Putin-linked think tank drew up plan to sway 2016 US election: Documents

WASHINGTON, APRIL 20 /--/ A Russian government think-tank controlled by Vladimir Putin developed a plan to swing the 2016 US Presidential Election to Donald Trump and undermine voters' faith in the American electoral system, three current and four former US officials told Reuters. They described two confidential documents from the think-tank as providing the framework and rationale for what US intelligence agencies have concluded was an intensive effort by Russia to interfere with the November 08 election. US intelligence officials acquired the documents, which were prepared by the Moscow-based Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, after the election. The institute is run by retired senior Russian foreign intelligence officials appointed by Putin's office. The first Russian institute document was a strategy paper written last June that circulated at the highest levels of the Russian government but was not addressed to any specific individuals.

It recommended the Kremlin launch a propaganda campaign on social media and Russian state-backed global news outlets to encourage US voters to elect a president who would take a softer line towards Russia than the administration of then-President Barack Obama, the seven officials said. A second institute document, drafted in October and distributed in the same way, warned that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was likely to win the election. For that reason, it argued, it was better for Russia to end its pro-Trump propaganda and instead intensify its messaging about voter fraud to undermine the US electoral system's legitimacy and damage Clinton's reputation in an effort to undermine her presidency, the seven officials said.

The current and former US officials spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the Russian documents' classified status. They declined to discuss how the United States obtained them. US intelligence agencies also declined to comment on them.

Putin has denied interfering in the US election. Putin's spokesman and the Russian institute did not respond to requests for comment. he documents were central to the Obama administration`s conclusion that Russia mounted a "fake news" campaign and launched cyber attacks against Democratic Party groups and Clinton`s campaign, the current and former officials said. "Putin had the objective in mind all along, and he asked the institute to draw him a road map," said one of the sources, a former senior US intelligence official. Trump has said Russia's activities had no impact on the outcome of the race.

Ongoing congressional and FBI investigations into Russian interference have so far produced no public evidence that Trump associates colluded with the Russian effort to change the outcome of the election. Four of the officials said the approach outlined in the June strategy paper was a broadening of an effort the Putin administration launched in March 2016. That month the Kremlin instructed state-backed media outlets, including international platforms Russia Today and Sputnik news agency, to start producing positive reports on Trump's quest for the US presidency, the officials said. Russia Today did not respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for Sputnik dismissed the assertions by the US officials that it participated in a Kremlin campaign as an "absolute pack of lies." "And by the way, it`s not the first pack of lies we`re hearing from `sources in US official circles`," the spokesperson said in an email.

Russia Today and Sputnik published anti-Clinton stories while pro-Kremlin bloggers prepared a Twitter campaign calling into question the fairness of an anticipated Clinton victory, according to a report by U.S. intelligence agencies on Russian interference in the election made public in January. Russia Today's most popular Clinton video - "How 100% of the 2015 Clintons' 'charity' went to ... themselves" - accumulated nine million views on social media, according to the January report. The report said Russia Today and Sputnik "consistently cast president elect-Trump as the target of unfair coverage from traditional media outlets." The report said the agencies did not assess whether Moscow's effort had swung the outcome of the race in Trump's favour, because American intelligence agencies do not "analyse U.S. political processes or U.S. public opinion."

Neither of the Russian institute documents mentioned the release of hacked Democratic Party emails to interfere with the U.S. election, according to four of the officials. The officials said the hacking was a covert intelligence operation run separately out of the Kremlin.

The overt propaganda and covert hacking efforts reinforced each other, according to the officials. Both Russia Today and Sputnik heavily promoted the release of the hacked Democratic Party emails, which often contained embarrassing details. Five of the U.S. officials described the institute as the Kremlin's in-house foreign policy think tank. The institute's director when the documents were written, Leonid Reshetnikov, rose to the rank of lieutenant general during a 33-year-career in Russia's foreign intelligence service, according to the institute's website. After Reshetnikov retired from the institute in January, Putin named as his replacement Mikhail Fradkov.

