why Moscow so valued Brandt, the head of the Social Democratic Party. Before 1969, a conservative coalition had governed West Germany without interruption. Now Bonn had a leader interested in reconciling with the eastern bloc. Brandt's goal, in part, had long been to resolve a daunting policy question: how to move beyond the ashes of World War II. "In my opinion, Germany will not rise again and will not be able to maintain herself if she fails to find an adjustment with the East as well as the West," he said back in 1949.[33]

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[31] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 300.
[32] Donald Gregg, interview by author, Armonk, NY, March 17, 2018.
[33] Angela Stent, *From Embargo to Ostpolitik: The Political Economy of West German-Soviet Relations, 1955-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 154. Brandt's experiences as mayor of West Berlin from 1957 to 1966 solidified his support for engagement with the Soviet Union and its eastern bloc. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, which America chose not to contest with force—and which Brandt called a "shocking injustice" at the time—demonstrated to him that Washington would not fight for a united Germany. See Westad, *The Cold War,* 295.

Two decades later, as the West German head of government, Brandt sought to engage directly with Moscow. "An essential ingredient of our Ostpolitik was that we applied ourselves to our own affairs in a new and more positive manner instead of relying solely on others to speak for us," he later wrote. "We became the advocate of our own interests vis-à-vis the governments of Eastern Europe."[34] Brandt intended to collaborate more closely with East Germany in particular.[35] By connecting West Germans with East Germans, he hoped to maintain ties between the two states emotionally, if not physically.[36]

In September 1969, the Soviets offered to open negotiations with Bonn. Moscow hoped to strengthen ties with West Germany and set the stage for détente.[37] With West Germany's election weeks away, Brandt asked Egon Bahr, his foreign policy advisor, to draft a working paper detailing a potential reconciliation agreement with Moscow. The memorandum was entitled "Reflections on the foreign policy of a future federal government" and served as the basis for Ostpolitik.[38] Following the election, the conservatives fell from power. In their place, Brandt, as chancellor, moved to put his plan into action.

### 2.2.2 The Stakes: Brandt's Normalization Agreements

Brandt's conciliatory foreign policy inspired the covert operation that saved his chancellorship. Partnered with the Free Democratic Party (FDP), Brandt's SPD could negotiate with the Soviet

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[34] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 168.
[35] Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (London: Vintage, 1994), 70.
[36] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 168. See also Suri, *Power and Protest*, 225. Notably, none of Brandt's normalization agreements mentioned reunification explicitly, as he believed that he had to accept the political realities of Europe before exploring the issue of reunification. Still, Brandt often reminded his eastern counterparts that he ultimately aimed to reunify Germany by peaceful means. See Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 168; Westad, *The Cold* War, 385.
[37] Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name,* 67–68.
[38] Ibid.

Union and its satellites without the support of Barzel's coalition.[39] The conservatives had long governed on the basis of the Hallstein Doctrine, which called for the non-recognition of East Germany and any state that recognized East Germany, with the exception of the Soviet Union. The Hallstein Doctrine had inhibited the increased engagement for which Brezhnev hoped.[40]

Brandt's election generated optimism across the eastern bloc.[41] Under the Hallstein Doctrine, Kopp said, East Germany was a "non-state [and] isolated in trade relations, culturally, and politically." But, he continued, Brandt "broke the pattern."[42] By forging ties with West Germany, Brezhnev could demonstrate that he, too, was prepared to forego old resentments. "Many in Moscow saw in Chancellor Willy Brandt and his coalition partners for their policies," Barzel, the opposition leader, later wrote.[43]

For the Soviet Union, Brandt's chancellorship had a specific set of stakes attached to it: the accords he negotiated with the Soviet Union, Poland, and East Germany, all of which promoted détente, eastern economic interests, and, therefore, Moscow's security.[44] First, Brandt approached the Soviet Union; talks began just after he assumed the chancellorship. Brandt knew that an agreement with Moscow had to precede accords with its eastern satellites. "At no time did we try to conduct an Ostpolitik behind the Soviet Union's back," he explained in his memoirs. "Our sense of priorities prohibited any such lack of realism."[45] Negotiations between

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[39] Julia Von Dannenberg, *The Foundations of Ostpolitik: The Making of the Moscow Treaty between West Germany and the USSR* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2008), 131–132.
[40] Judt, *Postwar*, 270.
[41] John O. Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 69.
[42] Kopp, interview by author.
[43] Rainer Barzel, *Die Tür blieb offen: Mein persönlicher Bericht über Ostverträge, Misstrauensvotum, Kanzlersturz* (Berlin: Bouvier Verlag, 1998), 54.
[44] See footnote #12 of this chapter for elaboration on Moscow's security interests.
[45] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 169.

Bonn and Moscow reached an intermediate stage in January 1970, and, in May of that year, resulted in a preliminary agreement.[46]

Also in May 1970, cracks within Brandt's coalition emerged for the first time. Brandt provided cabinet members with weekly updates on negotiations, but lawmakers still complained about a lack of transparency. Rumors circulated that members of the FDP might ally with the conservatives and stage a vote of no confidence. During a June 4 cabinet meeting, however, Brandt allayed the concerns of his wary allies—for the time being.[47]

The foreign ministers of the Soviet Union and West Germany finalized their agreement in August 1970, in what the *New York Times* described at the time as "an almost jovial atmosphere."[48] That month, Brandt personally traveled to Moscow, a gesture to which he believed the Soviets would attach "major importance."[49] A visibly thrilled Brezhnev invited Brandt into his office, where they talked for four hours.[50] In a television address the evening of August 12, Brandt advertised the merits of what was called The Moscow Treaty, declaring that "it is time to rebuild our relations with the east on an unqualified renunciation of the use of force, proceeding from the political situation as it now exists in Europe."[51]

The Moscow Treaty affirmed the boundaries of Europe and disavowed the use of force to change them. Specifically, "to maintain international peace and achieve détente," each party

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[46] "Bonn-Soviet Text Leaked to Paper," *New York Times,* June 13, 1970, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1970/06/13/76766536.html?pageNumber=7.
[47] Von Dannenberg, *The Foundations of Ostpolitik*, 164–165.
[48] Bernard Gwertzman, "Treaty Initialed by Moscow and Bonn," *New York Times*, August 8, 1970, https://www.nytimes.com/1970/08/08/archives/treaty-initialed-by-moscow-and-bonn.html.
[49] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 325.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid, 329. In his address, Brandt went on, "This treaty in no way impairs the Federal Republic's firm attachment to the Western Alliance and its freedom of association within it… The treaty endangers nothing and no one. It is intended to open up the way ahead. If it does, it will benefit peace, Europe, and each of us."

agreed to "settle their disputes exclusively by peaceful means" and to "regard the frontiers of all States in Europe as inviolable." The signatories also pledged to "improve and extend cooperation between them, including economic relations."[52]

Brandt next negotiated a reconciliation agreement with Poland known as the Treaty of Warsaw, signed on December 7, 1970. Similar to the Moscow Treaty, Brandt's agreement with Poland normalized relations between the two countries and confirmed their shared border. Both nations agreed to "reaffirm the inviolability of their existing frontiers now and in the future." They also denounced the use of force to resolve disputes and pledged to deepen their economic ties.[53] In both treaties, Brandt recognized Germany's postwar territorial losses. The conservatives complained—loudly. "Many of our German contemporaries accused us of being the first to crystallize what they refused to accept as an accomplished act and would rather have continued to ignore," Brandt later wrote.[54] While in Warsaw, Brandt, in a scene captured by television crews, fell to his knees after laying a wreath at the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, when German soldiers had slaughtered Jewish resistance fighters. Brandt, humbly and intentionally, was attempting to reestablish trust with the nations Hitler had terrorized.[55]

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[52] Treaty Between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Soviet Union (The Moscow Treaty) of August 12, 1970, *United States Department of State, Documents on Germany, 1944-1985* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), 1103.
[53] Treaty Between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland Concerning the Basis for Normalizing Their Mutual Relations (The Treaty of Warsaw) of December 7, 1970, *United States Department of State, Documents on Germany, 1944-1985* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), 1125.
[54] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 181, 401.
[55] Authoritative histories of this period highlight the importance of Brandt's gesture in Warsaw. Westad writes, "For Poles and others who watched in eastern Europe, it was a powerful symbol of a new German government intent on peace, headed by a man of a new generation who himself had no blame in Germany's wartime atrocities. It went further than any treaty in creating an image of a new West Germany for peoples in the east." See Westad, *The Cold War,* 386. Garton Ash likewise writes, "For many people around the world, Ostpolitik is Willy Brandt falling to his

Momentum built further when East Germany and West Germany agreed to an accord on transit between the two halves of Berlin.[56] Negotiations progressed through 1971 and concluded in December of that year.[57] The two states had also begun to explore a normalization agreement, which remained in the backdrop through the vote of no confidence and was finalized in December 1972.

Brandt's treaties with East Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union won him acclaim globally, including a Nobel Prize in October 1971.[58] Because of these achievements, however, tensions rose within the Bundestag. The conservative bloc derided Brandt's Nobel Prize as premature.[59] The Bundestag, after all, had not yet debated the accords. While meeting with Brandt toward the end of 1971, Brezhnev, preoccupied with his economic interests, asked, "just between ourselves," whether West Germany would actually ratify the Moscow Treaty.[60] The answer was anyone's guess.

In February 1972, the Bundestag opened debate on Brandt's agreements. The conservatives remained fiercely opposed.[61] In Washington, Kenneth Rush, the U.S. ambassador to West Germany, warned Richard Nixon, "[The conservatives] oppose détente. They're

knees before the monument to the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto." See Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name*, 298.

[56] Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 120–129, in which she further explains that the Quadripartite Agreement—finalized by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union in 1971—provided a legal basis for this transit accord.

[57] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 387.

[58] John Kess, "Brandt Wins Nobel Prize for His Efforts for Peace," *New York Times*, October 21, 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/10/21/archives/brandt-wins-nobel-prize-for-his-efforts-for-peace-brandt-awarded.html.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 349.

[61] Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 130.

Catholic and feel you can't deal with the devil."[62] Brandt later faulted himself for not anticipating the domestic uproar that his treaties would generate.[63]

Admired abroad, Brandt had become fiercely polarizing at home. By April 1972, he had negotiated agreements with the Soviet Union, Poland, and East Germany. But his effectiveness as a statesman did not translate into expertise in all aspects of politics. Amid his successes as a negotiator, Brandt lost control of his parliamentary coalition. He put it best: "The battle over the treaties had become a struggle to overthrow my government."[64]

Empowered by a series of defections, Barzel and his allies pursued the vote of no confidence. They aimed to reverse, by ballot and at the eleventh hour, the policies of Ostpolitik. Neither the Soviet Union nor East Germany could stop Barzel from attempting to unseat Brandt. An electoral mechanism in the West German constitution, Article 67, permitted a constructive vote of no confidence against the chancellor that, if successful, would result in his immediate removal.[65]

By all accounts, Brandt was prepared for his government to collapse. The morning of April 24, just after Barzel called for the motion, Brandt was said to appear unusually expressionless and stoic.[66] He later reflected that he had "accepted the possibility of defeat."[67]

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[62] "Memorandum of Conversation," January 10, 1972, *FRUS,* 1969–1976, vol. XL, Germany and Berlin, 1969–1972, doc. 337, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v40/d337.
[63] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 355.
[64] Ibid, 356.
[65] Article 67 reads: "The Bundestag may express its lack of confidence in the Federal Chancellor only by electing a successor by the vote of a majority of its Members and requesting the Federal President to dismiss the Federal Chancellor. The Federal President must comply with the request and appoint the person elected." See The Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, May 8, 1949, art. 67; accessed through the Bundestag website: https://www.btg-bestellservice.de/pdf/80201000.pdf
[66] Miard-Delacroix, *Willy Brandt: Life of a Statesman*, 130.
[67] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 435.

No evidence suggests that Brandt knew about foreign efforts to interfere in the vote. However, like others in the Bundestag, he sensed that the motion was corrupted. "Since the ballot was secret, it will never be known how the voting went. My conjecture that corruption had been at work during the run-up to the vote could not be definitely substantiated, but the whole affair left an unpleasant aftertaste," he wrote in 1976.[68]

Brandt's survival shocked onlookers and prompted much media speculation. The morning after the vote, reports circulated that anonymous conservative lawmakers had abstained. "One or more Christian Democrats… obviously voted against Dr. Barzel," reported the *New York Times*, in reference to the defections.[69] The Stasi's hand, however, remained hidden. With newfound momentum, Brandt consolidated support for his treaties. He traveled from Bonn to West Berlin, where he told 50,000 onlookers that the treaties would be ratified soon.[70] The *New York Times* reported on April 30 that Brandt, having reached a compromise with Barzel, was at last poised to ratify his "disputed treaties of friendship with the Soviet Union and Poland."[71]

By interfering in the vote of no confidence, the Stasi, at Moscow's direction, preserved Brandt's Ostpolitik and guarded eastern security interests. This operation—hidden for decades, immense in impact—furthered the Soviet Union's pursuit of détente. Had Barzel's maneuver succeeded, Brandt's treaties would not have been ratified. Because of the Stasi, however, Barzel fell two votes short, and West German history never took such a turn. Franz Josef Strauss, then the chairman of the Christian Social Union and a close friend of Wagner's, referred to the

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Binder, "Brandt Defeats Move to Oust Him."
[70] David Binder, "Brandt Appears to Gain on Pacts," *New York Times*, April 30, 1972, http://www.nytimes.com/1972/04/30/archives/brandt-appears-to-gain-on-pacts-talk-with-opposition-said-to.html.
[71] Ibid.

outcome of the vote as "one of the biggest scandals in the history of [West Germany]."[72] And in his memoirs, Barzel, who came so close to the chancellorship, lamented that "vote buying and national treason were in the game when it got to the stalemate between Brandt and me in the German Bundestag on the 27th of April 1972. This is how politics was done. Without this illegality, German history, and also my personal life, would have taken a different course."[73]

### 2.3 The 1972 Operation and its Aftermath

The end of the Cold War—and the collapse of the Soviet and East German states—has made it possible to answer the question that haunted Strauss and Barzel: how was the vote of no confidence manipulated? It was not until 1993 that Markus Wolf, the Stasi's long-time foreign intelligence chief, revealed that his men had purchased Steiner's vote; likewise, according to the KGB archives at Cambridge University, Steiner abstained from the vote "on instruction" from the Stasi.[74] Then, in 1996, Wolf disclosed that the Stasi had bribed a second lawmaker.[75]

"Everyone was buying votes," Wolf explained in 1996.[76] He was at least partially correct: the Stasi was not the only foreign actor that targeted the vote of no confidence. Moscow also tried to interfere in the contest, in a ploy about which the Stasi may not have known.[77] In his memoirs, Egon Bahr, Brandt's foreign policy advisor, recalled that a Soviet representative "asked us why we weren't buying parliamentarians" just before the vote, and then signaled that

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[72] Franz Josef Strauss, *Die Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Siedler, 1989), 398.
[73] Rainer Barzel, *Ein gewagtes Leben* (Berlin: Honenheim, 2001), 84.
[74] MITN 2/2, 52, the papers of Vasiliy Mitrokhin, accessed by author at Churchill College, Cambridge University.
[75] Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 133.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Based on available sources, it is unclear whether authorities in Moscow briefed their counterparts in East Germany on this approach to Bahr.

Moscow could provide any funds needed to do so.[78] Unlike the Stasi, the Soviets lacked the network to secure potential defectors directly. Instead, its operatives approached Bahr, incorporating a middleman into an operation where, for the Stasi, there needn't be one. Presumably for a host of reasons—both ethical and practical—Bahr refused the advance. He later learned that the Soviets had hoped to deliver him a "suitcase full of money" for vote buying.[79]

Soviet and East German intelligence officers sought to tilt the vote in Brandt's favor. In the process, as per the parameters of this thesis, these foreign actors deployed active measures—personal pressure, blackmail, and money—to manipulate individual voters and, when the time came, to alter the tally of a democratic vote of succession.

The security-based motivations behind the 1972 interference operation are clear enough. The Soviet Union—and its proxy, East Germany—valued Brandt because his policies opened the door to détente and economic relief. This section focuses on the conception, execution, and aftermath of this covert operation. Working with limited time, Moscow attempted to rig the vote and instructed the Stasi to do the same.[80] In this pre-digital atmosphere, the Stasi, in particular, still possessed the means to target West German lawmakers, weaponizing the personal information of a few individuals to prevent Brandt's downfall.

The 1972 operation was in certain ways unusual. It is unsurprising that the Soviet Union attempted to bribe parliamentary voters, since Moscow had spent much of the Cold War engaging in covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. But it was the Stasi,

[78] Egon Bahr, *Zu meiner Zeit* (Berlin: Blessing, 1998), 383.
[79] Ibid.
[80] See footnote #2 of this chapter for first-hand accounts of Moscow's directive.

with its established espionage network, that succeeded in rigging the vote, contrasting sharply with the agency's reputation for information-collection abroad and fierce surveillance at home.[81]

A Stasi directorate known as the HVA, the Main Directorate for Reconnaissance, had jurisdiction over foreign operations. The Stasi first absorbed the HVA in the early 1950s. Wolf led the division from 1952 to 1986. Horst Kopp was a member of Department X, or the HVA's disinformation branch. With Wolf's oversight, Department X spread propaganda and recruited agents abroad—especially in West Germany.[82] "There were a lot of spies in Bonn in the 70s and into the 80s," Joseph Wippl, the former CIA officer, said with a laugh.[83] "The Stasi was everywhere," added Bobby Inman, who served as the CIA's deputy director under Ronald Reagan.[84] Porter Goss, the former CIA director, put it simply: "I feared the Stasi."[85]

Moscow worked through Wolf, the HVA's feared and elusive spymaster. "I knew [Wolf] personally," Oleg Kalugin, the former KGB general, told me. "West Germany practically was totally infiltrated by the East Germans, and Markus Wolf in that sense was their number one man."[86] In his memoirs, published in 1997, Wolf detailed how he manipulated his targets—most famously, by planting so-called "Romeo Spies" inside West Germany, who then seduced women with access to state secrets. "The link between romance and espionage is no invention of mine," Wolf wrote. "But if I go down in espionage history, it may well be for perfecting the use of sex

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[81] Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story,* 4. On the Stasi's domestic operations, see David Childs and Richard Popplewell, *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service* (London: Macmillan, 1996). See also Gary Bruce, "The Prelude to Nationwide Surveillance in East Germany: Stasi Operations and Threat Perceptions, 1945-1953," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 2 (2003): 3–31.
[82] Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi*, 155, 165; Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story*, 263.
[83] Wippl, interview by author.
[84] Bobby Inman, interview by author, Austin, TX, November 2, 2018.
[85] Goss, interview by author.
[86] Oleg Kalugin, interview by author, Rockville, MD, August 7, 2019.

in spying." Wolf was comfortable crossing boundaries to achieve his objectives. And like many in East Germany, he valued Brandt, whom he described as an "engaging, intelligent, [and] morally upright man."[87]

In the context of the HVA, the 1972 operation still stands out. Wolf's directorate focused primarily on gathering intelligence overseas.[88] But to protect Brandt, the Stasi could not just collect information; it had to manipulate the vote. This type of operation presented risks. If the Stasi were caught, relations between West Germany and the eastern bloc would suffer, undermining Moscow's security interests. "The conclusion we often reached on interference operations was it was too risky to even try," said Donald Gregg, in reference to covert operations targeting democratic votes of succession that he considered as a CIA officer.[89]

At first, Soviet and East German authorities sought to help Brandt overtly. In early 1972, as Brandt's standing faltered, Wolf and other eastern leaders lent a helping hand. Brezhnev announced that he would consider recognizing the European Economic Community, a precursor to the European Union—a tactical move meant to bolster support for the Moscow Treaty, détente, and Brandt.[90] In February, the East German Politburo temporarily implemented its transit accord with West Germany; more than a million West Berliners then visited the other side of the Iron Curtain.[91] This maneuver, among others, helped generate support for Brandt's agenda. In response, Barzel cried foul. "As Barzel complains, the numerous steps taken by the

[87] Markus Wolf, *Man without a Face: The Autobiography of Communism's Greatest Spymaster* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1997), 135, 166–171.
[88] Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story*, 4.
[89] Gregg, interview by author.
[90] Wolfgang Mueller, "Recognition in Return for Détente? Brezhnev, the EEC, and the Moscow Treaty with West Germany, 1970–1973," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 4 (2011): 79–100.
[91] Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 131.

Soviets or East Germans in the last several weeks have cumulatively had effects on German opinion," a senior U.S. embassy official in West Germany reported at the time.[92]

Overt efforts to support Brandt increased after Barzel announced the vote of no confidence.[93] Wolf referred to the week leading up to the vote as the "Protect Brandt Week," as East German officials frantically attempted to bolster Brandt's standing. On April 25, the East German Politburo made concessions in traffic treaty talks, in order to enhance Brandt's reputation as a negotiator.[94] Washington, meanwhile, watched closely. "Brezhnev will be finished if the treaties don't get ratified," U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger told Richard Nixon while discussing the impending vote.[95] Brandt similarly recognized that Brezhnev had "staked his entire reputation" on the ratification of the treaties.[96]

For the Soviet Union, the stakes were indeed high—too high, in fact, to manipulate minds and hope for the best. Ballots had to be purchased. At Moscow's direction, the Stasi weaponized two of its assets in the conservative bloc: Julius Steiner—a junior lawmaker—and Leo Wagner, one of the Christian Social Union's highest-ranking members. The two men shared a range of bad habits: gambling, drinking, and womanizing. They also had strikingly different relationships with the Stasi. For years, Wagner fed information to a Stasi middleman who reported to Kopp, providing Wagner plausible deniability and raising the possibility that he did not realize whom he was assisting. Steiner, by contrast, worked directly with the Stasi and found himself under

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[92] "Telegram from the Embassy in Germany to the Department of State," April 14, 1972, *FRUS,* 1969–1976, vol. XL, Germany and Berlin, 1969–1972, doc. 354, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v40/d354.
[93] Barzel, *Die Tür blieb offen*, 97, in which Barzel explains that he announced the vote of no confidence on April 24 after briefing his inner circle of his plans on April 19.
[94] Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 130–133.
[95] "Editorial Note," *FRUS,* 1969–1976, vol. XL, Germany and Berlin, 1969–1972, doc. 358, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v40/d358.
[96] Brandt, *Begegnungen und Einsichten*, 336.

investigation shortly after the vote of no confidence.[97]

### 2.3.1 The Method: Knowing the Individual

The road to the Stasi's covert operation began well before April 1972. The structure of the West German government was such that a vote of no confidence could be called at any time, meaning foreign intelligence services had to plan in advance if they hoped to influence the outcome. Convincing individuals to work against their governments is often a slow-moving and inefficient process involving deception, escalation, and a series of incentives. By 1972, when the vote was called, the HVA had already corrupted Steiner and Wagner.

The Stasi targeted these men because of their personal vulnerabilities. The reality of the world prior to the spread of the internet was such that documenting the views—and vices—of millions was beyond the reach of foreign intelligence services. But the power of the personal was still present, and foreign actors deployed resources to study select targets.

In need of money, Steiner began feeding information to the Stasi as early as 1970.[98] "He was a drinker, seeking women, in debt," Kopp explained, and those debts exposed him.[99] Steiner's initial work for the Stasi did not involve active measures, but it did set the stage for what followed. The intelligence he provided was varied and documented carefully in the Stasi's files:

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[97] "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel,* November 27, 2000, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-17925474.html.
[98] Kopp, interview by author; "Der Deutsche Bundestag 1949 bis 1989 in den Akten des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit (MfS) der DDR," The Federal Commissioner for the Documents of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic, Berlin, Germany, March 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20131108051602/http://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2013/45329705_kw24_gutachten/gutachten.pdf.
[99] Kopp, interview by author.

**SA7301219**: Foreign policy measures of the CDU.
**SA7301725**: The current situation and the process of differentiation in the CDU/CSU resulting from the disputes over the basic contract and the BRD's entry into the United Nations.
**SA7303306:** Information on the attitude of leading West German monopoly circles and business associations on the economic policy of the SPD / FDP government.
**SE7301716:** Statements by CDU leaders on the fight in the party for the leadership positions, the ideology of the party and the relationship between the federal office and the parliamentary group.
**SE7301717**: Efforts by CDU politicians to reach an agreement with the FDP.
**SE7301719:** Proceedings within the CDU and CDU/CSU factions regarding the struggle for leadership positions within the party.
**SE7301720:** Opinion of CSU Bundestag deputies on the general sentiment in the parliamentary group.[100]

The second target, Leo Wagner, also committed espionage prior to the vote of no confidence. As with Steiner, the Stasi studied Wagner closely. Its files recorded Wagner's home address, birthday, political activities, and family details: "Catholic, married, two children."[101] In contrast to Steiner, Wagner had an extensive parliamentary career. In 1961, Wagner was elected to the Bundestag; he quickly became a rising star in the CSU. He was a friend and "close confidant" to Franz Josef Strauss, the party's long-time head.[102] By 1971, Wagner was one of the conservative bloc's parliamentary managing directors.[103]

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[100] Julius Steiner Dossier, Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, BStU, Berlin, Germany, 4. This file was provided to the author by the Stasi Records Agency (the BStU) in Berlin, Germany, in response to an archival request. It includes 299 pages of materials on Steiner collected and documented by the Stasi. Herein, this file is cited as the Julius Steiner Dossier.
[101] Leo Wagner Dossier, Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, BStU, Berlin, Germany, 21. This file was provided to the author by the Stasi Records Agency (the BStU) in Berlin, Germany, in response to an archival request. It includes 53 pages of materials on Wagner collected and documented by the Stasi. Herein, this file is cited as the Leo Wagner Dossier.
[102] "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel.*
[103] "Bis zu meinem Zusammenbruch," *Der Spiegel,* October 20, 1980, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14320885.html.

In public, Wagner presented as confident and ambitious. He even had a nickname: Handsome Leo. In private, however, he was self-destructive. While campaigning for the Bundestag, he often took out loans that he then struggled to repay. He was a regular at high-end clubs like Chez Nous, where he spent as much as 4,000 deutschmarks (roughly $7,800 in 2020 values) each night on champagne and caviar, both for himself and for the women he was entertaining.[104] A married man, Wagner carried out several affairs at once. "Leo Wagner, for us he was the mysterious Leo," Hans Korneli, a former bartender at Chez Nous, recalled in a documentary about Wagner that his grandson produced. "He was a real VIP guest and a very reserved person."[105] Wagner's long-time driver, Wolfgang Jankowiak, described him as a "politician by day, and by night, in these bars, a totally different person."[106]

Wagner's reckless behavior tore his family apart. "I basically buried him long before his death," Ruth Schwarzer, his daughter, said in the documentary. Wagner spent most of his time in the West German capital, Bonn, away from his wife and children, who lived in his home district. His Bonn apartment had a back entrance, so visitors—including mistresses—could visit without detection. On one occasion, Elfriede, Wagner's wife, called without warning; another woman answered the phone. "You whore," Elfriede yelled, before hanging up. She pleaded for divorce, but Wagner, ever mindful of his reputation, refused. "You'll never get a divorce. It's out of the question," he screamed, based on Ruth's recollection. Elfriede, trapped in a loveless marriage,

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[104] "Bis zu meinem Zusammenbruch," *Der Spiegel*. Conversion information for deutschmark to dollars (1972) taken from "Germany / U.S. Foreign Exchange Rate," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/EXGEUS; conversion information for dollar values (1972 to 2020) taken from "U.S. Inflation Calculator," https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/; both accessed January 19, 2021.
[105] *Die Geheimnisse des Schönen Leo*, directed by Benedikt Schwarzer (2019; Germany: Lichtblick Film & TV Produktion), copy provided to author by director.
[106] Ibid.

descended into alcoholism and depression. She soon died of cancer. A distraught Ruth then attempted suicide by drinking ant poison. She fell into a weeks-long coma but ultimately survived.[107]

The instability of Wagner's personal life made him vulnerable. "We tried to recruit Leo Wagner because he was so open to attack, especially for financial reasons," Kopp explained.[108] Wagner thought that he could conceal his vices by acting discreetly. But just as online activity leaves a trail, so did Wagner's late-night behavior. Kopp and his colleagues marveled at how conservative lawmakers in the Bundestag did not notice that Wagner was headed toward personal and financial ruin.[109] For the Stasi, this disconnect presented an opportunity.

The seduction and manipulation of Wagner was a complex affair. Beginning in 1970, Wagner provided intelligence to Georg Fleissman, a Bavarian journalist employed by the Stasi. Fleissman, having befriended Wagner, claimed that he represented private corporations that desired access to eastern markets.[110] The Stasi crafted Fleissman's cover story. "It was developed by experts here," Kopp said. "We had faked documents for the trade interest groups with proper names, addresses and letter heads," all to convince Wagner that Fleissman worked for lobbyists interested in doing business with the Soviet Union's eastern bloc.[111]

Wagner first met Fleissman, the middleman, in the mid-1960s.[112] "You can hardly understand this story without the shining person Georg Fleissman," Kopp said.[113] Fleissman began assisting the Stasi in 1966. He was an effective recruiter because he mastered Wagner as

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Kopp, interview by author.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel*.
[113] Kopp, interview by author.

an individual. Kopp explained, "Fleissman had Leo Wagner completely under his control. He was completely aware of his financial and family situation up to the tiniest detail."[114] (In 1995, Fleissman—who operated under the code name "Dürer" from 1966 to 1985—was found guilty of spying for the Stasi. He died soon after.[115])

In addition to money, Fleissman provided Wagner with intelligence about Brandt's Social Democrats. Fleissman told Wagner that he acquired this information through his work as a journalist. But his real source was the Stasi, which aimed to make Wagner as reliant on Fleissman as possible.[116] A group of German prosecutors, while investigating Wagner years later, found that he had been living extravagantly since the late 1960s, around when Fleissman began passing him intelligence and cash.[117]

Wagner came to depend on these covert payments. He frequently sent Wolfgang Jankowiak, his driver, to back alleys, where anonymous couriers waited with packages. "It had always been a brown envelope," Jankowiak said in the documentary, "filled with quite some bills." Jankowiak did not know who was providing the money.[118] It is likely that Wagner did not, either, since he worked through Fleissman, a middleman. Sometimes, with covert operations, interfering actors prefer to keep key players in the dark. Whether Wagner knew it or not, this arrangement lent him plausible deniability. "Wagner just wanted to receive the money," Kopp said. "He was deep in debt and he fully relied on Fleissman [to live] a lifestyle like somebody

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[114] Ibid.
[115] "CSU-Politiker Wagner soll Stasi-Spion gewesen sein," *Rheinische Post,* November 25, 2000, http://www.rp-online.de/politik/csu-politiker-wagner-soll-stasi-spion-gewesen-sein-aid-1.2268006; "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel*.
[116] Kopp, interview by author.
[117] "Urteil," *Der Spiegel,* December 29, 1980, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14340296.html; Kopp, interview by author.
[118] *Die Geheimnisse des Schönen Leo,* directed by Schwarzer.

great without having the means for such a lifestyle."[119] Wagner did not care for whom Fleissman worked; what mattered was what Fleissman could give him.

Come April 1972, the Stasi had the relationships it needed to interfere in the vote of no confidence. The final tally was sure to be close; robbing Barzel of two votes could prove pivotal. Kopp, though, worried about exposing his sources. "Balancing risks and rewards is a tremendous part of interference operations. Putting high level sources at risk is a tremendous, tremendous decision," said Donald Gregg, who, as a CIA officer, had oversight over sensitive foreign assets.[120] As the vote approached, the Stasi had to weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks of bribing Wagner and Steiner. "I was partly against using Wagner because I did not want to burn him," Kopp said. But ultimately, he and his colleagues decided that "this was a question between war and peace [because] if the east contracts didn't get ratified, then the east policy is finished, and it is finished for years to come."[121] And, as stated previously, Moscow had instructed the East German government to protect Brandt.[122]

Once the Stasi decided to manipulate the vote, its officers moved to secure Wagner and Steiner's cooperation, by offering each lawmaker 50,000 deutschmarks for their abstentions. Both men had by this point leaked insider information, but neither had actively undermined the West German government. Steiner agreed to abstain in exchange for cash near immediately. When pressed by Fleissman, Wagner did the same. "His debts, his position—everything was on the line" in the vote, Kopp said, because "without the money from us, he would have already been bankrupted."[123] The Stasi had corrupted Wagner and Steiner slowly, a "classic" espionage

[119] Kopp, interview by author.
[120] Gregg, interview by author.
[121] Kopp, interview by author.
[122] See footnote #2 of this chapter for first-hand accounts of Moscow's directive.
[123] Kopp, interview by author.

tactic, Donald Gregg explained. “The goal at CIA was always to draw a source in and then put him in a position where he really couldn’t say no,” Gregg said.[124]

And so, when Steiner and Wagner entered the Bundestag on April 27, 1972, they abstained from the vote on behalf of a foreign power. As Brandt celebrated his victory, so, too, did the Stasi. “We were all very happy and proud,” said Kopp, who received a medal from the Stasi for his efforts. Leading politicians took note. Just before the vote of no confidence, East German head Erich Honecker had told Egon Bahr that Brandt would survive “not least with our support and thanks to our measures.”[125] Then, in May 1972, Honecker wrote Nicolae Ceauşescu, the president of Romania, about the effectiveness of his government’s methods:

> We took several measures to support the Brandt government shortly before the vote of no confidence that had been presented to the Bundestag by the CDU/CSU… We proceeded because this government is obviously more convenient for all of us than a government under the leadership of Barzel and Strauss.[126]

### 2.3.2 The Aftermath: Investigations, Lies, and a Decades-long Cover-up

The aftermath of the Stasi’s operation is as instructive as the operation itself. The success of the scheme was inextricably linked to its secrecy. Had the operation been discovered, Brandt’s electoral legitimacy, along with relations between East and West Germany, would have collapsed. A weakness of the Stasi’s plan, then, was that its officers could not ensure the silence of Wagner and Steiner, whose self-destructive behavior made them useful prior to the vote but potential liabilities thereafter.

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[124] Gregg, interview by author.
[125] Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*, 133.
[126] “Der Deutsche Bundestag 1949 bis 1989 in den Akten des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit (MfS) der DDR,” The Federal Commissioner for the Documents of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic.

