

Perils of Ineptitude

by Andrew Levine - Counterpunch *Sunday, Aug 5 2018, 3:02am*

international / prose / post

When Donald Trump flubs through ignorance, incompetence, or poor judgment – that would be nearly all the time – he insists that he has not flubbed at all; that, quite to the contrary, he accomplished wonders. Whoever questions his words is spreading “fake news” and is an “enemy of the people.” Who knows if he believes these shameless self-promotions. It is possible; conmen often do fall for their own lines.

It has also been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that many of his marks – sadly, there are millions of them – are impervious to obvious facts. Some of them, the ones who crawled out from under the rocks Trump has overturned, will stand by him come what may; they owe him for setting “the darker angels” of their nature free. With backers like these, self-deception comes easily.

At some level, though, America’s flimflammer-in-chief does understand that the majority of his fellow citizens are on to him.

Thus he famously proclaimed: “don’t believe what you see or read.” Commentators immediately noted the similarity to one of the best-known passages in George Orwell’s 1984: “...the party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.”

When Hillary Clinton flubs through ignorance, incompetence, or poor judgment, which she does a lot, she blames somebody else.

Remember the “vast rightwing conspiracy” she used to rail against. She let that one go a while back, not so much because she was ridiculed for what she said, as because she found it expedient to change the story somewhat by making Vladimir Putin the villain.

That made sense: a candidate who cannot mobilize voters enough to frustrate the ambitions of a narcissistic, inarticulate, vulgarian real estate finagler and reality TV personality, a miscreant who exudes buffoonery and who panders to bumpkins and “deplorables,” is pathetic. There is less shame in being undone by a “master of deceit.”

When J. Edgar Hoover coined that description, he had Communists in mind. Back then, though, “Ruskies” and “Commies” – it was all the same. Americans were conditioned to live in fear that the Russians were coming.

That nonsense should have ended when Communism more or less officially expired in 1989, followed two years later by the demise of the Soviet Union itself. For a long time, it seemed that it had.

At first, the reaction in Western, especially American, political and media circles was triumphalist. The war was over and our side won.

Beneath the surface, however, there was mourning in America.

With the Cold War, the death merchants, the masters of war, the neocons, and a host of others had

had a good thing going. Having been born into it, the political class was comfortable with the status quo too; and generations of Americans had grown up imbibing Russophobia in their mother's milk (or infant formula).

It turned out, though, that American triumphalism was only a phase. Before long, it became clear that our economic and political masters had nothing to worry about, that Cold War anti-Communism was more robust than Communism itself.

However, in the final days of Bush 41 and then at the dawn of the Clinton era, nobody knew that. Nobody gave America's propaganda system the credit it deserved.

Also, nobody quite realized how devastating Russia's regression to capitalism would be, and nobody quite grasped the savagery of the kleptocrats who had taken charge of what remained of the Russian state.

For more than a decade, the situation in that late great superpower was too dire to sustain the old fears and animosities. Capitalism had made Russia wretched again.

That suited Bill Clinton and his First Lady, the former Goldwater Girl. Boris Yeltsin, Russia's leader, was their man. He was a godsend, a Trump-like cartoon character and a drunkard to boot - with an economy in tatters, and no rightwing base egging him on.

But anti-Communism (without Communism) and its close cousin, Russophobia, could not remain in remission forever. The need for them was too great.

In the Age of Obama, the Global War on Terror, with or without that ludicrous Bush 43-era name, wasn't cutting it anymore. It was, and still is, good for keeping America's perpetual war regime going and for undoing civil liberties, but there had never been much glory in it, only endless misery for all. Also it was getting old and increasingly easy to see through.

The time was therefore right for a return of the repressed — for full-blooded, fifties-style, anti-Communist (= anti-Russian) hysteria, or, since that still seemed far-fetched, for anti-Communist (= anti-Chinese) hysteria.

This was not the only factor behind the Obama administration's "pivot towards Asia," its largely failed attempt to take China down a notch or two, but it was an important part of the story.

However, by the time Obama and his team decided to pivot, China had become too important to the United States economically to make a good Cold War enemy. Worse still, it had for too long been an object of pity and contempt, not fear.

When the Soviet Union was an enemy, China was an enemy too, most glaringly during the Korean War. It remained an enemy even after the Sino-Soviet split became too obvious to deny. However, unlike post-1917 Russia, it had never quite become an historical foe.

Moreover, as Russia began to recover from the Yeltsin era, the Russian political class, and many of the oligarchs behind them, sensing the popular mood, decided that the time was ripe "to make Russia great again." Putin is not so much a cause as he is a symptom - and symbol - of this aspiration.

And so, there it was: the longed for new Cold War would be much like the one that seemed over a

quarter century ago.

As everyone who has seen, heard or read anything about the 2016 election “knows,” Russian intelligence services (= Putin) meddled. Everyone also “knows” that, with midterm elections looming, they are at it again.

