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Their Meddlers and Ours



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By the end of World War II, the United States had become a serial meddler in the affairs of the nations of the world, friend and foe alike.

American intelligence services took particular aim at Third World and Western countries with large Communist Parties, and at countries on the other side of what used to be called “the Iron Curtain.”

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Meddling there took some doing before the implosion of the Soviet Union. It still does in China and North Korea, and in countries with strong states, like Iran, that resist American domination. However, our intelligence services are well resourced and determined.

They are also inept. Therefore, their machinations fail as often as not.

Even so, with the Soviet Union gone, the European component of the formerly Communist world became easy prey.

It did not take long, in those circumstances, for American meddlers to become cruder and less subtle. But it was not until the Obama period that the extent of the transformation became too obvious to miss.

Thanks to Hillary Clinton's stewardship of the empire's affairs during her tenure as Secretary of State, and to the exploits of the liberal imperialists she and Barack Obama left in charge after she quit the State Department, the level of American brazenness in that part of the world has substantially increased.

This was especially evident in Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, adjacent to Russia, deeply connected, historically and culturally, to the old Russian and Soviet empires.

In these circumstances, what fair-minded person could blame the Russians for wanting to meddle in our affairs?

Our intelligence services claim that Russians meddled in the 2016 presidential election, and that they are gearing up to meddle again in the midterm elections later this year.

They are probably right, but it is always wise to be wary of what they say. They lie for a living — the CIA especially. It is their nature.

And does it not seem far-fetched to claim that those pesky Russians are at it again, now that meddling has become Topic A in the babble of Clintonite Democrats and their media pundits?

It is also worth noting that nobody has claimed that those nefarious Russians actually did anything more consequential than posting notices on Facebook and other social media sites, and having something to do with calling for, and perhaps also organizing, a few pro-Trump campaign rallies.

Much has been made of a Hillary-impersonator in a cage made to look like a jail cell, dressed in prison garb, whom the Russians are said to have hired for at least one such event — puerile stuff, worthy of college pranksters, not seasoned international spies.

It is noteworthy too that the charges our intelligence services have leveled against Russian meddlers accord well with many of the self-exculpatory and anti-(small-d) democratic positions vigorously promoted by the DNC, the Democratic National Committee.

Thus we are told that Russian machinations accounted in part – how large a part no one says — for the disdain for Clinton that led voters who would normally vote for almost any Democrat running against Donald Trump (or any of the other clowns who vied for the Republican nomination) to stay home on Election Day; or, horror of horrors, to vote for Jill Stein, the candidate of the Greens.

Were ours more like a real democracy, Stein would surely have done very well running against Clinton and Trump. She was the best choice by almost any standard, the most intelligent, articulate and progressive candidate in the race.

However, in our so-called democracy, duopoly-friendly electoral rules and servile corporate media insure that third party campaigns are non-starters. Stein's was no exception. Her campaign seems to have gotten under the DNC's skin nevertheless, much like Ralph Nader's campaign a decade and a half earlier.

We should not be too wary, however. Inasmuch as Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller and his team have now issued indictments against thirteen Russian individuals and three Russia-linked organizations, it is not impossible that there actually is some there there.

Notwithstanding his FBI past – and the blatant partisanship he is currently demonstrating – Mueller is reputed to be a straight shooter. It is as likely as not that he actually is.

We have to hope that he is because, with Republicans controlling both chambers of Congress, his investigation into Trump's Russian connections – which almost certainly have more to do with shady financial transactions, including money laundering, than with election meddling — is the only game in town.

Let us therefore “stipulate,” as lawyers say, that Russians did indeed meddle in the last election, just as our intelligence services claim they did.

We will probably never know for sure because the chances that any of Mueller's indictments will actually lead to trials are nil. The persons indicted are all now living in Russia, and Russia has no extradition treaty with the United States and no reason to cooperate with Mueller.

Ironically, this is yet another reason to be wary of what our intelligence services are telling us. Indictments without trials are more like insinuations than demonstrable proofs.

But even conceding that Mueller and his team could get convictions if their indictments were to go to trial, the outrage over Russian meddling that is now raging across the political landscape positively reeks of hypocrisy.

No surprise there! It is practically a tenet of the American civil religion, proclaimed in theory and observed in practice, that our “exceptional” nation has an absolute right to do

what others may not – to apply double standards as needed, and to violate that dictum about “doing unto others as you would have others do unto you” with impunity.