The institute says he served as the director of Russia's foreign intelligence service from 2007 to 2016. Reuters was unable to determine if either man was directly involved in the drafting of the documents. Reshetnikov's office referred questions to the Russian institute. On its website, the Russian institute describes itself as providing "expert appraisals," "recommendations," and "analytical materials" to the Russian president's office, cabinet, National Security Council, ministries, and Parliament. On Jan. 31, the websites of Putin's office and the institute posted a picture and transcript of Reshetnikov and his successor Fradkov meeting with Putin in the Kremlin.

Trump gutting H-1B visa programme: S Asian advocacy group

WASHINGTON, APRIL 20 /--/ A leading South Asian advocacy group has said US President Donald Trump's executive order on H-1B visas is a move to gut the programme popular among Indian technology pro fessionals. South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) also said in a statement that the Trump administration's recent court motion to revoke the "hard-fought" employment autho rization for some H-4 visa holders was very disturbing. "Both policies run contrary to core American values of respect for work and the right to participate in the workforce," SAALT said, a day after Trump signed the executive order directing an interagency review of the H-1B visa program. "We reject the premise that US-born and foreign workers should be pitted against each other to 'ensure the integrity' of the immigration system and serve the national interest," SAALT said.

The group said Trump's executive order will continue to increase immigration en forcement presence by encouraging immi gration raids at businesses and other places of employment, "further underscoring this administration's commitment to criminalizing immi igrants".

SAALT said it is "disturbed" by efforts of the current administration "to profile, ban, and deport community members by leveraging the full power of every federal agency, including the Department of Justice". "The executive order dishonours the legacy of immigrant workers in this country, past and present. The idea that the economic challenges of working class Americans stems from immigrant work, innovation, and entrepreneurship is nothing but a lie to us all and must be opposed," SAALT said. (PTI)

GOOD LUCK

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ARIES

Today, you may feel caught between the devil and the deep blue sea; while you must please your beloved, you can't afford to annoy your boss. It's okay once in while to walk the tight rope, smiles Ganesha. Life only gives you what you can handle.

TAURUS

Stress might take its toll on you today. Ganesha foresees a demanding and difficult day. There may be a need for solitude to spend time with yourself. In relationships, you will look for a common ground to live and let live, says Ganesha.

GEMINI

Today, you would want to take your beloved into your embrace and confidence. You will whisper your feelings and secrets into his/her ears as you hold him/her. There are other things though, in your list of preoccupations, education being the topmost. You will be widely appreciated for your artistic bend. Your incredible energy levels will see you through a very eventful day.

CANCER

Today, you will go on a shopping spree, predicts Ganesha. Sale or no sale, you will have a one-point agenda – buy them all. Your spouse may feel his/her palpitations rising on seeing all the stuff you have bought. You will almost buy a vehicle or a house. Business is doing good, and there should be no problem related to money, but there is a limit to what one can buy — a limit that you will definitely flout.

LEO

You will take important decisions relating to some partnership today. A progressive day at the workplace awaits. Traders may face some financial constraints however. The stress of over-work may tie you down. So do not bite off more than you can chew, says Ganesha.

VIRGO

Opening up to your beloved about your whims and fancies, as well as your goals, is the key today. Energy levels will hit the sky today. Pay due reverence to higher education and social customs. People will look up to your epicurean tastes, especially in the performing kinds.

LIBRA

When it comes to your children, no pain is too much. Today seems to justify that statement as you may indeed take pains to improve your children's welfare. But it's all worth the effort in the end. Afternoon brings with it the possibility of happiness and success. You may make worthwhile material progress today. Also, meditation might take up much of your time. Overall, it's a fulfilling day, portends Ganesha.

SCORPIO

You will understand the importance of creating a divide between your personal and professional life, feels Ganesha. On the professional front, your diligence and commitment to work will bring praise and benefits. Later in the evening, you will celebrate your success with your sweetheart. A candlelit dinner and some champagne will be the icing on the cake.

