

Paul Kolbe:

Good afternoon, everybody. My name's Paul Kolbe. I'm director of the Intelligence Project at the Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Welcome today to a discussion of Havana Syndrome, mysterious attacks which have afflicted scores of US government employees across six continents with varying degrees of brain injury and trauma. I'm really pleased to have with us here today Marc Polymeropoulos, former CIA senior operations officer and Adam Entous, New Yorker journalist. And I'll tell a bit more about them in just a moment.

Paul Kolbe:

A little bit of fine print up front. While this event is on the record, the event organizers prohibit any attendees, including journalists, from audiovisual recording or distributing parts or all of the event programs without prior written authorization. Thanks, everyone.

Paul Kolbe:

With that out of the way, since 2016, over 200 American officials have reported a range of symptoms to include searing headaches, vertigo, dizziness, nausea, blindness. Many have been now formally diagnosed at Walter Reed Hospital with traumatic brain injuries, TBI. Not only have officers have been affected, but also family members and even young children. These injuries began with a cluster of reports over five years ago, Cuba 2016, and have become commonly referred to as Havana Syndrome, also known by the more anodyne designation in the US government as anomalous health incidents, AHI.

Paul Kolbe:

Reports of incidents and injuries have continued since 2016. And the US government, after a period of confusion, delay and even denial, now takes it seriously. CIA Director Burns and Deputy Director Cohen have publicly stated that American officials are being attacked overseas. While the US has not yet assigned any attribution to the attacks to any specific parties or entities, a finding may be close, and suspicion naturally falls heavily on Russia.

Paul Kolbe:

In our discussions with Marc and Adam today, we will explore these mysterious attacks, consider the causes and culprits, examine the technology and history of weapons or tools that may be in use. Most importantly, we'll look at the policy questions these incidents raise. What might the US consider in response to the assaults? How does the US deter, defend or retaliate against what appears to be a new form of asymmetric deniable warfare?

Paul Kolbe:

Marc Polymeropoulos is a 26-year CIA veteran, senior leader in the intelligence service, Middle East expert with years of war zone experience and leadership under his belt. On an official visit to Moscow in 2017, he suffered injuries which plague him to this day. Now retired, he's the author of Clarity in Crisis, Leadership Lessons from the CIA. Adam Entous, New Yorker staff writer covering intelligence, national security and foreign affairs. He's been covering the Havana Syndrome since 2016 and is an author of Are US Officials Under Silent Attack. He has previously wrote at the Washington Post and shared a Pulitzer Prize and Polk Award.

Paul Kolbe:

So MarC, I'll start with you. And let's just open up. I think a lot of folks will have heard about this, but not really know the details of what's actually happened to folks. So could you just start with the story of your injury?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Sure. And Paul, first, thanks for having me here today. I wish I could be there in person. Unfortunately, some of my symptoms, the traumatic brain injury symptoms, have come back, so I wasn't able to travel to Boston. So when I give you the overview of my health journey and what happened to me, just obviously keep in mind that these are some things where a lot of us are still pretty severely affected.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

So I traveled to Russia in early 2017. It was a pretty benign 10-day trip, just for consultations and meetings. It was going to be with the US ambassador there, Jon Huntsman, who was a former ambassador in Beijing, former governor, a statesman. He was our ambassador to Moscow, and so I wanted to visit him. At the time, I was the deputy chief of operations of what's called the Europe and Eurasia Mission Center. So that's a geographic area that's covering everything from Dublin to the farthest time zones of Russia.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

I was a Middle East hand. With the new administration, they brought a whole bunch of Middle East operations officers and officers who were involved in counter-terrorism to try to be a little more aggressive in pushing back against Russian malign influence, in terms of election interference and other things. And so I was not a Russia hand. That's the reason why I was conducting a trip, which we call area familiarization.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And on top of that, interestingly enough, I was also involved in discussions with my counterparts in the Russian security services, both internal and external, which is something that, as Paul knows, and many others, we've done for quite some time. Even during the days of the Cold War, we still always talked to our adversaries. So I had official meetings. There was nothing particularly alarming about the trip. The Russians weren't thrilled that I was coming.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

In fact, myself and several of the others, they tried to actually revoke and deny our visas. I'm not really sure why, but nonetheless, it was just part of the routine discussions I had as what many others who had served at the US embassy in Moscow. We had constant surveillance, but not harassing. The fact of the matter, as I was walking around, I really figured I would never get lost because there were always so many people right behind us. And so in all essence, it was a pretty routine trip.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Then one night several days into it, I was staying at a five-star hotel only several blocks from the US embassy which, of course, you understand that all hotels are certainly monitored, both with physical and technical surveillance. If you're in Russia, nothing unusual about that. But I woke up in the middle of the night to an extraordinary case of vertigo. The room was spinning. I had a blinding headache. I had tinnitus, which is ringing in my ears. I felt like I was going to be physically sick, and something, I knew, was really wrong.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And as I describe this, I'd spent a lot of time in war zones. I'd been in certainly some physical danger. I'd been shot at many times, but this was a pretty alarming and, frankly, scary incident, just because I had lost control. But I really wasn't entirely sure what had happened. I was in a different country, could have been food poisoning. Who knows? But I woke up the next morning and still wasn't feeling right, and I muddled through the trip.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

The symptoms came back several days later, again, really in full force with just incredible vertigo. And I spent really the last 36 hours just holed up in my hotel room before I finally made it back to the United States. And what started there was this really unique medical journey, unfortunate one, that continues to this day. We're talking about it's almost four years this day. I still have, at times, really bad symptoms.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

I've had a headache, in essence, for four years, but the vertigo, now it comes back every once in a while. I've gone to probably every doctor under the sun, from neurologists to infectious disease doctors, et cetera, et cetera. But really one of the unfortunate parts of this whole story is that, and in which I've talked about obviously in public, is the CIA where I spent 26 years as a operations officer and I retired from the senior intelligence service, they were not supportive of my desire for healthcare.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And in fact, when I came back and through the early 2018, first of all, I asked to be screened for Havana Syndrome, what other members of the US diplomatic community had experienced in Cuba in 2016. And the answer was that I didn't look like the rest of the victims and the cohorts, for whatever reason. It was a pretty rudimentary test, and I was getting worse at the time. And by mid-2018, I'd lost my long-distance vision. I couldn't drive. I could barely go to work. And I was really pretty incapacitated.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And through this time, I was still asking and, at times, begging and pleading to be sent to some of the same facilities where some of the other victims in the US government had been sent after Cuba. Interestingly enough, I certainly had the support of the operations director up to the deputy director of operations, the DDO, the senior most operational manager at the CIA. And so there were some people who certainly believed something bad had happened to me, but the medical staff was just adamant that they had not.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Ultimately, I ended up having to retire at the age where I could have, at age 50, but in July of 2019, effectively, you retire earlier. So this was back in April of '19 is when I finally retired. And ultimately the agency finally sent me to the National Institute of Health for what was, in essence, just a research study because they were taking a look to see over a five-year period how people's bodies were deteriorating, but it wasn't anything to make me feel, frankly, any better.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Mid-2019 on, as my symptoms continued to get worse as well, I also started hearing from other colleagues of mine at CIA that they were being afflicted by this. And they, in fact, lobbied for, and in

