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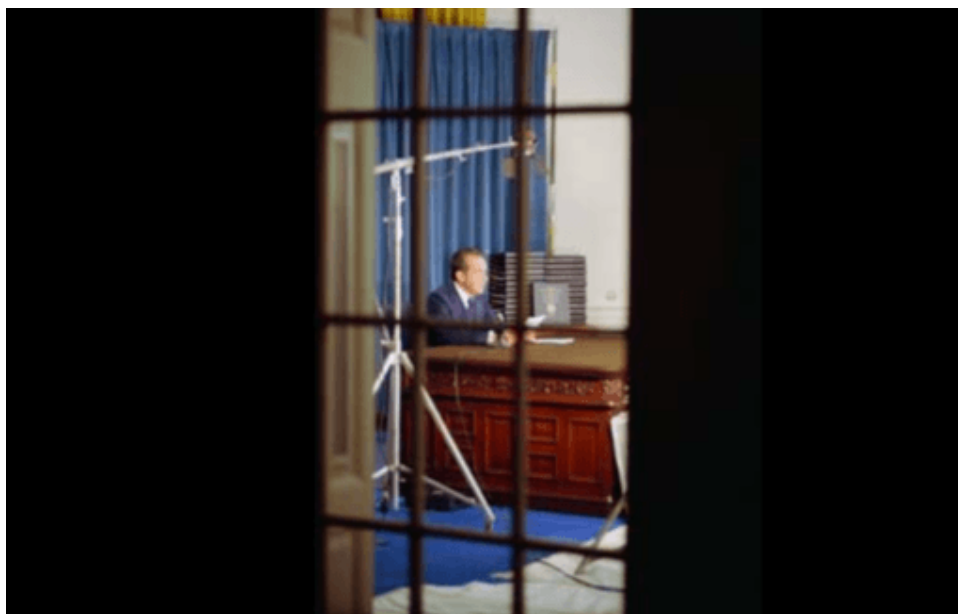
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Russiagate is Not Watergate



Photograph Source White House Press Office

Richard Nixon was a complicated man.

He was arguably our last liberal president. He transformed the political scene in countless ways; some good, some far from it. Together with Henry Kissinger, he was a geopolitical strategist of distinction who served the empire and the military industrial complex well.

Like Kissinger, he was also no slouch when it came to war crimes, crimes against the peace, and crimes against humanity. He got a whole lot of people killed and maimed — in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia and throughout the world.

And while neither he nor the administration he superintended were unusually corrupt, he could boast, were he so inclined, of having many a “high crime and misdemeanor” under his belt, and of taking his oath to defend and protect the Constitution of the United States lightly or not at all.

He was, in short, a later-day version of the sort of villainous and tormented figure that readers might encounter in a historical drama authored by William Shakespeare.

Ironically, in light of all he deserved punishment for, Watergate, “a third rate burglary,” and the bollixed cover up it precipitated, did him and his administration in.

To this day, in the public imagination, Nixon and Watergate are joined at the hip in ways that, for example, Nixon and his secret war in Cambodia will never be.

Thus Watergate, like George Washington’s cherry tree, has become part of the American story.

Despite the best efforts of Democratic Party functionaries and their media flunkies at MSNBC and CNN, Russiagate is not destined for a similar fate.

Among the many reasons why is the plain fact that there is nothing remotely Shakespearean about the pathetic figure cut by Donald J. Trump. The writers for “The Apprentice” were more than subtle enough to convey every facet of his one-dimensional (or less) personality.

Indeed, there is no need for subtlety at all; it is all right there in the open. Everybody who has been paying attention, even if only slightly, knows that the Donald is a narcissist with emotional maturity “issues” which he wears on his sleeve, and that he is an ignoramus who is proud of it even as he also claims always to know best.

Thus Trump is quite unlike George W. Bush, another president not entirely shipshape upstairs; Bush understood his limitations. To his credit, he took care to compensate for them, recruiting capable people to work in his administration, and ceding power to them whenever he could. Especially at first, he even let a lesser Nixonian figure, Dick Cheney, a respectable enough villain in his own right, operate as if he were a co-president.

Trump is something else altogether. He thinks that he is the smartest person not just in the room but on the planet. It is therefore no surprise that even minimally competent people don’t last long under his thumb.