Steiner's treasonous behavior was nearly uncovered a year after the vote of no confidence. What is now known as "the Steiner Affair" began, rather predictably, because of Steiner's own indiscretion. During a May 1973 interview with the *Der Spiegel* newspaper, Steiner said that a Barzel-led government would have been a "national catastrophe"—a scandalous statement from a member of Barzel's own coalition.[127] Steiner then disclosed that he had abstained from the vote of no confidence as a matter of conscience.[128]

Suddenly, one of the two abstainers had been unmasked. Reporters demanded to know why Steiner had abstained: out of principle or for money—and, if the latter, from whom. "It was all over *Der Spiegel* at the time," recalled Joseph Wippl, the former CIA officer.[129] Days after Steiner's interview, reports emerged that he had, in fact, been paid to abstain from the vote, demonstrating the long-running ability of the media to trigger investigations into foreign interference. Right-wing papers like the *Rheinische Merkur*, *Bild,* and *Welt* proclaimed a "Watergate in Bonn." *Der Spiegel* reported*,* "Once again, corruption seemed to be involved, this time in the coalition. A member of parliament who only a few insiders knew weeks ago had caused doubts and excitement, accusations and denials."[130]

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[127] Julius Steiner Dossier, 23.
[128] "Die sind ja alle so mißtrauisch," *Der Spiegel,* June 4, 1973, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-42645125.html; "Der Deutsche Bundestag 1949 bis 1989 in den Akten des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit (MfS) der DDR," The Federal Commissioner for the Documents of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic.
[129] Wippl, interview by author.
[130] Julius Steiner Dossier, 21–23; "Die sind ja alle so mißtrauisch," *Der Spiegel*. The Steiner Affair unfolded just as the Watergate scandal—which eventually resulted in Richard Nixon's resignation as president—was escalating in the United States. On Watergate, see Keith W. Olson, *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal That Shook America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

Steiner, immersed in a crisis of his own making, covered up his lies with more lies. Forced to abandon his initial story, he next claimed that Karl Wienand, a member of Brandt's Social Democratic Party, had paid him 50,000 deutschmarks for his vote.[131] *Der Spiegel* confirmed that the day after the vote of no confidence, Steiner had deposited 50,000 deutschmarks into his personal bank account.[132] In a June 1973 interview, Steiner insisted that he had received the bribe in Wienand's office and that he regretted accepting it.[133]

By this point, the Stasi had no more use for Steiner. His every move was now under scrutiny—his reputation tainted by scandal. Steiner's downfall amounted to perhaps the only cost of the Stasi's operation. From the Stasi's perspective, though, this loss was acceptable. Wolf later called Steiner a "mediocre source of information;" Kopp, too, dismissed Steiner's importance. "No one cared for him anymore, in the West nor in the East."[134]

Of more serious concern for the Stasi was whether the Steiner Affair would expose its broader operation. As the press scrutinized Steiner, the Stasi watched closely. Its files include press reports from mid-1973 alleging that Steiner was one of the two defectors, as well as step-by-step coverage of the inquiry that followed.[135] The Stasi also documented public reports that two of the ballots from the vote of no confidence had marks across them, signifying the anonymous abstentions in question.[136]

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[131] Julius Steiner Dossier, 23; Miard-Delacroix, *Willy Brandt: Life of a Statesman*, 131.
[132] "AFFÄRE STEINER: Rätsel über Rätsel," *Der Spiegel,* July 23, 1973, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41955242.html.
[133] Julius Steiner Dossier, 23.
[134] Kopp, interview by author; "Der Deutsche Bundestag 1949 bis 1989 in den Akten des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit (MfS) der DDR," The Federal Commissioner for the Documents of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic.
[135] Julius Steiner Dossier, 20–150.
[136] Ibid, 21.

The stakes were raised on June 15, 1973, when the Bundestag formed a committee of inquiry to investigate Steiner. The bipartisan committee aimed to determine "who bribed whom and by what means before Barzel's vote of no confidence in Chancellor Brandt."[137] The Stasi noted in its files that the committee would investigate, in part, whether "foreign intelligence services played a role during the vote and before Steiner's abstention."[138]

But the committee's work soon stalled, highlighting the difficulties of investigating covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. Over the summer of 1973, the committee's members struggled to wade through conflicting witness accounts.[139] "At no point has Mr. Steiner received any money from me," Wienand insisted in July.[140] Wienand's colleagues came to his defense, testifying that he did not enter his office after the vote, as Steiner claimed.[141] "First round of examination goes to Wienand," reported the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper.[142] The committee presented its final report in March 1974, having failed to reach any firm conclusions on the source of Steiner's bribe or on whom the second abstainer might be.[143] The Stasi's files specify that the inquiry had been unable to determine "whether there [were] any connections" between Steiner and the Stasi.[144]

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[137] "Affäre Wienand: „Der Kanzler hält sich raus"," *Der Spiegel*, June 18, 1973, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-42001389.html.
[138] Julius Steiner Dossier, 26.
[139] "AFFÄRE STEINER: Rätsel über Rätsel," *Der Spiegel*.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Julius Steiner Dossier, 23.
[142] Ibid, 38. Amid the inquiry, the CDU became attached to the idea that Wienand had bribed Steiner, likely because this version of events most suited the party's political agenda. See Julius Steiner Dossier, 76.
[143] Detlef Kleinert, Wolfgang Schäuble, and Friedrich Shepherd, "Bericht und Antrag zu dem Antrag der Fraktion der CDU/CSU betr. Einsetzung eines Untersuchungsausschusses," Bundestag, March 3, 1974, http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btd/07/018/0701803.pdf.
[144] Julius Steiner Dossier, 46.

Even with the powers of a special committee, investigators failed to uncover the hidden hand of the Stasi. This covert interference operation had relied largely on untraceable elements like cash and in-person meetings. By blaming Wienand, Steiner misdirected investigators and preserved the effectiveness of the Stasi's operation. Only after Germany reunified did Wolf and Kopp disclose that they had paid Steiner to abstain.

In certain cases, it can take decades, not years, to uncover the full extent of a covert operation to interfere in a democratic vote of succession. And sometimes, key participants in such operations face no consequences. Unlike with Steiner, Wagner's relationship with the Stasi persisted after the vote. In 1975, when reports of his disastrous finances finally emerged, he stepped down as parliamentary managing director. He left the Bundestag late the next year.[145] Sometime before then, Wagner had approached Fleissman in search of money, and the relationship between the two men resumed.[146] Between late 1975 and 1983, Wagner continued to work as an informant, leveraging his enduring access to conservative circles.[147] The Stasi's files, which list Kopp as Wagner's supervising agent, contains 41 entries summarizing the materials Wagner provided.[148] Most revolved around internal CDU and CSU matters, including:

> **SA7601475**: Information on the situation within the CSU before the party convention from May 24th to 26th 1976 in Hannover.
> **SA7704532**: On current aspects of CSU development.
> **SE7600075**: Internal CSU assessments.
> **SE7600987**: CDU/CSU documents.
> **SE7601711**: Internal CSU/CDU information.
> **SE7602094**: Documentation from the CDU/CSU Bundestag parliamentary group.
> **SE7702937:** Information and documentation from the CDU/CSU.

[145] "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel*.
[146] Kopp, interview by author.
[147] Leo Wagner Dossier, 7.
[148] Ibid.

**SE7703814:** Internal assessments regarding CDU/CSU politics.[149]

The information sharing between Wagner and Fleissman, unlike the 1972 operation, fit the Stasi mold. The HVA was uniquely positioned to penetrate West German society because of

[149] Ibid, 8–9. The remainder of the entries, detailed on pages 8 and 9 of the Leo Wagner Dossier, are as follows: S7604981: Background on the restitution of the CSU parliamentary unit; SE7600074: Internal comments by CDU leaders on the situation in Lower Saxony – Election of Albrecht; SE7602099: Minutes for the 24th federal convention of the CDU – May 24th to 26th 1976; SE7602995: Visit of the Balkans by [whited out]; SE7603024: German society for economic cooperation – situational report on South Korea – Recommendations for investment projects; SE7604373: Background and documentation on CDU/CSU discussion; SE7700917: Internal opinions of the CDU/CSU leadership on the strategic behavior of both parties regarding current issues – established January 1977; SE7704513: New conflict within the CDU/CSU; SE7706634: CDU/CSU internal statements; SE7721130: Internal statements regarding the situation of the CSU/CDU; SE7802747: CSU documents; SE7806036: Purpose and structure of the Robert-Schuman foundation; SE7820781: Assessments regarding the situation within the CSU; SE7823660: Report on the visit of a FRG delegation (VDI – Society for production technology – ADB) in the People's Republic of China and outline of a study on the current state of development on the PRC; SE7920433: Internal statements within the CDU and CSU on the current situation in both parties; SE7921480: Organizational rules and regulations of the Hans Seidel foundation; SE8002685: Internal assessments regarding current political issues; SE7922631: Report on activities of the Hans Seidel foundation in Munich regarding questions on the European Community and the Lomé Convention; SE8004365: Minutes (from memory) of a CSU executive meeting in May 1980 under Strauss' leadership; SE8020296: Report by the CSU-associated Hans Seidel foundation on opportunities for future action by the CSU in the context of European Community institutions and associated governments; SE8020580: Background information on the parliamentary election campaign; SE8021995: Current information and internal statements by CDU/CSU officials after the parliamentary elections; SE8023677: On the situation within the CSU after the party convention in Wildbad-Kreuth; SE8101212: On the reactions of the European Community on the Latin America address by MEP (member of European parliament) at the Ibero Club in Bonn on November 10th 1980; SE8101354: Statement by [whited out] foundation [whited out] on fundamental Christian values in EPP (European People's Party) policy; SE8101573: Outline of the European People's Party and its representatives in the European parliament on the development of the European Community; SE8101574: Working document on the problems posed by Portugal and Spain's entry into the European Community. Presentation to the European Union of Christian Democrats in Lisbon, June 1980; SE8105411: Situation within the CSU; SE8202856: On the visit of Strauss to the United States, during the preparation of the visit the following has been brought to attention; SE8300646: Position of the CSU regarding campaigning, expectations of the outcome, personal expectations; SE8301481: Results from the first meeting of the newly established CSU commission on the coordination of policy between the CSU boards of Bonn and Munich; SE8301637: Intentions of the CSU following the parliamentary campaign, expected election results; SE8304424: CDU/CSU relations.

their shared culture, language, and history. In the 1950s, Wolf planted spies throughout West Germany, including one who advised Brandt closely and whose unmasking triggered the chancellor's resignation in 1974.[150]

Because of his network and status, Wagner proved useful to the Stasi. "He delivered great information, information nobody else had about the developments within the party," Kopp said. "He was an exceptional, top source."[151] As Wagner's supervisor, Kopp is not without bias, since the two men were intimately connected. Still, it is indisputable that Wagner was a high-ranking and influential conservative lawmaker.

It took the German government decades to uncover Wagner's role in the Stasi's operation. In 1980, he appeared in court on fraud charges; prosecutors subsequently discovered that he had received 50,000 deutschmarks from an unknown source in 1972, around the time of the vote of no confidence.[152] In 2000, *Der Spiegel* reported that Germany's Office of the Federal Prosecutor suspected Wagner was the second abstainer. By then 81-years old, Wagner announced that he would relinquish his remaining affiliations with the CSU. "I do not want the party to be burdened by these allegations," Wagner told the press.[153] Wagner died a few years later, denying to the end that he had abstained from the vote of no confidence or provided intelligence to the Stasi.

Had the Stasi destroyed its records, Wagner's role in the operation may never have come to light. No committee was ever formed to investigate him. But like Steiner, Wagner's

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[150] Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story*, 150–162, 200.
[151] Kopp, interview by author.
[152] "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel*.
[153] "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel*; "CSU-Politiker Wagner lässt Ämter ruhen," German Press Agency, November 27, 2000, https://www.schwaebische.de/home_artikel,-_arid,38133.html.

indiscretions caught up with him. During his 1980 trial, he was fined 168,000 deutschmarks for fraud. Wagner's lawyers claimed that he had developed a brain disease that made him behave irrationally, a condition worsened by drugs and excessive drinking.[154] In its files, the Stasi included reports of Wagner's poor mental health.[155] "Nothing in the external image of Leo Wagner fits in with what he is accused of," *Der Spiegel* reported in 1980, as West German observers struggled to reconcile Wagner's public and private activities.[156]

In recent years, the German state has concluded that the Stasi used Wagner to interfere in the vote of no confidence. A 2013 government report found that the Stasi knew of Wagner's financial troubles early on and that, through Fleissman, the HVA paid him to abstain. By bribing Wagner and Steiner, the report concludes, the Stasi altered the outcome of this democratic vote of succession.[157]

Few people knew the real Wagner, who succeeded in keeping his subversive activities secret until well after the Berlin Wall fell. Wagner's life underscores the range of characters who can participate in foreign interference operations. A leading conservative, Wagner was willing to

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[154] "Bis zu meinem Zusammenbruch," *Der Spiegel,* October 20, 1980, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14320885.html. Reports had emerged in 1975 that Wagner was in a "miserable" mental condition. See "AFFÄRE WAGNER: Schübe in der Nacht," *Der Spiegel*, February 24, 1975, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41575601.html.

[155] Leo Wagner Dossier, 53.

[156] "Bis zu meinem Zusammenbruch," *Der Spiegel*.

[157] "Der Deutsche Bundestag 1949 bis 1989 in den Akten des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit (MfS) der DDR," The Federal Commissioner for the Documents of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic, which reads: "This leads to the conclusion that in 1972 Wagner was simply a corruptible parliamentarian whose financial problems the HVA exploited through the journalist Georg Fleissman (IM "Dürer"). The HVA manipulated the vote of no confidence in 1972 by targeting corrupt members of parliament… With all due prudence, it is assumed today that the deputies Steiner and Wagner were bribed by the [Stasi] in 1972 and led to the failure of Barzel's no confidence vote. This assumption is based on testimonies, self-accusations, reports by the Bundestag's investigative committee, the Federal Prosecutor's Office's insights from the espionage trials of the nineties, and accounts of those involved at the time."

betray his own party for money, even when the stakes were as high as determining the head of West Germany's government. In Italy, the CIA had manipulated the masses. The Stasi, by contrast, targeted and manipulated two parliamentary voters.

Horst Kopp's life, meanwhile, illuminates what inspired eastern intelligence officers. He had one overriding motive: "to achieve something meaningful." He called the 1972 operation, especially his oversight of Wagner, the greatest accomplishment of his life.[158]

## 2.4 Lessons

In his memoirs, Barzel wrote that the failure of the vote of no confidence was no accident: If not for outside forces, he lamented, his life—and West German history—would have gone in an entirely different direction.[159] Instead, the conservatives remained out of power, and détente progressed uninterrupted. Barzel sensed then what we know now: The Stasi, on Moscow's orders, had manipulated the vote and, in the process, preserved the status quo in the international system. The Soviets were motivated by security-based concerns, and the operation that followed was decisive in its efficacy. If not for the Stasi's interference, Brandt would have lost the chancellorship, imperiling détente, the Soviet Union's influence over West Germany, and the economic benefits of his treaties.

For Moscow, maintaining the status quo came with immediate benefits. Three weeks after the failed vote, the Bundestag ratified Brandt's treaties with Warsaw and Moscow.[160] Confidence in Barzel's leadership plummeted. In 1973, he resigned as the leader of the

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[158] Kopp, interview by author.
[159] Barzel, *Ein gewagtes Leben*, 84.
[160] "West Germany's Treaties with Soviet and Poland Win Bundestag Approval," *New York Times,* May 18, 1972, https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/18/archives/west-germanys-treaties-with-soviet-and-poland-win-bundestag.html.

conservative bloc. A *New York Times* feature entitled "Exit Mr. Barzel" explained, "His stock dropped dramatically when he forced a no confidence vote against Mr. Brandt in April 1972 and lost by two votes."[161] The anti-Soviet conservative bloc—as a result of covert interference in a democratic vote of succession—had entered into a period of disarray.

Brandt, meanwhile, rose to new heights. In the November 1972 election, his coalition secured 272 seats, compared to just 224 for the conservatives, giving Brandt a "firm mandate," according to one press report, "to continue [his] bold Eastern policy of normalizing relations with the Communist states of Europe."[162] The opportunity to reverse Ostpolitik had come and gone. "That second election confirmed the legitimacy of the former vote," Joseph Wippl, the former CIA officer, said. "It re-stabilized the government, and it showed that the majority of Germans were on Brandt's wavelength regarding Ostpolitik."[163]

The Stasi's operation, blessed by Moscow, offers essential insights into how interfering actors could target individual voters in the pre-digital era. The Stasi studied and manipulated influential voters, and then used those assets to alter the vote count directly. This operation, impact aside, was limited in its efficiency. This thesis defines efficiency as *the ratio of the work done to the effort and resources used by the interfering actor.* To affect just two ballots, the Stasi had to channel substantial effort and resources into West Germany, including not just hundreds of thousands of dollars (adjusted for inflation), but also years of time and planning. For this

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[161] "Exit Mr. Barzel," *New York Times,* May 10, 1973, http://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/10/archives/exit-mr-barzel.html. On the subsequent evolution of the conservative bloc's foreign policy, see Clay Clemens, *Reluctant Realists: The Christian Democrats and West German Ostpolitik* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989).
[162] David Binder, "Brandt Coalition Is Swept Back in for Second Term," *New York Times,* November 20, 1972, http://www.nytimes.com/1972/11/20/archives/brandt-coalition-is-swept-back-in-for-second-term-social-and-free.html.
[163] Wippl, interview by author.

operation, pre-established espionage networks—which can be laborious to develop—were a necessity. East German intelligence officers had begun drawing in Wagner and Steiner years before the vote took place. Since Barzel called for the motion mere days before it was held, foreign operatives had to act quickly.[164] The KGB lacked the contacts to penetrate the Bundestag on such short notice. The Stasi, by contrast, was well-positioned to manipulate the vote of no confidence, as a result of the effort its officers had already put into recruiting Wagner and Steiner.

The work done by the Stasi, compared to this investment of effort and resources, was narrow in scope: to change two votes. The Stasi's inefficiency limited its operational ambitions. Recruiting two lawmakers required careful planning and sustained effort; recruiting additional lawmakers would have been even more taxing and challenging. Furthermore, attempting to alter additional votes would have increased the Stasi's exposure. The agency's success depended on concealing its hand. By targeting two lawmakers, Kopp and his colleagues calculated that the potential benefits of the operation outweighed the risk of getting caught. Before April 1972, both Wagner and Steiner had compromised their integrity, increasing the likelihood that they would agree to abstain. Had the Stasi launched a more sprawling operation and been detected, the consequences would have been significant: Brandt's mandate would have suffered, and, based on the breathless news coverage of the Steiner affair, West German society would have erupted in outrage. Instead, the Stasi's operation remained secret for decades, to Brandt's benefit.

The Stasi succeeded because of a timeless consistency of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession: the power of personal information. The Stasi influenced Wagner and Steiner based on their individual vulnerabilities. These men could not resist their own vices,

[164] See footnote #93 of this chapter for further information.

which put them into debt. Had Wagner and Steiner lived more responsibly, they may have opted not to leak intelligence and, ultimately, to betray Barzel for money.

Steiner and Wagner were only half the puzzle: the operation also depended on the intelligence officers involved. From the CIA to the Stasi, covert interference operations targeting democratic votes of succession succeed or fail largely based on the skills of the puppeteers. In hindsight, Kopp and his team, recognizing the inefficiency of their operation, bribed just enough lawmakers to secure their preferred outcome. "The opportunity was there for the high-quality intelligence officer to spot and exploit, whereas the guy who isn't high quality would have missed it or put too much focus into exploiting it, which could blow the whole thing. Too much is almost more dangerous than too little in these cases," commented Donald Gregg, who was previously unaware of the Stasi's operation.[165]

The aftermath of the 1972 operation suggests that investigations into vote rigging are inevitably partisan in nature. As the committee of inquiry questioned Steiner, Brandt's allies charged that its *real agenda* was to tarnish the chancellor's electoral legitimacy.[166] "The aim of the Steiner affair is to try to drag the Chancellor into it," Horst Ehmke, one of Brandt's advisors, said in September 1973.[167] In hindsight, the committee's existence was more than justified. The vote had, in fact, been sabotaged. But when the prospect of interference is raised, the parties that may have benefitted—in this case, Brandt and his allies—naturally fear that investigating a vote's legitimacy means risking their own.

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[165] Gregg, interview by author.
[166] "Bonn Aide Admits He Withdrew Funds in Bribery Inquiry," *New York Times*, September 6, 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/09/06/archives/bonn-aide-admits-he-withdrew-funds-in-bribery-inquiry.html.
[167] Ibid.

And yet, Brandt had no knowledge of the Stasi's operation. His lack of involvement in the scheme demonstrates that a foreign power can affect a democratic vote of succession without the cooperation of the person who benefits. It would have been self-defeating for the Stasi to alert Brandt to its efforts. Had his involvement been uncovered, his electoral legitimacy would have collapsed. In 1972, at least, it served Moscow's interests to maintain the ignorance of its preferred candidate.

This case also demonstrates how relatively simple covert operations targeting democratic votes of succession can alter the trajectories of nations. Today, Brandt is remembered as one of the Cold War's pivotal figures. But he did not secure his most significant foreign policy accomplishments—accords with East Germany, the Soviet Union, and Poland—until after the vote of no confidence. Despite his talents as a diplomat, Brandt could not sustain his own government. He needed the help of a foreign intelligence service to preserve his chancellorship and, ultimately, his legacy.

# Chapter 3: Russia Targets America's 2016 Election

## 3.1 Introduction

Amy Pope, the U.S. deputy homeland security advisor in 2016, has since moved to London, where she is a partner at an elite crisis management firm. She does for private clients what she once did for the White House: put out fires quickly, discreetly, and strategically. In the summer of 2016, Pope and her colleagues grappled with a major crisis: a Russian covert operation targeting a U.S. presidential election. The minds of American voters were under assault. So, too, was America's electoral infrastructure, or "the equipment, processes, and systems related to voting, tabulating, reporting, and registration," as Moscow sought to manipulate this pivotal democratic vote of succession.[1]

What Russia was able to achieve—and how far Russia could have gone—in influencing America's November 2016 election was classified then and has remained closely guarded information since. "I wouldn't say that the full story is out there," Pope told me in June 2019. "You're talking about a foreign adversary interfering in the United States electoral system—nobody is going to tell you the full story."[2]

Many of the individuals interviewed for this thesis provided additional details about Russian interference in America's 2016 election, the third and final case study of this thesis. Barack Obama's former foreign policy advisers told me what it was like to defend America's

***Chapter 3: Russia Targets America's 2016 Election***

[1] U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 1: Russian Efforts against Election Infrastructure,* 116th Congress, 1st session, 2019, S. Report 116-XX, 3, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume1.pdf.

[2] Amy Pope, interview by author conducted by phone, June 26, 2019.

electoral sovereignty as November approached. The heads of the Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton campaigns described what it was like to vie for the presidency as Russia's operation was ongoing. Leading U.S. journalists and technology experts reflected on how their industries furthered Vladimir Putin's aims. Across these conversations was a central question: What does this case reveal about why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age?

This chapter focuses on the conception and execution of Russia's operation. The first section of this chapter analyzes Russia's motives heading into 2016. First, it assesses Putin's worldview and basis for distrusting western democracies. This section then details why Putin resented Clinton and believed it would advance his security interests to undermine her campaign, assist the Trump campaign, and sow discord in the United States. The purpose of Russia's operation was, in part, to achieve change rather than maintain the status quo in American politics, as Putin sought to denigrate Clinton, a former cabinet official in the Obama administration, and propel Trump into office.

The second section of this chapter examines the U.S. government's struggle to defend against Russia's operation in the summer and fall of 2016. It begins by elucidating why the United States was a ripe target for foreign subversion, as its leading national security officials failed to anticipate the threat of covert interference in the 2016 election. This section then analyzes the Obama administration's efforts to defend against two vectors of Russia's operation: the theft and release of sensitive emails, and the scanning and probing of election systems across the United States. (The third vector of Russia's operation, which took place across social media, went undetected until after the election and is the focus of the next chapter of this thesis.) As this chapter finds, the Obama administration prioritized countering Russia's more direct form of

interference—the targeting of state voting systems—over responding to Russia's covert email releases, which were designed to influence the minds of American voters.

This chapter then draws from this case unique insights into how foreign actors, in the digital age, can interfere covertly in democratic votes of succession. The central focuses include: (1) the relative ease with which Russia was able to reach the American electorate at scale using digital tools; (2) the dual nature of Russia's operation, which targeted both voting systems and public opinion; (3) the U.S. government's failure to detect the scope of Russian interference in real time; (4) the aspects of Russia's operation that the Obama administration underestimated prior to the election; and (5) the minimal costs that Russia suffered as a consequence for interfering in this democratic vote of succession.

In drawing on my interviews with 26 former advisors to Obama, this chapter recreates internal debates and decision points that are essential to understanding the evolving nature of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. Each vector of Russia's operation relied upon the internet. Intelligence services once manipulated democratic processes with physical methods, like stuffing ballot boxes and distributing bags of money. Establishing a material presence in the targeted democracy was a necessity. But the digital age presented Russia with new avenues for interference. In 2005, just 7 percent of U.S. adults were on social media; by 2015, that number had increased to 65 percent. Nearly nine in every ten U.S. adults were using the internet in some way.[3] The digitization of America lent Putin the means to target the

[3] Andrew Perrin, "Social Media Usage: 2005–2015," Pew Research Center, October 8, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/; "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/.

2016 election with newfound ease and efficiency. His hackers could manipulate American voting systems and voters from thousands of miles away, on computers in Russia, precisely and widely.

### 3.2 The Motivation: Hurt Clinton, Help Trump, and Sow Discord

In Moscow, the decision to interfere in America's process of succession revolved around the views of one individual: Vladimir Putin, whom the U.S. Intelligence Community has concluded authorized the covert operation against the 2016 election.[4] Of Putin, Steven Hall, a former CIA station chief in Moscow, told me, "[He's] the really single decision-maker in Russia."[5] Putin's motives for interfering in America's election evolved as time progressed. In 2014, when the operation began, Putin had two objectives in mind: to sow discord within the United States and to undermine Hillary Clinton's campaign.[6] This section elaborates upon these motives, traveling the road from Putin's long-running distrust of American foreign policy to his personal acrimony toward Clinton. This section then details how Donald Trump's unexpected political rise added a third motivation to Russia's operation: to assist Trump's campaign and, in the process, to alter the status quo in American politics.

For Putin, targeting America's election brought considerable risks. If provoked, the United States—with its substantial military, intelligence apparatus, and economy—could impose major costs upon Russia. Leaders in Moscow had grappled with this calculation before. Of Cold War-era operations to interfere in U.S. elections, Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB general, told me, "There was always a sense of potential feedback, that [the United States] could strike back, and it

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[4] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Intelligence Community Assessment, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, January 6, 2017, 1, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

[5] Steven Hall, interview by author conducted by phone, October 22, 2019.

[6] John Brennan, the then CIA director, elaborates upon Putin's initial motives on page 152 of this thesis.

may be worse for the initiator."[7] Despite the potential for blowback, Putin was motivated enough to target the 2016 election. In helping Trump, hurting Clinton, and sowing discord inside America, he sought to bolster Russia's power in the international system, since a more divided America would struggle to maintain its influence over other states, and because he would possess comparably more influence over a Trump administration than a Clinton administration. Further, as detailed in this section, Putin believed that he could guard Russia's security by working against Clinton, whom he viewed as a threat to the survival of his regime.[8]

### 3.2.1 Putin's Rise and Worldview

Putin's motivations for targeting the United States stretched back decades, to his long-running resentment of Washington's conduct abroad and his personal inclination for covert action. Born in 1952 to a working-class family, Putin was raised in St. Petersburg—then known as Leningrad—during the height of the Cold War. As a teenager, Putin dreamed of joining the KGB. "Even before I graduated from school, I wanted to work in intelligence," he said in 2000.[9] The KGB's covert operations intrigued Putin. So did its power. "What amazed me most of all," he marveled, "was how one man's effort could achieve what whole armies could not. One spy could decide the fate of thousands of people."[10]

In 1975, Putin fulfilled his ambition and became a member of the KGB; for years, he shuttled between domestic assignments and official training courses. A decade into his career, Putin was assigned to Dresden, East Germany, where his work revolved around studying and

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[7] Oleg Kalugin, interview by author, Rockville, MD, August 7, 2019.
[8] For definitions of power and security, see pages 16–18 of this thesis.
[9] Vladimir Putin, Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-portrait by Russia's President* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 4, 18–22.
[10] Ibid, 22.

manipulating unsuspecting minds—skills central to covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. "Recruitment of sources, procurement of information, and assessment and analysis were big parts of the job," Putin said. "It was important to know who was doing what and how." In East Germany, Putin learned to analyze foreign governments: "I looked for information about political parties, the tendencies inside these parties, their leaders."[11]

Then came the popular revolutions of 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, and the eastern bloc unraveled.[12] Still stationed in Dresden, Putin found it "upsetting" to watch protestors storm the Stasi's office and ransack the long feared agency (which had, just seventeen years earlier, covertly preserved Willy Brandt's government). Demonstrators also gathered around the KGB's district office, where Putin worked. "Those crowds were a serious threat," he thought, and yet "nobody lifted a finger to protect us." When Putin sought assistance, the reply was clear: "We cannot do anything without orders from Moscow. And Moscow is silent."[13] Putin's experience was representative of the Kremlin's posture generally. "It is simply stunning to observe how easily the Iron Curtain fell in 1989," writes historian Vladislav Zubok, "and how complacently the central Soviet leadership reacted, in contrast to the alarmist and warning signals from Soviet representatives in Central European countries."[14] Putin and his colleagues were left to hurriedly burn the KGB's files. Eventually, the crowd around their office disbanded.[15]

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[11] Ibid, 47–52, 66–70.
[12] On the collapse of East Germany's Communist regime, see Hans-Hermann Hertle, "The Fall of the Wall: The Unintended Self-Dissolution of East Germany's Ruling Regime," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 12/13 (2001): 131–164; Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); A. James McAdams, *Germany Divided: From the Wall to Reunification* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[13] Putin et. al., *First Person,* 76–78.
[14] Vladislav Zubok, "New Evidence on the 'Soviet Factor' in the Peaceful Revolutions of 1989," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 12/13 (2001): 11–12.
[15] Putin et. al., *First Person,* 76–78.

By the time Putin left Dresden in 1990, he had been shaped in important ways. He had worked for the KGB for fifteen years. In that period, he had learned to exist in the world as an intelligence officer. The KGB, in competition with the CIA, had long interfered in democratic votes of succession.[16] Putin did not participate in these operations, but he did study the tradecraft of the agency that executed them, including how to mold minds and how to achieve large ends with limited means. His natural foe was the United States. And by chance, he saw first-hand how popular demonstrations could topple closed societies.

The fall of the eastern bloc upset Putin, who seemed to connect his self-worth with the standing of his country. "We would have avoided a lot of problems if the Soviets had not made such a hasty exit from Eastern Europe," he later said. "I wanted something different to rise in its place. And nothing different was proposed. That's what hurt. They just dropped everything and went away."[17] Putin had come up in a conservative corner of Russian society. The KGB's leaders had opposed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's domestic reforms and, in August 1991, attempted a coup d'état, which the politician Boris Yeltsin played a pivotal role in thwarting. Four months later, the Soviet Union dissolved, and Yeltsin became the first president of the newly independent Russian Federation.[18]

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[16] For further information, see pages 9–10 of this thesis.
[17] Ibid, 80, 82.
[18] For further reading on the KGB and the Soviet military toward the end of the Cold War, see *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003), in which Amy Knight captures the role, work, and evolution of the KGB from 1985 to 1991 in "The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union," 67–93; John Dunlop analyzes the failed coup d'état and its consequences in "The August 1991 Coup and Its Impact on Soviet Politics," 94–127; and Brian Taylor examines the restraint of the Soviet armed forces in "The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR," 17–66. See also Oleg Gordievsky, "The KGB after the Coup," *Intelligence and National Security* 8, no. 3 (1993): 68–71.

Putin returned to St. Petersburg, where he worked as a local politician before moving to Moscow. He then ascended rapidly. In 1998, he became the director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the main successor to the KGB. A year or so later, he was appointed prime minister, as then Russian President Yeltsin simultaneously developed a cooperative relationship with Bill Clinton, his American counterpart, as well as a hollow democracy at home, featuring weak courts, pervasive corruption, and an oligarchic class.[19] Then, on December 31, 1999, Yeltsin resigned, and Putin became Russia's acting president.[20]

In private, Yeltsin assured Clinton that Putin was "a democrat" who "has the energy and brains to succeed," "knows the West," and has a "big soul."[21] Just after assuming the presidency, Putin spoke with Clinton. "We thank you personally," Putin told him, based on recently declassified U.S. government transcripts, "because you have done a lot to develop Russian-American relations."[22] Clinton was both impressed and concerned. Putin appeared "disciplined,"

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[19] Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 323–327; Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 41–47, 54. Of this period, Timothy Snyder writes, "The wealthy few around Yeltsin, christened the 'oligarchs,' wished to manage democracy in his favor and theirs." See Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 53. See also Anders Åslund, *Russia's Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019), 19–25; Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), chap. 3.

[20] Celestine Bohlen, "Yeltsin Resigns; Putin Takes Over; Elections in March," *New York Times*, January 1, 2000, https://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/01/world/yeltsin-resigns-overview-yeltsin-resigns-naming-putin-acting-president-run-march.html.

[21] Memorandum of Conversation between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, November 19, 1999 (Istanbul, Turkey), and Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, December 31, 1999, National Security Council and NSC Records Management System, "Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin," Clinton Digital Library.

[22] Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between President Clinton and Acting President Putin, January 1, 2000, National Security Council and NSC Records Management System,

"tough," and "very able," Clinton told me in an interview, and "never pretended to be something he wasn't privately—and I liked that." The trouble was that Putin seemed neither to "care much" about Russian democracy nor to approve of Yeltsin's closeness with western leaders. Clinton concluded, over time, that "Putin thought I had played Yeltsin a little bit to increase America's power in the post–Cold War world."[23]

By 2001, Clinton and Yeltsin had left office. Putin, a career intelligence officer, would now chart the future of a former superpower. After becoming president, he methodically dismantled the fragile democratic structures of the Yeltsin years, consolidated power, and enriched himself.[24] Karen Dawisha, a leading expert on Russia, has described Putin's governing structure as kleptocratic authoritarianism. Putin sought to strengthen Russia "not by breaking up the oligarchic system" developed under Yeltsin, Dawisha writes, "but by transforming an

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"Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Vladimir Putin," Clinton Digital Library.

[23] Bill Clinton, interview by author conducted by phone, April 4, 2020.

[24] In 2005, a Moscow-based research organization found that Russian businesses were paying over $300 billion in bribes annually—a nearly ten-fold increase in just four years. By 2014, the wealth share of the top one percent was a remarkable 66.2%. Of the world's major economies, Russia's had become the most unequal. Putin and his inner circle reaped the benefits. Russians like Sergei Roldugin, a cellist and confidante of Putin, hid billions of dollars in offshore accounts. See Steven Lee Myers, "Pervasive Corruption in Russia Is 'Just Called Business,'" *New York Times,* August 13, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/13/world/europe/pervasive-corruption-in-russia-is-just-called-business.html; Credit Suisse, "Global Wealth Databook 2014," October 2014, 125; Katy Barnato, "Russia Is the Most Unequal Major Country in the World: Study," CNBC, September 1, 2016, https://www.cnbc.com/2016/09/01/russia-is-the-most-unequal-major-country-in-the-world-study.html; Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Kremlin's Wars on the Internet* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015), 312–319. For further reading on Putin's rise, character, and worldview, see Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013); Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia against the West and with the Rest,* (New York: Twelve, 2019); Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Knopf, 2015); Masha Gessen, *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead, 2013).

oligarchy independent of and more powerful than the state into a corporatist structure in which oligarchs served at the pleasure of state officials."[25]

Amid this corruption, Putin has been sensitive to the potential for his own 1989 moment: the day when protestors will storm the Kremlin and overthrow his government. And ever a KGB officer, he has long suspected that the United States would support such a movement.[26] Steven Hall, the former CIA station chief in Moscow, explained, "Putin believes that the U.S. government writ large wants to do this, to foment a color revolution in the streets of Moscow, and it's a conspiracy theory obviously, but I think Putin actually believes it's true."[27]

For Putin, the evidence of America's intentions could be found overseas, in countries where the U.S. military had helped to unseat authoritarian leaders. In 2003, a U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq and ousted Saddam Hussein, the country's long-time dictator. "It seems easy to 'crush' such a small country," Putin complained. "But the ramifications, the 'splashes', are such that even today we don't know what to do."[28] Then, in 2011, NATO forces helped depose another dictator, Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi, who rebel soldiers overthrew and then shot to

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[25] Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 280. For additional interpretations, see Miriam Lanskoy and Dylan Myles-Primakoff, "The Rise of Kleptocracy: Power and Plunder in Putin's Russia," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 76–85; Steven Fish, "The Kremlin Emboldened: What Is Putinism?" *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 61–75. On the mechanics of kleptocracy, see Alexander Cooley, John Heathershaw, and J.C. Sharman. "The Rise of Kleptocracy: Laundering Cash, Whitewashing Reputations," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 39–53; Oliver Bullough, "The Rise of Kleptocracy: The Dark Side of Globalization," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 25–38; Christopher Walker and Melissa Aten, "The Rise of Kleptocracy: A Challenge for Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 20–24.

[26] For an example of such accusations from Putin, see page 147 of this thesis. See also footnotes #45 and #46 of this chapter.

[27] Hall, interview by author.

[28] Vladimir Putin, interview by Time magazine, December 12, 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24735.

death.[29] Putin called NATO's mission "a medieval call for a crusade" and questioned whether all the world's "crooked regimes" would soon be attacked.[30] "The United States actively contributed to the destruction of these state institutions," Putin said. "Do you understand what this leads to?"[31] The answer, to him, was coups d'état and chaos.

Putin likewise begrudged America's support for grassroots movements against strongmen. Ahead of Ukraine's 2004 election, for instance, the United States provided support overtly not just for the country's voter education and party training programs, but also for a pivotal exit poll. This secondary vote count revealed pervasive fraud and sparked what is known as the Orange Revolution, which secured the presidency for Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-western politician. "[Putin's] paranoia was reinforced by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004," writes historian Anne Applebaum. "The Libyan revolution showed an even more frightening prospect: street mobs, supported by the West, chasing out and then murdering a dictator who only months earlier had seemed to be in total control."[32]

Putin resented that the United States seemed to be molding nations in its image. "Indeed, in recent years it is as if people are saying to us: we are waiting for you, we want to welcome you

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[29] Martin Chulov, "Gaddafi's last moments: 'I saw the hand holding the gun and I saw it fire,'" *Guardian,* October 20, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/20/muammar-gaddafi-killing-witnesses.

[30] Ellen Barry, "Putin Criticizes West for Libya Incursion," *New York Times,* April 26, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/27/world/europe/27putin.html.

[31] Vladimir Putin, interview by Charlie Rose, September 29, 2015, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380.

[32] Steven Woehrel, *Ukraine's Political Crisis and U.S. Policy Issues* (Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2005), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32691.pdf; Anne Applebaum, "Obama and Europe," *Foreign Affairs,* September/October 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/obama-and-europe. See also Stephen Shulman and Stephen Bloom, "The legitimacy of foreign intervention in elections: the Ukrainian response," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 445–471.

into our family, into our civilized western family," Putin said as president. "But, first of all, why have you decided that your civilization is the best?"[33]

### 3.2.2 Enter Hillary Clinton

Still, Putin's adversarial posture toward the United States was not enough to motivate him to interfere covertly in the 2016 election. He also needed sufficient reason to disadvantage one candidate over another. He found such a motivation in Hillary Clinton. As detailed in this section, based on Putin's public comments and intelligence collected by the U.S. intelligence community, Putin associated Clinton with the aspects of American foreign policy that he believed threatened the survival of his government and, therefore, Russia's security interests.[34]

Putin became closely acquainted with Clinton during her tenure as secretary of state, a position she assumed in 2009, by which point she was already one of the most well-known figures in global politics. A former first lady and senator, Clinton had nearly won the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. At the State Department, she simultaneously supported the White House's pursuit of a so-called reset in relations with Russia while still lambasting aspects of the Kremlin's policymaking, especially toward Georgia. "We continue to object to and criticize actions by Russia which we believe are wrong," she told a Georgian audience in 2010. "And at the top of the list is the invasion and occupation of Georgia. We say it, we mean it, we

[33] Putin, interview by Time magazine.
[34] As established in the introduction of this thesis, a country advances its security interests by minimizing threats to its survival, welfare, and identity. For Putin's public comments on Clinton, see footnotes #42 and #51 of this chapter. For internal intelligence assessments of Putin's resentment of Clinton, see footnote #57 of this chapter.

support actions to try to give you the backing that you need in order to stand up to the threat that you believe comes from Russia."[35]

Privately, Clinton and Putin never got along. "When I would see Putin, he was just always bristly, would do what they call mansplaining, in the way he would sit and talk to me," she told me, behavior she attributed both to her being "a skeptic about Russia," and to Putin's "sexist view of the world."[36] Clinton had also advocated military action against the forces of Muammar el-Qaddafi, whose death in October 2011 had so disturbed Putin.[37]

A turning point in Clinton and Putin's relationship came in December 2011, when Russia held a parliamentary election. The United States had overtly distributed millions of dollars ahead of the contest to a range of civil society groups in Russia, including Golos, the country's only independent election monitor.[38] As the election neared, Golos reported thousands of electoral violations. Putin promptly complained that "so-called grant recipients" were working to manipulate Russia's affairs. On December 4, the day of the election, poll monitors documented widespread voter fraud in favor of Putin's United Russia Party. In response, thousands of

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[35] Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at a Town Hall with Georgian Women Leaders," July 5, 2010, State Department, 2009–2017, https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/143972.htm; Hillary Clinton, interview by author, New York, December 4, 2019. For a first-hand account of the reset policy, see McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace,* chaps. 6–13.

[36] Clinton, interview by author.

[37] Jo Becker and Scott Shane, "Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall," *New York Times*, February 27, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html.

[38] Kathy Lally, "Russia targets U.S.-linked election monitor," *Washington Post,* November 30, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-targets-us-linked-election-monitor/2011/11/30/gIQAlqzcDO_story.html; David Herszenhorn, "Russia Takes Legal Action against Election Monitors," *New York Times,* April 9, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/europe/russia-brings-charges-against-election-monitors.html.

Russians took to the streets, chanting "Putin is a thief."[39] Steven Hall, then the CIA's station chief in Moscow, walked outside and spoke with some of these protestors, even though Embassy officials had cautioned that Putin would respond by accusing the CIA of orchestrating the emerging movement against him. "Well, they're going to say that regardless," Hall replied.[40]

To Putin, Golos had helped spark these demonstrations, and then Clinton, in her role as secretary of state, fanned the flames. As voting unfolded, Clinton received reports that the parliamentary election had been "blatantly rigged," so she decided to speak out. "Russian voters deserve a full investigation of all credible reports of electoral fraud and manipulation," she said on December 5, because citizens deserve to have "their votes counted" in "free, fair, transparent elections" with "leaders who are accountable to them."[41]

Putin, always sensitive to the potential for a popular uprising, believed that Clinton was inciting demonstrations against him. She "set the tone for some actors" in Russia and "gave them a signal," he alleged on December 8, and protestors "heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work."[42] Putin had moved quickly to assail Clinton, who

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[39] Ellen Barry, "Russian Authorities Pressure Elections Watchdog," *New York Times,* December 1, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/02/world/europe/russia-puts-pressure-on-elections-monitor-golos.html; Michael Schwirtz and David Herszenhorn, "Voters Watch Polls in Russia, and Fraud Is What They See," *New York Times,* December 5, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/06/world/europe/russian-parliamentary-elections-criticized-by-west.html.

[40] Hall, interview by author.

[41] Matt Spetalnick, Arshad Mohammed, and Andrew Quinn, "U.S. voices 'serious concerns' about Russia vote," Reuters, December 5, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-whitehouse/u-s-voices-serious-concerns-about-russia-vote-idUSTRE7B42GK20111205. Clinton characterized the election as "blatantly rigged" in her interview with the author.

[42] David Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, "Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest over Vote," *New York Times,* December 8, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/europe/putin-accuses-clinton-of-instigating-russian-protests.html. Lilia Shevtsova of Chatham House argues, "[Putin's] scramble for self-preservation also reaches beyond Russia's borders. To a larger extent than most authoritarian regimes, the regime has turned its survival into an international problem by using its foreign policy for domestic ends. Confronted by challenges at home, it manufactures

assumed that the Russian leader was using her to distract from his own woes. "I don't think I had very much, if anything, to do with the outpouring in the streets that happened, so when he started attacking me, I thought it was theater," she told me. "But they were huge demonstrations, and that scared Putin."[43]

On December 10, tens of thousands of Russians took part in the largest demonstration in the country's post-Cold War history.[44] These protests had "really got Putin's attention," said Michael Morell, then the CIA's deputy director, because he is "scared to death" of a popular revolution and was convinced that this uprising was "originating in the United States."[45] Of Putin's thinking, the CIA took a somewhat different view than Clinton. Its analysts assessed that, in this moment, she epitomized what he feared most about the United States, stretching back to his tenure as a KGB officer. What Putin saw, Steven Hall explained, was "a powerful person in the United States who he honestly believed was trying to start a color revolution in the streets of Moscow, and that's something that [he] takes very personally."[46]

In the months ahead, Putin, while maintaining control at home, jousted further with Clinton abroad. During their next encounter, Clinton scolded Putin for blaming the protests on her. "I said to him: 'That wasn't me, Mr. President, that was your people.'" Putin was dismissive.[47] Then, in June 2012, at a G20 Summit in Mexico, Putin was 45 minutes late to a

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external threats in an attempt to sweep these domestic issues under the rug." See Lilia Shevtsova, "The Kremlin Emboldened: Paradoxes of Decline," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 102. See also McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace,* chap. 15.

[43] Clinton, interview by author.

[44] Steve Gutterman and Amie Ferris-Rotman, "Thousands of Russians protest against Putin," Reuters, December 10, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-protests/thousands-of-russians-protest-against-putin-idUSTRE7B907W20111210.

[45] Michael Morell, interview by author conducted by phone, March 6, 2019.

[46] Hall, interview by author.

[47] Clinton, interview by author.

meeting with Obama. "I told Obama that I would have just cancelled it. I would not have waited on Putin," Clinton said. Even after Putin arrived, she recalled, "it was a most unsatisfactory meeting." Later that year, at a conference at Vladivostok, Putin refused to see Clinton altogether. "He wouldn't talk to me," she said.[48] (In the end, they met briefly, just before a dinner where they had to sit next to one another.)

Tensions between the two persisted after Clinton left the State Department in 2013. In one of her final acts as secretary of state, Clinton submitted a classified memorandum urging Obama to adopt a harder line against Putin.[49] More publicly, in 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea, Clinton compared Putin's favor for ethnic Russians to "what Hitler did back in the '30s."[50] Once again, Clinton had called out Putin, and once again, the Russian leader was left seething. "It's better not to argue with women, but Ms. Clinton has never been too graceful in her statements," Putin shot back, when asked about her comments. "Maybe weakness is not the worst quality for a woman."[51]

By this point, Putin had two clear motivations for interfering in America's upcoming presidential election, scheduled for November 2016. The first was to sow discord in the United States, in order to show the world that the democratic model was flawed and unenviable, and to undermine America's societal cohesion and ability to execute its foreign policy effectively. Russians like Alexander Dugin, an ultranationalist theorist, had long argued that to achieve these

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 215.
[50] Philip Rucker, "Hillary Clinton says Putin's actions are like 'what Hitler did back in the '30s,'" *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/03/05/hillary-clinton-says-putins-action-are-like-what-hitler-did-back-in-the-30s/.
[51] Liz Kreutz, "Vladimir Putin on Hillary Clinton: 'Better Not to Argue with Women,'" ABC, June 4, 2014, https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/06/vladimir-putin-on-hillary-clinton-better-not-to-argue-with-women/.

objectives, Moscow should destabilize "the political processes within America" and introduce "geopolitical chaos within the American daily experience by encouraging all manner of separatism, ethnic diversity, social and racial conflict."[52] Through covert action, Putin could execute upon this line of thinking. "[The Kremlin's] principal goal is to create instability, particularly in democratic countries that they feel are competitors to Russia," commented Leon Panetta, a former CIA director and secretary of defense, in an interview.[53]

Putin's second motivation was more personal: to prevent Clinton from becoming president. By 2014, Clinton's domestic approval ratings were approaching 70 percent; political analysts frequently described her as the favorite to win the upcoming election.[54] The prospect of a new Clinton administration alarmed Putin. In interviews, Obama's former intelligence chiefs emphasized that Putin resented nearly everything about Clinton. He resented that she was a woman who had challenged him publicly and, he believed, had helped facilitate the release of the Panama Papers.[55] He resented that her husband had expanded NATO and prioritized U.S.

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[52] Alan Gilbert, "The Far-Right Book Every Russian General Reads," *Daily Beast,* February 26, 2018, https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-far-right-book-every-russian-general-reads.

[53] Leon Panetta, interview by author conducted by phone, November 12, 2019.

[54] Patrick O'Connor, "Hillary Clinton Exits with 69% Approval Rating," *Wall Street Journal,* January 17, 2013, https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/01/17/wsjnbc-poll-hillary-clinton-exits-with-69-approval-rating/.

[55] The Panama Papers were a set of leaked documents that emerged in early 2016 and contained details about Putin's personal finances. Putin interpreted their release as a U.S.-backed conspiracy against him. Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, two Russian journalists, have explained, "Putin believed the Panama Papers attack was sponsored by Hillary Clinton's people—this, in a way, provided him with a 'justification' for a retaliatory operation." See Adam Taylor, "Putin saw the Panama Papers as a personal attack and may have wanted revenge, Russian authors say," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/28/putin-saw-the-panama-papers-as-a-personal-attack-and-may-have-wanted-revenge-russian-authors-say/. See also Mansur Mirovalev, "Putin's Best Friend Is at the Heart of Panama Papers Scandal," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2016, https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-panama-papers-20160404-story.html; Luke Harding, "Sergei Roldugin, the Cellist Who Holds the Key to Tracing Putin's Hidden Fortune," *Guardian*, April 3, 2016,

democracy promotion.[56] And he resented that she had voiced support for protestors in Moscow and advocated military intervention in Iraq and Libya. "There was no question about [his] animus for Hillary Clinton," said James Clapper, Obama's long-time director of national intelligence.[57]

### 3.2.3 The Third Motive: Donald Trump

In 2014, Putin did not presumably know how far he would go in interfering with America's process of succession, but Russia did initiate its operation against the approaching election. By May 2014, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), an information warfare center based in St. Petersburg, was manipulating American voters across social media. The goal: to "spread distrust towards the candidates and the political system in general," according to communication intercepts later released by the U.S. government.[58] Also by 2014, the Russian government had begun an "extensive" campaign targeting America's electoral systems.[59] Then, in July 2015, Russian intelligence penetrated the networks of the Democratic National Committee (DNC).[60]

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https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/apr/03/sergei-roldugin-the-cellist-who-holds-the-key-to-tracing-putins-hidden-fortune.

[56] President Bill Clinton, for instance, made democracy promotion one of the three pillars of his national security strategy. See "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," The White House, Bill Clinton, mandated report, February 1996. For further reading on NATO enlargement, see James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1999). For a critical perspective, see John Lewis Gaddis, "The Senate Should Halt NATO Expansion," *New York Times,* April 27, 1998, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/27/opinion/the-senate-should-halt-nato-expansion.html. For a firsthand account, see Warren Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 2001), chap. 16.

[57] James Clapper, interview by author, Fairfax, VA, January 3, 2019.

[58] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 6, https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download.

[59] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 1: Russian Efforts against Election Infrastructure,* 3.

[60] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, 2.

None of this was related to Donald Trump, who did not announce his initially longshot presidential campaign until the summer of 2015. In targeting America's election, Putin initially had two motives: "to hurt Clinton," the then CIA director John Brennan explained, and to "stir up these political fissures here in U.S. society."[61] What is unknowable is whether Putin would have proceeded as aggressively had the Republican Party nominated a more conventional candidate, such as Senator Marco Rubio, whose views on Russia more mirrored Clinton's.

The Republican primary put America on a different path, as two developments progressed in parallel. Russian actors spread propaganda across social media, scanned voting systems, and infiltrated Democratic Party networks. And Trump, surging in the polls, deepened his ties with Russia both publicly and privately. By November 2015, he had signed a letter of intent—unbeknownst to the American public—for a real estate project in Moscow.[62] An odd dynamic was also unfolding before the world: Trump and Putin appeared to like each other. "There is no doubt that [Trump] is a very colorful and talented man," Putin said in December 2015. "He is an absolute leader of the presidential race."[63]

These two phenomena—Russia's ongoing interference operation and Trump's unlikely rise—quickly fused. Russia began promoting Trump's candidacy for two reasons: his friendly

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[61] John Brennan, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 10, 2018. For a typical article on Trump's campaign announcement—and the low expectations associated with his candidacy—see Alex Altman and Charlotte Alter, "Trump Launches Presidential Campaign with Empty Flair," *Time,* June 16, 2015, https://time.com/3922770/donald-trump-campaign-launch/.

[62] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential* Election (hereafter cited as the Mueller Report), March 2019, 70–71.

[63] Andrew Kramer, "Vladimir Putin Chides Turkey, Praises Trump and Talks up Russia's Economy," *New York Times,* December 17, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/18/world/europe/vladimir-putin-russia.html; Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference" December 17, 2015, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50971.

posture toward Moscow, and his inflammatory rhetoric around race, religion, and gender. For Putin, whose aim was, in part, to divide the United States, Trump's divisiveness was an asset in itself. In February 2016, members of the IRA received explicit instructions: "Main idea: Use any opportunity to criticize Hillary and the rest (except Sanders and Trump – we support them)."[64] In March, Clinton and Trump dominated a pivotal set of state primaries; a face-off between the two candidates seemed increasingly inevitable.[65] Russia promptly turbocharged its interference operation with great efficiency and speed. Between March 10 and April 7, the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, targeted the email accounts of more than 100 members of Clinton's campaign, including Clinton herself, and stole the emails of John Podesta, her campaign chairman. Also in April, the GRU newly breached the networks of the DNC and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC).[66]

By May 2016, the foundation was set. Trump had won his party's nomination; Clinton soon did the same.[67] One was Putin's friend; the other, his foe. Russia had first targeted America's election years earlier, when it seemed certain that both major party nominees would be similarly hawkish toward Moscow. But Putin had gotten lucky: Republican voters had

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[64] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 17.

[65] Maggie Haberman, "Super Tuesday Takeaways: Trump and Clinton Sprint, While Others Stumble," *New York Times,* March 2, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/us/politics/super-tuesday-highlights.html.

[66] The Mueller Report, 37–38; U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Hearings before the Select Committee on Intelligence on Disinformation, a Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns* (testimony by Thomas Rid), 115th Congress, March 30, 2017, 4, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/os-trid-033017.pdf.

[67] Amita Kelly, "Donald Trump Clinches GOP Nomination," NPR, May 26, 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/05/26/479588197/donald-trump-clinches-gop-nomination; Amy Chozick and Patrick Healy, "Hillary Clinton Has Clinched Democratic Nomination, Survey Reports," *New York Times,* June 6, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/07/us/politics/hillary-clinton-presidential-race.html.

coalesced around Trump, whose relations with Moscow stretched back decades, and whose positions on key foreign policy issues, such as the value of NATO, aligned with Putin's security interests and strategic objectives.[68] Ahead of the 2016 election, Putin told a group of Russian journalists that Trump's intention was to engage in "cooperation with us," whereas Clinton had adopted an "aggressive stance with regard to Russia" and espoused "harsh anti-Russian rhetoric."[69]

In advantaging Trump covertly, Putin had a unique opportunity to attempt to alter the status quo in American politics and in U.S.-Russian relations. Trump's nomination therefore added a third motivation—along with newfound urgency—to Russia's ongoing operation to interfere in America's upcoming vote of succession.

### 3.3 The 2016 Operation: Minds and Ballots

[68] The Mueller Report, 70–71; Ashley Parker, "Trump Says NATO is 'Obsolete,' UN is 'Political Game,'" *New York Times,* April 2, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/02/donald-trump-tells-crowd-hed-be-fine-if-nato-broke-up/. For further reading on Trump's decades-old business pursuits in Russia, see David Ignatius, "A history of Donald Trump's business dealings in Russia," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-history-of-donald-trumps-business-dealings-in-russia/2017/11/02/fb8eed22-ba9e-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html; Megan Twohey and Steve Eder, "For Trump, Three Decades of Chasing Deals in Russia," *New York Times*, January 16, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/16/us/politics/donald-trump-russia-business.html. For Trump's response, see Linda Qiu, "Trump Denies Business Dealings With Russia. His Former Lawyer Contradicts Him," *New York Times*, November 29, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/us/politics/fact-check-cohen-trump-.html.

[69] Vladimir Putin, interview by Russian journalists, October 16, 2016, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53103. Further, following Trump's election, Putin praised the new American president, stating, "I think he is an experienced person, a businessman with very extensive experience and he understands that if you need to partner with someone, you must treat your future or current partner with respect, otherwise nothing will come of it…. He has strong leadership qualities, of course, because he takes responsibility when he makes decisions." Vladimir Putin, interview by Megyn Kelly, March 10, 2018, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57027.

In targeting the 2016 election, Putin sought to divide American voters and to advantage Trump over Clinton, in order to alter the status quo in the international system and to guard his security interests. The operation that followed contained three parts. First, Russian military intelligence stole and leaked sensitive emails belonging to Democratic Party officials. Second, Russian military intelligence systemically scanned, probed, and penetrated America's electoral infrastructure. And third, the Internet Research Agency, the aforementioned troll farm based in St. Petersburg, spread propaganda across America's social media environment that aligned with Putin's objectives. This section examines the first and second of those tactics—the email dumps and the electoral penetrations—and the Obama administration's struggle to defend against them in the summer and fall of 2016. Russia's third tactic, executed across social media, went undetected until after Election Day and is the focus of the next chapter of this thesis.

### 3.3.1 Warning Signs

In 2015 and early 2016, with Russia's interference operation already underway, foreboding pieces of intelligence appeared in Obama's daily briefing. Some concerned probes of America's electoral infrastructure; others mentioned attempts to hack Democratic Party networks.[70] James

[70] In a PBS interview on August 9, 2017, Clapper said, "It was during the summer or so of 2015 that we began to see these indications, and certainly the hacking attempts at the DNC, which primarily involved the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security engaging with the DNC. Other things that began to unfold from then on through the election, of course, were the instances of what I would call reconnoitering by the Russian intelligence services into state-level databases, primarily voter registration rolls, in many cases maintained by contractor by each of the states…. [Obama] was thoroughly briefed up on this. And we had been doing PDB [President's Daily Brief] articles on this throughout, starting in 2015, about this activity as it unfolded and as we were able to understand it." See James Clapper, interview by Jim Gilmore, August 9, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/james-clapper/. Clapper further said, in his interview with the author, "We had been reporting on [Russia's activities] throughout in the PDB and other intelligence, but it was all individual vignettes" rather than a complete picture.

Clapper, the director of national intelligence, was unsurprised and unconcerned. "We accepted the fact that there seemed to be a certain ambient level of Russian activity in every election," he told me. He assumed, at first, that Russia's covert activities would prove insignificant. "They're going to be collecting, reconnoitering, lots of countries do that."[71]

Moscow was fixated on Washington, its long-time competitor, but the feeling was no longer mutual. Steven Hall, who was by 2015 the CIA's division chief with oversight over Russia, said that the agency had conducted a "massive" shift in resources away from Russia following the attacks of September 11, 2001.[72] John McLaughlin, the CIA's deputy director at that time, agreed that "9/11 did take us away from Russia in the sense that it reduced our focus on almost everything other than terrorism."[73] Michael Morell, the CIA's acting director in 2013, said the legacy of this reorientation lingered. "Russia was one of the places where those resources came from," he said. "As a consequence of that we were not as good on Russia as we should have been."[74] The American people had also stopped worrying about Moscow. In 2014, only 9 percent of U.S. adults said Russia was America's greatest enemy. The new flashpoint of U.S.-Russian relations, in Ukraine, had barely registered. In 2015, a total of 60 percent of U.S. adults said they had heard either little or nothing about tensions between Russia and Ukraine; just 16 percent could locate Ukraine on a map.[75]

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[71] Clapper, interview by author.
[72] Hall, interview by author.
[73] John McLaughlin, interview by author conducted by phone, September 5, 2019.
[74] Morell, interview by author.
[75] "Increased Public Support for the U.S. Arming Ukraine," Pew Research Center, February 23, 2015, https://www.people-press.org/2015/02/23/increased-public-support-for-the-u-s-arming-ukraine/; Jeffrey Jones, "Americans Increasingly See Russia as Threat, Top U.S. Enemy," Gallup, February 16, 2015, https://news.gallup.com/poll/181568/americans-increasingly-russia-threat-top-enemy.aspx; Kyle Dropp, Joshua Kertzer, and Thomas Zeitzoff, "The Less Americans Know about Ukraine's Location, the More They Want U.S. to Intervene," *Washington Post*,

America's disengagement presented an opportunity for Russia. The early warning signs of its interference operation—unremarkable in a vacuum—were alarming only in context. Russia's international posture in 2015 was far more adversarial than it had been even a few years earlier, before America's previous presidential election. In that period, Putin had accused the United States of fomenting protests in Russia, used digital means to wreak havoc upon Ukraine, and manipulated democratic votes of succession in countries across Europe.[76] None of this was unknown to officials like Clapper, but none of it was top of mind, either.

In interviews, Obama's chief advisors acknowledged that they failed to anticipate Russia's 2016 operation, despite the warning signs abroad. "We've seen Russian interference in Europe for the past ten years. We saw identical techniques: stolen information, misinformation,

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April 7, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/07/the-less-americans-know-about-ukraines-location-the-more-they-want-u-s-to-intervene/.

[76] In the years preceding 2016, Russia had been interfering in democratic votes of succession around the world, from Ukraine to Montenegro, in support of authoritarian-minded and divisive candidate. For example, a few days before Ukraine's 2014 election, a pro-Kremlin hacking group that U.S. intelligence has called a "front for Russian state-sponsored cyber activity" sabotaged the systems of Ukraine's Central Election Commission, raising the specter of foreign operatives disrupting the actual voting process. Ukrainian officials frantically repaired the damage, so votes could be tallied and reported on Election Day. "This was a serious, preplanned attack," Valeriy Striganov, the commission's head of IT, said in 2015. The hackers then leaked personal emails and photos stolen from the commission's network. The day of the election, the Ukrainian government only just detected a virus that would have caused the commission to display an inaccurate vote count (which Russian state media published, anyway). See Defense Intelligence Agency, "Russia Military Power: Building A Military to Support Great Power Aspirations," 2017, dia.mil.; Oren Dorell, "Alleged Russian political meddling documented in 27 countries since 2004," *USA Today*, September 7, 2017, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/09/07/alleged-russian-political-meddling-documented-27-countries-since-2004/619056001/; Margaret Coker and Paul Sonne, "Ukraine: Cyberwar's Hottest Front," *Wall Street Journal,* November 9, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-cyberwars-hottest-front-1447121671; Mark Clayton, "Ukraine election narrowly avoided 'wanton destruction' from hackers," *Christian Science Monitor,* June 17, 2014, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Passcode/2014/0617/Ukraine-election-narrowly-avoided-wanton-destruction-from-hackers; Laurens Cerulus, "How Ukraine became a test bed for cyberweaponry," *Politico Europe*, February 14, 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-cyber-war-frontline-russia-malware-attacks/.

all of that, in a variety of countries," said David Cohen, the CIA's deputy director from 2015 to 2017.[77] Yet America's security chiefs still viewed covert interference in democratic votes of succession as a distant threat—the type of weapon that the CIA had once deployed *over there,* in faraway places. "You would think previously: 'Oh, this only happens in third world countries,'" said Jeh Johnson, the homeland security secretary from 2013 to 2017. It seemed implausible that Putin, while targeting foreign democracies, would also target America's democracy.[78]

In Washington, few sensed the coming storm. "One of the things we did not do as well as we should have was sound the alarm," Cohen continued. "We didn't do a good enough job of better preparing ourselves, of saying, 'The Russians did that there, so there is no reason to think they're not going to do the same thing here.'"[79] Inside the CIA, Steven Hall never would have predicted or believed that Putin would launch a covert operation against a U.S. election: "There was no sense" of that, he said.[80] Despite Washington's history of interfering in democratic processes overseas, America's leading national security officials viewed their own democratic processes as impenetrable. "We were wrong and naive [in that] we were very focused on Russian meddling in one kind or another, but we were not at all focused on Russian meddling here," said Tony Blinken, the deputy secretary of state from 2015 to 2017. "That was not something that we thought was part of the game plan, and I think we thought ourselves much too resilient to anyone trying to pull that in the United States. We were wrong."[81]

The exception was the Obama administration's Russia experts. Two of those officials were Victoria Nuland, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, and

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[77] David Cohen, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2018.
[78] Jeh Johnson, interview by author, New York, July 29, 2019.
[79] Cohen, interview by author.
[80] Hall, interview by author.
[81] Tony Blinken, interview by author, Washington, DC, January 3, 2019.

Celeste Wallander, the senior director for Russia and Eurasia on the National Security Council (NSC). Nuland and Wallander shared a deep distrust of Putin. Part of their jobs was to track his foreign policy, and they feared that initial reports of Russia's covert activities foreshadowed something more. "We were the first to start sounding alarm bells as early as March and April of 2016 that the Russians were messing with our elections," Nuland recalled. Initially, Nuland believed that rather than favor a specific candidate, Putin would simply try to make the election "look messy and illegitimate." Obama's intelligence chiefs were unconvinced. "They said it was just the Russia team being paranoid again," Nuland said.[82]

### 3.3.2 Chaos at the DNC

That summer, the Russian threat became undeniable. On June 14, 2016, the *Washington Post* reported that CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity firm, had concluded that two state-sponsored Russian hacking groups had penetrated the DNC's network—one back in 2015, and another in April 2016.[83] The possibility persisted that Russia was merely conducting espionage. But then, on June 15, an anonymous persona called Guccifer 2.0 began uploading stolen DNC materials onto the internet. At that moment, the idea that Russia was interfering in the 2016 election, said Lisa Monaco, Obama's homeland security advisor, "crystalized" inside the White House. Monaco

[82] Victoria Nuland, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 22, 2019.
[83] Ellen Nakashima, "Russian government hackers penetrated DNC, stole opposition research on Trump," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-government-hackers-penetrated-dnc-stole-opposition-research-on-trump/2016/06/14/cf006cb4-316e-11e6-8ff7-7b6c1998b7a0_story.html. See also Dmitri Alperovitch, "Bears in the Midst: Intrusion into the Democratic National Committee," CrowdStrike, June 15, 2016, https://www.crowdstrike.com/blog/bears-midst-intrusion-democratic-national-committee/; Sheera Frenkel, "Meet Fancy Bear, the Russian Group Hacking the US Election," *Buzzfeed News*, October 15, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sheerafrenkel/meet-fancy-bear-the-russian-group-hacking-the-us-election.

was used to combatting terrorist attacks and disease epidemics; now, her focus shifted to defending against covert interference in America's process of succession.[84]

Russia's theft and release of DNC emails—one of the three vectors of its covert interference operation—arrived at a critical moment in the presidential cycle. In early June, Clinton had clinched the Democratic nomination. Bernie Sanders, her major primary opponent, had spent months contrasting his grassroots energy with her establishment ties. "You're not going to have a government that represents all of us, so long as you have candidates like Secretary Clinton being dependent on big money interests," Sanders had said that April.[85] These tensions endured even after Clinton became the presumptive nominee. When Sanders endorsed her at a rally on July 12, some of his supporters brought "Won't Vote Hillary" signs.[86] The Democratic National Convention, set to begin on July 25, now had a dual purpose: to unite the Democratic Party and to kick off Clinton's general election campaign.

Just before the Convention, Russia struck. The GRU, struggling to gain traction on social media, had sent stolen DNC materials to WikiLeaks, an international organization that specialized in uploading files onto the internet as a third-party cutout. On July 22, WikiLeaks published a trove of DNC emails. Their contents revealed an internal bias among Democratic Party officials for Clinton over Sanders.[87] National reporters feverishly covered the contents of

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[84] The Mueller Report, 42–43; Lisa Monaco, interview by author, New York, September 25, 2019.
[85] Colin Wilhelm, "Sanders Taunts Clinton Again on Wall Street Ties," *Politico*, April 17, 2016, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/04/sanders-says-clinton-made-more-in-one-speech-than-he-made-last-year-222058.
[86] Amy Chozick, Patrick Healy, and Yamiche Alcindor, "Bernie Sanders Endorses Hillary Clinton, Hoping to Unify Democrats," *New York Times*, July 12, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/us/politics/bernie-sanders-hillary-clinton.html.
[87] Michael D. Shear and Matthew Rosenberg, "Released Emails Suggest the D.N.C. Derided the Sanders Campaign," *New York Times*, July 22, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/us/politics/dnc-emails-sanders-clinton.html. On the

the emails, which were accurate, accessible, and dramatic. "The principal bias of the news media is toward profit," said Fareed Zakaria, a foreign policy host on CNN, in explaining coverage of the emails. "When you have highly sensational material that has some news value, it's difficult for me to understand what would be the circumstances, given the competitive dynamic of network news, of television news, and now digital news, to not bring that up."[88]

The DNC emails were certainly sensational. Outlets like *ABC* and the *Washington Post* published articles about the "most damaging" WikiLeaks revelations. Clinton's advisers insisted that Russia was behind the release, but the Obama administration offered no confirmation, and the substance of the emails attracted far more attention than their alleged source.[89] Russia had executed this move before: Ahead of Ukraine's 2014 election, Russian hackers had stolen emails belonging to the election commissioner and posted them online.[90] Nonetheless, American news organizations predominantly treated the DNC release as a domestic story while neglecting its international angle: that Russia was applying its global playbook to a U.S. election.[91]

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GRU's social media activities, see Renée DiResta and Shelby Grossman, "Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014–2019," Stanford Cyber Policy Center, November 2019, 8, 73, https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/potemkin-pages-personas-sio-wp.pdf.

[88] Fareed Zakaria, interview by author conducted by phone, July 18, 2019.

[89] Aaron Blake, "Here Are the Latest, Most Damaging Things in the DNC's Leaked Emails," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/24/here-are-the-latest-most-damaging-things-in-the-dncs-leaked-emails/; Alana Abramson and Shushannah Walshe, "The 4 Most Damaging Emails from the DNC WikiLeaks Dump," *ABC News*, July 25, 2016, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/damaging-emails-dnc-wikileaks-dump/story?id=40852448; Eric Bradner, "Clinton's Campaign Manager: Russia Helping Trump," CNN, July 25, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/24/politics/robby-mook-russia-dnc-emails-trump/index.html.

[90] For additional details, see footnote #76 of this chapter.

[91] There were exceptions in the media—first among them, Anne Applebaum, who said in late July that the DNC hack and release was "exactly out of the Russian security service's playbook," and that "this is a very established Russian tactic that's been used multiple times in democratic elections, mostly in Europe." She similarly said, in another interview in late July, that the DNC release "looks like almost exactly the same pattern is now in play in the United States that we've

The fallout was swift. Sanders complained that the emails were "outrageous" but "not a great shock." His supporters heckled pro-Clinton speakers. On July 24, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Florida congresswoman, announced that she would resign as DNC chairwoman. And on July 25, the DNC issued a statement offering "a deep and sincere apology to Senator Sanders, his supporters, and the entire Democratic party for inexcusable remarks made over email." The Convention, intended to unify a divided party, had proven chaotic and divisive, all thanks to Putin's hidden hand.[92] Clinton told me that, at the time, she was "caught off guard" and "dumbfounded" by the audacity of Russia's efforts to undermine her campaign.[93] Putin, for his part, was thrilled. "It doesn't really matter who hacked this data from Mrs. Clinton's campaign

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seen play out in other European countries." Later, in September, Applebaum wrote a column elaborating upon what Russia's interference operation could entail through Election Day, citing the experiences of various European countries. See Anne Applebaum, interview by Jacob Weisberg, *Slate*, July 28, 2016, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/07/i-didnt-think-it-could-be-done-in-the-united-states.html; Olivia Lazarus and T.J. Raphael, "Trump: The President Russia Wants?" PRI, July 26, 2016, https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-07-26/trump-president-russia-wants; Anne Applebaum, "How Russia Could Spark a U.S. Electoral Disaster," *Washington Post,* September 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-russia-could-spark-a-us-electoral-disaster/2016/09/08/303f8502-75e2-11e6-b786-19d0cb1ed06c_story.html.

