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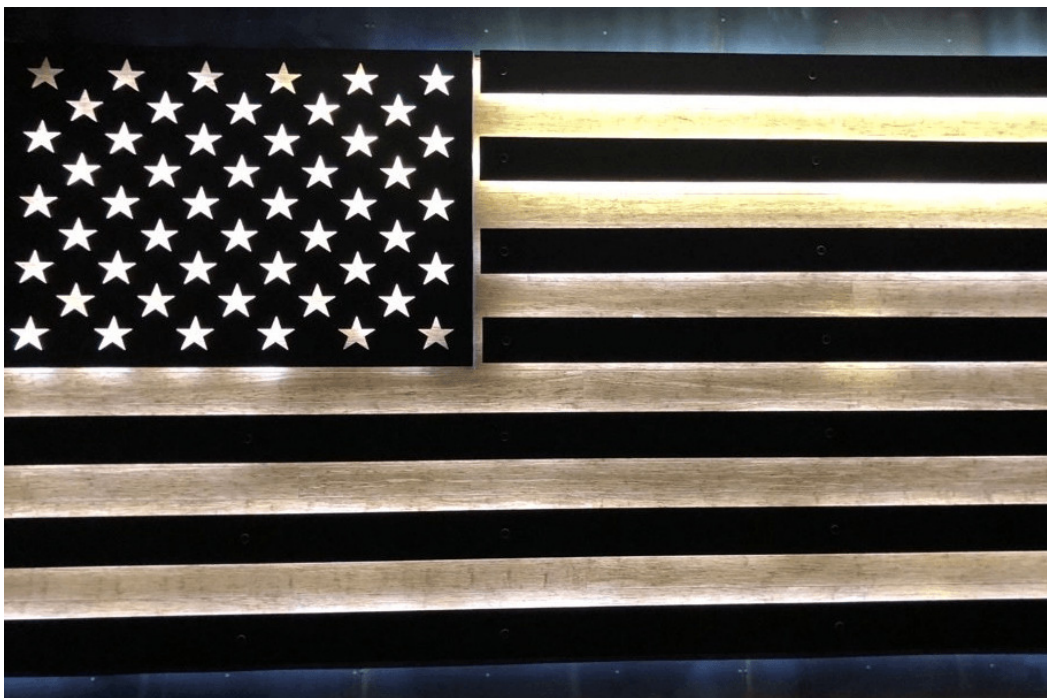
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The USA: Global Leader in Election Interference Abroad and Now at Home



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Walt Kelly's Pogo remarked that "We have met the enemy, and he is us." In terms of election interference, historically the United States has been the enemy abroad and now we are the enemy at home. There is more than 70 years of evidence of U.S. election interference abroad; the current interference at home is far more threatening. Donald Trump is prepared to do great harm to the November election, creating the kind of cynicism and disarray that will enable Russian President Vladimir Putin's propagandists to kick on an open door.

The intelligence community is giving mounting attention to the problem of foreign interference in the presidential campaign. Trump and the Republican emphasis on voter suppression, however, will do far more damage to the electoral process. Too many Democrats believe that Putin's Russia caused Hillary Clinton's defeat in the 2016 election, failing to acknowledge her misuse of personal email and a flawed campaign strategy. There's much irony in the fact that the United States calls so much attention to the issue of foreign intervention.

Over the past few months, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) has given nearly 20 congressional briefings on election interference, and it appears the ODNI has politicized the intelligence on foreign interference. CIA director Gina Haspel has avoided taking a public position on the issue of such interference, yielding the briefing responsibility to William Evanina, the principal counterintelligence official in ODNI. The ODNI's new director, John Ratcliffe, has a well-earned reputation for politicizing intelligence.

Evanina lacks the experience for the broad-based intelligence role he has been given. His background is in law enforcement and not intelligence; law enforcement, particularly the FBI, has a reputation for preparing worst case assessments. He is a certified SWAT team member as well as a certified sniper, not the best preparation for intelligence analysis. Evanina has a bachelor's degree in public administration from Wilkes University, and a master's degree in educational leadership from Arcadia University.