SAGITTARIUS

The fountain of creativity will be gushing within you today. You may strive to take on new challenges later in the day. Workplace may offer economic gains later in the evening. But do not neglect your health, says Ganesha.

CAPRICORN

Power is a privilege of a few. It's a day for those of you in power, of governance and the national purse, says Ganesha. A marvellous day awaits all civil servants and government employees. The dealings you will undertake will materialise and earn you distinction; rewards for the commendable efforts you have put in the past may also come. Professionals, on the other hand, will gain the trust of their bosses and the latter is likely to discuss certain controversial issues with you.

AQUARIUS

A sunny day and a starry night! Today is for friends, says Ganesha. You chat, sing, yell, and even talk philosophy, values and politics with your pals. You may indulge in a romantic evening with your partner, either in a restaurant or at the beach, or simply on the sofa watching Clark Gable woo Scarlet O'Hara.

PISCES

Honesty, sincerity and integrity both in your dedication to work and in your devotion to your family, is your hallmark. On the strength of this foundation, you will reach an important milestone today. Socially as well, your reputation will receive a boost, says Ganesha.

KIDZ CORNER

PUZZLE SPOT

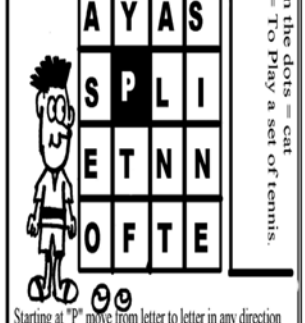
PUZZLE SPOT

Compiled and illustrated by Al Benge

Join the dots 1-27 to find out the mystery animal.

Join the dots

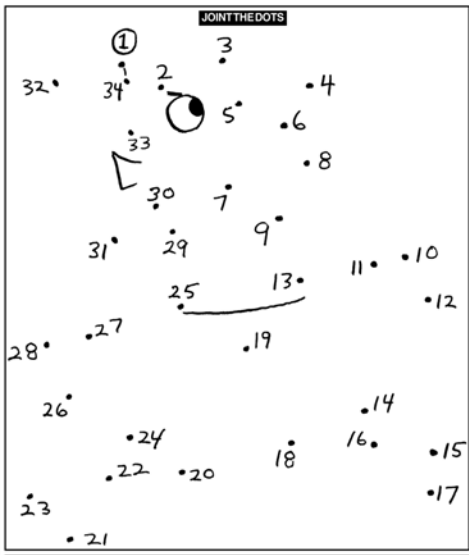
WORD TRAIL



Answers Join the dots = cat
Word Trail = To Play a set of tennis.

Starting at "P" move from letter to letter in any direction to find five words (4, 1,3,2,6). Clue - popular pastime.

JOINT THE DOTS



KidSpot™ THE PUZZLER

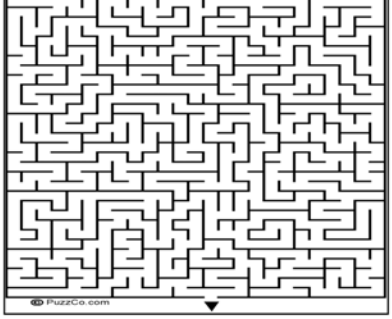
by Dick Rogers

I'm holding three playing cards in my hands. From the clues, can you name each card?

The ace of spades is to the left of the club.
The club is to the right of the heart.
The ace is not in the middle.
The queen is to the left of the king.

ANS: READING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ACE OF SPADES, QUEEN OF HEARTS, KING OF CLUBS.

Minute Maze



PuzziCo.com

5x5

Insert the missing letters to complete ten words - five across the grid and five down.

No.191

A	S	H	E	N
C	H	O	R	E
T	O	U	R	S
O	N	S	E	T
R	E	E	D	S

OUR SOLUTION TO PUZZLE 190

(Other combinations may be possible.)

R		S		S
	N		U	
S		A		S
	I		E	
S		E		Y

Reference: C.O.D. 1995