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Is Russia an Adversary?

The question is finally being asked, by the president himself: what's wrong with collusion? Or at least his lawyer asks the question, while Trumps tweets:

“Collusion is not a crime, but that doesn't matter because there was No Collusion.”

The problem of course is that of collusion with an alleged *adversary*. Russia we are constantly informed is one such adversary, indeed the main state adversary, with Putin as its head.

Adversary is a very strong term. The Hebrew word for adversary is *Satan*. Satan is the ultimate symbol of evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Satan tempted Eve at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, causing her to eat the fruit, and so evil entered the world.

Just like some want you to think that evil entered the (good, pristine) U.S. electoral process due to this Russian adversary in 2016.

(Sometimes listening to TV pundits vilifying Putin I find Luther's famous hymn floating through my head:

For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe.
His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.”

Luther's referring to Satan of course. But the current mythology around Putin—as someone who *still*, like Lenin and Stalin before him, and the tsars of old, wishes *us* harm; is an unbridled dictator with a powerful great nuclear arsenal; is the wealthiest man on earth; and hates democracy—resembles the mythology around the Adversary in the Bible.)

But let us problematize this vilification. *When* did Russia become a U.S. adversary? Some might say 1917 when in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution Moscow became the center of the global communist movement. But surely that period ended in 1991 with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR.

Throughout the 1990s the U.S. cultivated Boris Yeltsin's Russia as a friend and even aided the drunken buffoon in winning the 1996 election. Bill Clinton and Yeltsin signed the Start II treaty. Harvard professors advised Moscow on economic reform.

The Russians were not pleased by U.S.-NATO involvements in the former Yugoslavia, a traditional Russian ally, in 1995 and 1999, and the expansion of NATO in the latter year (to include Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary) in violation of the agreement between Ronald Reagan and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 that in return for Russia's acceptance of German reunification NATO would not spread "one inch" towards Russia. They protested meekly. But Russia was not an adversary then.

Nor was it an adversary when, in 2001, under its new president Vladimir Putin, it offered NATO a route through Russia to provision forces in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. The real change only came in 2004, when NATO suddenly expanded to include Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. This brought alliances forces right to the Russian border.

It was a clear statement by the U.S. to a friendly country: *We are your adversary*. But of course the Pentagon and State Department always pooh-poohed Russian concerns, denying that NATO targeted any particular country.

Four years later (2008) NATO announced intentions to draw Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. Meanwhile the U.S. recognized Kosovo as an independent state. Kosovo, the historical heart of Serbian civilization, had been wrenched from Serbia in 1999 under the pretext of a "humanitarian" intervention that included the first bombing (by NATO) of a European capital city since 1945. The province had been converted into a vast NATO base.

Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili, emboldened by the prospect of NATO membership and western backing, attacked the capital of the separatist republic of South Ossetia, provoking (as the Russians explain it) a proper punitive response: the Russo-Georgian War of August 7-16. After this Moscow recognized South Ossetia and a second breakaway republic, Abkhazia, in a tit-for-tat response to Washington's recognition of Kosovo.

Now Russia was labelled an aggressive power—by the power that had carved up Yugoslavia, and invaded and occupied Iraq on the basis of lies and killed half a million in the process. Plans to include Georgia in NATO had to be put on hold, in large part due to European allies’ opposition (why provoke Russia?) but the U.S. intensified efforts to draw in Ukraine. That meant toppling the anti-NATO elected president Viktor Yanukovich.

The U.S. State Department devoted enormous resources to the Maidan coup in Kiev on Feb. 23, 2014. Its agents helped topple the government, ostensibly for its failure to negotiate an agreement for Ukrainian associate membership in the EU, but really to bring pro-NATO forces to power and expel the Russian Fleet from the Crimean Peninsula where it has been based since 1783. Moscow’s limited support for the Donbass ethnic-Russian separatists and re-annexation of Crimea were of course depicted by the U.S. as more aggression, more mischievous opposition to “U.S. global interests.”

But from Moscow’s point of view these moves have surely been defensive. The main problem is (obviously) NATO and its dangerous, unnecessary and provocative expansion. Throughout his presidential campaign Trump questioned the continued “relevance” of NATO. Characteristically he focused on budget issues and allies’ failure to meet the goal figure of 2% of GDP for military expenses (misleadingly depicting investment shortfalls as a betrayal and rip-off of the victimized U.S.). But he did—to the alarm of many, and probably to Moscow’s delight—express little enthusiasm for the alliance’s historical purpose.

