

Plot or No Plot

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

I am not a conspiracy theorist. But the available evidence about possible Russian hacking and other manipulation of the U.S. 2016 presidential election is troubling.

The Plot to Hack America, published just pre-election last fall, draws together information from various sources to argue that influencing the election was a Russian intelligence operation.

The author, Malcolm Nance, is a retired U.S. Navy counter-terrorism intelligence officer and cryptographer. He argues that Putin's objective was to put in place a government in the United States more amenable to Russian interests and less likely to confront Russian behavior. Nance dubs this operation "Lucky Seven."

Nance's information fleshes out the reports of a CIA analysis last December that concluded Russia tried to sway the election.

There is no smoking gun in Nance's book, no memo or wiretap in which President Putin or other senior Russian officials say they are involved in an effort to shape the election. But there is a lot of circumstantial evidence that seems to point to an operation like Lucky Seven having taken place.

According to Nance, an outside investigation by the IT security company CrowdStrike traced the hacking of the Democratic National Committee computers in 2015 and 2016 to IP addresses associated with known Russian hacking operations.

Nance also traces relationships between the Russian government and officials who came in with the new administration. According to Nance, Michael Flynn, who was briefly U.S. national security advisor, was paid for a 2015 appearance in Moscow from RT, the Russian government-funded cable television station.

He also outlines President Trump's ties to Russian oligarchs, especially Aras Agalarov, with whom Trump collaborated in his winning bid to bring the Miss Universe beauty pageant to Moscow in 2013. President Trump has also apparently received investments from Russian oligarchs Alex Sapir and Rotem Rosen to construct the Trump SoHo Hotel and condo project in Manhattan.

The next disturbing connection Nance posits is between WikiLeaks and the Russian government. Nance calls WikiLeaks the Russian government's "intelligence laundromat." He points out how the embarrassing emails and other information stolen from the DNC by the Russian hackers were passed to WikiLeaks and then released to the public. The effect of the WikiLeaks intelligence breach was to weaken the candidacy of Hillary Clinton.

Early this March there was another WikiLeaks barrage of stolen classified information, coincident with the growing demand to investigate Russian influence on the election. These leaks cast aspersions on the U.S. intelligence community, which is expressing concern about the Russian role in the election.

The effect of WikiLeaks' activities more recently has been to com-

promise U.S. intelligence and possibly to weaken U.S. national security. Frustrating U.S. intelligence operations has long been a goal of countries that see U.S. policies as inimical to their objectives.

Add to this our new administration's favorable statements about Vladimir Putin, and more troubling, alignment with some Russian interests and policies that may not benefit the United States. For example, Russia has long sought to weaken NATO.

President Trump, at least initially, criticized NATO and questioned the U.S. commitment to NATO. He has also suggested we might make various deals with Russia, let Germany rather than the United States oppose Russia's activities in Ukraine and leave Syria for the Russians to handle.

The Trump administration is also advocating a retreat from the U.S. diplomatic presence in the world, deeply cutting the State Department budget and international programs the U.S. has long maintained, possibly leading to an American retreat from global influence. Obviously, with our opposition to Russian policies in Ukraine and Georgia, in Syria and other regions, that is something the Russians might like to see.

I am not concerned specifically about President Trump, who could be a witting or unwitting beneficiary of Russian interference, if Russian meddling did occur. What is alarming is the possibility that a foreign power like Russia could intervene in a U.S. presidential election. Hacking and cyberwarfare now make this type of interference achievable. The possibility of a foreign country having the ability to pressure or manipulate U.S. officials after they are elected, through WikiLeaks stunts or other means, presents an additional disturbing prospect for our democratic process.

Our ancestors, including my own, fought for the independence of this country, for the right of self-determination and against the control or interference of a foreign power. No matter how imperfect, our democracy is still the best system on the planet for individual freedom, economic prosperity, civil rights, equality, free expression and the other values we cherish. We need to protect it from manipulation or interference.

To put this controversy to rest, we must thoroughly investigate the U.S. intelligence community's allegations about Russian influence on the 2016 election, in a transparent way. Then we can all examine the evidence and decide what happened and how to deal with the results.



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy