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Russia and the Liberals

Hillary Clinton and the people around her did not revive the Cold War on their own, but they did play a significant role.

As a general rule, HRC's initiatives turn out badly. As First Lady, she set the cause of health care reform back a generation – or longer, inasmuch as the Affordable Care Act is no prize. As Secretary of State, she helped spread misery, death, and destruction all over the planet. Her mark is especially evident in such places as Syria, Libya, and Honduras.

A non-negligible amount of blame for the ensuing refugee crises is on her too, notwithstanding the fact that she never quite made it to the spot, occupied at the time by Barack Obama, where the buck finally stops.

There is however an exception to the rule: as a promoter of a new (or revived?) Cold War with Russia, she has done a fantastic job — mobilizing support in elite political and media circles and among liberals generally.

This is good news for everyone whose livelihood depends on war and preparations for war. To keep their game going, they need worthy and credible adversaries. Russia is good for that.

With its huge population and economy, China would be even better. But that would be bad for business. Moreover, the groundwork is already laid for Russia, while, for most Americans, China is a blank slate.

Cold War mongers seldom bother to argue for their cause. Why go to the trouble when everybody “knows” that those damn Ruskiies are out to subvert America's (ridiculously non-democratic) “democracy,” the pinnacle of God's creation.

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Cold War anti-Communism had been a tenet of the American civil religion for decades. After Communism imploded, this was no longer possible.

That venerable article of faith didn't disappear, however; it went dormant. American elites could live with that as long as Russia, reeling from its abrupt regression to the particularly vicious form of capitalism that domestic kleptocrats and triumphalist Americans and other Westerners imposed upon it, remained a basket case.

But circumstances change, and therefore so do the needs of ruling classes. As the neoliberal order matured, it became increasingly obvious that what they needed is what they had had when the original Cold War was on. They therefore did their level best to bring it, or something like it, back — along with the old time (civil) religion that made it possible.

In that endeavor, Hillary helped – inadvertently. Explaining how she could have lost to the likes of Donald Trump was a challenge. But in the collective consciousness under construction, Vladimir Putin – the very name strikes terror! – was, figuratively speaking, a master criminal with superpowers. Pinning Clinton's defeat and Trump's victory on him was easy peasy.

Though never the principal issue, except in theory and in the propaganda operations of both sides, Communism did play an important role in the rise of the Cold War ethos. It turned what would otherwise have been a two-party power contest, fought out on a global scale, into a world historical conflict between rival economic systems. This gave, or appeared to give, the Cold War a transcendent importance.

But now that “godless atheistic” Communism is gone and the mighty Soviet Union is no more, what is a Cold War monger to do? It turns out that this is less of a problem than people imagined at the time.

It is enough, it seems, that Russia is still around. Even without the other Soviet republics and notwithstanding the fact that the Russian economy is as capitalist as our own, deeply entrenched notions of “commies” everywhere, subverting everything in their way, and of Soviet agents hell bent on destroying the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave linger, waiting only to be revived.

And so, Russia became a serviceable adversary on its own. For defeated Clintonites in search of scapegoats, it has proven more than good enough.

Thus the old Marxist saw about the first time being tragedy and the second farce is proving true yet again. A new, Cold War orthodoxy is on the rise, asserting itself

everywhere – no less dangerously or unnecessarily, but a good deal more ludicrously, than before.

Had Hillary and her handlers been less inept at campaigning or less contemptuous of rural white folk or less indifferent to working class interests and concerns, or had they even just aligned themselves less disingenuously with the unions whose money and manpower they, being Democrats, treated as rightfully theirs, then, in all likelihood, there would be a Clinton administration in Washington today. Awful as that would be, it would be a lot better than what is now there instead.

But it would also be worse, or no better, in respects dear to the hearts of the stewards of the institutions, understandings, and practices that the United States and its allies concocted in the post-World War II period to assure as much American world domination as circumstances would allow.

Liberal media have taken to calling defenders of that world order “the adults in the room.” Because he could care less about governance or indeed anything other than his own vainglory and his and his family’s bottom lines, our Commander-in-Chief was eager to welcome a few of those adults on board, and even to let them have their way from time to time.

He was especially fond of putting top-level military men in responsible positions, so long as they would not challenge his judgment or abilities in ways he would notice, and on condition that they acknowledge his authority and remain under his thumb.