Violations of the Golden Rule have become so commonplace that most Americans do not even notice how flagrant they are. The rest of the world does, of course, but why would Americans care about that? “America first,” and also “last and only,” is inscribed in the collective psyche. All Trump did was accentuate the nativist and racist implications of that idea.

Trump has a knack for making everything worse, but, on this and so much else, he is only the latest in a long line. For almost as long as there has been a United States, American governments have been holding other countries to standards that they would never think to apply to their own.

For some seven decades now, they have gotten away with it easily because they wield the most over-resourced military juggernaut in the history of the world. Who or what would dare stand in the way?

The joke is on the American people, however; think what that money could do if it were put to some socially useful purpose.

This would never occur to any Democrat or Republican — not so much out of deliberate malice as because they know not what they do. Our political class is a bipartisan gaggle of self-righteous hypocrites; a “basket of deplorables,” if ever there was one.

The party line is a bit unclear on why the Russians meddled.

Sometimes, it is because Vladimir Putin has it in for Hillary Clinton; sometimes because he sees Donald Trump as a potential asset; and sometimes, because he wants to undermine Americans’ faith in “democratic” institutions.

The common denominator, in each case, is that Putin is an evil genius, working behind the scenes but pulling all the strings.

Why not? Demonizing Putin became a bipartisan obsession long before the Trump phenomenon erupted. It wasn’t always that way, but does anyone nowadays even remember when George W. Bush looked into the autocrat’s eyes and “saw that he is good?”

It is extremely unlikely, however, that Putin would disdain Clinton more than other recent Democratic nominees – Obama, John Kerry, Al Gore. All of them are cut from the same cloth.

Could misogyny have gotten the better of him? That is an explanation that Clinton and her boosters are always eager to trot out whenever they feel a need to make excuses for themselves. That taking this tack serves only to signal their own desperation doesn't faze them.

Perhaps Putin simply hates Clinton a lot. How could he not when she has been badmouthing him relentlessly since even before she took over at the State Department? It is extremely unlikely however, that he would let personal animosities dictate his behavior to such an extent. He is too much of a statesman for that.

And he has his priorities right. Did he not save Obama more than once from being pushed into escalating the level of American military involvement in Syria – something he would surely have come to regret? Putin is no angel, but, unlike his American counterparts, on matters of war and peace, he is cautious, reasonable, and wise.

Perhaps he had it in for Hillary because she is so blatantly bellicose and Russophobic. The problem with that explanation, however, is that compared to other American politicians, including Obama, she is not all that much of an outlier. If he could live with them, he could live with her.

Putin probably wanted Trump to win more than that he wanted Clinton to lose – not because he thought that, in Trump, he would have a president his government could work with, but because he would have a president he could blackmail or otherwise control.

If Russian intelligence is a tenth as good as it is made out to be, they probably have all kinds of dirt on the Donald. If they do, why would they not use it to their advantage?

There is plenty of circumstantial evidence suggesting that this is the case, but, so far, if anybody outside Trump's innermost circle really knows, they are keeping the information to themselves.

As for the Russian leader's purported desire to undermine faith in America's supposedly democratic institutions, the most obvious thing to say is that anybody whose head is screwed on right would realize that there is nothing that even the cleverest Russian trolls could do to undermine confidence in American institutions that American politicians and plutocrats are not already doing far more effectively themselves.

They have been at it since long before Team Hillary, desperate to make excuses for their own and their candidate's ineptitude, decided to make a federal case, as it were, of Russian meddling.

How could Putin not get it? Marxism has been a dead letter in Russia for a long time, but the idea that the internal contradictions of capitalist societies put the legitimacy of ostensibly democratic institutions in jeopardy could hardly elude his understanding.

It is not even clear why Putin *et. al.* would want to undermine faith in American institutions.

When blaming Russia served their purposes, old school Cold Warriors had a ready-made explanation for everything that struck them as sinister: “Communist subversion.”

Communism, they claimed (and may even have believed), aimed at world domination. Russian Communists would therefore seize any and all opportunities to sow discord and fan the flames of discontent throughout the “free world,” but especially in the United States, the linchpin of the entire system.

Cold War revivalists can hardly follow their lead – not with “the Communist menace” gone the way of the dodo bird.

They would have a hard time doing that even if the Kremlin was stocked full of Communists — because blaming foreign internet trolls for Americans’ disgust with electoral politics, much less for Clinton’s defeat, is laughable.

