WTH is going on with Trump's cyberattack on **Russia? Discussing Marc's interview with the** President

Episode #63 | July 16, 2020 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, and Ellen Nakashima

Marc Thiessen: Hi, I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: And I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: Welcome to our podcast, "What the Hell Is Going On?" So, Dany, what the hell is going on?

Danielle Pletka: Well, people may notice that there's a little bit of a role reversal here today, because I'm usually the one asking you what the hell is going on.

Danielle Pletka: Anyway, and you actually have something exciting going on, which is that last week you went in and interviewed Donald J. Trump, the President of the United States, just you and he, sitting in the Oval Office. And you broke some pretty exciting news that we've heard about but that the President, for the first time, confirmed. Tell us.

Marc Thiessen: So, I asked the President about news reports that he had carried out, in 2018, a cyberattack on Russia to defend the 2018 presidential election. And he confirmed it, on the record. Said he did it, said he was proud of it, and said it was part of a broader strategy of being tough with Russia, which we'll get into in a minute. But this is a big, big news item that I think is the biggest, under-reported story of the Trump presidency. Because, we spent two years of the Mueller investigation, right, investigating the conspiracy theory that Donald Trump and his campaign conspired with Russia to steal the 2016 election. And it turned out that wasn't true. And then, the story was, "But Donald Trump doesn't take Russian electoral interference seriously." And it turns out that when he was in office, and there was an election going on in 2018, and the Russians tried to start their interference again and do the same things they had done in 2016 — Barack Obama knew it was happening when he was in office, but he didn't use America's cyber capabilities to shut down the Internet Research Agency. Donald Trump did.

Marc Thiessen: He launched a cyberattack that shut down the Internet Research Agency, took them offline, and kept them offline during the course of the 2018 vote — a vote, by the way, which put Democrats in charge of the House. So he was defending an election in which his party lost control of one of the chambers of Congress. And Ellen Nakashima, my colleague at the Post, reported this in 2019 and it got a yawn, broadly, from Washington D.C., because, well, it didn't really fit the narrative. We don't want to give Donald Trump credit for doing something that Barack Obama didn't do, especially when our whole narrative is that Trump is a toady of Vladimir Putin. And so I confirmed it with the President, and he said it, in fact, happened. So I

think is huge news that the mainstream media wants to ignore because it doesn't fit their narrative about Donald Trump.

Danielle Pletka: Sorry. I mean, look. I think that a lot of us have come to understand that the whole narrative about Russia trying to control American politics and putting their puppet, Donald Trump, in office is ridiculous. That doesn't take away from Donald Trump's defects. The problem here, I think, is that this was the sole focus of the first two years of his presidency by the Democrats. And they've kind of let it go by the wayside. Now it is that he's the bad coronavirus president, or he's the... What else has he done that's bad? I don't know. I can't even keep track...

Marc Thiessen: It's easy Dany, everything.

Danielle Pletka: Everything, yeah. So I think that's the challenge. But what's interesting to me is that he went after the Russians. Did it stop the Russians, though? It slowed them down for a day or two, but they're back interfering in elections, from the United States, to Europe, to Asia, to wherever they can. Aren't they?

Marc Thiessen: Well, he did protect the 2018 vote. I mean, he did stop them from interfering, and it was part of a broader strategy that the administration had. It involved a presidential national security directive that gave our cyber warriors new authorities to combat this. It was legislation that was passed by Congress that gave new authorities for offensive cyber operations. This wasn't just an impulsive, "Okay, I'm going to pull up my MacBook and launch a cyberattack on Russia, because I feel like at this morning."

Marc Thiessen: It was a part of a broader strategy that was done largely in the covert space. And they didn't take a lot of credit for it. But the Intelligence Committee sure knew that it was happening, and they continued to attack Donald Trump in 2018. And by the way, this was all happening during the Mueller probe and they weren't taking credit for it publicly, even though Robert Mueller was in the process of pursuing the conspiracy theory about Trump/Russia collusion. This was a great talking point for the administration to push back on that and they didn't because they took the threat seriously when it happened on their watch.

Danielle Pletka: Okay. Wait. Wait. Oh, one second. So, I want to talk to you about 2020 and about the conspiracy theories as well. But that seems weird to me. I also want to point out that you brought this up with the President. He didn't bring it up with you. You asked him.