Those days seem to be over now, gone the way of Mad Dog Mattis. Mattis has become the latest in an increasingly long line of old regime malefactors that liberals have taken to glorifying. The consensus view in their circles is that his dismissal is cause for extreme concern.

No doubt, it is — inasmuch as his departure, along with the loss of other adults already departed, leaves Trump, a septuagenarian with the mind of an unstable male adolescent, his airhead daughter and son-in-law, his two adult sons – Don Junior and Eric, the Uday and Qusay of Trumpland — and a few manifestly incompetent sycophants in charge of the executive branch and of a military capable of destroying the world and much of what lives upon it many times over.

We don’t yet know how much, if any, damage control the new Congress will be able and willing to do. Neither do we know whether Republican Senators, enough to make a

difference, will somehow find the backbone to stand up against the sleazeball who hijacked their party.

It used to be that invertebrates massed under the Democratic tent. Many still do, but nowadays spinelessness is more of a Republican than a Democratic problem.

That is unlikely to change any time soon, though it now seems a lot less unlikely than it did just a few weeks ago, before the legal and political pressures Trump is under took a few quantum leaps forward, and before the Commander-in-Chief started going so obviously bonkers that pretending not to notice was no longer an option.

Extreme concern therefore seems about right.

However, this does not alter the fact that a Hillary victory in 2016 would have been perilously dangerous too – worse, in some respects, even than the Trump victory that has befallen us.

This is because, contrary to what liberals take for gospel truth, on matters of war and peace and imperial overreach, and on the discontents of all but a handful of rentier capitalists and venal connivers clustered around the very top of the economic pyramid, Trump sometimes was, and still is, more right, or less wrong, than she and the other adults in the room.

Starting and winning trade wars, closing down, or scaling back, NATO and other U.S. dominated multilateral organizations, and ending the never-ending “war on terror” that the United States has been waging against the historically Muslim world since even before 9/11, will not enhance the American footprint upon the world.

Perhaps Trump thinks he has to do all that and more in order to “Make America Great Again.” If so, he is dead wrong. But his views on trade and war and peace are on a sounder track than anything the gaggle of liberal imperialists and later-day neocons Clinton would have empowered would now be putting into practice. And they would probably be moving against Russia more aggressively than Trump now is as well.

It is unclear, at this point, why Trump is more restrained. I would venture that nefarious motives, tied in to Trump’s business dealings, have a lot more to do with it than irenic instincts or, for that matter, plain common sense. But, at this point, all we can do is speculate and conjecture.

What motivates the thinking of the people who defend the positions on trade and war and peace that Trump opposes is very clear, however. Their aim is to reinforce American hegemony over the entire planet.

Trump disgraces a lot more than the office he holds; he disgraces humanity itself. But when he is right, he is right, no matter how flawed or shallow his reasons.

He is even right that it is better to get out of Syria sooner than later, provided, of course, that the exit is executed in a thoughtful, not reckless, way; and provided that the more progressive forces in the region are not left in the lurch. Unfortunately, Trump's Syria pullout seems on track to doing precisely that: leaving the Kurds in the lurch.

But on the question of whether the U.S. should be there at all, he is a hell of a lot more right than the guardians of the status quo, the foreign policy establishment, that liberal media commentators love so much.

The problem with Trump, compared to them, is not that his instincts are bad and theirs are good; just the opposite is the case. It is that Trump is constitutionally incapable of getting anything done the right way. He doesn't have it in him. Therefore, all his desperate, inconsistent, and fundamentally incoherent tweets are likely to do is make things worse.

There is no way to know whether they would be worse still had Hillary not turned a sure and easy victory into an ignominious defeat. The consensus view in liberal media circles is that of course it would be worse – because Trump is worse than Hillary and Republicans are worse than Democrats. Indeed, this is generally the case. But it is far from certain that it is true in this case; and, even if it is, it is not obviously true, whatever Rachel Maddow and others of her ilk may think (and endlessly repeat).

A Rip Van Winkle who had slept through the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush years, and who was slow to awaken the first year or two of the Obama administration, would not find the current fixation on Russia odd.

What is going on now in liberal circles was a national pastime in the world he would have known before he fell asleep. Upon awakening, he would have needed to be caught up, however. While he was sleeping, anti-Communism bore its way back into the American psyche to a degree that had not been seen since the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War.

