

The Crisis That Keeps On Giving

Or, if the Aim of the Russians in Interfering in the 2016 Election Was to Throw the United States' Political System into Chaos, They're Sure Getting Their Money's Worth.

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By way of background, some anecdotes (in case you missed them): When, on their recent trip abroad, US President Donald Trump and his wife, Melania, arrived at Ben Gurion Airport in Israel after a flight from Saudi Arabia, Trump announced that he “just got back from the Middle East.” (Who says Trump is too ignorant to be president?)

While walking on the tarmac to meet the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his wife, Sara, Trump attempted to take Melania's hand, but she swatted his hand away. Several female columnists in the US speculated that, like many wives, Melania despises her husband. The question for me is — does she despise him because he's a crook, a liar, a bully, a bigot, a sadist, and amisogynist, or does she despise him because he's making a fool of himself as president and therefore making a fool of her?

While in Brussels, preparing for a photo op with the leaders of NATO, Trump rudely shoved aside the prime minister of Montenegro, Dusko Markovic, to force his way to the front of the group. He then primped and puffed himself up. This suggests that, despite his self-conception, Trump is more wannabe thug than the real thing. Real thugs, like Russian president Vladimir Putin, have “class”; they are polite and gracious in public. Putin doesn't have to prove he has power; everybody knows it. Everybody also knows that, behind the pose, Putin has plenty of henchmen to do his dirty work. These days, Trump's “henchmen” look more like The Three-Stooges.

As part of his commencement address at the US Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, Trump complained that, “No politician in history has been treated worse or more unfairly.” As some of us know, more than a few politicians “in history” have been assassinated, executed, tortured (e.g., had their eyes gouged out and/or their limbs pulled off), imprisoned, exiled, and impeached, but none of this compares to the treatment Trump has received at the hands of his enemies, particularly the media. What an image of modesty, selflessness, and courage the president offered to the Coast Guard graduates, young men and women who, rightly or wrongly, are dedicating their lives in service to their country! Trump is currently deporting innocent people and breaking up families, threatening to deny healthcare and much-needed public services to millions of others. He has insulted entire ethnic groups, entire religious minorities, entire genders,

the entire intelligence establishment, the entire general staff, the entire federal bureaucracy, the entire judiciary, and the entire media. But when they (surprise, surprise!) push back, all Trump can do is whine. CNN commentator, Van Jones, described Trump as having transformed from “Trumpzilla” to “President Snowflake.”

Over one hundred students at one of the country’s premier Catholic educational institutions, the University of Notre Dame du Lac, outside of South Bend, Indiana, walked out of commencement ceremonies to protest the actions and policies of the keynote speaker, vice president and former Indiana governor, Mike Pence. Organized by the student organization, WestaNDFor, the walkout was meant to protest Pence’s opposition to gay rights, his attempts as governor to prevent Syrian refugees from resettling in Indiana, his support for Trump’s travel ban, and his opposition to “sanctuary cities.” Pence wound up as the keynote speaker because thousands of students and faculty members signed a petition to university president Rev. John Jenkins insisting that Trump not be invited. Notably, in his own address, the Rev. Jenkins insisted that the rights of LGBT people be defended. Pence’s speech at commencement ceremonies at Grove City College, a Christian liberal arts school north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was also met by protests.

When a group of around 200 middle school students from South Orange, New Jersey, visiting the nation’s capital on a field trip, bumped into House Speaker Paul Ryan in the Capitol, about half refused to pose for a photo with him. They said they did “not want to be associated with” someone who would “put the interests of his party above those of the country.”

As president, Donald Trump is doing grave damage to the power and prestige of the United States and to its ruling elite, both internationally and domestically. Although Trump touted his recent trip abroad as a “tremendous” success, it was anything but that. Aside from revealing his ignorance, rudeness, and arrogance, Trump’s actions and words significantly hurt the international (imperialist) interests of the United States. These interests are protected and managed by a network of formal and informal alliances among the elites of other countries and in competition with actual and potential competitors. These “international relations” are often delicate and require considerable tending.

Beyond negotiating relations with various groupings and factions among the elite, US global hegemony is also dependent on the image the country projects to the world’s peoples. No ruling group can maintain its hegemony without winning some degree of popular support, both abroad and at home. In other words, image matters, and Trump has significantly tarnished the image of the United States. His colossal ignorance, his clumsiness, and his unbelievable boorishness have made the country the laughingstock of the world. How can anybody take the United States seriously when it is led by such a clod and a clown? While world leaders may be formally polite to Trump in public, in private they smirk, laugh, and make jokes. They have also sized him up pretty well (not that hard to do) and figured out how to “handle” him: first and foremost, assuage his ego, make him feel important.