Marc Thiessen: But he did it. That's the point, is that — making my point, which is they actually took this threat seriously and did something. And even when it was in their political interests to talk about it, they really didn't do it.

Danielle Pletka: Do you think they didn't talk about it because they were being reticent and because they felt like it was not appropriate? Or do you feel like they didn't talk about it because Donald Trump doesn't like talking about what a bad guy Vladimir Putin is?

Marc Thiessen: Number one, they didn't talk about it because it was a covert operation, which they wanted to preserve deniability of. And there's a value to that.

Danielle Pletka: So wait, wait. So he told you about it in the Oval Office, because that's a secure space?

Marc Thiessen: And he decided when asked… Well, first of all, I think it's a shameful statement that I'm the first journalist who actually asked him about it. How many press opportunities have they had since 2018 and 2019 when Ellen Nakashima reported this, and it was in the public domain? He's had probably 1,500 press conferences since then or opportunities to talk about it and no one ever asked him. I was the first one to ask, and when I asked, he said, "Yeah, I did it. I'm proud of it." So, shame on the media for not reporting this. Shame on the media for not asking him about it. But again, it's because it doesn't fit the narrative, because this is a good news story for the Trump administration. This is Donald Trump, Commander in Chief, who we just had a whole John Bolton book explaining why he's incompetent and incapable of exercising the powers of Commander in Chief.

Marc Thiessen: Well, this is a story where the President of the United States led the intelligence community to come up with a strategy to protect the elections. And then when the Russians were repeating their behavior of 2016, he pulled the trigger and launched a cyberattack on them that shut them down. No one wants to report that, because that puts Donald Trump in a good light, and says, "Hmm, there was actually a rational process." They came up with tools, they came up with a strategy, they came up with red lines, Russia crossed them, he executed. Why would we want to report that, and let the American people know that Donald Trump is actually doing a — at least in this area — doing a pretty good job as Commander in Chief?

Danielle Pletka: Now, I will say that, obviously, this had been out there. As you rightly say, there was a sort of dereliction of duty on the part of certain journalists, who didn't use the opportunity to ask about it. But, the journalists who covered this from the sort of technological side, were pretty nasty about how lame an attack this was, and how it didn't amount to a hill of beans, if I can coin a phrase. And there was a piece that said — I love the headline, "US Hackers Strike on Russian Trolls Sends a Message. But What Kind?" And the implication of the piece that was covering this was, "Eh, kind of lame."

Marc Thiessen: Yeah. Well, it wasn't lame. And anybody who follows national security and understands it, and we can talk to our guest about that in a moment, it was pretty serious. And what it was was a demonstration effect. They said they sent a message to Russia that if you do this, we have the capability to shut down your internet access and to take you offline. And if you mess with us, we can do it again. So, it was a shot across the bow. But again, Barack Obama didn't do this. I mean, he was briefed on the Russian election interference and he took no action whatsoever. And as the President said in my interview with him, that's because he thought Hillary was going to win and he didn't want to mess things up. And it turned out she didn't win. But he took no action.

Marc Thiessen: So it's kind of hypocritical for people to say, "Donald Trump doesn't take Russian electoral interference seriously," when Barack Obama did absolutely zero to combat it when it was happening in 2016. But when Donald Trump was president, he did it. It's an act of war to launch a cyberattack on a foreign country. And he did it. So, I think the President deserves credit when he does the right thing. My view of the Trump presidency is that I give him credit when he does the right thing. And when he does the wrong thing, I call him out for it. And that doesn't seem to be a widely held position in Washington today.

Danielle Pletka: Well, no. As you and I know, having watched too much of the press lately, that's not a widely held view in Washington, and that's not going to get any better in an

election year. We have somebody wonderful, one of your colleagues at *The Washington Post*, who was nice enough to be game to join us, to talk about this. She's a terrific reporter. Her piece was, "Trump confirms cyber attack on Russian trolls to deter them during 2018 midterms." Ellen Nakashima, she's been at the Post for 25 years. She's won a Pulitzer Prize for public service. She's won a Gerald Loeb award. She was actually a technology reporter, and a privacy reporter, before she started covering national security. And she covered Russian efforts to influence the outcome of the 2016 election. So she's basically the perfect person to do this story, and she's a great get for us.

Marc Thiessen: Ellen, welcome to the podcast.

