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Reflections on Media Gone Russia-Wild

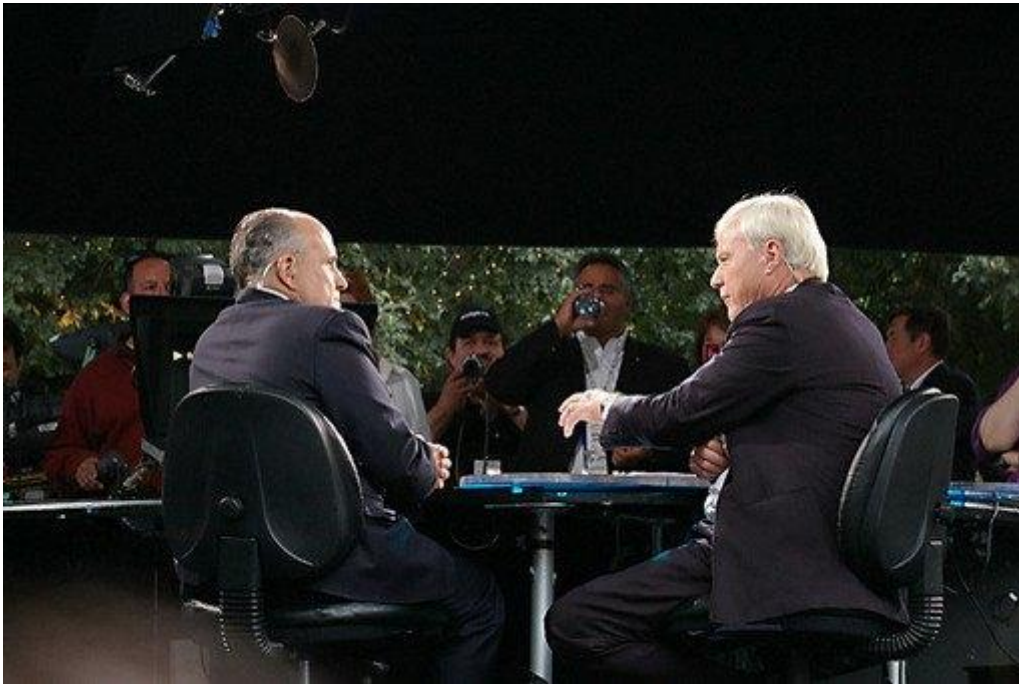


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Flipping through the cable news stations last Saturday morning, I came across an amusing sight at Russia- frenzied MSNBC. There was the stern host Joy Reid (“#AM Joy”) giving a concerned and sympathetic interview to William Browder, a worried multimillionaire financier who said that Vladimir Putin wants to murder him.

“Are you afraid, Bill?” Joy Reid asked, “are you taking precautions for your safety?”

“Am I at risk of being killed by Vladimir Putin’s regime? ... Yes,” Browder said, adding that there’s not much he can do “if they’re going to use chemical weapons to put poison on my door knob.”

The grandson (hilariously enough) of former US Communist Party General Secretary Earl Browder (a dutiful servant of the Soviet Union during the Great Depression and World War II), Browder is one of at least two “Americans” (including former US Russian ambassador Michael McFaul) Putin told Donald Trump he wants sent to Moscow for questioning by Russian investigators. Trump nodded approvingly as Putin discussed Browder’s theft of Russian assets during the Russian president’s joint press conference with Trump in Helsinki last Monday. Trump initially said he was willing to consider Putin’s request.

Two days before his appearance on “AMJoy,” Browder was given time on CNN. “To hand me over to Putin,” Browder told CNN host Kate Bolduan, “is basically to hand me over to my death.... The Russians...they’d like to get me back to Russia ... and once I’m back in Russia, they would like to kill me. Anything that begins that process is effectively a death sentence for me.”

Will masses of U.S-Americans rise to the great patriotic cause of protecting William Browder from death in Putin’s Russia? Not likely. Communist patrilineage aside (we don’t choose our grandparents), the Chicago-born William Browder *isn’t actually a U.S.-American*. He hasn’t been since 1998, when he became an American expatriate by re-“domiciling” to Britain in order *to avoid paying US taxes on foreign investments*.

Something tells me that Sam Adams and his Boston Tea Party compatriots would think twice before rallying to the defense of William Browder

Making Browder an even less likely American hero, Browder was for many years a top Russian kleptocrat, albeit one of a very curious kind.

Why does the former KGB official Vladimir Putin hate William Browder? Is it all because of Earl Browder’s misleadership of the American proletariat during the 1930s and 1940s? (That was a joke.) No, it’s about how Browder conducted his affairs when he swept into Russia and became a ruthless, spectacularly wealthy Russian financial oligarch in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Backed by the mobbed-up global investors and money launderers Edmond Safra and Beny Steinmetz, Browder’s firm Hermitage Capital became the leading foreign investment portfolio in Boris Yeltsin’s Russia. Browder made a fortune off the collapse of Russian socialism, filling his coffers while the collapse of social protections and the advance of the so-called free market drastically increased

Russian mortality. Browder profited from the great sell-off of Russian public and natural resources while ordinary Russians struggled with U.S.-led capitalist “shock therapy.”

