

Inquiring Minds topic - 20 January 2017

Ed Thomson, moderator

The appended paper published December 11, 2016 was suggested for discussion by Al Kaplan and I agreed to moderate.

The events of the last few days, including the report of the intelligence agencies and the response of Mr Trump, invite us to address concerns we have as to Russian actions both in the United States and in Europe.

Was the Russian intervention in Syria intended to exacerbate the flood of refugees to Europe? Was the real purpose to destabilize Europe? Is this the same as funding the party of Marie Le Penn? What elections would Russia like to tip? Is the real goal the destabilization of NATO?

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In 2004, Philip Roth -- arguably the greatest living American writer not to receive a Nobel Prize (maybe he should have learned the harmonica!) -- published a tome called *The Plot Against America*. Critics saw the alt-history novel -- Roth's most overtly political work -- as fueled by liberals' worst fears in the Bush-Cheney years. In 1940, despite eight years of economic growth under a Democratic president (FDR), American voters turned to a celebrity, isolationist Republican ([Charles Lindbergh](#)); once in office, President Lindbergh strikes a surprising peace deal with a foreign dictator (guess who) and implements troubling policies that violate the civil liberties of a religious minority (Jews). Lurking behind the narrative is the notion that an American president, for whatever reason, might be in the sway of a European autocrat.

Crazy stuff, huh?

Maybe Sweden should hurry up with that Nobel for Philip Roth. This weekend came another case where the reality of 2016 American politics turns out to be much, much stranger than fiction. Word leaked out on Friday night that [CIA officials now believe evidence shows that not only did Vladimir Putin's Russia hack the Democratic Party emails that were slowly dribbled out to help fuel a disastrous autumn for Hillary Clinton's failed presidential bid, but that all Putin's men had a goal: Putting Donald Trump in the White House. President Obama ordered a special report on the extent of Russia's hacking effort that will be delivered before he leaves office on January 20 -- but way, way after the time when the info could have helped American voters.](#)

The lightning bolt of news caused the most unsettled weekend in America politics that I can remember since my early '70s period as a teenage (and barely that) Watergate geek. Some major national news outlets seemed mildly terrified about covering a story that could cast doubt on Trump's legitimacy even before he takes the oath of office. Yet other pundits did call Russia's seemingly overt meddling in U.S. affairs a constitutional crisis -- one so severe that perhaps the Electoral College should put Trump's coronation on hold when its members vote in roughly one week.

Many of those voices, naturally, were liberals and/or Hillary Clinton supporters...but not all. Evan McMullin, the conservative ex-CIA operative who ran for president as an independent, [posted on Twitter](#) that Russia playing games with the U.S. is not new but "(w)hat's new is that our leaders have become so self-serving that they're willing to sacrifice our national security for their own power." John Dean, the former Richard Nixon aide who knows a thing or two about presidential elections and scandals, calls it all "[deeply troubling](#)."

Indeed, the Russian hacking affair does feel in a strong sense like another Watergate, even if the underlying facts of the two scandals are radically different from each other. Both in 1973-74 and now again as our brutal 2016 fades into 2017 and Trump's looming presidency, the fundamental integrity of American democracy feels wobbly. And yes, [just as in the case of Nixon's ultimately doomed administration](#), there needs to be a full and -- this can not be stressed enough -- public investigation, broadcast live on national TV. We need to find out what Putin's minions were up to a half a world away, but America also must yet again ask, what did the president-elect and his aides know, and when did they know it?

How could one not ask this, when Trump himself said at a news conference on July 26, "[Russia if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 \(Hillary Clinton\) emails that are missing](#)"? It is a coincidence that this was the last news conference that Trump has held, or that he refuses to take regular intel briefings? What do former campaign manager Paul Manafort -- [whose ties to pro-Putin oligarchs in Russia and the](#)

Ukraine are reportedly the subject of FBI inquiries -- and Russia-visiting foreign policy adviser Carter Page know about Russia's alleged role in the race? What are citizens to make of Team Trump's pro-Russia insertions in the GOP platform, of Trump's new foreign policy czar (heh) Michael Flynn and his dinner with Vladimir, and of the president-elect's plan to make Putin medal recipient Rex Tillerson of ExxonMobil his secretary of state?

Oh, and why did a close Russian advisor to Putin -- some have called him Moscow's Steve Bannon -- write in his native tongue on his Facebook page less than a week after Trump's election: ""? "

Did Russia's involvement tip the election -- which ultimately turned on just 70,000 or so votes in three key states, including Pennsylvania -- in Trump's favor? Not exclusively, no. Putin, as many online wags rightly pointed out this weekend, didn't tell Clinton [not to campaign in Wisconsin](#), or to leave any economic message for working class voters at home in Chappaqua. And we should be mildly relieved -- perhaps -- that the haphazard recount efforts in the three states [haven't revealed any evidence that Russia actually hacked the election results](#), America's worst nightmare. And to understand the full extent of Russian interference, our leaders must direct the CIA to make public far more info about both its report and its methodology.

Still, just what we already know about Russian hacking has exposed enormous holes in the American political system. The worst, alluded to above by Evan McMullin, is the craven and, at least morally traitorous behavior by some public officials who, in the worst ways possible, put crass partisan politics ahead of the national interest.

The poster child for this New American Treason, if you will, is the Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. When the Obama administration went to Capitol Hill this fall and pleaded for more information about the Russian meddling to be made public, it was [McConnell and his GOP allies who pressed instead to hide this critical election from voters](#). They claimed any release might unduly effect the White House race and, in essence, Trump's chances -- even as many of these same Republicans championed [a nothingburger release from the FBI's James Comey about Clinton's emails that absolutely had a major effect on the November 8 outcome](#).

This kind of anti-American behavior is par for the course for McConnell, who decided when President Obama arrived in Washington in 2009 that the goal was not to enact any policies, [merely to make the Democrat "a one-term president"](#). Throughout 2016, McConnell and the GOP deliberately shirked its constitutional duty to debate and hold Senate hearings on the decent man that Obama had nominated to fill the Supreme Court vacancy, Merrick Garland. Now, in working actively to cover up Russia's role in the election. McConnell has hit the grand trifecta of party over country. It's beyond shameful.

And what political hacks (no pun intended) like McConnell and Paul Ryan -- [who tonight declined to call for a tough probe of the Russian meddling](#) -- should realize is that their constant weakening of America's democratic norms is what makes it so easy for a foreign power to finish the job. But others have contributed to the rot as well, including the news media, which aggressively spread the purloined Democratic emails but never really asked tough questions about how the emails were obtained -- or the frightening implications of what Russian involvement might mean.

The bottom line is this: Constitutional crisis? When [nearly 3 million more Americans voted for the "losing" presidential candidate than for the "winner"](#), and when the Electoral College -- which was [envisioned by Alexander Hamilton](#) and other Founding Fathers as the tool for preventing foreign interference and the rise of an unqualified president -- is about to ratify a grossly unqualified candidate aided by an overseas autocrat, then something has gone horribly wrong. The dark cloud that will be looming over Donald Trump when he takes the oath on January 20 is something unprecedented in American history.

So much is murky right now. All we know is this, that Russia has already achieved its goal of wrecking faith in Western-style democracy. It was ridiculously easy for them to carry out their plot against America. But only Americans can fix this gigantic mess. And that, my fellow citizens, is going to be very, very hard work.