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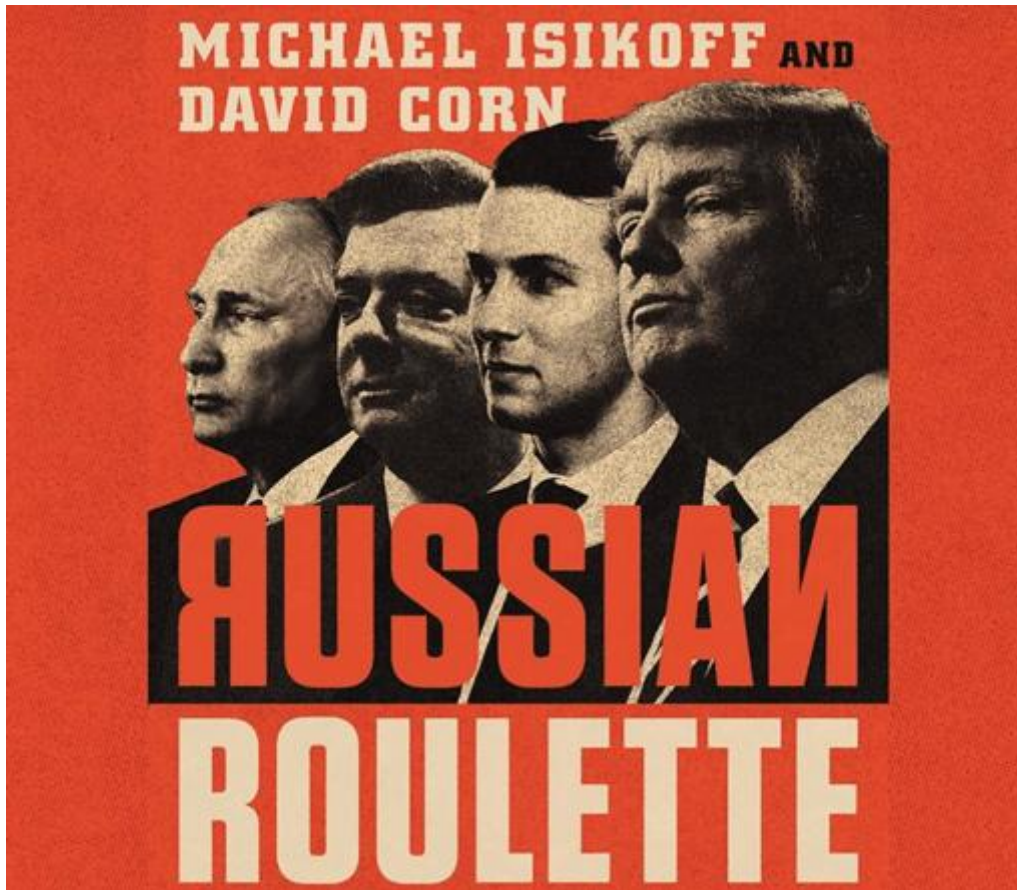
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Russian Roulette: No Smoking Gun, Six Key Flaws



Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Russian Roulette: The Inside Story of Putin's War on America and the Election of Donald Trump* (New York: Twelve, March 13, 2018)

Do you like complicated mystery novels that make you keep a list of names and dates so as not to get overwhelmed by clues and complex chronologies (unless you have a super-strong memory)? Are you prone to conspiratorialism? Do you blame Donald Trump's

presence in the White House on Russia and particularly on Vladimir Putin? Do you like to jump to conclusions before all the facts are in? Do you like to get mad at other countries for the nasty things they do (or may have done) while turning a blind eye to the nasty things the United States does? Are you a “progressive” fan of the U.S. “intelligence community” – the FBI, the CIA, NSA and the rest?

If you answered yes to all these questions, then boy, do I have a book for you: Democratic Party journalists Michael Isikoff (*Yahoo News*) and David Corn’s (*The Nation*) new volume *Russian Roulette: The Inside Story of Putin’s War on America and the Election of Donald Trump*.

Don’t get me wrong. *Russian Roulette* should be read by anyone interested in the peculiar and fascinating story of Donald Trump’s weird and disturbing relationship with Russia. It’s a riveting account. It’s the best treatment yet in book form of numerous knotty and bizarre chapters in the strange Trump-Russia saga, including:

+ Trump and top Trump associates’ financial, political, and espionage entanglement with Russian oligarchs, officials, and agents. The list of associates includes Trump’s slimy former campaign director Paul Manafort, Trump’s creepy former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, Trump’s longtime crypto-fascistic political adviser Roger Stone, Trump’s despicable son-in-law Jared Kushner, and candidate Trump’s goofball foreign policy advisers Carter Page and George Papadopoulos.

