

The Democratic Party Line That Could Torch Civil Liberties... and Maybe Help Blow Up the World

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Many top Democrats are stoking a political firestorm. We keep hearing that Russia attacked democracy by hacking into Democratic officials' emails and undermining Hillary Clinton's campaign. Instead of candidly assessing key factors such as longtime fealty to Wall Street that made it impossible for her to ride a populist wave, the party line has increasingly circled around blaming Vladimir Putin for her defeat.

Of course partisan spinners aren't big on self-examination, especially if they're aligned with the Democratic Party's dominant corporate wing. And the option of continually fingering the Kremlin as the main villain of a 2016 morality play is clearly too juicy for functionary Democrats to pass up — even if that means scorching civil liberties and escalating a new cold war that could turn radioactively hot.

Much of the current fuel for the blame-Russia blaze has to do with the horrifying reality that Donald Trump will soon become president. Big media outlets are blowing oxygen into the inferno. But the flames are also being fanned by people who should know better.

Consider the *Boston Globe* article that John Shattuck — a former Washington legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union — wrote in mid-December. "A specter of treason hovers over Donald Trump," the civil libertarian [wrote](#). "He has brought it on himself by dismissing a bipartisan call for an investigation of Russia's hacking of the Democratic National Committee as a 'ridiculous' political attack on the legitimacy of his election as president."

As quickly [pointed out](#) by Mark Kleiman, a professor of public policy at New York University, raising the specter of treason "is simply wrong" — and "its wrongness matters, not just because hyperbole always weakens argument, but because the carefully restricted definition of the crime of treason is essential to protecting free speech and the freedom of association."

Is Shattuck's piece a mere outlier? Sadly, no. Although full of gaping holes, it reflects a substantial portion of the current liberal zeitgeist. And so the argument that Shattuck made was carried forward into the new year by Robert Kuttner, co-editor of *The American Prospect*, who approvingly quoted Shattuck's article in a Jan. 1 [piece](#) that flatly declared: "In his dalliance with Vladimir Putin, Trump's actions are skirting treason."

The momentum of fully justified loathing for Trump has drawn some normally level-headed people into untenable — and dangerous — positions. (The "treason" approach that Shattuck and Kuttner have embraced is particularly ironic and misplaced, given that Trump's current

course will soon make him [legally deserving](#) of impeachment due to extreme conflicts of interest that are set to violate the Emoluments Clause of the Constitution.)

Among the admirable progressives who supported Bernie's presidential campaign but have succumbed to Russia-baiting of Trump are former Labor Secretary Robert Reich and Congressman Keith Ellison, who is a candidate for chair of the Democratic National Committee.

Last week, in a widely circulated post on his Facebook page, Reich [wrote](#): "Evidence continues to mount that Trump is on Putin's side." But Reich's list of "evidence" hardly made the case that Trump "is on Putin's side," whatever that means.

A day later, when Trump tweeted a favorable comment about Putin, Rep. Ellison quickly echoed Democratic Party orthodoxy with a [tweet](#): "Praising a foreign leader for undermining our democracy is a slap in the face to all who have served our country."

Some of Putin's policies are abhorrent, and criticizing his regime should be fair game as much as criticizing any other. At the same time, "do as we say, not as we do" isn't apt to put the United States on high moral ground. The U.S. government has used a wide [repertoire](#) of regime change tactics including direct meddling in elections, and Uncle Sam has [led the world in cyberattacks](#).

Intervention in the election of another country is categorically wrong. It's also true that — contrary to conventional U.S. wisdom at this point — we don't know much about a Russian role in last year's election. We should not forget the long history of claims from agencies such as the CIA that turned out to be misleading or downright false.

Late last week, when the Obama administration released a drum-rolled report on the alleged Russian hacking, Democratic partisans and mainline journalists took it as something akin to gospel. But the editor of ConsortiumNews.com, former Associated Press and *Newsweek* reporter Robert Parry, wrote an [assessment](#) concluding that the latest report "again failed to demonstrate that there is any proof behind U.S. allegations that Russia both hacked into Democratic emails and distributed them via WikiLeaks to the American people."

Even if the Russian government did intervene in the U.S. election by hacking emails and publicizing them, key questions remain. Such as:

- * Do we really want to escalate a new cold war with a country that has thousands of nuclear weapons?
- * Do we really want a witch-hunting environment here at home, targeting people with views that have some overlap with Kremlin positions?
- * Can the president of Russia truly "undermine our democracy" — or aren't the deficits of democracy in the United States overwhelmingly self-inflicted from within the U.S. borders?

It's so much easier to fixate on Putin as a villainous plotter against our democracy instead of directly taking on our country's racist and class biases, its structural mechanisms that relentlessly favor white and affluent voters, its subservience to obscene wealth and corporate power.

There's been a lot of talk lately about refusing to normalize the Trump presidency. And

that's crucial. Yet we should also push back against normalizing the deflection of outrage at the U.S. political system's chronic injustices and horrendous results — deflection that situates the crux of the problem in a foreign capital instead of our own.

We should reject the guidance of politicians and commentators who are all too willing to throw basic tenets of civil liberties overboard, while heightening the risks of brinkmanship that could end with the two biggest nuclear powers blowing up the world.

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