**WTH Should I Read This Summer? Spies, the**

**Epic Intelligence War between East and West by**

**Calder Walton**

Episode #215 | August 18, 2023 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen and Calder Walton

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: And I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast. What the hell is going on? Marc? What the hell is going on in August?

Marc Thiessen: Well, what the hell is going on is we are continuing our summer book series, What the Hell Should I Read This Summer? It's August, you're on vacation with your family, or things are quieting down in the office and you have a little bit more time to yourself. And so we're highlighting some of the most interesting books that are out there. Some of them new, some of them have been out there for a little while, but things that we are reading and think you should read, and we have a wonderful book to talk to you about today.

Danielle Pletka: So rather than Marc and I arguing with each other, for once we actually agree, and the book ... the author we're talking to today, is a fellow named Colder Walton. He's an historian at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, but he actually received his doctorate in history, as you will hear, because he sounds very English, from Trinity College in Cambridge. He helped write MI5's authorized a Hundred Year History. He's the general editor of the three volume Cambridge History of Espionage and Intelligence, which I have to admit, I now want to get. His previous book, Empire of Secrets won the Longman History Today book of the Year Award. And his new book, which we're talking about today, is called Spies, the Epic Intelligence War between East and West.

Marc Thiessen: And with everything that's going on right now with Ukraine, with China, just having a chance to talk to him about this a hundred year spy war between the West and the East, and how it impacts what's happening today in Ukraine, what's happening with China and Taiwan. It's a fascinating discussion.

Danielle Pletka: And of course, Marc managed to work in Hunter Biden as well. So listen in for that. Here's our interview.

Marc Thiessen: Well, Calder, welcome to the podcast.

Calder Walton: Thanks for having me. It's absolutely great to be here.

Marc Thiessen: We're so excited to have you. So you're part of our summer book series and you've written a fascinating book about the hundred year epic intelligence war between the East and the West. And you say this Cold War started not in 1945 as most people suggest, but in 1917. Tell us about that and tell us why you wrote this book.

Calder Walton: Well, let's take the second question first. Why did I write this book? Well, it seemed to me that ... I moved to the US in 2016 and I witnessed all of the Trump Russia saga firsthand, and I wanted to try to contextualize what we were seeing on the news all day, every day. So that was my initial motivation. And then clearly with the war in Ukraine, finishing this book became much more urgent for me. And on a personal level, I should add as well, because two of my researchers, one in Ukraine itself, and then another in Moscow have been caught up in the war. So it became a personal sort of story for me on a number of different levels. When did the Cold War start? Well, Marc, that's sort of like the ultimate Trivial Pursuit question, isn't it? But in many ways, my motivation was to try to correct what we see in the history books as you just mentioned, this is a post-war development. Actually, when you look at it from the activities of the intelligence agencies, particularly Russian intelligence, Soviet intelligence, well, from 1917 when the Bolshevik seize power in the Soviet Union, and then when the Western allies decided to intervene in the Russian subsequent Civil War, the two sides, the Bolsheviks and Western capitalist powers were, it seemed to me, on an ideological collision course waiting to happen.

But what we find is that when you look at what Soviet intelligence services were doing, they were already in this ideological conflict from the 1920s onwards. And it just took the subsequent years, and then during the Second World War and after it for the Western powers to realize that they were actually in this struggle already. They just didn't realize the full components and proportions of it. So by the end of the Second World War, and this is quite appropriate, given the film that's coming out this weekend, Oppenheimer, the end of the Second World War, the Soviets had stolen the plans for the US Anglo-American atomic bomb project. So by the time they detonated it, Stalin already had those plans from his spies, deep inside the Manhattan Project. And the nuclear weapons, of course, would shape the subsequent decade in international relations, down to the present day. So it all started, in my view, when you look at it from intelligence much earlier than we tend to imagine.

