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THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW for June 1, 2018

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Byline: **Rachel Maddow**

Guests: Dion Nissenbaum, Tim Johnson

Highlight: Kim Yong-chol, the North Korean master spy who founded the nation's elite global hacker army, spent a couple of hours in the Oval Office at an impromptu meeting with Donald Trump. Dion Nissenbaum, national security reporter for "The Wall Street Journal", talked with **Rachel Maddow** about the radical, anti-Muslim views of Fred Fleitz, hired by Donald Trump NSA John Bolton to serve as NSC chief of staff. Tim Johnson, cybersecurity correspondent for the McClatchy news service, talked with **Rachel Maddow** about a new fake news website with roots in Russia.

Body

RACHEL MADDOW, MSNBC HOST: Good evening, Chris. You nailed it, 9:00:00.

CHRIS HAYES, MSNBC HOST: Exactly.

MADDOW: You like syncopated your last three syllables to be -- is right now. Nice. Well done.

HAYES: Happy weekend.

MADDOW: Thank you.

Thanks to you at home for joining us this hour too. Happy Friday.

OK. So, James Franco plays the part of a TV personality who's very handsome and charismatic. Seth Rogen plays the part of James Franco's TV producer. And the conceit of the movie is these guys learn that Kim Jong-un, the dictator of North Korea, is somehow a fan of James Franco's TV show. And so, they pull off the impossible. And these guys arrange that they are going to do a TV interview with Kim Jong-un.

Now, upon learning that Kim Jong-un has agreed to do an interview with these two goofy Americans from the TV show, the U.S. government decides to take that opportunity to train those two Americans to kill him, to kill Kim Jong-un while they are sitting next to him to be able to do that interview.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: You are entering into the most dangerous country on earth. Kim Jong-un's people will believe anything he tells them, including that he can speak to dolphins or he doesn't urinate and defecate.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Whoa, whoa. You're telling me my man doesn't pee or poo?

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UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Everybody pees and poos. Otherwise we'd explode.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: But he does talk to dolphins?

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: That's the movie. Or at least that's part of the trailer from the movie. It's called "The Interview." produced in 2014 by Sony Pictures.

And North Korea got very angry about that movie, as you probably remember, and as you might imagine they would, right? They complained to other countries. They complained to the U.S. government. They complained to the United Nations. But ultimately, what are you going to do, right?

Ultimately, North Korea decided that it didn't matter that nobody was listening to their complaints. They decided they would take matters into their own hands. They decided they would attack Sony Pictures.

And initially, it seemed like kind of a goofy attack. On November 24th, 2014, employees arriving at work, at Sony Pictures, turned on their computers and this was on the screen, a picture of a big red horror movie skeleton. "Hacked by GOP" doesn't mean Republicans. It's like some other -- guardians of -- and it said, we have obtained all your internal data including your secrets and top secrets.

I mean -- so this was on everybody's screens, which is a little scary. They'd obviously been able to hack in for real, but this was kind of a goofy horror movie message, right? If you don't obey us, we will release data shown. All right?

So, the attack seemed somewhat effective but sort of amateurish from the outset. It turned out to be the real deal. They got in to the internal computer systems at Sony Pictures. They stole tons of internal communications and documents and scripts and contracts. They ended up basically doxing Sony Pictures by dumping that stuff online.

The worst image they did, though, was not just by stealing and turning those documents back out to the public. The worst damage they did was just flat out destruction. They flat out wiped, just erased tons of data and documents and internal material from the computers operated by that company. They just wiped hard drives.

They ended up essentially bricking 70 percent of the laptops and computers that were used at that entire company, at Sony Pictures, which is not a small company.

Ultimately, the movie did still get released. And although the North Korean state hacking campaign against it ended up scaring the movie off of a lot of movie screens and theaters around the country, the movie did end up doing pretty great, streaming online, I think driven in part by this very weird anti-publicity campaign conducted by North Korean military intelligence calling this movie the most dangerous thing in the world.

Now, that attack, 2014, the attribution for that attack specifically went to something called the Reconnaissance General Bureau, which is sometimes described as the equivalent of the CIA in North Korea but really it's its own thing.

It's foreign intelligence in North Korea. It's cyberwar. It's cyberespionage. Sometimes it's just plain war.

