



Photo Illustration by C.J. Robinson

Culture

# Alex Gibney on His Deep Dive into Russian Election Meddling

Delving into troll farms, email hacks, and secret meetings, the filmmaker's new HBO documentary *Agents of Chaos* offers a chilling takeaway: It could all happen again.

BY DAVID ALM

October 6, 2020

In early 2017, Alex Gibney flew to a secret location on the West Coast to meet a man named Glenn Simpson. Just a few weeks prior, Simpson, a co-founder of the research firm Fusion GPS, had become known the world over for his role in producing the so-called *Steele Dossier*, which alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government to secure Trump's 2016 presidential victory (among far more salacious activities). Simpson told Gibney he was concerned that if anything were to happen to him, then his side of the story might never get out. Gibney, an Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker who had already been looking into Russia, was eager to hear it. Just a few months later, Fusion GPS's findings would form the basis of the Mueller investigation.

Over the past 40 years, Gibney has built a reputation for unpacking some of the biggest scandals of our time: Enron, WikiLeaks, Lance Armstrong's blood doping, Elliot Spitzer's liaisons. If anyone could explain the Russia-Trump story in a way that others would understand, it would be him. And so after their meeting, Gibney set to work on *Agents of Chaos*, a two-part series that premiered on HBO in late September. The story it tells may not answer any unresolved questions, but it brings together a cast of characters who have never before appeared in the same story, including former FBI director Andrew McCabe, former Trump associates Felix Sater and Carter Page, and, of course, Glenn Simpson himself. Collectively, they provide chilling insight into the lengths to which Russia went to sow chaos in the U.S. in 2016, and the extent to which the Trump campaign was willing to help. More chilling still: While the series may be finished, the story is far from over.

In a telephone interview before the series premiered, Gibney told me that he thinks part of the problem with the way the Russia-Trump story has been told up to now is that "everybody wanted to tie it up neat." His team decided to take a different tack altogether, to "embrace the very idea of uncertainty. And once you embrace that idea, then tying up every loose end ends up kind of missing the essence of the story." The essence of this story, as Gibney tells it, is that the Russian government wanted to dismantle American democracy, and so they did, by the most convenient means at their disposal: us.

It's a far messier story than the myriad conspiracy theories that have attempted to explain the events of 2016, like the idea that Trump has been a Russian asset since the 1980s or the QAnon notion this is all part of a plot by deep state Democrats to frame Trump lest he unmask their cabal of pedophiles. And that's exactly Gibney's point. "Conspiracy theories, at their heart, are a way of explaining the unexplainable," he told me. "Everything fits together perfectly. Well, things don't fit together perfectly, usually."



*Agents of Chaos* begins with the election of Donald Trump, in November 2016, but quickly pivots to the machinations in Russia that helped him win. In the film's telling, it began with a mysterious outfit called [the Internet Research Agency, or IRA](#), where hundreds of internet trolls operate out of an inconspicuous building on the outskirts of Saint Petersburg. The IRA is funded by an Russian oligarch named Yevgeny Prigozhin, a restaurateur dubbed "Putin's chef" for his firm's catering of the president's state dinners who is also linked to the Wagner Group, a private military contractor that recruited soldiers to fight in Ukraine and Syria. In other words, the IRA functions, effectively, as an unofficial but very powerful arm of the Kremlin.

ADVERTISEMENT

As far back as 2013, these Russian trolls began posting comments on American news sites, blogs, and other channels under fake names. Soon they were creating entirely new personas and building their own social media profiles, amassing followers, and galvanizing groups on both sides of the political spectrum with increasingly divisive content on everything from the 2nd Amendment and Texas secession to LGBTQ rights and Black Lives Matter. The trolls' mission, as articulated by a researcher of cybersecurity and disinformation named Camille Francois in the film, was of course not to support any of those causes, but to exploit certain tribalistic tendencies in the American populace and, ultimately, pit those ideological groups against each other.

Recent reporting in the *New Yorker* questions the efficacy of these trolls' disinformation campaigns, and suggests the U.S. media may have exaggerated their influence, but what's clear is that they snuck into our feeds and, at least to some extent, helped to steer the national discourse. Some of them gained hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter and other platforms. Operatives of the IRA even came to live for periods across the United States, to better craft their messaging with an evermore nuanced understanding of American culture and regional thinking. The upshot, in Gibney's telling, is that the Russians didn't need to hack into U.S. election computer systems, though they had the means to. They hacked into our minds.

Gibney joined forces with the legendary investigative reporter Lowell Bergman, who had the contacts and resources to hire a team of independent journalists in Russia to dig into the IRA and its nefarious disinformation campaigns, which included ostensibly American Facebook groups and websites like SecuredBorders and Blacktivist. From there, they followed numerous threads to far more sophisticated cyber-espionage efforts by Russian parties and their counterparts in the U.S. Gibney told me his team began working on *Agents of Chaos* without knowing where it might lead. The final product is the most diffuse film he's ever made, one that does not attempt to tell a single story, but rather multiple stories at once, some of which go nowhere, and some of which intersect in extremely alarming ways. It's unwieldy, to say the least. And yet, at the same time, efficient and engrossing.