Danielle Pletka: So I want to talk to you a little bit, particularly about the anecdotes that you have in the book, but I also want to ask you sort of a general question, which I think is hugely important as we think about Putin right now, and how he makes judgments. You actually make the argument that, just as the sort of intelligence Cold War started before the actual Cold War, the intelligence Cold War has indeed continued long beyond the existence of the Soviet Union. But one of the points that you make is about how intelligence works under a dictator. And I thought it was absolutely fascinating, when you talked about the purges and the unwillingness to give certain information to the leader, the fear. Can you just sort of open up about that, and also try and apply it to how we should think about Xi Jinping and Putin and their intelligence and decision making?

Calder Walton: Absolutely. Thanks for that question, Dany. That's hugely important, and that was one of the messages that I was trying to convey in the book. So I'm glad it resonated with you, but let's take that in two different stages.

So on the Cold War, yes, as we just discussed, it started earlier than we tend to imagine. And when you look at it again from the intelligence and national security perspective, as far as the Kremlin's concerned, the Cold War never finished. This is a battle, a struggle, a war that turned out the wrong way as far as Putin's Kremlin is concerned, and actually in the 1990s as far as the intelligence services were concerned. So for Russian intelligence, the Cold War never finished. And in fact, Russia being humiliated on the world stage in the 1990s, no longer a superpower, was arguably even more aggressive than ... its services were even more aggressive towards the great enemy, the United States, than they were in the later stages of the Cold War.

And it's exactly out of that sort of revanchist stew, bitter stew that Putin emerges in the 1990s to become FSB director in 1998. And then to the surprise of everyone, including probably himself, to become a Russian leader and the way that he receives intelligence and understands intelligence and uses it. Again, it's so striking when you look at it from the historical perspective, the echoes with the great Soviet dictator Stalin, they're just so blindingly obvious. And we saw this with that bizarre press conference, National Security meeting on the eve of the war in Ukraine, if you remember. So this is where Putin gathered the National Security Council, his Russian National Security Council together, and it was quite clear that it was prerecorded because people's ... if you remember, their watches had different times on. So this was all choreographed, okay? But you will remember that one of his officials, in particular, the director of his foreign intelligence service, Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the SVR, which is the successor to the KGB, you remember how Putin humiliated him publicly because Naryshkin was sort of straying off script.

He wasn't saying exactly what Putin wanted to hear. And to my mind, looking at that, that is through and through straight out of the Soviet paradigm, of an intelligence chief is there to essentially provide confirmation to what a leader is thinking, not to challenge it. So there's no room for telling truth to power in Putin's very real murderous court. People ... Putin's officials quite rightly live in fear of their lives. So telling him that he's wrong is not something that anybody wants to do as a good career move, let alone to remain alive. So it's little wonder-

Danielle Pletka: They don't want to fall out of a window again, I guess.

Calder Walton: No one wants to ... you want to be very careful of walking near any windows if you're going to tell Putin he's wrong about something. So little wonder. So that one moment for me of when he was humiliating his SVR director spoke volumes about how intelligence operates.

But you're absolutely right that this isn't just Putin, this is, I would argue historically and present day, it's inherent to all autocratic regimes that, and we find the same, the little we have of the publicly available information in the West about Chinese intelligence. And we should say first and foremost, we don't have defectors that we know about in public from Chinese intelligence, hopefully defectors exist and are spilling the beans to Western intelligence services. But we don't have the same level as we do for Russian intelligence in the public yet. But you can see how the frightening prospect of Xi potentially making enormously significant geopolitical decisions on the basis of intelligence, which by default, by necessity, by the structural system of his rule, autocratic rule, the Ministry of State Security, its principal civilian intelligence service, is not going to be giving Xi intelligence, which says that he is wrong. And I've got this from interviews from CIA officers with deep expertise on China, that confirm that essentially it's a similar model of the Soviets in the past and Russia today. And these are inherent flaws within that model of intelligence and national security.

Marc Thiessen: So the confirmation bias inside totalitarian regimes of intelligence is an inherent flaw in their intelligence history. And so what we've seen here is that in Ukraine, because no one was willing to come to Putin and tell him what he didn't want to hear, he's made a terrible strategic blunder in Ukraine, and that that is now we're seeing all the repercussions within the Russian military, and the Prigozhin mutiny and all the rest of it. No one is willing to go to Xi and tell him, we're not ready to invade Taiwan. Our military might not be as strong as you think it is and all the rest of it. But does the demonstration effect of Putin's miscalculation have an impact on him? Do you think that there is, within China right now, any kind of reassessment going on of their ability or readiness to take Taiwan? Even if no one wants to tell Xi, is he smart enough to look at what's happening and order and request those things? Where the dictator is actually asking for that kind of assessment? Where the intelligence people might be free to finally tell him what's really going on? How do you think this whole Ukraine situation impacts intelligence within China?