some instances got to go to, what's called Walter Reed's National Intrepid Center of Excellence. That's one of the US's leading traumatic brain injury programs. It's a famous location because of, obviously, two decades of war, a lot of US military personnel go there. And I started asking the CIA to send me to Walter Reed because I just was not getting better. My symptoms were so bad.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And they denied this, and they did for some time. I then took the unusual step, which was very difficult for me in my personal journey, of going public with this. And through a journalist at GQ, Julia Ioffe, who was a Russia expert, I told her my story. I actually told the agency I was going to do this. I remember, before it was published, I went to senior members of CIA and told them what I was going to do, because this was my, in essence, desperate plea for medical care. And the story was published in October of 2020. And it certainly a bit of a storm in the media.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Fortunately, I had several members, former directors, three of them in fact, who, on my behalf, certainly reached back to the seventh floor and said, "Why are you not getting Marc healthcare?" And they did. And so ultimately I ended up going to Walter Reed to the Traumatic Brain Injury Institute in January of 2021. One of the things for me, as someone again, as a senior agency officer, I just never understood why the leadership didn't just take that first initial step when I had asked for healthcare just to simply get treated.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And that's something I think that'll be under a matter of discussion, especially when you turn to that accountability at the agency and the US government as a whole. And I know Adam's written on this, about the State Department as well, is when people are injured in the line of duty, even if you don't know what it is, why would you not just provide them just the medical care? That was kind of the path. I did a lot of interesting things with the US government for 26 years. I think I was involved in every covert action program in the Middle East. But I always knew that if something went wrong and I was jammed up, that the agency would have my back, and in this case they didn't. And that was pretty difficult.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

So Walter Reed, for me, was a pretty remarkable place. And where I am now, in my public persona on this, is really advocating for healthcare for victims of this, as victims do pile up, because it's a place that really, frankly, saved me. Because not only did I have physical injuries, there was a moral injury too of that betrayal. So they helped me with everything from obviously there's pharmaceutical options and things like that, but that really wasn't the case for me. There was more important things like therapy and meditation. There's things, biofeedback, neurofeedback training. There's the softer side of medicine and that, for the special operations community, for traumatic brain injury, has really helped.

Paul Kolbe:

Hey, Marc?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Yes.

Paul Kolbe:

Let me just pull back. I'll come right back to you, but let me just flip over to Adam for a moment and give him a chance. I want to pull back the lens a little bit and ask him about his journey in covering this story, and going back to 2016 and taking a look at some of the wider sets of folks that have been affected. Adam?

Adam Entous:

Yeah. So just to correct a little bit, the first time I wrote about this was 2018 at the New Yorker. And of course, the story began to break in the summer of 2017 because there were people that were being taken out of Cuba, and that's how the story initially came out.

Adam Entous:

And basically, I'm not a Cuba expert. I'm more of a Middle East expert, and the editors asked me if I was interested in trying to get to the bottom of it. And they were hoping that I'd be able to solve the mystery in the story, as if I'd be able to actually catch the perpetrator or figure it out. And I told them that it wasn't going to happen. This was going to be one of these stories that goes on for a long time with some question marks out there.

Adam Entous:

So what I was interested in was piecing together the context, which the Trump administration, not having any intelligence about who was behind or what was behind the events in Cuba, initially decided, and I think it was an interesting decision and certainly one that had implications, was to point the finger at the Cubans and to say, not that they had any evidence that the Cubans were actually doing it. In fact, the Cubans had explicitly told them, I think the quote was, "It's not us." But they knew enough about Cuba to know that nothing happens in Cuba without the Cubans having control of their territory.

Adam Entous:

And anyone who's spent any time in Cuba, particularly in Havana, will notice that literally the tallest building in the city is the Russian embassy, which is just this enormous monstrosity, frankly, that towers over the key areas of Havana where a lot of the diplomats live and where most of the foreigners live.

Adam Entous:

And so the idea was to figure out what was the context that was going on in Cuba when this all started. So the context was that Obama had decided to have an opening after he's reelected. After he's reelected, he decides one of his priorities is going to be to try to change that dynamic between the United States and Cuba.

Adam Entous:

And unexpectedly, these talks take off. And they're being held secretly in Canada, in Toronto and Ottawa. And at one of these sessions that takes place in Toronto, two of the American negotiators are in this airport hotel. All of this is completely secret. And these two individuals, if I remember right, a man and a woman and they have tattoos on their arms, they approach the two negotiators and they pull out their phone and they start immediately snapping pictures.

Adam Entous:

And I talked to the two diplomats who were there, and when they conferred with each other, they suspected, without any evidence, that this was the Russians that were trying to basically say to the Americans, "We know what you're trying to do. Cuba has been our ally. We know you're trying to peel them away and bring them closer to the United States." And the negotiators thought that the Russians were going to leak this information or leak the negotiations in order to sabotage the negotiations. But for some reason, that didn't happen. And they concluded that this was an attempt by the Russians to merely just let the Americans know that they were aware that the talks were going on.

Adam Entous:

Now, the talks go very quickly, and the Americans are frankly blown away by how easy it's going. Obama makes a visit to Havana. We basically have this huge moment when Obama's there. And he gives a speech which is aired live on Cuban television, which is also something that was quite extraordinary. And there was this tremendous outpouring in Cuba to what Obama had said. But after Obama's trip, American officials noticed a change in the Cuban attitude. There was a backlash as if their own deep state, their own intelligence services that for decades basically saw the Americans as the ultimate enemy and weren't really prepared to give up on the fight frankly, and didn't believe that Obama was frankly any different than his predecessors in terms of his end goal, which was to change the Cuban system to make it more pluralistic, less controlled by the regime. There was a backlash, and the American officials noted this.

Adam Entous:

The next surprise is Donald Trump wins the White House, and the Cubans, like pretty much everybody else on the planet, were expecting Hillary Clinton's to win. And so they're asking the Obama administration officials, what does this mean? Is this the end of the opening? And frankly, the Obama administration officials didn't really know what to tell them. Because during the campaign, Trump had frankly sent mixed messages about what he was intending on doing regarding Cuba. When he campaigned in Cuba, he was a hard liner, but in other states, when he gave remarks, he was less so.

Adam Entous:

And Fidel Castro also dies during this period. This is the context that occurs. And keep in mind that there is a last-minute flurry on the Cuban side to lock in the Obama guys before they leave office on a series of agreements. One of those agreements was intel cooperation. And the idea was, is that the Cubans were going to put an intel officer at their embassy in Washington, and we were going to have greater intel cooperation. This was one of the, I'd say, fantasies that was said, that both sides had embraced before everything fell apart.

Adam Entous:

So what happens is we're talking a few weeks after Fidel dies, a few weeks after Trump is elected, a CIA officer is in his residence in Havana, and he feels the pressure, he hears the noise, and he basically reports to the medical office that this strange thing happened to him. And there's total confusion by the medical staff. They've never seen anything like this. Completely doesn't make any sense. And that was the first case and patient zero, we might call him.

Adam Entous:

That same person has a second incident a couple of weeks later. Then it starts to affect other members of the station. Keep in mind, you guys know better than me, that is a tiny station. There aren't that many

officers that are working in that station. I never really got a good grip on the numbers, but it sounds to me, I would say, that almost everybody who worked at the station was affected at this point. And then at one point, the ambassador decides that he is going to basically let everybody know in the embassy what was going on. And he has an all staff meeting, and he lets them know.

Adam Entous:

And when that happens, suddenly a lot of other people say, "No, this also happened to me." And then the numbers started to spike. And so what I was trying to do when I was covering this, not having any position on who was behind it, what was doing it, just to lay out exactly what was happening in Cuba. What was the context? And I was writing this after Marc had already had his experience. I was writing this in 2018. It's after Marc had already had these incidents, but we were unaware that others at that point were affected.