I don't know what you call it when it's hacking into a foreign movie studio and destroying their laptops. I don't know what you call that. But that's the group within the North Korean military, North Korean government that was -- got the attribution for that attack, Reconnaissance General Bureau. That was 2014.

The year before, in 2013, the U.S. and South Korea were engaged in a joint military exercise. The U.S. and South Korean militaries do joint exercises all the time. North Korea tends to see them as very provocative. They essentially see these as practice sessions, if not raised to disguise the start of a real war.

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Some things about North Korea are crazy. The particular perception that these military exercises might be a threat to them is not all that crazy. But their reaction to these frequent joint military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea, their reaction to them is all over the map.

It's unpredictable. Sometimes they have a mild reaction. Sometimes they have a super over-the-top reaction. You never exactly know what they're going to do.

And in 2013, during joint military exercises between the South Korean armed forces and U.S. Armed Forces, the way North Korea decided to respond that year was with a cyberattack, another really serious one. They all but wiped the computer networks at a bunch of major South Korean banks and at the two largest broadcasters in South Korea as well. They got malware into the systems of those companies somehow and they just disappeared their data, wiped stuff, shut them down.

And, you know, once you've got that kind of capability, you have options for what to do with it. If you can get inside supposedly secure, corporate and financial systems around the world -- yes, they proved you can do damage, you can terrorize people. You can brick computers.

You can spy on people. You can steal their documents and post them online. You can hold stuff for ransom.

But if you've got those kind of skills, you can do a lot of different things once you've penetrated other people's computer networks. And once you've got the ability to do that, it's not that big of a leap to just start going straight for money.

This is the SWIFT system, Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications. Which sounds fake, but it's a real thing. It's an international system that thousands of banks and banking systems and businesses use to make financial transactions happen internationally.

Well, in early 2016 hackers linked to North Korea got into that system. And they didn't destroy documents. They didn't steal documents. They didn't wipe documents off people's computer servers.

In that attack, they actually created fake documents that looked almost like the real thing. And with those fake documents inside that system, they filed requests through the SWIFT system. They filed requests that the Federal Reserve Bank of New York should transfer -- they received a formal request. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York, they should transfer a whole lot of money from the Central Bank of Bangladesh to a random account that these hackers had access to in a third country.

(AUDIO GAP) a whole bunch of very official-looking requests that said the Fed in New York should make that transfer, basically from the Bangladeshi government to this offshore third-party account. In all, they requested the Fed move about a billion dollars that way. And most of those requests got rejected.

"The New York Times" reported last year that one of the reasons that some of those requests were rejected is because the hackers tried to use the word "foundation" in one of their documents and they spelled it fandation instead, which is an unusual typo. And that unusual typo stood out. Some people who reviewed those requests, that block some of those requests from going through.

So, no, a billion dollars didn't get siphoned out of the Central Bank of Bangladesh and sent to North Korea. In fact, more than 90 percent of these requests got rejected. But even with 90 percent rejected if you're asking for a billion dollars, you might still get something. In the end, they still got \$81 million approved through these fake transfer requests they made.

Think about that. In 2016, North Korean hackers stole \$81 million from the Central Bank of Bangladesh by convincing the Fed in New York to obey their fake requests to transfer the money, \$81 million. Not bad for a day's work, right?

North Korean hackers also it turns out also figured out a way to infect the computers of everyone who visited a relatively obscure banking Website, the Website of the banking regulator for the nation of Poland. Poland is not a

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financial hub. This is a random and somewhat technical part of the international banking system. Almost nobody's going to go to the Website of the Polish banking regulator except of course banks.

But that was the point. By basically rigging that real Website in Poland, these North Korean hackers were able to get their own malware into the computers of banks from all over the world who had visited that Website. And they ended up stealing from and targeting banks through that scheme in Brazil and Chile and Mexico and Estonia and Venezuela and American banks too, including Bank of America.

And, you know, that's one way to survive crippling international financial sanctions so you can keep building nuclear bombs and keep pouring high-end cognac down the throat of your dear leader. If you're cash poor and there's no legal way for you to get cash, well, then you might figure out some other creative ways to get cash. I mean, once upon a time North Korea's way around the international financial restrictions that have been put on them because of their nuclear weapons, once upon a time what they did to get around that was they counterfeited American \$100 bills. Not very well.

Now, they have a new government and military strategy that's good. It's dangerous. It's effective. It operates globally.