More than this, Trump’s words and actions are seriously threatening US interests in several regions. For example, when he was in Saudi Arabia, Trump called for an alliance of Sunni nations against the Shias, meaning, Iran and its clients and supporters. But members of the Shia sect of Islam live throughout the Middle East; most Sunni-majority countries have considerable Shia minorities among their populations. In making his proposal (clearly based on complete ignorance of the religious dynamics of the region), Trump risks alienating the entire Shia population of the area, effectively throwing them into the hands of Iran. Trump also seemed unaware of the fact that the Saudi ruling elite has funded Islamic fundamentalism for decades and has used funda-

mentalist groups and militias, including ISIS, as proxies in its struggle for regional hegemony with the Iranians. While Trump failed to note the atrocious human rights record of the Saudis, in Europe, Trump harangued the leaders of the NATO countries for not paying what he mistakenly calls their “dues” and pointedly failed to reiterate the founding principle of the alliance (expressed in Article V), that an attack on any one member nation will be perceived as an attack on all of them. He also scolded the Germans for running a trade surplus with the United States, even though the responsibility for this lies as much with the US as with Germany. Finally, at the G7 meeting in Sicily, Trump refused to indicate whether the United States intended to continue to abide by the Paris Accord to cut fossil fuel emissions in the fight against global warming. In effect, Trump is announcing to the world that the United States is abdicating leadership in the international effort to combat climate change. The Europeans’ response to all this was predictable: German chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the Europeans should, from here on in, rely only on themselves (that is, not on the United States). This has got to have perked up some ears of the more perspicacious members of the US ruling class. Although Trump, in his crude and clueless way, may believe that he is asserting American leadership, he is, in fact, ceding it.

Providing the context for these developments in the international arena are two broader issues. The first is the United States’ attitude toward Russia. As far as I can tell, there is no significant faction in the US ruling elite that favors a rapprochement with the Russians at this time. Quite the contrary; they see Russia as a geostrategic rival, an enemy. Yet, a US rapprochement with Russia is the avowed policy of the Trump administration. The second issue is the slow erosion of the United States’ international hegemony. This is a function of both the decline in US economic power and the rise in the standing of other countries, such as China and India. Although Trump may believe that his aggressive posturing and his nationalist and protectionist rhetoric will strengthen the US’s global standing, they will instead greatly weaken it. Beyond this, Trump himself, his bumbling administration, and the escalating political crisis at home are anything but an advertisement for the virtues of US-style bourgeois democracy. At a recent speech in Sydney, Australia, Arizona Republican senator John McCain essentially pleaded with US allies to “bear with us” for a while because the country is going through troubled times. Indeed!

As damaging as Trump has been to US capitalist interests abroad, his impact domestically has been equally negative. Notably, the political crisis swirling around his administration keeps building in intensity. Most recently, it was revealed that last December, that is, before Trump was sworn in as president, his son-in-law, business partner, and close adviser, Jared Kushner, spoke to the Russian ambassador, Sergei Kishlyak, about using Russian facilities to open a secret channel for communications between the Trump team and the Russians. While this may not actually have been illegal, it is certainly a violation of standard protocol. This, along with the revelation that Kushner met several times with other Russians (including the director of a state-owned bank with a shady past) while failing to disclose these meetings, has only fanned the speculation around the question of what, precisely, is the relationship between Trump, his family, and his administration, on the one hand, and the Russian oligarchy and its leader, Vladimir Putin, on the other; particularly, was the Trump team aware of, and did they collude in, the Russians’ interference in the 2016 elections aimed at helping Trump beat Hillary Clinton? Along with other questionable actions on the part of Trump himself – his firing of FBI Director, James Comey, his prior attempts to get Comey and the leaders of two other US intelligence agencies to drop their investigations of former national security adviser Mike Flynn’s ties to Russia, his divulging of classified information to Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and ambassador Kislyak – this

has added a ton of fuel to the fire of the (at least three, maybe four) ongoing investigations into the Trump administration.

At this point, my own view is that Flynn, former Trump campaign manager, Paul Manafort, international businessman and former Trump aide, Carter Page, and perhaps a few others are outright agents of the Russian state/oligarchy, that is, professional operatives (akin to lobbyists), hired and paid to promote Russian elite interests in the United States. I also suspect that the Russian oligarchs, under the direction of Putin, have been “cultivating” Donald Trump, his family, and his business associates for decades, schmoozing them up — socializing with them, wining and dining them, providing business opportunities for them, and lending them money — under the expectation that, at some point in the future, they might come in handy, as they have. (This is the long-standing modus operandi of the Soviet/Russian intelligence apparatus. Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin puts Trump in the “useful idiot” category.) The result is that the Trump family and their business and political associates represent a pro-Russian clique within the broader US ruling class that was able to sneak into power by what really adds up as a malfunctioning of the American political system. Unfortunately for the Trump cabal, their program has very little support in the ruling elite as a whole. Equally important, they have not managed to win over anywhere near a majority of the US electorate to their side. Quite the contrary, the more people see of Trump and his administration, and the more they learn of his policies, the more they are repulsed.