This, according to the mainstream consensus view, is a bona fide casus belli, a justification for war. To be sure, what they want is a war that remains cold; ending life on earth, as we know it, is not on their agenda.

But inasmuch as cold wars can easily turn hot, this hardly mitigates the recklessness of their machinations. Humankind was extraordinarily lucky last time; there is no guarantee that all that luck will hold.

Exactly what “Putin,” the shorthand name for all that is Russian and nefarious, did, or is still doing, remains unclear. But this does not seem to bother purveyors of the conventional wisdom.

Neither is ostensibly informed public opinion fazed by the fact that the evidence supporting the consensus view comes mainly from American intelligence services and from their counterparts in the UK and other allied nations.

Time was when anyone with any sense understood that these intelligence services, the American ones especially, are second to none in meddling in the affairs of other nations, and that the American national security state - essentially our political police — is comprised, by design, of liars and deceivers.

How ironic therefore that nowadays it is mainly bamboozled Trump supporters in the Fox News demographic — people who could care less about peace or, for that matter, about truth — who are wary of the CIA and skeptical of the FBI’s claims!

Try as they might, the manufacturers and guardians of conventional wisdom have so far been unable to concoct a plausible story in which Russian meddling affected the outcome of the 2016 election in any serious way. The idea that the Russians defeated Hillary, not Hillary herself, is, to borrow a phrase from Jeremy Bentham, “nonsense on stilts.” Leading Democrats and their media flacks don’t seem to mind that either.

They do not even seem to notice that what they allege, vague as it is, is trifling compared to the massive and very open meddling of American plutocrats, Republican vote suppressers and gerrymanderers, and the governments of supposedly friendly nations - like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies, and Israel.

Nevertheless, it probably is true that the Russians meddled. Cold War revivalists can therefore rest easy, confident that their propagandists will have at least a few facts with which they can work to restore the perils of their vanished youth.

Even so, the level of their hypocrisy is appalling. Russia, along with former Soviet republics and former members of the Warsaw Pact, has been bearing the brunt of far worse American meddling for far longer than anything sanctimonious defenders of so-called American “democracy” can plausibly allege.

Moreover, it should go without saying that the democracy they purport to care so much about has almost nothing to do with “the rule of the demos.” It doesn’t even have much to do with free and fair competitive elections – unless “free and fair” means that anything goes, so long as the principals and perpetrators are homegrown or citizens of favored nations.

Self-righteous posturing aside, Putin’s real sin in the eyes of the American power elite is that, in his own small way, he has been defying America’s “right” to run the world as it sees fit.

When Clinton was president, Serbia did that, and lived to regret it. Cuba has been suffering for nearly six decades for the same reason, and now Venezuela is paying its dues. The empire is merciless towards nations that rebel.

With Soviet support and then with sheer determination and grit, Cuba has been able to withstand the onslaught to some extent from Day One. Venezuela may not be so lucky – especially now that Republicans and Democrats feel threatened by the growing number of “democratic socialists” in their midst. Already, the propaganda system is targeting Venezuelan “socialism,” blaming it for that country’s woes, and warning that if our newly minted, homegrown socialists prevail, a similar fate will be in store for us.

This is ludicrous, of course – American hostility and the vagaries of the global oil market deserve the lion’s share of the blame. But the on-going propaganda blitz could nevertheless pave the way for horrors ahead, should Trump decide to start a war America could actually win.

Inconsequential Russian meddling is a big deal on the “liberal” cable networks, on NPR, and in the “quality” press. Democrats and a few Republicans love to bleat on about it. But it is Ukraine that made Russia our “adversary” and its president Public Enemy Number One.

Hypocrisy reigns here too. It was the Obama administration – run through with neocons, liberal imperialists, and other holdovers from Hillary Clinton’s tenure as Secretary of State – that did all it could to exacerbate longstanding tensions between that country’s Ukrainian and Russian speaking populations, the better to complete NATO’s encirclement of the Russian federation. And it was American meddling that led to the empowerment of virulently anti-Russian, fascist Ukrainian politicians, much to the detriment of Russian speaking Ukrainians in the east.

But never mind: Putin – that is, the Russia government – violated international law by sending troops briefly into beleaguered Russian-speaking parts of the country. That they were generally welcomed by the people living there is of no importance.

Worst of all, Russia annexed Crimea – a territory integral to the Russian empire since the eighteenth century. Since long before the Russian Revolution, Crimea has been home to a huge naval base vital to Russia’s strategic defense.

The story line back in the day was that anything that could be described as Russian aggression outside the Soviet Union’s agreed upon sphere of influence had to do with spreading Communism. In fact, the Soviets did everything they could to keep Communist and other insurgencies from upending the status quo. The mainstream narrative was wrong.