Calder Walton: Oh, such a good question, and I wish I had a smoking gun for you. It's the question that so many people are asking at the moment. The simple fact of the matter is that we just don't know. And again, one day when the archives become available, we might know what sources, if any CIA has, that can answer that, or other Western services. But we can make some good ... I personally, I can't see how Putin's miscalculation, the war in Ukraine, I can't see how that is not playing into Xi's calculation over Taiwan. But as we all know, it is the one, Taiwan is the one, quote unquote, legacy issue that Xi has left to solve. So this isn't going to be something that he's just going to sort of forget about and go, "Oh, nevermind about that". This is hugely important. As important for Xi, I would argue, as Ukraine is for Putin.

When I was finishing writing the book, I went to Hong Kong and actually wrote the final chapter about China. Much of it while looking out over at the skyline in Hong Kong. And it seems to me that Hong Kong also provides another way, another process by which Xi could have his designs on Taiwan, not necessarily with a military takeover, but by osmosis, it becomes so incredibly economically impossible for Taiwan not to be part of the Chinese economic sphere, that through a slow processor of osmosis it becomes Chinese. So that's another possibility.

And then once, there's a tipping ... and that's what we saw with Hong Kong, step by step, step by step, step by step. And then suddenly as the world saw during Covid, the passing of draconian national security laws, and all of a sudden the Hong Kong that I traveled to last year when finishing the book, is certainly not the Hong Kong that I knew and loved before.

Danielle Pletka: So we've been talking sort of thematically about the meaning and espionage overall and specific dictators. Pick one or two of your favorite stories from the book, the ones where, if you have to dangle them out there like a worm reeling in readers, what are those stories?

Calder Walton: Oh, it's a great question. Well, I mean, although they are fairly well known, it just is such an extraordinary story. And some of the records that were declassified recently shed new light on them. It's the five Cambridge Spies for me. So the spies who were recruited by the KGB's predecessor in the 1930s, and then during the Second World War, while the British government and the US government were looking elsewhere, and consumed by the war against Hitler's Germany, well, Soviet espionage masterfully inserted them, the Cambridge Spies, deep inside the British establishment, the foreign policy establishment. Kim Philby, the notorious Cambridge Spy, managed to become the head of the department in MI6 that was dealing with Soviet espionage. So the person in charge of MI6's operations to try to find Soviet spies was himself a spy. And looking at the records now, you can see how Philby outmaneuvered people within MI6 and within MI5 and used his involvement in those cases to then warn other Soviet agents that the net was closing in on them.

But I did find ... and in the book I've managed to explode some myths about the Cambridge Spies. So within the Kremlin today, within Putin's Kremlin and within Russia's services, they are inevitably regarded as these towering heroes, historic heroes of Russian foreign intelligence. And so Putin's narrative is that when the first two members of the Cambridge Spy Network, Anthony Blunt, sorry, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, when they defected in 1951, the suspicion was cast onto their friend Kim Philby. And in the Putin's narrative, in Kremlin's narrative today, Philby managed to sort of fend off British intelligence, and stoically didn't give anything away. Complete and utter nonsense as you can now see from records. When Maclean and Burgess defected and nobody knew where they'd gone to, Philby knew that his friendship with them was going to cast suspicion on him. And what does he do? He writes a letter to the head of MI5 and the head of MI6, and he says, these two guys, they actually might be Soviet spies, and they maybe even had one going back to Cambridge, maybe one recruited the other.