Adam Entous:

In fact, the next cluster that emerges is in Guangzhou in China, which is in spring, summer of 2018. And so anyways, that's how this takes off. And frankly, one of the most consistently frustrating parts about covering this has been you could talk to the victims, and anyone who has knows that they're deeply affected by this. But what's been incredibly frustrating has been the inability, and again, this may be a combination of the adversary, if there is an adversary, is extremely, very capable of preventing any leakage of information about what they're doing. But the government has no information, or at least has very little information about what is going on.

Adam Entous:

And that has been consistent from the first reports until very recently. I realize that things may be changing more recently, but until relatively recently, they really had nothing to offer in terms of an explanation or any concrete information. And maybe that initial decision to point the figure at the Cubans was premature, given some of the information that's come forward since then.

Paul Kolbe:

Thanks, Adam. So we've got Moscow, we've got Cuba, we've got Guangzhou up to 2018. Marc, can you talk a little bit about just the scale of this, what we know about who is being affected, and what are the commonalities between them? You described a set of symptoms you've encountered. Adam talked about reports of similar-sounding things. Can you just help people understand, what exactly is being reported, and what are those commonalities?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

I think you know, obviously this has been certainly covered quite extensively in the media. Just today, the Wall Street Journal just broke a story about a US diplomat being affected in Serbia. Most recently during Director Burns's trip to India, reportedly one of his staffers was hit. Prior to Vice-President Harris's trip to Hanoi several weeks ago, there were several embassy officers in the US embassy in Hanoi hit. And then there is throughout 2021 events at the US embassy in Vienna, Austria, which looks, again, reportedly-

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Marc Polymeropoulos:

It's at the US Embassy in Vienna, Austria, which looks again reportedly. I will source this to the media because it's been so extensively covered, but it looks almost like a mass casualty attack with dozens and dozens of US Embassy officials. So clearly the pace of this is increasing. And what I will say is from my standpoint as someone who has been very public about this, when people come back from overseas and they've been affected and I see them getting medical care, I will speak with them. And I think that's something that's really important that those who were injured all get together and talk about their experiences, but their symptoms are very similar. Obviously, it's headaches, it's vertigo, it's feeling of some kind of blast wave.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And it's pretty extraordinary that across the board the symptoms are consistent. One of the things that I think it's important to note is, and if you go back to a study back in 2019, by the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Dave Roman from Stanford in the study, and when I spoke to him as well, he also said that everybody also does not have to look the same because the level of exposure to whatever happened is going to be different, your body composition is different. And so when we go to a place like Walter Reed, and I was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury, that's the diagnosis that people are receiving now. And it's based on what the doctor say is an exposure event, but just like anything else that depends on what you were being exposed to.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

So I think those of us who were unaware of this in the beginning are more affected, I hope some of the recent victims got what we call got off the X, they left the area as they felt something happening. And I think they might have less symptoms and might heal quicker, but make no mistake that the pace of the attacks, certainly appear to be increasing. And the symptoms, at least in the victims that I talked to, and I talked to a lot of them are very similar.

Paul Kolbe:

Thanks, Mark. Adam, you made reference in Havana, you talked kind of refer to what seemed to be a possible geopolitical link, right. Whether it's causal or not, but that at the time an important development was taking place in the bilateral relations you saw activity, which effectively disrupted that. As you look at other cases or you look around the globe, do you see other geopolitical links to this too? I guess what, I'm starting to work towards is what's motivating this, what are the causes? What are the drivers, for what we're finding?

Adam Entous:

Yeah. So the suspicion right from the very beginning was basically, so this would be the Trump administration when they were dealing with this Pompeo at the time of the CIA, the conclusion their assessment, best guess, I would call it because frankly it didn't have a lot of intelligence to base it on, was that the Russians or the Chinese were responsible for this. And I think that was based on who's got the technological capabilities, who's got the ability to project force in these parts of the world. But like I said, that's based on just assumptions that are being made. Some of the Obama administration officials who I spoke to who were involved in the negotiations had a theory that obviously the Russians were very unhappy about the American role in Ukraine.

Adam Entous:

And we were by trying to pull the Ukrainians closer to Europe and the United States leading up to the Maidan revolution. And then after that revolution, we close ranks with the Ukrainians to a certain extent that maybe they were disappointed with how much they got from us in the end. But in the end, the Russians were unhappy with the way we handled that. In the case of Cuba, what was the United States doing was it was trying to basically peel, bring Cuba closer to the United States through largely diplomatic and economic trade relations and tourism. And also the Russians have a historically close relationship with the Cubans, going back to the Soviet period. That relationship has gone through, it hasn't quite been as close during some of those years since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Adam Entous:

But nonetheless, you can understand from the perspective of the Russians, that closing of the ranks between the Cubans in the United States would not be in Russia's interest. So again, this is hypothesis. Basically, I mean frankly, I found that American officials were largely guessing. I remember John Bolton. He was the National Security Advisor when the China case has popped. Now, before that Bolton was sort of split 50/50 between China and Russia being the most likely culprit. And when it happened in China, he decided, oh, it must be Russia because he doubted the Chinese would do it in their own backyard. So if that gives you a sense of grasping at straws nature of this, rather than these assessments being based on concrete intelligence or information. But in a lot of these places, if you look at Vienna, right, Havana, obviously, like I mentioned, has a huge Russian presence.

Adam Entous:

In fact, that the KGB used to send it's a counter-intelligence guys to get trained in Cuba during the Cold War, the Cubans are just so good at what they do. I used to be based in Israel and frankly the similarities between the Cuban services and the Israeli services, I was really struck by those similarities in terms of a singular focus on the mission and the belief that you're up against a singular adversary Islamic terrorism, in the case of Israel in various forms, and then with the Cubans, the United States. But the idea that the Russians might be the perpetrators here has remained sort of the operating hypothesis through the end of the Trump administration into the Biden administration. And top officials in the Biden administration have adopted those same beliefs, but also the amount of evidence that they have people some of it is questioned that one piece of information that has come forward is a geolocation data.

Adam Entous:

This is obviously the CIA and various US intelligence agencies are very good at identifying the phone numbers, the selectors connected to a certain individuals, and they have identified some GRU people, presumably not all of them, but some of them in certain places, and they can follow them around, basically on their phones. Obviously, if they were very skilled at their job, the idea is they're not supposed to have that phone on or for that matter on their person when they're doing their jobs, which is following American diplomats in American spies around the world at different locations. But nonetheless, some of them are obviously not as skilled as we've seen with Bellingcats investigations, and they tend to maybe want to chat with their girlfriend or their wife and send a few text messages and we can pick up on their locations.

Adam Entous:

In those cases we've been at my understanding is, is the intelligence community was able to pinpoint in some of these cases, not all of them, but in some of these cases, identifying GRU, which is a Russian military intelligence officers that we know about in the vicinity of the Americans who were affected at

the moment that they were affected. Now, a lot of people have pointed to this as being the best evidence that is available. Now, it may be true that that is the best evidence that is available. But I would also argue that it's also potentially circumstantial evidence because everybody who leaves those Embassies of a certain rank or a certain importance has a tail. Why is it only happening during these individual cases? And so frankly, I still feel that could change quickly.

