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CHUCK TODD:

This Sunday, war footing. President Trump changes his team for the coming battle with Robert Mueller.

DONALD TRUMP:

"We're all fighting battles, but I love fighting these battles."

CHUCK TODD:

John Dowd and Ty Cobb, out. Rudy Giuliani and Emmet Flood, in. Cooperating with Mueller, out. Taking off the gloves, in. Plus, Mayor Culp. The former New York mayor contradicts this claim by President Trump.

REPORTER:

Did you know about the \$130,000 payment to Stormy Daniels?

CHUCK TODD:

With this statement on Fox News.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Funneled it through the law firm, and then the president repaid it.

SEAN HANNITY

Oh, didn't know he did .

RUDY GIULIANI

Yeah.

CHUCK TODD:

Why did this story change?

DONALD TRUMP:

We're not changing any stories.

CHUCK TODD:

So, what happened?

DONALD TRUMP:

He started yesterday. He'll get his facts straight.

CHUCK TODD:

This exchange, just the latest example of the administration's growing credibility crisis. My guests this morning, Stormy Daniels attorney Michael Avenatti and professional emeritus at Harvard Law School Alan Dershowitz. Also, Putin's game. The Russian leader interfered with our elections. And the country remains more divided than it has been in decades.

Is Putin's gamble paying off? I'll ask the former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul. Joining me for insight and analysis are, Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute. Robert Costa, the Washington Post. The Boston Herald's Kimberly Atkins. And author and historian, Jon Meacham. Welcome to Sunday. It's Meet the Press.

CHUCK TODD:

Good Sunday morning. It was in the 1960s during Lyndon Johnson's presidency that the term credibility gap gained currency, the difference between what the administration told the public and what actually was true. The term seems particularly relevant again today. We have been told by his doctor that Donald Trump would be the healthiest individual ever elected.

Now, we're told by the doctor that Mr. Trump wrote the letter himself. We have been told by President Trump that he hired F.B.I. director, fired F.B.I. director James Comey because of the Russia investigation. Now, we're told by Rudy Giuliani that Comey was fired because he refused to say publicly that Mr. Trump was not a target of the investigation.

We have been told that President Trump knew nothing about the \$130,000 payment made by his lawyer Michael Cohen to porn actress Stormy Daniels. Now, we're told the president reimbursed Cohen through a retainer and that the president didn't know how the money was being used. Then, we were told by President Trump that Giuliani will get his facts straight.

But the president could not tell us what those facts actually are at that moment. Look, all presidents stretch the truth, some more than others. But the economy is strong. And the president does have a faithful base. Could it be that by the time Robert Mueller issues his findings, no matter what they are, people are too numb to the truth shading and too confused by the doubts Mr. Trump is irresponsibly sowing to care?

DONALD TRUMP:

So, Rudy knows it's a witch hunt. He started yesterday. He'll get his facts straight.

CHUCK TODD:

The president, trying to explain away troubling statements from his new lawyer, Rudy Giuliani.

DONALD TRUMP: Rudy is a great guy, but he just started a day ago. Rudy had just started when he made certain statements, he just started yesterday.

CHUCK TODD: Giuliani actually started two weeks ago. The backpedalling came after Giuliani casually confirmed Wednesday night on Fox News that the president had repaid his lawyer Michael Cohen the \$130,000 Cohen paid porn actress Stormy Daniels in October 2016 to make her story go away.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Funneled it through a law firm and the president repaid it.

SEAN HANNITY:

Oh, I didn't know. He did.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Yep. CHUCK TODD:Cohen told NBC News in February, quote: "I used my own personal funds ... Neither the Trump Organization nor the Trump campaign ... reimbursed me for the payment, either directly or indirectly." But on Thursday - Giuliani told the Washington Post that Cohen was "paid by Donald Trump's personal funds." Also on Thursday - the president confirmed Giuliani's shifting story - tweeting that Cohen had received a "monthly retainer." But by Friday, a walkback:

REPORTER:

Why did you change your story on Stormy Daniels?

DONALD TRUMP:

We're not changing any stories. Excuse me, you take a look at what I said. You go back and take a look.CHUCK TODD:

The president, referring to this exchange last month on Air Force One.REPORTER:

Did you know about the \$130,000 payment to Stormy Daniels?

DONALD TRUMP:

No.

CHUCK TODDNow, the New York Times reports that in fact Mr. Trump did know of the payment to Daniels several months before he denied any knowledge of it to reporters on Air Force One. On Saturday night, Giuliani was on the air again trying to clarify - but did not address that timing.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Even if it was for campaign purposes, if it was to save his family, to save embarrassment, it's not a campaign donation. And second, even if it was a campaign donation, the President reimbursed it fully with a payment of \$35,000 a month. That paid for that,and other expenses.CHUCK TODD:Giuliani's debut on friendly media was supposed to kick off a new, more combative legal strategy from the president and his new legal team - after months where Mr. Trump's previous lawyers tried to cooperate with the Special Counsel. DONALD TRUMP:

Let me tell you folks - we're all fighting battles. But I love fighting these battles.CHUCK TODD:

Yet by week's end, even many of the president's allies felt the pivot was not going according to plan.LAURA INGRAHAM:

What the heck? He did know, he didn't know? I love Rudy, but they better have an explanation for that. That's a problem.

CHUCK TODD:With some even challenging the president's credibility.NEIL CAVUTO:

You didn't know about that \$130,000 payment to a porn star until you did. Now I'm not saying you're a liar, you're president, you're busy. I'm just having a devil of a time figuring out which news is fake.