Now Philby knew that it was actually he himself who had recruited them, but this was an attempt to deflect attention away from him and onto them. What's the result? Philby lied to everyone. He lied to the British, he lied to his friends in Britain, he lied to the Americans. He also screwed over and threw under the bus his fellow Soviet agents. He also almost certainly lied to the KGB and never told them about what he actually did. So it's little wonder that when Philby gets to Moscow in 1963, he finally defects, it takes 14 years for the KGB to invite him into their headquarters. They didn't trust him at all. So this explodes the myth image that he was this master spy, that the KGB sort of welcomed home to a hero's ... absolute nonsense. They gave him a cheap little apartment in Moscow, and he basically drank himself effectively to death.

So it's very different when you scratch the surface. And then another wrinkle on that is that, as the net was closing in on him, Philby desperately reached out to the KGB to try to get some help. And his handler in the US, he was stationed in America at the time, his handler was nowhere to be seen, badly let him down. So again, we had this image of Russian intelligence as the sort of towering figure, these powering figures, superhumans, and actually scratched the surface, what you find, as I tried to show in the book is that often some of the best buys were motivated by their ideological ... their motivations, rather than the trade craft of the Russian intelligence services. A long way of answering your question, the Cambridge Spies is, I'm afraid, just the gift that keeps giving as far as the history of espionage is concerned.

Danielle Pletka: So another thing that I think sort of apropos of this spies in our midst problem, is this very interesting point you make, which is that somehow Americans can't seem to sort of chew gum and walk. Marc and I could spend hours talking about that as a policy matter, but that during the McCarthy era, yes, McCarthy saw a commie behind every bush, a commie behind every couch, but at the same time, there were a lot of commies behind all the couches and bushes. And so you talk about this, and one of the things that I wondered as you researched this, is this still is a matter of trade craft for the Russians and or the Chinese?

Calder Walton: Well, we should start by saying that I think it was Truman who said that Moscow's greatest asset ever was McCarthy. So what he did, the damage he did to US national security was more than any Soviet spy or agent of influence ever did. McCarthy got it wrong. The people that he named, almost none of them were actually Soviet agents, but he was not wrong about the underlying principles. Soviet spies were real, and they were inflicting serious damage on US national security.

Marc Thiessen: Including Alger Hiss.

Calder Walton: Including Alger Hiss. This is the great tragedy, it seems to me, of that early chapter of the Cold Warwick, McCarthyism, the US government and the British government had at that point decrypted a series of communications. It was later known as the Venona decrypts, and they revealed the breadth and depth of Soviet wartime espionage, against the US, including the Manhattan Project, the atomic bomb project, and including, as you just said, Marc, Alger Hiss.

The tragedy was that even after Venona Secret, the secrets of these decryption effort had been blown to the Kremlin, even when US and British intelligence knew that the secret was exposed, both governments continued to hold onto that secret for decades. It wasn't until after the Cold War when the UK and the US finally admitted the existence of the Venona decrypt. And it seems to me that they were ... I mean in the words of one FBI special agent who was involved in a lot of the early Cold War cases, he asked the director of NSA, who are you keeping the secret from? It's not from the KGB, it's from the American public. If the American public had known about the Venona decrypts, a secret which by the mid 1950s any reasonable damage assessment would've said, that secret's gone, the Kremlin knows it, it would've vastly changed American's public understanding of communism and Soviet espionage at that time. And as you pointed out, Marc, some of the most notorious cases, Alger Hiss, they could have avoided decades of left and right arguments, polarization within American society. So Dany, to get back to your point though, is this something that Russian services are still seeking to do, to exploit?

I mean, what we're really talking about here is how they plant the seeds of disinformation or use, to use the KGB's term, useful idiots in Western countries to whip up a frenzy. Absolutely. And the thing is, what's changed with all of this, is the environment, the social media environment today compared to the past, where it's just much quicker and easier for Russian services or any hostile service, to spread disinformation and then get people, particularly in this country, and I do love this country, but in this country in particular, to then believe objectively falsifiable nonsense, as truth. So that's the unhappy position that we seem to be in today, I'm afraid.