This isn't to say that *Agents of Chaos* offers an exhaustive index of every twist and turn, either. "I'm sure we left some things out, and there are certain parts of the story that we don't really dig into," Gibney told me. "But I think over time, in terms of crafting the tale, you go with the pieces of the story that you can get, and with a team worth investigating." For instance, Gibney decided not to look too deeply at George Papadopolous, one of Trump's early foreign policy advisors whose loose lips caused the FBI to begin surveilling campaign aides for any indications of collusion with foreign interests, beyond noting that at 28 he still lived with his parents and his resume was so slight that it included a line for Model U.N. And he couldn't gain access to Michael Cohen, James Comey, or Robert Mueller, though he tried. "A lot of people are very much invested in being able to tell their narratives only in the context of their own storytelling," Gibney said.

But he did get Carter Page, another of Trump's foreign policy advisors, who demonstrates as well as anyone that the Trump campaign wasn't actually interested in assembling a crack team of policy wonks, but simply needed a group of warm bodies to trot out as experts. "He didn't exactly represent the best and brightest thinking on matters related to Russia," Gibney said of Page. "He was just the only person they could get. Same with Papadopolous." And yet, Page was also believed by the FBI to have conspired with the Russians; he may have been a buffoon, but he was a cunning one.

ADVERTISEMENT

For Page, Gibney said, the film represented an opportunity to "show how he'd been abused." Page did not succeed, but that only adds another dimension to the tale. "I always try to seek out people from all sides of a story," Gibney told me. "I don't want to say both sides, because it's more like nine sides. And Carter Page was a fascinating character." Equally fascinating is Felix Sater, an ex-con and the Russian-American businessman who in 2015 brokered the deal for Trump Tower Moscow, which stood to net both Sater and Trump as much as \$100 million (though, as with many of Trump's financial claims, this [figure has been disputed](#)). In the film, Sater affirms that Trump could afford to assemble such a clownish team of advisors because he never expected to win the election; he simply wanted to jumpstart the Trump brand.

In addition to Andrew McCabe, Gibney also conducted extensive interviews with other top-level intelligence officers such as former CIA director John Brennan and Celeste Wallander, the former National Security Council director under President Obama. One of the biggest interviews he scored was with Andrew Weissmann, the lead prosecutor on Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team, who came late to the project but factors heavily into both parts of the film. Weissmann not only lends insight into the Mueller investigation, Gibney told me, "but he does so within the context of Manafort, who of course was the campaign manager. So it was a twofer." In Weissmann's book, *Where Law Ends: Inside the Mueller Investigation*, he writes that the team could have done more to investigate ties between the campaign and Russia, and characterizes Mueller as overly cautious and diffident. Gibney elicited similar candor from Weissmann in *Agents of Chaos*.

But perhaps the most fascinating, and disquieting, interview in the documentary is with Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT, the state-owned media company that serves, essentially, as a propaganda machine for the Russian government disguised as a legitimate news agency. Simonyan laughs at the idea of Russian interference. "If the intelligence community of the most powerful country in the world is that ignorant, the world is in much trouble," she says in the film. She comes across as completely sincere, "and that's where you enter the hall of mirrors," Gibney said of Simonyan. "How much is she a prisoner of her own beliefs, and how much is she spinning on behalf of Putin? She's clearly spinning, but she does so in a very elegant way, and in ways that sometimes make convincing points that are almost embarrassing for us. That's another part of the story that I think is so disturbing."

In short, it's often impossible to tell who was acting in good faith, who had ulterior motives, and who had been compromised so completely that they didn't even know if they were doing someone else's bidding—namely, Vladimir Putin's. And maybe, as reports of Russian meddling are again on the rise, the distinctions are moot. "The Russian trolls didn't introduce anything new into our bloodstream," Gibney said, citing the findings of Camille Francois. "All they did was boil the blood that was already here. It's political jujitsu." Or, as Joshua Yaffa put it in *The New Yorker*, "What if, to borrow an old horror-movie trope, the call is coming from inside the house?"

Gibney told me it felt right to end the film now, on the eve of the 2020 election, though it could have potentially gone on forever. The past six months alone have shown that the most powerful agents of chaos in our midst are none other than the current custodians of American democracy. And that gets at the ultimate question: Was 2016 an aberration, or the beginning of our demise as a sovereign state? "We'll find out the answer in a few weeks," Gibney said. "It's a scary moment in this country, and I hope we get it right. Because if we don't, it's not going to be pretty."

RELATED STORIES FOR GQ	HBO	DONALD TRUMP	VLADIMIR PUTIN
ENTERTAINMENT	POLITICS	DOCUMENTARIES	ELECTION

