

‘Russiagate’ Is Revealing Alarming Truths About America’s Political-Media Elites

By Stephen F. Cohen, 24 February 2018

Its allegations and practices suggest disdain for American institutions, principles, best interests, and indeed for the American people.

Stephen F. Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian Studies and Politics at NYU and Princeton, and John Batchelor continue their (usually) weekly discussions of the new US-Russian Cold War. (Previous installments, now in their fourth year, are at TheNation.com.)

The nearly two-year-long series of allegations and investigations now known as “Russiagate” was instigated by top American political, media, and (probably) intelligence elites (mostly Democratic or pro-Democratic, but not only). What they have wrought suggests profoundly disturbing characteristics of people who play a very large role in governing this country. Cohen specifies six such barely concealed truths, which he and Batchelor then discuss.

1. Russiagate promoters evidently have little regard for the current or future institution of the American presidency. At the center of their many allegations is the claim that the current president, Donald Trump, achieved the office in 2016 because of a conspiracy (“collusion”) with the Kremlin; or as a result of some dark secret the Kremlin uses to control him; or thanks to “Russian interference” in the election; or to all three. Which means, they say outright or imply daily, that he is some kind of Kremlin agent or “puppet” and thus “treasonous.”

Such allegations are unprecedented in American history. They have already deformed Trump’s presidency, but no consideration is given to how they may affect the institution in the future. Unless actual proof is provided in the specific case of Trump—thus far, there is none—they are likely to leave a stain of suspicion (or similar allegations) on future presidents. If the Kremlin is believed to have made Trump president and corrupted him, even if this is not proven, why not future presidents as well?

That is, Russiagate zealots seek to delegitimize Trump’s presidency, but risk leaving a long-term cloud over the institution itself. And not only the presidency. They now clamor that the Kremlin is targeting the 2018 congressional elections, thereby projecting the same dark cloud over Congress, as some embittered losers are likely to blame Putin’s Kremlin.

2. These same Russiagate promoters clearly also have no regard for America’s national security. This is revealed in three ways:

§ By loudly and regularly proclaiming that Russia’s “meddling” in the 2016 US presidential election was “an attack on American democracy” and thus “an act of war,” comparable to Pearl Harbor and 9/11, as recently inventoried by Glenn Greenwald, they are literally practicing the dictionary meaning of “warmongering.” Can this mean anything less than that Washington must respond with “an act of war” against Russia? Tellingly, Russiagaters rarely if ever mention the potentially apocalyptic consequences of war between these two nuclear superpowers.

§ Still more, by their Russiagate accusations against Trump, whom they characterize as a “mentally unstable president,” they risk prodding or provoking the president to undertake just such a war against Russia in order to demonstrate that he is not the “Kremlin’s puppet.”

§ Meanwhile, by repeatedly stating they do not trust Trump to negotiate with Russian President Putin, Russiagate zealots severely limit his capacity, possessed by all American presidents

since the onset of the atomic age, to resolve potential nuclear crises through diplomatic means rather than by military action, as President John F. Kennedy did in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. (Imagine, Cohen adds, the outcome had Kennedy been so assailed by the allegations being leveled against Trump today.)

In short, as Cohen has argued previously, Russiagate and its elite adherents are now the number-one threat to American national security, not Russia itself.

§ Having found no factual evidence of such a plot, promoters of Russiagate have shifted their focus from the Kremlin's alleged hacking of e-mails at the Democratic National Committee to Russia's social-media "attack on our democracy." In so doing, they reveal something bordering on contempt for American voters, for the American people.

SUPPORT PROGRESSIVE JOURNALISM

If you like this article, please give today to help fund *The Nation's* work.

§ A foundational principle of theories of democratic representative government is that voters make rational and legitimate decisions. But Russiagate advocates strongly imply—even state outright—that American voters are easily duped by "Russian disinformation," zombie-like awaiting a signal as how to act and vote. The allegation is reminiscent of, for people old enough to remember, the classic Cold War film "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." But, Cohen proposes, let the following representatives of America's elite media speak for themselves:

§ According to *Washington Post* columnist Kathleen Parker, Russia social-media intrusions "manipulated American thought... The minds of social media users are likely becoming more, not less, malleable." And this, she goes on, is especially true of "older, nonwhite, less-educated people." *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow addsthat this was true of "black folks." *Times* reporter Scott Shane is entirely straightforward, writing about "Americans duped by the Russian trolls," and Evan Osnos of *The New Yorker* spells it out without nuance: "At the heart of the Russian fraud is an essential, embarrassing insight into American life: large numbers of Americans are ill-equipped to assess the credibility of the things they read."