Marc Thiessen: Well, speaking of useful idiots, there's the whole controversy over Hunter Biden right now, right? And so Peter Schweizer was on our podcast recently, who's written a book, a wonderful book going into detail about all the financial transactions, and he goes after Republicans and Democrats alike, on their ties with China. But one of the things that he's dug up is that we just had this email exchange that Hunter Biden had with a Chinese energy executive, and saying, "My father's sitting right here. We need the money, we need it now, or we're going to make your life miserable". All the rest of it. Peter pointed out that he had already, this Chinese executive, had already given Hunter Biden $5 million from a company that this executive co-owned with the daughter of the Chinese Minister of State Security, right? This is the premier intelligence arm. And Peter's point is that this isn't just a corruption issue, that it's actually a national security issue. Is this conspiracy theory? Is this something we should take seriously? Should we be worried about? Is the Hunter Biden story, which has caught up in so much politics, is it something that we should be concerned about? From a national security standpoint in the context of all the things you've studied here about intelligence and espionage?

Calder Walton: Well, I would say two things. The thing that you learn about studying the history of espionage and disinformation, is that we need to be very humble or have some ... pump the brakes whenever a big scandal emerges. Now, history shows that what appears in the public domain is generally the tip of an iceberg, and there's a lot more going on. So is it possible that this is a serious national security issue? Yes. Do I have proof to say that? No. Is it ... what I would urge your listeners to think about is, hostile states like Russia and China who are after all in an alliance with no limits, will use every opportunity they can to confuse and to discredit the US government. So I would always, always think that when a big scandal emerges, is there a hidden hand? Who is releasing this information? And what is their vested interest in doing so?

And is it possible that there's a foreign hand behind it? Now, this doesn't mean that you need to go down into the wilderness of mirrors, and I don't know which way is up, and everything like that. But to answer your question is, with the fullness of time, and I would say this, I'm a historian, but more and more-

Marc Thiessen: We will know.

Calder Walton: ... Information ... we will know, and I can guarantee you that what we think we know right now is not going to be the whole truth and more stuff will come out, which will change our ... so humility, I guess, is what ... my overall takeaway from writing this book is that what appears to be one thing at one time generally turns into something else with the fullness of time. I'm sorry, I can't provide a more-

Marc Thiessen: No, of course. No one knows the answer.

Calder Walton: No one knows. That's-

Marc Thiessen: It's just fascinating that the family of the Minister of State Security would want to pay him that money. And it could be for influence. It could be to have him on the hook as kompromat to discredit the Biden administration in some way. I mean, there could be so many reasons why they did it, but it's not because Hunter Biden is an expert on energy in China.

Calder Walton: Yeah, it's a wildness of mirrors. Here we are.

Danielle Pletka: Look, I think you make one point very, very clear, and if I have to, there are a lot of lessons to take from the book, but one of the ones that I took most clearly, is that our adversaries are so much better at the long game than we are. And perhaps with the humility that is necessary that you described from learning about this sort of almost more than a hundred year war, that perhaps we could sharpen our long game just a little bit.

Calder Walton: I think you've summarized it better than I can. I mean, that's exactly it. The short termism in the US, and indeed in my native country, the UK, is staggering when compared to both, obviously China, but also Russia. Putin has been around for three decades. He's seen however many prime ministers and presidents come and go, and yet he's been able to pursue a grand strategy that is continuous. Little wonder then that we find ourselves spinning around in circles chasing our tails, while Putin has been this steady hand, and then compared to Xi now, we've got more of the same. So I think that short termism is an illness that needs to be cured, certainly in this country, and I would argue in Europe and Britain as well. How do we go about doing that? Learn more history.

Marc Thiessen: I've got so many questions I want to ask you, but one of the things, the stories you tell where everyone was shocked by obviously the Russian election interference in 2016, and we went down some wrong paths on that. They managed to get us to spend two years and tens of millions of dollars chasing a conspiracy theory. But one of the things that's lost in it, is that that was nothing new. You point out that Stalin meddled in the 1948 presidential election trying to elect Henry Wallace. Can you tell that story? I don't think people know that.