Ellen Nakashima: Thank you for having me.

Marc Thiessen: We've broken some news, between us, recently. You reported, back in February of 2019 that the president launched a cyberattack on Russia's Internet Research Agency, which is the troll farm that interfered in the 2016 elections. And then, this week, I got the President to confirm it on the record. So good collaboration between news and opinions this week. This is one of the most— what I consider to be one of the biggest news items that's been so under-reported or under-noted. Can you tell us a little bit about, first of all, what is the Internet Research Agency? And what happened with this cyberattack?

Ellen Nakashima: Sure. The Internet Research Agency is a, sort of, a company, loosely called — a company of internet trolls, or people who sit in a building. It was in St. Petersburg. I don't know where it is now. And they were posing as Americans to try to post stuff on social media during the 2016 election, and then again during 2017 and midterms to try to just exploit the social divisions in the country, in the US, and sow a little discord, similar to what they did in 2016. And this troll factory, as it's called, is run or financed — owned by an oligarch close to President Vladimir Putin. His name is Yevgeny Prigozhin. And Prigozhin is a wealthy man who also has done other shady things like finance an army of mercenaries that has been some malign activities around the world in Syria and Libya and Africa and elsewhere.

Ellen Nakashima: So, this troll factory — the US government, the military in particular, was concerned they would try to disrupt the 2018 midterms in the way they interfered in the 2016 presidential election. And so they came up with an operation, a cyber operation, that they undertook on the day of the midterms in November of 2018 and it ran for a few days after that, where they basically, using their operators, disrupted the access that these trolls in Russia had to the internet to prevent them from going online and trying to cause a little confusion around voting, perhaps in our American midterm. That's basically in a nutshell what they did. And they continued it for a few days after the actual vote to ensure that these trolls wouldn't try to disrupt the actual vote tallying and vote counting.

Danielle Pletka: So, Ellen, I mean, this is a great story. And as a voter, I'm delighted that we are trying to take it to the Russians. One of the things that you reported last year was that one of the authorities that was used by Cyber Command was a new presidential order that actually came out in August. We're used to talking about our SEAL teams and lots of other kinetic behavior. Can you just, sort of, put this in the broader context for everybody?

Ellen Nakashima: Yes. Right. So in fact, this operation against the IRAs, we'll call them for short, was

the first real sort of offensive cyberattack undertaken under this new authority, which is called in sort of the jargon, National Security Presidential Memo, or NSPM's routine that, as you noted, had been signed in August of 2018. And what it did was basically streamline and rationalize the process by which government agencies and, in particular, the Pentagon, could undertake cyber operations — cyber operations that are not considered armed attack or use of force operations, but fall slightly below that to avoid being too escalatory.

Ellen Nakashima: And this operation went through that process. And, as a result of having a faster approval process to do this, they were able to get it done and approved by the election. And there was also another key authority that they used and it was something that Congress had given the Pentagon in 2017 in the National Defense Authorization Act, the NDAA. And, there was a provision in that law that redefined such offensive actions that fall below the use of force as traditional military activity, TMA. Which basically meant that they could be undertaken without having to go all the way up the chain of command for presidential sign off. Although in this case, as Marc got the President to confirm on the record, the President did give sign off. He authorized this action.

Marc Thiessen: So you reported that this was part of a broader government effort to safeguard the 2018 election. Can you tell me a little bit more about that broader strategy and what that entailed?

Ellen Nakashima: So the government around the beltway is trying to make sure these elections come off safely. And that includes not just what the military does overseas, but what the Department of Homeland Security does inside the United States, working with the states and local jurisdictions to make sure that their registration systems, their voting systems are secure. To be sure, the elections are a state and local responsibility, not a federal responsibility per se. But the feds want to work in partnership with the states and locals to make sure that the elections go off smoothly. And then the NSA, the National Security Agency, worked closely with Cyber Command. In fact, they are headquartered on the same campus at Fort Meade in Maryland. And NSA was gathering a lot of the intelligence overseas that helped inform the Cyber Command operation. And then you've also got the Justice Department, the FBI working on various aspects of election security, whether it's looking for actions being taken on US soil by foreign agents, or whether it's trying to work with the social media companies to get them tips about what they're hearing overseas.

Ellen Nakashima: So all of that was part of this bigger effort to try to safeguard the election. And it's also what they're trying to do now for 2020.

