

## INTRODUCTION

# Beyond Their Wildest Imagination

**A**s one of more than 40 million Americans who'd already cast an absentee ballot for the 2016 presidential election, I was in Muscat, Oman—on almost certainly my last whirlwind trip to meet with Middle East leaders as US director of national intelligence—when the electorate went to the polls on November 8. Oman is nine hours ahead of Washington, and before I went to bed that night, about 2:00 A.M. in Oman and 5:00 P.M. on the US East Coast, election analysts and pundits were discussing how the Republican candidate for president, Donald Trump, “had a narrow path” to win the election, but only if a long list of specific states improbably broke his way. They predicted that as soon as Florida or Ohio was called for former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, the election would effectively be over. I slept four or five hours, rose, and turned on the TV, discovering that the narrative had flipped: The media analysts had called Ohio for Trump and said Clinton needed massive turnouts in all the left-leaning cities in Florida that hadn't reported yet for her to have a chance of taking the state's twenty-nine Electoral College votes. I was surprised, but didn't really have time to think about it.

I read the overnight intelligence reports and continued getting ready for the day. An hour later, the media called Florida for Trump and laid out a very specific list of states that would now all have to swing to Clinton for her to win. As the morning progressed, I worked through the back-to-back meetings that were typical of foreign trips. In the short breaks between, my staff updated me on how things stood with the election. As we broke for lunch, at 2:31 A.M. on the US East Coast, the Associated Press declared Trump to be the US president-elect.

I was shocked. *Everyone* was shocked, including Mr. Trump, who'd

continued on Election Day to cast doubt on whether he would accept the election results as legitimate. Having a few minutes alone, I kept thinking of just how out of touch I was with the people who lived in Middle America. I'd been stationed in heartland states repeatedly during my military career, particularly Texas, and I had traveled extensively as an agency director in the early 2000s and again during the past six and a half years as DNI, meeting with Intelligence Community employees outside of St. Louis, speaking at the University of Texas at Austin and with the Chamber of Commerce in San Antonio, and visiting many other places. I'd joked to audiences about just how out of touch people in Washington were, and I'd never failed to draw a laugh, sometimes applause. Working down in the "engine room" of our national security enterprise—"shoveling intelligence coal," as I liked to say—I never recognized just how much frustration with and resentment toward Washington those communities had, and just how deep the roots of their anger went. But Donald Trump had, and he'd appealed to them more than I'd realized or liked.

I also thought about the warning on Russian interference in the election that Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson and I had issued to the American public a month earlier. We'd agonized over the precise wording of the press release and whether naming Russian president Vladimir Putin as the mastermind and puppeteer of the Russian influence operation would cause an international incident, drawing Jeh's department and the Intelligence Community into the political fray. Reading responses to exit polls, I realized that our release and public statements simply hadn't mattered. I wasn't sure if people were oblivious to the seriousness of the threat we'd described or if they just didn't care what the Russians were doing. Either way, I saw that our efforts ended up having all the impact of another raindrop in a storm at sea.

I wondered what President Obama was thinking and if he regretted his reticence to "put his thumb on the scale" of the election—as he put it—by not publicly calling out the Russian interference while Putin was effectively *standing* on the other end of that scale. At the same time, I was no longer sure it would have mattered to the people in Middle America if the president had presented everything we knew about Russia's massive cyber and propaganda efforts to undermine American democracy, disparage former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, and promote Donald Trump. Despite the public narrative that Edward Snowden had disingenuously started in 2013,

alleging we were spying on everyday US citizens, the IC had no authority and no capability to evaluate how Americans were receiving the Russian propaganda or what they were thinking and doing when they entered polling booths. In a lot of ways, our capabilities were like the physical infrastructure at the signals intelligence facilities in Ukraine I'd visited in 1991 after the Iron Curtain fell. Just like the former Soviet antenna arrays had been, our capabilities were oriented outward toward the threat and largely incapable of looking inward, even if we wanted to. It simply wasn't our job. We'd been watching how the Russians were trying to influence US voters, not what impact they may have been having. We had no empirical evidence to assess whether the Russian influence campaign was working, and on Election Day, I was disturbed to recognize it probably had.

I didn't realize it then, but the Russians were just as shocked as we were. They'd succeeded beyond their wildest imagination and were completely unprepared for their own success. The Russian propaganda network in the United States, formerly known as Russia Today and since rebranded as just "RT," was jubilant in calling the election for Mr. Trump: "That's what this is, a defining moment in global history, that America is willing to turn the page and possibly isolate itself from the rest of the world." They declared, "The next speech that Donald Trump gives to the world will be one of the most important speeches in the history of the world." As the anchors reveled in Trump's victory, the crawl at the bottom of the screen continued running lines intended to delegitimize Clinton's win, such as SEVERAL STATES REPORT BROKEN VOTING MACHINES. The Russian internet troll factory scrambled to stop its #DemocracyRIP social media campaign, set to run from its fake accounts on Twitter and Facebook. In the middle of all this, Putin lost the chance to return the favor of challenging Clinton's victory, as she'd challenged the results of the 2011 Russian election when she'd been US secretary of state. I don't believe he minded—at all.