+ Trump’s fabled 2013 Miss Universe trip to Moscow and the mysterious sealed letter (its contents have never been revealed) Trump received inside “a black lacquered box” from Putin after the pageant.

+ A Russian journalist’s discovery of the infamous Internet Research Agency, a Russian “troll farm” (or was it a “troll factory”?) employing hundreds of proletarianized Russians creating and working with fake Web identities to influence U.S. and Western politics.

+ The alleged Russian Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear-Guccifer 2.0-WikiLeaks- hackings of the Democratic National Committee, the Clinton campaign, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in 2015 and 2016.

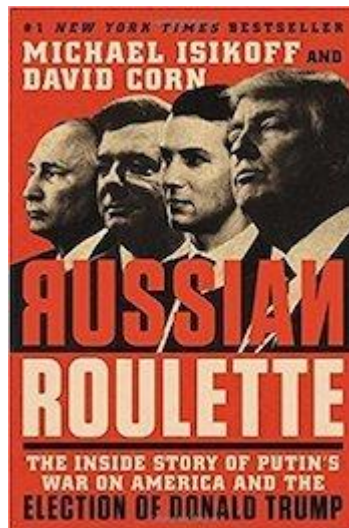
+ “Moscow’s ...clandestine propaganda endeavor, stretching across social media platforms, and in sync with the cyberattacks and the output of [Russian state media outlets] RT and Sputnik ...to persuade U.S. voters to elect a president who would adopt a softer approach to Russia.”

+ Donald Trump, Jr, Manafort, and Kushner’s infamous meeting with Russian nationals promising damaging information on Hillary Clinton in Trump Tower in June of 2016.

- + The famous and controversial Steele Dossier, a summer 2016 report by Britain’s former top Russian intelligence expert alleging that Russia had cultivated Trump for at least five years and possessed compromising and salacious (yo, golden shower video!) information with which to blackmail the future president.
- + The Trump campaign’s squashing of a Republican Party platform amendment that would have called for arming Ukraine in its war with Russia.
- + The Democratic Party’s panicked, paralyzed response to the “intelligence community’s” reports that that it was under Russian cyber-assault.
- + The Obama administration’s reluctance to forcefully and openly confront Russia on the Kremlin’s alleged subversion of U.S. “democracy.”

Anyone who thinks there’s nothing strange or disturbing about Donald Trump’s relationship with Russia and Vladimir Putin has got their head in the sand. Is Trump messed up with Russia? Are you serious? Of course he is. This book is a good place to start on that.

But read it with your bullshit detectors on. *Russian Roulette* has six basic flaws. First, it does not live up to its sub-title’s promise on Russian president Vladimir Putin. It comes nowhere close to offering smoking-gun evidence of Putin’s involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election or his motives. As the authors admit near the end of the volume, Putin’s role remains “shrouded in mystery.”



Second and related, the volume is technically premature. Special federal prosecutor Robert Mueller’s investigation of the book’s topic is still ongoing. Who really knows what Mueller’s got – or doesn’t? Collusion? Golden Don and/or Putin’s smoking gun fingerprints? I don’t know. Do you, dear reader? Do Isikoff and Corn? Maybe they should have held off.

Third, Isikoff and Corn refer to Putin's alleged subversion of something that doesn't really exist: "American democracy" (a mythical phenomenon, mentioned at least twice – see pages xi and 275). Let's be honest: The United States is a plutocracy and perhaps now even a full-on capitalist oligarchy. If you think I'm lying, read these two books by eminent liberal U.S. academics: Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, [*Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About it*](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2017) and Ronald Formisano, [*American Oligarchy: The Permanence of the Political Class*](#) (University of Illinois, 2017). Read [my recent Counterpunch](#) essay, "Who Will Protect Our Wrecked Democracy from the American Oligarchy?" and my book [*They Rule: The 1% vs. Democracy*](#) (Routledge, 2014).