Adam Entous:

Look what happened with Bin Laden. They got lucky in Pakistan and got the right license plate number and were able to follow the guide to Abbottabad, and that changed on a dime. And that could happen in this case too. But we haven't yet seen, at least I haven't, the intelligence that provides for a high confidence assessment that Russia did it and how they're doing it.

Paul Kolbe:

Thanks Adam. Mark, other than the reported symptoms, are there any commonalities or similarities between the victims, either the types of roles they have, or their profile, or their seniority, or are we just seeing what seems to be a random sampling?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Sure. In my understanding, again, this is based on individuals who come back and I see them during treatment. A lot of them were involved at some point in Russian operations. And that to me, is certainly highly suspicious. And I think that is likely led to some of the hypothesis that the Russians are behind this, that they are retaliating against US officials, whether it's state department or US intelligence officials who have worked the Russia file before. And so I think that's something that's quite notable. What's interesting now, and I think what has changed over the last month or two is the two events against VIP travel both in Hanoi and in Delhi.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And I think that has changed the equation a bit. I would imagine it has, because not only are these attacks against senior staff or staffers involved in VIP travel. It's also presumably a message that an adversary is sending that no one is immune. And I'm obviously not in the building anymore. I've been retired for several years, but I would imagine anyone from the secret service or diplomatic security or the CIA directors protective detail there is a bit of a different equation now perhaps this is a message sent that nobody is really immune to this. So I would say there was one of the commonalities was this common work against the Russians, the Russia file of, of different US government agencies. But now with this VIP travel, I think that this throws it into a little bit of a different direction. And presumably this has caused even greater alarm within the US government.

Adam Entous:

So just to expand on what Mark's saying, actually the London case. So back in Trump does a state visit to London it's right on the border between May and June 2019, and the delegations to prep for his visit arrive a week beforehand. And so Mark you're right that obviously with the Burns trip to India, and also with Harris going to Vietnam, but actually Trump going to London at the hotel where they were staying two individuals, administrative staffers who worked for the National Security Council were basically reported two incidents actually during that trip while Trump was there. In fact, the first incident occurs on the day that Trump arrives the same morning that he arrives.

Adam Entous:

And the second one occurs to people are in the same hotel room when it happens. And it's very similar to the stories that I've heard. I've heard out of Havana, frankly, where people are in a room and they're awake and they're talking and then suddenly they feel the pressure and they hear the noise and then they get off the X and suddenly they're they're in the clear. And so there were these two incidents and those two incidents in London really were a wake-up call to the NSC, which was under Bolton and Charlie Kupperman, who was the Deputy National Security Advisor at the time. So I think what's interesting about the dynamics of this occurring basically to senior leaders. Obviously this brings it home right. For, for them personally, right.

Adam Entous:

So Burns has got to think I have this very secret schedule. How were they finding us, on these trips with Harris, obviously this is more announced. People knew with Trump, they knew that they were coming, but what the London case did was it so shocked the NSC, it's so shocked Charlie Kupperman frankly, because he would pass these two individuals every day when he was going to the bathroom. Right. And so suddenly it was real for them in a way that frankly, hearing stories from people they don't really know, or they weren't traveling with it doesn't resonate in the same way. And so I think that is why I agree, Mark, that that changes the dynamic. I think it starts earlier and then fades because the Trump guys are out. But frankly, I remember during the transition, when I told the story to some of the Biden folks, they actually were quite dismissive of the Trump folks.

Adam Entous:

They said, oh, the fact that they had to know them to do anything about this just shows that they weren't taking it seriously. And then it happens to some of the Trump senior officials on these trips. And of course, naturally you have a very human reaction when you actually know people who do it, you have no reason to believe that they would not be serious. You know them, you trust them, you respect them. Of course, it's going to be much more real and you're going to want to demand answers much more than you might otherwise. So

Paul Kolbe:

Let me just ask you both that question of the doubt that people exhibited, unless they had talked to someone that knew, and you talked a bit earlier about that as well, Adam. There was an FBI report that came out I believe, that attributed this to a neurogenic issues that folks imagining it, or that it was psychosomatic or a form of "Mass hysteria," What was the basis of that report, and was there anything to that?

Adam Entous:

Right? So I'm not exactly sure the date of this report, I believe it was done in 2018, maybe 2019. So basically what happened was the initial Cuba victims, they were interviewed by the FBI kind of criminal investigation side. And those FBI agents wrote up evaluations. What happened, what these victims saw, where they were at the time of the incident, stuff like that, they were not doing a psychological assessment of these individuals. They were literally just writing a crimes report about what they had experienced. What happens is the Behavioral Analysis Unit was assigned the task at the FBI of assessing the victims. Now for reasons that are not entirely clear to me, they did not start re-interviewed the victims.

Adam Entous:

Instead, what they did was they took those FBI reports that had been written and in addition to that, they went to their doctors at the University of Pennsylvania who had prepared their own medical kind of reports based on their own discussions separately from the FBI, with the victims. And they took those two together and they went to some building in Washington somewhere, and they basically wrote a report that assessed that this was psychogenic illness and I think when they brief this report to the state department, the people who have dealt with the victims at the state department, the advocates for the victims in the state department were gassed by the contents of this report, how could this be? I've been talking to the victims.

Adam Entous:

Of course, this is real that the people who thought that it was psychogenic in the first place, saw the report. And they're like here's the proof that it's a psychogenic right. And what happens is they also brief the doctors at University of Pennsylvania and they bring their report and they brief the doctors and the doctors were like, what are you talking about? We actually thought it was psychogenic until we actually did an evaluation of the victims. And we put them through our medical diagnostics and did these tests, that would be impossible, according to the doctors at University of Pennsylvania, to fake or even copy, intricate eye movements that you'd have to be the best actor ever to try to recreate these things. And they saw it in patient, after patient, after patient.

Adam Entous:

So they said to the FBI, your guys are crazy. I mean, we ruled out at the very beginning after we did our evaluation. In fact, the doctor there Dr. Doug Smith at University of Pennsylvania told me a story once that when they first got the job of that evaluating and treating these patients, they were just told very little detail from the state department, because so much of it was classified because it involves CIA personnel. And they went around the room with all the doctors. And they were like, most of the doctors thought it was going to be psychogenic. When they heard the way it was being described by the state department officials who gave them the initial brief, and maybe the CIA officials, they thought it was psychogenic. But then when they actually did the testing, they concluded the opposite.

Adam Entous:

And what happens is this FBI report with this conclusion provides ammunition to those who were already inclined to believe that this was not real. And those who believed it was real were obviously undermined within the bureaucracy to basically get attention to this issue. And so, I think what Mark experiences, unfortunately for Mark, cause his timing sucks. It was right. Again, I'd have to check the dates exactly, but you can understand why I can put myself in the shoes of Gina Haspel at the CIA. I know not necessarily everybody want to put their imagined being Gina, but I can imagine if I go to my analysts and say, what have you got? What intelligence do you have that helps us with attribution? And the analysts say we don't got anything.

Adam Entous:

And then the FBI sends in their group from the Behavioral Analysis Unit and they say, here's our assessment. So I think I can understand why people didn't know what to believe. And so in some way's it sort of poisons the well and cast doubt. And once there's that little bit of doubt, it's hard to ever overcome it, especially since there an absence of intelligence coming in that is going to override the doubt. And so that's the dynamic within the bureaucracy, I think heading into basically the very end of

the Trump administration, because there is a wake up call at the very end of the Trump administration and certainly in the Biden administration. [crosstalk 00:43:24]

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Hold on, can I address-

Paul Kolbe:

One quick comment. And then a question to Mark [crosstalk 00:43:30].

