

Initial Thoughts on the Developing Political Crisis in the United States

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I believe that we are in the initial stages of a serious political crisis in the country, one that may not subside soon. Rather, I suspect it will continue to fester through a series of revelations and scandals. And depending on circumstances, it may well escalate into something on the level of the impeachment of Bill Clinton and perhaps even to the heights of Watergate.

The crisis currently centers around two explicit issues, with an additional one as yet implicit. The explicit issues are: (1) President-elect Donald Trump's relations with and attitude toward Vladimir Putin and Russia, and (2) Trump's business interests and whether he will separate himself from them sufficiently to avoid conflicts of interests. The third, so far implied, issue is Trump's fitness to be president — his colossal ignorance, his complete lack of political experience, and his narcissistic, bullying, and paranoid personality.

At the moment, the issue taking up most of the news is Trump's relations with Russia. This includes the interrelated questions of whether Russia directly interfered with the 2016 elections to help Trump get elected and whether Trump is somehow beholden to Russia, that is, whether Trump is, to put it crudely, a Russian stooge. We need not share the outrage expressed by US politicians, leaders of the intelligence establishment, and media commentators that the Russians tried to or actually did influence the recent election. The US government has been intervening in other countries to influence their political lives for decades, with outright invasions and invasion attempts (Cuba, Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Dominican Republic, Somalia), CIA-backed coups (Iran, Guatemala, Iraq, Vietnam, Chile), assassinations, and a variety of "dirty tricks," including blackmail, planted stories, and propaganda campaigns. Nor ought we to be overly concerned about the precise details of the current to-do, whether there is definite proof of Russia's actions vis a vis the elections, Trump's precise relations with Putin and other Russian oligarchs, whether the Russians have compromising material on him, etc. What matters more is the overall political context.

Specifically, I think it is very likely that the Russians tried to influence the elections, because, given the history of the two candidates, it would definitely favor Russian interests if Donald Trump won and Hillary Clinton lost. Clinton is on record as being hostile to Russia, particularly over Putin's support of Iran; his intervention in Syria; his annexation of Crimea, occupation of several provinces of eastern Ukraine, and ongoing military repressive actions

related to Russia's domestic scene, e.g., assassinations of political opponents in Russia and abroad, his harassment and repression of the mass media and the political opposition, and his campaign against LGBT people. In contrast, Trump has long had friendly relations with Russia: he held a beauty pageant there, has tried to get hotels and resorts built in partnership with Russian oligarchs, has been quite vocal about his admiration of Putin and his style of leadership, and has stated explicitly that he wants to improve relations between the US and Russia. He's also had several advisers who have been unabashedly pro-Russian, if they haven't been paid agents or at least had ongoing contact with the Russians during the election campaign, including Paul Manafort, Boris Epshteyn, and Steve Bannon. Lastly, he has nominated Rex Tillerson, former CEO of ExxonMobil, who's long done business in Russia and is on friendly terms with Putin, to be secretary of state, and has selected retired general Michael T. Flynn, who's also been chummy with Russian leaders and oligarchs and been open about his desire to reset Russian-US relations, to be his national security adviser. (I also believe both Tillerson and Flynn have both been given awards from Putin.)

As for whether the Russians have compromising material on Trump, I assume they do. It's long been one of the main jobs of the Russian intelligence and security apparatus to come up with such stuff, going back to the Stalin if not to Lenin, so it would make sense for them to have something on Trump. (And if you don't think the CIA, the FBI, and the NSA don't compile such dossiers on both domestic and foreign figures, you ought to wake up; former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had voluminous files on just about everyone, which was one of the reasons he stayed in power as long as he did.) In Russia, every phone is tapped, every room is bugged, there are video cameras everywhere, and foreign visitors, especially from Europe and the United States, are routinely tailed by agents. In an attempt to discredit the notion that the Russians have compromising material on him, Trump has claimed that, since he has long known about Russian surveillance, he would not have done something that would have put him in a compromising position. This argument, however, does not stand up to serious scrutiny. First, at the time his compromising acts likely occurred, he didn't realize he'd be pursuing a political career in the future during which his past conduct might be used against him (after all, he never worried about going bankrupt, stiffing creditors, hiring undocumented workers and refusing to pay them their full wages, and cheating the students at "Trump University"). Second, his presumed circumspection didn't prevent him from bragging about groping and harassing women under circumstances in which his comments might be (and, as we know, were) recorded.