And interestingly, in terms of understanding their power and what they're capable of, you should know they got very good at that very fast. This international hacking -- sorry, international cyber espionage, international cyberwar capacity, they built this up really well really fast. And it's remarkable in context, right, because North Korea's one of the least wired nations on earth. They're one of the least wired nations on earth in terms of electric light.

But I mean, in terms of internet connections, there are not very many Internet connected computers in North Korea. The North Korean people at large do not have access to them. That's because the North Korean government does not want their population at large to be tooling around on the Internet and learning stuff.

What the North Korean government has done instead as a national security strategy is that they have very tightly controlled their access to the Internet and their access to the Internet is used specifically as a military and intelligence weapon. They have harnessed all the intellectual firepower that they can within their country into a hacking corps that works under the auspices of the dictatorship.

And it's been described as sort of a Soviet system. They identify kids who seem to have promise in math and technology. They identify them really early, around ages 10 or 11. Once they think they've got kids who are showing promise, they separate them from their peers.

They bundle them into specific schools and training programs. And then they ultimately set them on a course where they're going to end up hacking for a living, hacking for the government, stealing money for and hacking at the direction of the dear leader and the military intelligence service that runs that part of their government.

Ultimately, where you end up if you're some North Korean kid and you get funneled into this system that they've built up within their military over the last few years, they separate you into a specific school. They separate you into specific training programs. They put you in one of two colleges that they have set aside space to work on specifically. And ultimately, if you get all the way through the system, you end up at Bureau 121 in the Reconnaissance General Bureau in North Korean military intelligence.

That is the part of the North Korean government that does this. That's who heads up this whole effort within the dictatorship. And that whole system within the North Korean dictatorship was actually built up by the guy who built that agency, the guy who built the Reconnaissance General Bureau.

This military intelligence agency in North Korea that's done all this stuff, that's in charge of foreign espionage, foreign intelligence and all their cyber stuff, this agency was only founded in 2009 or 2010. Founding director of the agency is a guy named Kim Yong-chol. He founded that -- you know, the North Korean CIA, NSA combined. He founded it in 2009 or 2010 and ran it until very recently.

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He is the senior spy in the North Korean government. He's a highly decorated general. And what he runs is a military operation. And in addition to all the cyber stuff that he does he also just sometimes blows things up.

In March 2010, there was another one of these joint military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea. About 125 kilometers away from the exercises near some disputed islands off the coast of North Korea, a South Korean navy ship got sunk. It was hit with a torpedo. There were 104 men on board, 46 of them were never found, 46 men dead.

Officially, the cause of the torpedoing that ship is still in dispute but the U.S. and South Korea both believe it was a North Korean torpedo. The covert lethal action that was masterminded by the head of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, by Kim Yong-chol.

Later that same year North Korea launched an artillery barrage at an inhabited South Korean island. Civilians were moved into bunkers. But still, four people were killed, 19 people were injured. North Korea shot dozens of shells at that island. That attack coming right on the heels, just a few months after North Korea apparently torpedoed that South Korean ship and killed more than 40 of their sailors.

Those two deadly incidents in close proximity brought those two countries very close to the brink of war. They were shooting at each other. That second attack where they bombed the island, that was also attributed to Kim Yong-chol, the head of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, the head of North Korean military intelligence.

So when it comes to power in North Korea, we all know about Kim Jong-un and about his dad, Kim Jong-il and about his dad, Kim Il-sung, right, this hereditary dictatorship. And dictatorships have a way of focusing attention only on the dear leader at the top.

But when it comes to what America knows and what the world knows about North Korea's capacity to attack, its capacity to exert force against others, what we know about its attacks on other countries, its attacks on U.S. companies and banks and all the other people who they've attacked through their military intelligence service, the other person to know about is Kim Yong-chol, the head of North Korean military intelligence, the guy who has built this massive international hacking empire.

He has been sanctioned multiple times for his role in the North Korean nuclear program. He's been sanctioned multiple times for his role in attacks on our allies and on the West. And he did build his country's military intelligence service into an international powerhouse.

When he took over, North Korea was still trying to pass off as their big cash idea. I mean, they had hacking aspirations but they were pitiful. He founded this Reconnaissance General Bureau turned it into a Soviet-style hacking academy for the nations. He built this system from the ground up to groom an army of hackers from children. They've ended up with a system now that is as good as any in the world.