Paul Kolbe:

So, I'm reminded, I hate to quote Donald Rumsfeld, but what I'm hearing in my head is that absence of intelligence is not intelligence of absence. And then on something that's going to be sensitive, tightly compartmented, highly sensitive, unless you're looking for it damn hard and with great resources and great sources, you're probably not going to see it.

Paul Kolbe:

Mark, the question for you is, and I just want to really highlight and make sure I'm understanding correctly, the situation multiple, multiple folks have been evaluated exhaustively and diagnosed with measurable, specific markers of specific traumatic brain injury that's consistent across places, across time, and that. So what in a way you remember it, the old surveillance. So, you confirmed surveillance over time, a distance, right? Multiple sightings over time and distance. Well, this sounds to me like multiple sightings over time of distance.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Right.

Paul Kolbe:

But let me just over to you, is that correct?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

So first. That is correct. And the second part of that, and I cannot state more forcibly how damaging that FBI report was, and for the victims this has a lot of emotion. So what I say now is I am not unbiased on this, because that FBI report, which again was done by the Behavioral Science Unit, never talking to any victim that was used by senior members during my time in the Office of Medical Services and at CIA to tell me that I'm making it up. And meanwhile, as we finally get to institutions such as University of Pennsylvania or Walter Reed, or Johns Hopkins or other places, Centers of Excellence on TBI, We then get diagnosed with traumatic brain injury.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

There are absolute markers as you stated. So there's this wild disconnect between this FBI report that was really used against us. And as I've stated and testified, to both the House and the Senate Intelligence Committees this was a pretty staggering case of incompetence on the part of the government. It was really unfortunate and there's a lot of strong emotions. Now, the FBI has changed. And I think Adam is certainly aware of this and he's written about it too, that they are taking this more

seriously and really the US government as a whole has. And I do have to give credit to the new CIA Director Bill Burns because he has taken a completely different view of this.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:46:04]

Marc Polymeropoulos:

... Bill Burns, because he has taken a completely different view of this on several different accounts, in terms of accountability on what happened, in terms of health care for officers, and of course in terms of the attribution piece.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And then let me make one other final point, and something that just passed both houses, both the Senate and the House. It's called the Havana Act, and the Havana Act is going to be on President Biden's desk for signature. It's going to provide financial remuneration for those of us who spent thousands of dollars out of pocket. I raise this now not to get into details, but if Congress and the president are going to sign something that is going to in essence cover the costs for a lot of things that happened, it seems to me that's a pretty strong admission that this is real. The U.S. government is not going to give out hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars to victims if it's something that is not pretty concrete.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And so going back to the FBI report, that was pretty damaging and I think there's still a lot of raw feelings about that, but I will say that they've gotten better. I think they've switched this, in my view or my understanding, to a counterintelligence matter, is where it should be. And so hopefully we can move on from that, but that was a pretty dark moment for a lot of the victims, and Adam and I have had long, extensive discussions on this as well.

Paul Kolbe:

Let me ask. Let me just switch threads real quickly. We've talked about what's happened. We've talked about to whom. We've talked a bit about where, but we haven't talked at all about how. If you read a lot of the press, it's basically nothing more concrete than mysterious waves, or mysterious energy, or mysterious mechanisms for attack. I know neither of you are directed weapons physicists or experts, but I'm sure you've done a bit of sleuthing on this. What is the reality? Is this science fiction, or are these real weapons programs that we see? And if so, what actors have such weapons or such capabilities?

Adam Entous:

Do you want me to try that?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Yeah, of course.

Paul Kolbe:

Either, yeah.

Adam Entous:

Yeah. Obviously, the U.S. government obviously is incredibly advanced when it comes to experimenting with different kinds of crowd control technology that might be used. I think if you go historically back and you go to Moscow during the height of the Cold War, back to Stalin's time, our diplomatic facilities had experienced microwave... had been bombarded with microwave for decades as part of intelligence collection operations that the Russians were carrying out. There's of course the famous case of the Beast, I think. Is it the Beast? Am I mixing it up? Basically using it to turn on a listening device in the ambassador's office.

Adam Entous:

There's also, if you go forward in time to the '70s and the '80s, including the late '80s into the early '90s just before the fall of the Soviet Union, the embassy in Moscow was experiencing microwave saturation for reasons that frankly they never were really able to totally understand what was going on. In those cases, the upper floors of the embassy were being bombarded. The suspicion was that it was either to turn on listening devices of some kind or to basically interfere with American intelligence collection efforts on the top floors of the embassy.

Adam Entous:

But this largely was not... It doesn't seem really analogous to what we're talking about. You do have, of course, weird clusters of illness that pop up, but it's difficult to do any connection that could be made. I think it's a mistake, based on my research, to draw any connection between those earlier incidents involving microwave and what happens with Havana syndrome potentially. But nonetheless, as we saw with David Relman's, the National Academy of Sciences' report, which quotes I think extensively from Russian research into the use of microwave by Russian scientists and Soviet scientists over the years.

Adam Entous:

I'm not a science reporter, so I don't want to make it sound like I understand how this works, but the idea is... Again, this is a theory. It hasn't been proven yet, but that the the individuals are being hit with these waves, and the waves travel through soft tissue such as the eyes and the ears into the cranium, the cavity. Our brains or the shape of our skulls, the density of our tissue, it varies depending on genetics, environment, and all these other things, and this accounts for the varying degree of effect that these waves have. Now again, this is just a theory. I'm not endorsing that this is what's happening, but this is the prevailing theory, if you will, that is driving the investigation as it's happening.

Adam Entous:

So the idea is some people might hear a sound because of the shape of their head and the way their ears are shaped on the inside. Whereas some don't. I've talked to victims who have heard sound. I've heard some who don't hear any sound. And so that's one of the explanations that's given for the variation in the effects and the impact that it has.

Adam Entous:

Now, my understanding is... I'm not sure how far along it is, but there was an effort going on towards the end of the Trump administration which was not acted upon, as far as I can tell, but it is allegedly now being acted upon by the Biden administration, which is to reverse-engineer what this might be. Can American scientists basically create a device that needs to be portable, obviously small in size, because there's otherwise no way... This can't be a vehicle size given some of the information we have about

some of the victims. It has to be a handheld device of some kind. So they're trying to see if they can actually, using American knowhow, build something that has this effect.

Adam Entous:

The other thing they want to do, which is a plan, again I don't know if they've actually done it, is to basically subject non-human primates to exposure to this kind of pulse microwave, and then to basically put them through the same MRI signature, to try to figure out how does it affect the brains of these monkeys. I don't know if they've done this yet. This was basically something they were planning on doing. The idea again is to see, okay, we have a hypothesis. Does the science basically support that hypothesis? And that was, at my last checking, still a work in progress, and I don't know the results of those investigations.