Calder Walton: No, it's an absolutely extraordinary story that I found from Russian archives while researching the book. So Henry Wallace, former vice president who Truman had fired for being too left wing, he was running as an independent in 1948. And there's always been this question Marc within the sort of specialized literature, was Wallace a Soviet agent? Doesn't seem that he was actually ever recruited. They didn't, as far as I can tell, the Soviet intelligence didn't give him a code name, which is revealing. He doesn't appear, seem to appear under a code name in the Venona decrypts that I mentioned earlier. But what we can now say for certain is, that in 1948, as he was preparing his election platform, running against Truman as an independent, he was secretly a corresponding, and I hate to use this word, but I think it's true, colluding with Stalin about what platform's, political platform's agenda would be useful for Stalin, for him, Wallace to include in his intellectual campaign.

So we've got the correspondence going between them through the Soviet ambassador in Washington, with Stalin's handwritten ... characteristic, handwritten notes in his pencils saying, this isn't so useful. Present more on that. And then they had a plan that that Wallace would write a public letter outlining how friendship with the Soviet Union could be created. And then Stalin, according to the plan, would publicly respond to that letter. It all went to plan. Now what happened? Wallace dismally lost that election. Okay. So the net result was nothing for Stalin. And then there's this absolutely horrendous footnote to the whole thing, which is, after that, then Wallace continued to write to Stalin. He never replied, and he writes to his foreign minister and says, we've got enough from this guy, we don't need to bother anymore. Let him go. Wallace in the early 1950s came clean and said, wrote this remarkable letter, public letter, saying "Where I was wrong about Stalin and communism".

So he saw that he got it right in the end after all of this, it's important to say. That lesson of using the freedoms within the West, particularly the US in its elections, to help candidates who would be advantageous to the Kremlin, that was not lost, and that was repeated again in the 1960s. They tried to undermine ... the KGB tried, did everything they could to prevent Reagan winning a second term. And then little wonder then that we find Russian intelligence in 2016 using the same strategy, different techniques, social media, same underlying principle, use the openness of the freedoms within the US as its own downfall, and help to get someone elected who would be advantageous to the Kremlin. Same strategy.

Marc Thiessen: So there was just a big piece. It was either the New York Times or the Washington Post, about the Chinese efforts to use the Chinese diaspora in Canada to target members of parliament who are anti-Chinese. There was a member from British Columbia, a member of Parliament who would, I guess is ethnically Chinese and was a very big critic of China on the Uyghurs. And all of a sudden no one in the Chinese community was answering his calls, all his money dried up, all of his support. No one would host him for events, like that. And it turns out that the Chinese Communist Party was infiltrating the diaspora to undermine him. I mean, is China taking the lessons of this and doing this as well?

Calder Walton: Absolutely, a hundred percent. And I've had this story coming at me in every direction for about the last year, from people within, that I know and highly respect, within Canadian intelligence and national security circles, saying the US media isn't reporting on this, but there is a significant effort of election interference in Canada. So finally, I think that the US media is giving this the attention that it deserves, and of course what happens in Canada, there's no reason why it won't be happening here. So I think, to my mind, we were, in the last presidential election, we were getting worried about the existence and operation of deepfake. As far as I know, that didn't really play out. That's the one area that I'm really very concerned about as we go forward, up to 2024, deepfake operated by both Chinese and Russian intelligence, on social media. I think that this is ... I can't see how this isn't going to be significant, put it that way. So to answer your question, yes, there's a deliberate effort on the part of Chinese intelligence just as there is with Russian intelligence to interfere in Western elections.

Danielle Pletka: So exit question from me, and we keep saying that we're going to let you go, and then I have another question for you, so absolutely the Chinese and the Russians have used their intelligence operatives and skills to interfere in elections, not simply in Canada, in the United States, but Australia and all over Asia and in Europe as well.

Calder Walton: The UK.

Danielle Pletka: UK for sure. Sometimes they have a preferred candidate. Sometimes they just want to erode faith in the system, erode faith in democracy as they've done very effectively I think certainly in the US. Here's a question though. You are the author of, or the editor of the Cambridge History of Espionage and Intelligence, so you know a lot about MI5 as well as the United States, and in our own intelligence. Have you seen any evidence that we are as good at doing these things, these deepfake, these influence operations, these infiltrations, as our enemies are?