Even if everything in Mueller’s indictments could be proven beyond a reasonable doubt, and even if Putin was found to be behind it all – something Mueller has so far never alleged — his meddling would be insignificant compared to the meddling of homegrown miscreants and plutocrats, the Koch Brothers, for example, or Sheldon Adelson. Not even the most fiendishly clever Russian meddlers could rival their malefactions.

There are also the crimes against (small-d) democracy perpetrated by Republican Secretaries of State and everyone else involved in suppressing the votes of persons of color and other traditional Democratic constituencies. How could anything Russians do compare to that?

And for undermining faith in democracy, never sell the duopoly party system itself short.

Who could have faith in elections that accord voters choices between a neoliberal Republican Party comprised of morally and intellectually defective troglodytes, and a neoliberal Democratic Party comprised of feckless goody-goodies in service to the same corporate paymasters as their rivals.

But even allowing that Russians really did exacerbate longstanding tensions in the body politic, what they plainly did not do is cause those tensions to come into being. Our economic system and the political superstructure that sustains it did that.

Neither did they interfere with the electoral process itself. Mueller has not and probably never will charge Russian meddlers with altering vote counts.

On the other hand, there have been plenty of credible charges of “lost” or incorrectly counted votes in recent elections. For this, Republican Secretaries of State and their enablers are to blame; not Russian hackers or internet trolls.

The problem arose, in part, because so many jurisdictions have gone from paper ballots to electronic systems that can be, or are believed to be, susceptible to manipulation.

The larger problem, though, is the corruption of our never very (small-d) democratic electoral institutions. Our “democracy” bears only a vague family resemblance to the democracy of democratic theorists. It bears a powerful resemblance, however, to marketing campaigns run by hucksters of varying degrees of preposterousness.

There are constructive conversations to be had about how to keep hucksterism at bay but, on this, there is almost total bipartisan disinterest.

There is, however, a bipartisan consensus, enshrouded by the usual hypocrisy, about the importance of keeping foreign hucksters out.

This would be an eminently defensible position in countries resisting great power, especially American, domination. The United States obviously does not fall in that category.

Presidential elections in the United States affect peoples and countries around the world to an extent that elections in other countries do not. They can be as consequential for persons living half a world away as for persons residing within our borders. This makes the meddling question – in general and in the 2016 election — more complicated than it would otherwise be.

It is relevant too that the American penchant for maintaining double standards has been conspicuously on display in recent years. The consensus view about the 2016 election and others before it is that, of course, Benjamin Netanyahu’s meddling posed no problem, while the very thought that Putin might have entertained such an idea sparks outrage.

Were those two judged by the same standards, Netanyahu would come off worse by far.

Also, for anyone viewing the situation impartially, there could hardly be any doubt that actual Israeli meddling has been more harmful to the United States than anything the Russians are alleged to have done. Israel was a strong backer of the Bush-Cheney wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; and the Israelis are working overtime now to drag the United States into a war with Iran.

It would be hard to imagine a more reckless idea. The Iraq War brought murder and mayhem and continuing geopolitical instability to the entire region. The consequences of a war with Iran would be worse by many orders of magnitude.

But even were there no double standards involved, it would be hard to justify the coexistence of a determination to keep foreign meddlers out with the welcoming attitude Democrats and Republicans accord to the homegrown meddling of some of the most iniquitous, self-seeking, and venal hucksters on the world stage today.

Does it really make sense to say that it is OK for America's death merchants and military brass, and for executives in the fossil fuel industry along with the many Wall Street banksters and corporate sleaze balls who are bringing ruination to the planet, to use our purportedly democratic electoral institutions to further their own purposes and feather their own nests, while real or imagined Russian meddlers who post Facebook ads and turn benighted folk out for dumbass campaign rallies are castigated for posing an "existential threat" to democracy (what democracy?) itself.

No doubt, there are liberal intellectuals clever enough to make a plausible, if not compelling, case that it does. They would have an easier time of it if their hypocrisy was less blatant, but, even so, their arguments would probably not be entirely without merit.

However that may be, it is surely reasonable to hold that if real democracy is out of the question – if we cannot have elections that ratify conclusions reached by free and equal citizens striving collectively to ascertain the public good, but must instead be subject to one or another huckster's wiles — then better even the machinations of the likes of Vladimir Putin than those of the miscreant plutocrats whose monies make a mockery of what little democracy we have left in our "shining city on the hill."