After the election, the CIA and the FBI continued to uncover evidence of preelection Russian propaganda, all intended to undermine Clinton and promote Trump, and the Intelligence Community continued to find indications of Russian cyber operations to interfere with the election. At a National Security Council meeting on Monday, December 5, President Obama gave us more explicit instructions. He wanted the CIA, NSA, and FBI—each agency with the mission-specific tradecraft and capabilities to determine what the Russians had done—to assemble all their findings, encompassing

the most sensitive sourcing, into a single report that he could pass on to the next administration and to Congress. He also asked us to produce a paper for public consumption with as much information from the classified version as possible. And critically, he wanted all of this done before he left office.

The highly classified IC assessment that resulted was, I believe, a landmark product—among the most important ever produced by US intelligence. I was proud of our work, but the unclassified version we published ran just a few pages and was written with the clinical sterility of a standard intelligence briefing. I still wanted to more fully capture what it felt like to be on the receiving end of the Russian influence operation in 2015 and 2016. For me, there was no specific moment in that time, no flash of insight when I understood that our primary adversary for nearly all of my half century as a US intelligence professional was—without exaggeration—hacking away at the very roots of our democracy. That realization slowly washed over me in 2016 in a tide that continued to rise after the election, and even after I'd left government and the new administration had transitioned into power. My concern about what I saw taking place in America—and my apprehension that we were losing focus on what the Russians had done to us—is ultimately what persuaded me to write this book, to use what we had learned in our IC assessment to frame my experience and our collective experience as Americans.

My hope is to capture and share the experience of more than fifty years in the intelligence profession, to impart the pride that intelligence officers take in their work, the care with which they consider the ethical implications of surveillance and espionage, and the patriotism and willingness to sacrifice that they bring to the job. And finally, I intend to show that what Russia did to the United States during the 2016 election was far worse than just another post-Cold War jab at an old adversary. What happened to us was a sustained assault on our traditional values and institutions of governance, from external as well as internal pressures. In the wake of that experience, my fear is that many Americans are questioning if facts are even knowable, as foreign adversaries and our national leaders continue to deny objective reality while advancing their own "alternative facts." America possesses great strength and resilience, but how we rise to this challenge—with clear-eyed recognition of the unbiased facts and by setting aside our doubts—is entirely up to us. I believe the destiny of the American ideal is at stake.

and our way of life. Repeatedly, the president has spoken about Iran's violating the "spirit" of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—the agreement that prevents it from attaining a nuclear weapon—and he announced in October 2017 that he was decertifying the deal. Yet Russia has built, repeatedly tested, and deployed cruise missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Those violations are a serious threat to global security, and Putin's March 2018 speech in which he described "invincible" nuclear weapons—messaging aimed at both domestic and foreign audiences—further illustrates the profound animosity he has for the United States, the only adversary these weapons are intended for. Russia has continued to occupy large parts of Ukraine and to murder civilians in Syria. It has worked against American interests in Afghanistan and helped North Korea avoid sanctions. And it has continued to attack American institutions and to drive social divisions deeper, on social media and state-sponsored broadcasts. Whether that involves assailing the credibility of the press, the FBI, and the US Intelligence Community or promoting the violent rise of neo-Nazis, the Russians have been there, often finding their propaganda effectively supported by the US president. And they've done these things with impunity. In July 2017, Congress voted to impose sanctions against Russia in response to election interference. The sanctions bill passed the House 419–3 and the Senate 98–2. Knowing any veto would be easily overridden, Trump allowed it to become law, and then the administration simply chose not to enforce the sanctions.

And there's something that bothers me even more. On Sunday, January 22, 2017—just two days after the inauguration—NBC's Chuck Todd confronted Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway on *Meet the Press*, asking her about Sean Spicer's blatant and obvious lie that "this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period." She responded, "Don't be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. You're saying that it's a falsehood, and they're giving, Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts."

"Alternative facts." I just can't square "alternative facts" with my life experience. My parents taught me that one faced life's truths head-on. Professionally, my dad approached his work without slant or politics, and I don't recall his ever changing facts to make his bosses happy. I never heard the phrase "truth to power" from him, but I saw how he lived and

worked. For fifty-three years, I tried hard to speak truth—sometimes very uncomfortable truth—to people making crucial decisions for our national security. Telling General Bill Livsey that I couldn't provide him with "unambiguous" warning of a North Korean invasion was a difficult truth to deliver. Telling Wayne Downing that it was wrong to hold Terry Schwalier accountable for Air Force institutional failings was another. When I made mistakes—mistakenly finding WMD sites in Iraq or misunderstanding Senator Wyden's question in testimony—they were honest mistakes.