Fourth, and intimately related to the third problem, Isikoff and Corn leave out a critical part of inside story behind Trump's election: the influence of U.S.-American oligarchs. This missing and big piece of the puzzle includes the remarkable influx of campaign cash Trump received from right-wing U.S. billionaires and equity capitalists in the late summer and fall of 2016. Even more significant, perhaps, is the way that Hillary Clinton's remarkable funding by big financial and other business interests (including corporate sectors that normally supported Republicans but o came over the Democrats' side thanks largely to candidate Trump's declared protectionism and isolationism) helped create the dismal centrist awfulness and deafening policy silence of Mrs. Clinton's miserable campaign. A useful source here is leading political scientist and money and politics analyst Thomas Ferguson's recent study (co-authored with Paul Jorgensen and Jie Chen) "[Industrial Structure and Party Competition in an Age of Hunger Games: Donald Trump and the 2016 Presidential Election](#)" (Institute for New Economic Thinking, January 2018). Ferguson's research suggests strongly that Putin and Russian oligarchs' impact on the election was tiny compared to that of U.S. corporate and financial oligarchs who sit atop "[America, the Best Democracy Money Can Buy.](#)" "Putin's war on America" is nothing compared the American ruling class's war on America when it comes to the inside story of how "American democracy" was pre-empted yet again during and by the last "quadrennial electoral extravaganza." (Noam Chomsky's phrase).

Fifth, Isikoff and Corn fail to provide any serious historical context (certainly part of the "inside story" of Russia and Trump) on why the Kremlin might very well have wanted to influence U.S. politics and particularly to (a) help a candidate (Trump) who promised (for whatever reasons, very likely including highly venal ones) to roll-back America's New

Cold War on Russia and (b) defeat a candidate (Hillary Clinton) who stood in the vanguard of that U.S. policy. A serious accounting of that context would include:

- * President Bill Clinton's decision to annul a 1990 agreement with Moscow not to push North Atlantic Treaty Organization further east after the reunification of Germany and not to recruit Eastern European states that had been part of the Soviet-ruled Warsaw Pact.

- * Widespread U.S. interference in Russian electoral politics and civil society before, during, after, and ever since the collapse of Soviet socialism.

- * NATO's decision to renege on its 1997 pledge not to install "permanent" and "significant" military forces in former Soviet bloc nations.

- * NATO's decision two years ago to place four battalions on and near the Russian border.

- * The 1999 U.S.-NATO military intervention in the Yugoslav civil war, leading to the dismemberment of Serbia and the building of a giant U.S. military base in the newly NATO-/U.S.-created state of Kosovo. (This remarkable development has not stopped Washington from shaming Russia for "forcibly redrawing borders in Europe" by annexing Crimea.)

- * President George W. Bush's unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

- * President Obama's decision to deploy anti-missile systems (supposedly aimed at Iran's non-existent nuclear weapons and really meant to intercept Russian missiles) in Romania and Poland.

- * Obama's decision to invest more than of \$1 trillion on an upgrade of the U.S nuclear weapons arsenal, which was already well enough stocked to blow up the world fifty times over. The upgrade involves "strategic" bombs with smaller yields, something that dangerously blurs the lines between conventional and nuclear weapons. It has certainly helped spark a new nuclear arms race with Russia and, perhaps, China.

- * Longstanding U.S. efforts "to move Ukraine out of Moscow's orbit and integrated it into the West" (to quote U.S. foreign relations John Mearsheimer).

- * U.S. provocation and endorsement of a right-wing 2014 coup against the pro-Russian government in Ukraine, right on Russia's repeatedly invaded western border – a development that predictably created war in eastern Ukraine and a crisis that led to numerous dangerous incidents between NATO and Russian forces. (As [Diana Johnstone noted](#) here in June of 2014: "With astonishing unanimity, NATO leaders feign surprise at events they planned months in advance. Events that they deliberately triggered are being misrepresented as sudden, astonishing, unjustified 'Russian aggression.' The United

States and the European Union undertook an aggressive provocation in Ukraine that they knew would force Russia to react defensively, one way or another...They could not be sure exactly how Russian president Vladimir Putin would react when he saw that the United States was manipulating political conflict in Ukraine to install a pro-Western government intent on joining NATO. This was not a mere matter of a 'sphere of influence' in Russia's 'near abroad.' but a matter of life and death to the Russian Navy, as well as a grave national security threat on Russia's border.”)

* Washington's self-righteous denunciation and slandering of Russia's reasonable and defensive annexation of Crimea, which was overwhelmingly supported by Crimeans as a natural response to the United States' installation of a right-wing pro-NATO and anti-Russian government in Kiev.

