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Meddling for Empire: the CIA Comes Clean



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“We’ve been doing this kind of thing [electoral meddling] since the CIA was created in 1947.”

Loch K. Johnson, *New York Times*, Feb 17, 2018

Electoral meddling has become the gruel of US politics for months, and more servings are being promised in the wake of the indictments against 16 Russians and Russian entities dished out Robert Mueller last week. Such actions can, when taken in isolation, seem

sensible. Righteous indignation can be channelled appropriately, and given the suitable icing of exceptionalism.

One of the difficulties behind the podium stance of virtue taken by the US political establishment on Russian interference in the country's electoral process is one of simple hypocrisy. In the game, and importantly theatre, of international relations, the shove, give, and take are all powerful incentives. Express outrage, by all means, but do so with a certain sentient awareness that you have been as culpable as your opponent of the same charge.

Idealism, however, is the magic mushroom that clouds such assessments. Filled with pride and a sense of purpose, individuals such as former CIA director James Woolsey are happy to first say that the CIA "probably" inserts its nose in the electoral affairs of other states, then justify it.

Friday's encounter with [Laura Ingraham](#) of Fox News was sufficiently frank, if unsettling, in pulling down any pretence about the role of US power and its self-justified assertiveness in the electoral processes of other states. "Have we ever tried to meddle in other countries' elections?" posed Ingraham. "Oh, probably," came the humoured response, "but it was for the good of the system in order to avoid communists taking over."

Then came a few points of illustration: "For example, in Europe, in '47, '48, '49, the Greeks and the Italians, we CIA..." Ingraham, at that point, charged in with an interruption, asking whether the US "did that anymore". "We don't mess around in other peoples' elections, Jim?"

Faux, tinselled idealism is indeed an ugly sight of kitsch. From a man familiar with the dark arts and antics of an organisation he once ran, it was hard to keep it in. "Well... Only for a very good cause." Through good causes, catastrophe breeds its dark spawn.

Down from the clouds of unreality that remains Fox News, former intelligence officers have been even more candid, thrilled to confess to something as natural as eating. "If you ask any intelligence officer, did the Russians break the rules or do something bizarre, the answer is no, not at all," comes the view of [Steven L. Hall](#), who left the CIA in 2015 after 30 years of service. Not only had the US "absolutely" carried out operations in influencing elections, he hoped "we keep doing it."

Long time student of the CIA, [Loch K. Johnson](#), elaborates on the characteristics of such interferences. "We've used posters, pamphlets, mailers, banners – you name it. We've

planted false information in foreign newspapers. We've used what the British call 'King George's cavalry': suitcases of cash."

It takes the sober touch of a study such as that of [Dov H. Levin](#) to show that Great Powers intrude, impose and meddle with gluttonous dedication. Electoral systems will be tinkered with; candidates will be sponsored and cultivated. Friendliness towards the great power in question will be encouraged, while enemies within that state will be defamed and denigrated.

The "stakes", as Levin puts it in the *International Studies Quarterly* (2016), are high for "foreign actors". Elections in a particular country, whether democratic or even mildly authoritarian, can "lead to major shifts" in policies domestic and foreign.

Levin's point is to argue that certain powers will find it irresistible to poke and prod through the undergrowth of a state supposedly at risk of changing course. "Their methods range from providing funding for their preferred side's campaign (a tactic employed by the Soviet Union in the 1958 Venezuelan elections... to public threats to cut off foreign aid in the event of victory by the disfavoured side (as the United States did during the 2009 Lebanese elections)".

Such interventions are impossible to be deemed good, as Woolsey would have it, despite the erroneous view that US involvement has been to assist political opponents against authoritarianism. In some instances, they are impressively disastrous, installing such murderous regimes of the quality of Pinochet in Chile.

In others, they reaffirm the order of things – take the re-imposed status of vassalage on Australia after the overthrow of the Whitlam government in 1975. The [CIA role there](#) is well documented yet discussed with a pinch of interest by Australians who tend to overlook the depravities of their paternal superpower. This, perhaps more than anything else, is the tragic realisation of electoral interference. It bankrupts and corrodes. But most disturbingly for US critics of the Russian operation, it affirms that the system was *ripe* for bankrupting.