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Some 'October surprise' conspiracies turn out to be true

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Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs a Security Council meeting in Moscow, Russia on June 16. (Alexei Druzhinin / Associated Press)

We Americans love conspiracies. They are like good spy stories: entertaining, intriguing and tantalizing. But historians learn to hate conspiracy stories. The evidence is often circular, circumstantial and infuriatingly slippery. And usually, the simplest explanation — not the conspiracy theory — turns out to be the best.

In my first biography, "The Chairman: John J. McCloy and the Making of the American Establishment," about the influential Wall Street lawyer and perennial presidential advisor, I had to write about President Kennedy's assassination. McCloy had been a member of the Warren Commission, charged with investigating the assassination. Early in the commission's deliberations, another member, Allen Dulles, passed around copies of a 10-year-old book about seven previous attempts on the lives of various presidents. The author's thesis was that would-be presidential assassins typically are misfits and loners — and not part of any conspiracy. Dulles observed, "You'll find a pattern running through here that I think we'll find in this present case." McCloy quickly retorted, "The Lincoln assassination was a plot."

I don't know what President Trump and his minions were saying to the Russians before or after the November election. But it is true that foreigners routinely try to influence American elections. Democrats in particular have painful memories of the 1968 "October surprise," in which Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon passed messages to the South Vietnamese president, Nguyen Van Thieu, telling him to stall on the peace

talks. Nixon always denied the allegation. But we now know from the private diary of H.R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff, recently discovered by the presidential historian John Farrell, that Nixon was lying.

> As a historian, I am always skeptical of conspiracies. But as McCloy blurted out in 1963, some plots do exist.

And then there was the alleged October surprise of 1980. The Reagan administration and Republicans always denied that they had any back-door negotiations with Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary regime during the Iran hostage crisis. Specifically, they denied that Reagan's campaign manager, William J. Casey, traveled surreptitiously to Madrid in the summer of 1980 to meet with a representative of the ayatollah, and to suggest that it might be in Iran's interest to stall the negotiations over the release of the American hostages. Casey allegedly intimated that a Reagan administration would resume arms sales to the Iranians.

These allegations seemed too outrageous, too outlandish to be believed. Journalists investigated. A House October Surprise Task Force delved into the story. Two good books, Gary Sick's "October Surprise" (1992) and Robert Parry's "Trick or Treason" (1993), made strong circumstantial arguments that something had happened, though neither were able to prove that Casey had flown to Madrid.

But just a few years ago, Parry discovered a damning memo in the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library. Dated Nov. 4, 1991, the memo was written by President Bush's deputy counsel, Paul Beach, and it described the State Department's efforts to collect documents in response to congressional subpoenas for "material potentially relevant to the October Surprise allegations." Beach then specifically mentions "a cable from the Madrid embassy indicating that Bill Casey was in town, for purposes unknown."

So we now know that Casey took time off from his campaign duties sometime in the summer of 1980 to visit Madrid. For "purposes unknown." That's all we know: There is a 1991 White House memo about a State Department cable that was presumably dated in 1980. We do not know if Casey went to Madrid with the knowledge of his candidate. Indeed, from what we know about Casey's love for intrigue and even skullduggery, this former spy and veteran of the World War II-era Office of Strategic Services may have initiated his own back-door channel to the Iranians without any authorization from Reagan.

But I think it is now reasonable to conclude that Casey did something. The Iranians dragged out the negotiations over the release of the hostages. President Carter believed these negotiations were nearly successful in late September 1980, but suddenly new demands were made that stalled the talks. Polls showed Carter within single digits of catching Reagan until about 10 days before the election. Carter lost decisively, and the hostages were inexplicably released minutes after Reagan was sworn in as president.

The story does not end there. Months later, Reagan's newly installed CIA director, Casey, gave the green light

to Israel to sell weapons to Iran. In retrospect, this was the beginning of the scandal that broke in 1987, when it became known that the Reagan administration had been exchanging weapons for hostages. Casey died of a brain tumor soon after the scandal broke, taking to his grave further details of this October surprise.

As a historian, I am always skeptical of conspiracies. But as McCloy blurted out in 1963, some plots do exist. Nixon did try to thwart the Vietnam peace talks. And it seems the Iranians conspired in 1980 to tilt the election toward the Republicans. Russian President Vladimir Putin clearly disliked the prospect of Hillary Clinton as president. Did someone in Trump's camp do what Casey did — and make a deal? If so, this will be very hard to unearth. But historically, Democrats have every reason to be wary.

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