

The Establishment Strikes Back

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Global Research, July 19, 2018

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There are a number of elements in the recent release of [an indictment](#) of twelve named alleged Russian military intelligence GRU officers by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein looking into possible ties between Moscow and the Trump Administration that I find either implausible or even incoherent. But before considering that, it is necessary to consider the context of the announcement.

The Department of Justice, which had, based on evidence already revealed, actually interfered in the 2016 election more than Moscow could possibly have done, continued in that proud tradition by releasing the indictment three days before President Donald Trump was due to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Helsinki Summit between the two leaders was critically important to anyone interested in preserving the planet Earth as we know it and there was no reason at all to release a non-time sensitive document that was clearly intended to cast a shadow over the proceedings. In fact, the surfacing of the indictment might easily be explained as a deliberate attempt by a politicized Justice Department and Special Counsel Robert Mueller to torpedo President Trump over concerns that he might actually come to some understanding with Putin.

The 30-page long indictment is full of painstaking details about alleged Russian involvement but it makes numerous assertions that the reader is required to accept on faith because there is little or no evidence provided to back up the claims and the claims themselves could be false trails set up by any number of hostile intelligence services to implicate Moscow. From an intelligence officer's point of view, there are even some significant areas where operational implausibility completely undermines the case being made.

The indictment identifies by name and position the twelve alleged GRU officers who "knowingly and intentionally conspired with each other, and with persons known and unknown to the Grand Jury (collectively the 'Conspirators'), to gain unauthorized access (to 'hack') into the computers of US persons and entities involved in the 2016 US presidential election, steal documents from those computers, and stage releases of the stolen documents to interfere with the 2016 US presidential election."

All twelve alleged GRU officers are described in detail, together with the cover mechanisms they reportedly used and the targets they pursued. But they are all in Russia and there is virtually no chance that they will be extradited to stand trial in Washington, which was certainly understood when the indictment was prepared. That means the "facts" as stated in the document will never be subjected to the normal judicial review process or discovery that takes place whenever someone is accused of a crime, which in turn means that information

contained in the indictment will never be challenged.

The document itself also provides no information on how the Russian officers and their positions were identified, which suggests that it could have been a US hack or agent in place, either run by CIA or NSA, that came up with a list of those individuals connected to GRU cyber operations. That would be information involving sources and methods, codeword protected material beyond Top Secret.

If the GRU list is authentic, it would expose US ability to penetrate that organization, leading to Moscow tightening up security to the detriment of American intelligence. But it might alternatively be suggested that the drafters needed a group of plausible Russians and used a generic list provided by either CIA or NSA to come up with the culprits and then used those identities and the detailed information regarding them to provide credibility to their account. What they did not do, however, is provide the actual evidence connecting the individuals to the “hack/interference” or to connect the same to the Russian government. If the information in the indictment is completely accurate, which may not be the case, there is some suggestion that alleged Moscow linked proxies may have deliberately sought to undermine the campaign of Hillary Clinton to favor Bernie Sanders, but absolutely no evidence that they did anything to help Donald Trump.

Beyond what is or is not contained in the document itself, there is a clear misunderstanding regarding how a sophisticated intelligence organization, which certainly includes the GRU, operates. If there had been a large-scale Kremlin sanctioned plan to disrupt the US election, it would not be run by twelve identifiable GRU officers working with what appears to be only limited cover and resources. If the facts are correct, the activity might have been a routine probing, collecting and selective dissemination of information effort that all intelligence agencies engage in. The United States does so routinely in many countries, interfering in elections worldwide, far more than Russia with its limited resources, and even carrying out regime change.

If the Kremlin’s objective were truly to undermine American democracy, a task that is already being undertaken very ably by the GOP and Democrats, hundreds of officers would be involved, all working under deep cover and operating securely out of dispersed sites. And no one involved would be using computers connected to networks that could be penetrated to enable personal identification or discovery of the ultimate source of the activity. Everyone would be working in alias on stand-alone machines and the transmission of information would be done using cut-outs to break any chain of custody. A cut-out might consist of using thumb drives to transmit information from one computer to another, for example. There would be no sending or receiving of information by channels that could be identified by NSA or CIA and compromised.

So the idea that the United States government identified twelve culprits who were responsible for trying to overthrow American democracy is by any measure ludicrous, if indeed there was a major plan to disrupt the election at all. The indictment is little more than a political document seeking to undermine any effort by Donald Trump to establish rapprochement with Vladimir Putin. It will also serve to give fuel to the Democrats, who are still at a loss to understand what happened to Hillary Clinton, and Republican hawks like John McCain, Lindsay Graham, Jeff Flake and Ben Sasse who persist in seeking to refight the Cold War. As Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin said in their Helsinki press conference, the coming together of the leaders of the world’s two most powerful nuclear armed countries is too important an opportunity to let pass. Cold Warriors in Washington should take note.

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