Danielle Pletka: I mean, it's reassuring in a lot of ways, obviously. What are the tools that the Russians use? You mentioned these troll farms. There's Macedonia, there's Montenegro, there's a whole series of efforts that are pretty geographically diversified that they're using. Do you feel comfortable talking a little bit about that? Because obviously, we're reacting to what they're doing.

Ellen Nakashima: Right. And as you know, they're not doing this just against the United States. They've been intervening in their own region and the near abroad much more actively and consistently over the years, going back to at least 2007 in Estonia, especially using the internet or cyber means, whether it's to disrupt an election authority on election night or just try to put in some disinformation and propaganda to rile up emotion on both sides of an issue or party. And they're doing that. They did that in Ukraine. They

do that in Estonia and in Georgia.

Ellen Nakashima: And so we here are coming to it a little late, because we weren't really paying attention to what the Russians were doing in Eastern Europe and Western Europe, frankly, too. But once we saw it in 2016, now all of a sudden we think, "Oh boy, what a big deal." And as we learned from Robert Mueller's indictments, the Russians also sent agents over here to the US in 2016 to, kind of, pose as Americans and try to gin up rallies on — and get people to pose, for instance, as I think in one case, Hilary Clinton in a cage in a float in some parade. Just to stoke the already, sort of, inflamed passions on various sides of hot button social issues here, whether it's race, gun rights, abortions.

Danielle Pletka: Right. I mean, their job is adding fuel to the flames. That seems-

Ellen Nakashima: Exactly.

Danielle Pletka: Right. And they're good at it. Obviously, the tradecraft is fascinating. But of course the man bites dog part of this is that the conventional narrative is that Donald Trump is really pretty comfortable with what the Russians are up to. Were you surprised when you got confirmation of this, that he authorized it, given that he's always poo-pooed the hoax?

Ellen Nakashima: Yeah. I think it's actually reflective of Donald Trump and his handling of Russia issues. Right? He doesn't want to publicly come out and accuse Putin of seeking to meddle or interfere in an election. He still says publicly he kind of had doubts about whether or not they really did interfere in 2016 or why would they? All sides do it. He's a little equivocal on that. But as we've seen, he will — when I guess the case is made to him by his advisors — will sign off on operations like this one that they will protect the election, or eventually coming around to signing the order that expelled some 60 Russian spies and diplomats from the US after the Skripal poisoning in the UK, signing sanctions orders on Russia over election interference, and approving reforms to Ukraine and their battle against Russia.

Ellen Nakashima: So, this administration has undertaken some pretty strong, aggressive steps against Russia and Russian aggression. It's just that the President himself doesn't use his bully pulpit to socialize the message or the issue that Russia is an adversary and they do want to try to interfere in our elections and we won't stand for it. You kind of want a president to say that loudly and clearly, and that's what I think has been missing from the White House.

Ellen Nakashima: Does that makes sense?

Marc Thiessen: Yes, absolutely. But on this particular operation, this seems to be such a good news story for the administration politically. They're accused of not taking Russian election interference seriously, for all the reasons you cited that the President sort of cast doubt on whether it happened. He even did that in my interview, actually, if you read what he said. He said that, "If it happened, we don't know for sure, but Obama was told that it was happening." He even did it then after talking about launching a cyberattack against Russia for doing it.

Ellen Nakashima: That's part of his MO too.

Marc Thiessen: Yes, it is.

Ellen Nakashima: He'll do that in the same interview, right?

Marc Thiessen: Exactly. But it's a good news story for the administration. And yet they didn't want to tell it. And when I reported that the President confirmed it, they actually asked me to pull it back when they realized that he had said it. Why do you think? And they cite national security. They've been very hesitant to tell the story, even though it's good politically. What about the operation and the national security risk makes you think that they've been so hesitant to talk about it?

Ellen Nakashima: This is something that goes back to maybe the founding of the National Security Agency. There's just a reflexive security around these cyber issues. I think even if President Trump were proud of it and wanted to say so publicly, they still might have wanted to just keep it quiet. Because for them, any operation that isn't public, clandestine here, or covert, they just reflexively want to keep that secret, or not have it publicly acknowledged. Maybe there's a little bit of a sense of, "Well, we just want to preserve some ambiguity to avoid escalation," but on the other hand, it was very clear. It was them, Russians afterwards, they realized it. At that point, any ambiguity is really taken away.