Part of the strategy has been to dispatch North Koreans who are trained in coding and hacking, to dispatch them all over the world, wherever North Koreans are allowed to work. And that has a couple of advantages. It allows those North Koreans to launch North Korean cyberattacks from other geographic locations, which is helpful in terms of avoiding accountability.

But it also lets those North Korean de facto spies, it lets them learn about international innovations in the cyberwar field and it turns out when they compete around the world they are as good as anyone or better. In 2015, at a global hacking competition that's called CodeChef, 7,600 teams competing from all over the world. At CodeChef 2015, North Korean teams came in first, second, and third place out of more than 7,000 teams competing worldwide. That's what Kim Yong-chol built.

So, for people who follow this stuff closely, particularly national security and in foreign policy who have watched North Korea not just for its nuclear program but have watched North Korea in this very short period of time turn into this global cyberwar, cyber espionage powerhouse, it was a remarkable and very specific thing when it was announced that North Korea would be sending somebody to the U.S. to talk to the Trump administration. They'd be

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sending a high-ranking official to New York City to have dinner with Mike Pompeo. And it was announced the guy they would be sending is Kim Yong-chol, the guy you see on the right side of your screen there.

This was the headline of foreignpolicy.com: North Korean-facing Mike Pompeo is master spy. Quote: the North Korean official meeting with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to salvage nuclear talks is a former spy chief linked to some of his country's highest-profile military operations in recent years including a 2014 cyberattack on Sony Pictures that cost the company widespread embarrassment and millions of dollars in damages.

From 2009 to 2016, General Kim headed North Korea's top intelligence and cybersecurity agency, the Reconnaissance General Bureau, where he was linked to infamous cyberattacks against the West and deadly attacks in South Korea. He helped groom Kim Jong-un during his ascent to bureau. Kim has served three generations of North Korean dictators. He managed to survive a deadly wave of purges that felled many of his counterparts in the top echelons of the North Korean government once Kim Jong-un assumed office in 2011.

So this guy is estimable, right? Like this is a guy worth taking seriously. This is the highest-ranking North Korean who's been allowed to visit the U.S. in nearly 20 years. He's the immediate former head of the North Korean intelligence service who in fact built that service.

Are you sure this is definitely the one guy you who want to let in? Are you sure there's no particular risk about him in particular coming over here? I mean, technically there is the matter of him being sanctioned multiple times personally by the U.S. government. Legally, he's not even technically allowed to set foot in this country.

But there he was, eating filet mignon and vanilla ice cream we're told with Mike Pompeo at some New York restaurant last night. And then this afternoon we got this note, quote, Kim Yong-chol will meet briefly with POTUS in the Oval.

What? That news moved at about 1:00 this afternoon. And then, in fact, he did show up. And it was not a brief meeting with the president in the Oval Office. It was nearly two hours.

And you know, from a distance without captions on what you're looking at here, he's this quiet-seeming older gentleman. Sort of a short guy compared to our tall president.

He was described today in all the press as the vice chair of the North Korean Central Committee. Oh, that sounds nice. He's on a committee.

Yes. Actually, he's the top ranked spy in the North Korean government and has been for a very long time. He headed military intelligence for the past seven years and he built the world's most elite hacking and cyber espionage service from scratch in a country where no one even has the Internet. Oh, and on top of that there's all the killing.

So, when you let that guy into the Oval Office for a couple of hours today in what was apparently an impromptu meeting for which there was no preparation -- we found out like an hour in advance that he might pop by. He did pop by, stayed for a couple hours.

Did he bring anyone with him? Did guys have a long chat? Did it wine around and touch on a lot of different issues? Did President Trump give up any code word protected super top secret intelligence like he gave to the Russians when he surprise hosted them in the Oval Office?

Did Kim Yong-chol have any equipment with him when he was brought into the Oval Office? Even like in his pocket? Did he leave you a thumb drive? Tell you it was a really fun game, you should plug it in, see what happens? Mr. President, did he ask to see your phone?

Is the president still using an unsecured phone like we were told last week he was? Was that phone in the Oval Office when the North Korean military intelligence chief was there in the Oval Office for a couple of hours today?

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I mean, maybe our government knows exactly what they are doing here. Maybe they are playing North Korea like a fiddle. Maybe every other U.S. president since North Korea came into existence was just too dumb compared to this one. Maybe every other previous U.S. president who decided not to meet with the North Korean dictator only did so because they were too dumb and not savvy enough to know how to pull off a meeting with the North Koreans safely and to our country's advantage.