Equally if not more important than all this is the likelihood that Trump owes the Russians money. It's certainly reasonable to assume that after one of his (six) bankruptcies (I assume the last one), nobody in the United States and Western Europe would lend him money, so he went where it was offered. (As players of the long game, the Russians likely surmised that this might give them some leverage down the road.) Of course, Trump could easily refute such rumors by releasing his tax returns. But he has, so far, adamantly refused to do so. I suspect he has several motives: (1) He's not as rich as he says he is. He claims to be worth \$10 billion; others estimate his net worth at \$1.3 billion. This isn't small change, but it's not \$10 billion, either; (2) He doesn't pay his fair share of taxes. It was revealed during the campaign that, through clever utilization of the existing tax laws, Trump hasn't paid taxes for 18 years. I suspect this is standard operating procedure for him; (3) He's tied to/does regular business with organized crime aka the Mob; (4) He's in debt to the Russians.)

The Trump/Russia issue is not likely to go away soon. One of the reasons for this is Trump's extreme defensiveness about the issue, beginning with his blunt dismissal of the allegations that the Russians tried to influence the elections by hacking the DNC's computers and releasing the emails. I seriously doubt that the leaders of the intelligence organizations were personally against Trump, so if they did release their findings and are now standing by them, this would suggest that they are reasonably confident such hacking actually occurred. A normal response (from a more astute politician) would be, "These are serious charges. If the Russians did this, this ought to be interpreted as an aggressive act against the United States. We need to investigate this as thoroughly as possible, both to see whether it did happen, and if so, to make sure, as best we can, that it doesn't happen again. I have complete confidence in the intelligence community to carry out such an investigation and come up with the truth." Instead, Trump lashed out, pooh-pooing the charges and insulting the intelligence organizations, disparaging them and reminding them of their past mistakes. Even without the other allegations and rumors, such a response would warrant suspicion: just what is Trump so desperate to hide?

But the main reason for the persistence of the story about Trump and his Russian connections is that the allegations have evoked the ire and the concern of a significant sector of the political establishment, not just Democrats (which is to be expected, since their candidate lost the election), but also prominent Republicans, particularly (so far) Senators Lindsey Graham, John McCain, and more recently, Marco Rubio. After all, the hard line taken against the Russians has had strong bipartisan support for some time. If anything, the Republicans have accused the Obama administration of not being tough enough. Those in the lead on this issue have good reasons (from the point of view of defending the global – read imperialist – interests of the United States) to take that position, whether from a stance of cynical realpolitik or from more idealistic conceptions of US foreign policy. And they are not likely to accept a substantial change in the United States' global geo-political stance without a fight. Whether other Republicans choose to join the Democrats and the Graham, McCain, and Rubio team remains to be seen, but until the allegations against the Russians and Trump and his team are cleared up or eventually die of a combination of lack of proof and fatigue, I doubt the issue is going to subside any time soon, especially if Trump continues to refuse to release his tax returns, which I suspect will be the case. Indeed, the issue is likely to escalate since, lacking any clear proof to the contrary, the question will continue to be raised – is Donald Trump acting, *de facto*, as an agent for the Russians?

To make matters more complicated, several of Trump's choices for his cabinet and other top posts have expressed explicit disagreements with Trump's views, especially on Russia. These include retired general James Mattis and designated CIA chief Mike Pompeo. With Trump's team containing so many people with so many conflicting views, will the Trump administration speak with a united voice, and if so, what will it be? Is anybody really minding the store? Some commentators have suggested that after using Putin's support to win the election, Trump will turn on him and move toward the US elite's position of hostility to Russia. If so, the crisis over Russia's involvement in the election and Trump's Russian connections may well die down. But if he persists in bucking received opinion, there's no telling what will happen.