Ellen Nakashima: But it's just, as I said, this reflexive secrecy that they cling to on all things cyber, and it's kind of maddening and frustrating. They have gotten better about it over the years, the administration has. It used to be — maybe all the way through the last year or so of the Obama administration, maybe last two years — it was difficult for them to even say China and cyberattack or hack in the same sentence, or Russia and hack.

Ellen Nakashima: There were diplomatic sensitivities too, I should say. It became a big deal when, in the Obama administration, Obama publicly blamed North Korea for the Sony hack, or, eventually, Russia for interfering in the election. But for a long time, the government has just not wanted to point fingers publicly at another state, another government. That's gradually changed somewhat, so I hope it continues and I hope they opt for more transparency in these operations.

Marc Thiessen: One of the interesting things about the attack, and maybe this might be part of it, is that they went after the Internet Research aAency, which is, sort of, quasi-governmental, has arm's length from the government. They didn't go after the GRU, the Russian military intelligence. They didn't launch it, as I understand it, an attack on them.

Marc Thiessen: One, why do you think they held back? Do you think that they were trying to use a demonstration effect to show, "Look what we can do to you, and we could do this to the GRU," or why do you think they held back, and do you think it was an effective strategy?

Ellen Nakashima: Yeah, I think there was, in part, a demonstration effect and also, maybe they hadn't detected any… I have to believe that if they had detected in advance that the GRU was preparing to try to disrupt some voter tabulation or voter registration systems on election day, they would definitely have acted. They wouldn't have refrained. I'm sure of that. I can only deduce from that that they didn't see any such intelligence on that score and so didn't want to take the slightly more escalatory and risky move of disrupting the GRU, which is the Russian military spy agency now.

Danielle Pletka: One of the things that's interesting is you see a lot of people — now, admittedly, people who are not necessarily disposed towards liking this administration, but nonetheless, pooh-poohing what happened. WIRED had a piece that basically said, "Oh, come on. This is some sort of symbolic garbage, and if you really wanted to let them know, you would have cut off the entire Russian internet," yada, yada, yada.

Danielle Pletka: There are a number of stories like that. Now you're talking about them walking that fine line, but some people are suggesting "Nah, they really weren't walking a fine line, they were just doing something that was a garbage-y little bit of a slop." What do you think?

Ellen Nakashima: Yeah. I talked to some CYBERCOM folks after the story became public, and they were dismissive of comments that said, "Oh that this was just a pinprick that didn't have any long term deterrent effect," because they were saying, "Sometimes you're not out there to just to do a long—" they were saying this very privately, that, "This is an operation that was supposed to be reversible, right? It's not like you were going to deny the trolls' internet access forever." And that's probably what made it below the use of force.

Ellen Nakashima: It was really to try to make sure that they could not access internet on election day and the next three or so days afterwards. Period, full stop. That's what they wanted to do. And if it had the effect of also saying, "See what we can do to you? Don't try it again in the future," so much the better. But they didn't want to blow it up out of proportion to make it like the end-all and be-all operation.

Danielle Pletka: Right. That's the interesting thing. Again, you talk about this calibration, and in testimony, Gen. Nakasone has talked about the same challenge, which is trying to calibrate, to not overreact, which would cause problems for us, but to still let them know that we have capabilities.

Danielle Pletka: But if we compare what we've done to the Russians, to, for example, what is going on in Iran right now? Again, no confirmation, but lots of speculation that there is an ongoing series of cyberattacks at Iranian nuclear facilities that are causing explosions, that are causing all sorts of trouble.

Danielle Pletka: Now, again, it's a bit of apples and oranges. On the other hand, that's an unmistakable message that the Iranians are getting. When we talk about the 2018 congressional, okay. We talk about 2016, okay. But if we look forward to 2020, do we want the Russians to get a stronger message? What do you think, having talked to so many people, do you think we have the capacity, the intent, the will?

Ellen Nakashima: Good questions. On capacity, intent, and will, I think, first of all, there are separate elements to 2020. There's the actual physical voting machine issue, which is, to some degree, out of the hands of the federal government, and up to what's going on in all of the states and counties. By all accounts, what I'm hearing is their security is better. In fact, things went off okay in 2018 and in the primaries so far.