CHUCK TODD:

And joining me now from Los Angeles is Michael Avenatti, the attorney for Stephanie Clifford, AKA Stormy Daniels. Mr. Avenatti, welcome to Meet the Press, sir.

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Good morning.

CHUCK TODD:

Let me start with a simple big picture question. Why is this case, the case you're working on, so important to the American people?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

I think it's important to the American people because, uh, it centers on a cover-up by the president, Michael Cohen and others relating to the \$130,000 payment, what the president knew, when he knew it, what he did about it, and now a series of lies that the American people have been told relating to that payment, uh, and the other facts surrounding it.

CHUCK TODD:

What are you trying to get out of this case? Why should voters still care about this nondisclosure case? I only ask that....um, um, Ms. Clifford has already told her story – we already – on 60 Minutes. It's already out there. What are

you fighting for at this point?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Well, she hasn't told the entire story. I mean, 60 Minutes aired about 17 minutes of a three-hour interview. Uh the president and Michael Cohen continue to threaten her with extensive damages that they claim are owed to them if she continues to speak out and tell her story. And this should matter to the American people because they have the right to be told the truth by their elected officials. They have the right not to be lied to, including onboard Air Force One. And cover-ups should always matter to the American people.

CHUCK TODD:

Are you trying to win a case or take down a president?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

We're trying to win a case. And we're trying to present facts and evidence to the American people. This is a search for the truth. Ultimately, the American people and others that are far more educated and powerful than us will decide whether the President is fit to remain in office.

CHUCK TODD:

You said um 60 Minutes did three hours of an interview they only aired 17 minutes. Is there stuff they left out that is, that they had to legally leave out? Is that were you're implying here? That there's more to her story? That there's stuff that had to be legally left out of that interview?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

I don't think that there's stuff that, quote, "legally," close quote, had to be left out. But there's no question that there's a whole host of details surrounding the relationship, surrounding the intimidation, surrounding the threats uh that were left out of the piece aired by 60 Minutes. I mean, their format only allowed them to air so much.

CHUCK TODD:

I want you to respond to something Rudy Giuliani, among the many things he has said about this case. But this one in particular was in an interview at the Washington Post on Thursday. He said, "If somebody made an allegation

against one of my clients that wasn't true and accepted \$135,000 to settle it, I know the public may think the settlement may mean an admission of guilt, but it's not. If you're talking \$5 to \$6 million, now you'd have something different."

He's implying here that in accepting the \$130,000, that she was a nuisance, it was a nuisance lawsuit, and that what she was claiming wasn't true— may not have been true. If it was true, she would have gotten more money. What do you say to that?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

I think it's ridiculous. I mean, I think it's just another absurdity that's been trotted out to the American people to deflect away from the facts. The American people are smarter than this. Look, the President and Michael Cohen have prided themselves for years on claiming that they're tough guys, that they're great negotiators. I mean, how many times have we heard that? Now, they expect the American people to believe that a woman came out of the woodwork, was lying, was not being honest, they had absolutely no reason to believe that this had happened, and they just took \$130,000 out of their pocket and paid her. I mean, it's absurd. If that was the--

CHUCK TODD:

Why did she accept that figure? I know you weren't her lawyer then. It was this lawyer that apparently Michael Cohen works with frequently by the name of Keith Davidson. Why – why this amount? And why did your client accept it?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Well, I think she accepted the payment because uh she understood that there was going to be an agreement whereby she was going to accept the money and this was going to go away. And there were releases on both sides. There was agreement not to speak on both sides. Not just on her side. There was an agreement by or there was supposed to be agreement by Mr. Trump to give her a full release, to leave her alone, to not discuss this.

And of course, uh, that agreement that never came to fruition because he didn't sign the agreement. There were a number of other reasons why the agreement didn't come to fruition. And then we fast forward to February – uh March of this year, when Michael Cohen decides to speak in response to the Wall Street Journal article. And they begin spreading lies about my client.

CHUCK TODD:

No, but I understand that. But why did she accept the money at the time?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

She – for the reason I just answered the question. For the reason I just stated. Because she understood that there was an agreement. She wanted to get on with her life. And she was prepared to operate under that agreement as long as the other side operated under the agreement.

CHUCK TODD:

Well, what's preventing her from--

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

And, of course--

CHUCK TODD:

I I mean, I guess what I don't understand is--

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Now, I'd like to finish.

CHUCK TODD:

For a year--

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

I'd like to finish.

CHUCK TODD:

But for a year, did they talk about this? That's what I'm trying to understand.

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

All right. I'd like to be able to finish my answer if I could. So she understood that the agreement was going to be honored by both sides and everybody was going to move on. And that's not what happened. Uh, she also understood that Mr. Trump had signed the agreement. She only found out in

early this year that in fact he had not signed the agreement. The agreement had never come to fruition. And in fact Michael Cohen then went, and violated the confidentiality, and began spreading lies about her and what happened.

CHUCK TODD:

What have you learned about Keith Davidson? How did he end up becoming, um, Ms. Clifford's lawyer?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Well, I mean, we've learned a lot about Keith Davidson. And we continue to learn a lot about Keith Davidson. I don't think there's any question that the relationship between Keith Davidson and Michael Cohen uh was not arm's length. It's unclear as to exactly how close they were. But that was not a traditional relationship among two adversaries. Uh it appears that they've had a long history together. They have a history that postdates and predates uh the involvement of my client. And we're still trying to get to the bottom of exactly what happened there.

CHUCK TODD:

Do you believe that Ms. Clifford was pitched his services under false pretenses?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

I don't want to offer an opinion on that right now. I'll say this. I think uh there's no question that I would have handled it quite a bit differently.