Also, the Soviet Union, America's once and future eternal enemy, was no more – its constituent republics mostly spun off, leaving the Russian Federation, a union of more or less autonomous, Russian speaking, culturally Russian republics in its place.

This would not have confounded a later-day Rip Van Winkle all that much. Russia was the Soviet Union's largest constituent republic and, by far, its dominant cultural, political, and economic force. To the public, "Soviet Union" and "Russia" were, for all practical purposes, synonymous.

Therefore, throughout most of living memory, vilifying Russians, or Soviets, was as American as glorifying sleazy real estate tycoons. It was different during World War II and, again in the nineties and early two thousands, but those were exceptional times; and, even then, genuine amity, when it existed at all, was the exception to the rule.

Lived experience is typically ahistorical, however, especially in what Gore Vidal liked to call the United States of Amnesia; and so, for anyone who imbibed the spirit of the still very recent past, when the last exception was on full throttle, the relentless vilification of Russia now underway should seem strange to the point of preposterous.

To the extent it does not for Americans now, our ruling elites have their media's highly efficient propaganda system to thank.

After all, Russia had become one of "us" – in more or less the way that the EU is. Along with other rising capitalist nations, it was one of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). To informed observers at the time (ten years ago), BRICS nations did pose a potential challenge to American world domination, but not one that was about to fall due. Along with global warming and climate change, worrying about them could be put off until the distant future.

Ten years on, that sense of things has vanished down the memory hole, in much the way that the period of World War II Soviet-American friendship did, almost immediately after World War II ended.

Meanwhile, the neocons of the Bush-Cheney era had become Obama's and Clinton's neo-cons. Notwithstanding solemn promises made to Gorbachev by Ronald Reagan and Bush the Father, they had made it their mission to move "democracy" – and, wherever possible, NATO – right up to Russia's borders.

Needless to say, by "democracy," they didn't mean democracy. They meant political regimes friendly to American world domination and integrated into the American dominated global capitalist system.

Having cut their teeth on the so-called "color revolutions" — the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan – they were itching to move on to new frontiers. By the time, Obama came along, the itch had become impossible to resist.

The times were right. The military-industrial complex, the motor of the U.S. economy since the end of the Great Depression, was, as always, in need of a reason for being. With the Soviet Union gone and "Red China" off on the capitalist road, plausible rationales for maintaining a (quasi-) war economy were becoming hard to find.

The Bush-Cheney “global war on terror” was serviceable for a while, but, after going on seemingly forever and getting nowhere, it wasn’t cutting it anymore. The reasons, real and imaginary, that brought it into being in the first place hadn’t changed fundamentally. However, they had become almost useless for justifying such a fundamentally irrational economic regime as the one we live under.

In earlier periods, capitalism was good for developing productive capacities; it performed its mission well, though at great human and environmental cost. But now that productive capacities have developed to the extent that they have under capitalism’s aegis, the United States and other developed countries no longer need to put their peoples or their environments through that kind of travail.

Yet for a variety of reasons, capitalism survives, as deeply entrenched as ever. And so, we have a system that, notwithstanding the confusions of its libertarian defenders, is kept afloat by massive public expenditures and various fiscal and monetary interventions.

To that end, war, and preparations for war have become indispensable means.

Thus while the underlying causes are economic, it is politics that has made ours a war economy.

Economic, political, and military elites, aided and abetted by stables of media flacks, create fear; public opinion then sides with those whom they regard as their protectors, the masters of war. And voilà– the military-industrial complex is in business, calling the shots. The need for something, anything, to keep the public on board became increasingly urgent as capitalism evolved in ways that began to deviate profoundly from the post-war ethos of shared prosperity across class lines.

World War II spending ended the Great Depression. Then, thanks to circumstances pertaining in the ensuing historical period, post-war state spending was able to go on working its magic for three decades longer. In time, though, even the hardest “solutions” run their course. By the late seventies, everything had to change in order that all could remain the same.

The riches that come with expanding productive capacities do not spread across class lines in the austere, neoliberal order that emerged as the post-war period ended. Neoliberalism shamelessly enriches the few at the very top, leaving the material condition of the vast majority to stagnate or decline. Also, by “starving the beast,” as Ronald Reagan put it, it causes public services and other institutional arrangements that benefit the many as much or more than the few to deteriorate.