Ellen Nakashima: There's that. Then there's the social media bucket of issues, which is the one that was most —we didn't even see that until after the election in 2016. As you noted earlier, the Russians were just pouring fuel on the fire. They weren't creating the congregation, they were just stoking it, but that's what they're doing with social media. How do you get a handle on that? That often requires some social media companies to take stronger policies or order Congress to regulate. There's a whole

debate around that, and where do you draw the line?

Ellen Nakashima: Then there's these physical issues with either the Russians hacking a political party and dumping out emails or hacking our election machines and messing with the votes. In that last bucket, I think, I mean, people so far say they haven't seen any real risks there in 2020, but it's July. Maybe we'll have to see what happens in October and on election day.

Ellen Nakashima: But there's a lot more attention and focus being paid to the overall Russian election threat issue than there was in 2016. Sometimes I wonder if there's a risk of overhyping it to the point where you see any little intrusion by Russia gets pumped up out of proportion to a big deal, when it's really just run of the mill espionage.

Marc Thiessen: Last question from me, Ellen. Dany mentioned the cyberattacks on Iran that have not been confirmed officially, but we've seen... Though I think earlier on, they did confirm that there were some cyberattacks on Iran. But it seems like Trump is using these offensive cyber capabilities more vigorously than any of his predecessors did. It's interesting because both he and Barack Obama campaigned on a promise to end George Bush's wars and to not start new wars, and Obama really embraced the drone war as a way to take on threats to America without massive military deployments.

Marc Thiessen: It seems, in a way — and tell me if you think this is fair, and your reporting confirms this — that Trump seems to be using cyber in a similar fashion, that he's using it as a proxy for other offensive operations, and it's this new weapon that's really come online. The drones only came online toward the very end of the Bush administration and Obama embraced them. Now, it seems like certain cyber capabilities we have that didn't exist under Obama have come online under Trump, and he is using them very vigorously. Do you think that's a fair comparison?

Ellen Nakashima: He is definitely using these cyber capabilities and authorities more vigorously than Obama did, and I think the one difference is that cyber is more of an enabling technology. With a drone, you fire a missile, level a village, kill people. With cyber, I don't think we've seen any cyber strike yet by the US that has resulted in death. And they think they'd be very careful on that part, because then you are going now to use of force level. The offensive strike that Trump authorized against Iran last year in June was calibrated to not be considered use of force, whereas remember he pulled back from authorizing the missile strike that would have caused death.

Ellen Nakashima: I think there's that difference between the use of cyber and the use of, say, drones. But I do think you're absolutely right that President Trump is much more comfortable with the use of offensive cyber and just using those authorities more vigorously. He's freed up the military to be more aggressive there. And it's not just in cyber. He's done that with counter-terrorism, as well.

Danielle Pletka: My exit question. I'm going to take away Marc's moment here because I can see him smiling when you said that he, in fact, has made more robust use, which is of course Marc's theory, which is his. My question is really about the elections. Okay, you're immersed in this. When you think — forget Donald Trump, forget whatever. When you think about elections and the changing arc of capabilities on the cyber side that malign actors have, and we're talking about the Russians, the Iranians the North Koreans, the Chinese, and probably others that I can't even think of- how worried should we be? Not just about the social media that you talk about, that's the low

hanging fruit of every election, and we've seen that in Europe, but how worried are you about the ability to actually interfere in our electoral processes, in the technology that gets us votes? Do you think that we're going to have another hanging Chad, cyber nightmare —

Ellen Nakashima: Yeah. Exactly.

Danielle Pletka: … 2020, '22, '24. Well, God forbid, but —

Marc Thiessen: Cyber Chad.

Danielle Pletka: You're immersed in this. How worried are you?

Ellen Nakashima: Yeah. I feel like we have to be worried that something unexpected — what I worry about is what we aren't prepared for it, because we're trying now — racing to make sure our machines, voting machines, are secure and can't be messed with. They found out in some primary, it was in Iowa, that their app was malfunctioning. And that wasn't even something that had to do with a hacker or anything. That was just shoddy technology.

Ellen Nakashima: So there are all sorts of ways in which the software can go wrong in an election. And what we don't know is what Russia, or maybe China or Iran, are trying to come up with as the black swan type of scenario here that they can use to just disrupt and throw a monkey wrench in the work.

