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The ‘Trump Threat’ Saga Continues

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From the moment Donald Trump became a major player in the political arena, his opponents have trotted out a seemingly endless series of alarming allegations. Two themes were especially prominent: that he was a Russian stooge or outright agent, and that he intended to establish a fascist dictatorship. Those assertions cast a shadow over his presidency for the entire four-year term, and despite his departure from office, they show no signs of going away.

A new episode highlights the typical nature of the second apocalyptic prediction. Gen. Mark A. Milley, who served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Trump’s administration, reportedly stated that he and many fellow high-ranking officers were convinced that the president intended to stay in office despite losing the 2020 presidential election to Joe Biden. The military brass even feared that the January 6 riot at the Capitol building might be the start of his effort to execute an executive coup. Milley’s comments were laced with comparisons to Hitler and his Brown Shirts, and worries that America could be facing a “Reichstag moment.”

Trump’s legions of detractors seized on Milley’s comments as “evidence” that the president plotted to establish a fascist dictatorship—something many of them had warned about for years. However, the new allegations were no more substantive than the previous ones. Critics (conveniently?) ignored the fundamental principle that allegations do not equal evidence, much less indisputable proof. Merely because Gen. Milley (and perhaps some of his colleagues) feared that Trump planned a coup and was a closet fascist all along does not mean that they were correct in their assumptions. Shared paranoia still can be nothing more than shared paranoia. As was the case with most of the previous charges against Trump, the Milley episode was long on shrill accusations, but decidedly short on substance.

The same problem has characterized the other stream of anti-Trump vitriol—that he is Vladimir Putin’s puppet, and in all likelihood a traitor. One accuser even speculated

that Trump may have been Moscow's agent as far back as 1987 during the Soviet era—not the usual avocation of a capitalist billionaire. No insinuation of a disloyal fondness for Russia and a slavish devotion to Putin on Trump's part has seemed too far-fetched to gain circulation. Even the salacious dossier assembled by former British intelligence agent Christopher Steele managed to become one of the pieces of evidence the FBI used to obtain warrants from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) court to conduct the “Crossfire Hurricane” investigation into possible collusion between the 2016 Trump presidential campaign and the Russian government. *BuzzFeed* published the Steele Dossier, despite a lack of corroboration from any credible source.

Assertions about “Russia collusion” remained the news media's most prominent topic from the beginning of Trump's presidency until Special Counsel Robert Mueller issued his commission's report in the spring of 2019. Even though, after an exhaustive investigation, Mueller found no grounds to file charges against Trump, members of the Trump campaign, or any other American, most of the president's opponents flatly refused to concede defeat. Yet the report certainly did not support their claims. Even a few progressive journalists reached that conclusion. Glenn Greenwald, at the time with the *Intercept*, aptly stated that Mueller “did not merely reject the Trump-Russia conspiracy theories. He obliterated them.” Greenwald added: “Several of the media's most breathless and hyped ‘bombshells’ were dismissed completely by Mueller.”

Trump's actual policies toward Russia also refuted the charges that he was Putin's puppet. He approved arms sales to Ukraine (a step President Obama had declined to take), added additional members to NATO, dramatically increased the pace and size of NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, withdrew from key arms control treaties that Moscow favored, and sought to undermine the Kremlin's client regimes in Syria and Venezuela. All of those measures would have constituted extremely peculiar steps for a “Russian asset” to take.

Nevertheless, the unsupported allegations that Russia posed an existential threat to the United States, and that Trump was indifferent to that threat, persisted. An especially odious episode occurred in 2020 with the appearance of a *New York Times* blockbuster report that Moscow had paid bounties to the Taliban to kill U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. Other news outlets throughout the country picked up that account. It was yet another occasion in which people accepted and promoted an inflammatory charge damaging to Trump with little or no real evidence.

There should have been massive doubts about the bounties story from the outset. The intelligence appeared to be based on little more a leaked anonymous CIA source citing the supposed testimony of two Taliban prisoners who had been captured (and almost certainly tortured) by Afghan government forces. Even the National Security Agency broke with the Central Intelligence Agency and concluded that the allegation was uncorroborated and warranted a “low confidence” rating. (A comprehensive intelligence community review of the report in 2021 did not improve its credibility.)

Nevertheless, Trump's adversaries in Congress and the media accused him of ignoring intelligence briefings about the bounties report and, once again, serving Russia's interests. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi leveled one of her patented drive-by smears. "With him, all roads lead to Putin," Pelosi said. "I don't know what the Russians have on the president, politically, personally, or financially." Once again, Trump's opponents believed the worst about Russia's behavior and Trump's reaction to it because they had long mentally programmed themselves to accept such horror stories without doubt or reservation. The assessment by Adam Macleod of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) was devastatingly accurate. With regard to the bounties story, he concluded, "evidence-free claims from nameless spies became fact."

That could be an accurate indictment of most of the Trump threat saga. There has been precious little evidence to support an endless array of emotionally charged accusations. Indeed, much to the frustration of his accusers, plenty of counter-evidence exists. The comparisons to Hitler were overwrought to the point of utter absurdity. Hitler did not simply file lawsuits to overturn an adverse election result or hold rallies and whine about vote fraud. Hitler didn't allow any free elections to be held at all, and he imprisoned thousands of political opponents, forcibly shut down an independent press, and established a full-fledged dictatorship within two years of taking office. That's what a real fascist dictator would do. Despite grumbling and poor sportsmanship, Trump left office peacefully on January 20, 2021.

Likewise, a Russian agent would not have adopted the policies that Trump did toward that country. If Putin thought that he had helped install a puppet in the White House, the continuation—indeed, the intensification—of Washington's confrontational policies toward Russia during the Trump administration meant that he had made a very poor investment.

Donald Trump may well have been a nasty, abrasive president whose policy skills were erratic at best. He even appeared to harbor more than his share of intolerant, authoritarian viewpoints. But those flaws did not make him either a would-be fascist dictator or a traitor. Trump's opponents have not covered themselves in glory by making such ugly, evidence-free allegations.

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