

Patriotism, Witch Hunts, and Donald Trump Jr: “The Russians Did It, and Someone Must Pay”

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The momentum against the Trump administration is building, and it should come as no surprise that it comes via the least original of avenues: the Russians did it, and someone must pay. For decades, the feared Russian has played a vital role in shaping US paranoia and a domestic landscape famous for its reactionary bursts and fearful lurches.

That paranoia has assumed galloping proportions. The US president’s approach to this assertion has been confused and varied. There is nothing surprising in this: from blanket, emphatic denial about any connections even smelling of a Russian touch, Trump has stated another variant of denial. He claims ignorance over his son’s attempts to tap Russian sources for electoral gain, notably that with lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya which revealed squat in the scheme of things.

What, then, is the problem with Donald Trump Jr? Negotiating is way out of a brown paper bag, for one. In June 2016, he received word from Rob Goldstone, manager of Azerbaijani pop figure Emin Agalarov, outlining Russian interest to supply the Trump campaign with “official documents” of a “very high level” nature against Hillary Clinton “as part of Russia and its government support for Mr Trump.”

He was enthusiastic (“love it”), though the June 9 meeting was subsequently described as one covering “the adoption of Russian children”. Children or not, it was certainly interesting enough for Jared Kushner and Paul Manafort to be encouraged to drop in.

Much of the assumed indignation, at this point, is one of circumspection. Surely Trump Jr would have been questioning on this score, consulting lawyers, considering the prospect that he would be becoming an unwitting accomplice to broader interests.

Such an attitude confuses the need for advanced political prescience to hold the business instinct in check while embracing the Stars and Stripes. Clinton was a rival to the campaign and material of any compromising material was being sought with a near mindless rapacity. Source was less relevant than impact; motivation for the supplier was less significant than the use it would be put to by the recipient. But most importantly of all, *patriotism* was irrelevant.

What the Trump campaign should have done, suggests one line of argument, is follow the approach taken by Tom Downey, formerly a close advisor to Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore. On September 14, 2000, Downey received an anonymous package with over 120 pages of planned debate strategies (Bush was, after all, such a debater) along with George W. Bush’s efforts at practising.[1] Downey and his lawyer immediately surrendered

the material to the FBI, and the world was spared a round of laughs on the skills of a future president.

The Trump Jr email chain is deemed unacceptable to the consortium of analysts at Lawfare, who suggest that covert collusion may itself risk letting Trump off the hook. They also seek the patriotic silver lining here without success. "It risks accepting that all is okay with the Trump-Russia relationship unless some secret or illegal additional element actually involves illicit contacts between the campaign and Russian initiatives." [2]

Before Sean Hannity, Trump Jr. claimed that "in introspect he would have handled the matter differently." And how. He claimed to have not referred the matter to his father - why should his kingpin Dad be appraised of everything? The meeting, he concluded, was a "waste".

Hardly important, claims Laurence Douglas. "Imagine a criminal accused of conspiring to receive stolen property. At trial, the accused testifies that he hired a big truck to carry away the goods, but when he arrived at the stash all he found was worthless garbage." [3] A short changed criminal doesn't alter that criminality.

David French at the National Review Online prefers a historical argument: that the Russians never really went away from the US political scene, and should be seen as continued dangers. "I don't want to use an over-worked term like 'kompromat', but compromising information doesn't need to truly 'turn' someone to have its impact." [4]

With disapproval, he takes to task those, including fellow conservatives, who refuse to see the fact that Russian interference has been standard fare, whether it be the KGB actions of the past, or the efforts made by such individuals as Teddy Kennedy to seek Soviet help in an effort to undermine Ronald Reagan. French was happy to suggest that this was a disease of the Left in the US, and mournful that Republicans decided to "pursue a similar course - dancing with the devil to win debates at home."

French's argument suffers in ignoring the obvious point that electoral interference, or dancing with foreign devils for local advancement, is the natural outcome of political calculation made by power players. If the outcome of a state's election matters, it is fair game. The British, for one, supplied a classic example of this in efforts to slander the America First campaign before the US entry into the Second World War. It was calculating, ruthless and indifferent to US sovereignty.

The result of the latest fanfare is an attempt to tie in the Trump family to Trump himself, to target a specific culture of management indifferent to the borders of ethics, even legality. In short, critics are on the hunt for the beating patriotic heart, the chest-thumping ideologue they cannot find.

The use of the term "witch hunt", a favourite of the Trump family, is not inaccurate. A family member is intended for burning, and the establishment high priests across the political spectrum want a sacrifice for flag and country.

It's not that corruption, collusion or entertaining interests deemed inimical to the state do not take place in rampant, easy-going fashion: it's the fact that Trump has become something of a realisation: that the business of US officials for decades has been business rather than patriotism. It is a sin that has been closeted rather than spoken about.

The nexus between the nakedly private and the political, between graft and the pursuit of enterprise, has been revealed. The question of illegality, however, remains unanswered, and Robert Mueller's task has simply gotten more interesting.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/07/us/ex-aide-to-media-firm-is-charged-in-theft-of-bush-debate-tape.html>

[2] <https://www.lawfareblog.com/wall-begins-crumble-notes-collusion>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/12/donald-trump-jr-smoking-gun-russia>

[4] <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/449406/donald-trump-jr-russia-meeting-campaign-explanation-naive-dangerous>

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