

Mainstream Assumptions: The CIA, Presidential Elections, and the Russian Connection

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Intent and causation are important features in the course of history. The former envisages motive and hope, irrespective of outcome; the latter envisages consequence. Often, these get muddled in the jumbled process of reasoning. An intervention in the affairs of another state goes awry; a historical incident goes belly up with ferocious consequences. Suddenly, in the aftermath, we are wise, we knew better, and we can categorise plans as venal and characters as wicked.

In a world of Clinton-Trump machinations, distinctions about intent and causation have fallen into a soup of conjecture. The stakes to win in November were so high for either candidate, mendacity and assumptions were bound to take centre stage.

From fake news to false modesty, from traditional deception to the exotica of dissimulation, it was a contest that furnished the US political landscape with greater punch and interest than anything offered since the infant days of the Republic.

Central to one allegation of the 2016 presidential election was that Russian hacking efforts, supposedly directed by Moscow's intelligence managers, had a direct effect on the outcome of the election. WikiLeaks had been roped into the cause, and was duly accused of being a Russian front, or an infatuate of Trump.

Trump has done his bit, as is his wont, to sink these propositions. To begin with, he told Time that he did not believe them as credible. "I don't believe [Russia] interfered." Nor did he find CIA assessments in general that credible. He specifically pointed out CIA incompetence, notably in its assessment of Iraq's famed, and subsequently non-existent stockpile of weapons prior to the invasion of 2003. "These are the same people that said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction." [1]

Behind him is Trump's national security adviser Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn. The CIA, according to Flynn in an interview with the New York Times in October 2015, "lost sight of who they actually work for. They work for the American people. They don't work for the president of the United States." In its declining utility, the organisation had become "a very political organisation". [2]

The intelligence cognoscenti were quick to wonder whether his presidency would be more than troubling for the 16 spying agencies he will have to cope with. "Given his proclivity for revenge combined with his notorious thin skin," claimed Paul Pillar, former deputy director of the CIA's Counterterrorism centre, "this threatens to result in a lasting relationship of distrust and ill will between the president and the intelligence community." [3]

This, at best, is a claim of the disgruntled, but it is one that has attracted its adherents. Linked to the causation argument is the notion that Russia's Vladimir Putin envisaged the electoral outcome, backing a more sympathetic horse in a far from sympathetic race.

The impact of these claims has been furthered by unquestioning media outlets now termed, euphemistically, the mainstream. These mainstreamers have been keeping a rather pedestrian line on matters, taking a few choice notes from various official sources to build an empire of speculation.

The Washington Post delved out one example last week, engaging in what Glenn Greenwald regarded as "classic American journalism of the worst sort". This entailed claims from "unverified assertions of anonymous officials, who in turn are disseminating their own claims about what the CIA purportedly believes, all based on evidence that remains completely secret." [4]

With one step, possibly two removed from the official CIA report, we were left with the view that the agency had "concluded in a secret assessment that Russia intervened in the 2016 election to help Donald Trump win the presidency, rather than just to undermine confidence in the US electoral system." [5]

This aptly perverse manoeuvre suggests that the very outlets keen to condemn fake news sites themselves become the incubators, and unquestioning disseminators, of unreliable material.

Within the intelligence community, the material on hacking – in so far as it pertains to goals – has also been questioned. Not all have jumped onto the CIA assisted narrative that the Kremlin was dabbling in its own gambling variant of regime change.

According to the Office of the Director of National intelligence (ODNI), more is needed. Yes, there may well have been hacking, but the issue of a Moscow-directed drive to benefit Trump over Clinton in the presidential race would require more heft.

According to Reuters, which similarly adopted the Washington recipe in interviewing three unnamed American officials on Monday, albeit more sceptical ones, "ODNI is not arguing that the agency (CIA) is wrong, only that they can't prove intent. Of course they can't, absent agents in on the decision-making in Moscow." [6] At the very least, such views add a sliver of needed context.

The CIA conclusion had a broader context to it, suggesting a pattern of hacking and penetration that was far from specific to Clinton. In other words, it was, again in the words of one of the three officials, a "judgment based on the fact that Russian entities hacked both Democrats and Republicans and only the Democratic information was leaked." It was, to that end, "a thin reed upon which to base an analytical judgment."

When all these factors are considered, Trump's dismissiveness of the intelligence community, while seemingly flippant, makes that much more sense. Predictably, it has been done by the wave of the hand, a contemptuous move that we will come to see as normal in due course. The intelligence bunglers will be having to do much more to earn their keep.

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Notes

[1] <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2016-donald-trump/>

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/12/us/politics/donald-trump-cia-michael-flynn.html?_r=0

[3]

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-cia-on-collision-course-over-russias-role-in-us-election/2016/12/10/ad01556c-bf01-11e6-91ee-1addfe36cbe_story.html?utm_term=.44567decbb51

[4]

<https://theintercept.com/2016/12/10/anonymous-leaks-to-the-washpost-about-the-cias-russia-beliefs-are-no-substitute-for-evidence/>

[5]

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-orders-review-of-russian-hacking-during-presidential-campaign/2016/12/09/31d6b300-be2a-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_russiahack-745p%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.7b235a7c14a1

[be2a-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_russiahack-745p%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.7b235a7c14a1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-orders-review-of-russian-hacking-during-presidential-campaign/2016/12/09/31d6b300-be2a-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_russiahack-745p%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.7b235a7c14a1)

[main_russiahack-745p%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.7b235a7c14a1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-orders-review-of-russian-hacking-during-presidential-campaign/2016/12/09/31d6b300-be2a-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_russiahack-745p%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.7b235a7c14a1)

[6] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-intelligence-idUSKBN14204E>

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