President Trump now says he is again planning on meeting with North Korea's dictator. The president announced today that even though that June 12th summit had previously been canceled, now it's back on. That said, the president today was a little bit hard to follow in his remarks. He gave a long rambling statement to reporters after his two hours with North Korea's ex-military intelligence chief.

He told reporters that he had received a very nice letter, a letter he called "very interesting" from the North Korean dictator at the meeting. Then several minutes later, he told the same reporters that he had actually not opened the letter. Even though he said it was very nice and very interesting.

The White House then released a couple of pictures where the president receives the letter like it's a big publisher's clearinghouse check, and he smiles like he won it.

The president also announced today after his two hours with North Korea's master spy that he is not going to take such a hard line on North Korea anymore.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REPORTER: Is maximum pressure over, sir?

DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Excuse me?

REPORTER: Is maximum pressure over, sir?

TRUMP: It's going to remain what it is now. I don't even want to use the term maximum pressure anymore because I don't want to use that term, because we're getting along. You see the relationship. We're getting along.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: We're getting along now. Everything's fine.

If in the middle of that Seth Rogen and James Franco movie, you had dropped in a subplot in which the long-time head of North Korean military intelligence was not just invited to the United States, he was invited not just to the White House, he was invited into the Oval Office in an impromptu meeting to kick stuff around with the president personally one on one for a couple of hours, if you had inserted that as a subplot in that James Franco movie, the movie that made Kim Jong-un so mad, that movie might not have made Kim Jong-un so mad because that subplot alone would have made it so ridiculous that nobody would have ever taken seriously that something like that could happen in real life. But that is what happened today.

There's no chance we're being played here, right? We're the masterminds of this, right? No chance we're being played, right?

Hold that thought.

MADDOW: "Wall Street Journal" today ran this story by reporter Dion Nissenbaum. You see the headline there. John Bolton's deputy draws ire of Jewish and Muslim groups.

This is a story about how the National Security Council is being handled now under Trump's third national security adviser. The first one you'll recall was only reluctantly fired despite the fact that he was under FBI counterintelligence investigation while serving in the White House. He's now awaiting sentencing on felony charges.

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The second one was enthusiastically fired by the president, reportedly because the president thought he was too serious, too boring, and he never told the president things he wanted to hear.

H.R. McMaster's last speech before he was fired as national security adviser was a fusillade at Russia for its international aggression, including toward us. But that was his last speech and then he was out.

The new national security adviser hasn't been there that long, but he has been cleaning out the National Security Council staff and replacing them with his own people. Most recently a new chief of staff for the NSC, and that's the one who's drawing all that ire in the words of the "Wall Street Journal."

John Bolton hired this new chief of staff away from an anti-Muslim group called the Center for Security Policy where he wrote books like this one, which really is called "Obamabomb." He also co-authored a book that claims that 80 percent of the mosques in America are, quote, incubators of at best subversion and at worst violence and should be treated accordingly. Eighty percent of mosques in America. Really?

This group he's been the senior vice president for policy and program says that the Muslim Brotherhood has achieved influence over the highest ranks of the U.S. government, says that there should be a new House Un-American Activities Committee, like back in the '50s to root out secret Muslims on the U.S. government. The group also says incidentally that it wasn't Timothy McVeigh who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City back in the '90s, it was Saddam Hussein. Sure, it was.

And you know, that's great. Free country, sure. But that's who's now the chief of staff at the National Security Council at the White House, at a time when we've got the president of the United States literally inviting the head of North Korean military intelligence to come hang out in the Oval Office for a few hours, just stop by, it'll be fine, what could go wrong?

Whatever you think about the president's personal judgment on matters like this, surely the president has great staff who can think through all the intricacies and threats here, right? Great staff, top-level folks.

Joining us now is Dion Nissenbaum, national security reporter for the "Wall Street Journal." His story in the journey paints this troublesome picture about Fred Fleitz who is the new choice to be chief of staff at the National Security Council.

Mr. Nissenbaum, thank you very much for being here.

DION NISSENBAUM, NATIONAL SECURITY REPORTER, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL: Thank you for having me.

MADDOW: Mr. Fleitz has worked with John Bolton before. In that sense, he's not much of a surprise in terms of somebody who John Bolton might want to hire. But is he an unusual choice for the National Security Council given what it does?