Meanwhile, the business of actually governing the country at the federal level has come screeching to a halt. The Republicans, divided among themselves and facing an aroused electorate, haven’t been able to put through any significant portion of their agenda, despite the fact that they control all three branches of the government. While, on a second try, they did manage to get their healthcare legislation passed by the House of Representatives, its prospects in the Senate appear to be dim, especially after the Congressional Budget Office estimated that it would result in 23 million people losing their health insurance. Trump’s second travel ban has been overturned by a circuit court and now seems headed to the Supreme Court, which recently declared unconstitutional the Republicans’ gerrymandering of election districts. Meanwhile, the prospects of tax reform and legislation to rebuild the country’s infrastructure seem poorer still.

The fact of the matter is that the Republican program has very little support among the American people. While Obamacare certainly has its flaws and problems, it has convinced the majority of Americans that healthcare is a right not a privilege. A considerable majority, including Republicans, also believe that global warming is a serious issue that needs to be dealt with. (Leaders of the major corporations in the United States, including the CEO of Exxon-Mobil [!], recently urged Trump to keep the United States in the Paris Accord.) A majority also opposes gutting federally financed public services that provide at least some help to the poorer members of our communities, certainly not when this is meant to finance substantial tax cuts for the rich.

About the only thing the Republicans have going for them is that their voting base has remained reasonably solid. While, according to some polls, Trump’s approval rating among the electorate at large reached a low point of 36%, his support among Republicans is still over 75%. However, it is worth noting that much of the Republicans’ support is based on false pretenses. Many of Trump voters did not vote for him because they support the traditional Republican program — tax cuts for the rich, deregulation of business, and slashing social programs — but because they wanted to vote against Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, whom they perceive as representing Wall Street and the rest of corporate America. Many of these people voted for

Obama in 2008 and (somewhat fewer) in 2012, but became disillusioned after Obama tended to the needs of corporate America (e.g., bailing out the banks and the automobile companies) while leaving the needs of middle- and working-class people (including homeowners “underwater” on their mortgages) unaddressed. Many also supported Bernie Sanders’ campaign in the Democratic primary, during which he excoriated Clinton for her ties to Wall Street and denounced the “billionaire class” but then completely capitulated to her (and them) before the Democratic Party convention. Although it has taken longer than might have been hoped, many of these working-class Trump voters are beginning to see who and what Donald Trump is and what the effects of his actual (rather than his promised) policies will be. As they wake up, which I believe they will (however slowly), the Republicans’ political base will significantly narrow. And when it does, I expect many Republican politicians (who hate Trump in private while supporting him in public) will run from the president like rats leaving a sinking ship.

At this point, it’s hard to see how this can end well for the Republicans. Although the Republican establishment originally saw Trump as an interloper who did not share their program, by the time he won the primary, they had jumped on the bandwagon and bet the farm on their new “convert.” They were elated by his victory and by their winning of majorities in both House and Senate, and hoped to utilize this as the basis for pursuing their reactionary program. Now, except for a few independent souls, they are tied to him, hook, line, and sinker, even as their program has stalled in Congress and as the president and his administration are being slowly torn to pieces by the ongoing revelations and investigations about the Trump’s connections with the Russian oligarchy. While, at this point, it is quite clear that the Trump clique and the Russian elite shared common goals, there is, as yet, no evidence that the Trump team directly colluded with the Russians’ efforts to influence the election. However, it has become increasingly likely that members of the administration, including Flynn, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Kushner, and Trump himself will be seen to have “obstructed justice,” that is, attempted to impede the investigations into Putin’s election shenanigans.

More broadly, the Republicans are being exposed as the pathetic and sadistic hypocrites they really are. They helped elect as president a man who has nothing in the way of what any intelligent and decent person, regardless of his/her politics, might consider to be “character.” Despite controlling all three branches of the federal government, they have proven completely incapable of governing. They have revealed that despite their rhetoric, they have no concern for the well being of the vast majority people of this country. Not least, they have demonstrated that the principles they have long claimed to uphold, particularly, their defense of “traditional values”, such as honesty, kindness, fairness, courage, patriotism, respect for the opinions and concern for the welfare of others, mean nothing to them.