CHUCK TODD:

How did you come to be representing um um Ms. Clifford? It's my understanding you said it was a referral. Who referred you?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Yeah I'm not going to get into the details of that. I will say this. No political party or anybody that's politically active uh referred me, if that's what people are suggesting, which that appears to be one of the most recent conspiracy theories in an effort to um debunk our effort or undercut our effort. Because

people don't seem willing to accept the truth. And the truth is that we are pursuing this for all the right reasons. This is a search for the truth. We're going to lay out the facts and evidence for the American people.

CHUCK TODD:

Do you believe this your case is somehow connected to Robert Mueller? Have you been – have has Robert Mueller's folks reached out to you? Or only the folks at the Southern District of New York?

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

I'm not at liberty to discuss who in law enforcement that we have communicated with. But suffice it to say that we are cooperating.

CHUCK TODD:

Have – okay. Have you been asked to speak to Robert Mueller? Have you or your client been asked to speak to Robert Mueller's prosecutors? That's not something that others have felt that they couldn't disclose.

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Well, others may not have felt that they could or could not disclose it. But that's not my position. My position is that we're going to respect the process and we're not going to be providing details on who in law enforcement we speak to and when.

CHUCK TODD:

All right. Michael Avenatti, uh the attorney um for Stormy Dan—uh, Stephanie Clifford, AKA Stormy Daniels. Mr. Avenatti, thanks for coming on Meet the Press.

MICHAEL AVENATTI:

Thank you.

CHUCK TODD:

And joining me now for another perspective is Alan Dershowitz. He's the Professor Emeritus at Harvard Law School, and of course, he's author of a new book that he put out, *Trumped Up: How the Criminalization of Political*

Differences Endangers Democracy. Mr. Dershowitz, welcome back to Meet the Press, sir.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Thank you.

CHUCK TODD:

I want to get you to react to something that Rudy Giuliani, the president's lead attorney, said last night on Fox News. Here it is.

GIULIANI:

Even if it was for campaign purposes, if it was to save his family, to save embarrassment, it's not a campaign donation. And second, even if it was a campaign donation, the president reimbursed it fully with a payment of \$35,000 a month that paid for that and other expenses.

CHUCK TODD:

Now, Mr. Dershowitz, I would expect you to provide me legal analysis. But this is the president's attorney trying to provide an explanation. And he's providing two different explanations. So, I gotta ask you. Is this legal strategy that Mr. Giuliani's pursuing here, has this been well-thought out over the last few days?

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

No, I don't think so. I think this was a very bad week for the Trump team. But it was also a very bad week for the Mueller team, in light of the judge who--

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--rebuked the Mueller team for the Manafort thing. I think it was a very good week for Americans, 'cause we now finally have a judge who's overseeing this. And who said Americans don't want to see anybody with unlimited power. But the Trump team has to speak with a single narrative. They have to get their story clearly set out. It has to be put in writing. It shouldn't be put on television shows off the cuff.

This is not the way to handle a complicated case. Now, Mr. Giuliani may have a point. That is, motives are complicated. The money may have been paid for a variety of motives to save embarrassment in the family, to help the campaign. It is a close case on whether or not there's any violation of any election laws. But if there are violations, they don't seem to be very substantial. If the president, for example--

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--did pay and didn't report it, it's probably more likely the treasurer is in violation of the law than the president himself.

CHUCK TODD:

Has--

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

So, I think that-- go ahead.

CHUCK TODD:

No, no, no, has Mr. Giuliani actually invited more scrutiny from prosecutors, though? Because of what he said? Now, the prosecutors are going, "Well, okay. You're either --we're either going to get you for not disclosing a campaign loan." You know, either way, they have actually violated some law. And you're right, it can be a technicality, if you want to call it that. But they're admitting to a violation here.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Well, I think they're admitting to enough that warrants scrutiny. And if you combine that with what the judge said, Judge Ellis, who said, "Look, this is all designed by Mueller to try to find evidence to either charge President Trump--  
"

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--or to impeach President Trump." And they have developed tactics for trying to do that. It seems to me that the approach last week of the Trump team plays into the hands of Mueller's tactic to try, at any cost, to find technical violations against lower ranking people. So that they can be squeezed. Remember, the judge made an interesting point.

CHUCK TODD:

Yeah.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Kind of parroting what I've been saying on television. That the risk sometimes that prosecutors can not only get somebody to sing--

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--but get them to compose. And there are real dangers to civil liberties in the approach that the judge said Mueller is using. But this was a bad week for both sides. And as I said, a good week for America. Because Americans get the benefit now--

CHUCK TODD:

All right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--of a judge who's prepared to look at this from an objective point of view. And to express views that all experienced people know. This is the way prosecutors operate. But Giuliani knows it too. And he shouldn't be playing into their hands.

CHUCK TODD:

I was just going to say, I have to ask you about another thing he said having to do with James Comey. Here's what he said.

GIULIANI:

He fired Comey because Comey would not, among other things, say that he wasn't a target of the investigation. He's entitled to that. Hillary Clinton got that. And he couldn't get that. So, he fired him. And he said, "I'm free of this guy."

CHUCK TODD:

Look. I think I believe, and I think you've said this before on the obstruction part of this, the obstruction case is only as strong as probably the actual conspiracy case itself. And I understand that. But did Mr. Giuliani actually strengthen, potentially, an obstruction case against the president by declaring that rationale as representing the president on television?

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Well, we now have, obviously, two narratives. The president himself said, both on television and in a meeting with the Russians, that he was motivated at least in part to end the Russian probe. I'm sure he was also motivated in part by what Comey refused to tell him. Motives are complex. Motives are multi-faceted. That's why motives should never form the basis of a crime. That's why it's wrong to question what a president's motives are when the president acted within his constitutional authority. We don't want to turn motives--

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--and analysis of the president's mind into criminal statutes. We have to look at what the president did, not what his motives are. Because motives are always complex, in both situations. The payment to Stormy Daniels--

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--And the firing of Comey. We see complex motives at work. But this can be presented much more effectively as a defense than it's been presented thus far by the Trump team.

CHUCK TODD:

I want to ask you actually about that in particular. When it comes to the questions that Mueller wants to ask the president, you have, I think, believed that a sitting president couldn't be compelled to answer questions via subpoena about his actions while in office. But what if--

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

No, no, about the motives behind his actions.

CHUCK TODD:

Motives behind. Right. I understand that.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Right, yeah.

CHUCK TODD:

But if Mueller wants to question the president about his actions and about his motives before he's in office, for everything that took place in the campaign, isn't that a much tougher subpoena for Mr. Trump's attorneys to fight?

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Yes. There are three categories. There's what happened before he was president. That, he can fight on Judge Ellis's grounds, that it has nothing to do with the mandate that was given to--

CHUCK TODD:

But that's a hard--

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--the special counsel.

CHUCK TODD:

But it's probably a high bar.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

That's a hard--

(OVERTALK)

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

That's a high bar.

CHUCK TODD:

Okay.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

The second is actions he took while president that are authorized by the Constitution. I think he prevails on that. And then there are actions during the campaign and the transition period, which have kind of crazy legal protection. So, there are three categories. And if they were to fight the subpoena, I think they would have a partial victory. But in the end, they would probably have to answer some questions. And I'm sure that's what they're thinking about now. Because when you volunteer--

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--at least maybe you can constrain the questions. When you're subpoenaed, a subpoena is broad. Your lawyer isn't present. This is a tough decision--

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--for the president's team to make.

CHUCK TODD:

I'm curious. Do you believe you enjoy attorney-client privilege with the president? And I ask that--

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Oh, absolutely not.

CHUCK TODD:

Okay, and I only ask that. Have you had conversations with the president about this probe?

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

I have made it very clear. I've had three conversations with the president since he's been president. All about the Middle East, primarily because I have been advising the White House on the ongoing efforts toward a Middle East peace process.

CHUCK TODD:

Okay.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

And every conversation I've had with the president was preceded by "Don't give me any information that you think is lawyer-client. We are not in a lawyer-client relationship. Nothing you tell me is privileged by lawyer-client privilege. And I'm not going to be your lawyer. That's not the relationship I have." I'm a civil libertarian--

CHUCK TODD:

Okay.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--who cares deeply, as the judge does, about protecting Americans from excesses of civil liberties--

CHUCK TODD:

And--

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

--and that's the position I'm going to maintain.

CHUCK TODD:

And where are you with Julian Assange and Wikileaks? There was a time you did some legal advisory work for them. Do you still advise Wikileaks for--

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

No.

CHUCK TODD:

--Julian Assange?

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

No. No. I ended my relationship with Wikileaks when Wikileaks became political and started to involve itself in the campaign, by leaking materials. My only contact with Assange was years ago, when he was wanted in both Sweden and was worried about an indictment in the United States. So, I have no current legal relationship with Wikileaks, though I did have a relationship with Assange many, many years ago.

CHUCK TODD:

All right. I wanted to clear that up, because I hadn't asked you about that before. But Mr. Dershowitz, I'm going to leave it there. Thanks for coming on, sharing your expertise.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Thank you.

CHUCK TODD:

Always a pleasure, sir.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ:

Thank you.

CHUCK TODD:

When we come back, the panel will be here to break down the latest on the Russia investigation, the Stormy Daniels case, and the administration's growing credibility issues.

CHUCK TODD:

Welcome back. Panel is here. Robert Costa, the Washington Post and moderator of Washington Week on PBS. Danielle Pletka, the American Enterprise Institute. Kimberly Atkins, chief Washington reporter and columnist for the Boston Herald. And Jon Meacham, author of the new book, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. We'll talk about that a little bit later.

Let me start with your colleague, Robert Costa, Dan Balz. And what he wrote on Friday morning. Sort of the larger reaction to everything we've learned. Does it bother anyone that President Trump has been caught lying? Does it bother anyone that this is not new? Does it bother anyone that the president has been shown to be a liar? That was Dan Balz's lead. That's not somebody who throws the L-word around. This is where we're at.

ROBERT COSTA:

Dan Balz, one of the best. And he brings up an important question. But for Republicans I'm covering, they still do not seem to be breaking with President Trump. Just months ahead of the midterm elections, they've bought the ticket. They're taking the ride. They're sticking with President Trump. But for those suburban voters in the country who watch all of this, with Stormy Daniels, the misstatements, lies, you do wonder. Do the voters who may have went from the middle to President Trump in 2016, do they flip back this year?

CHUCK TODD:

Danielle, the Wall Street Journal editorial page on Friday, Paul Gigot and company. "Mr. Trump is compiling a record that increases the likelihood that few will believe him during a genuine crisis, say a dispute over speaking with speaking with professional council Robert Mueller. Or a nuclear showdown with Kim Jong Un. Mr. Trump should worry that Americans will stop believing anything he says."

DANIELLE PLETKA:

So, this should bother us from the standpoint of leadership, as Americans. We want a president who we can trust. That, I think, is very separate from the political question that Robert just brought up. Which is, "What do the American people think for the midterms?" And I think the answer to that is they're not listening. This is just so much chatter. Who cares about the person you call a porn actress? Who cares about all these lawyers and all these people who are pimping themselves out on cable TV? Sorry.

CHUCK TODD:

No, no I, that's the part I've-- From the two interviews. On one hand, Kimberly, it's, "What, what is this about?" And then on the other hand, "Why is the president afraid to tell us what happened?"

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

Well, and it's also this, this idea that a lot of people still believe that this is some sort of attack on the presidency. They're buying into this narrative that the government, that the F.B.I., that our investigators, are somehow turned into a political operation to attack the president. And that is resonating. And I think that's one reason the fatigue over all of this, plus that message landing with some people, why we've actually seen his poll numbers tick up recently. People are getting tired of this. People are--they don't want to hear about the porn star anymore. And it's troubling at a time where, simultaneously, this White House has a terrible problem with the truth. It always has. It's getting exacerbated. So, you're seeing this division increase. But we don't even know what the political impact will be.

CHUCK TODD:

Jon?

JON MEACHAM:

It took four years to get McCarthy. It took three years to get Andrew Johnson. It's a dark moment. But I really do think at a certain point, you're right. People are not thinking as much about this as the political class. The reason he's president is a lot of people didn't believe what even more conventional presidents have said recently.

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

JON MEACHAM:

Right? He's president because, of the ten national tickets, eight had a Clinton or a Bush on them. They were basically saying to Washington, "If you're going to act like a reality TV show, I guess we'll send you, we'll send you a real one." And so, I think the polls, I'm skeptical of. I do know this, historically. And I

think we all know it intuitively. The presidents who get in trouble in the fullness of time are those who think they can put a fast one past the people. And I think this will have a cumulative effect.

ROBERT COSTA:

And what is that fast one? When I'm talking to the people closest to President Trump, they say the unemployment rate dips below 4%. We're having these talks with North Korea. But they still fear, even his closest allies, that if he moves to impeach or fire Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who oversees the Mueller probe, if he makes some kind of drastic action with regards to these investigations, all of that other issues, all the other policies that are going on, they could fade away. And you could have a crisis. And that's what really animates this White House internally.

CHUCK TODD:

Danielle, I read something this morning that I thought would just make you nuts. Because I think it's-- Because of the sort of--

DANIELLE PLETKA:

That's what I'm looking for.

CHUCK TODD:

--the cynicism. Ross Douthat wrote this about, you know, the best thing the Republican party has going for them is their lack of an agenda. And he notes, "The most important boost may be coming from inside his own party in the form of totally nonexistent agenda that congressional Republicans have put forward since the tax bill passed. That non-existence, of course, an indictment of the G.O.P. But politically, it's vastly preferable to the deeply unpopular legislation that Republicans might otherwise be pursuing." His point being, Democrats--or the voters-- the Democrats don't focus on healthcare and some of these other economic issues because Michael Avenatti, Stormy Daniels, the Mueller probe is coloring it all. And Republicans aren't paying a price for not doing anything.

DANIELLE PLETKA:

Well, you were totally right. That does drive me crazy. Because now is a moment of great opportunity for Congress. That they have completely squandered. Yes, they got the tax bill. But they've done almost nothing else

with their majority. The Republicans haven't. And of course, this is--it's true. This is a great distractor for the Democrats as well. They don't have an agenda either. This is, this is Clinton redux. It's enough. The American people will see he's a scumbag, and they'll vote for us. That's going to hurt the Democrats for sure. But the Republicans are in exactly the same place. They're doing nothing.

JON MEACHAM:

Harry Truman once said in his retirement that we get the government we deserve. And I think that's important here. I think that we have to think--

CHUCK TODD:

Yeah, we made this.

ROBERT COSTA:

Yeah. Yeah.

CHUCK TODD:

Over 20 years didn't we?

JON MEACHAM:

At what point are politicians more mirrors of the country than molders? And far more often, they mirror it. And right now, you know, only 17% of the country trusts the federal government to do the right thing. That's a number that's pre-Trump.

CHUCK TODD:

Right.

JON MEACHAM:

I think that it's a broader question here, then-- I think Trump is the apotheosis, if you can use that in the same sentence with Trump, of the issue.

CHUCK TODD:

Bob--

JON MEACHAM:

It's a question of trust.

CHUCK TODD:

Bob Costa, before I let you go, just the morale in the West Wing. It was my understanding that that not being able to stick to the Stormy Daniels story was really going to undermine a lot of morale. A lot of people lied for the president on this. And it bothers them. And I've-- we've been hearing it. How's the president--How is that playing inside that West Wing?

ROBERT COSTA:

You mention the West Wing. Inside the West Wing, there's the West Wing, and then there's President Trump. They really feel like they're isolated from their own president. With the Giuliani situation this week, it was the president communicating with Giuliani, not communicating with the broader staff. And that worries this White House. Because they're trying to get out in front of these issues. Yet the president, as his own communications director. As his own strategist.

CHUCK TODD:

Interesting.

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

Well, I mean, how is that different than since the inauguration day? The president has always laid out his own agenda. The people around him have to catch up. The facts are never a relevant thing. And so, I don't see how this is that much different. Why have you seen this sort of turnover that you've seen within the White House--

CHUCK TODD:

Well, is it the 26th floor he used to work at? Was that his office?

ROBERT COSTA:

The 26th floor.

CHUCK TODD:

The 26th floor is back.

ROBERT COSTA:

It is.

CHUCK TODD:

I think that's what we know. All right. When we come back, Vladimir Putin's meddling. What does he want from the U.S. and President Trump? And why did he retaliate? The former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, joins me next.

CHUCK TODD:

Welcome back. Vladimir Putin is being inaugurated for a fourth term as Russia's president tomorrow. And he's taking no chances. Hundreds of anti-Putin protesters were detained in Moscow and other cities yesterday, ahead of the inauguration. In Moscow, people chanted, "Russia without Putin," and, "Down with the tsar." Putin, of course, overwhelmingly won a discredited election in March in which some opposition candidates were barred from running. Putin has famously interfered with the U.S. elections in 2016. And Americans are even more politically divided than before. So, joining me now to talk about what Putin wants and whether he's succeeding is Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Russia. And he's author of the new book, From Cold War to Hot Peace. Ambassador McFaul, welcome back to the show.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Great to be here. And great to see you in person--

CHUCK TODD:

Nice to see you in person.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

--instead of staring at a camera from Palo Alto.

CHUCK TODD:

We were all joking, we were going to force the Stanford background in the back.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Yes--

CHUCK TODD:

You know -- just so people knew that you always traveled with your own backdrop.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Yes.

CHUCK TODD:

So, Putin, this decision to come after the United States, is this something he stumbled into? Or was this something that it just grew? He grew angrier and angrier and angrier and decided, "It's time to retaliate."

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Well, so these tactics, he has practiced for a long time inside Russia, right? Disinformation, using videos against various political actors. And I experienced it myself as ambassador in 2012, a lot of disinformation about me. So, the tactics he's done before.

CHUCK TODD:

What was the most successful disinformation that you -- that really -- that you had to work hard to undermine?

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

The most successful and frustrating was the narrative that Barack Obama sent me to Russia to overthrow Vladimir Putin. That appeared in fact about every, every couple of days. It was very intense during his last presidential campaign. They would splice things that I'd written and take out the word "not" and make that appear. They would show the back of my head at a rally, to make it look as if I was coordinating the rally. And whatever we did, on Twitter, on television, actually sometimes with President Obama talking to President Putin, one-on-one to say, "Knock this off," we were ineffective.

CHUCK TODD:

So, it seems as if we've heard, "Why did he want to do this?" Well, first, it was Hillary Clinton--

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Yes. Yes.

CHUCK TODD:

--in '11. All right, that was one. One of the things that we don't talk about enough is his anger about the Olympics and the doping scandal and the embarrassment that that brought. And then, there's these Panama papers. Which is the disclosure from this Panama law firm that essentially conveniently exposed the oligarchs of Russia, including Putin's wealth. Frankly, of wealthy people around the world, everybody except Americans. It was an interesting--

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Conveniently, yes.

CHUCK TODD:

Yes.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Well, you're right. All of those things built up. I mean, I think the turning point when he decided to go on the offensive was after the fall of President Yanukovich in 2014, the president of Ukraine. We did not have anything to do with that, but he blamed us. He blamed the C.I.A. for overthrowing his partner in Ukraine. And that's when he said, "To hell with these guys, I'm done dealing with these Americans. I'm going to strike back." That's when he takes Crimea. And when that's easy, then he goes into eastern Ukraine. And then, he decides to go on the offensive. And all those events you just described is part of why he decides to go on the offensive. And use tactics that he had used in Russia against us here in the United States.

CHUCK TODD:

Does he think his -- that he's seeing results?

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

That's a tough question. Candidate Trump promised a lot of deliverables, as we used to say in the government, to the Kremlin. He said he'd look into recognizing Crimea as being part of Russia. He would lift the sanctions. He

was tough on NATO. He didn't say a word about democracy and human rights. And so, they expected a big payoff. There was a lot of champagne drunk on election night in Moscow. He hasn't delivered on that agenda, because the Trump administration has actually continued a lot of policies of the Obama administration. However, our chaos, our arguing amongst ourselves, the, the, the withdrawal of American leadership around the world, all of those things are good things for Vladimir Putin. And so, the Trump presidency in net I think has been good for Vladimir Putin.

CHUCK TODD:

John McCain in his book believes you got -- that we have not been tough enough on Putin. And he writes, "We have cyber capabilities too. They should be used to expose the epic scale of his regime's corruption or to embarrass Putin in other ways." Yet, I would argue, it looks like the Panama papers, that was an attempt to do that and it didn't work. So, what would work with Putin?

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Well, whether it works or not, let's wait and see.

CHUCK TODD:

Okay.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Lots of demonstrators just yesterday. And most of those people were talking about corruption. Interesting. By the way, a lot of those kids were, were kids. They were arresting 12-year-olds in Russia. That's something new. But I agree with Senator McCain. We need a strategy. Tragically, I want to underscore it's not something I wanted. And my whole book is about trying to avoid that. But we need a policy to push back, deter Putin. Cooperate when we can and must on things like arms control. But basically, contain his behavior abroad.

CHUCK TODD:

I want to talk about the Iran nuclear deal. We're going to get a decision a week -- approximately a week from this weekend, whether the president's going to pull out or not. The Boston Globe reported this week that former Secretary of State John Kerry was working with -- talking with former allies or allies of the United States, his former--

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Yeah.

CHUCK TODD:

--counterparts in other countries. What would Secretary of State Kerry have thought if former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was negotiating or, or backseat driving U.S. policy with foreign dignitaries?

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Well, he probably wouldn't like it. We probably would have noted it. But it happens all the time, Chuck.

CHUCK TODD:

Yeah.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

My first--

CHUCK TODD:

But is it appropriate though? I feel, I mean -- what's this line here of where you--

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

It's a good question.

CHUCK TODD:

What is the line?

