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The Myth of American Exceptionalism

By Melvin Goodman
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Like too many nations, the United States likes to think of itself as a chosen nation and a chosen people. Presidential inauguration statements are typically an exercise in proclaiming American exceptionalism, and this mentality has far too much influence in the United States. It's particularly regrettable when individuals who should no better indulge the kind of hubris and triumphalism associated with American exceptionalism.

An excellent example of our exceptionalism appeared in Sunday's Washington Post in the form of an op-ed by Tom Malinowski, the former assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor in the Obama administration. In a fatuous display of ignorance, Malinowski lambasted Russian President Vladimir Putin for stating that the United States frequently meddles in the politics and elections of other countries. Malinowski argued that it is Russia that interferes in democratic elections, such as the U.S. presidential race in 2016, but that the United States consistently "promotes democracy in other countries."

One of the reasons why the United States has so little credibility in making the case against Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election is the sordid record of the White House and the Central

Intelligence Agency in conducting regime change and even political assassination to influence political conditions around the world. In 1953, the United States and Great Britain conspired to overthrow the democratically elected government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran; the following year, the Eisenhower administration backed a coup in Guatemala that led to the introduction of Central America's most brutal regime in history. Similarly, Eisenhower's willingness to pursue the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo led to the installation of the worst tyrant in the history of Africa, Sese Seku Mobutu.

The Bay of Pigs is the "poster child" for American operational failure, and the CIA's Office of the Inspector General put the blame squarely on what it described as "arrogance, ignorance, and incompetence" within the CIA. Ten years later, however, another American administration and the CIA tried to prevent the election of Salvador Allende, a leftist, as president of Chile. After Allende's election, the CIA moved to subvert his government. CIA director Richard Helms was given a two-year suspended prison sentence for lying to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about the operation in Chile. But it was national security adviser Henry Kissinger who ordered the operation and explained that he couldn't "see why the United States should stand by and let Chile go communist merely due to the stupidity of its own people."

The revelation of assassination plots in Cuba, the Congo, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam finally led to a ban on CIA political assassination in the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, when Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi was killed, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton boasted that "we came, we saw, he died." In an incredible turn of events, the United States invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein, although it was a CIA-sponsored coup against Colonel Abdul Kassem that led to the emergence of Saddam Hussein in the first place.

Vladimir Putin is certainly aware of CIA intervention on behalf of the Solidarity movement in Poland to destabilize the communist government there in the early 1980s; to bolster the regime of former president Eduard Shevardnadze in the Republic of Georgia in the 1990s; and more recently to undermine the regime of former president Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine.

Putin's intervention in Syria in 2015 was designed in part to make sure that the U.S. history of regime change didn't include another chapter in the Middle East.

Before former U.S. officials such as Tom Malinowski decide to lambaste Putin for cynicism and treachery, it would be a good idea to become familiar with U.S. crimes and calumny. Forty years ago, former senator Frank Church said the United States "must never adopt the tactics of the enemy. Each time we do so, each time the means we use are wrong; our inner strength, the strength that makes us free, is lessened." Malinowski should ponder William Faulkner's admonition about the land of his birth: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."