I don't believe our democracy can function for long on lies, particularly when inconvenient and difficult facts spoken by the practitioners of truth are dismissed as "fake news." I know that the Intelligence Community cannot serve our nation if facts are negotiable. Just in the past few years, I've seen our country become so polarized because people live in separate realities in which everyone has his or her own set of facts—some of which are lies knowingly distributed by a foreign adversary. This was not something I could idly stand by and watch happen to the country I love.

I've often thought about General George Patton's quote "The time to take counsel of your fears is before you make an important battle decision. That's the time to listen to every fear you can imagine. When you have collected all the facts and fears and made your decision, turn off all your fears and go ahead." Applying Patton's battlefield wisdom to the profession of intelligence, we provide facts to decision makers more broadly—whether they sit in the Oval Office or are hunkered down in an oval foxhole—to reduce uncertainty, risk, and, yes, fear. That's why intelligence is vital; that's what we do and why we do it.

As I left government service, I had my own decision to make. I thought hard about all my concerns—my "fears"—about the idea of writing a book. I had not planned to write anything, in spite of the urging of many friends and colleagues who thought I should, if for no other reason than to chronicle living through fifty years of the history of American intelligence. But after experiencing the election, the unprecedented Russian interference in our political process, and the behavior by and impact of the Trump administration, I changed my mind. I think the catalyst was the stark, visceral realization of seeing the fundamental pillars of our country being undermined both by the Russians and by the president. This shook me, since it was these very attributes—our form of govern-

ment, our deference to the rule of law, our rich mix of ethnicities and nationalities, and our freedoms, including especially a free and independent press, and freedom of religious practice—that all seemed under siege, no longer universally respected and protected as assumed “givens.”

My parents instilled respect for these unique attributes of America throughout my formative years. My dad, who served faithfully for twenty-eight years in the Army during World War II, the Korean conflict, and Vietnam, was a living example to me of the importance of actively defending and protecting this country and what it stands for. And as I've described, I followed in his footsteps, serving thirty-four years in the military, sixteen years as a civilian in government, and six years in industry—virtually all in the profession of intelligence. I always considered this a noble calling, a sacred public trust, because, simply stated, I believe in this country. Part of this instilled ethos was profound respect for the president as commander in chief; I served in that spirit every president from John Kennedy through Barack Obama. So, speaking critically of our current president is counterinstinctive and difficult for me to do, but I feel it is my duty.

We have elected someone as president of the United States whose first instincts are to twist and distort truth to his advantage, to generate financial benefit to himself and his family, and, in so doing, to demean the values this country has traditionally stood for. He has set a new low bar for ethics and morality. He has caused damage to our societal and political fabric that will be difficult and will require time to repair. And, close to my heart, he has besmirched the Intelligence Community and the FBI—pillars of our country—and deliberately incited many Americans to lose faith and confidence in them. While he does this, he pointedly refuses to acknowledge the profound threat posed by Russia, inexplicably trusting the denials by Putin about their meddling in our political process over the considered judgments by his own Intelligence Community.

The Russians are astutely and persistently exploiting this divisiveness with every controversial issue they can identify, and regrettably, we are a very inviting target for them as they target both sides of every issue. They exploit Black Lives Matter by pretending to be hateful white people online, and they incite anger among targeted groups of whites by playing to negative black stereotypes; they engender fear of Muslims among Christians and vice versa; they stoke fear on both sides of the gun control

debate; and so on. To be clear, the Russians are our primary existential threat. All those nuclear weapons they have or are developing are intended for only one adversary: the United States. They have been at war with us in the information realm for some time, and the apathy displayed by many Americans toward this profound menace is very disturbing. President Trump abets this apathy by his willful and skillful deflections. What we need him to do is to recognize this threat for what it is and to galvanize us in a coordinated national response. Only he can provide this leadership.

My hope is that this book will, in some measure, help people regain awareness. That's also the reason I decided to appear regularly on CNN, so that I could continue to speak "truth to power"—in this case, to the American people. In the letter I wrote to President Obama in the spring of 2010 when he was considering whether to send my nomination as DNI to the Senate, I said: "I do not like publicity. I've spent the last week cringing every time I saw my name in the paper, or my face on the tube. I think it is part of the unwritten code of professional intelligence officers to stay out of the media." That seems like a very long time ago, in a very different, more innocent environment.

I often encounter strangers in airliners, airports, and other public places who, upon recognizing me, convey gratitude for my speaking up and out, and giving them a voice. They do so in a way that doesn't sound like the reflexive cliché "Thanks for your service." I certainly don't make the pretentious claim that I am carrying the torch of truth, but in some ways, that seems to be what many people implicitly expect of me and others—such as John Brennan and Jim Comey—who are staunch advocates for our values. That's not to suggest that everyone I've encountered is uniformly supportive; some have angrily confronted me, questioning my loyalty and patriotism for speaking out.

It is, at this point, impossible to know whether we will restore our balance and national conscience. We have a reassuring history of recovery from similar national traumas, most prominently the Civil War and the Vietnam War. Our institutions were battered, and our national fabric severely stressed to the breaking point. But we recovered from both and, over time, emerged the better for it.