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

I don't have a good answer to that. We are a free society. We don't all pledge allegiance to the president. I--

CHUCK TODD:

But he's not lobbying Pompeo. He's going and working with France.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Yeah, do you know who my first guest was as U.S. ambassador? Henry Kissinger. After he had breakfast with me, he went to see Vladimir Putin. Do you think he was saying, "Oh, I think the Obama administration's doing a great job, you need to, to engage with the president"? I don't think so. And that's just fine. The good thing that Henry used to do, and I think probably still does, he would then come back and report to us and tell us about his impressions of Vladimir Putin. So, I hope Secretary Kerry's doing that as well.

CHUCK TODD:

With Secretary Pompeo.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Yeah.

CHUCK TODD:

All right. Mike McFaul, the book is From Cold War to Hot Peace. Basically--

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

You're in there too, Chuck.

CHUCK TODD:

--Russia relations since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Yes. But you're in there too. We, we shared some of this history.

CHUCK TODD:

Yes, we did. 2009, the Ritz. We've been to that Ritz.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Oh, yes. Stayed at the Ritz together.

CHUCK TODD:

All I know is it's a good Ritz. It was a very nice hotel overlooking the Kremlin. Anyway. Thank you sir.

MICHAEL MCFAUL:

Thanks for having me.

CHUCK TODD:

When we come back ahead of Tuesday's primaries, many Republican candidates have decided to be like Trump. But can that strategy work in November?

CHUCK TODD:

Welcome back. Data download time. If Republicans are going to hang on to control the Senate, they're going to need to win back states like West Virginia and Indiana. And we're just two days away from the big primaries in those states to see which Republican will have the chance to unseat two red state Democrats, Joe Manchin and Joe Donnelly, this November.

And right now, these G.O.P. primaries are turning into fights to see who can prove they love Trump the most. Like an Indiana candidate who donned a Make America Great Again hat in a TV ad. Or West Virginia candidates borrowing from the Trump playbook on Mueller.

PATRICK MORRISEY:

I think it needs to come to an end. It's a witch hunt.

EVAN JENKINS:

End this investigation now.

DON BLANKENSHIP:

When you know what really goes on in the Department of Justice, you wonder where this country's going.

CHUCK TODD:

Look, there's a reason for this. Donald Trump won West Virginia by 42 points. He won Indiana by 19 points. Significantly outperforming Mitt Romney's margin four years earlier. And that makes sense. These places both have large

white working-class populations, a voting segment that went big for Trump.

But here's the thing. We don't know if these enthusiastic Trump voters are going to come out in a general election if Trump himself isn't on the ballot. So far, that hasn't been the case in either the Alabama senate race or the congressional special election in Pennsylvania, where Democrats were able to flip a Republican held seat.

Nor was it the case in Virginia, where Democrats ended up running away with a race for governor that most thought was going to be much closer. And let's not forget. 2016 was just as much about Hillary Clinton as it was about Donald Trump. And it's not going to be easy to paint either of the Joes, Manchin or Donnelly, as Clinton's clones if she's not on the ballot.

And speaking of the Joes, Manchin won his last election in a landslide. And Donnelly won Indiana by six against a damaged candidate. But in a year, he won where Romney won the state by ten points. Candidates matter in these states. The point? Trump won over blue collar Democrats and Independents who couldn't stomach Clinton.

West Virginia and Indiana may tell us if you can rerun the 2016 campaign without the two main candidates on the ballot. And that seems to be a bit of a stretch. Yes, all politics in 2016 has been about the president. But the names on the ballots still matter. And there is only one Donald Trump. We'll be back in a moment with Endgame and an American hero.

ANNOUNCER:

Endgame. Brought to you by Boeing. Continuing our mission to connect, protect, explore, and inspire.

CHUCK TODD:

Back now with Endgame. Before we get to your book, because it gets us back on the topic, I want to quickly talk about the fact that on Tuesday, I talked about in Data Download this is the first multi-state primary day, Bob Costa. And it's we're learning about the hugging of Donald Trump and Trumpian-like figures. There's nobody who probably more is emblematic of this era of kooky candidates than this gentleman in West Virginia, Don Blankenship who has--

DON BLANKENSHIP:

--Mitch McConnell has created millions of jobs for China people. The war to drain the swamp and create jobs for West Virginia people has begun. I will beat Joe Manchin and ditch Cocaine Mitch for the sake of the kids.

CHUCK TODD:

Now, a kooky candidate is not new in a race. But a kooky candidate with a chance to win is new. At least in West Virginia. Republicans are fighting this guy, and suddenly, he's in the lead. It's like the more attention they've given to him, the better he's doing.

ROBERT COSTA:

And he makes racist, offensive comments in this ad, referencing Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. But it's another example of a Republican party, really since the beginning of President Obama's term in office, that has been unable to control its primary process. And that goes to the presidential race in 2016. It went to the Senate races in '10, '12, '14, '16. And now, again in 2018.

CHUCK TODD:

And-- go ahead.

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

I was going to say, it's also a test kitchen of sort of these races in Trump, a post-Trump world. This is a Trump state. It's a place where he won handily. You take a look at someone like Roy Moore. Roy Moore almost won. And you have a lot of folks saying, "Hey, I can take this Trump message. I'm not a pedophile. So, I may be able to get this over the finish line."

CHUCK TODD:

But this guy served time.

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

He did--

CHUCK TODD:

He wasn't a pedophile, but this one served time for people who died due to his mismanagement at a coal mine.