[92] Eliot Nelson, "Sanders Calls DNC Leak 'Outrageous,' Calls for New DNC Chair," *Huffington Post*, July 24, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bernie-sanders-dnc-email-leak_n_5794ceb5e4b02d5d5ed1edc4; Matt Flegenheimer, "Democratic Convention Day 4 Takeaways: Over? She's Just Starting," *New York Times*, July 28, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/us/politics/democratic-national-convention.html; Anne Gearan, Philip Rucker, and Abby Phillip, "DNC Chairwoman Will Resign in Aftermath of Committee Email Controversy," *Washington Post*, July 24, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hacked-emails-cast-doubt-on-hopes-for-party-unity-at-democratic-convention/2016/07/24/a446c260-51a9-11e6-b7de-dfe509430c39_story.html; Will Drabold, "DNC Apologizes to Bernie Sanders and Supporters over Leaked Emails," *Time*, July 25, 2016, https://time.com/4422715/bernie-sanders-dnc-apology-leaked-emails/.

[93] Clinton, interview by author.

headquarters," he said after the Convention, while denying that it was Russia. "The important thing is the content was given to the public."[94]

Inside the United States, the significance of the DNC email release was a matter of perspective. For citizens, what mattered was the actual messages. Few cared how WikiLeaks had acquired the emails. Maybe Russia was involved; maybe not. For Republican Party officials, the document dump provided a boost to Trump's campaign. Rick Gates, Trump's deputy campaign manager, later told federal investigators that he and his colleagues were "very happy about the release," according to notes of his testimony.[95] And for Democratic Party officials, it was obvious that Russia was seeking to undermine Clinton in favor of Trump, but they lacked the evidence that the Obama administration possessed. "We knew it was the Russians; we knew that right away" when WikiLeaks uploaded the emails, recalled Douglas Wise, then the deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.[96] Inside the White House, Obama's advisers reached the same conclusion. "We had technical attribution very early on and knew that it was Russian actors almost from the moment that we became aware of it," said Michael Daniel, then the White House cybersecurity coordinator, of the theft and release of the DNC emails.[97]

Only select officials in the federal government had access to top secret intelligence and, therefore, the bigger picture. From the outside, the DNC email release seemed like an isolated

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[94] Jake Rudnitsky, John Micklethwait, and Michael Riley, "Putin Says DNC Hack Was a Public Service, Russia Didn't Do It," *Bloomberg*, September 2, 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-02/putin-says-dnc-hack-was-a-public-good-but-russia-didn-t-do-it.

[95] Department of Justice, Office of Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, "Interview of Richard Gates 4/11/18," 21, released via FOIA on November 1, 2019, https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6537542-LEOPOLD-BUZZFEED-NEWS-FBI-Mueller-302s-FOIA.

[96] Douglas Wise, interview by author conducted by phone, October 21, 2019.

[97] Michael Daniel, interview by author conducted by phone, July 19, 2019.

event. But Obama's team also knew that Russian hackers were scanning and probing America's electoral infrastructure. And as Jeh Johnson, the homeland security secretary, put it to me: "If you could scan it, if you could probe it, you could alter it."[98] This second facet of activity gave the DNC incident graver meaning: Russia was executing a multi-part covert operation to interfere in the November election, in order to sow discord and advantage Trump. "The minute the Debbie Wasserman Schultz emails started coming out in July," Nuland said, "it became clear they were going to put their finger on the scale for one side."[99]

Still, it was unclear what Russia had planned for the months between July and Election Day. Obama's advisers were most alarmed about the probes of voting systems and voter registration databases. "That was cause for grave concern," Johnson continued, "because I didn't know where it was going to lead, and I know enough about politics to know that you can alter the outcome of a national election, given our Electoral College, and given that there are only certain swing states, by targeting a couple of key precincts in key states."[100] In early July, as the DNC email release unfolded, Michael Daniel convened an interagency committee charged with assessing the vulnerabilities of America's electoral infrastructure.[101] And later that month, a top-secret unit of CIA, NSA, and FBI officials began analyzing Russian interference in the election.[102]

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[98] Johnson, interview by author.
[99] Nuland, interview by author.
[100] Johnson, interview by author.
[101] Daniel, interview by author.
[102] John Brennan, in his testimony before Congress in May 2017, said, "When it became clear to me last summer that Russia was engaged in a very aggressive and wide-ranging effort to interfere in one of the key pillars of our democracy, we pulled together experts from CIA, NSA, and FBI in late July to focus on the issue, drawing in multiple perspectives and subject matter experts with broad expertise to assess Russian attempts to interfere in the U.S. presidential election." See Tim Hains, "Brennan: 'It Should Be Clear to Everyone That Russia Brazenly Interfered in Our 2016 Election,'" Real Clear Politics, May 23, 2017,

By this point, the White House knew that Russia had released the DNC emails through WikiLeaks and was targeting America's electoral infrastructure. But as explained previously, the third element of Russia's covert interference operation—information warfare across social media—remained "very poorly understood" through Election Day, according to Susan Rice, then the national security advisor. Nine of Obama's other foreign policy advisers agreed. "When it comes to the way the platforms themselves were being manipulated, we didn't understand it in real time," said Tony Blinken, then the deputy secretary of state. "We just didn't understand it."[103]

This two-part (and incomplete) picture of Russia's operation is significant because it formed the basis for Obama's decision-making. Even after the DNC email release, many in the White House were skeptical that such dirty tricks would matter much to voters. The other known part of Russia's operation, however, had provoked panic. "The mounting evidence in the summer of 2016 of how many voting systems they had intruded into—and not done anything with, just intruded—was really scaring people, if what they intended to do was to bring down the electoral infrastructure," said Celeste Wallander, then the top Russia expert in the White House.[104]

In late June, the FBI had notified Arizona that Russian actors had penetrated its voter registration database. State officials took the system offline between June 28 and July 8.[105] Then,

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https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/05/23/brennan_it_should_be_clear_to_everyone_that_russia_brazenly_interfered_in_our_2016_election.html.

[103] Susan Rice, interview by author conducted by phone, August 27, 2019; Blinken, interview by author. Catherine A. Theohary of the Congressional Research Service defines information warfare as "a strategy for the use and management of information to pursue a competitive advantage, including both offensive and defensive operations." See Catherine A. Theohary, *Defense Primer: Information Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2018), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10771.pdf.

[104] Celeste Wallander, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2019.

[105] David Sanger, "Harry Reid Cites Evidence of Russian Tampering in U.S. Vote, and Seeks F.B.I. Inquiry," *New York Times*, August 29, 2016,

on July 12, Illinois election officials noticed an unusually high volume of outbound activity in their state-wide voter registration database. By the end of the month, the FBI had contacted Illinois' election officials and launched an investigation into the breach.[106] These agents would discover that a unit of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, had penetrated Illinois' registration database, accessed the personal records of millions of voters, and exfiltrated the data of up to 500,000, including their birthdates, names, addresses, and partial social security numbers.[107] The hackers could have gone further. "Russian cyber actors were in a position to delete or change voter data," the U.S. Senate has since disclosed.[108]

Rather than actually manipulate voter data, the GRU had shown that it could manipulate voter data from Russia and with minimal effort, and therefore with substantial efficiency. Of the Illinois breach, Lisa Monaco, Obama's homeland security advisor, said, "I remember that being one of the most pressing concerns from the panoply of states."[109] Through the summer, the White House received ceaseless reports of Russian probes and intrusions into electoral systems. "Every single day, we were getting reports that this system had been scanned, this system had been penetrated," said Michael Daniel, the White House cybersecurity coordinator.[110] Amy

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https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/30/us/politics/harry-reid-russia-tampering-election-fbi.html; Dustin Volz and Jim Finkle, "FBI Detects Breaches against Two State Voter Systems," Reuters, August 29, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-cybersecurity/fbi-detects-breaches-against-two-state-voter-systems-idUSKCN1141L4.

[106] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 1: Russian Efforts against Election Infrastructure,* 6, 22–24.

[107] *United States v. Viktor Netyksho et al.*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1030, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 26, https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download; The Mueller Report, 50.

[108] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 1: Russian Efforts against Election Infrastructure,* 22.

[109] Monaco, interview by author.

[110] Daniel, interview by author.

Pope, Monaco's deputy, became convinced that Putin was sending Obama a message: "'We want you to know that you are vulnerable.'"[111]

### 3.3.3 The Push to Retaliate

Obama faced a significant choice. By this point, he knew that Russia was interfering in America's upcoming election covertly and with digital means. He also knew that Putin was directing this operation.[112] Obama now had to decide whether to retaliate against Putin before or after Election Day. "The bottom line is we were going to punish Russia," Susan Rice said. "The only question was whether it was more or less advantageous to do so before or after the election."[113] This question ignited fierce debate, which in turn elucidates the risks that Russia assumed in executing a covert operation to interfere in a democratic vote of succession in the digital age, as Washington had detected aspects of this operation as it was unfolding and possessed the capacity to retaliate. Further, this internal debate sheds light on the challenges the United States faced in seeking to defend its electoral sovereignty in the digital domain.

Inside the White House, one group of senior U.S. government officials wanted Obama to punish Putin that summer, to show that the United States would tolerate no further interference in the election. Celeste Wallander and Michael Daniel evaluated what this approach might encompass. In July, they convened an interagency committee that developed countermeasures to deploy against Russia. A core member of this group was Victoria Nuland, the assistant secretary

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[111] Pope, interview by author.
[112] That summer, Brennan informed Obama that Putin was personally directing Russia's covert operation against America's election. See Greg Miller, *The Apprentice: Trump, Russia and the Subversion of American Democracy* (New York: Custom House, 2018), 149–154. See also Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, 1; Monaco, interview by author; Brennan, interview by author.
[113] Rice, interview by author.

of state, who was adamant that America impose costs on Russia quickly. "We wanted to do light deniable countermeasures early, in July," Nuland said. "All of my Soviet and Russian training told me we had to deter with a strong set of measures up front and have them calculate the costs of continuing to attack us, particularly with a player like Putin."[114]

This committee prepared a series of retaliatory options: "sanctions, information revelations, quiet private messages, louder public messages, disruption operations, all kinds of things," Wallander explained.[115] In late July, Nuland briefed her superiors, including Secretary of State John Kerry, on these steps, including a "very reciprocal" measure that would have been "embarrassing" to Putin. "It would have looked exactly like what he does, been relatively deniable, and been completely painful," she said. "What we were suggesting were deterrent measures, to raise the costs on Putin personally." Nuland recalled that Kerry had told her to "work up countermeasures [and] I will take them to the White House." But Kerry returned with a clear reply: to stand down. "By August, we were told keep working on the countermeasures, and we will come back to it after the election," Nuland said.[116]

Wallander gathered that there was "no appetite" for her committee's work, not least because offensive action could jeopardize cooperation with Russia in other areas. So instead, on her own authority, she wrote a "frank, higher-level security clearance memo" outlining ways to retaliate against Putin immediately. Daniel, the cybersecurity coordinator, helped craft the specific countermeasures proposed in the memorandum. "I have not been reticent to say that I am one of those that believed that we needed to be forceful with the Russians, and that I advocated for being more active," Daniel said. In late August, Wallander submitted her

[114] Wallander, interview by author; Daniel, interview by author; Nuland, interview by author.
[115] Wallander, interview by author.
[116] Nuland, interview by author.

memorandum, which detailed a series of retaliatory options and the one she believed would be most effective: to expose the hidden "activities," "associates," and "vacations" of Putin and his inner circle. Wallander declined to say to whom she sent her cable, other than that it went to "my leadership." She received the same reply as Nuland: "The sense I got back was, 'We got this,'" Wallander said.[117]

Wallander's superiors at the time were Susan Rice, the national security advisor, and Avril Haines, Rice's deputy. Both Rice and Haines declined to comment on Wallander's memorandum, although Haines did say that, for key national security threats, interagency committees formulate policy options for more senior administration members to consider.[118]

Haines chaired what was known as the Deputies Committee, which included the deputy heads of key government agencies, like Tony Blinken at the State Department and David Cohen at the CIA. Susan Rice, Haines' direct boss, chaired the Principals Committee, a cabinet-level decision-making body that included, among others, James Clapper, John Brennan, Lisa Monaco, and Jeh Johnson. Together, these forums deliberated whether the benefits of offensive action outweighed the costs. "Just the intensity and frequency of meetings we had was a measure of how much activity it generated," Clapper said.[119]

Only one option was discarded from the outset. "The idea of spreading disinformation was rejected almost immediately," Tony Blinken said.[120] John Brennan was a staunch opponent of the kind of disinformation the agency had once spread in countries like Italy. "The truth is more powerful," Brennan insisted. "I always felt there was a lot of stuff you can highlight that

[117] Daniel, interview by author; Wallander, interview by author.
[118] Avril Haines, interview by author, New York, February 23, 2019.
[119] Clapper, interview by author.
[120] Blinken, interview by author.

would make your point, because if we were to fabricate something and it was exposed, it would totally undermine [us]."[121]

Other ideas were more seriously considered. One was leaking details about Putin's hidden wealth and corruption. "There was skepticism about how effective that could be," Tony Blinken said, "but it was something that was certainly part of the mix."[122] Jeh Johnson thought there was "a good case to be made that we should take action before the election," and that "whatever we did should be cyber related and correlate to what they're doing to us." But competing with Russia digitally presented major drawbacks. The United States would likely "end up on the losing end" of a "tit-for-tat escalatory cycle with Russia in the cyber domain," Blinken argued, where Russia could "do more harm to us than we could do to them." Few believed that diplomatic expulsions, another option, would much disturb Putin.[123]

Obama's advisers concluded that major economic countermeasures were most likely to deter Putin from proceeding with his interference operation. "I was pleasantly surprised by how forthcoming Treasury was on being willing to support very severe economic responses that we would normally not have gone with," Blinken said, because they "amounted to economic warfare."[124] The case for offensive action was straightforward: Imposing costs on Putin ahead of the election would deter him from further interfering in the contest. But some officials held the

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[121] Brennan, interview by author.
[122] Blinken, interview by author. For further reading on Putin's secret wealth, see Adam Taylor, "Is Vladimir Putin hiding a $200 billion fortune? (And if so, does it matter?)," *Washington Post,* February 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/02/20/is-vladimir-putin-hiding-a-200-billion-fortune-and-if-so-does-it-matter/; Adrian Blomfield, "$40bn Putin 'Is Now Europe's Richest Man,'" *Telegraph*, December 21, 2007, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1573354/40bn-Putin-is-now-Europes-richest-man.html.
[123] Johnson, interview by author; Blinken, interview by author.
[124] Blinken, interview by author.

opposite opinion: The risks of offensive action were too high, and Obama should wait to retaliate until Election Day had passed.

### 3.3.4 Obama's Hesitation

Obama had offensive options available to him, ready to deploy against Russia. But first, he weighed the risk of escalation. He did not feel as though he was operating from a position of strength. As explained already, by August, the White House knew that Russian hackers were probing and penetrating America's electoral infrastructure, prompting concerns internally that Putin intended to manipulate voter data or vote tallies directly. Jeh Johnson, the homeland security secretary, told me that he worried Russia "could screw around with voter registration lists to a sufficient degree" to alter the outcome of the election, by making it so Democrats in swing states like Florida would be unable to cast their ballots on Election Day.[125] Tony Blinken further explained that, in the early summer, the foremost concern internally was that "the Russians were actually going to literally try to manipulate the election results by interfering in ballot boxes one way or another. That was the initial preoccupation, and tremendous focus was put on that."[126]

At the Democratic Convention, Russia showed that it was willing to interfere in the U.S. election by manipulating public discourse. The next step, it seemed, was to subvert the actual voting process. In the United States, states and localities, not the federal government, purchase and manage America's electoral infrastructure.[127] Heading into November, voter registration

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[125] Johnson, interview by author.
[126] Blinken, interview by author.
[127] R. Sam Garrett, *Federal Role in U.S. Campaigns and Elections: An Overview* (Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2018), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45302.pdf. In "Increasing the Security of the U.S. Election Infrastructure," Herbert Lin, Alex Stamos, Nate Persily, and Andrew Grotto further explain, "In

databases appeared especially vulnerable to Russian sabotage. States are required by law to maintain a centralized voter registration list to "serve as the single system for storing and managing the official list of registered voters throughout the state."[128] In some states, voter registration databases were unencrypted and insecure.[129] By September, Blinken said, the U.S. Intelligence Community had concluded that Russia could not alter enough votes to swing the election. But, according to John Brennan, hackers could still manipulate voter databases and, at select locations, alter tallies. The damage would be severe. "If they could get people to question

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accordance with the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002, systems for voter registration are centralized at the state level. The administration of voter registration databases entails a number of large-scale tasks, including (1) maintaining the correct status of individuals who are properly registered to vote and their relevant information on voter registration lists, (2) removing individuals who are no longer eligible to vote (e.g., those who have moved out of the jurisdiction) off registration lists, and (3) delivering precinct-by-precinct registration lists to the individual precincts where in-person voting occurs (e.g., creating and delivering paper-based or electronic poll books). By contrast, vote casting systems are decentralized down to the county level. Each county within the same state can use a different electronic voting system, which must include the following: (1) electronic voting systems that record ballots cast by citizens in person at individual precincts, (2) tabulation systems that record absentee ballots via postal mail, and (3) programs that tabulate vote totals at levels higher than the precinct." See Herbert Lin, Alex Stamos, Nate Persily, and Andrew Grotto, "Increasing the Security of the U.S. Election Infrastructure," in *Securing American Elections: Prescriptions for Enhancing the Integrity and Independence of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election and Beyond*, ed. Michael McFaul (Palo Alto, CA.: Stanford University, June 2019), 17, https://fsi.stanford.edu/publication/securing-american-elections-prescriptions-enhancing-integrity-and-independence-2020-us.

[128] U.S. Congress, House, Help America Vote Act of 2002, H. R. 2395, 107nd Congress, introduced in House November 14, 2001, https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/3295.

[129] Monaco, interview by author. Outside experts have also concluded that voter registration databases presented an accessible point of entry for Russia in 2016. MIT Professor Charles Stewart III explains, "The rising number of centralized and Internet-reliant registration systems offers more targets for widespread attacks." See Charles Stewart III, "The 2016 U.S. Election: Fears and Facts about Electoral Integrity," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2 (2017): 58. See also Sarah Eckman, *Election Security: Voter Registration System Policy Issues* (Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2019), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/IF11285.pdf; Ben Buchanan and Michael Sulmeyer, "Hacking Chads: The Motivations, Threats, and Effects of Electoral Insecurity," Cybersecurity Project, Harvard Kennedy School, October 2016, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/hacking-chads.pdf.

whether the election was valid," Blinken said, "that would be perhaps just as good as actually manipulating the outcome, and so that was the intense focus of our concern."[130]

Inside the White House, the threat of direct vote alterations strengthened every argument for waiting to retaliate against Putin until after the election. "We were all concerned about the escalatory piece," Lisa Monaco said. "We were very worried that the wrong action by us could then tip the balance to actual disruption of the ability to actually vote."[131] If Obama punished Putin, the Russian leader could respond by altering actual votes—the exact outcome Obama hoped to avoid. In this sense, acting prior to Election Day could backfire. "There was consideration given to a number of options that we could have exercised, including rattling the Russians' cyber cage, but if we did that, it could have had very unknown consequences, in terms of whether or not Russia would have doubled or tripled down during the campaign," John Brennan said. "Throughout the course of the summer of 2016, we knew the types of things the Russians *could do*, we didn't know what they were *going to do*. They could have done a lot more than what we saw."[132]

A series of additional and related risks weighed on Obama. There was the concern that, in retaliating too soon, Obama would be exposing America's sources precisely when he needed insights into Putin's intentions. The U.S. Intelligence Community, James Clapper emphasized, had "spent literally billions of dollars acquiring" eyes and ears inside Russia.[133] Going on the offensive could jeopardize those sources. Obama's team would have to justify a retaliatory strike to congressional lawmakers and perhaps the public. Russian intelligence would seek to learn

[130] Brennan, interview by author; Blinken, interview by author.
[131] Monaco, interview by author.
[132] Brennan, interview by author.
[133] Clapper, interview by author.

what Obama knew and how he knew it. Perhaps internal intelligence assessments would leak. Or perhaps Russian hackers would steal them. The end result would be the same: America's sources and methods would be jeopardized, and Russia would take new precautions to evade detection.

Then there was Donald Trump, who seemed intent on destabilizing the election at an already volatile moment in American politics.[134] On July 27, just after the DNC email release,

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[134] Trump had introduced strongman tactics to Republican Party politics: mocking his primary opponents, developing a cult of personality, and embracing "lock her up" chants at his rallies. Beyond presidential politics, event after event was tearing at the fabric of American society. On June 12, 2016, a gunman killed forty-nine people at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, the latest in a years-long string of mass shootings in the United States. A little over a week later, Democratic lawmakers staged a 25-hour sit-in on the floor of the House of Representatives, trying, to no avail, to convince their Republican counterparts to vote on gun control legislation. On July 5 and 6, police officers fatally shot two black men, Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, in interactions that were filmed and posted online, prompting widespread protests against police shootings of black Americans. Also on July 7, a gunman in Dallas killed five police officers and injured nine more; the gunman targeted white members of law enforcement in retaliation for the recent shootings of black Americans. See Manny Fernandez, Richard Pérez-Peña, and Jonah Engel Bromwich, "Five Dallas Officers Were Killed as Payback, Police Chief Says," *New York Times*, July 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/09/us/dallas-police-shooting.html; Matt Furber and Richard Pérez-Peña, "After Philando Castile's Killing, Obama Calls Police Shootings 'an American Issue,'" *New York Times*, July 7, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/us/philando-castile-falcon-heights-shooting.html?module=inline; Richard Fausset, Richard Pérez-Peña, and Campbell Robertson, "Alton Sterling Shooting in Baton Rouge Prompts Justice Dept. Investigation," *New York Times*, July 6, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/us/alton-sterling-baton-rouge-shooting.html?module=inline; Lizette Alvarez and Richard Pérez-Peña, "Orlando Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead," *New York Times*, June 12, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/orlando-nightclub-shooting.html; Peter W. Stevenson, "A Brief History of the 'Lock Her Up!' Chant by Trump Supporters against Clinton," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/22/a-brief-history-of-the-lock-her-up-chant-as-it-looks-like-trump-might-not-even-try/; Jose A. Del Real, "Blasting 'Pathetic' Agreement, Trump Mocks and Taunts Rivals Cruz and Kasich," *Washington Pos*t, April 25, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/04/25/blasting-pathetic-agreement-trump-mocks-and-taunts-rivals-cruz-and-kasich/; David M. Herszenhorn and Emmarie Huetteman, "House Democrats' Gun-Control Sit-In Turns into Chaotic Showdown with Republicans," *New York Times*, June 22, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/us/politics/house-democrats-stage-sit-in-to-push-for-action-on-gun-control.html.

Trump asked Russia to target Clinton. "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing," he said, in reference to her personal correspondence. "I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press."[135] (Of these comments, Trump campaign advisor Steve Bannon told me, "That's just Trump. Remember it's theater to him. It's part of the show."[136]) A few hours later, Russian hackers, for the first time, attempted to breach Clinton's personal office.[137] Trump, meanwhile, began to warn his supporters that "the election's going to be rigged," a claim he repeated during interviews, campaign events, and the presidential debates.[138]

Talk of a rigged election disturbed the White House, not least because Russia might actually make the election appear rigged. One frequently discussed scenario involved the GRU editing voter data in key precincts, so that registered voters would be unable to cast their ballots. Trump could use this chaos to substantiate his conspiratorial charges. "He would call into question the entire system," Amy Pope said, by telling his supporters: "'You can't trust it. It's all fake.'"[139]

This worst-case scenario rested on a near universal assumption: Clinton would win the election. Putin had "backed the wrong horse," Obama told his advisers in September, confident that his former secretary of state would succeed him.[140]

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[135] Ashley Parker and David Sanger, "Donald Trump Calls on Russia to Find Hillary Clinton's Missing Emails," *New York Times*, July 27, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/us/politics/donald-trump-russia-clinton-emails.html.
[136] Steve Bannon, interview by author, New York, September 21, 2019.
[137] The Mueller Report, 49.
[138] Tessa Berenson, "Donald Trump: 'The Election's Going to Be Rigged," *Time*, August 1, 2016. https://time.com/4433984/donald-trump-general-election-rigged/
[139] Pope, interview by author.
[140] Obama's quotation about Clinton comes from former FBI director James Comey's memoir, *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership* (New York: Flatiron, 2018), 190.

Anticipating that Trump, in defeat, would allege that the election was rigged, Obama wanted the election to appear as un-rigged as possible. "The president was very clear," Michael Daniel said. "We did not want to do the Russians' job for them and undermine Americans' confidence in the integrity of the electoral process."[141] For that reason, punishing Russia prior to November could backfire in another way. Not only would Obama be accused of using national security to favor Clinton, but he would be signaling publicly that he was concerned about Russia's operation. Voters would be left unsure whether the election would proceed fairly. "Protecting the elections also means protecting people's confidence in the electoral process," said Denis McDonough, then the White House chief of staff. "If handled incorrectly, or handled in what appeared to be a partisan way, I believe[d] there [was] a real risk, especially in light of the fact that the candidate of the Republican Party was making the case that the election itself was rigged, that people would conclude that in fact the election was rigged."[142]

With Clinton poised to win, restraint seemed prudent, while offense seemed self-defeating. "A lot of the Russia hawks thought we should just lean a lot harder, that election politics were less important than the national security issues," Amy Pope said, but "there was just so much concern that [Clinton] was already so far ahead," so there was "no good reason" to assume the risks of retaliating.[143] Jon Finer, then the State Department's chief of staff, also said that Clinton's political strength prompted complacency. "Plenty of people in our administration," he said, believed that Obama could "win both ways: he could win in the sense of Trump not winning the election and he could win in the sense of having clean hands and staying above the

[141] Daniel, interview by author.
[142] Denis McDonough, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2018.
[143] Pope, interview by author.

fray."[144] In August, public polling showed Clinton far ahead of Trump—in some cases, by double digits.[145]

This polling did not factor into Situation Room debates explicitly, but it was on the minds of Obama's chief advisers. "Part of the thinking, though it was unsaid, were the polls," Jeh Johnson said.[146] James Clapper recognized that political forecasting influenced decision-making at the highest levels. "There was a feeling that, in the end, the electorate would do the right thing, and I think that implicitly moderated a more aggressive reaction," he said. When asked to define what he meant by "the right thing," Clapper clarified, "It was obviously a bias I suppose for Clinton against Trump."[147] The notion that Donald Trump, a reality television star, would succeed Obama as president did not seem possible to many Americans, especially Democrats, and especially Washington insiders. "In some circles there was a sense of inevitability to a Clinton win in the election," said Sarah Bloom Raskin, then the deputy Treasury secretary.[148]

The political winds seemed preordained: Clinton would win the presidency, and then Trump would incite unrest. In this environment, Obama administration officials feared that punishing Russia for its interference operation could prompt escalation. There was a "reluctance to do anything" inside the White House, Celeste Wallander said, because of a sense that the status quo "isn't good, but it's not bad enough, and it could be worse." The DNC hack and release seemed insignificant compared to the threat of actual vote alterations. "There was excessive focus on the vote machines," Wallander went on. "Of all the things to be worried

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[144] Jon Finer, interview by author, New York, February 20, 2019.
[145] Chris Kahn, "Clinton Leads Trump by 12 Points in Reuters/Ipsos Poll," Reuters, August 23, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-poll/clinton-leads-trump-by-12-points-in-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKCN10Y28J.
[146] Johnson, interview by author.
[147] Clapper, interview by author.
[148] Sarah Bloom Raskin, interview by author conducted by phone, February 3, 2020.

about, why *that* was so important, and why *that* was the priority, and as long as the Russians weren't going in and manually changing the vote count, then it was all okay, to this day I don't understand that."[149]

In interviews, Obama's core team of Haines, Rice, McDonough, and Monaco defended their approach. "I believe we made the best decision based on the information we had at the time and what our focus was, which was profoundly to make sure the actual conduct and the integrity of the election was stable," Monaco said. "Imposing some costs could have sparked some escalation again on the state systems."[150] The White House had prepared a "a series of very significant responses," Haines explained, that could be deployed if Russia engaged in vote tampering. In the Situation Room, this distinction—between changing votes and changing minds—instructed policymaking. Haines continued, "People viewed affecting actual votes, including preventing people from voting, as a red line of sorts, to use an overused term, or at least as materially different from an information campaign that would require a different kind of response."[151] Obama had developed a so-called red line with Russia. He did not want to provoke Putin into crossing it. "Our overriding objective was to prevent Russia from doing more and worse than they had already done when we discovered it[s]" operation, Rice said.[152]

At this pivotal juncture, Obama, unsure where offense might lead, exercised restraint. So long as Russian hackers did not manipulate America's electoral systems, retaliation for Russia's efforts to manipulate American voters could wait until after the election, by which point Obama could punish Putin alongside a President-elect Clinton. Permitting one form of foreign

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[149] Wallander, interview by author; Celeste Wallander, interview by author conducted by phone, January 24, 2020.
[150] Monaco, interview by author.
[151] Haines, interview by author.
[152] Rice, interview by author.

interference to prevent another, Obama had settled for a policy of managed interference, as Russia worked to influence the American electorate while suffering no consequences for doing so.

### 3.3.5 Warning Putin

While debating and delaying offense, Obama and his top advisers simultaneously played defense. The focus was America's voting systems. "We prioritized our focus on the [electoral] infrastructure," said Denis McDonough, Obama's chief of staff. In the summer and fall of 2016, the Obama administration offered cybersecurity assistance to state election officials via the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and, in an effort to establish trust with those officials, solicited from congressional leaders a joint statement about the value of such assistance. Lisa Monaco said that Obama's directive at the time was clear: "Priority one: Can we make sure people can cast their votes on Election Day?"[153]

Another component of Obama's defensive strategy unfolded abroad. One way to prevent an Election Day cyberattack was to bolster the security of voting systems; another was to urge Putin and his lieutenants to stand down. On August 4, CIA Director John Brennan spoke by phone with Alexander Bortnikov, his counterpart in the Russian government. Toward the end of their conversation, Brennan issued a stark warning: Interfering with a U.S. election would backfire, in that it would tarnish U.S.–Russian relations and unite Americans in shared outrage. Bortnikov, after offering a set of denials, said he would relay Brennan's message to Putin.[154] But

[153] McDonough, interview by author; Monaco, interview by author.
[154] "Transcripts: Intel Chief Testifies amid New Russia Revelation," CNN, May 23, 2017, http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1705/23/cnr.03.html.

in the ensuing weeks, as explained previously, the White House became even more concerned that Putin would order his hackers to manipulate vote tallies or voter databases.

Another debate emerged inside the Obama administration: how to engage Putin in-person, on September 4 and 5, when both he and Obama would be attending a summit in China.[155] Obama pressed his advisers on "what to say, when to say it, what to do, when to do it, should we tell Putin what we know, all those considerations," Jeh Johnson recounted.[156] These questions alone warranted extensive debate. Ahead of the summit, Tony Blinken recalled, there were "multiple, multiple" meetings of the Deputies Committee, the Principals Committee, and the National Security Council.[157]

The White House hosted a series of interagency discussions about Putin's psychology and how to get inside his head. The consensus was that Obama should issue a private and direct warning to the Russian leader. Haines said that while a warning would not address what Russia had already done to interfere in the election, it seemed to be "the most effective way to deter and stop the Russians from proceeding to affect the vote or otherwise continuing to lean into their interference in our elections."[158] Obama accepted the recommendation.

On September 5, the two leaders met face-to-face, at a precarious moment in U.S.-Russian relations. Obama huddled with Putin, looked him in the eye, and warned: "You f*** with us and we'll take you down," as one of his senior advisers put it. (Obama, recounting the exchange in December, said he told Putin to "cut it out" or face "serious consequences."[159]) The

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[155] In an interview the previous year, Putin had described his relationship with Obama as "frank and business-like." See Putin, interview by Charlie Rose.
[156] Johnson, interview by author.
[157] Blinken, interview by author.
[158] Haines, interview by author.
[159] The White House, "Press Conference by the President," December 16, 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/16/press-conference-president.

thrust of Obama's warning had little to do with Russia's efforts to manipulate voters and much to do with the threat of direct vote alterations. "We delivered the message to Putin and others in response to what we were seeing in the state systems," Monaco explained. "That was our focus."[160]

Years later, Obama's closest aides say his warning signaled strength. "The president of the United States doesn't go to the president of the Russian Federation with a very robust threat based on restraint," said Denis McDonough, who argued that Obama's "decisive action" and "clear messaging" did deter Putin.[161] Other former advisers to Obama disagree. "I don't think they mattered at all," Celeste Wallander said of both Obama's and Brennan's warnings.[162] Michael Morell, Obama's former CIA chief, was similarly dismissive. "That is absolutely silly if anybody believed that either one of those would be effective," he said. "That's not imposing costs or denying objectives. There is no deterrent effect whatsoever with either one of those. I just don't see how anybody thought those could be helpful besides the PR benefit of being able to say you did it."[163]

Initially, it appeared as though Obama had deterred Putin overseas. Just after the summit, the U.S. Intelligence Community reported that Russia's covert reconnaissance of voting systems had abated significantly. "We thought: 'Message received,'" Tony Blinken said.[164] Within weeks, however, the White House was receiving new intelligence about Russia targeting America's electoral infrastructure. "It was a steady state," said Lisa Monaco, the homeland

[160] Monaco, interview by author.
[161] McDonough, interview by author.
[162] Wallander, interview by author.
[163] Morell, interview by author.
[164] Blinken, interview by author.

security advisor, of the frequency of Russia's covert probes through October. "We did not see a spike. We didn't see an escalation."[165] Whether one was forthcoming remained unknown.