The most rational proposition Trump voiced before his election that the U.S. should “get along” with Russia. That is, get along with the so-called adversary. Trump as we all know had been in Russia on business, hosting the Miss Universe pageant in Moscow in 2013, and maintains interest in building a Trump Tower in the city. He has met and befriended Russian oligarchs. He quite possibly sees Russia as just another country, like Germany or France.

If “the French” had had dirt on Hillary, would it have been okay to “collude” with them to influence the election result? France is of course a NATO ally. Would that make it different? Now that the president and his layers are openly questioning whether “collusion” *per se* is even illegal, the specific nature of the colluder becomes more relevant.

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Putin in Helsinki acknowledged to a reporter that he had hoped Trump could win, because he had expressed hope for better relations. He might have added that he dreaded the prospect of a Hillary victory because of her warmongering and characterization of him as a Hitler. Naturally the Russian media favored Trump over Clinton at a certain point when he emerged as a credible candidate. So when Trump on July 27, 2016 called on Russia to release Hillary's missing emails ("if you've got 'em") the Russians probably felt invited to make contact through channels. And when informed that they had dirt, Don Jr. wrote: "If that's what you say, I love it." (Who can blame him?)

Let's say there was some collusion after the June 6 Trump Tower meeting. Trump has suddenly acknowledged that the meeting with the Russians was indeed to "seek political dirt." He adds that this is "totally legal," and this may be true. Some are now saying that Don Jr. may have violated a federal statute (52 USC 30121, 36 USC 5210) forbidding any foreign person to "make a contribution or a donation of money or other thing of value, or expressly or impliedly promise to make a contribution or a donation, in connection with any Federal, State, or local election." and for anyone to knowingly solicit, accept, or receive from a foreign national any contribution or donation prohibited by [this law]." But the language is vague. If a Canadian speechwriter works gratis for a U.S. political candidate, in order to help him or her win, is this not "a thing of value" intended to affect an election?

If Paul Manafort, Don Jr. and Jared Kushner had met with Canadian agents in Trump Tower I doubt there would have been any controversy. The fact is, Trump won the election and many of those stunned by that wish to undermine him using revived Cold War-type Russophobia. They insist: *He worked with our adversary to undermine our election.* And now they hope they've got him on this charge.

Five years ago a young man named Edward Snowden (now living in forced exile in Russia) revealed to the world the extent of the U.S.'s global surveillance. He showed us how the NSA wiretaps EU meetings, popes' conversations, Angela Merkel's cell phone and maintains metadata on virtually all U.S. residents. He showed us what the contemporary advanced state can do in this respect. We should suppose that Moscow has, if not similar capacity, at least enough expertise to hack into the DNC emails or John Podesta's gmail account. Is that surprising?

What none of the TV anchors is allowed to say needs to be said again: The U.S. interferes in foreign elections all the time, including Russian ones. It should surprise no one if

Russian intelligence responds in kind. The point is not the provenance of the leaked emails but their content.

Those horrified by the leaked material complain that their release was designed to “undermine faith in our democratic system.” Really? Don’t the workings of the system itself undermine one’s faith in it, once they are exposed? Was it adversarial of the leaker to inform us that the DNC had no intention of allowing Bernie Sanders to win the Democratic nomination, and thus that the process was rigged? Was it unfriendly to reveal that Podesta was hoping the media would hype Trump, as an easy target for his candidate? The question that will no doubt be debated in the coming days is whether seeking dirt on a political opponent from any foreigner is indeed illegal, or whether there are specific legal ramifications of meeting with someone from an “adversary” country. But it seems to me that Russia has not been defined as such officially. So we may have a discussion less about legality than the politics of Russophobia.

I am happy to see Trump besieged, rattled, possibly facing impeachment. But to bring him down on the basis of “Russian collusion,” on the assumption that Russia is an adversary, would only advantage the warmongers who want no-fly zones over Syria and military support for the Kiev regime against the Donbas separatists. Vice President Pence I believe favors both.

Trump has said that he cannot host Putin in Washington this year, or until the Russian Hoax witch hunt is over. But Putin has invited him to Moscow. One senses he wants some agreements with Trump before he is ousted by his gathering adversaries, including the press, courts, Democrats, select Republicans, turncoat aides and he himself sometimes in his unguarded tweets.