

# Meddlesome and more

Moral outrage that Russia suborned the 2016 U.S. election ignores American involvement in elections across the world



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U.S. President Donald Trump has been entangled in a quagmire of his own making when, in a joint press conference in Helsinki, Finland, last week with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he refused to accuse Russia of meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election (despite allegations by all intelligence agencies in the U.S.). Widespread condemnation of his refusal to endorse the findings of U.S. intelligence agencies has compelled him to walk back his statements at Helsinki. Yet, critics of the President conveniently forget that it was only 15 years ago that these same intelligence agencies fraudulently claimed that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

## Lost in interpretation

Two further points are lost in the firestorm of protests over the press conference. First, there is no instance that I can recall when journalists have accused one president – especially a President of a state as large and powerful as Russia – of interfering in the elections of another country in a joint press conference between the two Presidents. In joint press conferences, one head of government is not typically called on to label the other head of government a liar. Rather than discussing global issues, ranging from nuclear disarmament to conflicts in Syria and the Ukraine, journalists were focussed on a domestic issue in the U.S.

Of course, whether Mr. Trump

should have gone to Helsinki to meet Mr. Putin in all amidst these allegations is another issue. Perhaps the closest parallel was the 1960 Paris summit between the leaders of France, the U.K., the U.S. and the USSR after the U.S. had lied that its spy plane that had been shot down over the USSR had been a weather plane. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's outburst there against U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower led to a collapse of the summit.

## The U.S. hand

Second, and more importantly, setting aside Mr. Trump's remarks at Helsinki, the moral outrage that Russia had suborned the democratic process in the 2016 election breathtakingly ignores the very many times the U.S. has interfered in the elections of other countries – and even ousted democratically-elected governments.

In Russia itself when there was a fear that the Communist Party candidate, Gennady Zyuganov (who had received 32% of the vote in the first round of voting in 1996 to Boris Yeltsin's 35%), would win the presidency, U.S. President Bill Clinton pushed the International Monetary Fund to loan \$10.2 billion some months before the election and sent a team of political consultants to help the Russian incumbent. Yeltsin's popularity had plummeted as he had implemented the 'shock therapy' advocated by the U.S. and other western advisers and this had led to the evaporation of social protections as deindustrialisation swept across that vast land and the life expectancy of men and women fell from 64 and 74 years to 58 and 71 years between 1991 and 1994.

In an interview with Megyn Kelly earlier this year, Mr. Putin said that U.S. officials did not even deny that they meddled in Russian

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elections because they said that they were "entitled" to do so as they were "spreading democracy" while the Russians were not.

Indeed, Don Levin of Carnegie Mellon University had found that beginning with the Italian elections of 1948, the U.S. interfered in elections in other countries 81 times between then and 2000. In Italy, Mark Wyatt, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative admitted that they "threw everything including the kitchen sink" to help the Christian Democrats come to power and prevent a Communist Party victory. This included consultants to run political campaigns, subsidising "pork" projects, and threatening to end U.S. aid if the Communists were to come to power. And that was not the only instance of U.S. meddling in Italian elections.

Similarly, earlier this year, *The New York Times* quoted Loch Johnson, another CIA agent, saying that the U.S. has been interfering in elections ever since the creation of the intelligence agency: "We've used posters, pamphlets, mailers, banners...We've planted false information in foreign newspapers. We've used what the British call 'King George's cavalry': suitcases of cash."

Some of the other more notable instances of U.S. meddling in foreign elections – to say nothing of the overthrow of democratically elected governments like that of

Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran, Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala or Salvador Allende in Chile – have been in the Chilean elections of 1964, the failed 1986 attempt to defeat Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti, in the Nicaraguan and Czechoslovak elections of 1990, the 2000 elections in Serbia, and the Afghan elections of 2009.

Election meddling is nothing new. Mr. Levine's study also shows that the USSR/Russia intervened at least 36 times in overseas elections between 1946 and 2000.

Indeed, the U.S. government today sponsors several agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy to influence foreign elections. It granted \$23,000 in 2006 to a political adversary of Mr. Putin and two years ago \$6.8 million to anti-Putin organisations in Russia. Rather than allowing foreign populations to freely exercise their will, these interventions were designed to advance the foreign policy objectives of the U.S.

The current moral outrage in the U.S. of Russian meddling in elections stems also because since the end of the Cold War, mainstream broadcast media have largely balked at airing the viewpoints of foreign adversaries. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, Russians, Palestinians, even Iraqi officials in the run-up to the first Gulf War were regulars on U.S. television networks and news shows, now what passes for 'opposition' views is someone from the party not in the White House. If such foreign voices had been given airtime, the alleged election interference by the Russians would have been placed in a broader context.

## Changing geo-politics

Recognising the long history of states meddling in elections does not of course mean that it should

be accepted much less condoned. But it is not the meddling in elections that states have long practised that is at issue here. The indignation over Mr. Trump's refusal to accept the assessments of U.S. intelligence agencies stems primarily because he is undermining a foreign policy consensus in Washington to muscle into the power vacuum in Central and West Asia created by the demise of the Soviet Union.

In early 2014, transcripts of a phone call between then Assistant Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland and the U.S. Ambassador to the Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt in which they discuss the makeup of the Ukrainian government after the impending ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich were released on YouTube, presumably by Russian intelligence. That Mr. Obama's Assistant Secretary had previously served as U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's chief foreign policy adviser and U.S. President George W. Bush's ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation underlines a consensus between Republicans and Democrats on foreign policy – and it is this consensus that Mr. Trump is now disrupting.

Mr. Trump's focus is on a trade war with China, the European Union, and with Canada and Mexico. This is what plays to his base supporters even though his argument that these states take away jobs from the U.S. is spurious. Nevertheless, the strategic counterpart of this policy is a détente with Russia. It is this fundamental policy difference that is being occluded by the outrage over Mr. Trump's apparent acceptance of Russian claims of innocence in Helsinki.

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