There was a brief specter haunting Browder’s success by the mid-1990s. Yeltsin’s opponent in the 1996 Russian election was the communist Gennady Zyuganov, who threatened to re-expropriate privatized Russian companies. That would have called off the great plutocratic dispossession and enclosure that was fueling the rise of a new state-capitalist oligarchy in Russia. Browder’s his wealth. “I can stomach strikes, food shortages, and street crime,” Browder (still technically a U.S. citizen) said, “but not government expropriation.”

A great statement of Western capitalist humanism: Browder could have dealt with people starving and mugging each other in the streets, but the Russian government taking back public resources he and other capitalist oligarchs had stolen was too much.

Faced with the specter of Zyuganov, Browder, Safra, Steinmetz and more native Russian oligarchs joined their normally contentious deep pockets hands long enough ensure the drunken Yeltsin’s re-election. The United States helped Yeltsin win with a little “election meddling” of the right kind –*election meddling conducted by the United States*.

How did Browder make it on to the poison-door-knob shit list of “the world’s most powerful man” (according to CNN’s Fareed Zakaria), the Russian president? Putin didn’t and doesn’t mind cold-blooded and hard-nosed wealth acquisition. He’s all in with gangster state capitalism.

Still, callous fortune accumulation in Russia must proceed according to Putin’s dictates and on Putin’s terms. Browder broke two of Putin’s rules. First, he violated Russian national sovereignty concerns by using Russian front-men to circumvent restrictions means to prevent foreigners from gaining control over Russian oil and gas.

Second, Browder got too greedy for his own good. He hired the Russian auditor Sergei Magnitsky to exploit Russian loopholes (including the establishment of dummy companies in underdeveloped tax-free Russian zones) to take over Russian companies and to avoid paying Russian taxes. Magnitsky and Browder were ingenious, deploying numerous elaborate schemes to attack Russian firms and escape government levies.

When the ruses were discovered, Browder was abroad, having taken millions of dollars with him. Magnitsky was jailed for financial chicanery and tax evasion. Browder’s Russian assets were seized. When Magnitsky died in jail from natural causes in 2009, Browder constructed an Orwellian narrative that was swallowed whole by Western media. In a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black, he told childish and/or cynically

believing establishment US politicians and media operatives that his “lawyer” Magnitsky had heroically exposed financial misdeeds and thievery on the part of Russian government officials. Because of this marvelous and idealist muckraking, Browder claimed, Magnitsky had been imprisoned and tortured to death at Putin’s command. Using Magnitsky as his moral cover, Browder demanded the recovery of his lost Russian assets. He managed along the way to charge that anti-Semitism was part of why he was being oppressed by Putin.

Browder’s deceptive public relations campaign against Putin became a critical development in the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations and the crystallization of the full-on New Cold War. In 2012, the US Congress passed, and president Barack Obama signed the Magnitsky Act, which said that any Russian found responsible for Magnitsky’s death and/or the “misappropriation” of Browder’s assets could have their U.S. assets seized and their U.S. bank accounts frozen automatically, without any due process. Adding insult to injury, these dastardly Russians could no longer travel to the U.S. It was an opening act on the path to bigger and more significant sanctions to come in subsequent years.

In the wacky aftermath of the Trump-Putin Helsinki summit debacle last week, Browder is back on the guest roster of a U.S. cable news establishment that has gone Russia wild. Last Wednesday night for just one example, MSNBC’s Russia-crazed ratings star Rachel Maddow leaped from (a) reporting a Sarah Huckabee-Sanders comment on how the Trump White House was discussing whether or not to honor Putin’s request to hand over McFaul and Browder to Russia (which would be a bizarre and astonishing development and was obviously never going to happen) to (b) telling ordinary Americans they could soon be at risk of being picked up by the White House and handed over to Russia to be killed by Putin (or “other foreign dictators”).

Who was more crazy – White House Press Secretary Huckabee-Sanders, for saying that the White House was considering handing over a former US ambassador to Russian authorities (something that was never going to occur), or Maddow, for telling everyday folks that Trump or some other US president may one day mark them for rendition to Russia at the behest of the Kremlin (also never going to occur)?

FOX News may function as Trumpian state screwball television, but CNN and MSNBC have become Trump-mad dumpster fires in their own right. Their daily, hour-by-hour obsession with the latest breaking Trump-Russia story angle has gone full-on Crazy Train. The climate catastrophe proceeds at an ever-escalating pace with barely a trace of serious

media attention. Anthropogenic (really capitalogenic) environmental ruin, *the biggest issue of our or any time*, is a *non-story* in the dominant Russia-Trumped media. So is just about everything else that ought to matter to citizens concerned with democracy, social justice, and the common good: the coming economic collapse, hastened by runaway deregulation of the financial sector; mass poverty and inequality at home and abroad; racially disparate mass incarceration; endemic violence, drug addiction, and suicide; under-funded and segregated schools; the already marginalized migrant family separation crisis; the U.S.-backed humanitarian calamity in Yemen; the ongoing and invisible humanitarian crisis in the Congo and other Black African states...the list goes on. It's Trump-Russia, Trump-Russia, 24/7, the bizarre beat of a mass media gone mad – a media that wants you to care more about the fears and wealth of an absurdly opulent and dodgy expat financial mogul (William Browder) than about the fate of livable ecology or of the tens of thousands of children maimed, sickened, and murdered by the U.S and Saudi war on Yemen.