Calder Walton: So certainly in the Cold War, I think that both the British and the US were extremely effective at promoting propaganda, or if you wanted to use another term, disinformation. Disinformation always suggests that there is a falsehood. And so I think that's not right to describe what the British and US intelligence services were doing in terms of a narrative, a public narrative, about what the West stood for. They would forge documents occasionally, we saw that they would forge documents to discredit the Soviet Union. That's definitely disinformation. Are they as good? Well, unfortunately, you get up against the same problem, then past as it is now present. And that is it's fundamentally much more difficult to disseminate propaganda, influence operations in a closed police state, than it is in a free democracy. They hold all the cards, the things that we cherish, our freedoms in the West are exactly what makes us vulnerable to these things, but we don't want to change any of that because that's of course what makes the West what it is.

One way I'd look at this, and perhaps just leave this for your listeners to consider, is that in the 1980s, a KGB officer who specialized in disinformation, or what they called active measures, testified in Congress, and he was asked ... okay, he laid it all out, what the KGB was doing, what kind of disinformation they were doing, how they would seize upon so-called wedge issues within the US domestic audiences, race relations, that kind of thing, how they would exploit them. So he laid it all out there, and then the question was, "okay, well what do we do about it?" And he said ... this is Stanislav Levchenko, he said, "Well, what Americans need to do is to read widely, you need to not accept one source of news. You need to read as much as you can about a story, and be aware and or be alert to the idea that somebody planting that information has an agenda". And it seems to me that that is just the same today as it was then. Don't get your news from one single source, read widely and think critically. And that I think is the best antidote we can have.

Marc Thiessen: I'm going to have two exit questions because I want to end on a story that you broke in your book, based on what we just discussed, I wanted to ask you something else, which is, talk to us about the asymmetry and the relative strengths and weaknesses of Western intelligence versus totalitarian intelligence. We talked a little bit about the weaknesses and the confirmation bias, but you've written, you wrote a piece on foreign policy where you talked about how Chinese intelligence agencies aren't held to account by political bodies, so that gives them a certain freedom that ours don't have. They're allowed to conduct industrial intelligence, whereas our agencies aren't allowed to do that. They have ubiquitous technical surveillance that we don't have the advantages of. Talk to us a little bit about the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese and Russian intelligence versus the United States, and how do we make up for our weaknesses and exploit their weaknesses?

Calder Walton: Well, great question Marc. Massive questions. So that's exactly it. So China, like Russia, is probably ... and North Korea, Iran, they are as closed police states, the hardest possible targets for any foreign intelligence service to collect reliable intelligence on. So the Soviet Union was in the past, the eastern bloc at satellites, but now you throw into the mix, as you just correctly described it, ubiquitous technical surveillance, facial recognition, scanning QR codes to get in and out of buildings and stuff. You can quickly see how this becomes near to impossible for foreign intelligence services to operate effectively on Chinese soil or Russian soil. Now, intelligence communities love what they call their sources and methods. They are presumably doing things to work around those problems, their sources and methods that we shouldn't know about and we won't know about for years to come.

It seems to me, looking at the history of intelligence and national security in the 20th century, and then this century, the game changer for Western services is this revolution that's underway at the moment from open source, or commercially available intelligence. So outfits that your listeners maybe have heard of like Bellingcat that are doing some remarkable investigations into Russian operations in Western countries, all from commercially available intelligence. There are other providers of open source and commercially available. They're doing things that traditionally a secret service would've taken enormous resources to have pulled off. And even then not sure if they could have done, back in the old days, and they're now being done through the click of a mouse over computers. That's the future of how Western services, working in conjunction with the private sector, can compete with these closed authoritarian regimes. It seems to me that Western services need to figure out a way to incorporate what the private sector is doing, because the keys to success lay with the private sector, no longer with the government.

I mean, the statistic is that during the Cold War in the 20th century, about 80% of US intelligence collection came from clandestine collection. So from signals, intelligence, intercepts, other technical eavesdropping and from human sources. So 80% from that, 20% from open sources, and now those proportions are thought exactly reversed.

Marc Thiessen: Wow.