To a large extent this transformation was technologically driven; through robotics and by other means, economic development itself, beyond a certain level, renders many forms of human labor obsolete. This causes manufacturing jobs to disappear and wages to decline. In a socialist order, this would be all to the good. For the first time in human history, most people could be relieved of the burdens of toil, becoming free to engage, or not, in whatever activities they might want to pursue. Meaningful work could finally become available to the vast majority.

Instead, nowadays, people find themselves busier and more burdened by work than ever, bereft of free time and cut off from meaningful productive activity, while communities are enmeshed in debilitating fiscal crises that leave people increasingly on their own in their dealings with life's vicissitudes.

Public life is correspondingly impoverished, as we become increasingly unable to build new, cutting edge transportation and communication systems or even to maintain the infrastructure we already have.

“Make America Great Again” is code for making it white, or rather whiter, again. But taking Trump's foul words literally, the idea does have a certain appeal. America was once a place where great things could be accomplished, where a flourishing public sphere served the people. Those days are gone. Like progressive taxation, the America that could still, for example, build the interstate highway system has disappeared along with Ike and Mamie.

The best way forward would of course be to work towards establishing a more rational, post-capitalist – ideally, democratic and socialist — economic order. But this is not going to happen, at least not in the foreseeable future, in part because neoliberal capitalism has too severely damaged the conditions for its possibility, a vigorous labor movement, first among them.

And so, corporate liberals continue to lead the way. In the circumstances they confront, in order to keep things going as they are, their safest option is to try, as best they can, to restore the fear-driven mobilizations of the original Cold War period, relying on longstanding, deeply entrenched fears to keep people enough in line to render the old regime safe from fundamental transformations.

To that end, our economic and political elites have come back around to the view that the thing to do is to villainize Russia. They tried working the anti-Muslim angle for many years, but found eventually that they couldn't quite get all they needed out of it. What they needed was a more natural enemy, an enemy we Americans would know to be

villainous in just the way we would if that “knowledge” were somehow inscribed in our genes.

There is, of course, nothing natural about American Russophobia, though there might as well be thanks to what amounts to a century long experiment in genetic engineering – not the kind biologists have lately figured out how to do, but by something more nefarious: relentless propaganda assaults by media flacks intent on maintaining the political and economic power of the capitalists they serve.

American Russophobia is an exception to the rule that, in our era, international animosities are underwritten by nationalist ideologies or by religion. In this instance, class struggle is the principal cause.

Nothing matches religious fervor as a source of civil strife, but in a secular age, the genuine article is hard to find, even in communities in which the outer forms of traditional religious practices are strictly preserved.

Western animosity towards Islam is a case in point. The Christian West has been at war with Islam since even before the first Crusade. But this historical memory has not had much political resonance in Western countries since the dawn of the modern era, nearly half a millennium ago.

Since the late eighteenth century, when Western capitalism, having taken an imperialist turn, reduced Muslim peoples to a subaltern status, and as Western leaders and Western thinkers justified their depredations with orientalist and racist ideologies, Muslims, Arabs especially, went from being thought of as rivals, worthy of respect, to being “natives” fit only for domination and control.

For the most part, the “natives,” having been effectively disarmed, acquiesced. Also, some of them emigrated to Christendom, in both the old world and the new, seeking nothing more than to be left alone.

Thus, in the United States, until quite recently, Muslims were a not insignificant but nevertheless invisible minority.

Busy making a life for themselves and their families, they were not much interested in “celebrating” their differences, except in the private ways that other immigrant groups did. The future jihadists that everyone nowadays fears were very nearly as unassuming. It took liberal, anti-Soviet “adult in the room” schemers, like Jimmy Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, to arouse the demons of nationalism and religious zealotry from their irenic slumber.

Even after they became bona fide terrorists, and despite the unrelenting efforts of the most skillful molders of public opinion that the American propaganda system has produced, seeing them as worthy adversaries is difficult.

Liberals seem to have understood that. They understood the need for an enemy that could be depicted as a super-demon, led by an evil genius like the Putin of their imaginings, cunning enough to go after the American juggernaut on its own terms.

Islamist terrorists could never do that. They are only good for capturing poorly defended territories in remote desert areas, and spreading terror in civilian populations by launching unprovoked attacks on soft targets.

