

Russian Hacking: GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE NEOLIBERALS

A story that had circulated during the campaign without much effect resurfaced: it involved the charge that Russian operatives had hacked into the servers of the Democratic National Committee, revealing embarrassing emails that damaged Clinton's chances. **With stunning speed, a new centrist-liberal orthodoxy came into being, enveloping the major media and the bipartisan Washington establishment.** This secular religion has attracted hordes of converts in the first year of the Trump presidency. In its capacity to exclude dissent, it is like no other formation of mass opinion in my adult life, though it recalls a few dim childhood memories of anti-communist hysteria during the early 1950s.

The centerpiece of the faith, based on the hacking charge, is the belief that Vladimir Putin orchestrated an attack on American democracy by ordering his minions to interfere in the election on behalf of Trump. The story became gospel with breathtaking suddenness and completeness. Like any orthodoxy worth its salt, the religion of the Russian hack depends not on evidence but on ex cathedra pronouncements on the part of authoritative institutions and their overlords. Its scriptural foundation is a confused and largely fact-free 'assessment' produced last January by a small number of 'hand-picked' analysts – as James Clapper, the director of National Intelligence, described them – from the CIA, the FBI and the NSA. It is not the first time the intelligence agencies have played this role. Once again, the established press is legitimating pronouncements made by the Church Fathers of the national security state. Clapper is among the most vigorous of these.

It's hard for me to understand how the Democratic Party, which once felt skepticism towards the intelligence agencies, can now embrace the CIA and the FBI as sources of incontrovertible truth. One possible explanation is that Trump's election has created a permanent emergency in the liberal imagination, based on the belief that the threat he poses is unique and unprecedented. It's true that Trump's menace is viscerally real. But the menace posed by George W. Bush and Dick Cheney was equally real. What is unprecedented about Trump is his offensive style: contemptuous, bullying, inarticulate, and yet perfectly pitched to appeal to the anger and anxiety of his target audience. His excess has licensed overt racism and proud misogyny among some of his supporters. This is cause for denunciation, but I am less persuaded that it justifies the anti-Russian mania.

Besides Trump's supposed uniqueness, there are two other assumptions behind the furor in Washington: the first is that the Russian hack unquestionably occurred, and the second is

that the Russians are our implacable enemies. The second provides the emotional charge for the first. Both seem to me problematic. With respect to the first, the hacking charges are unproved and may well remain so. Edward Snowden and others familiar with the NSA say that if long-distance hacking had taken place the agency would have monitored it and could detail its existence without compromising their secret sources and methods. In September, Snowden told *Der Spiegel* that the NSA '*probably knows quite well who the invaders were*'. And yet '*it has not presented any evidence, although I suspect it exists. The question is: why not? ... I suspect it discovered other attackers in the systems, maybe there were six or seven groups at work.*'

Both the DNC hacking story and the one involving the emails of John Podesta, a Clinton campaign operative, involve a shadowy bunch of putatively Russian hackers called Fancy Bear. The name Fancy Bear was introduced by Dimitri Alperovitch, the chief technology officer of CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity firm hired by the DNC to investigate the theft of their emails. Alperovitch is also a fellow at the Atlantic Council, an anti-Russian Washington think tank. In its report CrowdStrike puts forward close to zero evidence for its claim that those responsible were Russian, let alone for its assertion that they were affiliated with Russian military intelligence. And yet, from this point on, the assumption that this was a Russian cyber operation was unquestioned. When the FBI arrived on the scene, the Bureau either did not request or was refused access to the DNC servers; instead it depended entirely on the CrowdStrike analysis. CrowdStrike, meanwhile, was being forced to retract another claim, that the Russians had successfully hacked the guidance systems of the Ukrainian artillery.

The chatter surrounding the hack would never have acquired such urgency were it not for the accompanying assumption: Russia is a uniquely dangerous adversary, with which we should avoid all contact. Without that belief, Attorney General Jeff Sessions's meetings with Russians in September 2016 would become routine discussions between a senator and foreign officials. Flynn's post-election conversations with the Russian ambassador would appear unremarkable. Trump's cronies' attempts to do business in Russia would become merely sleazy. Donald Trump Jr's meeting at Trump Tower with the Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya would be transformed from a melodrama of shady intrigue to a comedy of errors – with the candidate's son expecting to receive information to use against Clinton but discovering Veselnitskaya only wanted to talk about repealing sanctions and restarting the flow of Russian orphans to the United States. And Putin himself would become just another autocrat, with whom democracies could engage without endorsing.

Skeptical voices have been drowned out by a din of disinformation. Flagrantly false stories, like the *Washington Post* report that the Russians had hacked into the Vermont electrical grid, are published, then retracted 24 hours later. Sometimes – like the stories about Russian

interference in the French and German elections – they are not retracted even after they have been discredited. Retraction or correction is almost beside the point: the false accusation has done its work.

Some people and institutions have more power than others to define what constitutes an agreed-on reality: the power to create the 'common sense' of an entire society. Even if much of that society is indifferent to or suspicious of the official common sense, it still becomes embedded among the tacit assumptions that set the boundaries of 'responsible opinion'. So the Democratic establishment (along with a few Republicans) and the major media outlets have made 'Russian meddling' the common sense of the current moment.

The most immediate consequence is that, by finding foreign demons who can be blamed for Trump's ascendancy, the Democratic leadership have shifted the blame for their defeat away from their own policies without questioning any of their core assumptions. For the DNC, the great value of the Russian hack story is that it focuses attention away from what was actually in their emails. The documents revealed a deeply corrupt organization, whose pose of impartiality was a sham. Even the reliably pro-Clinton *Washington Post* has admitted that '*many of the most damaging emails suggest the committee was actively trying to undermine Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign.*'

The Democratic Party has now developed a new outlook on the world, a more ambitious partnership between liberal humanitarian interventionists and neoconservative militarists than existed under the cautious Obama. This may be the most disastrous consequence for the Democratic Party of the new anti-Russian orthodoxy: the loss of the opportunity to formulate a more humane and coherent foreign policy. The obsession with Putin has erased any possibility of complexity from the Democratic world picture, creating a void quickly filled by the monochrome fantasies of Hillary Clinton and her exceptionalist allies.

We find that there is a significant and meaningful relationship between a community's rate of military sacrifice and its support for Trump. Clinton's record of uncritical commitment to military intervention allowed Trump to have it both ways, playing to jingoist resentment while posing as an opponent of protracted and pointless war. Democrats may want to 're-examine their foreign policy posture if they hope to erase Trump's electoral gains among constituencies exhausted and alienated by 15 years of war'. If the insurgent movements within the Democratic Party begin to formulate an intelligent foreign policy critique, a re-examination may finally occur.

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