Evanina is currently distorting the possible role of China and Iran in order to signal the White House that he has less concern with the impact of Russian involvement. His linkage of Russia, China, and Iran is particularly ludicrous, but the mainstream media has already climbed aboard. A headline in the Washington Post on August 22, for example, declared that "At least 3 nations aim to influence U.S. vote, officials say." Parroting the intelligence briefings, the media accuse Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran with stirring the "passions of voters, with a mix of covert 'information laundering' and some ham-handed propaganda." In fact, Russia for the most part is using social media in its typical influence operations that have been a part of the rivalry between Washington and Moscow since the end of World War Two. There is no evidence thus far of Russian efforts to engage in the hacking and dumping of emails similar to the presidential campaign of 2016.

The efforts of China and Iran, moreover, are aspirational and in no way comparable to the efforts of the Kremlin. China and Iran have good reason to prefer the election of Joe Biden in view of Trump's tariff and trade war against China, and the campaign of maximum pressure against Iran. Tehran would like to return to the Iran nuclear accord of 2015; Biden offers that possibility while Trump offers the possibility of war. China for its part would like to forge the kind of correct state-to-state relations that existed for more than four decades under eight American presidents, both Democrats and Republicans. Stable economic relations are the key to China's national interest in the global community.

Russian influence operations in the 2016 election cannot be ignored, but U.S. voter suppression had a greater impact on the ultimate defeat of Hillary Clinton than anything orchestrated by the Kremlin. Poll taxes and literacy tests were part of the voter suppression of the 19th and 20th centuries, and it wasn't until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that these tactics were made illegal. Voter ID laws are still being used to prevent specific groups of people from voting, and Trump is threatening to place law enforcement officers at voting polls in November to intimidate potential voters. In 2017, Trump established the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, but appointed Kris Kobach, a staunch advocate of stricter voter ID laws, to head the commission.

In other words, Putin's impact on the election is modest compared to the damage that Trump and Republican legislators throughout the country can inflict. Voter suppression remains a huge problem, particularly in the wake of the Supreme Court decision in 2013 to weaken the Voting Rights Act. The campaign against mail-in voting is creating uncertainty and cynicism throughout the country as is Trump's constant ravings about vote by mail causing a fraudulent election. The litigious and manipulative response of the Republican Party to the Florida election in 2000 presumably could be multiplied many times by various challenges and lawsuits to state elections throughout the country. The Supreme Court placed George W. Bush in the White House in 2000; the court may not be needed to reelect Trump in 2020.

The history of the United States and the CIA in foreign election interference is one of tragic failure. The classic case of CIA interference took place in Guatemala from 1952 to 1954, an operation codenamed PBSUCCESS. The congressional investigations of illegal CIA activities in the 1970s omitted any discussion of the Guatemalan operation because it was such an embarrassment to the image of the United States and the Eisenhower

administration. For several decades, CIA directors denied numerous Freedom of Information requests to gain information on the operation.

David Shimer's highly praised book on election interference ("Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference") obliquely refers to "CIA operations to topple the leaders of Iran and Guatemala in the early 1950s," and offers no elaboration. In Iran, the CIA harassed religious figures, even bombed their homes, to turn them against the democratically elected government of Mohammed Mossadegh and pave the way for the Shah of Iran. In Guatemala, CIA operatives worked with military regimes that engaged in political assassinations. The ease of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's operations in Iran and Guatemala led directly to the disaster of President John F. Kennedy's Bay of Pigs in Cuba.

Shimer's book makes no mention of the CIA role in the elections in Indonesia or the electoral politics of the Congo. In Indonesia, CIA's efforts to overthrow the government led to the rise of the largest communist party outside of the Soviet Union and China. In the Congo, President Eisenhower endorsed an assassination attempt against Patrice Lumumba, which led to the emergence of Joseph Mobutu, the worst tyrant in Africa's history. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States invested several billion dollars on influence operations in Ukraine, including the promotion of anti-government riots, which is relegated to an obscure footnote in Shimer's book.

We are accustomed to the evidence of Soviet and Russian interference in foreign elections, but we have failed to acknowledge the history of U.S. efforts to undermine even democratic governments in Iran, Guatemala, and Chile. Now, we are faced with the White House itself engaging for the first time in overt and covert efforts that threaten our governance and even democracy itself.

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