§ Cohen emphasizes (though this is hardly necessary) that these are lead writers for some of America's most elite publications. He adds, their apparent contempt for "ordinary" Americans is not unlike a centuries-old trait of the Russian intelligentsia, which held the Russian *narod*(people) in similar contempt, while maintaining that it therefore must lead them, and not always in democratic ways.

4. Russiagate was initiated by political actors, but the elite establishment media gave it traction, inflated it, and promoted it to what it is today. These most "respectable" media include *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, and, of course, CNN and MSNBC, among others. These media outlets constantly proclaim themselves to be factual, unbiased, balanced, and thus another essential component of American democracy—a "fourth branch of government."

§ But that has been far from the case in their reporting and commentary on Russiagate. Their combined loathing for Trump and "Putin's Russia" has produced one of the worst episodes of media malpractice in the history of American journalism. This requires a special detailed study, though no media critics or journalism schools seem interested. But a somewhat close reader of these mainstream newspapers, and television "news" viewer, will note their selective, disproportionate coverage of some stories to the exclusion of others; the prejudicial language

and prosecutorial slant often employed; the systematic violation of journalistic due process or presumption of innocence; the equal exclusion of contrary “sources” and “expert” opinions in their pages and on their televised panels; and other disregard for long-established journalistic standards.

§ Nor are these elite media outlets above slurring the reputations of people who dissent from their prosecutorial coverage of Russiagate. Very recently, for example, *The New York Times* traduced a Facebook vice president whose own study suggested that “that swaying the election was not the main goal” of Russian use of Facebook. Even more revealing, a brand name of the liberal-progressive MSNBC, John Heilemann, suggested on air, referring to Congressman Devin Nunes, “that we actually have a Russian agent running the House Intel Committee on the Republican side.” The Democratic senator being interviewed, Chris Murphy, was less than categorical in brushing aside the “question.”

§ And not to be overlooked, these mainstream media have done little if anything to protest the creeping Big Brother censorship programs now being assiduously promoted by government and private institutions in order to ferret out and ban “Russian disinformation,” something of which any American dissenter from the orthodox Russiagate narrative might be “guilty” entirely on his or her own. Indeed, leading media have abetted and legitimized these undemocratic undertakings by citing them as legitimate sources.

§ Cohen leaves to others to decide what the Russiagate role of establishment media reveals about the elites who run them.

5. Briefly regarding the obvious role being played by the Democratic Party, or at least by its leading members, in Russiagate, whatever the serious commissions and omissions of the Republican Party may be: In a word, as it looks ahead to congressional elections in 2018, this essential component of the American (perhaps lamentably) two-party democratic system is now less a vehicle of positive domestic- and foreign-policy alternatives than a party promoting conspiracy theories, Cold War, and neo-McCarthyism. (According to conversations with a number of local candidates, these electoral approaches are less their initiatives than cues, or directives, coming from high party levels—that is, from the Democratic elite.) And this leaves aside the Russiagate social-media narrative that blames the Kremlin for “divisions” in America that have pitted American citizens, and Democrats and Republicans, against each other for decades, often in “exacerbated” ways, not merely since 2016.

6. Finally, but no less revealing, American elites have long professed to be people of civic courage and honor. But Russiagate has produced very few “profiles in courage”—people who use their privileged positions of political or media influence to protest the abuses itemized above. Hence another revelation, if it is really that: America’s elites are composed overwhelmingly not of “rugged individualists” but of conformists—whether that is to be blamed on ambition, fear, or ignorance hardly matters.

STEPHEN F. COHEN: Stephen F. Cohen is a professor emeritus of Russian studies and politics at New York University and Princeton University and a contributing editor of *The Nation*.