Try, some seventeen years after 9/11, to keep Americans on board with the neoliberal version of an economic stimulus with nothing more to work with than that! No wonder our rulers need the Russians back.

Therefore, if Putin's Russia didn't exist, our ruling elites would have had to invent it, which is pretty much what they did – not from nothing, but from the remnants of a century's worth of Russophobic Cold War mongering.

Who would have believed it? Even as recently as Election Day 2016 and then in the immediate aftermath of Trump's Electoral College victory, with the candidate hankering to get the Cold War back up and running having suffered an embarrassing and unexpected defeat, Russia was just not on peoples' minds.

Remarkably, though, the Cold War that everyone thought had ended decades ago bounced back with a vengeance.

One has to hand it to its promoters on Team Clinton, their co-thinkers in the larger Democratic Party and, by now, in the entire political class — not exactly for getting their way, history had over prepared Americans for that, but for getting their way despite the stupefying levels of hypocrisy involved.

The United States and other Western countries began “meddling” with Russia almost from the moment the Bolsheviks assumed power. “Meddling” was the least of it; in the ensuing Civil War, the American army, along with its European counterparts, fought on the side of the counter-revolutionary forces.

In Communism's heyday, there were limits to what the CIA and other Western intelligence services could do in the Soviet Union, even in republics far removed from the centers of Soviet power. But ever since Communism imploded and the Soviet Union fell

apart, the United States has been working overtime, not without success, to exercise all the influence it can.

Nowhere have American meddlers been more active than in Ukraine – the very place where, according to the dominant Western narrative, the evil Putin has been at his most mischievous and most diligent.

In fact, Russia today, like the Soviet Union decades ago, is playing a mainly defensive game in the face of Western hostility. In the face of the West's unrelenting efforts at regime change (or modification), it has little choice.

This exacerbates the hypocrisy that all but defines the American stance. Trump isn't the only one who faults his opponents for doing what he ought to be faulted for more. The liberals' "adults in the room" are as bad or worse.

And it isn't just Russia and former Soviet republics that bear the brunt. One would be hard pressed to find an election anywhere in the world or at any time since the end of the Second World War that might have turned out in ways that the U.S. would oppose, where America has not thrown its substantial weight around, even to the point of initiating or malignly supporting rightwing coups d'états.

Then there is the utter fatuousness of what Russia is supposed to have done. Intelligence services exist to lie, but even if everything the CIA and the others claim about Russian meddling in the 2016 election actually happened, Russia did nothing to America that Americans didn't do, a lot more effectively, to themselves.

Attack American values? Suppress the African American vote? Who needs the Russians for that when there are Koch Brothers, and fat cat Republican donors around, not to mention Republican Governors and Secretaries of State. And, of course, the war on "truth, justice, and the American way" is not confined to the more odious duopoly party. Democrats are part of the problem too.

So far, it is fatally unclear what benefit Russia has gotten from Trump's victory. Would Clinton really have been worse for them? Or, even if not, is that what they thought?

She would surely have brought the neocons and liberal imperialists that she and Barack Obama empowered back into the government, and her administration would have been comprised of persons a good deal more hostile to Russia and more eager to derogate Vladimir Putin than Trump's flunkies have been. Also, she herself she would have been more hostile towards the Russian government and its president than Trump has been.

The propagandists and (retired) military and diplomatic “experts” who establish the going narratives in print media and on America’s liberal cable networks would today be boosting, not knocking, administration officials for their attitudes towards Russia.

But would the chances for peace be worse than they now are? And would Russia now be worse off had Clinton won than it now is with Trump in the White House?

There are no easy answers to these questions. It is clear, though, that if the Russians thought it would be good for them to have Trump where he now is, they were very, very wrong.

Wouldn’t a true evil genius, much less a sophisticated intelligence service such as Russia is supposed to possess, have figured that out from the beginning, without having had to bother meddling or colluding or whatever else the Russians are supposed to have done? After all, Trump’s myriad character flaws and well-demonstrated unreliability weren’t exactly secrets.

If they really did spend time, effort and money doing their part to get the Donald elected, then they are incompetent or unlucky or both. Even Sheldon Adelson was less of a dunce.

He got his money’s worth, after all: the American embassy is now in Jerusalem.

Liberals should ponder that before their problem with Russia becomes, as it has been from time to time in the past, even more of a problem than it currently is.