Paul Kolbe:

Any comment from [inaudible 00:53:52]?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Yes. A couple things. One is in terms of my own individual case. Ultimately, when I was first diagnosed with some of the injuries, it was something called occipital neuralgia, which is in essence a pretty severe migraine headache in the back of your head. But then when I finally went to Walter Reed, and they've had experience with victims of these attacks, it all made sense to the doctors, because the occipital nerve is the nerve closest to your skin. It's in the back of my head. I'm lying down at night in a hotel room in Moscow with my head tilted to the side. That's where any kind of exposure would have occurred. It makes absolute sense what happened to me. So as you work through all the scenarios on when people were injured, there's some pretty logical conclusions that you can come to.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

In terms of the history of this, I think that one of the things that frustrated me at the beginning is when so many people were saying, "We don't know. We don't know." Well, the fact is there has been a lot of research and there has been a lot of reporting on this over the years. Obviously Mark Zaid is a well-known national security attorney. He was actually an attorney who helped me finally get to Walter Reed. But through Freedom of Information Acts and other legitimate requests to the U.S. government, there is acknowledgement from the National Security Agency and others that... You call it a hostile country, but presumably Russia has had in the past high-powered microwave weapons. So there is a history of this, and certainly people who have served at the U.S. embassy in Moscow know all about this.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

One final piece, too. If you look in open-source right now, the U.S. government is buying weapons systems from the private sector using directed-energy weapons to knock down drones. These are mobile. It's vehicle, and so perhaps it's not a handheld device, but this is not all that newfound technology. And so I think we have to move away from this great mystery on what this is. I think we know what it is. We have to see what the device looks like. Clearly there's going to be a lot of intelligence community efforts on this, but the idea that this is some kind of newfound technology, I would debate that.

Adam Entous:

Paul, also one wants to look at a country's adversary's history of pushing the envelope in terms of harassment, let's call it. I realize harassment is an understatement of what we're dealing with here, but nonetheless, an intelligence agency's tradition of being rough with their American counterparts. Certainly, anybody who's served in certain countries where a CIA officer knows that they might come home at night and find a cigarette butt in the ashtray, or something had been moved, or maybe a turd in the toilet that wasn't flushed. Basically, a calling card that says, "We were here," and obviously there are famous cases in Russia. Russia is one of those countries, obviously Israel is another and Cuba is another, where harassment occurs, this is kind of we follow you around, we enter your house when you don't know it, and we leave these calling cards.

Adam Entous:

Now, the Russians have a history of pushing the envelope in this. There have been some very striking examples of an American intel officer who gets I think his shoulder broken on his way back into the embassy at one point. So literally a physical attack occurs. And so the Russians, unlike some of these other countries, are more willing to take chances, and are more willing to push the envelope in terms of the actions that they take.

Adam Entous:

Back in some people might call it during the Cold War days, we would do the same kind of things, not necessarily the exact same thing, to them. So if they messed with one of our people, we would mess with one of their people, and it was reciprocal, and this was the understanding. The CIA guys would basically put pressure on the FBI guys to really mess with the Russians here if the Russians messed with our people there, pop some tires, ride right on their tail and flash the lights. If that's what they're doing to us in Moscow, do the same thing in Washington or in New York.

Adam Entous:

Russia just has a history of being willing to go further than other adversaries have been willing to go, because they're less risk-averse and maybe they don't think that the Americans are going to respond in a forceful way. This has been an ongoing source of tension within the intelligence community about our reluctance to really respond to these provocations as they're happening. Now, not to equate those other provocations to what's going on now, because this is at a degree and severity that is far beyond those earlier cases. But nonetheless, when you're looking at trying to pinpoint who might be the culprit here, you do want to factor in things like who has a history of pushing the envelope and harassment.

Paul Kolbe:

I think you take a look at recent examples of activities that took place that shocked the senses and were seen as being beyond the pale. So use of polonium to poison Alexander Litvinenko in London, use of Novichok to attempt a poison of Skripal in London, assassination of... gunning down of Chechen separatists on the streets of Berlin and Vienna. So there's a whole series of extreme actions that have been taking place.

Paul Kolbe:

But also for me, if you look into philosophies of hybrid warfare and use of weapons that are asymmetric, profoundly asymmetric, i.e. not hard to create but have disproportionate effect, that are nonattributable, that are hard to trace back, that are extremely disruptive, and that are deniable. I put cyber tools into that category as well. This just feels like it fits into all those parameters of an ideally

asymmetric, disruptive, nonattributable i.e. capability. S for me, there's a pattern of coincidence or not there.

Paul Kolbe:

I want again just to underscore these capabilities and weapons exist. Directed electromagnetic radiation can have the types of effects that Marc has been talking about, Adam has talked about. It has physiological effects that's measurable that we're seeing, so it's consistent there. It's not proof, but it's consistent.

Paul Kolbe:

But that gets us to... We've skirted around attribution. We've talked about Russia. China has come up, Cuba. No one else really has. We've talked about the hunt, the intelligence hunt, the counterintelligence hunt to try to track down what this is, to apply more resources to it to get more definitive answers, or to get definitive answers. I suspect it's going to be very hard to get completely definitive answers, but who knows? We may be able to do that with the right sources and methods.

Paul Kolbe:

But the question then becomes, with attribution, wherever that lays, is what the hell to do about it. It feels to me like an extraordinarily difficult policy problem, and a number of the questions that we're getting from folks in the audience are focused around that. How do you react? That brings me back to how do we put together a policy that deters, that defends, and takes appropriate action on that.

Paul Kolbe:

Marc, let's start with you, and then Adam, over to you. Could you hang up your journalist's hat and put on a policy-maker hat?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

As former intel officials, we can put on our policy-maker hats as well. Not the norm, but ultimately, I think you said it best before. This is not an easy problem. Can you imagine the National Security Council meeting that likely would happen, and I would argue fairly soon, in terms of attribution? I think, Paul, you're right. We're not going to get to high confidence, but if you hear comments by deputy director of the CIA Dave Cohen the other day, in an open forum, said, "We're kind of getting closer." The word is, and I think the intelligence community is going to get closer, so at some point there is going to be a National Security Council discussion on what to do about this.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And it's going to be very complicated for a variety of things. First, the confidence levels probably will not be... It won't be at high confidence, so people are going to make an argument to take action on confidence levels similar to frankly what Adam said before, as the Abbottabad raid. That was in essence a 60% confidence call or something around that sort. But I think that there is a lot of pressure on the administration now to do something because of the pace of the attacks and because of what we saw about senior VIPs. So the question is what to do. What are the measures that are unlike things that we have done before, the traditional methods of sanctions, or declaring Russian intel officers persona non grata, or kicking out the Russian ambassador? Is that really enough?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

I say that, and what's important is because you also have the dynamic on the Hill where you have, and I tend to agree with this, representatives and senators... Senator Collins, who's been really instrumental in pushing this, saying, "This is an act of war against Americans, against the United States." So there's going to be a lot of pressure to take some relatively severe action, which also might of course go up against the regular bilateral issues that we have with Russia. And so it's going to be a heck of a National Security Council meeting, also probably pinning different agencies against each other. I would imagine the CIA's going to want to take much stronger action, as the Department of Defense. Perhaps the State Department will not. That's traditionally been the case when it comes to retaliatory measures against Russia, or in the past, the Soviet Union.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

I think as we go over it, I think it's worth having a discussion of a suite of measures. They likely will have to be a little more severe than what we've seen in the past.

Adam Entous:

Yeah, there was a bit of a discussion of this at the end of the Trump administration. At the Pentagon, there was a small group of people led by Chris Miller, who was the acting secretary of defense, to try to come up with response options. And the idea was kind of what I was describing, where we basically would let the air out of some tires. We would find some GRU guy in Lagos and leave him a little card on his bed when he got home from the hotel saying, "We know what you are," kind of thing. So really more messing around than really doing anything serious.