Ellen Nakashima: I feel like we've come a long way and that, in fact, in 2016, there really weren't any votes altered. I know some people say that's not 100% established, but I think from all the evidence we've seen — there hasn't been any evidence that any actual votes were changed. And I don't think that happened in 2018. So, fingers crossed, it won't in 2020.

Ellen Nakashima: What's harder, I think, to understand is the way in which influence operations actually affect behavior, whether they can induce people to stay home from voting, not go to the polls, or change a vote or — that's the part that is really difficult to measure. And my hunch is, though, that, in that respect, it's domestic actors that are far more influential than anything foreign actors are doing in trying to interfere in an election. And that what the foreign actors do is amplify or take advantage of the chaos that we ourselves create because of the fissures in our society.

Danielle Pletka: Well said.

Marc Thiessen: Your reporting on this has been terrific, and it was fun collaborating with you last week. So thank you for your great reporting and for joining us today.

Ellen Nakashima: It was my pleasure.

Danielle Pletka: Thanks a ton, Ellen.

Ellen Nakashima: Thank you.

Danielle Pletka: So Marc, here's the $64,000 question. And just as an aside, who even knows

anymore what a $64,000 question is? It was a game show.

Marc Thiessen: Not a lot of money these days. That was like a fortune. That was like a million dollars when that game show was on.

Danielle Pletka: Here's a somewhat small change question for you. So, 2020 elections — one of the assertions that I think underpins a lot of the allegations about Donald Trump is that he's soft on Russia, Vladimir Putin wants him to be president. But of course, we have detailed — even I, the great naysayer, have detailed — that this is an administration that has been extraordinarily tough on Russia. More sanctions, more leaning on them, more leaning on the Europeans to keep up sanctions, more individuals and banks and companies in Russia sanctioned than under any previous administration. And now, Donald Trump confirms that, in fact, they're also trying to stop the Russians from interfering in our election. So why would Vladimir Putin want Donald Trump to remain president?

Marc Thiessen: That is a fascinating question and I don't necessarily think he does. What the President said to me is, "If he does, he's crazy." He didn't use those exact words, but he basically laid out a litany of things in the interview that he did that were against Russia, many of those that you mentioned like sanctions and other things.

Marc Thiessen: But there's also the fact that, in Syria — Prigozhin, this oligarch who's running mercenaries as well in Syria, the US forces killed a lot of those mercenaries in a battle in Syria, as well. So he's actually not only used cyber weapons against Russia, he's actually used kinetic weapons against Russian troops and killed a lot of them.

Marc Thiessen: And then he also says a number of things not traditionally seen as being tough on Russia, but for example, making the United States the number one oil producer in the world. That's not good for Russia, he pointed out. There's a number of things as well. Our military buildup and the fact that he's invested a lot of money in our military to make up for the damage that was done during the Obama administration, that's not good for Russia.

Marc Thiessen: So he laid out a litany things that he has done that should make Vladimir Putin not very happy. I think, quite frankly, the idea that Putin wants Trump in office is kind of a myth at this point.

Marc Thiessen: He may have thought in 2016, because Trump ... This is the thing about Trump. Trump's actions against Russia, I think he's absolutely right when he says, "I'm the toughest president on Russia ever." Ronald Reagan brought down the Soviet Union, so that's hard to beat. But beside that, no president's ever been tougher on Russia.

Marc Thiessen: But his rhetoric in 2016 was, "Oh yeah, I can get along with Vladimir Putin. We're going to have good relations with Russia." He was talking about — they took out the plank in the Republican platform on Ukraine. There was a number of signals that Putin listened to that probably made him think Donald Trump would be a lot better. Plus, he hated Hillary Clinton.

Marc Thiessen: Hillary is not on the ballot this time around. And Vladimir Putin, if he wanted to put Donald Trump in the White House, he certainly miscalculated. And I don't know if there's — it's an interesting question I don't know the answer to, is what are they going to do in 2020? Putting aside the question of whether they can because of the

counter-operations that we have in place and the capabilities that we've demonstrated, whether they can interfere, why would they want to?

Danielle Pletka: Well, that is the interesting question. So the piece that I wrote actually said, "Why would Vladimir Putin not want Bernie Sanders to win the election?" And it's a similar question. I guess there's one front where I can see that Russia would find the Donald congenial and that is on the question of his doubts about NATO. That's really an area in which I think he and Putin probably see eye to eye.