Trump likes it that way; he likes to surround himself with bona fide kakistocrats, even less knowledgeable and less skilled in the arts of governance than he. Because he could care less, they govern on his behalf and, when necessary, clean up the messes his semi-literate and frequently incoherent tweets bring on.

In short, unlike the sublimely villainous Nixon, Trump is a world-class mediocrity, interested only in glorifying and enriching himself. He is avaricious, egotistical and emotionally immature. The man cannot even hold a thought or stay on target for much more time than it takes to reveal the incoherence at his core.

Because of the position he holds, he commands attention, but, as a person, he is of no interest whatsoever. Unlike Nixon’s, his soul is not conflicted; he is far too shallow for that.

With Watergate, a mass of contradictions was brought down by a trifle. It now seems unlikely that anything, including G-Man Mueller’s report in whatever form it eventually reaches the public, will bring Trump down. To the dismay of leading Democrats and the liberal commentariat, Russiagate is turning out to be a dud.

“It’s not the crime, it’s the cover up,” the saying goes, but in Watergate the crime was trivial; therefore, the cover up was all.

In marked contrast, the purported crime in Russiagate was a doozy, nothing less than colluding with an historic enemy — assuming, that is, that history began a century ago, with the Bolshevik Revolution.

However, it is far from clear that the underlying crime alleged actually occurred. If it didn’t, how could Russiagate be any kind of cover up?

For that matter, could it be that Trump’s “no collusion” mantra is actually spot on right?

Democrats say No; they insist that whatever the Mueller report says, it is inconceivable that there is no there there; and that when they finally get their hands on the G-man’s complete, unredacted report, this will become clear.

My hunch is that they are both right – that there is a there there, but also that, strictly (and narrowly) speaking, the Trump campaign and the Russian state did not collude.

By far, the best, arguably even the only plausible, explanation for nine-tenths of Trump's tweets and for his campaign rally rants is that "Putin" – shorthand nowadays for all that is Russian and nefarious — does have something on him, perhaps enough to turn him into a Russian asset.

But if that is what he is, then shame on Russian "intelligence" for not understanding, long before anything like Russiagate is supposed to have happened, that, with assets like him, who needs neocons and liberal imperialists, and military-industrial complex flunkies, or, for that matter who needs Hillary Clinton!

Has he done anything at all for Russia except getting a few words on sanctions changed in the 2016 Republican platform? They were only words; the sanctions are still there.

The conventional wisdom, conveyed by corporate media at every opportunity, is that "Putin" wants to meddle and collude in order to undermine Americans' faith in democracy.

Newsflash: what democracy? One that countenances minority rule, which is, after all, how Trump got into the White House in the first place? One that makes it all but impossible to be rid of him for at least four perilous years?

Newsflash: we Americans are quite capable of undermining faith in democracy without any help from Russians or, for that matter, from foreigners of any kind. A few gerrymandering Republican legislators or, better yet, a handful of malicious Secretaries of State – they are the officials that superintend elections at the state level – are worth a thousand Russian spies.

And what about all those venal donors exercising what Republican Supreme Court Justices deem their Constitutionally protected First Amendment rights — by buying and selling candidates in ways that make a mockery of all sound notions of democratic deliberation and collective choice?

Any intelligence agency worth its salt, much less the purportedly omnipotent and omniscient Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, successor of the mighty KGB, would have concluded from Day One that, as an "asset," Trump is worse than useless – because he cannot hold a thought long enough to stay on track with whatever program they are promoting, and because the one thing he can be counted on to do is bail the second he sees some percentage in it.

This is just what has been happening since the GOP's 2016 convention. Can anyone plausibly claim that Russian-American relations today would be worse, from Russia's point of view, had Hillary Clinton won the blessing of the Electoral College?

The Russian collusion hypothesis also gives Russian intelligence too much credit. How could they have figured out that America's far right "populists," the latest in a long line of "deplorables" extending back to before the days of the Palmer Raids, who having imbibed anti-Soviet and then anti-Russian propaganda with their mother's milk, would flip abruptly from a "better dead than red" frame of mind (where "red" still meant red; not Republican) to philo-Putinism just because some flunkies of Rupert Murdoch moronized them with AM radio, a rightwing cable news network, social media, and all the tabloid reading material that's unfit to print.