Now Communism is gone and nothing has taken its place. Even so, the idea that Russia has designs on its neighbors for ideological reasons is hard to shake – in part because it is actively promoted by propagandists who have suddenly and uncharacteristically become defenders of international law.

Meanwhile, of course, the hypocrisies keep piling on. It is practically a tenet of the American civil religion that international law applies to others, not to the United States. This is why, when it suits some perceived purpose, America flaunts its violations shamelessly.

Thus nothing the Russians did or are ever likely to do comes close to the shenanigans Bill Clinton displayed – successfully, for the most part – in his efforts to tear Kosovo away from Serbia. Clinton even went so far as to bomb Belgrade; Putin never bombed Kiev.

The Cold War that began after World War II involved a clash of rival political economic systems. The Cold War that reignited a few years ago involves a clash of rival imperialist centers. Its world more nearly resembles the one that existed before World War I than the one that emerged after World War II.

However, the difference may be more superficial than it seems. The ease with which Cold War revivalists have been able to get the Cold War up and running again, even without Communism, suggests what a few observers have long maintained — that the Cold War, on Russia's part, had little, if anything, to do with spreading Communism around the world, and everything to do with maintaining a cordon sanitaire around Russia's borders in order to protect against a demonstrably aggressive "free world."

George W. Bush claimed that 9/11 happened because "they hate our freedom." "They" would be radical Islamists of the kind stirred into action in Afghanistan by Zbigniew Brzezinski and his co-thinkers in the Carter administration. Their objective was to undermine the Soviet Union by getting it bogged down in a quagmire like the one that did so much harm to the United States in Vietnam.

That part of Brzezinski's plan was at least a partial success. But inasmuch as Bush's "they" are still there, still spreading murder and mayhem throughout the Greater Middle East, America and the world has been paying a high price for the benefits, such as they were, that ensued.

The never-ending wars set in motion by the "pivot" towards radical Islamism decades ago never quite succeeded in producing an enemy as serviceable as the USSR. But now that Putin's Russia has been pressed into service, that problem is potentially "solved."

However, the American public is not as naïve as it used to be, and it is impossible to say, at this point, how well this new story line will work.

Efforts to recycle Bush's "they hate our freedom" nonsense ought to be non-starters. But this is the best Cold War revivalists have come up with so far. The Russians, they say, simply cannot deal with the fact that we Americans are so damned free.

It is hard to believe, but there are people who are actually buying this but, with a lot of corporate media assistance, there are. No matter how clear it is that they are not worth being taken seriously, Cold War mythologies just won't die.

However, it is worth pondering why today's Russia would do what it is alleged to have done; and why, as is also alleged, it is still doing it.

From a geopolitical point of view, Russia does have an interest in doing all it can to ward off Western aggression. It also has an interest in undermining strategic alliances aimed at blocking anything and everything that challenges American supremacy. And, until sanity prevails in Washington and other Western capitals, it arguably also has an interest in aiding and abetting rightwing nationalists in

order to exacerbate tensions within Western societies.

However, in view of prevailing power relations, these are interests it cannot do much to advance. Acting as if this were not the case only puts Russia in a bad light — not for meddling, but for meddling stupidly.

No doubt, for reasons both fair and foul, Putin wanted Hillary to lose the election two years ago. So, but for one little problem, would anyone whose head is screwed on right. That problem's name is Donald Trump.

Clinton is bad, but Trump is worse — not just by most measures but by all.

Her fondness for war and preparations for war was alarming; she was bellicosity personified. But it was plain even before the election that Trump, a mentally unhinged narcissist, would be even more likely than she to bring on massive devastation. A vote for Trump was and still is a vote for catastrophe.

Putin's enemy was Trump's enemy, and it is axiomatic that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" — except sometimes it isn't. Sometimes, my enemy's enemy is an enemy far worse.

For reasons that remain obscure, Putin and Trump seem to have a "thing" going on between them. Some day perhaps we will know what that is all about. For now, though, the hard and very relevant fact is that Trump has done nothing to help, and quite a few things to harm, Russia.

It isn't just ordinary Russians who have been made worse off. Trump has been at least as hard on oligarchs close to Putin as Clinton would have been.

If those damned Russians were half as smart as they are made out to be, they would have realized long ago that, for getting anything done that bucks the tide, Trump is too inept to be of any use at all; and that anything he sets out to do is likely to turn out badly not just for America and its allies but for Russia too.

Therefore, if there really was Russian meddling, as there probably was, Putin should be ashamed — not so much for the DNC reasons laid out 24/7 on MSNBC and CNN, but for overestimating Trump's abilities and for underestimating the extent to which what started out as a maneuver of Hillary Clinton's, concocted to excuse her incompetence, would take a perilously "viral" turn, becoming a major threat to peace in a political culture that never quite got beyond the lunacy of the First Cold War.

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