Calder Walton: Open source is the coin of the realm, and that's what's happening. And then it can be supplemented by clandestine collection. So the age of the traditional secret service, the age of the CIA, as we think about it historically, that's over, and it is about open source. We're not going to compete with Chinese intelligence or Russian intelligence using traditional methods. And I guarantee you, the way ahead with this, and I know that intelligence communities are thinking along the same line, but they're in a sort of existential crisis themselves, trying to figure out how do we incorporate open source, commercially available intelligence into a secret service? Doesn't that mean that we're no longer a secret service? Well, yes, I'm afraid so, because intelligence is changing. So that's what we're undergoing in the West at the moment.

Marc Thiessen: All right, and final question, actual last exit question, because you've got so many great stories in this book and I encourage everybody-

Calder Walton: Oh thanks.

Marc Thiessen: ... to go read it because there's so many great stories. But you broke some news because, under Stalin, of course, you talk about how the Soviets carried out campaigns of assassinations abroad, and how Putin has revived this. And so I'd like you to talk a little bit about that. But you broke a particular story about, I'm going to mispronounce the name, Alexander Poteyev? Tell us who he is and what you found out that the Russians tried to do to him.

Calder Walton: So this is a story that was really ... it was a remarkable story that I got from two different sources. So Alexander Poteyev is a spy who the CIA recruited deep inside Russian intelligence, and he was working in the so-called illegals directorate, that's to say Russian operatives, deep undercover, like the series The Americans, if you remember that. So these are Russian intelligence operatives blending in, living under aliases or what they call legends in Western countries. He was the one who disclosed the existence of, amongst other secrets he betrayed to the C I A, the existence of a network of Russian illegals operating in the United States. And they were arrested in 2010. And this included, if you remember Anna Chapman, the rather glamorous, femme fatale as she was, and they were swapped in a spy swap, with Western agents being swapped, going the other way. And the caught Russians spies going the other way. Soon after, needless to say the CIA exfiltrated, their agent Poteyev to the West, and he has been living under an alias ever since.

Now, the year after he disappeared, it was blindingly obvious who the spy was, because all of a sudden he disappeared, a Kremlin spokesman said, the year after in 2011, we know who the traitor is and we're going to be sending a Mercader, which is a reference to the Soviet assassin who killed Trotsky in 1940. So they said, we're going to send an assassin

Marc Thiessen: Openly announce this.

Calder Walton: Openly. But part of this, of course is making, as the Kremlin sees a traitor, as we in the US, a brave hero who betrayed secrets about Putin's regime to the West. The strategy is to make him a terrified for his life. So there was no secret that the Kremlin was trying to do this. But what I showed through two exclusive interviews, with CIA officers who wish to remain anonymous, is that that in 2020, Russian intelligence was in late stage planning of an assassination plot to kill him on US soil. And the proportions of this, the significance of this really can't be overstated. Throughout the Cold Warwick, and up until that point, there had always been a bright red line that Russia wouldn't conduct assassinations on US soil. Britain, something different, as we saw with Litvinenko, if you remember, assassinated using polonium laced tea in Central London, and then Sergei Skripal in 2018.

And there have been a spate of assassinations in Europe as well, but never in the United States. And this was a red line that, it seems now we can say with confidence that Putin was prepared to step over, and actually conduct an assassination on the US soil. It was thwarted by US intelligence, and I'm reliably told that the CIA spy is now somewhere else entirely, living under a different alias. So it really showed the murderous intentions of Putin's regime. It seems to me incredible story. It was-

Danielle Pletka: Incredible story.

Calder Walton: It was a remarkable story. I'm a historian, not an investigative journalist, so I'm the first to say out of my depth with this. But-

Marc Thiessen: The New York Times investigated and confirmed it.

Calder Walton: I have to say that was one to put on my bedroom wall, to say the New York Times has confirmed my research. So it was relieving to say the least that I wasn't going down the wrong trail with this. And no, it was, I think a hugely important story to get out in the public domain, to try to throw as much light as possible on the intentions of Putin's intelligence services and what they're prepared to do.

Danielle Pletka: Well, the whole book is fantastic. It really is. And for all of our listeners, we really do commend it. Spies, the Epic Intelligence War between East and West, Calder Walton. This has just been amazing. What a great conversation. Thank you for joining us.

Calder Walton: Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

Marc Thiessen: Take care.

Danielle Pletka: Great. Take care.