### 3.3.6 The October Statement, and the Podesta Release

The White House also had to decide what to disclose publicly about Russia's ongoing operation to interfere in America's impending vote of succession. In early September, then FBI Director James Comey had offered to publish an op-ed about Russia's theft and release of the DNC emails, as well as its targeting of voter databases. But Obama had demurred. "The Obama team's deliberations were, as usual, extensive, thoughtful, and very slow," Comey writes in his memoirs.[166] As September progressed, the case for more transparency grew stronger. Inside the Obama administration, there was "sufficient confidence and coordination among the relevant components of the Intelligence Community," said Avril Haines, the deputy national security advisor, "to make a statement about Russian interference in the election."[167]

In the Situation Room, Jeh Johnson clashed with James Comey. "I forcefully urged that we make a public disclosure," Johnson said, but "there were others around the table, specifically [James] Comey, who believed that simply by making that public declaration, you're playing into the Russians' hands, by sowing the seeds of doubt about the integrity of our democracy."[168] Despite offering to run an op-ed, Comey also felt that a public statement might "accidentally accomplish the Russians' goal of undermining confidence in our election system." Johnson retorted that American voters, akin to shareholders of a stock, deserved to know about market manipulators, and that remaining silent was akin to political suicide. "Think about if we say

[165] Monaco, interview by author.
[166] Comey, *A Higher Loyalty,* 190.
[167] Haines, interview by author.
[168] Johnson, interview by author.

nothing and [Trump] wins," Johnson told his colleagues, "and it comes out that we knew what we knew and didn't say anything, that would be unforgivable, it would be a scandal." This argument eventually won over the room.[169]

But what should be said, and who should say it? Much of what Brennan's CIA knew by that point would remain classified, including Putin's personal oversight of the operation and his preference for Trump.[170] And Obama, as the head of the Democratic Party, opted not to issue the statement himself. "[Obama] had a clear favorite in the outcome of the election," said David Cohen, the deputy CIA director. "That played into how we publicized the issue."[171] Internally, Obama's advisers went "around and around" debating, Johnson said, until he and James Clapper agreed to issue the statement together.[172] "We tried to have the least politicized parts of our

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[169] Johnson, interview by author; Comey, *A Higher Loyalty*, 189–190, in which he elaborates: "I also acknowledged to the president that an inoculation effort might accidentally accomplish the Russians' goal of undermining confidence in our election system. If you tell Americans that the Russians are tampering with the election, have you just sowed doubt about the outcome, or given one side an excuse for why they lost?" Ultimately, Comey declined to sign the statement alongside Johnson and Clapper. Of this decision, he writes, "A month later, in early October, the Obama team decided some kind of formal statement from the administration was in order after all. The director of national intelligence, Jim Clapper, and the secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, were prepared to sign it. The FBI leadership team and I decided that there was not an adequate reason for us to also sign on." See Comey, *A Higher Loyalty,* 191. Of Comey's thinking, then FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe later told the Senate that "Director Comey felt that [the op-ed] was important to do when he suggested it." However, "[b]y the time he kind of got around to thinking about it seriously, he felt like the opportunity had passed and we were too close [to the election] at that point to have the intended effect on the electorate." See U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 3: U.S. Government Response to Russian Activities,* 116th Congress, 2nd session, 2020, S. Report 116-XX, 35, https://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/Senate_Russia_Report_Volume3.pdf?mod=article_inline.

[170] Of the U.S. government's knowledge of Putin's oversight of this operation, see footnote #112 of this chapter.

[171] Cohen, interview by author.

[172] Johnson, interview by author.

government make the statement so it would be perceived as more credible and nonpartisan," Haines said.[173]

In their announcement, Johnson and Clapper made two disclosures: first, that senior members of the Russian government had ordered the DNC hack and release and, second, that states had been experiencing scans and probes of their electoral infrastructure.[174] Both of these revelations withheld key details. "At one point the draft said Vladimir Putin" had orchestrated the DNC release, Johnson recalled, but Putin's name was subsequently removed.[175] When asked about this omission, Clapper grew defensive. There were "good reasons" at the time not to single out Putin, he insisted, and interagency debate and time constraints had hampered the editing process. "People parse the wording of a statement, amazing," he told me in early 2019. "Look, you can go back and do coulda woulda shoulda's all day long, two years later, okay?"[176]

The part of the statement about America's electoral infrastructure was purposefully vague. The statement did not attribute the scans to the Russian government, although readers could draw that conclusion. "We were not in a position to publicly say, 'We know it is the Russian government screwing around with the electoral infrastructure,'" Johnson said, as the White House sought to "warn people about the threat" without making it seem as though the vote would be "all manipulated [and] all screwed up." The statement also stressed that it would be near impossible for hackers to change the outcome of the election, since America's electoral apparatus was so decentralized. This point struck Johnson as misleading. "It's a bit awkward

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[173] Haines, interview by author.
[174] U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Joint Statement from the Department of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security, October 7, 2016, https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/07/joint-statement-department-homeland-security-and-office-director-national.
[175] Johnson, interview by author.
[176] Clapper, interview by author.

because we say there are thousands of jurisdictions, it would be hard to alter, which in reality is not really true, because all you'd have to do is go to key precincts in key states," he said.[177]

The statement was scheduled for release on October 7, which proved to be one of the most chaotic and unpredictable days in the history of American politics. That morning, Johnson briefed Clinton and Trump, separately, about an ongoing hurricane-relief effort. Johnson was not "authorized" to tell either candidate about his impending statement. "When I hung up with Trump," he recalled, "I said to myself, 'Gee, I just told them about [the relief effort], and they have no idea about this statement that we're about to issue.'"[178]

Johnson and Clapper released their statement at 3:00p.m., anticipating that it would receive extensive media coverage. But just after 4:00p.m., the *Washington Post* published a 2005 recording of Trump boasting to Billy Bush of Access Hollywood that he could "grab women by the p****." Then, at 4:32p.m., WikiLeaks—acting as a cutout for Russian intelligence—began uploading the personal emails of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta.[179] Journalists immediately started sifting through the stolen emails, which were released on a daily basis through the election. "There were probably some instances where we covered the emails too much," said Philip Rucker, the White House bureau chief for the *Washington Post*. "And I absolutely worry about being used as a tool of a foreign interference operation. But Russia

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[177] Johnson, interview by author.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 153–154. See also U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Joint Statement from the Department of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security"; David A. Fahrenthold, "Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eeed4_story.html.

understood the news media in the United States, Twitter, competitive pressures that news organizations face, and they knew what they were doing with those emails, dripping them out day by day, because every new piece of information the media would jump on."[180]

Johnson and Clapper's statement barely registered, in part because of the next phase of Russia's operation—the Podesta email release—and in part because of the Access Hollywood tape. "Our message got completely emasculated," Clapper said.[181] Johnson regretted that the statement was "below-the-fold news," as reporters "ran off to chase after sex, lust, and greed."[182] Members of the Trump campaign paid the statement little mind. "It might have been different had Access Hollywood not come out; maybe [the statement] would have gotten more attention," Steve Bannon, then the Trump campaign's CEO, told me. "The Billy Bush tape was so overwhelming that I don't even remember the Podesta emails coming out that day."[183]

Russia's covert email release, which was enabled by the digital domain, shaped the campaign's discourse and debate. Near the end of October, at the final presidential debate, moderator Chris Wallace asked Clinton about comments she had made about "open borders" during a paid speech about which "we've learned from the WikiLeaks." Clinton quickly cited Johnson and Clapper's statement and emphasized what Wallace had omitted: that the Russian government, not WikiLeaks, was behind the release. But Wallace's focus was on the contents of the messages, not their source. Trump then went on the offensive. "That was a great pivot off the fact that she wants open borders. Okay? How did we get on to Putin?" he shot back, before casting doubt on the veracity of the October 7 statement. "She has no idea whether it's Russia,

[180] Philip Rucker, interview by author conducted by phone, September 2, 2018.
[181] Clapper, interview by author.
[182] Johnson, interview by author.
[183] Bannon, interview by author.

China, or anybody else."[184] Trump's obfuscation helped to divert attention from Russia until after the election. "It was in December, after the election, when the mainstream presses said, 'Oh my God, the Russians interfered,'" Johnson complained. "We told you that two months ago."[185]

But the Obama administration, too, made choices that limited the impact of its statement. The first was what was *not* disclosed. It was not until after the election that the U.S. Intelligence Community revealed that Putin was overseeing a complex interference operation to sow discord, hurt Clinton, and help Trump. "My instinct would have been to publicize and act earlier and just tell the American people this is what we discovered and this is what we're doing against it," said Dennis Blair, Obama's first director of national intelligence. "The strange thing on all of this is that our enemies know and yet our own people don't know. Who the hell are we keeping the secrets from?" asked Blair, who said it would have been "better for the country" had the White House disclosed more about Russia's operation sooner. "We needed to impose penalties and I think we needed to give a lot more information to people as to what's going on, and it was derelict not to."[186]

The key revelation of the statement—that the Kremlin was behind the DNC release—had already been widely covered in the media. "The administration's October statement was at best a marginal addition to the public's knowledge," Comey later wrote.[187] Obama had also waited until October to disclose what his team had known for months. "We were wrestling with an unprecedented situation," Johnson said, in defense of the timing of the statement. "The considerations as to whether to disclose were serious considerations. Are we compromising

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[184] "Full Transcript: Third 2016 Presidential Debate," *Politico,* October 20, 2016, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/full-transcript-third-2016-presidential-debate-230063.
[185] Johnson, interview by author.
[186] Dennis Blair, interview by author conducted by phone, May 27, 2019.
[187] Comey, *A Higher Loyalty,* 191.

sources and methods? Are we playing into Trump's hands, his talking points? Are we playing into the Russian government's hands? I'm just glad we made the statement when we did and not on November 7."[188]

Obama also chose not to issue the October 7 statement himself, instead delegating the task to Johnson and Clapper. On this point, Obama's closest advisers are especially defensive. "I've heard the argument that had the president said it, and not the director of national intelligence and the secretary of homeland security, that more reporters would have covered it," Denis McDonough, then the White House chief of staff, said. "I think that's bulls***. Reporters report. That's what they do."[189]

Despite his efforts, Obama was struggling to defend against Russia's interference operation. The October 7 statement had received minimal attention, and various states had refused to accept election security assistance from Washington. Before Election Day, thirty-three state election offices and thirty-six local election offices allowed DHS to assess the security of their electoral infrastructure.[190] This progress, while positive, was insufficient. Various states opted not to cooperate with DHS. "Ahead of elections, states reject federal help to combat hackers," CBS reported on October 28, listing nearly a dozen states that had yet to accept DHS assistance, from New Hampshire to Georgia to Michigan.[191]

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[188] Johnson, interview by author.
[189] McDonough, interview by author.
[190] John F. Kelly, letter to Senator Claire McCaskill, June 13, 2017, https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DHS%20Documents%20to%20McCaskill.pdf.
[191] Alexander Tin, "Ahead of elections, states reject federal help to combat hackers," CBS News, October 28, 2016, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ahead-of-elections-states-reject-federal-help-to-combat-hackers/.

And despite Obama's warning, Putin did not seem to be relenting. Russia's targeting of electoral infrastructure, Celeste Wallander said, remained "active" through October.[192] In early November, GRU officers sent malicious emails to more than 120 Florida county election officials, in an attempt to gain access to their computers, a tactic that required minimal effort but had significant potential. The FBI later concluded that the GRU successfully penetrated the networks of at least two Florida counties, exposing voter registration data.[193] Just before the election, Michael Daniel, in a final ploy, used a cybersecurity hotline to warn Moscow to "cease and desist" its "scanning of and penetrations of the voter registration databases." Within 48 hours, his counterpart in the Russian government had replied. It was "the normal Russian response," Daniel said, "which was: 'Received, send us more information.'"[194]

On Election Day, the U.S. Intelligence Community still believed that Russian hackers could, if authorized, alter voter data and even the actual vote count.[195] It was up to Putin whether to do so.

### 3.4 Election Day: Crisis Preparations

By November 8, 2016, the day of the U.S. election, Russia had already interfered in the contest

[192] Wallander, interview by author.
[193] The Mueller Report, 51; Patricia Mazzei, "Russians Hacked Voter Systems in 2 Florida Counties. But Which Ones?" *New York Times*, May 14, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/us/florida-election-hacking-desantis.html; Patricia Mazzei, "F.B.I. to Florida Lawmakers: You Were Hacked by Russians, but Don't Tell Voters," *New York Times*, May 16, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/16/us/florida-election-hacking-russians-fbi.html; Dustin Volz, "Hackers Breached Voter Databases in Two Florida Counties Ahead of 2016 Election," *Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/hackers-breached-voter-databases-in-two-florida-counties-ahead-of-2016-election-11557854717.
[194] Daniel, interview by author.
[195] On Election Day concerns, see the next section of this chapter.

aggressively, in furtherance of its security interests and Trump's election prospects. Russian intelligence had stolen and leaked the DNC and Podesta emails. Russian operatives had spread other types of propaganda online. And Russian hackers had targeted election systems across the United States. The Obama administration, unaware of Russia's operations across social media, knew that Russia was working to manipulate U.S. voters by stealing and releasing sensitive emails. The focus of the White House, however, was on a separate prospect: that on Election Day itself, Russia would sabotage America's actual voting process.

The morning of the election, Jeh Johnson, the homeland security secretary, braced for Russia to escalate its covert interference operation toward direct vote tampering. He had already ordered DHS to establish a crisis response center, in case Russian intelligence actively disrupted the vote. "That was my decision," he explained, when asked who formed this team, which was prepared to offer "quick cyber assistance" to states, were a "cyber intrusion [to] manifest itself on Election Day such that people who show up to vote can't vote, or there is a problem in the reporting of the votes." For months, Johnson and his colleagues had tried to shore up America's cyber defenses. These efforts had borne some fruit but ultimately failed; electoral systems remained vulnerable. Johnson's focus had thus transitioned from preventing a cyberattack to managing one.[196]

In secret, the Obama administration awaited an Election Day cyberattack. Emergency plans were in motion. "Everybody was prepared for the worst-case scenario," Amy Pope said, including by establishing "a whole crisis team, a whole team, a pretty big team, ready to

[196] Johnson, interview by author.

respond" to a Russian strike. "It was very high alert," she said. "People were taking it very, very, very seriously."[197]

At the center of this emergency apparatus was the White House. "We did, in fact, have an entire crisis team set up in the White House," Michael Daniel said, as did the "usual national security agencies." Daniel lacked direct evidence that Russian intelligence was still inside voter registration databases, but it seemed likely, given the intrusions that had been detected since the summer, as well as Washington's limited insight into the security of state electoral systems. As voting progressed, Daniel updated Susan Rice and Lisa Monaco, who, in turn, updated Obama.[198] "We were monitoring very carefully, not just on Election Day, but in the run up to the election, whether there was any evidence of Russia mechanically distorting the vote, whether that was by manipulating or falsifying voter rolls, before or on Election Day itself," Rice said. "That was obvious to do and necessary to do."[199]

America was vulnerable, and Obama's security chiefs knew it. "[Russia] could have done things as far as voter registration rolls, they could have done things as far as tallies," John Brennan said.[200] The White House considered it "very possible," Amy Pope explained, that there would be "actual interference with the voting record and voting systems" on Election Day.[201] For Jeh Johnson, the nightmare scenario involved "data being manipulated in a handful of key precincts in Miami Dade, in Dayton, Ohio, in a key precinct in Michigan, a key precinct in Wisconsin, a key precinct in Pennsylvania."[202]

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[197] Pope, interview by author.
[198] Daniel, interview by author.
[199] Monaco, interview by author; Rice, interview by author.
[200] Brennan, interview by author.
[201] Pope, interview by author.
[202] Johnson, interview by author.

The White House remained most concerned that Russian hackers would manipulate voter registration databases. Under this scenario, voters would arrive at polling places only to find that their addresses were inaccurate, or that their names were missing altogether. "If that happened at scale, you could have a real problem. You would have chaos in the actual conduct of the vote," Lisa Monaco said of this specific threat.[203] As Americans struggled to cast their ballots, mass confusion would spread, as would news reports of electoral tampering. Cyber experts might say Russia was responsible, but it wouldn't matter, because Trump would say otherwise. "What did seem very plausible," Avril Haines said, "was that [Russia] could affect the votes of a small percentage of the population by, for example, changing the addresses of registrants to make it more challenging for them to vote and thereby undermine faith in the election process."[204]

Public polling still pointed to Trump's defeat. On Election Day, six forecasts tracked by the *New York Times* assessed that Clinton had a 71 percent, 85 percent, 89 percent, 92 percent, 98 percent, and greater than 99 percent chance of victory.[205] Trump had signaled that he would not concede quietly. At the third presidential debate, he questioned the integrity of voter registration databases. "If you look at your voter rolls, you will see millions of people that are registered to vote… that shouldn't be registered," he said, before declining to say whether he

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[203] Monaco, interview by author. Of this scenario, Monaco further explained, "What I was very concerned about and what we spent a lot of time worrying about as a worst-case scenario was manipulation of voter registration databases such that what we were seeing was that they were obviously very diffuse and not subject to any kind of uniform set of cyber-security standards or controls. Encryption was spotty, not uniform… We had seen Russia scanning and probing voter registration databases, and I think we were all worried again, as in any threat situation, what is it that we don't know? … My worst-case scenario was John Smith goes to vote on Election Day and appears at his polling place and says I am John Smith from First Street here to vote and on the database and on their records they have him listed somewhere else or don't have him."

[204] Johnson, interview by author; Haines, interview by author.

[205] Josh Katz, "Who Will Be President?" *New York Times,* November 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html?_r=0#other-forecasts.

would concede on Election Day, were Clinton to win. "I will tell you at the time. I'll keep you in suspense."[206]

It seemed obvious to Obama's team that Trump, after losing, would label the election illegitimate. A cyberattack on electoral systems would strengthen his case. In this chaotic atmosphere, "law enforcement [was] planning for a contingency outcome," Denis McDonough said, involving "instability [and] violence."[207] A separate strain of crisis planning focused on this scenario. "The working hypothesis was that Clinton was going to win, and that [Trump] was then going to go and incite people to violence by claiming that the system was rigged," Pope said, so there was "planning around riots and all of that." Pope went on, "The expectation was this was a guy who was not playing by the rules and if it served his personal strategy, he would very happily push a narrative that the electoral process was rigged against him."[208]

The U.S. Intelligence Community was also tracking the looming uncertainty of what Russia intended for after the election. Covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession can progress into other forms of covert action. "The Russians already had shift[ed] gears," Clapper said. "They were already anticipating [Clinton] winning the election, and were bent then on what they could do to undermine the legitimacy of her presidency."[209]

The next phase of Russia's operation, internal intelligence indicated, would begin just after Election Day. First, Moscow would reveal that voter data had been altered, legitimizing Trump's claims of a rigged election. Next, Russia would leak information damaging to Clinton that the CIA knew the Kremlin possessed but had not yet released. "They fully expected Hillary

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[206] "Full Transcript: Third 2016 Presidential Debate," *Politico*.
[207] McDonough, interview by author.
[208] Pope, interview by author.
[209] Clapper, interview by author.

Clinton to become president, and they wanted to have bullets they could use during her presidential term," Brennan said, in explaining why Moscow held on to these materials. "It's one thing to bloody a candidate, and it's something else to be able to continue to wound a president of the United States, maybe on the eve of certain meetings," he continued, "so there's a clear rationale why you don't want to shoot your entire wad prior to an election." Brennan declined to elaborate further.[210] Clinton said in an interview that she didn't know of these withheld materials and did not believe they existed.[211]

Russia had "lots more stuff that they stole that they never released," Celeste Wallander added, including from "people who might serve in a Clinton administration," as well as "lots of stuff that they stole from Republicans that is compromising material that they could use if they wanted to."[212]

But none of these uncertainties came to fruition. No cyberattack caused chaos at polling places. No files stolen from these unnamed individuals appeared online. The one thing taken for granted inside the White House—the outcome of the election—turned out to be wrong, too. Although Trump lost the popular vote by nearly three million votes, he won three pivotal swing states by a margin of fewer than 80,000 votes and, therefore, won the Electoral College.[213] Obama's chief advisers, many of whom said Clinton's lead had influenced their decision-making, were stunned. "It was kind of a shock to me personally how disconnected I was from flyover America," Clapper said.[214]

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[210] Brennan, interview by author.
[211] Clinton, interview by author.
[212] Wallander, interview by author.
[213] Philip Bump, "Donald Trump Will Be President Thanks to 80,000 People in Three States," *Washington Post,* December 1, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/12/01/donald-trump-will-be-president-thanks-to-80000-people-in-three-states/.
[214] Clapper, interview by author.

In making sense of Trump's victory, Harry Reid, the Senate minority leader in 2016, insists that the full scope of Russia's operation remains unknown. With the CIA, the KGB, and the Stasi, the extent of their Cold War-era covert operations often became clear only decades after they took place. The GRU archives have not been opened, and Putin's closest advisers have not started talking publicly about Russia's 2016 operation. Once they do, Reid is convinced that the United States will learn that an Election Day cyberattack did take place. There is "no question," Reid said, that Russian hackers covertly altered the vote count. "I think one reason the elections weren't what they should have been was because the Russians manipulated the votes. It's that simple," Reid said, his only evidence being the concerns expressed by Jeh Johnson and others prior to the election about the exposure of America's voting systems. "It doesn't take a math expert to understand that by just changing a few votes, the outcome will be different. So, I have no doubt.[215]

Obama's leading advisers dismissed Reid's theory, with one qualification: They could not rule it out. "We saw no evidence of interference in voter tallying, not to say there wasn't, we just didn't see any evidence," James Clapper said.[216] Susan Rice said that she had not seen any indication that Russia had "successfully altered votes or electoral databases."[217] And Denis McDonough said that "as of right now, our best information says the person who was elected was freely elected."[218] Perhaps Reid will eventually be proven correct, or perhaps it is the straightforward and alarming notion of direct vote alterations that has continued to captivate him, as it did Obama.

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[215] Harry Reid, interview by author, Las Vegas, NV, July 24, 2019.
[216] Clapper, interview by author.
[217] Rice, interview by author.
[218] McDonough, interview by author.

After the election, Obama was left in a surreal position. The Election Day cyberattack he had envisioned had not manifested itself, but the candidate Putin supported had won, and the status quo in American politics had been transformed. In an interview just before leaving office, Obama acknowledged that he had not grasped how the internet had so exposed Americans to foreign influence. "I underestimated the degree," Obama said, "to which, in this new information age, it is possible for misinformation, for cyber hacking and so forth, to have an impact on our open societies, our open systems, to insinuate themselves into our democratic practices in ways that I think are accelerating."[219]

### 3.5 Lessons

Using digital tools, Putin had launched a sustained and substantial operation to interfere in America's democratic process of succession. Back in 2014, Putin had initiated this operation in order to sow discord in the United States and to disadvantage Clinton, whom he believed threatened the survival of his regime and therefore Russia's security interests. Trump's unexpected political rise then lent Putin a third motivation: to advantage the Trump campaign, in order to alter the status quo in American politics and U.S.-Russian relations.

Russia's subsequent interference operation, and the Obama administration's struggle to defend against it, offer essential insights into the evolution of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession in the digital age. The first of those lessons has to do with the complexity of the Russian effort, which was executed across the internet and included efforts to manipulate voters and to target actual voting systems. The multi-part nature of Russia's operation made it more difficult for Obama to guard against, as the exposure of America's

[219] "'This Week' Transcript: President Barack Obama," *ABC News*, January 8, 2017, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/week-transcript-president-barack-obama/story?id=44630949.

electoral infrastructure dominated his decision-making process. One vector of Russia's operation, the electoral intrusions, diverted attention from the other two: the email releases and social media manipulation. "That is what they were focused on," Victoria Nuland said, in explaining how the specter of vote alterations captivated the White House. "They were not focused at all on what we knew had been very effective elsewhere: the influence campaign, changing public opinion."[220]

Obama had tried to deter Russia from executing an Election Day cyberattack, but he had not at all deterred Russia from manipulating voters. Celeste Wallander said that leading administration officials demonstrated "complacency" in overlooking the significance of tactics like the email releases. "Get[ting] people to take this seriously—as being really important—was really hard," she said.[221] James Comey similarly sensed that Obama did not believe Russia's attempts to influence public opinion would end up mattering much to voters. "Why risk undermining faith in our electoral process, [Obama] seemed to conclude, when the Russian efforts were making no difference?" he writes in his memoirs.[222] Some of the president's key advisers accept the thrust of this analysis. "Without question," Avril Haines said, "we did not have as clear a picture as we do now of what the Russians were doing and of the potential impact of their influence campaign."[223]

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[220] Nuland, interview by author.
[221] Wallander, interview by author.
[222] Comey, *A Higher Loyalty,* 190.
[223] Haines, interview by author. In exploring the intricacies of deterrence in the digital age, Lucas Kello writes, "The principal problem with current doctrine is that it is designed to punish individual acts," and so, "when applied to the current context, adversaries understand that so long as no single cyber action unambiguously crosses the bar of war, they will escape its certain penalties." See Lucas Kello, *The Virtual Weapon and International Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), chap. 7.

The United States, which had long manipulated democratic processes abroad, had forgotten a key lesson of this history: Covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession can encompass efforts to manipulate not just voting systems but also voter opinion. It's a lesson that Cold War-era U.S. policymakers would have known from experience, as they oversaw CIA operations to spread physical propaganda throughout targeted democracies. The traditional tools of these pre-digital operations, such as letters, posters, pamphlets, and articles, were used to influence voters. So, too, were tweets and hacked emails in 2016. Russia's methods, which marked a continuation of this long-running tradition, were innovative in their use of the digital domain. "There is no question," Susan Rice said, "that the advent of the internet has created new avenues of attack, not just for the Russians but for everybody."[224]

Whether Putin intended it or not, the threat of one type of interference—direct vote alterations—had distracted Obama and his security chiefs. "Why they decided not to do it? Maybe they never planned to," John Brennan said, of the cyberattack against electoral systems that never came, while maintaining that Russia was "prepared" to be "much more aggressive" in interfering in the election but "chose not to" escalate its operation. "I'm not sure how much we deterred, if we deterred anything, if we deterred a lot with the messages we sent."[225] John Podesta, a former counselor to Obama and a target of Russia, said the president and many of his cabinet advisers "misperceived the problem" in focusing on direct vote alterations, which he described as a "very narrow view" of Russia's operation. "That's where all their energy went and that's where their warnings went to the Russians," Podesta said. "They went to the direct interference rather than this indirect interference. I think that was a mistake."[226]

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[224] Rice, interview by author.
[225] Brennan, interview by author.
[226] John Podesta, interview by author, Washington, DC, June 15, 2018.

Russia's covert interference operation, while complex, was also efficient. This thesis defines efficiency as *the ratio of the work done to the effort and resources used by the interfering actor*. In 2016, Russia deployed relatively minimal resources and effort across the internet—confined to the capabilities of its state-sponsored hackers—to target voting systems and spread propaganda across the United States. The efficiency of this operation was therefore high, given the subsequently sprawling reach of Russia's operation. From Moscow, Russian hackers targeted election systems across the United States and stole and released tens of thousands of sensitive documents, in the form of the DNC and Podesta emails.[227] Rather than provide those emails to the press, Russia released them through WikiLeaks, a third-party cutout, for journalists and citizens to consume and share. "In today's media world, we're no longer the filter we once were," reflected Peter Baker, the chief White House correspondent for the *New York Times*.[228]

For Russia, the email releases constituted an efficient way to reach the American electorate at scale. The required effort was low, while the work done was immense. The first WikiLeaks dump, in July, overtook national headlines and disrupted the Democratic National Convention; the second, in October and early November, exposed the contents of Clinton's paid speeches to banks, received sustained coverage, and distracted her top advisers. "It was the worst month of my life in the context of the worst two years of my life," said Teddy Goff, Clinton's chief digital strategist, of the period between October 7 and November 7, when WikiLeaks released 33 batches of Podesta's stolen emails.[229] "The psychological impact of that cannot be overstated. At a senior staffer level, [WikiLeaks] deliberately did it with a drop every day and twice some days. In addition to everything else going on, it's like, 'What am I going to find out

[227] Daniel, interview by author.
[228] Peter Baker, interview by author conducted by phone, October 17, 2018.
[229] The Mueller Report, 48.

tomorrow about my colleagues and what we've all been saying about each other?'"[230] For Podesta, the month of October felt like "the fog of war," as his private correspondence became public fodder. "There's yet another effect, which is personally the most painful and the most difficult," he continued, which is that the release of his emails spawned "a whole world of completely fake news which claims to be evidenced and proven by the emails even though it's all f****ing made up."[231]

This vector of Russia's operation leveraged a core democratic attribute—the free press—by leaking documents that journalists would want to cover. "It's really easy to blame reporters," said Zeke Miller, then the White House correspondent for *Time*, but "undoubtedly, those emails were newsworthy," not least because "they provided a window into the functioning of a major party presidential campaign that was at times enigmatic to say the least, into the psychology of the candidate and the people around her… and their unvarnished thoughts on what was going on."[232] Philip Rucker of the *Washington Post* likewise said that the Podesta and DNC emails merited coverage because they were accurate and provided insights into powerful institutions. "If we did it all over again, we would still cover the emails," Rucker said. "The coverage probably would have been a little less breathless," he continued, but "we would not have kept information from the public if it were newsworthy."[233]

The media aggressively covered the hacked emails, which lent Russia's operation further reach, and therefore bolstered its efficiency. The emails "infected press coverage," writes communications expert Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "add[ing] arguments to Trump's rhetorical

[230] Teddy Goff, interview by author, New York, August 22, 2019.
[231] Podesta, interview by author.
[232] Zeke Miller, interview by author conducted by phone, July 11, 2019.
[233] Rucker, interview by author.

arsenal" and "foster[ing] an anti-Clinton agenda and frame in news."[234] The *New York Times,* for instance, ran at least nine stories on the contents of Podesta's emails, with headlines like "Highlights from the Clinton Campaign Emails: How to Deal with Sanders and Biden."[235] None of those headlines mentioned Russia, in part because the Obama administration had not yet attributed their release to Moscow, and in part because insider details were more attention-grabbing. "Our human nature is such that we're going to focus on the truth rather than the medium, on the message rather than the medium," said Paul Sonne, then a national security reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, of the emails.[236] Foreign policy professionals were left frustrated. "The *New York Times* ended up being a useful idiot of a Russian operation," Celeste Wallander said. "They were an instrument of the Kremlin's strategy. They let themselves be used."[237] In a December 2016 feature, three veteran *New York Times* reporters acknowledged, "Every major publication, including The *Times*, published multiple stories citing the D.N.C. and Podesta emails posted by WikiLeaks, becoming a de facto instrument of Russian intelligence."[238]

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[234] Jamieson, *Cyberwar,* 150, 156.
[235] Amy Chozick, Nicholas Confessore, Steve Eder, Yamiche Alcindor, and Farah Stockman, "Highlights from the Clinton Campaign Emails: How to Deal with Sanders and Biden," *New York Times*, October 10, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/us/politics/hillary-clinton-emails-wikileaks.html. Other headlines included "Leaked Speech Excerpts Show a Hillary Clinton at Ease with Wall Street"; "Hillary Clinton Aides Kept de Blasio at Arm's Length, WikiLeaks Emails Show"; "Hacked Transcripts Reveal a Genial Hillary Clinton at Goldman Sachs Events"; "Email about Qatari Offer Shows Thorny Ethical Issues Clinton Foundation Faced"; "'We Need to Clean This Up': Clinton Aide's Newly Public Email Shows Concern"; "Donations to Foundation Vexed Hillary Clinton's Aides, Emails Show"; "Chelsea Clinton's Frustrations and Devotion Shown in Hacked Emails"; and "WikiLeaks Lays Bare a Clinton Insider's Emphatic Cheers and Jeers."
[236] Paul Sonne, interview by author conducted by phone, June 20, 2019.
[237] Wallander, interview by author.
[238] Eric Lipton, David Sanger, and Scott Shane, "The Perfect Weapon: How Russian Cyberpower Invaded the U.S.," *New York Times*, December 13, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/us/politics/russia-hack-election-dnc.html.

John Podesta and Steve Bannon, the heads of the Clinton and Trump campaigns, respectively, agree that Podesta's emails received more media attention than they deserved. Journalists "treated news gathering and democracy the way BuzzFeed treats click bait," Podesta said, in their "somewhat obsess[ive]" coverage of his emails. "They pumped s*** up, that if somebody had just walked on a street corner and said it, it was like nothing."[239] Bannon found the contents of the emails insignificant. "When the emails came out, they were inner office emails with some snarky shit in there. Does anyone even remember what the Podesta emails said today?" he said in September 2019. And yet, Bannon continued, reporters covered the emails "like it was the end of days."[240] In the process, emails stolen by Russian intelligence dominated the campaign news cycle, and the private lives of Democratic Party officials became a matter of public record. "This was a window into something inherently private and secret," Philip Rucker said. "In the case of John Podesta, it was exploiting his privacy and his personal space to be reading all of those emails, but once it becomes public, as it did on WikiLeaks, that's not a reason to hide them from the public if it's newsworthy."[241]

In addition to its complexity and efficiency, Russia's operation was also difficult to detect, as one of its core vectors went undiscovered through Election Day. As detailed in the next chapter, as voting unfolded, the Obama administration did not recognize that Russia was systemically manipulating social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. "We only scratched the surface of the depth and the pervasiveness of what the Russians were doing on social media," James Clapper said. "I didn't fully comprehend at that time the magnitude of what

[239] Podesta, interview by author.
[240] Bannon, interview by author.
[241] Rucker, interview by author.

they were doing."[242] The rare journalists tracking Russia's covert operations abroad anticipated what the U.S. government did not. In July 2016, Anne Applebaum wrote that a "host of fake websites and Twitter accounts with Russian origins" were "actively support[ing] Trump and are contributing to some of the hysteria on the internet."[243] Washington's attention, however, was elsewhere. Michael Daniel said that, despite certain warning signs, America's national security apparatus "focused very little" on "understanding the scope and scale" of Russian interference across social media. In October 2016, the FBI's Counterintelligence Division had a contractor examine Russian propaganda on Twitter rather than devote internal manpower to the task.[244]

It was not just the FBI that overlooked this vector of Russia's operation. Since departing the Obama administration, David Cohen, the CIA's deputy director in 2016, has reflected upon the decisions he and his colleagues made ahead of the election. The U.S. Intelligence Community, he recognized, had not sensed the bigger picture. "We probably should have anticipated that what we were seeing, as is often the case in intelligence, was the tip of the

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[242] Clapper, interview by author.

[243] Applebaum went on, "But whatever resources Putin wagered on Trump, they are paying off. For even if Trump never becomes president, his candidacy has already achieved two extremely important Russian foreign policy goals: to weaken the moral influence of the United States by undermining its reputation as a stable democracy, and to destroy its power by wrecking its relationships with its allies." See Anne Applebaum, "How a Trump Presidency Could Destabilize Europe," *Washington Post,* July 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-a-trump-presidency-could-destabilize-europe/2016/07/21/9ec38a20-4f75-11e6-a422-83ab49ed5e6a_story.html.

[244] Daniel, interview by author. In a statement provided to the U.S. Senate on March 1, 2019, the FBI said, "In October 2016, the Counterintelligence Division tasked a contractor to identify Russian influence activity on Twitter. The FBI contractor collected and analyzed a sample of Twitter activity conducted by an overtly pro-Russian network of 13 Twitter accounts and their followers, including automated accounts, which promoted US election-related news and leaked Democratic party emails published by WikiLeaks." See U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 116th Congress, 1st session, 2019, S. Report 116-XX, 73, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

iceberg," he said.[245] John Brennan, Cohen's boss, said that, when Special Counsel Robert Mueller indicted a Russian entity for manipulating America's social media environment, he was "unaware" of much of what Mueller's team found. "I was aware of things that were happening but not a lot of specifics," he said. "I do not know the full extent of what [Russia] did."[246]

Based on the intelligence provided to him, Obama had responded to Russia's operation based on its email dumps and probes of voting systems, without realizing that Russia was also influencing millions of Americans across social media. Michael Morell called this oversight "an intelligence failure"—and has said as much to his colleagues who were still working for the U.S. Intelligence Community in 2016. "There were Russians in Russia doing this," he has told them, "and you didn't see that, you didn't have an asset, a human spy, or a technical penetration of the Kremlin, or of these organizations that were doing this, so that you could have told the president here is what they're doing."[247] Douglas Wise, the deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2016, agreed with Morell. "It was an institutional failure on the part of [the Intelligence Community] in our failure to anticipate that the Russians were adopting the use of these very powerful social media tools," he said. "That certainly was on my part an individual failure."[248] Leon Panetta, a former CIA director, said that the U.S. Intelligence Community had demonstrated "a real misjudgment of the capability" of Russia, not only with respect to social media, but with respect to its intentions generally. "Nobody anticipated the kind of bold effort that was involved" in 2016, he said, "and that is without question a real miss in terms of what our intelligence agencies are supposed to be able to protect us from."[249]

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[245] Cohen, interview by author.
[246] Brennan, interview by author.
[247] Morell, interview by author.
[248] Wise, interview by author.
[249] Panetta, interview by author.