Rupert Murdoch isn't that good and Russian intelligence is neither that stupid nor that smart.

And so, I think it more likely than not that Barr's four-page account of the Mueller findings, though strictly correct, was nevertheless seriously misleading.

I suspect that it will turn out that Mueller did indeed conclude that there is nothing he found that "rises to the level" of an impeachable offense, whatever that means. Or maybe he figured that, with an election "only" nineteen or twenty months away, there is nothing worth disturbing domestic tranquility over.

But his report will not show that there was no collusion, according to perfectly reasonable, non-technical, understandings of the term.

If there was no collusion, what was he investigating in the past two years, and what was the point of all the trouble he and his staff went to by securing so many indictments and convictions?

And what about the idea that where there is smoke, lots of it, there is fire?

And why would the Donald act like he had much to hide if he did not? Doesn't consciousness of guilt count for anything anymore?

In the face of all these indications, rightwing media, make the point that the official story, conveyed by Trump's Attorney General William Barr, is that there is no actionable evidence of "collusion" between agents of the Russian state and the Trump campaign, and that this consideration cancels out all suspicions, and therefore ought to lay all doubts to rest.

If the polls are on track, most Americans do not believe that official story. But a large minority do – roughly about as large as the minority that still stands by Trump, either because they have somehow managed to convince themselves that he is not unfit for the office he holds, or because their personal and political priorities lead them not to care.

There is no way to account for this without acknowledging the fact that Trump's unfitness for office, already clear beyond a reasonable doubt in 2016, has become so glaringly obvious over the past two and a half years that anyone who is still a Trump supporter, who is not morally corrupt or of unsound mind, is in a state of profound self-deception.

Are those who insist that, the official story notwithstanding, there was collusion after all, also deceiving themselves? Until actual evidence of collusion is produced, I am inclined to think that they are, but also that it doesn't much matter because the Russian collusion question is a good deal less important than it is generally made out to be.

There is something unseemly about the whole issue, no matter what the facts of the matter turn out to be. The problem is not just with the charge itself, with its gross disproportionality, but also with what Donald Trump famously called its "oranges" (origins).

If everything Rachel Maddow and other Cold War mongers of her ilk say about Russian malfeasance were true, it would still be the case that the premier meddler in the political affairs of other nations is not, and never has been Russia, or the Soviet Union before it. It is the United States of America.

This has been the case in the Western hemisphere since the early days of the republic; since the reconstruction of the world order after World War II, it has been the case nearly everywhere.

From that time on, the Soviet Union and then, after it imploded, the Russian Federation and former Soviet republics in close proximity to it have received more attention from American meddlers than anywhere else on the planet.

In the heyday of the Cold War, the Balkan republics, then effectively incorporated into the Soviet Union, and the Soviet "satellite" nations in eastern and central Europe also bore the brunt of intense American meddling.

So did China, to the extent that our intelligence services were able to operate there, and, of course, the countries of eastern and southern Asia and nearby Oceania. Some of them suffered especially egregiously; Vietnam and Cambodia are obvious examples, but there is also Indonesia and the Philippines.

Thus the United States is not only the world's foremost meddler, it is also the most hypocritical nation on the face of the earth.

And because there is no way to meddle effectively in other country's affairs without actively colluding with locals, it is also among the premier colluders of all the nations of the world.

If there really was no collusion between the Trump campaign and "the Russians," it only goes to show how devastating the Trump presidency has been to longstanding American

behavioral norms, and therefore how much of an anomaly Trump is. Ironically, we could add that to the already large and overflowing list of ways that he is unfit for the office he holds.

I am inclined to think, though, that Trump and his people must have colluded a lot because of the vehemence with which he proclaims “no collusion.” Trump’s thinking is incoherent, but his behavior is full of what poker players would call “tells.” For anyone tuned into them, an adamant denial from the Donald is as good as a confession.

In a similar vein, so are attributions of unseemly character traits, especially when they are spot on right about their target. “Crooked Hillary” was among the best, or at least the most descriptively accurate nickname in the Trumpian repertoire. But when it comes to being a crook, compared to Trump Hillary doesn’t even begin to compete.