What we’re seeing is just the latest stage of a process that began under Richard Nixon when, in the face of the Black liberation movement and the Democrats’ adoption of a civil rights program, the Republican party adopted the “Southern Strategy,” an all-but-explicit appeal to the racial fears and outright racism of many white people in the country. What started out as the party of Lincoln, the party that went to war to oppose the expansion of slavery, the party of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the US Constitution, had, out of opportunism and desperation, become the party of racism. In effect, as the Democrats abandoned the southern segregationists, the Republicans adopted them. And they have tied themselves to virtually every socially and culturally retrograde cause in the country. Yet, along with the not-so-hidden appeals to white supremacy and to all the other attitudes that define a good chunk of their

base, the Republicans still claimed to uphold the principles of 19th liberalism, that is, defense of the market, free trade, limited government, the rule of law, the rights of the individual, and, of course, “traditional values.” Now, even that pretense has been shown to have been hollow.

It would be nice to predict the demise of such a putrid organization. Unfortunately, as we know, the Democratic Party is little better. While it has managed, at least rhetorically, to place itself on the “progressive” side of the crucial social and cultural issues of the day, it is no exemplar of honesty and decency, and certainly no champion of the needs and interests of the American people. A look at the lives and careers of people like Bill and Hillary Clinton — their dishonesty and cynicism, their greed and ambition, their self-righteousness and hypocrisy — might serve to remind people just what the party stands for. Most important, the Democrats’ fundamental goal remains the defense and effective management of American and international capitalism, with all the brutality, injustice, and lies that this entails. Should the Democrats regain power, which I expect they will at some point, they may well provide the stimulus for a revival of the Republican Party. (And around and around we go.)

Epilogue: *Some initial thoughts on Trump’s decision to pull the United States out of the Paris Accord.* June 2, 2017

President Trump’s announcement that the United States will withdraw from the Paris Accord to combat climate change may come to represent a truly historic occasion. It appears as if, with this decision, the United States is abdicating its global leadership role, a position it has had for over 70 years. Of course, it’s possible that if Trump’s term is somehow cut short (via impeachment or forced resignation) or if he is defeated in the 2020 elections, the US can reclaim its international station, but, even now, too much may have been lost. According to several measures, the Chinese economy is bigger than the United States’ and is continuing to grow at a considerably faster rate. Moreover, the Chinese leadership has recently taken steps to promote itself as a viable replacement for the United States on the global level. Whether it, perhaps in partnership with the European Union, can do so is another question. More likely is a continued slide toward a more multi-polar, and more dangerous, world.

It will be interesting to see if any of the figures within the Trump administration who advocated staying in the Paris Accord, such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson or Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin, will have the integrity, the political acumen, and/or the self-respect to resign. At this point, it seems likely that Donald J. Trump will be remembered as one of the worst, if not the worst, president in the history of the United States. Do they really want to continue to be associated with him? (I am not holding my breath.) It will also be interesting to see whether Trump’s decision will strengthen the political forces aiming to drive him out of office. Trump position is extremely unpopular among the majority of the US elite, including the top corporate leadership, most of whom urged him to stay in the accord. Unfortunately for them, the man who would replace him if he were driven from power, that is, Vice President Mike Pence, might well be worse.

One wonders whether Trump’s decision to renounce the Paris Agreement was the main goal, or at least one of the main goals, of the Russians when they meddled in the US political process. The Russian economy is 10% of the size of the US’s and 40% of the size of Germany’s. Plagued with an aging and undereducated population and an obsolete infrastructure, it is currently stagnating. Most crucially, it is overwhelmingly dependent on the export of oil and natural gas, whose global prices have been declining. Thus, Putin and his cronies had everything to lose by an accelerated transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

In any case, the transition to a renewable-energy world economy will continue to occur, although perhaps not as fast as it might have had the US stayed in the Paris Accord, and nowhere as fast as would be needed to avoid substantial damage, particularly to the poorest countries of the world and, of course, the Earth. Market forces – especially the substantial decline in the costs of green technology and the fact that the renewable energy sector is now one of the fastest growing in the economy – may already be as important as government policies in powering the transition. Moreover, former New York mayor, Michael Bloomberg, one of the richest men in the country, has announced that he will be coordinating efforts, among both private citizens and state and local governments, to ensure that the United States will meet its commitments under the Paris agreement.

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This article was written before President Donald Trump announced that the United States would be exiting the Paris Accord to fight global warming. Some of the implications of that decision, beyond those discussed in the body of the piece, are addressed at the end.

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