NISSENBAUM: Well, I think the one thing that John Bolton will expect from him first and foremost is that he's going to be sort of an enforcer within the National Security Council. As you mentioned at the beginning of the Trump administration, there were a number of people who had these sort of conservative controversial views about Islam, and I think we may be seeing a return to that at the NSC. But he's going to be I think John Bolton's enforcer first and foremost within the NSC to clamp down on leaks and sort of enforce John Bolton's vision.

The big question I think we're all trying to understand here is how much is his personal view going to influence what happens with the NSC? And we're still waiting to really get some clarity on that position.

MADDOW: I mean, somebody who says that there ought to be a new House Un-American Activities Committee, who was the executive vice president of a group that advocated that. He says that 80 percent of mosques in this country are either advocating subversion or violence. That the Muslim Brotherhood has infiltrated the upper ranks of the U.S. federal government.

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I guess the question is whether or not criticism on those types of grounds, criticism for that specific type of radicalism might actually be seen in this administration as a feature, not a bug. As something that makes them trust this kind of a hire more.

NISSENBAUM: Yes, exactly. And what's been interesting about the response from the Trump administration on this is that they basically characterized this as a smear campaign against Fred Fleitz.

But what we did was read through what he said and read through this study where he lays out these views, paints this very dark vision of Islam, says that 80 percent of the mosques in America are these dens of subversion or violence. It talks about banning al Jazeera. It suggests stripping citizenship from people that promote some conservative views of Islam.

It lays out a lot of policy prescriptions. It talks about declaring war on this sort of broad global jihad issue. And I think -- I haven't been able to get the White House to answer whether they support these positions, whether Fred himself still endorses these positions. And I think we need to get some answers from the White House about that.

MADDOW: Especially at a time when the National Security Council would formally be expected to be doing the staffing and prep work for all these important national security decisions that are being made, including this fairly radical decision today to host the North Korean military intelligence chief in the Oval Office. It's an important time for them to get it right.

Dion Nissenbaum, national security reporter at the "Wall Street Journal" -- really appreciate your time tonight. Thank you.

NISSENBAUM: Thank you.

MADDOW: All right. We'll be right back. Stay with us.

MADDOW: Meet usareally.com. Not typos.

Quote: Trump determined to go to commercial war. All advices from his European allies so that Trump did not get out of the Paris agreement against climate change did not break the nuclear pact with Iran and did not move the embassy of the states united from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem result nothing.

Or this report, quote: very unusual attacking with scissors was happened in Florida. Well, it is Florida.

Maybe this reads weirdly, right? But in some ways it's not that weird. In some ways it might seem familiar.

"McClatchy News" has just reported that this odd little news site, usareally.com, is about the United States but it was created by Russia, specifically by people operating out of the same St. Petersburg building that housed the Kremlin-linked troll farm that was the subject of a sprawling criminal indictment just a few months ago by special counsel Robert Mueller for their role in attacking the U.S. presidential election.

Now, as of right now, Russians operating from that same address are using this new USA really Website to spread news about scissor attacks in Florida but also to try to organize a White House protest. To try to organize a flash mob two weeks from now at the White House on June 14th.

They say, quote: On this day, we officially starts our project, USA Really. The honest media about what is really happening around. Our slogan is USA as it is. We invite all Americans, all who cares about the country, to celebrate this. Come up to the White House on June 14th at 2:00 p.m. to congratulate America.

The site first appeared on the Internet a month ago. What the Russians did in the last election, they appear to be doing all over again but maybe some of their best copyreaders got fired?

For the record, McClatchy reports that after they asked Facebook about the USA Really page Facebook turned it off. But the Website itself is still live and publishing and there's more to that. Hold that thought.

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MADDOW: I want to bring into the conversation now, Tim Johnson. He's a national and cybersecurity reporter for "McClatchy" news service. Mr. Johnson broke the story today of what appears to be a new weird Russian op directed at American voters, an effort apparently run out of the same Russian troll farm in St. Petersburg that was the subject of a Robert Mueller indictment for their role in attacking the 2016 election.

In other words, they're back. And part of the way we know that is this usareally.com website that they have set up as of the last few weeks.

Tim Johnson from "McClatchy" news service -- thank you very much for being with us tonight. Nice to have you with us.

TIM JOHNSON, CYBERSECURITY CORRESPONDENT, MCCLATCHY: You're welcome.

