

Russia-gate Still Matters

by Eric Chenoweth

A majority of Americans support the impeachment inquiry of President Donald Trump. With each witness's testimony, they learn the extent of how Trump risked America's national security and betrayed his oath to the Constitution to extort Ukraine's new leader for his own political benefit. Speaker Nancy Pelosi has described the issue as having "clarity."

A narrow focus on "Ukraine-gate," however, ignores another grave issue. If the U.S. Constitution demands Congressional action to prevent manipulation of a future election by an incumbent president, it similarly demands action against a foreign power's past manipulation of a U.S. presidential election that the incumbent used to gain power in the first place. Oddly, even as evidence has mounted of this original crime against American democracy, the media have generally ignored a connection with Ukraine-gate. But it is an issue that also has clarity.

Since November 2016, we have known three things: the Russian government interfered in the U.S. presidential elections; Trump and his campaign solicited and used Russian help; and Trump won his Electoral College victory by a total of 77,000 votes in three states while substantially losing the national vote to Democrat Hillary Clinton. The response (as I wrote in the [Washington Post](#)) was to look away from the inter-connection. Although, in Russia, the consensus was that "Putin has won," here it was that Trump's unlikely election was determined by domestic factors.

Three years later, two reports based on extensive investigation have described this high crime against American democracy. One demonstrates a considerable effort by President Trump and his allies to cover up this crime. Together, these reports demonstrate the scope of the Russian government's intervention, the Trump campaign's use of Russia's help, and the likely impact in determining the 2016 election. Can we still afford to look away?

The first report, Special Counsel Robert Mueller's "Report on Russian Interference in the 2016 Elections," describes a "sweeping and systematic" intervention by the Russian government to illegally benefit Donald Trump. This report, not only details charges against 28 individuals and entities involved in Russia's conspiracy, but also reveals the larger scope of Russia's efforts to affect U.S. voter behavior. At least 80 people (as many as in the Clinton campaign's entire digital operation) worked 12-hour shifts in the Internet Research Agency's (IRA's) social media operation directed at American voters. The report also states — in an unexplored finding — "other Russian entities engaged in similar active measures operations in the U.S."

The second report, the bipartisan Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's recently issued "Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns in the 2016 Election," expands on Mueller's findings. It describes "a vastly more complex strategic assault on the United States than initially thought." For example, the investigation found that, "[T]he Russian government and its proxies infiltrated and utilized nearly every social media and online information

platform” to reach “large U.S. audiences” (126 million people on Facebook alone). The effort had specific intent to encourage Trump supporters to go to the polls and, more so, “to suppress the vote of potentially pro-Clinton voters” through repeated messaging and engagement in swing states. The IRA had “three types of voter suppression initiatives” that especially targeted African Americans and Bernie Sanders voters.

The Senate Report also describes the coordination of Russia’s pro-Trump operations — something ignored previously. In just one instance, the IRA’s troll activity spiked (reaching 20 million people) on the day before and day of the initial Wikileaks release of stolen emails from Clinton campaign. For the next 30 days, as the general media generated negative stories about Clinton, the IRA and Russia’s English-language stations based their propaganda messaging on Wikileaks releases to re-enforce the impact of the effort. So did Trump, the Trump campaign and pro-Trump media. Kathleen Hall Jamieson has demonstrated in *Cyber-War*, one of the few studies of Russia’s efforts on voter behavior, that these joined operations and their role in affecting media coverage and campaign messaging had a clear impact on the election.

The Mueller Report further confirmed definitively that Wikileaks received the DNC and Clinton campaign emails directly from the Russian military intelligence unit that had stolen them. While there is no proven criminal conspiracy, all reports, as well as testimony in the Roger Stone trial, make clear the Trump campaign’s interoperability with a Russian intelligence front. Mueller also uncovered real evidence of possibly more active collaboration with the Russian government’s social media campaign. For seven months, the Trump campaign chairman and deputy chairman funneled internal polling data and state-by-state strategy to someone with “known Russian intelligence ties.”

The cover-up to the crime is equally evident — and did gain a great deal of attention from both the media and lawmakers. But even the Mueller Report’s description of Trump’s efforts to impede the Special Counsel’s investigation does not fully account the illegality of Trump’s behavior. For one, Mueller testified that Trump lied in written responses to questions from the Special Counsel’s Office — a point that also was largely overlooked by media. But the illegality goes much further. Since January 2017, the U.S. intelligence community has briefed Trump about the full scope of Russia’s election interference. All reports (and reporting) has confirmed the validity of the intelligence community’s findings. Trump, in turn, has deliberately and systematically lied to the American people about Russia’s support of his election as well as his campaign’s ties to this effort. In doing so, he has promoted foreign-generated propaganda claiming that the election intervention itself is a “hoax.” Each of these actions is a violation of Trump’s oath of office and specific criminal statutes.

America’s democracy was damaged through the intervention in a U.S. election by a hostile foreign power that exploited vulnerabilities in its political and electoral system. That is clear. It is also clear that Donald Trump solicited, welcomed and used that large-scale help to win the presidency, promising benefits in return. To ignore such cheating in a presidential election would abandon the basic premise of America’s experiment in self-governance.

It is also an open invitation for foreign countries to continue to intervene in U.S. elections. Russian President Vladimir Putin obtained real gains on large geo-strategic goals by aiding Trump's victory, among them: the ceding of Syria to Russia's military dominance; Russia's expanding power projection in the Middle East; the successful stalemating of Russia's occupation of Ukraine; and a significant weakening of Transatlantic relations giving Russia further opportunity to divide Europe. Trump's demand that the president of Ukraine manufacture investigations into a U.S. political rival and imagined 2016 election interference in exchange for military aid is a multiple deliverable. It undermined the U.S.'s commitment to an ally; it weakened Ukraine's new president in thwarting Russian aggression; it continued the devaluation of America's intelligence agencies; and it heightened America's internal political crisis. Ukraine-gate is a full reflection of Putin's gains from Russia-gate.

In the impeachment process, Russia-gate should matter. Both the crime and the cover up deserve full public scrutiny.

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