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Helsinki Theatrics: Trump Meets Putin

The first official meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his counterpart Donald Trump was a fairly casual, unpeopled affair, absent bureaucrats and note takers. This was what both wanted in Helsinki, men who believe in the gold weighting authority commands. According to Masha Gessen of *The New Yorker*, their meeting reflected “their shared understanding of power: the triumph of nothing over everyone.”

The Helsinki meeting, on the surface, did more for Putin than Trump, though the details about the actual discussions are scant. “Why did Trump,” inquired former director of the Central Intelligence Agency John Brennan, “meet one on one with Putin? What might he be hiding from Bolton, Pompeo, Kelly, and the American public?” Left, instead, was a joint press conference that had the intended rumbling effect, filled with distraction and fury inspiring titbits.

Trump, showing his traditional hostility to the US intelligence community, fell a touch short of publicly believing the Russian president over his own aides. “They said they think it’s Russia. I have President Putin – he just said it’s not Russia.”

His own director of national intelligence Dan Coats is of the contrary view. “We have been clear in our assessments of Russian meddling in the 2016 election and their ongoing, pervasive efforts to undermine our democracy, and we will continue to provide unvarnished and objective intelligence in support of our national security.”

Even more defiantly, Trump’s views were being aired in the aftermath of indictments against twelve Russian intelligence agents accused of interfering in US politics, a reminder that Robert Mueller has every intention of keeping the issue of Russia and the 2016

election in the news. This is standard fare for Trump; prior to breakfast at Mäntyniemi Palace, he took the opportunity to fire a few broadsides at the special counsel investigation, characterising it a “Rigged Witch Hunt”.

The glacial state of US-Russian relations also came under scrutiny, and for that, claimed the president, one need only look to the poisonous well of US foreign policy. Such audacious instances of self-inculpation are rare.

The Democrats, certain Republicans and the anti-Trump fraternity, were not amused. The reaction was one of stunned derision laced with jaw-dropping consternation. Former House speaker, Newt Gingrich assessed it as “the most serious mistake of his presidency” which needed correction “immediately”.

Senator minority leader Chuck Schumer resorted to hyperbolic comparison: “In the entire history of our country, Americans have never seen a president of the United States support an American adversary the way President Trump has supported President Putin.” Siding with Putin “against American law enforcement, American defense officials, and American intelligence agencies is thoughtless, dangerous and weak.”

Policy establishment wonks former and current screamed treason. Brennan, who has made it a habit to attack the elected head of his country, shows the yawning and disconcerting gap between Trump the populist and the intelligence services who seem to, in some quarters, fantasise about a coup d’état. “Donald Trump’s press conference in Helsinki,” came Brennan’s assessment, “rises to and exceeds the threshold of ‘high crimes and misdemeanours’.” Casting the pale light on Trump in such a way – that such conduct was “nothing short of treasonous” – feeds the desperate drive for impeachment.

Some of the responses have been unmoored from any sense of proportion. “I’m ready to call this the darkest hour in the history of the American presidency,” tweeted a despairing Garry Kasparov, a person who has vainly railed against the Putin apparatus for years. “Let me know if you can think of any competition.”

The contenders are surely more plentiful than Kasparov admits; the corruption of Watergate, the inglorious elections that gave two terms of the Bush administration; decisions made to expand warrantless surveillance and the catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003 – all these provide concrete examples of ruination and battering that have given us the shoddy Republic we have today. The Trump-Putin show is simply that, a boys’ own gathering where dreams and delusions can be exchanged with minimal impact. Showing fury and frothing rage at such acts is precisely what the Trump complex feeds off, drawing in critics and supporters alike.

In Russia, the details of the meeting matter less than its fact, supplying a totally different angle on proportion. Agendas are less significant than performance, and no one is going to remember anything past the bromide exchanges in Helsinki. Relations between the countries remain on their icy settings, with Trump unmoved to change US policy towards Crimea's annexation in 2014 and the Iran nuclear deal. A new era in US-Russian relations has been proclaimed without script or object.

Apoplectic critics of Trump, having fallen for what they regard as the grotesque and sinister, ignore the actual machinery of policy making that is this administration. The capital now runs on a set of parallel lines that never threaten to meet, one set in the White House as a televisual production with Making America Great Again as its pitch, and others running through traditional establishments in the State Department, the Pentagon and security annexes who continue feathering the National Security State. Such aides as national security advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo are certainly not softening to Putin.

The Trump show remains one of goggles and screen rather than substance and product; and while Putin will have a damn good go at convincing Trump to wind back the Magnitsky sanctions and embrace the visage of authoritarian confidence, that is something reserved for domestic consumption. This show of nothingness, as Gessen deems it, has yielded nothing.