Danielle Pletka: But again, Trump said to you, and I don't know whether you reported this in your two pieces — and I commend everybody to read the two pieces that Marc wrote that were the result of his interview with the President. We'll link them both in the podcast. But did he say to you something about how he's done more to try to get more money for NATO than anybody else. He did, didn't he?

Marc Thiessen: He did say that. In fact, he denies that he is opposed to NATO. He explicitly said, "I support NATO" to me. And he said, if any one of the litany of things that he's done that should make Putin angry is that he got the NATO allies to actually kick in more money. We now have, I think, eight other countries that are paying and meeting their two percent of GDP requirement that they had committed to. He says that he's gotten them to kick in 140 billion dollars more. And over three years, that's going to be 400 billion dollars more in defense spending.

Marc Thiessen: And he says, "I would not have been able ..." He told me, "I would not have been able to get them to do that if I hadn't intimated that I would leave NATO, that was the only way I got them to do it." But he said, "But I don't want to leave NATO, but I want them to pay their fair share."

Marc Thiessen: And quite frankly, I think that's a hundred percent correct. If this is going to be a real alliance that is capable, it can't be just the fig leaf for American power in the world. They have to actually invest money and spend money.

Marc Thiessen: I wrote speeches for George W. Bush. I wrote speeches for Donald Rumsfeld at NATO summits saying, "You have to meet your two percent commitment." They never did it. And Donald Trump got them to do it, and that's not good for Putin either.

Danielle Pletka: Right. Well, he hasn't gotten everybody to do it. The Germans —

Marc Thiessen: Not everybody, but a lot more.

Danielle Pletka: Right. Well, again, and our allies have been deadbeats on this front. They need to invest more in defense. It's a very interesting question. It's Donald Trump the narrative versus Donald Trump the policymaker. And those are two very different stories, but it would be nice to see him take a much harder verbal line against bad guys. It really would.

Marc Thiessen: What he said was, and he didn't say this quite directly, but he said, "I've managed to do all these things and maintain a strong personal relationship with Putin. And that is paying off because we're negotiating a nuclear agreement now." And he talked about how they had violated the INF Treaty, how they violated their previous accords, and how we pulled out of that, but that he's trying now to negotiate an

agreement on nuclear weapons with Putin.

Marc Thiessen: And so I think the way he sees it is, there's no value in terms of the policy of boasting about the tough actions he's taking. He boasts about them in response to people saying, "You're Putin's puppet." But he seems to think, in the words of Teddy Roosevelt who now we're going to pull down his statutes too, but say, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." In this case, he's not speaking softly. He's speaking loudly about how he loves Vladimir Putin as a person, but he's carried a big stick.

Marc Thiessen: And it's just like much of the Trump presidency. Put Russia policy aside. It is often a much better presidency with the mute button on. If I told you before the election, "Dany, we're going to have a Republican president who's going to beat Hillary Clinton and he's going to impose sanctions on Russia. He's going to launch a cyberattack on the Internet Research Agency. He's going to get the NATO allies to spend more money. He's going to increase our defense budget. He's going to make us the number one country in the world in energy," and all of these things, you would have said, "Ronald Reagan came back to life?"

Marc Thiessen: But then you hear the words and it's like, "Oh no!" sometimes.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah. Not sometimes. Almost all times. And that, of course, is the concern. Still, you've given all of us a reason to hope that, beneath the bombast, beneath the absolutely foolish statements, is somebody who is willing to do what it takes when given wise counsel about it, John Bolton's book notwithstanding.

Danielle Pletka: I'm really looking forward to talking to you some more about the President, and I hope one day we'll be able to get him on the podcast, because that'll be really fun.

Marc Thiessen: He said, so news flash for our listeners, he doesn't do interviews for print and audio at the same time. And so I asked him whether we could use the interview on the podcast and he said no, but that he would come on the podcast and do an interview with us separately. So, we have a commitment from the President to come on the show. So, get ready, Dany.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah. Well, that's why you all should subscribe, because that's going to be some fun.

Marc Thiessen: That's going to be epic.

Danielle Pletka: Hey, thanks, everybody, for listening. It will be. Thanks again for being there. Hope everybody's taking care.