It is also relevant that, as far as meddlers in American affairs go, Russia, even if it is as bad as the Cold War mongers on MSNBC claim, is still small potatoes compared to Israel, against which, even nowadays, with the Israel lobby finally encountering serious opposition, one hears nary an unkind word on liberal cable outlets.

What all this goes to show is that, at root, what sets the blood of our political and media leaders boiling is not foreign meddling or colluding or violating the “sanctity” of one or another of our vaunted institutional arrangements. It is getting their friends and enemies lists wrong.

The Israeli Right has understood this well for a long time. It took some doing to make an enemy — an “existential threat,” no less – out of Iran, notwithstanding some of the rhetorical stances to which Iranian theocrats are prone. It was even harder for them to befriend Saudi Arabia, covertly but undeniably.

However, with America’s evolving “friendship” with the Saudis and the other Gulf monarchies taking shape as they were, Netanyahu *et. al.* had no choice but to rise to the occasion.

Thus, by now, it is practically axiomatic in their circles, and therefore in the thinking of Christian Zionists that those damn ayatollahs are standing in the way of the End Times, while rightwing Jews in Israel and around the world worry that, unless beaten back to the stone age by force of American arms, Iran will deprive them of their G-d-given “birthright.”

Therefore now, with Trump in tow, the Bibster or whoever succeeds him could soon lead the United States into a far more devastating fiasco than anything encountered during the two Bush family Iraq wars.

Until recently, Clintonite Democrats, spurred on by a military maxed out by the never-ending war on terror and by the several Bush-Cheney and Obama led counter-insurgency wars of the twenty-first century, have generally had a harder time finding suitable enemies than the Israelis have had with Iran.

Because it was so pointless and potentially dangerous, reviving Cold War hostilities with Russia took some doing. “Pivoting” towards Asia – the Obama-Clinton euphemism for targeting China – was proving even more difficult.

Then two things happened that accelerated the quest for turning Russia back into a serviceable enemy. Goaded on by Western, especially American regime-change meddling in Ukraine, Russia annexed the Crimea and occupied (sort of) a few other territories in the east of the country. This made it possible at last for the United States to see Russia as the “adversary” it was again its destiny to become.

And then Hillary Clinton flubbed egregiously in her race against the laughing-stock that Trump plainly was. She and her team, being incapable of acknowledging their own ineptitude and culpability, did what came naturally to that superannuated Goldwater Girl – they blamed the Ruskies.

Thus the “orange” of the collusion obsession was born.

And with it came faith in the probity of the FBI, the most flagrant enemy of progressive politics in America in living memory.

With it too came a yearning for deliverance from the consequences of the mess Hillary and her team and her party made. In practice, this meant hoping for a Second Watergate, by now, in the collective psyche of the American public, the archetypical mode of deliverance from presidencies gone rotten.

But regardless what Trump and the Russians did or did not do, this hope was always a snare and a delusion.

Trump is no Nixon; to think that he is is to disrespect honest, authentic villainy. The Donald is a mediocrity in way over his head; neither more nor less.

And regardless of its factual basis or lack of one, Russiagate is no Watergate. The problem now is neither a crime nor a cover up; it is a political culture, anchored in inequality, which serves no one except the miscreants at the very top.

Thus there is no quasi-legalistic remedy for what ails the body politic now.

There are only far-reaching, radical political remedies for which the collusion obsession is ultimately a distraction.

What is called for now is not just voting Trump and Trumpians out of office when we finally get a chance, late next year. It is also, starting now, organizing to turn power away not just from a Republican Party in thrall to the Trumpian menace, but also from a Democratic Party dedicated to maintaining the conditions for Trump and Trumpism's possibility.

Fortunately, there is more to the existing Democratic Party than that; a lot more since the 2018 midterms.

Meanwhile, calls for Democratic Party unity – in other words, for maintaining the power of those who made Trump and Trumpism possible and even necessary – are becoming deafening.

Don't even think of challenging "moderate" or "centrist" (actually, rightwing) Democratic incumbents we are told. This is nonsense, nonsense on stilts.

In the months ahead, as much as it is urgent to "resist" Trump and all things Trumpian, it is urgent to fight back against the Democratic Party establishment and its media epigones, the lesser enemy, as it were, but an enemy nonetheless.

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