Adam Entous:

But those proposals, those response option proposals didn't go anywhere at the end of the Trump administration, in part because within the bureaucracy, including officials at the Department of Defense who advised the secretary on Russia matters, thought that this was a provocation. That if we were to respond in advance of a high-confidence assessment, before the CIA had reached a conclusion with high confidence that this was the Russians, "You can't do these things that you're proposing, Chris." Now, Chris, if anybody knows him, is not your traditional, typical Pentagon chief. He's very, very informal, the way he talks. So he basically thought, "Well, I got enough. I'm satisfied. What's the harm? Let's just do it." That was vetoed. In the end, they don't do it.

Adam Entous:

In comes the Biden administration, which is sort of the opposite of the Trump administration in terms of process. The Trump administration never really had any meetings, or not that many meetings. The Biden administration seems to be like a photocopy of the Obama administration in many ways, a lot of the same players, and they really are into meetings. They're really into having discussions. And like the Obama administration, despite the Abbottabad example, believe that you don't do anything until you've got a high-confidence assessment. So medium confidence is not going to cut it, I think, with these guys who are actually responding. It might be enough for them to use diplomatic channels to communicate concerns and things like that, but I think if they don't get a high-confidence assessment out of the CIA, it's going to be very hard for them to really respond in any meaningful way, like the ways that Marc is referring to.

Adam Entous:

I don't know where they are in terms of high, medium confidence levels on this, but knowing these guys in the Biden administration, we just saw what happened in Afghanistan, where they basically had really millions of meetings. I'm exaggerating, but they had a lot of meetings leading up to what ended up happening. If they are going to do something about this, imagine how many meetings they're going to have to discuss it. It's going to be a lot of meetings, because the implications of actually doing anything real are enormous, and they'll be very risk-averse. So even though this administration is taking this far more seriously than the previous administration at large, and even though they've taken concrete steps to really address the concerns of the patients in terms of their care, I think that their willingness to take anything less than high confidence and run with it is very limited.

Adam Entous:

Taking off my journalism hat...

### PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:09:04]

Adam Entous:

Taking off my journalism hat and just predicting what's going to happen, I don't think that much is going to happen unless they get the high-confidence assessment.

Paul Kolbe:

Feels like a significant reward needs to be put out there for information leading to the arrest or capture of perpetrators involved. A couple of questions focus on why the focus just on Russia. Why not other adversaries? And what are alternative theories to what might be going on?

Adam Entous:

Yeah, so there was initially some interest in pointing the finger. Obviously, the Cubans controlled the space initially, and so the assumption of H.R. McMaster, who was the national security advisor at the time, was, "Since we don't have any intel, let's just say they're responsible, because they control the territory." Obviously we haven't seen a similar pointing of the finger at the Austrians. After what happened in Vienna, it's not like we said, "Hey, Austrians, you guys are to blame for this." That hasn't happened. In fact, that hasn't happened anywhere except for what happened originally in Havana.

Adam Entous:

There was some concern in the Trump administration that this might be the Chinese. Like I mentioned, Bolton initially thought that was logical. And if you want to go back and look at what was going on in Cuba at the time when this starts, the Chinese had been making tremendous inroads in Latin America and in places like Cuba. And so people thought, "Okay, there's a possibility that this is some Chinese gear that was given to the Cubans that either malfunctioned or had this kind of impact." That was again in the realm of just speculation that was going on at the time, that maybe this was Chinese equipment. Because the relationship between Cuba and the Russians was less close after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Chinese sort of stepped in to try to be a close partner with the Cubans, with a closer security partnership. And so that was one of the theories that was put out there.

Adam Entous:

There were theories that it was the Venezuelans working with the Cubans. Frankly, the joke at the NSA at the time was that whatever adversary they cover was the perpetrator. So North Korea for a while was

suspected of being the perpetrator. They had just did this crazy operation in an airport in... Was it Singapore? Where they put I can't remember what kind of poison in the face of the brother of the leader. I'm sorry if I'm mixing up the details.

Paul Kolbe:

VRX.

Adam Entous:

So frankly they were grasping at straws, and they didn't really know. Whoever you covered was the perpetrator initially, but the overall average of all of these hypotheses ended up falling with the Russians, but without really there being, as far as I know, really concrete intelligence to back it up.

Paul Kolbe:

Marc, you spent a career planning operations. You spent many years hunting high-value targets in Iraq and in the Middle East, and you know as well as anyone the intense operational planning, the targeting support, the logistics trail, the infrastructure of any single operation that takes place. It strikes me that given the number of countries that have been cited here, the length of time this has been going on, this is a nontrivial operational endeavor. It would take significant investment of people resources, of logistical resources, of tradecraft resources, of targeting, of understand who your target is, where they're going to be, surveillance resources, etc., etc. All of which, as we saw from some of the Bellingcat investigations of the Skripal attempted murders, all of which leaves footprints of some sort, trails of some sort. They don't happen in a magic vacuum.

Paul Kolbe:

That gives me, one, a little bit of hope that there are lots of places to look, not the least of which would be presumably waves. It's part of the electromagnetic spectrum, right? It's measurable. It's detectable. It's recordable, and that's going to start giving you... And with that information, we're going to start being able to find direction. We could find locations that they were launched on, find safehouses, and, and, and. So there's a huge, as you said, counterintelligence task here, but also can you speak to a little bit of your understanding of what that operational infrastructure to do these kinds of operations around the world over a sustained time would look like?

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Sure. Let me make something clear, and this is not certainly to denigrate colleagues in the past who are working on this, but I don't think we actually did a lot before in trying to investigate this. And I would argue it was only until Director Burns really got there and put together this task force, and as you saw from the press, brought members of the team who were involved in the targeting effort to find Osama bin Laden. These are our man-hunting experts, frankly, and so they brought them to the task. So I think it was only until Burns really brought the appropriate amount of people, resources, and really this willingness from the top to treat this as a priority. So that's why I actually am confident we're going to find out.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

The problem that we have on this is there is a time constraint here. We're going to find out in the end which adversary is doing this. The problem is people are getting hurt right now, and so that's where we're coming up with that pressure.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

But Paul, you're exactly right. I always used to think, and I never understood why this was not treated as a counterterrorist issue. Because when we look at terrorist groups and when we do things to certainly counter them, you look at things like pre-attack surveillance. Surveillance teams will have to be on the street, or perhaps there's technical means where our adversary is finding out the location of U.S. officials, but there's going to be a signature on that.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

And then of course there's the attack itself, and as you saw, and certainly what Bellingcat has certainly proven, is that we can capture the Russians with at times shoddy tradecraft. Frankly, I think we're going to, but again, it's the idea of putting the proper amount of people, time, resources, personnel on this. And then once again, I think that the eyes of the U.S. diplomatic community as well as the intelligence community in the United States are looking at our leaders, because people overseas are getting hurt. So the workforce is watching on this, and I think there is going to be a lot of pressure for them to do something.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

But back to that point, too, to me it's a classic counterterrorism issue. We followed terrorist groups for years. The U.S. got really good at man-hunting. We know the MO of what pre-attack planning is, what the actual attack is itself, the exfiltration of individuals after the event, and I think we should use that same kind of methodology here. Frankly, by taking people from the Counterterrorism Center, which is exactly what Burns has done, that says to me he actually agrees with that and is putting that into practice.

Paul Kolbe:

A couple questions focus on who else might have been suffering from this. Any indication that other than Americans have been targeted, and any indication that other than diplomats and officials have been targeted? Anything internal, either targets in any other countries, or any other of our friends or allies?