In December 2016, after Obama ordered an interagency review of Russia's operation, his team began to grasp what they had missed in the preceding months. "During the excavation in December," Victoria Nuland said, "we found more than even Celeste and I, who had been considered paranoid lunatics in the summer, had expected."[250] The U.S. Intelligence Community then released a classified assessment of Russia's operation to federal officials, as well as an unclassified version to the public. Its judgments and findings, Brennan told me, were the same as those he had developed in August: Putin had directed a covert interference operation to divide Americans, denigrate Clinton, and advantage Trump.[251]

At the end of December, Obama announced some diplomatic and economic countermeasures against Russia for interfering in America's 2016 election across the internet.[252] But many of his advisers now say those retaliatory steps were overdue and insufficient. "I don't think anything we did deterred future action," Celeste Wallander said. "We haven't begun to raise the costs on the Kremlin for this kind of interference."[253] Michael Morell said "what Obama did fell far, far, far short" and that, "if I were Putin, I would have seen it as a slap on the wrist."[254] Haines said the president, approaching the end of his term, was reluctant to sanction Russia more aggressively, in part because his successor could undo those actions once in office. "One issue, among many, that was raised," she said, was that "if we enacted heavy sanctions it

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[250] Nuland, interview by author.
[251] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, 1; Brennan, interview by author.
[252] David Sanger, "Obama Strikes Back at Russia for Election Hacking," *New York Times,* December 29, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/us/politics/russia-election-hacking-sanctions.html.
[253] Wallander, interview by author.
[254] Morell, interview by author.

would give the next administration, which seemed obviously less inclined to seriously counter Russian aggression, the excuse to roll those sanctions back upon coming into office."[255]

Obama's team had unearthed additional details about Russia's operation, but much remained hidden. "We only scratched the surface of what the Russians were doing," James Clapper said, "and a lot of that has come out since then." As new information has emerged, many of Obama's former advisers have concluded that the United States should have retaliated against Russia in the summer of 2016, after all. Clapper would have "preferred" that Obama announce the December countermeasures prior to the election.[256] Tony Blinken added, "Knowing then what we know now, yeah, we should, absolutely should, have done more, faster, harder."[257] Sarah Bloom Raskin, the deputy Treasury secretary in 2016, said that, looking back, the sanctions that Obama announced in December amounted to a "light package," relative to the severity of Russia's actions. "From one perspective, the time to have protected all of this was before the elections," she added, especially had the scope of Russia's social media operation been better understood internally. "That was the point at which, possibly, you could have escalated the use of the [sanctions] tools to make Putin's manipulation more costly," she said.[258] Other officials regretted that politics had influenced policymaking. The "outcome of an election" is "too unknowable and too uncertain to predicate your policy on," said Jon Finer, then the State Department's chief of staff, who "would have done more sanctions sooner." He went on, "I would have just done what was in the interests of the country and in the interests of national security, and that cut very strongly in favor of telling people what had happened in a very clear

[255] Haines, interview by author.
[256] Clapper, interview by author.
[257] Blinken, interview by author.
[258] Raskin, interview by author.

and direct way and imposing very real and onerous consequences on Russia. We eventually got there. We got there slowly."[259]

Obama, meanwhile, prepared to leave the White House. But first, he issued warnings about the threat he had underestimated months earlier: that foreign actors could manipulate American voters in new and efficient ways across the internet. In private, he urged Mark Zuckerberg, the head of Facebook, to combat fake news.[260] And in an interview with ABC, he cautioned, "If we're not vigilant, foreign countries can have an impact on the political debate in the United States in ways that might not have been true ten, twenty, thirty years ago."[261] The White House had spent months defending America's electoral infrastructure. Now Obama recognized the need to defend America's information space. But it was too late. Russian propaganda had already reached tens of millions of U.S. voters. The damage, as detailed further in the next chapter, was already done.

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[259] Finer, interview by author.
[260] Adam Entous, Elizabeth Dwoskin, and Craig Timberg, "Obama Tried to Give Zuckerberg a Wake-Up Call over Fake News on Facebook," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/obama-tried-to-give-zuckerberg-a-wake-up-call-over-fake-news-on-facebook/2017/09/24/15d19b12-ddac-4ad5-ac6e-ef909e1c1284_story.html.
[261] "'This Week' Transcript: President Barack Obama," *ABC News*, January 8, 2017.

# Chapter 4: Social Media in 2016

## 4.1 Introduction

In June 2014, two Russian citizens, Aleksandra Krylova and Anna Bogacheva, arrived in the United States. Carrying drop phones, evacuation plans, and cameras, the pair spent twenty-two days traversing at least nine states, from Texas to California to New York. Then, they returned to Russia and filed a detailed intelligence report about their trip. Krylova and Bogacheva were not mere tourists. They went to the United States with a mission: to lay the groundwork for a covert operation against America's upcoming election.[1]

Krylova and Bogacheva worked for the Internet Research Agency (IRA), an information warfare center based in St. Petersburg.[2] Funded by a Russian oligarch with close ties to Putin, the group's purpose was to spread propaganda across social media. Just before Krylova and Bogacheva's trip, the IRA launched the "translator project," which focused on targeting American audiences. Its "specialists" created Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, Instagram handles—entire lives that appeared to belong to real Americans. By the fall of 2016, the IRA's monthly budget exceeded $1,250,000, and the translator project had more than eighty full-time employees.[3] The Kremlin had developed an off-the-books U.S. campaign, based in Russia.

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***Chapter 4: Social Media in 2016***

[1] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 12–13, https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download.

[2] For the pertinent definition of information warfare, see footnote #103 of chapter three of this thesis.

[3] Ibid, 6–7; U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 116th Congress, 1st session, 2019, S. Report 116-XX, 22–24, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf. For further reading on Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Russian oligarch who funded the IRA, see Neil MacFarquhar, "Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian Oligarch Indicted by U.S., Is Known as 'Putin's

This chapter examines the work of the IRA, the third and final vector of Russia's operation to interfere in the 2016 election. As detailed in the previous chapter, in the summer and fall of 2016, the Obama administration was aware of Russia's theft and release of emails and targeting of state electoral systems. But in that same period of time, unbeknownst to the Obama White House, the IRA's employees were disseminating propaganda across America's major social media channels in furtherance of Putin's objectives: to sow discord, damage the Clinton campaign, and advantage the Trump campaign.[4] Without the internet, the IRA could not have existed, since its operatives worked across online platforms. As such, the IRA's operations shed essential light on why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age.

The U.S. Intelligence Community, while grappling with the other two vectors of Russia's operation, overlooked the activities of the IRA. So, too, did Facebook. "We didn't have the IRA stuff in 2016," Alex Stamos, then Facebook's chief security officer, told me. "Nobody had a full grasp of it. Nobody did."[5]

The clues were there. In 2014 and 2015, a handful of reporters published exposés about the IRA's inner workings. These select journalists painted an alarming portrait: Inside a secretive factory, hundreds of people had assumed fictitious online identities and were spreading

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Cook,'" *New York Times*, February 16, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/europe/prigozhin-russia-indictment-mueller.html.

[4] The U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that "the Russian government tasked and supported the IRA's interference in the 2016 U.S. election," that "the IRA sought to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election by harming Hillary Clinton's chances of success and supporting Donald Trump at the direction of the Kremlin," and that "IRA social media activity was overtly and almost invariably supportive of then-candidate Trump, and to the detriment of Secretary Clinton's campaign." See U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 4–5.

[5] Alex Stamos, interview by author conducted by phone, May 28, 2018.

propaganda designed to influence public opinion in Russia, Ukraine, and America.[6] Stamos's team "went and shut a bunch of stuff down" in response to these articles. But, he continued, the investigation stopped there. "There was never an attempt to put together a dedicated team to follow up on that, and we should have."[7] Reporters moved onto other subjects.[8] Inside the CIA, Steven Hall, the division chief overseeing Russia through 2015, said the IRA's existence was such a poorly kept secret that he assumed its work was insignificant. "The fact that we were discussing this in a public venue would indicate to me that there was probably not a whole lot there," Hall said. "But it turns out that the Russians were just being much more aggressive than we anticipated and cared apparently a lot less about being found out."[9]

As 2016 progressed, Stamos felt confident about Facebook's security efforts. His team, he recalled, was on top of GRU-run accounts probing the personal Facebook accounts of Democratic Party officials.[10] "A known GRU account going and doing some reconnaissance—that was a Tuesday. Every week we handled three or four incidents like that," Stamos said. "We

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[6] Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *New York Times*, June 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html. Even earlier, in 2014, BuzzFeed published an article about how the IRA, with a staff of more than 600 people and a yearly budget of more than $10 million, was using social media to influence public opinion at home and abroad, including in the United States. See Max Seddon, "Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America," *Buzzfeed News*, June 2, 2014, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/maxseddon/documents-show-how-russias-troll-army-hit-america/.

[7] Stamos, interview by author.

[8] By July 2016, Adrian Chen wrote, "The Internet Research Agency appears to have quieted down significantly." See Adrian Chen, "The Real Paranoia-Inducing Purpose of Russian Hacks," *New Yorker*, July 27, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-real-paranoia-inducing-purpose-of-russian-hacks.

[9] Steven Hall, interview by author conducted by phone, October 22, 2019.

[10] An indictment issued by the office of Robert Mueller described another aspect of the GRU's social media activities: "Unit 74455 assisted in the release of stolen documents through the DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0 personas, the promotion of those releases, and the publication of anti-Clinton content on social media accounts operated by the GRU." See *United States v. Viktor Netyksho et al.,* 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1030, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 5.

reported that to the FBI," he continued, but "got nothing back from them."[11] Disclosing the GRU's activities publicly was disallowed; the potential blowback seemed too significant. "Everybody thought Hillary was going to win, and I think there was a huge fear, just as there was obviously in the Obama White House, inside of Facebook of looking like we were putting our thumb on the scale," Stamos said. Just as Obama wanted Clinton to win, so did many of Facebook's leaders. "Almost every member of the executive team, other than a couple of really important exceptions, was a Hillary Clinton donor or a donor to the Democratic Party," Stamos explained. "The company was so kind of tied to the Democratic Party," he continued, that "nobody wanted to be looking to help her win."[12]

Election Day came and went. Trump became the president-elect. Obama retaliated against Russia for its email releases and targeting of state electoral systems. All the while, this third vector of Russia's operation, executed by the IRA, remained unappreciated. "It was nobody's job to track professional propagandists, especially with our elections," Stamos said. "It was nobody's job in the government; it was nobody's job at the companies." Only in 2017, during an internal probe, did Facebook officials grasp what they had overlooked. Concerns about appearing partisan persisted internally. "The company just didn't want to take the blame for Trump winning," Stamos explained.[13] Facebook went into damage control mode. "I can't talk

[11] Officials at Twitter had a similar experience. The company's general counsel told the U.S. Senate in January 2019 that "to the best of our knowledge, Twitter received no information from the U.S. government in advance of the 2016 election about state sponsored information operations." See U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 73.
[12] Stamos, interview by author. On those exceptions at Facebook, see David Smith, "How Key Republicans inside Facebook Are Shifting Its Politics to the Right," *Guardian*, November 3, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/03/facebook-politics-republicans-right.
[13] Stamos, interview by author.

about it," Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's COO, told me, when asked how Facebook was responding to Russia's operation. "But we're working hard on it."[14]

The IRA's reach proved sprawling. On Facebook alone, the IRA reached an estimated 126 million Americans and generated 76.5 million engagements. On Twitter, the IRA generated 72 million engagements. On Instagram, the IRA reached 20 million Americans and generated 187 million engagements.[15] On YouTube, the IRA posted roughly 1,100 videos across seventeen channels.[16] And, on Tumblr, the IRA reached 11.7 million Americans. Other platforms that the IRA targeted include Reddit, Pinterest, Medium, and LinkedIn.[17] (The GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, also sought to influence American voters on social media, but its posts generated comparatively negligible engagement.[18])

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[14] Sheryl Sandberg, interview by author, New York, June 2018. On Facebook's internal quarrels and decision making after the election, see Sheera Frenkel, Nicholas Confessore, Cecilia Kang, Matthew Rosenberg, and Jack Nicas, "Delay, Deny and Deflect: How Facebook's Leaders Fought through Crisis," *New York Times,* November 14, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/technology/facebook-data-russia-election-racism.html.

[15] See U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social,* 45–50, which further explains that, on Facebook, the 76.5 million engagements included 30.4 million shares, 37.6 million likes, 3.3 million comments, and 5.2 million reactions, and that on Instagram, almost half of the IRA's 133 accounts had over 10,000 followers, and 12 had more than 100,000.

[16] Renée DiResta, Dr. Kris Shaffer, Becky Ruppel, David Sullivan, Robert Matney, Ryan Fox, Dr. Jonathan Albright, and Ben Johnson, "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," New Knowledge, December 17, 2018, 7, https://www.newknowledge.com/articles/the-disinformation-report/.

[17] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media*, 59–62.

[18] Stanford researchers found that across the GRU's Facebook accounts, "Engagement was minimal. Across all posts, there were 4,830 Likes, 5,469 reactions, 3,432 shares, and 902 comments…. While GRU-attributed Facebook posts spanned a period from 2014 to 2018—a time when the IRA was operational and actively spending money and effort on audience engagement—only one of the GRU-attributed Pages bought ads…. The effort expended on attracting audiences, even via obvious strategies like running ads, was conspicuously minimal; the marked lack of engagement is indeed somewhat perplexing. There are a few possible explanations for this: the first is that social influence was not the focus nor the goal of GRU activity, which was primarily concerned with media hacking…. A second explanation is that

This chapter, in assessing the work and significance of the IRA, completes the story of Russian interference in America's 2016 election, the third and final case study under examination. In furtherance of the aims of this thesis, this chapter is structured around identifying continuities and discontinuities between the IRA's work and likeminded operations of the pre-digital period. The initial sections of this chapter analyze three of those continuities: (1) the idea of molding minds across a penetrable news source; (2) the objectives to sow division and advantage a specific candidate; and (3) the methods used to attain these objectives. Then, in its final section, this chapter identifies what about the IRA did, in fact, mark a departure from historic methods. Drawing on this analysis and that of the preceding chapters, this thesis then proceeds to its conclusion, which examines why and how covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have evolved in the digital age, focusing on continuities and discontinuities in this practice and its efficiency as the internet has spread.

Across its analysis, this chapter advances two arguments about the IRA. The first is that Russia, by transforming social media into a mechanism for covert interference, manipulated American voters widely and efficiently across the internet. The second is that this achievement, while pathbreaking, built upon preexisting ideas. Much about the IRA's work marked a continuation of past practices, enhanced by the digital domain. "There is nothing new here,"

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they didn't fully understand the dynamics of social platforms. A third is that they were simply ineffectual or incompetent in their execution." On the IRA and GRU, the researchers conclude, "The extent of coordination between the various entities with influence operations capabilities—in this case, the GRU and the IRA—is an open question…. There has been no concrete evidence of collaboration between the two entities." See Renée DiResta and Shelby Grossman, "Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014–2019," Stanford Cyber Policy Center, November 2019, 5, 7, 9, 91, https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/potemkin-pages-personas-sio-wp.pdf.

commented Porter Goss, a former CIA director. "What has changed is the platform—the devices, the means, the IT world."[19]

### 4.2 The First Continuity: The Idea

To mold minds, interfering actors identify and then manipulate conduits for information. This is what the CIA and the KGB did during the Cold War, when they corrupted newspapers, radio programs, and television stations. And this is what the IRA did in 2016, when its employees corrupted social media platforms efficiently and widely. The cost was low, the accessibility was high, and the reach was vast. Any Russian with a computer could study and influence American voters. "It's the new cheap warfare," Nikki Haley told me while serving as UN ambassador. "Countries regardless of their wealth can now use this power to fight and infiltrate a country."[20]

Social media had become a dominant part of America's information ecosystem remarkably quickly. In 2003, neither Facebook nor Twitter existed. By 2016, many millions of Americans had plugged into these platforms and others, from Instagram to Pinterest to Snapchat.[21] While surging in popularity, these companies systemically collected the personal

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[19] Porter Goss, interview by author, Florida Keys, FL, December 26, 2018.
[20] Nikki Haley, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 23, 2018.
[21] Shannon Greenwood, Andrew Perrin, and Maeve Duggan, "Social Media Update 2016," Pew Research Center, November 11, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/. Michael Hayden, the NSA director from 1999 to 2005, told me that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, he expected a digitally connected world to "create a common dialogue and bring people together toward a middle, deeper, and richer understanding." Still, some thinkers, like Jack Goldsmith, Tim Wu, and Lawrence Lessig, sensed that a globalized Internet, with all its potential, had much potential for abuse. "Everything you do on the Net produces data," Lessig wrote in 2006, "about what you do and what you say," which can be used to influence "you in a direct and effective way." See Lawrence Lessig, *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace, Version 2.0* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 216. Goldsmith and Wu, in their 2006 book, warned that authoritarian states like China would maintain a "model of political control" through a "sphere of influence over network norms," while the United States would adopt a "free and open model" of internet activity. As a result, Wu and Goldsmith forecast "a technological version of the cold war, with each side pushing its own vision of the Internet's future." See Jack

data of their users. "It really amuses me about how people get all exercised" about government-run "'mass surveillance,'" James Clapper, the former director of national intelligence, said. "The government pales compared to the social media platforms, and the insight they have on individuals and personal information that people give up."[22]

With these platforms came the ability to influence user behavior on an individual basis. Facebook recognized this capacity early on. In 2010, the company showed roughly sixty million Americans a post encouraging them to vote; researchers found that an additional 340,000 people cast ballots as a result of this intervention.[23] American campaigns caught on. Political spending

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Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 101, 184.

[22] James Clapper, interview by author, Fairfax, VA, January 3, 2019. Kira Vrist Rønn and Sille Obelitz Søe reflect on questions of privacy and social media platforms, arguing, "While they feel private to users, they are in fact public spaces." See Kira Vrist Rønn and Sille Obelitz Søe, "Is Social Media Intelligence Private? Privacy in Public and the Nature of Social Media Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 3 (2019): 363–378. On the undemocratic consequences of social media, see Ronald Deibert, "The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths about Social Media," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 25–39; Larry Diamond, "The Road to Digital Unfreedom: The Threat of Postmodern Totalitarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 20–24.

[23] Robert Bond et al., "A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization," *Nature* 489, no. 7415 (2012): 295–298, which finds that "the results show that the messages directly influenced political self-expression, information seeking and real-world voting behavior of millions of people," and that "the messages not only influenced the users who received them but also the users' friends, and friends of friends." Also, prior to America's 2012 election, Facebook researchers manipulated the feeds of 1.9 million users to promote more "hard news" stories; those users subsequently demonstrated increased civic engagement and turnout on Election Day. See Micah Sifry, "Facebook Wants You to Vote on Tuesday. Here's How It Messed with Your Feed in 2012," *Mother Jones*, October 31, 2014, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/10/can-voting-facebook-button-improve-voter-turnout/. For further reading on messaging in America's evolving information environment, see Bruce Hardy, Kate Kenski, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money and Message Shaped the 2008 Election* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Yue Tan and David H. Weaver, "Agenda Diversity and Agenda Setting from 1956 to 2004," *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 6 (2013): 773–789; Richard Johnston, Michael Hagen, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundations of Party Politics* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Adam Kramer, Jamie Guillory and

on digital advertisements in 2016 totaled $1.4 billion—a 789% increase from the previous cycle.[24] "I'm not a believer in television [advertisements]—not with all the social media options around," Steve Bannon said.[25] Discourse on social media, research has shown, spreads to other information channels, such as cable news and fringe websites.[26] Teddy Goff, the Clinton campaign's chief digital strategist, described social media as an essential tool in modern campaigning. "These platforms are highly sophisticated attention-sucking systems," he said. "That's their whole business model."[27]

Russia launched its own digital campaign targeting the 2016 election. With nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults getting at least some of their news from social media, Russia seized the opportunity to manipulate a democratic vote of succession by manipulating minds.[28] Putin's strategists have since commented on their own ingenuity. "When the internet was being hailed everywhere as an inviolate space of unrestricted freedom, a place where everything was open to everyone and where all were equal, it was from Russia that hoodwinked humanity heard the sobering question: 'So who are we in the worldwide web—the spiders, or the flies?'" wrote Vladislav Surkov, one of Putin's closest advisers, in February 2019. "And today everyone's

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Jeffrey Hancock, "Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks," *PNAS* 111, no. 24 (2014): 8788–8790.

[24] Kate Kaye, "Data-Driven Targeting Creates Huge 2016 Political Ad Shift: Broadcast TV Down 20%, Cable and Digital Way Up," *AdAge*, January 3, 2017, https://adage.com/article/media/2016-political-broadcast-tv-spend-20-cable-52/307346.

[25] Steve Bannon, interview by author, New York, September 21, 2019.

[26] On the persistent influence of TV news, see Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (2017): 211–236.

[27] Teddy Goff, interview by author, New York, August 22, 2019.

[28] Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016," Pew Research Center, May 26, 2016, https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/.

rushing to disentangle the Net, including even the most freedom-loving bureaucracies, and to denounce Facebook for facilitating foreign interference."[29]

### 4.3 The Second Continuity: The Objectives

What the Internet Research Agency sought to achieve was likewise unoriginal. Its primary objective, to sow division, had long been central to Moscow's operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. "They have long tried to cause chaos and diminish democratic institutions," said Bobby Inman, the CIA's deputy director in 1981 and 1982. "But social media has made it so much easier, and you can do it directly."[30] Nor was America the only victim of Russia's digital subversion. Juan Manuel Santos, Colombia's president from 2010 to 2018, struggled to counter Russian attempts to "encourage and strengthen polarization" by interfering in his country's social media environment. "Russia is more interested in maintaining the disorder than anything else," he said.[31]

By May 2014, the IRA had incorporated this long-time aim into its U.S. operations. Intercepted and since released communications reveal that the IRA resolved to "spread distrust towards the candidates and the political system in general," including by fomenting "political intensity through supporting radical groups, users dissatisfied with [the] social and economic situation and oppositional social movements."[32] Putin, ever the KGB officer, sought to weaken

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[29] Vladislav Surkov, "Владислав Сурков: Долгое государство Путина," *Независимая газета*, February 11, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html.
[30] Bobby Inman, interview by author, Austin, TX, November 2, 2018.
[31] Juan Santos, interview by author, Oxford, England, November 13, 2018.
[32] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 6, 14. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded, "Analysis of the behavior of the IRA-associated social media accounts makes clear that while the Russian information warfare campaign exploited the context of the election and election-related issues in 2016, the preponderance of the operational focus, as reflected repeatedly in content, account names, and audiences targeted, was on socially divisive issues—such as race, immigration, and Second

the United States and showcase to the international community—and especially to his own people—the shortcomings of the democratic model.

To achieve Putin's desired end, the IRA exploited preexisting fissures in American society. As Stamos put it, "They were looking to radicalize people that are already a little radical. You like Black Lives Matter, we're going to try to make you hate cops. Do you dislike immigrants? We're going to try to make you a super villain horrible anti-immigrant racist."[33] Many of these posts intentionally contained lies, designed to mislead readers and spread widely. On social media, disinformation thrives; MIT researchers have found that on Twitter false news stories spread far more quickly and broadly than accurate ones.[34] It is an ideal platform on which to disseminate hate. "What is most alarming," H.R. McMaster, Trump's former national security advisor, told me, "is the degree to which Russia was able to take advantage of divisions within our own polity and exacerbate those divisions in a way that pit communities against each other while diminishing confidence in our democratic principles, institutions, and processes."[35]

The secondary objective of the IRA was also familiar: to advantage one candidate and damage another, which is the tradition of covert interference in democratic votes of succession.

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Amendment rights—in an attempt to pit Americans against one another and against their government." See
U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 6.

[33] Stamos, interview by author.

[34] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1146–1151, in which the authors find that "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news." This pattern of behavior extended into 2016. See Craig Silverman, "This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook," *Buzzfeed News*, November 16, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook.

[35] H.R. McMaster, interview by author conducted by phone, October 17, 2018.

A few weeks after Trump launched his campaign, in July 2015, IRA-run accounts began posting pro-Trump content and attacking his Republican rivals, including Senators Ted Cruz, Lindsay Graham, and Marco Rubio. The IRA developed an impressive following among right-wing voters: Content on its "Being Patriotic" Facebook page generated 6.3 million likes; on its "Stop All Invaders" page, 773,305 comments; and on its "Heart of Texas" page, 4.8 million shares.[36]

The other half of the equation was Hillary Clinton, Putin's foe. In September 2016, an IRA supervisor criticized an employee for uploading a "low number of posts dedicated to criticizing Hillary Clinton" on the IRA's "Secured Borders" page. "It is imperative to intensify criticizing Hillary Clinton," the supervisor instructed.[37] IRA specialists heeded this directive, spreading disinformation about Clinton's personal email server, family foundation, and tenure as secretary of state. They especially derided her character. One IRA-run Facebook post displayed a picture of Clinton alongside the text "Hillary Is Our Enemy"; another showed Clinton and asked users to "Like If You Agree: Hillary Clinton Is a Serial Liar"; while another warned "Hillary Clinton Will Eliminate the Free Speech Rights of Anyone Who Gets in Her Way."[38] The IRA—along with Russia's state-sponsored media outlets, Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik—frequently posted about the GRU-orchestrated email dumps. "There was a synergistic relationship," writes communications expert Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "between the WikiLeaks releases and Moscow-

[36] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 9, 21, 76–80, in which these researchers also explain that Clinton and Trump, while a persistent theme, were not the IRA's focus: Just 18 percent of its Instagram posts, 7 percent of its Facebook posts, and 6 percent of its Tweets mentioned either candidate by name. The priority was to sow division, amass followers, and, at key moments, release election-related content.
[37] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 17.
[38] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 56.

backed social media content." These overt mechanisms—RT and Sputnik—enhanced the covert components of Russia's operation.[39]

The IRA's effort to disadvantage Clinton was multifaceted. Its accounts pushed veterans, evangelicals, and other traditionally conservative communities to vote, while prodding traditionally left-wing communities to stay home or to support Jill Stein, a third-party candidate. This voter suppression effort especially targeted black Americans, who predominantly supported Clinton.[40] In October 2016, the IRA-run "Woke Blacks" Instagram account posted: "[A] particular hype and hatred for Trump is misleading the people and forcing Blacks to vote Killary. We cannot resort to the lesser of two devils. Then we'd surely be better off without voting AT ALL."[41] The IRA targeted other minority groups. In early November, "United Muslims of

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[39] Jamieson, *Cyberwar,* 5, 68; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Intelligence Community Assessment, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*, January 6, 2017, 3, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf. Donald Trump, as a presidential candidate, granted an interview to RT, during which he criticized the American press. See Adam Taylor and Paul Farhi, "A Trump Interview May Be Crowning Glory for RT, a Network Funded by the Russian Government," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/09/09/a-trump-interview-may-be-crowning-glory-for-rt-network-funded-by-the-russian-government/. For further reading on RT and Sputnik, see Jim Rutenberg, "RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War," *New York Times*, September 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/rt-sputnik-and-russias-new-theory-of-war.html.

[40] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, chap. 5. Philip Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Liotsiou, John Kelly, and Camille François conclude, in their study of IRA-run accounts, that "it is evident that the campaigns sought to demobilize African Americans, LGBT, and liberal voters," and that "messaging to African Americans sought to divert their political energy away from established political institutions by preying on anger with structural inequalities faced by African Americans, including police violence, poverty, and disproportionate levels of incarceration. These campaigns pushed a message that the best way to advance the cause of the African American community was to boycott the election and focus on other issues instead." See Phil Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012–2018," Computational Propaganda Research Project, Oxford Internet Institute, December 2018, 19, 34.

[41] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 18. The IRA also targeted Native Americans. See Ryan Brooks, "How Russians Attempted to Use Instagram to Influence Native Americans," *BuzzFeed News*, October 23, 2017,

America," another IRA creation, posted, "American Muslims [are] boycotting elections today, most of the American Muslim voters refuse to vote for Hillary Clinton because she wants to continue the war on Muslims in the middle east and voted yes for invading Iraq."[42]

The IRA further attempted to weaken Clinton by sowing confusion among left-wing audiences, including and especially Bernie Sanders supporters. Just before the election, an IRA-run Twitter account spread the message "Heads Up: If you voted for Bernie in the Primaries, the Election Board will NOT let you vote for Hillary on Nov 8."[43] Even the most discerning voters had no way to know these misleading posts were produced outside the United States.

### 4.4 The Third Continuity: The Method

For the IRA, as with interfering actors historically, reaching voters was a prerequisite to manipulating them. During the Cold War, the KGB and CIA went to great lengths to influence as many voters as possible: funding news outlets, recruiting reporters, spreading physical propaganda, and orchestrating grassroots initiatives. Yet the "limited circulation" of certain pieces of KGB propaganda in the United States, its archives explain, meant they "were very unlikely to get any real resonance."[44] Social media offered new opportunities to influence the masses. To do so, the IRA had to attract an audience.

The first step was making it seem as though IRA accounts belonged to actual Americans. Foreign operatives do not enter the public square—or log onto Twitter—and declare their

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https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryancbrooks/russian-troll-efforts-extended-to-standing-rock.

[42] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 18.

[43] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 85.

[44] MITN 1/6/5, p. 436, the papers of Vasiliy Mitrokhin, accessed by author at Churchill College, Cambridge University.

identities and intentions. Covert interference in democratic votes of succession necessarily involves cutouts, or middlemen, designed to hide the hand of the interfering actor. In this instance, the IRA hid Russia's hand from voters. "The thing that is powering this [operation] is their ability to lie about who they are," Stamos said.[45] For interfering actors, cutouts are essential. Without them, the covert becomes overt, and foreign machinations are exposed as such.

IRA employees lived inside these digital creations. Specialists focusing on Facebook had to manage six fake personalities at once. The all-consuming nature of this work took a toll. "Of course, if every day you are feeding on hate, it eats away at your soul," a former IRA employee said in 2015. "You start really believing in it. You have to be strong to stay clean when you spend your whole day submerged in dirt." Marat Mindiyarov, formerly of the IRA, further described the organization's disorienting nature. "Your first feeling, when you ended up there," Mindiyarov told a reporter in 2018, "was that you were in some kind of factory that turned lying, telling untruths, into an industrial assembly line."[46]

IRA specialists studied U.S. discourse before mimicking it. Supervisors offered feedback on whether posts "appeared authentic."[47] Proficiency in English was a valuable asset. In December 2014, Mindiyarov, then an IRA employee, applied to join the U.S.-focused translator

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[45] Stamos, interview by author. See also Ahmer Arif, Leo Graiden Stewart, and Kate Starbird, "Acting the Part: Examining Information Operations within #BlackLivesMatter Discourse," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, no. CSCW (2018).
[46] Seddon, "Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America"; Anton Troianovski, "A Former Russian Troll Speaks: 'It Was like Being in Orwell's World,'" *Washington Post*, February 17, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/17/a-former-russian-troll-speaks-it-was-like-being-in-orwells-world/; Shaun Walker, "The Russian Troll Factory at the Heart of the Meddling Allegations," *Guardian*, April 2, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/putin-kremlin-inside-russian-troll-house.
[47] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 14–15.

project. His entrance exam consisted of writing a paper about Hillary Clinton. "I failed the test because you had to know English perfectly," he later explained. "The reader must not have the feeling that you are a foreigner. The language demands were in fact very high."[48]

IRA specialists, posting in English, sought to persuade Americans to engage with their accounts. One tactic was advertisements: The IRA purchased 3,393 online ads that reached more than eleven million Americans, at a cost of just $100,000.[49] But more importantly, the IRA attracted followers through regular posts across multiple platforms. On Facebook, the IRA issued 61,500 posts across 81 unique pages; on Twitter, 10.4 million posts across 3,841 accounts; and on Instagram, 116,000 posts across 133 accounts.[50] "This is an information ecosystem problem. This is not limited to one platform," said Renée DiResta, an information warfare expert.[51]

IRA specialists tracked which elements of their content engaged the most people. They assembled detailed metrics reports and tailored their messaging to the news of the day.[52] On September 11, 2016, when Hillary Clinton physically stumbled in public, IRA-run Twitter accounts quickly promoted hashtags like #ClintonCollapse, #ZombieHillary, and #SickHillary.

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[48] Troianovski, "A Former Russian Troll Speaks: 'It Was like Being in Orwell's World.'"
[49] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 43–44. To examine actual IRA-run ads, see Scott Shane, "These Are the Ads Russia Bought on Facebook in 2016," *New York Times,* November 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/us/politics/russia-2016-election-facebook.html.
[50] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 40, 77, in which Senate investigators found "that paid advertisements were not key to the IRA's activity, and moreover, are not alone an accurate measure of the IRA's operational scope, scale, or objectives…. The nearly 3,400 Facebook and Instagram advertisements the IRA purchased are comparably minor in relation to the over 61,500 Facebook posts, 116,000 Instagram posts, and 10.4 million tweets that were the original creations of IRA influence operatives, disseminated under the guise of authentic user activity."
[51] Renée DiResta, interview by author conducted by phone, May 22, 2019.
[52] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 15.

Oxford researchers have found that IRA accounts entered into overdrive at other key moments in the campaign, such as the primary and general election debates.[53] Posts about topical issues could generate significant activity. "When there were black people rioting in the United States we had to write that US policy on the black community had failed," a former IRA employee explained in 2015.[54] IRA-run accounts also frequently linked to polarizing local news stories, perhaps because U.S. adults tend to trust local outlets more than national ones.[55]

By 2016, IRA-run pages boasted hundreds of thousands of followers—akin to major regional newspapers.[56] On Twitter, 118 IRA-run accounts had more than 10,000 followers, and six had more than 100,000 followers. On Instagram, ten IRA-run accounts had more than 109,500 followers, including @Blackstagram_ (over 300,000 followers), @american.veterans

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[53] Philip Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media, and Political Polarization in the United States," 12; Craig Timberg and Shane Harris, "Russian Operatives Blasted 18,000 Tweets Ahead of a Huge News Day during the 2016 Presidential Campaign. Did They Know What Was Coming?" *Washington Post*, July 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/07/20/russian-operatives-blasted-tweets-ahead-huge-news-day-during-presidential-campaign-did-they-know-what-was-coming/.

[54] Tom Parfitt, "My Life as a Pro-Putin Propagandist in Russia's Secret 'Troll Factory,'" *Telegraph*, June 24, 2015, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11656043/My-life-as-a-pro-Putin-propagandist-in-Russias-secret-troll-factory.html.

[55] Leon Yin, Franziska Roscher, Richard Bonneau, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua A. Tucker, "Your Friendly Neighborhood Troll: The Internet Research Agency's Use of Local and Fake News in the 2016 US Presidential Campaign," SMaPP Lab, November 19, 2018, https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2018/november/russian-trolls-relied-on-local-news-more-than-fake-news-in-2016-.html. Spreading the content of news sources perceived as trustworthy has its advantages; MIT researchers have found that laypeople are "quite good at distinguishing between lower- and higher-quality sources" online. See Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "Fighting Misinformation on Social Media Using Crowdsourced Judgments of News Source Quality," *PNAS* 116, no. 7 (2019): 2521–2526.