The second Trump-related issue that's been in the news recently is the question of what to do with Trump's businesses. A broad array of ethics-and-politics experts have insisted that to avoid any conflict of interests, or even the appearance of conflicts of interest, Trump and his entire family must completely divest themselves of their business enterprises, either sell them off or, at the very least, put them in a blind trust managed by an independent manager. So far, Trump

has refused to do this, proposing instead to turn them over to his two sons who will supposedly manage them without any discussions with or any input from him. According to the ethicists, this is totally unacceptable and will leave President Donald Trump open to continued accusations of acting not in the best interests of the United States but with the intent of (further) lining his pockets. I believe that this issue also has staying power. Will the presidency of Donald Trump be a four-year soap opera, an ongoing series of overlapping and intensifying scandals? (As the World Turns, anyone? How about Dallas, or Empire?) I, for one, hope it will.

So far, the current crisis is being played out in the political sphere, including the intelligence bureaucracy, with little or no input from broader layers of the ruling elite beyond the media and the political commentators. In particular, the corporate leadership, the “capitalist class” proper, has been watching and waiting. As far as I can tell, the vast majority of business leaders of all the major economic sectors of the American economy either supported Hillary Clinton or remained neutral in the election. (The Koch brothers did not support Trump, although they gave money to down-ballot Republicans. Even casino magnate and arch-Zionist Sheldon Adelson, who initially came out for Trump, did not give money to the campaign.) Except for a few individuals, corporate leaders were extremely wary of Donald Trump; capitalist business needs stability, and a Trump presidency seemed to promise anything but that. Since then, they have been at least guardedly optimistic, taking advantage of a rising stock market and hopeful that Trump’s promises of lower corporate taxes, less government regulation, a surge in spending on the country’s infrastructure, and a substantial boost in military spending will mean higher profits and an improving economy. Yet, they still have their concerns. Some have warned that if NAFTA is scrapped without being replaced with something similar, the country could lose 12 million jobs. They are worried that if the Trans Pacific Partnership trade deal is dropped and another, comparable treaty is not signed, the Pacific Rim countries, such as Peru, will increasingly look to China as their major trading partner. They are also concerned that slapping a 35% tariff on imports will spark a trade war. Others are wary of the talk of building the border wall, tightening immigration, and deporting millions of undocumented workers; already, farmers are complaining about a labor shortage and having to plow under entire fields of crops or just leave them to rot. The healthcare industry is fretting about repealing Obamacare without having a workable replacement ready; hospitals are already cutting their budgets. And a group of several hundred business leaders sent an open letter to Trump urging him not to reverse the progress made on fighting global warming.

Further down the social scale, some of the Trump voters are already experiencing buyers’ remorse. Laid off coal miners and other people in Appalachia are worried about losing their health insurance. Trump voters who are also supporters of Planned Parenthood are concerned that it might be defunded. And then there are the millions of people who either voted for Clinton, voted for third party candidates, or didn’t vote at all who already despise Donald Trump and everything he stands for. At its largest, Trump’s political base is under 27% of the electorate. (He won 46% of the votes, while only 58% of the eligible voters voted.) I suspect that his actual base is considerably smaller than that, since many people voted for him simply out of disgust at Hillary Clinton or out of a desperate belief that, if elected, he would listen to their cries for help and do something to help them. And then, of course, there are the people who feel directly targeted by Trump and the racist and reactionary forces he’s mobilized: undocumented workers and in fact all immigrants; Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Muslims, Jews, and other ethnic and religious minorities; women; union members; healthcare workers; school teachers; and liberals and radicals of many persuasions. Are all these people likely to sit by and watch as a boorish, scandal-ridden president attacks their rights

and living standards? We'll just have to see. At the very least, I expect that the next four years will be very interesting.

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