One does not have to be either a fan of Vladimir Putin (I'm not) or (something quite different) a Left critic of U.S. imperialism (guilty here) to understand the logic behind the Russian president's concerns with U.S. and Western policy – and the popularity of Putin's resistance to that policy among millions of Russians. As the mainstream “realist” U.S. foreign relations scholar John Mearsheimer argued in a [2014 article published](#) (under the title “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault”) in the establishment (Council on Foreign Relations) journal *Foreign Affairs*, Putin reasonably viewed Washington's commitment to NATO expansion and NATO's U.S.-led recruitment of Ukraine as “a direct threat to Russia's core interests...Who can blame him?” Mearsheimer asked, adding that “*The United States does not tolerate distant great powers deploying forces anywhere in the Western hemisphere, much less on its borders*(emphasis added).”

“We need not ask,” [Noam Chomsky wrote two years ago](#), “how the United States would have reacted had the countries of Latin America joined the Warsaw Pact, with plans for Mexico and Canada to join as well. The merest hint of the first tentative steps in that direction would have been ‘terminated with extreme prejudice,’ to adopt the CIA lingo.”
Indeed.

If you don't want other countries messing, or trying to mess with your nation's internal politics, don't mess with theirs and don't set up armies and hostile regimes on their borders.

If Putin did in fact undertake a “war” on supposed U.S. “democracy” (well, on U.S. major party and big money-big media *elections*, which should never be confused with real popular sovereignty[please see the sources hyperlinked under points three and four, above]), American imperialism is at the heart of the “inside story” of why the Kremlin

took that dangerous step. (Motive is a key part of any good detective story and prosecution, no?) In *Russian Roulette*, deadly U.S. and NATO aggression appears primarily if somewhat offhandedly as a figment of evil Putin's paranoid imagination.

That's a big mistake.

Isikoff and Corn's silence on U.S. aggression seem driven by imperial ideology and Western arrogance. *Russian Roulette* boasts a major back-cover blurb from the leading liberal paranoid-style Russian conspiratorialist and New Cold Warrior Rachel Maddow. To make matters worse, Isikoff and Corn say nothing about the neo-Nazi affiliations of the pro-Western Ukraine coup regime Putin and Russia quite reasonably feared. That's a little disturbing.

Sixth, Isikoff and Corn's reference to Russian election help as the "original sin" of Trump's presidency is insulting to people of color, immigrants, women, and environmentalists, many of whom could reasonably argue that racism, nativism, sexism, and/or rapacious eco-cidalism are the true original sins of the Trump presidency.

Though they were strong pro-Clinton Democrats in 2016 (I recall Corn telling NPR that people who couldn't make themselves vote for Hillary Clinton had no business protesting Trump's inauguration), Isikoff and Corn deserve credit for reporting something we can expect many Democratic Party-affiliated readers to quickly forget on pages 30 and 31 of *Russian Roulette*:

"The day after ...Russian spies were arrested [on June 27, 2010], Bill Clinton arrived in Moscow to deliver the keynote speech at a conference sponsored by Renaissance Capital, a Russian investment banking firm with links to the Kremlin. Clinton was paid a whopping \$500,000 for his ninety-minute appearance, which drew an audience of top Russian government officials. Though his wife was secretary of state, the former president had not curbed his lucrative overseas speech-making, even when the gigs were underwritten by groups that might have interests before the State Department...In the case of Renaissance Capital, the firm at that time was promoting a stock offering of a company called Uranium One—a mining firm that controlled about 20 percent of uranium production capacity within the United States. And Russia's nuclear agency, Rosatom, was in the process of purchasing a controlling interest in Uranium One, pending approval of a U.S. government foreign investment review board on which Hillary Clinton sat with eight other senior U.S. officials...Around the time of the Uranium One deal, the company chairman's family foundation donated about \$2.35 million to Clinton Foundation programs."

That raises an interesting question: if Hillary Clinton had run a better campaign and fended off the Trump-Steve Bannon-Robert Mercer-Sheldon Adelson- (and Putin/Russian?) assault in the late summer and fall of 2016, would a Clinton45 presidency now be facing Congressional inquiries into the Clinton crime family's Russian entanglements – as well as Hillary's 30,000 lost emails and use of a private email server to official government business during her years as Secretary of State?

Will Isikoff and Corn follow up their study of Russia's subversion of U.S. "democracy" with an equally ambitious account of the United States' epic, longstanding, and ongoing interference in other nations' sovereign political affairs (elections and Russia included) across the planet? Don't hold your breath.