[56] For example, as of February 2021, the *Hartford Courant*—the largest daily newspaper in Connecticut—had roughly 165,100 Twitter followers and 30,300 Instagram followers, the *San Francisco Chronicle* had 248,000 Twitter followers and 159,800 Instagram followers, and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* had 172,300 Twitter followers and 64,100 Instagram followers.

(215,680 followers), and @sincerely_black_ (196,754 followers). And on Facebook, the IRA's pages attracted an estimated 3.3 million followers.[57]

The size of these audiences lent the IRA's accounts credibility and attracted the attention of celebrity users. On Election Day, Donald Trump Jr. retweeted the IRA-run @TEN_GOP account: "This vet passed away last month before he could vote for Trump. Here he is in his #MAGA hat. #voted #ElectionDay."[58] The IRA had worked hard to develop accounts like @TEN_GOP into "leader[s] of public opinion," according to intercepted communications, so their posts would reach influential personalities.[59] Eric Trump, Sean Hannity, Michael Flynn, Kellyanne Conway, and other conservative figures also unwittingly engaged with IRA-produced content.[60] Their many followers were thus exposed to disguised Russian messaging.

The IRA used its digital cutouts not only to spread propaganda but to get people to do real things in real life. In May 2016, the IRA concocted and advertised competing demonstrations outside a Houston Islamic Center. The dueling events generated mainstream media coverage.[61] Then, in the summer and fall of 2016, the IRA planned a series of pro-Trump

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[57] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 45, 49, 54.
[58] Philip Bump, "At Least Five People Close to Trump Engaged with Russian Twitter Trolls from 2015 to 2017," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/11/02/at-least-five-people-close-to-trump-engaged-with-russian-twitter-trolls-from-2015-to-2017/.
[59] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 14
[60] The Mueller Report, 28, 33–34; Bump, "At Least Five People Close to Trump Engaged with Russian Twitter Trolls from 2015 to 2017."
[61] Mike Glenn, "Dozens Turn Out to Support Houston Muslims," *Houston Chronicle*, May 21, 2016, https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Dozens-turnout-to-support-Houston-Muslims-7926843.php. See also U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 47; Claire Allbright, "A Russian Facebook Page Organized a Protest in Texas. A Different Russian Page Launched the Counterprotest," *Texas Tribune*, November 1, 2017, https://www.texastribune.org/2017/11/01/russian-facebook-page-organized-protest-texas-

rallies in New York, Florida, and Pennsylvania. Some of these events gained minimal traction; others attracted hundreds of Americans. One pro-Trump rally in Miami drew the attention of Trump campaign officials, who then posted about it on the candidate's Facebook page.[62] Digitally masked Russians persuaded Americans to help plan these events, from a Trump campaign volunteer who provided rally materials, to another American citizen who was paid to dress up as Hillary Clinton in a prison uniform. These unwitting recruits had to be managed: The IRA kept an internal spreadsheet tracking the more than 100 Americans its specialists had contacted.[63]

### 4.4.1 Target, Target, Target

Alongside its efforts to reach a wide audience, another continuity in the IRA's methods was its focus on targeting. Interfering actors have long aspired to target voters based on their individual views and biases. The social media ecosystem made it far easier to do so. By design, online platforms profile their users. Every American on Facebook relinquishes personal information involving their locations, their interests, and their backgrounds.

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different-russian-page-l/. On the purpose of GRU-run social media accounts, by contrast, one set of researchers found, "The operations were primarily focused on creating long-form state-aligned propaganda content and seeding it for distribution within other media properties, including authentic media in the local ecosystem. This is distinct from the social-media-first strategy of the International Research Agency (IRA) Pages, which focused primarily on memetic propaganda with high virality potential to attract the like-minded and facilitate tribalism…. The GRU narrative strategy also involved the creation of think tanks and 'alternative news' sites to serve as initial content drops, from which the content was syndicated or republished on other sites." See DiResta and Grossman, "Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014–2019," 7.

[62] The Mueller Report, 29–31.

[63] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 22–23, 29. Critically, Robert Mueller concluded, in his final report, that his team had "not identified evidence that any Trump Campaign official understood the requests were coming from foreign nationals." See The Mueller Report, 35.

Basic functions of social media platforms reveal the personalities of users. When an American joins a page like "Secured Borders," they do so because of a personal investment in immigration issues. "People self-organize into these homogeneous hyperactive ideological echo chambers, as is intended by the platforms," said Jonathon Morgan, the CEO of Yonder, an information integrity company.[64] The IRA also used advertisements to reach specific types of voters: 1,852 of the IRA's ads incorporated interest-based targeting.[65] "The thing that's really special about advertising is it's the only function on Facebook that allows you to put content in front of somebody who had no desire to see it," Stamos said.[66]

Additionally, the IRA targeted voters by location. In June 2016, an IRA employee, under an alias, messaged a Texas-based organizer, who explained the importance of "purple states like Colorado, Virginia & Florida." From then on, the IRA "commonly referred to targeting 'purple states' in directing their efforts," according to U.S. investigators.[67] The IRA also incorporated geographic filters into roughly 800 of its advertisements. One IRA-run ad, issued in the fall of 2016, targeted voters aged 18 to 65 within specific regions of Pennsylvania, a swing state, and with these specific interests: "Donald Trump for President, Job title: Coal Miner."[68]

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[64] Jonathon Morgan, interview by author conducted by phone, May 3, 2019.
[65] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 34.
[66] Stamos, interview by author.
[67] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 13, 29.
[68] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 34–35. Still, Colin Stretch, a senior Facebook official, emphasized in his written testimony to the U.S. Senate that the IRA's method was in certain ways unsophisticated: "The targeting for the IRA ads that we have identified and provided to the Committee was relatively rudimentary, targeting broad locations and interests, and did not use a tool known as Contact List Custom Audiences." See U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 41.

As part of its targeting, the IRA focused on fomenting tensions among black and Jewish Americans. A generation earlier, the KGB had targeted the same racial and religious groups. "We tried to take advantage of all these differences," recalled Oleg Kalugin, the former KGB general, "to fan discord" inside the United States.[69] The IRA likewise spread anti-Semitic content. One IRA-run Twitter account, for example, warned real-life Jewish reporters that Trump was "warming up an oven" for them.[70] But above all, the IRA targeted black Americans. "By far, race and related issues were the preferred target of the information warfare campaign designed to divide the country in 2016," the U.S. Senate concluded in 2019.[71] On some pages, the IRA spread racist propaganda; on others, the IRA attracted black Americans as followers. The IRA-run "Blacktivist" Facebook page generated 11.2 million engagements. The vast majority of the IRA's 1,107 YouTube videos concerned race and police brutality.[72] Five of the IRA's ten most popular Instagram accounts focused on issues related to black Americans, while 30 of the IRA's

[69] Oleg Kalugin, interview by author, Rockville, MD, August 7, 2019. During the Cold War, as part of its covert operations against the United States, KGB officers went so far as to mail anonymous anti-Semitic letters to Jewish leaders, arrange for swastikas to be painted onto synagogues, and pay assets to desecrate Jewish cemeteries, while also staging racist hate crimes throughout the United States. See Oleg Kalugin, *Spymaster: My Thirty-two Years in Intelligence and Espionage against the West* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Kalugin, interview by author.
[70] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 91.
[71] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 6, which went on: "The Committee found that no single group of Americans was targeted by IRA information operatives more than African-Americans."
[72] Amid the IRA's operations, racial tensions and protests inside the United States had drawn Putin's attention. In 2015, Putin said, "Do you think that as regards democracy everything is settled now in America? If this were so, there would be no Ferguson issue, right? There would be no other issues of similar kind, there would be no police abuse… We closely follow the developments in the US." See Vladimir Putin, interview by Charlie Rose, September 29, 2015, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380. On protests in Ferguson, see Monica Davey and Alan Blinder, "Ferguson Protests Take New Edge, Months After Killing," *New York Times*, October 13, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/14/us/st-louis-protests.html.

81 pages on Facebook targeted black audiences. Likewise, on Tumblr, the IRA appealed to black users on accounts like "blacknproud" and "black-to-the-bones."[73]

Across these accounts, the IRA had two objectives: to suppress black voters, and to exacerbate racial tensions. "That's an old Soviet tactic," Kalugin said, "adjusted to the realities of political life today."[74] The IRA was seeking to exploit fissures already ingrained in American society. Some had to do with race and religion; others had to do with national unity. After Britain voted to exit the European Union in June 2016, the IRA cited this vote in urging Texans to secede from the United States. "If Brexit," one IRA-run post asked, "why not Texit?"[75]

### 4.4.2 Promote Fear

Across its accounts, the IRA weaponized fear—again, more of the same. The thrust of CIA covert operations in countries like Italy was to frighten citizens into voting for America's preferred parties.[76] Similarly, the IRA's pages for left-wing audiences, right-wing audiences, and black audiences all sought to scare voters. Conspiracy theories flooded online platforms. Some IRA-run accounts posted conspiratorial content about the murder of Seth Rich, who had worked for the DNC. (RT and Sputnik also amplified falsities about Rich's death.) Others spread

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[73] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 6, 61; DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 16; Scott Shane and Sheera Frenkel, "Russian 2016 Influence Operation Targeted African-Americans on Social Media," *New York Times*, December 7, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/us/politics/russia-2016-influence-campaign.html. See also Ahmer Arif et al., "Acting the Part: Examining Information Operations within #BlackLivesMatter Discourse."

[74] Kalugin, interview by author.

[75] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 72.

[76] In Italy, according to David Robarge, the CIA's chief internal historian, the CIA worked to "scare the Italians into not voting for the Communists." David Robarge, interview by author, McLean, VA, July 19, 2019. For further reading on this CIA operation, see the first chapter of this thesis.

disinformation about pandemic diseases, vaccines, and aliens. One IRA-run post went so far as to claim that the Hillary Clinton appearing in public was not actually Hillary Clinton. "Where is a real one?!" the post asked.[77]

The IRA's scare tactics focused, in part, on the sanctity of the 2016 election. Its right-wing accounts alleged that voter rolls and voting machines had been corrupted, and that Clinton would "steal" the election. One account displayed a mugshot of Obama alongside the text "Like if You Agree: Obama Should Be Prosecuted for Enabling Voter Fraud." Another post warned of systemic voter fraud and that "if Killary wins there will be riots nationwide, not seen since the times of Revolutionary war!!" As voting unfolded, the IRA issued posts about rigged election systems and impending violence.[78]

This aspect of the IRA's scare campaign has disturbed experts like Celeste Wallander and Alex Stamos. On Election Day, the GRU was in a position to alter voter rolls and vote tallies, in order to make the election appear rigged.[79] All the while, the IRA was alleging covertly that the election would be rigged. Wallander, the top Russia expert in the White House in 2016, has

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[77] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 69; David Weigel, "The Life and Death of the Seth Rich Conspiracy Theory," *Washington Post*, May 24, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/the-life-and-death-of-the-seth-rich-conspiracy-theory/2017/05/23/aba640c4-3ff3-11e7-adba-394ee67a7582_story.html. The investigative reporter Michael Isikoff connects the genesis of the Seth Rich conspiracy theory to Russian intelligence, in "Exclusive: The True Origins of the Seth Rich Conspiracy Theory. A Yahoo News Investigation," Yahoo News, July 9, 2019, https://news.yahoo.com/exclusive-the-true-origins-of-the-seth-rich-conspiracy-a-yahoo-news-investigation-100000831.html?guccounter=1. For further reading on Russian efforts to foment fear and division around the safety of vaccines, see David A. Broniatowski, Amelia M. Jamison, SiHua Qi, Lulwah AlKulaib, Tao Chen, Adrian Benton, Sandra C. Quinn, and Mark Dredze, "Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate," *Am J Public Health* 108, no. 10 (2018): 1378–1384.

[78] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 81–92.

[79] For further information on the GRU's Election Day capabilities, see the third chapter of this thesis.

become convinced that had Trump lost, Russia intended to use its "intrusions into some voting sites" to erase voter data retroactively, so it would appear as though "all these people voted [for Clinton who] weren't registered" and therefore that Trump had been cheated. "[They'd] make it look like the Clinton people had done it: that there was nefarious activity, not by the Russians, but by Americans, and to cast doubt on the results."[80] Stamos has reached a similar conclusion. "She wins, you've left all of these breadcrumbs all over the place, and you create a bunch of new personas who are like: 'I'm a pro-Hillary hacker,'" he said. "You can then have a social media disinformation campaign that is powered by the facts to push the idea, and then make half the country feel like [the election] was stolen."[81]

### 4.4.3 Assume Effectiveness

Once Trump won, the IRA stopped spreading propaganda about voter fraud delivering the election to Clinton. Putin's preferred candidate was headed for the White House. The specialists who had managed multiple cutout accounts—and spent years manipulating American voters—were left wondering if they had secured Trump's victory. It's a timeless question, with one key continuity: An interfering actor whose preferred party triumphs naturally feels all-powerful.[82] In this case, IRA specialists assumed their work had made the difference. "On November 9th, 2016, a sleepless night was ahead of us," one IRA employee recalled, in since intercepted communications. "And when around 8 a.m. the most important result of our work arrived, we

[80] Celeste Wallander, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2019.
[81] Stamos, interview by author.
[82] Such was the case, for instance, with the CIA in 1948, as detailed in the first chapter of this thesis.

uncorked a tiny bottle of champagne… took one gulp each and looked into each other's eyes… We uttered almost in unison: 'We made America great.'"[83]

Whether Russia's operation actually proved decisive is a separate question. Kathleen Hall Jamieson concludes it is "likely" that the IRA's campaign, along with the email dumps, changed the outcome of the election.[84] Intelligence professionals like James Clapper have said the same.[85] Other experts disagree. Yochai Benkler, a professor at Harvard Law School, argues that there is "little evidence" that Russia's operation "actually made a meaningful difference" in tilting the election, and that speculation to the contrary, if anything, has generated discord within the United States.[86]

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[83] U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 34.

[84] Jane Mayer, "How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump," *New Yorker*, September 24, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump. See also Jamieson, *Cyberwar.*

[85] James R. Clapper and Trey Brown, *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence* (New York: Viking, 2018), 395, in which Clapper argues, "Of course the Russian efforts affected the outcome. Surprising even themselves, they swung the election to a Trump win. To conclude otherwise stretches logic, common sense, and credulity to the breaking point. Less than eighty thousand votes in three key states swung the election. I have no doubt that more votes than that were influenced by this massive effort by the Russians."

[86] Yochai Benkler, "Cautionary Notes on Disinformation and the Origins of Distrust," MediaWell, October 22, 2019, https://mediawell.ssrc.org/expert-reflections/cautionary-notes-on-disinformation-benkler/, in which he further writes, "Nonstop coverage of propaganda efforts and speculation about their impact, without actual evidence to support that impact, feeds the loss of trust in our institutions to a greater extent than the facts warrant." Stephen McCombie, Allon Uhlmann, and Sarah Morrison similarly argue that the IRA's impact on the outcome of the election was "minimal," but that the discovery of its operation has sowed much discord inside the United States: "The Russian information operation—of which the IRA action was a major component—has served Russian goals indirectly by ostensibly failing to retain its cover and being perceived and presented as having played a potentially decisive role in the election." See Stephen McCombie, Allon Uhlmann, and Sarah Morrison, "The US 2016 Presidential Election & Russia's Troll Farms," *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 1 (2019): 95–114. Several studies have examined the limited reach and impact of fake news on American discourse ahead of the 2016 election. See Allcott and Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election"; Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker, "Less than You Think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook," *Science Advances* 5, no. 1

The IRA's efficiency, though, was indisputably high. Its divisive content spread far and wide, reaching more than 100 million Americans. "This content is being shared by thousands and thousands of real people," said Renée DiResta, the information warfare expert.[87] Whether the IRA proved effective is unclear. What matters perhaps more is the perceptions of Americans and Russians. Inside the United States, this lingering question of decisiveness has divided voters and degraded trust in democratic institutions. Inside Russia, if Putin believes the 2016 operation proved worthwhile, he may be motivated to launch similar operations against upcoming democratic votes of succession. (Indeed, after Trump won, IRA-run accounts entered into overdrive fomenting discord by, for example, advocating protests against the Electoral College.[88])

### 4.5 The IRA as Evolution

Much of the IRA's operation built upon historic practices. Ahead of November 2016, the IRA covertly targeted a democratic vote of succession, weaponized an influential platform for information, and sought to sow discord and advantage one candidate over another. As part of this operation, the IRA used cutouts to promote fear, secure the help of unwitting Americans, and manipulate voters based on their personal profiles. Then, once Russia's preferred candidate won,

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(2019); Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson, and David Lazer, "Fake News on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election," *Science* 363, no. 6425 (2019): 374–378.

[87] DiResta, interview by author.

[88] DiResta et al., "The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 93; The U.S. Senate, in its investigation of Russia's information warfare operation, found, "The data reveal increases in IRA activity across multiple social media platforms, post–Election Day 2016: Instagram activity increased 238 percent, Facebook increased 59 percent, Twitter increased 52 percent, and YouTube citations went up by 84 percent." See U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media,* 8.

the IRA's employees assumed they had made the difference. These patterns of behavior denote core continuities in the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession.

What, then, about the IRA was pioneering? The answer has to do with both process and ambition—and everything to do with social media, which enabled Russia to act with newfound efficiency. This thesis defines efficiency as *the ratio of the work done to the effort and resources used by the interfering actor.* Russia invested considerable effort and resources into the IRA, including several million dollars and the manpower of dozens of Russian operatives based in St. Petersburg. This investment, however, was dwarfed by the work that the IRA then did, as its operatives reached more than 100 million Americans across social media with targeted propaganda.

Across platforms like Facebook and Twitter, Russia turbocharged preexisting tactics at little cost. Rather than work through a few human cutouts, the IRA created thousands of digital cutouts. Rather than spread a single line of messaging, the IRA spread many messages—to vote, not to vote, to beware of voter fraud, to be racist, to be outraged by racism—all at the same time, and all tailored for specific audiences. Instead of targeting a few voters specifically or reaching many voters randomly, Russia used social media to achieve both of these aims: to manipulate the masses *and* to do so in a targeted way. For David Cohen, the CIA's deputy director in 2016, this aspect of Russia's operation was a major break from the past. "I feel it in my bones," he said. "Harnessing this new technology, this new capability, to essentially broadcast to millions of people, and to target those broadcasts to people who you are able to identify as particularly receptive to the message, *that* is different."[89]

[89] David Cohen, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2018.

The other revolutionary aspect of the IRA was that its specialists so deeply penetrated the United States. During the Cold War, the KGB and the CIA influenced the masses in other countries, but the Soviet Union never was able to do so in the United States. The internet changed what was possible. What was unprecedented about Russia's operation, said Jake Sullivan, a former senior foreign policy advisor to Clinton, "was the degree to which the Russians were able to take to scale the weaponization of political discourse."[90] In September 2016 alone, IRA-run accounts reached up to 30 million U.S. citizens.[91] Leading figures in U.S. national security cannot help but acknowledge Russia's ingenuity. "The speed with which they recognized the opportunities that social media presented and the skill with which they have executed on them—pretty dazzling," Bobby Inman said.[92] "To some extent good on them for figuring out how to do it," David Cohen added.[93] Tom Donilon, a former U.S. national security advisor, put it best: Putin saw both "a weakness in the west in terms of internal divisions" and "the power of these social media platforms," and "he sought to and did take advantage of it in a brazen way."[94]

Since 2016, the United States, while aware of its exposure across social media, has struggled to defend itself. "This social media stuff, it's a different world," said Harry Reid, the former Senate leader, who was born in 1939. "To completely understand social media, you have to be less than thirty years old."[95] Federal officials, many of whom feel personally unfamiliar

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[90] Jake Sullivan, interview by author, New York, April 17, 2019.
[91] Hannah Levintova, "Russian Journalists Just Published a Bombshell Investigation about a Kremlin-Linked 'Troll Factory,'" *Mother Jones*, October 18, 2017, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/10/russian-journalists-just-published-a-bombshell-investigation-about-a-kremlin-linked-troll-factory/.
[92] Inman, interview by author.
[93] Cohen, interview by author.
[94] Tom Donilon, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 16, 2018.
[95] Harry Reid, interview by author, Las Vegas, NV, July 24, 2019.

with social media, also lack authority over these platforms. Just as the White House had to rely on states to report intrusions into voting systems, Washington must rely on social media companies to provide data related to foreign interference operations. (Lawmakers could regulate these platforms, but they cannot censor them or seize their files.) Facebook and Twitter have revealed certain details about the IRA's operation, but smaller platforms have not. Much about the IRA's work therefore remains unknown. "We don't know anything about Russian activity on any of these other sites," Stamos said. "But I guarantee they're doing it, because it is a lot easier."[96]

The United States is not the only democracy grappling with the consequences of social media. In 2019, Germany both restricted Facebook's data collection practices and fined the company for under-reporting instances of hate speech.[97] A challenge for foreign countries has been that leading social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are based in the United States. "Imagine how much harder it is for a government outside the United States to get information from them," said Robert Hannigan, who led GCHQ, Britain's equivalent to the NSA, from 2014 to 2017. National security officials in London are at a loss. "There is no bit of government that does monitoring on social media to see whether it is being used systematically by a foreign power," Hannigan explained, as surveilling social media could jeopardize civil

[96] Stamos, interview by author.
[97] Thomas Escritt, "Germany Fines Facebook for Under-Reporting Complaints," Reuters, July 2, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-germany-fine/germany-fines-facebook-for-under-reporting-complaints-idUSKCN1TX1IC; Natasha Singer, "Germany Restricts Facebook's Data Gathering," *New York Times*, February 7, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/technology/germany-facebook-data.html.

liberties. “There is something about the cross international nature of social media that just disempowers sovereign parliaments.”[98]

American policymakers and technology experts, citing the work of the IRA, are concerned that they lack the ability to defend America’s electoral sovereignty in the digital age, as a result of the penetrability of social media platforms. “I don’t believe that we can get the social media influence campaigns to near zero, because the openness of our social media ecosystem is a feature not a bug of democracy, so that is something we more have to manage,” Jake Sullivan said.[99] Alex Stamos predicted that operations like the IRA’s cannot be reduced even to “close to zero.”[100] And Nadia Schadlow, a former deputy national security advisor for strategy to Trump, said that this threat is not necessarily Washington’s to resolve. “The problem in responding to disinformation is that the U.S. government does not have a serious operational capability to respond,” she said. “We don’t own the internet platforms. So as people get upset, given Russian actions, they have yet to articulate how—operationally, how—the U.S. government should respond on private platforms. The problem is broader than government.”[101]

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[98] Robert Hannigan, interview by author, London, England, March 22, 2019. On the liberal and illiberal potential of social media, see Joshua A. Tucker, Yannis Theocharis, Margaret E. Roberts, and Pablo Barberá, “From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 46–59. On the weaponization of social media abroad, see Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, “Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation,” Computational Propaganda Research Project, the Oxford Internet Institute, July 20, 2018, https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/07/ct2018.pdf.

[99] Sullivan, interview by author.

[100] Stamos, interview by author.

[101] Nadia Schadlow, interview by author conducted by phone, November 9, 2018.

# Conclusion

The threat of foreign interference in democratic processes, while evolving, is long-running. For decades at least, states have targeted votes of succession held inside other states, using covert means to pursue their desired ends. The aim of this thesis is to understand this practice and how it is changing. The central research question of this thesis is: why and how has the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession evolved in the digital age? The Italian, West German, and American cases provide a basis for such analysis. The initial two cases illustrate how interfering actors, in the pre-digital era, could reach foreign populations at scale as well as target individual voters. The final case demonstrates how a foreign actor weaponized the digital domain to manipulate an entire electorate in a targeted manner. Across these cases are patterns and lessons that can be used to study this phenomenon in international relations.

The central argument of this thesis, based on its case studies, is that core features of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have remained constant over time, but that the reach and the penetrability of the internet have enabled states to engage in such operations with greater efficiency than was possible in the pre-digital era. This conclusion elaborates upon this argument, by drawing from these case studies continuities and discontinuities in the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession. Finally, this conclusion analyzes whether other state and nonstate actors could launch similar operations in the future, as well as why, amid this digital evolution, the United States and Russia have diverged in their use of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession.

## 5.1 Continuities

The first aspect of the central argument of this thesis concerns continuity: As the digital age has taken hold, core aspects of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have remained constant. The Italian, West German, and American cases elucidate those continuities. Although the CIA and the Stasi acted without digital tools, while Russian intelligence relied on such tools, their interference operations illuminate core consistencies in the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession amid the advent of the digital age.

The first of those continuities concerns the purpose of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. Each interfering actor under examination in this thesis pursued the same idea: to interfere covertly in the process of succession of another state, in order to influence the trajectory of that state. Specifically, the United States sought to manipulate Italy's process of succession in favor of the Christian Democratic Party; East Germany and the Soviet Union sought to manipulate West Germany's process of succession in favor of the Social Democratic Party; and Russia sought to manipulate America's process of succession in favor of the Republican Party. Furthermore, each interfering actor supported the party that furthered its security interests, as well as its power in the international system. As established previously, this thesis defines the pursuit of security as a state seeking to minimize threats to its survival, welfare, and identity, and power as the influence one state ("A") holds over another state ("B"). The below figure exemplifies that in each of these three cases, the interfering actor sought to advantage a political party, safeguard its security interests, and preserve or enhance its power in the international system.

*Figure One: The continuous importance of power, security, and political preferences*

| | **Political Preferences** | **Security Considerations** | **Power Dynamics** |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The Italian Case** | The United States sought to advantage the Christian Democratic candidate Alcide de Gasperi over the Communist candidate Palmiro Togliatti. | The United States sought to safeguard its security by working against the Communist-led left, which the CIA judged would undercut America's security interests in the economic and military domains. | The United States sought to maintain its influence and thus power over Italy by preserving de Gasperi's Christian Democratic government, which was more aligned with Washington than Togliatti's Communist-led left. |
| **The West German Case** | East Germany and the Soviet Union sought to advantage the Social Democratic candidate Willy Brandt over the Christian Democratic candidate Rainer Barzel. | East Germany and the Soviet Union sought to safeguard their security by working against Barzel's conservative bloc, which threatened to undercut the economic welfare and therefore the security interests of the eastern bloc. | East Germany and the Soviet Union sought to maintain their influence and thus power over West Germany by preserving Brandt's government, which was more aligned with Moscow than Barzel's conservative bloc. |
| **The American Case** | Russia sought to advantage the Republican candidate Donald Trump over the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. | Russia sought to safeguard its security by undermining the campaign of Hillary Clinton, whom Russian President Vladimir Putin viewed as a threat to the survival of his regime. | Russia sought to enhance its influence and thus power over the United States by advantaging Trump, who was more aligned with Moscow than Clinton or the outgoing Obama administration. |

As with purpose, there are also core continuities in the method of interfering actors. Most fundamentally, the operations under examination encompassed two ways to manipulate a democratic vote of succession: by changing actual votes and by changing the minds of voters. In 1948, the CIA launched a sprawling operation to manipulate the views of the Italian electorate. In 1972, the Stasi targeted two voters, in order to change their actual ballots. And in 2016, Russia

pursued both forms of interference at once, by accessing American voting systems while also manipulating millions of American voters across social media and with stolen emails. The tools used in each case differed, but the underlying methodological approach—to manipulate voters or to manipulate ballots—was continuous.

As for their operational design, these cases possessed several additional continuities: the use of targeting, the deployment of cutouts, and the melding of the covert with the overt. Regarding the first of those continuities, each of these cases involved, to varying degrees, the practice of targeting, or the manipulation of voters based on their individual personalities. In Italy, the CIA was able to target voters with widespread success on one occasion, when its officers orchestrated the 1948 letter-writing campaign, which resulted in thousands of Italian Americans sending letters back to Italy, to friends and loved ones, urging them to vote against the Communist Party. Just as the CIA used Italian Americans to target specific voters, the Stasi went on to target two parliamentary voters—Leo Wagner and Julius Steiner—based on their hidden vices. Using digital tools, Russian operatives sought to target specific American voters in 2016, by spreading propaganda across social media that was tailored for individual users. The practice of targeting, in its pursuit and use, was therefore present across these cases.

The second continuity in the operational design of these cases was the deployment of cutouts. A cutout is a third-party through which an interfering actor operates, in order to conceal its hand and maintain the covert nature of its operation. Cutouts proved essential to each of the operations under examination. The CIA worked through cutouts like Italian journalists, Italian Americans, and the Catholic Church. Likewise, the Stasi approached Leo Wagner through the cutout Georg Fleissman, a West German journalist. And Russian intelligence employed cutouts—such as fake websites, social media accounts, and online pages—in order to shield its

interference operation from public view. All three intelligence services pursued the same idea: to work through middlemen, as demonstrated by the figure below.

*Figure Two: The continuous use of cutouts*

| | **Cutout Used** |
|---|---|
| **The Italian Case** | Rather than spread propaganda across Italy in an attributable manner, the CIA worked through various cutouts, such as Italian journalists, Italian Americans, the Catholic Church, and grassroots organizations. |
| **The West German Case** | Rather than approach Leo Wagner directly, the Stasi worked through the cutout Georg Fleissman, the West German journalist. |
| **The American Case** | Rather than spread propaganda across the United States in an attributable manner, Russian intelligence worked through various cutouts: not just WikiLeaks, but also fake websites, social media accounts, and online pages. |

In addition to targeting and cutouts, these operations shared a third design feature: They augmented covert tactics with overt ones. In each of the cases analyzed in this thesis, the interfering government acted both covertly and overtly. In 1948, the United States engaged in various forms of overt interference against the Communist-led left, from the politicization of the Marshall Plan, to interim aid packages, to the Justice Department's regulations against known Italian Communists. Similarly, in 1972, as the Stasi worked to help Willy Brandt covertly, the East German government did the same overtly, by announcing policy changes that would strengthen his domestic standing. And in 2016, Russia's state-sponsored media outlets RT and Sputnik overtly spread propaganda aligned with the covert operation that the Kremlin was executing. Across each of these cases, as the below figure makes clear, the interfering actor thus enhanced its covert operation with overt messaging.

*Figure Three: The continuous use of overt mechanisms to enhance covert operations*

| | **Covert forms of interference** | **Overt forms of interference** |
|---|---|---|
| **The Italian Case** | The CIA funneled millions of dollars to the Christian | George Marshall announced that a Communist-led Italy |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Democratic Party, masterminded the letter-writing initiative, supported the Catholic Church's anti-Communist campaign, and spread propaganda across Italy designed to scare voters into opposing the Communists. | would not receive Marshall Plan aid, the Department of Justice announced that known Communist voters in Italy could not come to the United States, and the Truman administration flooded Italy with supplies and aid ahead of the election. |
| **The West German Case** | The Stasi targeted, manipulated, and ultimately altered the ballots of Leo Wagner and Julius Steiner, two key voters. | The East German government announced various policy changes that were meant to bolster Brandt's domestic standing at a time when his government was in peril. |
| **The American Case** | Russian operatives targeted American voting systems, stole and released sensitive Democratic Party emails through a third-party cutout, and spread propaganda across social media using fake accounts. | RT and Sputnik, Russia's state-sponsored media outlets, spread propaganda overtly that aligned with the messaging of Moscow's unfolding covert operation. |

The final set of continuities across these operations concerns the environments in which they took place. In each case, external circumstances affected the design of the operation under examination: The CIA responded to the unexpected Czechoslovak coup by incorporating warnings of an impending Italian coup into its information warfare campaign; the Stasi responded to the opposition's unexpected call for a vote of no confidence by launching its covert operation; and Russian intelligence responded to Trump's unexpected political rise by incorporating pro-Trump propaganda into its already unfolding covert operation. These interfering actors existed inside complex political atmospheres, so they had to be ready to act—and adjust—based on outside events. Even then, success was not guaranteed. As ballots were cast in 1948, 1972, and 2016, the CIA, the Stasi, and Russian intelligence anticipated that their

preferred candidates might still lose.[1] The outcome of each of these votes, while known after the fact, was neither clear in real time nor preordained. Feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability therefore stretched across these instances of covert interference in democratic votes of succession.

In their aftermath, these operations had a continuous effect: They provoked partisan reactions and exacerbated societal divides. After the Italian people learned about the CIA's covert operation, leftist politicians attributed their various defeats to the agency. In West Germany, as the Bundestag investigated interference in the vote of no confidence, Brandt's allies charged that the probe was a hoax designed to damage the chancellor's political standing. And ahead of November 2016, Trump argued publicly that the threat of Russian interference was a fiction meant to damage his candidacy, pitting the Republican Party against the U.S. Intelligence Community. Italy's Communists, West Germany's Social Democrats, and America's Republicans differed from one another in myriad respects, but when confronted with the issue of covert interference, their reactions were continuously political and defensive.

The actual impact of these operations, though, could only be assessed in certain instances. Because the purpose of the Stasi's operation was to change actual ballots, its officers could measure their exact impact: They altered two votes. The CIA and Russian intelligence, by contrast, aimed to change the minds of voters at scale, the impact of which proved more challenging to measure. "We still argue about it," David Robarge, the CIA's chief internal historian, told me, regarding the impact of the CIA's operation in Italy.[2] Since 2016, experts have similarly debated the impact of Russia's operation: Some, like communications expert

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***Conclusion***

[1] Of Russia's expectations, see page 193 of this thesis.

[2] David Robarge, interview by author, McLean, VA, July 19, 2019.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, have argued that the Kremlin changed the outcome of the election, while others, like Harvard professor Yochai Benkler, have argued the opposite.[3] "Measuring it is hard," John Sipher, a former CIA station chief, told me, of the impact of covert operations to change minds rather than ballots.[4] This distinction exposes yet another continuity across these cases: Of the two types of operations to interfere covertly in democratic votes of succession—those that alter votes directly and those that influence voters—only the impact of the former could be measured with precision.

The three cases under examination took place in different countries at different moments in history. Two of them involved no digital tools; one of them relied on such tools. And yet, across these cases are timeless continuities in the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession. The United States, East Germany, and Russia all sought to advantage a political party in a democratic vote of succession overseas, in furtherance of their power and security interests. The covert operations that followed included efforts to manipulate voters and to manipulate actual ballots, and their operational design featured the use of targeting, cutouts, and both overt and covert mechanisms. The CIA, the Stasi, and Russian intelligence reacted, in real time, to external events, and they did not know ahead of time what the results of the votes they were targeting would be. Once ballots had been cast, it was possible to assess the precise impact of vote altering, but not of efforts to influence voters. These continuities—spanning the

[3] Yochai Benkler, "Cautionary Notes on Disinformation and the Origins of Distrust," MediaWell, October 22, 2019, https://mediawell.ssrc.org/expert-reflections/cautionary-notes-on-disinformation-benkler/; Jane Mayer, "How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump," *New Yorker*, September 24, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[4] John Sipher, interview by author conducted by phone, October 18, 2019.

Italian, West German, and American cases—provide a foundational understanding of covert interference in democratic votes of succession amid the advent of the digital age. They also demonstrate, as this thesis argues, that as the digital age has taken hold, core aspects of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have remained constant.

## 5.2 Discontinuities

In order to analyze why and how the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession has evolved in the digital age, this conclusion examines both continuities and discontinuities in the cases under examination. The prior section detailed what about these operations stayed constant, or did not evolve, amid the spread of the internet. The second aspect of the central argument of this thesis, which is the focus of this section, concerns the subject of discontinuity: The reach and the penetrability of the internet have enabled states to engage in covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession with greater efficiency than was possible in the pre-digital era. The contrasts between the pre-digital Italian and West German cases on the one hand, and the digitally enabled American case on the other, illustrate this shift in efficiency.

