

Beware of The Real Russian Threat

by Michael Curtis



One of the memorable anecdotes of Hollywood concerns the film noir, *The Big Sleep*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall because of its complex story. It is puzzling, almost incoherent, with its convoluted plot, and many double crossing characters who come and go. Neither the original writer Raymond Chandler, nor William Faulkner, one of the screen writers, could fully explain what and why some incidents occurred, let alone the reasons for the behavior of the characters or the menacing atmosphere.

Send in the clowns in the U.S. Congress. It is sad to perceive

that the behavior of some of the characters, if not as charismatic as Bogart, in the never ending fantasy of the complex plot of collusion between the presidential campaign of Donald Trump and Russian characters, is outperforming the *Big Sleep*. One of the characters in the drama is the indefatigable Adam Schiff (D-Cal) , the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, who asserts there is “abundance of non classified information that is evidence on the issue of collusion, and some...on the issue of obstruction.” Schiff also points to evidence in the public domain: one meeting in June 2016 between Trump campaign members and a Russian lawyer.

Here comes the Congressional facsimile of the convoluted *Big Sleep* to delight Raymond Chandler. In spite of his “evidence” Schiff admits “I’ve never said there was proof beyond a reasonable doubt.” Moreover, he explained he could not go into “specifics” until they are unclassified. There are a lot of reasons, he said, why the names of U.S. persons and organizations are not used.

The cast of characters in the collusion drama changes almost daily. Some remain in the shadowy background, Carter Page, Bruce Ohr, Sidney Blumental, Cody Shearer.

More central is Oleg Deripaska, the 50 year old Russian self made billionaire, the founder and owner of the Basic Element group of companies, one of the largest diversified industrial groups in Russia, and president of number of other companies including United Company Rusal, the second largest aluminium company in the world. He was denied entrance to the U.S. because of alleged links to the mafia.

Whether true or not, Deripaska does have numerous links. One is Paul Manafort who was hired by Deripaska to work for pro-Putin oligarchs in Ukraine, 2006-2009. More recently, he is suing Manafort regarding a \$20 million investment and fees from a 2008 business deal in the Cayman Islands.

Deripaska has international connections. He owns townhouses in Manhattan, and has a stake in the Russian language paper, *V Novom Svete* (New World), in New York. He hosted and tried to cultivate British politicians, Lord Mandelson and George Osborn, former Chancellor of the Exchequer.

But his most pertinent dealings are with Christopher Steele, a key player in the collusion comedy of errors. Steele was recruited by British MI6 immediately on graduation from Cambridge, where he was president of the debating society, and became head of its Russian desk. In 2009 he founded his own private investigation agency, Orbis Business International, and in 2015 began working with the Democratic National Committee, creating the "Steele Dossier," and planting information with journalists and others.

One intriguing puzzle is whether Steele worked with Paul Hauser, an American lawyer in London, who represents Deripaska and therefore indirectly with Deripaska?

Steele's role is not akin to Bogart's but the respective scenarios are equally complex. Part of it is the link between Steele and Mark Warner, ranking Democratic member of the Senate Intelligence Committee through a man named Adam Waldman, a Washington lawyer who in 2009 registered as a U.S. agent for Deripaska, "to provide legal advice on issues involving his U.S. visa as well as on commercial transactions." A year later he was also an agent for Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. Waldman is said to receive \$40,000 as a monthly retainer for these services. It was Waldman who on March 16, 2017 texted Warner that "Chris Steele asked me to call you."

Russian connections and the appeal of Moscow are not new. Writing during the Blitz over London by Nazi bombers in 1941, George Orwell attempting to define British culture in his essay, *England Your England*, wrote that "the intellectuals who hope to see (Britain) Russianized or Germanized will be

disappointed. The intellectuals in politics take their cooking from Paris, and their opinions from Moscow.”

Britain has had its experience with this. The details of the pro-Soviet activities of the Cambridge Five, including Guy Burgess and Kim Philby, all of whom betrayed secrets to the Soviet Union are well known and have become legendary. Rather surprisingly, in February 2018, allegations have surfaced that in December 1986 an agent from the then Soviet Bloc country, specifically Czech secret police, met three times with the young Member of Parliament, Jeremy Corbyn, now leader of the Labour party. Corbyn was and is no spy but he is alleged to have reported on British security activities, and his hostility to the Thatcher government, and was positive about Soviet foreign policy and its “peace initiative.”

More important are other allegations, revealed first by British private sector cyber security experts, then by the UK government on February 15, 2018, and a day later by the U.S. Russia is directly named responsible for the NotPatya cyber attack in June 2017. Its primary targets were Ukrainian financial, energy, and government sectors. But its effects spread and it also affected European business and disrupted organizations and is estimated to have cost companies more than \$1.2 billion.

British government ministers are clear and forthright. The British Defense minister, Gavin Williams blamed Russia for malicious cyber activity. He commented that we are entering a new era of warfare..a destructive and deadly mix of conventional military might and malicious cyber attacks. Russia, he argued, is “ripping up the rulebook” by undermining democracy and affecting lives by targeting critical infrastructure and weaponising information. He pointed out that UK intelligence agencies have discovered the involvement of the Russian military.

His colleague, British foreign minister Lord Ahmad also

attributed the NotPetya attack to the Russian government , specifically the Russian military. The Kremlin has positioned Russia in direct opposition to the west. He called on Russia to be a responsible member of the international community, rather than secretly trying to undermine it. Britain was committed to strengthening coordinated international efforts to uphold a free, open, peaceful and secure cyberspace.

The U.S. Congress should learn from this British forthrightness. This is even more the case since Special Counsel Robert Mueller on February 16, 2018 issued his report, and the Department of Justice announced the indictment of 13 Russians and the Russian Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, involved in interfering in the 2016 presidential election and in a conspiracy to disrupt the election. Equally pertinent is that no allegation is made that any American was a knowing participant in this illegal activity, and no allegation that the Russian conduct altered the outcome of the 2016 election. Congress, including Adam Schiff, can now concentrate on the cyber space problem, and the Russian activity in it.