MADDOW: One of the things that is striking about this is how bad the American idiomatic English is. There's a lot of misspellings and things that seem weird. This seems like sort of a -- this seems like sort of a first effort rather than something that they do after having had a lot of practice with this during the 2016 election.

JOHNSON: Well, as you say, it is rather crudely done. And they advertise that they need English-speaking employees to help them polish this. But I think the message is really that Russia simply doesn't care that -- that they're not obfuscating what they're doing in trying to influence American public opinion. So, you know, I think that they're gambling that there are plenty of Americans who would just as soon believe what Russia says as what the mass media in the United States says.

MADDOW: One of the really striking details in your reporting is the connection to the actual building address, the actual physical location in St. Petersburg in Russia that housed the Internet Research Agency which was the subject of that Robert Mueller indictment and the special counsel's investigation into the attack on our election in 2016.

What do we know about the connection between this new effort and that effort that resulted in criminal charges?

JOHNSON: I can't verify that there is an actual connection between this USA Really campaign and internet research agency. I learned about this yesterday at a cybersecurity conference here in Washington. And the cybersecurity conference firm, FireEye, which is a very well-respected company, says there's a lot of open source intelligence that indicates that the two companies are very closely linked and it may just be a reboot of the Internet Research Agency but this isn't confirmed yet.

MADDOW: Do we know yet if this is part of a network of similar efforts or if this is being cross-promoted by other means of -- by other types of social media, if there are other Websites like this that the same folks are operating?

JOHNSON: FireEye knows that there's other domains using this name, USA Really, that haven't been launched yet. So, yes, it's clearly the beginning of something that's broader. Of course, there may be obfuscated other attempts by Russia to influence the midterm elections that are five months away. We just don't know about them yet.

But the fact is that a lot of people are looking for these kinds of sites. So, it's not going to be as much of a surprise perhaps if they're found in the coming weeks.

MADDOW: Tim Johnson, national and cybersecurity reporter for "McClatchy" - - fascinating report. Thanks for being here to help us understand it. Much appreciated.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

MADDOW: All right. We'll be right back. Stay with us.

MADDOW: We have an interesting update for you because I think we figured some of this out. We reported two days ago on the unexpected arrival of this new thing, which sort of appears to be a fund-raising vehicle for Trump

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campaign chairman Paul Manafort to help him pay his legal bills while he fights multiple felony charges brought against him by the special counsel.

Now, it only sort of appears to be a new defense fund for Paul Manafort because it's hard to be sure, whoever set up this fund for Manafort did it anonymously. They describe themselves as long-time friends of Paul Manafort, except nobody knows who these long-time friends are. No trustees of the fund are announced, no organizers, no points of contact give their names. It's been days since this thing has been live and still nobody is taking any credit for it.

The fund, according to this website, has at least three different names. They have already changed who you're supposed to make the checks out to. There's also a bunch of spelling errors and typos. They say they will accept donations in any amount, and they say they will keep the identity of all their donors secret. They go out of their way to say they will accept money from foreigners.

If you want to send a money order or a check, you have to send it to this anonymous-looking P.O. box in Clifton, New Jersey. So since we first saw this thing, I have been wondering, is this real? Is this a scam? Or is this, you know, possibly somebody's cheap and cheerful way to cover up sending Paul Manafort a whole bunch of money at a time he's under intense pressure to cooperate with prosecutors.

I don't know. It doesn't look like a normal legal defense fund. We've been doing a little bit of digging and found a couple of interesting things already. So, first one is that Paul Manafort's legal defense fund is hosted at a Website that is Manafortdefense.org. Records show that the Website was created in December by an attorney named Bruce Baldinger.

Now, Bruce Baldinger has a small practice in Morristown, New Jersey, and one of his clients is Paul Manafort. He's done legal work for Paul Manafort for several years, mostly related to Manafort's real estate deals and financial transactions, including some that are currently being investigated by the special counsel. And it's stuff you remember from the Manafort charges.

So, like you remember that Manafort set up a new company the day he quit the Trump campaign and then that company soon got multiple financially inexplicable multimillion dollar loans from a bank run by a Trump supporter. Well, that company that Manafort set up the day he left the campaign, that was set up by this lawyer.

So, this is sort of an unusual thing. There are deals where this lawyer played a role, and these deals turn up multiple times in the felony indictments pending against Paul Manafort. This lawyer, who turns up in all those deals, now appears to be running an anonymous, no questions asked fund-raising effort for Paul Manafort's legal expenses.