Adam Entous:

The only ones that I'm aware of are the Canadians who were in Havana, and I've heard rumors. I don't know for sure whether they've been affected in other places, but Canadians were the initial group. It was really the Americans and the Canadians in Havana that were affected in 2016-2017.

Adam Entous:

Aside from that, I'm not aware of any other country reporting these sort of events affecting their personnel. Within the U.S. government, if you look at Guangzhou in China, you have Commerce. You have some Commerce Department employees that were working on trade issues at the time. I can think of two individuals from the Commerce Department. There may be more. You have Pentagon... Obviously, the CIA is the largest group. The State Department I would say is number two, and after that is the U.S. military. There have been large... I don't know what the breakdown exactly is, and frankly it gets all confusing, because the CIA mixes everything up, so you don't really know if all the State Department people are really State Department people. But there are some military attaches around.

Adam Entous:

Then you also have family members, not actually employees but the family members who travel in some places have also been affected while their spouse, who is an employee, is unaffected. That's also occurred in various places. So it's a really mixed group, frankly, although the CIA, and the State Department, and the Pentagon make up the lion's share of the cases.

Paul Kolbe:

Of course, military attaches overseas are considered intelligence officers by the countries they serve, so yeah, that focus. A couple things cause concern there. A, that specific targeting, the knowledge of who is being targeted, and then your story about the Delhi trip also is of concern there for a number of reasons. We're coming up to the bottom of our session. I wanted to give each of you a chance to close out with the comments that you would want folks listening to have as their key takeaways on this. So Adam, let's go to you first.

Adam Entous:

I don't know. At this point, I obviously would following it as closely as possible, and trying to answer the questions about who or what is behind it. To me, one of the things I've been struck by covering this for so long is how little information actually is in the hands of the government about this. While that could change overnight with a lucky break, that is the thing that I have been most struck by. I, as a personal philosophy, accept the mystery. I don't have to be impatient for them to figure it out, whereas obviously for people who are victims, Marc, and people in government who are concerned about additional victims are much more focused on the clock than I can be. And so I'm basically, frankly waiting for it to be figured out, and we'll see what happens and how quickly they can do that.

Paul Kolbe:

Just a quick follow-up on that. We talked a little bit ahead of this, along with other issues, but is the press inadvertently reporting loudly and wildly, loudly and widely on this? Not wildly. Is it doing the job of the adversary in creating more disruption, in amplifying the effect of this? How do you balance that?

Adam Entous:

Yeah, so definitely if it is a weapon, it's definitely a terror weapon. That's for sure. Maybe the goal was collection initially, or who knows. The frenetic efforts by the press to report on every single case as they pop up has created this, and some of them are wrong. Some of the initial reports, we had people getting it in Miami at times. We had one of the cases that I think is one of the most interesting ones and also a cautionary tale to journalists. There was a report that some American forces in Syria had this happen to them. Well, it turned out that they got food poisoning. It just took a while for the test results to come back. And so what's happening in some of these cases is that we hear about people being added to the list of potential Havana syndrome victims, but then they get diagnosed and something else is determined to be the cause of their symptoms.

Adam Entous:

And so the hunger for the scoop has whipped this frenzy, created again this frenzy. Which I agree, Paul, if the adversary is maybe hoping to terrorize, that increases the terror. It also increases the chances of false positives, because while Marc is right that there are specific indicators that can be looked at in people's blood, through MRIs, specialized MRIs in particular, the symptoms themselves are very common in a lot of cases, the kind of stuff that those initial victims in London, when they went to go see

their White House doctor when they got back from that London trip, they were prescribed to take antihistamines, because they thought that they had stress-induced sinus infections.

Adam Entous:

So I would just urge caution to reporters, because some things are being misinterpreted, misdiagnosed, and we just have to make sure that everything we report is exactly accurate. And so that has been a concern where I feel like maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves sometimes in terms of saying who we think the culprit is or what we think the weapon is. And also in the individual cases, where we think we have a case, but then we find out if you call a week later, you'll find out actually no, that was a mistake. That was not related to this.

Adam Entous:

Or it could be cases that are related, but it could be like what happened in Marc's case, where the initial doctor says, "No," but then the criteria changed over time between the administrations, and now somebody who got a no last time is now a yes when they go to a place like Walter Reed, where they actually know what they're looking for.

Paul Kolbe:

Yeah. There's certainly a lot of noise in the system. One of the audience members just talked about the proliferation of trolls now boosting the idea that it's a hangover, it's food poisoning. So that's certainly going to be coming out. One of my takeaways from you, Adam, and then just thinking about the policy formulation piece of it, one part of policy is being able to characterize what you're dealing with, to be able to put a label on it that sticks. I think your designation of this as a terror weapon, it immediately clicked for me that yeah, that's exactly what you're looking at because of what it's designed to induce and the impact of it. So I think that's a really interesting way to think about it, and that also then circles back to what Marc was talking about in terms of how you think about it organizationally and operationally.

Paul Kolbe:

Marc, over to you. Last word.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

Thanks, Paul. Thanks for this. This was a fascinating discussion. I think about the last four years, the extraordinary journey that I have gone through, and many others as well, from getting injured and really not being believed, to then having these discussions in which there is really no more debate on whether this is a real thing or not. I can't stress enough how important that is. The moral injury that a lot of us suffered when you're not believed, you know you're physically hurt yet people are not believing you, that was pretty tough to take for a lot of people in the United States government. So even as I still suffer from these symptoms now, I do have a lot of hope that we're on the right track and the right direction. And again, I give Bill Burns a huge amount of credit on this, because I think we are going to find out what happened.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

In times of despair and in times of seeing other people still being injured, which is awful, in particular because we still have so much trouble in trying to counter this, I do think there is a light at the end of the tunnel here. My concern, and what I'll leave everyone with, and Adam certainly alluded to it, and

this is not a ding on the Biden administration because this is a tough call, but I really do wonder if we're ever going to get to a point where we can really counter the adversary who is doing this. Are we going to be able to do enough to do what we did in the past with counterterrorism operations, where you detect, disrupt, deter? That's the sacrosanct language in the counterterrorism community.

Marc Polymeropoulos:

We have to do the same thing now, and I think we're going to get close to attribution soon. The confidence level might not be high, but those policy recommendations are really what we're all going to be looking at, because that is how this is going to be stopped.

Paul Kolbe:

Thank you, Marc. Adam, really appreciate your reporting on this. Appreciate you being on the case on this. The articles, if folks haven't read them in the New Yorker, are extraordinarily informative and beautifully written, by the way. So really appreciate it, and as well as your balance and objectivity, as you clearly are working to embrace the mystery but also to lay out facts as they become known and apparent. I think that's an extraordinarily important piece of this. I'm sure many folks will want to not deal with this in a public way. Personally, I believe having transparency in both what's happening and in what actions are taken to counter it are going to be absolutely essential to have confidence, both of the public and of employees of the government.

Paul Kolbe:

Marc, thank you for being here today. Thanks not only for your service over the course of a career in a lot of dangerous places, but taking what I think was probably the most courageous step you took, and that was outside of the agency and going public with this story. I know that you're the face and proxy, the avatar for a lot of other folks who you are representing, both in fact and spirit, in terms of being able to tell a story that others can't. So appreciate that, Marc, and I know that took real guts to do that, so thank you.

Paul Kolbe:

Thanks, everyone. Really appreciate you being with us today for what I found was a fascinating, important discussion, and certainly the last part of it.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:30:07]