As established previously, this thesis defines efficiency as the ratio of the work done to the effort and resources used by the interfering actor. The internet, this thesis argues, has made the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession a more efficient exercise. Specifically, the cases under examination reveal five discontinuities, all caused by the internet, that have resulted in this increase in efficiency.

The first of those discontinuities concerns the geographical limitations of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. Without the internet, the CIA and the Stasi typically had to deploy physical tactics against their targets, such as cash bribes, leaflets,

and posters. Neither intelligence service could use these tools from a distance, so the CIA ran its operation from Italy, and the Stasi worked through its officers in West Germany. Russia, by contrast, utilized digital tools from within its own borders. Recognizing that nearly nine in every ten U.S. adults was using the internet in some way, Russian operatives targeted the minds of U.S. voters through online platforms and devices.[5] The GRU, from its headquarters in Moscow, stole sensitive emails and targeted U.S. voting systems, while the IRA, from its headquarters in St. Petersburg, targeted U.S. users across major social media platforms. This form of interference—transnational in nature and enabled by the internet—did not require the effort and thus inefficiency underlying a major on-the-ground presence in a foreign country.

The second discontinuity in efficiency caused by the internet concerns the costs of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. The CIA and the Stasi, in executing their localized, physical operations, expended considerable resources on a per voter basis. In Italy, the CIA expended between $32.2 million and $75.1 million, adjusted for inflation, to influence an electorate in which 26 million people cast ballots.[6] In West Germany, the Stasi expended 100,000 deutschmarks, or roughly $194,000, adjusted for inflation, to affect just two votes. The cost of Russia's digitized operation proved substantially more manageable per voter. The price of the GRU's influence operation, which involved already employed intelligence officers sending emails, was marginal. The price of the IRA's campaign per voter was similarly

[5] "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/.

[6] This cost estimate is based on the account of David Robarge, the CIA's chief internal historian, who told me that the CIA spent more than $1 million and less than $10 million on its operation in Italy, in 1948 values. Robarge then estimated in our interview that the agency's operational expenses amounted to "several million" dollars, which this thesis reasonably considers to be between three and seven million dollars in 1948 values, or between $32.2 million and $75.1 million in 2020 values. Conversion to 2020 values executed by "U.S. Inflation Calculator," https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/, accessed January 19, 2021.

low. In September 2016 alone, at a time when the IRA's monthly budget was $1.25 million, IRA-run accounts reached an estimated 30 million U.S. citizens online.[7] The below figure demonstrates that the costs associated with Russia's digital tactics, as compared to America's and East Germany's physical ones, proved more efficient by voter.

*Figure Four: The costs of the Italian, West German, and American operations per voter*

| | **Cost** | **Voters reached** | **Cost / Voters reached (the lower the figure, the greater the efficiency)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The Italian Case** | $32.2 - $75.1 million | Up to 26 million | 1.23 – 2.88 |
| **The West German Case** | $194,000 | Two | 97,000 |
| **The American Case (GRU)** | ~$0 | Millions | ~0 |
| **The American Case (IRA)[8]** | $1.25 million | 30 million | .04 |

The third discontinuity in efficiency caused by the internet concerns the potential work done by interfering actors to change actual ballots, one of the two types of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. Lacking digital tools, neither the CIA nor the Stasi could penetrate and manipulate the Italian or West German ballot box directly, and only the Stasi—through an operation that took years to develop—was able to change votes through Wagner and Steiner. The internet freed Russian intelligence of these constraints, enabling its officers to do more work with fewer means. America's digitized election systems proved vulnerable to hacks. The GRU took advantage of this exposure. From Moscow, military intelligence officers targeted and penetrated election systems across the United States. In Illinois

[7] *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 6–7, https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download; Hannah Levintova, "Russian Journalists Just Published a Bombshell Investigation about a Kremlin-Linked 'Troll Factory,'" *Mother Jones*, October 18, 2017, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/10/russian-journalists-just-published-a-bombshell-investigation-about-a-kremlin-linked-troll-factory/.

[8] This table treats the September 2016 figures for the IRA—which are uniquely documented and publicly available—as a representative snapshot of the IRA's cost and reach.

alone, Russian intelligence gained access to a state-wide registration database, exfiltrated the data of up to 500,000 voters, and had the ability to delete or alter this information.[9] The GRU, with modest effort, had therefore done more work—and acted more efficiently—in targeting actual ballots than was possible in the pre-digital cases under examination.

The fourth discontinuity in efficiency brought about by the digital domain concerns the work done by interfering actors to influence voters, the second type of covert operation to interfere in democratic votes of succession. The gold standard of this practice is to reach voters in a personalized manner. As established previously, however, with one exception, the CIA was unable to manipulate the Italian electorate at scale and in a targeted manner. The Stasi, conversely, was able to target two West German voters, but could not replicate its approach to fit an entire population. Using the internet, Russian intelligence, with ease and precision, was able to break new ground in reaching the masses and doing so in a targeted way. IRA propaganda reached more than 100 million Americans, based on their online profiles and groups. The IRA's operatives worked across social media, which, by design, profiles the personalities of its users. Individuals who use platforms like Facebook necessarily disclose information about themselves. Their locations, their interests, their backgrounds—all of it is recorded online, and all of it can be used to manipulate unsuspecting citizens. In this sense, the IRA's work amounted to an enhanced, more efficient version of the ideas that the CIA and the Stasi pursued, in seeking to target voters based on who they were and what they believed.

[9] *United States v. Viktor Netyksho et al.*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1030, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), 26, https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download; The Mueller Report, 50; U.S. Congress, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election Volume 1: Russian Efforts against Election Infrastructure,* 22.

The fifth and final discontinuity in efficiency caused by the internet concerns the effort put into—and the risks accumulated by—interfering actors and cutouts. As detailed earlier, the use of cutouts denotes a continuity in the practice of covert interference of democratic votes of succession. The types of cutouts deployed, though, have evolved with time. The CIA and the Stasi, operating physically, expended effort recruiting unreliable human cutouts in the democracies they targeted. William Colby, the former CIA chief in Italy, recalled in his memoirs working with one Italian asset who was jailed, and another who tried to steal the CIA's money.[10] In West Germany, the Stasi relied upon George Fleissman, who required maintenance and was eventually outed as a spy.[11] Russian intelligence, by contrast, adopted the use of digital cutouts, which required less effort to create and invited less risk than the use of human beings. By working through fake social media accounts and front websites, Russian intelligence officers did not need to acquire physical assets inside the United States, nor did they have to funnel money to those assets, as the CIA did in Italy and the Stasi did in West Germany. Instead, Moscow paid members of the IRA and GRU to concoct virtual disguises. Russia's use of digital cutouts proved more affordable, less time-consuming, and therefore more efficient than the aforementioned pre-digital practices.

This shift in efficiency in the digital age has been accompanied by a process-oriented discontinuity: an increase in the likelihood of detection. In 1948, the CIA operated through newspapers and grassroots organizations, not traceable online accounts, and so it was not until

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[10] William Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 121–122.
[11] "CSU-Politiker Wagner soll Stasi-Spion gewesen sein," *Rheinische Post,* November 25, 2000, http://www.rp-online.de/politik/csu-politiker-wagner-soll-stasi-spion-gewesen-sein-aid-1.2268006; "CSU-Spion enttarnt," *Der Spiegel,* November 27, 2000, http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-17925474.html.

the mid-1970s that the agency's operation in Italy became publicly known, as a result of a domestic investigation inside the United States. Similarly, the Stasi's physical operation remained secret for decades—a feat much more difficult to achieve today, when interfering actors leave digital trails. Indeed, in 2016, the U.S. government uncovered aspects of Russia's online operation in near real time, enabling the Obama administration to consider how to defend the election and when to impose costs on Putin. Internal White House debates over these questions elucidated the risks that Russia had assumed in executing its operation, as Washington possessed the capacity to retaliate in response, as well as the challenges the United States faced in seeking to defend its electoral sovereignty in the digital domain. Still, some of Moscow's operational vectors—namely, across social media—remained unappreciated through Election Day, as the GRU and the IRA used digital tools to interfere in the U.S. election efficiently and widely.

The internet, these three cases demonstrate, has made the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession a more efficient tool of statecraft. Unlike the CIA and the Stasi, Russian intelligence could operate from within its own borders rather than expend the effort of working out of a foreign country. The cost of Russia's digital operation was lower on a per voter basis than that of its pre-digital peers, while Russia's ability to breach the ballot box, as well as to target voters in a personalized and scalable way, proved comparatively more expansive. Additionally, in carrying out its operation, Russia was able to work through digital cutouts, an affordable and efficient alternative to physical ones, despite the heightened risk of detection that accompanied them. For these reasons, and as this thesis argues, the reach and the penetrability of the internet have enabled states to engage in covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession with greater efficiency than was possible in the pre-digital era.

## 5.3 A Divergence

The preceding sections of this conclusion, in analyzing the Italian, West German, and American cases, identify continuities and discontinuities in the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession amid the advent of the digital age. This section analyzes why, amid this digital evolution, there has been a divergence in American and Russian state behavior in their use of this tool. In the pre-digital period, the Soviet Union and the United States, as detailed in the first chapter of this thesis, targeted democratic votes of succession on a global basis. Newer democracies proved most vulnerable to this form of subversion, which was used to advance Cold War-era objectives. Seeking to contain Communism, the CIA interfered in Italy's 1948 election and in many democratic contests thereafter. From Japan and Guyana to Chile and El Salvador, the CIA and the KGB targeted democratic votes of succession around the world. Some operations, like in West Germany in 1972, directly altered votes; others molded public opinion through letter writing and scare campaigns, disinformation, and propaganda initiatives.

Then the Cold War ended, the internet spread, and the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession evolved. This tool became more efficient and accessible, as Russia demonstrated in 2016. Amid this evolution, as this section explains, the United States has moved away from covert interference in democratic votes of succession as a policy option, while Putin's Russia, empowered by the internet, has doubled down on the practice.

### 5.3.1 Russia

Russia's operation against America's 2016 election, while far-reaching and instructive, did not occur in a vacuum. Based on available research, the United States is just one of the more than two dozen countries in which Russia has interfered in recent years with newly efficient

digital methods.[12] "It's important to keep in context that Russia's 2016 operation [against the United States] was part of a pattern of Russian activities in Europe and elsewhere over the past ten years," said Nadia Schadlow, Donald Trump's former deputy national security advisor for strategy.[13]

In October 2016, for example, Russia targeted Montenegro's parliamentary election. At the time, Milo Đjukanović, the country's prime minister, was campaigning to join NATO, which Putin had recently complained was "moving closer to our borders."[14] As the election approached, Russian state entities financed political parties challenging Đjukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists. "I can tell you with certainty, tens of millions," Đjukanović said in our interview.[15] According to Montenegrin authorities, Russia also used digital tools to spread disinformation across social media platforms and bring down news and government websites. For Election Day, members of a GRU unit had intended to execute a coup d'état against Đjukanović. Montenegrin officials said they thwarted the plot just before the election, which Đjukanović's party then won.[16] Since then, the Kremlin has denied interfering in Montenegro's election, but in

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[12] Oren Dorell, "Alleged Russian political meddling documented in 27 countries since 2004," *USA Today*, September 7, 2017, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/09/07/alleged-russian-political-meddling-documented-27-countries-since-2004/619056001/. See also U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security,* 115th Congress, 2nd session, 2018, S. Report 115-21, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf; Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa, "Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War," *New Yorker,* February 24, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war.

[13] Nadia Schadlow, interview by author conducted by phone, November 9, 2018.

[14] Vladimir Putin, interview by John Micklethwait, September 1, 2016, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52830.

[15] Milo Đjukanović, interview by author, Oxford, England, November 26, 2018.

[16] Aleksandar Vasovic, "Montenegro opposition rejects election outcome due to 'atmosphere of fear,'" Reuters, October 18, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election-protests-idUSKCN12I0UQ; Petar Komnenic, "Montenegro begins trial of alleged pro-Russian coup plotters," Reuters, July 19, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election-

interviews, Đjukanović and senior U.S. government officials told me there was no doubt that the Russian government was behind the effort.[17]

Russia's digitized operations span the globe. In the summer of 2018, Juan Manuel Santos, the Colombian president, provided Enrique Peña Nieto, his Mexican counterpart, with an urgent warning: He possessed intelligence indicating that Russia would interfere in both of their countries' approaching elections. (Santos and Peña Nieto, both term-limited, were not on the ballot themselves.) "We received a lot of warnings that this was going to happen," Santos told me. "I took tremendous care and gave pertinent orders to investigate… and even had some foreign intelligence services help us." Neither Santos nor his Mexican counterpart uncovered definitive proof of Russian interference in their processes of succession. "Again, the Mexicans could not prove it," he said. But Santos, whose term expired in August 2018, left office

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trial/montenegro-begins-trial-of-alleged-pro-russian-coup-plotters-idUSKBN1A413F; Julian Barnes, "Ex-C.I.A. Officer's Brief Detention Deepens Mystery in Montenegro," *New York Times*, November 23, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/us/politics/cia-montenegro-russia-coup-joseph-assad.html; Ken Dilanian, Josh Meyer, Cynthia McFadden, William M. Arkin, and Robert Windrem, "Exclusive: White House Readies to Fight Election Day Cyber Mayhem," *NBC News*, November 3, 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-house-readies-fight-election-day-cyber-mayhem-n677636; Michael Schwirtz, "Top Secret Russian Unit Seeks to Destabilize Europe, Security Officials Say," *New York Times*, October 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/08/world/europe/unit-29155-russia-gru.html.

[17] Douglas Wise, then the deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said he was "certainly well aware" of Russia's attempted coup. "We knew they had a whole hit team there," added Victoria Nuland, then an assistant secretary of state. The United States had tried to help Đjukanović before the election; according to Celeste Wallander, then a senior White House official, Washington sought to "make sure the Montenegrins knew what was going on." After the election, Senator John McCain called the operation against Đjukanović the most "disturbing indication of how far Vladimir Putin is willing to go to advance his dark and dangerous view of the world." See John McCain, "Why Should You Care about Russian Interference? Look No Further Than the Attempted Coup in Montenegro," Medium, June 20, 2017, https://medium.com/@SenatorJohnMcCain/why-should-you-care-about-russian-interference-e70024281f3c; Douglas Wise, interview by author conducted by phone, October 21, 2019; Victoria Nuland, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 22, 2019; Celeste Wallander, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2019.

unsettled. He worried that Russian intelligence had deployed active measures across the internet covertly, and that he had failed to prepare his country to safeguard its electoral sovereignty. "I hope I did," Santos said. "But I can't control that, because technology advances so fast."[18]

Indeed, for Putin and his advisors, the digital age has made covert interference in democratic votes of succession a more appealing policy option. In 2013, Valery Gerasimov, the head of the Russian general staff, described a strategy of hybrid warfare that would make "broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures."[19] Gerasimov and his contemporaries have used digital means to interfere in democratic contests around the world. Russia's current methods can best be understood as enhanced versions of old ideas, such as spreading hateful content and exploiting the personal biases of unsuspecting citizens. The internet has empowered Putin to turbocharge these traditional tactics, reaching more people in more countries and in a more targeted fashion.

By interfering in democratic votes of succession with digital tools, Russia can weaken democracies at little cost, financial or otherwise. It is a practice as well-suited to Russia's strengths and objectives as it is to democracies' vulnerabilities. Open societies, unable to censor the internet, are asymmetrically vulnerable to this type of assault. "Enemies will exploit a free, democratic, open society," said Porter Goss, a former CIA director. "Elections are an easy target.

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[18] Juan Santos, interview by author, Oxford, England, November 13, 2018; Nicholas Casey and Susan Abad, "Colombia Elects Iván Duque, a Young Populist, as President," *New York Times*, June 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/world/americas/colombia-election-ivan-duque.html; Azam Ahmed and Paulina Villegas, "López Obrador, an Atypical Leftist, Wins Mexico Presidency in Landslide," *New York Times*, July 1, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/01/world/americas/mexico-election-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador.html.

[19] Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," translated from Russian by Robert Coalson, published originally in *Military-Industrial Kurier*, February 27, 2013.

Innocent people are an easy target. Gossip is an easy target. Uninformed people are an easy target."[20] A Spanish envoy to the European Union told me that Spain has been detecting "constant attempts by the Russians" to manipulate its elections. Arild Heiestad, a Norwegian NATO representative, described Russian operations to influence elections as unrelenting. "If you look around the Baltics," he said, "it's their everyday life."[21]

For Russia, the idea of covertly interfering in democratic votes of succession is long-running, but the efficiency provided by the internet is new and useful. Because of the digital domain, covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have become cheaper, more accessible, and more far-reaching. The CIA and the KGB once expended hundreds of millions of dollars, adjusted for inflation, influencing democratic processes in countries like Italy. Today, Russia can reach many millions of voters with far fewer resources. From the United States to Montenegro, Russia has violated the sovereignty of rival states without suffering major consequences. As William J. Burns, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, said of Putin, "He's smart enough as a trained professional to understand that the biggest intelligence successes oftentimes are taking advantage of your opponent's weakness rather than asserting your strength."[22]

### 5.3.2 The United States

As Russia has reinvested in the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession, the United States has walked the opposite path, in part because of the consequences of the digital age. Based on my interviews with eight former CIA directors and acting directors, as well as

[20] Porter Goss, interview by author, Florida Keys, FL, December 26, 2018.
[21] Arild Heiestad, interview by author, Brussels, Belgium, December 4, 2018.
[22] William J. Burns, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 9, 2018.

former CIA deputy directors and directors of national intelligence, the United States has all but abandoned the use of covert interference in democratic votes of succession.

In the 21st century, Washington's senior-most national security officials have considered using the CIA to interfere in democratic votes of succession on rare occasions. In one instance—ahead of Serbia's 2000 election—debate did turn into action, as the CIA spent millions of dollars working against the incumbent Slobodan Milošević, an indicted war criminal.[23] "I didn't have a problem with it," Bill Clinton told me, of the CIA's effort to influence Serbian voters, because Milošević "was a stone-cold killer and had caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people."[24] John Sipher said that between 1991 and 2014, when he was serving as a CIA operations officer, he knew of just one "successful" CIA operation to interfere in a democratic vote of succession overseas: in Serbia in 2000, when the CIA went to work "supporting and funding and providing help to specific opposition candidates—that was the main thing."[25]

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[23] Milošević was many things: a Moscow-aligned communist, a Serbian nationalist, and a grave abuser of human rights. In the early 1990s, he had enabled a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A few years later, he did the same in Kosovo, as his soldiers systemically terrorized, murdered, and expelled ethnic Albanians. The severity of these atrocities prompted NATO, in 1999, to launch an air campaign against Milošević's forces, and an international court to indict him as a war criminal. See Jane Perlez, "NATO Authorizes Bomb Strikes; Primakov, in Air, Skips U.S. Visit," *New York Times,* March 24, 1999, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1999/03/24/897485.html?pageNumber=1; Michael Scharf, "Indicted for War Crimes, Then What?" *Washington Post,* October 3, 1999, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/WPcap/1999-10/03/031r-100399-idx.html; Michael Dobbs, "Serbian Nationalism Lifts Milosevic," *Washington Post*, March 30, 1999, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/milosevic033099.htm; Marlise Simons, "Court Declares Bosnia Killings Were Genocide," *New York Times*, February 27, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/27/world/europe/27hague.html; Jane Perlez, "'Ethnic Cleansing': Enormity of Atrocities is Called 'Shocking' by Administration," *New York Times*, March 28, 1999, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/28/world/conflict-in-the-balkans-the-assualt-ethnic-cleansing.html; Ian Traynor, "Russia moves to ditch old ally," *Guardian*, September 26, 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/27/balkans3.

[24] Bill Clinton, interview by author conducted by phone, April 4, 2020.

[25] Sipher, interview by author.

In another instance, in 2004, the George W. Bush administration weighed using the CIA to interfere in Iraq's upcoming election but opted against it. Senior CIA officials "least wanted to be involved" with this operation, explained John Negroponte, then the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, because it could expose the agency to criticism if detected across the internet.[26] Congressional leaders also objected to the plan. For Tom Daschle, then the senate minority leader, the arguments against covertly interfering in Iraq's election were two-fold. The first was a matter of optics: how "terrible it would look" if exposed. The second was normative. "It was no longer the Cold War," he told me. "Doing what we had been doing even twenty years earlier was just not appropriate; it wasn't keeping with what our country should be all about."[27]

Since then, the logic of the Iraq decision has become the norm. America's former intelligence chiefs, in discussing the CIA's covert operations with me, fell into two groups. The first claimed that the agency has turned the page entirely. "The U.S. did historically intervene in elections, but that ended," said Michael Morell, a former CIA acting and deputy director who worked for the agency from 1980 to 2013.[28] Former CIA Deputy Director David Cohen similarly said "it is not true" that the agency still interferes in democratic votes of succession as Russia does, and David Petraeus, who led the CIA in 2011 and 2012, said he is "not aware… in more recent times" of such operations.[29] John Brennan, the CIA's director from 2013 to 2017, offered a more blanket assurance: "With President Obama and President Bush '43, there was never an effort to try to influence the outcome of a democratic election. We believed it was antithetical to

[26] John Negroponte, interview by author conducted by phone, May 21, 2019.
[27] Tom Daschle, interview by author conducted by phone, August 12, 2019
[28] Michael Morell, interview by author conducted by phone, March 6, 2019.
[29] David Cohen, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 17, 2018; David Petraeus, interview by author conducted by phone, October 8, 2018.

the democratic process to do that." The CIA once interfered in foreign electoral processes, he continued, "but over the course of the last eighteen years or so, that has not been the case."[30]

The second group of officials did not speak in absolutes. They suggested that the CIA has moved away from, but not necessarily stopped, influencing democratic votes of succession. "There wasn't much of it. This is not something that intelligence does with anything like the sense of flexibility and freedom that it might have had in the early Cold War," said John McLaughlin, who, as the CIA's number two in 2000, would have been involved with the Milošević case.[31] Since then, such operations have, at the very least, been raised at the highest levels. The Bush administration debated the Iraq scheme; the Obama administration weighed similar proposals. "It's not like these ideas don't resurface, but at least in [the Obama] administration they would get rejected," said Tony Blinken, who served in senior national security positions from 2009 to 2017.[32] Of this second group, Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA from 2009 to 2011, was the most forthcoming. He said he never "got into" altering votes directly or spreading disinformation, but that on rare occasions his CIA did work through foreign news outlets ahead of key democratic votes of succession, in order to "change attitudes within the country."[33]

Every interview pointed to the same conclusion: For the CIA, covert interference in democratic votes of succession has become the exception rather than the rule. Either the agency no longer seeks to influence democratic outcomes, as Morell and Brennan asserted, or it does so only in rare cases when, as with Milošević, a tyrant can be ousted by ballot. The exact truth is

[30] John Brennan, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 10, 2018.
[31] John McLaughlin, interview by author conducted by phone, September 5, 2019.
[32] Tony Blinken, interview by author, Washington, DC, January 3, 2019.
[33] Leon Panetta, interview by author conducted by phone, November 12, 2019.

unknown. But this general shift marks a dramatic departure from the Cold War, when, as David Robarge, the CIA's internal historian, put it, the agency was interfering in the electoral processes of "many, many" countries around the world. From the perspective of Washington, the costs of such operations have come to outweigh the benefits. "Frankly political action of that kind is really part of the past. Iraq convinced me of that. It was just zero appetite for [electoral] intervention," said John Negroponte, who, in the Bush administration, also served as the director of national intelligence.[34]

Skeptics will insist that America's intelligence leaders are lying. But considering present-day realities, the skeptics may be the ones defying logic. In contrast to Russia, in modern times, it would be self-defeating for the United States to covertly interfere in democratic votes of succession in all but the most exceptional of circumstances. One explanation as to why concerns the end of the Cold War, which robbed the CIA of its long-running purpose: to counter the Soviet Union. Milošević, for one, was a relic of a previous era. Generally, with the Soviet Union gone, explained former CIA operations officer Arturo Muñoz, the thinking inside the agency became, "If you're not afraid anymore, if you don't view these guys as a huge threat, then why [mess] around with elections anymore, who cares?"[35] After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the CIA found a new focus in counterterrorism, which called for drone strikes and paramilitary operations, not covert interference in democratic votes of succession.

[34] Robarge, interview by author; Negroponte, interview by author.
[35] Arturo Muñoz, interview by author conducted by phone, July 20, 2019. For further reading on the CIA in this transitional period, see George Tenet and Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

America's post-Cold War leaders declared an era of liberal democracy, defined by free and fair elections.[36] This transition, from containing communism to promoting democracy, made covert interference in democratic votes of succession a riskier proposition: If the CIA were caught across the internet, American hypocrisy would be broadcast before the world. "You can't stand up and be for free and fair elections and then turn around and intervene in them covertly. So we don't do it anymore. [Russia] does; we don't," said Michael Morell, the former CIA acting director. John McLaughlin, another former CIA acting director, further captured America's evolving outlook: "If you are interfering in an election and are exposed as doing so, you are a lot more hypocritical than you would have appeared in the Cold War, when that sort of thing tended to be excused as part of the cost of doing business."[37]

Hypocrisy, however, had not stopped the CIA before. And in recent years, policymakers in Washington have had a stake in many foreign electoral processes. Changes in high politics, then, only partly explain this shift in CIA activity.

The rest of this story has to do with the advent of the digital age, which has changed Washington's calculus for two reasons. First, as detailed in this thesis, the internet has exposed U.S. elections to foreign sabotage, as demonstrated by the Obama administration's struggle to defend against Russia's 2016 operation. Officials in Washington have become reluctant to authorize the type of operation to which their country has become so vulnerable. "If you're in a glass house don't throw stones," said David Petraeus, the former CIA director, "and we're the

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[36] The end of history, thinkers like Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in the immediate post-Cold War period, had arrived. "There was a tremendous sense of possibility," James Steinberg, a senior White House and State Department official in the 1990s, told me. "People were very optimistic and excited by this positive agenda of molding a peaceful, prosperous, democratic world." See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); James Steinberg, interview by author conducted by phone, October 30, 2019.

[37] Morell, interview by author; McLaughlin, interview by author.

biggest glass house when it comes to internet connectivity." Second, as established already, the digital age has made it harder to maintain the secrecy of an operation to manipulate an electorate. "It's very difficult to keep that kind of activity from ultimately getting out," Petraeus explained.[38] And for a democracy like the United States, getting caught matters. "If the United States were identified as having promoted disinformation or tampering with votes in an election, it would undermine our credibility and our policy efforts, given how inconsistent such actions would be with the values we promote, which are at the heart of our soft power," said Avril Haines, a former deputy CIA director. "The same is not true for Russia."[39]

None of this is to say that the CIA cannot maintain the secrecy of a covert operation to interfere in a democratic vote of succession. But in the digital age, the risk of detection is greater. And were such an operation revealed, it would serve as a piece of propaganda for America's enemies. John McLaughlin said that when considering covert operations targeting electoral processes, "It only makes sense that the bar for admission has to be much higher than it used to be, given the high likelihood of exposure."[40]

Adjusting for these new dynamics, the United States has been influencing democratic votes of succession overtly and with less brazen methods. "The terms changed. The expectations changed. What might have been termed a covert action, people say: 'Why bother to hide this?'" said Porter Goss, the former CIA director. One option is the overt work of the State Department and pro-democracy NGOs like the International Republican Institute and the National

[38] Petraeus, interview by author.
[39] Petraeus, interview by author; Avril Haines, interview by author, New York, February 23, 2019.
[40] McLaughlin, interview by author.

Democratic Institute.[41] Another is public endorsements. America does "all sorts of perfectly overt messaging about our preferences in foreign elections," explained David Cohen, the former CIA deputy director. In 2016, for example, President Barack Obama endorsed the Remain campaign in the United Kingdom. "In the Brexit scenario, how can you say that we were not trying to influence the outcome of the vote? That is ridiculous," said Avril Haines, then the deputy national security advisor.[42]

The consequences of the digital age have helped spawn a divergence in American and Russian policy making. In recent years, CIA-led interference in democratic votes of succession has become the exception rather than the rule. For the United States, no consistent call to action exists without a Communist adversary, the risk of getting caught is considerable, and the consequences of detection would be severe. Russia, by contrast, in seeking to degrade

[41] From 2007 to 2017, the United States directed, on average, over $2.5 billion annually toward democracy promotion programs, including several hundred million dollars each year for initiatives associated with "political competition." IRI and NDI still operate around the world. Separately, there is the National Endowment for Democracy: By 2010, its annual government allocation had increased to $118 million and, most recently, to $300 million. Michael Hayden, the former CIA director, said these "above-board NGOs [are] trying to spread what we think is a successful formula for self-governance." Sometimes, though, these initiatives show bias. "The State Department does do some things where it prefers not to be seen as doing it. My view is that that is inappropriate," Michael Morell said. But, he continued, the CIA is removed from such operations. "From a covert action perspective," he said of his time in CIA leadership, "there was really nothing that touched on elections." See Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance* (Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2019), 14–15, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44858.pdf; "National Endowment for Democracy (NED), NDI, IRI, CIPE and Solidarity Center Welcome Increased Funding from Congress," National Endowment for Democracy, December 21, 2019, https://www.ned.org/national-endowment-for-democracy-ned-ndi-iri-cipe-and-solidarity-center-welcome-increased-funding-from-congress/; Michael Hayden, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 5, 2018; Morell, interview by author.

[42] Goss, interview by author; Cohen, interview by author; Barack Obama, "Barack Obama: As Your Friend, Let Me Say that the EU Makes Britain Even Greater," *Telegraph*, April 23, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/21/as-your-friend-let-me-tell-you-that-the-eu-makes-britain-even-gr/; Haines, interview by author.

democratic systems globally, has used covert interference operations to do so. Empowered by the internet, Russian intelligence has been targeting democratic votes of succession on a global basis, including and especially inside the United States.

To date, Russia has been the pioneer in using the internet to enhance the efficiency of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession. One possible area for further research, building on this thesis, would be to examine other potential cases of Russian interference in democratic votes of succession in the digital age, including against Ukraine's 2014 election, Britain's 2016 referendum on European Union membership, and France's 2017 election.[43] Additionally, other actors in the international system possess the means and potentially the will to replicate Russia's approach. China, an ascending power, has already established a form of digital authoritarianism at home and targeted democratic votes of succession in countries like Taiwan and Australia.[44] Another potential area for further research

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[43] For introductory reading on the Ukrainian case, see footnote #76 of chapter three of this thesis. For introductory reading on the British case, see David Kirkpatrick, "Signs of Russian Meddling in Brexit Referendum," *New York Times*, November 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/europe/russia-brexit-twitter-facebook.html; Matthew Field and Mike Wright, "Russian trolls sent thousands of pro-Leave messages on day of Brexit referendum, Twitter data reveals," *Telegraph*, October 17, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/10/17/russian-iranian-twitter-trolls-sent-10-million-tweets-fake-news/; Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 106. For introductory reading on the French case, see Rachel Donadio, "Why the Macron Hacking Attack Landed with a Thud in France," *New York Times*, May 8, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/08/world/europe/macron-hacking-attack-france.html; Alex Hern, "Macron hackers linked to Russian-affiliated group behind US attack," *Guardian*, May 8, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/08/macron-hackers-linked-to-russian-affiliated-group-behind-us-attack; Mark Hosenball, "U.S. increasingly convinced that Russia hacked French election: sources," Reuters, May 9, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-russia/u-s-increasingly-convinced-that-russia-hacked-french-election-sources-idUSKBN1852KO.

[44] Joshua Kurlantzick, "How China Is Interfering in Taiwan's Election," Council on Foreign Relations, November 7, 2019, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-china-interfering-taiwans-election; Ben Blanchard, "Taiwan President Says China Interfering in Election 'Every Day,'" Reuters, November 19, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-election/taiwan-

would be to study the evolving practices of countries like China in targeting democratic votes of succession abroad. John Brennan, the former CIA director, portended that in the future, any government could pay "illegal and illicit" hacking groups to wreak havoc upon U.S. elections, given the discontinuities created by the digital age.[45] Covert interference in democratic votes of succession, once a weapon of superpowers, may become a weapon of far wider use, to which all democracies are vulnerable.

### 5.4 Concluding Points

The central research question of this thesis is why and how has the practice of covert interference in democratic votes of succession evolved in the digital age? To answer this question, this thesis examined three cases of covert interference in democratic votes of succession—in Italy, West Germany, and the United States—as part of a three-pronged small-N study, and then analyzed continuities and discontinuities between these cases. Those findings, detailed in the preceding sections of this conclusion, substantiate and cement the central argument of this thesis: Core features of covert operations to interfere in democratic votes of succession have remained constant over time, but the reach and the penetrability of the internet have enabled states to engage in such operations with greater efficiency than was possible in the pre-digital era.

This case-based examination, as established in the introduction, relates directly to the practice of International Relations. Peter Katzenstein and Ruda Sil explain that "progress in

president-says-china-interfering-in-election-every-day-idUSKBN1XT145; Colin Packham, "Exclusive: Australia Concluded China Was behind Hack on Parliament, Political Parties—Sources," Reuters, September 15, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-china-cyber-exclusive/exclusive-australia-concluded-china-was-behind-hack-on-parliament-political-parties-sources-idUSKBN1W00VF; John Garnaut, "How China Interferes in Australia," *Foreign Affairs*, March 9, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-09/how-china-interferes-australia.

[45] Brennan, interview by author.

International Relations research" necessarily requires "attention to problem solving," including through works that "can make us understand problems of strategic interactions among actors."[46] This thesis has engaged in such analysis, by exploring how states have manipulated democratic votes of succession inside other states, as well as how this type of covert action has evolved in the digital age. Further, as Stephen Van Evera writes, theses in political science can be used both "to explain the causes, pattern, or consequences of historical cases" and to analyze what "guided official or unofficial policy actors" within those cases.[47] Such is the nature of this thesis, which applied historically-driven analysis to the Italian, West German, and American cases in assessing its central research question.

The findings of this thesis hold significance for all democracies seeking to safeguard their electoral sovereignty amid the spread of the internet. The continuities across the Italian, West German, and American cases reveal timeless patterns that can be used to help anticipate what interfering actors like Russia will do next, from the use of cutouts to the melding of covert and overt mechanisms. Additionally, the discontinuities across these cases reveal what about these operations have evolved and why democracies like the United States have become more exposed to external penetration. Using digital tools, Russia has been able to target ballots and influence voters with newfound efficiency, expending fewer resources to do more work. Time will tell whether other state and nonstate actors are able to replicate Russia's approach.

Russia broke new ground in 2016 in its use of the digital domain to sabotage an American election, but what comes next is as yet unwritten. Perhaps Putin and like-minded

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[46] Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil, "Rethinking Asian Security: A Case for Analytical Eclecticism," in Allen Carlson, Peter Katzenstein, and J.J. Suh, *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004), chap. 1.
[47] Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 91–92.

leaders will maintain control over the coming digital storm, or perhaps a tidal wave will catch them by surprise as citizens develop new ways to use online tools to start protests, organize mass movements, and stage revolutions. Technological achievements like the radio and television were not necessarily pro-democracy—fascists weaponized the former, and communists weaponized the latter. The internet is no different. The challenge before democracies is how to integrate this rapidly evolving domain into their societies.

The cases of covert interference in democratic votes of succession examined in this thesis offer many lessons. At the most fundamental level, they demonstrate that electoral processes are not inherently secure, and that democracy is threatened in evolving ways. But these cases also provide a degree of reassurance: Italy and West Germany, which fell victim to such operations last century, remain vibrant democracies today. As Russia assaults democratic votes of succession anew, in the United States and elsewhere, this type of covert action will remain present in international relations. It will be up to democratic systems to defend their electoral sovereignty.

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