DANIELLE PLETKA:

But it's funny. You know, we spent many, many years railing against the idea of a smoke-filled room. And the political parties would pick people. When political parties picked people, this kind of stuff didn't happen. This is what elevates the Roy Moores, the Blankenships, the Jeremy Corbyns in the U.K., is this sort of ability to engage in a populist message. And then, of course, they're complete whack jobs once they get in the job.

CHUCK TODD:

Jon, you have a new book out. And I actually wanted Blankenship because I think it connects to all this. The point of your book, I think, as sold in America, is I think to make some of us feel better. To say, "We've been through this before. We'll get through this." And you highlight five periods of our time where this fear mongering was working.

JON MEACHAM:

Sure.

CHUCK TODD:

And in the moment, it looked like it was working. But let me ask you this. You're sort of implying we hit bottom. Right now. Do you think we really have?

JON MEACHAM:

We're awfully close. There are four or five forces that have saved the republic at various points. The presidency, the Congress, the press, the courts, the people. In this case--

CHUCK TODD:

Discredited. Discredited. Discredited. Discredited. I mean--

JON MEACHAM:

Down to the courts and the people and some parts of the press. Exactly. If we had been having this panel in 1866, and you looked good then, we would have been saying, "Oh my God, Andrew Johnson is opposing the 14th and 15th Amendments. Woodrow Wilson's cracking down 400 newspapers. Joe McCarthy is leading the Red Hunting charge." In my native region, 50 years

ago, we had functional apartheid in the South. We do get better. But it requires the protests. It requires the resistance. It requires these conversations.

ROBERT COSTA:

His book is infused with optimism. I think that comes through in the book. That America has been through so much. But when I'm out there as a reporter, and you're meeting people, people are going about their days. They're not fighting with each other every moment. This country moves forward.

CHUCK TODD:

Right. We're going to get through it. You know, one of things that your book struck me on is like, "Are we moving fast or slow in our evolution?"

DANIELLE PLETKA:

We're moving much faster. I mean, I think, you know, information technology has transformed the speed. But I do think the one thing that you say which is so resonant and true, first of all, America does have a soul. And second of all, the American people are not distracted in the same way by the things that we would talk about every Sunday.

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

And we have to remember we will get through it. But there will be damage. I mean, if you look at our history, there's still the vestiges of racism, the vestiges of other things from the fights that we fought. It's how bad the damage will be once we get past it.

CHUCK TODD:

I have to say, Jon, every moment in here is infused with race, actually.

JON MEACHAM:

Absolutely.

CHUCK TODD:

Every moment, every rough moment we've had, and in some ways--

JON MEACHAM:

Unquestionable.

CHUCK TODD:

--it's some version of race.

JON MEACHAM:

Unquestionably. Because it's our original set. The Constitution itself, which is otherwise the document that has sort of saved us, because it's a human document. It recognizes that appetite and ambition. The Founders would have been stunned that it took this long to get a president like this. They designed this document for demagogues. If you said 2016, they would have thought, "Hey, pretty good." Doesn't mean that it's easy. But I think the most important--

CHUCK TODD:

Someone might have thought Andrew Jackson had qualified for that, but that's okay.

JON MEACHAM:

Well, that's a different story for a different Sunday. But remember, what the document says is that we are on a journey to a more perfect Union, not a perfect one.

CHUCK TODD:

Before we go, we heard from somebody we haven't heard from in a long time, meaning John McCain. Heard his voice. And we're hearing from him via his book. First, I want to just play the excerpt that they released from the audio of his new book.

MCCAIN:

I don't know how much longer I'll be here. Maybe I'll have another five years. Maybe with the advances in oncology, they'll find new treatments for my cancer. They'll extend my life. Maybe I'll be gone before you hear this. I'd like to see us recover our sense that we are more alike than different. We're citizens of a republic made of shared ideals, forged in a new world to replace

the tribal enmities that tormented the old one. Even in times of political turmoil such as these, we share that awesome heritage and the responsibility to embrace it.

CHUCK TODD:

Felt like it was a nice optimistic tone that John McCain's trying to strike.

DANIELLE PLETKA:

Well, the nicest thing is that it is an expression that's gotten overused in this era. But John McCain really is a great American.

ROBERT COSTA:

I started reporting on Capitol Hill in 2009, right after he lost the 2008 presidential campaign. And watching him up close, you see this spirit. And he doesn't quit. The guy does not quit. It's inspiring.

CHUCK TODD:

Kimberly, it's interesting. We're learning in the book. He's not settling scores. But he is trying to appease those critics about Sarah Palin. And he says, "In my gut, I wish I would have picked Joe Lieberman." He doesn't trash Sarah Palin at all in it.

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

Right.

CHUCK TODD:

But now for the first time, he's saying, "I wish I would have picked somebody else."

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

And doesn't say that he thinks that would have made him win. But if he was going to lose, he wish he had done it on his own terms.

CHUCK TODD:

That's right.

KIMBERLY ATKINS:

Rather than someone else's.

ROBERT COSTA:

Here's something about John McCain. The night he lost the presidency, he alluded to Booker T. Washington being invited to the White House by T.R., which was this incredibly important symbolic moment in race relations. Senator McCain has a sense of history. And he made history.

CHUCK TODD:

It was one of the great concession speeches, really, of our time. Anyway. Thank you all. Before we go, a quick programming note. Tonight on Dateline, Lester Holt has an exclusive interview with the rapper Meek Mill. In his first interview since being released from prison, Meek Mill talks about how his decades-long journey through the criminal justice system exposes the need for reform. That's tonight on Dateline. 7:00, 6:00 central on your local NBC station. That's all we have for today. Thanks for watching. And remember, if it's Sunday, it's Meet the Press.

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**TOPIC** MEET THE PRESS

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