If that lawyer has been involved in some of Paul Manafort's financial activity that's been the basis for the felony charges brought against him, is it conceivable that that guy could also be called as a witness by the special counsel? What would that mean for the Manafort legal defense fund if a potential witness helped set it up?

Here's the second thing that we found: buried in those registration records for the Manafort defense fund website is this generic P.O. box address. That is the same P.O. box where you are supposed to send donations to Paul Manafort's dodgy defense fund, the one set up by his unidentified long-time friends.

But according to public records, that P.O. box currently accepting donations to pay Paul Manafort's legal bills, it's not associated with long-time friends of Paul Manafort. It's associated with Paul Manafort's family. His wife, Kathleen, and his daughter are both listed as the people who receive mail at that P.O. box in Clifton, New Jersey. Records show they have held that box since February of this year, a couple of months after that Website was first registered for Manafort's legal defense.

So, it is possible that there are long-time but anonymous friends of Paul Manafort's who live in that P.O. box too, but as far as we know it is starting to look like his long-time friends are just himself, and/or his lawyer and/or his wife and daughter.

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We know Manafort is under strict travel restrictions because he's awaiting two criminal trials in D.C. and Virginia. Who's managing this fund? Who's picking up the checks that are undoubtedly flowing in a mile a minute, right?

Why has this thing been set up to funnel anonymous donations of any size from someone somewhere to fund the legal defense of Paul Manafort? Paul Manafort is the one American citizen charged thus far into the investigation into the president's campaign who has not yet pled guilty and/or agreed to cooperate with prosecutors as they continue their investigation. And this honestly is not a great public facing appeal.

It is, though, potentially a perfect vehicle for some very interested donor somewhere to funnel as much money they want to the man who so far is holding out against what must be incredible pressure to flip and tell prosecutors of what if anything he knows.

I mean, just for the sake of imagine the president or an ally of the president wanted to send Paul Manafort a little help. A little keep the faith help.

You're the former Trump campaign chair. You're holding the line and awaiting trial. Pressure must be incredible to flip. How about we give you a little cash?

Could this mysterious new vehicle be -- this mysterious new fund be a vehicle for even the president himself to pass Paul Manafort a big chunk of change? Remember, they'll keep all donations secret. There's not even an indication that all this money will actually go towards Paul Manafort's legal bills. The site says, quote, a gift by you will help Paul and his team.

Who's Paul's team? I mean, is it his wife who gets mail at that P.O. box where the checks are going? What's the money for? Where will it come from?

Based on the information we have, we can't answer any of those basic questions. The Website Jezebel talked to them and they said the Website is legitimate but Paul Manafort is not behind it. We asked the same spokesperson for comment and he told us no comment. But we did then figure out that Paul Manafort's family runs the Website -- I mean runs the P.O. box.

We also reached out to Bruce Baldinger to ask who's running the fund and where they're taking the money from and where the money is going to. He just didn't respond to us at all. This thing remains a mystery, but we'll keep pulling at it.

MADDOW: Missouri's Republican Governor Eric Greitens announced earlier this week he'd resign as governor. At 5:00 p.m. today, he traded that promise to resign in exchange for prosecutors dropping a felony charge against him related to campaign finance violations. This is the agreement the governor made. Charges would officially be dropped upon receipt of defendant's resignation.

Well, that resignation letter arrived today. The secretary of state in Missouri tweeted out a picture of it complete with a giant unmissable Eric Greitens signature. Also, what looks like may be a bit of somebody's afternoon snack. A little crumb there.

The Missouri political press glee fully noted the presence of a moving truck outside the governor's mansion today, but amid the packing, Governor Greitens had some last-minute governing to do. On his last day in office before resigning in disgrace, he signed 77 bills into law, including one that makes putting naked pictures of someone online without their permission a crime.

He also pardoned five convicted felons and commuted the sentences of four others before his tenure in office officially ended and the moving van pulled away. It's a good thing the Missouri press was paying attention while all this was happening because Missouri's new governor wasted no time erasing all traces of Eric Greitens from the state's official Website.

Eric who? No matter how make your signature, when you're gone, you're gone.

That does it for us tonight. We will see you again on Monday.

Now, it's time for THE LAST WORD WITH LAWRENCE O'DONNELL.

Good evening, Lawrence.

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